

THE MALDIVE ISLANDERS

A STUDY OF THE POPULAR CULTURE OF AN ANCIENT OCEAN KINGDOM

Xavier Romero-Frias



NOVA ETHNOGRAPHIA INDICA

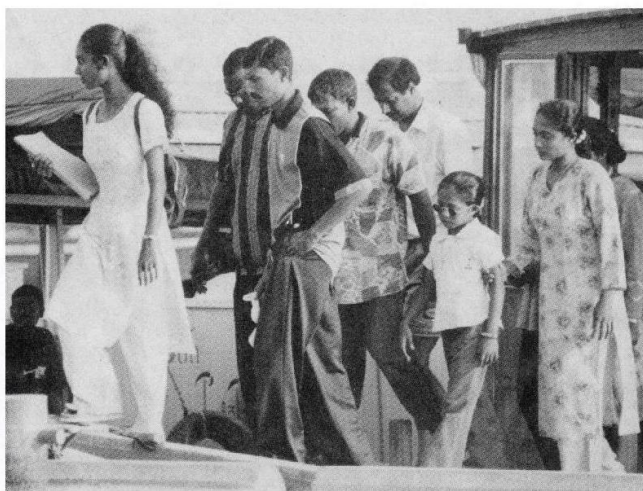


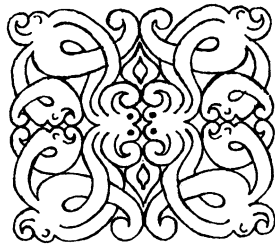
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by

Xavier Romero-Frias



NOVA ETHNOGRAPHIA INDICA

1999

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“A society, like an individual, reveals the secrets of its inner life only to those who bring to its study not merely scientific curiosity and a mastery of technique, but respect and affection.”

R. H. TAWNEY

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Foreword

By Rohan Gunaratna Ph.D. FRSA

I first met Xavier Romero-Frias in 1986 during a visit to the equatorial island of Fua Mulaku, in the Indian Ocean. Together with my father and a group of seafarers, I wanted to navigate the deep oceans and experience for myself the trials and tribulations of earlier generations of travelers.

I had been told that the people of Fua Mulaku were beautiful, and they were. They ate citrus fruits in abundance and that gave their skin a special colour. In the officially Muslim nation of the Maldives, these islanders practiced rituals and kept customs that predated Islam.

I had been also told that the archaeological remains of the ancient Maldivian Buddhist civilization were still well preserved in Fua Mulaku. I rejoiced at the sight of stupas, shrines and a monastery dating back to 2000 years. The island was an almost inaccessible place. Without a harbour, mooring was difficult and the captain of our boat told us that we couldn't stay for very long. Perhaps owing to its remoteness, Fua Mulaku was the place of the Maldives where islanders had kept many of their ancient traditions, practices and way of life still intact.

In my quest for knowledge, I was not alone in Fua Mulaku. Xavier Romero-Frias was living among the native people. They called him "Shavi". We met in the night at the light of an oil lamp. There was no electricity, no running water and no modern amenities on the island, but Shavi was at ease, living humbly, without any special privilege, just like the other islanders.

Since he hailed from a wealthy Catalan family and had University education Xavier Romero-Frias welcomed the opportunity of chatting

with me. This was a chance that, according to him, was rare in that isolated corner of the world. An island almost lost in the vastness of the Central Indian Ocean, where islanders were only concerned with the immediate needs of life. Births, deaths, marriages, bad fishing, the chronic lack of food, dominated their conversations in such a way, that there was almost no higher intellectual life. And yet, Xavier was able to appreciate the harmony of the old Maldivian traditions and how important they were for the long-term survival of that particular society.

The pace of transformation of the world that we live in has been unprecedented during the past five decades. Cultures and societies around the world have changed and continue to change. Populations have exploded; the youth have ceased to be satisfied with the way of life of their ancestors and have moved to the cities or have traveled abroad in search of high-paying jobs. Few young people would be happy to stay in a mountain village and look after goats, like their own family did for generations or live in a remote island and be a fisherman until old age.

There seems to be a longing to live “in the centre of the world”, in the places “where things happen”, and to dismiss the ancestral cultural ways as boring, useless and unattractive. The influence of the world-wide media and consumerism is now felt in every corner of the earth. The result is that many ancestral ways of life have disappeared irreversibly during the last decades and only “strong” cultures have managed to survive, although markedly altered by the intensity of the recent changes.

Caught in the middle of these changes, Xavier Romero-Frias took the right action. ‘The Maldivian Islanders’ provides a priceless testimony of the last days of a self-contained society that was imminently poised to change. If Xavier would have not used his position and his skills to preserve all the information contained in this book, it is very likely that precious little of the traditions of the ancient Maldivians, of which I only could catch a brief glimpse, would remain today.

We live in eternal gratitude to Xavier Romero-Frias for his careful documentation of a disappearing civilization. This book is proof that its

author greatly valued, respected and admired the ancient Maldivian folklore. Working incessantly, he took the necessary steps to make sure that not all got lost. To enrich human civilization, Xavier Romero-Frias followed in the footsteps of H.C.P. Bell, a great historian, archaeologist and anthropologist of the previous century.

Professor Rohan Gunaratna, Head, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Singapore, and Senior Fellow, Combating Terrorism Centre, US Military Academy at West Point, is the author of the international best seller "Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror" (Columbia University Press)

Introduction

One or two treasure ships of the Middle Kingdom went there too. They purchased ambergris, coconuts and other such things. It is but a small country.

(Ma Huan, The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores)

When I visited Maldives for the first time, in June 1979, I used to spend a lot of time in the Majeedi Library. It was the main one in the capital, Male', and it has since been renamed as the National Library. Back then, it was a very quiet place where there was a pleasant atmosphere and employees were friendly and helpful. As I wanted to know about the land, which incidentally is, like Siam, one of the few Asian countries which were spared foreign colonization, I read all that I could find there, which was not very much. I remember very clearly that what struck me most at the time was how few books of substance had been published about the Maldives, and the fact that most of them had been written long ago.

Those few old books dwelt at length on royal genealogies and life in the Sultan's court, where the few foreign travelers visiting the country (Ibn Batuta, Pyrard de Laval) had been entertained. Modern publications were little more than shallow statistical reports or glossy tourist guides. I felt that the country had been described but not understood. The Maldivian people, their way of life and their feelings had never been given a voice. They seemed to have been dismissed as 'just a silent presence in the background,' like servants in a palace. Thus, vast areas of knowledge about this island country had still not come to the light.

As years went by, I became fluent in Divehi, the local language, and I developed a sense of perspective concerning the Maldivian cultural heritage. However, I was puzzled by the inconsistent Maldivian attitude towards history. A few gentlemen belonging to the educated elite were aware of an obscure and distant Buddhist past which, they would know

little about. They claimed that the present country had nothing to do with it. Years later, a few Maldivians acknowledged a form of what they called 'mysticism' within the autochthonous culture. However, they treated it as an isolated, purely local phenomenon of 'mysterious' origins.

At a popular level things were even more clouded: most islanders didn't want to have anything to do with their Buddhist ancestors. They preferred to say that other folks had been Buddhist in their country, not them. It sounded as if the people of the Maldives had always been Muslim and could not have possibly been anything else. In what looks like a blind form of destructiveness, Maldivians, instead of acknowledging and giving due honor to their ancestral Buddhist heritage, in which most of their culture is still rooted, spared no effort to dissociate themselves as much as possible from their own past.

The Maldivian past is like a misty region, where even events of recent history seem to be far away in time. To the outsider, this gives the impression that the actual character of the Maldives is concealed behind a mask. At the same time, I could not avoid realizing that the visible face of the country was changing rapidly around me. During the 1980's the Maldivian Islands underwent a profound transformation. I witnessed how the new aggressive Islamization and modernization of the country, paradoxically happening simultaneously, upset the traditional Island society, stifling most forms of popular expression. In a scenario where the forces of Islamization and technological consumerism were poised for a combined onslaught on the Islands, the stresses for the concealed ancestral cultural heritage were so huge that I wondered whether any traces of it would survive at all.

The awareness about a whole country losing its true personality, gradually translated itself into concern. In the face of the general passivity, I felt responsible for keeping the fragile legacy of the ancestral Maldivian expressions alive, which led me to collect clues about the country's past. This book is the fruit of many years of observing and collecting samples not only of tales, but also of the iconography, popular beliefs, festivals, rituals and customs of the Maldivian Islanders. In the end I gathered such a

vast amount of data that it took me almost as many years to analyze them, categorize them and evaluate them in the context of the art and traditions of the Indian Subcontinent. This comparison was necessary since the Maldivian folkways didn't just pop 'mysteriously' out of the blue and, certainly, it is not merely an 'Islamic Country' as the local authorities would like us to believe: The present work, by comparing myths and way of life, tries to establish that the first people settling the Maldives were fisher folk from the nearest maritime regions, the coastlines of South India and Ceylon. Besides the racial affinity, we will see how below the Islamic veneer the folk culture of the whole area is still very similar.

There are clear indications that sometime in Maldivian antiquity (probably about two millennia ago) a kingly dynasty from the northern regions of the Subcontinent established their power in the Maldivian Islands without much local opposition. It is likely that those first 'noble rulers' brought the Buddhist Dharma in their wake, although there are legends that hint at a later conversion to Buddhism. In clear divergence from Sri Lankan myths, in the Maldives those northern kings perhaps became Buddhist centuries after beginning their rule over the Maldivian atolls. Next follows an analysis of the traces of Goddess-worship and the fear of spirits of the dead which are still present in Maldivian popular traditions. The Dravidian Devi cult and a form of tutelary spirit and ancestor worship are prevalent among the coastal peoples from the Tulu region of India (Coastal Karnataka) to the southern shores of Ceylon.

Maldivian archaeological remains and some inscriptions found therein, point to influences from 8th or 9th century Bengal, in the form of Vajrayāna Buddhist iconography and writing. This work describes the island world of esoterism and demonstrates how nowadays, to a certain extent, the Vajrayāna Tantric teachings have endured in the Maldives in a syncretistic form of occult magical practices, known locally as *faṇḍitaverikan*. Thus, the traditions described in this study are not yet a thing of the past. Many aspects of the ancient Divehi folkways remain alive and form a part of the present-day culture of most Maldivian individuals. This survival has not been easy, and towards the end of this

book I describe how, since the thirteenth century, there have been quite a number of kings and 'holy men' who tried to make the Maldives more Islamicized disregarding local cultural needs and values in the process.

I am aware that quite a few aspects of this study may offend some readers. Folklore is close to the more immediate realities of life, the worries of the common man and woman, young or old. Thus, in the text there are many explicit references to blood, sex, defecation, disease and death. To add to the difficulty, this is a field where nothing seems to be holy, for folkways consistently display a casual lack of respect towards established religions and government authority. However, instead of being ingenuous and condemn, one must keep in mind that folklore is rooted in emotions and deviations that all human beings manifest. Reality doesn't leave much room for idealization, and those who may be dismayed by Maldivian popular culture should remember William Graham Sumner's testy dictum that anybody likely to be shocked by reading about folkways, of whatever sort, had better not read about folkways at all.

Since Maldivians were reluctant to talk about their popular beliefs, it was initially not easy for me to get to the core of their culture. It took years of patient work and living among the average folk, sharing one roof, their meals, their preoccupations, their joy and their pain, to finally be able to understand their ancestral soul. After spending a great part of my life among the Divehi people, I came to admire the way in which they have adapted to their environment. My hope is that this book will help them to recover their pride in their heritage.

Note: For the transcription of the Maldivian language the ISO 15919 transliteration of Indic scripts has been used, save a few exceptions

Acknowledgments

I have to thank all the Maldivian people who told me stories, anecdotes and even mere hearsay, mostly without thinking that what they were

telling was important at all. I am especially grateful to Aishath Naazneen for constantly providing valuable advice and guidance in the translation into English of difficult concepts in Divehi. I also have to thank her for succeeding in making me grasp certain nuances of her culture which I would easily have overlooked or misinterpreted.

The foremost of the Maldivian storytellers was the late Magieduruge Ibrahim Didi of Fua Mulaku, who ended up becoming a very good friend of mine; I cherish the memories of his patience, consideration towards me and his never-failing sense of humor. I also made many other good friends in that island, such as ‘Light’ Hamidu and his dad Vaijehēge (Unakeḍege) Ali Didi, whose company I thoroughly enjoyed; Kenerige (Madarusāge) Muhammadu Saidu, the kindest government officer I have ever met; Nuḍalḥī (Mādaḍibeage) Naṣīmu, captain of the Funāḍu boat, with whom I often had the chance to travel to Huvadu and Addu Atolls practicing how to use a sextant; Daḍimagi Rafigu and his family; Bondorāge Muhammad Didi the last faṇḍita man in Maldives having performed a ‘Bahuru Kiyevun’, Muhammadu (Kalhu) Maniku; Hudufinifenmāge Ahumad Didi; all the people in Karānge, Shabnamvilla, Hittange, Himitige and Finifenmāge; Bēremagi Aliu, and also Tuttu, Mubinu’s dad, who went with me crisscrossing Fua Mulaku convincing the sorcerers to let me copy the secret drawings in their books.

In Male’ I have to thank Nedunge AliNajibu and Ba who gave me copies of some rare old pictures; Ahumadu Shafigu and Hirunduge Donkokko for generously sharing information about the old times in the Radun’s palace.

In other islands: Rashidu in Hurā (Male’ Atoll) Ahumadu Saidu and Hasan Maniku from Gaddu (Huvadu Atoll) whose company was so pleasant; Afifu in Ratafandu Island (Huvadu Atoll); Kuḍafari Kalēfānu (South Miladummaḍulu Atoll); Abdul Hādi in Kuḍa Huvadu Island (Nilande Atoll); and Abdurrahim Abdul Majid the former Nilande Atoll Chief, who provided me with the opportunity of visiting many islands in Central Maldives and who taught me Tāna calligraphy.

I extend my thanks to Kambulō Daitā and her family in South Miladummaḍulu Atoll, Holhudu Island; in Addu Atoll: Saidu and Nasimu in Fēdu Island, Havvā Diye and Ibrahim Didi in Hitadu Island, Sēbuge Ali Didi in Mīdu Island; besides a number of families in Haddummati Atoll Māmendu; Huvadu Atoll Gemanafushi, Kolāmāfushi, Māmendu and Tinadu islands for their generous hospitality.

I thank also the officials at the Spanish Embassy in New Delhi, especially Carlos Fernandez Espeso and Isabel, for their generous assistance whenever I needed something from them between the years 1979 and 1999. Next I thank all the people who provided me with jobs which helped me to survive during the many years I lived in Maldives, among which the foremost are Ewald Kiebert, Pitt Pietersoone, Cos Rousso, Shakeeb in E.D.C., Muhammad Asim, Eddy & Ursula Drzensla in Hembadu, Ernesto in Halaveli, Philippe Coigne in Makunudu and several people at Club Med.

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I thank Edward L. Powe for giving me advice on how to put into writing my knowledge about the Maldivian spirit world; Austin Hale for the fonts I needed in my computer; Bruce Cain for helping format my text and index; Kitty Holloway for editing my manuscript; Bob Sluka for making the last-minute corrections; Ali Manikfan and his daughter Amina Manike of Minicoy for providing me with information about their lonely island; the Archaeological Survey of India for pictures about Buddhist remains in

Minicoy; Paul Johnson, from the U.S. Navy, who was based at Diego Garcia in the 80's and sent me information and pictures of the little-known Chagos; Habeeba Husain Habib from the National Library in Male' for allowing me to photocopy certain books and M. Loutfi for giving me permission to take a few pictures in the Male' Museum.

Last but not least, I have to thank certain people who provided me with books when I was in a very isolated environment. First my friend Manolo Martinez Marti and his wife Mercedes Sanchez Lodaes, who even went all the way to Paris, to the French National Library, to photocopy a very rare manuscript, the 'Voyage de François Pyrard,' in its original 17th century French edition. Next Tashi Recordati for providing me with books about Buddhism in the middle of Maldives, and also Andreas Loetscher, Roque Romero (my dad), Nina and Rosa Romero (my sisters), Avel-li Bassols, Massimo Gattuso, Katy Rasera, Jacques Riolacci, Amet Belig, Elfriede Kopf, 'Manta' Hans, and Germana Citterio for sending me books which were crucial for my studies when I asked for them in similar circumstances.

I thank also my two fellow countrymen Ramon Faura Cunill and Eduard Masdeu Jorda whose love for the Maldivian Islands and their recollections from their travels there made this country the main theme of most our conversations during the 1990's. Their never-fading interest in my stories about the Maldives has been a major source of encouragement.

Finally, I have to express my deep gratitude to many Maldivian men and women that, unfortunately, I have not mentioned above. Time has passed and it is impossible now for me to recall all names and faces. However, I do remember clearly that many people kindly shared their time with me, putting up with my numerous questions and casually telling me stories and memories of their childhood, when the Maldives was a very different place.

Trivandrum, October 1999

Part I. An Oceanic Civilization

We ought to give the whole of our attention to the most insignificant and most easily mastered facts, and remain a long time in contemplation of them until we are accustomed to behold the truth clearly and distinctly.

René Descartes

1.1.1 A SEAFARING NATION

Maldives is a nation with a great seafaring tradition. Life in the Maldivian Atolls would be almost impossible without trade. Unfortunately, the communication that existed since very ancient times between the larger inhabited islands and the trading harbors of Ceylon,¹ South India and Bengal has never been properly documented.² One of the features of this trading arrangement was that Maldivians put great common effort in undertaking journeys from their scattered inhabited islands to the main Ceylonese or South Indian harbors. However, trading vessels from those countries rarely, if ever, visited these small islands scattered in the central Indian Ocean.

¹ Since Maldivian old men interviewed were not familiar with the term 'Sri Lanka', the name 'Ceylon' has been also used according to the context.

² Except by Bernard Koechlin of the French C.N.R.S. who wrote a short paper on the odj at the end of the 1970's. 'Notes sur l'histoire et le navire long-courrier odi, aujourd'hui disparu, des Maldives', Archipel. Etudes interdisciplinaires sur le Monde insulindien, 18, 'Commerces et navires dans les mers du sud', p. 283-300, 1979

The reason foreign traders avoided the Maldivé Atolls lies in the relatively little commercial importance these low and small coral islands had, when compared to the other large and heavily-populated countries in the area. Besides, no Maldivé island, no matter how far away from the capital, can evade the intense influence of the local administration and there were no places to hide for smugglers.

Aware of its grip on the country, the Maldivian monarchy sought to centralize all non-local trade in the capital and did not allow any foreign vessels to touch the long archipelago except at Male'. The king, however, had to tolerate the yearly trips from the individual islands because the heavy-laden local boats found it more hazardous to travel along the long atoll chain, with its many treacherous coral reefs and shallows, than to venture out into the open ocean.

It was certainly much easier for Maldivian traders to sail away from their country and land somewhere in the large landmasses of the northeast after about a week of relaxed navigation, than to hop painfully from atoll to atoll until they reached the capital.

Even though this commerce has been acknowledged in the few works on Maldivé trade, most authors have highlighted the romantic topic of 'isolation,' while the fact is that commercial trips to the coast of the neighboring countries were always indispensable for Maldivians as the following verses eloquently express:

*Hakurāhaṇḍulā teluṇ / tāṣimuṭṭā fēramuṇ,
Bēru ne' nnama libuṇ/ nete hurihā dati filuṇ.*

Our problems are not all solved if we do not get sugar, rice, oil, pottery and textiles from abroad. (*Etere Veṣi*, verse 6)

*Oḍi koḍamā Takuru bē/ Hāvi nakatu tōfurē
Oḷudū agu ves hevē/ mas boṇḍi āros vikē.*

Quartermaster (the word Takurubē refers to the person assisting the navigator or Mālimi) let's repair the trading boat in order to leave between the first and the 13th September. In Ceylon prices are interesting and we can sell our fish and sweets. (*Etere Veṣi*, verse 26)

Unlike in Polynesia, where there is the custom of eating raw fish, Maldivians have always cooked everything they caught; therefore they badly needed cooking pots. Pots had to come necessarily from abroad, for the Maldivian Islands are geologically made up only of coral rock and its derivatives. There being no clay with which to make pottery and no mines to obtain metals in their country, Maldivian boats used to sail every year to South India or Ceylon and trade between the Atolls and the closest foreign harbors was brisk.

The name Oḷudu used in the poem is the now obsolete traditional name for Ceylon or Sri Lanka in Divehi. It means 'Tame Island' and it echoes how much at home Maldivians felt over there compared to other places. On the other hand not all harbors on the long South Indian coast were favorable for Maldivian traders. Magieduruge Ibrāhīm Dīdī of Fua Mulaku recalled that once the veḍi he was journeying on landed at a place called Kācmāṇḍ and business there was bad.

This yearly trade gave vitality to island life. During the exciting months close to the departure, womenfolk prepared dried tuna (Maldivian fish), sweets and rope. Every tuna was divided into four longitudinal quarters (ari), which could be cut into thick slices (foti) if the specimen was very large. These were boiled in salty water and subsequently dried. A certain fungus covered the fish after drying, preventing it from getting rotten. Maldivian fish was known as 'umbalakaḍa' in Ceylon, where it was in great demand.

Sweets (āros and boṇḍi) were also a common trade item. These sweets were made by cooking palm sap along with mashed screwpine (kēva āros); and since the 18th century also breadfruit. Boṇḍi sweets were

made by cooking tender coconut flesh in palm syrup until it became thick and could be rolled in dry banana leaves. Women also would make rope with coconut husk fibers, another product in great demand in Ceylon. Meanwhile the men would repair the oḍi in its shed making it fit for travel. In the northern atolls, another important trading item was the cowry shell (*Cypraea moneta*), which used to be gathered by women in shallow muddy lagoons at low tide.

The oḍi or veḍi was a somewhat heavy bark-type vessel. It was also called ‘daturu oḍi’, ‘furadde oḍi’ or ‘baṇḍu oḍi’, meaning ‘traveling vessel’, ‘external vessel’ and ‘belly vessel’ respectively. Oḍi is the name in Male’, voḍḍā in Huvadu and veḍi in Aḍḍu Atoll; formerly in the South the term ‘furadde veḍi’ (external vessel) was also widespread. Here the term ‘external’, which can also mean ‘foreign’, refers to the fact that the boat is outward bound, in contrast to the common fishing vessels which rarely ventured beyond the nearby waters. The length of an average oḍi was about 14 m and it was built entirely of wood. It usually had a main mast and a lesser mast close to the stern. In the North, a different type of two-masted craft known as ‘batteli’ was used for the same purpose.

The trading ships had to be made thoroughly oceanworthy to be able to cover safely with a heavy load of cargo the broad expanses of ocean between the Maldivian atolls—which become larger as one goes south—and reach the closest coasts. For this reason the great skill and technology that went into building these oḍi affected the building of even the smallest fishing boats to such an extent that crude boats are simply non-existent in the Maldives.

Ever since the beginning of historical times, all Maldivian vessels have been highly sophisticated. This is true to such an extent that there is not even a memory of outriggers or hollowed trunks in Maldives, while these relatively cruder and simpler craft are still widespread in the coasts of South and South-East Asia and other island groups of the Indian Ocean where the inhabitants lived in greater isolation, such as the Nicobar

Islands. The only outriggers I saw were in certain toy sailboats used by children in Fua Mulaku. These toy boats look like a small replica of the average dōni, but with an added outrigger. They sail like a real boat and are rigged in a way that they can be controlled from the beach by means of long fine ropes or fishing wire.³

Although small rafts called kandufati (usually made with logs of the kandu tree) were used in the Maldives for practical purposes, like unloading cargo from a ship or short trips between islands on the same reef, they were never considered proper vessels among Maldivians.

There are indications that in ancient times the planks forming the hull of Maldivian boats were tied together with coconut rope, as is still done in Kerala and Lakshadweep. In modern Divehi, to refer to boat construction the verb banuñ ('to tie')⁴ is still in use even though in Maldives and Minicoy (Maliku) wooden pegs and brass nails have replaced rope for the last three centuries. Keen to add new improvements to their already ocean worthy craft, Maldivians have carefully observed every detail of the construction in the foreign boats happening to anchor in their archipelago or in the wrecks of the ships that ended up caught in the long and treacherous coral reefs of their Atoll chain along their history. New technologies were always welcome and the technique of using nails was learned from the Portuguese.

Maldivians learned numerous technological skills from the Portuguese. The heavy metal hammer used to drive in the metallic nails is not different in shape from the wooden hammers (muguru) which had been used in building boats with rope. However, with the arrival of the new

³. Demonstration in 1980 by Tarānage Abdullāhi Dīdī, Fua Mulaku

⁴ Although other verbs are available in the Divehi language, one always has to say "to tie a boat" referring to naval construction. Thus, 'dōni bannani'. Information by Mr. Mūsā Dīdī, Henvēru, Male'.

technology the new tool received the Portuguese name *maruteyo* (*maruteli* in the South). Further proof that there were many improvements in Maldivian carpentry owing to contact with the —now much maligned— Portuguese is furnished by the fact that not only names of tools, but also Divehi words relating to furniture, like cupboard or table for example, are also derived from Portuguese words. As centuries passed and hegemonies shifted in the Indian Ocean, other improvements in boatbuilding were subsequently learned from the Dutch, the French and the British.

The day that the *oḍi* was put in the sea, all the women would go look at the scene in their best dress. The ship would stay anchored off the island for a few days until it was fully loaded. The departure towards the NE would be in the *Vihānaka*iy (from the first to the 13th September). On the day the boat left, the women would give to their husbands or lovers a present of betel leaves in a bundle with sweet-smelling flowers inside.

By and large only the men traveled abroad, although it was not unusual for a few women to go as well. In those cases Maldivians were aware that the other countries were more dangerous for females and they would adopt certain protective measures. In one instance that a *veḍi* from *Aḍḍu* strayed off its course and ended up in a strange coast, the first thing the men did before going ashore was to hide the sex of the only woman on board. Thus her hair was cropped short and she was given men's clothes to put on.⁵

A number of Maldivian folk stories talk about the plight of Maldivians after their trading ship strayed off its course missing the shores of South India or the island of Ceylon. Following such an event, people could end up in

⁵ This particular case was in the Somali coast. Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī of Fua Mulaku (1983). Cf. 2.6.2 'The Mystery of Female Power' regarding the position of women in Maldivian society compared with other countries in the region.

the Andamans, the Burmese coast or Sumatra and they would come back after facing many hardships.

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands were known by the name ‘Minikā Rājje’ (Country of the Cannibals) in the Maldivian lore. In ‘Doñ Beyyā’, a long story from the 18th century, or earlier, a veđi from Gan (Huvadū) is said to end up in the Andamans where everyone is caught and eaten by cannibals except for the cook. Aside from the ancient Maldivian lore, however, there are no reliable records regarding the various indigenous people of the Andaman being cannibals.

Missing the relatively conspicuous coasts of South India or Ceylon was not as bad as missing the Maldives in the return journey. Memories about the strange places visited, including the habits of the natives in matters of food and clothing and the difficulty of communication, were kept within the family and guests were entertained with those stories for many years to come. Occasionally houses were named after a non-descript village on a foreign coast where a family member had strayed during a trading trip.⁶ In Fua Mulaku there is a house named ‘Borosali’ after a certain place in Burma. The father of the family told how the Ceylon-bound veđi he was travelling on had ended up there after having gone astray during a storm.

Long ago, when there was no radio communication, the people in the island would analyze their dreams in search of indications that their folks had arrived safely in Ceylon or South India. The dream revelation would be called bavati.

Ođi gos Karaya vanī/ kamašē khabaruñ, aī
Koļambuge mas kađā matī/ tibi huvafenuñ bavativī.

⁶ Each Maldivian house has a different name. Formerly homes used to be named after some person living there or after an ancestor, but names of flowers, countries and constellations have become commonplace.

News arrived that (our) ship (is in) the foreign land, in a dream it has been revealed that (our folks) were at the fish market in Colombo. (*Etere Veṣi*, verse 36)

*Iruvā kula udarehuñ /iruvāde ira' lllumuñ,
Bavati vē feni huvafenuñ / hita' de haluvamuñ.*

The NE monsoon colors appear twice on the horizon (sunset and sunrise are more colorful in this season), omens (about the departure of our ships) are seen in dreams and hearts beat (in anticipation) . (*Etere Veṣi*, verse 63)

In spite of the steady travels, relationship with other countries of the Indian Ocean rim was limited to trade. There were no settlements of Maldivians in other places and it was only rarely that a foreigner came to the Maldives on their trading ships to settle on the islands. This situation has changed since the late 1980's. These days, for the first time in the country's history, there are relatively large numbers of Maldivians residing in Colombo, Trivandrum and Singapore.

Traditionally, after anchoring their ship in the harbor, Divehi people went straight to the marketplaces to make business. If they had to go to some place farther away, they usually went in a group. In this manner they never dispersed, and at dusk they always returned to their ship to sleep. Although there was not much cultural exchange between Maldivians and the people of other countries, sometimes the travel became an occasion to make friendships, as the following story proves:

My Friend the Vedemāhatte

"I went many times on a veḍi to Ceylon in the yearly journey from our island. As Siṅgaḷa (Sinhalese), is not so different from our island's language, I was able to communicate quite well with the local people.

On one of my travels, at the beginning of the nineteen-fifties, our veḍi saw land in the southern end of Ceylon and we anchored at Gāli (Galle) harbor. Like everyone aboard, I used to go ashore every morning after tea. One day in the afternoon, while I was strolling through the market area, one young man stopped me and asked me whether I was from the Maldiv Islands. When I said “Yes,” he seemed very happy and introduced himself.

I looked at him, mistrusting the man at first, because we Maldivians often meet people who try to take advantage of us in the market streets of foreign harbors. However, this person didn’t look like a crook: he was a handsome man, clean-shaven, with his hair cut short, wearing a white shirt with buttons on the shoulder and a white muṇḍu.

This man said he wanted us to be friends. He explained that he was a Vedemāhatte, a medicine-man in Siṅgaḷa, and that he was very interested in the Maldiv Islands. Then he asked me to show him our ‘hōḍi’, which is the way they call our veḍis there, and we went together to the harbor. There we jumped on a bokkurā (dinghy) and rowed to my ship. Before reaching it, he took pictures of the veḍi with his camera. Once aboard, he looked at every detail and took more photographs, including some of the crew and traders present there. Then he said: “Let’s go ashore!”

He was full of charm and very lively, smiling and chattering all the time. He greeted a lot of people in the streets of Gāli. Together we entered a noisy hotel⁷ where there were a lot of people eating, chatting and smoking. He called some friends of his and he introduced them to me. Among them was his kokko (younger brother) who was taller, darker and thinner than him, but this man didn’t speak much. Vedemāhatte then invited me to his table to eat and asked many more questions about our islands. I told him everything he wanted to know and he seemed genuinely interested.

⁷ In South Asia, little wayside restaurants are normally called ‘hotel,’ pronounced ‘hoṭā’ or ‘foṭā.’

Time passed quickly and it was getting late. I said I had to go back to my veḍi because it was getting too dark and I wanted to be there soon otherwise it would be difficult for me to find a dinghy. Before we parted he told me that we were friends now. Then he gave me a packet of cigars and a matchbox (during the following days he would offer me the same present every evening when it was time for me to leave) and told me to come back to the same place at eight o'clock in the morning.

The next morning I arrived at the time he told me and the hotel was full of people sitting at the tables drinking tea. The Vedemāhatte recognized me from a distance and called me. He immediately ordered breakfast for me. It was an excellent meal and I noticed that he not only paid the food for about twenty men sitting there, but also offered them as many cigarettes as they wanted. After breakfast, we went to a corner of the same hotel and he showed me eight wooden boxes with little holes. When I asked him what they contained, he winked at me and smiled: "Yāluminia, you will see it in a moment! " (Yāluminia means friend and this is the way the people of Ceylon used to address us).

Then he asked his companions to take the boxes outside and they brought them to a shady spot close to the street under a large, spreading tree, just opposite the hotel. As we stood by the boxes, the Vedemāhatte began to shout in Siṅgaḷa and soon many people gathered around us. Nevertheless he went on yelling until a big crowd surrounded us. When he looked around and considered that the crowd was large enough, he opened the box in the middle and took out of it the biggest snake I had ever seen. As he held it, the snake went around his neck and moved its tongue in front of his face. Unfazed, Vedemāhatte, smiling happily kept addressing the public in his very loud voice all the while. When he put that serpent on the ground, it went alone into its box.

The snake from the second box was smaller, but even so, it was so large that when it went around my friend's neck, both its head and tail touched the ground. The next four boxes contained different snakes, which in turn

he wove around his body with surprising ease and without showing the slightest fear.

The seventh box was very little compared with the other ones. As soon as he opened it, a smaller snake with a broad, flat neck shot half of her body out and stood menacingly in front of him. But Vedemāhatte coolly patted her head shouting something in Siṅgaḷa and she returned to the box. Again, when he yelled something she shot up. He laughed and, mimicking an angry expression he yelled at her and she curled down again. Finally, one of his friends came with some dead rats and Vedemāhatte put one in each box and closed well all the boxes.

The eighth box was a normal metal trunk. He opened it shouting with renewed fervor and gesticulating towards the onlookers. Inside there were only pills. Suddenly the crowd became enthusiastic and in the rush that followed I could not see anyone who was not buying pills. Now Vedemāhatte and his fellows were very busy selling their medicine and cashing money.

After the crowd dispersed the boxes were brought back to the hotel and I enquired about the pills. He just said that he made them himself. Then he told me: "Tonight come back here and we will go to the cinema." I was nervous about leaving the veḍi alone in the dark and asked him: "Shall I come alone?" He noticed my fear and with a broad smile he answered: "Yāluminia, do as you please. You can bring a friend along. He will be welcome too."

Thus, that same evening I went to meet my friend with somebody from the veḍi. With his spontaneous generosity, Vedemāhatte paid for our meals, tea, cigarettes, and everything we wished for. Then we went together to the cinema. That night I asked him about his family. He said that his father was a very rich man, living in a big house far from Gāli. "Why don't you live with him?" I asked.

He replied that he liked to pay all his expenses with his own money. “I get much money selling medicines and I like to live like this. I like to share food and money with many people, because I am happy when I can make others happy and everyone is in a good mood around me.” Vedemāhatte was smiling, but I remained silent. I had never met anyone like him and I didn’t know what to think. He certainly was followed by many companions all the time, but I had no way to ascertain whether they were really his friends. He told me that we should meet again the next morning and we shook hands.

During the following six days he came every morning to the veḍi to pick me up. He accepted to drink tea aboard with us and he said he liked the foḷi and mas huni very much.⁸ Then we left together to the same spot under the tree to enact his snake-show and his pill-selling frenzy while I just stood by.

Eventually, every day we were surrounded by crowds. When I asked why he picked me up every single day, he told me that he liked me and that we were friends. Nevertheless, with a quick wink of the eye he added that my presence under the tree was beneficial for his business, because Maldivians had a good reputation as great magicians and herbal doctors in Ceylon. I had suspected something like that, but I didn’t mind, because I really enjoyed watching his skill with the snakes.

On the seventh day the Vedemāhatte didn’t come and, as I had business to do, I didn’t have time to enquire about him. A few days later, when our veḍi was fully loaded and we were ready for departure, I thought I should go to see my friend before I left. Thus, on our last afternoon in Gāli that year, I went ashore and walked across the market area to the hotel close

⁸ Foḷi (Aḍḍu and Mulaku Bas) is the flat chapati bread called roṣi in the rest of the Maldives. Mas huni or masuni is a mixture of grated coconut, chillies, minced tuna and finely chopped onion eaten usually for breakfast.

to the big shady tree. I spent a long time looking for him among the crowd, but I didn't find him.

At last, after a long time I saw his kokko and asked him: "Where is Bēbe (older brother)? " He didn't seem too happy to see me and just said that his brother had gone away. He was a sullen man, very different from Vedemāhatte. I couldn't get any more details from him and I was feeling uncomfortable, so I left. That same night we weighed anchor and sailed away from Ceylon.

The following year, in late September, our veḍi anchored in Gāli too and on my first day ashore I happened to meet Vedemāhatte's kokko in a busy market street. I immediately asked him: "Where is Bēbe? "

His answer was brief: "Dead."

I was shocked. I couldn't take in that such a handsome man, so full of life was dead. He had been my friend and I had been looking forward to meet him. I felt dizzy. Meanwhile, kokko was still there, staring at me with a blank face. I lost my temper and began to fire questions at him: "Which sickness killed him? How did he die? "

The man simply said: "A snake bit him."⁹

After selling their merchandise, Maldivians filled their boats with what they would need in their island. These goods were mainly rice, oil, iron scraps, white sugar, flour, pots, cloth, firecrackers and diverse utensils. Usually Divehi traders would spend between two and three months doing business in the foreign harbor. The return towards Maldives would take place in December, when the first gusts of the Northeastern Monsoon winds begin to blow.

⁹ Told in 1990 by the late Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī of Dūṇḍigamu, Fua Mulaku.

The journey back home was reckoned to be far more hazardous, for it was fraught with the danger of missing the Maldives altogether. Since they are an extremely low-lying archipelago, with wide and deep channels between the atolls, the Maldives could be easily missed from a boat approaching the area during the night. In such an event, it was hard to tack against the prevailing wind and current with an oḍi, a vessel that was so heavy and unwieldy. Since there is no land for thousands of miles westwards, the hapless ship going off course could end up very far away. Occasionally, some oḍis were totally lost, with people, cargo and all and there would be no news about their fate.

Vessels drifting too far south would have been caught in the powerful winds and currents of the Westwind Drift. These ill fated ships would have been carried eastwards at great speed and may have ended up sinking in the icy raging waters of the ‘Roaring Forties’ or smashed against the rocky coast of some remote island of the vast Subantarctic region of the Indian Ocean.

On any of those desolate islands —Kerguelen, Heard, MacDonald, New Amsterdam, St. Paul, or even distant Macquarie— Maldivian survivors would have quickly perished owing to the prevailing inhospitable conditions and cold temperatures. Captain F. Hasselborough of the brig ‘Perseverance’, who sighted Macquarie Island in 1810, recorded seeing a wreck “of ancient design” on the forbidding coast of the island. This unknown wreck —subsequent visitors to Macquarie failed to find it— could possibly have been the tragic remains of a veḍi from Maldives.

Oḍis that reached the Seychelles,¹⁰ Madagascar or the East African coast were relatively luckier. Somehow, from those distant places, the people

¹⁰ In the Seychelles it is assumed that the first people who resided in one of the islands, Ile Silhouette, were Maldivian fishermen (sic) towards the year 1,200. Gilles Fonteneau, ‘Les Seychelles’. Unfortunately it is difficult to elucidate further data about this assumption.

aboard managed to travel back to the Maldives. Wherever they landed, the first thing Maldivians did was to look for the British authorities in order to negotiate their return home. However, in one recorded instance one southern veḍi ended up in the Somali coast and the Maldivians were very surprised to find out that there were no Englishmen ruling there, but Italians. This particular group ended up being transferred to Aden but many died of diseases before the party returned home.

The following account shows how ruinous for the traders' business it was when a ship happened to miss the Maldives:¹¹

The Vast Ocean

“We left Colombo in December 1951 and were sailing back towards the Maldives with a fully-loaded veḍi. The wind was a strong and steady Northeasterly, but there were many sudden squalls. One week went by and we began to worry because we were constantly scanning the horizon and didn’t see the Atolls. More days passed and we became sure that we had slipped through one of the broad channels during the night. The Maldives were now behind us, but our ship was so full of cargo that it couldn’t tack against the wind. The captain said that we would keep sailing westwards and wherever we would land we would seek the help of the British to bring us back home.

Day after day we kept sailing through deep dark blue seas. From sunrise to sunset there was nothing in the horizon. After more than two weeks without sighting land we were very anxious. Food we didn’t lack. We had a lot of provisions below deck and there were frequent squalls, so we could

¹¹ Told in 1984 by the late Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī.

catch water.¹² However, we were nervous because we had been too many days seeing only the empty ocean and that was bad for our morale.

At last, one day we saw a long submerged coral reef stretching from horizon to horizon. It was a broad turquoise blue band, similar to some submerged shallow reefs we have in Maldives. We followed it northwestwards for a long time. Finally, in the late afternoon we saw a flat coral island in the distance and our spirits rose. It looked very much like one of our islands, but we knew it could not be because we were too far away from our country. When we threw anchor in the lagoon off this mysterious island the sun had already set. We lit the lamps and decided that we would disembark the following day.

After dinner, when we were ready to go to sleep, we heard the noise of oars in the quiet lagoon. There was just a little red light left in the western horizon, but we could make out a long rowing boat coming towards us. We were all scared. We didn't know what to expect and we all went under the roof.¹³ Only our captain stayed outside. Nobody made a noise. Finally we heard a thud and the sounds of people climbing aboard. The first one we saw stepping on our deck was an Englishman in neat clothes. He was wearing shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and a hat. His face was pink and he had a little moustache. Beside him were two large black African men wearing only shorts. The Englishman spoke with a kind voice, but no one among us knew well English, except for a few words and those proved quite useless. So our conversations with him took a long time as we had to struggle word by word.

¹² In such a situation the lack of firewood for cooking would pose a serious problem. In extreme cases certain planks from the boat structure itself would be carefully removed.

¹³ The vedis had a deck house thatched with coconut palm leaf, covering the surface between the main mast and the stern.

Somehow though, the Englishman understood us when the navigator (mālimi) asked him about the name of the island, and he said: “Providence.”

We asked him whether he could grant us passage to the Maldiv Islands and his reply was that he had to send a message to his superiors and wait for a reply. Some of us expressed the wish to go ashore to take a bath, so he allowed us to go ashore on the following morning.

Providence was very much like one of our islands. The sand was white coral sand. There were no mountains and it was covered by very tall coconut trees. In the Maldives, we never let them grow so tall because we are eager to use the wood. The only difference between Providence and our islands was that there were pigs and dogs. The pigs were kept in pens and the dogs wandered about. The African people lived in a cluster of houses. They were much taller and stronger than us and we didn’t know how to communicate with them because they spoke only French. They used to laugh very loudly all of a sudden without any apparent reason and we found that very scary.

The Englishman was staying in a neat bungalow, at a distance from where the Africans lived. He was the only white person on the island and he lived alone in his house, which was a bit like the “Island Office” in our islands. There was a flag and some flowering trees planted close to it. During our stay there, our captain went every day to visit the Englishman and they had tea together. He had sent a radio message to his superiors about us and was awaiting instructions. We asked him for permission to pick some coconuts, because we had finished ours and we didn’t know how to cook without them.¹⁴ He allowed us to pick as many as we wanted. When he saw that one of our men was getting ready to climb a palm tree he said:

¹⁴ Coconuts are a basic item in Maldivian cuisine. It is a well-known fact in the islands that formerly Maldivian women didn’t know how to cook without coconuts.

“We just pick the ones that fall. Only robbers climb trees here.” Then he brought us to a place where there were many dry coconuts strewn over the ground.

Having noticed that there were some breadfruit trees on Providence, on another occasion we asked the Englishman whether we could pick some breadfruits, a common staple in our island. He was surprised. He didn’t know that they were edible and holding one of the fruits, he squinted and looked at it as if it were a bad thing. After asking one of the Africans who was with him, he told us that they used them as food for the pigs only. He added that, of course, we were allowed to take as many as we wanted to our ship. After what he had told us, we were apprehensive that the breadfruits there would taste bad, so we just took a few, but after trying them and finding out that they were excellent, we returned ashore to pick many more.

One day a large ship came to pick us up. We were sad to leave our veḍi, but we were at least allowed to take our cargo along with us. One or two days after leaving Providence, we arrived to the capital island of that territory, which was the island of Mahe in Seychelles.

Our spirits rose because it was a beautiful island, with nice streets and big buildings and we were put up in comfortable guest houses. However, it was quite an expensive place. As we stayed for over a month there, having to pay for our food and accommodation, we had to sell most of our merchandise. The local inhabitants were very friendly. Most of them were black Africans who knew little about the Maldives, although there were also a few locals of Indian origin looking very similar to our people. What surprised us most was to find out that not a single person in that place, ven among the most educated, had even heard about Muhammad Amīn, the leader of our country.

Finally one day we were informed by the local authorities that we had to board a ship going to Aden. We were extremely disappointed, for we had

told them that we wanted to go to Maldives. The English officials were polite and apologetic saying that there were no boats going to the Maldives from the Seychelles, but they assured us that Aden was a more important harbor. Thus, we found ourselves again on a large ship that carried us to another unknown destination. Our morale was very low, we were very homesick, our cargo had dwindled to almost nothing and, to make matters worse, some of us had fallen ill.

When we arrived to Aden, there was a ship bound for Cochin in the harbor and we were transferred to that vessel. Fortunately, it weighed anchor after only two days. Our trip was quite uneventful until we arrived to Cochin. From there we sailed to the Maldives and, after arriving in Male', it took still some weeks until we could find passage on a boat to sail further south to our home island.

We had been more than six months away from our island and we arrived exhausted, with empty hands. Some fireworks for the children and a few lengths of cloth for my wife was everything that was left from all my cargo. However, we were very happy to be alive and back home, among our own people. Some veḍis, after missing the Maldives, get lost at sea and no one ever returns. The traders and crew probably meet death at sea in despair and for Maldivians that is a dreadful way to die.

Even nowadays, Maldive boats traveling between Atolls occasionally lose their course and get lost in the ocean. If the survivors manage to be rescued, they make the headlines in the local papers when they return to the Maldives. The stories of their ordeals, often full of grisly details, are widely circulated because there is always great interest in them. Similarly, this interest is reflected in popular songs and poems. One of the most famous songs of Jēmu Doṅkamaṇā, a well-liked Maldivian singer, deals with the description of the terrible hardships some Maldivians lost at sea had to face.

Not only trading boats got lost in the Maldives. The possibility of being driven away by the wind and currents and ending up lost in the wide limitless ocean was always present, even on the smallest of journeys between neighboring islands. About three or four centuries ago a dōni from Fua Mulaku, with sixteen people aboard, was driven off course by a strong gale during a journey to Huvadū Atoll and eventually landed on the Chagos Islands, after being so badly damaged on a reef that it could not be repaired.

Back then the Chagos were uninhabited and covered by thick jungle. Since no one in Fua Mulaku could possibly know that their people were languishing there, the castaways found an ingenious way to communicate by tying up messages to the legs of frigate birds, which make their nests in those islands, before they headed north in their yearly migration. Back then Fua Mulaku people used to catch frigates for food and one of the messages was found. Subsequently a party was sent to look for them and the castaways were brought back home.¹⁵

Named by Portuguese geographers, the Chagos were settled in 1793 by the French who established an oil factory and brought African and South Indian people to work in their coconut plantations. The lepers of Ile de France (Mauritius) were also sent there to live. After the Napoleonic wars the Chagos became British. In time the inhabitants of the Chagos developed a French-based Creole and an identity of their own and were known as 'Ilois.' Following an agreement between the U.S. and the U.K., by which Diego Garcia was leased to the U.S. Military to set up a base, in 1973, all the Ilois were forcefully expelled from the handful of islands they inhabited (Diego Garcia, Egmore, Boddam, Takamaka, Ile du Coin, Ile Manoel and Grande Soeur). The about 1,400 Ilois were sent to live in a slum in Mauritius and given no compensation. Most of them long to go

¹⁵ Told in 1990 by Katībuge Ibrahīm Saīdu of Diguvāṇḍo, Fua Mulaku.

back to their islands, but so far have not been successful. The Chagos are meanwhile uninhabited, except for the U.S. Base.¹⁶

In Maldives the Chagos are known as Ho||avai in the South and Fō|avahi in the North. Even in the remote and strongly oceanic Southern Maldivian Atolls, knowledge about their neighboring island group was only vague and fragmentary. Ho||avai, according to Southern Maldivian old men, was a generic name for all the islands and island groups South and Southwest of the Maldives. These included not only the Chagos, but also Seychelles, Mauritius & Reunion and Rodrigues, all of which were uninhabited until as late as the 16th or 17th century.

When pressed for information about Ho||avai, Aḍḍu Atoll —and also Fua Mulaku— people claim that their old folks mentioned that there are very big hermit crabs (coconut crabs) there. Stories about those crabs gave probably origin to the giant hermit crab so often quoted in Maldivian folklore. Also there is mention about giant turtles, which do exist in distant Aldabra —thousands of miles to the west of the Chagos— as well as about islands with a great quantity of birds. One well known fact is that the frigate birds which come seasonally to their Atoll breed in Ho||avai.

Historically, Maldivians have shown but little interest in those far-flung, formerly uninhabited, expanses of the Indian Ocean and there was no effort to exploit the resources of the Chagos from the Maldives. The great distances involved —the distance between Gan in Aḍḍu Atoll, the southernmost island of the Maldives and Ile Yeye in Peros Banhos Atoll, the closest island of the Chagos, is about 500 Km; and the distance between Aḍḍu Atoll and Mahe Island in Seychelles exceeds 2,000 Km— made a hypothetical journey unappealing. Moreover, the lack of safe anchorages in between and the meager potential trade benefit from those few scattered island groups didn't justify such a hazardous journey.

¹⁶ 'Diego Garcia Tropical Times' Vol 2, Nos. 23, 24

According to the island lore it is clear that Maldivians only visited those remote islands by accident and that they by no means endeavored to settle there. Thus, the Maldives has remained the only island group in the vast area of the Central Indian Ocean having supported a population with a truly indigenous culture since very ancient times.

1.1.2 VILLAGES IN THE OCEAN

In the low, lush tropical coral islands of the Maldivian Atolls, villages were located in the middle of the island. Owing to their independent spirit, Maldivians used to build their homes in a haphazard way about the island. Thick coconut groves and other vegetation encircled the human settlements, so that no house would be seen from the sea. The only constructions with a 'beach view' would be makeshift sheds for boatbuilding or boat-repair and lonely 'ziyārai' shrines. Nowadays, owing to a very high birth rate and a drastic reduction of the mortality rate, some islands have become overpopulated. Naifaru and Hinnavaru (Fādippoļu Atoll) and Kandoḷudu (Māḷosmaḍulu Atoll), the latter abandoned after the 2004 tsunami, are examples of islands completely covered by homesteads.

There are a number of reasons for hiding human settlements. Traditionally Maldivians didn't think that it was good for a person to look too much at the sea, because one's 'heart would turn to stone'. This sentence, in Divehi means that one would lose one's memory and the capacity of concentration, becoming absent-minded, finding it difficult to concentrate on, for example, reading.¹⁷ It does not mean that one would become merciless

Furthermore, many trees didn't grow well if the salt-spray hit them directly, only bōshi (*Heliotropium foertherianum*) with velvety grey-green leaves and magū or gera (*Scaevola taccada*) with fresh-looking glossy yellowish-green leaves; and also larger trees, such as ḷos (*Pisonia grandis*), diggā (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) and kāṇi or kauṇi (*Cordia subcordata*).¹⁸ They are common in the shore of every Maldivian island and just need sand and

¹⁷ Source Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī (1982).

¹⁸ Magū, bōṣi and ḷos leaves could be used as food in times of famine.

seawater to grow. Therefore, the first barrier of resilient bushes growing close to the waterline and the second barrier of coconut trees would effectively protect the more salt-sensitive plants growing in the interior of the island, such as bananas, papayas and breadfruit trees. For the same reason, paths were narrow and winding, and the point where a path met the beach was considered an important geographical feature in the Maldivian settlement pattern.

Such points were called fannu in Divehi, the language of the Maldives, and they were like the ‘gates’ or ‘mouths’ through which the village inside the island opened to the sea. People went to the waterline with a purpose. Men would go to the sea to fish, girls would go to the beach to scrub pots, all people would go regularly to answer calls of nature, and sometimes boys would go there to play. However, unless there was a necessity to go there, people would stay as much as possible in their villages inside the island.

The interior of the islands back then was a green, pleasant and cozy place, admirably described by H.C.P. Bell when he visited the Maldives in 1922:¹⁹

“A thousand trees towards heaven their summits rear” making of the clean-kept peaceful roads “with leafy hair overgrown”, cool umbrageous “cloisters”, almost continuous in their extension. Houses there are in plenty, but so well embowered and hidden by sheltering fences and skilful adaptation, as to give the effect of a somewhat close-set rustic village; with little suggestion of regular streets and habitations ... to mar the picturesque peaceful tout ensemble. In roads, gardens, houses —no matter what or where— “order in most admired disorder” rules.

However, during the nineteen-forties, the self-contained world of the Maldivian islanders experienced a terrible shock. Muhammad Amīn

¹⁹ H.C.P. Bell’s Monograph, ‘The Maldivian Islands.’

Doṣimēna Kilēgefānu, who ruled first as regent (since 1944) of an absentee Radun (king) and then as President of the first Republic he proclaimed in 1953, the last year of his rule, decided to build new avenues in the islands. The drive was allegedly to 'give a modern facade' to the country. Nevertheless, given Muhammad Amīn's militaristic inclinations, it was probably a counter-insurgency measure (of preventive character, for there was no insurgency within the country back then). Having studied in Europe, the new ruler had knowledge of modern warfare and introduced many reforms in the Maldivian military.

Amīn introduced leader-cultism in the islands. He was the first Maldivian leader wearing a military uniform at public events. His portrait had to be displayed in every office, public building and school throughout the Maldivian Islands. His desire was to have an avenue in every island to stage parades where he himself would be leading his modernized army. Soldiers were given khaki uniforms to replace the ancient black-and-white fēli waistcloth they used to wear.

Under the direct supervision of Muhammad Amīn, the entire Maldivian population, in every island of the country, was ordered to work in the construction of wide, straight streets. These were traced crisscrossing every island from beach to beach and many valuable trees were sacrificed in the process. The punishments for any islander shrinking from work were unduly harsh, for these avenues had to be built in record time. Special government officers were dispatched to every important island in order to check that the work was advancing at a fast pace.

Thus, men folk were not allowed to go fishing and spent their days working hard, felling and uprooting trees, digging and carrying earth from one place to the other. Since no modern machinery was used in the process, conscripted workers had to use their bare hands or rudimentary small tools. Island people said those were terrible times; that womenfolk and children went hungry for lack of fish. I met the widow of a man who was killed, tortured to death, in a punishing cell made especially for those

who disobeyed government orders and went fishing or to gather coconuts to feed their families. The number of people who died in those circumstances was never recorded.

Islanders failed to understand the rationale behind such broad streets going literally from nowhere to nowhere and allowing the deadly salt-spray to enter right into the heart of the island. Traditionally, the paths within islands were winding and shady and, according to the islanders it was a pleasure to walk on them. Those paths were also winding, not only to avoid the salt-spray, but also to hamper the movements of certain evil spirits that moved in straight lines, like the malevolent spirits of the dead ancestors, known as kaḍḍovi, and the feared vigani as well. This metaphysical dimension points at the relationship between the layout of the village and the need of sanctifying space. In the words of J.C. Levi-Strauss: *"We have then to recognize that the plan of the village had a still deeper significance that the one we have ascribed to it from the sociological point of view."*²⁰

More often than not, though, people were sore for having to sacrifice so much badly needed good soil and the cool shade, and the fruits of different kinds the trees could offer. All individual islands in the Maldives are very small (the largest being barely 5 sq/km) and the total land surface of the whole archipelago lies around a mere 300 sq/km. Considering that there is so little of it, it is hardly surprising that land is so precious in the Maldives. Therefore, practically all Maldivians, except for a few staunch supporters of their charismatic leader, Muhammad Amīn, considered the broad avenues to be a pointless waste.

The traditional pattern of urbanization was brutally disrupted too. Maldivian villages which had been originally clusters of homesteads —every house auspiciously aligned towards the proper orientation determined by

²⁰ J.C. Levi-Strauss, "Tristes Tropiques." Cf. 1.4.1 'The First Mosques'.

the nakatteriyā or astrologer— became long alignments of houses stretched along the new avenues. All this had —and is still having— unforeseen traumatic effects upon the vitality of the Maldivian society and many of those adverse effects have not even been fathomed, for the traditional position of the house and the orientation of its door in relation of the cardinal points had a paramount influence on social organization and attitudes.²¹

The new streets had to be fringed on both sides by coral walls. Thus, much sand, lime and coral stones were needed. The new homesteads delimited by walls, increased people's privacy and did away with the custom of walking from one house to the other through the spaces between house proper and kitchen. This area was known as medugōti in most of the Maldives and as medovatte in the southern end of the country. Shaded by plantains, drumstick trees or fruit trees, the medugōti was where Maldivians, who used to live outdoors sharing the company of their neighbors, spent most of their lives.

Most men and women in the Atolls claim that the new urban disposition led to the exacerbation of island rivalries and to the loss of community life. Many also blame the general growth of pride, demoralization and selfishness among islanders to the privacy and isolation of walled-in compounds. Thus, much of the island social fabric was destroyed by such an apparently harmless action as building new streets.

²¹ J.C. Levi-Strauss analyzed this phenomenon among an Amazonian tribe, the Bororo. The colonial authorities were aware of this fact and in order to stupefy and neutralize the natives, they moved them to villages where houses were arrayed in parallel lines. "...*Désorientés par rapport aux points cardinaux, privées du plan qui fournit un argument à leur savoir, les indigènes perdent rapidement le sens des traditions, comme si leurs systèmes social et religieux (nous allons voir qu'ils sont indissociables) étaient trop compliqués pour se passer du schéma rendu patent par le plan du village et dont leurs gestes quotidiens rafraichissent perpétuellement les contours.*" Op. Cit.

After the traditional urbanization pattern was callously disregarded and swept away by Muhammad Amīn, no one has come up with an alternative idea. This misguided plan is, even now, the only blueprint existing for island urbanization in the Maldives. Therefore, the local Island and Atoll Offices throughout the country keep still opening new straight, broad avenues and enforce the building of walls lining them, exactly as in Amīn's time. Since the mid-nineteen-nineties, however, some ecological laws have been implemented to protect the reefs. The indiscriminate quarrying of coral stones has been restricted. Sand and gravel (coral products too) keep being quarried for the construction of walls though.

In 1985, one teacher in Mīdū, Addū Atoll, an island crisscrossed by a broad, desolate and surrealistic looking avenue, glaring white in the harsh tropical midday sun, told me that most of his island's people thought walls were useless and didn't see the point in building them. As coral stones and lime were becoming rare, they were making a sacrifice to build the walls, considering that some of their own little houses were not even walled, but thatched. He concluded by saying that the government "doesn't realize how poor some people are."

All these troubles could have been avoided if the common people's opinion had been valued or respected. Muhammad Amīn is now considered to be a great leader in the official Maldivian propaganda. He is called 'The Great Modernizer.' However, his methods were feudal: to build his avenues, all able men in each island were recruited to do forced labor and were not allowed to attend to their families. Every morning the island men had to go to the empty space close to the government office and stand in ranks. Then, at eight o'clock they marched towards the road-building sites.

Anyone who reported late was beaten with a stick. One man said that he had been given many lashes when he had been very late. If someone refused to come he would be locked in a small, stinking cell. Even though the actual republic was proclaimed only in 1953, the last year of

Muhammad Amīn's rule, all those years of penury are known as 'Jumhurī Duvahī' —the days of the republic— in the collective memory of Fua Mulaku people. According to one islander who lived through those times:²²

"When we had to open the new avenues in our island, many of those streets cut straight through marshy ground. Thus, we had to bring sand and gravel from the beach in baskets to the working sites. We also had to uproot the stumps of very large trees. We used iron rods and ropes. Work was very hard and we came back home exhausted.

*If we would have been fishing or climbing coconut palms, we would have been exhausted too, but at least we would bring fish or palm-sap home. Now we were arriving home empty-handed. Many children would die because of this. We were getting so little food that we were forced to eat papaya stems, plantain roots and different kinds of leaves.*²³

"The men who worked were given very little and very bad food. Not like the food you get at home. My neighbor was jailed after he had been unloading sugar sacks from a veḍi trading ship. He was so hungry he pulled a little bit of sugar from one end of the sack with his finger. He was seen licking his fingers by a supervisor and was reported. Then he was brought to the koṣi (jail) straight away. His wife, an aunt of mine, went to plead to the authorities for his release, but was rudely sent back home under threats. Prisoners were given almost no food. They couldn't get the customary daily bath and were given no medical treatment. Thus, my neighbor died after a few months.

²² I have chosen to protect this person's identity.

²³ Certain leaves such as digutiyara (*Senna occidentalis*), muranga (*Moringa oleifera*) massāgu (*Amaranthus* spp.) and kuḷḷafila or gōramfau (*Launaea sarmentosa*), among others, were traditionally valued by Maldivians as food, especially when fish was scarce.

“When we washed him for burial, we saw that his body was full of horribly infected, stinking wounds. He was not the only one to suffer that fate though, for many more people died in that jail. A lot of women and children starved to death during those days too, sitting silently in their homes. Their husbands were not able to bring any food home and they were too terrified to complain to the authorities.

“We didn’t know why all this was happening to us. We were not informed properly of anything. They said that there would be fewer mosquitoes on the island, but we didn’t understand what all that heavy work had to do with insects, and anyway there were the same amount of mosquitoes, if not more, afterwards. Our old people, racking their brains for an explanation, said: “Muhammad Amīn is the friend of the Englishmen. He wants to kill us all and give our islands to them, so they will come here with their cars and lorries. That is why he makes us build those avenues.”

Muhammad Amīn is still a controversial figure in the Maldives and his ten years of iron-fisted rule disgusted many islanders. The Maldives was then a British protectorate, but Amīn is officially considered a nationalist hero and he had, and still has, a group of fervent supporters. According to Koli Hasan Maniku, a local historian, his tenure was a ‘one-man-show.’ On the one hand, he introduced necessary reforms, but on the other hand, his contempt for the plight of the common man in hard times earned him fierce enemies all over the islands. It cannot be denied that he had a vision for the future of his country, but he adamantly disregarded advice and lacked the necessary imagination to adapt development policies to the needs of the Maldivian Islands. Besides, in spite of his ‘modern’ image, Muhammad Amīn’s private life was rather like that of a feudal despot, as he maintained a large number of concubines from different islands. Thus, his modernization campaign was perceived by the islanders to be a brutally carried out implementation of his personal whims and fancies.

Last, but not least, Muhammad Amīn showed the same contempt towards autochthonous customs that certain rather bumptious Arab ‘holy men’,

exalted to undeserved high positions, had repeatedly displayed throughout Maldivian history. (Cf. 4.3.2 'Foreign Masters') The period of his rule is remembered as a long and difficult decade by most islanders who had to live through it. Southerners claim that his harsh and insensitive policies made them loathe the central government. Therefore, it is not unlikely that the resulting discontentment led, less than one decade later, to the self-proclamation of the Suvadive government in the three southernmost atolls.

The Suvadive secession was then a belated antagonistic reaction, unprecedented in the history of Maldives, towards Muhammad Amīn's excessively centralistic policies. The ancient absolute power of the Maldivian Radun—which Amīn made not the slightest effort to relinquish—coupled with modern methods of communication and control, translated itself into a centralism that stifled the traditional economy and the independent and laid-back island way of life.²⁴

The Suvadive state was born out of unresolved historical grievances, for ethnically and culturally there was not much justification for a division of the Maldives. Even though discernible linguistic differences exist between the North of Maldives, including Minicoy, and the South of the archipelago—every one of the three Southern Atolls speaking a markedly divergent variant of the language—the Maldivians are a homogeneous ethnic group. Oddly enough, there is more linguistic homogeneity between Haddummati Atoll and Minicoy—even though 700 Km distant from each other—than between Huvadū Atoll and Fua Mulaku, which are only 60 Km apart.

The fact that, even in the wake of extreme hostility towards Male', the secessionist Suvadive government adopted the Male' form of Divehi for

²⁴ Sultān Abdul Majīd was a Maldivian gentleman living in Egypt who had no interest in going back to his native country. Thus, Muhammad Amīn became the de facto ruler of the country even before he proclaimed the First Republic.

official correspondence shows the degree of affinity between the northern and southern atolls.

For official purposes and correspondence, the three Southern languages are considered coarse, the reason being that, stemming from more egalitarian backgrounds, they lack a courtly or ceremonial language. On the other hand, Male' Bas has the —rather feudal and affected— Emmeh Mā goiy used formerly to address the aristocracy. This language is still now in use to address high government officials. Mā goiy, a second-level ceremonial language is used to address minor officials.

The 'United Suvadive Islands' republic was a new country formed by the atolls of Huvadu and Aḍḍu and the island of Fua Mulaku. It was proclaimed on March 13th 1959 in the evening from its capital island Hitadū in Aḍḍu Atoll, under the light of kerosene lamps (bigaru). But the new state of the Suvadive Islands would never be recognized by any other government. The secession ended on November 1st 1963 and its leader, Abdullah Afīfu, was exiled to the Seychelles with his immediate family members. He remained there until his death in 1993. President Afīfu's local name was Eḷa Dīdīge Alī Dīdīge Afīfu and he belonged to a good family of Hitadū.

The four years of the secessionist Suvadive government are remembered as times of penury and famine by the people of Southern Maldives. They couldn't send their veḍi trading ships to Ceylon for fear that they would be seized by the local authorities, who took up the cause of the government in Male' and seized the few Southern veḍis that arrived at Colombo or Galle in September and October 1959. Those were days of anguish when people were waiting, anxious at the delay, for boats that never arrived.

False rumors spread easily and, in the Southern Atolls, men, women and even children, kept assuring each other, full of eager anticipation, that such-and-such boat was about to arrive with badly needed goods.

Ultimately, the arrivals never materialized and those vessels have remained associated in the popular memory with very long periods of vain expectancy. Expressions such as ‘Kobā Barubāri bōṭu?’ have been perpetuated in many tongue-in-cheek local sayings, enriching the island lore.²⁵

This anxiety with which the trading boats were expected during the days of the Suvadive state is a good indication of how vital trade with the neighboring continent is.²⁶ The Maldives is not a place where people can afford to spend their lives “lotus eating”, a myth that some authors, including serious researchers such as H.C.P. Bell, have propagated and which downplays the importance of the fact that the inhabitants of this long Atoll chain could not survive in isolation.

²⁵ ‘Where is Bārubāri boat?’ Other widely-known Southern popular expressions connected with trade mock the dishonesty of traders who claimed that merchandise trusted to them by islanders was rotten or that their chicken died. One of them is: ‘Mannānu datere e’likah.’ (Like Mannān’s trip).

²⁶ The short-lived and doomed effort to build a new nation in the central Indian Ocean inspired a popular British fiction writer to write a thriller based on the desire of a young and adventurous English heir to help the people of the isolated Suvadive Islands. Hammond Innes, ‘The Strode Venturer’

1.2.1 THE PROBLEM OF THE MALDIVE PAST

There are very few historical documents throwing light on the past of the Maldivians. Even many documents locally accepted as history are mostly myth. Archaeological evidence shows that there was a flourishing culture in the islands before the last Buddhist king decided to convert to Islam. The precise reasons why this monarch decided to abandon his ancestral Buddhist faith are not known, but edicts written on copper plates (*lōmāfānu*), make it very clear that the general conversion to Islam was ordered by the king. Some of the oldest *lōmāfānu* are from the islands of Gan, Isdū and Dambidū in Haddummati Atoll, where there were large Buddhist monasteries. These royal edicts were etched towards the end of the twelfth century AD and the Isdū *lōmāfānu* was issued precisely in the year AD 1194. However, the conversion of the Maldives to Islam was in AD 1153 according to the Maldivian 'Tārikh' chronicle.

The *lōmāfānu* were written in the curly Evēla²⁷ form of the Divehi akuru²⁸ or old Maldivian alphabet, which has strong similarities with the Tamil Grantha script of the 7th century Pallava and Paṇḍya dynasties.²⁹

²⁷ The ancient Divehi alphabet. 'Evēla akuru' was a tentative name given by H.C.P. Bell to differentiate it from the more recent forms of the same script (divehi akuru) which were in use between the 12th and the 19th centuries. H.C.P. Bell, 'The Maldivian Islands. Monograph on the History, Archaeology and Epigraphy.'

²⁸ Wilhelm Geiger and H.C.P. Bell in their writings erroneously called this alphabet 'Dives akuru', but the word 'Dives' is a misspelling. The real name of that alphabet, as quoted by Boḍufenvaluge Sīdī in his authoritative work, is 'Divehi akuru', meaning 'Island letters' or 'Maldivian letters.' Previously Christopher and Young had referred to this alphabet as 'Divehi Hakaru'. W. Geiger, 'Maldivian Linguistic Studies.' H.C.P. Bell 'Excerpta Maldiviana.' Boḍu Fenvaluge Sīdī, 'Divehi Akuru' Vol 1. Lieut. I.A. Young & W. Christopher, 'Memoirs on the Inhabitants of the Maldivian Islands.'

In certain documents, a form of old Nagari or Protobengali script is also present, which shows that there were contacts with the centers of Buddhist learning of Nalaṇḍa, Ratnagiri and Vikramaśīla. These must have taken place from the 8th century AD onwards, when Buddhist culture revived and flourished in Eastern India owing to the patronage of the Pāla kings of Bengal.³⁰

The religious and cultural relationship between Maldives and Bengal was made possible by regular seaborne trade with that region of the Subcontinent facilitated by favorable winds and currents.³¹ The large wooden trunks used by traders in their journeys were known in Divehi as ‘baṅgaḷufoṣi’ (Bengali box) and in the Divehi oral tradition there are myths about the importance of trade with Bengal in the distant past.

“Atirige DonDīdī” is a Maldivian legend referring to Bengali merchant ships visiting the Maldives once yearly; its main theme is the opening of the first trading post (fihāra) in Male’ through the marriage between DonDīdī, a noble Maldivian lady, and a handsome Bengali trader who later dies at sea. Their son, who in the story always scrupulously follows the advice given by his mother, is said to have challenged the ruler of Male’ and opened the first trading store close to the harbor.

²⁹ Some authors claim that the old Divehi script resembles the medieval Sinhalese Elu alphabet, but the fact is that the affinities with the Tamil Grantha script and with the earlier forms of Malayalam script are much greater from a graphic point of view, even though the Divehi language itself is closer to the Sinhala language

³⁰ The Pāla kingdom included Bengal (made up of present-day West Bengal and Bangladesh), Bihar and part of Orissa (Ganjām).

³¹ Trade between Sri Lanka and Bengal also flourished during that time. When the Pāla Kingdom fell, Mahayāna and Vajrayāna influence in Ceylon came to an end. In time, the Buddhist kingdom of Sri Lanka became practically landlocked. Nandasena Mudiyanse, ‘Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon.’

The Pāla dynasties were rulers over the last Buddhist coastal kingdom in South Asia. In the middle of the 12th century the beleaguered Pala kingdom was invaded by the Sena dynasty, which promoted the Brahminical religion, followed by the Muslim invasions led by Muhammad Khilji. The latter culminated with the annihilation of the Pala dynasty and the plundering and destruction of the Nalaṇḍa and Vikramasila Buddhist centres of learning. The disappearance of the Pala kingdom led to the decline of Buddhism in the area formerly under its influence, followed by the rise of Islam and, in a lesser measure, of Brahminism. The Muslim armies went on to thoroughly destroy the great centers of Buddhist learning named above. It is said that the vast seven-storied library of Nalaṇḍa University kept burning for six months and that fifteen thousand monks were burned to death trapped inside while having their midday meal. Some of the monks who escaped the massacre took refuge in Burma, Nepal and Tibet. These events took place in the era of the conversion of the Maldives to Islam.

Even at that time, the actual Maldivian archipelago was under the control of a single king (Radun) or royal family. This king must have been very secure in his power to be able to deal with the strains of the country's mass-conversion from Buddhism to Islam. In the Dambidū lōmāfānu the Radun addresses his edict to all islands between Kelā (in Tiladummati Atoll), one of the northernmost islands of the group, and Aḍḍu (Atoll) in the Southern end.

It is interesting to note that Maliku (Minicoy), a culturally Maldivian island under Indian administration is not mentioned in those documents, even though it is known that, besides sharing the Buddhist religion, this isolated atoll already had both ethnic and linguistic affinities with the rest of the Maldivian Islands at that time.³²

³² The area where the Buddhist ruins are located in Minicoy is locally known as 'Salliballu'. Source: Archaeological Survey of India"

Oral tradition says that in centuries past Minicoy was devastated by a cyclone that broke most of the coconut trees. Since their island was then ruled by the Maldivian king, Minicoy islanders sent a delegation to Male' asking for financial assistance. The king, however, told them that he had not enough money in his treasury; consequently this delegation went onwards to the Malabar Coast, where they found favor with the king of Cannanore who agreed to help them rebuild their island. Thereafter the Minicoy people owed allegiance to this kingdom of the SW Indian shore.³³

However few, a number of archaeological remains from the Buddhist period have survived in many of the most important islands of the Maldives. Thanks to the *lōmāfānu* it is known that the monasteries in Haddummati Atoll were of great importance within the Maldivian Kingdom. In other atolls, many islands have mounds or low hills which indicate where a Buddhist Stupa was located.³⁴ In fact, these remains quite accurately indicate which islands were inhabited during Buddhist times.

Unfortunately, these mounds have been heavily vandalized, especially in the recent past when certain ancestral superstitious beliefs were overcome. According to those beliefs, going near old ruins or interfering in any way with them, like removing stones or earth, would bring disgrace to the intruder. As an example, in Māļos (Ari Atoll), a man who had tried to break a little hemispherical coral block (probably a small Stupa) known locally as Muḍu, complained that he had horrible nightmares that same night.³⁵

³³ Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī, Fua Mulaku Island

³⁴ Stupas were said to have been built by the Redin. V. Raṣoveṣi: *Havittā uhe haudahau, Redin taneke hedī ihau* (How tall is the Caitya! A Redin place built in ancient times). Thor Heyerdahl made much speculation around that word, but it is just a name that Maldivians used in the first centuries after conversion to refer to their Buddhist ancestors.

³⁵ Source: Ahumadu Salīmu, Victory House, Māļos, Ari Atoll.

Another cause of heavy destruction during recent years has been archaeological excavations on those sites themselves. Regrettably, these investigations were either done carelessly, or left the site unprotected after excavation. The removal of the sheltering jungle exposed the site to subsequent vandalism. Often local inhabitants plundered the place in the vain hope of finding gold or other treasures, as soon as the archaeologists and accompanying government officials left the island.³⁶

Perhaps the fact that most endangers the preservation of ancient archaeological remnants in the Maldivian Islands is that among Maldivians, save rare exceptions, there is a definite lack of pride in their ancient history, especially in what has come to be labeled as 'pre-Islamic'. Hence, it is not surprising that disrespect for the ruins of Buddhist monuments is very common among islanders of all walks of life.

Much of the general disinterest in their ancient cultural heritage lies in the confusion arising from the lack of definition of Maldivian cultural identity. In every Maldivian mind there is a sharp struggle between inherited customs and Muslim ideology. Since this conflict remains unresolved, there is a widespread feeling of guilt and frustration at being unable to adjust the ancestral cultural heritage to the Islamic ideological pattern.

After the country's mass-conversion to Islam in the 12th century AD, the culture of the Maldivians and the Islamic ideals were only overlapping to a certain extent. Large areas of the Maldivian cultural heritage had no compatibility with Islamic ideology (albeit these have been greatly reduced during the 1980's and 90s as government-sponsored Arabic cultural influence grew exponentially). At the same time, all through the post-Buddhist history of the country there were large areas of Islamic cultural patterns incompatible with the ancestral ideals of Maldivians.

³⁶ Source: Magieduruge Ibrahim Dīdī, Fua Mulaku Island

To illustrate the latter point, when the Moroccan traveler Ibn Batūta had been appointed as supreme judge by the Maldivian queen and ordered the hands of people guilty of stealing to be cut off according to Islamic Sharia' law, most spectators in the hall fainted.³⁷ Although this event took place in the 13th century, average Maldivians still privately consider acts of violence, even if committed in the name of the religious law, barbaric. Paradoxically, these strengths, fruits of an inherited cultural refinement that the Maldivians possess as a nation, have been made to appear as their weakness by elements propounding greater arabization.

Always suspicious of any type of religious syncretism, the government has been responsible for the enforcement of religious orthodoxy in the island communities. This activity has known no respite throughout Maldivian history and, as a result, it has brought about periodical repression of all type of Divehi cultural expressions deemed un-Islamic. As this has been the pattern since the 12th century, there was no small amount of perplexity in far-off islands at the paradox of a sudden official interest in preserving the remainders of "Kāfir ruins" in recent times, when tourists and foreign archaeologists have begun to pay regular visits to ancient Maldivian Buddhist sites.

Undoubtedly, the most conspicuous physical destruction happened at the time when the King ordered the islanders to abandon their ancestral religious practices. The converted monarch was ruthless in his resolve to erase all traces of the former religion of the Maldivians. According to the *Isdū lōmāfānu*, monks from monasteries of the Southern Atoll of Haddummati were brought to Male' and beheaded.³⁸

³⁷ Ibn Batūta, 'Travels in Asia and Africa'.

³⁸ H.A. Maniku & G.D. Wijayawardhana, 'Isdhoo Loamaafaanu'.

All anthropomorphic and zoomorphic iconography and other important religious symbols were systematically vandalized. The Gamu lōmāfānu tells us that Satihirutalu (the Chatravali crowning a Stupa) were broken to disfigure the numerous Stupas. It tells us also that statues of Vairocana, the transcendent Buddha of the middle world region, were destroyed; and the destruction was not limited to sculptures.

The wealth of manuscripts —probably written on screwpine leaves— that Maldivian monks in their Buddhist monasteries must have produced was either burnt or otherwise so thoroughly eliminated that it has disappeared without leaving any trace. Therefore there are no samples of paintings from the Maldivian Buddhist period itself and also there is no record of Maldivian Buddhist religious figures.

The only actual remains of the art of those times are a few sculptures and etchings on coral stone. Most of these were preserved in a room at the National Museum in Male', where they were destroyed by vandals following political unrest in February 2012.

1.2.2 THE STORY OF KOIMALA

Koimala's legend is the oral tradition of the first 'ruler of noble race' in the Maldives. It is a very old story and there are many versions of it throughout the Islands. Most variants stress the fact that certain aristocratic newcomers from the North —the Indian Subcontinent— began their rule over the archipelago from certain specific islands before finally settling in Male'. Since the main theme remains very similar throughout the narrative, discrepancies between one version and another are largely marginal.³⁹

Koimala's Legend

"Long ago, in the northern mainland"⁴⁰ lived a poor couple in a hut deep in the forest. One day the husband went to hunt and didn't return. His wife, who was pregnant with her first child, went to look for her husband, dreading that something had happened to him. While she was walking through the forest, the woman suddenly felt the pains of childbirth. She sat under a nikabilissa tree⁴¹ and gave birth there alone. While she was lying there exhausted, a tiger jumped out of a bush and devoured the woman. Since the child was hidden between two roots, the tiger didn't see him and went away.

³⁹ This is the abridged version of the story the late Gōnahijje Fatmaifānu from Fua Mulaku told Meṭa Muhammadu of Miskimmago in the same island. Collected and translated in 1990.

⁴⁰ Uturu Karā, (Northern Coast) the Indian Subcontinent. A few versions have Ceylon, but since the same mythical 'noble settlers' of that country were said to hail from North India as well, this difference is understandable

⁴¹ The Aśoka tree (*Saraca indica*). This tree is mentioned in many Maldivian legends and tales for children.

A herd of cows arrived after some time at that particular spot and one cow with a full udder happened to stand right above the child while she was grazing. The child felt for the nipple with his lips and sucked the milk. The cow, whose swollen udders had been hurting, felt relieved and so returned every day to that spot under the nikabilissa tree. In this manner the baby grew and as soon as he could crawl he followed the herd of cows.⁴²

Years passed and the child became a handsome boy, but he walked on all fours and said only “moo” like the cows. Hunters who spotted him in the jungle told the king about this wonder. His interest aroused, the monarch went out with his court into the jungle. A trap was set and the boy was caught in a net. He was brought to the palace in a cage. The king invited all the learned men and doctors of his kingdom to see this amazing creature. They agreed that the child was not a monster, but a normal human being. Teachers were appointed for him and soon he learned to walk upright and to talk. The king remarked that he was an exceptionally handsome young man and gave him the name Maleffadakoi (the boy like a flower). Soon the monarch discovered that he was very wise and honest too and trusted him more than anyone else.

One day the king asked Maleffadakoi: “During your life in the wilderness, what is the greatest wonder you have seen? “

Then the young man told the following story: “One day I was walking with the cows by the coast⁴³ and I saw seven large ships sailing at a distance. Suddenly an enormous fish came out of the waters, opened its jaws and

⁴² The story of Aputra in the Tamil epic Manimekhalai, tells us that a heavily pregnant Brahmin pilgrim woman on her way to Kaniyakumari gave birth to a son and abandoned him in a palm grove. A cow passing nearby, hearing the cries of the hungry baby, came close, licked its whole body, and then, for seven days, fed it with her milk, protecting it from all harm. Shattan, 'Manimekhalai.'

⁴³ The Divehi word used here by the storyteller was 'kināri', a word used only in poetic speech

swallowed the seven vessels in one gulp. But before the fish could plunge back into the depths, a huge bird came from the sky and devoured the fish. However, the bird had flown but a short distance when an immense snake came out of a hole in a mountain and gulped the bird.”

The king asked in amazement: “Would you be able now to show me that mountain?” The boy agreed and, as it was in a very distant place, the next days were spent preparing for the journey.

After traveling a long distance, the king along with Maleffadakoi and his retinue, arrived at the mighty mountain. They all stared at the gaping hole in awe, as the snake could come out at any moment. The king ordered that large quantities of wood be thrown into that hole. During the next days, thousands of the king’s slaves carried logs of wood and dumped them into the hole day and night, but it was so deep that it took three whole months to fill it. Then the king ordered his slaves to set fire to the wood. The pit burned for many days and the whole mountain became so hot that it took as many days to cool.

Finally, one day they climbed the mountain and stood close to the hole. There the king ordered that a rope be thrown down and asked his warriors whether they dared to go into the pit. As no one of them dared, Maleffadakoi said he would go down himself. As he went on his long descent, disappearing down into the depths of the mountain, the king waited anxiously for Maleffadakoi to come up. A long time passed and, as the monarch was repenting of having let his trusted friend climb down the hole, the boy reappeared out of the darkness unscathed. He showed the king a fistful of gold dust and said: “I found it down there.”

The king realized that it was the purest gold he had ever seen and asked: “Is there a lot of it down there?” and the boy answered that at the bottom of the pit there was nothing else but gold dust. However, he couldn’t tell down to which depth. Then the king ordered all his slaves to bring all this treasure to the surface and to transport it to his palace. After arduous

work and a long journey back, the slaves carried so many basketfuls of gold dust that the palace vaults were overflowing with it.

The king was very pleased. His kingdom had never been so wealthy. Full of gratitude, he went to Maleffadakoi to tell him: "I owe my good fortune to you. Ask me any favour you want and I will grant it to you."

The young man said: "The only thing I want is a large ship with a crew of experienced sailors and a load of gold dust." The kind monarch readily agreed, thinking it was a small price to pay for the blessings the boy had brought upon him and his kingdom. Once Maleffadakoi got his ship, he bade farewell to the king and sailed away from the coast, into the Indian Ocean.

The reference to the nikabilissa tree at the beginning of the story is particularly meaningful. This tree with its sagging branches of rich, orange-colored blossoms is one of the most auspicious trees in Indian lore.⁴⁴ Very ancient legends associate it with young maidens (Skt. Śālabhanjikās), symbolizing fertility and beauty, and it is also one of the symbols of Shiva. The Buddha himself is said to have been born under a nikabilissa tree.

The cow is a revered animal in Indian tradition and it is both a privilege and a duty to lead and look after the cows. Stories like the Raghuvamśa describe how the hero's valour and selflessness are tested by living along with a cow in the wilderness.⁴⁵ In the Tamil work Periyapuraṇam, saint Tirumūlar feels sorry for a herd of cows whose cowherd Mūlan had died. Using his yogic powers, Tirumūlar enters Mūlan's body and revives it.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See Shakti M. Gupta, 'Plant Myths and Tradition in India' and also Naveen Patnaik, 'The Garden of Life.'

⁴⁵ Kalidāsa, 'Raghuvamśa' Canto 2.

⁴⁶ "...the cows were overjoyed by this." S. Rajam, 'Periapuranam'

Furthermore, the beauty of the boy and the fact that he was leading a herd of cows could be representative of god Shiva (or possibly of Murugan). In his benevolent aspect Shiva is described as very handsome (Skt. Sundaram), as well as as the 'Lord of the Cows' (Skt. Paśupati)⁴⁷ And in this context the reference to a snake, one of Shiva's attributes, has some relevance too.

The animals swallowing each other in succession appear in one of the versions of the Rāmāyaṇa,⁴⁸ in which Rāmā, while the monkeys are building a bridge across to Lankā, asks the great Ṛṣi Vālmīki what kind of creatures there are in the great ocean. Vālmīki's answer was that "there is a creature which swallows fish called Timiṇ, there is another which swallows Timiṇ and still another who swallows the one who swallows Timiṇ."

Nevertheless, the snake, the mighty hole, the burning mountain and the gold, are very ancient symbols and they are associated with the Naga cult and Dēvi, or goddess, worship. The identification of both the snake and goddess cults is very ancient and characteristic of the Indian subcontinent. The great hole out of which a giant snake had issued forth is akin to Mahābila, the great hole out of which the Dēvi came out and burned the universe to ashes.⁴⁹ The bounty of gold dust⁵⁰ is a symbol of the favour of the goddess in her benevolent form as provider. The cults of Mānāsa Dēvi

⁴⁷ H. Zimmer, 'Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization'.

⁴⁸ The great Indian epic. See 'The Story of Rāmā in Tibet' by J.W. De Jong in 'Asian Variations in Rāmāyaṇa', Sahitya Akademi.

⁴⁹ R. Nagaswami. 'Tantric Cult of South India'. Cf. 2 'The Island Mother' for references on Devi cult in the Maldives

⁵⁰ Some versions of Koimala's story have jewels instead. In Indic tradition jewels are connected with snakes and the Dēvi as well.

in Bengal and Jāṅguli in Nepal and Tibet⁵¹ arise out of the identification of snake and goddess worship. In the ancient tradition of Maldivians, and until recent times, snakes were held in reverence and people avoided killing them.⁵²

The story of Koimala continues with the arrival of Maleffadakoi to the Maldivian Islands from the North and his journey along the Northern Atolls of the archipelago until he reaches the island that would become the capital:

“The ship entered the Maldives from the North at Ihavandū and anchored there at sunset.⁵³ On the following day a large white bird came flying and rested on top of the main mast. After squawking loudly, it flew southwards. This bird came again the next day and did the same thing. On the third day, Maleffadakoi told his sailors to follow the bird. Sailing south they finally arrived at an islet where the bird landed. This islet is called Dūnidū today.⁵⁴ Then he landed in a large sandbank close by.

This sandbank was where the fishermen of Girāvaru, an island not far away to the west, used to cut and cook their fish. The sea surrounding the sandbank was always colored red by the abundance of fish blood. Thus its

⁵¹ S. Nivedita & A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Myths of the Hindus and the Buddhists'

⁵² Shāhida, Mandūvilla, Male', casually obtained this information from her grandmother

⁵³ The name means "the island entered first". It is located in Ihavandippu Atoll, a natural atoll which was merged with the Northern Tiladummati province for administrative purposes.

⁵⁴ "Bird island." This place now houses a jail.

name was Mahalē.⁵⁵ There was no tree on Mahalē, but the bird was nowhere to be seen after it had landed there.

Maleffadakoi became friendly with the Girāvaru people. They liked him and gave him the name 'Koimala' and traded goods with him in exchange for gold dust. They also welcomed him to settle in Mahalē. Koimala built the first house in Mahalē and planted the first tree, which was a papaya tree.⁵⁶ He also built a large warehouse to store his gold dust. After some time, people from all the atolls gathered in Mahalē and crowned Koimala king.⁵⁷ Years passed and many people settled in Mahalē. With time, the name of the island became Māle'.

The Koimala story clearly states that when those who would eventually become the rulers of the Maldives arrived, they found some indigenous people already living there. In all probability these native people were living in every atoll, but in the legend only the people of Girāvaru Island are mentioned. Although this island is very close to the capital, its

⁵⁵ Meaning 'fish blood'. However, this is not without controversy. Since Mā, a particle prefixed to many names of relatively large Maldivian islands, comes in all probability from Skt. Mahā (great), it could also be 'great blood'. Thus, Male' could have originally been a place where important blood sacrifices had been taking place.

⁵⁶ At this point of the narrative there is a similarity with Mākumbē, a popular tale of the Maldivian folk tradition. Mākumbē, the fat and greedy hero, chases his seven children away from his home and they move to a large sandbank. There they begin planting papaya trees and in time become prosperous.

⁵⁷ Other variants of this story claim that a number of other islands between the Northern end of the atoll chain (including Minicoy) and Male' were temporarily chosen as capital. Hence, the capital would have been shifted from one island to the other until the Royal dynasty finally decided to settle in Mahalē. This would provide an explanation for the names of certain Northern islands being prefixed by 'Ras' (Royal), like Rasgetīmu, Rasmadū and Rasdū

inhabitants used to take pride in having customs that differed from those of the other islanders.⁵⁸

In his book 'People of the Maldiv Islands', C. Maloney points out that the Girāvaru people, who are acknowledged to be of Tamil descent, are representative of the older population of the Maldives. This is plausible because of their emphasis on monogamy and the fact that their widows do not remarry, which are ancient Tamil traditions. The island of Girāvaru is described thus by Bell in his Monograph:

"This small island, which lies a few miles NW of Male' on the western reef of North Male' Atoll, is occupied by a separate colony of some 150 Maldivians (origin unknown) noted for their churlish, but not quarrelsome independence; who neither court, nor appreciate, intercourse with other islanders. They inter-marry almost exclusively among themselves; are strictly monogamist Muslims; and widows do not remarry. To their headman (Ravveri) they are admirably submissive. Said never to leave the Atoll, they visit even Male' only to sell fish and procure necessities.

According to the Koimala legend, these communities welcomed the immigrants from North India who, in turn, staked a claim to kingship over the whole island group. The original inhabitants of the archipelago were apparently fishermen and palm-sap tappers who, owing to their freedom-loving spirit and their 'extreme location', probably had no strong form of government of their own.

Their coastal ancestors, the fiercely independent fishermen castes of the Southern Indian seashore, such as the Mukkuvar and Parava, live on very long and narrow strips of land. Their close identification with their

⁵⁸ Since their island was heavily eroded, its size greatly reduced and its wells having become salty, Girāvaru's inhabitants were moved in mid-century to Hujule island. Later on, when an airport was built in Hujule, they were resettled at the western end of the capital. Most of them still live in that neighborhood, but they have not been able to retain their separate identity

geographical location and with the ocean is bound up with their perception of themselves as 'fringe-dwellers',⁵⁹ that is people who live spread out in a somewhat dangerous environment, unprotected against the seasonal fury of the waves and winds, away from the more compact, mellow and protected agricultural areas.

The kingdoms of the hinterland, whether in India or Ceylon, considered fishermen to be inferior human beings, coastal barbarians, and left them very much to themselves. For example, in South India, when a king of Vēnāḍ wanted to sternly punish a nobleman, he had him swiftly executed and ordered that his family be sent to live among the fishermen.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, their degraded status in caste society gave them, at the same time, liberties that few communities in South Asia have ever experienced. Albeit somewhat narrow and exposed, they had a territory they could claim as their own. Barring occasional harassment by royal tax collectors, the Mukkuvar and Parava people were free from the yoke of dependency on the higher castes which the landless agricultural lower castes, like the Pulaya and Pallan, had to bear.

Historically, the coastal fishermen did not have their own kingly dynasties and merely owed allegiance to their local headmen or chiefs. Thus, they were relatively unaffected by the rising and falling fortunes of the inland kingdoms, whose only role in the history of the fishing communities seemed limited to the taxes they periodically extracted, or sought to extract, from them.

The conclusion of Koimala's story, dealing with the conversion of the archipelago to Islam, will be narrated and discussed in the following section.

⁵⁹ A term used by Kalpana Ram in 'Mukkuvar Women'.

⁶⁰ P. Shungoonny Menon, 'A History of Travancore'.

1.2.3 THE CONVERSION TO THE NEW RELIGION

The story of the saint, the sea monster and the conversion to the Islamic faith is certainly the most widely known legend in all Maldives and has been recorded in the 'Tārīkh'.⁶¹ It is supposed to be a chronicle on how the whole archipelago converted to Islam in AD 1153. Usually it is narrated as a continuation of Koimala's story. Thus, the arrival of a kingly dynasty from North India is connected with the arrival of Islam, even though in reality both events were almost certainly about 1400 years apart in time!

According to the Tārīkh, translated by H.C.P. Bell, the legend goes thus:

"The almighty God, desiring to free the natives from ignorance, idolatry and unbelief, leading them into the right path, inspired Maulāna Shaikh Yūsūf Shams-ud-Dīn of Tabrīz, the most pious saint of the age, 'whose knowledge was as deep as the ocean', to visit the Maldives. After that he disappeared from his native town, called Tabrīz (in Persia), and appeared at the Maldives.

Once in the Islands, the Shaikh tried to convince the idol-worshipping islanders to become Muslims. However, until they had been shown great miracles, not a single man offered to embrace the faith of Islam. One proof of his miraculous powers was the raising of a colossal giant 'whose head almost reached the sky'. By reason of their great fear, the King and all the inhabitants of Male' became Muhammadans.

⁶¹ One of the two autochthonous "historical" records, the other being the Rādavali. This manuscript is written in Arabic and was compiled by three erudite members of one family (father, nephew and grandson) quite recently: between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 19th. It is made up of three volumes, the first being a 'Treatise for Rulers,' the second a 'Condensed History of the Prophets prior to Muhammad' and the third a 'History of the Maldivian Sultans or Kings.'

Upon the king, who had previously borne the title “Sirī Bavanāditta”, Tabrīzugefānu bestowed the name “Sultān Muhammad”. Thereafter, emissaries were sent to the different Atolls, who converted all the inhabitants without exception, whether willing or unwilling, to the Muslim faith; so that throughout the Maldives there were none but Muslims.

Upon Tabrīzugefānu’s advice, regulations were instituted for the administration of the islands, religious laws duly enforced, and knowledge of the new faith freely disseminated. All traces of idolatry were effaced and mosques built everywhere.⁶²

The basic structure of this legend and its main points are very similar to the story of how Padmasambhava, the Indian Buddhist Ācārya, brought Buddhism to Tibet:

“Padmasambhava⁶³ visited the Tibetan kingdom at the invitation of King Trhisong Detsen. In little time, displaying his great siddhi powers, he managed to subdue many mighty demons, making a great impression on the ruler. Following this, he promoted the building of monasteries and the first Tibetans were ordained as Buddhist monks. He stayed in the mountain kingdom until the Dharma, the Right Path, was firmly established through royal edicts. His departure from Tibet was dramatic: Prince Mutig Tsanpo (Mu-tig btsan-po) accompanied Padmasambhava over the mountain passes until they reached the border of the kingdom. There the Ācārya mounted on a winged blue horse and flew towards the Southwest disappearing in the horizon.⁶⁴

⁶² H.C.P. Bell, ‘The Maldives Islands’.

⁶³ According to Mahayāna tradition, Padmasambhava was born in Swat valley (Pakistan), one of the main holy sites of Buddhism. This saint is known in Tibet as Guru Rimpoche

⁶⁴ H.W. Schumann, ‘Buddhistische Bilderwelt’.

Most of the regions or ethnic groups in South Asia who earlier had accepted Buddhism, such as Afghanistan, Gandhara, Bengal and the Maldives, were the ones that became later Islamicized.⁶⁵ However, in a few places this Islamization was not confined to the time of the Muslim invasions, but had been going on even earlier through trade contact. Hence, there is a pattern of confusion relating to conversion myths, as for example in the legend of the last Chēramān Perumāḷ king of Kerala, where it is not clear whether he became a Buddhist or a Muslim:

“There is a tradition in Malabar that the last of the Chēramān Perumāḷs became a Bauddha and went away somewhere in a ship leaving his kingdom to a number of his relations and dependents. It is believed by the word Bauddha, which is today applied in Malabar to all avaidika⁶⁶ religions, is meant Muhammadanism and the land to which Chēramān Perumāḷ sailed away was Arabia. It is very likely that he actually became a Bauddha under the influence of the Bauddhist teacher at Mūlavāsam.”⁶⁷

Therefore it is very likely that the legend of the pious Arab holy man and the sea monster that has remained in the Maldives is merely an Islamic adaptation of a much older story narrating an earlier conversion: The advent of an ancient Buddhist Siddha (saint) and the spread of the Dharma, preached by him, throughout the Maldivian Islands. Siddhas were Buddhist saints who had developed miraculous powers (siddhi) through the practice of rigorous asceticism.

⁶⁵ Source: Mr. Bhaskaran Nair, history teacher at Sri Sankaracharya Sanskrit University in Trivandrum

⁶⁶ Meaning the non-Vedic religions, including the indigenous teachings of Buddhism and Jainism, as well as the non-indigenous religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity

⁶⁷ T.A. Gopinatha Rao, 'Travancore Archaeological Series Vol. 2.'

Of particular interest, hence, is the indication that the first converted king in the Maldivian Muslim legend⁶⁸ —Koimala himself according to some legends, but Koimala's nephew according to the Rādavali⁶⁹ — who took the name Muhammad-ul-Ādil, carries the title Darumavanta⁷⁰ Rasgefānu, meaning “the king upholding Dharma”. Accordingly, the Tārīkh mentions that Sultān Muhammad was:

“...A just, impartial and pious ruler, who observed very strictly the laws religious and secular. He was beloved by his subjects for his saintly wisdom, kindliness and generosity.

In short, Sultān Muhammad was a monarch following the ‘Rajadharma,’ which are the strict rules of right governance expected to be followed by all Hindu or Buddhist kings of the Indian subcontinent. Here it is significant to point out that the Rajadharma and its clear injunctions are of much greater antiquity than Islam. However, there are no great differences between the standards of the Rajadharma and the behavior expected from a Muslim ruler of the Maldives, as laid down in the first part of the Maldivian Tārīkh, under the title ‘Treatise of Advice to Sovereigns.’

There are even versions of Koimala's legend where there is no reference to any saint. The conversion is just stated in one sentence, without further elaboration. This is the conclusion of Koimala's story according to the version narrated in the previous chapter, ‘The Story of Koimala’:

⁶⁸ In all the lists of Maldivian Kings the Buddhist dynasties have been omitted. Thus there is a gap of over thousand years between the first mythical king who came from North India (Koimala) and the first local Muslim king

⁶⁹ A minor and, compared to the ‘Tārīkh’, curtailed Maldivian historical work written both in Divehi akuru and in Tāna characters with Arabic sporadically interspersed. The compilers are unknown and the oldest existing copies date back to the 18th century.

⁷⁰ The aspirated ‘dh’ disappeared early from Divehi phonetics, being replaced by ‘d.’

“The Islands then became Muslim and Koimala became a Muslim king. His name became ‘Darumavanta Rasgefānu’. One day, on the street, coming out of the mosque after Friday Prayers, the king saw a child drawing a ship on the sand. The monarch thought it was very beautiful and asked the boy to sell him the ship. The boy said: ‘Majesty, I offer it to you’. Then the king went to the palace and ate lunch. After having finished his meal, while he was washing his hands, the child he had seen before came to him and said: ‘The ship is anchored in the harbor’. The king went there and saw a large ship. The people on it were dressed in white and a small dingy brought Koimala aboard the mysterious vessel. As soon as the king set foot on it, the ship flew away and disappeared.

The disappearance of the first Maldivian Muslim king is recorded in similar terms in the *Tārīkh*, where the Sultān, after announcing that he is going to Mecca, embarks on a vessel without attendants or provisions:

“Forthwith the ship passed from sight ‘like lightning flash’ or flight of bird.

This dramatic end —a flying ship instead of a flying horse and a harbor instead of a mountain pass— is similar to the end of Padmasambhava’s story, even though at this point personalities are switched. It is the pious king who disappears in the air, while the saint dies in Male’ after an unspecified period of time and is buried in a very large raised tomb (ziyārai) close to the king’s palace. This grave, called Medu Ziyārai was greatly venerated and had a large white flag on a tall pole at a corner and a number of smaller flags surrounding the tomb.⁷¹

H.C.P. Bell, in his authoritative monograph, mentions in a footnote that in the context of this legend:

⁷¹ Owing to Wahhabi influence within the government, the flying of flags over this important Maldivian landmark was discontinued in the late 1980’s

“Ibn Batūta, as a native of Tangier, would assign the credit of the conversion to Abū’l Barakāt, the Berber, a Maghrabīn. ... Ibn Batūta calls the (first) Maldivian (Muslim) king “Ahmad Shanurājah.”

Here Bell explicitly puts into question Ibn Batūta’s version and, therefore, gives more credence to the Tārīkh. However, for some reason, the legend that has found more ‘official’ favour in contemporary Maldives is Ibn Batūta’s, being taught in Divehi schools as if it was an important landmark in the birth of the Maldivian nation. This same version has been widely popularized in the last decades and it is also mentioned in every tourist guide, highlighting the ‘peaceful’ way in which the Maldives were converted to Islam.

It wouldn’t be far-fetched to assume that the linking of the country’s conversion to a saint hailing from the Persian city of Tabrīz, located in a country of Shia’ majority, presents more problems for the creation of a Sunni-based Maldivian nationalistic ideology, than the figure of the hypothetical non-Shiite Maghrebian saint. Nevertheless, while there is historical evidence that a saint Shamsuddīn from Tabrīz existed, the proof of Abū’l Barakāt’s existence rests exclusively upon the veracity of a few paragraphs in the book of Ibn Batūta’s travels;⁷² and the fact that the famous Moroccan traveler’s accounts are often confusing and inaccurate from a historical point of view should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, the absurdities contained in Ibn Batūta’s book are not confined to the historical field. Considering that Maldivian culture was closely connected to the broader Indic tradition, other details narrated by the Moroccan traveler are difficult to accept from an ethnological

⁷² In the North Indian lore there is mention of a saint called Shams-at-Tabrīz, a fakir having such great spiritual powers that, for example, the heat of the city of Abbotabad (pop. 50,000) in Pakistan is attributed to one of his miracles. But it is unlikely that he ever visited Maldives. However, there is no mention of saint Abul Barakāt ul Barbarī in any other document or tradition of the time other than in ‘The Travels of Ibn Batūta.’

viewpoint.⁷³ One of the prominent features of Ibn Batūta's version of the Islands' conversion to Islam is the statement that ancient Maldivians used to make human sacrifices to an evil 'Jinn', a spirit that is called Ranna Māri in the Maldivian lore.⁷⁴ Some descriptions claim that it came from the sea and looked like a boat full of lights. This much publicized part of the famous mediaeval traveler's text includes also a rather 'Thousand and One Nights' elaboration of a virgin girl being found raped and dead.

*"Abū-'l-Barakat, the Berber, a Maghrabin ... exorcised a Jinni that monthly demanded toll of a virgin at the islanders' budkhana (idol temple), by taking one such victim's place and reciting the Qurān throughout the night."*⁷⁵

In its details —the girl, the emphasis on virginity and defloration expressing Arab, rather than Maldivian, preoccupations⁷⁶ — this human sacrifice has no parallels with the types of ceremonies found in the

⁷³ Ibn Batūta didn't write about his own travels. In H.A.R. Gibb's introduction to 'Travels of Ibn Battuta,' Gibb, hardly a detractor, acknowledging that there are errors of exaggeration and misunderstanding in Ibn Batūta's travel book, comments: "*Ibn Battuta may have taken notes of the places that he visited, but the evidence is rather against it.*" After many years had passed, Ibn Batūta's adventures were committed to writing on the order of the Sultan of Fez by Muhammad ibn Juzayy, one of the royal secretaries.

⁷⁴ Since it is coming from the sea, the name Ranna Māri probably originated in the Skt. Ratnaka 'Ocean', and Māri, the goddess personifying pestilence. But perhaps it is likely derived from Skt. Ratna 'Jewel', since 'Jewel-' or 'Pearl-' Mother (Muthialamma) are common titles of Māri, the Dravidian village goddess. H. Krishna Sastri, 'South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses.'

⁷⁵ See 'Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia & Africa 1325-1354', translated by H.A.R. Gibb.

⁷⁶ Virginity was never an important factor in Maldivian culture. Even the Maldivian word 'bikuru' (virgin) was borrowed from Arabic. This is in sharp contrast with the obsession with female virginity found not only in Arab culture, but even among the Sinhalese of neighboring Ceylon.

Subcontinent, where only men used to be chosen as the victims.⁷⁷ The traditional Indic practice of offering only males seems to have been followed also in Maldives, because in more recent Maldivian animal sacrifices cocks, but never hens, were used as acceptable offerings.

The detail about the girl victim in the story is, in all likelihood, Ibn Batūta's own fabrication, unless this part of his narrative is a misplaced reference to the ancient beliefs of the Maldivian Islanders, for one of the primordial myths of the Dravidian village goddess is the story about an innocent, virtuous woman being unjustly mistreated or killed by an abusive male or group of males (Cf. 2.5.1 'Inauspicious Death.').

And yet, blood sacrifices, and even human sacrifices,⁷⁸ were indeed a feature of Dravidian Dēvi-worship. In South India even to this day, bloody ceremonies including animal sacrifices and nightly processions with lights are still part of the worship of goddess Māri.⁷⁹

It is to be expected that Buddhism, upon its arrival in the Maldives, sought to stop human sacrificial offerings offered to the ancestral Goddess, so common throughout Dravidian village India. The readiness to offer these sacrifices has to be traced to the extreme fear Maldivians had of epidemics and diseases in general. Perhaps in the original legend Ranna Māri, the demon confronted by the saint, represented the ancient

⁷⁷ *"Females are not to be immolated (to the goddess), except on very particular occasions; the human female never."* W.J. Wilkins, 'Hindu Mythology'. Among the Khonds, a Dravidian tribe of Andhra Pradesh *"(In human sacrifices to avert calamity from sickness...) grown men are the most esteemed (as victims)."* Edgar Thurston, 'Ethnographic Notes in Southern India.'

⁷⁸ *"By a human sacrifice, attended by the forms laid down, Dēvi is pleased for a thousand years; and by the sacrifice of three men, a hundred thousand years."* Ibid. (Thurston).

⁷⁹ H. Whitehead, 'The Village Gods of South India.'

Dravidian form of worship, bloody and linked to fear and disease, which Buddhism sought to replace.

This irrational dread of diseases must have seemed a severe form of attachment to the first Buddhist saints visiting the Maldives and, understandably, they sought to put a stop to it. By means of their scriptures —note the book symbolism in the Qurān mentioned above— the Buddhist visitors introduced an alternative to overcome the terror that paralyzed and enslaved the minds of Maldivian Islanders. Hence, even Ibn Batūta’s version of the Islands’ conversion to Islam displays strong affinities with the way in which Buddhist saints spread the Dharma among the unenlightened.⁸⁰

A few non-written versions of this latter legend though, blame the Maldivian king for the death of the sacrificed girls. Some of these even claim that the king himself would rape the girls before killing them. These seem to be later elaborations, for they are not only incompatible with the personality ascribed to the “first king upholding righteousness”, but —unless this king underwent a total change of character after conversion— they are also in conflict with that particular monarch being worthy of the title ‘Darumavanta Rasgefānu’.

On the other hand the death of young women in the Maldivian legend could be an allusion to the ancient custom of sacrificing a number of female attendants at the death of people of royal lineage. After being ceremonially killed, the bodies of the servant girls were buried —or cremated— along with the dead king or queen. This practice was not at all uncommon in the history of the early South and Southeast Asian monarchies, where it was deemed that it didn’t befit royalty to go to the netherworld unaccompanied.

⁸⁰ Legends of Indian Buddhism, 'Ed. by L. Cranmer-Byng & S.A. Kapadia.

Still, the relevance of these elaborations should not be underestimated, for the ascription of bad qualities to the king is a recurring feature in the Maldivian lore. Again, this perhaps reflects a historical attitude, since there might have been some degree of local resentment against the first kingly dynasties that came from the Northern Subcontinent to rule the fiercely independent Maldivian fishermen of yore.

Hence it is not surprising that in many popular Maldivian Island stories the king embodies the role of the villain.⁸¹ The story 'Doñ Hiyala and Alifuḷu' in the next section characteristically portrays the despotic king ruling in Male' as a lustful, cruel and ruthless person.

⁸¹ Cf. 2.2.3 'The Link between Blood and Life' for a better understanding of the relationship between fear of spirits and fear of authority in Divehi folk wisdom

1.3.1 THE EVIL KING

“Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu” is arguably the most important epic work in Maldivian literature. Formerly it was a long narrative poem that used to be recited by story-tellers, but it has been printed in prose in recent times.⁸² Although this step has contributed to its preservation, the prose form has lost much of the rough strength of the original folk poem. The story of Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu offers us a rare glimpse into the traditional courtesy of the Maldivians. Owing to its extreme length, dwelling on descriptions of islands and topics like jewellery, genealogies and local activities, I have chosen to present an abridged version:⁸³

Doñ Hiyalā and Alifuḷu

“Aisā was a woman from Donfanu island (Māḷosmaḍulu Atoll) living in the island of Buruni (Koḷumaḍulu Atoll). She was so beautiful that she was famous all over the Island Kingdom. Her husband was an affluent trader called Mūsa Maliku whose native island was Māroṣi (Tiladummati Atoll), in the far North. However, in spite of having been favored with beauty and wealth, disgrace followed this woman closely. None of the six children born from her womb escaped death at birth.

Years passed and when Aisā became pregnant for the seventh time she was full of dark forebodings and she couldn’t hide her sadness. When she felt the pangs of birth, the midwife who had assisted Aisā during her

⁸² I heard ‘Don Hiyalā & Alifuḷu’ narrated in verse form by Baḍiā Ibrāhīmu of Fua Mulaku. Unfortunately I was unable to record it. ‘Doñ Hiyalā āi Alifuḷu’ was rewritten and published by Abdullah Sādigu. Since most of the traditional storytellers have died out, this is now accepted as the ‘standard version’. It dates, however, only from the 1970’s.

⁸³ Told in 1991 by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Male’.

previous six tragic deliveries, happened to be far away from Buruni on another island. Thus, a younger midwife from the southern end of the village was engaged for the occasion.

With her help Aisā gave birth to a girl of such breathtaking beauty that the new midwife was taken aback. While the mother was still unconscious from the effort, the midwife, without saying a word, showed the baby to the father.

It was such an amazingly lovely girl that Mūsa Maliku became frightened when he saw the child. Now it dawned on him that the wicked old midwife had been killing his six previous daughters, one after the other, and had buried them in all secrecy. She had committed these heinous crimes because she was jealous of the prodigious beauty of the baby girls. Aware of the dangers awaiting the newborn baby, Mūsa Maliku took a decision and whispered to the new midwife: "Don't tell anybody about this child and I will give you whatever you wish for."

The woman's expression was grave. She understood the situation at once and agreed, asking for a big amount of gold. Mūsa Maliku, without hesitating, gave it to her. The midwife went out and, in the darkness, looked for a cat, killed it and buried it in complete secrecy. In the morning, she showed the tiny mound of white sand in the graveyard, close to the beach, and told everyone that Aisā's baby was born dead.⁸⁴ Everybody mourned the beautiful lady's tragic fate. They sighed: "Aisā is getting old, her beauty is fading, and all her children have died."

⁸⁴ Compare this section with the beginning of the story of Lāvāṇaka: "A merchant from Pāṭaliputra (India) had a beautiful wife called Candraprabhā who became pregnant. When she gave birth, her daughter was so beautiful that the moment she came out of the womb she lit up the room with her beauty. ... When the father saw that the midwives were both astonished and a little alarmed, he was frightened. ... He hid his daughter inside his house and announced to the world that she was dead." Somadeva, 'Kathāsaritsāgara.'

Mūsa Maliku decided to keep his new born daughter completely hidden from the sight of human eyes and had an underground chamber built especially for her. A trustworthy old woman kept guard at the door and looked after the little girl. In the dark room there was a dim oil lamp always burning. Aisā, the mother, entered it only to give her breast milk to the baby.

This lonely child was called Doñ Hiyalā. She grew up completely concealed within the four walls of her abode where the sun never shone on her.

** * * **

In South Nilande Atoll, not far from Koļumaḍulu Atoll, there is an island called Huļudeli where many people are expert goldsmiths. The richest man there at that time was Mussandi Ahumadu. He had only one son, Alifuļu. His father was so fond of him that he was always eager to fulfill his every desire. However, Alifuļu didn't become a spoiled child. He had a noble character and as the years passed he grew up into a handsome and intelligent young man.

At the same time the Katību, or island chief, of Huļudeli had a daughter called Havvā Fuļu. She was the most beautiful girl in Nilande Atoll. While they were children, she and Alifuļu had played together. As years went by, Havvā Fuļu grew into a lovely, yet somewhat fierce, young woman. She was also a bright student, learned in sciences and magic. Since her adolescent days, she had fallen deeply in love with Alifuļu, but her pride forced her to hide her love.

One day Alifuļu went to visit the island chief to discuss business matters on behalf of his father. The Katību received the young man with the entire honor that a man of noble birth deserves. He bade him to sit on the middle of the large swingbed at one end of his cool verandah on a mat from

Huvadū Atoll⁸⁵ that had been previously spread especially for him. The Katību called his daughter and pretty Havvā Fuḷu appeared, walking proudly, wearing all her jewellery and her best dress.

She was conscious of the impression she was making: a graceful woman with slightly dusky skin and a perfect body. Havvā Fuḷu's face was so charming that many young men all over the Atoll had fallen in love with her. However, she snubbed one man after the other. She had already secretly given her heart only to Alifuḷu, but he didn't know. Havvā Fuḷu was too arrogant to tell anybody. She didn't even tell her heart's longings to the girls who were closest to her. Thus when her father told her: "Daughter, bring something to drink for our guest!"

The girl was very careful to avoid showing any emotion. Obediently, she left and came back with a glass of fruit juice she had prepared herself. When the young woman reached it to Alifuḷu he touched her hand making sure her father didn't notice it. As they looked into each other's eyes she put on a coy smile, turned and disappeared inside the house.

Thereafter, Alifuḷu felt uneasy while he talked with the Katību about business matters, but that was why he was there. When their conversation was over he felt relieved. While he was leaving the house Alifuḷu found Havvā Fuḷu waiting for him at the gate. Without hesitation he whispered to her: "I will send two witnesses tonight," the girl whispered back: "I agree." Then he went home.

That evening Alifuḷu, without telling his parents, paid one gold mohur to two men to act as his witnesses to settle the engagement (rañ kiyuñ). When they went to Havvā Fuḷu's home she was lying on the boḍu aṣi.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ The best mats of Maldives are woven there, in the island of Gaddū.

⁸⁶ A raised platform made of masonry and wood formerly common in all island dwellings

The visitors were surprised at her behavior for she turned her back on them and ignored them. Awkwardly they sat down uninvited and asked her: "Do you agree to marry Alifuḷu?" and "Please tell us the amount of the engagement." They went on repeating the same questions over and over again but the girl looked away and kept stubbornly silent. As they had been very well paid, the witnesses insisted, but Havvā Fuḷu didn't respond.

Finally the Island chief came. The two men explained the situation. The father was puzzled. He decided that he liked Alifuḷu and thought he would be a good son-in-law. He tried to persuade his daughter to say yes. However, the young woman obstinately kept her mouth shut. After many hours of insisting everybody was tired except Havvā Fuḷu. Finally the witnesses left declaring: "We don't think Alifuḷu would have sent us here if the girl hadn't given him a clear sign," they were confused and it was very late in the night.

After such a long wait Alifuḷu was anxious. When at last the witnesses arrived and told him about their failure he didn't show any pain on his face. He courageously swallowed his disappointment with all his strength. The young man gave one gold mohur to each one of the witnesses and sent them away in the most courteous manner.

The next day Alifuḷu went about his normal life hiding his sadness and purposefully ignoring Havvā Fuḷu. The days passed as if nothing had happened. Suddenly one night he had a dream so vivid it felt as if it was real: a spirit appeared and spoke to him: "Alifuḷu! This is not the island where you will live your life. You should go to live on the island of Buruni in Koḷumaḡulu, to find the girl you ought to marry." Then he went on explaining to Alifuḷu in full detail how to build the ship that would bring him there, a very unusual sailboat, built not with wood but entirely of

black coral.⁸⁷ Its name would be Enderi Ođi. At last the spirit said: “Wake up! Get up! “

Alifuļu woke up instantly and couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night. After sunrise he went to his father saying: “Father, I want to go fishing.”

His father was surprised: “You don’t need to do that kind of work my son.” Alifuļu stubbornly insisted until his father agreed. Then the mother, who had been listening, exclaimed: “You cannot send our son on other people’s boats, the crew might humiliate him. If he goes fishing he must have a new ship built for him.” So Mussandi Ahumadu arranged to build a boat made of black coral for his son.

Meanwhile, having great learning in faṇḍita (sorcery); Havvā Fuļu sensed that Alifuļu was going to leave Huļudeli Island forever. Urgently, she sent a messenger to him asking for forgiveness and telling Alifuļu that she was now ready to marry him. The young man told the messenger: “Tell Havvā Fuļu that it is too late now. I have forgiven her but I don’t intend to marry her anymore.”

Havvā Fuļu was outraged when she received the news but she was careful not to show it. In her cool anger she sneaked every night into the shed where Alifuļu’s ship was being built and thoroughly tried to destroy the work that had been done during the daytime. Nevertheless, the young man’s determination was such that the work went ahead and the ship was finally built by his team of carpenters in the way Alifuļu had seen in his dream.

One day the ođi was put into the sea and Havvā Fuļu, with a pang in her heart, realized that Alifuļu was going to leave forever. But she was

⁸⁷ Enderi or black coral (Antipatharia) is not a true coral, but a marine organism related to the Gorgonids. Instead of calcium carbonate, its skeleton is made of a kind of keratin, the same substance as horns or claws.

determined to keep him and she used her knowledge of magic to raise a storm. The wind howled and the seas around the island looked so frightening that Havvā Fuḷu was confident that the man she loved wouldn't leave. However, that same night Alifuḷu decided to go fishing with two companions.

Unable to sleep in her agony of desire for the man who spurned her, Havvā Fuḷu woke up in the darkness before dawn at the time the fishermen usually go to fish. The young woman hurried to the beach and saw Alifuḷu trying to leave on his boat braving the ferocious storm. She could see that all her previous efforts had been unsuccessful, but she wouldn't give up and used all the force of her magic charms to prevent Alifuḷu from leaving. The girl was so enraged at being despised in such a humiliating manner by the young man that she cast a mighty spell and went home.

Now the men on board realized that, in spite of all their efforts, their ship couldn't get away from the island. So far Alifuḷu had tried to build his boat and leave without harming Havvā Fuḷu, but now he saw that to break that deadly spell he had no choice. He had to cast hahurā, a magic spell,⁸⁸ to kill her. The young man, reciting magic words, took three coconuts and broke one. Nothing happened. Then he took another one and broke it in the same way. Nothing happened either; the storm was still raging around them and the breakers threatened to sink them. However, when he broke the third coconut the foam from the air vanished and the roaring storm was gone.

Right at the same time, Havvā Fuḷu felt deathly sick and fell with a loud cry to the ground. Her parents woke up instantly. Finding their daughter unconscious on the floor, they brought her carefully to her bed and nursed her. And yet, even on her deathbed the girl's fierceness didn't cool.

⁸⁸ Black magic. Charms intended to kill an adversary.

Panting, she made a solemn oath: “Alifuḷu didn’t marry while I was alive and he will not marry a woman other than me until my body is buried.” After saying this Havvā Fuḷu closed her eyes and died.

In the morning, the young woman’s corpse was ready for burial. All Huḷudeli islanders who went to see her face for the last time were impressed by the tragic and sudden end of such a lovely girl’s life: “So much beauty wasted! “ they mourned.

After finally being able to leave, Alifuḷu instead of fishing sailed southwards, towards Koḷumaḍulu Atoll. Once they arrived at Buruni, Alifuḷu went ashore and, after giving many presents to his two crew members, sternly told them: “Find a boat from this island, sail back to Huḷudeli and tell my parents that I caught a very big fish, but since my arms were strong but my legs were weak, I was thrown overboard clutching the line.” Thus, his companions sailed away, leaving Alifuḷu alone on the beach of Buruni with his box.

Having learned the skill in his native island and having carried his tools with him, Alifuḷu worked in that island as a jeweller.⁸⁹ Soon thereafter he became the best goldsmith in Buruni and settled peacefully in his new home. As months passed, he saw all the young women of the island, but he knew none of them could be his future wife, so he ignored them. The girls, however, liked him very much and were often talking about his great skill in making ornaments. This news reached Mūsa Maliku’s ears too.

One day Mūsa Maliku sent somebody to invite Alifuḷu to his home. He received the young craftsman in his verandah with a great display of courtesy. Mūsa Maliku called his wife and ordered her to cook the best food for their guest. After a while Aisā had made the meal ready: Grilled

⁸⁹ A highly prestigious job in island society at that time, for jewellery was an essential part of Maldivian female attire. Apparently in the distant pre-Islamic past it had been even more important than clothing.

fish, rice and garudiya,⁹⁰ bananas, palm syrup. She spread the food on the boḍu aṣi and told the men to come. Alifuḷu mixed a bit of everything in his plate and put the first morsel in his mouth. Then he got suddenly up, went to the hand washing basin and spit it out. Mūsā Maliku was surprised: “Alifuḷu, what happened? “ the young man rinsed his mouth and said: “I can’t eat this, it’s too salty.”

Aisā was very sorry and took away all the plates. After a while she came back with rice soup, coconut milk, sugar and dried fish. She spread the plates on the boḍu aṣi and called the men again. Alifuḷu mixed a bit of everything in his plate put the first morsel in his mouth and then left the aṣi again to spit it in disgust. Mūsā asked “Alifuḷu, what is wrong? “ his guest replied “It’s not sweet, it hurts my throat. “

Mūsā Maliku was upset that the meals his wife had cooked didn’t please Alifuḷu. At last he went inside the house into the underground room and asked his daughter: “Hiyalā my child, there is a guest in this house and your mother’s cooking didn’t taste good to him. Please cook something yourself or shame will fall upon our house.”

Hiyalā, through a crack between two wooden planks had spied Alifuḷu. She said: “I’ll cook something special for him, father.” The girl was annoyed and knew that the purpose of Alifuḷu’s visit was to try to catch a glimpse of her, so when her father left she thought: “He will see what I’ll cook!” She chose unclean and unwashed rice put some water in it and a whole handful of salt. Once it was cooked, she put moldy rihākuru⁹¹ in a bowl and stale dry tuna, as hard as wood, on a plate. Then she told her mother that the lunch for the guest was ready. Aisā brought the plates to the aṣi and put them in front of Alifuḷu. He ate and ate, emptying all the plates,

⁹⁰ The broth of the boiled tuna, one of the most common Maldivian daily food items

⁹¹ Rihākuru is a salty and thick paste made by cooking tuna fish until most of the water evaporates. This is one of the most important items in Maldivian cuisine.

and said to Mūsā: “I have never eaten such good food in all my life! “ After that he chewed some betel leaf with arecanut and left.

On the next day Hiyalā told her father: “I am sure that all the girls on this island have gold bangles, but my arms are naked.” Her father was sorry and decided to do something. “I shall go to the best goldsmith, Alifuḷu, and ask him to make bangles for you.”

When Hiyalā’s father came to his workshop, Alifuḷu asked: “Which size?” Mūsā Maliku made a circle with his fingers saying “More or less so.” Alifuḷu made very large bangles and brought them to Mūsā Maliku. When Hiyalā put them on, they were so big they went all the way up to her shoulders. She cried: “I won’t wear these bangles! “ Mūsā Maliku took them to Alifuḷu saying: “Please make them smaller.” Alifuḷu asked: “How much smaller? “ “Much more,” said Mūsā Maliku.

This time the bangles didn’t even fit. She cried: “How can I put on such small bangles? “ Her father went back to Alifuḷu and said: “Please make them a little bigger” The young man replied: “Mūsā Maliku I can’t make them the right size without seeing the arms of the young lady. Why don’t you show them to me? “ Mūsā Maliku felt compelled to lie: “Her arms are full of wounds and she has scabies, that’s why I can’t show them to you.” But Alifuḷu was adamant: “I can only make the bangles of the right size if I see the arms, I don’t care if they are ugly or not.” After much discussion the father finally agreed and left.

Hiyalā’s arms were shown to Alifuḷu through heavy curtains hanging over the door of her abode. Alifuḷu already suspected they would be beautiful, but they were so lovely that he couldn’t hide his astonishment. In a daze, he went back to his workshop and made bangles exactly her size. Mūsā Maliku brought them home that same evening.

In the dark hours before dawn Hiyalā made betel with nuts ready, put them in a special wooden tray and secretly sneaked out of the house for the first time in her life. She went straight to Alifuḷu’s workshop and,

finding him sleeping, she woke him up. The young man was so surprised and so overwhelmed by Hiyalā's beauty, that he thought he was still dreaming. He had to gasp for air. The girl smiled at him demurely, sat down and taking the cover off her tray, offered him the betel leaves and arecanuts.

She found him very handsome and her eyes were shining. They felt awkward for a long while, but finally they managed to talk to each other. Even though they began shyly, soon their conversation flowed and flowed. Time passed and they didn't notice until it was already dawn and the twilight outside was blue. Hiyalā said: "I must leave now!" Alifuḷu solemnly promised: "I will tell your father today that I want to marry you."

That day Alifuḷu, confident that he was on friendly terms with her father, went to Hiyalā's house. He found Mūsa Maliku outside and asked: "Mūsa Maliku would you give me your daughter in marriage?" The old man went inside the house as if he hadn't heard. He sat on the boḍu aṣi with his head low. His wife seeing him so depressed asked: "What happened?" He began to weep: "The treasure we were hiding so carefully has been discovered. Our times of happiness and peace are over. I don't know what will happen to our life now."

Aisā's color left her face. "He has seen our daughter's arm! He is the only one who knows about her," after a while she went on in a distraught voice: "Well, he is a very handsome man, courteous and a hard worker. Not a bad match for our daughter after all." Mūsa Maliku remained speechless.

That same afternoon he went to Alifuḷu's workshop. He found him there and spoke gravely: "I give you my consent to marry my daughter. Make everything ready and come tonight to my house, but the ceremony must be performed in secret." Mūsa Maliku then went home and asked the old woman who was looking after Hiyalā to decorate the room with special marriage decorations and to bathe, perfume, dress and make-up Hiyalā as

a bride. Aisā was sorry to marry her daughter in such a secret and hurried way. She would have loved to give a party for all the islanders.

In the evening Alifuḷu came with two witnesses, Mūsa Maliku acted as the judge and they were married without ceremony. The witnesses were given a great amount of gold to keep their mouths shut and went back to their homes without saying a word. Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu spent their wedding night and the day that followed in total bliss, unaware that tragedy was looming in the air.

* * * *

Far away in a northern atoll, in the island called ʔaimagu,⁹² lived a weak and cunning young man called Faḡīru. One night he had a vivid dream in which he saw that in the island of Buruni there was a woman living hidden from human sight. She was of the rarest kind of beauty and he was so astonished when her features became clear to him, that he woke up with his heart beating fast. During the next days Faḡīru was deeply disturbed by his dream. But slowly, in his dishonest mind, a plan emerged to profit from the knowledge of the zealously guarded secret that had been revealed to him.

One day, Faḡīru began to act up as if he had become blind. His parents were very concerned and tried to apply medicines. The loathsome young man, however, refused to be treated saying that ʔaimagu's medicine men were not good enough. He asked to be allowed to travel to the south to receive proper treatment. After a few days, he left on a ship and sailed southwards.

During his journey, as he was approaching Male', Faḡīru convinced the captain to sail between the two islands called Baṇḍos and little Baṇḍos.

⁹² Tiladummati Atoll. In this island there is a low mound in the place where popular folklore says that ʔaimagu Faḡīru built his boat.

This was a forbidden maneuver, as only royal vessels or ships carrying urgent messages to the king were allowed to sail between those two islands. After he saw the sail, the Mīrubahāru (royal commodore), sailed out from Male' harbor to meet the Łaimagu boat.

As soon as he got alongside them, the commodore shouted: "I am coming to arrest you! You have broken the royal navigation law! "

Fagīru answered: "Tell the Radun that I am on my way to Buruni on a very important mission for his benefit. Be sure that when I come back to Male', I will bring very good news for him."

The Mīrubahāru concluded that, as this young man was claiming to be on some important errand at the service of the king, he had the right to sail between those two islands. However, seeing the unreliable look of Fagīru, he direly warned the young man that he would be punished if the news he was telling about was not worth so much trouble.

Łaimagu Fagīru's boat continued its journey towards Kołumađulu Atoll and one evening he entered Buruni's lagoon. It so happened that at the moment his ship's crew threw anchor off the island, Alifułu arrived on his ođi back from fishing. When Łaimagu Fagīru saw Alifułu he knew this handsome young man must be Hiyalā's husband. Acting as if he had slipped, Fagīru threw himself to the water and, frenzily thrashed the surface with his arms as if he was drowning. He shouted: "I'm a poor blind man and I can't swim, please save me! " Alifułu jumped immediately into the lagoon and rescued the stranger, pulling him aboard his boat. Once on the deck, he asked: "Where do you come from? "

The fraudulent character answered meekly: "I'm from Łaimagu and I'm blind since birth. My father is very rich and knowing that in this island there are good medicine-men he has sent me here to be treated, but I don't have any acquaintance here. Please bring me to your home," pointing to his vessel, he said: "I will give you the presents I carry in my

ship.” Moved by the pitiful look of the foreigner, Alifuḷu brought him to his own home.

Since he thought his guest was harmless owing to his blindness, Alifuḷu let him sit inside Hiyalā’s secret house on the *boḍu aşı*, where no visitor was ever allowed. Alifuḷu told his wife that he had invited this blind man from another island to stay in their home. Hiyalā was surprised. She looked intently at *Ḥaimagu Faḡīru*’s eyes and became alarmed. She wasn’t fooled by the suspicious man and called her husband aside. Quietly, she led him to a corner and whispered to him: “Alifuḷu, my love, who have you brought to this house? I don’t think that man is blind, he only wants to deceive us,” her husband refused to be drawn into her mood: “How can you know?” She looked up in exasperation searching for an answer, but before she could talk Alifuḷu held her hands saying: “Trust me Hiyalā; I know he is blind; I saw him fall from his boat and saved his life. He has come to Buruni for treatment. Don’t worry.”

However, during the next weeks, Hiyalā was not happy at all having the shadowy guest right inside her home. Although *Faḡīru* tried to make himself helpful, and even went fishing on their boat, she was determined to chase him out. She doggedly begged her husband to send the blind man somewhere else, saying: “He is not a harmless person as you think.” But Alifuḷu refused to acknowledge this and accused his wife of pestering him. Hence, there was much tension in the house owing to the presence of the blind stranger and the relationship between the loving couple became much stressed. Meanwhile, the obscure visitor kept discreetly in the background, acting as if he didn’t notice the heated arguments going on between husband and wife.

One day, Alifuḷu told Hiyalā to grind a special medicinal paste for the stranger’s eyes. Obediently, the young woman went inside the house to grind the medicine, but as she wasn’t convinced at all of the blind man’s honesty, she took charcoal, glass and chilies and ground them in the stone, handing the mixture over to her husband. When he smeared the

medicine on the guest's eyes, Fagīru howled and shook himself in the wildest manner. Alifuḷu, feeling sorry for the man, asked her what went wrong. Hiyalā calmly replied that the ingredients must have been stale, but she was very happy seeing the intruder suffer. She hoped the unpleasant guest would now realize he was not welcome. Nevertheless, even after this painful experience, Fagīru continued staying in Alifuḷu's house.

One morning Alifuḷu was away in his workshop and Doñ Hiyalā went to take a bath. At once, while the young woman was in the veyo (pool) behind the house, the stranger sneaked to the thatched kitchen and set it on fire. The thatch was so dry, that the kitchen was instantly enveloped in flames. As soon as she saw the huge fire the young woman ran in panic out of the pool across the house, forgetting that she was undressed. Having carefully concealed himself, ʔaimagu Fagīru could have a good look at nude Hiyalā from where he was standing. He was pleased to see that Doñ Hiyalā was a woman fit for the Radun. Her body was flawless.

Upon reaching the main door, Hiyalā realized that she was completely naked. Suddenly, she felt shy and covered herself in haste. Then she called the old lady and Mūsa Maliku, who came immediately to help her extinguish the flames. After a while, they managed to put the fire out, but the kitchen was ruined. Later in the day, when Alifuḷu came back from fishing Hiyalā told him what had happened and added: "I'm sure that, for some reason, that hideous stranger you keep here burned down our kitchen. Old people say: It is better to be under the sail of a capsized ship than under the power of a blind man."

As ʔaimagu Fagīru had seen what he wanted to see, he took leave from his hosts and sailed back to Male' in his oḍi. Alifuḷu told Hiyalā: "Now you will be relieved." She threw a very serious look at him and replied: "I am feeling uneasy. I think he is still able to hurt us."

Once in Male', ʔaimagu Faḡīru went straight to the royal palace. There he asked for an immediate audience with the Radun claiming that he had information of the highest importance. When he was finally allowed to meet the king he requested to be left alone with him.

The monarch, looking at the contemptible person in front of him, sternly warned Faḡīru that he would be heavily punished if the news was not worth the inconvenience of dismissing the nobles present there. When he saw that the intruder was undaunted, the Radun ordered everybody else to leave the audience hall. ʔaimagu Faḡīru's chest swelled with pride when he and the king were left alone: "Oh Radun! I know a secret nobody knows: in your kingdom there is now a young lady living in a certain island far away from here whose beauty is a true wonder." The king's face lit up at once: "In which island?"

ʔaimagu Faḡīru lowered his voice: "She's so extraordinarily beautiful that she lives completely hidden in her parents' house in the island of Buruni, in Koʔumaḡḡulu Atoll. I have clearly seen every detail of that young woman's body and I have come to tell you how she is." The Radun, a lustful man, smiled wickedly. Meanwhile, Faḡīru was not in a hurry. He was rather enjoying the vile way in which he was arousing the king's interest and lingered on. The monarch, though, was impatient and threatened: "Speak at once or you will be given one hundred lashes!"

*Faḡīru winced and obliged: "O Radun! As I was saying before, I have seen all the rare charms of that hidden lady with my own eyes. She is a Faymini!"*⁹³ *The king ordered him to describe her in detail and listened eagerly as Faḡīru made a careful description of Hiyaḡā's body. Relishing the monarch's interest, the despicable character confirmed that each part of the young woman of Buruni corresponded with the traditional Maldivé canons of highest beauty, using well known poetical imagery. After Faḡīru*

⁹³ A woman of extraordinary beauty (Skt. Padminī).

ended his long and detailed description, the king's desire reached such a peak that, without wasting any time, he ordered his Naval Commander to prepare his ship at once: "We are sailing immediately southwards, to Buruni Island!" he declared. Then, turning towards Fagīru, he sternly admonished him: "If what you have told me is a lie, you will be put to death as a punishment."

Two days after, as soon as the royal ship threw anchor off Buruni, the king went ashore escorted by his soldiers. He was in no mood for protocol and ignored the welcome of the local authorities. Brushing aside the crowds that had gathered at the beach seeing the great vessel moored in their lagoon, the Radun went straight to Hiyalā's house. Finding the beautiful young woman alone, the vain king, dressed in his costliest regal robes, tried to impress her by displaying great wit, charm and florid speech. However, Doñ Hiyalā totally ignored him and, after a while, the monarch sat down in a sullen mood.

When Alifuḷu arrived, the Radun ordered him to divorce his wife immediately. But the young man courageously refused. The monarch flew then into a rage and ordered the soldiers to take him out and to call havaru,⁹⁴ at which command all islanders had to mob and lynch Alifuḷu. The soldiers pushed the young man very roughly out and threw him into the hands of the assembled crowd outside. For a long time Alifuḷu was savagely beaten, scratched and cut by the bloodthirsty jeering mob. Finally, when they tired and thought he was dead, they left him in a lonely spot in the jungle.

Meanwhile, the king grabbed Hiyalā, who was pulling away from him, yelling and trying to break loose, and called the Mudīmu, or caretaker of

⁹⁴ An old custom by which mob cruelty was let loose in order to punish offenders having defied authority or committed certain crimes. This was one of the rare times when physical violence (beating, slapping, and throwing stinky fish oil, scum, dirt and even stones) was encouraged by the authorities in the Maldives

the mosque. He ordered him to marry them there and then. The Mudīmu was in a quandary because the conditions for a valid marriage were not present. But the king's arrogant attitude and angry determination were frightening to behold, so willy-nilly he gave Hiyalā in marriage to the monarch.⁹⁵ Hiyalā screamed, shook and cried but she was forcefully taken by the king and his soldiers to the royal ship and, as soon as they set foot on board, the anchors were lifted. Some time before sun set, while the ship was leaving Buruni's lagoon, a white crow followed it.

The king was gone and calm descended on the island. Mūsa Maliku, Aisā and the old woman went to look for Alifuḷu. After a long search, they found him lying in the forest. He looked like a corpse, with bones broken and many bleeding wounds. Carefully they took him to their home and looked after him for many months, applying massage and medicinal ointments until he was completely healed.

As he slowly regained consciousness, Alifuḷu felt miserable because he knew that his wife was gone. In spite of the pain inflicted by his serious wounds, his biggest woe was that his Hiyalā was far away from him. During those difficult months, they kept in contact thanks to the white crow, which was carrying messages between the lovers. In time, when Alifuḷu felt strong and could stand on his feet, he decided to repair the Enderi Oḍi, his special ship. He was determined to go to rescue Hiyalā on no other ship than his own. However, it was in such bad shape that it took him many days to complete the work.

Meanwhile in Male', the king was proud to have Hiyalā in his palace. He even had her paraded through the capital, soon after his arrival, so that his subjects could see what a charming new wife he had found. The

⁹⁵ "Nu kiyā ranaka', nu dē valiyaka', mīhegge hagge' Manikufāna kāivenī ko' dīfīn." This untranslatable sentence uttered by the humiliated government official during the marriage ceremony reflects his helplessness at being unable to make the law prevail when the king wishes to go against it.

Radun's other wives were no match for Hiyalā's incredible beauty and everyone stared at her in admiration. Try as he might to attract her attention, she utterly ignored the king and all the presents he brought her. The young woman had only contempt for him, but still the Radun, unfazed, nurtured hopes of winning her heart as time passed and he made it a point of being always courteous to her.

In spite of the great luxury and comfort of her new life, during the long months that followed Hiyalā was grieving. She was only thinking of her Alifuḷu and it wasn't easy for her to put up a brave front and hide her grief. Since she knew she was constantly being watched, her only way to get a chance to escape was not to let anyone suspect that she was longing to leave the palace. She constantly nurtured the hope that her captors would one day lower their guard. Meanwhile she communicated with Alifuḷu sending messages through the white crow.

Many more days passed until Alifuḷu finally repaired his boat. Finally, when he left Buruni, he didn't want anybody to come along with him. He had a plan and, while he was sailing northwards, he sent the white crow with a message telling his lover to be ready to flee from the royal palace. He hoped to land in Male' at the little guarded southwest point.

When the white crow came to Hiyalā's window, the Radun happened to be with her. Seeing no way to escape, the young woman looked around in dismay. To make matters worse, that day the monarch was in a sore mood, complaining: "You have been here for a whole year and still haven't said a word to me. If you would have been another person, I would have already given orders to put you to death long ago. Nothing in my palace makes me happy anymore and my only hope is that one day you may change your attitude towards me. There is nothing I would like more than to eat some dish prepared by you."

Hiyalā didn't waste any time when she heard this. Wishing to get rid of the Radun, she obliged and cooked some food especially for him. The King was

amazed and, when he left to perform a ceremony, he looked immensely satisfied. As soon as he was gone, the young woman noticed that nobody was watching her and sneaked out of the royal palace. Hiyalā headed straight to the southwestern corner of the island, towards the spot where Alifuḷu had told her to be.

Wading into waist-high water, Hiyalā managed to reach the coral reef-edge right at the time that Alifuḷu arrived with his boat. In a highly risky maneuver, the young man sailed alongside close enough for her to jump aboard and a sudden gust of wind helped them to leave the King's Island. Once in high seas, they tried to put as much distance as they could between themselves and Male'. Hiyalā was so happy to be with her handsome Alifuḷu, she couldn't take her eyes off him while he held the rudder.

As soon as the Radun found out that Hiyalā had escaped, he became speechless with fury. When he came to his senses, he ordered a thorough search. The soldiers carefully looked for her in all the houses in Male', but Hiyalā was nowhere to be found.

Finally somebody pointed out that a black boat had been seen sailing away from the southwestern end of the capital. Instantly, the king commanded that his royal ship be made ready to sail as soon as possible. Once aboard with his soldiers, the monarch gave orders to follow the small sail that could be seen in the distance.

Alifuḷu found it difficult to maintain his boat on a steady course in the midst of the ocean swells and the royal ship was fast catching up with them. Hiyalā could already make out a big sail in the horizon and she knew it had to be that evil king, in hot pursuit, to bring her back to the palace.

The Radun was heading towards them at great speed and he vowed that he would catch them. Meanwhile, Alifuḷu and Hiyalā were anxiously looking astern. As time passed, the young woman was watching in dismay how the distance between them and her captors was steadily getting

shorter and shorter. Soon the king's ship was so close to Alifuḷu's Enderi oḍi that they could clearly see the people on the prow. Sure of his victory, with his soldiers arrayed behind his back, the wicked Radun was laughing with contempt and glee.

When the big royal vessel was towering behind their small boat, Hiyalā was in such a state of despair that she told Alifuḷu: "I will rather die than let this cruel demon of a man take me away again! " Before Alifuḷu could catch her, Hiyalā jumped into the ocean. All of a sudden, a huge jellyfish (māvaru) rose from the depths; and instead of falling into the water, the young woman fell into the middle of the monster. Since her waist was so incredibly slender,⁹⁶ Hiyalā broke in two with the strength of the impact and both pieces of her body slipped into the sea.

Alifuḷu let the rudder go and watched helplessly as the two parts of his lovely wife's body sank slowly into the ocean leaving wide red trails of blood. Right then, with a great crashing noise, his black coral boat hit the jellyfish and shattered into pieces. When the young man fell into the water, he was already dead. Thus, Alifuḷu sank along with his Don Hiyalā's broken body until they both were lost in the blue depths.

Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu, the faithful lovers, were together at last and no one would be able to separate them again. Some say that their bodies drifted together to a lonely beach and, after burial, a shrine (ziyārai) was erected over their tomb.⁹⁷

In this long narrative, where the king plays the role of a bad character, one cannot avoid noticing that there are, as the storyteller herself pointed

⁹⁶ One of the marks of her proverbial beauty.

⁹⁷ As the sea is no place for a body, the drifting of the corpses to a beach is considered extremely auspicious. There are versions, however, in which Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu don't die. Instead, they drift to a certain island where they are proclaimed king and queen.

out, many similarities with the Rāmāyaṇa. This well-known Indian epic strongly influenced the folklore not only of the Subcontinent, but also of most South-East Asian countries, where it inspired popular celebrations in the form of theatre, puppetry and shadow-plays. Some of the parallels between the Divehi story ‘Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu’ and the Rāmāyaṇa are striking:

The main plot, which narrates the kidnapping by an evil king of a woman of extraordinary beauty, is basically the same as the Rāmāyaṇa’s.

Sītā , the heroine of the Indian epic, was born supernaturally from the earth when her father King Janaka was plowing, hence her name, meaning “furrow”. In Hiyalā’s story, the girl was kept since birth concealed in a special room under the earth, which her father had built especially for her. Such a room is an odd place by Maldivian standards, for Island houses are never built underground owing to the shallowness of the water table.⁹⁸

Alifuḷu was exiled from his home island Huludeli, after seeing a spirit in a dream that commanded him to do so. In the Indian epic, Rāmā was exiled from his own kingdom by his father’s order following the wishes of Kaikeyi, one of his father’s wives.

Havvā Fuḷu’s ardent infatuation with Alifuḷu and her feeling of rage and humiliation at being snubbed by him, reflect Śūrpaṇakhā’s feelings towards Rāmā, and, in both cases, the consequences are tragic. Havvā Fuḷu died and Śūrpaṇakhā ended up being badly disfigured. In both stories the point is that the hero was not predestined to marry those eager and treacherous ladies of high birth.

⁹⁸ In the Siamese and Burmese versions of the Rāmāyaṇa, Sītā is concealed in a copper box as a baby and set afloat. The box was later found by peasants in the fields.

The part where ʒaimagu Fagīru describes Hiyalā's charms to the Radun, and the king's reaction, is identical with Śūrpaṇakhā's description of Sītā's beautiful features to her brother, king Rāvaṇa.

Alifuḷu valiantly faces the King when he comes to fetch Doṅ Hiyalā by force, a rare display of courage in a country where fear of rulers is paramount. His personality corresponds with that of Rāmā in the Rāmāyaṇa, where Rāmā is a fearless hero, undaunted by any obstacle or threat, from the beginning to the end.

Doṅ Hiyalā and Alifuḷu's strong and steady love for each other, their mutual faithfulness and determination to be reunited after separation, and the Radun's callous flouting of the vows that bind together a man and a woman in marriage, are well within the main argument of the Rāmāyaṇa.

The attitude of Doṅ Hiyalā during her long captivity at the king's palace in Male', where she contemptuously ignored the Radun's approaches for such a long time, is identical with Sītā's behavior while she was under Rāvaṇa's power. Similarly, the Radun's attitude is exactly like king Rāvaṇa's, as he didn't try to take Hiyalā forcefully. Instead he put her under surveillance and hoped to gain her heart with the passing of time.

The faithful white crow messenger has a certain parallel with Jaṭāyu, Rāmā's ally. Jaṭāyu was the son of Garuḍa, having the shape of an eagle or vulture. (A crow is also mentioned in quite another context in an episode of the Rāmāyaṇa where a crow pestered Rama and Sītā while they were playing in the water at a place called Citrakuta. When Rama tried to shoo the bird away, Sītā's waistcloth fell off and, her nudity suddenly exposed, she became angry and shy.) Again here there is a similarity with the part where, after the mean character Fagīru (not unlike a crow in character) burns the kitchen, Hiyalā runs stark naked out of her bath and suddenly feels shy.

Hiyalā's readiness to kill herself by jumping from the boat onto the monstrous jellyfish to avoid a life of shame in the court of the king corresponds with Sītā's willingness to jump into the fire⁹⁹ when her virtue was questioned upon her return to Ayodhya.

In the end, it is said that, after dying in the sea, Doñ Hiyalā and Alifuḷu's bodies drifted to the beach of an island. Thereby the mutually faithful young couple attained an exalted form of divinity in the eyes of the islanders. The breaking in two of Hiyalā's body and her subsequent burial may reflect Sītā's sufferings (when her behavior in captivity was put into question) and her return to the earth. Sītā was acknowledged as the daughter of Mother Earth (Bhumi Dēvi) since she was found in a casket under the ground. In the end, after having been unjustly treated, she was given sanctuary by the earth goddess. Thus, as the gods watched, the earth opened up and Sītā smoothly descended deep into the earth. In the Maldives the bodies of the lovers reach firm ground after drifting in the sea. Following their burial a shrine (ziyāraiḡ) was erected over their tomb. There is a parallel in this case with Rāmā and Sītā being a divine couple in the original Indian epic.¹⁰⁰ The list of parallels is not exhaustive; there may be other similarities here and there that deserve further study.

No names of the original Rāmāyaṇa characters are identifiable in this Divehi story and, although the sequence of the connections pointed out above corresponds to the order of the Rāmāyaṇa, the original narrative which gave origin to the 'Doñ Hiyalā and Alifuḷu' story has been lost. Nevertheless, there are still a few hints in the island lore, that the Rāmāyaṇa must once have been part of the ancient Maldivian tradition.

⁹⁹ Contact with a jellyfish produces a strong burning sensation. In the South certain type of jellyfishes (*Physalia* spp.) are known as giniki ('gini' meaning 'heat').

¹⁰⁰ Cf. 2.6.2 'The Mystery of Female Power' and 3.1.3 'Tantric Heroes' to understand the significance of the ziyāraiḡs.

One of these, for example, is that the generic name for monkey in the Divehi language is 'rāmā makunu', Rāmā's monkey.¹⁰¹

Kopī Mohamed Rasheed, a well-known Maldivian writer who made 'Doñ Hiyaḷā and Alifuḷu' into a local movie, points out that there many sections of the story where inconsistencies mar the flow of the narrative, as if the different parts forming the epic poem had been put together in a haphazard manner. If we consider that Vālmīki's epic, the one that is nowadays popular in the Subcontinent, assumed its present form between BC 400 and AD 200;¹⁰² and if there was, far back in time, a Maldivian version of the Rāmāyaṇa subject to local variations, this is hardly surprising. The current Doñ Hiyaḷā and Alifuḷu legend, after so many centuries of successive oral transmission, followed by as many centuries of Islamic bowdlerization, is a highly inconsistent story which barely retains a flimsy skeleton of the original epic.

Hiyaḷā's physical charms are part of the greater Maldivian faiymini legend which originated in the figure of Padminī, the lotus-lady of ancient Sanskrit literature.¹⁰³ A faiymini is a woman of rare beauty possessing certain features that identify her as such. While in the ancient Sanskrit texts every part of the ideal Lotus-woman's body was compared in allegorical fashion to things found in the Subcontinent (for instance, her body being soft as the Shiras flower, her eyes like those of a fawn, her body-odor like the fragrance of the lotus, etc.),¹⁰⁴ Divehi poets drew

¹⁰¹ There is a difficulty with the translation of the word 'makunu' since in Divehi it may mean 'monkey', but also 'bedbug' and 'spider' (in the two Southernmost Atolls both bedbug and monkey are 'makoṇo,' but spider is 'makuḍu').

¹⁰² Asian Variations in Ramayana', Sahitya Akademi.

¹⁰³ Padminī is a woman of the first of the four classes into which writers of erotical science divide women." Vaman Shivram Apte, 'Sanskrit-English Dictionary'

¹⁰⁴ Detailed descriptions of Padminī's qualities are found in medieval Sanskrit works such as Ratī Manjarī, Koka Śāstra and Anaṅga Raṅga.

inspiration from local elements. Thus, in Maldives, the faiymini's eyes are long like the kuraṅgi bird's (a kind of white tern with black markings) and her wrist looks like the section of the body of the giyuḷu (Green jobfish) where it fans into its tail.

Despite the local adaptations most of the faiymini's traits are common to the ancient Indian ideals of feminine beauty. The main ones being: fair complexion, shiny, smooth abundant jet-black hair, oval face, long eyes, straight and fine nose, delicate lips (larger in the ideal of Maldivians, like those found in women represented in Maurya and Gupta art), fleshy and soft limbs (not angular and bony), full round breasts (set close together and high), three fleshy folds or creases below the ribs,¹⁰⁵ a very thin waist, rounded large hips, small belly and slightly bulging pubic area among other, mostly more intimate, details.

In Maldives the description of such features in both women and men and their hidden significance is the subject of a great amount of secret literature which is read with glee. Those books are kept concealed but are very popular, being copied by hand and passed around discreetly. Some of this ancient knowledge links with the local astrological tables and lists of auspicious qualities, times and directions peculiar to nakaiyterikaṇ.¹⁰⁶ It is probable that this interest has its origins in —and is somehow related to— old Buddhist texts describing the auspicious marks of the Buddha and their determining value.

Faiyminis are very rare and their existence is regarded as something of a portent. On a large coral reef, on Tiladummati Atoll's western rim there is

¹⁰⁵ Skt. trivālī, "the three folds of skin above the navel of a woman" (one of the marks of supreme beauty according to the ideals of the Subcontinent). V.S. Apte, 'Sanskrit-English Dictionary'

¹⁰⁶ Astrology. The knowledge of the nakaiy (nakshatra constellations) and their influence upon daily affairs.

a small island called Rasfuṣi. Though it is tiny and uninhabited, people in the neighboring island of Nellādū claim that, after many years, Rasfuṣi will become larger, people will settle it and then, one day, a faiymini will be born there. This extraordinary uniqueness surrounding a faiymini explains why the king's interest was aroused so easily.

Throughout 'Don Hiyālā and Alifuḷu', though arrogant, lustful and cruel, the monarch in Male' is at least considered to be a human being and not a demon, unlike in the Rāmāyaṇa, where Rāvaṇa was a demon-king. However, in the following legend¹⁰⁷ a Maldivian king is portrayed in an even poorer light. This is one of the versions of a well-known Oḍitān Kalēge story, highlighting the exploits of the mythical sorcerer, one of the central figures of ancient Maldivian folklore (Cf. 2.4.1 and 3.3.1):

Oḍitān Kalēge Unmasks the King

"Oḍitān Kalēge, the mighty magician, was staying in Male', the king's island, in a house called Keyoge. He used to always stay in that particular house whenever he visited the capital of the kingdom. One day, while this famous faṇḍitaveriyā was strolling down the street, the king went with his retinue through the island. Oḍitān stopped and watched the Radun walking slowly under the royal umbrella, followed by his court. After the procession had passed, Oḍitān Kalēge became very anxious. Then, lost in thought, he went back to Keyoge.

Oḍitān didn't talk much at home and after having lunch he went to rest for a little while. When he got up he took a bath and put new clothes on. In the afternoon light, Oḍitān walked to the market place by the harbor. There he began to call the people in a loud voice and soon a crowd

¹⁰⁷ Told in 1987 by Bandēri Abdurrahmanu, Male'.

gathered around him. He told them that he had something very important to say and they demanded: “Speak, then.”

Then the respected sorcerer said that their king was not a human being. He was a furēta (demon).

The people around Oḍitān were alarmed and warned him: “How do you dare to say that? Be careful! The king will be very angry if he hears what you have said. You will be severely punished.”

Oḍitān shouted: “What king? There is no king in this island! I am telling you he is a monster! I have a plan to catch him and you should help me. Do you agree? “

The people in the crowd were hesitant because they were afraid of the king, but they knew Oḍitān Kalēge well and they had great respect for him.

The great sorcerer went on: “I cannot prove anything right away, but if you help me now, by tomorrow morning you will see that I was right. However, you must work hard, because everything has to be ready before sunset.”

After hearing this, the people reluctantly agreed and asked him: “What should we do? “

Oḍitān instructed them to dig a big pit in the middle of the market area. Then, the great faṇḍita man worked hard to attach a big hook to a huge coconut-tree log which had been securely fixed at the bottom of the pit. When the fishing boats began to arrive full of tuna fish he had already finished his work. As he came out of the great pit he told the fishermen to throw all the gills and innards of their fish into it and fill it. After cutting all their fishes, the men in the market came with dripping muļōṣi (baskets) full of a stinking mixture of fish offal and blood and slowly filled the huge pit. Once it was almost full, Oḍitān Kalēge said that it was time to cover

the pit with sand. When the work was done, the sun was setting and the sorcerer was relieved. Then Oḍitān warned everyone again not to say anything to the Radun. All the people present there promised to keep silent and, after having had dinner, everyone went to sleep.

The next morning, everyone went to the fish market at sunrise. There was an unbearable stench over the whole area and people could see already from far away that the pit had been disturbed. When the crowd came closer, they saw that in the middle of the pit there was a hideous creature on all fours, with its mouth firmly caught in the hook. As it had bitten the sorcerer's hook in its voracious greed for fish offal and blood, the monster was dead. Oḍitān Kalēge explained to the assembled crowd that the hook he had attached to the log was a powerful magic hook; otherwise the horrible furēta would not have died. Casting frightened looks at the dead beast inside the pit, everyone sighed in relief.

The palace was thoroughly searched, but there was no trace of the king. Finally, close to the pit, among the sand, blood and fish gills and innards, the stained clothes of the king and his royal turban, were found. Everyone agreed that Oḍitān Kalēge had been right and all were very pleased with him. The monster was buried in the large pit itself without ceremony. Later, the most powerful nobles of Male' chose a new king and Oḍitān was invited to the Palace for a special dinner and was given costly presents.

One of the main points of this story is that keeping a secret, even from the highest authorities themselves, is beneficial not only for the particular individual, but also for the community at large. It repeats an important concept in Maldivian story-telling, which probably owes its origin to the fear and mistrust the ruling elite inspired in the local people since a kingly dynasty of North Indian origin established itself in the Islands. The identification between the power of the ruler and demonic power is a common feature in Maldivian folklore and, interestingly, it reverses the pattern of the Vedic legends where Aryan kings are godly and Dravidian kings demonic.

Like most feudal lords all over the world, kings in Maldives were accustomed to ruling in a ruthless manner. Pyrard de Laval, the French nobleman stranded in the Maldivian Islands at the beginning of the 17th century, was alarmed at the cruelty of the punishments inflicted on the islanders who had accepted presents from the shipwrecked French sailors.¹⁰⁸ Those poor people had disobeyed the harsh royal decrees stipulating that all merchandise from ships running aground on the Maldivian coral reefs belonged exclusively to the king.

Maldivians had no control of their own lives; they lived in a feudal system in which their well-being depended from their total submission to the king.¹⁰⁹ When the royal power felt itself threatened, all other considerations became secondary and even the law, which an angry Radun could easily override, offered no protection. Since there was no place to hide in the Maldives, life became impossible for anyone falling in trouble with the king, no matter how honest or law-abiding.

Possibly by telling stories like the ones which have been narrated in this chapter, where the Radun is pictured as a despicable villain, common island people found a way of exorcising some of their deep resentment against their rulers. Thus, in the Oḍitān Kalēge story above, the monarch's sordid character and his greed are emphasized in unequivocal terms and the end of the tale relishes the king's public humiliation.¹¹⁰ The great sage

¹⁰⁸ This and the following data are taken from "Voyage de François Pyrard". The translation from the French is my own

¹⁰⁹ According to Paul A. Webb, a British consultant who became very close to a number of high government officials during the 1980's, the methods of the Maldivian ruling class have hardly changed since very ancient times. He underlined the continuity of the old feudal system despite a few cosmetic changes. (Personal communication.)

¹¹⁰ In the popular story 'Mākumbē,' the greedy and infamous hero, after eating a meal at each of his seven children's houses, ends with his belly pierced by a spike used to remove the husk from coconuts spilling out his intestines (gohoru) on the sand.

Vaśiṣṭha often cursed and humbled kings in Indian tradition.¹¹¹ Hence, this legend is consistent with the personality of the famous Ṛṣi who gave origin to the Maldivian tantric hero Oḍitān Kalēge.

The Divehi popular glee at the abasement of the ruler¹¹² is hardly surprising, given the boundless greed, venality and arrogance which most Maldivian leaders have displayed towards their subjects throughout the history of the islands. King Ibrahim III, who was reigning when François Pyrard de Laval arrived at the Maldives, behaved in a way not very different from the king portrayed in “Don Hiyaḷā and Alifuḷu.” Here are two accounts of great historical worth taken from the French castaway’s book:

“Some years after his father’s death, the king of Maldives fell in love with a married woman. She was the fairest and most beautiful lady in the whole country. ... I have seen many times her arm, which she used to show as a gallant act, and it was as fair as the arm of the fairest and most beautiful ladies of my country. Her husband was a pilot, the best navigation expert in the kingdom. Besides, he was a very wealthy person too.

The king and this woman were very much in love and he had expressed his intention to marry her. She tried every day to persuade her husband to divorce her, but he didn’t want to leave his wife. Hence, this lady was so full of indignation that she advised the king to put her husband to death. Having fallen in love with her, the king obliged and resolved to kill him. Thus, one day he called the unsuspecting husband asking him to come

¹¹¹ In the Puraṇas, Vaśiṣṭha curses the demon-king Rāvaṇa. The Puraṇas are a collection of ancient Indian legends devoted to the glorification of deities compiled between 900 AD and 1500 AD.

¹¹² As recently as the 1980’s, following a coup attempt, popular street parades, posters and songs lampooned former president Ibrahim Nāsir as greedy, incompetent and cruel. Mostly, these manifestations degenerated into the throwing of mere crude insults. The one most often heard was ‘gohoru’ (intestine) meaning extreme greed.

with a chart of the country to discuss some navigational matters. The pilot went to the king and, as he was bent over the map, the king stabbed him with his dagger. He had actually aimed at the man's stomach, but the pilot, trying to deflect the stroke, received the impact straight in his eye. It seems this man escaped with just a spoiled eye and received no more wounds, because I saw him many times after his ordeal. He was quite a friendly man. ...

But let's go back to this woman. She finally succeeded in her efforts and the king married her. However, after being together for some time, the king fell in love with another woman, who happened to be the queen while we were there. Thus, the king became quite sick of this former lady, who was truly of the most shameless kind, for she had casual sexual relationships with all types of men, including slaves. Nevertheless, this was not the only reason why the king abandoned her.

In another account by Pyrard, the woman was not even consenting to marry the covetous king and was snatched from her husband by force, very much like Doñ Hiyalā in the story further above:

"The king had two nephews who were brothers. The elder brother was married to a young lady who was the wealthiest woman in the islands. She was the granddaughter of the man who was the governor during Portuguese rule. ... This lady was noble, young and pretty and this made the king fall in love with her. The trouble started when her husband didn't want to leave her and she didn't want to divorce him either. Indeed, she didn't have any desire to be a queen. She preferred to preserve her marriage and her freedom.

Knowing the intentions of the king, husband and wife resolved to flee on a boat.... But such was their misfortune that they were caught while trying to escape and the royal ships brought them back to Male'. There, the unfortunate husband was forced to divorce his wife. This man became so

distressed that, after a whole year without stepping out of his home, he died.

The young lady amply showed everyone that she had been married against her will. During the following years, she never showed any sign of affection towards the king, while she openly displayed her friendship towards other men. ... The king never divorced her. At the time of his death she was still with him, along with two foreign wives. However, this woman always looked back at the loss of her first husband with a persistent feeling of sorrow and regret. He had been a princely man, the lieutenant general of the army, and she missed him all her life.

Ironically, the Maldivian royal chronicles or ‘Tārīkh’ don’t make any reference to these objectionable episodes in the life of king Ibrāhīm III and refer to this very monarch as a “wise, brave, just, peaceloving and learned Sultān.” In the light of such statements, even a mere cursory reading of the ‘Tārīkh’ will help to give an idea of the wide gap that separates the flattering, officially approved ‘historical’ records of the Maldives from the saucy popular island tales. Both of these extremes underscore the ambivalent status quo prevailing in Maldivian society to this day concerning behavior towards high-ranking officers. On the one hand the ruler is the subject of an excessive open display of vain flattery and praise, but on the other hand there is nothing that Maldivian people secretly enjoy more than derisive and contemptuous anecdotes about that very person.

1.4.1 THE FIRST MOSQUES

The first mosques that Maldivians built after the conversion to Islam incorporated the ancient idea of keeping a space or a surface holy. The sense of the sacred in Islam and in the ancestral Maldivian tradition was divergent. Sacralization of space for the Maldivian Islanders meant keeping a demarcated place free from the attacks of evil spirits as we will see in this chapter.

The Isdū lōmāfānu consists of a series of copper plates by which former grants to Buddhist monasteries were revoked by the king and new grants for the building and maintenance of mosques, the temples of the new religion, were issued. This event took place at the end of the 12th century, when the whole of the island society was undergoing radical changes owing to the conversion to Islam.

An old order was overthrown and a new religion was being imposed and established. All Maldivians, without exception, were threatened into abandoning their old beliefs and embracing the new faith. The Maldivian King, who was the center of religious and political power,¹¹³ proclaimed that: *"I shall kill the infidels who do not utter saadat."*¹¹⁴ Ancient rituals and practices were banned. Ancestral worship sites were desecrated. Stupas and monasteries were destroyed. New buildings called mosques had to be built instead.

Those were deeply traumatic times for the whole archipelago. Muhammad Ismā'il Dīdī, leading member of the committee exploring the

¹¹³ The usual practice among the South Asian monarchy which often gave way to the phenomenon of the 'God King' throughout the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

¹¹⁴ Isdū Lōmāfānu, plate 3. These copper plates were translated from the ancient Divehi by the late Alī Najībū, Nedunge, Male' and published by H. A. Maniku, Kolige.

Buddhist ruins of Toḍḍu Island in the 1950's, was amazed at the care with which a Buddha statue they found had been buried. His mind wandered back to the time of forceful conversion and his view was:

“Even though the people in Male’ had already become Muslims, (Toḍḍu) islanders were still attached to the Buddhist tradition. However, knowing that they had to submit to the official religion, they decided to hide the idol they used to worship and did so with utmost care. As fast as they could, they removed the idol (budu¹¹⁵) from its pedestal and placed it on a depression of the floor of the surrounding temple compound filling it with fine sand. They buried it very respectfully along with other holy implements and flower garlands, circling the perimeter with stones. They didn’t destroy the temple building itself, probably because our ancestors of this island hoped that after a short time, the Buddhist religion would establish itself again. Then they would be able to reinstate the idol to its original position.”¹¹⁶

Surrounded by this turmoil, the same skilled craftsmen who had traditionally been employed to build and decorate Buddhist temples were now ordered to build Islamic houses of prayer. There is no evidence that Arab craftsmen ever came to the Maldives to instruct native artisans. Drawings of mosques being not available, the way a mosque should be built had to be guessed. The only guideline followed by Maldivian craftsmen at that time was the strict avoidance of any kind of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery in sculpture and painting. Trees and other vegetal motifs, like creepers and flowers, so important in Hindu and Buddhist iconography, continued to be widely represented until Islamic orthodoxy made deeper inroads into the country. The wealth

¹¹⁵ The generic Divehi term for idol, fetish, statue, doll and Buddha. Even though this noun originated in the figure of the Buddha, in this case it was probably used in reference to a statue of the transcendent Boddhisattva Avalokiteśvara

¹¹⁶ Divehi Tārīkhah Au Alikameh. Chapter 11, page 262.

of paintings and carvings found in ancient mosques show that there was a continuation of the ancient Maldivian art, albeit without human and animal representations, which endured for many centuries after the Islamic conversion.

The first mosques Maldivians built in their own traditional style were beautiful buildings, with elaborate woodwork. The ceilings were lacquered in black and red. Even visitors from Muslim countries, like Ibn Batūta were impressed by those mosques and admired their beauty. The old Maldivian mosques reflected the ancient temple-building tradition to such an extent that when two French ships —the *Pensée* and the *Sacre*, under the Parmentier brothers, that had sailed from Dieppe in 1529— landed in Fua Mulaku and their captain and crew visited the main mosque, they were not even sure whether it was a mosque —a building French travelers would have recognized— and expressed their surprise at finding no idol inside after inspecting the building's innermost enclosure:

“In this island was a Temple or Mosque, a very ancient structure, composed of massive stone. The Captain desired to see the inside as well as the outside, whereupon the chief priest bade them open it and entered within. The work pleased him greatly, and chiefly a woodwork screen of ancient mouldings, the best he had ever seen, with a balustrade so neatly turned that our ship's carpenter was surprised to see the fitness of the work. The Temple had galleries all round, and at the end a secret enclosure shut off by a wooden screen, like a Sanctum Sanctorum.

The Captain bade them open it to see what was within, and whether there were any idols there, but he perceived nothing but a lamp formed of the coconut. The roof or vault of this Temple was round in form, with a wainscoted ceiling covered with ancient painting.

Hard by the Temple there was a piscina or lavatory, flat-bottomed, and paved with a black stone like marble,¹¹⁷ finely cut with ancient mouldings, and having all the appearance of massive workmanship.¹¹⁸

The building the French sailors talk about (along with the adjoining veyo or tank) has long since been destroyed. However, according to the description given above, the mosque they saw at the beginning of the 16th century was not very different from the Friday Mosque in Male', which can be seen even now, although its veyo has not been preserved. The Male' Friday Mosque does have an inner chamber, much like a Sanctum Sanctorum, which is never found in mosques anywhere in the world, but which is a feature of ancient Bengali temples. The Bengali temple architecture reached its zenith under the Pāla dynasty (AD 770 - 1196). The Pāla kingdom patronized the finest Buddhist art of the Subcontinent's medieval period and its style has been preserved in Nepal.¹¹⁹

Only approximately from the 19th century onwards, with the increasing contact with the Arab religious centers, were simpler mosques built throughout the Maldives. Gradually, the locally developed decorative Arabic script was replaced by calligraphic styles following the strict classical Arabic canons (mainly thulūth and naskh).

However, in the building of the old Maldivian mosques ancient rules retained their significance not only in the decorative arts, but also in the layout of the new holy sites:

¹¹⁷ This stone must have been Porites coral, worn smooth by daily use, with a black patina given by certain algae growing on it by constant exposure to fresh water.

¹¹⁸ This is the account included in H.C.P. Bell's Monograph. Unfortunately, I could not get hold of the original document in French.

¹¹⁹ R.E. Fisher, 'Buddhist Art and Architecture'

“When five hundred and eighty two years had elapsed since the noble Prophet Mahammad’s ascension to heaven, His Majesty King Srī Gaḍana Aditya, as an act of enlightenment to be performed towards God, on an attractive area endowed with firmness (situated) in the monastery grounds of Srī Isdū, having driven into the earth structures to exclude water, caused a mosque to be constructed with stone, timber and diverse decorative paintings. (His Majesty) marked the direction to face in praying, placed the pulpit, covered (the mosque) with thatch and completed the (construction) work. He gave it the name ‘Dumā’ mosque.

On the four boundaries which existed previously (on the land) where the mosque was constructed; (His Majesty) erected walls on the four faces and (established) gateways. (His Majesty also caused the construction of) the lāge (decorative carved and lacquered wooden ceiling structures), the alms-house and the store room, and spread planks for placing the forehead. All the buildings that existed in the present mosque compound were caused to be transferred as the habitable property of the mosque. (His Majesty) discontinued the succession of ordained monks in the community of monks. (His Majesty) placed Isdū in the perpetual position of chief village and established the continuity (of this status), giving it the name “The Chief Village of the Eight Divisions”.

(His Majesty) allowed to reside among the families of this village, those who had uttered saadat and those who in the past had given atinvat.¹²⁰ (His Majesty also) prohibited those infidels who did not utter saadat from residing among the families of the village. (Isdū Lōmāfānu. Plates 3 and 4.)

The oldest type of mosques, as well as the compound surrounding them, had a quadrangular structure. There were four gates, corresponding to the four cardinal points, to enter the compound. The buildings themselves

¹²⁰ Shahada is the Muslim statement of faith. The meaning of the word ‘atinvat’ is not clear

had four gates too, except that the western one, roughly corresponding to the mihrab, was blind. The existence of these four boundaries, which formerly had been the limits of the previous compound, is of such crucial importance that they deserve some detailed study.

Practically all the architecture of the Indian subcontinent is based upon written guidelines of sacred knowledge, Āgama. Primitive temples were circular in form,¹²¹ reflecting the shape of the womb and extending it into a representation of the universe. However, when the Āgama texts began to look upon the world as being bound by the four directions, they insisted that the shape of the sanctum must be a square, with its opening normally facing the East, as in the old Maldivé mosques.

This square-shaped compound included, like most temples in South Asia, an open space with a large rectangular water tank (veyo), because the scriptural texts insisted that water for use in worship must be collected from a place exposed to sunlight and fresh air. The sanctified mosque area would include a graveyard which would be kept clean and free from weeds. Small paths inside the compound would be neatly fringed with low stone borders. Only one or two trees of a few species —mostly a white frangipani (bōlakinkiri) or pink frangipani (gulcampā) tree and a jasmine bush (huvandumāgas) — would be allowed to grow in that area.

Inside the building, lamps would be lit every evening at sunset. They were kept burning all through the night, in order to preserve the holiness of the place. According to Maldivé tradition, the light keeps away darkness and the malevolent spirits coming along with it. Reading holy books and lighting lamps was meant to ward off evil and it was still important until quite recently in the Maldivé Islands. Children would be made to recite

¹²¹ Still, in Kerala, quite a few temples retain the ancient round form while the surrounding compound has a square perimeter, thus the Maṇḍala shape keeps its relevant function as a space-sacralizing concept

their Qurān¹²² lessons in the evening by the lamplight at home. Even nowadays, at least one lamp is kept burning all through the night in every house and every mosque.¹²³

The Āgama doctrinal approach views the sacred enclosure of the temple as based on a traditional symbol that is both ancient and enduring: the Maṇḍala (Divehi maḍulu) or pattern of powers. The temple is in fact regarded as a Maṇḍala. There is a symbolic correspondence between the human body as the 'moving' (Skt. chara or jaṅgama) Maṇḍala and the temple as the 'stationary' (Skt. achala or ṣṭhavaṛa) Maṇḍala. If the Tantra emphasizes the human Maṇḍala, the Āgama focuses its attention on the temple as the divine Maṇḍala.¹²⁴

In the Maṇḍala, the four sides symbolize the four main spatial directions defined by a human being standing with extended arms: front, back, left and right. This results in the shape of a cross.¹²⁵ These points correspond with the four cardinal points in the geographical sphere, known in old Divehi as: Uttara (N), Dakusana (S), Fūrubba (E) and Fakusama (W). Now, the four corners at 45 degrees from each main direction (NE, SE, SW and NW in the geographical sphere), represent the four mid-directions. According to the Hindu sacred texts, these eight directions are the Eight Divisions, quarters or realms of the heavens in the universe and each is protected by a guardian divinity (Skt. Dīkṣā). The inner quarter

¹²² Maldivians traditionally pronounced this word 'Guruvān.'

¹²³ This is a common custom in the Subcontinent: *"And Bengali women go at night with a lamp into every room to expel the evil spirits."* Lal Bihari De, 'Govinda Samanta'; quoted by W. Crooke in 'Popular Religion & Folklore of Northern India.'

¹²⁴ S.K. Ramachandra Rao, 'Indian Temple Traditions' and 'Art & Architecture of Indian Temples, vols. I, II & III'. See also Stella Kramrisch, 'The Hindu Temple, vols. I & II'

¹²⁵ Martin Brauen; 'The Mandala, Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism.'

symbolizes the creator (Brahma), symbolic of activity. Guarded by the eight Dīkpalas, the Maṇḍala is a symbol of the whole universe.

Another image that enters into the Maṇḍala background of the temple is the “lay-out of the building site” (Skt. Vastu). Whenever a building is sought to be constructed, the area on which it will be erected has to be ceremonially propitiated. The idea behind this is that the ground delimited for the construction must be reclaimed from spirits (divinities and demons) that inhabit that area. These rituals are known as ‘the pacification of the spirit of the site’ (vastu-śāmana). There are two types of Maṇḍalas used in this procedure: The first is a square divided into nine smaller squares on each side, altogether making 81(Skt. ekāṣṭi) squares and the other is a square subdivided on each side into eight smaller squares, in which case the total number of smaller squares would be 64 (Skt. chauśaṣṭi).¹²⁶ In each one of the cells of the Maṇḍala a particular spirit is invoked and propitiated. In either system, the entire Mandala is surrounded by seven Yoginīs or Mātṛkas regarded as attendants of the gods.¹²⁷ And that particular area becomes hallowed ground once the propitiation ceremony has been completed. Thus, when a devotee enters the temple, he is actually entering into a Maṇḍala and therefore participating in the power-field.

The essence of Buddhist monuments, whether Stupas, Temples or shrines is that they constituted architectural adaptations of the basic Maṇḍala design. In the Buddhist tradition, Maṇḍalas are diagrams, normally drawn or painted on cloth or paper or on the ground with sand or powder of different colors. A great deal of the systematic philosophy of the

¹²⁶ The numbers 81 and 64 are based on the eight directions counting the center (9), and on the eight directions respectively (8). These in turn correspond to the number of Yoginīs. See Vidya Dehejia, ‘Yoginī Cult and Temples’

¹²⁷ Cf. 3.2.1 ‘Lurking in the Darkness’ on how the presence of Yoginīs and Mātṛkās has endured in the popular Maldivian lore

Mahayana and Vajrayāna forms of Buddhism is summarized in the Maṇḍala. In Vajrayāna Buddhism the scheme of a Maṇḍala follows certain sets of rigid regulations. The primary purpose of those rules is the spatial division of space in four directions around a central surface. Each of the areas thus defined symbolizes one of the realms of human knowledge within the cosmic circle. Therefore, owing to the integration of the directional and the cosmic elements in one representation, practically all Maṇḍalas incorporate both circular and quadrangular patterns.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ G. Tucci, 'Teoria e Pratica del Mandala'.

1.4.2 THE STRUGGLE AGAINST MALEVOLENT FORCES

The Maldivian islanders are ever surrounded by the vast, shapeless, amorphous ocean which pervades the country. Thus, in their old culture it was extremely important for them to have a number of ordered, well delimited and correctly oriented surfaces on the little firm land they had. Homesteads, streets and mosque grounds were regularly kept free from weeds and swept clean by the women to increase their 'purity'. In this manner Maldivians felt that they were living in a 'protected' hallowed space.

The cleaning and weeding a place, along with the planting of flags and lighting lamps at night, symbolized life and order, against death and chaos. When an epidemic killed the inhabitants of an island and its survivors abandoned it, weeds and creepers took over, trees grew and dry leaves covered the dead place. Hence, in traditional Maldivian eyes, there was no beauty in the jungle: places far from human habitation looked scary. 'Unprotected' places of the island, such as the beach (goṇḍudoṣu) close to the village or the gefili behind a house, in which people would defecate or throw rubbish, were the spots where one was most exposed to the attack by evil spirits.

As has been briefly outlined before, the origin of this belief is based in the identification between the earth and ancient temples or holy spaces, which in turn were identified with a deity. This 'holy plan' finds expression in the Maṇḍala. The relevance of the Maṇḍala in building is that, above all, it prescribes the limits of the consecrated surface. Adrian Snodgrass, in 'The Symbolism of the Stupa', refers to the ritual demarcation of the Stupa plan and stresses the importance of the directional symbolism in Buddhist sites:

"The ritual orients and delimits space and in so doing renders it meaningful. It creates spatial order from disorder, cosmos out of chaos. It sacralizes space, establishing a sacred area in the midst of profane

environs. The periphery of the square separates a formal area, a space with form, from an amorphous surrounding; it marks out a defined, and therefore knowable, space from an indefinite and inconceivable extension; it specifies a relevant area, a field of ritual operation, from an irrelevant expanse.”

Therefore the importance of the use of a Maṇḍala pattern in the layout of a building site is to ensure that malignant forces are kept outside of the perimeter of the temple. Furthermore, the insistence in aligning the gates of the sacred surface according to the correct direction in space, found its justification in the belief that malefic forces will be less likely to attack from a particular angle. The adverse powers (Skt. vighna) that may destroy the sanctity of any consecrated space are assumed to be demonic and malevolent.¹²⁹ The vighna, vighni in modern Divehi, are the dark forces that threaten the sacred purity of the place within the limits of the Maṇḍala. In the Buddhist Tantric philosophy, vighna means ‘obstacle’, anything that obstructs the path towards enlightenment.

The nature of vighna is evil; their Lord is Yama, the God of Death. As in Indian Buddhist mythology, one of the aspects of Yama is the personification of evil in man and of his inevitable death.¹³⁰ The vighna are assumed to be an amorphous and turbulent mass and, despite their importance, in Buddhist iconography they are never represented with as much precision as the vighnāntaka. The latter are the awesome guardians of the gates —akin to the dvarapāla¹³¹ — which are expected to put an end to the vighna with their terrifying appearance. The vighnāntaka are a

¹²⁹ G. Tucci, Op. cit.

¹³⁰ Alex Wayman in Karel Werner, ‘Symbols in Art and Religion, the Indian and the Comparative Perspectives’

¹³¹ There are different types of Dvarapālakas but all look horrible, fierce and often carry weapons. Some are even feminine (Dvarapālikas). In Tamil they are called Mannadiyār

common feature in Buddhist sculpture and these fearsome looking images are a frequent feature by the gates of Buddhist holy sites.

A few of the archaeological remains which have reached us from the Maldivian Buddhist past, confirm how particular the ancient Maldivians were about keeping evil spirits away from certain places. In the museum in Male' there are two large coral 'stakes' or 'nails' (Skt. *kīla*) with fearsome (Skt. *krodha*) carved faces which are some of the finest specimens of Maldivian sculpture hitherto recovered. The faces on those *kīla* represent *vighnāntakas*¹³² and the Divehi Evēla akuru inscriptions on them are mantras deemed powerful enough to keep away and kill any demons entering the protected precinct.

Auspicious symbols, such as the bow (Skt. *dhanu*) and the thunderbolt (Skt. *vajra*)¹³³ reinforce the power of the mantras and the *krodha* faces. The function of these *kīla* was to keep evil spirits away from a certain important area —possibly the grave of a king— and they were not meant to be seen. They were made to be buried and that is the reason why they cannot stand upright and have a rather 'dagger-like' shape.

For obvious reasons, the sculpting of the fearsome looking *vighnāntakas* was abandoned after the conversion to Islam, although much smaller *kīla* made of *kuredi* (a very hard mangrove wood) with inscriptions are still used in *faṇḍita*. These magic stakes are usually buried in a chosen spot with the purpose of either causing evil or warding off evil (Cf. 2.1.1 'Haṇḍi Don Kamaṇā,' 3.4.1 'The Ocean Side of Kaṭṭarufuṣi,' and 4.1.1 'The Broken Covenant').

¹³² These protective, mostly mustachioed, fearsome guardian faces are still popular in Tamil Nadu, where they are called 'Śūran'. They are related to Māḍan, the ancient and popular guardian spirit of Kerala and Southern Tamil Nāḍu

¹³³ W. Schumann, 'Buddhistische Bilderwelt'.

In the ancient Maldivian culture there were other ways of making a site auspicious. One of these included the setting of hollow foundation stones before the construction of a building. These in turn were related to the idea of correct orientation in space, so important in this seafaring country. In 1958, during the discovery of Buddhist remains in Toḍḍu (an isolated island off Ari Atoll, a few miles to its Northeast), the main Stupa was leveled and pictures were made of its garbha, the pit inside the Stupa where sacred objects were kept before its erection.¹³⁴ These photographs, along with the pictures of other remains, were then sent to Dr. S. Paranavithana, an authority on archaeology in Ceylon at the time. His comments¹³⁵ reflect that he believed that ancient Maldivians placed special emphasis in directional symbolism:

“Photograph No. V is taken to be the interior of the stupa, the garbha in which the sacred objects were deposited. We have a rectangular pit in the centre with four similar but smaller pits at the four sides. The arrangement clearly indicates the centre of the universe and the four directions. In corresponding positions in Ceylon stupas we have nine, instead of five pits, four being added at the corners. The arrangement in this Maldivian stupa is clear evidence that the so-called yantragalas¹³⁶ in Buddhist stupas originated as a directional symbolism which is quite obvious here. ...

In that particular case, the hollow pit clearly has the shape of a small Maṇḍala, or holy plan. This stresses the close relationship between the custom of placing auspicious objects in the foundation of a building, the directional orientation and the hallowing of a particular surface. All these

¹³⁴ The custom of placing a hollow stone with auspicious objects in the foundation of a house was still followed well within the 20th century.

¹³⁵ Quoted in “Divehi Tārīkha’ Au Alikame’,” publ. by the Council for Linguistic and Historical Research, Male’, Maldives

¹³⁶ Paranavithana uses the word ‘Yantragala’ derived from the Sanskrit ‘Yantra’ (drawing) and roughly homologous with ‘Maṇḍala.’

were of paramount importance in the layout of every house and place of worship and even boat-building sheds in the Maldiv Islands.

The custom of including a hollow stone in the foundation of certain houses with some auspicious objects in it was still followed within this century in the Maldives. One day in 1983 Magiedurugē Ibrāhīm Dīdī of Fua Mulaku introduced me to his friend Ahamad Dīdī who had come from Fiōri Island in Huvadū Atoll for a visit. Then both of them began a conversation and I was surprised to notice that they spoke in the Aḍḍu language with each other. After his friend left, Ibrāhīm Dīdī commented:

“Ahamad Dīdī was the wealthiest man in Fiōri. He has a very big house in that island. When the foundation was built, a special ceremony was performed. A faṇḍita man (sorcerer) laid a hollowed stone shaped like a box with a lid made of hirigal (Porites coral) among the foundation stones. Inside the box he put a piece of hard dry fish, a piece of gold, a piece of solid palm sugar (karo hakuru), a piece of cloth and I don’t remember what else. The idea was that the house would prosper and those auspicious things would be always available in abundance for the people of the household.

Alas! Nobody lives in that big house now. It is empty. Ahamad Dīdī is very ill and nowadays he is not so rich. He usually lives in Male’ and spends his days in a very small room.

In the construction of a Stupa, besides including the necessary relics, perhaps the greatest importance was to build it in the correct Maṇḍala shape. Even though in the Maldives Stupas ceased to be built eight hundred years ago, the Maṇḍala as a decorative symbol in architecture endured many years after the Buddhist sites were desecrated. The basic plan of every dwelling place of Maldivians was assumed to have a four-cornered basic Maṇḍala layout and its rectangular design was assumed to be a square. Before setting the foundations, a house had to be oriented correctly by the astrologer. The door of the house had to correspond to

an auspicious direction and it was placed at the centre of the front wall. Later, added verandahs or rooms made the plan of the house end up having a rough Maṇḍala shape.

This basic Maṇḍala pattern remained such an important feature in building that mosques built six and seven centuries after the destruction of the last Buddhist places of worship have Maṇḍalas carved and painted in their ceilings or on their doors. Furthermore, until the mid-nineteen-nineties, when the custom of decorating the rudders of fishing boats was abandoned, most fishing boats carried Maṇḍala-based designs etched and painted on their rudder.

It is not known whether anybody was aware of the significance of Maṇḍala-type symbols after Islam became the official religion, but it is understandable that, among fishermen, there is an obsession with being correctly oriented geographically. This definitely makes sense in a country where 99% of the territory is very Deep Ocean. Islands barely rise above the horizon and are quickly lost, especially during bad weather. The formless and directionless liquid surface of the Indian Ocean dominates the landscape of the Maldives. Evil spirits and giant demons were assumed to dwell in the ocean depths, ever threatening to overwhelm the few scattered outposts of human presence in the archipelago.

Thus, Maldivians sought as much as possible to create order out of chaos not only within the few small islands which they inhabited, but also within the reduced space of their boats, on which fishermen and traders spent a great part of their lives. Therefore, it is not surprising that four-pointed and eight-pointed shapes were about 90% more frequent than six-pointed or five-pointed forms in Maldivian boat decorations. There Maṇḍala-like forms and also Cakra-like (hakurā) shapes, which will be discussed later, run into and merge with the shape of the wind rose of the modern compass.

In ancient Maldivian geography, lacking accurate maps, islanders of certain atolls assumed that their particular atoll had a perfect geometrical (circular or square) shape. Thus they fancied themselves as living in a great Maṇḍala whose calm inner lagoon (eterevaru) and the islands within it were a safe and relatively hallowed ground (eterevaru), compared with the dark and dangerous waters of the surrounding ocean (fuṭṭaru). Thus it is interesting to observe that Haddummati Atoll is perceived as having eight divisions, like a Maṇḍala. Besides, there are three natural Atolls: Miladummaḍulu, Māḷosmaḍulu and Koḷumaḍulu, carrying the word 'maḍulu', meaning 'Maṇḍala' in Divehi, in their names. This sacralization of geography was and still is very common all over the Indian Subcontinent.

The need to protect a certain space and to keep it free of evil influences is still of great importance in Maldivian esoterism. To safeguard the perimeter of a house against evil spirits there is the custom of planting a plant called kandoḷu¹³⁷ in the four corners of the compound. This plant is rather nondescript in appearance, having a large, onion-like bulbous root that is not edible. Its leaves are long and pale green and the flowers are white. In certain cases, rows of that plant are neatly arrayed on the four sides of the surface needing protection. It grows well in sandy soils and is frequently found in mosque compounds in the south of Maldives.

In case that there is fear of an imminent evil, the faṇḍita man will draw a circle called ana (or aṇu in the South). This circle can be drawn on the sand with the toes or using a stick. Malevolent forces will not be able to enter the perimeter of the magic circle if it has been traced by a good sorcerer. The importance of the ana lies not in the skill of tracing it, but in the correct reciting of powerful mantras while it is being drawn.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Kenduḷu in the South. *Crinum Asiaticum* (Seashore lily).

¹³⁸ Information by Boṇḍorāge Muhammad Didi, Fua Mulaku.

An ana doesn't need to be circular. It can have different shapes and sizes according to the place that has to be protected. For example, around a house it will be square. If the ana is around an entire island it will have the shape of the island and it will be traced with a stick. If it is around a boat, it will be traced by the sorcerer with his ritual knife (*masdaiyffiohi*) and it will have the shape of the boat. The smallest ana or magic circle is usually the one the *faṇḍita* man traces around himself with his toe when he sees the need of protecting his own person.

Another way to keep the evil spirits away from a holy ground, or even from a homestead, was to fool the spirits. In the Friday Mosque in Male' there are little false doors, complete with key, carved on the sides of the building. These were meant to mislead the prowling demons. Finally during epidemics, which are highly inauspicious times, homesteads used to be protected against wandering evil spirits by means of low fences across the island paths made of sticks and woven palm leaves, so that spirits may be fooled into believing that there is no path. These were erected during the night on the island paths leading to the house and were removed at daybreak.

Finally, it was important to have a great tree growing in every island, usually in its center, close to human habitations. These were usually *nika*¹³⁹ (banyan) or *boigas* (*bo*) trees which, besides providing shade, served as an important reference point towering above the coconut and other small island trees. Fishermen badly needed such landmarks in a country where usually the highest point is the coconut palm and islands quickly sink below the horizon after a relatively short distance. Most of these trees were cut in the nearly vandalistic urbanization policies that did away with the traditional harmony of homestead, controlled tree plantation and slightly winding road pattern. During the last decades not

¹³⁹ Known as *kirigehe* or *kirigas* in the Southern atolls

only these venerable giants, but also many invaluable ancient mosques, carved tombstones and other treasures were thoroughly destroyed under the express orders of high Maldivian government officers.

1.5.1 THE LAW OF JEALOUSY

The distance between the Northern and Southern ends of the Maldivian archipelago, About 900 Km between Turākunu at the northern and Gan at the southern end, is huge compared to the surface of the available dry land.¹⁴⁰ Like Chile, it is a long and narrow country aligned north to south. Its inhabited islands lie scattered in about 23 natural atolls which are often separated from each other by vast expanses of deepest ocean.

But, despite the great distances, the daily life of Maldivians in the individual islands shows very few differences all along the length of the Atoll chain. Except for the capital, Male' (pop. 60,000), the environment in most islands is dominated by practically the same small number of ingredients: trees of a few types, low houses with small yards, the waterside always close at hand and almost no dramatic variations in the landscape.

The Maldives has about 200 inhabited islands. The typical population is about 300 inhabitants per island, distributed in about fifty households. Although there are a variety of physical types, Maldivians have never divided themselves along racial lines and, in spite of linguistic divisions, they have always tended to regard themselves as a homogeneous group.

The island atmosphere may well appear as extremely dull to an outsider. Maldivian rural life revolves around the same main activities: Men go fishing, boat-building and to climb coconut trees, while womenfolk are usually engaged in looking after the children, cooking and sweeping the island. Some tasks would be performed by both sexes, such as thatching roofs, preparing for trade journeys, or exploiting the coconut palm and its multiple products. Notwithstanding their tediousness and repetitiveness,

¹⁴⁰ Counting Minicoy (now under Indian administration), the total distance is over 1000 Km

all these activities have been traditionally a source of endless interest for islanders.

Maldivians were attracted to the things that were part of their own cozy world. Not only did they find life in the sameness of their own communities exciting, but, what is more important, they experienced it as an organic whole. This idea of wholeness was revered to the extent that events like death, love, anger, disease and jealousy, were inseparable from their other, more mundane, activities such as fishing and trading. Divehi people lived in a balanced, self-contained environment, where external interference was minimal; and whenever the latter occurred, it was immediately rendered harmless.

Traditionally, Maldivians used to show but little interest in other countries. Old men who had been on trading journeys to India and Ceylon, concentrated their attention on the products in the market they would bring to their island. I got little from most of them by the way of descriptions of landscapes and people in the foreign lands they had visited. The islanders' curiosity for foreign things would be mostly restricted to the inspection of flotsam. Most would scan the beach at sunrise to see what had drifted to their island with the current and wave action during the night.

Their hope was to find things that could make a person rich overnight, such as ambergris, and in ancient times also tavakkāṣi, Coco-de-Mer drifting from Praslin Island in the Seychelles.¹⁴¹ But commonly what Maldivian beachcombers found was driftwood of varying sizes,

¹⁴¹ Before the 16th century AD, when the Seychelles were uninhabited and nobody was picking those coconuts, the tavakkāṣi would fall in the sea and the currents would carry them to the Maldivian coast. It was an important trading item back then, along with ambergris (māvaharu) and cowry shells (tuttu boli)

containers, glass buoys, pieces of nets, and other floating junk.¹⁴² These items would be brought home where uses would be found for them. Within their environment Maldivians had a choice to discard or accept things coming from outside. Thus, what they accepted was readily taken for granted and integrated into their world.

As Maldivians saw their hallowed little world as being perfect and harmonious, balance was an important concept in their society. Owing to this importance, anger, hatred and suspicion towards what, according to each individual's perception, was upsetting this harmony, was justified. Thus jealousy was sanctified as a natural impulse. In the following story from Aḍḍu Atoll, the mistrust of outside influences is well expounded:¹⁴³

The Sandbank of the Seabirds

“Once upon a time, in a certain Atoll there was a large sandbank. It was in a privileged location, far away from the large islands inhabited by humans, which were barely visible in the horizon. Food was abundant there. The turquoise-blue lagoon close-by was teeming with schools of silvery fish. During low tide, a huge number of small crabs, sea worms and other animals found themselves exposed on the dry coral reef. Hence, a large number of seabirds felt safe there and used to breed and find rest on its white sands.

¹⁴² This interest can have tragic consequences too. In 1915, in Kuḍarikilu island, Māļosmaḍulu Atoll, a floating steel mine drifted to the beach. When some islanders tried to break open the strange object with iron rods (fāntila), it exploded killing not only the people that were working on it, but a great number of onlookers too.

¹⁴³ Told in 1986 by Karānge Hasan Dīdī of Fua Mulaku. He said that long ago a man from Aḍḍu (Rekibea) had told him this story.

One day, shortly before sunset, a Dīkoi bird¹⁴⁴ flew to it and asked for permission from the seabirds to stay overnight with them. They didn't seem very happy, so he pleaded: "Please let me stay! I was flying from one island to the other and I am very tired. I cannot fly any longer and I might fall into the sea and die. If you let me stay, I will not bother you and I promise I will leave tomorrow before sunrise."

The birds could see he was exhausted and felt sorry for him, so they allowed the newcomer to stay. The Dīkoi looked for a dry place well above the waterline, settled comfortably there, and immediately fell asleep.

Later in the night, under the starry sky, the oldest bird made sure that the Dīkoi was sleeping and then went to the far end of the sandbank. There he gathered the other seabirds around him and spoke thus: "I didn't say anything before because I know you birds are very foolish and wouldn't have paid attention to my words anyway. However, I am telling you that you made a big error by allowing that land bird to sleep here among us. I am sure that something bad will happen because of him."

The other birds were annoyed. One of them confronted the old seabird: "The Dīkoi was tired. He had nowhere else to go. We did a good thing!" The old bird just said: "One day you will know I was right." After that he went to sleep. Soon all the other birds fell asleep too.

At dawn, the Dīkoi, refreshed after a good night's rest, flew away towards his destination. The seabirds mocked the old bird saying: "You are always worrying too much. You see, nothing happened."

But, unnoticed by the other birds, the intruder had left traces on the sandbank. His droppings carried seeds from berries he had eaten. Well lodged in the sand above the waterline, the steady wind covered them with a layer of fine sand. After the first rains, one of the seeds germinated

¹⁴⁴ The local cuckoo-bird (*Culculus saturatus*), known as kovali in Male'.

and a pale-green bush began to grow. The birds eyed it at first with curiosity.

Months passed and the old bird, pointing at the big bush told the other birds: "Look! Before, this never happened. Soon there will be many bushes on our sandbank and we will have to move away." The birds eyed it at first with curiosity. Since it was providing some shade and protection, they thought the bush was all right, and said: "Old bird is always grumbling."

Soon berries falling from that bush sprouted. As time went by the whole surface of the sandbank not reached by the tides was covered by lush, green vegetation.

One day a fisherman landed on the sandbank with his small dōni and inspected it. Back on his island he wrote a letter to the Atoll Chief asking for the right to use the new islet. As soon as the Atoll chief granted him permission the man decided to plant coconut trees on it. Thus, a few days later the man went to the sandbank in the morning carrying small coconut palms and planted them among the bushes. He also planted other types of trees, such as diggai and kauṇi,¹⁴⁵ which grow well in such poor soil and provide wood and shade. During the following months he used to go occasionally to see how his trees were doing.

Years passed and the palm trees produced coconuts. Then the fisherman built a hut and dug a well in the middle of the island. Now the man went often to the islet with his wife and children. He used to harvest coconuts while the woman looked for firewood. The children loved to scare the seabirds and looked for their eggs to eat. Their father caught every now

¹⁴⁵ Diggā and kāni in the Male' form of Divehi (Hibiscus tiliaceus and Cordia subcordata)

*and then a seabird and brought it home with its legs tied and its wingtips cut.*¹⁴⁶

Finally, one night in the faint starlight, the old seabird gathered his few and battered surviving companions at the tip of the island. He was now almost blind and crippled with age and spoke gravely: "I warned you but you didn't heed my words. Now this island is not a safe place for us. It doesn't belong to us anymore. I told you long ago something bad would happen. Now we will have to leave."

And when dawn came, all the birds, giving a last, sorrowful look at the island they had lost, flew away in search of a safer place to settle.

When islanders felt their community threatened by some dangerous interference, they tried to destroy it by gossip; and if this didn't work, they resorted to secret violent action. Sometimes, what infringed their idea of harmony could be something hypothetical, like the perceived damage to their community resulting from a girl being far more pretty than the average local female. In this case, even though the potential threat might lie in the far future, it would be taken very seriously. For example, in the popular Divehi story 'Don Hiyalā and Alifuḷu', where Hiyalā's mother's first six baby girls were killed right after birth by the midwife for being 'too beautiful'.

Maldivians would police their own community themselves, which is also connected to the fact that, in their traditional society, there was always a keen interest in the activities of others. This is still true to some extent today, where the government easily finds individuals who willingly inform on the behavior of their neighbors and kin. Therefore, since there is a whole spontaneous network of tattle-telling people all over the country,

¹⁴⁶ Maldivians used to like to keep seabirds in their backyards as pets. Left at the mercy of the children, their life was often miserable.

real friendships, in the sense that one would strive to protect and stand for a friend in trouble, are rare among Divehi people.

Mutual distrust has even worsened with the introduction of puritanical measures (censorship, segregation of sexes, enforcement of Islamic codes of dress and behavior, etc.) since the beginning of the 1980's. Puritanism breeds intransigence and, in turn, intransigence breeds denunciation, a readiness to report, to betray and to inform on others' behavior.

The story that follows is an introduction to the world of island gossip and deflected aggression. This type of indirect violence occurs when an islander wants to hurt somebody who has caused him or her something perceived as an outrage:¹⁴⁷

The Man Who Burned the Mosque

“Long ago, on an island, lived a man who was known for being prone to anger. One day, he had a grudge against some people living in a certain part of his island, concerning the ownership of some coconut trees. When the Nāibu¹⁴⁸ ruled in favor of the others and declared that the trees belonged to them, this man became very angry.

Hiding his wrath, he patiently waited for the night to come. Then he went to the mosque that was at the other end of the island, in the area where the people he hated lived. It was midnight and nobody walked the streets at that time. Upon entering the mosque, he took the little oil lamp,¹⁴⁹ went

¹⁴⁷ Told by in 1987 by Raḥḡu, Daḡimago, Fua Mulaku.

¹⁴⁸ The island judge, the official dispensing justice before the government introduced a system of courts.

¹⁴⁹ Lamps were kept burning all night in every mosque in the Maldives. It is considered a very bad omen if the lamp in the mosque is blown out. A dark mosque might be invaded by malevolent spirits lurking close by.

outside and after setting fire to the ends of the thatch roofing, he threw the lamp to the ground. Hurriedly, he left the mosque compound and walked away as fast as he could. He was glad that he met no one on the dark streets and, as soon as he arrived home he went to bed.

Meanwhile, the roof of the mosque caught fire very fast because it was the dry season. When the people living close by heard the crackling noises and noticed the bright flare, they got up at once and hurried to the site of the conflagration. But it was already too late to save anything, because the beams had caught fire also. Men, women and children, stood at the edge of the compound and watched helplessly as the mosque was consumed by flames.

In the morning, the angry man woke up and went out. Passing close to a group of women, he overheard the people talking about the mosque having been burnt. During the day, as he visited different houses, he noticed that no one was wondering about who had put the mosque on fire. They didn't seem to suspect any one of having committed the wicked deed.

Now, this angry man was an irritable person, lacking in judgment and he grew very restless. He had the impression that all the people in the island knew something that they wanted to keep him from knowing. This was perhaps because, in his fear, he thought he would end up being caught some day anyway, for there is a Maldivian proverb saying that offenders eventually always end up being brought to justice.¹⁵⁰ Hence, try as he might he couldn't sleep well that night suspecting that, although the people knew it was him, there was a conspiracy not to tell him so.

The following morning he approached the same group of women close to his home and asked them: "Do people say that it is me who has burned the

¹⁵⁰ "Thousand days a robber, one day under (the power of) the ruler."

mosque?” They were a bit surprised by his question and also noticed the fear in his face. When they answered “No, nobody said it was you who burned the mosque!” the women could see that he was clearly relieved and they grew suspicious.

Then the angry man went on, in the same manner, to the other people he had been with the previous day and all gave him the same answer. Thus he went back home, feeling that a weight had been lifted from him and slept soundly that night.

Meanwhile, all the people in the island talked about how anxiously the angry man had been asking around whether anybody was accusing him of having burned the mosque. This news reached the island authority. The Nāibu, after pondering about the matter, ordered the sarudāru (town crier, a petty government officer) to bring the angry man to his home. At first, when the Nāibu asked him: “Who burned the mosque?” the man was irritated and lied, claiming that he was sleeping at that time. But, after having been intensely questioned by the Nāibu, the man finally gave up and confessed. Immediately, he was arrested and kept confined. Later, as a punishment, he was given a hundred lashes and was banished to another island.

Nowadays in the Maldives, when someone, possibly moved by guilt, asks questions trying to find out whether others are talking about some wrong that he himself (or herself) has done, people would say: “Just like the man who burned the mosque!”

This type of oblique aggression is especially common in the islands among jilted lovers. Instead of physically attacking the person who won over the favors of the woman (or man), the embittered individual would rather choose to inflict damage on objects belonging to or cherished by the offender. Often groups of girls from other islands on a visit are the target of vicious indirect attacks by local females, resenting the attention their own island men folk are giving to the visitors.

In former times, these somewhat intense rivalries between islands were sometimes mitigated by staging celebrations. One of these was a festival called Maulūdu, where the local islanders had to build a large, open-sided pavilion with wooden poles. They would thatch it with coconut-palm fronds and decorate it with oil lamps and special patchwork draperies. The day of the event, special food would be prepared and beautifully displayed for the benefit of a great number of guests coming from their rival island (or village), in their best dresses, on festively decorated boats. Here the host islanders had to prove themselves hospitable in the preparations and accommodation, in order to be able to compare favorably when it was their own turn to receive hospitality in the rival island on a similar occasion.¹⁵¹

Owing to the obsession with harmony, extravagance was not tolerated and no one was allowed to escape the gregarious instincts of the group. Hence, nowadays, the sudden influx of money into hitherto poor families by young men working as seamen is the cause of a great number of tensions in almost all islands. Flaunting one's wealth creates extreme resentment, and it never goes ignored. Neighbors would complain bitterly: *"Now those (low) people have become high people too!"* or *"They were nobody before and now they have sent their parents to Hajj!"* or *"They have become so arrogant (foni), they have built a tall wall around their new house."*

Paradoxically playing often into the very hands of the people showing off newly obtained status symbols, there is the traditional, unavoidable and all-pervading curiosity about the new acquisitions and changes in lifestyle of others within the village. This interest in other people's affairs can be said to be common to all rural areas of the world, where communities are small; and villages in the islands are indeed small places, where there is

¹⁵¹ Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī. Fua Mulaku Island.

literally no physical space to escape each other's presence. However, the obsessive need to equalize, and the aggressiveness displayed in bringing everyone down to the same level, cannot be explained away in the same manner and it is possibly a cultural trait which Maldivians share with the fishing people of the South Indian coasts. This need often expresses itself in destructive ways, like in the Doñ Hiyaḷā story above.

Kalpana Ram, in her lucid study of the Mukkuvar community of Kanya Kumari district, sees in the jealousy of the Southern Indian fishermen a preoccupation with the absence of harmony in the community. This takes place after the introduction of elements of disequilibrium, which in turn excite deep-lying resentments:

*"The paramount emotion underlying Mukkuvar analysis of psychic and social imbalance is the sentiment of porāmai or envy. It refers to the infinite capacity of human beings to want what cannot be had, a capacity which turns rancid with frustration. It is therefore a subset of the broader category of desire, in this case desire full of resentment over the good fortune of another. It is porāmai which underlies attempts by villagers to employ sorcery on one another, thus providing the entry point for supernatural agencies to attack. In a community where even daily food is an uncertainty, porāmai need not focus on anything extraordinary: even the ability of a neighbouring family to feed itself may be sufficient. An old woman was described as one who was so envious that she would 'resent the smoke from a neighbour's hearth.'"*¹⁵²

In the traditional Divehi background, envious sentiments would be allowed to be permanently active as a regulatory force in society and, hence, they would be taken for granted. Even so, it is not less true that islanders would be, at the same time, keenly aware of the dangers of desire as the cause of extreme jealousy. One of the worst ways of

¹⁵² Kalpana Ram, 'Mukkuvar Women'.

insulting somebody would be to refer to that person as 'dahi', which means extreme eagerness, covetousness and greediness. Generosity and an elegant detachment from things material are held in high esteem. Hence in Maldivian popular wisdom, the worst sins are greed, arrogance and anger, thus 'dahi', 'foni' and 'ruji gada' are common insults, intended to dismiss a person as unworthy.

1.5.2 DISPLAY OF ANGER

In traditional Divehi society there was practically no private space for anyone. Houses were small and people relaxed and did their daily chores mostly in the open, under the shade of the trees or in open verandahs which are known as feṇḍā in the North of the country and nivaidaṣo in the South. The doors of the house —there used to be a front door and a back door— were opened at dawn and kept ajar until the evening, when people retired to sleep. Anybody was welcome to enter the house anytime. People didn't resent visits, because they considered that a home visited by many was blessed. There were no separate quarters for women and for men in the traditional houses of Maldivians and their surrounding compounds, except that men usually didn't enter the kitchen. However, this owes rather to a sexual division of labor than of space.¹⁵³

There is barely elbow room for everyone in such a reduced physical environment. As a consequence, island life places many constraints and stresses on the people living in the community. In their average daily life, islanders are very calm and quiet people. They usually speak in a mild voice and avoid gesticulating and showing emotion. Gentleness, refinement, self-control and discretion are highly acclaimed virtues. Direct violence is very rare and is considered a big crime. If one person hits another, he or she will be immediately arrested. Often, within this social scenario, tensions provoked by jealousy run deep, because there is hardly any way of defusing them.

When anger builds up beyond a certain point, it usually explodes in the form of fierce verbal street fights and I saw such expressions of anger in a number of islands, North and South. Some people claim that their own

¹⁵³ Labor divisions were of paramount importance in ancient Maldivian society. Fishing and climbing the coconut trees were male activities, while the women cooked, fetched water, looked for firewood and tended the taro fields

island people don't indulge in such wild behavior, but I had no means of checking the truth of such statements. It is likely that if one stays long enough in any island of the Maldives, sooner or later that person will witness these loud, open-air, verbal street fights between different families.

People live their lives mostly in full view of others and, in the absence of privacy repressed grudges very soon become public matters. When things get out of hand, women, especially the middle-aged ones, take the lead in fights among families. The reason behind this is that their persistence, fierceness and fury in verbal battles usually make them stronger than male opponents.¹⁵⁴ In these fights, both contenders begin by facing each other in an open space, separated by a distance of about 10 m. At the head, on either end, stands a woman sideways, legs apart, with her head turned towards her opponent. One foot is resolutely set forward and her chin is raised in defiance. She shows her anger by projecting her left hand forward, her fingers deftly moving according to the insult or accusation she is hurling, while her right hand rests on her hip.

Voices aren't very loud when the quarrel begins. Usually the complaints are described in detail with a whiny voice. Further on, accusations and insults follow, the pitch rising as the fight progresses and the supporters, aligned at the back, intervene in the battle. Sometimes a supporter may temporarily take the lead, if a certain insult particularly offends her, or him. As the fight reaches its paroxysm, the leaders start making wild motions, jumping, yelling incoherent words at each other. They do so beating their flat hand with their fist, making threatening gestures with

¹⁵⁴ *"It is a generally admitted fact in South India that it is the Dravidian women rather than the men who are adepts in the use of bad language and vigorous terms of defamation. Aryan and Muhammadan influence has somewhat suppressed the Dravidian women, yet it is commonly known that these women usually secure their own way, and that by methods not always pleasant."* W.T. Elmore, "Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism."

their arms, grotesque grimaces with their face and disheveling their hair. Relatives, male and female, usually try to intervene at this point of the fight, in a half-hearted, and mostly futile, attempt to calm the participants down. The fact is that such fierce anger follows its own course, and no amount of threats or good advice can stop it.

Towards the end, within a frenzied display of rhythmic movements and screams, the contenders seem to be in a trance, oblivious of the crowd. At this stage, there are cases of women who become so furious, that they take off their clothes and walk away dragging their libās in one hand and their waistcloth in the other. The display of their sexual parts to their opponent is acknowledged to be the ultimate insult.¹⁵⁵ Usually this is the point when, among the jeers of spectators, who are sitting or standing at a prudent distance, the fight is over. It may nevertheless keep simmering for some hours or even days, until it flares up again.

Though the contenders may reduce the initial distance during the fight, and practically do look as if they are going to kill each other, they never resort to direct physical violence. Nevertheless, the sight of the face of an angry Maldivian woman in the heat of a verbal street-fight is, by any standard, awesome.

The average life-experience of Maldivian Islanders provides them with ample opportunities to experience the horrifying and dangerous side of femininity. People of both sexes and all ages are so familiar with village-feuds led by women that, even if privately they complain about those fights, they resign themselves to accepting them as an unavoidable facet

¹⁵⁵ Even though generally such behavior would be frowned upon, the boldness involved in this action commands respect. Women who had removed all their clothes in public at some point in their lives, didn't want to talk about the experience. However, they smiled mischievously and acknowledged the admiration of the people who pointed them out to me ("Mi vara' varu hurī kerē dattā") with a certain amount of pride.

of female darker nature. Thus, in island communities, both the gentle and the fierce aspects of women are taken as two sides of the same coin.

Although women engaged in such duels are perfectly normal people leading average lives, occasionally, a middle-aged woman's character sours and she turns into a person who is permanently angry. This condition is considered to be some type of natural disorder not related to spirit or demon possession, which is quite common among island women and is known as *avaluñ* (or as *jinni avaluñ*). Islanders have a special awe for this condition and look at it with respect and fear, because the demon is deemed to be holding onto the person.

All these symptoms of aberrant behavior are reckoned to be bordering the state of madness or lunacy which is called *duniyēñ moya vuñ*.¹⁵⁶ The most common signs of this condition include, among attacks of fury, keeping hair unkempt, being careless about dress and general appearance, and abandoning of duties. While against demon-possession *fañḍita* (magic) is deemed effective, madness is reckoned to be a hopeless state against which there is no cure.

In the Maldives, for some reason, it is practically always women who are likely to be prone to demon-possession, fits of anger and madness. It is generally acknowledged that this condition afflicts women only after puberty, when they are sexually mature, and never during childhood. Thus, islanders assume that there is a connection between active female sexuality and madness. The following article from the local press narrates a recent event involving adolescent girls that took place in Alifuṣi Island, North Māļosmaḍulu Atoll:

“Girl Students overcome by unexplained force in classrooms in Raa Alifushi / Islanders believe school may be hexed

¹⁵⁶ Duniēñ Moya vuñ in the South (Aḍḍu Atoll and Fua Mulaku).

Alifushi, Raa Atoll, August 07 1999 (HNS) - for two weeks now strange incidents have been occurring at Raa Alifushi School involving most of its female students, Island Chief Abdul Matheen said Saturday.

Halfway through classes girls start crying, after a while fall unconscious to the floor and on waking up lose their senses and go raving mad, Matheen said.

Every day 14 girls come under this strange spell and on some days even 20 or more girls. "All this happens in the classrooms of the island school. We can't get one girl outside and under control before the same thing starts happening to others," Matheen said.

The incidents have been explained to both the Atoll Office and the Education Ministry in turn and investigation is to start into the cause of these disturbances to the girls.

According to some islanders Matheen said, this is the work of a "dark spell" placed on the school and it would have to be cleansed to make the spirits go away.

"It could be some physical or mental defect, altogether non-spiritual but we still haven't found the reason for this behavior from the girls," Matheen said.¹⁵⁷

Women who display a tendency towards possession play an important role in the folk religion among the Dravidian peoples of the neighboring Subcontinent. Rituals where girls are possessed by the goddess are common in Kerala, especially in tribal areas. In the TuĻu folk religion, a woman possessed by Siri cannot be scolded nor given stressful work and has to be looked after.¹⁵⁸ Among the Maldivian Islanders, women possessed

¹⁵⁷ Havīru Newspaper, Male', August 8th 1999

¹⁵⁸ L. Honko, 'The Siri Epic', Turku University, Finland.

by spirits are assumed to always speak the truth and are allowed to get away with any type of offence, no matter how outrageous or shocking.

In many tourist guidebooks about Maldives it is stated that owing to the absence of violence, the atmosphere of the country is generally pleasant and safe. However, this is rather the romantic perception of an uninformed outsider. It is true that a foreigner would feel quite safe in any Maldivian island, for he would neither fear the local spirits nor the local magic; possibly the latter has no effect on foreigners, as they are reckoned to be somehow out of the system of island beliefs with their causes and effects. But strong undercurrents have always stirred the apparent calmness of the society's surface and, in their own islands Maldivians are constantly worried about the activity of evil spirits, feuds between families, tyranny of government officials and sorcery performed on one another.

In order to understand how the atmosphere of an island feels from the point of view of Maldivians themselves, one should become familiar with the world of secret magic spells and how and when they are used. In this story set in Huvadū Atoll a long-repressed grudge and the use of strong *faṇḍita* to bring down the Atoll Chief, a person enjoying high status and good fortune, are portrayed among other important island traits and preoccupations:

Hiya Ari Ariegga' Hiya Va'

"Long ago, in the island of Vādū,¹⁵⁹ lived a handsome middle-aged man named Kanubē. Although he was blind (kanu =blind), he was never alone.

¹⁵⁹ Vādu is an island of Huvadū Atoll famous for good magicians. The South of the Maldives, usually more traditional than the North of the country, is assumed to be "the place where things happen" by Maldivians and most legends come from that end of the archipelago

All the time a boy called Gōtidonfutu served as his eyes and hands. The young boy cooked, washed, and helped Kanubē in everything he needed. They were very good friends. No one ever saw them quarrel.

At that time Vādū was the capital of the Atoll.¹⁶⁰ The Atoll Chief had his house, called Vāruge,¹⁶¹ in that island. One day, the Atoll chief decided that the Atoll needed an oḍi, a big trading ship. Thus, he prepared to build the Atoll oḍi and gave orders that everybody had to go to the forest to look for wood. People from all the islands in the atoll had to contribute, bringing in food, equipment, building supplies, and anything needed for the construction work. This matter was so important that the day came when the Atoll officials came to Gōtidonfutu and told him, "You must come too."

The boy turned to Kanubē and touched him on the arm. After keeping silent for some time, Kanubē said, "Go!" Gōtidonfutu did so, obediently. He left, feeling sorry for the blind old man left alone.

The boy worked hard that whole day, that night, and the next morning. He was only allowed to go back home in the afternoon. Kanubē asked, "Did you cut sticks?"

"Yes. They are the poles for the haruge (an open-sided pavilion)."

"What else?"

With bright eyes the boy answered, "So many people brought things to the Atoll house that they had to build a separate warehouse to store them."

¹⁶⁰ A claim made often by storytellers to stress the importance of their own island. However, it is seldom supported by historical evidence. In this case, the storyteller, from the North of the country, was unlikely to promote his own island though.

¹⁶¹ Vāruge was the residence of the Royal Tax Collector. The atoll chief had the authority to impose the royal tax (vāru).

Kanubē seemed to ponder over what the boy said, and didn't speak for a while. After some time, he said abstractedly, "Good, very good!"

They went to sleep early that night because Gōtidonfutu was very tired.

After one month, when all the materials were ready, the construction of the oḍi started. The people at Vāruge, the Atoll Chief's house, cooked for a zikuru¹⁶² celebration and that same night, they recited the zikuru. Many people came to eat, sing and dance at the pavilion, but not Kanubē, who stayed home with the boy.

Quite late in the night, when the celebration was at its height, Kanubē and the boy went to the beach. As they silently walked back home from the shore, the man said, "Let's go to wash our feet at Vāruge's well!" When they arrived there they could hear the noise of merrymaking in the pavilion and Kanubē said to Gōtidonfutu, "Get me an ilōṣi"¹⁶³ Then he went to the trunk of a banana tree and drew a magical figure. He held the ilōṣi over one point and said, "Go take a look at the people in the haruge and tell me how they are doing."

The boy went to look, and was amazed to see that every man and woman inside the beautifully lit and decorated pavilion had stopped in the middle of what they were doing. Then he went back to Kanubē and told him what he had seen.

Kanubē thrust the ilōṣi into the center of the figure and said, "Let's go home." As soon as they arrived home, he took a knife and wrote some magical signs on it in letters that the boy had never seen. He said to the boy: "Go now and thrust the knife into the center of the figure, then take the ilōṣi out, break it in two, throw it away, and bring back the knife."

¹⁶² A community festival featuring religious chantiung similar to Maulūdu.

¹⁶³ The hard stem from the blades of the coconut frond.

Gōtidonfutu did so. From the darkness he spied the pavilion lit with many vo'.¹⁶⁴ Around the sides of the haruge were hung white sheets sewn with beautiful designs of black and red cloth flowers and stripes. Everything appeared normal. People were talking and eating, as if they had not noticed that time had stopped.

He went back home thoughtfully. "I have known Kanubē for many years. But I never knew that he could do those magical things. He never told me about that." And yet, he loved Kanubē like a father, so he could not be afraid of him. But he kept wondering. When he arrived home, he watched Kanubē sleeping peacefully for a long time.

The next day, Kanubē never mentioned the strange events of the previous night, and acted as if nothing had happened. While the keel of the oḍi was being built, people talked about some strange feeling they had that night in the middle of the zikuru. They did not know how to describe it. However, as the construction work went on and everything else seemed normal, the mood in the island was happy and carefree.

After some weeks, the Atoll chief sailed to Male' to visit the Radun.¹⁶⁵ When he went to the royal palace to have an audience with him, he began discussing the affairs in his Atoll. Finally, the chief had a chance to talk about his oḍi and courteously asked the Radun for a contribution towards building it. Since they were friends, and were talking informally and privately, the Radun felt free to tell him bluntly: "I have nothing now, my friend. These are not very good times economically. But, I have here a very

¹⁶⁴ Vo' (veṣe in Aḍḍu and voṭṭā in Huvadū), round bronze or brass oil lamps with seven wicks and a chain to suspend them from a hook. They were usually imported from South India and it is said that they produced a pleasant, subdued light

¹⁶⁵ Or Rasgefānu. Both of these are respectful Divehi words for "king" in storytelling. The official Arabic title 'Sultān' is never used in common speech

good banana plant I can give you.” So he ordered that three shoots of that plant be given to the Atoll Chief.

The Atoll Chief valiantly swallowed his disappointment as is expected from a man of his standing. After bidding farewell to the King, he brought the three shoots to the boat and sailed back to his island. There he planted the three shoots close to Vāruge. Soon he forgot about his unfruitful visit, for there was a lot of activity and the oḍi was to be finished within the month.

During those weeks, Kanubē lived his usual peaceful life. Gōtidonfutu was immensely relieved that he did not see him doing anything mysterious again. Meanwhile, the banana plants grew and gave fruit with amazing speed. One of the bananas produced a very big bunch: “Hiya ari ariegga’ hiya vah.”¹⁶⁶ It was so big that even the Radun heard about it.

Gōtidonfutu reported to Kanubē about the progress of the work on the oḍi and he also told him about the bananas. When the oḍi was finished, Kanubē asked “Is it a nice ship?”

“Yes. Soon the Atoll Chief will be sailing on it to Male’.”

That same night, after supper, Kanubē said to the boy, “Let’s take a walk to the beach.”

As they strolled along the seashore, Kanubē said, “Let’s go to Vāruge’s well to wash our feet.” When they were there, washing their feet, the blind man said, “Remember you told me about that big banana bunch? Where is it? Show it to me.”

¹⁶⁶ A formidable bunch having ninety-six (hiyā) clusters of ninety-six bananas. Clearly an exaggeration, as the average bunch has a mere eight clusters of about sixteen bananas each

The boy brought him there. Touching it admiringly, Kanubē said, “How big! So this is it! I am amazed.” He turned to Gōtidonfutu and said, “Go fetch my big knife.”

Gōtidonfutu was shocked, but had to obey. While the blind man waited, he went home and brought the knife. Then the boy watched Kanubē sever the huge banana bunch from the stalk with great precision. He didn’t look at all like an old blind man. He seemed bigger, stronger, and younger.

They carried the banana bunch far away, and wrapped it in big banana leaves. Then, they dug a pit and buried it. The blind man and the boy carefully covered over the spot, not leaving a trace. As they had been working very hard, they slept soundly that night.

In the morning, the oḍi was launched amidst great rejoicing. Drinking water, cargo and food were brought aboard. As the Atoll chief proudly stepped on his ship’s deck, a boy on the stern said, “I heard that we would bring that big banana bunch to the Radun.”

The Atoll chief exclaimed, “Yes! Yes! How could I forget about it?” Quickly he sent a group of fourteen men ashore to look for it. However, when they reached the grove, they just saw the empty stalk. Puzzled, they went back to the Atoll Chief and reported, “There is no banana bunch. Only the stalk is there.”

The Atoll Chief was incensed. He immediately stopped the travel preparations and shouted: “We are not going to Male’!” Then he went ashore fuming.

Everyone knew that the Atoll Chief was a big faṇḍita man. But first he told all the islanders to look for the banana bunch. Everybody looked for it, but they did not find it. A search party arriving near Kanubē’s house was discussing, “Why should we go there? He’s blind. It’s useless.” However, someone said “But the Atoll Chief said we must look everywhere for the bananas, so we must look here too.” Thus, they went into the house and

respectfully addressed the blind man, “Kanubē, we are looking for a banana bunch. We must search this house also.”

Kanubē asked, “Which banana bunch?”

“That big one at Vāruge,” answered the men.

“Oh, I am going around robbing every night, am I?” he said, acting offended.

Ashamed, they mumbled, “No, no. We are sorry. We are leaving.” In this manner, they searched the entire island but did not find it.

Seething with anger, the Atoll Chief declared, “Today, this banana bunch must be found!” However, the night fell, and it was not found.

That same evening, Kanubē said to Gōtidonfutu, “Go to the beach tonight, and stay there. Catch a few small fishes on the reef, but keep them alive.”

Gōtidonfutu went to the beach in the night to fish. The boy caught three hikā and carried them in a large coconut-shell vessel.¹⁶⁷ When he returned home it was dawn. Kanubē was sleeping. Softly, the boy woke him up.

The man ordered, “Put the hikā in a clean pot of sea water. Don’t let them die.”

Meanwhile, the Atoll chief, after sleeping badly, woke up before daybreak still full of rage and vowed, “I must make strong magic to find that banana bunch.” First he ordered all the islanders to gather in front of the empty stalk. Soon, all the people were there, men and women just roused from

¹⁶⁷ Wrasses (*Coris* spp.), small long fishes having a pointed snout living in the lagoon among the corals close to the surface. Small fish would often be used in *faṇḍita*, especially the hardy triggerfish (*ronḍu*) which survives quite a long time after being taken out of the water.

their sleep. Many were yawning and scratching their backs; some carried lamps because it was still dark.

The Atoll Chief took a masdaiyffiohi (knife used in magic) and recited magic words in a frightening voice. While he was reciting, his legs were bent and the hairs rose on his head. In this manner he walked stiffly towards the banana tree. The aim of his magic was to kill the person who had stolen the banana bunch as soon as he thrust the knife into the tree stalk.

Meanwhile, Kanubē was in front of his home, in the space between the house and the kitchen hut. He was reciting magical words too and Gōtidonfutu was near him, shivering with fear. Kanubē's countenance looked terrifying. "Give me one hikā," he said to Gōtidonfutu. The boy plunged his hand in the pot, took one of the small fish, and handed it over to Kanubē. The man twisted off the head of the fish and threw it over his shoulder.

At that moment, one of the Atoll Chief's legs broke. Undaunted, he continued crawling toward the banana tree on all fours.

Again, Kanubē twisted off the head of the second fish.

Instantly, the Atoll Chief's other leg was broken but he was so full of determination that he resolutely continued pulling himself forward on the ground using his arms. However, right when he was about to touch the tree, Kanubē twisted off the head of the third fish, and the Atoll Chief dropped dead.

The boy noticed with relief that Kanubē's face suddenly relaxed and that he was looking normal again. Kanubē sighed, "It's over." Calmly, he got up and entered his house.

Meanwhile, all the people in the island were alarmed because of the sudden and unexpected events. Before the sun rose a group of men took

the corpse of the Atoll Chief and carried it to his home to wash it and prepare it for burial. The death ceremonies took most of the next day.

Kanubē didn't go to the Atoll Chief's house. He stayed the whole day at home, but that night, while the boy was sleeping, the man sneaked out of the house alone. Under the moonlight, he could see his path well. He walked quickly to the Vāruge and went straight to the Atoll Chief's widow's room, being very careful not to wake up anybody.

The widow was called Doñ Aisā and she and Kanubē had been madly in love when they were very young. Unfortunately, she had married the Atoll Chief because her mother had forced her to do so. Kanubē vividly remembered the pain in his heart. Doñ Aisā had been the prettiest girl in the island back then and now, even if she was past her youth, she was still a charming and elegant lady.

When Kanubē stealthily entered her room it was dark because the only light was a very dim oil lamp. The woman was lying on the bed with her eyes half open. He looked at her for a while and felt his heart beating faster. Softly, Kanubē put his hand on her shoulder.

Doñ Aisā shuddered, and struck away his hand, angrily exclaiming, "Who is this on the night of my husband's death?"

He tried to touch her again, but she pushed him away with fierce determination. Then, as he was not going away, the woman got up muttering curses, grabbed the ilōṣifati (a broom) and beat him up savagely. Kanubē was taken off-guard and turned his face away from the dangerous blows, while she, in her fury, beat his back until it bled.

Unable to speak or to cry out, Kanubē had to go away because the woman's anger didn't cool down. The man went back home full of perplexed thoughts, "We loved each other so much! It cannot be that she is so angry with me now. She might have not recognized me in the faint light." His back was so badly bruised that he had to sleep on his stomach.

In the morning when Kanubē awoke, the boy told him, “Kanubē, look at your back! It looks like somebody has cut a fish for grilling!”

Kanubē lied, “I thought there were some bedbugs on my back, and I scratched myself with the fōvvaḷi.” (The special scissors to cut arecanut.)

The boy did not say anything, but of course he assumed it was a lie. Crestfallen, that whole day Kanubē lay on his stomach and Gōtidonfutu applied medicine to his back.

That night, while the boy slept, Kanubē heard someone unlock the door. Then, through the darkness, a person came in. As Kanubē, in pain, tried to make out the shape among the shadows, the intruder was silently inching forward until she was just above him. He smelt flowers and when he looked up he saw a woman bending over him. It was Doñ Aisā!

She whispered sweetly “Kanubē! Kanubē!”

He hushed her. “Don’t call my name now! Last night you beat me up with all your strength. You almost killed me.”

She opened her eyes wide and her jaw fell in astonishment. “So it was you! I am so sorry! How could I know? It was dark and I was so confused.”

Doñ Aisā caressed his back very tenderly and sighed “Do you know what? I endured all these years patiently, thinking always of you and only you.”

At once, Kanubē’s heart filled with warmth. His resentment against her vanished and he smiled at her. She giggled like a girl now, and exclaimed full of excitement: “Now our time has come. We must marry!”

Looking into her eyes, he held her hand tightly, “Go home now. I will arrange it.”

The next evening there was a full moon. Kanubē sat beside the door. Some people passed by on the street, and asked, “What are you doing under this moonlight?”

Kanubē called them “Come! Come! You must do some thing for me. I want you to go to Doñ Aisā. You must perform the rañ kiyuñ (a ceremony preceding marriage) for me.”

They agreed and smiled. Then they went to her and did the rañ kiyuñ ceremony. After finding the necessary witnesses, Doñ Aisā and Kanubē married. She went that same night to Kanubē’s house. They spent a night full of bliss together. In the morning, Kanubē said to Gōtidonfutu, “You don’t need to cook for me any more. Datta will cook instead of you.”

Something even more surprising happened to Gōtidonfutu. That day he realized that his friend Kanubē was not a blind man after all!

At midday, after lunch was cooked, Kanubē told the boy, “Go to that place you know, and bring three bananas for us.”

The boy did so. When he brought the beautiful bananas, Kanubē looked out of the corner of his eyes at Doñ Aisā, to see whether she would say anything. The woman ate her banana casually, and acted as if nothing had happened.

One month later, while Kanubē was sitting on the hoļuasi,¹⁶⁸ a dōni arrived at the island and anchored in its lagoon. When its crew came ashore they went straight to him and gave him a sealed paper. The sailors said, “This is the fa’kkoļu (royal edict or decree) sent to Kanubē by the Radun.”

¹⁶⁸ A log platform by the beach under the cool shade of a tree where islanders used to wait for the fishing or trading boats.

Kanubē broke the seal and read that the Radun had named him Atoll Chief. Later, by virtue of his newly acquired power, Kanubē named Gōtidonfutu Katību (island chief).

*Thus, Kanubē and Doñ Aisā lived together happily until they died.*¹⁶⁹

The magic knife mentioned in this text has great importance in Maldivian sorcery. Masdayffiohi were beautifully crafted knives with a strangely-shaped handle made of a sperm whale tooth (masday). Sperm whales (fāvibō) and other species of whales are abundant in the deep ocean waters off the Maldivian Atolls, but they were not hunted by locals. Hence, the teeth needed for the knives' handles were obtained from the occasional dead whales that drifted carried by the currents and ended up rotting on beaches of the Maldives. If there happened to be any shortage of sperm whale teeth at any given time, these were obtained at the trading harbors of South India and Ceylon. The blade of the masdayffiohi knife is allegedly made of an alloy of seven metals (haylō). All faṇḍita men owned these knives in the past, and probably most of them still do today.

Owing to the identification between magic and power, men of authority and learning in the Maldives, like the Atoll Chief (Atoḷuveriyā) in the story, were often expected to be well-versed in faṇḍita as well. Although in this instance the masdayffiohi is used by the chief with the intention to cause harm and kill —by means of hāhurā, the same type of magic performed by Kanubē using other means— these knives were more commonly used to immobilize evil spirits. Knowing the proper recitations, when the masdayffiohi's blade is thrust into the ground or onto a tree stump, the demons submit and obey the sorcerer performing the rite. Other uses of this knife include the writing of magic words on leaves or wood, and the

¹⁶⁹ Told by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Male'. She had heard this story from Husēn Bē, of Miladū Island, Miladummaḍu Atoll.

drawing of magic protective circles (ana or aṇu), among other activities. Since it was such a special tool, the masdayffiohi was traditionally used only for rituals and not for kitchen or other household purposes.

1.6.1 THE HORROR OF DISEASE

Broadly speaking, the Maldivé Islands have been a peaceful place all along their history. Except for a fair amount of palace intrigue in the capital, there was no warfare between island groups or clans. Invasions at the time of certain Chola kings and, centuries later, harassment by Malabar Muslim raiders, as well as from Portuguese garrisons in the Southwestern Indian coast, have been recorded, the northernmost atolls being the most vulnerable to such attacks. However, the fact is that, owing to the general lack of wealth in the Maldives, these interferences were few and far between compared to the situation in the neighboring Subcontinent. There, large areas suffered the most noxious forms of foreign disturbance in the form of successive waves of destructive Muslim invasions, followed by pervasive humiliation and exploitation at the hands of European powers during the colonial era.

In the absence of warfare, the small size of the islands has often resulted in overpopulation. Often cursed by their own fertility, Maldivians had no indigenous form of coping with the problem and this trend was checked naturally by means of severe epidemics. Lethal illnesses struck the islands periodically with such vicious intensity, that they created a psychology of terror among the islanders.¹⁷⁰ Lacking the means to analyze properly which were the distinctive symptoms of a deadly disease, the source of this scourge was perceived to be potentially any sickness.

Thus, there was nothing that struck more horror in the ancient Maldivians than a general outbreak of illness. The danger that all the people in the island could be wiped out by an epidemic was always in the back of the

¹⁷⁰ The Maldivé Atoll chain earned notoriety among ancient mariners for being a very unhealthy place prone to bad illnesses. Even in quite recent editions of 'The Indian Ocean Pilot', Huvadu was mentioned as a disease-ridden Atoll. Perhaps this bad reputation discouraged settlers from other countries in historical times.

islanders' minds when confronted with even mild forms of sickness. These were deemed to be the threshold for more deadly diseases.

A very high fever, a malady lasting for a long time, swelling of the body, severe skin diseases, the appearance of bursting pustules and leprosy were deemed to be exceedingly unwholesome. Once any one of those afflictions had set in, the degree of evil and the type of magic to be used to ward it off were assessed by the faṇḍitaveriyā according to the case. Often the people afflicted by such diseases were forced to live far away from the community, in another island or, in the case of very large islands, in a lonely spot in the forest or the beach, at a safe distance from the village.

The places where those wretches were kept were considered malevolent (nāmān) spots and were thus feared and avoided by other Maldivians. Not much pity used to be shown towards those suffering such miserable fate. Fear stifled every expression of mercy or compassion. The mere sight of the diseased was considered grossly offensive and healthy islanders were horrified by hearing their blood-chilling howls. "After she was brought to that place she didn't stop crying." Or "She cried and cried until she died." Or "You could hear her even from a long distance." Such comments were made by people not wanting to hear those shrill moans. If they could, they would have erased those frightening reminders of the presence of the terminally diseased from their mind altogether. However, this was not so easy when they lived in the same island, as the following verses from the Raṣo Veṣi poem which describes the coastal perimeter of Fua Mulaku Island, show:

Miskiffanna' jjeḥē/ Māvēde biru ganē
E tanā balihā loḍuñ/ gengos lāti ihuñ
Mānera'vves damuñ/ hitu tere kekuḷe sihuñ

One fears (the spot) called Māvēde, which is close to (a place where a path meets the beach known as) Miskiffanno. In ancient times people afflicted by disease were left there and (even after having passed that

fearful spot) going towards Mānere (the main anchorage of the island during the NE monsoon) one's heart still aches with fright.

The painful story of a woman from Fua Mulaku called Havvā Dīdī, completely abandoned by her family and friends, expresses the intense anguish people in those circumstances went through.¹⁷¹

Havvā Dīdī

“A pretty young woman called Havvā Dīdī was happily married. She was a loving and efficient housewife and the mother of one child. Her husband liked her very much.

One day, while she was cooking, she removed a boiling pot from the fire bare handed. Now, a woman passing through her yard happened to glance in at the kitchen door and saw that Havvā Dīdī did not use anything to protect her hands from the burning hot metal. She gossiped through the village about what she saw. The listeners widened their eyes and felt chills down their spines, for this was a sign of the most dreaded of diseases.

When the news reached the leaders of the island they met to discuss this matter seriously. They agreed that if Havvā Dīdī was allowed to roam freely around, that repugnant disease might spread like oil on water. Finally they agreed to take her to a little clearing in the middle of the jungle, close to a place in the southern end of Fua Mulaku called Kuduheraivali.¹⁷² This spot was far away from the inhabited parts of the island. The authorities ordered that a well be dug there and a small hut built; and this was done after a few weeks.

¹⁷¹ This is the version told by the late Magieduruge Ibrahim Dīdī in 1981.

¹⁷² This name indicates that formerly there was a separate little island (Kudu Herā = small islet) in that spot which has now merged with Fua Mulaku's landmass

Meanwhile, Havvā Dīdī noticed a drastic change in people's attitudes towards her. Even her kinsmen started avoiding her. Conversation ceased abruptly as soon as she entered a house. If she walked past a group of people, she heard whispers behind her back. No longer did visitors drop into her home.

One day, a twelve-year old girl came to her kitchen and stood at the threshold looking inside. Havvā Dīdī commented, "You have become very rare lately Sanfā Diye."¹⁷³

Not answering, the girl looked away.

"Are you not my friend any more?"

Sighing, Sanfā Diye stared sadly at the ground, saying, "You know I am your best friend. Why do you ask such a silly question?"

Havvā Dīdī avoided her eyes too. She looked at the kitchen floor while she was scraping coconut and spoke in a whiny voice, "Well, I don't know what has happened these days. No one talks to me and nobody comes to my home anymore. You used to come here every day and spend long hours in this kitchen talking to me. But I haven't seen you for a long time and I was thinking that you, like the others, wouldn't come anymore. Now, after so many days avoiding me, you have come just like that, suddenly. Is this silly what I say?"

Then, the girl answered, "No, that's not silly at all. Things have really changed." She longed to tell the news, but feared to hurt her friend.

Havvā Dīdī tenderly appealed to her friend, "Tell me what is wrong. When I ask, people become silent. There must be bad news going around the island, I can feel it. Please tell me. It will be Dharma."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Local way of saying: "You don't come by very often anymore."

Not bearing to look at her friend's face, Sanfā Diye said: "The bad news concerns you. I am sorry to be the one to say this, but everyone is sure that you have some dreadful disease which cannot be cured. Just by being with you, others might catch this evil curse. Do you remember the cooked taro you brought to my home the other day? As soon as you left, my mother threw them into the fire. She warned me not to tell you anything. When I heard this news, I was so frightened I didn't want to come here anymore."

Attempting a smile, Havvā Dīdī only managed a strange grimace, but her eyes betrayed her shock. So this was why the burns and cuts she discovered lately on her hands did not hurt. She was a leper! Trying to appear calm, she asked Sanfā Diye, "If you are so afraid of me, like all the others, why are you here now?"

Aware of the sarcasm in her friend's voice, Sanfā Diye was close to tears: "Because I feel very sorry, and, some nights I cannot sleep, thinking of how nice you have always been to me. It is not right that I not see you any more." She began to weep as she added: "They say they will put you in a little house in the middle of the forest. I heard that the well is finished and they will thatch the roof tomorrow. My brother is going there to work too." At this point the girl could hardly control her sobbing: "My parents will not allow me to meet you there. So, I had to come here now. I don't know whether I will see you again!"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Sanfā Diye watched her friend scrape coconut for a while. When she left, she covered her face with her hands, crying aloud.

Inside, Havvā Dīdī was seething. She had grown up in this island along with these people. She had been always kind to them; and now they were treating her this way. Her husband must have known, and even he had not

¹⁷⁴ The Sanskrit word 'Dharmā' is used in colloquial speech. "darumā venne." Meaning 'It will be the right thing to do'.

told her. What kind of people were they? Waves of silent anger were replaced by suppressed grief. Then she thought, "What is the use of all this self-pity? I must stop it or I will become mad."

During the next few days, Havvā Dīdī became a stoical, serious woman. Her eyes held an unearthly look.

One day, her husband arrived home with the island authorities. They started flattering her, but she stared at them, narrowing her eyes. The young woman knew what they were going to say and she despised them.

Nervously, one of the men said, "We are sorry, but we must tell you some bad news. You have a very dangerous disease. It would be better for you to change the place where you are living. We have prepared another house for you and will provide for all your needs. It is useless to resist. We would have to use other means, and that would be unpleasant."

In a docile way, as directed, Havvā Dīdī packed her things. Again she thought: "What kind of people are these?"

Her husband said, "You must leave your son here. It is better. Otherwise he will become sick too."

With her eyes like slits, the young woman glared at him. How she longed for him to stand up to the island chiefs in her defense! But he had not said even one word. Now she must leave her home and her child. She did not hate her kind husband; she only wished he had been more courageous.

Her head low, Havvā Dīdī picked up her bundle and followed the sarudāru (a minor government official) to the middle of the jungle. She wondered whether the people were regretting what they had done to her. She ended up thinking that, probably they were relieved that she was moving far away.

In the beginning, many friends brought Havvā Dīdī bananas, choice taro, cakes, fresh fish and other delicacies. Often she had more than she could

eat. Over time, the special meals dwindled. In the end only the sarudāru came; and even the food he brought was of lower quality day after day.

Her first nights alone in that place were dreary. As an average islander, Havvā Dīdī feared the darkness and the strange jungle noises. During many dark and lonely hours she felt she was having a bad dream. She thought that at any time a demon would come to devour her and end her sufferings. She tried not to make any sound which might attract the spirits. But as time wore on, the young woman forgot about keeping quiet and she heard herself wailing her loneliness and misery. However, she was far away from the nearest house and no one heard her heart-rending sobs in the dark, long, tropical nights. In the morning, Havvā Dīdī, seeing her wet pillow, was ashamed of her weakness. During the daytime she tried hard to behave as if nothing bad was happening to her.

Weeks passed and, gradually, Havvā Dīdī became accustomed to the night. She learned to walk to the beach in the starlight and not fear looking at the dim sea. Watching the white frothy foam of the waves breaking against the coral reef protecting the island, suited her mood and fed her soul. For hours she sat very still on the white boulders with her tresses untied. She liked to feel the salt spray on her face and the ocean wind thrashing her long black hair.

Some evenings, her husband came secretly to visit her. He kept at a distance, not wanting to approach her, just wanting to talk. The young woman grew very cold towards him. In the end she preferred that he not come. Havvā Dīdī would rather be alone in the darkness, watching the surf pound furiously against the island under the starry sky. Months later she heard that, pressured by his family, her husband had divorced her and married another woman. By now, she did not even care.

Havvā Dīdī repeatedly tore her clothes to make bandages to protect her wounded hands and feet, so that every so often she ended up without dress. Whenever other women in the island heard that she was naked they

*would leave old dresses and worn lengths of fabric close to her hut, but these did not last a long time.*¹⁷⁵

Some people say that, as the sickness followed its course, Havvā Dīdī did not become ugly like the other lepers. Although her members were deformed, she died before her face became disfigured. She developed an exalted look about her, completely detached from her actual situation.

Others say that the important people on the island brought her to the Royal Air Force Base hospital in Gan Island, Aḍḍu Atoll. Thanks to medical care there, Havvā Dīdī was cured of her leprosy. She still looked very beautiful. Many begged her to return to Fua Mulaku, but she refused. She did not want either to talk or look at anyone from her own island. Instead she went north. Her eyes dry, Havvā Dīdī boarded the ship, not looking backwards. She had no tears left for the place of her birth. It is said that she married a wealthy man in a northern atoll, and lived happily ever after. Some people like to think she is still alive today.

The place where this woman lived is still known as “Havvā Dīdī Bēvi Tañ”, the spot where Havvā Dīdī was kept and it lies in a forested area at the southern end of Fua Mulaku Island. Nowadays it is fully overgrown with large bushes and there are no traces left of the hut, but still one can make out where the well Havvā Dīdī used was dug. This woman became a mythical, almost divine, figure after her trials, for there is a suggestion of immortality at the end of the story. The idealization of females who had undergone difficult tests and ordeals during their life is a recurrent facet of Maldivian folklore and the deification of women after a lifetime of suffering will be discussed at length further ahead. This feature echoes the pattern of Dravidian legends, such as the Śīlappaḍikāram of Tamil Nadu and the Siri legend of Tuḷu country.

¹⁷⁵ This paragraph was omitted when the story was published in English in ‘Finiaši’ (Iru, Male’ 1988).

The story that follows is the personal testimony of somebody having visited a certain island in Huvadū where sick people were banished. Of special interest here is the rare insight it gives into the conditions in such places. Casual visits to those islands were strictly forbidden by the Government. Those unfortunate enough to be exiled there rarely had a chance to tell others about themselves, as their families mostly didn't even care. Sick people personified horror and they were abandoned there until death ended their agony.

Vehafulā

"Long ago, when I was a child, I was taken on a trading journey across Huvadū Atoll. On the dōni there were mostly people from our island. One afternoon, heavy rain and strong winds made the captain look for shelter leeward on the closest island. This island was called Vehafulā. It wasn't very big and it had thick vegetation, mainly tall coconut trees.

As soon as we threw anchor we could see people on the beach and I became suddenly overwhelmed by fear. In front of my eyes was the most abject bunch of human beings I have ever seen. Some were walking like cats, others hobbling like rabbits, but most of them were crawling or dragging their miserable bodies on the sand. They were waving at us, calling us to give them something. The laments filling the air and this pathetic sight were enough to leave us paralyzed with terror. However, our captain remained calm and this was very reassuring considering our situation. He spoke matter-of-factly: "All the hopelessly sick men of Huvadū are left to rot in this island. The women are brought to the island of Funadū, farther away. If they were close by they would swim to meet each other."

We kept very silent, staring mesmerized at the horrid crowd on the beach. The captain went on: "It is strictly forbidden by the king to disembark or even anchor close to these islands, but I need to have a look. I know all the

islands of this large atoll very well except for these two places and I have always wanted to see the interior of these islands. This is a good chance to go ashore and see by myself.” Then he faced us and his voice became a little threatening, “I don’t want anybody on board to mention this later. Is this clear?” Since this captain was a much liked and respected person, everyone on board assented.

Thus, the captain and three other men disembarked bringing me along. Wading through the shallow waist-high water they reached the beach. I was sitting on one of the men’s shoulders and once ashore I walked beside them. But, as soon as we were near the inhabitants of that island, I wished I had stayed on board. The deformed and maimed men on the sand were even more terrifying seen so close by. It was revolting to look at their hideous wounds. These were nauseating, without bandages or medicine, oozing fluids, and their sickly smell filled the air. But the thing that most horrified me was to stare at their repulsive faces with no eyes, no lips or no noses. Even so, these wretched people were very kind and considerate, despite their woeful existence. They kept all the time at a prudent distance from us, because they realized we were alarmed if they came too close. They were very silent while we walked through their island.

The interior of the island was green, lush and gloomy. Big banana clumps grew here and there. The sick and deformed inhabitants of the place lived in meek, tumbledown little huts, which were built at a relatively little distance from each other. The roofs of their shacks, thatched with woven coconut palm fronds, were no higher than a man’s chest.¹⁷⁶ As we set to leave the place to board our dōni, some local men, who had been silently following us, told us to wait.

¹⁷⁶ The usual Maldivian house, no matter how humble, would have a high pointed roof and its dwellers would be able to stand inside.

After a while they returned bringing a freshly cut banana bunch of the māloskeu variety (the type that are good for cooking) and they offered it to us. We were moved because the people who had been banished here were so poor and wretched, yet they still thought it was important to be kind and courteous. Then our captain spoke to one of the young men of his crew who went to our boat coming back with a muḍeiṣi (basket) full of mangoes. After the sailor deposited it on the beach, we all waded back to our dōni. Once aboard, we felt lighter.

Presently the sky was clear and in the golden light of the late afternoon we could see a rainbow in the east.¹⁷⁷ The captain said it was alright to pull up the anchors and leave. When we sailed away from Vehafulā all the passengers sighed in relief. Nothing in the world could have compelled us to spend the night close to that lonely, dreary place.¹⁷⁸

Those wretches were kept away from the rest of the islanders in an attempt to keep their terrifying diseases at bay. This insulation had nothing to do with knowledge of germs and mechanisms of infection. Instead, it had its source in the proverbial abhorrence Maldivians had towards diseases. For these were perceived to be the external manifestation of an intense evil which had the power, if unleashed, to destroy whole communities. It was fear that promoted the cruel treatment of sick people in the islands. Segregation and discrimination were not common in the Divehi social background, where people of both sexes and all ages would usually live together. No one was excluded and even persons with mental diseases or disabilities would be integrated.

¹⁷⁷ Detailed descriptions of the weather and the sky are a common feature of traditional Maldivian seafaring stories

¹⁷⁸ Narrated in 1985 by Keḍēre Muhammadu, Fua Mulaku Island. The island he names Vehafulā is probably Voḍamulā, located on one of the eastern reefs fringing Huvadu Atoll a few miles NW of Funadū, the other island mentioned in this story.

However, men and women, who are never segregated in traditional Maldivian society, were strictly kept away from each other in those sad islands, as if to compound their misery. The rationale behind the separation of male and female sick people was that the evil which caused the disease should never be allowed to reproduce. The best way to deal with it was to let it die slowly. Their intense, often irrational, fear made healthy islanders focus on the malevolent entity producing the disease. In the process, the humanity of the suffering sick persons was diminished to the point of being almost erased.

1.6.2 IN THE WAKE OF AN EPIDEMIC

When the evil causing disease in one island was considered to be too overwhelming, the inhabitants would be gripped by an irresistible terror. The source of this abnormal panic was the feeling that they might be the last people on the island, that they would be the last horrified witnesses of the extinction of their own community. Historically, among the different types of epidemic diseases, the most feared one was smallpox (kašividuru).¹⁷⁹ The reason was that smallpox struck suddenly, spread very fast and was very deadly, affecting anyone, even healthy and strong-looking people. The high fever and oozing boils characteristic of this disease were interpreted as some evil that was dwelling inside the affected person and was struggling to come out.

In extreme cases islands would be abandoned and the whole population would travel on their boats with a few belongings to settle somewhere else. The following story is based on a real event. The storyteller claimed that this took place in his own island about 800 years ago, but no other historical data were provided to ascertain the dating.¹⁸⁰ Ayyani Daitā, the heroine, is a middle-aged woman who survived being left alone in the island for over four months:

Ayyani Daitā

“A long, long time ago, a massive epidemic struck Fua Mulaku Island. The deadly disease hit every household and wrought havoc among the children. Soon there were deaths in every family and adults caught the

¹⁷⁹ Kašividiļi in Aḍḍu Bas. Cholera (bēra’ hiṅguṅ) would come in the second place because of quick emaciation followed by death.

¹⁸⁰ Told in 1990 by Kaṭibuge Ibrahīm Saīdu, of Diguvāṇḍo village, Fua Mulaku

affliction too. Faṇḍita men were helpless to contain the calamity. They made big efforts with their magic, but deaths kept increasing alarmingly. To make matters worse, an ill-omen appeared. In the still air of the doldrums, steam that rose from both lakes located in the middle of the island formed a long ominous-looking cloud stretching from the NW to the SE right above Fua Mulaku. It is said that it had the shape of a marlin and that its tail was moving slowly.

The most reputed faṇḍita men of the island made magic to “cut” (to cause it to dissipate) this malevolent fish-shaped cloud but they were unsuccessful and the deaths continued unabated. The hideous phenomenon kept hovering above the island during those accursed days. Meanwhile, in every household, men, women and children died one after the other. Horror and despair overtook everyone when they watched how the best magic was useless to arrest the number of deaths. The faṇḍitaveriṇ urgently called a meeting with the Vāroveriya, the royal tax collector, who was the island’s highest authority at that time, and the dōni owners. The Vāruge and its verandah were lit by many oil lamps. Many men, women and children waited anxiously outside. With a grave voice, the island’s best sorcerers informed the chief and the main traders that the evil which had gripped Fua Mulaku was too big to be overcome by magic, at least at this point. They warned that, unless everyone left the island, the whole community would be wiped out by the disease.

Discussion followed, but fear and death with their ghostly presence ensured that no one was very much in favor of staying on. At the end of the meeting, the final decision of abandoning the island was taken unanimously. Then it was agreed that it would be better if the whole community settled in one place together, otherwise they may become dispersed. They decided to sail Northwards, past Huvadū, cross the channel and settle in the island of Gan in Haddummati Atoll. After many heated arguments, this particular island was chosen by the traders. On their way back from their yearly journeys to Ceylon, they had often landed in that long island and had made good friends there.

Everyone was very sorry to leave their home island, but their fear was stronger than their sadness, and the news traveled quickly from household to household. Soon, in every home, men and women worked feverishly preparing for their journey and for a long absence from Fua Mulaku. Upon arrival to the new island, they needed to have their own food otherwise they would be a burden for their hosts and would give them an excuse to talk bad about them. Besides, they needed to bring presents as befits Maldivian custom. Many women forgot for a while their fear while they were busy preparing sweets.

Ayyani Daitā was thus in her kitchen, preparing fukkaro for the journey.¹⁸¹ She had no immediate family and was living alone in a small house at the edge of a village at the Northern end. She was past her youth, but she was not yet affected by the infirmities of old age and managed very well living on her own. She was an active, hard-working woman who was always cheerful. In the houses close to her home, people were busy packing. The young men were carrying all the bundles and boxes to the dōnis. Ayyani Daitā was so absorbed in cooking fukkaro that she didn't pay much attention to her neighbors who were calling her to get ready and leave. Absent-mindedly she muttered: "Yes, yes, I'm coming."

The dōnis were loaded and there was much confusion as they were being boarded, so the neighbors forgot about Ayyani Daitā in the midst of their frenzied activity. Soon Fua Mulaku's whole fleet of fishing and trading boats left the island and sailed northwards. Meanwhile, the woman was still cooking her fukkaro. "It is getting thick enough," she thought. Suddenly she noticed something unfamiliar: She could hear no noises. Ayyani Daitā felt a sudden fright and went out of the kitchen. Outside there was complete quietness. She ran to the next house and found it

¹⁸¹ Fukkaro is a sweet solidified mass of palm syrup rolled into banana leaves. To get the palm sap to become thick enough it has to be kept cooking on low fire for a very long time

empty. With her heart pounding, she ran across the whole village, but no one was there. All houses were deserted. Some people had left even valuable things scattered about because of their hurried departure. Now Ayyani Daitā ran towards the beach in panic. She went calling all the time on the way. But in the light of the late afternoon, the island was so strangely quiet, that it seemed to absorb her loud cries. As she arrived at the beach her worst fears were confirmed.

Far, far away in the horizon she could see the sails of the dōnis. Ayyani Daitā screamed, danced and jumped wildly on the beach until she became tired. Finally, in bitter despair she realized that the sails were so small, that there was no chance that the people on board could see her. Now Ayyani Daitā was outraged. How could they have left her? She sat on the sand and cried. After a while she looked around and her anger subsided. Precious possessions lay strewn about the beach: Mats, bundles of betel leaves, baskets (muļōši) full of coconuts and dried fish, helpless chickens tied by their legs and many other things. She realized that the people must have boarded the boats in frenzy and if they hadn't thought much of leaving costly things in their haste to leave, how could they have remembered a poor, lonely woman like her in those moments?

Ayyani Daitā released the chickens and watched them running away and hiding in the bushes. She sighed. She had known pain in life, she had been through famines and she had seen so many people die in this terrible epidemic, but she had never been totally alone in those difficult times. Stunned, she went back home, slowly coming to terms with the fact that she was all by herself on that big island. Her thoughts were frightening her so much, that she resolved to stop thinking too much and remembered that she hadn't finished cooking the fukkaro. She started walking at a faster pace deciding that, at least, she wouldn't let her fukkaro spoil.

The sun was setting as the woman walked through the deserted village. She was afraid to make much noise, for the whole place was eerily silent now. No cries of babies, no loud talking of neighbors. All were gone.

Ayyani Daitā had been used to live alone in her small home for the past few years, but she had never known such desolation. She entered her kitchen. It was filled with the sweet smell of fukkaro. The fire had consumed itself and Daitā lit it again. She kept stirring the syrup slowly with the dēfa’ (ladle) squatting in front of the pot. It was becoming thicker and thicker and this slow movement, the warmth of the kitchen and the sweet smell pervading it, gave some peace to the woman’s troubled heart. Now that she could think more clearly, she pondered over the helplessness of her situation, but she realized that there was nothing she could do to change it.

It was a moonless night and it was very dark outside. Then she heard noises. Daitā felt her hairs rising and a chill down her spine. She distinctly could sense a presence behind her, at her kitchen door. It was the ferēta responsible for the death of so many islanders. The woman had to make a great effort not to start shaking all over with fear. She tried to keep as calm as possible and kept slowly stirring the fukkaro. Suddenly the ferēta asked: “Daitā, what are you doing?”

The poor woman was so terrified she could not talk properly, so out of her mouth came some nonsense: “Haṇṭa maṇṭani!” This puzzled the ferēta so much that he kept silent for a while wondering what Daitā meant by “Haṇṭa maṇṭani”.

Meanwhile, the woman felt her hatred towards that detestable being growing in her. That ferēta had killed so many of her relatives and friends, and so many children too. It would have killed everyone in the island if they hadn’t fled.

Trembling with excitement, Daitā said: “Try some fukkaro!” She didn’t want to look straight at the loathsome ferēta, but with the corner of her eye she could see the monster opening his awful jaws full of sharp teeth. At that moment, Daitā hit the creature hard in the mouth with a ladle full of boiling fukkaro. With its throat full of the hot, sticky substance, the

ferēta ran away howling in pain. It fled at great speed into the darkness, heading straight to the beach. Without hesitating the horrible creature jumped into the water with its jaws wide open and was gone.¹⁸²

Daitā was still shaking and it took a while before she got up. She put the fire out and anxiously followed the tracks of the monster in the starlight. They ended in the beach at a point called Ayyani Gal in the Northern end of the Fua Mulaku.¹⁸³ She looked at the sea, but could not make out any shape among the breakers. Satisfied that the ferēta had disappeared, the woman slowly walked back home. Even though it was dark, the island didn't look so frightening now and the woman went to sleep. During the following days, she went back to the same spot to check whether there were any tracks of the monster coming from the ocean, but as the days passed and she could see no new traces on the white sand, Daitā became sure that it would never come back again.

The woman knew that it would take “three times forty days”, the period recommended in faṇḍita to return to an island abandoned after an epidemic, before the first faṇḍita men would come to see whether the island was inhabitable again. Thus, she had to depend on her own wits to gather food for a long time. In the beginning there were parcels of food and dry fish strewn about the yards and the beach. Daitā brought home as much as she could. But as the days passed most of that food decayed or was eaten by crabs and other pests. As no one was there to pick them, coconuts were falling from the trees. Fruits like limes, jambu and bananas were plentiful. In the abandoned fields, there was such an abundance of

¹⁸² The encounter of Daitā with the monster is the subject of a short, separate story having a number of versions. In some, Daita acts as if she eats the burning logs (or as if she is eating knives, by ingesting coconut pieces cut into the shape of knife-blades). The demon lurking outside sees her and thinks: “*What will become of me in the hands of such a woman who eats fire (or iron)?*” after which he leaves in fear.

¹⁸³ This rock is a landmark in Fua Mulaku's northern shoreline. According to local people it is unlikely that it is named after the woman.

kaļo ala¹⁸⁴ that Daitā could pick and choose, and she felt sorry that so many were getting rotten without anybody being there to eat them.

After over a month of eating fruits and tubers, the woman felt the need to eat fresh fish. She tried her luck casting a net on the reef and, after many unsuccessful attempts she finally learned how to throw the net properly. One day, at the end of the Southwest monsoon, when a sharp, crisp wind brings large shoals of pelagic fish close to the island and the frigate birds fly overhead, Ayyani Daitā went to the beach in the morning and saw it strewn with fluttering flying fish. The hapless fishes, in a vain attempt to escape from being eaten by the numerous tuna and the voracious frigate birds, ended up landing on the sand.¹⁸⁵ Ayyani Daitā was not afraid or anxious anymore. She was well fed and she looked much healthier and younger than before. But the days passed slowly and she was tired of so much solitude. She was missing the other people, especially the children playing, laughing and singing about the island. Over three months had passed and Daitā was counting the days. Every morning she climbed to the top of the Havittā, an ancient Buddhist Stupa at the northernmost point of Fua Mulaku.

The woman scanned the horizon in the hope that someone might come earlier, but no sail was to be seen in the empty ocean expanses surrounding her lonely island. Ayyani Daitā patiently cleaned the path to her home every day. Many other paths in the island were already blocked by vegetation. Most of the yards of the houses were overgrown. The woman didn't even think of clearing them all, but they looked frightening to her.

¹⁸⁴ Lit. 'black taro', a type of taro Southern Maldivian people used to eat back then. Most taro fields now are planted with a variety called vilāti ala (foreign taro). This type of taro was introduced to South Asia by the Portuguese

¹⁸⁵ Huļammaha (fuļañgi) lani, a phenomenon happening once yearly according to local tradition

Finally, five months after Daitā had been left alone, one sail appeared in the horizon at sunrise. The woman ran to the seashore full of joy and exultation. When the dōni came close enough she could see that there were twelve people, men and women on it. Daitā was so excited, she stood on the beach smiling and waving at them.¹⁸⁶ Once the dōni had made it past the breakers and entered the shallow water on the coral reef, Daitā was appalled seeing the expressions of fright written on the people's faces. They were pointing at her and talked to each other with a worried look. How foolish she had been! In her excitement she had thought they would be happy to see her, and now she realized that they were afraid of her. She shouted at them: "Do you think I am a monster? It's me! Ayyani Daitā!"

However, this didn't help at all to dispel their fear. The people on the boat didn't want to step down. They were turning the dōni back oceanwards, trying to flee from the island again. Then Ayyani Daitā cried out to them in panic: "You left me already alone all these months! Are you going to leave me again? Don't leave! I cannot live alone any longer." In utter hopelessness, the woman fell to the ground sobbing bitterly. At that point, the people on the boat felt sorry for her. They had been eyeing her with alarm while they were waiting for a chance to row past the breakers back into the ocean. Still, when they turned again towards the beach, they kept the boat at a prudent distance. Two of the men jumped in the water and waded until they reached the shore. Cautiously they walked towards her. Ayyani Daitā asked them in tears: "Why were you leaving me? Why were you leaving me again? What did I do?"

At last, one of the men, an old faṇḍitaveriyā, overcame his mistrust and replied: "Kāñlo don't cry. We were thinking you were an evil spirit. You

¹⁸⁶ This implies that she was so happy that she forgot about manners and didn't care to look like a fool. The polite thing to do would have been to pretend to be indifferent, for in Maldivian courtesy the paramount thing is to always appear calm and suppress emotions.

look much younger and prettier than before. We were afraid.” Then he made a sign to the people on the boat and they rowed hard until the keel softly touched the white sand. Now Ayyani Daitā got up. The other people disembarked and the women came close to her. Their faces had broad smiles. She was crying and laughing at once. Life would come back to the island! She had never been so happy.

In a variant of this story, a man called Diyarehifāṇḍi Beyyā, who was living at Fua Mulaku’s SE end, had been left alone too. After many days of exploring farther and farther from their respective homes they both suddenly met. At first both thought the other is a spirit, but when they finally managed to convince each other, they were very happy and Beyyā went to live to the NW end with Ayyani Daita.

The end of the story mentions the dread of Maldivians upon finding what they assume is a spirit on an island. In 1556, Manoel Rangel and his companions, the survivors of the Portuguese ship Conceição had a similar experience. After their vessel ran aground in Peros Banhos Atoll, Chagos Islands, on 22d August 1555, many months passed and nobody came to their rescue. The numerous castaways were inevitably dying owing to their inadequate diet in those uninhabited islands. Manoel Rangel and a handful of men built a small boat with the planks of their wrecked ship and sailed northwards. After a hazardous journey, they arrived to an uninhabited island in Maldives (most likely in Huvadū Atoll) in very bad condition, direly in need of help. But, mistaking them for spirits, the Maldivians who were gathering coconuts there ran away from them and left on their boats. After waiting for months, seeing that no one was coming back, Manoel and his companions repaired somehow their damaged boat and sailed to another island they could see in the horizon. Once they arrived there, again the Maldivians that came there to harvest coconuts fled from them. In despair, Manoel swam after them, held tight to their boat and jumped aboard. Realizing that they were afraid of him, he took a rope and acted as if he was binding himself and began to sob in despair. When they saw that he was binding himself and crying bitterly,

they felt sorry for him. Finally they rescued him and his companions and brought them to the capital of their Atoll (almost certainly Havaru Tinadu) where they were treated very well. Later they were brought to Male', where, according to Manoel Rangel, a Moor (Mouro) was ruling, and everyone was very kind to them, overwhelming them with presents. From Male' the Portuguese took a ship to Cochin, which they reached in January 1557.¹⁸⁷

The Ayyani Daita story also shows that, among the numerous spirits inhabiting the island, there is a specific malignant monster or spirit who roams the place and is responsible for that particular epidemic. This creature was known as dakō and it appeared always when a disease attributed to the vigani, the evil force sent by the Lord of Death, struck one island.¹⁸⁸ Thus, in Southern Maldives it is commonly said that the dakō is the permanent companion of the vigani, as it comes along with it.¹⁸⁹ In ancient times, when deadly epidemics struck the islands, if close to half the population died, the community faced the frightening prospect of being obliterated. In that case the faṇḍita man would blame the calamity on the vigani, the amorphous evil force.

To assess the severity of the situation, the sorcerer would tensely scan the western sky right after sunset looking for signs of the vigani's presence in the crimson clouds. If the faṇḍita man pointed to a small compact cloud, often shaped like a fish, weirdly glowing like a rainbow he would call this phenomenon 'duni eḍani' (the bow is set).¹⁹⁰ This meant that the

¹⁸⁷ Bernardo Gomes de Brito, "Historia Tragico Maritima".

¹⁸⁸ Skt. Yakṣa, Prakrit Yakkhō. In Indian tradition the Lord of Death is Yama. In the story above, the more common generic Divehi term 'ferēta' was used by the storyteller

¹⁸⁹ Source: Finifenmāge Hasan Dīdī, Fua Mulaku

¹⁹⁰ Duni aḷani' in the Male' or official form of Divehi.

epidemic would continue killing people and everyone in the island would die. Then, in a last-minute attempt to avoid this, he would perform sorcery to cut this cloud in two. If he had not succeeded by dark, which wasn't a long time in the short equatorial twilight, the entire population would feel compelled to abandon their abode, either moving to another side of the island or leaving it altogether to settle in another island.

This explains why in large islands like Fua Mulaku there are ruins of settlements in so many different parts of it. Also why in some atolls, like Huvadū, there are some big, fertile islands with fresh water in the subsoil, like Gan, close to Gaddū, and Kūḍḍu, close to Viligili, which are still uninhabited.¹⁹¹ The next story is about such a place, an island which was never again resettled after a fierce epidemic decimated most of its population.

The island of Havoḍḍē in Huvadū Atoll was the last island in that large Atoll to be completely depopulated according to the pattern described above. In 1925, it was abandoned following a virulent epidemic. After moving to another island of the same Atoll, its former inhabitants never came back to resettle it. Havoḍḍē has been uninhabited ever since.¹⁹²

The Careless Words

“In the year 1925, in the island of Havoḍḍē, ten girls came of age at the same time. Their families agreed to make a big party following the ancestral puberty ritual of libās levvuḥ which took place at the time of the first menstruation. Like all females in the islands, the young women had been wearing only a length of black cloth around their waist since

¹⁹¹ Source Ahumadu Saīdu, a government official in Gaddū Island Office.

¹⁹² Told by Kaṭibuge Ibrahīm Saīdu, Diguvāṇḍo village, Fua Mulaku.

childhood. On this occasion, according to the tradition, their hair was combed, arranged in a bun and their hands and feet were dyed dark red with *hīnafaiy* (henna).¹⁹³ Then they were given five new dresses of different colors.

The *libās levvuñ* ceremony would take place inside the house, where each girl in turn, had to stand on a *hunigoṇḍi*¹⁹⁴ in the center of the room. Then she had to put all the dresses on at once, one over the other, helped by her family. Following this, her head would be covered with a cloth and she would bend her head looking down while the *faṇḍita* man walked around the girl seven times reciting mantras.¹⁹⁵ At the conclusion of the ritual, the girl would exit the house from the auspicious door determined by the astrologer and the cloth covering her head would be removed.

Once all the girls had put on their dresses and their formal rites were completed, incense was burned and a *salavāḥuḷu*, a Muslim prayer in the form of a song, was recited. After that, special food and sweet drinks were served for everyone present. Following this ceremony, the girls were considered adult women by the society as a whole.

Once their *libās levvuñ* celebration was over, the ten pretty young women of *Havoḍḍē* went to their houses. Each kept their favorite dress on and put the other away folded into their boxes. Then they met again under the

¹⁹³ Instead of the complicated floral designs of other cultures, Divehi women used to dye the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet uniformly, using abundant henna, in a rich brown color which in time turned to orange. The tips of their fingers and toes were dyed as well until the fingernails became dark brown

¹⁹⁴ A low chair with a serrated metal blade at one end used to grate coconut. In older times the girl would put her feet on top of two gold sovereigns, placed on a sack full of rice instead of the *hunigoṇḍi*

¹⁹⁵ The connection between the number seven and puberty rituals was also common among the Pulaya or Cheruman of Southwest India. K.A. Iyer, 'The Tribes & Castes of Cochin.'

shady trees by the beach. Conscious of the impression they made in their new shiny dresses, the girls decided to walk around the island to show off.

In the islands not everyone could afford such a ceremony. Those ten girls were part of the lucky few, for their families were well-to-do. Other women could only afford one dress, which they kept carefully folded in their box to be worn only on special occasions. Still, many more were so poor that they became old without ever having a dress of their own, wearing only a black cloth around their waist all their lives.

Such an unhappy woman, hacking firewood in the forest, saw the girls walking towards the beach. She was in her middle age and she had never worn a dress in her life. Those neatly-dressed young women, swelling with pride and joy in their colorful dresses, giggling, singing and joking were a provocative sight for her. When they passed close to the sullen woman, they asked playfully, “Is Daitā looking for firewood?”¹⁹⁶ The woman had seen her best years fade away without ever having owned a nice dress like they had. She could not stand the sight of them and, in a burst of jealousy, she scoffed with all her venom, “Look how numerous people are getting in this island! Ten girls are becoming big at the same time!”

The girls laughed and, without looking at her, replied in a loud, mocking voice for the woman to hear, “Daitā is bitter because she has to walk about half naked, like a child, although she is so tall.” They didn’t pay further attention to her and ran away singing. But the ill-disposed woman stood very still and kept following them with eyes full of resentment until they disappeared among the trees.

Eventually, Daitā’s wicked words stirred up some evil spirit and from that very moment a calamity of disastrous proportions poised itself to wreak havoc in the hapless island. Events moved very fast. That same evening

¹⁹⁶ The third person is commonly used as a mark of respect. In this particular case there would be a clear implication of mockery as well

one of the maidens who had undergone the libās ceremony told her parents after dinner that she didn't feel well. She had been the most beautiful and proud girl of the group. Her father was alarmed because she looked very ill; in fact he had never seen such a sickly expression on his lovely daughter's face. The mother arranged the pillows on the swingbed in the verandah and told her affectionately: "Lay down here my child, the night air is cool and you will soon feel better."

As soon as she sat down, the girl complained that she felt sick and, before her mother could bring a basin, she suddenly bent over herself and vomited messily all over the floor. After her parents brought her to bed, she spent the night panting with very high fever and throwing up many more times. The next morning her condition had not improved at all. Her mother gave her food, but she could not keep it inside. Vomiting and vomiting that girl died miserably after three days of agony.

This tragedy repeated itself in the other nine houses of Havoḍḍē where the remaining girls who had come of age lived. One after the other, all those charming young women ended up in the same manner, shaking with convulsions and fever in their beds and vomiting themselves to death in front of their helpless families. It seems that this vomit was particularly evil-smelling and that the whole island was reeking of it during that terrible period.

This swift and lethal sickness spread to the whole population. Men, women and children were struck by fever, vomited violently, and died in but a few days. It is said that all along that deadly epidemic, a malevolent spirit hovered over Havoḍḍē and a continuous buzzing noise like the sound

of flies, could be heard during the night all over the island.¹⁹⁷ In spite of the intense activity of the local sorcerers, who tried all their magic, religious reading and medicines to ward off the disaster, the situation did not improve even for a single day. It only grew much worse.

Weeks passed and, as the local faṇḍita men failed to stop the evil disease from spreading, fear overtook the whole island. People confronted their faṇḍita men and wondered what they were doing to keep the disease away. Knowing that they were losing credit, they gave up trying desperately to make their sorcery work, and acknowledged that they did not know the right magic. After a meeting with the island chief, they resolved to send a dōni to Vādū to bring a good faṇḍita man to Havoḍḍē.

Two days later, the awaited faṇḍita man arrived from Vādū. His name was Ahumad Dīdī and he was a neatly dressed serious old man. The people of Havoḍḍē went to welcome him at the beach. They felt relieved and hopeful, for he was a renowned faṇḍita man; and Vādū was an island famous for its learned men. He was put up in the island's best house.

Ahumad Dīdī began to work the same day he arrived. He started by drawing ambalaṇ, magic squares, neatly drawn on fresh, white sand, inscribed with magic words, delimited by four (or eight) eṣi (coconut palm stems) and with flowers arranged in a pattern. Another written eṣi was planted in the middle of the square. He drew those squares at every place

¹⁹⁷ The mysterious noise is a claim often made, especially in Huvadu Atoll, about severe epidemics that ravaged islands in ancient times. The type of sound changes from place to place, i.e. in Kūḍḍu island, which was depopulated a few centuries ago, the noise that was heard everywhere during the lethal illness, was the sound of cats meowing and it is said that it started from the eastern side of the island. Similarly the survivors of the Gan epidemic who fled to Gaddū in the late 18th century claimed that cats could be heard all over their island during the nights that people of all ages fell ill and died. Sources: Zāhiru, operator of the Viligili generator and Ahumadu Saīdu, Gaddū.

where paths were forking (*tin aṅgoḷi*).¹⁹⁸ Also, at every branching path a *buñkeḷe* was put.¹⁹⁹ These magic lamps, supported by a stick split in three at the top, were left to burn during the night and sheltered with big taro leaves against wind and rain. It was a very bad omen if such a lamp went out.

In the evening, a procession went through the village starting from the mosque after the dusk (*Ishā*) prayer. At the head, two of the local *faṇḍita* men, one holding a shoot of a coconut palm with magic words inscribed on it and the other with a *kehā* also written with magic words, went reciting mantras. The rest of the procession was made up of the adult males of the island. Women and children had to stay at home.

Some of the men were blowing into *dumari* (whistles made of palm leaves) written with magic words. Others, carrying lamps, chanted a special Muslim religious canticle (*takbīr*), while the ones who knew, recited verses from the *Qurān* aloud. The procession stopped for a while at every *tin aṅgoḷi*. It also stopped at the shrine (*ziyārai*) where a special *fātiha* prayer was recited to the local saint who had been buried there long ago, asking for his help. At last, it returned to the mosque where ten people had stayed constantly reciting the *Qurān*. Late in the night, after more prayers and chanting of magic words, *Ahumad Dīdī*, the *faṇḍita* man of *Vādū*, who had organized the procession, finally told everyone to go home. The men were tired and sleepy. However, no one slept well that night, because an

¹⁹⁸ In Southern India, the placing of offerings at the crossing of paths is related to the worship of the “Seven Little Mothers.” C. Sivaramamurti, ‘Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature.’ However, *Māri*, the goddess of epidemics is considered superior to them in power and much worse in temper. H. Whitehead, ‘The Village Gods of South India’.

¹⁹⁹ A *buñkeḷe* (*kālīvah* in Male’ *bas*) is made with a young coconut (*kihah*) with the top cut off and most of the liquid drained away the remaining part being filled with coconut oil. Magic words were written around it in a spiral and a wick was placed inside it and lit. Similar devices are used in the propitiation of village goddesses in South India; see L.A. Krishna Iyer, ‘Man in Kerala’

eerie noise, exactly like the noise of the procession continued until dawn even though no one was on the road.

The second night the men arrayed themselves in the same manner and went around the village. Again, the noise of that procession was heard mysteriously after everyone had gone to sleep, repeated and repeated on the dark and lonely island paths.

The third night, exactly the same thing happened.²⁰⁰ After the procession had long stopped, its noise, the monotonous reciting of hundreds of men, like a lament, was heard anew echoing over the dreary empty streets.

Ahumad Dīdī could not explain this portent. He knew that during those three days there had been no improvement. People had been dying seized by spasms at the same alarming rate. The stench of vomit from a nearby house reached his nostrils. Now even the mighty faṇḍita man from Vādū was frightened. He heard whispers close to his ear that night and he woke up trembling, bathed in cold sweat. To ward off this unknown evil he stayed awake reciting old mantras and reading the Qurān by the lamp in his room until dawn. He felt in his bones that the power of the abomination causing the deaths in the island was stronger than any horror he had known, or even heard of, in his whole lifetime.

In the morning, without breakfast, Ahumad Dīdī packed his box and went straight to the beach asking to be brought back to Vādū. Alarmed by the hasty and undignified departure of the faṇḍitaveriyā the island chief went to meet him at the beach. A group of islanders, who had gathered there,

²⁰⁰ The three consecutive nights are connected with goddess Māri. “I must not omit to mention that the propagation of smallpox is attributed to Mari Amman...When the disease breaks out in a village and continues to rage for some time, the inhabitants seek to propitiate this goddess by means of bloody sacrifices and other offerings, and also place her image on a car and carry it about with great solemnity through the streets for three successive nights.” S. C. Chitty, ‘The Castes, Customs, Manners and Literature of the Tamils.’

seeing the worried expression on the face of the man they had trusted so much, felt their throats choke with fear. If even such a mighty sorcerer was deserting them, there was no hope left for them at all. Sorrow floated over the desolate scene. "Why are you going so soon?" asked the island chief. Even if he had tried to speak calmly, as befits a person of authority, the tone of his voice betrayed his intense anxiety.

"The evil is bigger than I expected. I'm sorry, I can't do anything," Ahumad Dīdī spoke hurriedly without looking at the chief's eyes. He did not want him to discover that he was afraid too.

The island chief didn't know what to say. Ahumad Dīdī looked at him now and was overcome by the sadness in his face. He felt he had been too harsh and tried to speak in a warmer and friendlier manner. "Look, people have been dying all the same after I came here. I have done the best magic that can be done. I have tried very hard, believe me."

The island chief's face was full of hopelessness when he asked, "What should we do, then?" Ahumad Dīdī, deadly serious, instructed: "Leave the island! Go anywhere else. Tell everyone in Havoḍḍē to go away. Don't stay here if you care about your life." His last words were a whisper.

The island chief's face plainly showed panic. Hysterically he pled, "Ahumad Dīdī! Don't leave right now! At least stay with us while we get ready to leave! We will need your magic and your protection."

With a stiff gesture of his hand, Ahumad Dīdī categorically refused. "By Allah! I am not going to stay another night in this island!" His manner was brusque now and he almost had become hysterical himself. Forgetting his dignity, the elderly faṇḍitaveriyā turned rudely away from the island chief, waded in the knee-deep water, jumped on board the dōni and shouted at the sailors to punt out of the lagoon.

The boat's sail was unfurled and caught wind. Ahumad Dīdī felt now relieved. He looked astern and saw the chief and the men, women and

children on the beach lit by the morning sun. Their silhouettes became smaller and smaller. It was a gloomy scene in spite of the light, the beautiful turquoise color of the lagoon and the lush green trees on the island. He felt sorry for having been rude. They had treated him so well.

After a while, as the *dōni* caught speed, Ahumad Dīdī almost couldn't make out the figures on the beach. Havoḍḍe looked now just like a long, dark clump of trees over the sea surface. No! Definitely he could not have stayed there another night. Now he remembered that, because of his haste in leaving he had not even asked for any payment. But he didn't regret it at all. He was happy that he was sailing east, towards Vādū. What can be more important than saving one's own life (*furāna*)?²⁰¹

The chief called all the islanders and told them to gather close to the wall of the mosque, by the graveyard. Pointing at the rows of fresh tombs he announced in a distressed voice to the men and women assembled there that they had to leave Havoḍḍe and that there would be no discussion of the matter, because even such a great *faṇḍita* man from Vādū had not been able to save them. There was no more hope or remedy against the affliction they had been enduring. Everybody was silent. The cemetery was filled with new graves, long, white sand mounds shining bright in the sunlight.

Following this painful gathering, the people of Havoḍḍe buried their last dead, of which there were more than four per day, in a hurried manner. There was almost no time to go through all the traditional death and grief rituals.²⁰² Everyone took his most precious possessions and loaded their

²⁰¹ The word used here was 'furāna' (Skt. *prāṇa*), which roughly means 'soul,' but in Divehi tradition its meaning is less connected with the spiritual aspect of the soul, than with the breath of life. The breath leaves the body and the body becomes lifeless. Literally, Ahumad Dīdī said: "To save one's own life-breath."

²⁰² When a person dies it is important that as many people as possible go to see his or her face before burial, a custom known as 'Mūnu Beluṅ.'

boats. Since it took some days before all the men, women and children and old people were ready, more of them died in the midst of the general confusion. Most of the battelis sailed towards Māmendū which lies on the eastern reefs fringing Huvadū Atoll. But some of them chose to travel to the capital island, Havaru Tinadū, where they settled. Although they were well received by the inhabitants of both islands, many people continued vomiting and dying after arrival. Havoḍḍē is still uninhabited.

This story underlines the consequences of imprudent speech. The jealous woman's reckless words brought about the tragedy that eventually took enormous proportions. Divehi people are usually careful about which things must not be said to others. Dark spirits might be lurking unseen anywhere nearby and, when taunted, may cause some misfortune. For example, no mother will take as a compliment when somebody says: "How fat your child is!" A malevolent (nāman) spirit might hear this, send a curse (esfinnā) and the child might be afflicted with some serious disease, become thin or die.

The female puberty rites described in this story were very important in Maldives back then. Immediately following the menarche, a Maldivian girl would not be allowed to go out of her house. She was not permitted to see men not related to her during the week after the first signs of menstrual activity. The libās levvuñ celebration itself could take place any time during the following weeks or months, when families agreed on an auspicious date and were ready to meet the expenses of the celebration. In the traditional Divehi environment children had their partners recommended by their parents, who would favor the offspring of their closest friends. In the South the best partner for a girl would be her mother's brother's son (Mābeyyāge futā). Normally boys and girls were

quite free to refuse, in which case they used to choose their own partners themselves at a very early age and without ceremonials.²⁰³

The pre-adolescent age would be the time when teeth would be filed. The filing of teeth (*daiy keṇḍuñ*) had both aesthetic and ritual purposes. Maldivians used to have aversion towards teeth with jagged edges, since they look like the fangs of animals (cats, sharks, and crocodiles) or evil spirits. Hence filing their edges into a straight line was originally meant to have a refining or 'purifying' influence into ushering the children from the more 'wild' ways of childhood into the more 'serious' and responsible ways of adulthood.²⁰⁴ Although its ceremonial meaning has been lost, still the filing of teeth kept having great aesthetic value in the Southern Maldives during the 1980's and I found many people who suggested that I would look more handsome if I would get my own teeth filed.²⁰⁵

The informal recognition of pre-adolescent couples as future marriage partners included license to indulge in a sexual relationship.²⁰⁶ When girls reached puberty, at the *libās levvuñ* ritual they were de facto ushered into full married life with their child partners, without the need of a proper wedding ceremony. This is the reason why traditionally in the

²⁰³ Nowadays Maldivians speak against this custom claiming that sex at childhood, when both partners were about eight years old or perhaps earlier, caused early puberty and even early old age. Source: F. Naīma, *Gāge, Male'*, and others

²⁰⁴ The sand-like teeth filings were not just thrown away. They were spit by the boy or girl onto a piece of banana leaf which was then stuck inside a crevice of a coral wall. This was also the way of disposing of hairs and nail-clippings, which in no case should touch the ground nor be thrown into the sea. Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī, 1983.

²⁰⁵ Among them, Nerivaki Kalō of Miskimmago, Fua Mulaku, persistently made this suggestion

²⁰⁶ Relative sexual freedom among boys and girls was also widespread among the matrilineal tribes and castes of Southern India. To mention a few of the closest ones to the Maldivians geographically: Ezhava, Kānikar, Mukkuvar, Nāyar, Pulaya, Vellāla and Vettuvan. See N.N. Bhattacharyya, 'Indian Puberty Rites.'

Maldives no great importance was attached to the wedding ritual itself. Marriage rites were low-key affairs without relevance in social life. This was in clear contrast with funeral, birth and menarche ceremonies which were celebrated with much fanfare amid cooking and feasting. Nowadays the situation has inverted itself. The traditional puberty ritual has practically disappeared while wedding parties are assuming increased importance within Maldivian society.

1.6.3 MASS DEATH

Unfortunately I was not able to gather much information about epidemics in the North of Maldives, but it would not be right not to mention at least one of the few narratives I collected from that part of the country.

In Miladummaḍulu Atoll there is an island called Vavati. It was inhabited until about 1910. However, it never had much population. Only a few families lived there, totaling about twenty or thirty people, including men, women and children. In the Maldives it is generally acknowledged that when islands had such a small population, people used to live in very good harmony with each other.

The coconut trees grew very well in Vavati, thus the island was covered with tall, lush, and healthy coconut palms. Every family owned a large group of palm trees and, when they collected the coconuts, they would have to give half to the king and keep the other half for themselves. This strange story²⁰⁷ explains the circumstances surrounding the epidemic that wiped out the population of Vavati:

The Evil Ship

“One time, after the coconuts of the island had been harvested, Ibrahīm Koyi, a man of Vavati, filled his dōni with the coconuts that had to be surrendered to the Radun as tax and sailed to Male’. He was bringing along with him one of his sons. On the way, after sunset, as the dōni laden with the king’s tribute had left the atoll and was smoothly sailing southwards, Ibrahīm Koyi saw a dark ship ahead, sailing towards his atoll.

²⁰⁷ Told in 1991 by Husein Koyi Bē of Hoḷudū island, South Miladummaḍulu Atoll.

They sailed alongside the unknown ship and, in the dusk, they made out a figure aboard. Ibrahīm Koyi called: “Ship Ahoy! Where are you going?”

A spectral voice answered: “We are a government boat! We are sailing to Vavati Island to put the royal seal on all the coconut trees there!”²⁰⁸

Ibrahīm Koyi had a bad feeling and yelled back: “My name is Ibrahīm Koyi. Please don’t put any seal on my trees!”

They could barely hear the dark silhouette answering: “All right! Only your trees will be saved!” and then the gloomy ship was already too far astern. Ibrahīm Koyi was relieved when it was lost.

Once in Male’, after bringing the coconuts to the tax-collector, Ibrahīm Koyi made some business there and, without further delaying his departure, he set sail back to his own island. He was feeling some anxiety and wanted to return to Vavati as soon as possible. He had left no man in his home, only women were there.

They arrived to Vavati two days later in the afternoon and Ibrahīm Koyi and his son thought that it was strange that no one had come to greet them at the beach. Usually there would be a couple of old people under the shady tree by the shore and the girls and boys would come swimming to the dōni amid much noise and laughter. After throwing anchor they went ashore. The island was eerily silent. No children came to greet them. When they reached the village they didn’t see anyone around the homesteads and no smoke was coming from the kitchens. Ibrahīm Koyi called the people by their names and, as no one answered, he entered the first house close to the path.

²⁰⁸ This meant that since all the coconuts harvested from the trees would henceforward belong to the king, local people would have no right to the traditional 50% share

Immediately a powerful stench hit his nostrils and he was confronted with a gruesome scene. Everyone inside the little house was lying dead on the floor and their eyes had been gouged out. All the houses had open doors and they entered one after the other and saw the same grisly sight: men, women and children lying about in different positions. All were dead and all of their eyes were missing. The evil smell was unbearable. The only noise was the buzzing of flies.

Full of foreboding Ibrahīm Koyi arrived to his home which was the last one at the other end of the village. He saw that the door was closed. When he called, the door was opened and he saw the frightened face of his eldest daughter. He was relieved to see that everyone from his family was alive. His wife and four daughters, with their eyes full of tears, told him that they did not know exactly what had happened, but the night after he left to Male', they heard everyone crying. They became so terrified, that they did not dare to leave the house. In the morning, when they went out they saw that some evil spirit had killed everyone on the island, sucking the eyes of the victims out. Even the old people and the babies had not been spared the tragic fate. Then they stayed inside their home with their doors closed until Ibrahīm Koyi arrived.²⁰⁹ Those days had been terrible for them and it showed in their faces and their wasted bodies.

After this horrible experience, no one from the surviving family wanted to stay in Vavati any longer they were too afraid to stay even a further single night. Hastily, the frightened men and women packed all their valuables and loaded the dōni with coconuts. They left that same day before sunset and settled in another island of the same Atoll, where they recovered and prospered. Thus, Vavati became uninhabited. Even many years after the tragedy had happened, no one from Ibrahīm Koyi's family wanted to

²⁰⁹ As a rule, Maldivian Islanders leave the doors of their homes wide open from dawn to sunset. Privacy is an alien concept in Island tradition.

return to their island. Vavati was abandoned for good and was never resettled.

Although it narrates a relatively recent event, this story is clouded by puzzling and esoteric features. It is not even sure that it describes an epidemic, as the people died in too quick succession. Furthermore, the symbolism of the ship is not clear. The storyteller claimed that the dark ship represents a deadly spirit coming from the sea which can also take the shape of a drifting log. This spirit, which will be mentioned again later, is known as *bēri* in the local folklore and it is quite well-known in *Miladummaḍulu* and *Māḷosmaḍulu*, two large natural atolls of Northern Maldives.

The rule in Maldivian mythology is that one should never reveal one's name to spirits; otherwise they may strike that person with affliction or death. Oddly, in this story exactly the opposite happens: The person revealing his name to the evil spirit sees his own life spared, along with the lives of his son, wife and daughters, in the carnage that left most of Vavati's inhabitants dead and eyeless.

The feature of gouged-out eyes appears in many Maldivian stories and even in the narrative of real events. For example, when a person having gone to an uninhabited island or to some remote corner of an island alone doesn't come back, and, after dying in unknown circumstances, the party searching for the person finds the corpse, it often has no eyes. Probably it is the crows that have eaten them, but Maldivians traditionally claim that this is a habit malevolent spirits have.

The story that follows is told in two parts.²¹⁰ The first section narrates the tragic events surrounding a sudden and lethal epidemic that struck Fua Mulaku at the beginning of the 18th century. Apparently, it was the

²¹⁰ Told in 1990 by *Katību Ibrahīm Saīdu* of *Diguvāṇḍo* village, Fua Mulaku island

deadliest plague in the island history and very few of the original inhabitants were left. This was the last time that Fua Mulaku's population moved to another island en masse.

The Ghastly Fleet

“Long ago, during the reign of king Muzhir-ud-Dīn in Male’, there was a prolonged dry period in Fua Mulaku. The trade winds stopped and the climate became unbearably hot.²¹¹ It is said that, owing to the heat, some people fell ill. The disease began slowly at first and it didn’t appear to be too threatening. The faṇḍita men made magic on behalf of those afflicted by the sickness and they seemed to improve.

However, more days passed and the hot and stifling weather continued. Suddenly, one day, all over the island people began falling sick and die at an alarming rate. A full-fledged epidemic was striking the island with unbelievable viciousness. The faṇḍita men worked hard to ward off the disease, getting involved in complicated rituals that required expensive ingredients. However, the deaths continued unabated and affected every household. Every day there were so many death ceremonies that there was no time for anything else. The graveyards were full to overflowing and people had to be buried outside of the mosque enclosure.

The sorcerers couldn’t cope with the number of men and women of all ages requiring their services during those dismal days. All over the island people saw evil spirits roaming around in the night. People built a certain type of fences with palm leaves in order to hamper the movements of the spirits, and stayed indoors at night. The deaths kept increasing until people almost despaired of being able to bury all the dead. The faṇḍita

²¹¹ Sultān Ibrahīm Muzhir-ud-Dīn reigned from 1701 to 1704.

*men panicked and declared that the vigani had taken over the island. The evil force was too big to be counteracted by their magic.*²¹²

One day at dawn, the most respected faṇḍita man gathered all the important people of the island led by the Vāroveriyā or chief at the aṣige²¹³ and declared: "We have made our best magic, but to no avail. At the present rate of deaths, maybe nobody will be left to bury us when we die. The vigani that has struck this island is a most malevolent one. We have to leave even now as we are speaking."

As he became aware of the frightening despair in the sorcerer's words, the Vāroveriya addressed the dōni owners and told them: "Make your boats ready as soon as possible. Tell the women there will be no time to prepare presents or cook any food for the trip. Take only what you can carry in your arms." Some of the people present tried to argue: "How can we go to another island without bringing presents to our hosts? This is giving them a reason to criticize us. It will be humiliating for us to stay there!"

²¹² Compare this and precedent descriptions of deaths with the narrative of a similar event in a South Indian village: *"Never before had any one in Ongole known what cholera and smallpox were, but now they learned and trembled. The wrath of Mahalakshmi was very fierce. She slew all before her. Twelve died on the first day after she had begun her work. Many more died during the weeks that followed. No one could count them all. ... So great was the thirst of Mahalakshmi for blood, that when a man fell sick he died on the spot. She let none escape. Many were numb with terror. Others said: "If Mahalakshmi must have blood, give her the blood of beasts. ... Perhaps she will spare us while she drinks it."* E. Rauschenbusch-Clough; *Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*. The relationship between epidemics, the village-goddess and bloody sacrifices is essential to understand Divehi mythology and will be explained further ahead in this book

²¹³ Aṣige were large thatched community huts built with coconut wood beams and screwpine pillars for village gatherings, celebrations, dances and 'just to hang around and chat'. Instead of an earthen floor, like usual buildings, they had a raised platform made of coconut frond stems, which made them very cool and comfortable. Apparently, since the 1950s the last ones fell apart and the rulers discouraged the building of new ones because 'people used the aṣige to do bad things', which may either refer to dances or other celebrations that were considered 'incompatible with Islam' by the government.

But the chief was somber. In other circumstances he might have argued gently, but now he was not in the mood for discussion: "The dōnis will be ready very soon. We will go to Mīdū. We and they are one people. They are the closest people to us and they might understand why we left in such a hurry. Now the important thing is to see whether we can even save our own bodies and souls. It is better if you don't even go home. Go straight to the beach. I am going there presently."

The veḍis (large boats used for the yearly trading journey to Ceylon and South India) were left on the island. There was no time to make them ready. About three hundred people, all that was left of a population of over a thousand, squeezed themselves on the eight dōnis that waited at the beach at a point called Rasgefanno. It was early morning when they sailed away from Fua Mulaku. The journey to Mīdū took about ten hours and the sickness, made worse by the steamy weather and the glare, took its toll even while the desperate islanders were trying to flee from it.

When this horrid fleet arrived to Mīdū, the sun was setting and the people traveling on the boats were exhausted by the heat, shock, sorrow and disgust. Not all of them survived and on some of the dōnis there were only corpses. With the help of the local people, the gruesome drifting boats filled with dead bodies were brought to the shore. Those wretches were buried in a separate graveyard, close to Mīdū's main cemetery, which still stands today.

Mīdū's inhabitants were shocked. They were not ready for such a sudden influx of visitors, but they were awed by the dreadful sight of boats arriving with so many dead bodies and the blood-chilling stories they heard from the survivors. People in Mīdū always had assumed that Fua Mulaku was a big, fertile island, a better place to live than their own island. Hence, they were surprised when they realized that the meager two hundred odd miserable people that came in despair to their island were all that was left from Fua Mulaku's former strong and healthy inhabitants.

Many men and women in Mīdū grieved bitterly, because among the numerous dead there were close relatives and friends. At first there was some confusion, as so many people, full of anxiety, asked the survivors for details about their relatives and how did they die. But then the important people of the island told them not to pester their guests, convincing them that they needed rest. However, thanks to these numerous family connections, the settling of the survivors from Fua Mulaku was arranged without problems. Although some of the more weakened people died during the following days, the epidemic stopped and nobody fell ill after arrival to Mīdū.

The second part of this story, introduces Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu, the faṇḍita man whose magical powers made Fua Mulaku island safe again for human habitation. Mūnufāhaga means ‘mark on the face’, for he had a purple mark on one side of his face.²¹⁴

Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu

“Right at the time of the epidemic that ravaged Fua Mulaku, a big faṇḍitaveriyā from that island was in the service of the Radun Sultān Muzhir-ud-Dīn, in Male’. Since he had a birthmark on his face, he was known as Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu. He was a learned and wise person and his magic was very powerful. As a result of his good character and his great magical powers, he was employed by the King to make sorcery against the Malabar vessels. Those Muslim pirates periodically came on their ships from their harbors along the Southwestern Indian

²¹⁴ Although this is just a continuation of the first part, both parts are normally told as separate stories. In this case the same storyteller (Ibrahīm Saīdu) told both sections in one stretch.

coast and raided Male', looting and destroying the capital and the royal palaces in it.

Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu was in his middle age and was living a comfortable life in Male'. He was very well paid and he had the prestige that came from living at the court and being in close contact with the king. However, when he received the news about the epidemic in his island, he could not believe what he was hearing. The terrible reports about massive deaths and the ravages of the disease that had nearly wiped out his native island's population, made a deep impression on this man. He became distraught and couldn't enjoy anymore his good reputation, his riches and the pleasures of life in the palace anymore.

After that every day he went to the fish market in Male', making enquiries of all ships arriving from the South, eager to find out what had happened in Fua Mulaku. With every piece of news, the magnitude of the catastrophe that had befallen his home island became clearer to him. He spent many sleepless nights thinking about the horrifying tales he had heard. The many deaths, and the tragic reports about boats full of dead bodies drifting to Mīdū, completely overwhelmed him. It was thus that Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu made the decision to sail to Mīdū to help his island people.

Upon informing king Muzhir-ud-Dīn of his decision, the monarch understood his concern. He asked him not to leave in a hurry, but to make the necessary arrangements concerning his possessions in Male' and to appoint his successor to fill his post. Once he had taken care of that, Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu sailed southwards to Mīdū in the first ship he could find. As soon as he arrived to Mīdū, he went to meet the wretched survivors of the epidemic. He was glad to speak again in the distinctive language of his island and realized that if all Fua Mulaku people had died, their language would never again be spoken in this world. Alas! The first thing he knew was that all his close relatives had passed away except for one little boy. Most of his friends had passed away too.

Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu stayed in Mīdū, close to his people, during the following months. As they knew he was a good faṇḍita man, they asked him whether they could ever go back to Fua Mulaku. He told them that he would go to see the island after some time and then he would make the right magic to free their island from the evil that had overtaken it. After “three times forty days” had passed since the large island was abandoned, Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu gathered the Fua Mulaku people living in Mīdū and told that he needed thirty people to go with him to explore the island and make a spell to send away the evil. Many men and women offered themselves, and even some children wanted to go, but the faṇḍita man told them that the island was not safe enough to bring children yet. In this manner, he selected thirty healthy-looking men and women and instructed them to bring their own food.

*The thirty people, including Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu left Mīdū on one of the twelve-oar dōnis at dawn. When they arrived at Fua Mulaku the sun was very low. They anchored offshore at Rasgefanno, Fua Mulaku’s main anchorage, on the island’s eastern shore, and waited for a while under the faṇḍita man’s advice. When they stepped down after sunset, they first unloaded the heaps of flowers, consisting of 500 unimal (*Guetarda speciosa*), 50 kaṣimal (*Pandanus odoratissimus*), 1000 huvandumal (*Jasminum grandiflorum*), and the 100 limes they had brought with them. A place indicated by the sorcerer was swept clean of leaves by the women. Then the flowers and limes were arrayed in neat heaps close to the shoreline under the gera (*Scaevola taccada*) trees and the women were told to return to the boat.*

All this work was done in the twilight and no one dared to venture inland, because Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu had clearly warned everyone that before exploring the island, magic had to be done at the boundary of the affected place, otherwise some disaster may happen.

Once the ingredients for the ritual had been arranged and the spot was very clean, Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu sat down close to the flower

heaps and began to recite magic words. The other people sat silently at a certain distance from him. He went on for about half an hour until the light in the western horizon disappeared. Then the ceremony was over and everyone went swimming back to the dōni where the women had prepared food for them. That night they felt the awful presence of the dark and empty island close to them and everyone aboard was so frightened no one dared to speak loudly.

The following day they stayed on the boat until right after sunset. Then the men went ashore and repeated exactly the same solemn ritual. In the evening, when it was over they swam back to the dōni anchored offshore. As in the previous night, they ate their dinner in silence and went to sleep uneasily, full of dark forebodings.

Finally, on the third evening, while the men were engaged in the ritual, they felt that a new presence was there. Looking from the corner of their eyes they realized that somebody else was sitting with them, but they couldn't make out the features of the strange silhouette in the gloom. Meanwhile Mūnufāhagamudīñkalēgefānu kept reciting as in the former two rituals and acted as if nothing new had happened.

However, when the night fell, Mūnufāhagamudīñkalēgefānu told his companions that he would go and come back very soon. He swam alone to the anchored dōni and told the men and women to bring the boat close to the shore. As the sea was calm that evening, they rowed right to the beach without difficulty and there the faṇḍita man ordered everyone to take all their belongings and bring them ashore. After a while, the food, mats, cooking pots and the other utensils were lying in a heap on the beach, high above the waterline. Everything had been done in the darkness and in total silence. Then the sorcerer told the men who had been sitting at the ritual spot by the bushes to take all the flowers and limes and bring them to the dōni.

Once the flower heaps filled the empty boat and holding the dōni in waist-high water, Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu called in a loud voice: “The ones who are not from this island get aboard first!” Suddenly, a dark figure jumped aboard in the gloom and the sorcerer pushed the boat with all his strength and let it go towards the ocean. Soon the offshore current caught the dōni and carried it swiftly away from the island.

Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu sighed and told the people gathered at the beach under the starlight that the spirit who had caused the deadly plague was now adrift on the dōni. The island was now free from its curse. Everyone cheered and a fire was lit on Fua Mulaku for the first time since they arrived. They cooked and slept on the beach that night. Their fear was gone and they joked and sang. Even in the dark shadows of the night the island didn’t look like an ominous place now.

The next day they repaired and made seaworthy one of the dōnis which had been abandoned on the island during the epidemic. Once it was ready some people sailed on it to Mīdū to tell the others that Fua Mulaku was free from its curse and that it was safe to return. In this manner, during the weeks that followed, many of Fua Mulaku’s original inhabitants came back to resettle their own island, but not all of them desired to do so, as some had decided to stay in Mīdū.

After much hard work, Fua Mulaku people succeeded in making their island an inhabitable place again. People were so happy with their great faṇḍita man that they asked him to stay. Moved by the devotion and admiration of his countrymen, the sorcerer decided not to go to Male’ to his comfortable post in the king’s palace. Mūnufāhagamudīṅkalēgefānu married a girl from his own island and lived peacefully there until death took him away.

At the beginning of the narrative there is a reference to the island having been taken over by the vigani. Again here, like in so many old Maldivian stories, the star role is taken by the faṇḍita man, who succeeds to trick

the spirit or dakō who caused the epidemic to flee from the island.²¹⁵ In this case, the islanders are willing to sacrifice a large twelve oar dōni, which is set adrift to get rid of the evil.

In the height of an epidemic, it was common in Maldives to perform the ceremonial departure of a boat from the island. This ritual was called Bali Furuvāluñ and was centered around a model boat, about four or five feet in length, but often much bigger. Since Maldivians are skilled carpenters, this ceremonial ship would be very nicely built, with proper little sails and rigging. Mostly it was a replica of a local vessel, like a dōni, batteli or oḡi (or veḡi), but occasionally it looked like a foreign warship (manavaru) or a trading brig or schooner (nā or nau).²¹⁶

The ceremonial vessel was specially prepared for the ritual and filled with sweet food, commonly boṇḍibaiy (boiled rice soaked in palm syrup and rolled in dry banana leaves) or perhaps fonifoḷi (sweet pancakes), along with limes, flowers, oil lamps, and sandalwood. The ship's hull was painted in black with white and red stripes, and its masts decorated with pennants made of strips of cloth with magic words written on them. Then, during a colorful procession passing through the main streets or paths, the ritual ship was carried around the main streets or paths of the island afflicted by the disease. If the boat was small, the men would usually bear it on their shoulders,²¹⁷ but more often than not these boats were so large

²¹⁵ The relationship between the dakō and death was emphasized in the popular religion of ancient Ceylon as well where the Yakas were considered to be the spirits of the dead. C. G. Seligman 'The Veddas.'

²¹⁶ Maldivian royal brigs and schooners (nākoḷu), as well as other large vessels known as bagala and ḡaṅgi were built at the shipyards of Bey pore in the Malabar coast. Most of this information was given by Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī; Ahamad Dīdī, Fiyōri, Huvadu, among others from Aḡḡu and Huvadu Atolls

²¹⁷ A boat of this type was used as a decoration in the officer's mess in the British air base in Gan, Aḡḡu Atoll

that they had to be carried around the island fixed on a frame with wooden wheels which was pulled by strong ropes.

The ceremony of releasing the boat (Bali Furuvāluṅ) would be performed at a chosen spot on the leeward side of the afflicted island. The best time would be right after sunset in the twilight, which is a very special time for the performance of faṇḍita. To conclude the ritual, the small wooden vessel would be brought to the lagoon and, after putting it afloat, the small oil lamps and the incense sticks it carried would be lit. Then it would be held by four men, with water above their knees, and its sails would be set while the faṇḍitaveriyā stood close by reciting special magic words to attract the evil causing the disease in the island towards the ship. In the meantime, many men, women and children would be watching the departure from the beach. Finally the little ship would be released and it would slowly drift with fully open sails towards the ocean.

This ceremony was done in the hope that the dakō or spirit causing disease would be attracted by the sweets, fruits and flowers, as well as intimidated by the mantras recited by the sorcerer, and would leave the island on the ritual vessel. The performance of the Bali Furuvāluṅ was, until relatively recently, very common in Aḍḍu and Huvadū Atoll, and it is very likely that this same ritual, or a similar one, was customary all over the Island Kingdom in more ancient times.

Except for the fact that in the Maldivian ceremony no crafted images are present, this custom has much affinity with processions and festivals in honor of the village-goddess in certain places of the neighboring Subcontinent. There, the image decorated with flowers is also carried around the village, before being set adrift in a river or estuary, or in the

sea.²¹⁸ Similar ceremonies are enacted to banish Māri, the dreaded goddess of pestilence, from a particular area. In some instances, in places where there is no large river or sea, a cart pulled by oxen, filled with bags of grain (or with large vessels of boiled rice sprinkled with blood) can be used for the same purpose.²¹⁹ Once again, this provides a good glimpse into the relationship between the South Indian goddess Māri and the ‘boat full of lights’ of the legends of the Maldivians, as mentioned in the references to Ranna Māri further above.

Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī told that once, on a trading journey to Gaddū (Huvadū Atoll) in the mid nineteen-sixties, they intercepted on the way such a ceremonial boat offshore, close to the southern rim of Huvadū Atoll. It seems it had been released on a Bali Furuvāluṅ ritual performed by the people of Fiṽōri Island after some sickness, possibly cholera, spread there. The crew of the dōni he was traveling on, picked the small ship up, relieved it of its load of foṇifoḷi (sweet pancakes very common in Huvadū Atoll traditionally made with turtle eggs and flour), and let it go. Some of the traders and sailors aboard ate the foṇifoḷi but Ibrahīm Dīdī refused to eat them. Old people aboard had warned that it was dangerous to tamper

²¹⁸ The procession preceding the Bali Furuvāluṅ is strongly reminiscent of the custom, common all over India, of carrying around temple images on carts or palanquins decorated with flowers and lamps. The final releasing of the carefully-crafted boat in the sea is similar to the Sedo and Berā festivals in Bengal and also to the conclusion of the famous annual Durgā Pūja festival in the same region, when the image of the goddess is immersed in the river. A. Bhattacharyya, ‘Folklore of Bengal.’

²¹⁹ In a reference on how the regent of Kotah drove cholera out of the place, W. Crooke writes: *“Having assembled the brahmans, astrologers, and those versed in incantations, a grand rite was got up, sacrifices made, and a solemn decree of banishment pronounced against Māri, the cholera goddess. Accordingly an equipage was prepared for her, decorated with funeral emblems, painted black and drawn by a double team of black oxen; bags of grain ... were put into the vehicle, that the lady might not go out without food, and driven by a man in sable vestments, followed by the yells of the populace, Māri was deported across the Chambal river, with the commands of the priests that she should never again set foot in Kotah.”* ‘Popular Religion & Folklore of Northern India.’

with such a ceremonial, but, apparently, nothing untoward happened during the following days or months to whoever had eaten those sweet pancakes.

Part II. The Island Mother

The learned author says that Sri Always-Happy advised him that privacy is essential for 'attacking enemies, offering prayers, casting spells, eating the forbidden meat, administering poisons and sexual intercourse.' At my request, member Sri J. reviewed this quotation. Sri J. complements the author. He adds in his memo: 'The Tantra says a man should make a secret of his age, wealth, holes in the walls of his house, his mantra (incantation with which he summons psychic aid), his sexual habits, medicine (that suits him), his austerities, his yoga practices, his charities and the insults offered to his person. Their publication causes much anartha (no good, no worth).'

G.V. Desani, 'All about H. Hatterr'

2.1.1 THE DOUBLE FACE OF FEMININITY

In Divehi mythology women are portrayed as having absolute qualities of one kind or the other. A woman is either extremely beautiful or extremely ugly, either loving and pleasant, or dangerous and frightening. These qualities are not meant to reflect the common Island womenfolk. Indeed, they transcend average human characters and are rather based on mythical personalities.

In the Maldivian myths, many evil spirits are female and the most important one is called haṇḍi. This name comes from the Sanskrit 'Caṇḍī', a form of Dēvi. Caṇḍī or Caṇḍika is an older name of Durgā, one of the epithets of the Great Goddess in the Devi Māhātmya, the first comprehensive work about the figure of the Goddess in Sanskrit dating back to the 5th century AD. Nevertheless it is not known how this particular name of the goddess was popularized in ancient Maldives.

This spirit's appearance is generally that of a lovely young woman wearing a red dress, although in some instances she may be naked, along with beautiful jewellery and flowers in her hair.²²⁰ She usually dwells under certain trees, mainly trees with red flowers such as berebedi (*Erythrina variegata*), kāṇi (*Cordia subcordata*) and nikabilissa (*Saraca indica*). It is important to note though that for traditional Maldivians the color referred to as 'red' (rai) could be broadly any color ranging from yellowish orange to brown. In addition this ghost would also be found in a few types of trees with white flowers which grow in the forest far from human habitation such as funa (*Calophyllum inophyllum*), kimbi (*Barringtonia asiatica*) and bōkeyo (*Pandanus zeylanicus*), dense, sprawling trees which usually grow forming dark, thick clumps, especially the latter, the wild screwpine.

The striking thing about the haṇḍi is that, in spite of her awesome beauty, she is able to transform herself into a monster: a powerful, fearsome hag with protruding fangs, bloodshot eyes, a wild mane of hair and sharp claws. One of the main features of this Maldivian female spirit is that she has a claw or talon on her heel, like a rooster's, which, save rare exceptions, is present even in her benign aspect. In order to be able to live among humans without being identified the haṇḍi has to hide her claws. This striking zoomorphic feature probably owes its origin to the diverse animals Indic Dēvis and Yoginīs use as vehicle or mount (Skt. *vāhana*). Most *Vāhanas* are claw-bearing animals, like the lion, tiger, crow or owl.

²²⁰The Smallpox-goddess or village-goddess, Sīṭalā, is also represented either wearing a red dress or naked in the iconography of the Subcontinent. This divinity is also known as Māri in Southern India and is connected with any deadly contagious disease

As these spirits have both a benevolent and a malevolent aspect, they also possess the ability to use their supernatural powers both to please and to harm people. This popular legend illustrates their ambivalence.²²¹

The Fruits of Greed

“Once upon a time, Maniku and Kayddā, a very poor couple lived in an island. They had two children, but they were not able to feed them. One day, while they were looking for firewood in the forest, they sat under a large berebedi tree and Kayddā began to wail in despair: “What are we looking for firewood for? We have nothing to cook! How can we go back home like this? Our children will be crying, dying of hunger!”

Her husband became very sad seeing his wife in this mood and he too began to sob aloud. The sun was setting and they should have been on their way home, but they were so hopeless that they just sat there crying and crying.

Suddenly Maniku and Kayddā realized that a very beautiful young woman was standing in front of them. She had a pleasant face, shining like the moon. Her dress was red and she wore the finest golden jewellery. In her straight black hair, there were bright red hibiscus and garlands of little white flowers. The poor couple stopped crying and, as they looked at her in sheer awe, they became so scared they began to shiver with fear.

The pretty girl smiled kindly at them and spoke with a very sweet voice: “Don’t be afraid, I am not going to hurt you!” She laughed,” Please listen to what I am going to say: I know you are a very honest couple and I know

²²¹ Told by the late Doñ Kokko, Hirunduge, Male’, the former lamplighter of the King’s palace

how poor you are. I have heard your cries and I came to do something good for you.”

At this point the haṇḍi thrust her hand forward, opened it and dropped a few shiny coins (favanu) in front of Kayddā and Maniku. “Here are some gold coins! With them you can build a small dōni (fishing vessel). You will be able to fish every day and you will live well. Then, you and your children will never be hungry anymore. But, remember. . .” suddenly, her voice became frightening and her sweet expression vanished: “You must never tell anybody about this!”

Maniku and his wife were so afraid they didn’t dare to move. The young maiden pointed at the coins and laughed again: “Take them, they are for you!” she exclaimed. And all of a sudden, she disappeared.

The distraught Kayddā and Maniku took the coins and went home. They were still shivering when they examined them at the light of the lamp.

The next day they bought food and had a good meal. They were glad to see the children happy. Later on, Maniku went to a carpenter to have a dōni built for him. The carpenter was surprised, but when he saw the gold coins he agreed.

After a few months the couple had used up their gold coins, but they had their own boat. Maniku went regularly to fish and they were not poor any longer. It is true that they were not rich either, but they never were miserable and hungry anymore, as the beautiful haṇḍi had predicted. Now they could live with dignity and the truth is that husband and wife were both very happy along with their children.

Meanwhile the carpenter’s wife became friendly with Maniku’s wife. She had been suspicious for a long time and asked her every day where they had got those gold coins from, but Kayddā eluded her questions.

However, when, after much prying, Kayddā finally gave in and revealed the secret of her good fortune, the carpenter's wife said: "You are silly! You should go more often to the forest and get more gold coins. You are maybe not as wretched as before, my dear, but you are still living in a very modest house. Just look at yourself! You have no beautiful dress and almost no jewellery. How can you say you are happy?"

Kayddā thought over what the carpenter's wife had said and felt miserable. When her husband came happily home after a good catch, he was surprised at his wife's gloomy face and asked: "Are you sick?"

Kayddā told Maniku in a whiny tone what was the cause of her sadness.

Her husband was very annoyed and said: "You shouldn't pay attention to the carpenter's wife. You should be grateful for what you have got. Have you forgotten the times when we went around the island begging for food?"

But Maniku's wife was not convinced and pouted her lips. From that day onwards, Kayddā kept sulking and nagging her husband until one day he gave up: "All right! All right! We will go again under that tree to see whether we get some more gold coins. But I still don't think it is proper to do so." Thus, one day, late in the afternoon, the couple went back to the same spot. When they arrived it was close to sunset. Kayddā and Maniku sat under the tree in the same manner and howled and cried in the twilight as if they were really suffering.

All of a sudden a monstrous being appeared in front of them and they held each other in terror. It was not the lovely girl they had expected, but a hideous-looking woman. Her face was too horrible to behold, with a wide mouth full of sharp teeth, a wild mane of hair and hands with long nails, stained with blood. Her red eyes looked cruelly at them and she spoke with a roaring voice: "Why did you come here again? Did I tell you to come?"

The frightened couple didn't dare to utter a word. Instead, they turned around in panic and fled as fast as they could. When Kayddā and Maniku arrived home, they were panting and shivering.

The next day, while Maniku was out fishing, his dōni crashed against a hidden coral reef and sank. He barely managed to save himself and came back home swimming. After this he and his wife Kayddā became again a poor wretched couple and they lived miserably, as they had been before.

This is a story with a moral end that puts emphasis on the evils of greed and lack of contentment. There are a number of folk tales in India following a similar pattern: The honest poor couple, the blessing by the village goddess and the jealous neighbor's wife spoiling everything. Often, it is the latter that is punished, like in the story of Mandodari,²²² a folk tale of Andhra Pradesh.

This haṇḍi story also stresses the importance of keeping a secret and the consequences of revealing the secret to the wrong person. A secret that is beneficial for a person should never be divulged. Secrecy is the foundation of Tantric knowledge and many stories in Maldivian folklore are based on this common wisdom.

The fact that the haṇḍi appeared under a tree at dusk, a time where humans were not supposed to be in the forest, may have its origins in the Indian Yakṣī legends. Such tree-spirits or sprites appear often in the Buddhist Jātaka tales as well.

Although the term dakīnī and its male counterpart dakō,²²³ which have its origins in the Sanskrit terms Yakṣīnī and Yakṣa, do exist in the Divehi

²²² B. Rama Raju, 'Folk Tales of Andhra Pradesh'.

²²³ The dakō is also identified with the type of monsters called furēta (ferēta). Its activity is assumed to cause severe epidemics and he is deemed to come together with the vigani, the amorphous evil force. (Cf. 1.4.2).

language, practically all the female tree spirits are now called haṇḍi. In South India though this name is rare and, among the sanskritized terms to refer to the goddess, the form ‘Cāmuṇḍi’ is more common. Other names, such as ‘Isakki’, are derived from the Skt. Yakṣi

Another Maldivian story illustrating the feminine duality, albeit in a different manner, is the story of Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā of Kāṣidū.²²⁴ This is a well-known romantic tale with a sad end, subject of many versions of different length. The following is a bowdlerized version that was put into novelette form and popularized during the nineteen-seventies in Male’:²²⁵

Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā

“Kāṣidū, one of the most important among the Maldivian Islands, lies in the Kardiva Channel about five degrees north of the equator. The nearest atolls are not visible from its lonely shore. Compared to other islands in the archipelago, it is fairly large, being about two miles long, but narrow. Even today, it is so heavily forested, that a sailor approaching from the east would not discern any human habitation.

Long ago, a handsome young carpenter called Māvaḍi Doṇ Ahamadu lived in this island. He had no close relatives and lived alone in a small house where he had his workshop. He enjoyed his job and was a strong and hard-working person. Daily, he left the village early in the morning and went into the forest to cut wood. He usually went there with a young boy who was helping him to carry his tools. When they reached the middle of

²²⁴ The word ‘doṇ’ in Divehi generally means ‘fair skinned’ (although in fruits it means the state of ripeness). However, it is often prefixed to a common name, not necessarily implying that the person is particularly fair.

²²⁵ Told in 1988 by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Male’. In the ancient versions of the legend, the characters were not named. Abdulla Sādigu, a contemporary writer, popularized the names in the story.

the forest, the boy left and Doñ Ahamadu began his toil. Since he liked to chew betel and arecanut he carried it in a maḍisīla²²⁶ which he left under a tree along with his food and water.

After finishing his hard work, Doñ Ahamadu would open his maḍisīla and sit calmly chewing betel.²²⁷ Meanwhile, as he assumed that he was alone in the forest, he would begin to sing raivaru in a loud voice.²²⁸ This was his favorite time of the day: the heat of the day was gone, the sun was low and its light became golden. The young man enjoyed the cool breeze and his songs reflected his joy.

One day, when he finished his song, he heard an eerie female voice sing a reply from the deepest part of the forest. Astonished, Doñ Ahamadu wondered where that crystal-clear voice could come from. "I didn't know any woman on this island could sing like that," he murmured to himself.

On the next day, at the same time he heard that incredible lilting answer. For several weeks, every day after he finished his work, and before setting out for home, he heard that mysterious voice. He came to anticipate it eagerly. Day by day their songs became increasingly intimate, until he realized he had fallen in love with the hidden singer. Finally, Doñ Ahamadu decided to marry her.

One day the young man, sitting in his usual place chewing betel, expressed his desire in raivaru and the girl suddenly appeared before him. Doñ

²²⁶ A round cloth bag that can be opened or closed by means of a string.

²²⁷ The chewing of betel (biley) and nut is normally a social activity. However, it has a sensual connotation as well. Frequently, in the Maldivian Island lore, references to the betel leaf and the areca nut have an alternative meaning which is outright sexual

²²⁸ Raivaru are couplets, a form of verse which was formerly very popular in the islands. Tradition says that in ancient times certain spirits taught the Maldivian people to sing raivaru.

Ahamadu was so stunned he almost fell backwards. In front of him stood a smiling young woman of such radiant beauty her face seemed to shine. She was wearing a lovely red dress and delicate flowers in her hair. Doñ Ahamadu's heart was beating so fast he gasped for air.

Nervously, he stuttered, "W-who are you?"

"I am Doñ Kamañā" replied the girl still smiling at him.

"I never saw you or heard of you. Did you grow up in this island?" Ahamadu tried to control his voice and sound calm.

"Yes, I did. Perhaps you didn't look around in the village very much." She laughed.

"Yes, yes." He agreed "That's why I was so surprised. I didn't know there was such beauty in this island. I thought I loved you because of your voice. But now, having seen the way you look, I love you more deeply than I thought I could ever love anyone or anything. When shall we marry?"

"I am ready now. But, first, you must accept my conditions."

"For you I would do anything. Tell me your conditions and I'll agree."

Then the girl said, "You must solemnly swear you will never ever look at me while I am by the well. Second, you must never look at me while I am in the kitchen. Third, you must never ask where I get fish and other food. And fourth, you must always let me wear the dresses I like."

Readily Doñ Ahamadu assented, relieved that her conditions seemed so easy, and got up. As he walked home along with the pretty girl through

the forest in the light of the setting sun, he could not believe he was so lucky. The very next day these two young people were married.²²⁹

Time passed and husband and wife lived together in bliss, continuing as deeply in love as the day they met. Doñ Ahamadu was very proud of Doñ Kamaṇā. She seemed ageless, remaining as beautiful as when he first saw her. Because of his love, Doñ Ahamadu faithfully kept his promise not to look while his wife was by the well or in the kitchen. He never asked where she got their fish either. Doñ Kamaṇā chose her dresses, which were always red, and she liked wearing sweet smelling flowers in the hair. Her husband didn't find anything wrong with her. To him she always looked very pretty and neat.

As years went by, Doñ Kamaṇā gave birth to a girl and two boys who were as beautiful as her. The three children cheered the house even more and the young couple was so happy they were all the time singing or laughing.

Unfortunately, after twelve years of marriage this happiness came to an abrupt end. One fateful day Doñ Ahamadu went to the beach and saw a trading dōni lowering its sails. Suddenly, he realized that while others traveled and kept in contact with people in other islands, he had isolated himself for years from his friends. His life consisted of his wife, his work and his home.

He asked somebody sitting on the hoḷuaṣi (raised log platform) "Where did that dōni²³⁰ come from?"

²²⁹ Traditionally, in the Maldives Islands, marriage was not a very important ceremony. It never had the social relevance that birth and funerary rituals (and in the case of girls the libās levvuṇ puberty ceremony) had. This was also the norm in ancient Sinhala society in Buddhist Ceylon.

²³⁰ Although the dōni is normally a fishing boat, large dōnis are frequently converted temporarily into trading vessels by erecting a long hut in the middle of the deck, behind the mast

“From the South. I think it is Takurufānu’s dōni.”

Doñ Ahamadu decided, “I must wait until I know for certain.” Takurufānu was a very good friend of his and he had not seen him since the days before his marriage. Thus he sat on the hoḷuaşi, eager to meet his friend again and to share with him the news about his happy life. After the dōni threw the anchor and the passengers came ashore, Doñ Ahamadu went on board the trading vessel and met Takurufānu, who besides being a trader, was a learned fañḍita man too. He was highly respected in Kāşidū.

Takurufānu was surprised at seeing his old friend and exclaimed, “Doñ Ahamadu! You are looking very well! Where have you been all this time?”

Doñ Ahamadu replied, “Here, in this island. It has been many years since I last saw you!” Although he was very pleased to meet him, Takurufānu acted as if he was annoyed: “Hmm! Before you used to visit me and come to my island. Now, for so long, you have kept to yourself. You could as well have been dead. I didn’t even get any news about you.”

A bit abashed, but smiling, Doñ Ahamadu explained, “Well, I am married now. But let’s go ashore!”

Takurufānu agreed and when he stepped on the beach, he instructed a young boy to take his box of belongings to the Katību’s house while he went along with Doñ Ahamadu.

Arriving at Doñ Ahamadu’s home, Takurufānu sat on the boḍuaşi (indoor raised platform) and considered his surroundings. He was impressed: “You have a very good house. No wonder you have kept to yourself. You must have a wonderful wife also, because everything is in its proper place. The richness of a home is not in its furnishing, but in orderliness and cleanliness.” The older man kept taking in the details admiringly and, after a while, said: “So . . . where is your wife? Is she pretty too?”

Doñ Ahamadu was enthusiastic: “She is more beautiful than any woman in the world! I have never seen anyone you could compare to her; and she is so kind to me too.”²³¹

His friend was amused by the sudden rapture and had to smile “Well, well. You must show her to me, then.”

Don Ahamadu called Doñ Kamaṇā. The lovely young woman entered silently and leaned against the door frame in a graceful position.

Takurufānu eyed her with a penetrating stare. Feeling uncomfortable, Doñ Kamaṇā turned her gaze away from him. She tried to smile, but she couldn’t and a veil of deep sadness fleetingly passed across her face. Then her expression became vacant. After some tense moments, seeing that neither his wife nor his guest had said a word to each other, Doñ Ahamadu sent her away on some pretext.

Smiling nervously to break the tension he asked, “Isn’t she charming?” But as soon as he noticed the look on his friend’s face, Doñ Ahamadu’s grin froze.

Takurufānu brought his index finger to his lips, and intoned, “Lā ilāha illa allāhu.”²³² What have you done my friend! Your eyes will not be saved! Where did you find that woman?”

Doñ Ahamadu was puzzled: “In the forest. You know I cut firewood. Why are you so worried?”

²³¹ Here, indirectly, reference is made to a Maldivian proverb saying that ‘A knife is pretty when it is sharp and a wife is pretty when she is kind.’

²³² A popular expression of surprise, meaning ‘There is no God except Allah’ in the Arabic language

"She is not human! You are married to something which is not a human being!"

"What! What is she then?" His eyes glittered, like those of a mad man.

"She is a haṇḍi!"

Losing his self-control, he cried out: "Takurufānu! What can I do? I even have children from her!"

"Children! Oh no! How many?"

Cold with fear, Doṇ Ahamadu shivered: "Three children, a girl and two boys. To me they look normal. They are very beautiful. But now I don't know what to do. Please help me!"

Seeing the horror in his friends face, Takurufānu told him, "Come with me."

They both went to the Katību's house and Takurufānu gave Doṇ Ahamadu a very powerful magic spell written on a sharpened piece of kuredi (a very hard wood). He said: "Bury this stake in the varuvā corner of the house. Your wife will be forced to leave by herself."

Still frightened, Doṇ Ahamadu asked, "What if she gets angry?"

"Why do you fear that woman so much? Is there something you have not told me about her?"

"Well, yes. She forbids me to look at her while she was in the well and while she was in the kitchen."

"How could you agree to that? How foolish!"

The young man lowered his eyes: "I love her."

Takurufānu ignored the sorrow in his friend's voice: "When you go home," he instructed him. "Spy on what she is doing, and tell me later."

Still nervous, Doñ Ahamadu went home alone and quickly buried the charm as instructed. Hearing his wife by the well, he peered around the corner. Instantly he regretted it. Her appearance was terrible to behold. She bent over the well, and caught a tuna fish using her sharp, long teeth. Her face was hideous, her loosened hair looked wild and her very movements were repulsive.

Doñ Ahamadu concealed himself, so his wife would not know he was home. Later, hearing a noise in the kitchen, he peeked through the door at her. Doñ Kamañā sat with her legs thrust between the three stones supporting the cooking pot. Where the firewood was normally placed, he saw flames flare from her feet. Shortly thereafter, the fish started boiling. A great chill went down the young man's spine and he fled into the house and sat on the boḍuaṣi.

Soon she came to him. "Do you want to eat?" she asked with her usual kind and musical tone which he had found so pleasant before.

Startled at hearing his wife's voice, his body jerked. "No!"

"Are you not hungry?" Doñ Kamañā enquired with a concerned look on her face.

Uncontrollable quivering overcame Doñ Ahamadu. He started to one side past her. "I'm not feeling well."

"What has happened to you?" She asked gently. "You have never been like this! I'm very sorry to see you like this. You are shivering!"

Her husband did not answer and stared in front of him, avoiding her gaze.

Then the beautiful woman spoke with a voice full of sadness: "You shouldn't think I am ignorant of what's going on. I know everything. The

moment I saw Takurufānu, I knew that he would be like an earwig cutting through my life.²³³ Haven't we already been married twelve years? Isn't that of any value to you? All those years of blessings, along with the joy of our three children, you've sacrificed on that man's empty words. Why give so much importance to an outsider who just arrived this morning? Now, I know you don't love me! If you did, you would have valued my words, not someone else's." The harrowing tone of his wife's voice made Doñ Ahamadu realize, all of a sudden, how deeply he had hurt her.

He now turned his eyes towards his wife's charming face. She was almost crying. He remained silent, remembering the bliss they had known together and feeling his love revive.

"It is true," she continued in sorrow, "I am a haṇḍi. But, even if I am a spirit and not human, what disgrace has befallen you? You knew only happiness with me. It was to spare you the shock of seeing me in my other shape that I made those conditions when we married. I wanted to be a human being, just for you."

Her husband didn't know what to say and just sighed deeply. Now it dawned on him that he had done something very wrong and that it was impossible to mend it.

The young woman spoke with tears running down her lovely cheeks. "I know you have used potent magic to get rid of me. Therefore I must go. I could easily take revenge, and yet I have no wish to hurt you, because I still love you. I have always loved you. Although I am more powerful than you can imagine, I will never use that power to harm you."

Realizing that he had destroyed their relationship, Doñ Ahamadu gasped. "I'm sorry for what I did. Please don't go." He began to cry too.

²³³ A local expression meaning 'to bring misfortune'.

*She narrowed her eyes, “I will go, because you want to send me away. I’ll take the children and leave no trace. Everything will be as it was before I came. I’m sorry I made any difficulties for you. You won’t be troubled any more.”*²³⁴

Doñ Ahamadu miserably pled, “Doñ Kamaṇā! Please stay! I love you.”

Ignoring him, the sobbing woman took their children to the beach, walked into the sea, and disappeared.

The young man followed her to the seashore, knelt down on the coral sand and wailed in despair. Every single day of his life he returned to that place. He stayed for hours looking towards the sea and sobbed bitterly. Doñ Ahamadu never married. He never talked to anyone and aged quickly. Claiming he was crazy, people avoided him until he died.

Doñ Kamaṇā never returned. The place where they lived was called Haṇḍi Gaṇḍuvaru. Until recently, the ruins could be seen in Kāṣidū. Now, even they are gone.

There are rougher versions of the same legend, some of which are not even set in Kāṣidū, that contain grislier, cruder details, typical of island spirit folklore. In these undoubtedly older versions Haṇḍi Doñ Kamaṇā literally splits her offspring in two equal halves at the end. She leaves one child with Doñ Ahamadu, takes another child with her and the remaining child she deftly cuts lengthwise in two with a cleaver (katiṇḍi). Her half-

²³⁴ at this point in more pristine ghastlier versions Haṇḍi Doñ Kamaṇā literally splits her offspring in two equal halves. She leaves one child with Doñ Ahamadu, takes another child with her and the remaining child she deftly cuts lengthwise in two with a cleaver (katiṇḍi). Her half-child keeps living, stands up, and walks with his mother into the sea, while the other half-child dies and begins to rot. His father buries it not far from the beach, close to the place where he goes to weep every day. The relation between women with supernatural powers and machete knives links this part of the story to the fierce aspect of the goddess such as black Kālī who always holds a bloodied cleaver in one hand.

child keeps living, stands up, and walks with his mother into the sea, while the other half-child dies and begins to rot. His father buries it not far from the beach, close to the place where he goes to weep every day. The relation between women with supernatural powers and machete knives links this part of the story to the fierce aspect of the goddess such as black Kālī who always holds a bloodied cleaver in one hand.

There are echoes of the Mahābhārata in the strict conditions Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā set before agreeing to marry Doṇ Ahamadu. In the Indian epic, Goddess Gaṅgā assumed human form as an attractive young woman and appeared on her own banks, for she herself is the river Gaṅgā too, dressed in silk and jewels and with lotus garlands on her hair. As she stood there, King Santanu arrived at that very spot to watch the beautiful sunset. When he saw the charming Gaṅgā there he fell suddenly in love with her and felt compelled to ask Gaṅgā to be his wife. She agreed to marry Santanu on one condition: “You must never question any of my actions, however irrational they may seem, and you must never try to prevent me from doing what I desire, or I shall leave you.”

Even if Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā’s narrative follows a different course, in the end, she, like Gaṅgā, leaves her husband because he broke his promise after a long period of marriage. The similarities end there though, because Doṇ Kamaṇā’s children don’t play any further role in the story, while Gaṅgā’s only surviving son, Bhiśma becomes one of the main characters of the Mahābhārata. The relationship between the man and the supernatural female forms the core of the legend in the Maldivian popular story, but the relationship between mortal King Santanu and beautiful goddess Gaṅgā is just the prelude to the great Indian epic poem.

Gaṅgā, though a female goddess, has no Krodha form,²³⁵ so the fearful aspect of Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā has its origins most probably in the Dravidian Village Goddess tradition.²³⁶ Her frightening appearance, which she took care to never show to her husband, is one more instance of the Dēvi or goddess taking a fearful shape. This duplicity is part of her very nature.

²³⁵ There is a relationship though, between female tree spirits (Yakṣīs) and female goddesses having water monsters as their vāhana or vehicle, like Gaṅgā who is usually standing or sitting on a Makara. See Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Yakṣas, Vol. II'.

²³⁶ There are also parallels in the part of the Gaṅgā story when she was expelled from heaven because of her pride and overbearance, (C. Sivaramamurti, 'Gaṅgā') and the legend of goddess Māri Ammā, the South Indian smallpox-goddess, who was expelled from heaven on account of her haughtiness (L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, 'The Tribes and Castes of Cochin, Vol 1').

2.1.2 FROM SWEETNESS TO HORROR

The descriptions of the haṇḍi female spirit in her frightening aspect vary, but, generally she has a savage look: Her hair looks dirty and unkempt, her eyes are red, her mouth is large, with fang-like long teeth, her hands and feet have nails looking like claws, her complexion is dark and often she is either stained with blood or blood is dripping from her mouth, staining her teeth red. This, again is in sharp contrast with Doṇ Kamaṇā's appearance as a lovely maiden, wearing fresh flowers in her carefully combed and braided bun, her flawless face and body, sweet voice, and, in short, every quality and virtue which can make a woman desirable.

Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā's well combed hair, neatly arranged in a bun on the side of her head, decorated and perfumed with flowers, was a strong tradition in the Maldiv Islands. Divehi women had to wear their hair always combed, oiled and bound, either plaited or arranged in a bun. When every girl or woman got up in the morning, the first thing she had to do was to thoroughly comb her locks. Unkempt and puffed-up manes of hair were not tolerated except while washing it during the bath, while allowing it to dry after it, or when females were in the process of grooming themselves.

Divehi women used to engage in the latter task as a social activity in small groups, idly combing, delousing and applying oil and perfume to each other's locks. The lice (ukunu) and the nits (lī) were killed between two fingernails. Usually, one of the women was languorously spread out, gently resting her head on the other's thigh and this was a moment for pleasant conversation in soft hushed tones. Placidly dressing and delousing each other's hair, like between sisters or friends, or mother to daughter, was regarded as a mark of the highest mutual esteem among island women.

In traditional Maldiv society it was totally unacceptable for a woman to go around with disheveled hair out of the context of bath or grooming,

unless she was mentally ill. If a girl happened to walk out her house, or even if she stayed within her home for a long time without combing her hair, other people would confront her saying: “You look like Minikā Daitā!” (the Cannibal Woman) or “You look like the dafferēta” (a very ugly spirit). The latter is a southern expression. Da’ or Daiy=tooth, Dafferēta literally means ‘the tooth monster’.

Conscious of the dread they were causing, sometimes women would dishevel their long black hair on purpose in the midst of heated family arguments or verbal street-fights. In ancient times, little girls of poor families or orphans would have their heads regularly shaven until they were close to coming of age. Then they would be sent to work in a wealthy household within their own island “to let the hair grow” for a certain period until they got married.²³⁷

Within the traditional Tamil and pan-Indian socio-religious context, the bound hair is symbolic of control and virtue,²³⁸ and, by extension, a symbol of the Goddess in her pleasant form. On the other hand, the disheveled mane of the monstrous aspect of his wife Doñ Ahamadu sees by the well, represents chaos and disorder, or the dark, horrifying face of the Dēvi. In the Tamil epic Śilappadikāram, wrathful Kaṇṇagi’s wild long hair “spread like a forest”, so terrifies the king of Madurai when she confronts him, that he dies upon seeing it.

Haṇḍi Doñ Kamaṇa’s red dress, a common feature in Maldivian haṇḍi tales except for some stories where the haṇḍi is naked (Cf 2 ‘Spirits and fever.’), has its origins in red being the auspicious color of the Dēvi. In Tamil Nadu, village goddesses are often just crude images or stones covered with a red cloth and all over rural India, stones representing the

²³⁷ Source: Kokkobeage Sakīna, Funāḍo village, Fua Mulaku

²³⁸ Kalpana Ram, Op. cit.

Goddess are daubed with red pigment. Even mere red marks by the side of a tank, or on a rock, or on a tree by the water may already represent the village goddess.²³⁹ These village deities are mostly identified with the smallpox goddess (Māri or Sītala), who is also viewed as a form of Kāli, the fierce goddess of time and destruction. Maldivians claim that trees having red flowers are especially malevolent and the significance of the red color within the context of the goddess tradition will be subject to further discussion somewhere else in this book.

The fact that the haṇḍi has no husband or male consort, thus being free to roam in the forest at will, as well as falling in love with a human being and being able to marry him, is a proof of the great antiquity of this Divehi spirit. In village India, although the ancestral village-goddesses are mothers, surprisingly, they are not married. Unlike average village women, these exalted females are not bound by social constraints and are free to do as they please. No father-figure was deemed necessary in the societies in which these goddesses originated.²⁴⁰

Furthermore, Doṇ Kamaṇḍā's astonishing magical powers, like fishing tuna, pelagic saltwater fish, from the shallow freshwater well, or cooking with the fire that comes out of her bare feet, are also strongly reminiscent of a tribal or village deity from the Indian Subcontinent. Among the beliefs of the Bhil, a large 'tribal' people group of Central India researched by Waharu Sonavane, one legend tells that when the Bhils had no more firewood for their kitchen stove to brew liquor, their divinity Raja Panatha put his foot under the pot to keep the fire burning. Moreover, in Bengali folklore tree-haunting female ghosts known as Saṅkhcinni or Saṅkhacurni are able to take the place of a human wife and cook with their feet.²⁴¹

²³⁹ See D.D. Kosambi, "Cults to Deified Women" in 'Myth and Reality'.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. "Mothers, but unmarried".

²⁴¹ Lal Behari Day 'Folk Tales of Bengal'

It is also possible though that the fire coming out of the girl's feet has its origins again in the Śilappadikāram story. The feet are the place where anklets are worn and it was a misplaced anklet that unleashed the awesome and fiery temperament of the heroine, Kaṇṇagi. As her anger was the cause that the whole city of Madurai was burnt down to ashes, there is a relationship between anklets and fire. This relationship is present as well in the Pattini Dēvi cult in Ceylon, which in turn owes its origins to the Kaṇṇagi tradition too. In Mal Pattini Upata, one of the local narratives woven around the figure of goddess Pattini, the Dēvi scorches demons with the fire of her anklet.²⁴²

Towards the end of Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā's story there is a moment where the husband, Doṇ Ahamadu, expresses his fear from his wife in emphatic terms. Paradoxically, this takes place even before he has seen Doṇ Kamaṇā's terrible aspect, when his only experience with her has been continuous bliss. This connection between lurking fear and women is a common occurrence in the haṇḍi stories of Maldivians, whether they belong to the ancient oral tradition, like the stories above, or whether they are descriptions of actual experiences, like the following one:²⁴³

The Haṇḍi in the Dream

“Long ago, it was the custom for us boys to go into the jungle to pick certain flowers during the month of Ramzān in the afternoon. We would then sit down and pass our time knitting the small flowers into garlands which we would give later to the girls we fancied.

²⁴² R. Weerakoon, ‘Sri Lanka's Mythology’.

²⁴³ Told by Eduruge Aisā Dīdīge Muhammad Dīdī of Fua Mulaku Island.

One day, I had picked a bunch of uni flowers in the forest.²⁴⁴ It was hot and, while I was bringing them home in a cloth, I felt tired and sat under the shade of a tree. As I was feeling sleepy, I put the flowers on one side and dozed for a while. When I woke up, my heap of flowers had disappeared. Thus, I went home empty-handed, because I was too tired to pick more flowers.

That evening while I was sleeping I had a very clear dream: I saw two girls standing right in front, looking hard at me. They were close together, one partially hidden by the other. Both were beautiful young women and the one farther away was taller than the other. However, for some reason, maybe the intensity of their stare, I found them frightening. In fact, I became very tense and was so scared I didn't dare utter a word and stood very quiet facing them. Time passed and I had not moved at all, but suddenly the girl closer to me asked in a very aggressive tone: "Why did you touch me?" And before I had the time to answer, she thrust her hand forward towards me. This terrified me to so much that I screamed in panic and woke up. Having heard my anguished cry, my grandfather came to my bed and calmed me down.

The next day after sunset, I was chatting with some friends, sitting under a large funa tree.²⁴⁵ Suddenly, I felt a hand pulling my arm and I jerked it off and yelled. My friends didn't see anything, then we all got up and looked around, but there was nothing there. However, I was very frightened and went home. My grandfather, seeing my state, made some powerful faṇḍita. In time I was not troubled by the girl spirit anymore, whether asleep or awake.

²⁴⁴ Sweet-scented little white flowers (*Guettarda speciosa*) that grow wild in all Maldivian Islands.

²⁴⁵ *Calophyllum Inophyllum*, a large tree with dark foliage and pretty white and yellow flowers. This tree is rated as a malevolent tree (*nāman*) in Maldivian tradition

This story helps to understand the reasons behind the fear that Maldivians have of some flowers and trees. Such apparently innocent activities as picking certain flowers and bringing them home, or making a siesta under a particular type of tree, may provoke the attack of female demons. This type of spirits is generically known as haṇḍi too, but they don't necessarily have two aspects, like Doḥ Kamaṇā. As the story above illustrates, female tree spirits can be very frightening even if nothing in their outside appearance looks alarming. In the story 'The House of Sorrow' (Cf. 2.2.3) the heroine scares the sorcerer out of his wits even though she looks like an average adolescent girl. Another good example is Dōgi Āihā who is the heroine in two stories further ahead in this book.

The haṇḍi is a spirit who is generally linked with the forest and with the trees. In every story the girl appears under a certain tree, deep in the woods, far from human habitation, and generally at a particular time of the day. Still, in the Maldives the people consider that people should keep away from certain sectors of the forest, especially after sunset. It is as if certain parts of the woods were reserved for them, as if those places were holy.

In Fua Mulaku oral tradition there are hints that in the distant past there were sacred groves, where trees having to do with female spirits owing to the red color of their flowers, would be preserved and no branches were chopped down from them. Such a place was called Kaḷḷā Māri, in the southwest of Fua Mulaku Island. It seems that yearly some kind of popular celebration was held at that sacred grove, with men disguising themselves in costumes made of coconut palm leaves. The head was a tall cone made of woven palm fronds with red flowers (hibiscus) attached at the top. The Kaḷḷā Māri forest disappeared long ago and only the memory remains.

The relationship between Dravidian female divinities and trees is very ancient. The most primitive forms of village goddesses had a 'sacred grove' surrounding their aniconic image. Still in India, some local Dēvis have such a sacred grove (kāvu or rāna), which means literally 'forest'

about the stone representing them. Although in most cases this has shrunk to a thicket of shrubs worthless as fuel, occasionally the grove is quite a jungle,²⁴⁶ where not a single branch of any living tree may be cut in spite of the shortage of firewood. The relationship between beautiful women and trees is an ancient feature of the Indic folklore.

This connection has been extended in some cases to the fruits produced by the trees. In certain stories about Dravidian goddesses it is said that a beautiful young woman was born from a ripe mango fruit. There is a Tamil legend where a lovely young woman was transformed into a mango to escape being raped and killed by a group of evil men while she was taking a bath in the river. The mango was hanging from a branch over the water, and when the fruit became ripe and fell, it was carried downstream by the current. An old woman found the mango, brought it home and when she cut it, the beautiful girl suddenly appeared in front of her.²⁴⁷

In the story about goddess Pattini from the popular religion of Ceylon, it is said that this female deity was born from a mango in one of her seven births. The figure of goddess Pattini originated in the Kannagi tradition of the Subcontinent; therefore it holds an anklet in her hand in local iconographic representations.²⁴⁸

‘Lāl Parī Kamaṇā’ is a long fairy-tale myth that was one of the most popular in Maldives at the time when local storytellers had some prestige in the island society and were called to the houses —usually in the evenings or on rainy days— to provide entertainment by reciting their

²⁴⁶ “The mother-goddess ‘forest’ at Phagne, about three hundred metres long by fifty to a hundred wide, is easily the most impressive sight in the middle Paunā valley”. ‘The Sacred Grove’ in D.D. Kosambi, Op. Cit.

²⁴⁷ ‘Virgin Goddess of the Mango’ by Prema Nandakumar about the Tamil book ‘Masaniyamman’ by Tulasi Iramasami. ‘The Hindu’ March 16th 1999 issue

²⁴⁸ Gaganath Obeyesekere, ‘The Cult of the Goddess Pattini.’

stories. Such storytellers used to receive some payment in kind in exchange for their services.

‘Lāl Parī Kamaṇā’ is based on a story coming from the Indian Subcontinent, although it contains some features that are clearly local. This folktale incorporates the theme of a woman being ‘born’ already as a grown-up girl from a ripe mango fruit. Such a surprising feature, which would be quite odd in another context, fits well within the lore of the Dravidian village-goddess tradition. In the gruesome punishment at the end, the story contains a clear warning about the dangers of defying the existing social order that is extremely ancient and markedly South Asian.

In addition, and more to the point of the theme discussed in the present chapter, the ‘Lāl Parī Kamaṇā’ legend includes female characters displaying both the extreme aspects of femininity found in all Maldivian haṇḍi legends: On the one hand the kindness and virtue, and on the other the readiness to commit acts of violence and manipulate the well-meaning and somewhat naive male characters of the story.

The name ‘Lāl Parī’ is of North Indian or Persian origin. Although parī is the name for ‘fairy’ in Divehi, the woman in this story is not a fairy according to Maldivian folklore, while lāl, meaning ‘red color’, is likely to refer to red as a powerful symbol; for the color of fresh blood is the color of the Goddess and it is directly related to her fertility and the bloody sacrifices offered to her in Dravidian tradition.

How did the term ‘Caṇḍi’, rare in neighboring South India, arrive to the Maldives Islands? In Divehi, the term ‘mother’ —so popular in Dravidian religion to refer to the goddess— is not used to refer to female spirits that originated in the village goddess.

‘Caṇḍi’ probably came to the Maldives from further North, from Bengal. In Bengali village cults, the local form of the smallpox goddess or Śītālā is

called 'Basanta Caṇḍi'.²⁴⁹ This goddess has no temple dedicated to her and she is generally worshipped under a tree. Also in some districts of Bengal, the term Caṇḍi is a generic name given to several goddesses who, however, share no identity in power and functions and having different iconographic representations. Most of those deities worshipped under the name Caṇḍi in the Hooghly district are village goddesses whose modest shrines are located under shady trees.

Sītala is a name used in Northern India. Her iconography and background—she rides an ass, holding a broom in one hand and a winnowing fan in the other—differs from that of Māri, a term more common in Tamil Nāḍu, except that, like the Maldivian haṇḍi, she either naked or wears red clothes. It is important to take into account, though, that Sītala, Caṇḍi and Māri are generic names for a large array of village goddesses.

²⁴⁹ Somnath Mukhopadhyay, 'Caṇḍi in Art and Iconography'.

2.2.1 SPIRITS AND FEVER

The Maldivian haṇḍi is far from being a mere fairy owing to its complex character that habitually includes a malignant side. The haṇḍi, like most malevolent spirits, is linked to disease. This female spirit is blamed for causing illness, especially fever, and this is one of the main reasons why they are feared. Since it was assumed that there was no medicine against it, fever (huṅ) was always taken very seriously.

Before modern medicine reached the islands, Maldivians were positive that fever was a disease caused by malevolent spirits. Thus, they believed that fever could only be treated by faṇḍita (magic or sorcery). The fact that heat would come out of the body was perceived as a great evil. Even though faṇḍita and Divehi bēs (traditional herbal medicine) were usually practised by the same person, no herb was deemed effective against fever. The body had to be cooled by magic.

To protect themselves from attacks by evil spirits, people avoided vulnerable locations. When in the forest, men and women would avoid sitting too long in the shade of certain trees because a haṇḍi may appear to them and cause fever or death. They would not tamper with certain flowers, such as funamā (*Calophyllum inophyllum*), kimbimā (*Barringtonia asiatica*) or berebedimā (*Erythrina variegata*). These wild flowers would never be brought home, because they are assumed to carry the influence of the haṇḍi along with them, hence people in Southern Maldives use to claim that red flowers are particularly risky regarding malevolent influence.

Haṇḍi stories are extremely common. In my interactions with Maldivians I was astonished by the number of persons of both sexes and of every age and background who affirmed having seen a haṇḍi with their own eyes. One old man saw this spirit as a young girl swinging under a screw pine tree and when he went close he realized there was nothing there. In another instance a boy suddenly saw the haṇḍi, a beautiful bejeweled

lady, appear in front of him in the middle of the forest and was so unnerved by the unexpected apparition that he shat in his pants (gāṣa gūlī). According to the notes I took, all the people claiming to having seen a haṇḍi had previously heard this spirit described by someone else. This factor may explain why, despite the varying circumstances of the different encounters, the descriptions of the spirit itself were very similar. The story that follows, told by a young girl,²⁵⁰ is fairly representative:

The Haṇḍi from the Kimbi Forest

“I was with two other girls my age at the beach in Kandovali.²⁵¹ We had collected lots of different flowers from the forest and were playing with them, making figures with petals of different colors on the white smooth flat stones by the waterline. At that time I was standing at a distance from the other girls and happened to look towards the bushes.

There stood a woman broadly smiling at me. Behind her, further inshore there was a thick kimbi (Barringtonia asiatica) jungle. She held her arm out straight and was moving her index finger downwards, calling me to come to her. She was wearing a red dress and red flowers in her hair. She was very beautiful, so fascinating I could hardly take my eyes off her. She certainly looked familiar, like someone who belonged to our island, although not like any specific person. First I thought: She must be looking for firewood. But then I thought: She is smiling too much and calling me with too much insistence. She is also behaving in other strange ways.

²⁵⁰ Nāzima Ibrahīm, Baḍiā Ibrahīmu’s daughter, Funāḍu village, Fua Mulaku. She was fourteen-years old at the time of telling the story.

²⁵¹ A section of the shore at the southern end of Fua Mulaku. The name means ‘forest of kandu trees’ (Hernandia ovigera)

Then I realized that no one in our village looked like her and that it was Friday prayer time. I got scared and told the girl closer to me: 'It's a haṇḍi!' At once she ran away as fast as she could and I followed her. The other girl came after us wondering why we were leaving so quickly. We told her later, once safely in the village. Later, that night I became feverish and I was cured with faṇḍita.

Among the initiated, the learned faṇḍita men, there seems to be a tradition of being able to deal with spirits in unconventional ways. Rather than avoiding contact with spirits, great sorcerers seek contact with them and even boast of performing unusual feats with spirits. Faṇḍita men do this in order to show not only that they don't fear these weird creatures, but that they are even able to control them.²⁵²

Long ago, in Dūṇḍigamu village, Fua Mulaku, lived a man called Nūhu Mūsā who tried to capture a haṇḍi in the middle of the night by grabbing hold of her long hair, saying: "Mi kāka tae mihai damvegohō?" ("Who is this at such late hour?") Apparently, the spirit pulled with such strength that it broke free, but Nūhu Mūsā entered his own home, where folks were not sleeping owing to a childbirth party, and showed everybody some beautiful, smooth black strands of the haṇḍi's hair.²⁵³

However, good sorcerers are rare and the non-initiated should avoid, as much as possible, any contact with evil spirits and the trees they haunt. The following story describes how some average men teased a spirit, with tragic consequences.²⁵⁴

²⁵² For more details on the probable origins and purposes of this practice see David Kinsley, 'Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine'

²⁵³ Told in 1990 by Ibrahīm Dīdī, Daylight Villa, Dūṇḍigamu village, Fua Mulaku.

²⁵⁴ Told in 1990 by Faḷōḍaḍi Muhammadu Hasanu of Fua Mulaku.

The Spirit on the Screwpine Tree

“Three men of Dūṇḍigamu, my village, went one Friday morning to cast the net on the reef. As it was a good day, they became engrossed in fishing and time passed quickly. It was already forenoon, Friday prayer time, when they were ready to return home and they decided to take a shortcut through the forest, instead of going along the normal path.

On the way, as they were walking close to a tall screwpine, they saw a woman sitting on one of the upper branches.²⁵⁵ The three men stopped in their tracks and wondered what she was doing up there. She was completely naked, sitting with her legs spread apart, exposing her genitals. They thought: “This is surely not a person from our village!”

Even though the men were quite close to her, the spirit was not paying any attention to them. She was a good-looking woman and was busy licking her shoulders, her arms, her knees, as if she had not noticed their presence. The men realized she was not a human being and, although she didn’t look fearsome, they began to get frightened. They looked at each other not knowing what to do.

But then one of them said: “I am not afraid of a haṇḍi!” And he began waving his bundle of fishes at the woman from below the tree, teasing her: “Añh! Kāñlō! Maha kā dē! (Hey! Girl! Fish for you to eat!)”

Then the haṇḍi, slowly licking one of her shoulders, threw a mean sidelong glance at the men, briefly sneering at them with contempt. After this she went on licking herself, utterly ignoring them. The men made a few

²⁵⁵ Pandanus spp., a large bushy plant with stilt roots and long, spiny leaves. It grows wild, in dense shrubs close to the seashore and is probably the most abundant tree in the Maldivian jungle

attempts to catch her attention again, but their efforts proved futile.²⁵⁶ Finally they went home.

As soon as they arrived at their houses, all three of them fell ill with high fever. They also developed other symptoms, like itching and coughing. The condition of two of the men never improved and they died within a few weeks. They were the ones that had been teasing the spirit. The other man was very sick for a long time. Even though he survived the illness, he never fully recovered. During the rest of his life, he never felt as strong and healthy as he had been before seeing that evil spirit.

After hearing such tales, people point out that taunting female spirits can be extremely dangerous because of their unpredictability. This story creates a certain amount of controversy among local islanders though. Some people claim that the spirit described is not a haṇḍi, but they couldn't come up with a different name for it. They would say: "It's something else, something very evil, but not a haṇḍi." However, everyone agrees that the three men were foolish to walk through a narrow path cutting across deep forest right at Friday prayer time, a highly malefic time, when everyone should either stay at home or be at the mosque for Friday prayers.

The description of this alarming spirit matches with ancestral female guardian figures, having their origin in local or tribal deities, seen often carved on gates and pillars of temples in Tamil Nadu.²⁵⁷ These images are said to ward off the evil-eye and a few adaptations of them were once

²⁵⁶ The licking emphasizes her tongue; and in Indian legends and iconography the goddess in her fierce aspect displays her red tongue.

²⁵⁷ See Religion: Belief System and Practices in S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, 'Coromandel Fishermen.' See also Carol R. Bolon, 'Forms of the Goddess Lajjā Gaurī in Indian Art.' A similar tutelary divinity, Dilukai, exists in Micronesia, far away from the Subcontinent. Anne D'Alleva, 'Art of the Pacific Islands.' Concerning the connection between display of sexual parts and aggression. Cf 1 'Display of Anger.'

popular throughout the Subcontinent and may be known as Lajjā Gaurī or Reṇukā, Renukā being also one of the names or forms of Māri, the goddess of illness.

In this story, the connection between meeting a female spirit in the forest, falling ill with fever, and eventual death is made again. This is a very ancient relationship, which goes back to the character of the Indian Mother Goddess in her manifestation as Māri.

The name Māri or Māriamman is commonly used in Tamil Nadu, although it is also known in North India among the Chamār for example. The same goddess in Kerala is referred to as Bhadrakālī, Bhagavatī, Dēvi or simply Ammā (mother). In Andhra Pradesh she is called Pośamma or Śītalā, the goddess of smallpox or village-goddess.

Village-goddess is a translation of the Sanskrit term 'Grama dēvata'. Even though she is commonly called the 'goddess of smallpox', the village goddess has as its function to protect her village against the attacks of the demons of disease, the most deadly ones being traditionally smallpox and cholera in this order, hence the name 'Smallpox Goddess'. However, it is also her duty to keep away other evils like famine, discord and drought from her locality. Under this manifestation, the goddess is assumed to punish her children for having neglected her. The mother sends disease in the form of fever along with other symptoms, like pus-filled pustules in the case of smallpox, and diarrhea in the case of cholera. The latter symptoms might eventually bring about death, caused by the Dēvi's determined and protracted anger.²⁵⁸

During an outbreak of disease the heat is assumed to come from the mother's uterus. Fever is a disease of the heat. Therefore its antidote has to be cold (hence the name of the Hindu goddess Śītalā, meaning "cold" in

²⁵⁸ See explanations in J.S. Hawley & D.M. Wulff, 'Devi Goddesses of India' and in David Kinsley, 'Hindu Goddesses'.

Sanskrit). The name Māri is also said to have its origins in the Tamil word for rain, which cools down the heat and cures the fever produced by epidemics.²⁵⁹

Remedies like water and white foods are assumed to be cooling. In Maldives, foods that are considered to be heat producing are fish, especially skipjack tuna (kaṇḍumas), with its dark red flesh, while cooling foods are white rice gruel (bayppeṇ) and water. The fever and boils produced by smallpox are treated with a cooling paste made grinding the leaves of the hiti tree (Azadirachta indica).²⁶⁰ Therefore, in these circumstances even the simple fact of cooling the person suffering from high fever with a cloth or towel soaked in cool water, would be already considered an esoteric activity and not a casual one.

²⁵⁹ For the etymology of the word Māri see S. Bhakthavatsala Bharati, Op. cit.

²⁶⁰ See R. Brubaker, 'The Ambivalent Mistress' for an explanation of the relationship between the village goddess and the leaves of this tree in South Indian tradition.

2.2.2 BLOOD SACRIFICES

The legend behind Māri, the Indic goddess of illness, is that she was expelled from heaven on account of her haughtiness. She is, thus, full of repressed anger. That makes her fastidious and difficult to please.²⁶¹ In her wrathful aspect, the Dēvi is associated with blood and heat. The first derived from the red color of menstruation and the blood present at birth, and the second from the heat of the womb.²⁶² Blood and its red color, ancient symbols of primordial femininity, are always related to the goddess in South Indian tradition and it is not surprising that Maldivian female spirits are always said to wear red when they are dressed.

In the rural areas of the Subcontinent, as persons afflicted by disease were reckoned to be suffering from the Dēvi's wrath sacrifices were offered to appease the goddess.²⁶³ Blood sacrifices are the main characteristic of Dēvi worship especially in South India and Bengal.²⁶⁴

In these rituals blood has to be shown, because it is believed that the goddess is thirsty for blood and only blood can appease her. Even if in Maldives no open acknowledgement whatsoever was made that such a goddess was the recipient of the sacrifice, certain rituals existed where red roosters--never hens, only male animals-- were commonly

²⁶¹ L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, 'The Tribes and Castes of Cochin'

²⁶² These symbols are illustrated in D.B. McGilvray, 'Symbolic Heat, Gender, Health & Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka'. Often in South Indian iconography the Dēvi and her clothes are green, the color of the fresh leaves of trees and plants, another color related to fertility.

²⁶³ *'(The goddess) mercilessly chastises her people with the disease, but holds its victims especially dear; she delights in the disease, is aroused by it, goes mad with it; she kills with it and uses it to give new life.'* Richard Brubacker, Op. cit.

²⁶⁴ *'...This completes the presentation of the sacrifice to the goddess, who is supposed to delight in the food offered, and especially in the blood.'* Henry Whitehead, 'The Village Gods of South India'

slaughtered. Sometimes the ceremony would be made in the name of an obscure entity without attributes called ifurinfarā. This name is derived from Parṇaśavari, who is the goddess that corresponds to Māri or Śītala in the Vajrayāna Buddhist pantheon.²⁶⁵

In the Maldivian Islands, if a particular sickness had been lasting very long, if in a certain island fishing was bad for a long period of time, or after an island had been deserted following a deadly epidemic, the blood sacrifice would be made with great ceremony. Perhaps this is the reason why in Divehi the word for sickness is ‘bali’ (Skt. = sacrifice). The timing of the ceremony among Maldivians follows the ancestral pattern of the Subcontinent where traditionally village-goddess festivals were not undertaken regularly or routinely.²⁶⁶

The probable origin of this custom is that in ancient times, in a similar manner as sickness, bad fishing, the withholding of nourishment, was interpreted as a sign of the wrath of the Mother-goddess. Once the need for the performance of a major ritual was assessed, islanders would work hard on the preceding days looking for flowers in the forest and doing other jobs to make all the necessary arrangements for the blood sacrifice. Even if women and children would take active part in the preparations, the actual sacrificial ceremony was conducted only by adult males.

²⁶⁵ Here a local deity (Māri) found expression and definition thanks to the condescending attitude of Vajrayāna Buddhism towards the reemergence of ancient cults. This may explain why both Ranna Māri and Ifurinfarā are present in Maldivian tradition. See also B. Bhattacharya, ‘The Indian Buddhist iconography’

²⁶⁶ ‘... Festivals were only held and the goddesses were only worshipped when some disaster, usually an epidemic, struck the village.’ Kingsley, “Hindu Goddesses”. H. Whitehead, is even more explicit: “So long as everything goes on well and there is no disease afflicting man or beast, and no drought nor other great calamity, it seems safest to let her (the village goddess) alone. But, when misfortune comes, it is a sign that she is out of temper, and it is time to take steps to appease her wrath.” Op. Cit.

This bloody ritual was called Bahuru Kiyevuñ and it was a complex process of great solemnity. First, the leader (imāmu), a skilled faṇḍita man, would set an auspicious date to begin the ceremony. Then he would choose a good spot in the varuvā (NW) corner of the island. In that place an open-sided pavilion would be erected on the seashore and, starting from it, a small jetty would be built reaching from the beach to a deeper spot in the lagoon. While the pavilion was constructed with wooden poles and was thatched with coconut-palm fronds, the jetty was built with coral stones and filled with white sand or fine coral gravel. In some instances the jetty was covered with a thatched roof supported by wooden poles all along its length. Finally, all these structures would be decorated with flowers and other ornaments made from palm leaves.

Once everything was ready, the Bahuru Kiyevuñ would begin. The ritual would last for ten days and its performance would normally start on a ‘Thursday night’ (Friday eve) right after sunset for a period of about two hours.

Inside the pavilion the leading faṇḍitaveriyā sat along with a number of men (any number between four and forty, but usually ten) who would read the Qurān aloud and one man who would recite a chant called salavāfulu. All participants would cover their heads with a white scarf (foṣā). These white scarves were not only often part of the traditional male attire, but they also had a ceremonial significance in ancient Maldives.²⁶⁷ The faṇḍita man would lead the ceremony and, from time to

²⁶⁷ It was customary to carry such a white scarf as an offering to ask for an audience with the king or a very high official. At the moment of the meeting the foṣā would be held with the two hands extended forward, and the king may decide to take it or let it fall to the ground.

time, he would interrupt the Qurān chanting and recite mantras. Beside him there would be a heap of flowers on a round brass tray.²⁶⁸

The preparation of such flower heaps was complex.²⁶⁹ The long spathes of kaṣimā, the screwpine flower (*Pandanus odoratissimus*),²⁷⁰ would be split in two, arranged in a Maṇḍala-like square and the space therein would be filled with smaller flowers, like unimā (*Guettarda speciosa*) and jasmine. Then another tier would be laid on top with the points oriented at a slightly different angle, giving the ensemble an eight-pointed star shape, and the same operation would be repeated. The star-shapes would become smaller as the heap became higher and the top of heap was crowned with a lime.²⁷¹ Only white flowers would be used in this ritual, for it was deemed that red ones would attract dangerous spirits.

Someone would be outside of the pavilion burning coconut shells and reduced them to embers. A special paste made of dry unimā, agal wood,

²⁶⁸ See the description of the Māri festival in Paranūr in E.O. Shaw, 'Rural Hinduism', where a mud pot surmounted by a conical structure covered with leaves and flowers represents the vehicle for the goddess. Limes, coconuts and camphor on brass plates are part of the preparations for worship in that same festival.

²⁶⁹ Elaborate flower offerings in different shapes (heaps, garlands, pots) are common all over South India in village-goddess worship. Compare for example with the careful preparation of the karagam in the Kurumbaiaamma (cholera goddess) festival in Irungalūr in Tiruchirapalli district, Tamil Nāḍu, described by Henry Whitehead, *Op. Cit.*

²⁷⁰ A large, odd-looking flower described technically as Spadix. The flower is clothed in leafy whitish-yellow spathes that emanate a strong odor.

²⁷¹ Limes (*Citrus medica*) are commonly used in Dēvi worship rituals all over rural India. Besides daubing red pigment on rocks representing the Goddess, a lime cut open is a common offering since it is also a symbol of the Dēvi. Yama's consort Dhūmrōmā (a form of Cāmuṇḍi) is represented in iconography holding a lime fruit in her left hand.

sandalwood, benzoin, ambergris and other ingredients,²⁷² powdered and mixed with coconut oil and palm syrup, would be brought. The embers would be put inside of a special brass vessel (dummēši)²⁷³ and the mixture would be slowly shredded over it, causing abundant aromatic smoke. A red rooster would be tied to a little pole under the pavilion, although in some cases, a sea turtle (velā) could be used as well.²⁷⁴ While the ceremony was being conducted the pavilion would be lit with oil lamps.²⁷⁵ The religious chanting and the recitation of magic words would go on until there was no trace of twilight left in the western horizon. Then the flowers would be kept in a white scarf and all participants would go home.

The next evening, a new flower heap would be arranged with fresh flowers picked that same day, and the same ritual would be repeated. At its conclusion, the flower heap would be again tossed in the same cloth of the previous evening. Then all participants and witnesses would retire for the night.

The ceremony would continue the next day after sunset. It would be performed during the following eight days identically. However, on the

²⁷² The names were given in Divehi and for some of the items (kalagāṇi, dunsamarāhi, lādari and ūdu) I couldn't find a translation. They probably correspond to incense-like natural resins and aromatic herbs

²⁷³ Name thus in Fua Mulaku and Aḍḍu. This implement is made of brass and looks very much like a brazier

²⁷⁴ The descriptions were provided by Boṇḍorāge Muhammad Dīdī of Fua Mulaku, one of the last persons in Maldives having performed a complete Bahuru Kiyevuṇ, as well as by the late Magieduruge Ibrahim Dīdī, who had witnessed a number of such sacrifices in Huvadū Atoll. He quoted an instance where a leatherback turtle (Dermochelys coriacea) had been chosen as the victim

²⁷⁵ Round brass lamps with seven wicks, known as veše in Aḍḍu and vo' in Male' that were hung from the beams by means of a chain with a hook at its end.

ninth evening,²⁷⁶ after the rites were over, the flower heap would be placed in a new, separate white scarf. The proceedings of the sacrifice would vary and may have been even more complex in the past.

On the tenth and last evening the Bahuru Kiyevuñ would reach its climax.²⁷⁷ On that occasion, after the reciting ended, the last flower heap would be put in a new separate cloth, as in the previous night, and the Imāmu would decide that the time was ready to “show the flowers” (mā dekkuñ). The final rite had to be performed in the dark.²⁷⁸ All the lamps would be extinguished and (lighted only by the stars) the men would descend from the end of the jetty into the sea. There, with water up to the knees, the three scarves with the flowers —one heavy with all the now faded flowers of the first eight nights and the other two with the flowers of the ninth and last night respectively— would be carried by two men, each holding two corners. After certain mantras were recited, at a sign from the leader the men would throw first the limes, then the last flowers, followed by the flowers of the ninth night and, finally, all the flowers of the eight preceding nights would be thrown into the sea.

Meanwhile, the faṇḍitaveriyā would continue reciting magic words and the moment of “showing blood” (lē dekkuñ) had come. Right then one man with a knife would cut the neck of the rooster and let the blood drip

²⁷⁶ In the Indian Subcontinent there are very ancient nine-night festivals in honor of the village goddesses. These ceremonies invariably end with blood sacrifices. See “Mothers as Death-goddesses” in D.D. Kosambi, ‘Myth and reality’.

²⁷⁷ The festival to the local goddess at Irungalūr, Tamil Nāḍu, lasts for then days. According to H. Whitehead, in it “the blood of the victim seems to be regarded as the food of malignant spirits.” Op. Cit.

²⁷⁸ Regarding the obligatory blood sacrifices to the goddess in rural India, D.D. Kosambi writes that blood sacrifices are demanded on no-moon nights. The pitch dark being essential for such blood rites. Ibid.

into the sea.²⁷⁹ This was the moment when the spirit would arrive. It seems that often it would be seen as a kind of sudden and abnormal phosphorescence in the waters of the lagoon.

Then the leader would instruct all participants to go ashore walking backwards, with their faces towards the sea. Once on dry land, the *faṇḍita* man would keep reciting magic words and draw magic circles (*aṇu*) on the sand around him. He would change place three times, drawing a new circle every time, and the ceremony would conclude when the leader of the ritual would declare: “*Āman vī*”, meaning that the spirit was favorably inclined towards them. Finally, some lamps would be lit again and everyone would return home. It is widely claimed that invariably fishing would improve during the following weeks or months, but that a dangerous presence would be felt at the same time.

Fisher folk of South India always used to worship goddesses to protect them while they sailed the seas and help them procure big hauls of fish.²⁸⁰ The Mukkuvar or fishermen of the Southwestern coast of India have as their chief deity the goddess Bhadrakālī, a generic name used in Kerala for the village-goddess (*Māri* in Tamil *Nāḍu*) or goddess of pestilence; she is also called Bhagavatī or simply Amma (mother).

Formerly there were no elaborate images nor temples dedicated to this divinity. Instead, she was represented by a log of wood, placed in a hut. During festivals (to improve fishing), which used to be held four times a year, the fishermen assembled for the sacrifice of a red cock and offerings of lime fruits and flowers. These ceremonies were performed by a man

²⁷⁹ In Dravidian fertility rituals, the end of one life (the sacrificial victim's) symbolizes the threshold of a new life. For instance, the Urāli tribals of the Western Ghats perform analogous rituals to the Bahuru Kiyevuñ by sprinkling a field, instead of the sea, with the blood of the sacrificed animal.

²⁸⁰ See the paper 'Village Goddesses of South India' by K.V. Raman in 'Shakti in Art and Religion' ed. by Nanditha Krishna

from the Mukkuvar caste, acting as priest or pujāri. All these rituals had to be conducted by every community in their own local or home shrine,²⁸¹ because fishermen were not allowed to enter the temples of the major Hindu divinities.

Nowadays, in Maldives, vahutāñ, a ritual for the improvement of fishing in a particular island, is made by tying a kind of pennant or windvane-like device to a stake. Sometimes this stake is tied to a high tree close to the beach, but often it is also driven into the ground at a particular spot above the waterline and sheltered within a little hut made of palm-frond thatch and sticks. It is not surprising that the latter contraption is similar to the Mukkuvar goddess shrines, because vahutāñ is quite clearly a local fertility ritual.²⁸²

The following story is set in Huḷudū, which though called an 'island' by Maldivians, is in reality a village or sector at the southwestern end of a large (by Maldivian standards) and roughly triangular island, whose northwestern end is another village named Mīdū and whose eastern point is uninhabited. It informs us of the dire consequences of a Bahuru Kiyevuñ ceremony gone awry and of the favorable treatment of the unnamed spirit towards the community having offered the blood sacrifice:

²⁸¹ It is recorded by Captain Hamilton (A New Account of the East Indies, 1744) that he saw at many Muchwa (fishermen) houses, a square stake of wood, with a few notches cut about it, and that stake drove into the ground, about two foot of it being left above, and that is covered with cadjans or cocoanut tree leaves, and is a temple and a God to that family." E. Thurston, 'Castes and Tribes of Southern India'.

²⁸² *'The basic relationship between the village goddess and her village seems quite straightforward. In return for the worship of the villagers the goddess ensures good crops, timely rain, fertility and protection from demons, diseases and untimely death. The arrangement is a local one, with little or no room for outsiders ... so villagers leave her jurisdiction and protection when they venture beyond it.'* Kingsley, Op. Cit.

The Wrong Kind of Blood

“About 700 years ago²⁸³ the island of Huḷudū, in Aḍḍu Atoll, was suffering because the fishing had been very bad for a very long time. The sea didn’t yield enough for the islanders to survive. Without enough fish to fulfill their daily needs, there was famine and people were starving.

Finally, the people of Huḷudū decided to do something about their desperate situation and asked a great faṇḍita man called Kudu Abū²⁸⁴ to make a magic ritual to improve the fishing in their waters and relieve them from their plight. The magician informed them that he would perform a powerful sacrifice.

Thus, a Bahuru Kiyevuñ ceremony was organized in the traditional way.²⁸⁵ During the days that followed the men and women of Huḷudū worked hard to make all the preparations. Children also helped in the collection of flowers and limes. A jetty and a small open-sided pavilion were built by the beach in the NW end of the island.

Once the pavilion was ready, the required amounts of flowers and a red cock were brought there for the sacrifice. During the following evenings there was the customary religious chanting at dusk under the light of many oil lamps. It was a very serious ritual and Huḷudū people were filled

²⁸³ Told by Boṇḍorāge Muhammad Dīdī of Fua Mulaku island. No reference was provided for this dating by the storyteller.

²⁸⁴ Historically, there was a faṇḍita man with this name living in Huḷudū in the 19th century. As this story is many centuries older, one possible explanation could be that there have been a number of faṇḍitamen in Aḍḍu with this same name. (Cf. 3.1.3 ‘Tantric Heroes’)

²⁸⁵ The storyteller pointed out that back then the ceremony might have been more complex than the one described further above in this same chapter.

with awe. Kudu Abū, displaying his great faṇḍita skills, confidently led the rites and performed the reciting of mantras.

At last, on the crucial day of the ceremony, after the twilight became darkness and the western horizon was as gloomy as the rest of the sky, the solemn chanting in the pavilion was concluded and all lamps were blown out. In the starlight, the performers of the ritual walked along the jetty into the water carrying the bundles of flowers. Kudu Abū and the man he had chosen to perform the blood sacrifice followed, holding the rooster and a knife.

But it so happened, that, after the flowers were thrown into the shallow water of the lagoon, the person who had to sacrifice the red cock was suddenly overwhelmed by fear. When the time came to ‘show blood’ to the sea, this man was so scared that he was trembling. Meanwhile Kudu Abū was absorbed in reciting the necessary mantras and in the almost total darkness he couldn’t see his companion well. Unfortunately, when he instructed that it was time to cut the neck of the cock, the terrified man was shaking and shivering so much that he clumsily cut his own finger with the knife. He screamed in pain: “Addoyōi! I cut my finger!” And his blood dripped into the sea.²⁸⁶

Now human blood had fallen into the waters and it was too late to correct the error. Kudu Abū immediately sensed that the approaching spirit had taken a form of such deadly power and malevolence that he yelled at it: “Please leave us alone! Go away! We will give you half of our millet fields

²⁸⁶ Here, in the summoning or incantation to the nameless divinity, instead of the beneficial form of the deity, its wrathful, bloodthirsty form had been accidentally invoked.

(veradaḍo) in Gan Island²⁸⁷ and you can have the blood of the people of Hitadū Island if you spare us!”²⁸⁸

The sorcerer kept feverishly repeating this and reciting strong mantras. After he went ashore Kudu Abū traced an aṇu (protective magic circle) all around the island and engaged in special recitations until he was exhausted. However, he was still not sure whether the spirit had accepted his desperate plea.

The next day, Huḷudū fishermen went out to the sea and realized that fishing had not improved around their island. Nevertheless, during the days that followed, looking for the elusive school of fish, some fishermen wandered westwards and north of Hitadū. Seeing a great number of seabirds hovering over the ocean at that point, they came to know that in the waters close to Hitadū island’s northern end the fishing was excellent. In the days that followed all the boats of Huḷudū flocked there and returned with a huge catch. Thus, they now were sure that the evil spirit they accidentally invoked had accepted their deal. It had kept away from their island and had gone to dwell close to Hitadū.

²⁸⁷ People from all other inhabited islands in Aḍḍu Atoll would own stretches of land in this large, fertile island, now the site of an airport. When a field was “given” to a spirit it would be left without tilling and it was said that the spirit was ‘eating it.’ The fact that plants would not thrive in uncultivated areas was attributed to the spirits drawing ‘their blood.’

²⁸⁸ Compare this passage with the following South Indian legend where the wrath of the goddess is diverted somewhere else: “*The Rajah of Goomsur had Mahalakshmi as his goddess ... Every day she had to have the blood of two buffaloes. ... After he had been taken prisoner (by the British), the Rajah could do nothing more for Mahalakshmi, and she waxed angry. One day she approached him, and said: ‘You offer me nothing. What am I to do?’ The Rajah replied: ‘The English government did me this evil. Go to them, spoil everything they have, bring cholera and smallpox to their regiments.’ The goddess left him, thirsting for blood. Great trouble and distress came upon Ongole three days after the Rajah had passed by. ... So great was the thirst of Mahalakshmi for blood, that when a man fell sick he died on the spot. She let none escape.*” E. Rauschenbusch-Clough. ‘While Sewing Sandals; Tales of a Telugu pariah Tribe.’

Weeks passed and some fishermen decided that it involved much effort to sail from Huḷudū to Hitadū and back every day. As there was so much fish close to that island, they would dry their catch right there on Hitadū. Thus they built some huts in the northernmost point of that island in a place known as Koṭṭe.²⁸⁹ There they processed and stored their fish and kept their boats during the night.

Hitadū is (by Maldivian standards) a very long island and Koṭṭe was quite far away from the village. However, some of these fishermen from Huḷudū were wondering why no one was coming to where they were, not even women looking for firewood which was abundant in the place. One night one of the young fishermen left the hut where he used to sleep and went furtively across the forest towards the village. He had been often on Hitadū in other occasions and he had a girlfriend there.

Back then, it was customary for lovers to know where exactly in the house their girlfriend would sleep. If a young woman happened to fall in love with a man she liked and trusted, she would secretly make a small hole close to her bed, in the thatch mesh forming the walls of her home. She would then cover it with loose ends of palm leaves to hide it and she would tell her lover where the opening in the thatch was. During the months that followed the girl would make it a point of sleeping every night with her head near that side.

Thus, if the lover wanted to meet with her, he would choose a late hour, to make sure everyone was sleeping. Then he would thrust his hand through the hole in the thatch and gently pull the hair of the sleeping girl to wake her up. Once awake, she would feel for his hand, affectionately press it

²⁸⁹ 'Koṭṭe', meaning 'fort' in Divehi. At that lonely point, there are the ruins of a fortification crudely built with large, loose, coral stones. The site has been vandalized in recent times and only traces of it remain now. H.C.P. Bell took pictures of the structure at the beginning of the century, which were subsequently published in his comprehensive monograph.

and he would withdraw his and wait. After carefully looking around in the dim lamplight,²⁹⁰ trying to make as little noise as possible not to wake the other people in the room, the young woman would sneak out of the house and go with her boyfriend into the bushes or to some other hidden place. If, by chance, someone in the house happened to get up while the girl was going out, she could always say that she was going to the beach or the forest to relieve herself. But let's go back now to our story.

This young man of Huḷudū, made fearless by the anticipation of a night of pleasure, embracing his pretty Hitadū girlfriend under the bushes, finally arrived in the village after crossing the dark forest. Silently, he walked through the quiet and empty streets under the starlight. The air was thick with heavy, putrid smells and this boy, far from being alarmed, thought this was normal in any village of his atoll when the fishing was very good. In such times of abundance, a lot of tuna was processed and dried. Hence, more offal and gills than the cats and crows could eat were carelessly thrown here and there, and they were left to rot. Anyway, as we have already mentioned, the boy's mind was preoccupied with something else and he was not even thinking about the foul odors.

Finally, he arrived at the house of the girl he loved. In almost total darkness, owing to the large banana trees surrounding the house, the boy searched for the correct wall and felt for the hole. Once he found it, he gently separated the loose ends of thatch, which cleverly hid the opening she had made. With his heart beating at a fast pace, the young man thrust his hand across the thatched panel covering the sides of the girl's home and, feeling the mat and the pillow, he carefully searched for her hair with his fingers. With a feeling of triumph, the boy found a soft hair lock and, taking hold of some strands, he gave it a gentle tug. As the girl didn't respond, he thought: "She is in deep sleep," then he groped for more hair

²⁹⁰ Most houses had only one room where the whole family would sleep. Usually there would be four beds or raised platforms occupying the four corners

and, when he caught a thicker strand, he tugged with slightly increased strength.

However, the girl was not waking up and the boy was feeling miserable, squatting in the dark, tortured by mosquitoes. Having been looking forward to a sweet night of pleasure, he insisted, holding all the time the young woman's hair between his fingers. He was tugging from time to time, wondering whether perhaps she was awake, but was angry at him for having neglected her for so long. However, he quickly dismissed that possibility thinking: "If this would be the case she would have plugged the opening or gone to sleep somewhere else." As time passed and no reaction was forthcoming, the young man became so frustrated that he was considering giving up. Angrily, he gave a strong tug to the girl's strands.

To his amazement, a whole length of the girl's tresses came to his hand. Immediately, his surprise turned into horror, as he pulled a bit more, and out of the hole he drew a piece of his lover's rotten scalp. At this, the young man was overcome by nausea, got up and vomited right there, propping himself against the stalk of a large banana tree. Now he realized that the vile smell of decay pervading the village was not the stench of rotten fish. The man uttered a cry of fear and loathing when he saw that he was still holding the girl's hair between his fingers. He let the rotten scalp fall in disgust, rubbed his hands hysterically, and stumbled away in sheer terror.

It was a very different man who walked now hurriedly northwards across the coconut groves and the forest in the shadows. He was avoiding the houses of the silent village, fearful of the unseen horrors they may contain. When he arrived to Kottē, he rushed into his hut, fell on his cot and broke into uncontrollable sobbing. The other fishermen woke up in alarm and asked the boy what was wrong. But it was difficult for him to talk. The young man would try to say something, but the words that came from his mouth were totally incomprehensible ("Hus veḍe", meaning 'only

nonsense') and after frustrated attempts to communicate he would burst into sobs again. For the rest of the night no one slept.

It was close to dawn, when everyone should have been preparing for fishing, but all the fishermen were worried about the state of their young companion. After much strain they managed to understand what he said and it was horrifying news: "All the people of Hitadū are dead."

Then a group of the fishermen decided to go to the village to ascertain the truth of what the boy was saying. While they were on their way, some of them were bragging that, no matter what they would find there, they were not scared. But before noon, they arrived to the first houses at the northern end of the village and what they saw there chilled every one of them to the bones.

Men, women and children had died within their homes and their bodies were skin and bones. For the spirit which had been accidentally conjured up in Huḷudū, in that fateful ceremony where human blood had been shed into the sea, was a bloodthirsty evil demon that had killed them all and sucked out their blood. There were unburied corpses in every house; all were in an advanced state of decay and full of maggots. The stench of rotteness was so overwhelming that most of the men felt dizzy, but it could not be avoided even going out of the houses because the whole village was reeking of it. It was an abominable place and the stunned men had not uttered a single word since they were confronted with the horrid sights. After but a short while, they exchanged meaningful looks and stopped walking southwards. They had seen enough and no one felt like going further into the dreadful village.

Thus they fled the ghostly town walking northwards at a fast pace, almost running, and when they arrived at Koṭṭe their faces were ashy-pale with fear. It took a while before any of them recovered his speech. Feverishly, the fishermen packed all their belongings, dismantled the huts, loaded their boats, and returned to Huḷudū that same afternoon.

During the months that followed, Huḷudū fishermen didn't profit from the abundance of fish in the waters around Hitadū. Instead, they avoided that malignant area like the plague and went in search of other fishing grounds, which they eventually found, although they were not so rich. The long island, looming ominously on the western horizon, could not be easily ignored, but they now looked at it in awe and never sailed close to it, fearful of the unspeakable horrors it contained.

It is said that many years later a party of people from another island went up to Hitadū and walked ashore. A good faṇḍitaveriyā performed some strong magic there to free the island from its evil and all the unburied corpses were duly buried. At first some people of other islands went to Hitadū merely to harvest coconuts or wood and to look for useful things among the ruined homesteads. They stayed only for short periods of time to profit from the many unclaimed trees and their fruits. Decades later, however, people from neighboring islands began to resettle this large island. As years went by, its population grew until there were again as many inhabitants there as there had been before the calamity struck.

This story vividly demonstrates the fact that village goddesses are purely local deities, their allegiance apparently restricted towards the reduced group of worshipers of the locality to which they belong. They seem never to be regarded as having any relation to the world as a whole. The sole object, then, of the worship of these village deities is to propitiate them and to avert their wrath. Therefore, behind all those sacrifices there are no great spiritual goals and by means of their rituals, local people are merely looking for the benefit of their own island by getting rid of some evil disease or improving the fishing around its waters.

H. Whitehead is eloquent on this subject:

"I have dignified the periodical sacrifices to the village goddesses by the name of festivals, but the term is a misnomer. There is really nothing of a festal character about them. They are only gloomy and weird rites for the

propitiation of angry deities or the driving away of evil spirits, and it is very difficult to detect any traces of a spirit of thankfulness or praise. Even the term worship is hardly correct. The object of all the various rites and ceremonies is not to worship the deity in any true sense of the word, but simply to propitiate it and avert its wrath."²⁹¹

The Dravidian Dēvi cult is a very ancient form of religious expression. Its origins are lost in dozens of millennia and go back perhaps to the times of the very first human settlers on earth. See S. K. Ramachandra Rao, 'Durga Kosha'. Unlike relatively more recent religions it is not connected to any form of government or law-making body. Neither has it included regular worship rituals, uniform iconography nor a prescribed set of standard prayers. Even the term 'worship' itself lacks accuracy when dealing with the rites surrounding the village goddess. It is true that sacrifices are offered to this obscure divinity²⁹² in scattered villages or islands, but one cannot affirm that these constitute worship in the Semitic or even the Vedic sense of the word. Therefore, the lack of greater, loftier aims in village goddess cults was extremely repugnant not only for the Islamic hard-liners, but even for many turn-of the century writers, both English and Indian.

The remarkable aspect of the Bahuru Kiyevuñ ceremony is that the bloodthirsty goddess, although not named as such and assumed to be an amorphous, shapeless spirit, is reckoned to come from the sea.²⁹³ This

²⁹¹ Certain events involving goddess-worship in a South Indian village seem to corroborate this point: *"The object of transporting the goddess to the lands of the next village is to transfer to that village the wrath of the deity, a precaution which does not show much faith in the temper of the goddess, nor much charity towards their neighbors."* H. Whitehead, Op. Cit.

²⁹² Or rather divinities as she is assumed to be the same one mother, but is claimed jealously and exclusively by every single locality for its own petty and selfish interests. W.T. Elmore, 'Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism.'

²⁹³ This spirit was deliberately identified with Satan and evil Jinns as the islamization of the country increased.

fact is again stated in the Maldivian story of Ranna Māri, where the evil spirit comes from the ocean on the night when a girl is sacrificed to her. In the Ranna Māri legend it is said that “this spirit looks like a boat full of lights” and, interestingly, illuminations and nightly processions, as well as animal sacrifice, are a feature of the festivals in honor of Goddess Māri in Tamil Nadu to this day.²⁹⁴ Hence, it is likely that the ancient worship of Māri in Maldives included processions on boats carrying lamps in honor of this goddess. The human sacrifice, a common feature in ancient Dēvi worship all over the Subcontinent, was replaced in time by the sacrifice of cocks.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ “Mother Māri Amman has earned a unique name and her attraction lies in her warding off her devout bhaktas from satanic forces and dreadful diseases. ... And the annual festival (in her honor) lures huge crowds overflowing the temple complex and the town. Illuminations and procession are its star attraction and devotees come from far off places to redeem the vows taken with performance of special rituals.” Prof. K.K. Moorthy, “Sarvam Sakti Mayam”.

²⁹⁵ See R. Nagaswami, ‘Tantric Cult of South India’ and also ‘Mother Goddess Cult’ in ‘Racial History of Dravidians’ where the author, L.A. Krishna Iyer, in a bid to promote greater Brahmanical influence (as many South Indian reformers of the time, such as Sri Narayana Guru) is very explicit in his deep contempt for village worship: “The Dravidian religion was dark, repulsive, obscene and bloody. The worship of Mother-Goddess with human sacrifice ... has always flourished where Dravidian religion held its ground.” However, in recent times, there are some writers who try to expound a positive, less elitistic, view of the village-goddess cult. See for example Kancha Ilaiah, ‘Why I Am Not a Hindu’

2.2.3 THE LINK BETWEEN BLOOD AND LIFE

In the Maldivian Islands, once the blood sacrifice was over, the cocks or sea turtles used in it would be brought home by the faṇḍita man and would be eaten. If there was abundance of it, the meat would be distributed among neighbors and friends and there would be a feast. As in South Indian Dēvi worship, the idea behind this practical attitude towards the sacrificial animal is that the goddess, as she delights in the blood, takes away the essence or spirit and leaves the worshipers the material substance. This is probably the origin of the custom of cooking chicken curry as the main dish in any major celebration even at the present time. For example, in the long poem ‘Etereveṣi’ describing the local customs of Fua Mulaku islanders, the killing of a chicken, the maulūdu religious festival, and an opportunity for celebration owing to the arrival of the trading fleet are closely connected.²⁹⁶

In a traditional Maldivian ritual called vajīduvuṇ, a colored cloth with some geometrical figures would be spread on the ground and men would dance around it to the tune of drums (tāra). As the dance would grow increasingly frenzied, the dancers would slash themselves on the head and in the tongue with sharp instruments. The dance would continue with the participants displaying the blood oozing out of their wounds. People, having witnessed those dances, used to say that those self-inflicted wounds would heal miraculously after the dance was over. This type of ritual survived many centuries and was banned by the government only about thirty years ago. The word vajīdu, coming from the Arabic, meaning ‘extasy’ or ‘trance’, was probably given by government officers, the original name of the ceremony having fallen into disuse.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ See also H. Whitehead, *Op. Cit.* above

²⁹⁷ Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī.

Contemporary Maldivians, such as Said Abdullah, Pearl, Male', my first Maldivian friend and a well-traveled seaman, assert that the vajīduvuñ ceremony is connected with Shia' atonement rituals held in the month of Muharram to commemorate the death of their martyrs. Some even go as far as suggesting that the ritual originated in African voodoo.²⁹⁸ However, these assertions don't explain satisfactorily why a certain Shia' ritual was widely practiced in Islands which have been Sunni Muslim since the conversion from Buddhism. Besides, in the Maldives there was no explicit mourning for any Shia' martyr in this rite, and the self-mortification was rather a purely personal experience.

It is also not clear why it was such an ancient, popular and widespread custom in the Maldives if it had come from such extremely distant places as Persia and West Africa. It is true that occasionally the ruling king in Male' used to set free an African slave and give him a homestead in some Atoll away from the capital. In a few islands, such as Goidū (South Māļosmaḍulu) and Feridū (Ari Atoll), there are families claiming African ancestry. However, most of the Maldivian Atolls had but little influence from outside and yet the vajīduvuñ rites were performed there as well.

Actually, the explanation of the roots of vajīduvuñ is much closer at hand. In all probability it has its origins in the South Indian coastal region, where there are some popular ceremonies in which much blood is openly displayed. These have been part of festivals peculiar to the temples of the village goddesses since very ancient times.²⁹⁹ Popular Dravidian Dēvi rituals include practices like piercing one's tongue or cheeks and slashing at one's breast and forehead with swords until the blood spurts out. In the same manner as in vajīduvuñ, these practices are performed by males

²⁹⁸ 'Dhanfuji' magazine, September 1996 issue.

²⁹⁹ See the chapter 'Village Deities' in H. Krishna Sastri, 'South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses'.

in front of the crowd of devotees during the festival and it is said that they are garish remnants of the ancient practice of human sacrifices offered to the goddess.

Both the Maldivian *vajīduvuñ* and the Bahuru *Kiyevuñ* ceremonies reflect the underlying South Indian belief that the goddess is pleased by the display of blood. It is implicit that if blood is not displayed to the *Dēvi*, she will take it herself in a supernatural way. The affected person will become thin and people will assume that the *haṇḍi* is absorbing his or her blood. As blood is connected with life and fertility, the consumption of blood from the afflicted man, woman or child, will inevitably lead to extreme emaciation, followed by death, if drastic measures are not taken to make amends with the local goddess.

Maldivian spirits, unless they are crude flesh eaters, such as *Minikā Daitā*, *Dōgi Āihā* or *Kaṇḍu Furēta*, do not suck blood biting in the neck in vampire fashion. Instead the blood is drawn out of the victim's body in the course of prolonged contact with this type of spirits, or even through their mere physical proximity. Hence the local term used in this case is *lē damani* (drawing out blood), instead of the term *lē boni* (drinking blood).³⁰⁰

The following legend shows how prolonged contact with a bloodthirsty female spirit draws the life out of a whole family and lays a curse upon the household. Again, according to islanders, it is not clear whether this spirit is a *haṇḍi* or not. However, she has all the characteristics of a type of female tree-spirits called *Yakṣi* in India,³⁰¹ including the ability to either

³⁰⁰ See the chapter 'Village Deities' in H. Krishna Sastri, 'South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses'.

³⁰¹ These spirits are ever-present in popular tales and films in Malayalam. Their appearance is that of a pretty young maiden, but they are capable of killing and devouring people. They are especially reputed for luring a man using their charm and beauty and then inevitably bringing about ruin to his life in the form of madness and death. See I.K.K. Menon, 'Folk Tales of Kerala'

show herself or remain invisible at will. This gloomy story, full of horrid detail, has been passed on for many generations among the families in the village of Funāḍo, SW Fua Mulaku, in order to explain why no house could be built in a certain abandoned plot at the edge of that village.³⁰²

The House of Sorrow

“Very long ago, a house stood here. The owner of the house lived there with his wife and three children. One night he went to the beach at Kandovali, a fannu in the SW of the island, to fish with a big machete knife (the toṣi taḷani mode of fishing).³⁰³ It was around midnight when he decided to return home with his catch.

Not far from the beach, on the left side of the path leading into the island, there was a large nikabilissa tree which has long since disappeared.³⁰⁴ It was a dark night, but the man could make out a figure under the tree, walking slowly towards him. First he was frightened, but as he came closer he realized it was a girl and he scolded her: “What are you doing here?”

Politely, with a soft voice the young woman answered: “It’s very late Bēbē³⁰⁵ and your wife is already sleeping. I came to look for you and I will cook the fish you caught tonight. Reef fish spoils quickly.”

³⁰² Slightly abridged version as it had been narrated by the late Kendūgebeage Muhammadu to his daughters. Told by Shabunamvilla Āminat Alī in 1986.

³⁰³ Known as ‘faru taḷani’ in the Male’ form of Divehi.

³⁰⁴ No more nikabilissa (*Saraca indica*) are left in Fua Mulaku island now. At the time of putting this story into writing there were a few left in Aḍḍu Atoll. It seems that the reverence in which trees with rich red or orange blossoms were held has faded during the last decades. When Hamīdu wanted to show me a berebedimal tree in his village of Dūṇḍigam, we found out it had recently been cut.

³⁰⁵ The polite form of addressing elder males.

The man thought “My wife is pregnant and I don’t like to wake her up during the night. She already works very hard during the daytime.” Thus, he acquiesced and both walked together to his home.

Once there, the girl quickly cleaned and cooked the fish. While the man ate heartily she stood next to him watching him eat, but didn’t speak. After the meal he told her: “Now I am going to sleep. You can go back home.”

Suddenly the young woman began to weep: “I live on the other end of the island. I cannot go home so late! Please let me stay here.”

Now the man had a good look at her at the light of the oil lamp and thought: “I have never seen this woman before, but she is not too short, neither too tall, nor too dark; she is also not too thin³⁰⁶ and her smooth black hair is well oiled. Her waistcloth is not worn and her girdle chain (faṭṭaro) is not too short. She is maybe from a good family.” He decided that it would not be right to leave her out at such a late and cold hour of night and, as the girl kept sobbing and pleading with him, he allowed her to stay. He pointed to her the aṣi (platform) where she should sleep and went to bed.

During the night one of the small children woke up and cried. The man was too tired to get up and his wife was sleeping deeply beside him. Suddenly he heard the girl taking the baby and lulling it back to sleep. At this the man thought: “How good!”

In the morning he told his wife: “This girl can stay here and work. You are pregnant and should not exert yourself too much.” The woman cast a long look at the girl and she thought she had a sweet face and looked neat and gentle. Thus, she agreed with her husband and during the days that

³⁰⁶ A local and now obsolete way of implying that the girl was good-looking. Ancient indigenous standards of beauty emphasized the absence of extremes.

*followed, besides looking after the children, the newly-arrived girl did most of the household work. She was very clean and hard-working and always smelled nice. Her body seemed to emit a great number of fragrances, like different kinds of flowers, at different times. As she didn't like to be close to the fire, she left the cooking to the woman of the house.*³⁰⁷

As time passed, the wife came to like the mysterious young woman more and more, because she was obedient and always spoke politely. She also noticed that the girl displayed a lot of patience with the children and never became angry. However, there were a few weird things about her. Like the fact that she could not stand any grown-up person touching her, and that she never left their compound. When visitors came, she would always hide. The husband and wife smiled to themselves and thought she was a bit silly being so shy.

The day came when the wife gave birth. As soon as the midwives left the house, the young woman emerged from her hiding place and took the child in her arms. She was happily carrying it all the time and would only let it go, albeit reluctantly, when the baby needed his mother's breast.

One evening, the husband was away fishing and the wife heard the child crying in a strange, muffled way, while she was dozing alone on her bed. She silently got up and secretly watched what was happening in the other room. There she saw that the girl was pressing her mouth against the child's nose. Carefully she returned to her bed and remained awake owing to her alarm and her anguish. Before dawn, when her husband came, she told him what she had seen. He became so angry she had to calm him down before they both went to confront the girl. They found her placidly sleeping close to the baby. The husband woke her up roughly and asked her what did she do to their baby and why.

³⁰⁷ This is in clear contrast with other *haṇḍi* stories such as 'Kaṣidū Haṇḍi Doṅ Kamaṇā' where the spirit herself would produce fire with her own feet.

The girl sat on the bed and looked away, avoiding their gaze as if ashamed. As the man kept pressing her for an answer he became very angry at her passivity and yelled at her. At this the young woman became offended. Arrogantly raising her eyebrows, half closing her eyes and pouting her lips, she got up. Without saying a word or even looking at them, she quietly walked out of the house into the night and was gone.

The couple was baffled. After a long silence, the wife snapped: “You always have to shout! You could have been more careful!” And now the husband directed his anger towards her: “You started it with your stories! I don’t know why I even had to believe you!” The wife was indignant: “So you tell me I am lying?”

In this manner they argued and argued until their noise woke up the children and they began to cry. While the wife was stilling the baby, the husband looked at the small flame of the oil lamp. Then he looked around the room. The other children kept crying and now the wife shouted at him: “They are crying! Don’t you hear?”

The man was too tired to retort. He quietly went to sit close to the children and lulled them to sleep. After a while everyone fell asleep and it was dawn.

The next morning they woke up late and were in bad moods. There was a lot of work to do in the house and the wife had still not recovered from giving birth (it is customary in Southern Maldives that women stay away from work in total rest after childbirth). She felt that the household work was too heavy for her alone and her husband had to stay in the house to help her. As he could not go fishing, there was no fish to eat.

The children missed the girl and kept asking “Kobā Dattā? (Where is Auntie?)” the whole day long. They cried very often and their tantrums were putting their parent’s nerves on edge. During the night both of them weren’t getting much sleep after having worked hard in the daytime. The children woke them up constantly crying and whining. Husband and wife

became haggard and depressed. To top it all, their constant quarrels made each other's life miserable to the point that their neighbors and kin began to avoid them.

Seven long days passed in such manner. One evening the husband was sitting inside the house lulling a child on the swingbed, while the wife was cooking in the kitchen. Suddenly, when he happened to glance towards the door he saw the girl standing at the threshold in the twilight. She was looking at him silently. The man asked: "How long have you been standing there? I didn't hear you coming." She didn't answer. Then he called his wife.

The girl didn't utter a word and kept staring at them. Her face was grim. The man and his wife tried to cheer her up and told her they were sorry for having been angry and rude. Finally they begged her to stay. Now the young woman reacted and walked calmly and proudly inside the house. She tilted her head up and addressed the husband in a sharp tone: "You take me as your wife and I will stay." She was no longer meek; there was a new impudence about her now. She knew she had power over them.

The woman of the house was full of dismay but she had to accept her defeat when her husband agreed.³⁰⁸ He justified himself by telling his wife that, as there was so much work in the house they needed her badly. After sealing the deal, the girl brazenly warned the man: "You must not tell anyone that I am living with you as your wife now." The husband suddenly realized that there was something highly frightening about the young woman, a new menace in the air, but there was no coming back

During the following days the girl kept working as diligently as ever. Slowly and steadily she ended up running the household. She wanted to have things done her own way and no longer took orders from the woman of

³⁰⁸ Polygamy was very rare in traditional Maldivian society, except among the royal family

the house. The husband and his wife became apprehensive of her, they felt that she was very evil, but could not explain why, because she was as hard-working and tidy as she had formerly been. And, except for the fact that she was now occasionally cohabiting with the husband, the young woman didn't do anything openly wrong and was always polite and correct with the man and his wife. However, they both secretly agreed that things had changed for the worse. The girl had a certain snake-like quality he had not noticed before. She always seemed to observe them with piercing, cold eyes. In time, their loud conversations dwindled until they became mere frightened whispers between them.

The wife could now take time for her needed rest, but her strength didn't return. The little baby slowly fell ill. He became listless and his body was getting thinner and thinner. His mother wanted to call the faṇḍita man, but the girl adamantly refused. She asked her husband to intervene, but he could only mumble some feeble protests. The young woman was so vehement in her resolve not to let any sorcerer enter the house that the man had to give up. He felt he had no willpower anymore to counter the intruder's vicious dominance and his wife stood by watching helplessly and in dismay as this implacable girl took full command of the household. By now both husband and wife had become sickly and weak, like their children. They seldom left their abode and spent bleak, languid days in that sad house.

After a few weeks the baby died and the parents felt wretched and guilty. One by one all the other children became skinny and sad. With their bodies reduced to shin and bones, they died one after the other within a few months. Following the death of the last child the wife became mad with sorrow and despair. Her wasted body was frightening to behold and she felt so weak, she couldn't get up from her bed. The poor woman was not able to sleep during the nights and, crying and whimpering, she ended up dying miserably on her wet mat. Her husband, thin and in a pitiful condition too, spent his last strength arranging her burial.

The young girl was looking as pretty, young and healthy as ever, and the man lived alone with her now. She looked after him and the house as efficiently as before, but his health was only going from bad to worse. The man spent his days lying down because he was too weak to get up. Meanwhile the young woman kept him company chatting pleasantly as a good wife would do.

One day, after a long time, a neighbor came in for a visit while the man was lying on the swingbed and the girl was sitting beside him swinging it. The visitor stood in front of him and felt sorry for his friend. He was looking almost like a skeleton now. Out of concern for him he said: "Bēbē you look very ill. It is so sad that your wife and all your children are dead. What to do? Now you are left alone in this house with no one to look after you. Please come to my house. There is one of my sisters that you could marry. You know her. She will look after you and you will recover."

At this the man looked at his neighbor in bewilderment. Smiling wryly he pointed at the girl: "What do you say? This is my wife now and she is looking after me." The neighbor, genuinely surprised looked around in confusion and asked: "Who? Where? I don't see anybody!"

Finally, it dawned on the man that the girl in front of him was a spirit. As he beheld at the same time the young woman, now sneering at him in contempt, and his perplexed neighbor, looking in puzzlement at him he thought: "Of course, he is unable to see her because she is not human!" And, all of a sudden, the visitor saw such terror in the face of the sick man that it sent a chill down his spine. Thinking his friend had become raving mad he left the accursed house in haste and never came back.

Presently the man realized he had been living all this time with an evil spirit, and that he himself had brought this calamity to his own home. He remembered now his wife and his children and the dreadful way they died. Feeling guilty, he cried bitterly, but he had no strength left to leave the

house or to chase the young woman away. She now looked in a new way at him, always with a sort of mocking smile, which scared him to death.

The girl, however, was not openly unkind to him and dutifully kept cleaning the house and feeding him, but the man didn't want to live anymore. He refused to eat her food and tried to ignore her, avoiding conversation with the young woman no matter how much she teased and taunted him. After but a few weeks this poor man died in silence and in utter disgrace, because nobody was there to bury him.

The man's corpse was in an advanced state of decomposition when neighbors living on the leeward side of his home, alarmed by the smell of rotten flesh, entered the house. They found the putrescent body full of maggots on the swingbed and took the necessary measures to bury it quickly, without ceremony. Later, the man's relatives came, took away everything of value and left the ghastly house empty.

With no one to look after it, the house slowly fell into disrepair. The thatched roof decayed and rain poured in. The kitchen, the verandah, and annex rooms built of sticks, were dismantled and carried away by women looking for firewood. In time, only the four main walls and the wooden beams remained. The garden was soon overgrown with weeds and creepers. However, the haṇḍi was still living there.

Back then there were few houses built of stone. The surrounding compound was cool and shady. On its fertile earth big trees grew. Hence, before too many years passed, some relatives of the former house owner moved in. They said it was a good place and worked hard to renew the house. After repairing the roof, they thatched it with new woven palm fronds, built a new kitchen and verandah, cleared the garden of weeds and settled in.

With new white gravel scattered all around the house the place now looked welcoming. The new family should have been happy in their renovated house. However, they were always full of sadness. They had

horrible nightmares in their sleep and, as time passed, they all fell ill one after the other. All of them became thin and weak and the children became listless. One day, they called a faḥḍita man and he advised them to wear charms on different parts of their body,³⁰⁹ but, after he saw that they were not improving, he consulted his books and gravely advised them to move to another place.

Finally this family moved back to their former house. In time, as the deserted house looked so good, some poor relations asked the owners for permission to settle in it. They agreed, but warned them that they had known only sorrow there.

These poor newcomers were proud of living in such a good house, but soon they fell sick as well and had to recognize that there was a powerful evil there. Disenchanted with the house, they soon moved away too. After them, even poorer and lower people with no place to go moved in during the next years, but the haḥḍi didn't spare anybody her curse, even though she now never showed herself. Thin, enfeebled and full of gloom, everyone among the series of men, women and children who spent some time there, ended up abandoning that dreary place. After this, word got around the island about the malevolence of that spot and no one wanted to live there anymore.

This time the house was definitely abandoned and it fell thoroughly into ruin. Years upon years passed. The beams collapsed, the veu (stone bath with steps) filled with rubble and vegetation, the whole place became overgrown and the path leading to the accursed homestead disappeared. But the girl-spirit still lived there.

³⁰⁹ Tavīdu. Charms consisting of magic or Quranic words written on a small piece of paper which is rolled and put inside a small copper, brass or gold casket which is fastened by means of a string to the arm, waist, etc

Many more years passed and even the children of the ones who had tried to live there became old and died. This malignant spot had now become a jungle. The stone walls, cracked by roots of large trees, collapsed. Among the thick vegetation, low remainders of the wall, now covered with dark moss, gave a hint that once a house had stood there. But even then, the haṇḍi continued to haunt the dark, small ruin. People walking close to that spot in the evening, said that they heard sad, wailing voices and cries of children, and quickened their pace in fear. A few of the old people knew something was wrong among those mossy stones. They remembered the frightening stories their elders had told them about the house that once stood there and they passed them on to their children.

As centuries went by, the present times came and, either because people have grown more sceptical about spirits or because the last time the haṇḍi living in that place had caused real harm was so long ago, the stories about the evil female-spirit drawing the blood of a whole family lost their power. People had no more fear of that part of the forest, where the dark stones hidden among the bushes told that a house stood there many hundreds of years before. There were many such ruins in the island. However, the fact that the memory of the haṇḍi had faded didn't mean that she was not there, with her deadly malevolence very much alive.

Thus, a man called Alī Dīdī, the grandfather of somebody living in the island today, thought in his youth: "People just speak nonsense about this place. I have inherited this excellent plot close to the village limits. Why shouldn't I make a profit from it?"

He cleared the place thoroughly of undergrowth, cutting and uprooting trees which had grown thickly all over. After this he knocked the ruined remainders of the small building down to their foundations. The stones, now black and green, hideously slimy, were carried away to one end of the plot and left there in a heap. Alī Dīdī then brought new white coral stones, lime and sand, and built a brand-new house. Beside it he erected a solid kitchen with a stone foundation. Then he thatched both buildings and dug

a new well. Finally he planted breadfruit trees, coconut palms and bananas, spreading new white gravel all over the compound.

The new house looked neat and cozy and Alī Dīdī moved in with his family. However, even on the first night no one could sleep well there. The children kept waking up and crying, and their mother thought that she saw ghostly animals inside the house during the night, even though the door was locked. The frightened woman would tell her husband that red roosters and cats jumped all of a sudden from unexpected corners startling her and scaring her terribly.

The truth is that Alī Dīdī had nightmares too. Nevertheless, he had worked so hard and invested so much of his fortune in building this house that he tried to ignore the evil power at work within it. But his wife and children looked alarmingly unhealthy, getting more languid and skinny day by day, and he was looking no better. They didn't seem to have the willingness to live anymore. His wife never sang while she was working as before, and his children didn't play. They all dreaded the frightful, gloomy nights and spent their days idly lying down, struck with a pernicious, overpowering weakness.

At last, one day, after a heated discussion, his wife admonished Alī Dīdī very seriously: "Look! My patience has run out. I am moving to my parent's house." Thus she left, taking the children with her. And, indeed, being away from that wretched house worked miracles for her and the kids. They recovered immediately, gaining in health, weight and cheerfulness.

Even after the bitter quarrel with his wife, Alī Dīdī stubbornly kept calling that horrid dismal place his home. He thought that by insisting in staying there, his wife would eventually return. But now, alone there, his nights were full of desolation and horror. He tried to sleep in the daytime and keep awake at night to avoid the terrifying nightmares that tortured him as soon as he closed his eyes. However, keeping awake was no better

owing to the abominable spectral visions he had and the mysterious noises he heard.

Shortly thereafter, Alī Dīdī, dispirited and swallowing his pride, followed in the wake of his wife. When she saw him coming, he was so thin and looked so sad, that tears came to her eyes. She nurtured him lovingly until he recovered. At her parents' place they maybe didn't have much room for themselves, but at least they were free from fear and sorrow. In but a few weeks they all healed completely and they were their normal, happy selves again.

The frightening house was again deserted, but not for long. After a severe family squabble, one of Alī Dīdī's cousins left his wife's parents' home. As he was angry and didn't want to return to his in-laws' house, he went to check the empty homestead and approached the owner: "You are not using that house and I need a home as soon as possible."³¹⁰ Please let me make use of it." Alī Dīdī agreed but warned him: "The air is bad there, though, and people become sick."

But his cousin didn't care: "If we fall sick we will make medicine or faṇḍita." And so he moved in with his family. His immediate impression was that the house was very pleasant and he was full of enthusiasm. However, as soon as he stepped inside he and his wife began to feel uncomfortable. Eventually, as the days passed, they too fell ill and became prey to violent nightmares. Alī Dīdī went to visit his cousin after but a few weeks and, seeing his somber face and the emaciated bodies of his children, told him about the agony he had endured during the days he spent alone in that dreary house.

³¹⁰ In Maldives it was customary for the husband to live with his wife's extended family. Local people say that, if one could get along with the others, it was better to live in one sprawling home where many men of the household would go fishing, others would go to climb coconut palms and many women would work in the fields and in the kitchen, sharing prosperity. Even in ancient times, however, both types of households, the nuclear and the extended family, coexisted in the islands

“There is some strong evil spirit causing all this,” they agreed.

Thus, they both went to a good faṇḍitaveriyā and asked him to make powerful magic to rid the house of its insidious, hostile presence. The sorcerer, after listening carefully to them, sat for a long while lost in thought. Finally he said: “I will see what I can do. Don’t give me money now; pay me only if I am successful.”

The first thing the faṇḍitaveriyā did was to tell Alī Dīdī that, as he needed to be alone to make this kind of magic, he had to tell his cousin to leave the place. Accordingly, the occupants of the house vacated it that same day before the evening. On the next day in the afternoon, the sorcerer went to the sinister empty house and planted kendoḷu plants all around the perimeter of the building.³¹¹ Once he was finished, he waited for the sun to set. He then sat down on the ground in front of the main door, which was on the eastern side of the house, and began reciting magic words. After a while, he took his masdaiyffiohi (ritual knife) and, facing the door, thrust it between two kendoḷu. But this magician was ill-equipped for a spirit of such lethal malevolence and, while he was thrusting the knife, he began to shiver in fear.

When he looked up, he was startled. There, at the threshold of the house, a dusky girl was standing facing him. One of her hands was raised, resting on the doorframe.³¹² Her dress was merely the traditional black cloth reaching from her waist to her feet and her ornaments were of a very

³¹¹ Kandoḷu in Male’ Bas (*Crinum asiaticum*) with a large, onion-like bulbous root, long pale green leaves and white flowers.

³¹² This gesture is important in local culture, since it implies that she was behaving as if she was the owner of the house

ancient type.³¹³ *She had a sad look about her face and a lovely expression. A fragrant flower smell hit the sorcerer's nostrils and he began to think he had been foolish by being so apprehensive.*

Yet all of a sudden, the girl's lips twisted and she giggled at him in such a wicked way that the magician froze in terror. Nothing of what Alī Dīdī had said had prepared him for this and he was speechless with fear. This man was not one of those mighty sorcerers of yore that knew how to deal with all types of demons and the tremendous evil in the girl's smile and in her hard eyes chilled the inexperienced faṇḍita man to the bone.

The poor sorcerer was at a loss about how to continue the ritual he had come to perform. He had never been confronted closely by such an awful apparition. Time passed while he sat like paralyzed, aware of the danger right in front of him. Looking upwards, towards the orange and pink clouds of the twilight, the man was fidgeting nervously, trying hard to avoid the intense, terrifying stare of the young woman. Finally he sighed and, trying to gather courage, addressed the malevolent presence gently in what came out as an awkward tone: "Kāñlō, what are you doing here?"

She snapped back with such ferocity that the scared sorcerer almost fell backwards: "Look!" she roared, "This is my house! Who are you?"

The sorcerer shuddered in fright and embarrassment. He didn't know what to answer and felt like an intruder. The horrid girl, looming a few steps before him, was seething with savage hatred now, like a wild beast poised to attack. Panic overtook the poor man and, mumbling some lame excuses he fumbled with the knife and hastily withdrew it.

³¹³ Her dress was the black waist cloth known as kaṇḍikī in Male' and alfaḱā in the South; aristocratic ladies used to wear the fēli, a more elaborate waistcloth with broad horizontal white and black bands. Regarding female ornaments, when ancient clay, glass or alabaster bangles are unearthed while digging wells in the islands or when sea erosion exposes them, these are assumed to belong to female spirits and are called haṇḍiulā

The faṇḍita man didn't dare to take his eyes off the sand. His heart was beating fast and he was breathing heavily. After a while, when he looked up, the dreadful young woman had vanished. He realized now that he was drenched in cold sweat. Shaking, he got up and went home feeling dizzy, stumbling many times on the way. His wife noticed his state when she saw him walking slowly on the street at dusk and met him at the door: "What happened? What happened?" she cried anxiously.

The weary sorcerer lay down and told her about the horror he had seen. He was panting and sweating. His wife tried to convince him to get up and eat something, but he didn't want to take any food. During the night he was shivering with very high fever. The next morning he had become insane. He never recovered.

Following these events no one lived in that awful, dismal home. Alī Dīdī used it as a storehouse, but after his death, when the roof collapsed, it was not repaired. The main building was already in a ruinous state when Alī Dīdī's son destroyed it. He knocked the walls down, burned the decayed wood, scattered the stones about and planted coconut palms and breadfruit trees in that plot. Neighbors say that dreadful place is still haunted and if one dares to walk close to it in the night, mysterious sounds can be heard, like a woman weeping bitterly, little children crying and other unexplainable noises.

Before concluding this chapter, it will be worth drawing attention to the fact that in Maldivian popular spirituality there are a few constant factors which need to be analyzed in order to establish a pattern:

The spirits are not the spirits of the objects that are propitiated, thus they remain outside of them. Therefore, the tree spirit above is not the nikabilissa tree itself in human form, but a spirit that has chosen to dwell there, as it may choose to dwell in a rock, in the sea or in the ruins of a home.

Some spirits have a human origin. Probably all of them have a story explaining how they became spirits, but most of these stories are lost.

Spirits can take human form, even if it is not known whether they have a human origin or not, like the girl in the story above. While in human shape, their malevolence is often masked by beauty and youth. Many evil spirits have the appearance of charming, beautiful women.³¹⁴

Contrary to what it may seem, not all spirits are evil. There might be a lot of harmless spirits all around, but these seem to be irrelevant. In practice it is the malignant spirits which draw all the attention towards themselves, as it is precisely the fear of their displeasure which calls forth the different ceremonies of propitiation and appeasement described in this chapter.

*"Fear is, rather than respect or veneration, what pervades the relationship between the Maldivian folk and their ancestral evil spirits. Disease, anger, quarrels with family and neighbors are perceived to be the result of demons meddling with one's life. The average islander's innermost wish would be to be able to lead a quiet, prosperous and blissful life, free from the interference of dark powers."*³¹⁵

We have seen in previous chapters how in the eyes of the Maldivian people their own rulers seem often to act in the same random and destructive manner as evil spirits. For instance, instead of stigmatizing

³¹⁴ *"The fundamental conception of the Dravidians with regard to the origin of their gods is without doubt that they are the spirits of departed people."* W.T. Elmore, 'Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism.' The fact that it may not be stated or known leads us to the following questions: Is the possibility of having a human origin irrelevant to the story? Does this possibility add to the spirit's malevolence?

³¹⁵ All these factors are analogous to the 'outstanding characteristics of Dravidian animism' described by W.T. Elmore. *"It is, therefore, by a consideration of the Dravidian fear of evil-minded spirits that we shall find the key to practically all of the ideas and customs connected with their worship."* Ibid.

lawbreakers, Islanders tend to consider that to become a “proper Maldivian” (Divehi vuñ) one has to have been exiled or imprisoned by the government at least once in one’s lifetime. Therefore, people arrested by the authorities seldom feel any guilt; instead they just think “it’s their turn.” *Hence*, both the popular fascination by dark magic power and the veneration towards powerful or ‘holy’ men are tainted with terror. As a result of this perceived link, in the mindset of Maldivians there is a readiness to fear all sources of power, whether spiritual, magical or political. Thus, the common fear of the government is merely a derivation of the atavistic fear of demons.

2.3.1 THE VILLAGE GODDESS

In the folk-narrative of Maldives there are a few stories about women eating human flesh. These anthropophagous females are known generically as Minikā Daitā (Cannibal Aunt). One hypothesis about the origin of such myths could be that in times of extreme famine islanders may have been reduced to practicing cannibalism. However, this doesn't explain why a single woman in each case has emerged as a mythical human-flesh eater and why we don't have matching stories about groups of islanders, or males, incurring in such aberrant behavior.

People in Fua Mulaku love to tell stories about a woman who lived very long ago in their island and liked to eat human flesh. They take a certain pride in this cannibal female and claim her as their own, never failing to tell strangers about her. It is said that she lived at a place called Kāṣifiṣi (the mound of bones) where many human bones lay buried in the earth. The most representative variant of this weird story is the following:³¹⁶

Diguvāṇḍi Daitā

“Long ago, in Fua Mulaku, in the village of Diguvāṇḍo lived a woman with her husband. Since she was very beautiful he was very much in love with her; accordingly, he made it a point of fulfilling every one of her wishes. One day this woman became very angry because he returned from fishing without fish. “Ekkalas dogo hadani!” (“You are always lying!”) She yelled at him.

The truth is that it was a very bad fishing season, but the furious lady wouldn't take any excuse and threatened her husband with dire consequences if he came back without fish again. To make matters worse,

³¹⁶ Told by Kaṭibuge Ibrahīm Saīdu, Diguvāṇḍo village, Fua Mulaku.

she didn't want any kind of fish, it had to be skipjack tuna (Katsuwonus pelamis) which has dark red flesh and is the favorite fish of all Maldivians.

The husband couldn't fish anything either on the following day. Arriving at the house, he sneaked to the well at the back of his home before she could see him. There he took the extreme step of cutting a strip of flesh from his own leg. After bandaging the wound he brought the piece of flesh to his wife saying that it was the only piece of fish he could get. When she asked him why he was limping he said: "I just fell from a coconut tree and I have a wound here."

Diguvāṇḍi Daitā cooked it and found the flesh delicious. The next few days were also bad fishing days, so the husband kept cutting strips of his flesh by the well to keep his wife happy.

However, Diguvāṇḍi Daitā grew suspicious about the fact that her husband was going straight to the back of the house as soon as he came back from fishing. So she spied on him and found out that he was cutting his own flesh. She thought: "This is why this flesh tasted much better than tuna." Thus, without hesitating, that same night she killed her husband, drained his blood into a bowl and drank it. Then she cut his body in small pieces and cooked them into garede (rihākuru).

After a few days Diguvāṇḍi Daitā gave birth to a child. The midwives who came to her home to help to deliver the baby asked for some food. She told them there were boiled taro, coconuts and garede in the kitchen. While they were taking food, one of the midwives took something from the pot of garede with the ladle and they saw in horror that it was a human hand!

Often this story would end with the same corollary as the one that follows: "Then the island became Muslim and Daitā was killed." The

variant that follows is less common and it is set in the adjoining village of Hōdaḍo:³¹⁷

Hōdaḍi Daitā

“Long ago, before the people of Fua Mulaku were converted to Islam, a woman known as Hōdaḍi Daitā lived alone in a big house in the village of Hōdaḍo on the northeastern part of the island. Inside her home, in the main room, she had planted forks with the tines upward behind the swing.³¹⁸ Since she lived near the middle of the island, people going from the northern end to the southern had to pass close to her house. When the fishing season was bad, she would invite the passers-by saying: “Come! Come in and rest!”

When a man, woman or child entered the house, the woman would tell him or her to sit on the swing while she brought some tea. Then she went to the kitchen.³¹⁹

Hōdaḍi Daitā kept the inside of her house very dark, day and night. While the unwary islander waited for tea, she would suddenly enter the house and ram hard into the sitting visitor. Taken by surprise, the hapless person would lose balance and would be pushed off the swing onto the sharp forks. If the prongs didn’t pierce the body in any vital organ, she would

³¹⁷ Told by the late Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī. This is the version Diguvāṇḍo people use to tell.

³¹⁸ Maldivian traditional homes always had a large swing inside the house and/or in the verandah

³¹⁹ In the traditional Maldivian homestead, the kitchen would be a separate building, a few meters away from the house. In the southern atolls, the open space between the kitchen and the house where the people, would spend most of the day, is called Medovatte (the ‘v’ sound being silent)

finish her victim off with a knife. Then she would eat the flesh and drink the blood.

This bloodthirsty woman continued killing and eating the island women and men, old and young, in this manner, until only six people remained in Fua Mulaku. These few survivors feared that the island's population would be obliterated. However, right at that time the island became Muslim and the King sent a commissioner who executed Hōdaḍi Daitā.

The grisly features of these stories are a reflection of the fact that in Maldives, as in South India in ancient times, blood sacrifices were customary in the worship of local goddesses, even going to the extent of cutting a piece of one's own flesh.³²⁰ The mention in both stories of a bad fishing season is not mere coincidence, as this type of sacrifice would be called for precisely in such an extreme event. The lack of fish in the sea would be interpreted as caused by the Goddess' wrath, and bloody sacrifices would be made to her, as the provider of human needs, to appease her anger.³²¹

The reference to a fork in the first story is significant, because forks are not common implements in the traditional Maldivian household. This feature definitely hints at a goddess, for practically all South Indian village or locality goddesses wield a fork or trident (Skt. triśūla). The most common iconographical form of the village goddess in South India represents her having four arms holding a trident, a noose and a skull-bowl (kapāla) full of blood, while the last hand is in the position of granting favors (varada mudrā). Eventually she may hold a small drum (ḍamaru) with a snake tied around it, a shield, a sword and a hand showing the gesture of protection against fear (abhaya mudrā) instead of

³²⁰ This particular sacrificial offering, among other sanguinary rituals in honor of the goddess, is described in R. Nagaswami, 'Tantric Cult of South India'.

³²¹ See the chapter "Village Goddesses" in D. Kinsley, 'Hindu Goddesses'.

any of the implements or mudras specified above. The trident is an essential attribute of the goddess to such an extent that many village goddess shrines in Tamil Nadu have just a trident or a spear planted in the ground to represent the Mother Goddess.³²²

In the first story the woman lives alone in the house and it is assumed that she has no husband. This circumstance is consistent with the paradoxical role of the ancestral village goddess as Mother and unmarried woman simultaneously. Though a Mother, Dēvi tolerates no consort, as no father was deemed necessary in the society in which the village goddesses originated.³²³

The pitifully meek male, so eager to fulfill his wife's needs, playing the role of the husband in Diguvāṇḍi Daita's story does not display the strength of character expected from a real island man in such a dire situation. The respect and devotion he has for the dangerous woman sharing his household is excessive even by local standards in the Southern Atolls, where traditionally women have been wielding a lot of authority. The husband's behavior towards his wife in this story is a mixture of love, awe and fear, which reflects rather the relationship between the devout worshipper and the goddess in the ancient Tamil country.³²⁴

³²² Most village-goddess shrines are very humble structures: "...from their (demons) who inhabited queer-shaped stones, dead trees, darkness, caves, the tiny little shrines (of the smallpox-goddess) which were nothing but a few iron spikes stuck in the ground or a lump of stone covered with red stain and oil. For (the world of the people of the Kolli Mountains in Tamil Nadu) was teeming with frightening deities who must be placated with spells and incantations and libations of the blood of pigs." D.C. Wilson, 'Granny Brand, Her Story.'

³²³ D.D. Kosambi uses this argument as a proof of the extreme antiquity of the village Dēvi cults in 'Myth and Reality'

³²⁴ "She saw the terrified eyes of a mother creeping to make offerings at the hideous little shrines of the smallpox goddess." D.C. Wilson, op. cit.

In both stories the geographical position of the woman's house is mentioned and both women are named after their village. As both villages still exist in present day Fua Mulaku, it is likely that, in ancient times, there were important goddess shrines in the localities of Diguvāṇḍo and Hōdaḍo, which attracted devotees from the northern and southern ends of the island. In the same manner, in South India, village goddesses are known by the name of their village or locality, preceding the generic name of the goddess (Amma, Dēvi, Bhagavatī, etc.).³²⁵

Although some of the present-day Dēvi temples in the Subcontinent are attracting devotees from distant places, originally all village goddesses were purely local deities. They were assumed to cause either profit or injury to the area deemed to be under their protection. To their devotees their relation to the cosmos was of no consequence. From such limited perspective, the goddess symbolized only the simple facts and worries of village life, such as cholera, small-pox and bad fishing instead of relating to the great forces of the universe.³²⁶

³²⁵ Rural goddesses remain connected with the name of the village in the Subcontinent as well. See "Local Mothers" in D.D. Kosambi, *op. cit.* Even now, in Kerala locality is of such crucial importance that all Dēvis are prefixed by the name of their corresponding town or place. The generic Dravidian or Sanskrit names are interchangeable, for example Aṭṭukal Ammā, Aṭṭukal Dēvi or Aṭṭukal Bhagavatī (A famous local goddess in Trivandrum)

³²⁶ Currently the situation has changed owing to the influence of new doctrines claiming that village goddesses are merely manifestations of Kālī or Durgā, in order to bring all these local cults into the Hindu mainstream. The epitome of this largely political, rather than spiritual, activity is the creation of brand-new myths such as the goddess Bharat Mātā.

Just as in South India, in Maldives the local goddesses looked after their own village in exchange for the unflinching devotion of the villagers.³²⁷ As it has been previously hinted, village goddesses can be dangerous and malevolent when, through a lack of devotion, their vengeful spirit is aroused. In such an event, when they afflict the village or island with epidemics and famine, blood, fruit and flower sacrifices have to be made to them in order to appease their ill temper. In 'The Village Gods of South India', H. Whitehead compares the offerings made to the village goddess with the offerings made to "a tyrannical government official to secure his favor."

Towards the end of Hōdaḍi Daitā's legend, it is stated that she killed so many islanders that only six people remained on the island. This is probably an oblique reference to the last major epidemic that struck Fua Mulaku before the conversion to Islam. Severe epidemics hit this island periodically and it is known that it was depopulated at least twice during the last thousand years. The conclusion that Daitā was killed by order of the King after the Maldives became Muslim is, in all probability, an allegory of the desecration of Dēvi temples and images, once the king imposed Islam on the whole archipelago back in the 12th century. The copper plate edicts (lōmāfānu) of the time show that the enforcement of Islam upon the Maldivian population was a carrot-and-stick affair. While, in the new situation, some islanders received extraordinary privileges from the King, others were harshly threatened.

³²⁷ *"The people of Goomsur, who are Khonds and are of Dravidian origin, have a goddess called Jugah Pennu, who 'sows smallpox upon mankind as men sow seed upon the earth.' When a village is threatened with this dread disease, it is deserted by all save a few persons who remain to offer the blood of buffaloes, hogs and sheep to the destroying power."* The bloodthirsty character of the village goddess, as well as her connection with a particular locality are well described by E. Rauschenbusch-Clough 'While Sewing Sandals; Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe' in the chapter 'The Fiend Mahalakshmi.'

In the North of Maldives, there are stories about a scary, fierce woman who relishes eating human flesh as well. She is called Minikā Daitā (Cannibal Aunt) and plays the main role in the well-known tale of the telabaguḍi girl.³²⁸ This legendary woman also displays the elusive and unpredictable changeability common to the goddesses worshipped by South Indian villagers:

Telabaguḍi Koe'

"Once upon a time a very poor woman lived in Male'. She eked out a living by sweeping the yards of other people's houses. One day while she was bent low doing her humble job she happened to find a boḍulāri (four lāri coin). She became so happy that she stopped sweeping and ran home to show it to her daughter. Koe', her only child always longed to eat telabaguḍi (fried round sweet cakes) but being so poor they couldn't afford to buy such an expensive sweet. Now this woman could fulfill her wish.

As soon as the girl got the coin she ran across the island to buy a telabaguḍi. Koe' bought only one and, as she couldn't wait, she began nibbling at it on her way back home. As she walked close to the beach she went there to defecate.³²⁹ She still had half of her telabaguḍi, so first she looked for a clean spot, picked two big leaves, put the cake between them

³²⁸ Told by Gāge Fātumatu Naīma of Māfannu, Male'.

³²⁹ As in other stories of this book, such as 'Kamaṇā', 'Bloodshed under the Tree', and 'The Wrong Kind of Blood' the verb 'to shit' used to be part of the casual speech and didn't necessarily have rude connotations. This verb refers to a natural activity for islanders. People used to go to the beach (or to the forest) to defecate, especially in the morning, like they would go to eat at noon and to sleep in the night. This situation has changed somewhat in recent times after the introduction of toilets, but the use of this verb without coarse implications used to be common in storytelling and colloquial conversation

and laid it on the ground, covering all with a piece of coral rock. Then she squatted close to a bush and afterwards walked on the sand to the water to wash her private parts.

When Koe' went back to take her telabaguḍi home she saw that it wasn't where she had left it, even after all her precautions. Fuming, she looked around and saw that it wasn't very far away. A crab was pulling it towards its hole.³³⁰ But when the girl ran to catch it, swiftly the crab disappeared taking the sweet inside its lair. So she walked slowly back home, feeling miserable.

After three days, when she happened to pass by the same spot of the beach on a walk, Koe' noticed that from the hole in the ground where the crab had taken her telabaguḍi a tree had started growing.

As a good Maldivian, the girl knew all the trees growing in the islands and their names, but she had never seen such a tree before. It was a kind of tree she didn't recognize. She was so thrilled that she didn't tell anybody, in case they would give it to the King for his garden. Thus, every day she went to have a look at the tree as it grew and grew. This amazing tree grew faster than other trees and soon it became very large with spreading shady branches.

One day Koe' went to look at the tree as usual and she was surprised to see that its branches were full of telabaguḍi. She was so happy that in no time she had climbed the tree and was sitting on one of its branches. When she tasted the first telabaguḍi it was so good that she went on eating and eating until her belly was so full that she could eat no more. Then Koe' climbed slowly down the tree and had a good look at it. To her

³³⁰ The ghost crab (*Ocypode* spp.). Its name in English has nothing to do with spirits and it probably owes its origin to the crab's pale greenish color. It lives in the sand, close to the waterline, digging holes where it swiftly hides when it feels threatened. These crabs are very common in Maldivian beaches. Some islanders jokingly say that they are more numerous than Maldivian people.

amazement its branches seemed as full and heavy as before, even though she had eaten lots of those sweet cakes. The sun was setting and the girl didn't want to be in the forest after dark, so she went back home, walking very slowly because she couldn't run after eating so much.

From that day onwards, Koe' went to her tree at sunrise and spent her days there idly munching telabaguḍi from its branches until she could eat no more. In the beginning her mother wondered why her child didn't take any food when she came back home in the evening. She asked her, but the girl wouldn't say anything. However, as the days went by and she saw that her daughter looked well fed, she thought the girl was eating in some rich people's house and stopped worrying.

One day, while Koe' was sitting up the tree as usual, a woman came. The child was startled because this was the first time someone had come to disturb her blissful days in the tree. When she looked down she saw a wild-looking woman with a big mane of disheveled hair and a large mouth with long sharp teeth. She was Minikā Daitā, the cannibal woman, but the girl didn't know it. With a meek voice the woman asked:

"Can you throw me one?"

The girl did as asked and threw one telabaguḍi at her. The woman caught it saying: "Oh! It fell into the sea. Throw another!"

Koe' didn't know that she was being fooled as it wasn't easy for her to see the woman clearly between the leaves below her. So she threw another telabaguḍi.

"Oh! What a pity! It fell on a crap!" Lied the woman this time.³³¹ And in this way the woman kept fooling the girl until she looked up and said:

³³¹ As this is a story for children, in the original version the different wrong places where the Cannibal Woman says the proffered telabaguḍis are falling are named one by one, which can be rather tedious

“Look! I couldn’t catch any of them. You are too far away. I think it will be better if you put a telabaguḍi between your toes and reach it out to me. It’s no use throwing them, they get wasted.”

Koe’, who was tired of throwing and throwing telabaguḍis, agreed and picked a telabaguḍi, put it between her toes and stretched her leg so that the woman could reach it.

All of a sudden, the woman clutched the girl’s ankle and pulled her down with enormous strength. Immediately she put the stunned Koe’ into a sack and, carrying it on her shoulder, she went home.

When she arrived home the man-eating woman left the sack on the verandah and told her daughter: “Child, go to cook while I take a bath. Today I have brought good food for us.”

Saying this, she went to take a bath while her daughter went into the kitchen to kindle the fire. After a short while, Minikā Daitā’s child felt a strong wish to see what was in the sack her mother had brought. She peeped out of the kitchen door and looked around to make sure that her mother was not there. Then she strained her ears and when she heard the sound of water from the veyo behind the house, the girl was sure that her mother was taking a bath. Swiftly, she came out of the kitchen, went to the verandah and opened the sack.

Minikā Daitā’s daughter was surprised to see a girl curled inside. Koe’ was dazzled by the sudden bright light and closed her eyes tightly. Gradually she opened them and she was pleased to see a girl of her age instead of that horrible woman. She giggled excitedly and Minikā Daitā’s daughter beamed back at her, exclaiming: “How beautiful you are! Do you want to play with me?”

With a jerk Koe’ came out of the sack and, happily clapping her hands, she exclaimed: “Good! We are the same size! Let’s exchange our waistcloths and our ornaments to see if you can look as pretty as me.”

So both girls playfully took off their pieces of cloth and their jewellery and exchanged them. After doing so they looked at each other and laughed. Then Koe' suggested to the unwary Minikā Daitā's daughter: "Now let's play another game! Let's see who looks more beautiful while sleeping. Lay down on this hirigā (A large, flat, coral rock), close your eyes, and be very quiet."

The unsuspecting girl stretched herself on the stone and, smiling, closed her eyes. At once, without hesitating, Koe' took a kativaḷi (large knife or cleaver) and cut her neck, severing her head with such a swift blow that the girl died instantly without having any time to react and without uttering any cry.

Then Koe' hastened to cut the body of Minikā Daitā's daughter into little pieces. Once she had done that she washed all the blood off well. She also washed the hirigā, the knife and her hands thoroughly. Then she put all the flesh into the cooking pot and boiled it on the fire.

When the mother came from her bath in the veyo, she found the food was ready and greedily ate the meat without knowing it was her own daughter's. While she was eating she went on saying: "It's delicious! Come to eat too. Are you not hungry, my child?"

Koe', who was hiding in the kitchen said: "I won't eat now, mother. I will eat later, keep some for me."

Minikā Daitā didn't insist and went on relishing her food. When she was so full that she could eat no more, she went out, belching, to wash the dishes. Then she noticed that up a tree by the well there was somebody singing a song; it was Koe' who in the meantime had climbed up the big tree. Standing safely on a very high branch the girl was mockingly singing: "After eating up her own daughter this woman went to wash the dishes"

The Cannibal Woman, thinking it was her own child singing on the tree said smiling: "Daughter, daughter! To whom are you singing this song?"

"Oh! I was singing it to the crow."

Koe' sang the song again and the woman asked: "To whom are you singing this song?"

"I was singing it to the bat."³³²

Saying so the girl went on singing from the tree the same nagging song over and over: "After eating up her own daughter this woman went to wash the dishes."

While Minikā Daitā was washing her dishes and pots, Koe' repeated the song so many times that the woman finally lost her temper and angrily scolded the girl: "Stop that nonsense!"

At this point Koe' spoke clearly: "I am singing this song to you, evil Minikā Daitā! Today you pulled me down from my tree and brought me here in a sack, and your daughter let me go out, and we played and exchanged our dresses. After that I tricked her and slaughtered her very easily. Then I cut her into little pieces, I washed all the blood, cooked her flesh and put it on your table. You ate her, not me!"

When Minikā Daitā heard this she realized what she had done and flew into a horrible rage. Her eyes looked fiercely up the tree and became red and very cruel. Her disheveled hairs stood on end and became wilder and more entangled. Her voracious wide mouth opened and showed her large, jagged teeth.

³³² Vā (vavalā and vaulu in the southern languages), the fruit-bat or flying fox, a very large bat common in the Maldives. To avoid monotony the text has been shortened at this point. Here the girl keeps repeating that she is singing the song to a number of local land animals, including mākanā (grey heron, itself the main subject of many Divehi folk stories), hōnu (gecko), cat, bonḍu (a lizard of the gen. Calotes), rat, hikandi (shrew), kambili (white-breasted swamp hen), baraveli (hermit crab), koveli (a kind of cuckoo bird), and the toad.

The cannibal woman looked now much bigger and was awful to behold. She was so enraged that she frenzily tried to climb up the tree, scratching the bark with her long nails, jumping and uttering blood-chilling cries. This fearful woman seemed to increase in strength as her anger grew. She was shaking the tree with such violence that the girl became extremely worried. Finally, feeling no longer safe up there, Koe' jumped down in panic and ran away as fast as she could.

Immediately, Minikā Daitā ran after her with terrible speed, but she was so blinded by her fury that she strayed off the path, fell into a burning lime-pit and caught fire. When Koe' heard the frightening cries she looked back and saw that Minikā Daitā was in flames. Then she stopped running and, panting, looked on as the living torch consumed itself.

Once the girl was sure that the dreadful Minikā Daitā was dead, she turned and went back home.

The mixture of the humorous and the gruesome is a common feature of Maldivian mythology. Even if in the Maldives this is meant to be a tale for children, the telabaguḍi story contains some interesting parallels with the village-goddess tradition of South India where the combination of both naive and macabre features is also present. Local goddesses can have a frightful appearance when they embody their destructive nature, which paradoxically coexists with their nurturing, motherly character. Goddess Nīli, one of the ancestral divinities of Travancore, is usually represented with fangs, holding one child on her arm;³³³ and The Tamil goddess Isakki, who carries a child in one arm and a trident in the other, is appeased with blood sacrifices. Minikā Daitā, though eager to kill and devour the

³³³ According to Chellam, priestess of a Nīli temple in Kaliyankad, Tamil Nadu, “the goddess uses the child as a snare (or weapon) to waylay wrongdoing people to their death. The unwary person hears the child crying in a dark or bushy place and while he goes to look for it, gets lost and is killed by the fiery goddess...the child is just one of the weapons Nīliamman can produce at any time.”

telabaguḍi girl, is very kind to her own daughter. Here her daughter, a gentle, average girl strangely sharing the same household with her terrifying cannibal mother, could represent the faithful devotee who calls the Goddess 'Mother'.

The heroine, Koe', may represent an ungrateful and selfish person in the eyes of the goddess. Although she offered a few cakes to her, throwing them from the tree, the girl had sought to keep her tree's location secret even from her own mother. As the mother is the most revered figure within the island kinship system, Koe''s self-gratifying attitude is generally acknowledged to be reprehensible, even though in the end she escapes unhurt.

In 'Telabaguḍi Koe'' the ambivalence of femininity can be perceived both in the heroine herself and in Minikā Daitā. Koe' and the cannibal woman's daughter are assumed to be average pre-adolescent island girls —or in their early adolescence— having pleasant features. Nonetheless, Koe' displays unusual cruelty and audacity as she doesn't hesitate to ruthlessly murder, slaughter and cook her kidnapper's unsuspecting daughter, which is not a probable action by an average young girl. Even so, in Maldivian folklore this bloody and aggressive behavior, coupled with dexterity in handling knives is frequent among women characters.

The fact that Minikā Daitā is a scary sight is not unexpected though, for Village Goddesses in their dangerous aspect look horrifying: They usually have fang-like teeth, a wild mane of hair and a lolling tongue. Their disposition is violent and they are often eager to devour humans. Like Diguvāṇḍi Daitā in the second story of this chapter, this frightening woman has a daughter, but there is no mention of a husband.

Among the ancient popular divinities of Kerala, which mostly displayed abominable attributes, there was a deity called 'Pillatini', the child-

eater.³³⁴ Such man-eating women are also mentioned in some of the Jātaka and Pancatantra tales. They are described as partly or fully naked ogresses, often black in color, with a wild mane of hair and large teeth. They usually live in the forest and are known as Yakkhinī in Prakrit, the Sanskrit generic name being Yakṣinī or Yakṣī, a tree sprite. Within the Indic tradition, it has been observed by W. Crooke that:

“We have already learnt to look to the folktales for the most trustworthy indications of popular belief. ... The (Queen ḍākinī) Kālarātri or “black night” is of repulsive appearance.³³⁵ She has dull eyes, a depressed flat nose, her eyebrows meet together; she has large cheeks, widely parted lips, projecting teeth, a long neck, pendulous breasts, a large belly, and broad expanded feet. She obtains her powers by eating human flesh. (ḍākinīs) carry on their unholy revels in cemeteries and cremation grounds. (Cf. 3.2.2 ‘Fūḷu Digu Haṇḍi’) They meet under the leadership of the dreaded Bhairava (a fearsome form of Shiva).”³³⁶

Coomaraswamy, a highly respected South Asian scholar made a remark about the spirits called Yakṣīs that is very illustrative in this context:

“It is a fact beyond dispute that the tales about these ogresses themselves have their origin in the stories about very ancient rural divinities of the Subcontinent.”³³⁷

³³⁴ K. Narayana Panikkar, ‘Folklore of Kerala.’

³³⁵ Kālarātri is also the most fearful form of Durgā in the nine forms of this goddess or ‘Navadurgās’. A ḍākinī is a female imp or goblin (V.S. Apte, ‘Sanskrit-English Dictionary’).

³³⁶ W. Crooke, ‘The Popular Religion & Folklore of Northern India.’

³³⁷ A. Coomaraswamy, ‘Yakṣas, vol. 2’

2.3.2 THE SURVIVAL OF OLD MYTHS

At the present time, while there is no actual goddess worship, tales about female spirits are still very popular in the Maldives. This is more evident in the South, where the folk mythology is better preserved. Some of those demons are considered more dangerous than others, but all of them are feared. Surprisingly, even through the fear, one would be able to detect a certain amount of unexpected emotions, like warmth towards certain female spirits, justified as: ‘After all she belongs to our island’.

South Indian Dēvi worshipers have a comparable attitude towards their local goddess, for in the worship of the Village Goddess of the Indian Subcontinent there is an intimate connection between devotion, expressed as submission, and fear. Similarly, in the Maldives, the fear of spirits in general, but especially of female spirits is so real that one could well say that it gives them life. Hence, even though in the Maldivian Islands goddess-worship has disappeared as such, the goddesses are still present and still play a role in the life of the average islanders, even though merely as fearsome spirits, like the ubiquitous haṇḍi.

To illustrate this latter reflection, the following story³³⁸ emphasizes the anger of the Goddess and the simmering antagonism between the old and the new religion:

Vaṣoveu Haṇḍi

“In Fua Mulaku Island there is an ancient round bath of coral stone, cut and fit together tightly without mortar. Although now it lies hidden in the jungle, often islanders go there to look at it and wonder how their

³³⁸ Told in 1985 by the late Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī.

ancestors possessed so much skill. They call it simply vaṣoveu (round bath).

Long ago, a seven year old girl went near the vaṣoveu with two of her friends. As the jungle bushes were very thick, she lost sight of the other girls. They looked for her and started to call her name: 'Kaddā! Kaddā!'

A haṇḍi happened to hear nearby and heard the name clearly. Instantly, she assumed the appearance of Kaddā's mother and appeared before the girl. Beckoning to her, the spirit tricked the little girl and she followed the haṇḍi deeper and deeper into the forest, far away from her friends. Finally, they came to a sinister-looking clump of wild screwpine, so thick that a human being couldn't penetrate it. The haṇḍi confined Kaddā within the mesh of screwpine roots and when the night came she brought her food and water.

Meanwhile, as the sun had set and the girl did not appear, Kaddā's real mother searched for her frantically. People told her that they had seen her on her way to the vaṣoveu so she went there with some men and big bright torches. They searched through the night and more people became involved in the search, but they didn't see any trace of the girl.

During the following days, from sunrise to sunset, groups of people searched the forest. Meanwhile throughout the island the drums were beaten and the takbīr (a Muslim religious chant) was recited aloud. Finally, at noon on the sixth day, a group of men and women who were at the vaṣoveu area looking for Kaddā suddenly saw the girl dropping from the top of a tall screwpine. She fell messily onto the ground, in front of them.

The people squatted down to take her up carefully and saw that Kaddā's cheeks were deeply gouged and her face covered with scratches. She was dead, but still not rigid. They were puzzled, because the top of the screwpine is a bunch of spiny leaves and they knew that the girl could not have climbed there.

Local islanders say that being an unbeliever, the haṇḍi was sick of hearing the Muslim chants and became very angry.³³⁹ Blinded by her rage, the haṇḍi got rid of poor Kaddā and went into hiding deeper into the forest. Since then, parents in that island never let little girls go to the vaṣoveu alone. At any rate, everyone agrees that the two girls who went with Kaddā into the jungle were foolish because, if a companion is lost in the forest, one should never call her name or his name. Instead, one should call, “Hō! Hō!”³⁴⁰

Here the female spirit is referred to as haṇḍi, a term which originated in the Sanskrit Caṇḍi, which is a form of Durgā, the powerful demon-slaughtering goddess. In the Subcontinent local goddesses often were, and still are, identified with Durgā (and sometimes with Kālī), but they have never been thoroughly incorporated into the mythological mainstream. Neither have these fierce village goddesses been ascribed husbands, like the submissive wives Sarasvatī or Lakṣmī. Thus, these potentially dangerous goddesses have remained at the fringes of the orthodox Hindu pantheon, maintaining an autonomous presence.

In Maldives, feminine demons carry the names of goddesses actually worshipped in the Subcontinent, like haṇḍi (Caṇḍi), hāmuṇḍi (Cāmuṇḍi) and Ranna Māri (Māri). Although all three names have a meaning in Sanskrit, the first two names (Caṇḍi and Cāmuṇḍi) are epithets of the Great Goddess in The Dēvi Māhātmya, (and are thus well within the Brahmanical mainstream) while Māri is the name used mainly in Tamil Nāḍu for the goddess of smallpox, worshipped for prevention and cure of

³³⁹ Although the word Kāfir is used, in this instance it simply refers to the fact that this female spirit is a non-Muslim. The division of spirits into believers and unbelievers is not exclusive to stories told by Muslims. Many centuries before Islam it was already a typical feature of Jaina stories

³⁴⁰ Usually girls going to cut firewood to the jungle always call “Hō!” when they lose sight of their companions. Source: Keuḷukovage Havvā, Hōdaḍo, Fua Mulaku

disease, especially by mothers on behalf of their children. Mahamāri is also an epithet of Kālī. The Northern Indian name for the same goddess is Śītalā (The Cool One). Other Maldivian female spirits have names of lesser Dēvis, such as dōgi or Dōgiaihā (Yoginī).

In South India, a number of local female divinities worshipped by non-brahmins in Kerala and Tuḷu country are known as Cāmuṇḍi, Māriamma and Caṇḍika.³⁴¹ Despite their Sanskrit names, the fact that they are mostly not worshipped by Brahmins points to their great antiquity, because all throughout the Subcontinent there is a link between low caste and aboriginal forms of religion. These are the same goddesses that gave origin to the names of Maldivian spirits: Caṇḍi, ‘the wrathful’ an epithet of Durgā common in Bengal, Māri (meaning ‘the one who is pestilence’ or ‘the killer,’ the goddess of epidemics)³⁴² and Cāmuṇḍi (‘the one who killed the demons Cāṇḍa and Muṇḍa,’ the most fearsome form of Dēvi). They are, in general, not part of the Buddhist pantheon. The most important female divinities that entered later branches of Buddhism are the goddesses Tārā and Prajñāpāramitā, which were included in it as bodhisattvas, compassionate helpers who can assist in bringing about enlightenment.

Taking into consideration these facts, it is practically certain that, at some point in the local history, the generic name haṇḍi was applied to the numerous village goddesses worshipped throughout the Maldives, much in the same manner as many village Dēvis are assumed to be manifestations of Kālī or Durgā in the Subcontinent. The Sanskritized

³⁴¹ Coastal Karnataka, Studies in Folkloristic and Linguistic Traditions of Dakshina Kannada Region of the Western Coast of India, edited by U.P. Upadhyaya

³⁴² Unlike the other two, this is a name almost exclusively used in Tamil Nāḍu. According to Sanskrit sources, the name ‘Māri is derived from the Sanskrit for ‘death’. However, in Tamil etymology, it is claimed that this name derives from the Tamil word for ‘rain’, as goddess Māri cools down the heat produced by epidemics. S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, ‘Coromandel Fishermen.’

name 'Caṇḍī', could have been adopted, along with the name Cāmuṇḍī, in very ancient times, when Brahminical influence reached Southern India. However, it is also possible that the nomenclature mentioned above was borrowed at a later stage of the Maldivian Buddhist period.

The Mother-Goddess worship is such a resilient form of religious expression that, in spite of royal patronage, the Buddhist teachings were not able to interfere with the continuity of the original Village Goddess cults. These must have been prevalent in the islands since immemorial times, when the Maldives were settled by fishermen from nearby coasts.

The stories about dangerous female spirits and about women in aggressive or dominant roles, which form the core of Maldivian mythology, are but the last remnants of very old pre-Buddhist Dēvi cults; and despite having almost disappeared from South-Asian coastal territories, it is a well-established fact that Mother-Goddess worship was the ancestral religion of the entire South Indian fisherfolk.³⁴³

Therefore, the notion that the presence of terrifying goddesses in the Maldivian folklore precedes the Buddhist period is something that can be established beyond any doubt. Even if today the Mukkuvar and Parava fishermen of the Southern end of the Subcontinent are predominantly Christian, those fishing communities have retained strong traces of goddess-worship, the Virgin Mary or Mātā (Mother) being generally their main object of devotion. In the Anga Gada Mituru and Anga Madu Mituru stories of the Northern Maldivian folklore there is a fairy-like female figure who magically can replace spoiled teeth by a set of new teeth. This fairy is known by the name 'Santi Mariyambu', possibly derived from the Portuguese 'Santa Maria' or Virgin Mary, a remnant of the sporadic contact with the Portuguese preceding British hegemony in the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile the dangerous goddess Isakki, whose name is derived

³⁴³ E. Thurston, 'Castes and Tribes of Southern India' Vol. 5.

from 'Yakṣi', is identified by the Mukkuvar with the devil of the Christian religion.

In the Hindu temples of Kanyakumari District, Isakkiamman is usually represented holding a child on one arm and a trident or any other weapon in the other. She may have large teeth and sometimes holds a corpse between her fangs. Since these fishermen of the nearest coasts are the most probable ancestors of the Maldivians, it is not surprising that this same persistence of Dēvi worship, albeit in a highly residual form (Cf. 2.2.2 'Blood Sacrifices'), is present in the Maldives too. Braving official disapproval, it still somehow endures despite many centuries of Buddhist rule³⁴⁴ followed by as many centuries of Muslim hegemony, owing to the fact that it is deeply rooted in the popular psyche. This survival is not easy, and it is almost miraculous, as the Islamic religious tradition, by its very nature, doesn't include any high-profile form of femininity able to match the popular Roman Catholic figure of the Virgin Mary, which in turn could secure a form of continuity analogous to the devotion to the Holy Mother among the South Indian fishing communities mentioned above.³⁴⁵

Considering all this, it is not far-fetched to assume that in Maldives, the old pre-Buddhist cults resisted the more severe form of early Buddhism to such an extent that, when it began to collapse, they took again the upper hand and found their way into the Vajrayāna system which prevailed in

³⁴⁴ There are traces of Jaina influence in the Maldivian past. The word for 'followers' in the lōmāfānu copperplates being "fētambaruṇ", from "śvētāmbara" (white-clad), an important term in Jainism.

³⁴⁵ "(The Virgin Mary) is worshipped as a central figure of importance in her own right, not as a mother or wife to a male divinity (... and there is) ethnographic evidence indicating that goddess worship has historically been an important feature of religion among Hindu fishing communities in South India." And "(The Virgin Mary) is more important to the (Mukkuvar) belief system than the figure of Christ." Kalpana Ram, Op. cit.

the Maldives between the eighth and the twelfth centuries AD.³⁴⁶ Thus, the Maldivian village-cults strengthened themselves during the last centuries of Buddhist rule in the Island Kingdom and received new vigor right before the onslaught of Islam.

Vajrayāna Buddhism was an offshoot of the greater Mahāyāna vehicle. Most Maldivian archaeological remains found to date bear the imprint of this form of Buddhism, a school of thought which increased its popularity by including a variety of dogmas, theories, rites and practices which either had been imported from other religious systems or had been keeping a low profile within the society in question. Hence, it was easy for ancestral cults to come to the surface, and a number of gods and goddesses (both ancient and new), along with different rituals, philosophies, esoteric cults and magic were included in the Vajrayāna branch. This form of Buddhism was cosmopolitan in character and included the aspirations of all classes and ranks of people. Thus it became very popular as it satisfied the needs of both pious people and habitual sinners.³⁴⁷

However, in Maldives the extreme popularization of religion, led to the dissolution of the central religious authority. This explains, to a certain extent, the reason why the Maldivian government during the eight centuries of Islamic rule that followed has felt consistently threatened by popular creeds. Hence, most of the efforts of the local learned men were directed towards stifling popular traditional religious expressions. Consequently, as religious authority had been invariably in alliance with the royal power to protect mutual interests, a conflict was unavoidable. In mid-twelfth century, the Maldivian king, unwilling to accept the gradual

³⁴⁶ G. Tucci makes this comment about the inhabitants of Swat valley. Quoted by M. Taddei in 'South Asian Archaeology' edited by Norman Hammond.

³⁴⁷ N. Ghosh, 'Śrī Sarasvatī in Indian Art and Literature'. The author concludes that "*Vajrayāna Buddhism was a very demoralizing form of religion which went against the original teachings of Lord Buddha.*"

erosion of his power, sought to reverse this situation; and it is within this background that Islam came in handy to reestablish a stern, centralized religious rule.³⁴⁸ In the light of the texts preserved in the Isdū and Dambidū lōmāfānu copperplates and examining the history and dynamics of the Vajrayāna system, it is not surprising to find that a great number of the writings on the copperplates etched right at the time of conversion, are direct appeals from the monarch to his subjects to join the new religion he had chosen, mingled with threats if they failed to do so.

Before concluding this subject, it is important to draw attention to the elusive attitude of Maldivians towards their female spirits, sorcery and Islam. In this behavior we can see at play the constant shift between the hieratic way of worship —usually the official, government-sanctioned form of religion— and the household religious expression or popular cult. This duality is very frequent all over South Asia, where common people have a tendency to think that ‘serious religion’ cannot help them in their daily, more immediate and urgent needs, but that their local goddess, spirit or sorcerer definitely will.³⁴⁹

Among numerous people groups of neighboring India, there is a stress between the Sanskritized way of life and what is usually referred to as the

³⁴⁸ A similar situation arose in neighboring Ceylon, which was resolved by the reinforcement of the more severe Hinayāna Buddhism and the expurgation of all traces of Mahāyāna (including its branch Vajrayāna) doctrines from the island. N. Mudiyanse, ‘Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon.’

³⁴⁹ *“The line between the deities of Konduru’s high religion and those of the low is not always sharp, and Balayya, like other villagers, switches easily in his worship from one to the other. He worships the Hindu gods with the aid of his Brahman priest and turns to worship the goddesses assisted by his family Washerman or Potter. The goodwill of all is necessary for his health and safety, the prosperity of his endeavors, and the well-being of his household.”* Paul G. Hiebert, ‘Konduru. Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village.’

low caste or tribal ways.³⁵⁰ In the Maldives this conflict expressed itself in the tensions between the Islamic ideology promoted by the government and the laid-back ancestral Divehi way of life. W. Crooke in his 'Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India' observes:

"(The deities constituting the Hindu official pantheon) are the deities of the richer or higher classes, and to the ordinary peasant of Northern India these great gods are little more than a name. He will, it is true, occasionally bow at their shrines ... but from time immemorial ... his allegiance was bestowed on a class of deities of a much lower and more primitive kind.

Traditionally there was an enduring resistance against what was deemed to be 'organized religion.' Buddhism disappeared when it ceased to enjoy royal patronage in the Maldives. However, having a life of their own among the common folk, the ancient popular beliefs in spirits survived in secret. Even under a Muslim government, islanders saw no contradiction in adopting certain practices of Islam along with magic and sacrifices to local spirits, hence C. Maloney in his 'People of the Maldivian islands' suggested that the attitude of Maldivians in this context was schizophrenic. In present-day Divehi society, though, the stress on ideological purity makes the balancing act between the two religious spheres increasingly difficult.

The imposition of an undiluted Islamic way of life has been acute since 1978, when a government hostile to Divehi lifestyle and traditions, which it sees as a deviation from Islam, came to power. Its policies have been successful owing to the non-existence of institutions that could effectively protect the local traditional heritage. This lack makes Maldivian people extremely vulnerable to the predatory whims of their leaders.

³⁵⁰ "The old and mediaeval Bengali literature bear out this fact reflecting the struggle between the worshippers of local goddesses and the deities of Brahmanical hierarchy." S. Mukhopadhyay, 'Caṇḍi in Art and Iconography.'

2.4.1 THE SORCERER AND THE DEVI

In the ancestral oral literature of Maldivians the faṇḍitaveriya or sorcerer is always portrayed as a hero. Only recent stories tend to cast him in the role of a villain. The reason behind this new attitude is that increasing scholarization and contact with the wider world has allowed educated Maldivians to analyze and criticize, even going to the extent of ridiculing, their own local traditions. But, ironically, they have been strictly forbidden to apply the same methods of rational enquiry to the intruding Arab doctrine.

However, the fact remains that in the traditional Maldivian society the faṇḍitaveriya was —and still to some extent is— highly admired and respected. He belonged to the ‘learned men’ category and his services were in great demand. In contrast to the fact that within the Maldivian mythology most of the evil spirits are female, sorcerers are almost exclusively male. There are a number of exceptions to this rule though, i.e. the notorious Havvā Fuḷu, in the story “Doṇ Hiyaḷā and Alifuḷu.” Nowadays, among faṇḍita practitioners, there are some women following this profession as well, but in general female sorcerers are more common in the North of Maldives than in the South. Even though female spirits might have great magic powers, they are not reckoned to be human. What’s more, the masdaiyffiohi or ritual knife to immobilize spirits was meant to be used only by a man.

The greatest faṇḍitaveriya in Maldivian lore is Oḍitān Kalēge. There are quite a few stories about him throughout Maldives and he is often associated with beautiful female spirits and fierce spell fights. The beginning of this story³⁵¹ is of special importance because it reveals a clue hinting that the great Maldivian hero Oḍitān is none other than the

³⁵¹ Told in 1990 by Muhammadu Sālihu, Daisy Villa, Dūṇḍigamu village, Fua Mulaku

famous Ṛṣi Vaśiṣṭha. Ṛṣis are sages or ascetics. They play a central role in Hindu and Buddhist tradition. In Buddhism their equivalent are the Siddhas and Arhats. Vaśiṣṭha's importance resides in the fact that he plays a role in some of the greatest Hindu epics, such as the Rāmāyaṇa:

Oḍitān Kalēge's Troubles

"When Oḍitān Kalēge was a child he was already a great magician. One day, while his mother was pregnant, he heard some people talking in the house that she would soon have a child. Now, young Oḍitān was not happy at all, for he didn't want his mother to have another baby. Thus, he lay down on the eḷigēṇḍi clutching an egg over his belly and muttered incantations.³⁵² As a result of this, his mother, who was inside the house with the midwives, was unable to give birth and was screaming in pain for long hours. His anxious father entered the house and kicked his son off the eḷigēṇḍi because he was blocking the way. When Oḍitān fell, the egg he held in his hands was crushed and, in that very instant, his mother gave birth.

Then it dawned on the father that Oḍitān Kalēge had been doing some nasty trick and he became very angry.

As he went to grab him, young Oḍitān slipped away. His father ran behind him and they ran and ran to the end of the island. But Oḍitān kept running until he went out of the world and reached the place under the Dagas.³⁵³ Under that gigantic tree he met a lovely young woman named Dōgi Āihā

³⁵² Raised doorsill in the Fua Mulaku form of Divehi. Oḷigaṇḍu is its equivalent in the Male' Bas. The purpose of this raised doorsill was to hinder certain spirits from entering the house.

³⁵³ A mythical tree giving shade to the outer world. Heavenly trees, such as the Kalpaka who grows only in heaven, are a common feature in Indian traditions

Kāñlēge. Oḍitān was fascinated by this girl and looked at her too long. Stunned by her radiant beauty, he fell in love with her.

However, Oḍitān was still a child. He had to make a great effort to overcome his shyness when he asked Dōgi Āihā to marry him under the Dagas. Hearing this, the girl laughed scornfully in his face. Oḍitān was confused by her long, outrageous laugh and looked at her in stupor. Dōgi Āihā stared back at him with contempt. She frowned and said mockingly: “How dare you ask for that? You are too young to marry me!” Oḍitān Kalēge was indignant and exclaimed: “I am not too young! I am a mighty magician already!”

Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge³⁵⁴ squinted with her lovely eyes and looked hard at the good-looking boy without saying a word for a while. Finally, she sighed and instructed: “All right young magician! I am going to give you a chance to prove you are worthy of me: First, you have to go back to where you came from, learn endeṣegiri and vaḍodeṣegiri,³⁵⁵ and then I will marry you.” Thus Oḍitān Kalēge, with serious determination, went back to the world and feverishly engaged himself in learning endeṣegiri and vaḍodeṣegiri. The years passed while he was deeply immersed in his studies and he became a handsome young man.

After having learned all that esoteric knowledge, Oḍitān Kalēge went back to the Dagas to meet dashing Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge again. Even though he tried to keep cool, the young sorcerer was dazed by the splendor of her beauty as she stood smiling in front of him. She was well aware of his feelings and asked him playfully: “So, did you learn endeṣegiri and

³⁵⁴ This name is in the *Mulaku Bas* and its equivalent in *Male’ Bas* would be Dōgi Āihā Kambulēge. Dōgi Āihā was a Yōginī, a semi-divine being. Yōginīs and their relevance in Maldivian mythology will be discussed further ahead

³⁵⁵ ‘Secret knowledge about what happens in the bed and by the well’. Literally: ‘The submarine peaks (or rocks awash) of the bed and of the well.’ These words are in the Fua Mulaku language and they refer to sex and the ablutions after sex.

vaḍodeṣegiri?” Oḍitān proudly answered: “Yes I did! And now I want to marry you!” The girl laughed her crystal-clear laugh and exclaimed: “All right, I am ready for the wedding, but first you must ask for valī.”

Oḍitān Kalēge was taken off guard. He had not expected this difficulty. But when he spoke he remained self-possessed: “Who is your Valīveriyā (guardian)?”³⁵⁶

“Hasan Mala,”³⁵⁷ answered a defiant Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge.

“Where can I find him?” asked Oḍitān Kalēge acting as if he was unimpressed.

The girl gave him precise instructions: “Go back to the world, to the southern rim of Haddummati Atoll, off the Māmendū channel, along Hitadū’s ocean side.”³⁵⁸ There, when you shout over the waters he will appear.”

Oḍitān went back to the Central Maldives, to the precise spot where Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge had said and after he yelled an imposing figure arose from the sea. Hasan Mala stood in front of the young magician in all his magnificence, carrying his books and asked him: “What do you want?”

Oḍitān Kalēge kept calm as he spoke: “I want to marry Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge and I have come to ask for your permission to marry her.”

³⁵⁶ Permission. Until menopause all single Maldivian women have a guardian who has to approve of their marriage.

³⁵⁷ A Maldivian mythological figure likely derived from Mañjuśrī, a transcendent Bodhisattva whose main attributes are to possess great beauty (hence the name Mala) and to hold the book of wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) in his left hand.

³⁵⁸ This is not the same Hitadū mentioned in other chapters of this book. Some islands of the Maldives have the same name though located in different atolls

After reflecting for a moment, Hasan Mala replied: “All right. I give my agreement and I will not put any further condition unless my father disagrees.”

The magician asked: “Where can I find your father?”

Hasan Mala duly informed him: “He is in the Kardiva Channel, off Kāṣidū Island. Go there; shout and my father will appear.”

Oḍitān Kalēge did as directed and went north. As he was off of Kāṣidū’s shores, he gave a yell and, instantly, Hasan Mala’s father, a huge, dignified old man, appeared. The towering figure in front of him asked: “What do you want from me?” And the young magician explained: “I want to marry Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge and her Valīveriyā is your son. He gave me his permission to marry her, provided you give your consent too.”

The old man looked at young Oḍitān Kalēge and replied: “I agree with my son and I will not put any further condition unless Hasan Mala’s mother disagrees.”

Oḍitān Kalēge asked: “And where is Hasan Mala’s mother?”

The old man directed him: “Go to Aḍḍu Atoll, off the Gan channel, in the ocean, there when you shout my wife will appear.”

Oḍitān Kalēge went to the southern end of the Island Kingdom, and over the dark oceanic waters off Gan Island’s southeastern shore, he shouted and an old woman of impressive size rose from the sea.³⁵⁹

She asked him gently: “Why did you call me?”

³⁵⁹ As no further attributes were given, the correspondence between Hasan Mala’s father and mother and figures of the Vajrayāna Buddhist pantheon is not clear. Still, the fact that these deities were dwelling at strategic geographic locations and their gigantic size, points out to their probable role as mythical guardians over the Maldivé archipelago.

Young Oḍitān Kalēge told her that he wanted to marry Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge and he added: “Hasan Mala is her Valīveriyā. I went to him first and he agreed. His father, in turn declared he will consent if you don’t put any further condition.”

Hasan Mala’s mother said: “I will not put any condition. It is fine with me.”

Happily, Oḍitān Kalēge went again out of this world to the spot under the Dagas and met Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge again. She was calmly combing her beautiful hair and smiled at him knowingly. The young sorcerer was very excited and hurriedly told her that he had finally obtained permission to marry her. So they were married that same day under the mythical tree.

On the morning of the next day Oḍitān’s wife gave him a good fishing rope (rodo) with a silver hook, saying: “Here out of the world, same as in your place, the man has to go fishing to feed his family. I own two grindstones (dāiy),³⁶⁰ one is for fishing and the other one for long-distance trading journeys. Both are black and they are under the shade of a grass (buru) clump by the beach. Are you ready to go fishing right now?”

Oḍitān Kalēge nodded his agreement and Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge continued: “Now pay attention to what I say: Take the smaller grindstone for fishing. As you sail out into the ocean, you will see a school of big digimaha (wahoo, *Acanthocybium Solanderi*). You may fish any one of them except the large wahoo leading them. Will you remember?” Seeing the serious expression of his wife, Oḍitān Kalēge had to smile and told her not to worry: “I know well how to fish.” He said.

Thus, Oḍitān Kalēge went to the beach with his hook and rope, took a blade of the buru grass, put the smaller grindstone in the water and, with

³⁶⁰ The great magicians of the Maldives were assumed to have such skill in magic that, instead of using conventional boats, they would be able to make a heavy grindstone float and travel on it, using a grass blade as a sail

his powerful magic, made it float. Then he sat on it and, using the small blade of grass as a sail, he sailed into the ocean. Soon enough, in the dark blue waters he met the school of big wahoo his wife had told him about. Seeing the big beautiful wahoo leading them, Oḍitān became so filled with childish enthusiasm that he completely forgot Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge's instructions and went straight for it. He hit the fish with his rodo and his skill was such that the hook got snagged into the left flank of the huge wahoo at the first strike.

Suddenly the long blue and silvery fish pulled with such strength that it snapped the line and went away with the hook. Thus, Oḍitān Kalēge couldn't fish anymore. He now realized that he had been foolish disobeying his wife's instructions on the very first day. Crestfallen, he returned home without fish or hook. When he arrived Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge was sitting in the kitchen cooking palm syrup (rā hiyani) thrusting her feet under the pot instead of firewood. The noise of the stones inside the pot was such that she didn't hear him coming.³⁶¹ Upon reaching the threshold of the kitchen door he could see that his wife's left flank was bleeding and that the silver hook was caught in the fleshy folds below her ribs.³⁶² Instantly Oḍitān Kalēge thought: "Oh no! She is going to be very angry!" and began to back away from the kitchen door.

Right then Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge turned her face towards him. Their eyes met and he saw such hatred and fury in hers that he winced. Since he knew he didn't have the strength to face her intense anger, Oḍitān Kalēge ran away from his wife in panic. Panting, he arrived at the beach, took the

³⁶¹ Smooth white pebbles are put inside the palm syrup to avoid excessive foaming while boiling. Somewhat incongruously, this female spirit is not afraid of this noise, for other female spirits are. (Cf. 2.5.2 "The Tamed Haṇḍi")

³⁶² These three flesh folds just below the ribs (Skt. trivalī) are one of the marks of Dōgi Āihā's great beauty. Cf. 1.3.1.

bigger grindstone and a blade of grass and, putting it in the sea, sailed away as fast as he could.

Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge got up from the fireplace and darted out of the kitchen like lightning. In no time she arrived at the seashore, took the smaller grindstone, used a blade of grass as a sail and, putting it into the water, raced after her fleeing husband. She kept pursuing him for a long time in the seas out of the world, until those seas ended and they came to this world off the southern fringe of Haddummati Atoll.

Fearing her husband would escape, Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge, with her strong faṇḍita, made three large fire waves rise out of the ocean and sent them after him. Oḍitān Kalēge, whose magic power wasn't small either, turned his back and cast a spell hurling three fire waves just as large against his wife's deadly waves. Thus, his waves and her waves hit each other and became fixed at a particular spot in the form of watery waves.

These three waves can be seen to this day at a point in Haddummati Atoll's southern outer edge called Golā Konā.³⁶³

Even after cultural isolation and the passage of time cut the Maldives off from the Hindu-Buddhist mainstream of the Subcontinent, the main features of the first part of this Oḍitān legend cannot hide the fact that it finds its roots in the following ancient Indian story about Vaśiṣṭha quoted in the Rudrayāmala and the Brahmayāmala:³⁶⁴

"The great sage Vaśiṣṭha performed his ascetic meditations with terrible penances (Skt. tapas) for six thousand years, trying to compel Dēvi, the great Goddess, to show herself to him. As he failed, he flew into a rage and tried to curse the Goddess, but his father told him not to do it and

³⁶³ Northern Maldivian people call this place Golā Kañ.

³⁶⁴ B. Bhattacharya, "An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism".

explained to Vaśiṣṭha that he had a wrong idea of Dēvi: In reality, she is the boundless material, brilliant as ten thousand suns, out of which the cosmos is made. She was Herself the substance of the Buddha's enlightenment, kind, loving and beautiful.

"Vaśiṣṭha tried his meditations again in a different spirit and in the end the goddess Tārā (a form of Dēvi) appeared to him in all her dazzling splendour. She explained to Vaśiṣṭha that he was still on the wrong track, and that he had to learn the Kaula Tantric method of religion.³⁶⁵ She said that he wouldn't reach her by mere yoga and asceticism, not even to glimpse Her proper feet. 'My worship', she said, 'is without austerity and pain!' Finally the goddess told Vaśiṣṭha that he must go to Mahacīna (probably somewhere in the Himalayas) and learn the proper forms. Then she disappeared."

In the Maldivian version of this story, the figure of Dēvi is initially replaced by the figure of the mother (the word "mother" being commonly used to express some of the qualities of the Goddess in Indic tradition), until Oḍitān's father, in anger, forces the young sorcerer to seek refuge under the mythical tree out of this world. Thereafter the Dēvi appears in the form of Dōgi Āihā, a beautiful and fiery Yoginī, a figure related to the goddess as well, for the name Dōgi derives from the Sanskrit Yoginī, a kind of lesser goddess in Hindu-Buddhist tradition.

These stories are meant to underline the fact that the worship of Dēvi involves certain specific esoteric rites. Furthermore, they point out that there is a clear link between Tantric worship and the popular village-goddess worship. In India these cults have been periodically dismissed as

³⁶⁵ The hidden path. The Kaula school was a result of the fusion of Tantric Brahmanism and Śaktism on one side and Vajrayāna Buddhism on the other. Among the Kaula sects, the most important one was the Yoginī Kaula cult believed to have been founded by the saint Matsiendranātha, believed to be identical with the Buddhist Siddha Luipāda.

the 'vulgar and crude religion of uncultured and half-civilized people.' Many Indian historians, though Hindu, are keen to propagate this view and see in Tantricism and the Dēvi cult a degenerate form of religion.³⁶⁶ This contempt was not so much stemming from the nature of some of the Dēvi-worship ceremonies, but mostly because their practice was mainly confined to the 'backward' castes and the rural dispossessed groups, arguably the aboriginal inhabitants of the Subcontinent. Now most of these groups are considered (in the Indian language of officialdom) 'low' or 'backward' castes and tribes, and are largely despised and marginalized. This approach reflects the historical and socio-cultural fact that, in the eyes of the ruling religious elite in the Subcontinent, anything that the lower castes do is disgusting.

This repulsion finds expression in ancient Indian stories such as the adventure of King Lavana, where he becomes a Caṇḍāla (untouchable) in an experience induced by an ascetic. In another work, the Kādambari of Bana a Caṇḍāla village is described thus:

"A very market place of evil deeds, surrounded on all sides by boys engaged in hunting, unleashing their hounds, teaching their falcons, mending snares, carrying weapons, and fishing, horrible in their attire, like demoniacs. On all sides the enclosures were made with skulls; the dust heaps in the roads were filled with bones; the yards of the huts were miry with blood, fat, and meat chopped up. The life there consisted of hunting, the food of flesh, the ointment of fat, the garments of coarse silk, the couches of dried skins. Dogs are household attendants, cows are for riding, wine and women are men's only enjoyment, blood is the oblation to their gods, cattle their sacrifice. The place was the image of all hells."

³⁶⁶ See for example A.S. Menon, 'History of India' and A. L. Basham, 'The Wonder That Was India.'

The Tantric cult and its rites are of great antiquity. They are rooted in the ancient rural worship of female divinities and originated, as such, in the aboriginal religion of the Subcontinent. The Vedic Brahmanism of the Aryan invaders from Central Asia frowned upon those popular cults finding them base, despicable and devilish. This is in tune with the fact that the aboriginal Indian (or Dravidian) population was consistently identified with dark devils in the Brahmanical lore.

After Buddhist hegemony gave a serious blow to the dominance of Brahmanism all over South Asia, the hieratic initial form of Buddhism, with its insistence in revering the 'great man' (thus effectively leaving the female element out of the religious sphere), kept these popular cults at bay. However, all along the history of India, their practice instead of being discontinued was kept secret. Hence, in the Subcontinent, towards the end of the Buddhist period, all the hidden Tantric cults found their way into Buddhism itself. These came to the surface when the more popular Vajrayāna vehicle appeared in the second half of the first millennium AD.

Tantras are ancient Hindu texts which deal mostly with prescriptions and rituals for the worship of the goddess. In Tantric worship great importance is given to Mantras (magic words) and Yantras (magic diagrams). Owing to an unhealthy fascination with the occult in recent times, Tantric rituals have been described ad nauseam in a great number of works.³⁶⁷ True to form, the Tantric tradition included many practices (Skt. *sādhana*) that were closely guarded secrets. The reason being that, on one hand those rites would openly conflict with the prevalent South Asian social norms —now heavily influenced by a puritanical combination of Brahmanical, Islamic and British colonial values— and were deemed vile and scandalous, and on the other hand because every sorcerer

³⁶⁷ For a scholarly outline of the Tantric ritual system see S. Chattopadhyaya, 'Reflections on the Tantras.'

naturally strove to preserve the secrets that gave him access to special powers (Skt. siddhi):

*“Very little is known about the Tantras before they made a debut in a well-developed form in the beginning of the Tantric period, which began about mid-seventh century AD. It is bound to be so, because the Tantras, as has been pointed out, were practiced in secret and handed down in secret through an unbroken chain of preceptors and disciples, who never made themselves known, and, as such, passed out of recognition.”*³⁶⁸

Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge telling an innocent Oḍitān, barely out of childhood, to obtain experience in secret sexual practices, and the Goddess Tārā asking Vaśiṣṭa to desist from his ‘clean’ but ineffective penances and devotions and to follow the esoteric Tantric path are basically the same type of request, as the Kaula path is the esoteric, or left handed, path of the highest order.

In India and Nepal, the (so called) left-handed way of tantric worship (the right handed being the “clean” way) is usually practised by only a small, select circle of followers owing to the need to protect its secret nature. It includes five essential parts as offerings to the goddess. These are (in Sanskrit): matsya (fish), māmsa (meat), mudrā (parched grain), madya (liquor) and maithuna (sexual intercourse). The initiated are expected to partake of all of these elements. This ceremony usually takes place in hidden places in the night. This ritual is, at least in theory, no orgy. The Kumāritantra states emphatically that a worshipper who performs this

³⁶⁸ See for example what is said about the Tantric author Padmavajra (AD 693). *“Padmavajra was a historical figure, and a very interesting work of his, entitled the Guhyasiddhi, has lately been discovered. ... The whole work is written in what is called the twilight language, or the ‘Sandhyābhāṣā’; but there is enough to show to and ordinary reader that he advocated many mystic and objectionable rites and practices, which he termed secret rites.”* B. Bhattacharyya, ‘An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism.’

type of sādhanā for material gain or for satisfying sensual pleasure, goes to hell (narakā).

In Maldives these secret rituals were known as diyōge kuḷi, or ‘Game of the Goddess,’ for the Divehi word ‘diyō’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘Dēvi’ (Prakrit ‘Dēviyō’). Some old people still know about sites where it was practised on their own or on other islands.³⁶⁹

In Maldives, the diyōge kuḷi was the target of much official persecution for centuries, owing to its essentially immoral nature,³⁷⁰ and it has probably died out. Periodically, during the past four or five hundred years, vessels with the black flag of the Sayyidu Bēkaluṅ, whose task was to enforce Islam in the Maldivian Kingdom, would sail to the islands where the practice of this tantric ritual became known to them and severely punished the islanders indulging in such practices.³⁷¹ The Sayyidu Bēkaluṅ were high-ranking officials of the Maldivian Government claiming to be descendants of the Prophet. They included mostly Maldivian religious men educated in Arabia and sometimes visiting Arabs who were given the rank and privilege to repress any Maldivian cultural manifestation deemed un-Islamic. The severe Sayyid Bēkaluṅ were ‘holy men’, greatly feared and respected. They not only wielded considerable political muscle but were also reckoned to possess special spiritual powers.

Nowadays, as a result of the ancient Diyō ritual and its necessary five ingredients, the number five is still associated with the goddess in popular

³⁶⁹ This same ritual was also very common among the palm-climbing castes of Kerala. See L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, ‘The Tribes and Castes of Cochin, vol. I’.

³⁷⁰ In Maldives it was easy for palm-climbers (rāveriṅ) to produce alcoholic drinks. They used to put a grain of rice in a container with the sap and let it brew for some time. It is believed that this part of the ritual was what incensed the stern Muslim government officials most. Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdi.

³⁷¹ Source: Ahumadu Shafeegu, Taṇḍiraiymāge, Māle.

Maldivian lore. Hence, the common five-armed starfish is still known as *diyōkāli*, “the mark of the goddess”,³⁷² in Aḍḍu Atoll and Fua Mulaku Island, and as *randiyēkālla*, “the mark of the golden goddess”, in Huvadū Atoll. In the island of Guḷi (South Male’ Atoll), a larger five-armed starfish is known as *kamaṇā*, also the name of a queen- or goddess-like female figure in Divehi mythology; and in Māḷos Island (Ari Atoll) its name is *mēli*, a kind of fairy from the local folk tales. Therefore, it is very likely that in ancient Maldives the starfish was one of the emblems of a female deity.

The *diyō* is not a ‘spirit’ that average Maldivians can describe as readily as they would describe the ubiquitous *haṇḍi*. In fact, in the island lore, apart from the *diyōge kuḷi* and the southern names of the starfish, *diyō* is only mentioned in popular lullabies for children as a fairylike figure with strong magical powers. She can convert plain coral stone into turquoise and plain sticks into sandalwood. By and large, *diyō* is described as a dignified, beautiful woman wearing a crown or diadem. Although she appears to be exceedingly pretty, she may have a terrifying and ugly aspect too, a distinctive trait of South Indian female divinities.

In ancient times a number of Maldivian queens used the name *diyō* appended to their proper name, like Kakuni Diyō or Āmina Diyō. There is nothing unusual about this practice, as traditionally queens throughout the subcontinent have been wearing the name *Dēvi* in the same manner. There is also a beautiful long poem called *Diyōge Raivaru* about a powerful queen called *Diyō* and her fleet of ships, but it was composed in relatively recent times (the 18th century) by the Maldivian writer Baṇḍēri Hasan Manikufānu and its heroine has very little in common with *diyō*, the mythical figure of the ancient Maldivian folklore.

³⁷² In the Southernmost atolls, a *kāli* (the *ā* slightly nasal) is a general word for any implement made by tying to a stick shorter sticks with rope. It usually has a cross-like shape, except in this case, stressing the crucial importance of the number five in relation to the *Dēvi*.

The main aim of the diyōge kuḷi and other esoteric rituals practised in the Maldives was to secure special powers for a reduced circle of participants. As we have seen above, within the Tantric context —the Goddess’ explanation to Vaśiṣṭa— the implication that mere conventional knowledge is not enough is stated in very clear terms. This leads unavoidably to the suggestion that there is an aura of naivety and incompleteness about what can be termed as ‘average learning’, like the following story shows: ³⁷³

The Man Who Learned from Two Books

“Having completed his education in the continent, a young man called Rekifutu returned to his island in Aḍḍu Atoll. He was handsome, from a good family, and was now well versed in the Qurān, Arabic and certain sciences. His parents were very proud of him, for he was their only male child, and his four younger sisters had missed him sorely and were very happy to see him back. The girls kept flattering their brother and fussing about him all the time, and the truth is that he himself could not hide his pride at his achievements.

Soon after arrival, Rekifutu went to the main mosque for the Friday prayers. The island chief was leading the prayers and, in the customary sermon, this cunning man asserted that all islanders had the obligation to be very kind to their island chief and bring him money and presents whenever they could. God didn’t want the island chief to be poor; instead He was pleased to see islanders treat their chief well. The sermon went on for quite a while, with the chief praising himself and bragging about his goodness.

³⁷³ Told by A. Nasīm I. Dīdī, Nūḍalīhī, Funāḍo village, Fua Mulaku.

Rekifutu was dismayed to hear these words. As soon as the sermon concluded, knowing that the islanders couldn't understand Arabic, he rose and directly addressed the boastful chief in that language; saying: "What kind of sermon is this? You use your craftiness and the name of God to become richer at the expense of people who are quite poor. It is wrong to do that! Surely God is not pleased with your behavior."

The chief was surprised, but he quickly smiled and replied in not-so-perfect Arabic: "Look here, my son, don't get angry. These people are like animals, ignorant and stupid. If I can get revenue from them, I will do it. I am the chief of this island and I must be wealthy. I deserve it! It is difficult and boring to rule over them all the time," finally, with a wink, he offered: "We can both benefit from this situation. If you are smart and don't tell anybody about this, I shall give you part of my wealth."

Rekifutu did not reply and the Friday prayer went on. At the end, when everyone was leaving the mosque, the young man stood at the gate of the compound, gathered the people about him and told them that their chief was a deceitful man, who was abusing his authority over them to increase his wealth. He declared: "God never said that chiefs should become rich at the expense of poor people."

Furiously, the island chief elbowed his way through the crowd, demanding in a very loud voice: "Who is this insolent young man talking to you and insulting me? I have known this Rekifutu since he was a baby. What does he know about life? He went to a foreign country, and already thinks that everything can be done here as foreigners do. Now he has come back to our island and has become so arrogant that he wants to turn you against me. This impertinent youngster is not interested in the welfare of our island! His only aim is to put me down, I who have been so good to you, so that he may become a tyrannical ruler over you. If you listen to his subversive words, all of you will suffer. Think of me. You know me. I am your chief and I have always been good to you."

Reacting angrily, the islanders became a blind mob who beat Rekifutu savagely. When they had had enough, they left the poor young man unconscious and bleeding at the gates of the mosque.

As soon as they heard the terrible news, Rekifutu's sisters ran to the mosque with tears in their eyes. Since nobody was willing to help them, the four sobbing girls had to carry their badly bruised brother home as well as they could. His mother lovingly cared for his wounds for many anxious weeks until he was completely healed. However, even after he was cured, her son was apathetic. He seemed to be always lost in thought, never smiling and joking as he had done before. Rekifutu's parents and sisters were very worried, for he had become very silent and his eyes stared all the time vacantly. They feared the beating had affected his mind.

But Rekifutu's mental state was fine and during the time of his recovery he had been nurturing a hidden determination. As soon as he felt fit enough, he left Aḍḍu Atoll without saying a word to anyone and went to Male'. There, in the capital, the young man frequented the dark alleys of the Bazaar area and boldly became involved with the worst outlaws and thugs of the Island Kingdom. He mixed with criminal elements such as Soi Kuḍa Kalō, Gobu Umaru and Boḍā Bea, and with wanton women like Baburu Mañje.³⁷⁴ For two years Rekifutu lived discreetly among dubious characters, cleverly disguising his identity and not telling any of his relatives.

When he returned to the island, everybody welcomed Rekifutu. Most of them had forgotten how they had treated him. His parents and sisters

³⁷⁴ Here the narrator threw in a few names of well-known Maldivian shady characters, but not all of them were contemporaneous and they seem to have been huddled together for the sake of effect. The word 'baburu', is the Divehi word for 'Black African.' In ancient Divehi 'baburu' was a generic word for 'foreigner'; however, at some point in history between the 12th century and the arrival of the Portuguese, this word began to be used to refer exclusively to Africans

were delighted to see the young man back safely. They hadn't had any news about him for a very long time and feared that some disgrace had befallen him. As he hadn't told them of his whereabouts, they all assumed that he had spent more years abroad continuing his studies. In a breezy manner, Rekifutu tactfully avoided all the questions about his more recent activities during the happy and carefree days that followed.

Friday came and Rekifutu, impeccably dressed in white, went to the mosque. There, the chief gave his usual boastful, greedy and self-serving speech. Rekifutu said nothing and smiled confidently. The Island chief studied him with slight apprehension. But after a while, as Rekifutu just kept smiling, he was pleased. He assumed that the learned young man was now his supporter. Once he had finished his sermon without any unpleasant interruption, the chief thought "good! I gave him a good lesson. He has finally learned to respect his elders."

At the end of the Friday prayer, Rekifutu very politely requested the chief for permission to speak. The island chief became alarmed and wondered, "What is he up to now?"

Rekifutu quickly calmed him saying he just intended to make a little speech to tell the islanders how fortunate they were to have such a good leader. As the chief was a very vain man, he felt flattered and gave his permission eagerly.

Rekifutu addressed the crowd praising the chief in the most exaggerated terms. The unsuspecting island chief, standing beside him, was immensely satisfied. At the conclusion of his speech the young man emphatically assured the islanders that their leader was such a worthy and holy man, that if one of them was lucky enough to get hold of a droplet of his blood, or a piece of his clothing, or a tuft of his hair, the gates of heaven would be surely open for that person.

Suddenly, all the people turned towards the island chief and started to look at him with relish. Calmly detaching himself from the crowd, Rekifutu walked back home without hurry.

It is said that the chief didn't make it to the gates of the mosque. The mob, in the ensuing frenzy, tore him to pieces. Some even used knives. Soon nothing was left of the island chief, not even a single blood droplet on the sand.

Though it is mostly told as a light, humorous story, 'The Man Who Learned from Two Books' is actually a cynical illustration of how firmly Maldivians believe that mere religious and scholarly studies —represented by the 'first book'— cannot make a man powerful. Accordingly, there is a general acceptance among islanders of the fact that a person not possessing 'special' esoteric knowledge —the 'second book' of the story— will not be successful within the community.

2.4.2 SECRET KNOWLEDGE

Since in the Maldives faṇḍitaverikaṇ was essentially a syncretistic remainder of former religious beliefs, a great part of this special knowledge was of hidden nature, suitable only for the initiated. Naturally, when the Islamization of society gradually increased, a process that was more marked since the 16th century, the antagonism between faṇḍitaverikaṇ and Islam became more acute, a process described further ahead in this book.

Traditionally, the faṇḍitaveriyā or sorcerer had a respectable function in the islands. He was a combination of doctor, shaman and learned-man. His position commanded prestige and appreciation in society and historical records show that most faṇḍita men were from wealthy and noble families.

In some islands there are people who practice a ritual called ajida. A faṇḍita man in Dūṇḍigamu village, Fua Mulaku,³⁷⁵ explained that ajidāṣa eruṇ is like performing a prayer. “One salutes the sun at sunrise and at sunset. Then one salutes the four cardinal points.” He told that he found inner peace in the practice of this ritual. Some orthodox Muslim men of his village claimed that he was indulging in idolatry, but he refuted the charges. He said that anyone making ajida will find health, success and peace of mind. When asked about the origin of this rite, he said that it came from the old people.

Within an increasingly hostile environment, there are two reasons why faṇḍitaverikaṇ is mostly made up of secret knowledge. The first is because it has its origins in the highly secretive Tantric teachings; and the second is because its contradictions with the government-enforced Muslim doctrine should not be exposed. Even though much maligned in

³⁷⁵ I have omitted the name of this person to protect his identity.

recent times, sorcery is still widely practiced and, for instance, nowadays in all islands in the Maldives practically all fishermen still seek the help of faṇḍita to improve their luck in the fishing grounds. This type of magic is called vahutāñ and it is undoubtedly the most popular form of sorcery practiced in the Maldives.

As the faṇḍitaveriyā's knowledge is such an important secret, it naturally follows that it has to be protected. This is seen as a duty and, at a very early age, Divehi children are taught the importance of keeping a secret and the harm that may result from divulging it. Stories like 'The Skull below the Tree'³⁷⁶ clearly emphasize the dire consequences of betraying a secret to the wrong person, even if it be the king himself:

The Skull below the Tree

"A very poor man called Ibrāhīmu lived long ago on an island. Since there was very little food, he had to go search for something to eat when he became hungry. He went to a midili tree (Terminalia Catappa) but there were no kanamadu (the nuts of that tree). Disappointed, with his stomach empty, he went into the forest and wandered for a long time. While he was in the deepest part of the forest, Ibrāhīmu noticed a glint below a big tree. Fearfully, he crept near and saw that it was only a human skull bleached white by the sun. When he had almost reached it, a noise startled him.

The skull said: "Come nearer!"

Alarmed, Ibrāhīmu responded, "I'm surprised that you speak."

³⁷⁶ Told in 1987 by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Male'

"Come, come nearer, my friend. I'll do you no harm. I have been here a very long time, and no one has come. I'm very bored. Tell me, where are you going?"

Ibrāhīmu answered, "I am just a poor, hungry man looking for food. There is not much to eat on the island."

"So you're hungry. Don't worry. Just go to the watermelon creeper behind this tree over me."

Ibrāhīmu thought: "How unusual, a watermelon creeper here in the wilderness!"

But to his amazement there behind the tree he found indeed a large vine with many big, beautiful watermelons.

The skull said, "Eat as many as you can. But, every day you must come and talk to me."

The melons were excellent and Ibrāhīmu ate and ate until he was full. As he was about to leave, the skull said, "Be sure not to tell anyone about the melons you ate and about who is here under this tree. Remember that we are now friends."

"I will remember," Ibrāhīmu said before leaving that spot.

During the next weeks Ibrāhīmu was very happy. He went every day to talk with the skull and eat some melons. Each time the skull reminded him not to tell anyone about what he was doing. One day Ibrāhīmu commented, "I have been coming here so many days. You must tell me who you are and why you are like this."

The skull answered, "Alas! Once I was a very wealthy and respected man. But my mouth killed me."

"How could your mouth kill you?" Ibrāhīmu asked.

Impatiently the skull retorted, "That's all I know. Don't ask more about it."

But Ibrāhīmu left unsatisfied.

Many days later, when Ibrāhīmu came to eat his daily share of melons, the skull told him, "Now we have come to the point that we know each other well. You look better fed. People might ask, 'How is that?' and they see you disappear in the forest every day. You must promise solemnly not to tell anybody about the watermelons and about me."

"I will not tell anybody," Ibrāhīmu pledged.

For some time everything went well and Ibrāhīmu kept his agreement. However, one fateful day while he was idly sitting at home, he reconsidered the skull's story. "How amazing this is! He says his mouth killed him. I must tell the Radun (the King). His Majesty will be pleased to hear that such bizarre things take place in his kingdom. Since the Radun is generous, he might even give me a big present."

So, one day he went by dōni to Male' and told the whole story to the Radun. Naturally, the Radun was astonished. "Is it possible that such a thing could happen in my kingdom?"

The ministers did not trust Ibrāhīmu and stared at him in contempt, saying, "His Majesty should not pay attention to these crazy stories."

The Radun asked Ibrāhīmu, "Do you swear to me that there is a talking skull below a tree in your island, and that in the same spot there is a big vine giving watermelons everyday?"

Ibrāhīmu said, "Yes! I have been going there so many days, I know it well and I have eaten a great many very tasty watermelons." Then he added, "The skull claims that his mouth killed him. Everything I have told you is true Your Majesty."

The Radun became very serious and warned him: "If you are trying to fool me, you will be punished severely."

Ibrāhīmu smiled with assurance. "Your Majesty will not be deceived."

The Radun sailed on the royal ship with his ministers to Ibrāhīmu's island to see the wonder with his own eyes. Ibrāhīmu led them into the forest to show them the mysterious spot. However, when they arrived there, neither the skull, nor the melon vine, were to be seen. Everybody searched thoroughly, but there was no trace of a vine or a skull any place nearby.

Looking at Ibrāhīmu angrily, the ministers declared, "You lied!"

Ibrāhīmu froze, staring at them in terror.

The Radun demanded, "Why did you try to fool us?" He reflected a moment. Then without waiting for any answer, his face grew hard and he announced, "Now you will know the punishment for anyone who dares to tell a lie to his king."

Ibrāhīmu started weeping bitterly, swearing it was no lie.

"O king! Have no mercy on him," urged the ministers impatiently. "Here we stand. We can see that this man has shamelessly lied, but still he refuses to admit what he has done. This worthless villain thinks he can continue fooling us."

The king's face was grim. Ignoring Ibrāhīmu's frantic pleas, the Radun ordered his soldiers to tie Ibrāhīmu tightly to the tree. After leaving that place the king went to the island village and sternly warned the people that no one should go to help Ibrāhīmu, or they would suffer a similar punishment." Ibrāhīmu is condemned to death by Royal order," he concluded.

Meanwhile, left tied to the tree, Ibrāhīmu wept miserably. Suddenly he heard a laugh and at his left, under the tree, he saw the skull. Shocked, Ibrāhīmu cried “Where have you been?”

“I came to tell you my mouth killed me as your mouth killed you.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ibrāhīmu.

“You are a foolish, unworthy man. Though I was your friend and treated you well, letting you eat my watermelons, you broke your promise to me. I should not even be here talking with you. But I will tell you my story:

“In my time, long, long ago I was a mighty faṇḍita man. It so happened that with my own mouth I made a promise to the King one day. Some time later I lied to him, breaking my promise with my own mouth as well. The King executed me under this same tree just like you. But, that was long ago.”

Ibrāhīmu begged in anguish, “Help me, please!”

“No, no,” said the skull. “I warned you. We were friends, but you broke your promise. It is right that you die.”

Scorning Ibrāhīmu’s desperate supplication, with a burst of raucous laughter, the skull disappeared.

The detail of the skull in the story is highly relevant, for graveyards, dead bodies and skulls are of central significance in Tantrism. Skulls are often worn as garlands by Tantric divinities and are widely used in Tantric paraphernalia along with other human bones.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ There is a wide range of literature on this subject, see for example: Ajit Mookerjee, ‘Rituelle Kunst Indiens’; P.S. Rawson, ‘The Art of Tantra’, D. Kingsley, ‘The Sword and the Flute.’

The secret has to be kept on the basis that “The secret benefits you, thus your duty is to keep it.” The vital importance of not revealing a secret is repeatedly emphasized in Tantric literature: “*Gopanīyam, gopanīyam, gopanīyam prayatnatah, Twayāci gopitavyam hi na deya yasya kasyacit.*” (Keep your secrets to yourself only. Leave no stone unturned to retain their secrecy. Never leak them out to a layman.)³⁷⁸ As in these verses, the central theme of this story is the insistence and repetition of the secrecy pledge by the skull to stress the extreme seriousness of the matter.

The story that follows, Alifuṣi Keuḷubē, illustrates how zealously a vital secret can be kept by a sorcerer-fisherman. Keuḷubē means ‘uncle master fisherman’ and the keuḷu (or keyoḷu) is a very important figure in Maldivian fishing lore. In some islands a certain popular festival known as Boḍu Mas (‘big fish’) is a drama in which the difficulty in catching a large fish is enacted.

In the Boḍu Mas the figure of the keuḷu, or master fisherman, is idealized and represented larger than life, with a mask costume made of sackcloth and coconut palm fronds. In this festival the other main players are some young men carrying the big fish, usually made to look like a marlin or spearfish, skillfully crafted of woven palm fronds and sticks. The boat is made of the same material and it normally is carried hanging from the shoulders by a number of men who are at the same time holding mock-oars. Other actors, like the faṇḍita men, dressed in white, play a big role. Lesser roles are played by people wearing mask costumes which make them look like octopuses, crabs and sea monsters. All these costumes are made of woven palm fronds too.

In this open-air dramatic representation, the keuḷu gets practically all the attention and the show revolves around him. He is not even inside the boat, but moves freely around, holding his line and expressing sentiments

³⁷⁸ Tantra Mahāvijñāna, S.R. Sharma

of frustration, anxiety and hope, while the large fish (Boḍu Mas) moves back and forth, always reluctant to get caught. The final triumph comes when the keuḷu catches the big fish. This show is usually staged in an open area in the moonlight during the night. It is still performed in many islands in the Northern and Central Maldives as part of the Boḍu Īdu celebrations,³⁷⁹ but it has practically died out in the Southern Atolls.

Though set in an island in the North, the following legend is told by people in the South of Maldives.³⁸⁰ Located at the northern end of Māḷosmaḍulu Atoll, Alifuṣi is famous for its good carpenters, but nothing concerning the island is mentioned in the story:

Alifuṣi Keuḷubē

“Long ago, in Alifuṣi Island, lived a master fisherman who became famous all over the country. He used to fish in abundance at every time and place.

In the lean season, even if other dōnis would come close to his, they would not fish at all, while he would fill his with large tuna right at the same spot. When other fishermen were worried because they came home without fish, he was the only one never failing to make a good catch. Many people were jealous of him, but respected him for his skill or luck.

Alifuṣi Keuḷubē sailed only with his sons. He never accepted anyone else in his crew. Every day, after putting the bait fish in the wet compartment in his dōni, he would sail out into the ocean. Once there, he would go forward to the prow, recite something in a low voice, bow low, jump into

³⁷⁹ The Maldivian way of referring to ‘id-ul-Adhā, the yearly Muslim holiday following the lunar calendar. ‘Boḍu Īdu’ means big ‘id and ‘Kuḍa Īdu’ or small ‘id is ‘id-ul-Fitr, the holiday following Ramzān.

³⁸⁰ Told by Vaijehēge (Unakeḍege) Alī Dīdī.

the sea, swim under the keel, and emerge at the stern. Once aboard, he would start throwing the bait fish and begin fishing. Beautiful tunas would swarm around his boat and Keuľubē would pull them up along with his sons until his boat was full. Then he would return to the island.

His sons had been sternly warned by him not to ask any questions. They didn't. Besides, they were also afraid to ask him. Even when others asked them, they didn't tell anybody either what their father was doing to fish so successfully.

Because of such abundant and steady catch, Alifuşı Keuľubē was rich and lived comfortably in his house with his wife, sons, and daughters. They were happy because he always brought fish home and the family was never in need, but the truth is that he didn't have many friends.

Years passed and Keuľubē became older, but he kept fishing in the same manner. People talked about him. The wives of other fishermen would tell them to go and ask Keuľubē: "He is always fishing, but you never do. He makes good faᅇđita. Ask him how he does it." So, a group of fishermen went to his house and asked him to reveal them his magic secret to them. Keuľubē angrily sent them away and they were afraid to ask again.

But the day came when Keuľubē became very sick and couldn't go fishing anymore. His illness became worse and he stayed in bed. His family thought he was close to death and his eldest son went to him whispering in his ear:

"Father, we don't know what you recite to catch so many fish. You never told us and, following your wishes, we never asked you. But now you are dying and, if you don't tell your secret to us, we will become as poor as the other fishermen. Please, tell me how you make that faᅇđita"

Keuľubē, making an effort, told his son the following story:

“When I was very young, I was a very greedy and arrogant person. I used to become very angry when I could not catch fish, so I was always working very hard, trying and trying again, spending a long time in the ocean. I was usually alone, because nobody wanted to go with me such long hours.

One day I went to an old faṇḍita man and explained to him that I wanted to catch fish always. This man taught me a certain magic ritual and the spot where I should go to fish. Thus, the following morning itself, not bothering that it was Friday prayer time, I went alone there on my small dōni. And, indeed, within a little while a very big marlin bit the hook.³⁸¹

It was the biggest spearfish I have ever seen and, after a long and mighty struggle, I finally succeeded in catching it. I remember that I was very tired and my hands were scraped raw. Then, with great difficulty, I began to tie the enormous marlin to my boat. Meanwhile, the waters around me were red with the blood pouring from the mortally wounded and exhausted fish, which was longer than my dōni.

All of a sudden, at one point in front of me, the sea started to boil. I was looking intently at that spot, wondering what the cause of the strange turbulence was. Suddenly, out of the red foam, a woman rose from the water. She was very young and beautiful and had flowing, long black hair. She stood hovering over the blood-red waters, but was not wet at all.³⁸² Her attractive face was full of kindness, and yet I was frightened, sensing danger. The girl saw my expression and told me not to fear. Cheerfully, she said that if I gave her the big spearfish I had just caught, she would teach me the way to always catch a lot of fish.”

³⁸¹ Makaira indica, hibaru in Divehi. It can be a very large fish, reaching a length of seven meters

³⁸² Cf. 3.2.1 ‘Lurking in the Darkness’ and 3.4.1 ‘Monsters from the Sea’ for the meaning of the red waters in relation to female deities

"I was reluctant to let that big marlin go, but I also was very eager to know how to fish more and, thus, I agreed. Following this the young maiden did something that left me amazed: She took the huge dark fish out of the water with only one hand, opened her mouth wide and swallowed it headfirst in front of me. I couldn't believe my eyes, for all the while her graceful body was no larger than mine; and her slender shape did not change. Then this girl ordered me to bow down to her, and I was so much in awe and fear that I did. After that she taught me the secret words and the way to make always a good catch, in any season and in any weather. Finally, she smiled again at me and disappeared into the sea within a wake of blood-red foam."

"As you know, my son, with the knowledge that faṇḍita I soon became the best fisherman in the Kingdom. But I bowed down to an evil spirit and I had to recite devilish words. I wanted the things of this world. Now I can see I was wrong. Good Muslims shouldn't do those things. Now I am going to die carrying a heavy burden. I have done much wrong. You are young and innocent. I want you to be honest, hardworking, to have patience and to keep away from pride and greed. Don't be afraid of poverty. If you have faith, God will provide."

The son became sad and his father noticed it: "Don't be disappointed. Even having committed such sin, I know what is right and what is wrong. Be courageous, and when you are old you will remember these words and you will know that I was right. Even if I am leaving this world like this, you should live a good life." Saying thus, Alifuṣi Keuḷubē died.

In other, probably older, versions of this legend, Keuḷubē, instead of advising his son to avoid practicing faṇḍita, goes along with him to the point where the spirit rose from the waters and, in a typical end of a Maldivian haṇḍi story, the spirit, now appearing in a fearful form, refuses to give the powers to Keuḷubē's son. Still, in another version, the wrathful spirit kills both father and son.

A feature in the story above that deserves mention is the fact that the abundant blood oozing from the large fish attracts a spirit. To prevent this, Maldivian fishermen, after fishing, clean the boat very well with abundant seawater until they have effaced all traces of fish blood. Behind this action there is the belief that when a boat is dirty with blood and fish offal, it will catch a greedy spirit that will hinder it from fishing. This evil spirit is called *ressi* and it is connected with the spirits of the dead ancestors (*muladovi*).³⁸³ Once the *ressi* has caught hold of a fishing boat, only magic will be effective to free it from such curse. One of the mantras recited while performing the ceremony against *ressi* goes thus: “*Ressi Muladēvi debē nē, rīti magu atiri abbāni, Hali mi oḍiñ faibāni*.”

Even ashore, Maldivians make it a point of cleaning thoroughly with water all the implements they use for cutting fish, knives, wooden boards, washing well their hands and keeping the surrounding areas scrupulously clean too. All this activity in getting rid of any traces of blood has their origin in the popular belief mentioned above those places where blood is thrown are likely to attract the unwanted attention of demons lurking in the shadows. This relationship between blood and spirits has already been elaborated in the chapter dealing with blood sacrifices.

In a similar manner as in *Alifuṣi Keuḷubē*, in the very ancient *Oḍitān Kalēge* story narrated at the beginning of this chapter, spirits rising from the sea play a central part. This feature of Maldivian traditions harks back to the fact that the surrounding ocean is held in high reverence by Islanders. The sea is the place that provides the food on which they survive, but at the same time it remains a dangerous place, immensely vast, deep and full of mystery.

³⁸³ And also with a voracious spirit called *dābba* who lives on dry land. In Southern Maldivian folk tradition, the *ressi* is described having a head with a big mouth full of large teeth and two Marlin fish tails. Source Magieduruge Ibrahim Dīdī (1983).

Probably the most intriguing feature of the story narrated above, is that in it a local spirit is explicitly identified with the devil (Iblis or Śaitān) of the Islamic religion in a similar manner as the Christian fishermen of the South Indian coast identify the Devil with the goddess Isakki, one of the fearsome goddesses of the Tamil village cults.³⁸⁴ Here we can clearly see how the strains of syncretism are showing and the spirits of ancient beliefs have been made into satanic figures within the new religious order. Even though they may provide temporary material benefits to the person invoking them, no good is acknowledged to result through contact with such devilish creatures. Thus, in the new type of myth, the person excelling in magical powers is no longer a hero, but a sinner repenting from his evil deeds.

Nowadays, Divehi fishermen still resort to the customary ceremonies in order to improve the fertility of the ocean surrounding their island. Since they are now informed that these rituals are in contradiction with orthodox Islamic piety, they are probably performing them with a certain amount of bad conscience. Fishermen are well aware that by trusting in those magic rites, they can be easily accused of ‘selling their souls to the devil’ for material benefits —as the story above highlights— and of being ‘bad Muslims,’ but they keep doing them all the same.

All Maldivian fishermen love to fish more and bigger fish. They hate to go back home with an empty boat, thus all of them to some extent perform *faṇḍita* to improve fishing. For example, all Maldivian *dōnis* and *battelis* (fishing boats) carry a little metal plate, inscribed with magical signs, within the wood of their keel. This copper or brass plate is tightly embedded between planks at the moment the boat is being built. In case this copperplate may not be enough, Maldivian fishermen periodically

³⁸⁴ Kalpana Ram, Op. cit.; The name Isakkai is said to be derived from the Sanskrit ‘Yakṣī’, Krishna Rajamani, ‘Arts and Crafts of Tamil Nadu’

perform a number of different types of sorcery or witchcraft to ensure a better catch.

The somewhat controversial goal of the contemporary ruling elite is to make 'pure Islam' flourish in the Maldives Islands. High-profile local fisherman traditions, such as the Bahuru Kiyevuñ sacrifice or the vahutāñ shrines, are perceived to be in conflict with the official doctrine and, thus, are considered satanic. Within this uncompromising ideological pattern, syncretism cannot be accommodated in any form and, openly, there is no room for the old traditions anymore. Hence they have to be kept secret.

2.5.1 INAUSPICIOUS DEATH

In stories told by Maldivians, women and sorcerers usually play the leading role. The underlying fascination with both the powers of femininity and the powers of magic lies in the fact that both have a mysterious, inexplicable source. In addition, both powers are reckoned to be able to either bring blissful fulfillment of a man's wishes or wreak havoc in his life.

The following story with a tragic end is from Central Maldives.³⁸⁵ The heroine is called Kamaṇā in most versions, but not all storytellers agree on this name. A very common legend, this is one of the few Maldivian stories mentioned by C. Maloney in 'People of the Maldivian Islands':

Kamaṇā

"Long ago, in the island of Hannyāmīdū, on the eastern fringes of Ari Atoll, a good and honest couple had only one daughter. When the girl grew up, she became a woman of extraordinary beauty. Many men in the island were attracted to her, but when they tried to approach her, the girl repeatedly rejected their advances. She was not interested in interacting with men. Instead, she was a very hard-working, cheerful, kind, truthful and clean girl. After some time, most of the island men stopped bothering the young woman, but a few bad characters secretly plotted against her.

One morning at dawn, Kamaṇā went to the beach to defecate as usual. Suddenly, a group of evil men who had been hiding in the bushes jumped on her while she was in the edge of the water washing her private parts. They caught the young woman by her arms and legs and immobilized her. Then they raped her many times over and beat her up viciously. The

³⁸⁵ Version told in 1987 by W. Rashīdu, Māfushi island, South Male' Atoll

unfortunate girl cried and yelled for a long time, but nobody came to help her. Perhaps Kamaṇā was too far away from the village and no one could hear her. But it also could be because people were afraid of the group of men.

The girl was now at their feet sobbing, begging them to let her go. But the wicked men were filled with murderous rage. Ignoring Kamaṇā's pleas to spare her life, they heaped heavy blows on the young woman until they ended up killing her. However, even after her last breath, she looked so beautiful that the men were still not satisfied. They couldn't stand the sight of the girl's calm, serene beauty and decided to disfigure her. Thus, they mutilated Kamaṇā's dead body, cutting one of her breasts. Finally, the wicked men dragged the dead woman into the sea and washed the blood on their bodies. While the murderers left the scene of their crime, the girl's corpse was carried eastward by the currents.

It is said that the dead young woman drifted to Māfushi Island, in South Male' Atoll. The people who found the damaged body on the beach buried it close to the shore in awe. They claimed that, in spite of the wounds and lacerations, the dead girl looked lovely and fresh, as if she was only sleeping. Later they built a small building on top of the girl's grave, planted little white flags around it and kept always a lamp burning during the night.

In the Maldives, such constructions are called ziyārai. They are a common sight in almost every island. An average ziyārai looks like a low, little white house located at a lonely, windswept end, close to the sand of the beach and often half-hidden by the green and bushy vegetation of the shore.

A ziyārai was a little portion of hallowed ground, swept clean every day, sanctified by the tomb in its middle. The islanders used to periodically plant new fluttering white flags around it and a little lamp was kept burning inside during the night. The ziyārai in Māfushi is one of the few

said to contain the remains of a woman. Usually ziyāraiys were erected on the graves of learned or ‘holy’ men³⁸⁶ or on the tombs of corpses having drifted to the shore.

In Konḍē Island in Huvadū Atoll, there is a famous ziyārai containing a headless and armless human corpse which drifted there long ago.³⁸⁷ Further South, in Fua Mulaku there is a ziyārai called Riba in a lonely spot on the SW tip of the island. The islanders say that it houses the body of a person who had the extreme blessing of finding land and a decent burial even after death. The ocean is a foreboding place of evils hidden in its depths; it is deemed to be no place for a human body and death in the sea was considered a curse.

Owing to their auspiciousness, vows used to be made to such ziyāraiys. Masts, oars, and even heads of swordfish were planted in the ground within their enclosure, after the favour had been granted. Even now islanders in Fua Mulaku put small pebbles on the low wall around the Riba—which is now in a semi-ruinous state—when they want a wish to be fulfilled. Thus, ziyāraiys were places where the supernatural power of the departed people’s souls kept helping the living. Currently most ziyārai shrines have fallen into disrepair for the government has actively discouraged the tradition of revering the tombs of saints, labeling it as an un-Islamic practice.

The fact that a beautiful and virtuous girl from Ari Atoll, after having been mercilessly defiled, killed and senselessly mutilated by lustful and violent males, reached a position of power after death is representative of the Dravidian Dēvi tradition. The lovely young woman who repelled the

³⁸⁶ Danna bēkaluñ. The classical meaning of the word ‘learning’ in Maldives, includes not only religious, but faṇḍitaverikañ, esoteric knowledge, as well.

³⁸⁷ Source: Ahumadu Saīdu, a government officer in Gaddū island office, Huvadū Atoll (1983).

advances of the men desiring her and was brutally murdered is a classic example of the legends woven around Dravidian village goddesses.³⁸⁸

Village goddesses in the Subcontinent earned their divinity by having unjustly suffered extreme outrage at the hands of men. Girls who were killed or driven to commit suicide to escape unwanted attention became objects of worship. After their death, the places where those women were buried or cremated became holy for the local people. Altars for animal sacrifices or memorial stones were erected in their memory, in a parallel, but not identical, manner as the worship of Sati memorials in North India.³⁸⁹

Even in contemporary Maldivian literature there are stories where a virtuous woman, without any provocation, finds herself in the role of the victim. The following one is an abridged translation of a story published in 1977 in a small magazine in Male':³⁹⁰

Little Raindrops

"In a large island in Northern Maldives, lived a fisherman called Hasanu. Every morning when he woke up before dawn, his wife Fātumā Fuḷu, got up and prepared food for him. There was no woman in the whole island like her. She was hard-working, tidy, patient and gentle. Besides, even

³⁸⁸ Broadly speaking, 'Dravidian' refers to what could be called the native culture of the Subcontinent, while 'Brahmanical' to the Sanskrit Vedic-Aryan doctrines and people groups that are generally assumed to have originated in Central Asia. Although the 'Dravidian' element is reckoned to pervade mostly South Indian culture nowadays, the fact is that both elements coexist in different degrees all over the Subcontinent. See T. B. Coburn's Prolegomenon in 'Devi Māhātmya.'

³⁸⁹ See 'Virgin Goddess of the Mango' a review by Prema Nandakumar of the Tamil book 'Masaniyamman' by Tulasi Iramasami in 'The Hindu' March 16th 1999 issue

³⁹⁰ Written by Ahmed Wahīd Alī. Published in Divehi (Latin script) in the booklet 'Vara' by Kopī Mohamed Rashīd under the title 'Hima Fodhu Vaarey'.

though perhaps not the prettiest in the island, Fātumā Fuḷu was a good-looking woman, very intelligent and full of wit.

Fātumā Fuḷu's immediate relatives were all dead. She had married Hasanu right after her libās levvuḥ puberty ritual. While still an eleven-year-old girl, she had been suddenly thrust into the life of a married woman. It had been hard in the beginning to give up the games and the carefree ways of childhood. But now, looking back, she was happy with her husband Hasanu. He worked hard and didn't waste money in useless things. Even though both of them were from quite poor families, as years went by, their household prospered.

There was only one cloud in the horizon of their otherwise pleasant existence: Hasanu and Fātumā Fuḷu hadn't had any children in their fifteen years of marriage. However, this didn't seem to bother the couple very much, since they were very fond of each other. They never quarreled and everyone in the island considered that wife and husband were leading exemplary lives.

One afternoon, Hasanu told Fātumā Fuḷu that he was going to get some chilies and left. On his way, he saw in the distance some young girls who were walking to the well carrying their pots. He was fascinated by their graceful way of walking and felt a twang of pain: "Girls seem to be prettier in these times. It's my bad luck that I married so long ago."

As he walked closer to the girls, he happened to look at one of them and was stunned: "How beautiful she is!" he thought. Hasanu couldn't take his eyes off the young woman and stopped walking to have a better look at her. As he stood there, close to the well, Hasanu kept fixing his eyes on the unsuspecting girl and indulging in dreamlike thoughts of possessing her.

Meanwhile, the girls, having filled their pots, put them on their heads and began to walk by him. At that moment Hasanu was in such a self-inflicted state of feverish eagerness that he decided to take some immediate

action. Thus, he rashly grabbed the girl's hand asking: "Mañje,³⁹¹ what is your name?"

The girl angrily shook her hand off his grip and, trying to keep the heavy pot on her head balanced, scorned Hasanu: "Are you asking my name to ask for me in marriage?"

When he said "yes!" the girl was furious. With a quick movement, she threw the pot full of water on his head and ran away. The other girls, who had been watching the whole scene, were now laughing aloud. Hasanu was embarrassed and, their ill-temper now aroused, they began to tease the wet man. One taunted him: "Go to her home if you want to marry her!" and another fumed, "Do you think you can get a girl like us just by grabbing her hand?"

Hasanu bravely withstood their mockery and anger. Finally, the man was able to calm the irritated girls down and, before they turned to go, he even managed to get from them the name of the girl he liked and the place where she lived. Then he went to the field in a hurry, picked a few chilies and went home. As soon as he arrived he took a bath and told his wife that he had to meet Keuḷu Bē (master fisherman) and left in a hurry.

Instead of going to Keuḷu Bē's house, Hasanu went to Kaḷu Ibrahimbē's home. When the latter saw him coming to his verandah, he exclaimed jokingly in surprise: "Hasanu! Have you lost your way?"

Trying to act naturally, Hasanu said: "I just was walking by and, being thirsty, I came in."

Kaḷu Ibrahimbē called: "Aisā Manikē! Bring a good glass of water for our visitor."

³⁹¹ A northern term of endearment for girls.

When the girl appeared, Hasanū's heart gave a leap. As he took the glass of water he softly pressed her hand. He then had a long look at the girl, who stood frowning in front of him, and drank all the water in one draught. After taking the glass, this time being careful to avoid Hasanū's groping fingers, Aisā Manikē left.

The man was for a moment lost in deep thought. Kaḷu Ibrahimbē noticed it and tried to cheer him up. Hasanū asked him: "Is your daughter married?" And when he heard that she wasn't, he decided: "I want to marry her. What do you think?"

Kaḷu Ibrahimbē calmly replied: "It's all right. I had been thinking lately that it is time to give her away in marriage."

Thus it was agreed and, after talking for a while in the verandah with the father, Hasanū eagerly went inside the house and sat beside Aisā Manikē. However, she stubbornly looked the other way refusing to talk to him and the man left in frustration.

Kaḷu Ibrahimbē, seeing him coming out so soon asked: "What did she say?" Hasanū was disappointed: "She didn't say a word."

"She is too young and inexperienced," the girl's father said "Don't worry! I will talk to her mother. Come back tomorrow in the evening."

Hasanū walked very slowly back home taking a long roundabout. As he realized the predicament he was in, he needed to think. The decision he had just taken at Aisā Manikē's house appeared now reckless and foolish. The future ahead of him looked difficult and scary. People in the island considered him a model husband and Fātumā Fuḷu a model wife. The truth is that he had no excuse to divorce her.

It was a sure thing that he would get a bad name for having left such a good woman just for the sake of marrying a young girl.³⁹² His reputation as a trustworthy and honest person would suffer. Along the years, Hasanu had built very good friendships with wealthy and influential people of his island who assisted him in times of need. He could lose those important connections and that could mean struggling with poverty again.

But then again he thought of Aisā Manikē and his lust for her took the upper hand. “She is so young and attractive! There is no way I am going to step back from marrying her.” Hasanu was torn inside. He thought that he would never find peace unless he arranged the matter in a decisive manner. He needed a drastic solution that would put an end to his uncertainty. And, at that moment, Hasanu took a certain dark resolution which no one but he could know.

The following evening Hasanu went to meet Aisā Manike again. Their marriage had already been arranged with the additional consent of her mother and now they were happily chatting outside in the twilight. Soon thereafter, every evening Hasanu and his young bride-to-be met in some dark corner and engaged in a full-fledged sexual relationship. It took then but little time for the whole island to be aware of this development and the news reached Fātumā Fuļu’s ears too. After all her years of knowing Hasanu, she didn’t expect this and was deeply hurt. Hiding her shock and pain, she never confronted her husband with what people secretly had told her and in a determined bid to trust him Fātumā Fuļu dismissed the rumors as mere backbiting. Thus, Hasanu foolishly thought that his wife didn’t know and became even more careless.

³⁹² Here the attitude of island society reflects their ancestral values, which insisted on monogamy and saw no excuse for getting rid of a virtuous wife, even if no offspring was forthcoming. On the other hand, according to Islamic Sharia’ law there is no problem for a man to divorce his wife if she can have no children.

One evening before sunset, after taking a bath as usual, gentle Fātumā Fuḷu was carefully combing her hair in a sheltered spot under a tree close to her home. She had a good look at herself in the mirror and thought: “I haven’t become any uglier and my face still looks good; I cannot see any wrinkle.” Then she smiled at herself, displaying her white teeth, “I haven’t lost a single tooth, and my hair has not even one white strand. I wonder why Hasanu wouldn’t want me anymore.” Suddenly, she heard two women she knew well, Doḥ Kamaḥā and Doḥ Kambulō, talking about her in a loud voice. The thick palm-tree trunks hid her from their sight and they didn’t realize that she was listening.

What Fātumā Fuḷu heard was much worse than the bits of bad news people had whispered to her. These two women were feeling sorry for her and told nasty details, while describing her husband’s sexual frolicking about the island with the young girl. They claimed that they would never remain passive like Fātumā Fuḷu in such a case and that they wouldn’t hesitate to attack and beat up their husbands if they happened to hear that they were involved in some dirty affair like that. Even so, what pierced her heart in a more dreadful manner than any physical harm was to hear that her own husband, Hasanu, was going around the island telling everyone that she, Fātumā Fuḷu, was not a good wife anymore, that she had become dirty, careless and lazy. After the gossipers left, the sun had set and the woman, wounded with a pain that was impossible to bear, was crouching on the ground, crying silently and not daring to get up.

That evening, Hasanu came late as usual. Upset at having to keep on leading his stressful double-life, he didn’t try anymore to be pleasant to Fātumā Fuḷu and grumbled aloud. He found everything wrong with the food his wife had carefully prepared and neatly displayed in front of him as usual. At that point, her patience wore out and the injured woman exploded: “Of course you don’t find my food tasty anymore!” Then Fātumā Fuḷu revealed to her husband point by point that she knew everything that was going on.

Hasanu had never seen his wife like this and didn't react as the deeply-hurt woman in front of him poured out on him all her sorrow, hopelessness and despair. She was overcome by the loneliness and exasperation she had endured lately and her words became incoherent. Shaking with pain and repressed rage, Fātumā Fuḷu turned her back on his blank face and shedding tears went into the kitchen.

Then Hasanu became furious. His first impulse was to scream back at his wife and put her in her place. However, he tried to control himself thinking: "If I start a fight, she will definitely be stronger;"³⁹³ besides, the sympathies of the people in the neighborhood will mostly be with her." But all of a sudden, when the secret decision he had taken came to his mind, he calmed down and didn't say a word.

The following day in the afternoon, Hasanu prepared his adze, machete and axe, took a sack and put them inside. Then, while he was having lunch, he told his wife that he wanted to plant some things in the fields and, as there was a lot of work, she had to come along with him.

Fātumā Fuḷu didn't feel like walking the long distance to the fields to toil there in the hot afternoon sun. Lost in reverie, the woman thought about how much things had changed between her and her husband in such a short time: "Now he never smiles at me and he never says a kind word to me anymore."³⁹⁴ I am still young and my husband already wants to throw me away." She sighed deeply, "Just a few weeks ago I would have so much enjoyed to go with him to the fields, even at this hot time, but now I guess I have to go because we are still married after all." And yet, something

³⁹³ In Maldives women are assumed to be more skilled in being fiercer, using more venomous language and to endure for a longer time in verbal fights. Cf. 1.5.2 'Display of Anger.'

³⁹⁴ One should talk to the person one respects with a smile in Maldivian courtesy.

inside her was telling her not to go. She recalled that her right eyelid had been trembling often lately.³⁹⁵

After Hasanu finished his meal he got up, took the sack with his tools on his shoulder and handed over some banana shoots to Fātumā Fuḷu. The woman tied them up together with some fiber, put them on her head and followed him. The couple walked and walked and, passing by the fields, entered the forest. Fātumā Fuḷu was puzzled, “Why do you want to plant bananas so far away?” she asked. Her husband ignored her and silently walked on, deep into the jungle. She was tired and, although her heart was telling her to go back, she just walked mechanically forward until they were far away from the village.

Finally Hasanu stopped. The place around them was full of large, shady trees. It was a spot where islanders were not even going to cut firewood and where malevolent spirits were likely to dwell. Fātumā Fuḷu was frightened and began to shiver. In front of them was a small rectangular spot that had been recently cleared. It looked ominous and the woman felt as if even the trees were beckoning her to go away from there.

Hasanu began to dig in the small clearing. He worked for a long time, digging a large and deep pit. The sun was setting and Fātumā Fuḷu, standing close-by looking at him, wondered: “It’s getting late. Why are you making the hole so deep? The roots are going to rot.” Her husband merely laughed in contempt and kept digging. Finally, he got out of the long trench he had dug and stood close to his wife looking down at it.

Unexpectedly, the woman was pushed violently into the pit and landed with a thud. Fātumā Fuḷu uttered a cry, but when she looked up in astonishment and pain, she saw her husband’s face and was shocked to see his vicious expression. Instead of complaining she fell instantly silent.

³⁹⁵ This can be either an auspicious or an inauspicious omen, according to what the faṇḍitaveriyā deems is the case.

Hasanu grunted: "Now you don't need to ask what I am going to plant here."

Fātumā Fuḷu now realized she was lying inside the pit that was going to be her own grave and felt a chill of terror. The helpless woman begged Hasanu to spare her life. Weeping, she got up and rested her head on her husband's feet, wetting them with abundant tears. As they had lived so many happy years together, she hoped that some love for her would remain in his heart. Hasanu, however, was utterly indifferent to her pleas and his face showed no humanity at all. He was only becoming impatient. Slowly, it dawned on the woman that her last hour had come and she looked up to the sad red sky in despair.

Right at that moment, from an isolated little cloud, it began to rain very softly. Fātumā Fuḷu suddenly felt the coolness of the raindrops on her warm face, swollen from so much crying. With the palms of her hands upwards to catch the raindrops, the woman wailed in a clear, harrowing voice: "Oh little drops of rain! Nobody is going to see how I am killed! Little drops of rain! As you touch my body while I am being killed, please be the witnesses of my death! Be my witnesses! O crimson clouds of sunset! Be my witnesses! All the trees here around me! Be my witnesses!"

Hasanu cruelly mocked her and, as she bent again towards him begging for mercy, he lifted his adze and hit his wife on the back of the head. The blow was so strong that Fātumā Fuḷu, after giving a short death-cry no one would hear, instantly fell flat into the pit her husband had prepared for her burial.

The woman's body lay motionless and her sweet face, now shining with a beautiful expression of peace, looked upwards. Fresh blood oozing from her mortal wound was bubbling on the earth at the bottom of the grave.

Hasanu was now in a hurry. He first threw a large, heavy stone on his wife's chest and quickly dumped earth over her body. Carefully, he flattened the place and covered it with dry leaves and twigs, making it

look like a natural clearing. Then, as the light was quickly diminishing, he headed towards the village at a fast pace. The red clouds of twilight were mute witnesses to the man's hasty flight from the scene of his crime. After crossing the dark forest, Hasanu took a perpendicular path that led him to the seashore. There he took a bath, washed well his adze to efface all traces of blood and went home walking along the beach in the dusk.

Later in the evening Hasanu went to the Katibu's house and acted as if he was very upset. The island chief asked: "What happened? Why do you come at such a late hour?" The man told him that his wife went at sunset to the beach and still had not come back. Without wasting time the Katibu organized a search by blowing his conch shell and calling all the islanders to cooperate. All able people were woken up and search parties combed all the homesteads, the forest and the beach of the island.

Hasanu acted as if he was desolate during those difficult days, not eating, not shaving, not changing clothes and barely sleeping. He was secretly worried that someone could find his wife's secret grave and the anxious expression came easily to him. While the whole island was taking part in the search for the lost woman, he cunningly avoided Aisā Manike, crying on everyone's shoulder and proclaiming how much he missed Fātumā Fuḷu. Finally, after three days of unfruitful effort, the Katibu came to Hasanu's home, announcing with a sad face that he had given orders to give up the hopeless search. Hasanu was so relieved that he broke down and cried. The island chief, misunderstanding the true meaning of the tears, felt genuinely sorry for the man.

Hasanu prudently waited for a few weeks. As time passed, the islanders became busy with the preparations of a Maulūdu celebration. Then Hasanu carefully resumed his relationship with Aisā Manike and set an early date for the marriage. His island had erected a beautifully decorated pavilion to conduct the Maulūdu festival. Many high people from other islands, including the Atoll Chief and his entourage, had arrived for the occasion. Hasanu had put his best clothes on and had perfumed himself.

He was not able to hide his happiness and relief anymore. The future ahead looked bright and easy for him. He would now have a pretty young wife and his reputation as a worthy man would continue.

It was close to dusk and the large Maulūdu pavilion was lit by the light of many lamps. As the preparations were still going on, many people waited standing outside, watching how the women were bringing in the food and carefully arraying it. Hasanu, owing to his friendship with his island's important people, was standing within the crowd right beside the Katibu. Suddenly it began to rain very softly, but the excitement was such that no one paid much attention. Looking up at the red clouds and feeling the little raindrops falling on his face, Hasanu spoke aloud: "These are the same kind of raindrops that fell when I killed my wife!"

Suddenly, the Katibu looked towards him in alarm and bafflement, but Hasanu kept gazing at the sky lit by red clouds far overhead, calmly repeating: "The same little raindrops . . . the very raindrops that fell when I killed my wife."

Fuming, the island chief hit Hasanu in the back and yelled at him: "Hasanu! You first said that your wife was lost and now it turns out that you killed her!" cursing in anger, he continued, "The Atoll Chief is close by. Consider yourself arrested until I get to the bottom of this matter."

Suddenly Hasanu realized what he had said and opened his mouth in surprise. But it was too late and there was no way he could mend things now. Feeling dizzy, his legs failed him and he sat down on the ground holding his head with his hands. Immediately, Hasanu was firmly held by three men who tied his hands and feet. Shocked by the sudden disclosure, the men and women of his island surrounded him in amazement and disbelief as the news of his crime spread.

Hasanu was brought in shame to the Katību's house, where in a little time a great crowd assembled.³⁹⁶ There he was closely questioned in front of the important people of his island and the Atoll Chief. He had no will left to hide anything anymore and ended up confessing every detail of his hideous crime.

The following day the prisoner was put aboard a dōni to be brought to the capital. There he would be given lashes until the skin of his back would burst and Ionumirus (a mixture of red hot chillies and salt) would be spread on his wounds. After that the faṇḍiyāru (chief judge) may even order that he be put to death. Hasanu thought: "My plan of getting rid of Fātumā Fuḷu and marrying Aisā Manike failed. Like my wife said, the little raindrops bore witness to her death."

From the deck of the ship, Hasanu, in pain from having his feet and hands tightly bound with coconut rope, looked towards his island. It was becoming smaller and smaller. Now his whole life on that island, from his childhood onwards, came to his memory. Overwhelmed by all the thoughts that came to him, he tried to empty his mind, but he couldn't. In spite of himself, he ended up recalling some fond memories of Fātumā Fuḷu and when his island disappeared in the horizon he was weeping.

The leading point of this story is that the treacherous and unjust manner in which kind Fatmā Fuḷu is killed by Hasanu, the husband she trusted and loved, gives her access to supernatural powers even after her death. Thus, the wronged woman is able to cause even such unlikely things as raindrops to become her witnesses. Incidentally, this crucial event takes place at twilight, which is the best time to propitiate spirits. Although it is not sure whether Ahmed Wahīd based this story on an older tale, the fact that this kind of plot is ever popular in the Maldives and the fact that it

³⁹⁶ Violent crime was rare in the Maldives back then and such an event would naturally have attracted a big crowd

falls within the Dravidian village goddess narrative theme are, in all likelihood, not mere coincidence.

Childlessness is one of the common marks of these martyr goddesses. And in the story above, one can see how in Maldivian society it was not customary to divorce a woman merely on the excuse that she would not bear children. There were few things that Maldivians enjoyed more than the constant company of children of all ages in every activity. And yet, even though children were considered to be a blessing, a childless couple was not considered inauspicious, as long as they led exemplarily lives, like Fātumā Fuḷu and Hasanu in the beginning of the story.

In Maldivian culture it was important for every boy and girl to marry as soon as possible and to raise a family. Children were expected to look after their elders and provide security for them in old age. Unlike in most communities of the Subcontinent, where parents would prefer to have sons who would be able to perform the proper funeral rituals, in the Maldivian islands, there was no particular preference for boys. While in the neighboring cultures only a male could light the funeral pyre, Maldivians have always buried their dead and sons had no privileged role in death ceremonies. Hence, a couple having only daughters would not consider itself cursed.

Considering the general fondness Islanders have for children, neighbors and relatives would feel privately sorry for a childless couple. But even then, traditionally everyone thought it a cruel act if a man would divorce his barren wife after years of marriage. In fact it was deemed more uncharitable to divorce a childless wife than a woman who had already children because that would compound her loneliness. Still, if the husband decided to do so, the new wife would be under the threat of the former wife's sorrow, bitterness, and eventual malevolence. As traditional Maldivians reckoned that females had some kind of obscure powers, few people would feel comfortable putting themselves in a position that was so vulnerable to attacks.

Divehi women may resort to sorcery to bring their husband back: There is a folk story called ‘Doñ Beyya’ a castaway and sole survivor of an ill-fated trading journey, who had settled somewhere in what is now Indonesia after a terrible ordeal, despairing to ever return to Maldives. Meanwhile the wife in the hero’s island, sure that he is alive, spends years making magic to bring her husband back home. Thousands of miles away, Doñ Beyya’s new wife is prey of horrible nightmares induced by his former wife’s sorcery. This has the effect of ruining the man’s marriage, leading him to take the decision to leave his foreign wife and look for a way of returning home. Owing to its importance in preserving the marriage and its role in social control, this theme will be discussed with more detail in the next chapter.

While in ‘Little Raindrops’ it is the attraction towards a younger girl that triggers murderous thoughts in the hero, in Kamaṇa’s story the beauty of the heroine herself makes her the center of sexual attraction. Even if she is not interested in having relationships with men, it is her intense beauty that brings about the girl’s violent end and gruesome mutilation.

Since she is powerless to avoid her cruel fate, Kamaṇa’s myth fits the first of the two patterns Brubaker identified in the Dravidian village goddess stories: The woman is innocent and her suffering is an outrage; her attractiveness is her undoing but it is not her doing; the male is drawn to her and uses her cruelly, but she does nothing to provoke his action. In the second pattern, which can be discerned in other Divehi stories (‘Haṇḍi Doñ Kamaṇā,’ ‘The House of Sorrow’ among others), the emphasis is reversed: The goddess uses her attractiveness to lure the male and this eventually leads to his destruction.³⁹⁷

Female beauty is a double-edged sword. Beauty as a curse for a young woman is a recurring theme in ancient Tamil literature. Often the heroine

³⁹⁷ R.L. Brubaker, Op. cit. above

wishes her beauty away in order to achieve other goals in life, like in the story of Avvaiyār (an incarnation of Goddess Sarasvatī) or the case of Kāraikkal Ammaiyyār (the faithful and devoted worshipper). In both instances beautiful women prefer to become old hags to avoid being bothered by men or by marriage.³⁹⁸

In the Maldives, as in Indic tradition, beauty is a mark of great auspiciousness; therefore the attractiveness in a woman is to be displayed so that its brilliance may shine on all. This resilient island custom has constantly clashed with the Islamic mania of covering and cloistering females. The traditional jewellery Divehi women used to wear, the complex hairstyles and even the later karufehī libās dress with its golden embroidered neck were meant to enhance feminine charm. As beauty is held to be a virtue, the young wife is considered to be a treasure. She is a family's greatest ornament, enhancing the dignity and worth not only of her husband, but of her whole household.

Contrary to Semitic custom, Maldivian society has always let female beauty unfurl and good-looking women have traditionally been valued as a source of pride for any island, reflecting the ancient values of the neighboring Subcontinent where the Kathāsaritsāgara, referring to the beautiful wife of a King, says: *"She was a fitting ornament to the king, like language is to a poet who enjoys its many possibilities. She shone with virtue and auspiciousness and (her beauty) was to the king as moonlight is to the moon which contains the nectar of immortality."* Comparisons of female beauty with the moon are very common in Maldives too.

On the one hand the calm display of beauty and virtue, on the other the violent sexual defilement and senseless mutilation, followed by death. In Kamaṇā's legend there is an element of loss in the destruction of the

³⁹⁸ Thangam Krishnan, from the story 'The Goddess who wanted to be a Mortal' in 'A Mythological Mosaic' and S. Rajam, 'The Lady of Karaikkal' in 'Periapuranam in Pictures'.

potential fertility and of the good that would have resulted from the unfolding of the girl's qualities, if she would have lived, that is followed by intense spiritual pathos. This leads irreversibly to the community's mourning ennobling the cause of the young woman. The two Goddesses Sammakka and Sarakka, popular in certain tribal Telengana districts, unlike Brahmanic Gods, are martyrs, instead of victors. In spite of having been killed in an unequal battle, suffering utter defeat like Kamaṇā, they were transformed into divine spirits and are now worshipped as protective divinities.³⁹⁹

Notwithstanding the fact that Kamaṇā is pure, beautiful and full of promise, the flower was nipped in the bud before it could fully open and ripen. Hence, while the girl represents health and growth, her attackers personify brutal and random powers which bring about suffering and desolation. Both the divine forces of virtue and the demonic forces of destruction are reckoned to be at work within the community. The reliable and positive strength is represented by a beautiful and virtuous female and the unpredictable and violent forces by lustful men. Here the latter gain the upper hand, so that the sad results may be shown. The mythic theme of these Dravidian stories underlines the fact that the goddess's abuse by males is in relationship with the invasion of the village or island by hostile demons from outside during an epidemic.⁴⁰⁰

Epidemics may represent either that the Goddess's protective defences have broken down and victorious demons are able to attack the island, or the wrath of the awakened Goddess, who is demanding worship by punishing her own people for having neglected her. In the first case the Goddess is, albeit temporally, defeated by demons: *"She receives the main brunt of the onslaught, but she is unable or unwilling, to contain it all and*

³⁹⁹ K. Ilaiah, from the chapter 'Hindu Gods and Us', Op. cit. above

⁴⁰⁰ D. Kingsley, Op. cit. above

*spreads it to the villagers*⁴⁰¹ and in the second she displays a further weakness and chastises her own children for not fulfilling her need for attention.

Thus is the ambivalence of the Village Goddess who, though herself the epitome of virtue and might, knows deeply the suffering and defeat in the heart of every devotee.⁴⁰² Her empathy attracts worshippers, because there is nothing as human as suffering and defeat, which everyone has to face, sooner or later, in life. Furthermore, out of the necessity to keep at bay hostile demons, emerges the terrible, armed and bloodthirsty aspect of this same Goddess. The idea of revenge, which is also very human, is usually the other side of the coin in most Dravidian stories about mythical martyred women. Kamaṇḍā's legend is like the beginning of the story of Nīli, a folk-goddess of Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nāḍu, but the end where in the Indian Dēvi folk stories the bloodthirsty goddess arises, is oddly absent and we are left to wonder what became of the brutal men who martyred innocent Kamaṇḍā. Nīli's story goes thus:

"Once there were two sisters of contrasting characters. The elder sister (Palavūr Nīli) was somewhat naive. She assumed that everyone had good intentions. Kaliyankāḍ Nīli, the younger sister, was a practical person. Although a good girl too, she didn't see the point in trying to please everyone. One fateful day some evil men, taking advantage of the elder sister's soft character, brought her to a lonely place and brutally raped her. The younger sister became furious. She wanted so vehemently to punish the offenders, that following her rightful and strong desire she received divine powers. Thus she became a fiery goddess who immediately set out to destroy the men who had defiled her sister. Nīli killed them in a gruesome way, torturing them and ending up cutting their throats and

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Kalpana Ram, Op. cit. above

*spilling their blood all over. She then went on destroying all the men who showed signs of wickedness. Even though bloodthirsty, Nīli is disarmed by people who have a good heart and do good deeds out of sincere motives.*⁴⁰³

The meek and gentle women in the Divehi stories narrated in this chapter are in sharp contrast with the terrifying female spirits prevalent in Maldivian oral narrative. Interestingly, the fearful face of the goddess seems to be justified by the fact that men always tend to take advantage of the position of authority they are commonly assigned in society. Folk tales like Kamaṇā show how male privileges are often used to hurt righteous women and there are other stories where a symmetrical cruel woman—which reflects the violence inflicted by males upon women—sets things right.

As if to confirm this, present-day social changes brought about not only by the enforcement of ideological Islam, but even by modernization have affected the traditional status of Divehi women in a negative way. With the advent of the tourist industry and merchant-navy labor, the lion's share of economic opportunities has fallen into the hands of men, upsetting the traditional male-female economical balance. Thus, Divehi women have lost power in their society. The bloodthirsty Dēvi portrays the innermost wishes for justice experienced by disempowered women enduring a situation that is not right. Thus, it reverses in the spiritual realm the injustices of the physical world.

⁴⁰³ Source: Chellam, Nīli temple priestess, Kalyankāḍ, Tamil Nāḍu.

2.5.2 THE IDEALIZATION OF THE FEMININE

Even when, generally, a series of disquieting, inauspicious qualities have been ascribed to women and female deities in the Indic tradition —pollution through menses, jealousy, destructive anger, tempting men to sin— one cannot ignore the fact that, at the same time, they possess the acme of auspicious qualities: fertility.⁴⁰⁴ From it springs the basic law that without women there are no children. Indeed, the Mother, as creator and preserver has a more plausible religious role, within the popular Dravidian village cults, than Brahmānic male divinities like creator Brahmā or preserver Viṣṇu.⁴⁰⁵ After all, babies grow within the mother's womb and it is woman who gives birth to them (creation), and it is woman who feeds them the milk of her own breasts and who nurtures and cares for them until they are big enough (preservation).

The Tamil work Śilappadikāram portrays the goddess as the supreme deity, adored by all the gods, including the trinity of Brahma, Viṣṇu and Shiva. The idealization of woman as mother in the Southern Indian Village Goddess tradition has its origin in the fact that in the village cults of the subcontinent female deities are preponderant and wield a great deal of authority. Despite the fact that village goddesses are generally called 'Amma' (mother), some authors, such as W.T. Elmore, argue that many of their functions are anything but mother-like:

"The general idea, however, which the Dravidians have of their gods is not at all maternal, and I believe that mother-worship did not originate with them either as to the name or the conception."

⁴⁰⁴ Ellis O. Shaw, 'Rural Hinduism'.

⁴⁰⁵ Concerning the identification of the Dēvi with Viṣṇu, see the comments on the Tamil work Takkayāgapparaṇi by Ottakkūtar (12th cent. AD) in R. Nagaswami, 'Tantric Cult of South India.'

On the other hand, the Brahmānic goddesses are secondary divinities who keep mostly in the background, as the subservient and self-effacing wives of the powerful Hindu male gods.⁴⁰⁶ Village goddesses are often defined as forms of Shiva's wife Parvati, in an effort to assimilate all cults of the Subcontinent into the Hindu pantheon. This tendency was more marked from the 12th century onwards, when Śaiva shrines were incorporated into most Devi temples.

In the Maldivian island environment, there is a parallel between the ambivalence of the Goddess as both bountiful mother and wrathful, fearsome hag, and the ambivalence of the sea as both a source of food to sustain island people and as a dangerous place taking the lives of fishermen and traders. Furthermore, both the mother —as the role of the feminine in society— and the surrounding sea are regarded as unavoidable and ever-present aspects of island life.

Kamaṇā in the story of the preceding chapter was not an average woman. Already during her lifetime, her insistence on keeping away from males and her numerous virtues can be categorized as supernatural within the Maldivian island social background. Similarly, when a haṇḍi, a spirit, goes to live among humans, it displays virtues that are definitely part of a superhuman ideal. Since it is well known that such spirits have a negative, fierce side to them too, stories like the one that follows tend to underline and idealize Janus-like characteristics that are assumed to be essentially feminine.⁴⁰⁷

In contrast with most haṇḍi myths, the following one is a gentle, pleasant story which even includes humorous scenes:

⁴⁰⁶ Source: Srikala Nair, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit

⁴⁰⁷ Told in 1991 by Muhammad Manikufānu, Diggāmāge, Dūṇḍigamu Village, Fua Mulaku Island.

The Tamed Haṇḍi

“Maige Ahumadu Takkān’s son Muhammad Dīdī was a mighty faṇḍitaveriyā. He was hard-working and honest and he had a reputation for being a fearless man too. Even though he was past his middle age and his hair was turning silvery grey, he went every day alone to the forest to plant coconut palms or clear the jungle in order to plant taro.

One day he was in a very thick part of the bush slashing the vegetation to prepare a taro field. He was keeping the thickest sticks to bring home for firewood and burned the heaps of leaves and twigs left by his work. Clearing in this manner with his axe, he cut some heavy kando (Hernandia ovigera) branches loaded with large green leaves. When they fell to the ground, he saw a naked girl curled up in the ground against the mesh of intertwining stilt roots of a dense screwpine shrub. Muhammad Dīdī was startled and drew back in fear, but then he realized that the girl looked terrified.

Her eyes and mouth were larger than normal and she had big, beautifully gleaming, very white teeth. Then Muhammad Dīdī saw also something that sent a chill down his spine: This girl had curved sharp talons at the back of her heels. She was not a human being! She was a haṇḍi, and he could see that she had been trapped there, unable to flee from the fire and the smoke.

It was the first time Muhammad Dīdī had seen a haṇḍi so close, for these spirits feel uneasy at cleared places and love the thick, dark bush. But once his initial surprise faded, he was not afraid anymore. After all, he was a faṇḍita man and knew how to deal with spirits. Muhammad Dīdī also knew that a haṇḍi would be hard-working and talk little. Now, at his home, the women —at that time the extended families used to live together in a single house or compound— were lazy, careless, talkative and always very cunning, finding an excuse for not working. He knew that

if he could force this haṇḍi into submission she would be obedient, clean and straightforward. She could work inside the house, so the other women would be able to go to the taro field, gather firewood and do other tasks.

Meanwhile, the girl was frozen by terror and remained very quiet, opening her eyes very wide. Thus, Muhammad Dīdī performed some strong faṇḍita writing, a powerful mantra to bring the spirit under his control, on the blade of his masdaiyffiohi (ritual knife) which he always carried on him. Next he thrust the knife in the earth close to the Haṇḍi's feet.

Muhammad Dīdī now squatted close to the girl and spoke to her in a kind voice: "Kāñlō,⁴⁰⁸ come to my house, I will treat you well." She glared at him knitting her brow, like local people do when confronted with an impertinent question. He insisted a second time very gently. She kept silent, eyeing him still with mistrust. Muhammad Dīdī insisted a third time. Then her face relaxed and she lowered her head, looking down. Now he knew she would come, so he said: "Get up and come!" and the haṇḍi got up and followed him. On the way home Muhammad Dīdī cut screwpine leaves, shaved the thorny edges off, and bound them together at one end. Then he told the girl to cover her nakedness with this leaf skirt. When she tied them around the waist, the leaves covered her legs down to her feet.⁴⁰⁹

Both of them arrived home quietly and Muhammad Dīdī told everyone: "She is a poor girl from the other end of the island. Her parents are dead and nobody is left to look after her. She will work in this house, but she will not go to the taro fields or to gather firewood to the forest." When they

⁴⁰⁸ A term of endearment. Kambulō in the Male' Bas.

⁴⁰⁹ Fua Mulaku people say that in very ancient times, islanders wore skirts made of screwpine leaves. Later only utterly destitute people wore them. This custom disappeared long ago.

asked her for her name, he himself answered: "She is called Maryā, she doesn't talk much."

True to her nature, Maryā was silent, obedient and very hard working. She only had to be shown once how a particular task was to be done and she would repeat it to perfection. After a few days, she could do most of the work in the home. Muhammad Dīdī's family house was a big, wealthy place, which every day got its share of fish from their dōni (fishing boat). Soon the haṇḍi was cutting the large tunas, boiling them and drying them better than any woman in the household.

The time came when Muhammad Dīdī ordered that a red libās dress and a fēli (waistcloth with black and white bands) be woven for Maryā; and also that some ornaments be bought for her. He didn't think it was fair that she go around looking so scruffy, with only a long leaf skirt around her waist, when she was doing so much work. Some of his women relatives angrily protested: "She is just a homeless, wretched girl! It's all right if she is dressed poorly. Who is she anyway?" But Muhammad Dīdī gently calmed the women down by pointing out: "We live in an affluent house. People already know how hard she works and how good she is. If we let her go about dressed like a poor person, they will say we are very greedy and miserly people." The women, after considering this, had to agree.

But it so happened that when Maryā put on the dress, everybody was stunned. With her hands and feet dyed red with henna and the sparkling jewellery, she looked like a lady of noble birth. Her beauty was so dazzling that the young people of the house lowered their eyes before her in awe. Henceforth the children gave up teasing her and began calling her 'Maryandaitā' out of deference.⁴¹⁰ Respect for this unpretentious girl increased all over the house, for no one could find any fault in her and she herself never spoke evil about anyone. Soon thereafter, even the entire

⁴¹⁰ Daitā, meaning approximately 'auntie', a term of endearment and respect

neighborhood agreed that the girl deserved to be treated with respect and everyone always referred to her as ‘Maryandaitā’. However, young women both in the house and in the neighborhood began to feel threatened.

The haṇḍi talked little but wasn’t sullen. She never used filthy language, and there were no lice in her hair. Once Muhammad Dīdī’s mother spied on her and realized that she ate very little: just a small aladari (young taro shoot) and a mahavaḷi,⁴¹¹ and only when she was alone, while the other women were stuffing themselves with food at every meal. Maryā also worked in a way that she always seemed to enjoy what she was doing. No job seemed difficult or boring to her. Her hands were never still and when there was no work to be done in the kitchen or in the house, she made rope with coir fiber. She was so clean and careful, that there was not a single bedbug in the beds and the whole place was spick-and-span and in order. Muhammad Dīdī was happy.

But being beautiful made life difficult for Maryā and it bred conflict. In the evenings, while the other young women went out to make jokes and laugh⁴¹² with young men close to the house, Maryā chose to stay inside. She went to sleep soon after lighting the oil lamps and hanging them in their places. If a young man asked her why she wouldn’t come outside to talk to him, she would politely refuse, saying that she preferred to go to sleep early in order to wake up before sunrise to sweep the place; and so she did. Every morning, while it was still dark, the young woman got up and went to call the boys who had to go fishing.⁴¹³ Then she took a bath in

⁴¹¹ When the tuna is cut in the Maldivian way, this corresponds to a small section close to the gills which is mostly bone.

⁴¹² In traditional Maldivian society, there were no restrictions for girls as regards talking or in interacting socially with men. However, parents would advise their young daughters not to laugh and joke with them.

⁴¹³ Fishermen are usually called to go fishing when the dikoi (or koveli) bird (*Culculus saturatus*) sings, that is between three and four o’clock in the morning.

the veu, dressed herself, combed her hair, tied it in a neat bun⁴¹⁴ and swept the leaves which had fallen from the breadfruit trees during the night. After she had piled the dry leaves up in heaps and set fire to them, the girl went to the kitchen and started to work while everyone, except for the fishermen out at sea, was still in bed.

Some men, impressed by Maryā's beauty and good qualities, approached Muhammad Dīdī. They privately told him they wished to marry her, but he put them off, one after the other, giving some excuse. Men talked admiringly about Maryā, and the other girls in the house and in the neighborhood were openly jealous of the way all the young males were fussing about her.

Women ridiculed Maryā's way of putting men off, thinking it was just a way of trying to fan more interest in her, and mocked: "She is so arrogant!" Truly, men were not discouraged by Maryā's disinterest and made magic charms using limes, cockroaches and other things, to make her fall in love with them. But their sorcery had no effect on her. In time, as all their efforts proved unsuccessful, they gave up desiring Maryā and approached more easy women. Maryā, who resented so much unwanted attention, was relieved. The other females, who had been so openly hostile towards Maryā at first, felt very happy with her because they could see she wouldn't take away their lovers from them. As time passed, all the other girls came to trust her and became her friends again. However, a haṇḍi is a haṇḍi and Maryā's behavior was at times very strange.

Muhammad Dīdī had many coconut trees and from a good number of them, the rāveruñ would tap the rā (palm sap). Very often a lot of rā was brought to the house and it was cooked in large pots, to make syrup. While it is boiling, some pebbles are put inside the sap, to avoid excessive

⁴¹⁴ Cf. 2.1.2 'From Sweetness to Horror.' The importance of hair-tying in Dravidian society is explained in K. Ram, Op. cit. above.

foaming. Although she managed to do every other job well, the girl was terrified at the noise made by the boiling *rā* with the stones banging against the pot. Every time, after putting the pots of sap over the fireplace, Maryā would run away before it started to boil.⁴¹⁵ She darted out of the kitchen and across the taro fields into a wild screwpine clump, a much loved place for female spirits to conceal themselves. There she would hide until somebody would call her and assure her that the syrup was ready and the fire was put out. Then the girl would emerge out of the screwpine trees and walk slowly towards the house, trembling, with downcast eyes out of fear and shame.

Everyone thought Maryā was a bit crazy and they got used to her strange habit. The other women had their fun at seeing her run out the kitchen in terror every time the *rā* began to boil. Sometimes the children would follow her and stare at her while she was sitting wedged between the stilt roots of the screwpine or sitting up on the screwpine branches, terror written all over her face. She would ignore them no matter how much they teased her. The only one in the house who didn't make fun of Maryā's ways was Muhammad Dīdī and his face had a troubled look when anyone spoke to him about this.

Many years passed and Muhammad Dīdī died. However, beautiful Maryā kept staying in his house. She was not growing old, but kept looking as young and pretty as the first year she came. She still was humbly doing all the household work without ever complaining. Now the magic that kept her in the house was gone. But it is said that she didn't go back to the forest because she loved dearly the people in what had been Muhammad Dīdī's home and she was dearly loved by them in return.

⁴¹⁵ Certain noises, as well as the sound of certain mantras, are known to scare away spirits. Among the Chamar caste of North India it is believed that the sputtering sound of the chapati on the tawa is offensive to goddess Sītala and women dip their hands in flour before flattening it to avert her anger during smallpox epidemics. G.W. Briggs, 'The Chamars.'

One day, Maryā was sitting on the aṣi (a raised platform) with other men and women of the household. While they were engaged in conversation, idly chewing betel, she was scratching her leg absent-mindedly. All of a sudden, a man saw her bare leg and noticed the claw on her heel. The girl happened to look towards his shocked face and quickly pulled her fēli underclothing down. But it was too late, because he got up, went straight towards her yelling: “You are not a human being! You are a haṇḍi!”, and grabbed her fēli, pulling it with such strength that it came off.

Maryā lost balance and fell messily on the floor with her two legs in the air. Now everyone got up and stared at her with mouths open in amazement and horror. Full of shame, the young woman didn’t dare to look up. She lay there propped on her elbows for a while in bewilderment with legs spread apart exposing her taloned heels. Finally she looked up. The man was standing in front of her, holding her fēli in his hand, and all the eyes of men, women and children were fixed on her. Then she began to weep bitterly and, before anyone could react or even say a word, Maryā jumped up and fled from the house.

Some children playing outside saw the girl racing across the taro fields in tears before she disappeared into the forest without leaving any trace. After a while, the people in the household were regretful and looked and looked for her, but nobody found out where she was hiding.

Maryā never came back, but long after she disappeared some people said that they still had seen her and heard her close to Muhammad Dīdī’s house in the darkness, before dawn. They say that she would sweep the path to the house or that she would sneak into the kitchen and clean the pots and put everything in order. Local tradition claims that she is still occasionally seen to this day.

It is worth noticing that Maryā’s attitude towards men is identical with Kamaṇa’s, the heroine of this chapter’s first story. Muhammad Dīdī’s refusal to give the haṇḍi in marriage and Maryā’s utter disinterest in men

can be better understood in the context of Indian folk tales where the goddess comes to live among common mortals, such as in one of the tales of the Kathāsaritsāgara: *“Honourable lady, who are you and why have you descended into my house?” She replied, ‘You must not give me to anyone in marriage. As long as I am in this house, you shall prosper. What need is there for you to know any more?’ Dharmagupta was frightened when Somaprabha said this and hid her inside his house.”*

The goddess coming to live as a humble girl among humans and doing the household work to perfection is a common theme in popular South Indian narrative. There is a popular Telugu movie about a girl (who later turns out to be an incarnation of Durgā) supernaturally doing all the heavy work her grumpy mistress forces her to do.

This story gives a good insight into the idealization of feminine qualities in Divehi female spirits, once their negative, dangerous nature has been effectively neutralized. In South Indian culture, as has been briefly pointed out further above, it was important for a girl to lead a discreet, unpretentious life. A young woman, who was forced to come out of her prescribed role owing to unwanted circumstances, was justified in expressing her outrage by committing suicide or expressing extreme destructive anger. This is manifestly portrayed in the figure of Kannagi, the heroine of the Tamil epic Śilappadikāram, who in her righteous fury destroyed the city of Madurai.⁴¹⁶ Instead, in ‘The Tamed Haṇḍi’ story, Maryā disappears, depriving the people of the household of her beneficial and benign presence. She is justified in doing so in outrage at having been put to shame in public after her life had been led with virtue and discretion.

Maryā’s story is basically not very different from a very famous legend of Kerala called the Yakṣī of Padmanabhapuram. Yakṣīs or Yakṣīnis are

⁴¹⁶ Ilango Adigal, ‘Śilappadikaram’.

graceful female tree spirits which can become bloodthirsty hags, killing their victims and sucking their blood out —although the term *dakīni* exists in Divehi no stories connected to it were forthcoming—. In this legend, a beautiful *Yakṣī* used to lure the wayfarers traveling between Trivandrum and Kanyakumari with her beauty, to kill them afterwards. One day, she is domesticated by a Brahmin priest who plants a magic nail in her head. Then he brings her to his aunt's home and she does the household work there to perfection. But one day his aunt, while combing the *Yakṣī*'s hair, removes the nail and the girl disappears.⁴¹⁷

At the end of the 'Tamed *Haṇḍi*,' as in the popular tale 'Haṇḍi Doṅ Kamaṇā,' the supernatural heroine disappears when her secret is discovered by the humans she has been living with. Also in North India there are legends with a similar ending. One of these is the story of the *ḍākinī* ancestress of the Palwār Rājputs of Oudh (Ayodhya). Note that in this story it is a man who discovers the secret, in the same manner as in 'The Tamed *Haṇḍi*':

*"Soon after the birth of her son this lady was engaged in baking roṭi. Suddenly, her baby began to cry and she was obliged to perform a double duty. At this juncture her husband arrived just in time to see his demon wife assume gigantic and supernatural proportions, so as to allow both the baking and the nursing to go on at the same time. But finding her secret discovered, the ḍākinī disappeared leaving her son as a legacy to her astonished husband."*⁴¹⁸

In Maldives there are a few other stories following the pattern of 'The Tamed *Haṇḍi*.' The spirit appears mysteriously in the kitchen and in the house while nobody is around, does some work and disappears. This spirit

⁴¹⁷ I.K.K. Menon, 'Folk Tales of Kerala'.

⁴¹⁸ Oudh Gazetteer, III, 480, quoted by W. Crooke, 'Popular Religion & Folklore of Northern India.'

is sometimes referred to as avat̤tehi or avat̤teriya (neighbor) and there are islands in the North of the country where it is said that, instead of a lady, it is a short, black child who cleans the pots left outside the kitchen during the night.

2.6.1 THE DANGEROUS SIDE OF WOMEN

Maldivians conceive married life as a must. Celibacy is not only unthinkable, but also suspect: if a man and a woman don't have a normal sexual life, understood as a functioning marriage in order to build a family, it is assumed that they may fall prey to unnatural, perverse habits, ending up worse off. Scott O'Connor, a friend working in a small-scale farming project in Ari Atoll, told me that the islanders were convinced that goats of both sexes needed to be together in order to live. They were positive that if males and females were kept in separate pens, as he had suggested, death would follow.

Within the context that marriage is unquestionable, islanders generally believe that man's lot in life is closely connected to his wife's character, qualities and behavior. A man married to the right woman will attract blessings in his life. He will not only be free from worries as far as the running of his household is concerned, but he also will generally have 'better luck' in whatever he undertakes: His palms will produce more sap or more coconuts, he will fish more and bigger fishes, his trade dealings will bring him higher profits, etc.

In Divehi tradition it is assumed that women have an enormous influence in the fate of men. They have powers to control the supernatural forces that can make a life easier or more difficult. Generally, it is considered harmful to wrong a woman, because destructive forces of unknown consequences may be unleashed by her grief, worry or spite. Hence, women, as opposed to men, are considered to be unpredictable and to possess potentially dangerous powers. This dark, sacred power that women possess is called 'aṇaṇku' in the Tamil language. It is one of the two main powers, the other being the kingly authority, that rule human life according to the ancient Saṅgam literature. Both powers are deemed to be divine, the center of religious and political power being the king, and

women holding the key for the survival of the society by their ability to give birth and nourish the babies.⁴¹⁹

A Maldivian woman's duty is to be a hard-working, clean and virtuous wife, but this is attached to the condition that her husband is under the obligation, which is almost a threat, to treat her well because of her mysterious control of obscure powers. Many local stories are based on the ruinous consequences of upsetting this balance. The following tale⁴²⁰ is an illustration of a woman's destructive power wreaking havoc after her husband causes her to become entangled in an unbearable situation:

The Scarlet Wake

"Long ago, a handsome middle-aged man came to an island in Aḍḍu Atoll on a trading journey and had to stay there for a few weeks. He hadn't met his good-natured hosts previously, but they were very kind to him. There was such a pleasant atmosphere in their home, that the stranger felt obligated to them to continue having all his meals there, steadily refusing the frequent invitations from other houses.

In that happy house lived a pretty young woman, Eḷa Fātumā, who was unmarried. She didn't belong to the house owners' family. Her parents were very poor and she had been working in that house since she was a little girl. She didn't miss her family. As she was treated very well and loved her employers, she was very glad to live there.

Eḷa Fātumā did all the household work in a cheerful mood. She was always smiling and singing. Among her daily chores, she often had to serve food,

⁴¹⁹ See also K. Ram and W.P. Hartman, Op. cit.

⁴²⁰ Told in 1983 by the late Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī. The trader's Atoll was very likely Huvadū, but specific islands were not mentioned in this story.

drink, or betel and nut to the stranger. One day his eyes met hers and she flashed an alluring smile. Thereafter, whenever the young woman brought a glass to the handsome guest they playfully touched each other's hands while nobody was looking (a very common way of flirting in rural Maldives). It took but little time and they fell deeply in love with each other.

The man asked the girl to marry him, but he also told her that he had to go back and that perhaps it would be difficult for her to live far away from her home island. However, Eḷa Fātumā was so much in love with this man, that she already had made her decision. She told him that she was ready to go with him wherever he went. Shortly thereafter, they were married.

One day the newly-wedded couple boarded a boat and left to the man's island. The young woman was very thrilled and she considered herself very lucky. Suddenly, upon arrival at the island that would be her new home, Eḷa Fātuma, to her dismay, found out that her husband was a widower who had been already married before. He even had two grown-up daughters who came to greet him to the beach. The girls looked very arrogant and were almost as big as her.

How outraged she was! She thought: "I have never felt so much shame in all my life."⁴²¹ Her world, from being golden and blissful, had suddenly turned very bitter. Making an enormous effort, the young woman swallowed her feelings of humiliation and smiled wanly to everyone she met in her husband's home. During the following gloomy days Eḷa Fātumā was very careful not to show either anger or disappointment. But her husband felt some change in her mood and said: "I know why you are angry." She answered: "I am not angry."

⁴²¹ "Ladaha' kiriyā maru nivē." Literally: "Almost died of shame." A local expression, often spoken aloud, to signal distress and humiliation.

He knew she was, though; and he missed her bright, easy smile and her lively chatter. So, he tried to be nice to her, giving excuses like: "I didn't dare to tell you about these girls, because I thought that you wouldn't want to marry me. But you don't have to worry; they will help you in the house. Life will be easier for you."

Eġa Fātumā looked around her in consternation, but acted as if she was contented. She tried to be friendly to the girls, but they were cold and indifferent towards her. The two young women and their deceased mother's relatives clearly resented the attention their father was giving to this stranger from another island. They were extremely unfriendly and their constant ill-will didn't make life easy for her.

Months passed and Eġa Fātumā had to endure the nagging, disdainful ways of the other women in silence. The injury in her heart was by now too deep to heal; she felt lonely, trapped and hurt. She sorely missed the happy and carefree ways she had left in her home island, among her own people. Her husband was the only person in that hostile place who had some sympathy for her, but she knew well that even his heart was divided. It was useless to complain to him because he was very fond of his daughters and she would look like the bad person. Whenever she was alone, Eġa Fātumā crouched in a dark spot and cried bitter tears in secret.

The fishing season was approaching. One day, at dawn, the husband brought his wife and his two daughters to a certain uninhabited island to cut a large amount of firewood that would later be needed to boil the tuna in order to preserve it. They traveled on a small sailing boat. The women carried some food, pots and their kativali (large machete knives). The man repaired the little hut in the island with some new thatching and sticks. As he was leaving he told Eġa Fātumā and the girls that he was going to catch some reef fish and that he would be back before sunset.

Once her husband was away, Eġa Fātumā told one of the daughters to stay at the hut and cook something while she and her sister went to cut

firewood. Then she walked with the other girl resolutely into the bush. When they had been going for a while, the daughter was tired and sweating from trying to keep up with her stepmother. Finally she whined: "Why are we going so far away? We can start cutting firewood here; there is so much of it around us." Eḷa Fātumā didn't answer. She kept walking obstinately at a fast pace and the daughter, who was afraid to be left alone in the wilderness, had to follow her grudgingly. The jungle was thick and, to be able to move forward, now and then both women had to cut low branches with the *kativaḷi* they were holding.

All of a sudden, when they came to a small clearing, Eḷa Fātumā stopped. But before her stepdaughter standing behind her could move, she turned and gave the stunned girl such a violent blow with her *kativaḷi* that her head, cleanly separated from her neck, flew into the tangled bushes and rolled on the dry leaves. Then the woman took a shortcut across the forest and went to the waterside, where she washed her bloody hands and knife. After letting some time pass, Eḷa Fātumā walked along the beach towards the hut.

The other girl had made a hearth with stones close to the hut and was squatting there in the shade of the large trees, cooking rice in a pot. She was busy keeping the fire going, so she didn't get up when she heard someone arriving. The daughter didn't look well at the woman's face either when Eḷa Fātumā came close to her, firmly clutching the murderous weapon in her hand. Vaguely looking around she just asked: "Where is my sister?"

Eḷa Fātumā, ominously looming behind her, said: "She went to the beach at the other end to take a bath," and while the girl was distracted fanning the fire to reduce the smoke, the woman's *kativaḷi* hit her neck from the back with all her strength. The blow was so powerful that the daughter's severed head banged against the pot, spilling the water to one side. Most of its long, black hair got instantly burned in the fire.

Then Eḷa Fātumā walked again into the forest and returned with the bleeding head of the other girl. Carefully, she put each head in a separate muḍeişi basket and brought them to the brightly-lit lagoon. There, holding a muḍeişi in each hand, she waded until the water was waist-high. Only then she released the baskets, setting them adrift. The young woman watched how the current carried the girls' heads away, their scarlet wakes slowly fading. After a while, Eḷa Fātumā washed herself with the sea water and walked back to the bushes fringing the beach above the waterline.

Eḷa Fātumā sat very still under the shade of a tree and looked persistently at the horizon. She was squinting with her eyes, waiting only to see the sail of her husband's boat. Many hours passed and in the late afternoon, when the little vessel was in sight, the woman had not stirred at all.

Now she got up and walked calmly to the beach to meet him, holding one katalaḷi in each hand. As the boat touched the sand, the man stepped out. His wife was standing in front of him but didn't say a word. She was looking at his eyes with intense fierceness, breathing heavily. Her long black hair was a wild, uncombed mane blown larger by the wind.

The island was eerily silent. The man nervously looked around and then, reluctantly, at fearful-looking Eḷa Fātumā. He hesitated, and then his voice trembled when he asked: "Where are the girls?"

Without answering, holding the knives upright, blades inwards, Eḷa Fātumā stretched her neck and, with a swift and vigorous movement, crossed her hands over her chest.⁴²² Her severed head fell at the feet of her husband and a thick jet of blood sprinkled him before the young woman's body collapsed.

⁴²² At this point the storyteller mimicked the powerful, scissor-like motion with his own arms

It was common for young Maldivian girls of destitute background like Eḷa Fātumā to seek employment by themselves in the houses of affluent people before puberty. Since before that age girls used to have their head shaven regularly, this custom was called ‘bol dikkeranna’ (to let the hair grow). Once it became obvious that a girl was growing into a woman, she would not have to shave her hair anymore unless she had to apply medicine on her head.⁴²³ However, marriages such as Eḷa Fātumā’s were very rare in island society. The usual norm required the groom to come to live to the bride’s home and become part of his wife’s family. Hence, Eḷa Fātumā’s decision involved a great risk from a Maldivian point of view, since she would place herself at the mercy of a family not her own, in a strange island. Ibn Batūta noted that his Divehi wives asked to be divorced when he decided to leave the country.

The interplay between the beneficial and the dangerous side of a woman is a recurring theme in Divehi folklore. Although at the beginning of the narrative the heroine is portrayed as a poor, self-effacing and kind girl, she turns out to be a very strong and determined female. Her husband, by more or less unwittingly causing her humiliation, awakens his young wife’s dark face opening a Pandora’s Box of violence, released by her deep chagrin, as if the violence had been lurking there, waiting to happen. Telling these stories to preserve the memory of women who have died in a tragic way is a very important feature of South Indian folklore, as in the ‘Kamaṇā’ story narrated in the previous chapter. The striking feature about this story is the tragic end in which the heroine cuts off her own head. Eḷa Fātumā does this out of vindictiveness and what is left unsaid,

⁴²³ Information by Kokkobeage Sakīna, Fua Mulaku

but is implicit in the ending, is that the woman's spirit will haunt her husband for the rest of his life.⁴²⁴

As in many other Maldivian tales, 'The Scarlet Wake' is probably not based on a real event, but it may reflect the content of very old legends about some kind of supreme sacrifice. It is known that in ancient Tamil Nadu there were devotees who went to the extent of cutting off their own head as an offering to the goddess Koṭṭavai.⁴²⁵ In South India, sculptures or bas-reliefs representing a devotee severing his own head with a sword are a common feature in the vicinity of medieval Durgā sculptures. *"(They) offer the supreme sacrifice to the goddess by cutting off their head and offering the blood coming out of their severed neck."* This ritual was called Avippali in ancient Tamil Nadu. Head-offerings are also mentioned in the Bengali version of the Rāmāyaṇa, where king Rāvaṇa cuts off his ten heads, one after the other, to propitiate goddess Durgā.⁴²⁶

In the story of king Śūdraka from Somadeva's Kathāsaritsāgara, one can see how the cutting of one's own head represents the supreme sacrifice to the goddess. The faithful servant Vīravara sacrifices the head of his son to the goddess in order to save the King's life. His daughter dies of grief and his wife kills herself, thus he ends up cutting his own head in goddess Caṇḍikā's temple. King Śūdraka, who had been watching in secret, was so amazed by Vīravara's courage and faithfulness that he decides to sever his own head too as a sacrifice to the goddess. However, as he was ready to

⁴²⁴ Compare with the story about the Wudders (navvies) who cut their own throats in the presence of the king of Warangal in 'The Village Gods of South India'. H. Whitehead calls this "A truly Indian method of taking revenge."

⁴²⁵ Also spelled Koṭṭavai, the goddess of war and destruction of the early Dravidians. She is currently identified (and thus incorporated into the Brahmanical pantheon) as a form of Kālī or Durgā. R. Nagaswami, Op. cit. and R. Bernier, 'Temple Arts of Kerala'

⁴²⁶ S. Mukhopadhyay, 'Op. cit.'

do so, goddess Caṇḍikā, impressed by the display of devotion and bravery of the King and his servant, speaks to King Śudraka and restores Vīravara and all his family back to life. Also part of the Kathāsaritsāgara is the story of Madanasundari ('The Wife Who Switched the Heads). Madanasundari's husband and her brother sacrifice their heads to the goddess. Interestingly, in this work there is no mention of women sacrificing their heads; only male devotees seem to do so.

Thus, the cutting of one's own head is the supreme mark of devotion to the goddess in Indic tradition. This ritual is never performed in the honor of male deities, but only to the goddess, for as a mother who has bestowed the gift of life Dēvi is more likely to be moved by this utmost effort to show devotion to her and will be more ready to grant favors to devotees taking this extreme step.⁴²⁷ The fact that the woman in the story was alone with two younger women at the time of the cutting off their heads and the fact that each one had a kativaḷi is not without significance. In Vajrayāna Buddhist iconography, the goddess Cinnamuṇḍa Vajravārāhī, is represented as having cut off her own head with a cleaver (Skt. karṭṛ), flanked by her two smaller female attendants who have cut off their own heads too. Also within Vajrayāna tradition there are stories about female Siddhas: Mekhalā and Kanakhalā, two young sisters who cut off their own heads to show their Guru their great Siddhi-powers.⁴²⁸

In Hindu iconography, Kālī is always depicted holding a severed head in one of her left hands —she has normally four arms, but may have any number— and a bloodied cleaver or sword in the upper right. Goddess Chinnamastā, one of the ten Mahavidyās, is represented headless; with her head in one hand —she has two arms— and a sword in the other. Out of her severed neck, three equal jets of blood flow in regular arches

⁴²⁷ R. Nagaswami, Op. cit.

⁴²⁸ H.W. Schumann, Op. cit. above

across the air. One of the jets enters her mouth, while her two female attendants, with swords in their hands swallow the blood coming from each of the other two jets.⁴²⁹

Finally, this story also has echoes of the Jamadagni-Renukā myth, where Parasurama severed both the heads of his mother and that of a low-caste Chakkilian woman, in a symmetrical way. This tale is very common among the Coromandel fishermen and it is one of the myths explaining the origin of goddess Māri, the goddess of illness.⁴³⁰ While in Jamadagni's myth both women were later restored to life, but in confusion the goddess got the low-caste woman's head and viceversa, in the Maldivian myths emphasis is laid upon the impossibility of mending things.

The symbolism of putting the heads in baskets and setting them adrift, so that the currents carry them away from the island were the headless bodies lay, should be interpreted as a powerful curse. In the previous chapter it is mentioned how important is for Divehi people to be properly buried ashore, on land. The sea is no place for a human body. Even hairs or nail clippings cut aboard a vessel are never thrown to the sea, but are carefully kept and thrust into cracks or holes in the coral walls of the next island.

According to contemporary Maldivians, the previous story is meant to illustrate how very seriously a woman —and here it is implied a woman of quality— takes the offering of her own body to her male partner. The contrast between the general male attitude and female attitude towards a sexual relationship is emphasized here: while a man may take sex as a game, a woman does not, as she is investing too much of her deep self in

⁴²⁹ E.A. Benard, 'Chinnamastā, The Awful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess'

⁴³⁰ S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, 'Coromandel Fishermen.'

the relationship; hence the bloody, self-sacrificing symbolism and the resulting destructive hatred.

The following story is allegedly based on real incidents.⁴³¹ However, it is very likely that it may be a myth reflecting the story of an ancient village-goddess. The circumstances surrounding the strong will and determination of a woman of quality, Doñ Sittibū, are idealized to the point that, instead of the depiction a real-life personality, what indirectly emerges is the reflection of the islanders' devotion towards that extraordinary female character:

Doñ Sittibū

“Doñ Sittibū was a young and very beautiful lady living in Fua Mulaku Island over six hundred years ago.⁴³² Her home was in the center of the island at one place called Duvaffāṇḍo. She also was very wealthy and very wise, everyone in the island held her in high esteem.

One day, the island's Vāroveriya (royal administrator) asked Doñ Sittibū to marry him telling her that their alliance would make them both very powerful. However, she politely declined his offer. Instead, she married another man of her choice.

It so happened that very soon after their wedding her husband became seriously ill and died a sudden death. The Vāroveriya promptly accused Doñ Sittibū of having murdered her own husband. The people of the island, however, instead of believing him, were sure that she hadn't killed

⁴³¹ Told in 1985 by Abdul Latīfu, Ronḍuge, Mādaḍo village, Fua Mulaku.

⁴³² No evidence is given for the dating, except that the narrator mentioned that it was during Queen Khadīja's rule. Frequently in oral narrative it is said that Maldives was ruled by queens in ancient times, which may be a reference to the prevalence of matriarchy in ancestral island society

anybody. They claimed that the Vāroveriya, sore at having been rejected by Doñ Sittibū, had made haherā (black magic) to kill her husband. All the islanders stood behind her claiming that she was no criminal and that all this was a mean plot to humiliate her.

Doñ Sittibū didn't want to stand trial before the Vāroveriya. She knew she would be putting herself in a disadvantageous position, as the chief was a person with a grudge against her. Thus, she asked to be brought to Male' where she would put herself under the authority of the Baṇḍēri (High Royal Officer). The Vāroveriya reluctantly had to accept, because he was aware that the people of the island were on her side and he didn't want any trouble.

Doñ Sittibū gave orders to make one of her own veḍis (cargo vessels) ready for the trip to the capital island and gave instructions to her sailors to include a load of arecanut (fua') husks. Once aboard, while the ship sailed towards Male', Doñ Sittibū dedicated her whole time to making rope with her hands using the difficult short fiber strands of the arecanut husks. When she arrived to Male' the young lady had made an enormous bundle of excellent-quality rope. The measures were: 12 bēnḍi = 1 fōl in the local measuring system.

Doñ Sittibū was escorted to the Baṇḍērige (Officer's Residence) by the Vāroveriya's envoy and, all along, she insisted on carrying her big bundle of rope herself, over her shoulder. Once at the Baṇḍērige she was shown, as a mark of deference, a place to sit on the aṣi (raised platform), but Doñ Sittibū politely declined and preferred to sit on her rope.

When the Baṇḍēri arrived he asked the lady why she was not sitting on the aṣi. Doñ Sittibū calmly replied that she didn't want to sit on someone else's property. The Baṇḍēri, who was acting on behalf of the queen, was impressed by her poise and dignity. After the Vāroveriya's envoy informed him of the reason he had brought Doñ Sittibū to his presence, the Baṇḍēri questioned her concerning her alleged crime.

After a very long interrogation, the Baṇḍēri decided that Doñ Sittibū had been a victim of the Vāroveriya's machinations and proclaimed her innocent. The impression this lady made on him was so favorable that he not only set her free, but also formally stripped the former ruler of his post and named her the new Vāroveriya. He proclaimed that any place in Fua Mulaku Doñ Sittibū set her feet upon would become baṇḍāra (property of the administrator).

Doñ Sittibū gracefully accepted all the favors bestowed upon her. She was very well treated during the rest of her stay in the capital until she decided it was time to prepare the journey back to her island.

After leaving Male', as she was sailing southwards, her ship passed close to a dōni whose crew had caught a big Marlin (Makaira indica). The huge fish was leaping out of the water, causing a big commotion and the fishermen fiercely struggled with it. Meanwhile, on Doñ Sittibū's ship the crew, who were anxiously following the spectacular scene, started to argue about which part of the Marlin was best to eat. As they couldn't agree, they asked her. The lady's answer was that the best part was the one called bōṣifiya (a small section between the rear end of the belly and the anal fin of the swordfish). Suddenly she had an idea and commanded the captain of her ship to sail back to Male'.

Once again in the capital, she disembarked and went straight to the Baṇḍēri's house. He was surprised to see her back so soon. She asked politely for another favour. The Baṇḍēri declared that he was ready to grant it. Doñ Sittibū said that the bōṣifiya from every Marlin caught by local fishermen should be added to her revenues. The Baṇḍēri agreed and she bid him farewell again.

Thus, Doñ Sittibū set sail again towards her island. After a few days, she landed at Neregaṇḍo, in the Northwestern end of Fua Mulaku. Men, women and children took her from the dingy at the beach and carried her on their shoulders. They didn't want her to set her foot anywhere, but on

the way to her home, when she liked a particular place for her, she shook with such vigor that she managed to fall and step on the ground, claiming that spot for herself. It is said that she lived the rest of her life being carried on people's shoulders every time she stepped out of her home.

Doñ Sittibū had people at her service to collect her taxes and she would pay them back what she wished. Her opinion was so respected that she would decide the amount to be paid to the Queen in Male', without having to consult anybody.

It isn't known whether she married again, but it is certain that she died without having any children. Her house became a ruin invaded by thick jungle, but until living memory there was a stone weight to weigh cotton (ūkirigal) there.

Much of the mythology describing Māri, the dangerous goddess of fever and disease, addresses the reasons why this goddess is either single or widowed: Men either fear to marry her or, when they have, she has murdered her spouse. Even festivals celebrated in her honor reenact, in certain cases, the death of her husband.⁴³³ This death leaves her ritually and mythologically a widow, but there is no talk about the goddess expressing her grief, because the village goddess, though a mother, tolerates no consort.⁴³⁴ As there is no mention of any offspring either, this is in line with the village goddess tradition. Her children are her own devotees, the local people who worship her and call her 'Mother'.

Doñ Sittibū dedicating her time to making rope with her hands using the difficult short fiber strands of the arecanut husks is a symbolic, very difficult task, proof of this mythical woman's perseverance and determination. Usually rope is made with the longer fiber of coconut

⁴³³ W.P.Hartman, 'Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess'.

⁴³⁴ See 'Mother Sixth' in D.D. Kosambi, 'Myth and Reality'.

husks. The arecanut gives its name to Fua Mulaku, the widely acknowledged reason being that traditionally the arecanut palm used to grow very well in this large and fertile island.

This short legend may be the remainder of a long ancient epic. It is certainly very much in line with the Siri myth of the Tuḷu country,⁴³⁵ where a woman of courage, dignity, self esteem and strong determination, after many difficult ordeals achieves her goals and becomes a protective figure for her devotees. The Siri myth is narrated in 15,683 lines. According to L. and A. Honko, it represents the struggle between the matrilineal and patriarchal kinship systems in Tuḷu society. As in Maldivian society elements of both systems are present in a mixed form, there is evidence of these tensions too.⁴³⁶

The devotion of local islanders towards Doṇ Sittibū is apparent in their unanimous willingness to accept her as their leader, even when she had been accused of having murdered her husband. The grants made to her by the Queen through her officer may have been land grants for the temple of this goddess. The fact that she was carried around the island and her feet never touched the ground, may refer to her idol being carried around the island in procession, as it is so common for village deities all over South India.

Within this background, it is also highly likely that the piece of flesh called bōṣifiya from every marlin captured by Fua Mulaku fishermen had to be brought to her temple as an offering. Finally, the stone referred to as an ūkirigal, may have even been the likeness of this goddess itself, as village divinities have traditionally had no images in iconic form, being

⁴³⁵ Tuḷu is a Dravidian language spoken in an area located at the northern end of Kerala and part of coastal Karnataka. Though it has a distinctive culture, the Tuḷu region is not reflected in the administrative division of India

⁴³⁶ L. Honko, Op. cit. above.

represented by stones, pots, tridents and even mere heaps of sand. In Dravidian worship, the crucial fact is locality. Thus, representation has less relevance than the place where the spirit appeared or is deemed to reside. Often the purpose of the stone or image is merely to mark the spot related to the story that keeps alive in the devotees' memory, thus, it is not an idol, a fetish or a totem in itself.⁴³⁷ Iconography was not an important element in the Dravidian village-goddess worship because these cults were almost entirely based upon oral tradition. Nowadays, however, many village-goddess shrines in South India take the standard calendar-art Bengali-inspired figure of goddess Kali as the iconographic representation of their local deity.⁴³⁸

All the stories above stress the preeminence that women had within the traditional Maldivian social system. Since Divehi marriages are not arranged, and usually the man comes to live in his wife's home, young women throughout the Atolls in the Maldives have never been consistently at the mercy of mothers-in-law, like their hapless counterparts in the Subcontinent. Maldivian girls have been allowed to develop their own personality with few restrictions since time immemorial. Divehi women have somehow managed to maintain this position in spite of the growing intrusion of revived 'global' Islam within Maldivian social norms. There is a daily struggle: although they would not like to be perceived as attacking the religion and despite of being regularly fed apologetic rhetoric through the media, almost all Maldivian women privately agree that the prevailing religious laws and regulations give undue advantage to men.

⁴³⁷ See W.T. Elmore, *op. cit.* above.

⁴³⁸ See Sreelatha Vasudevan's paper (Iconographic Concepts and Forms of Korravai in Sangam Literature) in 'Shakti in Art and Religion,' ed. by N. Krishna.

This flourishing of the Maldivian woman's character is striking compared to what is the norm in South Asia. For instance in India, girls in general have to cultivate an abashed look in order to be able to please their future mother-in-law and, in a very one-sided contract, a married woman is judged by how devoted to her husband she is, no matter how bad he treats her or how outrageously he behaves.⁴³⁹ Similarly, in neighboring Sri Lanka, much importance is attached to pre-marital virginity, and women are assumed to have some kind of sinister influence. Therefore, they are the subject of numerous taboos and it is usual for Ceylonese women to be kept away from many ceremonies and rituals.⁴⁴⁰

However, this is certainly not the case in Divehi society, as writer and former member of the Central Information Service of the Government of India K. Gopinath, who visited the island of Minicoy in the 1970's, observed in his book "The Coral Islands of the Arabian Sea":

"In Minicoy, women enjoy equal rights and status with their male counterparts on account of their active participation and involvement in socio-economic pursuits from olden days. Women of Minicoy have considerable freedom in personal and matrimonial matters too. They possess a dignity, poise and confidence which one does not come across frequently among tribal or non-tribal women in the (Indian) country. They occupy the place of pride in their society, enjoy high social position and believe in community living and organization. The predominance of women in all walks of life is a unique feature. ...

The girls have the freedom to choose their husbands. Their communal system affords a good deal of scope for young men and women for

⁴³⁹ There is extensive bibliography on this subject, such as J.L. Gupta 'Challenges to the Fair Sex: Indian Women, Problems, Plights and Progresses.'

⁴⁴⁰ N. Wijesekera, 'Deities, Demons and Masks,' N. Ratnapala, 'Folklore of Sri Lanka' and Seligmanns, 'The Veddas.'

courting prior to wedding resulting in love marriages. ... A peculiar feature of their custom is the absence of the role of parents at the marriage which is performed by the Katibu. The bridegroom is accompanied by a few friends and the bride by two or three elderly women. The ceremony is followed by a simple feast or tea party. The bride and bridegroom then return to their own houses. Afterwards the bride sends a messenger to bring the bridegroom to her house. Since then the bridegroom becomes a member of the bride's family. In Minicoy the house (as a property) belongs to the women.

That the houses belong to the women is also true in the tradition of certain islands in the Maldives. In Fua Mulaku, for instance, some houses are known by the name of a female ancestor (i.e. Tubbige) and some men are known by the name of their mother appended to their name (i.e. Kudu Aisāge Hasanu).

Gopinath calls Minicoy 'The Island of Women' and underlines the fact that the position of pride women occupy in Minicoy has no parallel in the other islands, otherwise so similar in appearance, comprising the U. T. Lakshadweep. Minicoy is presently under Indian administration and officially belongs to the Union Territory Lakshadweep. However, it has strong cultural affinities with the Maldives. Minicoy's inhabitants speak, although with some archaic variations, the Male' form of the Divehi language, which they call 'Mahl.' The rest of the Lakshadweep group, such as the islands of Androth, Kavaratti and Chetlat, where the language spoken there is a form of Malayalam, has more affinities with the Malabar culture.

According to M. Ali Manikfan of Minicoy, the situation of women has worsened during the last two decades in his island. He mentions the influence of immigrants from rural Tamil Nadu from one side, who are spreading the practice of arranged marriages, and the influence of local militant Muslim hardliners from the other side. He laments that the distinct culture of Minicoy is getting irremediably lost

This pride that is inborn in Divehi women is probably the single most distinctive feature of Maldivian civilization. It is the factor that makes Maldives stand out most clearly as a separate nation among the nearest South Asian countries, although it goes generally unacknowledged.

Yet this quality has been often terribly misinterpreted in the neighboring Subcontinent: In 1995, a young Maldivian woman, Maryam Rashīda, was arrested in South India, in the city of Trivandrum, on charges of being a spy. After interrogation, one senior Malayali police officer remarked to the press: “She (Maryam Rashīda) has absolutely no inhibitions.” This comment was prompted because this girl didn’t display any of the sheepishness —or feigned shyness— which is expected from South Indian women in their interactions with men. Another explanation could be that she wore modern ‘Western’ dress, like younger generation Maldivian women usually do, unless they have been enrolled in the Arabic Madrasahs or have fallen under the influence of the sectarian Islamizing groups active within the country.

What the Indian Police spokesman above felt compelled to express about this hapless girl arises out of a fundamental misunderstanding between two neighboring cultures, for in spite of the geographical proximity the people of South India generally not aware of the cultural differences of Maldivians or Minicoyans. In Maldivian society men and women are free to interact together without being subject to the constant self-righteous inquisition and reprehension of sex-segregated Kerala.⁴⁴¹ In the Divehi

⁴⁴¹ Kalpana Ram’s own experience as a ‘Westernized Indian’ in Kerala is revealing: “(In Kerala) women’s apparent adaptations to a Western model are viewed with a prurient curiosity, mixed with connotations of moral betrayal but also with anticipations of the sexual availability projected onto Western women. My best hope was to be subjected to the more benign versions of surveillance, to outright wonderment and curiosity, rather than to the brutal forms of sexual aggression and hostility. I was fortunate in the rural areas where my fieldwork was based. My experiences were less happy in the crowded, seething urban streets of Trivandrum.” K. Ram ‘Op. cit.’

traditional environment it was rather inhibited women, acting coy and subdued, that were mistrusted and considered threatening. The following oft-quoted Maldivian proverb reflects the fact that Maldivians have a natural tendency to be suspicious of women looking sheepish:

“Maḍuñ moṣē gurā bārah daigannāne eve.”

The parrot crowing softly will bite most viciously.” (Or “Maḍuñ inna gurā bārah daigannāne eve.” The parrot staying quiet will bite most viciously.)

Since in the Maldivian Islands, male intimidation and sexual aggression against females is extremely low compared to the level prevalent in present-day Kerala, Maldivian women are bred feeling comfortable within their own society and grow up being fearless of men. As a consequence of the safe environment thus created, their personalities are able to grow unrepressed, like flowers that can fully open in a favorable atmosphere. Unlike their counterparts in India, Divehi females are not exclusively responsible of having to represent a ‘tradition’ that has been adulterated in favor of the males.⁴⁴² Therefore, traditionally they have been freed from the indignity of systematic sexual discrimination so common in other South Asian states.

⁴⁴² In present-day South Asian societies, the word ‘tradition’ and its contextual meaning should be taken with caution, especially concerning women. The Vanuatu poetess Grace Mera Molisa writes powerfully about the counterfeit gender roles promoted in the name of ‘tradition’ in modern times: “Custom” - misapplied - bastardised - murdered/ a frankenstein corpse - conveniently - recalled - to intimidate - women. Quoted by Anne D’Allewa, Op. cit.

2.6.2 THE MYSTERY OF FEMALE POWER

It is difficult to find a traditional Maldivian tale where there is not a woman, or a group of women, playing a central role. Despite the heavy influence of Hindi movies and a number of foreign soap-operas, story-telling remained popular in Maldives in the 1980's. The local radio often staged story-telling contests and to meet the growing demand, old tales were changed and rewritten. Thus, romantic elements have been introduced in order to make recent Divehi stories more attention-grabbing in a commercial sense.

Even though the new popular stories are pervaded by culturally alien features, still the heroines must remain in the foreground to please the Maldivian public. The graphics of contemporary Divehi novelettes sold in local bookstores, as well as the illustrations at the head of the story section of the major Divehi newspapers, prominently display figures of beautiful women.

In certain characteristic Maldivian tales reflecting lore of great antiquity, the purpose of the woman in the main role and the plot of the legend find justification in the display of her supernatural powers. Much in the same manner as the stories which form the background of the ancient Dravidian female divinities in the neighboring Subcontinent, sexuality and romance are not essential to the narrative and may be totally absent. Even something as important in the popular tales of Maldivians as the beauty of the main female character is done away with. Although the core of these ancient Divehi stories revolves around a central female figure, whether she is beautiful or not becomes irrelevant and, instead, the emphasis is laid on the extraordinary events surrounding that particular woman.

This type of Divehi narrative often connects the heroine with a particular locality and, as has been previously outlined, the main difference between Dravidian village-deities and the goddesses of the Brahmanic pantheon is

that their origin is associated with a geographical location. Their story usually begins on earth, often as the ghost of some person who has died. In the following Divehi story no dates were mentioned and, although it is told as if it would have been a relatively recent event,⁴⁴³ its features are similar to legends behind local female deities in South India:

The Lament

“In Miladummaḍulu Atoll there is an uninhabited island called Burehifasdū. Long ago, an old man from a distant island and two young sisters from the neighboring inhabited island lived there as caretakers. The girls worked very hard during the day, thus they retired early.

One evening, while the sisters were sleeping inside their thatched hut as usual, the mosquitoes were especially irritating and the old man decided to drive them away. Thus, he made a little heap of coconut husks in front of the door and set it on fire. After a while, he put the flames off, so that the breeze would carry the smoke inside to drive away the mosquitoes. Then he left to finish some work he had to do before going to sleep.

However, the old man didn’t check the smoking heap well and, while he was away, it caught fire. The flames licked the front of the hut and, feeling the heat, the sisters woke up. The girls stared horrified at the fierce flames which were now blocking their only exit. In sheer panic, the younger sister sprang recklessly past their scorching gate. But the elder sister didn’t dare to jump after her and, in despair, took the fatal decision of hiding under the cot.

⁴⁴³ Told in 1987 by Mohamed Ibrahim, Selvio, Male’.

Soon the blaze enveloped the whole hut. Presently, the old man, having seen the light of the tall flames, returned in haste. He found the younger woman badly burned and in shock.

She yelled at him: “Go, get Dattā out!”

Frantically the girl ran back and forth. The old man was at a loss about what to do and the girl stared at him fiercely and demanded: “Do something!”

Right then, the burning walls collapsed inward and the elder sister gave a piercing death scream through the flames: “Addōy, ma saharō!”⁴⁴⁴

Hearing this, the younger sister went mad. The old man tried to calm her, but the girl kept darting about like possessed, waving her arms wildly and muttering incoherent words.

Running onto the shallow reef, she piled up firewood on a flat coral rock rising above the waterline, screaming, “We must warn the people in Hembadū! Dattā must be saved! Dattā must be saved!” She kindled the wood, but the wind blew the flames down.

Seeing her signaling fire fail, the girl rushed to the bokkurā (dinghy), pushed it into the lagoon and jumped in it. Ignoring her painful injuries, she rowed frenziedly. However, the wind and the current were very strong that night and, despite her superhuman efforts, the young woman was unable to reach Hembadū. Instead, the bokkurā drifted towards another island, Bōmasdū. There the girl jumped ashore and, even though she was not familiar with the village, she went screaming along the streets until the people woke up. Weeping, she told them what had happened.

⁴⁴⁴ An interjection of intense pain (akin to Tamil ‘Ayyō’), followed by the cry “Woe to me!”

Immediately, some men brought the girl on a dōni (sailing boat) to nearby Hembadū, where her people lived. She was sobbing all the time, wiping her face with her bloody hands. The young woman was a scary sight with her face smeared with blood, her hands scraped raw from so much rowing, her feet bleeding from the wounds (inflicted by sharp corals while she walked on the reef carrying firewood) and the burns on different parts of her body. Seeing the girl in such a state, crying hysterically, her family brought her immediately home and tended her wounds.

In the morning a group of people went to Burehifasdū. The party searched through the small smoking ruin, while the bewildered old caretaker stared, as though hypnotized, at the charred remains of the hut.

The young woman's body was completely carbonized, except for her silver bracelet and a small piece of her intestine. Since then, no one has lived in Burehifasdū. However, even now, people who happen to go there say that, once a day, you may hear the girl's tormented wail: "Addōy, ma saharō!" eerily echoing all over the island.

In the end of the story there is a parallel with the myths explaining the human origin of various Dravidian village goddesses. In the legend of a local Dēvi called Buchamma (Pośamma) from Andhra Pradesh, whose worship includes the usual blood sacrifices, it is said that after her body was burnt: *"Her father went to the fire-pit and after searching in the ashes, found her jewels and 'tali botu' or wedding symbol."*⁴⁴⁵ Compare this legend also with the local myth of Kitsamma, from Andhra Pradesh: *"The fact that she spoke from the flames makes her a goddess of unusual power. After her death some of the people who had heard her call from*

⁴⁴⁵ W.T.Elmore. Op. cit. above.

*the flames, went to a place at some distance and addressed her three times, to which calls she replied.”*⁴⁴⁶

In Maldives, as has been previously outlined, women are very often connected to extraordinary or portentous happenings. Those events and the role of the woman, or women, in them are always presented in the form of a story where the context and the narrative are purely local. They build a nexus between the people and the islands they belong to by introducing a new meaning and a new perspective to familiar places. Hence, all types of island people have a special fascination for these stories. The one that follows is one of the many versions of a recently popularized island legend as told in 1990 by Ahumad Dīdī, Alifuḷuge, Fua Mulaku Island:

The Girl in the Shark’s Belly

“Long ago in the island of Fiōri, on the massive coral reef that fringes the ocean in Southern Huvadū Atoll lived a young girl who was her parent’s only child. She was not only a very pretty girl but she also had a good education. Her manners and learning were excellent, because her parents had looked after her very well. However, she herself felt that they were always protecting her too much and she wanted to have more freedom, like the other girls in the island.

One day she told her mother: “Annyā, (the word for “mother” in Huvadū Atoll) I am always inside the house. The other girls say it is such fun to go to the beach to bring saltwater.”

The mother replied lovingly: “You don’t need to go to look for saltwater, we are affluent and there are people who will do it for us.”

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid

But the girl insisted: “Aḷā⁴⁴⁷ let me go with them!”

Then the woman told her daughter this story: “When you were a baby, a learned man from Vādū came here and read our palms. He told your father and me that you would always be our only child and that we would never have any more offspring. Then he looked at your tiny hand and said that something would happen to you before becoming a woman. We asked him what he meant, but he only told us that he didn’t know. However, he instructed us to watch over you very well.” Then she smiled and continued: “That is why we either keep you always at home or we let you only go out when we go along with you.”

But the daughter insisted, promising that she would be very careful and that the other girls who would go with her could watch over her too. Finally, she cried and looked so desolate that her mother let her go.

The girl was given a guḷi (a terracotta pot) and left along with the other girls to the beach to a spot called Aḍḍanāhuṭṭā. There she had a great time playing in the water and in the sand with her friends. After a while, when it was getting late, her companions went to a deeper place and filled their pots with saltwater. Then they waded up to the beach and every girl, after putting the pot on her head, went home.

Now this girl had been left alone because she could not wade as well as her friends. She tried to do as they did and went to the edge of a deeper place to fill her pot. Unfortunately she lost her balance and fell splashing into the water. She managed to keep afloat by holding the pot with the mouth downwards, but, the current carried her swiftly away from Fiōri, across the lagoon towards the ocean. The girl panicked when she saw that the bottom under her was becoming a deeper shade of blue. She screamed

⁴⁴⁷ A common exclamation meaning “come on!” in Huvadu; “Aḷē!” in Male’ Bas

and yelled for help until her voice was hoarse, but, as nobody had seen her falling in, no one could hear her.

Anyway, the island was now far off in the distance and the girl was now being tossed by the surf over the dark waters.⁴⁴⁸ She was so terrified that she held tightly to her pot closing her eyes all the time.

Far offshore, one of the huge predator sharks that cruise the Indian Ocean close to the surface, saw the little figure floating over the dark blue depths and, without hesitating, opened its mouth open wide and gulped the girl in an instant.

After some days had passed, in a northern atoll of the Kingdom, there were some fishermen who had sailed far into the ocean to hunt the big sharks as was customary in their island (the specific island was not mentioned in this version). That day, the men aboard the boat caught a big fish and were full of joy. They followed it, slowly drawing in the line all the while, and saw that it was a very large tiger shark. When they got close enough, the keulu (master fisherman) exclaimed: "Look! It is turning and showing its belly."

The other fishermen looked at him and asked in puzzlement: "What does this mean Keulubē?"

The master fisherman looked at the huge white belly of the shark over the surface as if lost in thoughts and said: "I have never seen this before, but I heard old people say that this means that a human being is inside."

Thus, the fishermen threw their harpoons skilfully, close to the jaws, taking care not to touch the shark's belly. Blood oozed abundantly from the wounded gills, staining the ocean around them red. Once they were sure that the mighty fish was dead, they tied it along the boat and sailed

⁴⁴⁸ Right off Fiyōri the bottom of the ocean quickly sinks to a depth of 2,000 m

immediately to the uninhabited island where they used to slaughter their catch. When they pulled the shark ashore, they carefully opened the big belly with a knife and, to their astonishment, found a girl cuddled inside, holding her pot tightly against her. She was miraculously alive.

The girl opened her eyes wide and looked frightened. She didn't say a word when the fishermen addressed her and didn't offer any resistance when they took her out of the belly. They washed her with sea water and brought her to their boat. The girl watched the men in silence while they cut the huge liver off the shark and prepared it to make oil. Once they had finished their work the fishermen jumped aboard and sailed back to their island.

Everyone was surprised when they saw the men who had gone fishing sharks arrive with an unknown young woman. Soon a crowd gathered around the fishermen. Keuḷubē brought the distraught girl to his home and, after she had a bath and some food, she went to sleep. During the following days the girl didn't speak at all. Keuḷubē's family found out that she was very well-bred, but only after a long time she began to stammer some words. She didn't remember from where she had come from and when they tried to ask her about her island of origin, she became so terrified that she fell completely silent, staring into the void.

Years passed and Keuḷubē looked all the time after this mysterious girl as if she had been his own daughter. When she became a very pretty grown woman, she married one of the keuḷu's sons. This made her adoptive father very happy, because both his son and his daughter-in-law remained in his own home. As years went by, the girl had children and everyone forgot about the extraordinary way in which she came to the island. The only odd thing about her was that she was very afraid of the sea and would refuse to go to the beach even to wet her feet.

One day, on a batteli (trading boat) coming from the South, the father of the long-lost child happened to visit the island where Keuḷubē lived. He

was now a very old man with white hair. Once ashore, he said he was exhausted from the trip and needed some rest. He was brought to the keulu's home and sat on the undōli (swing) in the cool verandah. When he asked for a glass of water, his own daughter came and gave the glass to him. The old man was startled and told her not to go. While she stood puzzled in front of him, he studied the young woman carefully.

"Who is this girl?" He asked Keulubē. Then his host sent her back to the kitchen and described in detail the circumstances of the girl's arrival to the island.

Once his host had finished the story, the old man didn't know what to say. Suddenly tears welled up in his eyes and Keulubē asked him: "What is happening?" And then the father of the girl narrated how his only daughter had disappeared long ago from Fiōri and how, after months of fruitless search, they had given up all hopes of ever finding her alive.

At this point Keulubē told the girl to come and asked her whether she knew who their guest was. She looked at the old man squinting with her eyes, but after a while she said that she didn't recognize him. Then the old visitor told her the whole story. All of a sudden, the girl remembered and began to weep. Everyone watching them was in complete silence, even the children. Suddenly, the young woman ran away and went to hide in the kitchen where she began to sob aloud.

After a long while the girl came out, her eyes still wet with tears. This time she looked at the old man again and smiled, full of joy at the reunion. All the people present began to talk excitedly and the silence was broken. Beaming with pride she called her children to show them their real grandfather. Hugging the little boys and girls, the unexpected visitor told her: "This is the happiest day in my life. I will send word to your mother to come here so that she can see her daughter again in this world."

This tale prominently mentions the fishing of large sharks, a type of fishing full of risk, known as mākeulukañ and sung in epic form in raivaru

poetry (Mākeuḷukamuge raivaru). The sharks fished are large species such as tiger shark, white shark and mako. Fishermen spend about three days at sea in certain points where the large sharks are known to cruise. The boat is stabilized by sandbags sunk to a certain depth held by a mere three strands of thin rope. After being attracted to a hook with a bait of rotten fish or a rotten sea turtle with maggots and all, pieces of the kernel of young coconuts are thrown. When the shark bites the hook, the stabilizing sandbags break free and the shark drags the boat along until it is tired. Finally, when the shark comes close enough it is harpooned.

Traditionally those large sharks were killed for their liver oil, which was mainly used to coat the wood below the waterline in Maldivian boats. Therefore typically only the liver was taken to make oil and the rest of the shark was left to rot to be used in turn as future bait. The stench of the rotten sharks was so unbearable that this activity would not be carried out in the fishermen's home islands, but in a separate uninhabited island or islet. Since more recent times the shark flesh is salted and sold to merchants who export it abroad.⁴⁴⁹

This legend has been recently popularized and written in novelette form by Ahumadu Sharīfu, a contemporary Divehi writer. His small novel makes interesting reading, as it describes a number of customs and ceremonies related to island life in ancient times.⁴⁵⁰ In his version, the girl hails from Mārandū, an island at the northern end of Huvadū Atoll which is now uninhabited. Swallowed by the shark when she was only about three years old, the girl was later found in the island of Takandū, Tiladummati Atoll, in the far North.

⁴⁴⁹ Sources: Nizar, Hinnavaru (Fādippoḷu Atoll) and documents from the Maldivian Islands section. National Archives, Colombo.

⁴⁵⁰ Ahumadu Sharīfu, Maradū Island, Aḍḍu Atoll "Miyaru Baṇḍun Negi Kujjā" (The Girl taken from the Shark's Belly).

In all the versions recorded the girl was from Huvadū Atoll as well, and in most variants, she is from Vilingili, an island happening to be located in the northern end of that large Atoll. However, in clear divergence from Ahumadu Sharīfu's version, in oral tradition the heroine is not in her early childhood during the fortuitous event involving the shark. In the stories still told in the South of Maldives, the girl at that time is between ten and twelve years old, right before puberty, for according to Divehi tradition, the pre-adolescent phase of a girl's life, before performing the libās levvuñ puberty ritual, is a critical age. It is considered to be the time when girls are most in danger of something awful happening to them. Furthermore, while in A. Sharīfu's novelette the little girl walks straight to the beach and into the lagoon unseen by her mother —oddly enough, the reason why she keeps afloat without drowning when carried away by the currents is left unexplained—, in the oral tradition she gets lost while going to fetch saltwater with a pot, either a ceramic cylindrical guḷi or a metallic spherical baṇḍiyā, depending from the storyteller.

The girl didn't know how to swim because her protective parents had never allowed her to go to the beach. However, she didn't drown while being carried away into the ocean by the current because she was holding to her container placed with the mouth downwards, to keep it full of air—a trick she had just learned from her friends—. Therefore, the pot is of central importance in the story, contributing to the salvation of the girl's life. This is the reason why she still holds to it tightly when she is found within the shark's stomach. The pot or vessel is a symbol of the goddess because of the parallels between it and the mother's womb. Some South Indian village goddesses are represented by a pot. Owing to the neglected state of the Maldivian folklore, it is not surprising to find such disparities between variants of the same story in oral tradition and the written novelette version. Among contemporary Divehi writers reproducing their local folklore with fidelity doesn't seem to be a priority.

This story not only echoes Dravidian folk-goddess stories, but it also has affinities with the biography of a certain Buddhist Siddha called Mīna or

Matsyendranātha. This Buddhist saint was swallowed by a giant fish while he was fishing and it is said that he kept alive within its belly owing to his favorable Karma. Mīna used this circumstance to practice austerity, thereby obtaining great siddhi powers. Many years later, the fish in which he dwelled was caught by fishermen and was towed to their village. There all the locals were astonished when they cut open the fish belly and saw the unharmed Siddha emerge unharmed out of it.⁴⁵¹

The legend of the girl in the shark's belly is not the only story in Maldives about the connection between a human being and large fish in singular circumstances. The story 'Donmohonāi Miyaru' tells about a young man who liked to sit daily on the trunk of a coconut palm bending over the lagoon. After some time he strikes friendship with a shark he sees every day swimming in the waters below.

There is also a well-known Maldivian local legend displaying similarities with the stories about Buddhist Siddhas and their supernatural powers. I heard this story both from Said Abdulla (Sīdī), Pearl, Male' and from Husēn Dīdī, Karānge, Fua Mulaku right at the beginning of my stay in Maldives. Later, as I adopted the methodology of asking different persons to tell me stories I already knew, I heard it from a number of other people. More than a real story it is just a reference without a plot in it. It could possibly be a fragment of a very old story too. The hero of this tale is a man who, for many years, wandered across the oceans holding onto the back fin of a huge fish (whale), for in Maldivian folklore, whales were not considered to be mammals, but just another kind of fish. It is said that the lower part of this person's body, from the waist downwards, was covered with barnacles and seaweed.

This fact draws attention to the amazingly long time that this man had been living on the seas with part of his body constantly under water. Logs

⁴⁵¹ H. W. Schumann, Op. cit.

that drift for months in the ocean are covered with barnacles and seaweed below the waterline. They begin growing in patches and they will end up covering the whole hull of a boat when it has been left quite a long time floating without being put ashore. Barnacles are resilient marine creatures and are notorious for being a nuisance.

Most islanders telling this myth don't question at all the fact whether it is likely or not that a man would survive for such a long time in the saltwater. This story, like the two previous ones about extraordinary events, is a wonder in itself and it is there to be listened to in amazement and not to be questioned. And, incidentally, within a non-oceanic background, quite similar claims are made about ascetics or Ṛṣis in the Subcontinent.

In Indian traditions it is often mentioned that some sages sit for such a long time performing penance that creepers grow on them. In the well-known case of Vālmīki,⁴⁵² the writer of the Rāmāyaṇa, he remained so many years deeply immersed in ascetic trance that he ended up completely covered by an anthill (Skt. Vālmīka), hence his name.

⁴⁵² R.K. Narayan, 'Gods, Demons and Others.'

Part III. At the Threshold of the Spirit World

Und die Menschen vergaßen allmählich die alten Gottheiten. Die Alten nahmen die Überlieferungen mit ins Grab, die von den Vorfahren ererbten Traditionen starben mit ihnen. Mit den Jahren wurden aus den Jungen alte Männer, doch sie erinnerten sich bereits an nichts mehr. Die halbvergessene Geschichte des Stammes und die neuen Göttervorstellungen vermengten sich in ihren Köpfen auf phantastische Weise.

L.W. Saposchnikowa; Wege im Dschungel, Erlebnisse einer Ethnologin unter indischen Bergvölkern; Leipzig 1970

3.1.1 ANCIENT SORCERERS: MYTHS OF ORIGIN

In ancient Maldives, successful faṇḍita men (sorcerers) were so highly respected that they became established as famous figures of the island lore even long after their death. The admiration bestowed upon them in the traditional society was such that in the narration of their mighty deeds the lines between myth and reality became blurred. In some cases even geographical features were ascribed to the activity of ancient sorcerers. Thus, their names continued to be remembered and honored many centuries later.

In the Maldivian origin myth that follows, the figure of the faṇḍita man is central to the story. Unfortunately his name has been lost, but this unknown sorcerer is connected with the Divehi myth of the origin of the coconut palm. This important tree is called divehi ru' (Maldivian palm) in the Island language. Maldivians make a cultural claim on this tree because much of the local landscape, activities and wealth, are dominated by it. In

spite of its scant length and lack of detail, this myth⁴⁵³ which describes the anthropomorphic origin of the coconut palm reflects the lore of the earliest times of the islands:

The First Coconuts

“Very, very long ago the first people who came to the Maldives couldn’t live on the islands because there were no coconuts and no coconut palms. Food, drink, shelter, utensils, wood for boatbuilding, firewood, medicines, toys for children, whistles, baskets, cooking oil, lighting oil, hair oil, brooms, rope and shade, among other benefits can be got from the marvelous coconut tree.

Those very first people on the Maldivian Islands found it so difficult to live without those essential things that they began to die in great numbers. However, a great faṇḍita man, seeing that so many people were dying every day, decided that he had to do something. After searching in his books, he prepared a certain secret magic mixture.⁴⁵⁴ Then, he went to the graveyards and, before burial, he put a bit of that mixture in the mouth of every dead man, woman and child.

During the following weeks the deaths continued unabated. However, after some time, out of the mouth of every skull a coconut palm grew. Months passed and the trees began to develop. Some were big, others small, some fair and others dark, depending from the color and size of the corpse out of which they had originated.

In this manner the Maldivian Islands were soon covered by coconut trees. However, only few people had remained alive to witness this splendor.

⁴⁵³ Told by Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī. Fua Mulaku

⁴⁵⁴ The word used by the storyteller was bēs (medicine).

Then the great faṇḍita man taught the survivors how to make use of everything the tree gives and the people stopped dying. Soon their existence became easier thanks to the coconut palms. In recognition, they set some coconuts from every palm aside to plant new coconut trees.

From that time onwards, the future looked bright for the islanders, because there is no better wealth that a Maldivian father can give as a legacy to his children, than a great number of coconut palms planted by his own effort.

None of the ancient stories of the Maldivians tells where the earliest islanders came from. In all the myths, when foreign kings and religious figures arrived occasionally through the centuries, and perhaps millennia, Maldivians were already living in their islands. According to the myth above, the coconut tree has a human origin and the nut itself is identified with a skull. Of the three spots that every coconut shell has at one end, the hard two spots are reckoned to be the ‘eyes’ of the skull, while the softer spot from which the shoot will come out, is its ‘mouth’. Even now in the Divehi language, the hard coconut shell and the human skull contain the same word: nāṣi.

There are different varieties of coconut trees and nuts. Some trees never grow tall. Nuts come in different sizes and colors, from pale yellow to orange and olive green and, in the Divehi language, the names given to the different colors of nuts correspond to the names given to different skin shades of people.

The coconut was also a symbol of new life: at childbirth, ancient Maldivians would not throw away the placenta. It was customary to place it inside the shell of an empty coconut in the kihah stage —young coconut having soft shell— with the severed top as a cap, following which it would be buried outside of the burial ground and a coconut tree would

immediately be planted in the same spot.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, people could see along their lives the growth of the coconut palm that had been planted right at the moment of their birth. The custom of burying the placenta in a *kihah*, which looks very much like a small funerary urn, stemmed probably from the repugnance ancient Maldivians had for letting human remainders be in direct contact with the earth, for in this Island country all deceased persons would be buried in a wooden coffin. If they could not afford one or if wooden planks were not available, the corpse would be packaged in woven coconut palm fronds.

Even miscarried fetuses or very small children would be buried in small ‘coffins’ made out of a section of the thick stem of the plantain tree. To be ready for the eventuality of having a proper burial, many Maldivian houses would have the dry wooden planks for the coffins of the family inside the home, resting on the inner beams. The idea that the planks of their future coffin were constantly in full sight of the men, women and children living in the household did not seem to disturb local people the least. Being prepared for eventual death was a matter of pride.

Ripe coconuts had primordial relevance in an ancient ritual called *niuļuñ jehuñ*. This ceremony would be performed to bring auspiciousness to a new boat (or a renovated one). A person —or a number of persons— holding a coconut would turn around the completed vessel before it was launched into the sea and break the coconut below its prow.

Although the *niuļuñ jehuñ* took place mostly in relation with boats, this same ceremony would be performed around a house in the event that its dwellers would be having problems in the forms of frequent quarrels or dislike by neighbors. The ritual would begin by placing the *dāiy* (grindstone) before the door. Then, all the members of the household

⁴⁵⁵ Source: Himitige (Bīruge) Halīma, a midwife from Miskimmago, Fua Mulaku (1985)

would walk around the house —the older men first followed by the young and the women— holding a coconut and finally breaking it on the grindstone. In this manner the house would be made auspicious again. These niuḷun jehuṇ rituals were always presided by a faṇḍitaveriyā. The breaking of coconuts is an important feature of popular worship in South India and Ceylon as well.⁴⁵⁶

As the coconut tree has occupied since time immemorial a central place in Maldivian culture, it is not surprising that along with the growth of nationalism worldwide, it has nowadays been incorporated into local nationalist symbology. A coconut tree with eleven fronds is part of the modern Maldivian national emblem and the green-colored rectangle at the center of the national flag is said to have been inspired by the green color of the fronds of the coconut palm, which symbolizes the country's wealth.

The origin myth that follows also reflects the lore of very ancient times. Its importance lies in the fact that it seeks to explain how the skipjack tuna (*Katsuwonus pelamis*), the basic and most appreciated Maldivian food fish, came to the waters surrounding the Atolls. Considered 'the king of the fishes' in Maldives, skipjack tuna (*kaḷubilamas* or *kaṇḍumas*) is the favorite fish of Divehi people and it is topmost in the list of their gastronomical preferences. What makes it most valued in their diet is the firmness of its flesh, its dark red color and its rich taste. It can be preserved very well as "Maldivian Fish" and formerly it was not only a good resource for lean fishing times, but also a valuable trade item.

Second to skipjack tuna come other pelagic fishes closely related to it, like yellowfin tuna (*kanneli*), little tuna (*laṭṭi*), frigate mackerel (*rāgoṇḍi*), and wahoo (*kurumas*), whose flesh is still firm, though somewhat whitish.

⁴⁵⁶ Source: Zāhiruge Muhammad Dīdī and Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī of Fua Mulaku. The latter had witnessed such rituals before they disappeared.

Reef fish (farumas) were not valued by Maldivian Islanders in former times and were considered a lower kind of food. According to Divehi nomenclature the term farumas (reef fish) includes many species that are pelagic, for the term kaṇḍumas (ocean fish) is used mostly to refer to the tuna species having red flesh. However, some of the larger species belonging to this category, such as red snappers (raiymas), jacks (handi), and quite a few others —such as the fiyala of the story that follows— were occasionally welcome at the table of the average Maldivian. Sharks (miyaru) and rays (maḍi) were not greatly appreciated because of their particular texture and smell.

Concerning preference for certain species of the great variety of smaller reef fish, there used to be slight variations between the different atolls, and even from one island to the other, and it can be said that the favorite among these smaller fishes was the big-eye scad (muṣimas). But, unlike in Polynesia, moray eels (veñ) were never eaten in the Maldives. Finally, parrot fishes (laṇḍā) with their soft, somewhat smelly flesh were probably the most despised food fish by Divehi standards.

Lobsters, clams, squid, crabs and other marine invertebrates, though appreciated in other countries, were eaten by Maldivians only in case of emergency; especially when fishing in a particular island was so bad that ‘proper’ fish was impossible to find. Still, there are some exceptions to this rule, for quite a few people enjoy the tough flesh of the octopus (bōva), and a certain sea snail (donaṅga) used to be a popular delicacy in the Northern part of the archipelago, including the capital island Male’.

Again, like in the previous myth, the central character of the following one is a great faṇḍitaveriyā.⁴⁵⁷ This story contains a number of esoteric details and, while in the legend about the coconuts the name of the ancient

⁴⁵⁷ Told in 1991 in Male’ by Nihani Riza.

faṇḍita man is unknown, in this instance, the hero's name and the fact that he was skilled in the art of navigation are prominently mentioned:

The First Tunas

“Long ago, in the island of Feridū in Ari Atoll, lived a famous navigator (mālimi) called Boḍu Niyami Takurufānu. One day he went on a trading journey with his ship and on the third day at sea his crew caught a big fiyala (Coryphaena hippurus). This is a large pelagic fish with very tasty flesh and whose head is considered a delicacy. Boḍu Niyami, who happened to be up the mast at that time busy with his astronomical calculations, called down to his men and told them to keep the head of the fish for him.

However, when he came down from the mast with his instruments, he found out that, after boiling the fish, someone from the crew had already eaten the head and, after picking it clean, had thrown it to the sea. Then Boḍu Niyami flew into a rage and refused to give indications to the helmsman. When the latter insisted, the outraged navigator said: “Go towards the head of the fiyala!”

In this manner they sailed for eighty eight days until they reached the giant black-coral tree at the edge of the world.⁴⁵⁸ It was a frightening place. The current was very strong and huge masses of water were falling in a big roar down the edge beyond the black tree. The crew was so scared that, in despair, they threw a line and fastened the ship to one of the branches of the huge tree. Following this, they fell down on their knees begging Boḍu Niyami to save them.

⁴⁵⁸ The actual Antipatharia or black coral (enderi) doesn't rise above sea level like this mythical tree. It lives at a depth of about 20 m and is related to the Gorgonids. Its skeleton, made of black keratin, is very appreciated by local jewelers

Finally the navigator, seeing the poor sailors so helpless and frightened, told them that his anger was gone, but that they would have to wait some time before the wind and the tide became favorable. Although the anxious crew spent a sleepless night, the next morning, they were pleasantly surprised. The sea had become calm and there were some strange big fishes leaping in the waters close to the giant tree.

Bođu Niyami thought: "This is a beautiful fat fish and its flesh must be good and firm." So he took a piece of parchment and traced on it its figure. Then he recited some magic words over it to capture the souls of the mysterious fish. After this he rolled the drawing, put it into a bamboo flask and sealed it.

After three days passed and the wind became favorable, the ship sailed back towards the Maldives and a school of the strange fish followed in its wake. After sailing for eighty eight days they reached Tiladummati Atoll and the school of fish had increased in numbers to such an extent that there was barely free water around the ship and some of the fish jumped onto the boat's deck.

As they approached the Baraveli Kaṇḍu, north of Ari Atoll, the crew saw something that looked like two huge rocks rising out of the sea directly ahead of them. Bođu Niyami realized that those were the pincers of the Queen of the Hermit Crabs and that she had come up from the depths attracted by the huge numbers of beautiful fish following his ship. Then this mighty navigator quickly realized that he had to do something to send the whole school of fish towards the bottom of the ocean immediately, otherwise the giant hermit crab might catch his ship instead of the fish.

Thus, Bođu Niyami quickly took the rolled parchment out of the sealed bamboo flask and, after attaching a weight to it, threw the magical drawing into the dark waters as far away from his ship as he could. The crew watched in relief as the school of fish disappeared into the blue depths and the pincers of the Queen of the Hermit Crabs sank out of sight.

After arriving to Feridū without further incident, Boḍu Niyami went ashore to sleep. On the next morning he sailed on his fishing boat to the west of his island and threw the empty bamboo flask into the ocean. Since then, at any time of the year, there are schools of skipjack tuna in those seas.

People in Feridū claim that Boḍu Niyami Takurufānu's tomb can still be seen; apparently, two low sand hills on the island mark the place where he built his traveling ship. However, it is not unlikely that these mounds might actually be the remainders of an ancient Buddhist Stupa. Similar low hills are present in most of the relatively large Maldiv Islands that had been inhabited eight centuries ago.

The part where the navigator directs the boat towards the head of the fish, at the beginning of this story, is often told as a separate legend called 'Fiyala Bolah Oḍi Duvvi' ('the boat was directed towards the head of the fiyala-fish'). Accordingly, here two stories have been tied up, a method not at all uncommon in Maldiv oral tradition.

In the shorter version, the boat ends up in the African coast, the cargo and ship are lost and the captain, traders and crew only come back to Maldives with much difficulty. The morale of this well-known Maldiv tale draws attention to the dangers of arousing anger. Not only fools, but even learned and respected people, such as the navigator, can become reckless when their resentment and stubbornness are aroused by a trifle. Their self-destructive anger makes them ready to ruin themselves, not caring about drawing others in their wake.

3.1.2 MYTHS OF EXTINCTION

There is not much in the way of myths of extinction in the Maldivian folk-narrative. However, the general idea is that at the end of the ages there will be a great natural disaster and the waters of the surrounding ocean will cover the whole country. That will be not only the end of the Maldives, but also of the whole world.

Such a line of thought is only natural in this extremely low country that is so vulnerable to the onslaught of tidal waves, and which, therefore, perceives itself as being constantly under threat by the sheer force and pervasiveness of the Indian Ocean.

Interestingly, there are similar myths among the aboriginal inhabitants of other island groups in the Indian Ocean, such as the Andaman and the Nicobar Islands, where the ground is on average much higher than in the Maldives. Much as in the Maldivian myth, the Andamanese lore talks also about great cataclysms submerging all land and drowning men and beasts. The Nicobar Islanders, although from different ethnic origin, also have a myth about a great catastrophe flooding the entire land.⁴⁵⁹ In the Maldives, the drama of this perceived fate is given a true dimension through the fact that the physical existence of this nation is apparently threatened by sea-level rise. Being so flat, the whole country could easily disappear owing to a rise in the level of the oceans.

There are no mountains and no cliffs at all in the Maldives, where all dry land is just a few feet above the mean sea level. The highest points of the country are a few unimpressive dunes. These are no higher than 6 m and are present only in a few islands, like Gulī in South Male' Atoll and the northwestern shore of Hitadū Island in Aḍḍū Atoll. In certain islands lacking these natural features, the highest points are ancient man-made

⁴⁵⁹ Anjana Kaul 'Andaman and Nicobar, Islands in the Sun.'

mounds. These are mostly the ruins of Buddhist Stupas, the most conspicuous one being probably the one at Isdū, Haddummati Atoll.

According to the tradition of Maldivians, there are mighty copper walls at the limit of the oceans which hold vast amounts of sea water. It is said that during the night, evil demons work hard to destroy these walls by licking them with their tongues. Owing to their persistent and malignant activity, right before dawn each morning the walls become very thin at the places where the demons have been damaging the copper. However, every day a certain chant in Arabic known as *gunūtu* (Arabic 'Qunut') is said to be able to restore the protective walls to their original thickness. This chant is recited before sunrise, during the *fatisnamādu*, the dawn prayer, one of the five obligatory Muslim daily prayers.

The demons who are engaged in trying to damage the copper walls are active only during the darkness of the night, which is a most inauspicious time. Hence, it was very important for Maldivians to recite the *gunūtu* during the Muslim prayer right before the rising of the sun to undo the evil work the demons did in the previous night. Otherwise the copper walls would give way and masses of ocean water would sweep over the Islands destroying everything, killing everyone and submerging the whole archipelago forever.⁴⁶⁰

The *gunūtu* is a brief chant, characteristic of the Shafi' sect, recited aloud with the palms of the hands raised in front of the face. Other Muslim sects don't consider the reciting of the *Qunūt* at dawn important at all. Some Maldivian people say that the destructive demons are led by *dajjālu* (the Antichrist). Others identify these demons with *shaitānu* or *iblis*, the devil of the Islamic tradition.

⁴⁶⁰ Source: Fatumat Naima, Gaage, Male'. This legend is also quoted by François Pyrard de Laval in his travel narrative.

3.1.3 TANTRIC HEROES

Maldivian faṇḍita men, in their powers and in their characteristics, are very closely related to the Tantric Heroes and R̥ṣis of the Subcontinent. Even though there is a background of reality in the stories told about them, these should be taken with some caution. The line between myth and reality is often blurred and the personalities of different faṇḍita men are mixed up. This is a problem which mars the biographies of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist tantrics as well; and it is important to take this difficulty into account to put into proper perspective the strange stories told about mighty Maldivian sorcerers:

“Absurd accounts are recorded about the life of Nāgārjuna (AD 645); and wild stories are told of his stupendous magical feats. From learned and scholarly observations it can be easily seen that the Tibetan sources have hopelessly mixed together the accounts of 2d century AD Nāgārjuna (the disciple of Aśvaghoṣa), with 7th century AD Nāgārjuna (the disciple of Saraha). The two names thus being separated by 500 years. But as these two persons are taken erroneously to be the same, a serious confusion has arisen. The Chinese version, which does not take into account the Tāntric Nāgārjuna, is less confusing, though it also abounds in absurd stories about his life. ... But it can be easily proven that the second, or the Tāntric, Nāgārjuna is a historical person and a follower of Vajrayāna (Buddhism).”⁴⁶¹

In the pages that follow, a few relatively more recent Maldivian faṇḍita men and their exploits are described in detail:

Ahumad-ul-Hāfiz Edurukalēfānu is better known as Dūṇḍigami Edurukalēfānu. It is said that he lived in the 16th century. There was no

⁴⁶¹ B. Bhattacharyya, ‘An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism.’ See also M. Walleiser, ‘The life of Nāgārjuna, from Tibetan and Chinese Sources’

specific reason given for this approximate dating, but if he studied with Vādu Danna Kalēfānu (see footnote below), it must have indeed been in that century. Although most of his life is clouded in mystery, fiction woven with fact in intricate patterns, a feature common to all stories about Maldivian sorcerers.

There is some historical evidence on Dūṇḍigami Edurukalēfānu 's life. He was born in the village named Dūṇḍigamu, at the southeastern end of Fua Mulaku Island. His parents were well-off and, while still a child, they sent him to Vādū in Huvadū Atoll, an island known by its excellent navigators. While in Vādū, the boy studied with Vādū Dannakalēfānu, also known as Nāibu Tuttu and as Muhammadu Jamāl-ud-Dīn. Nāibu Tuttu had lived most of his life in Hadhramaut, Southern Arabia, learning the Arab language, customs and religion. This learned man had numerous pupils while in Maldives in the last quarter of the 16th century. It is claimed that he spent his last years in near-reclusion in Vādū Island.

After spending many years learning in that island, Ahumadu returned to Fua Mulaku with a lot of knowledge. His master Nāibu Tuttu had given him a number of books as a present and he kept them in a safe place at home. Ahumadu had a good character and, in spite of having become a learned man, he never became arrogant. Instead, he was a gentle, considerate and kind person, who always spoke to everyone, high or low, with a smile on his face and, according to Maldivian courtesy standards this trait is very important, for seriousness is interpreted as lack of refinement.

This eminent faṇḍita man lived a simple life and never put a distance between himself and his friends. He was a real islander who liked also to work with his hands. Often, in the night, he liked to go fishing to the reef with his casting net.⁴⁶² Like all mighty sorcerers, he was not afraid of

⁴⁶² Del iannā; landā in the Male' form of the language.

spirits. He was acquainted with the world of ferētas, ghosts and goblins, to such an extent that even those creepy beings had high regard for him, an ability or skill that is also common among Śaiva Tantrists or priests all over the Indian Subcontinent. The following story⁴⁶³ describes Ahumadu's familiarity with ferētas and his control over powerful reef monsters which can change size at will:

The Stone Ring

“Dūṇḍigami Edurukalēfānu went one evening to the coral reef to cast his net. He was a bit miffed because he didn't find anybody to go along with him. It is not easy to throw the net, while carrying the fish at the same time, but that particular night all his friends had something else to do.

He went to the reef edge, wading close to the breakers at low tide, Ahumadu cast his net once and caught a few fish. While he was disentangling them from the net, he felt a presence beside him and thought: “Good!” In the starlight, reef and sky shine dull grey and the vegetation on the shore looks black. One cannot make out details of figures well. However, this renowned sorcerer didn't ask his companion who he was and just kept handing over the fishes to him.

Silently, the dark silhouette beside Ahumadu carried the bundle of reef fish he was catching. When he thought he had fished enough, the faṇḍita man put his net on his shoulder and waded ashore. While he was walking through the forest path towards the village, his mysterious helper followed him without making any sound. When they arrived at the mosque well, Ahumadu washed his arms and legs to get rid of the salt and the fish

⁴⁶³ Told in 1985 by Kudu Ibrahīm Dīdī, Daylight Villa, Dūṇḍigam village, Fua Mulaku

smell. He noticed that his partner was not washing himself. And, right then, he heard the dark presence talk for the first time: "I must leave".

Ahumadu asked him: "Who are you?" And his companion answered: "I am Raṣikeḍe Ferēta."⁴⁶⁴

As an initiated faṇḍitaveriyā that he was, Ahumadu was unfazed: "Take your part of the catch." He said casually.

The monster replied: "No. I will take only one eye." And he grabbed one of the fishes and sucked its eye out. Then he turned and left.

Days passed and another day at sunset, Ahumadu went again alone to the coral reef with his net. The tide was too high and he thought: "The fish will swim out of the net's range before it sinks. I think the tide will be lower in an hour, and if I go home now I will not feel like coming back afterwards."

Thus he waded ashore, chose a good spot behind the bushes above the waterline, spread his net on the grass and laid down on it. In the twilight Ahumadu looked at the clouds spread across the sky, noticing how they kept changing color. Then he fell asleep.

He woke up when a small crab pinched him.⁴⁶⁵ It was already dark and it was raining heavily, but to his astonishment he wasn't wet. When he looked up, Ahumadu saw that a large ferēta was standing right above him on all fours, sheltering him from the pouring rain with its body. Now, when an islander is suddenly so kind to another it invariably means that he is soon going to ask him or her for something. So the faṇḍitaveriyā enquired:

⁴⁶⁴ Raṣikeḍe is a lonely, windswept point in the southern coast of Fua Mulaku, where a submerged reef (Raṣikeḍe Faro) extends for a further two miles southwestwards into the ocean.

⁴⁶⁵ Beach crabs do this to check whether something edible has drifted close to their territory. The first time they pinch lightly.

“Why have you come here?” And the ferēta answered: “I came to see you, because Daši Aḍi Ferēta stole my ring and he doesn’t want to give it back.”⁴⁶⁶

“What can I do?” asked Ahumadu.

“You can do much!” replied the monster. “Everyone respects you. If I ask Daši Aḍi Ferēta to give me back my ring he will not give it. But if you ask him, surely he will.”

“Alright,” said the sorcerer. “Go and bring him here.”

As soon as the ferēta left, rain poured over Ahumadu, soaking him to the bones. The faṇḍitaveriyā had forgotten that the monster was sheltering him and regretted having sent him away so soon. But while he waited, the rain stopped and presently he could see in the starlight two enormous dark figures stomping across the coral reef towards him.

He walked out to the beach to meet them. When they stood before him he boldly confronted the ferēta that looked a bit abashed: “You took Raṣikeḍe Ferēta’s ring!”

“No. I did not!” answered the demon.

Ahumadu was firm: “Don’t lie! Bring it here immediately!”

The monster at once turned and left. He came after some time holding in his hand a huge round coral stone having a hole in the middle.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁶ Daši Aḍi is another point in Fua Mulaku’s southern end, further east from Raṣikeḍe

⁴⁶⁷ As large as this room, would say the storyteller making a wide horizontal circular movement with his hand.

The sorcerer ordered: "Leave it here!" Obediently, Daşı Ađi Ferēta bent and left the ring on the sand. Raşıkeđe Ferēta took his ring, put it on his finger and beamed with satisfaction, his huge teeth suddenly visible; then both monsters left, leaving Ahumadu alone on the beach. The faṇđita man took his net, folded it and put it on his shoulder. He looked around and thought: "It is too late now to go fishing." Then he went home.

Ahumadu married a young woman from his own island. He used to travel to Ceylon and South India in the yearly trading trip and he is reputed for having brought the first breadfruits to Fua Mulaku. This information is disputed by some who claim that the first breadfruit shoot was brought from Male' by somebody who had stolen it from King Ghias-ud-Dīn's compound and that Ahumadu Edurukalēfānu was the first who began to eat breadfruits, showing that they were edible. However, chronologically this is impossible for King Ghiyas-ud-Dīn would reign about two centuries later, when Ahumadu Edurukalēfānu was long dead

Ahumadu and his wife had three children, two daughters and one son. Unfortunately, both girls died a sudden and tragic death when they were close to coming of age. On a dark night, while Ahumadu's daughters were traveling in their father's veđi their ship hit the treacherous Kendere reef in Huvadū Atoll and sank like a stone, with people, cargo and all.

After Dūṇđigami Edurukalēfānu's two daughters died, he was left with only one son. The boy's name was Ibrahīmu. He was very good in his studies and he faithfully followed in his father's steps. It is said that, while still a child, Ibrahīmu learned Arabic, the Qurān and faṇđita. In time, Ibrahīmu became a mighty faṇđita man himself.⁴⁶⁸ This is what happened to the boy once:

⁴⁶⁸ This story and the details about Dūṇđigami Edurukalēfānu's life and personality were told by the late Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī, also known as Unakeđege Alī Dīdī, Hamīdu's father

The Voracious Monster

“One day, while searching through his father’s books, Dūṇḍigami Edurukalēfānu’s son Ibrahīmu found a loose paper. It was an old manuscript describing how to conjure up a dābba.

A dābba is a monster of insatiable hunger, suddenly appearing from the depths of the earth that devours everything it sees.

Ibrahīmu was so excited that he couldn’t sleep that night. Thus, in the late hours, he got up, took the paper and went to Huru Aḍi Mago. This was a lonely place away from the village, where he was sure no one would come at that time. The boy recited the spells correctly and a dābba rose from the earth. It was bigger and more horrifying than Ibrahīmu had expected, with a mouth like a toad, but full of large, sharp teeth, and the child became frightened. He knew that one shouldn’t look at a dābba in the eye otherwise it would attack and devour him at once. Hence the boy, in despair, drew the attention of the monster towards other things, such as a coconut-tree stump, a bush and a large stone, among other objects which the dābba gulped one after the other. Thus the things around him were becoming less and less and Ibrahīmu feared he would be next in line to be swallowed. Trembling with fear, he tried to recite the mantras to make the beast vanish, but his voice was quivering.

Right at that time Dūṇḍigami Edurukalēfānu saw his son’s desperate plight in a dream.⁴⁶⁹ Immediately he got up and hurried to Huru Aḍi Mago. Fortunately, Ahumadu arrived right on time, because around the boy there were no other objects to devour. And, after Edurukalēfānu hurriedly recited the correct magic words, the dābba disappeared back into the earth. Ahumadu wanted to scold his son, but he was so happy that he had

⁴⁶⁹ This phenomenon is locally known as bavativuñ.

rescued him, that no harsh words would come out of his mouth. He just laughed and walked happily back home with the child. It is said that the next day there was a big pit in that place.

This description of the dābba matches with a monster from Hindu tradition created by Shiva from the spot between his eyebrows to destroy Rāhu. A horrendous demon with a big head, protruding eyes and sharp teeth, whose alarming body was lean and emaciated, giving notice of insatiable hunger, yet of resilient and irresistible strength, embodying the destructive power of its creator. This demon was later elevated by Shiva himself to the rank of Kīrttimukha (Face of Glory) and it is frequently seen in Hindu iconography crowning the arch framing a divinity.⁴⁷⁰

The following story⁴⁷¹ explains whay the kaṭṭēḷi (Promethean scholar), a long, slimy black fish, lives now in deep areas off the island and no longer close to the surface:

The Eye-sucking Ferēta and the Kaṭṭēḷi

“Years later, when Ibrahīmu became a teenager, he liked to go to the coral reef to cast the net like his father. At that time, certain fishes locally known as kaṭṭēḷi were coming to the shallow reef waters during the night; and it so happened that every night that Ibrahīmu went to the reef, a certain ferēta followed him. This spirit was a nuisance for the boy, because each time he caught a kaṭṭēḷi with his net, the ferēta begged him to give him the fish. The monster would then suck one of the kaṭṭēḷi’s eyes out and, instead of giving the fish back to the young man he would throw it into the sea.

⁴⁷⁰ H. Zimmer, ‘Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization.’

⁴⁷¹ Told by Donkāratu Beyya, Dūṇḍigamu village, Fua Mulaku

At first Ibrahīmu wouldn't mention this to his father, because the truth is that the awesome looking monster wasn't causing the boy any harm. However, one night Ibrahīmu caught only kaṭṭēli with his net and the spirit, after sucking one of their eyes out, threw all the fish into the sea. Thus, the boy came back home late at night empty handed and very annoyed, because the kaṭṭēli is a delicious fish.

When his father heard him coming he woke up, because he liked to eat fresh fish cooked at night, as it is a custom in the islands. He saw his son's long face and asked: "Kalō,⁴⁷² What happened?" And Ibrahīmu told him about the eye-sucking Ferēta. At this, the mighty faṇḍitaveriyā became so angry, that he went immediately to the beach and throwing a handful of sand towards the coral reef, he cast a powerful spell by which all Kaṭṭēli fishes would be forever banned to the depths. In this manner, Ahumadu ended the harassment of his son by the reef monster.

Kaṭṭēli is very much valued as food in Fua Mulaku, especially when tuna fishing is scarce. This type of fishing is done only at night. In the present times, to fish kaṭṭēli one has to go off Fua Mulaku's shore on a dōni and fish with a very long line and a weight, because these fish never come close to the surface anymore.

The Nagūsēsaru

After the death of his father Ahumadu Edurukalēfānu's, Ibrahīmu became the best faṇḍita man in the Kingdom. It is said that he was the only person in the whole Maldives who knew the Qurān by heart at that time. Once he traveled to Male' on his veḍi and stayed there for some time. The Radun heard of his knowledge and appointed him faṇḍiyāru (chief judge). However, Ibrahīmu politely refused, for he was a modest man and he

⁴⁷² A local term of endearment for boys

enjoyed living a simple life, like his father. Life in the royal court was full of intrigue and he knew that if he was given political power he would lose his true friends.

While Ibrahīmu was in Male', he was invited to an important maulūdu celebration. In the evening, when he arrived to the haruge (pavilion), all lamps were lit and all guests of honor were sitting in front of their plates, ready for the meal. Ibrahīmu was a bit late and saw that there was no free dish. Someone had come uninvited, but no one else had noticed.

Then this great sorcerer looked well at the guests and realized that the Nagūsēsaru, a demon with a long tail, was there in human shape, eating among the others. Ibrahīmu could see that his tail was rolled under his muṇḍu —a lunghi, the cylindrical-shaped cotton waistcloth used by men— and a small section of its tip stuck out. Resolutely, Ibrahīmu went towards the Nagūsēsaru and yanking out his tail strongly, shouted: “Who are you? You have not been invited!”

The Nagūsēsaru got up and left in shame, but before leaving the beautifully lit and decorated pavilion he turned and, raising his hand, addressed Ibrahīmu coldly: “Alright, alright,” (“Heu, heu,”) and walked into the night.

Days passed and one fateful evening Ibrahīmu went to the beach in order to relieve himself.⁴⁷³ While he was squatting close to the shallow water washing his private parts, the Nagūsēsaru appeared from the sea. Even in the darkness, Ibrahīmu could see that the spirit had assumed its most dreadful shape and it was not looking human at all. Suddenly the great faṇḍita man stood up and realized that he had forgotten his masdayffiohi, the ritual knife which could protect him against demons, at home. He was

⁴⁷³ That is, to defecate. Usually done during the evening or at dawn.

thus helpless, when the monster thundered: “There in the maulūdu haruge you humiliated me, but now you are in my hands!”

Ibrahīmu had no hope: “I have nothing to say. You can do what you want.”

Then, the hideous beast poised its long tail and struck the man viciously across his body. As Ibrahīmu fell unconscious on the sand, the monster, now satisfied, disappeared over the coral reef into the sea. At dawn some women saw the wounded man being lapped by the waves and brought him home.

The respected Ibrahīmu Edurukalēfānu was now gravely ill. Everyone who visited him knew he would never recover. The places where the demon’s tail had hit him were swollen and although he was very well treated, the women dutifully applying medicine to his wounds, he wouldn’t heal. His last words were: “Whatever favors a person from Aḍḍu and Fua Mulaku asks me, I will grant.”⁴⁷⁴

Ibrahīmu was buried in Male’, close to the gate of Māfannu Ā Miskiy. Legend says that no ziyāraiḡ was erected over his tomb on purpose and that Male’ people kept its location secret for centuries, in fear that someone from the Southern Atolls would ask for kingship. But some people knew, for the narrator, Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī, told that Daṇḍukoṣige Muhammad Dīdī showed him once the location of the grave when both of them went to Male’.

Edurutakkānge Muhammad Dīdī was also a famous faṇḍita man of ancient times. He is a bit of a mythical figure and there is not much information about him as a person or about his life. It seems that he lived in Diguvāṇḍo village, Fua Mulaku Island and that he was a student of

⁴⁷⁴ “Aḍḍu Mulaki mīhaku ma ekahi ā kommi bēnume fudenne.” In the same manner as Subcontinental ṛṣis, Maldivians considered that their holy men had the ability to bestow boons on their devotees.

Dūṇḍigami Edurukalēfānu. One of his main feats was to kill the Arruffanno Ferēta. This is the story of his exploit as told by the late Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī:

Arruffanno Ferēta

“Long ago in Fua Mulaku Island’s western edge, where a village path joins the beach at a place called Arruffanno, a monster came ashore from the sea.

Some people casting a net on the coral reef at night saw it. They said that the evil spirit looked like a huge, pale flame over the reef. That fiend haunted the villages in the night, killing many people and drinking their blood, hence the inhabitants lived in fear.

Edurutakkānge Muhammad Dīdī, a learned faṇḍita man of the island, spent many days on the reef making magic ritual. Although he worked very hard with his sorcery, the demon still came ashore at night and continued killing people and spreading terror. The situation was so desperate many dreaded the island would become depopulated.

Distressed that all his magic had failed, Muhammad Dīdī used all his skills into casting one final spell to defeat the evil spirit. Following this last powerful curse the monster became a large coral rock.

At Fua Mulaku the western reef surface is flat and that isolated rock stands out in the landscape. The local people call it Ferēta Gal, the demon stone. When it is hit with an iron rod, it still oozes blood. It is said that it will do so forever, whenever it is struck.

This story may be an elaboration of a much older legend. The stone at Arruffanno could have been an ancient sacred site, the blood being a symbol of the goddess. That a stone oozes blood when hit is a claim often made about aniconic stone images of village deities in the neighboring

Subcontinent. *“A Pulaya woman who had come to cut grass sharpened her scythe against a stone which started to ooze blood. The horror-stricken woman shrieked aloud and the Pulayas in the neighborhood came running to the spot.”* Later a shrine was built over that stone.⁴⁷⁵

The fact that the spirit was drinking blood may be an oblique allusion to bloody rituals. Furthermore, the mention of many people being killed is likely to refer to an epidemic, which in turn is always connected with the village-goddess who is propitiated by means of blood sacrifices in times of pestilence. The flame symbolism is also revealing, for there is a relationship between goddesses and fire in the Indic tradition. Some locality goddesses, such as Mīnakṣī of Madurai, were born from the sacrificial fire, while others are said to wear a halo of flames around their head.

According to local lore Edurutakkānge Muhammad Dīdī’s other mighty deed was to banish another spirit called Mābē under a big coral rock at the NE shore of the island. The corresponding story is narrated in the chapter ‘Tutelary Spirits’ further below.

Karaiyye Muhammad Dīdī was a more recent faṇḍita man. He lived in Fua Mulaku at the beginning of the twentieth century and his house was in the village of Mādaḍo, in the middle of this large island. His descendants are still living there.

Muhammad Dīdī’s main exploit was to banish Neregaṇḍo ferēta, a monster living in the ocean between Aḍḍu Atoll and Fua Mulaku. It used to come ashore through the channel called Neregaṇḍo, which is a deep notch in Fua Mulaku’s Northwestern reef. This ferēta could take any

⁴⁷⁵‘The legend of Cōṭṭānikara Dēvi’ in K.R. Vaidyanathan ‘Temples and Legends of Kerala’.

shape and it used to terrorize the people living close to that area, in the village of Daḍimago. In the story that follows⁴⁷⁶ the Neregaṇḍo ferēta takes the shape of a frigate bird.

Neregaṇḍo Ferēta

“In his middle-age, Karaiyye Muhammad Dīdī was in love with a very beautiful woman living in Bategedaro, in Daḍimago. Back then, he used to go every evening to the northern end of the island to meet her. He always was accompanied by a young boy in his nightly escapades, and he used him as a messenger with his lover. One evening, Muhammad Dīdī was walking northwards along with his companion through the dark island paths. As he was getting close to the lady’s home, he was very happy and his heart was beating faster in anticipation. The sun had set and, at a certain point, as he looked towards the pink sky overhead, he saw something strange.

By the path, high up on a frond hanging vertically from a coconut tree there was a big frigate bird. It was thrusting its head between two leaves (fanva’). Muhammad Dīdī thought: “Strange! Frigate birds never do that. This is no bird. I’m sure it is some evil spirit lurking there, waiting for the darkness to set in to do some evil.”

Quietly slowing his pace, the faṇḍita man told the boy to follow him and walked off the path to the trunk of the coconut palm where the ferēta sat. Reciting magic words, Muhammad Dīdī planted his masdaiyyfiohi (ritual faṇḍita knife) in the base of the tree trunk and then told his companion to climb the palm and catch the bird. Immobilized by the spell, the large, black bird was easily caught by the boy, who brought it to the ground.

⁴⁷⁶ Told by Meṭa Muhammadu, Miskimmago, Fua Mulaku.

Then Muhammad Dīdī, reciting mantras, drew an aṇu (magic circle) on the sand and put the Frigate bird in the middle. He said: “At dawn, it will not be able to go back to the sea and it will die.” Thus they left, and while the sorcerer was enjoying himself in the company of the beautiful lady, the spirit spent the entire night wailing aloud, caught in the aṇu.

Much later, close to dawn, Muhammad Dīdī reluctantly left the warmth of the woman’s body and stepped out into the cool, damp night. As he drew close to the palm tree where he had immobilized the spirit, its laments grew louder. Then the faṇḍita man was struck by the fact that the poor ferēta had been suffering all night while he had been having a good time. Feeling sorry for it, he went close to the magic circle and said: “If you promise not to come ashore anymore, I will free you.”

The Neregaṇḍo ferēta replied: “I cannot live without ever coming ashore. Thus, people shall still see me between Koṭṭe (the Northern end of Hitadū Island in NW Aḍḍu Atoll) and Neregaṇḍo, but I promise that I will never hurt anyone anymore.”

Muhammad Dīdī agreed and, squatting down, cut the aṇu. Swiftly, the ferēta, now no more in the shape of a bird, but in a larger, hideous form, ran towards Neregaṇḍo, jumped into the sea and disappeared leaving a wake of foam. Right at that time the first cock crowed.

The great faṇḍita man, still squatting, realized that the ferēta had narrowly escaped death. Then he got up, brushed the sand from his muṇḍu, and went home. He was tired and still had a long way to go.

Frigate birds (hurā in the southern and hōrā in the northern form of Divehi) are black, large seabirds. Females have white feathers under the neck down to the belly region, and males a red neck pouch, which is normally deflated and barely visible.

Unlike the seagulls, frigate birds can get wet. Thus, if they touch the water, they will not be able to fly. Therefore, they eat either the fishes

stolen from seabirds that can dive, or flying fishes caught while they glide above the surface. If rain comes, they can soar very high, up above the rain clouds. Ancient Fua Mulaku lore tells that frigate birds were once people that became birds owing to a curse. They are very common in southern Maldives during certain seasons, when they arrive in large squadrons to catch flying fish. They breed mostly in the Chagos Islands.

The story also mentions the common island practice of using younger people to exchange messages between lovers. Traditionally women would use a girl and men a boy to act as a messenger. Their main task was to exchange messages without arousing suspicion and to check whether everything was clear before an arranged meeting. Girls and boys would do this job in exchange for gifts, but they found it thrilling too.

Perhaps there were stories about Northern faṇḍita men in the past. However, even after much inquiry, I did not succeed in obtaining stories about great magicians from the Northern Atolls. Some people knew the Oḍitān Kalēge stories, but they had no knowledge of any mighty magician hailing from their own atoll. In a rare display of utter lack of chauvinism, most northern islanders candidly acknowledged that Southerners are far better magicians. In legends such as ‘Bēri’ or ‘Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā’, the sorcerer comes from an unspecified island in the South. And more recent stories, such as Gabuḷi Bādalu mock the gullibility of Northern islanders when confronted with a sorcerer pretending to come from the South of Maldives.

Old people from Male’ and other northern islands reckoned that, ever since ancient times, when they needed a faṇḍitaveriyā (or kaṇveriyā), they went to look for him in the boats coming from the Southern Atolls anchored at Male’ harbor. In the future it will be worth while investigating more thoroughly the Northern Maldivian lore in order to find out whether there was any historical sorcerer in that vast region of the country.

Endeavoring to ascertain the dates when Maldivian sorcerers were reputed to be living can be complicated. Often the exploits of very ancient faṇḍita men are attributed to sorcerers of the more immediate past. Kudu Abu (Small Abu), a faṇḍita man from Huḷudū (Aḍḍu Atoll) was known to be able to kill a tree instantly just by pointing his finger at it. He used to display this skill in public and it is said that he could kill easily a person in the same manner.⁴⁷⁷ However, there is a chronological problem in the narration of some of his feats, for Kudu Abu apparently lived in the nineteenth century and exploits that are undoubtedly many centuries older are ascribed to him as well. Despite that, Kudu Abu is unquestionably a historical figure and his descendants are still living in Huḷudū.

Even though names of actual houses, islands and even people are prominently mentioned in the narration of the exploits of faṇḍita men, there are some important ones, including Oḍitān Kalēge, whose existence is disputed. Nonetheless, despite not being told as if they were fact, which would include the mention of ancestry and belonging to a specific island household, their stories remain popular all the same. ‘Sifa Huturu Koyya,’ the following story, is one of the favorite legends about magicians in the Southern Atolls. The hero, a young sorcerer, is also from Huḷudū, an island reputed for its mighty faṇḍita men.

Huturu koyya’s magic powers are great, but he is not considered handsome by island standards of beauty. He is a skinny man with very dark complexion, and he is compared to the wiry, almost black trunk of a

⁴⁷⁷ Compare this with what W. Crooke writes about Bengali sorceresses: “Among the Agariyas of Bengal there are old women, professors of witchcraft, who stealthily instruct the young girls. The latter are all eager to be taught, and are not considered proficient till a fine forest tree selected to be experimented on is destroyed by the potency of their charms: so that the wife a man takes to his bosom has probably done her tree, and is confident in the belief that she can, if she pleases, dispose of her husband in the same manner if he makes himself obnoxious,” ‘An Introduction to the Popular Religion & Folklore of Northern India.’

uni tree,⁴⁷⁸ meaning that the young man was black and skinny. Among Maldivian people there is a very large spectrum of different skin colors. Darker skinned or ‘black’ people are considered ugly and often, in this process, all their other marks of beauty are overlooked. Hence, the comment: *rīti doṅ kujje’* or “beautiful fair child” is very common, while one never hears the expression *rīti kaḷu kujje’* or “beautiful black child.” Handsome people were supposed to be fair skinned and not thin. Maldivian ideals of beauty are akin to those of the neighboring Subcontinent, where dark-skinned people are assumed to be ugly.⁴⁷⁹

The expression ‘four years, four months and ten days’ mentioned at the beginning of the story is an emphatic and cheek-in-tongue way to say ‘a very long time’ in Maldivian lore. It originated in the period a woman has to wait to remarry if her husband is lost at sea, which is four years, added to the period (*iddā*) a widow has to wait to remarry after her husband died, which according to local Sharia’ Law is four months and ten days.

‘*Sifa Huturu Koyya’* is an old Divehi digu vāhaka (long story).⁴⁸⁰ These stories are traditionally told, calmly, in a leisurely manner, at home on rainy days, or on the deck of a boat, during a long journey towards distant islands on a full moon night. There are features in these long narratives which make them interesting for islanders of all ages:

⁴⁷⁸ (*Guettarda speciosa*) A small tree with very dark, almost black, bark, large velvety leaves, and small, fragrant, fast-decaying, white flowers (*unimā*). It is normally not cultivated and grows wild in the forest.

⁴⁷⁹ Although a large proportion of the population of South Asia is of rather dusky complexion, not only the traditional art, but also contemporary magazines and films show almost exclusively fair-skinned people. Even divinities supposed to be dark, such as Kṛṣṇa and Kālī are mostly depicted in a surreal sky-blue color or, less frequently, in a darker bluish hue, but never in the dark-brown color typical of the local darker-skinned people

⁴⁸⁰ Told by Muhammadu Sālihu, Daisy Villa, Dūṇḍigamu village, Fua Mulaku.

Sifa Huturu Koyya

"The departure of the vāru oḍi from Huvadū Atoll had been delayed, for various reasons, four years, four months and ten days. Finally it left Havaru Tinadū, the atoll's capital, loaded with the Sultan's tribute. Before leaving the Atoll and crossing the broad Huvadū Channel, it stopped at Māfuṭṭa,⁴⁸¹ where the sailors went ashore to cut betel leaves. As they jumped from the bokkurā (a small rowing boat) there was a very ugly, black and skinny man under the shade of the hirundu tree.⁴⁸² He looked like a burned trunk of an uni tree. As soon as they set foot ashore, he asked the sailors, "Where are you going?"

"To Male'." They said.

"Bring me along with you."

Looking at him in contempt, the sailors exclaimed, "Yuk! Not you!"

Since he kept insisting, finally, they said, "Ask Nevi Kalēfānu, the captain. He'll come ashore soon." And the sailors left, walking into the island to cut betel leaves.

Nevi Kalēfānu came ashore on the next bokkurā. He did not fail to see Huturu koyya (the ugly man) who asked him, "Can you bring me on your ship?"

The captain stared at him and seeing how black and skinny he was said, "No!"

⁴⁸¹ Now joined with another island and officially known as Kolāmāfuṣi.

⁴⁸² The yellow tulip tree (*Thespesia populnea*), cultivated on chosen spots close to the shoreline. The cool area under the shade of this tree was a social meeting point in almost every island.

Huturu koyya asked “Why?”

Haughtily the captain answered: “Our oḍi is not an ordinary one. It is this atoll’s vāru oḍi, carrying the tribute (vāru) to the king. It’s full. We have already been delayed four years four months and ten days. You have no time to prepare for the trip.”

Huturu koyya said, “I don’t need to prepare. In fact, I don’t need to take anything. I am ready. Just give me a small place on board to sit down.”

“There is no place for sitting down. It is all full!” said the captain wearily.

“Then give me a place for my two feet to stand.”

This time he lost his temper “Not even that. No!”

Huturu koyya said menacingly, “All right! All right! If you don’t bring me, you’ll take a further four years four months and ten days to arrive in Male’.”

The captain was surprised and asked mockingly, “And if we bring you?”

Huturu koyya looked at the sun. It was low; the rays were golden. He thought: “In one hour it will be setting.” Slowly he turned his head towards the captain and, narrowing his eyes, said calmly, “If you bring me along, you’ll be entering Male’ harbor tomorrow and you will see the sun rising over Huḷule.”

The captain thought this was absurd, because the journey would take at least three days with the best of winds. However, he agreed to bring Huturu koyya aboard to see what he would do, and perhaps to make a fool of him.

The oḍi was moored to the local buoyed cable off Māfuṭṭa. This mooring, used for short calls on the island, consisted of two heavy submerged weights joined with a strong rope. The ship’s rope was secured to the

buoy. A small stern sail was hoisted to steady the ship. As they saw the captain coming on board, the sailors started hoisting the other sails.

The moment Huturu koyya stepped on the ship behind the captain, a sudden gust of wind blew from Norimma (the SW) and there was confusion on board. The heavy vessel creaked under the strain of the unexpected motion. Some of the half-hoisted sails blew full and the mooring rope became so taut the captain had to find an axe to cut it. Released, the ship sailed smoothly out of the Māfuṭṭa channel into the ocean. The sun was setting right at that time.

The captain, after considering the clouds in the horizon, commanded Huturu koyya to take the tiller of the rudder. Huturu koyya thought: “What cheek he has! I am a passenger and he asks me to be his helmsman!”

It was getting dark, and the last islands of the great Huvadū Atoll were lost astern. The captain and the crew drank tea and ate their evening meal. After eating, they talked and chewed betel, but they did not give anything to Huturu koyya. They did not even make him part of their conversation. He did not ask for anything either. Soon, everybody fell asleep.

In the darkness, Huturu koyya sat patiently at the tiller. He was maintaining a steady course towards the North. The ship was sailing at a good speed and was careening beautifully. After a while the young man felt something bumping softly against the hull ahead, close to the prow. And, deftly reaching over board with his left hand, he pulled a huge piece of ambergris (māvaharu) from the water. Koyya laid it on deck in front of him, considered it briefly, and then he took his knife and cut it into three equal pieces.

One boy was not sleeping. Huturu koyya told him, “Futā!⁴⁸³ Make some fire.”

The boy took some coconut shells, lit a piece of cloth with the fānus (hurricane lantern), the only light on board, and set them on fire in a metal pot. After a while, when they became red hot coals, he put the pot beside Huturu koyya by the sternpost. Then the boy said he was tired and went to sleep. After letting a little time pass, Huturu koyya began to recite magic words and rubbed the ambergris between his fingers. While he slowly shredded the first piece over the embers, thick smoke rose and the heavy oḍi creaked and took an astonishing speed. When he burned the second piece over the red hot coals, the oḍi’s speed increased so much, that the people who habitually lie say it was flying. People who don’t lie say it did touch the water though.

As he finished the second, and began to shred the last piece of ambergris over the live embers, even the people who don’t lie, say the ship didn’t touch the waters. It was flying. In the darkness, above Haddummati and Koḷumadulu Atolls and over the sea between Nilande and Mulak Atolls, the oḍi sped northwards while everyone on board except Huturu koyya was in deep sleep. At dawn, it entered South Male’ Atoll through Rannaḷi channel, leaving it by Velassaru. Finally it flew over Maātila, the channel to enter North Male’ Atoll, and, right at that moment, the sun rose.

Huturu koyya shouted to the oḍi people, “Hey there! There are noble people ashore, what is this lack of courtesy? We should lower the sails!”⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸³ A term of endearment originally meaning ‘son’ (Skt. Putrā), common in the Southern Atolls

⁴⁸⁴ Since Male’ was the Royal island, all incoming vessels had to lower their sails way before entering its harbor. This was done as a mark of deference to the King.

Suddenly all got up, captain, crew and passengers. Baffled, they realized where they were and could not believe their eyes. Fortunately, all southern people carry a knife and, in a frenzied manner, they cut the ropes to lower the sails as fast as they could. At last, they entered the harbor rowing and punting, and anchored the oḍi close to the northern gate.

Huturu koyya went to the captain and said, "I want to be brought ashore."

The captain was now suddenly kind to him. With an oily smile, he said, "Wait, Huturu koyya. Eat with us, drink tea, chew, and then go ashore."

"No. Last night you even didn't give me a glass of water," he commented coolly. "You don't need to give me anything now." He insisted on being brought ashore.

Once on land, Huturu koyya went straight to Daharāge, a noble house. At the gate there was a middle-aged woman in fine clothes bent over, sweeping the road. He stopped close to her and called, "Fahaveri Dattā!" (Sister-in-law)

She looked up at him, and then continued her sweeping with increased energy, without answering. To her dismay, she had seen that the stranger was black and ugly and wore only a tucked up muṇḍu.

He called again, and she did not even look at him. The third time he called, she thought, why doesn't he go away? Who is that? But she did not answer and kept sweeping.

Huturu koyya complained, "Now the wife of my elder brother doesn't even talk to his younger brother?"

The woman now remembered that her husband once spoke of having a brother from another mother in the far South, in the island of Huḷudū. She had heard he was a big faṇḍita man.

She got up a bit embarrassed. Now she looked at him with respect and, according to tradition, invited him inside. She brought him tea, and betel and nuts to chew and sat with him on the undōli.

He asked, “Where is Bēbē?” (Elder brother)

“He is in the palace now. He is making faṇḍita for the king’s daughter!” answered the woman.

“What happened?”

“You don’t know? Well, it’s a long story: When the Radun saw that his wife had a difficult pregnancy, he made a vow that if the child was born healthy, he would go to Matīraffuḷu⁴⁸⁵ for the circumcision if he was a boy,⁴⁸⁶ or to perform the libās levvuñ ceremony if she was a girl. Finally, the queen gave birth to a daughter. The baby was healthy and without defects. She grew strong, tall, and fair, but she was always a bit thin. The Radun likes her very much because she is his only child.

One day, looking at her, the king thought, she is becoming a woman now and he remembered his vow. So, he prepared his daughter to travel to Matiraffuḷu. The royal oḍi left Male’ in the morning but the wind was not favorable. Before the sun set, they anchored at Kuḍabanḍos for the night.⁴⁸⁷ Tea was cooked aboard and after dinner, everyone went to sleep. Sometime before dawn, while it was still dark, the princess woke up. She went out on deck, cleared her throat and spat overboard into the gloomy, silent waters. Somehow, right after that, she felt ill and went to her bunk.

⁴⁸⁵ Matīrah (Tiladummati Atoll), an uninhabited island at the northern end of the country where there is a very important ziyārai shrine.

⁴⁸⁶ Khitān kuruñ in Male’ Bas. This ceremony was traditionally known as Islām kuruñ in the South.

⁴⁸⁷ A small, uninhabited island a few miles north of Male’

The next day she was very sick and was brought back to Male'. Ever since, she hasn't recovered and they say that she is suffering all the time."

"How long ago was that?" Huturu koyya asked.

"Four years ago! Think about it! She is always in bed and all the time faṇḍita is being made; and yet she still has not gotten well a bit. The king is very sad and hopeless."

Huturu koyya smiled sarcastically and said, "She could easily be healed. I'm sure I can heal her!"

Suddenly his sister-in-law became frightened. She hushed her voice and confronted him, "How can you say that? At the palace they will think you are mocking them. You might be punished." And indeed, a girl working in the kitchen had been listening secretly to their conversation. Immediately she sneaked out of the house, went straight to the palace kitchen and told the servant girls there what she had heard. Naturally, it took no time for the young man's claim to spread through the whole royal court.

While Huturu koyya and his sister-in-law were still sitting on the undōli chewing betel, Dahara Takurufānu, Huturu koyya's elder brother entered. He was so beside himself that he didn't even take time to greet his brother with the formal courtesies. Facing him, he exclaimed: "What have you said? Now you have been summoned to go to the palace immediately!"

Shocked, his wife put her finger to her mouth.⁴⁸⁸ "You see? As you are staying at our place, now we are all in trouble because of you."

Huturu koyya calmed her, "Don't worry sister-in-law. I can manage this. But I cannot go to the palace in this garb. I need a bath and clothes."

⁴⁸⁸ A gesture indicating fright or surprise.

His brother gave him some of his old clothes and the sister-in-law showed him the bath. He bathed, put his brother's clothes on and sat on the undōli.

Hastily, his brother went towards the gate, saying "Let's go."

However, on the way, Takurufānu realized that Koyya was not following him. He had to walk back home and found him still sitting there. "Why don't you come with me to the palace?" he asked impatiently.

Huturu koyya said in a fastidious tone, "I won't go to the palace in this outfit."

Mumbling crossly, his brother gave him his best clothes. Finally, they both left.

On the way, Takurufaān told his brother, "In the royal palace there are many rules. You must know how to behave. Remember not to sit on the transverse small platform in the outer room of the building. Then he went on, telling him six other places he should not sit, as they were reserved for high nobles only.

Huturu koyya went through the gates of the palace with Takurufān. Once inside, the young man calmly sat on the small transverse platform, the very place his elder brother warned him not to sit. His brother angrily told him to get up, in a muffled voice, and complained about his bad manners.

Offended, Huturu koyya left the palace without saying a word. At the gate, the dami aṣi people (the royal guards), saw him coming out alone and mockingly asked him, "Hey, handsome faṇḍita man, how many nāli (about 800 grams) of different flowers do you need to make your magic?"

Huturu koyya walked past the guards ignoring them. At once, his brother went out to look for him and met him on the street. He begged him to go back to the palace at the king's order.

This time in the palace, they had brought a special chair made of black wood with a red cushion especially for him. Huturu koyya sat there and when the Radun arrived they talked for a long time.

“What do you need?” the king finally asked.

“I will tell you about that later. First I need to be left alone with the princess.”

The Radun did not like to leave the ugly black man alone in a room with his only daughter, but refrained from saying so. He ordered that the princess’ chamber should be put in order. Thus, the room of the princess was cleaned, her hair was combed and a new fēli (waistcloth) was put on her. At last, after removing the dirty clothes and pots, the servant girls informed the King that everything was ready.

When Huturu koyya entered, he ordered the maidservants and attendants to leave. Then, making sure that he was alone, Huturu koyya went to the middle of the room and looked around in wonder, appreciating how refined the place was. He admired the heavy undōli, the beautiful mats, the embroidered pillows and the bronze lamps.

He thought: “For four years the best faṇḍita men of Male’ have been coming here making magic for her with expensive ingredients. I will show the King what I can do.”

His gaze turned towards the princess lying on the bed as if she was peacefully sleeping. Huturu koyya had never been alone with such a lovely girl and he stared at her in awe. She looked pale, and a bit too thin. Every now and then she winced with a pain so intense, that it distorted her serene features. Occasionally, she arched her back all of a sudden, as if she was suffering violent torture.

With utmost care, Huturu koyya put his palm on her chest, then on her cheek, and third on her shoulder. He then went out, requested just a glass

of water and recited mantras over it. Sitting at the head of her bed, he put one arm around the neck of the princess. Raising her head, he forced her mouth open, and poured the water down her throat.

Almost instantly the girl opened her eyes and was cured. She looked at him startled, and asked, "Who are you?"

Hearing the voice of the princess, the servants and maids rushed in and could not believe their eyes. Meanwhile, Huturu koyya quietly left the room.

Everyone in the palace rejoiced that night. Huturu koyya was made to sit in a place of honor and was served the best food before he went home. The Radun praised his powers and so did everyone of his entourage.

During the next days Huturu koyya stayed idling in Daharāge. Every day he received food and also carefully packed betel and arecanut presents from the palace. However, seven days later, on the following Thursday night, the princess again fell unconscious and was jerking in pain.

Huturu koyya was urgently called to the palace that night. The king was full of sorrow when he talked to him, "She is suffering again. Can you cure her completely? I have faith in your magic now and I know you can do much. For many years local faṇḍita men have been consuming my money in expensive remedies and you only needed a glass of water."

Huturu koyya said, "Of course I can fully heal her. But for that I need many things, and they will cost a lot of money."

The Radun said, "All right. No fortune will be too great if it is going to heal my daughter."

Then, Huturu koyya said, “The following things will be needed: A small pavilion⁴⁸⁹ should be built in the island of Kuḍabaṇḍos where the hoḷuaṣi is now located. In front of the pavilion, a small jetty should be built, reaching out to the deep waters of the lagoon. Upon its completion, forty kambili (White-breasted swamp-hens), forty cocks, forty sea turtles, forty goats, and forty cows, including the big cow of Henvēru,⁴⁹⁰ should be brought there with their legs tied together. Lastly, forty people who know how to read Arabic should be brought with forty Qurāns and 10 oil lamps.”

“Anything else?” asked the king.

Smiling, and remembering the royal guards who had ridiculed him, he said, “Yes! Every dami aṣi man should bring forty nāḷi of flowers.” Then Huturu koyya went home.

As soon as he arrived to Daharāge, he went to the garden and made a magical drawing on the ground, close to the weeds. Then he went to sleep. During the next days, no flowers would bloom in Male’.

Meanwhile, on Kuḍabaṇḍos, the small decorated pavilion and jetty were promptly built and everything Huturu koyya had requested was brought to the island. The Radun then sent for Huturu koyya and pleaded, “We have now arranged and gathered everything you mentioned, except for the flowers. The dami aṣi men are worried.”

The king summoned them. The guards came and humbly begged the young sorcerer to forgive them. As he saw that they were sorry, he said,

⁴⁸⁹ Although the building is a small, open-sided pavilion (haruge), here the word ‘gaṇḍuvaru’, meaning ‘palace’ is used. By this it is understood that it is a building worthy of the princess, but not necessarily a permanent and solid palace, since pavilions are usually temporary constructions.

⁴⁹⁰ The eastern quarter of Male’, where a very big cow was reported to be living; but since it was the norm to offer only male animals in this type of sacrifices, here the word ‘geri’ may mean bulls

“Tomorrow, you’ll be able to gather the flowers. But you must pick them fast because I cannot make the magic without them.”

Huturu koyya left for home and rubbed out the drawing on the earth. That same evening, one hundred thousand flowers burst open in Male’. Picking them kept the dami aṣi men busy the whole night.

The next day, Huturu koyya and the forty people were brought together with the king’s daughter on the royal ship to Kuḍabanḍos. After anchoring in front of the island, they waited for the late afternoon and went ashore. The princess was carefully laid on the bed that was in the center of the small pavilion. Around her the ten oil lamps were hung and lit. Under every lamp, four Qurāns (Tiris) were placed on stands with four people reciting from them, facing each other.

Huturu koyyā went to check the sacrificial animals that had been brought ashore with their feet tied, and counted them to see that they were all live, healthy animals.⁴⁹¹ Then he went to the jetty and sat down. The sun had set. The flowers had been carefully arranged close to the jetty in neat conical heaps. Now he ordered the forty men to start reciting, while he faced the sea and recited ancient mantras.

Some time passed and it was dusk. All of a sudden, against the starry sky, the silhouette of a large black ship glided towards the island. Silently, it threw anchor and loomed in front of the jetty. Aboard this sinister vessel were all the spirits, furētas and ghosts of the northern expanses of the Maldiv Ocean Kingdom. Fearlessly, Huturu koyya called: “Ship ahoy! Is there anyone aboard who is causing this princess to suffer?”

A muttering sound went around the spooky ship. The spirits were asking each other in whispers whether anyone had done anything to the princess.

⁴⁹¹ At this point, in the original story, all the animals are named again.

Finally a tall, slimy demon standing on deck assured Huturu koyya that no one aboard their ship was causing any distress to the Radun's daughter.

Satisfied, Koyya yelled: "All right! Weigh anchor and leave." And the spirits pulled the anchor and left the lagoon noiselessly.

Again the young sorcerer ordered the forty people to recite, while he chanted his magic words. Some time passed and another ship, much larger and darker than the previous one, sailed into the lagoon and anchored alongside the jetty. Aboard this huge, dismal vessel there were a great number of spirits of all types. They were the haṇḍis and ferētas of the southern end of the Maldiv Islands.

Huturu koyya boldly called: "Ship ahoy! Is anyone aboard inflicting pain on this princess?" And he pointed towards the girl lying on the bed under the light of the oil lamps.

Again, the ship trembled with a commotion. A sinister rustling sound revealed that the innumerable spirits were passing the question and the answers around. After some time, a regal-looking haṇḍi came on deck with all her sumptuous jewellery glittering in the starlight and addressed the magician in a clear, musical voice: "Sir, there is no one on board this ship causing injury to the daughter of the King."

Huturu koyya, appreciating her beauty and her courteous tone, replied: "All right, you may weigh anchor and leave." Thus, they raised their anchor and left southwards.

Again, Koyya immersed himself in the recitation of old incantations from the end of the jetty, while the forty men surrounding the princess inside the pavilion read their forty books aloud. Those were the only sounds that could be heard in the quiet night. And, after a long time, a somber, creepy ship arrived from the west and entered the lagoon. Though it was not as large as the previous one, aboard were all the ghosts, spirits and haṇḍis of the central regions of the Maldiv Kingdom.

As it threw anchor, Koyya called: "Ship ahoy! Is there anyone on board making the princess suffer?"

The spirits and furētas aboard whispered to each other for a while, and finally answered him: "No. No one here is hurting that noble young lady in any way."

The sorcerer calmly said: "All right, you may sail away."

However, when the spirits tried to raise the anchor they couldn't. The rope didn't move. It was rigid as steel. Even when all the ghosts and goblins aboard tried hard to pull the rope, it did not even tremble slightly.

Huturu koyya smiled and exclaimed: "Surely someone aboard is causing some evil to the princess."

The spirits were puzzled and looked at one another. Frightening, mysterious sounds could be heard as the numerous haṇḍis and demons conferred with each other in hushed voices. They were anxious for there was not much time left before dawn and they had to be back to their islands before that time, otherwise they might perish. Finally, after a long search, stowed in a dirty dark place in the keel water at the bottom of the ship, they found a very shabby furēta. He was old, had only one eye, one ear, walked on one leg and one arm was missing. The other spirits questioned him sternly and he finally confessed.

This pitiful creature was brought on deck and facing him, the young sorcerer asked: "Is it you who is causing the agony of the princess?"

Reluctantly, the goblin answered: "Yes."

Koyya noticed how embarrassed he was and encouraged him to talk: "Tell me what happened."

Not daring to look up, the pathetic spirit spoke in a monotonous, nasal voice: "I am among the poorest and most wretched creatures among

spirits. Look at me. I have only one eye, one ear, one arm and one leg. I have seven daughters; all have one eye, one ear, one arm, one breast and one leg.⁴⁹² We are so poor I always have to wander around looking for food for them.” Wiping away a tear of self-pity, the miserable furēta continued: “Years ago, I happened to pass under the royal ship’s hull while it was anchored close to this island. I saw the light of the lamp astern and looked up. Then, all of a sudden the princess spat over board and hit me. Look!”

He showed the top of his head, where there was a hideous, large wound. “That is why I stuck a thorn in her body.”⁴⁹³

Huturu koyya bent down from the jetty, scooped up a little salt water and recited magic words over it. Then he sprinkled it over the furēta’s head and, instantly, his severe wound was healed. Looking sternly at him he said: “Now you must pull the thorn out. Recite the following words along with me: Lussē, lussē, kaṣi lussafiē, mulussē.”

Still full of rancor at the young princess for having inflicted him the painful wound which had tortured him over the past four years, this grotesque furēta didn’t want to recite the mantra. He fidgeted and recited it wrongly four or five times.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹² In Nandadeva Wijesekera, “Deities & Demons, Magic & Masks” there are a number of descriptions of Sri Lankan prētas and their features, including female prētas with one breast. In South India, among the ancient popular divinities of Kerala there was a minor goddess called ‘Oṭṭamulaci’, the single-breasted one. K.N. Panikkar, ‘Folklore of Kerala.’

⁴⁹³ Though not specifically mentioned, among a Divehi audience it is understood that this a ‘magic thorn’.

⁴⁹⁴ This is one of the favorite parts with the children. The storyteller makes a long show of the furēta reciting that mantra wrongly, while the magician patiently repeats it as it should be said.

Each time, patiently, Huturu koyya repeated the mantra; and each time the furēta said some word wrong. The other spirits on board began goading him, grumbling: “Come on! Soon it will be dawn and we must be back in our islands before then.”

Finally, tiring of resisting, the goblin said the words correctly. Right then, Huturu koyya turned his head towards the pavilion and asked: “Is the princess well?”

The girl had risen. She sat on the ominous edge of her bed and was gazing around with wide eyes.

The young sorcerer simply told the wretched-looking furēta: “Now you can leave.” And, quick as lightning, the little monster disappeared below deck. Then the other spirits pulled the anchor, which now came up easily. In but a little time, the dreary ship was gone, lost against the night sky.

The flower heaps on the jetty were prepared and bunches of them were thrown into the sea. Then, each of the forty men brought an animal to the top of the jetty and waded into the water. First, they brought a kambili each. The sorcerer cut its throat over the sea, but not a drop of blood came out. One by one, they went back for the cocks, the sea turtles, the goats, and last the cows. In the same manner Huturu koyya severed the throat of each animal, but not a single droplet of blood came out, even from the big Henvēru cow.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁵ Owing to the ominous presence of such a large number of spirits during the night, no blood was left in their bodies. Cf. 2.2.2 ‘Blood Sacrifices’

However, as blood had to be 'shown' (lei dekkuñ) to the sea, Huturu koyya cut the tip of his own finger and let the blood trickle into the water.⁴⁹⁶ The ritual was now concluded and the evil had been dispelled at a great risk.

As dawn came, everyone got on board the royal oḍi. They arrived to Male' while it was still early morning. Soldiers and servants who had seen the royal vessel's sail from afar were anxiously waiting at the harbor. As soon as the princess came ashore they escorted her to the palace. Huturu koyya went to Daharage and the forty men went around Male' telling about the wonders and evils they had witnessed on the little island.

Meanwhile the princess was the center of attention at the palace. Her father was beaming with satisfaction and ordered that Huturu koyya be brought immediately into his presence. When he was brought before the Radun, the young sorcerer was told that, as the King was so pleased, he would grant him anything he wanted.

Calmly, Huturu koyya asked the King to give him the princess in marriage.

The monarch was taken aback at the insolence. But the princess, who was spying, opened her eyes wide and looked at him in a new manner. She was so impressed by what she had seen that she liked this young dark man.

The king fumed: "Ask me for anything but that."

Huturu koyya insisted: "I don't want anything else; I only want your daughter."

The Radun, affronted by so much impertinence, dismissed him rudely: "You go now! I have to think about that."

⁴⁹⁶ "An oblation of blood which has been rendered pure by holy texts, ... blood drawn from the offerer's body is looked upon as a proper oblation to the goddess Caṇḍikā." W.J. Wilkins, 'Hindu Mythology.'

The sorcerer left and the king called his daughter. "Do you know who was just here?"

"No." She answered, although she had secretly witnessed the whole scene.

"Huturu koyya was here. And he wants to marry you! Think of that!" exclaimed the outraged king.

The princess politely said, "Father, why don't you agree? He is a big magician. There is no one like him in the whole Island Kingdom."

The Radun was nonplussed. "Are you ready to marry him; that ugly man?"

His daughter lowered her eyes and spoke softly, "O father! When I opened my eyes and found myself in that pavilion, I glanced towards the end of the jetty and there he was, looking back towards me. He was close to a big, dark ship full of spirits, but didn't show the slightest fear. Father, I found him handsome then and I still think he is not that ugly.

The king, clutching his head in dismay, gasped: "You love him!" and he turned his face away from her muttering: "Love is indeed a blind thing."

The monarch didn't know what to say. Meanwhile his daughter stood very quietly in front of him. He looked at her with a worried expression: "Daughter, now you have become a woman. You should not walk around like this, without being properly dressed with a libās as befits a lady of your standing. You must first go to Matīraffuḷu to undergo the libās levvuñ ceremony. I hope that after this trip you will change your mind and think like a noble lady, not like a silly girl."

The princess had not said another word, but her father was irritated and dismissed her. He had already improvised a secret plan to give orders to prolong the trip to that northern island, in the hope that his daughter's youthful infatuation would cool off.

Thus, the young princess was sent away in the royal ship to the northern end of the Maldivé Kingdom. The Radun had given instructions to her servants to stay there for at least four months; and so they did. Even after the ceremony was over, the girl told the servants that she was ready to go to Male', but they gave to her one reason after the other for not leaving. One week they told her that the wind was not favorable and after over a month, when even the princess could see that the wind was blowing fine, they told her that the astrologer had said it was a bad day for leaving and they were waiting for an auspicious day, and so forth. The poor girl was helpless to change anything and her vacant days in that nondescript, uninhabited island were long and full of boredom.

Meanwhile, Huturu koyya waited patiently in Male' for the return of the princess; and every evening, the King sent the prettiest girls of his kingdom to Daharāge with special instructions to flirt with Koyya. They came smiling coquettishly, bringing him sweets and betel leaves, but the young sorcerer did not even look at them. He ignored all these girls until they went back to the palace having failed in their mission, one by one, night after night.

At last, one day Huturu koyya heard through a royal servant that the princess had come back and he went to the palace immediately. He found the King in an angry mood, because he had just been informed by her girl attendant that she was still infatuated with that ugly man. Seeing him the Radun thought: "Why doesn't he just go? I would give him so much gold and anything he wanted. Why does he want my daughter?"

Huturu koyya ignored the king's somber face and said candidly: "Your Highness knows why I am here."

The monarch sighed in weariness: "All right, you are a mighty magician. However, you are not a nobleman. If you want to marry the princess, you must do some heroic deed first."

The young man was unfazed: "What shall I do?"

The king instructed: “You must catch the giant sea turtle (boḍu velā) of Gādūkoḷu.⁴⁹⁷ And you will have to catch it tonight, before sunrise. Otherwise you cannot marry my daughter.”

After Huturu koyya left, the Radun called the princess. “This ugly magician wants to marry you; do you want to marry him?”

The girl said: “Yes father,” and smiled shyly. But then he told her that he had ordered Koyya to catch the giant sea turtle of Gādūkoḷu before sunrise. Since she had already secretly listened to this, she was already sad. Now tears poured out of her eyes. She was indignant: “Father! You know he cannot do that! Nobody can!”

Her father dismissed her and laughed wickedly, satisfied with himself.

The boḍu velā was a giant sea turtle which haunted the ocean off Huḷule’s southern reef end. In the evening, Huturu koyya went there, swimming from the Lonu Ziyāray Koḷu, the southeastern end of Male’. He was carrying a big, strong rope and waded close to the breakers at the southern tip of Huḷule’s reef. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, he saw the mighty turtle coming towards him. As they came together, Koyya tied the rope around the animal’s neck. It fought fiercely, but the sorcerer held his ground with his feet firmly planted on the coral reef edge and slowly, he managed to tie one fin after the other until the turtle was helpless. Then the young man tugged his huge trophy across the channel to Lonu Ziyāray Koḷu. There, with great effort he pulled it ashore when it was already dawn.

Huturu koyya gave a big sigh and, gazing at the sky, he realized how long his struggle with the giant reptile had been. Yet, still he had enough strength left over to put the turtle upright, making it stand on the tail end

⁴⁹⁷ The southern tip of Huḷule Island, close to Male’

*of its shell. Thus, the huge body of the great turtle cast a shadow over Male' as the sun rose.*⁴⁹⁸

In the town, the people didn't see the sun until after ten o'clock. Everyone exclaimed in wonder: "The sun hasn't risen over Male' today." In the palace as well, everyone was amazed. However, the Radun was red with fury.

Huturu koyya, after taking a bath and putting on clean clothes, went to the king and declared: "Now I have done what you wanted. Shouldn't you give me your daughter in marriage?"

The monarch was beside himself. With venom in his voice he hissed: "All right, you have done what I asked for. But, still you are Huturu koyya. Who are you to come here and give me orders? This is my Kingdom!"

The young sorcerer was not prepared for so much anger and could not utter a word.

Threatening him with his finger the king vowed: "You will not marry my only child as long as I rule these Islands."

Politely, Huturu koyya said: "All right!" and calmly went away, unfazed by his humiliation. He was tired and very disappointed. However, at Daharage his sister-in-law stared at him in awe and tried to raise his spirits. While she served him tea, she told him that all Male' was talking about his prowess. The young man didn't feel like talking and, after eating hungrily, he went to sleep.

He slept all through the day and, waking at sunset, he bathed and went to the harbor. There he went to meet Keulubē ('Uncle master-fisherman'),

⁴⁹⁸ The storyteller literally said: "That day the sun didn't rise over Male'".

the most experienced fisherman in town, and told him: "I want to go fishing with you tonight, but no one else should go with us."

Keuḷubē agreed and Huturu koyya jumped aboard the dōni. Before it became dark, they left. After fishing a few bait fish off Male's northern shore, they went out into the ocean. Within a short while they had caught seven hundred large skipjack tunas and Keuḷubē was very happy: "Koyya, you certainly are a good faṇḍita man! I never have trouble fishing, but I have to tell you that never in my life I have fished so much in such a short time."

However, although Keuḷubē was in an excellent mood, he could not cheer the young sorcerer up. Huturu koyya was sad. Kindly, the master-fisherman asked him: "Shall we return? You don't look well and we have enough fish."

"Not yet!" said the magician. "Let me first do what I must do. For that I will need all the fish."

Keuḷubē was surprised, but seeing his determination, he quietly assented. He watched on in amazement as Huturu koyya tied the seven hundred tunas in a bunch. Then they sailed off Huḷule, along its long reef's western side, trailing the enormous bunch of fishes behind them. This large cluster of dead tunas, releasing all their blood, awoke a giant hermit crab which had been sleeping buried in the sand of the ocean depths.

The sun was rising and the titanic crustacean showed part of his huge shell, large as an island, above the surface. To Keuḷubē's horror, the monstrous hermit crab slowly but steadily began following them and Huturu koyya turned their boat towards Male'.

At that moment, the Radun awoke from his sleep and looked casually at the harbor from his window as he did every morning. Suddenly, the king beheld Huturu koyya standing on the boat with a crab of colossal proportions towering behind him. At once his pride vanished and he

realized in fear that this sorcerer had more power than him. The Radun now saw that if he didn't give his daughter in marriage to the young magician, even if he be so ugly, he might lose his kingdom.

Hence, the monarch immediately sent his prime minister (Boḍu Vazīru) to the beach to tell Huturu koyya to stop bringing the tremendous crab closer to the palace.

The prime minister quickly went to meet the young sorcerer on a boat and yelled: "The Radun himself has requested me to tell you that he has decided to give you the princess in marriage."

As soon as he heard that, Huturu koyya released his huge cluster of tunas. The current swiftly carried the seven hundred fish southeastwards through the Huḷule channel into the deep ocean and the giant hermit crab followed the bait and disappeared.

All Male' now sighed in relief and the men, women and children who had gathered anxiously at the beach to watch the dramatic events, cheered with delight when the young magician disembarked. The girls put flower garlands on him and the boys carried him on their shoulders to the palace gate.

Thus, the ugly magician at last married the princess and they led a happy and prosperous life together. The lesson of this story is that one should never spit in dark places without calling a warning: "Jai, dure!"⁴⁹⁹

Seemingly harmless actions of humans can have disastrous consequences in the spirit world. Since Maldivians believed that they were constantly

⁴⁹⁹ Or simply "Jai!" This was the warning cry in the Southern Maldives. In Male' and the North it was the custom to give the spirits a longer warning: "Gaikoḷu gaigā duru!" Source: Fātumatu Nāima, Gāge, Male'

surrounded by spirits, the moral of this legend stresses the importance of being careful. One never knows the consequences that a trivial action from the human point of view such as spitting, may have on the spirit world. Formerly, in the Maldives, it was customary for people to give a warning cry before throwing the vaḷudāni (a small bucket attached to a pole to draw water from the shallow Maldivian wells) into the well during the night, as it may hit a spirit happening to be there. Such a warning would be uttered as well when throwing dirty water or rubbish into dark, humid, overgrown places, as those spots are the favorite haunts of spirits.

Being mindful of the surrounding spirits is the subject of a well-known Bengali folk tale, “Niścōydatta of Ujjayini” where the king of the Yakśas (spirits), complaining that a number of Yakśas had been killed by some careless humans, declares:

“In ancient times men were reasonable. Before dropping a bucket into a well they used to call out, ‘Peace! Peace be with you!’ as a warning to the Yakśas that happened to be loitering at the bottom of the well. Then, in later times, men used to shout, ‘Look out!’ It was not a polite warning, nevertheless it was a warning. But nowadays what do they do? They just hurl a bucket into the well without any warning! ... You can’t blame us for punishing you.”⁵⁰⁰

Although Sifa Huturu Koyya’s story is deeply marked by Divehi features, some key parts of the plot are highly reminiscent of South Indian lore. There is a Telugu legend in which Sanubhuti, a skinny and flimsy Brahmin, strikes a deal with an evil spirit (Brahmarakśasa) who feels sorry for him.⁵⁰¹ As a favor to Sanubhuti, the spirit possesses a princess of a city

⁵⁰⁰ Sudhin N. Ghose, “Folk Tales and Fairy Stories from Farther India”

⁵⁰¹ This legend is present in a more elaborated version in the Tamil lore, the Brahmin being originally from the village of Manarkāḍ, traveling to Mysore, from there to Kashi and then finally to Trivandrum. K.A. Seethalakshmi, ‘Folk Tales of Tamil Nadu.’

called Vanadurga, so that the Brahmin can heal her and become wealthy and marry a fine woman. Arriving at Vanadurga, Sanubhuti informs the palace guards that he can heal the princess and they bring him immediately to the king. Seeing the ragged appearance of the Brahmin, the king does not believe that he can cure the princess. Finally, after much haggling Sanubhuti makes a solemn oath and the king leads the Brahmin towards his daughter's room. When he is asked what he needs to perform the powerful ritual to exorcise the evil spirit from the princess, Sanubhuti smiles and says he does not require any equipment for the ritual. Then he enters the room and closes the door behind him. Eventually the Brahmin heals the princess and the king showers him with honors and wealth.⁵⁰²

This part of Sanubhuti's story is practically identical with Huturu Koyya's. Given that both tales reflect ancestral lore, they confirm that there must have been a deep cultural connection between South India and the Maldiv Islands in ancient times. What is not known is at which point Indian lore influenced Maldiv tradition, and whether it was along with the establishment of Buddhism or whether it was owing to popular contact much farther back in time. As in the legends about Oḍitān Kalēge, who corresponds in the Indian epics to the famous Ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha, the Brahmin tantric hero, this story shows that the Brahmins of the Subcontinent and the faṇḍita men of the Maldiv Islands had a very similar function within their respective social backgrounds.

⁵⁰² B. Rama Raju, 'Folk Tales of Andhra Pradesh'.

3.2.1 LURKING IN THE DARKNESS

The number seven has a mystical significance in popular Maldivive culture. It is believed that it is an auspicious number and that it may have magical power. Here are a few instances of its importance:

In the island of Māļos (South Māļosmaḍulu Atoll) there is the custom once every year to take a bath in seven different wells (haiy vaļuñ feñ veruñ).⁵⁰³ This is probably an ancestral Dravidian custom. The Pulaya or Cheruman, an agricultural caste of Kerala, used to take a bath in seven different tanks when they were considering themselves polluted.⁵⁰⁴

During the ceremony of libās levvun (a puberty ritual for girls) when they are no longer considered children and are introduced as women into the society, the faṇḍita man has to turn seven times around a hunigoṇḍi (a long, low chair with a blade to grate coconut at one end) on which the girl stood. Formerly the girl had to stand on two gold sovereigns placed on top of a sack full of rice.

The masdayfiohi, a knife with a handle made of a spermwhale tooth, used for magical rituals, has a blade said to be made of seven metals (haiylō). I could not get precise information about exactly which metals were those. Probably it is just the impressive name of a certain alloy, not necessarily containing seven different metals. In India, an alloy of five metals (Pañcalōha) is common for the casting of idols and ritual tools.

There is a game played with stones and seven holes, where it is very difficult to win. Upon winning this game it is said “haiyñ attavāļiñ gā neguñ” (taking the stones out of the seven holes), which is an indication of having performed an extraordinary feat.

⁵⁰³ Source: Mohamed Zuhair (Juhā), Vainujehēge, Māfannu, Male’.

⁵⁰⁴ E. Thurston, ‘Castes and Tribes of S. India’, Vol. 2.

In some children's tales, such as 'Mākumbē' and 'Māmelidaitā' or Māmulidaitā, known as 'Mēliyādaitā' or simply 'Mēliyā' in the Southern Atolls, the main characters have seven children, usually alternate girls and boys. In the local epic 'Donhiyalā and Alifuḷu', the heroine's mother gave birth to seven children and only the last survived.

In addition, the number seven is also connected with the activity of certain evil spirits afflicting little children with fear and disease. This phenomenon is known in the islands as kudingē biru (children terror).

Lurking in the darkness of the long equatorial nights there is a certain female spirit who is said to cause fear in children. She is especially dreaded because Maldivians affirm that both too much fear and continuous crying can be deadly, especially among little boys and girls. Since it is believed that children may easily become weak and lose appetite due to fear, much faṇḍita is done against this particular demon.

Most people don't know this spirit by a name and refer to it as 'Kudingē Biru Daitā' (The Aunt of the Terror of Children). It is deemed to be a stately, queen-like woman of either blue or very dark complexion (the color of the deep ocean, also referred to as kaḷu 'black') or who wears dark blue clothes. She never comes alone, having her own attendants and displaying great personal pomp and splendor. Her faithful companion is a seven-headed snake called haiybōrāhi, always looming behind her. The color of this mythical snake is either black or dark blue as well.⁵⁰⁵

This female demon is said to have seven daughters or attendant girls (haiy aṇheṇbēḷuṇ), who rotate their positions of privilege day after day in succession. Thus every day of the week a different girl will command over

⁵⁰⁵ Source: Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Māfannu, Male'. Note the relationship between a female divinity and a snake, so common in the tradition of the Subcontinent.

the others. The eldest daughter is called Lajjigavisanāvi.⁵⁰⁶ Except for her name, which could have its origins in Vaiṣṇavī, one of the ‘Seven little mothers’ of the Indian lore, no other details are known about her.

This woman-spirit may sit on top of the house and make the children inside cry. In the night, there will be unusual noises coming from the thatched roof. The main name of this demon is not clear, some people say she is a manifestation of hāmunḍi, the fearsome woman haunting graveyards and unclean, dark, humid places mentioned at the end of this chapter. Others call this spirit by the non-indigenous name Umm-us-Subyānu, which is a certain figure of Arabic folklore well-known in Egypt. In all likelihood, this name was brought to the Maldives by local learned men having studied in Arab lands. Having only vague ideas about their own folklore, such men were led to confuse a Divehi spirit with a demon they had heard of while in distant Egypt.⁵⁰⁷

Old Maldivians insist that the two names mentioned above are not referring to the same spirit, since hāmunḍi is generally connected with causing madness, violent behavior and death, while Umm-us-Subyānu is supposed to bring about degenerative diseases, like polio, in children. This leaves us with the assumption that, if they are not the same spirit, Umm-us-Subyānu must have had an older name in Divehi which has been lost.

In Southern Huvadū Atoll there is a story related to this theme about a certain local spirit called Kaḷobolā (lit. ‘Black Head’). The journey of the spirit and the boy is described in the bandi form of verse and all important islands of the southern section of Huvadū Atoll are mentioned beginning

⁵⁰⁶ Probably from the Sanskrit ‘Latikā’=A string of pearls or a small creeping plant, and ‘Vaiṣṇavī, one of the Saptamātrkās.

⁵⁰⁷ Except for a few names, such as Umm-us-Subiyānu, Ghūlu and the generic word ‘Jinni’, popular Arabic folklore has had not much effect upon the Maldivian mythology

in Vādū: *‘Vādūn Hurā fannyā Kaṇḍahagā nubalannyā... and ending in Fares ...deñ Kava hadā Kava husvū Farehu huṭṭē Koḍē haulu govē*, after having completed the full circle. In spite of some similarities with Kudinge Biru Daitā, it is not clear whether this is a female demon or not.⁵⁰⁸

Kaḷobolā

“In the island of Vādū one evening a boy was crying and crying. His mother couldn’t sleep and asked him what was wrong. Instead of answering, he kept crying. She tried to soothe him, hugging him and cooing soft words into his ear, but it didn’t help. He cried and cried. She asked whether he was angry or sick, but the child just went on crying. Finally the mother became so mad that she grabbed him and put him out of the house.

When he saw that he was outside, the boy stopped his cries. He looked up and in the moonlight he saw Kaḷobolā, a big black spirit, sitting on the roof of his home. Kaḷobolā came down, packed the boy on his shoulders and left at high speed.

They went eastwards from island to island during the night. At the cock’s call, Kaḷobolā came back to the Southeastern rim of Huvadū from the west, having covered a circular route of about hundred and fifty miles. The spirit told the boy: “I have been carrying you around the whole night and I have brought you here safely. You have to pay a price.” Saying so, Kaḷobolā gouged out one of the boy’s eyes, gulped it, and disappeared into the sea.

When the sun rose, the boy saw that he was at a lonely end of the beach on the island of Fares, not far from his home island. An old man called

⁵⁰⁸ Told by Murushīdu from Fares Island, Huvadū Atoll. He was not a little reticent to tell it, fortunately he was encouraged by my friend Afīfu from Ratafandū Island in the same Atoll

Ekoḍukalōbeyya, who had the reputation of eating only lizards, found him there. He brought the child to a house in Fares where he stayed until a boat brought him back to Vādū.

The gouging out of eyes seems to be a common habit among different Maldivian demons. In northern Maldives this story is told with a different, far more tragic, end: Instead of Huvadu Atoll, other versions will be located in different places according to the native island of the storyteller and, after having been taken around by the spirit, the child doesn't survive the ordeal and, in the morning, his skeleton is found picked clean. This crueler version of Kaḷobola has no specific name or sex and it is assumed to be some kind of monster.

From a Divehi perspective, the most striking feature of this story is the abnormal unkindness of the mother. No average mother would punish her child so severely as to put him out of the house during the night. In Maldives children were not even allowed to see the red sky at sunset and they were kept indoors in a room lit by a dim lamp from dusk to dawn to shelter them from evil spirits lurking in the gloom outside. Looking at the red sky was considered inauspicious and even the children's clothes drying on the line were put indoors before that time. Red skies, as well as the red waters of the sea reflecting them, are connected with the goddess in her malevolent and destructive form in Indic tradition.

Throughout the Maldivian Islands, the material world and the spirit world are assumed to be parallel. Hence, spirits connected with harm to children and pregnant women are reckoned to be always physically nearby. Since fatness is considered a good quality among babies in the traditional Maldivian context, one should never say that a particular child, especially one's own, is fat or beautiful. Dangerous female spirits lurking nearby may be tempted to strike the child with affliction and disease. If the child becomes thin it is already considered a very ill omen. Thus, only a jealous person wishing evil to befall others would do such a thing. The polite way would be to say: 'Oh, your son has become thin!' so the

parents will be happy. In India, the child-afflicting goddesses need to be propitiated during pregnancy, in the labor room as well as during the child's early years.

“Behind child-afflicting goddesses such as the Mātrkāś is probably the belief that women who die childless or in childbirth linger on as inimical spirits who are jealous of other women and their children and whose jealousy is appeased by stealing or harming their children. Worship of the Mātrkāś is aimed primarily at keeping them away. Not referring to one's children as beautiful or attractive and marking children with collyrium to hide their beauty are practices probably related to keeping these goddesses from noticing one's children, lest their jealousy be aroused and they harm the offspring. To make much of one's children might attract the Mātrkāś attention and risk incurring their dread afflictions.”⁵⁰⁹

While in the Subcontinent these deities are appeased with offerings, baths and sacrifices, in Maldives much faṇḍita is done to counteract this occurrence. Divehi children are also told frightening stories about spirits so that they stay indoors during the night. Safaru Kaiddā is the subject of a popular tale usually told by mothers to their daughters. Like in the story of Kaḷobolā above, here we find again a spirit plucking out a human eye.

Safaru Kaiddā

One evening a woman told her daughter, “Let's hide the vaḷudāni (small bucket attached to a pole) and the funḍā dāy (grinding stone) and go to sleep.”

“Why should we hide them?” the daughter asked, “We never do.”

⁵⁰⁹ D. Kinsley, “Hindu Goddesses”

Lovingly the mother answered, "Tonight is the 15th of Safaru, and every year Safaru Kaiddā comes this night with her seven daughters. One of them has one eye missing. So, you must hide the vaḷudāni and dāy."

"Tell me why, mother!" the daughter insisted. "What will happen if we don't hide them?"

Widening her eyes and lowering her voice, her mother explained, "Once, when I was a small child like you, we went to sleep on the 15th of Safaru without hiding them. That night Safaru Kaiddā came. She ground medicine for her seven daughters on the dāy and used the vaḷudāni to bathe them at the well. So, the whole night we heard the sound of water being pulled out of the well.

"At dawn, when she left, we went outside. There was a lot of dirt around the well from the daughters' bodies, for she washes her daughters only once year. When we cleaned up the mess, under the mud, we found a gold gilāfati.⁵¹⁰ We could hardly make it out through the thick layer of grime covering it. My aunt took it and kept it hidden in the house.

"The next year, Safaru Kaiddā returned on the night of the 15th of Safaru. In a frightening voice, she asked 'Where is my daughter's gilāfati?' Angrily she beat the walls of the house with her fists demanding: 'Give it back!' Inside we were shaking with fear, without uttering a word. Then she threatened: 'If you don't give the gilāfati back to me, I'll take one of your eyes for my daughter to eat.'

Savagely, this terrible woman beat, kicked, and shook the house. Finally, she broke the door, forcefully thrust her hand through it, gouged out my aunt's eye, and left happily."

⁵¹⁰ An ancient type of short, massive necklace worn close to the base of the neck. The gilāfati is obsolete now.

*The mother concluded, “You see what happens if, on the 15th of Safaru’s night, the funḍā dāy and vaḷudāni are left out. So, my child, let’s hide them inside the house and go to sleep.”*⁵¹¹

Safaru is the month of Safar in the Arabic lunar calendar, and Kaiddā is a local form of the Arabic name Khadīja (Kaddā in the South of Maldives). Again, although Safaru Kaiddā is a local Divehi spirit whose portrayal matches with certain aspects of Cāmuṇḍi, it carries an Arabic name in the same manner as Umm-us-Subiyānu. She is said to be a looking like a fearsome, cruel-looking old woman wearing gold jewellery. It is believed that Safaru Kaiddā always comes along with her seven daughters. Since her daughters are young, some Divehi people say that Safaru Kaiddā is not old, but middle-aged, for an old woman would be referred to as someone ‘having children who have grown-up children.’

One of the girls has only one eye and every time her mother gouges an eye out of a person for her sake, she delights in eating it. The justification behind the action of feeding human eyes to her daughter is that the disfigured, one-eyed, girl seeks comfort in the mutilations she causes. The origin of this elaboration is obscure, as none of the Saptamātṛkās has one eye, but it could have some relationship with Cāmuṇḍi who, in her most fearful form, looks like a hag and enjoys eating corpses and drinking blood. In the Dēvi Bhagavatam there is a story about a certain goddess who was in love with Viṣṇu and, displaying her charms to him, attempted to make him fall in love with her. Viṣṇu asked her for her disk-weapon and she gave it to him, then he asked her for one eye and, without hesitating, she gouged it out.

Where did these stories about fearsome, grotesque-looking women who are dangerous to children originate? In the tradition of the Subcontinent there is a confused account in relation to a group of minor goddesses

⁵¹¹ Told by Gāge Nāīma, Māfannu Male’, in 1989

called Lokamātās sent by Indra (the king of the gods) to kill Kārttikeya (or Skanda) shortly after his birth. However, when they approach the child, their full breasts begin to ooze milk, and they are unable to harm him. Then these women ask little Skanda to adopt them as his mothers and he agrees. Although the Lokamātās do protect the baby and nurse him, they are still frightening female demi-goddesses whose qualities and habits are inauspicious. On this weird relationship between tender motherhood and bloodthirsty cannibalism, so common in the most ancient Indian folk-goddesses, see the chapter ‘The Village Goddess’ further above.

Only two of these Lokamātās are described: one is said to have been born from fury and to carry a trident in her hand. The other is said to be the blood-drinking and cruel daughter of the red sea.⁵¹² Even if Kārttikeya adopts them as his mothers and divides them into good and evil spirits, the Lokamātās are collectively characterized as stealing children. Later, the desolate wives (R̥ṣipatnīs) of the seven sages (Saptaṛṣis, also the constellation Ursa Major, known as Assaraṅga in the Divehi language) who have been unjustly accused of adultery and divorced, ask Kārttikeya to adopt them as his mothers. Thus, they became the pretty constellation Kṛttikā, known as Ketī in Maldives.

The Lokamātās, probably the former ones who had attended Skanda in the beginning —here the account is vague— wish to be his mothers. He agrees and asks them what else they wish. They ask to be recognized as great goddesses and to live off the children of men, as they themselves have been denied their own children. Kārttikeya is reluctant to do so, but allows them to torment children until they are sixteen years old and grants them their terrible appearance.

⁵¹² There is a deity worshipped by Tamil fishermen called Ceṅkaḷunīr Amman, the ‘Goddess of the Red Water.’ Cf. 3.4.1 ‘Monsters from the Sea’ further below.

One of the ‘mothers’, Kadrū, is said to be able to enter the womb of pregnant women, eat up the fetus and come out as a snake. Besides the sea snakes (*Pelamis platurus*) that live in the ocean and, though highly poisonous, rarely reach the coast, there are only harmless and small land snakes in the Maldives. Hence, in the Maldives, instead of a snake, women having miscarriages fear that an octopus may come out of their womb. There is also the related belief that pregnant women should not eat octopus, lobster nor triggerfish, for these are animals which fiercely resist being pulled out of the coral cavities in which they hide, at the time of being fished.⁵¹³

Furthermore, in Kārttikeya’s (or Skanda’s) army there is a large group of about two hundred female beings, called *mātṛgaṇa* or Mothers, who help him to fight the demons. Most of those female fighters are described as beautiful, youthful women and yet they are said to have sharp teeth, long, sharp nails and protruding lips. Some are emaciated, with sagging breasts, others are round-bellied and others have long ears.⁵¹⁴ They can also assume any form they desire.

⁵¹³ Information provided by the late Halīma, Himitige, a midwife from Miskimmago village, Fua Mulaku.

⁵¹⁴ Vidya Dehejia, ‘Yoginī Cult and Temples.’ and S.K. Panikkar, ‘Saptamātrkā Worship and Sculptures’.

3.2.2 THE SEVEN MOTHERS

Despite being called ‘Little Mothers’, the Mātṛkās represent dangerous spirits, who are lurking in the rooms where birth takes place and close to where children are, to afflict them with affliction and diseases. In the Subcontinent, not only disease, but also sorrow, strife and passivity are reckoned to be caused by evil spirits. The number and names of these lesser goddesses are not exactly determined. However, normally there is reference to seven (Sapta) or eight (Aṣṭa) Mātṛkās. Furthermore, there are many common points between the Mātṛkās and the Yoginīs, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.⁵¹⁵

Generally, all these ‘mothers’ display a number of inauspicious qualities, in spite of being often considered only relatively evil. Their color is said to be dark, hence, although the spirits called Umm-us-Subyānu and Safaru Kaidda in the Maldivian lore are probably separate spirits, they still have three characteristics in common: A dark complexion, seven daughters and a name derived from the Arabic language.

In the Tamil country, the Saptamātṛkās are represented in all the big temples and are thought to be related to the seven Kanniyamār (unmarried girls) of the ancient Tamil folklore; they are frequently appeased by means of special offerings when any unforeseen and sudden illness takes hold of a person.⁵¹⁶ In Karnataka, the Māris of Mysore are said to be seven in number, and all the seven are sisters: Bisal Māri (the sun), Gunāl Māri, Kel Māri (the earthen pot), Yīranagari Māri, Hiridevati (the eldest sister), Candamandamma and Uttahnahaliamma.⁵¹⁷ There

⁵¹⁵ According to the Skanda Purāṇa, Yoginīs can help in child and unborn foetus protection. Vidya Dehejia, op. cit.

⁵¹⁶ See “Village deities” in H. Krishna Sastri, ‘South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses’

⁵¹⁷ H. Whitehead, Op. cit.

seems to be a very close relationship between the Seven Sisters and the village goddesses. W.T. Elmore comments: *"In all parts of South India the Seven Sisters are the most prominent among Dravidian deities. ... Localities quite near together often have different names for them. ... Poleramma is the best known, being found in almost every village."*⁵¹⁸

Furthermore, within the village beliefs of Ceylon there are a group of ill-defined divinities called Kiriammas whose number is generally acknowledged to be seven. The very name Kiriammas, meaning 'milk mothers',⁵¹⁹ implies that they may have something to do with children and, again like the Mātṛkās of the Indian lore, they are the subject of abundant, albeit often mutually contradictory, popular legends. Nowadays Kiriamma ceremonies have been incorporated into Pattini worship. *"Associated with Pattini (a form of Kannagi) worship is the cult of Kiriammas. They are seven in number and their help is invoked when children are afflicted by contagious diseases."*⁵²⁰

Other inauspicious goddesses are the dark Jieṣṭhā, of the Hindu pantheon, who haunts homes where family members quarrel and food is given to grown ups, disregarding the hunger of their children. In the Buddhist tradition, there is the goddess Hārīti who afflicted children too until Buddha transformed her essence. Traditionally Divehi children are given preference at meal times; and not only are much fuss made about their feeding, but also they are given excess food to play with too. It is fairly

⁵¹⁸ W.T. Elmore, 'Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism.'. In Oppert's list in his work 'Original Inhabitants of India', Pidāri, the generic name for a series of popular Tamil village goddesses, appears to be Poleramma.

⁵¹⁹ Although there are texts that say that the name Kiriammas doesn't come from 'Kiri' (Milk), but from 'Giri' (mountain). N. Wijesekera, 'Deities and Demons, Magic and Masks' and N. Ratnapala, 'Folklore of Sri Lanka.'

⁵²⁰ Nandasena Ratnapala, Op. Cit. above.

common that parents give their son or daughter a banana or a sweet to hold in each hand, even after the child is full.

Traditionally, Maldivian Islanders could not tolerate children crying. When a child weeps, he has to be quickly stilled, often by giving him immediate satisfaction or by entertaining him in such a manner that he stops crying as fast as possible. Continuous crying, even among adults, is considered a very ill omen and is always connected with malevolent demonic activity. If not stopped, it may invite even more evil spirits and it could even cause illness or death. When a person cries without any apparent reason, powerful magic has to be done, like in the following story describing an event that actually happened:

The White Disk

In a house where a big family lived, there was a girl called Sanfā who wailed every evening. She sat close to the lamp or lay in bed crying her heart out without any apparent reason. This young woman was in good health and there were no worries in the household, but whether she was surrounded by people or alone, Sanfā cried and cried.

Everyone at home was very anxious. How could this be a happy place with someone crying inside all the time? Visitors felt uneasy, especially if they happened to come after sunset. The sight of that young girl and her continuous weeping made the atmosphere unbearable. Usually, all outsiders left after but a short time and from then onwards made it a point of keeping away from that house.

Her family had arranged for a maitiri to be recited by a very good faṇḍitaveriyā.⁵²¹ Along with this chant, they had tried powerful magic in

⁵²¹ The maitiri was a chant or recitation meant to protect the person to whom magic was done against from the evil consequences of that magic

several different occasions, but nothing seemed to help. Thus, Sanfā kept crying every night until everyone in her home felt so miserable, they were thinking that they were going to become crazy.

Her family tried all means to cheer her up engaging the girl in conversation, playing games, cracking jokes, singing or whatever they could come up with, in order to make her happy. Her impatient father went as far as letting his anger overcome him. He threatened her and scolded her, which only made matters much worse.

One evening, while Sanfā was laying on the bed crying her heart out as usual, Āminā, Sanfā's older sister, brought in an oil lamp to hang up inside the room. As she was trying to reach the hook, a gust of air blew the lamp out and she found herself suddenly in the darkness. Startled, Āminā turned towards the sobbing girl and saw a luminous white disk suspended over her. The room was gloomy, but the round shape seemed to emit its own light.

When the girl went closer to it, she saw that in the disk there was a beautiful, smiling face. Its eyes, lips and nose were very much like those of a pretty young woman. Around it a much darker red halo was glowing and the most amazing thing was that this luminous disk was hovering in the air without any support. Fascinated, Āminā waved her hand before it and around it, to determine whether it was merely a reflection or whether it was caused by a beam of light coming from outside. But try as she might, the round white smiling face remained unchanged. Meanwhile under it Sanfā continued her endless weeping.

Suddenly, Āminā's expression became grave. She thought: "This may be a spirit!" Frightened, she went to her father and whispered to him: "Bappā, please come to see Sanfā's bed."

The man was relaxing on the swingbed and was in no mood to get up. "What for?" he asked.

"There is something there. Maybe it is a spirit" The girl answered.

The father reluctantly got up and stood grumbling at the threshold: "Do I now have two crazy daughters?" he complained, "I don't see anything. It is too dark in here. Where have you put the lamp?"

Āminā, with awe on her face, ignored his mood and urged him: "Come into the room while it is dark." Following him she whispered, "Look closely over the top of Sanfa's bed. Do you see it, father?"

Now the man was staring at the smiling face in wonder and didn't say a word.

He went out of the room and came back with a lamp and the Tiris.⁵²² After putting the book on its wooden support, he sat close to Sanfa's bed and recited Sifat-un-Nabī, Mūsā Qubūr and all chapters of the Qurān he knew how to read well.

Āminā stayed for a while close to him, but as time wore on and she became tired, she went to sleep. Meanwhile, the disk trembled slightly, but remained there, smiling at him, unchanged. Below it, far from improving, the man's daughter kept crying all the while.

At this point the father lost his patience. He just couldn't stand that white, round smiling face anymore. It definitely seemed as if it was mocking him and his efforts. His anger welled up and he began beating it with his hands. But it was like beating air. Unaffected, the white shiny disk kept smiling at him. Then the man took Sanfa's kannai (a long, cylindrical pillow) and trashed the disk in a fit of blind rage with such violence that the pillow broke and kapok was flying all over.

⁵²² This is the name people in the South traditionally use to call the Qurān. It means 'thirty' and it refers to the fact that the Qurān was formerly divided into 30 books. The latter are independent from the chapters or Sūras.

The lamp had fallen and its flame went out. The room was now in total darkness, but nothing happened to the smiling face. The pillow had broken by hitting the wall and the disk stood there, its aloof smile a challenge, while Sanfā was bitterly weeping underneath. Breathing heavily, and painstakingly regaining his self-control, her father began to recite the takbīr (a Muslim chant of praise) aloud.

This time, when he looked at the evil round face, he noticed that it had become slightly smaller. Encouraged by this sign, he kept reciting and reciting the takbīr until the white disk shrunk to the size of a coin. The man's voice had become hoarse, but after this he had to recite it only three further times until the smiling round face finally disappeared.

The house was now in complete silence. He got up and checked carefully over his daughter's bed and realized she had stopped crying. He sighed and went out to look for some fire. It was very late in the night, soon it would be dawn.

Sanfā was sitting on the bed when her father lit the lamp. They smiled at each other. He told the girl lovingly to lie down and sleep. Then, after smoking a biḍi he himself went to bed. The next day he woke up late in the morning, but he was a satisfied man. Ever after, the mood in that household was happy, and Sanfā never again shed tears in the night.⁵²³

Although in the story above the relationship is not clearly stated and the only suggestion of a female spirit is the beautiful smiling face inside the disk, it is not improbable that in Maldives most spirits afflicting children were formerly connected to the Saptamātṛkās or mothers.

In the Subcontinent, among these 'seven mothers' the one called Cāmuṇḍi is the most outstanding. Traditionally, Cāmuṇḍi is frequently included among the Mātṛkās, who are considered to be mere lesser

⁵²³ Told by the late (Unakeḍe) Alī Dīdī, Vaijehēge, Fua Mulaku

goddesses, although she is a goddess in her own right. The spirit called hāmuṇḍi in Maldives haunts dark, damp and dirty places or graveyards. It is a violent demon that can attack straight away, causing madness or bleeding wounds, like in this story about hāmuṇḍi from Ari Atoll:

“Once, I was relaxing in my verandah late in the night and I saw some mysterious chicken that were following a hen in the starlight. I thought: “Strange, that those chicken are awake in the middle of the night!” I was so amazed that I got up and run after them. After a while the chicken entered the shadows of some bushy place and I followed them. Suddenly, I felt something in my neck. I don’t remember very well what happened and it was so dark I couldn’t see anything. Since I lost track of the chicken, I headed back home. When I reached my house I went near the lamp and realized that I had a wound close to my throat. Although I almost was feeling no pain, it was bleeding. Then I realized I had escaped some very big danger (evil thing). I consider myself lucky to be alive.”⁵²⁴

Since this is a very scary spirit, probably one of the most malevolent in the Maldives, stories about hāmuṇḍi are commonly told to the children by their elders to prevent them from wandering about the island after dark. She is said to appear as a thin naked woman, with dirt or ashes smeared on her skin —or of grey-colored skin—, wild, dirty hair and protruding teeth. She looks frightening, although some people say that her face is not ugly while she is calm. It seems that this female spirit can look like a beautiful woman until she opens her mouth wide, for her teeth may be pointed, sharp and stained red with blood. Hāmuṇḍi is generally found in

⁵²⁴ Narrated by Ahmadu Salīmu, Victory House, the Kuḍa Katību (assistant headman) of Māḷos Island, Ari Atoll in 1989.

the sitting position, one leg drawn up and a hand resting on her knee. Whoever meets her frontally is in imminent danger of death.⁵²⁵

The presence of this female spirit is invariably heralded by chicken or other birds. She is also said to lead a group of seven hens and to be able to transform herself into a grey, or ash-colored, hen at will. Hāmuṇḍi can also, in certain cases, use her great powers to produce instantly a very large number —either ninety-six or one-hundred— of other chicken out of the blue. Oddly, hāmuṇḍi's chickens are active during the night, when normal chicken are sleeping. Even if they walk slow or come very close, no one can catch those ashen chickens. If a person tries to capture them, they will disappear in the dark vegetation.

The identification of hāmuṇḍi and birds is not mere coincidence. In Indian tradition, although there are a few exceptions, like the peacock, practically all birds are considered a bad omen. Hence, their presence, especially in great numbers, is extremely inauspicious and even dangerous. Birds like owls or crows are emblematic of Goddesses which, if driven to anger by lack of devotion, have the power to bring about calamity or disgrace, like Cāmuṇḍi. *“Once, Allauddīn Khalji, after having destroyed many Hindu places of worship during one of his raids, set out with his troops to destroy a certain Dēvi temple in Bahuchara, Gujarat. When his Muslim army neared this temple in the evening they were surprised to see thousands of hens. As the soldiers were hungry, instead of destroying the temple, they became engrossed in catching and cooking the hens and only one hen escaped. After eating them they were so tired they went to sleep. During the night, the only surviving hen (Which was in reality the goddess in that form) started crying: ‘Kukkur, Kukkur, Kukkur.’ Then all the cooked-up hens in the stomachs of the soldiers came back to*

⁵²⁵ Data about hāmuṇḍi were checked with a number of different sources; however, the late Muhammad Jamīl, the last great Maldivian scholar of the ‘Old School’, provided the main points.

*life calling back the same sound, tore open the bellies where they were imprisoned and the Muslim army was destroyed.”*⁵²⁶

Birds are often the vāhana or vehicle of numerous Yoginīs. In Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition Cāmuṇḍī is the consort of Yama, the God of death, the divinity presiding over the numerous hells where the wicked suffer. Finally, in the R̥g Veda Yama is said to use a bird as his messenger of death.⁵²⁷

Fear of spots associated with death is, at any rate, quite high in the Maldives. Graveyards, even though usually sanctified by a mosque, are considered the most inauspicious places in an island. Even now, if they can avoid it, Divehi people would prefer not to walk near places burial grounds, especially ancient ruined cemeteries or isolated tombs, even in broad daylight. One of the most popular Maldivian stories connected with this theme is perhaps Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi, meaning ‘the spirit with the long umbilical cord.’

Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi

“Once upon a time, a woman called Ayminā Bi went to look for water to the well by the graveyard surrounding the mosque. As she turned to go home with the full pot she saw a sight that instantly chilled her blood: Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi was sitting on the sand of a fresh grave nearby. It was a fearsome looking spirit and it was pouring sand on its head with a human

⁵²⁶ K.K. Moorthy, “Sarvam Sakti Mayam”.

⁵²⁷ Vidya Dehejia, Op. cit. and R. N. Saletore, ‘Encyclopedia of Indian Culture.

skull.⁵²⁸ *Ayminā Bi was so terrified, that she ran back home as fast as she could.*

Once inside the house, she lay on her bed exhausted and soon she felt very ill. Her husband Takurufānu was away on a trading trip, so she was alone at home and very afraid. The sun set and Ayminā Bi was shivering with fever. In the middle of the night Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi came and, as it couldn't find a way to get in, it walked around the house shouting: "Ayminā Bi, Ayminā Bi! Did you see me at the graveyard while I was pouring sand on myself with a human skull?" The frightened woman screamed in terror: "I didn't see you!"

"Good!" exclaimed the spirit "I will come back tomorrow night."

In the morning Ayminā Bi told all the women in the village about her ordeal and when the sun set all the women in the village were frightened.

The haṇḍi came at a very late hour and, as in the night before, it went walking around the house yelling: "Ayminā Bi! Did you see me at the graveyard while I was pouring sand on myself with a human skull?" The poor woman screamed: "I didn't see you!"

"Good!" exclaimed the spirit "I will come back tomorrow night" and left.

The next morning, Takurufānu, Ayminā Bi's husband, arrived to the island and was sad to see his wife shivering in bed with high fever. Crying, Ayminā Bi told him everything.

Takurufānu was incensed: "Let it come tonight! We'll get rid of this nuisance! Don't be afraid." He called their neighbor Mariyambu and told

⁵²⁸ Nāṣigaṇḍu. The bowl-like half of the human skull (Skt. kapāla) is not only an essential ingredient for tantric ceremonies which are usually performed in graveyards (or cremation grounds), but it is also a very common iconographical attribute of village goddesses, the fierce goddess Kālī, ḍākinīs and Yoginīs

her: “Ayminā Bi is sick and cannot work, please grind some lonumirus (a paste of hot red chilies, black pepper, garlic and salt) for me.”

At sunset Mariyambu came with the thick red hot paste on a big green leaf. Takurufānu told her to stay with them that night and she agreed. As the night grew darker, Takurufānu told his wife to pretend not to be scared when the haṇḍi shouted and to answer ‘Yes!’ this time. Ayminā Bi said she would try her best. At midnight, Takurufānu was ready inside holding a knife and the chilly-pepper mixture.

After walking around the house in the dark, Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi called: “Ayminā Bi, Ayminā Bi! Did you see me at the graveyard while I was pouring sand on myself with a human skull?”

This time Ayminā Bi answered boldly: “Yes! I saw you!”⁵²⁹

Immediately the haṇḍi flew into a rage: “What? You saw me? How do you dare? Wait, I will teach you a lesson you will never forget!” Then it began to thrust its umbilical cord through a gap in the thatch that covered the sides of the house.

Inside, the two women and the man watched in horror the disgustingly long umbilical cord entering the room and moving about like a snake. It became longer and longer until it almost filled the house. Takurufānu moved close to the hole where the spirit’s umbilical cord had come into the house. Then he took his big knife, hacked the umbilical cord off at the root and immediately smeared the red-hot salty paste on the cut. The haṇḍi screamed in pain and rage: “Ouch! My navel! My navel!” Yelling like mad, it fled into the night and was never seen again.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ In other versions the haṇḍi asks: “Did you tell the people that you saw me pouring sand on myself?” and the woman answers: “No, I told them you were pouring gold dust.” On the last night she says: “I told them you were pouring sand!”

⁵³⁰ This is the version told by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Male’.

Nowadays this story is frequently enacted by students in popular theatre form and the role of the haṇḍi, or evil spirit, is mostly played by a man. Since the original meaning of this particular legend has been lost, it is now generally assumed that a woman is more likely to be harassed by a male spirit than by a female one. Southern islanders, however, uphold that a haṇḍi, whether in terrifying or benign form, is always female and categorically discard the possibility that a haṇḍi may be a male spirit. Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī, Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī, both from Fua Mulaku and other old storytellers were categorical in this regard. They claimed that northern islanders have confused their myths. Younger Northern Maldivians with a modern education commented that the difficulty surrounding this haṇḍi's sex was irrelevant in ancient times and that it only arose when the need for translation into English required to specify 'he' or 'she' instead of the non-gender specific Divehi pronoun.

Certainly, being ugly, scary, thin and dirty are conditions that contribute to subdue, if not to obliterate, this haṇḍi's sexual features. But, since the remainders of Maldivian mythology as preserved in the Southern atolls are more consistent than in the North of the country, in all likelihood Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi was a female spirit in older versions of the legend. Indeed, after meeting Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi, the woman in the story is attacked by fever and the Divehi female spirit called haṇḍi is known precisely as being the cause of fever itself. The Arabic generic word 'Jinni' is almost never used in the south of Maldives, where every spirit has preserved its own Divehi name and specific attributes, and the Maldivian haṇḍi originated in the Dravidian bloodthirsty goddess of disease, as has been mentioned further above in this book. The Fūlu Digu Haṇḍi story, where comical situations are mingled with horror is usually taken as a nonsensical tale for Maldivian children. Nevertheless, the description and the attributes of this haṇḍi itself and the fact that it is found in a grave are highly relevant from the mythological point of view for they provide very important clues about ancient Maldivian beliefs.

Both in looks and in behavior, Fūḷu Digu Haṇḍi, with its large protruding teeth and disheveled hair, has a striking similarity with a tantric goddess in her fearsome (Skt. *krodha*) form, like Cāmuṇḍi. Thus, despite its name in the story, the spirit mentioned in it has more affinities with the Maldivian spirit called hāmuṇḍi, than with the female demon referred to as haṇḍi. Again, the fact that this haṇḍi is sitting on a grave has great relevance within this context, for in Indian iconography goddess Cāmuṇḍi is portrayed as a fearsome-looking woman —often horribly emaciated, hollow-eyed, almost skeleton-like— sitting on a human corpse.

Finally, Fūḷu Digu Haṇḍi, as described in the tale, has many affinities a ḍākinī or a Yoginī, which are lesser goddesses in the Indic tradition. Yoginīs frequent the burial grounds, have a frightening appearance and their hair is in disorder. Their eyes are red and fierce. They hold a skull (Skt. *kapala*) in one hand. They wear no clothes, unless they cover the lower part of their body with raw hides. They use human entrails or snakes as a girdle around their waist, hence the ‘long umbilical cord’ (fūḷu digu) elaboration in the Maldivian tale. *“These creatures wander around in the night, especially in cemeteries and their vicinity, inspiring fear to all humans, except to the initiated.”*⁵³¹

Graveyards have great relevance in tantric worship. They are used as the scenario where the initiated are taught to overcome fear, in a spiritual test that eventually would enable them to increase their magic powers (Skt. *siddhi*) and to become familiar with the spirit world. In the Subcontinent, graveyards or cremation grounds were used by ascetics to meditate upon the transient nature of the material world.

“Here the sage pursued his goal of spiritual liberation by smelling the rottenness of corpses and experiencing the loneliness of these miasmic,

⁵³¹ Vidya Dehejia, Op. cit.

peripheral places where human life ends, places of pollution and horror, avoided by the common man.”⁵³²

In Maldives, even now, burial grounds are fearsome places assumed to be frequented by evil spirits during the long tropical nights. Only the initiated, the faṇḍita men, dare to go there at late hours to procure themselves bones for their rituals and also, exceptionally, other human parts from freshly buried corpses, as will be mentioned in the next chapter. There is a parallel between the Maldivian behavior and the attitudes of the South Indian fishermen in the same context:

*“Men are also vulnerable to attack from demons in particular physical locations: the graveyard, where ghosts lurk and where ‘mantravaadis’ come to steal the parts of the body they need for sorcery, the parts of the village associated with repeated death such as a point along the beachfront where two boys were swept away”*⁵³³

⁵³² D. Kinsley, ‘The Ten Mahavidyas’

⁵³³ Kalpana Ram, Op. cit

3.3.1 FEAR OF THE BURIAL GROUNDS

Traditional Divehi social organization lacks Sanskritic influence. As we have seen along this book, Divehi mores and rites are markedly Dravidian. Thus, instead of a complex caste system, like the Vedic one, Maldivians knew merely a distinction between noble (bēfulu) and common people. According to Vedic customs, widows were not allowed to remarry, but there were no limitations concerning marriage for Divehi widows; and while Aryans had a strict concept of pollution through non-vegetarian food and contact with certain substances, Maldivians have always eaten fish, preferring the blood-red flesh of Skipjack tuna and, what's more, some of their ancient folk-religious rituals (diyōge kuḷi) included the drinking of palm wine.

Even so, perhaps, the most relevant trait that links the ancient Divehi people to Dravidian civilization is the fact that, unlike in Ceylon, there are no indications that they ever burned their dead. Divehi people always carefully buried their deceased ones. The location and arrangement of the burial place was a matter that was given great consideration by Islanders high or low. Burial grounds and isolated tombs were important landmarks in every island village.

Maldivian cemeteries are usually close to a mosque, in the belief that the prayers said therein will soothe the spirits. Since certain disgusting or frightening diseases are associated with particularly evil demons, those spirits should not be allowed to dwell near a frequented place or even a mosque, lest they trouble worshippers at night. Therefore, people having died of malevolent illnesses are not buried in the graveyard close to the mosque compound. Instead their burial place will be an isolated, lonely spot as far as possible from human habitation, or even in a separate uninhabited island.

Thus, on every single Maldivian island there are a number of places where people should not go without very good reason, or only at certain times.

The whole duration of the night and the Friday-prayer time —every Friday between forenoon and early afternoon— are considered highly malefic times. In Fua Mulaku a person called Rekkā⁵³⁴ who died of a swollen body —probably hydropsy— was buried in a lonely place close to the beach in the Southeastern shore of the island. His tombstone has disappeared, but his name, his disease and the approximate place where he was buried are still remembered in the island lore. In the Raṣoveṣi, a lengthy poem describing the landmarks around Fua Mulaku Island, Rekkā's tomb is the subject of the following verse:

Rekkā hamatā mi vī/ Muḷa mīheke duḷa balī
Vaki ko' mmi atirimatī/ o' vvā nimi avadivī

(We) have arrived to (the place called) Rekkā, (which is named after) a person afflicted by the sickness of the swollen body (hydropsy). He was left isolated on this shore until he ended up dying.

In the Maldives the malevolent spirit rising out of a corpse still wrapped in its shrouds after it is buried is known as 'kaḍḍovi.' Ka' meaning corpse and dovi spirit; dovi or devi comes from the Sanskrit 'devata,' meaning divinity or spirit.⁵³⁵ It is said that these deathly specters rise mainly from the tombs of people who have died suddenly of deadly diseases or of unnatural causes. In the Island folklore certain diseases such as leprosy, smallpox and hydropsy, were considered a highly inauspicious omen.

They come out in the night and haunt the island, hovering a few inches above the ground in a rigid, upright position. Kaḍḍovi are pale spirits, appearing wrapped in the shrouds they have been wrapped in; like a body

⁵³⁴ A common local name until the mid-19th century, when Arabic names began to be used. Since mid-1980's, with the introduction of identity cards where the person's name is written in the Arabic script, Maldivians have been discouraged by their own authorities from using non-Arab names, including their traditional autochthonous ones.

⁵³⁵ The 'v' sound is silent, hence this word is pronounced 'kaḍḍoi.

after rigor mortis has set in, they are unable to bend. The spirits of the dead are believed to rule during the malefic nightly gloom and in the daytime they are presumed to keep low. While it is to be expected that spirits would rise out of every corpse, only the malevolent ones receive all the attention.

Fear of such spirits strongly influenced Divehi architecture in ancient times and people took great pains to make sure they couldn't enter their homes. Before the entrance of a Maldivian house, the roof would extend to the height of a man's chest, covering a short verandah, after which, the door of the house proper would have a doorsill rising to a height of eighteen inches, known as *oḷigaṇḍu* in the Male' Bas and as *eḷigēṇḍi* in the Aḍḍu and Fua Mulaku form of Divehi. Thus, somebody entering the house would have first to bend very low, and then, after only one or two steps, that person would have to raise his legs again to get into the house proper. There were no windows in these buildings.

In Divehi tradition there is no private sphere within the house and anyone is welcome to come and visit anyone at any time during the day. In all island homes, doors are always kept open between sunrise and dusk and a household visited by many people is considered a blessed place, although Island wisdom also said that one same person should not visit too many houses in order to avoid trouble. However, after nightfall when the *dovis* are said to roam around the island, the doors of all homes are tightly shut. Since the spirits of the dead don't like the light; within the house a lamp would be always kept burning. Usually, its flame would be lowered to save oil or kerosene after everyone goes to sleep. This light would be put off only after dawn.⁵³⁶ It was considered a very inauspicious omen if the lamp went off during the night, leaving the house in darkness.

⁵³⁶ This is also the case among the malevolent spirits of the dead in the neighboring Subcontinent. "*The Rakṣasas always depart at dawn.*" W. Crooke, 'Popular Religion & Folklore of Northern India.'

Since the kaḍḍovi move in straight lines, the paths approaching human habitations from malevolent spots, like the forest, the graveyard and the beach, would be winding in order to hamper their mobility. These specters are white and glow dimly in the dark. It is believed that if a person sees a kaḍḍovi in the cemetery in the night, he might die in a few days of a terrible sickness; the back arched, all muscles tensed, and with intense pain or convulsions with a ghastly grin on the face after the last gasp.⁵³⁷

This same spirit also receives other names, such as muladovi (mula = death) when able to take the appearance of the deceased person, usually appearing in customary dress instead of wrapped in shrouds, and also as buddovi, a spirit of a long-dead ancestor (Skt. Bhuta).⁵³⁸ The figure of bhuta as a ghost associated with death is present all over the Southern coastal regions of the Subcontinent, from Tuḷu country down to Southern Ceylon. In those areas bhutas are still a living legend which manifests itself in local narrative and vibrant popular expressions with colorful dances and masks.⁵³⁹

The kaḍḍovi, muladovi and buddovi are spirits that appear to act independently of any outside control, being able to inhabit corpses and cause different diseases, which might be followed by death. Thus they are

⁵³⁷ These look very much like the symptoms of tetanus (lockjaw).

⁵³⁸ and 'Coastal Karnataka, Studies in Folkloristic and Linguistic Traditions of Dakshina Kannada Region of the Western Coast of India', edited by U.P. Upadhyaya

⁵³⁹ There is some speculation that buddovi could be a sort of demon derived from the person of the Buddha, but in Sri Lanka, where demon cults and Buddhism coexist, the figure of Buddha is never included in the world of the demons causing disease. Hence, among the Buddhist populations of that island both beliefs remain parallel, as they most likely were in Maldives before the conversion to Islam. See N. Wijesekera, 'Deities and Demons, Magic and Masks'; A.G.S. Karyawasam, 'Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Sri Lanka'.

also comparable to the spirits known as *vetāla* in the Indian Subcontinent. Unlike other fearful spirits, they do not unearth bodies and eat human flesh. In fact, apart from the corpse they may happen to dwell in, they do not appear to have a body of their own.

Certain Maldivian ghosts are generally known as *furēta* or *ferēta* (Skt. *Prēta*), a sort of hungry ghost, often tall and larger than a human being, and to this group belongs a spirit called *kissadovi*, (Skt. *rakṣasa* = a demon + *dovi*). Like the *kaḍḍovi* and *muladovi*, these spirits wander around the island in the night and haunt graveyards and dark places, but they are less subtle ghosts. Usually they are crude flesh eaters, whether in a fresh or rotten state. Although their bodies are more or less anthropomorphic, their features are often deformed and grotesque. They correspond to certain demons known as *prēta*, *rakṣāsa* and *piśac* in the Subcontinental tradition.

All the spirits mentioned above bother human beings in different ways and in the island lore there are detailed descriptions of their features and the diseases or evils they may cause. The special characteristics that define a certain spirit may change from island to island and some names may be known in one atoll but not in the other.⁵⁴⁰

Some of these flesh-eating spirits are also similar in their features to the ghouls of the Arab folklore. The ghoul (Arabic ‘*gūl*’) is a fearsome-looking spirit with the body of a corpse and the head of a dog. Like the *furētas* it haunts graveyards and feeds on corpses. It is not part of Maldivian

⁵⁴⁰ Most of these data were provided by the late Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī in a number of conversations in the early 1980's. At first it was not easy to make sense of the scattered bits and pieces of information I gathered about spirits of the dead ancestors and their link with the concept of *vigani*. It took many questions to get Ibrahīm Dīdī to repeat certain details enough times for a definite picture to emerge in my mind. Unfortunately, much of this information was surreptitiously abstracted from my notes and published in a small pamphlet named *Vanavaru* in Male' in the late 1980's without duly acknowledging any of the sources.

mythology because Maldivians are not familiar with dogs, there being not a single dog in the whole country. Quite a few Maldivians know the word *gūlu* though and use it occasionally as an insult, but they don't know exactly what it stands for.

It is widely believed that a great number of the spirits known as *dovi* were spirits of ancestors who had found no rest. Hence, they came back to trouble humans, especially if they rose from the body of an evil person, from someone having died an unnatural death, as has been mentioned before, or from a corpse which had not been properly buried. W.T. Elmore comments that: *"The Dravidians have a great fear of ghosts of all kinds, regardless of what their earthly career has been."*⁵⁴¹ The latter is the case in the following story told by Husēn Koi Bē, Hoḷudū Island, South Miladummaḍuḷu Atoll:

The Haunted House

"Long ago in Male' there was a nice large house which was always empty. As soon as people moved in, they fell sick and, if they didn't leave the place for good, they died in a very short time. The owner ended up asking for a very cheap rent, but even then no one wanted to live in it.

One day, an Englishman residing in Male', having heard this story, told the owner to let him live in that house for some time. The owner readily agreed and the foreigner moved in. He slept during the daytime, which is easy in Male' during the hot hours between forenoon and late afternoon. At sunset, he put a table and two chairs in the middle of the main room. As it became dark, the Englishman sat on one of those chairs, holding a notebook and a pen, placed a small, dim oil lamp on the table, and waited.

⁵⁴¹W.T. Elmore, 'Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism.'

After a long time, in the middle of the night, a thin man with a sad face appeared and sat down. This man told the foreign gentleman that he had been killed by a former owner of the house years ago. To confirm this he pointed to the spot where he had been mortally wounded displaying a broad gash under his shoulder. As the Englishman looked at the wound, the thin man told him that the wicked killer had buried him secretly inside that same room, cunningly wiping off every trace of the crime. Saying thus he pointed to the floor at the place where his body had been buried. The man complained that he had been given a hasty burial without having been duly washed and without any ceremony, and he was bitter about that. Then, without saying another word he disappeared.

The next morning, the Englishman told his landlord about his meeting with the ghost. They first had breakfast together and then they brought an adze and a spade to dig in the exact location the spirit had pointed out. It took but a little digging when they suddenly found human bones. Carefully, they removed all of them and brought them to the graveyard, where they were finally given a proper burial. After that the house ceased to be haunted.

Close to the island of Hitadū, in Aḍḍu Atoll, there is a small island called Kabbōhera, which means the ‘islet of the many corpses’.⁵⁴² This ghastly name was given to this place because there are a lot of human skeletons buried in its sands and their origin is the matter of much speculation. Some people in Hitadū say that this place was used for certain weird rituals before Islam. A certain legend⁵⁴³ explaining the presence of those bones goes thus:

⁵⁴² Herā means islet close to the ocean fringe and corresponds to hurā in the northern form of Divehi

⁵⁴³ Told by Boṇḍorāge Muhammad Dīdī of Fua Mulaku.

Kabbōhera

“Long, long ago, some people of Hitadū sat under the trees close to the beach enjoying the cool sea breeze. Shortly after sunset, they saw a beautifully lit ship entering the shallow lagoon and threw anchor. From it the sound of music and dances (nacaraṅgu) could be heard. The island men, women and children who were looking from the beach became so fascinated by the mysterious vessel that they went into the water and waded towards it.

Some time passed and, after seeing that those people were not coming back, their families or friends began looking for them. As they went to the beach, they were confronted by the eerie sight and the attractive sounds coming from the ship full of lights. They thought that the others must have boarded the vessel and were having fun there and, stepping into the lagoon, they waded towards it. Again, as those people were not coming, others went to the beach and waded towards the ship thinking that there must be a good show there. In the end even old people, the infirm and the women with babies went towards the dazzling vessel. In this manner, everyone on the island of Hitadū went to see the ship and disappeared.

It is said that on the following day there was no trace of the ship, but in the same spot where it should have been there was a large heap of dead bodies. Those were the corpses of Hitadū’s entire population piled on top of one another. The island was completely silent and the rotten bodies began to emit an unbearable stench. Eventually, the crabs feasted on the decaying flesh, but there was too much of it even for them. In time, the waves brought sand that covered the rotten bodies completely. Many months later, bushes grew on the sand and a new islet was formed.

Several years after this awful event, when new settlers arrived to Hitadū, some people went to that small island to plant coconut trees. While

digging there, they were amazed at the large quantity of human bones in the sands of that little islet. Thus they called it Kabbōhera.

This legend repeats a theme found in northern Divehi legends: a boat full of lights and its association with mass death. Once more, this might reflect the link between deadly epidemics and festivals offered to Māri, the pestilence goddess who sends smallpox and cholera to punish her children. Kabbōhera was probably the place where the people affected by a lethal plague were buried in mass graves. Since the pattern of human habitation has changed along the centuries, there are some places in many islands where people were buried in the past and which cannot be easily identified now because all the visible signs of a graveyard have disappeared. Sometimes the present village grows towards these ancient burial grounds. Hence, it is not uncommon for people to find human bones while digging a well.

There are some islands where changes in the pattern of the tidal currents on the coral reef have eroded away the sites of ancestral cemeteries and where human bones are exposed. This is taken to be not only a very bad omen for an island, but also a source of great shame, because bones should remain underground forever. And yet, at the same time, such an event is not entirely unwelcome, as it comes in handy for the old people to illustrate the transience of this world. “You see, such-and-such island was a large island long ago, where people had been living for many generations. Alas! Now the current is eating it away and even the bones of their ancestors are coming out to the surface!”⁵⁴⁴

Certain islands, such as Kunāvaṣi in Northwestern Felidū Atoll, were populated in the distant past, however Kunāvaṣi has been so thoroughly eroded, that only a very small bushy islet remains.⁵⁴⁵ The only witnesses

⁵⁴⁴ Source: 1984 Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī.

⁵⁴⁵ Source: 1989 Alī Najībū, Nedunge, Male’.

of former human habitation in Kunāvaṣi are now the large quantity of pottery shards strewn over the long sand spit of the present islet. Hence, it is likely that with the passing of the centuries, some of the Maldivian islands that had formerly been inhabited may have completely disappeared.

Other islands were abandoned in the past because the water table had turned salty. The rainwater falling on a coral island percolates into the porous ground and forms an underground layer of freshwater resting over the underlying saltwater known as the 'Ghyben/Hertzberg lens'. Although it doesn't mix with the saltwater below, that freshwater layer can be easily depleted. Ancient Maldivians were spartan in their use of freshwater, but now, with the introduction of flush toilets and washing machines the situation has changed. Nowadays many islands in the Maldives rely on collection of rainwater in tanks for their supply of drinking water. Male' and tourist resort islands have desalination plants.

When the water table grows increasingly salty the permanent wells become useless, and the only way to collect fresh water is to dig a shallow well, collect the water and cover it again. Women do this job using coconut shells and waiting until the mud has settled before collecting the water. This was still normal practice until recent times in some northern islands such as Filladū, Tiladummati Atoll. As this process involved a lot of hard work, Maldivians believed that this calamity struck a place when its inhabitants had been sinful. Neighboring islanders claimed that the people of the island suffering such a curse had exposed themselves to the attack of demons because of their recurrent bad habits. Thus, even the increasing salinity of the wells in an island (or in a particular section of the island) would be deemed to be the result of supernatural activity.

In the past, Maldivian people felt extremely vulnerable to the attacks of evil spirits. Hence legends where a great magician fights back the demons

causing deaths and disturbing even the deceased ones in their graveyards used to be very popular in the Maldives. In the story that follows,⁵⁴⁶ the great faṇḍitaveriyā Oḍitān Kalēge, married to a fierce and powerful Yoginī, is confronted with bitter truth:

The Double Life of Dōgi Āihā Kāṇlēge

“Oḍitān Kalēge was a learned and powerful faṇḍita man. He lived in an island of Haddummati Atoll alone with his young and beautiful wife Dōgi Āihā Kāṇlēge, a mighty faṇḍita woman too. Oḍitān was a good hearted man but, unknown to him, his wife was very evil. People in neighboring islands were dying in horrible ways during the night and corpses in graveyards had been unearthed and eaten.

One day, a frightened man came to Oḍitān Kalēge and whispered to him that his wife Dōgi Āihā Kāṇlēge was responsible for the many deaths and the desecration of cemeteries. The great sorcerer was annoyed and refused to believe him because he was fascinated by her and she was always kind and loving to him.

The man calmed him, “Please don’t get angry. Just stay awake at night and watch what your wife does, especially on the dark nights of the new moon.”

Forgetting his usual good manners Oḍitān dismissed the man rudely. Later he told his wife what the man had said. She laughed and replied: “How absurd! You know that I am always beside you and there is nothing I do that you don’t see.”

⁵⁴⁶ Told by Abdul Hamīdu, ‘Light’, Dūṇḍigamu, Fua Mulaku.

Even though he knew this was true, the great sorcerer wanted to be sure and asked: “Do you always stay in this island in the nighttime?”

The young woman calmly looked into his eyes and declared: “I swear to you that I never leave this island during the night!” Then she smiled sweetly at him and pouted her lips, acting mockingly offended. Ođitān looked at his pretty wife and was relieved.

However, during the following months, as the nightly carnage in the neighboring islands continued unabated, doubts about Dōgi Āihā kept nagging Ođitān’s mind. One night, after he went to bed with his wife, he closed his eyes, but didn’t sleep. After about two hours, when he was almost dozing, he noticed her stirring. Stealthily Dōgi Āihā got up and left the room without making any noise. There was something uncanny about her manner that made the husband suspect that she was not just going to answer a call of nature, so he followed her secretly in the darkness to see what she was up to.

Dōgi Āihā left the house and walked hurriedly to the tuṇḍi, a sandy projection at one end of the island. There the young woman planted her two feet firmly on the sand and lifted her head towards the starry sky. Then she raised her arms and began to sway from her hip upwards, reciting magic words. First she moved very gently, but after some time her movements became wilder and wilder. Slowly, the upper part of her body extended itself towards the sky, making her waist into a long, long strip.

Ođitān Kalege was hiding in the bushes by the beach and, after seeing how Dōgi Āihā bent her body like an arch to reach one of the inhabited islands, he realized that the man had told the truth about his wife. And yet, the fact was that Dōgi Āihā had not lied either when she said that she never left his island. While the upper part of her body was killing people, drinking their blood, eating their flesh, disturbing dead bodies in graveyards and incurring into other unmentionable deeds in distant places, her feet actually stayed at home. Ođitān decided that he had to

stop Dōgi Āihā's bloodshed there and then. Thus, without wasting more time, the sorcerer gathered firewood, built a fire close to where the woman was standing and dragged her feet into it.

Struck with burning pain, his wife's body shrunk. Dōgi Āihā Kāhlēge was now awful to behold and Oḍitān was taken aback. Blood was dripping from her lips and her teeth were stained red with it. To make matters worse, she was glaring at him with fierce hatred. There was no love left for him in her fiery eyes, as she hissed murderous incantations against him.

Instantly, Oḍitān shielded himself against her vicious magic with his own *faṇḍita*. However, Dōgi Āihā's power, compounded by her anger, was of such malignant intensity and ferocity, that he realized he could no longer protect himself. Thus, the eminent sorcerer ended up having to flee from his angry wife. Frantically, he ran to the house, intending to leave on the boat.

Casting deadly spells in quick succession, Dōgi Āihā set on fire the house, the boat, as well as every piece of wood on the island. Desperately, her husband searched for a way to escape from her unleashed fury, running to and fro on the charred place, but there was none. Finally, Oḍitān found a grinding stone among the ashes of the kitchen. He quickly carried it into the lagoon and made it float by the power of his magic. Then he took a little blade of grass and held it as a sail between his fingers.⁵⁴⁷ With the strength of his *faṇḍita*, sitting on the stone and powered by the 'sail' he was holding in his hand, Oḍitān sailed away from his island at great speed.

Furious at seeing him escape, his wife gathered all her perverse forces for a final blow. Standing in the shallow water of the lagoon, Dōgi Āihā thrust her right hand forward, raised three huge waves of fire from the sea, and

⁵⁴⁷ A type of grass known as *buru*.

hurled them after him. The massive effort left her exhausted. Instantly she died.

Meanwhile Oḍitān saw the three flaming waves fast approaching him. Being near an islet, he hastily made for its beach. The moment he stepped on the sand, he was beyond their reach. Hence, they turned into waves of water, and so he was saved.

To this day, at a point near the beach of Golā Konā in Haddummati Atoll, ocean swells break into series of three waves. Natives of the atoll attribute this natural wonder to Dōgi Āihā. They say that her magic fire waves became normal ones and stayed there forever.

Certain legends about Māri, the goddess of smallpox, say that once she blasted her husband with supernatural flames while she was in a rage.⁵⁴⁸ The particular island where Oḍitān lived is not identified, but the atoll corresponds to Haddummati Atoll, traditionally said to have seven inhabited islands (Haddū=sat-duvu), hence its name.

The stone-boat sequence appears in a few of the Oḍitān Kalēge and Dōgi Āihā stories. The common explanation for it would be an emphatic: “Their magic was so powerful that they could make a grindstone float and use it as a boat.”

Characteristically, and not without humor, a great stress is laid on the amazing magic powers of both Oḍitān and Dōgi Āihā. Although Divehi grindstones (dāy) do have the shape of a ship, they are usually small (about 50 cm in length only). Since there are no hard rocks in the Maldives, just coral, the dark basalt grindstones used in the islands have been traditionally brought from India or Ceylon. The symbolism of the floating stone is obscure but it is probably related to the fact that grindstones are coming from abroad.

⁵⁴⁸ Brubaker ‘The Ambivalent Mistress.’

Formerly, in the uninhabited island of Abūhera, in Aḍḍu Atoll, there was a small archaeological remain whose purpose was a bit of a mystery. Abūhera is actually the name of the southern prolongation of Hitadū Island, rather than a truly separate island in the common use of the term. Narrow, sandy and at the mercy of the strong winds, Abūhera was not fit for human habitation. Within a stony enclosure there was a boat built of hirigā (porites coral) close to a low stone building of the ziyārai (shrine) type. As they had not been looked after, both stone-boat and stone-house were in a semi-ruinous state. Unfortunately they were completely destroyed in the 1940's when the causeway linking Hitadū with the British military air-base in Gan was built. According to Hitadū people, it was a non-descript spot that had no popular religious significance within living memory. However, some local people say the house and the boat were meant to be used by the spirits.⁵⁴⁹ It is not known how ancient were those ruins and in present times confusing and contradictory local statements provide no clue.

The only reference to stone-boats I found outside of the Maldives is in a legend from Ceylon, linked to the Pattini cult, the popular worship of a goddess which originated in the Kannagi tradition of the Subcontinent. Hugh Nevill, who studied popular folklore in mid-19th century Ceylon, describes this myth as embodying extremely ancient lore.

*"Then she was reborn as a Dēvi or goddess, and called Ambarapoti. She constructed a stone boat, and landed in it at Madakalapu (Batticaloa). There she received power to alleviate suffering ... She is described as wearing necklaces and large ear ornaments. She built a temple for herself on Paelawa rock, and there she tosses balls in the air for sport, in three sets of seven each. ... She removes pestilence."*⁵⁵⁰ Note the connection

⁵⁴⁹ Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī.

⁵⁵⁰ R. Weerakoon, 'Sri Lanka's Mythology'.

between this goddess and Māri, the Indian Smallpox or Village Goddess, for the identification of evil spirits with Māri is a recurring feature of Maldivian popular beliefs.

Interestingly, in the Maldive legends, the stone-boats appear in connection with female spirits too. At least in two stories they belong to Dōgi Āihā, Oḍitān Kalēge's fiery wife; and here again, in Dōgi Āihā's secret defilement of tombs and eating human flesh, while openly acting as a good wife, we see the link between the beneficent and the wrathful aspect of the Goddess: Her capacity both to cause pestilence if slighted and to remove it if properly invoked, a theme has been discussed with more detail in other chapters of this book.

The fierce battle of magic spells between Oḍitān Kalēge and Dōgi Āihā is consistent with Vaśiṣṭa's personality as a sage of great siddhi powers with a competitive spirit. However, in the Indian tradition, Vaśiṣṭa's rival is not his wife, but the sage Viśvāmitra.⁵⁵¹ The mutual animosity and bitter rivalry of these two great Ṛṣis appears in many important epic poems, like the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas, where both Ṛṣis curse and pursue each other. For example, in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, Vaśiṣṭa and Viśvāmitra, in a wrangle, cursed each other to become birds and, in those shapes, the two sages fought such a terrible battle that the whole universe was seriously disturbed. Finally Brahmā, in the interest of peace, restored both of the rivals to their original form and brought about reconciliation between them.⁵⁵²

The name Dōgi Āihā comes from the Sanskrit term Yoginī, the feminine ending 'nī' having been replaced by the Arabic common name Aihā (Āisha). Kāñlēge is the southern form of the Divehi respectful title

⁵⁵¹ However, from the point of view of character, Arundati, Vaśiṣṭa's wife in the Indian epics, has little in common with the fiery Dōgi Āihā of Maldivian tradition

⁵⁵² R.N. Saletore, Op. cit.

Kambulēge. In the Indian tradition, a Yoginī is a feminine divine being, usually a female attendant of the Goddess.

According to the Yaśastilaka of Somadevasuri (10th century AD), Yoginīs can traverse the heavens at great speed and their behavior is wild. They decorate their naked bodies with designs made of blood, wear snakes and skulls as ornaments, utter ferocious cries and their companions are vultures. In some religious texts, a Yoginī can be an aspect of the Goddess herself, and the most persistent belief about them is that they feed on human flesh and can fly across the sky.

The story of queen Kuvalayavatī in the Kathāsaritasāgara has quite a few similarities with Dōgi Āihā Kāñlēge’s Maldivé legend above:

“The king, returning unexpectedly from an expedition, is confronted with an awful sight in his own palace, when he finds his wife performing a frightening ritual. The queen was stark naked, with her hair standing on end and her lips trembling in muttering incantations, in the midst of a great Maṇḍala made with various colored powders, after offering a horrible oblation of blood, liquor and human flesh.

“The terrified husband demands an explanation, and thus the queen tells him that she is a ḍākinī and that the ceremony he has seen enables her to fly in the air. Long ago, she once saw some women flying across the sky. When she asked them how to obtain this power of Khecara, she was told that she must be willing to consume human flesh. On indicating her agreement, she was initiated into the secret circle by the chief ḍākinī, Kālarātri.

“Then the queen describes to the alarmed king the ghastly initiation ceremony: “Kālarātri made me take off my clothes and perform a horrible ceremony to the terrific aspect of Shiva (Bhairava), standing in the middle of a Maṇḍala. After she had sprinkled me with water, she revealed to me various spells known to her and gave me human flesh to eat that had been offered in sacrifice to the gods. Upon receiving the spells and eating the

human flesh, I immediately flew up, naked as I was, into the heavens along with other women belonging to the ḍākinī circle. After I had amused myself thoroughly, I descended from the sky by my teacher's command. Later, I went quietly to my own apartments."

"Thus, even in my girlhood, while I was still a young princess, I became a member of the secret ḍākinīcakra and in our meetings we devoured the bodies of many men".

In this story, as in Dogiaihā's story, the husband doesn't know about the nocturnal whereabouts of his wife. She, in turn flies across the sky and eats human flesh. The ability to fly is considered as a lesser variety of magical power among the sādhakas (initiated). Consider for example how Devī addresses Shiva in the Śrī Matottara Tantra, a text dealing extensively with Yoginīs: *"My lord, impart to me the secret knowledge about cakras of Yoginīs, the knowledge of which bestows the ability to fly in the air."*⁵⁵³

⁵⁵³ Vidya Dehejia, Op. cit.

3.3.2 SPECIAL POWERS

In Divehi legends, as we have seen, there is a relationship between obtaining magic powers, nudity and consuming human flesh. This connection is also present in local sorcery, faṇḍitaverikaṇ. In order to be able to fly into the air, become invisible or to compel other people to do one's wishes⁵⁵⁴, powers which are known respectively as khecaritvam, adrśyatvam and prākāmya in Sanskrit, Maldivian sorcerers would perform a special faṇḍita ritual without clothes. Occasionally this ceremony to obtain special powers would include the consumption of flesh or organs taken from people who had died recently.

The faṇḍita man would go to the graveyard in the night to cut pieces of flesh from a corpse in the darkness. Owing to its white color the heap of sand of the fresh tomb would stand out. No one would bother the person going through the ghastly task, as graveyards were especially avoided at such late hours. Even so, this type of rituals were rare and mostly sorcerers would go to the graveyards at night to pick other parts for their more common rites, like skulls and long bones from older tombs.

The link between nakedness, consumption of human flesh, secret ceremonies and natural phenomena, is part of the popular tradition of the Subcontinent as well. An illustrative instance is the legend of the ḍākinī Nonā:

“Dhanwantari, the physician of the gods was mortally bitten by the snake king Takśaka. Before he died he ordered his sons to cook and eat his dead body to succeed to his magical powers. The snake king dissuaded them from eating the unholy meal, and then let the cauldron containing it float down the Ganges. Nonā, a Chamār (leather-worker caste) woman, found the pot and ate the contents. She immediately obtained the power of

⁵⁵⁴ Source: Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī

healing, especially snake-bite. One day the women who were transplanting rice wondered how Nonā was able to do as much work as all of them put together. So they watched her and saw that when Nonā thought she was alone, she stripped herself naked, muttered some spells and threw the bundle of rice seedlings into the air. When the plants settled in their proper places, the spectators cried out in astonishment. Finding herself discovered Nonā tried to escape. As she ran the earth opened and all the water of the rice fields followed her. The channel which she formed is the Noni River to this day."⁵⁵⁵

‘The Daughters of the King of the Thirty Three Kingdoms of the Sky’ is a lengthy tale which includes fragments of ancient Divehi folklore within the background of a tale with Persian or North Indian influence. This story, which features a deō (giant, Skt. ‘daitya’) and beautiful girls who fly through the sky, was popular among traditional story-tellers in Male’.⁵⁵⁶ Hasanu, the hero who falls in love with one of the princesses, overcomes temptation when other beautiful girls are luring him and are not shy to expose their nudity. The difference with most Maldivian stories about supernatural females is that in the tale above the women don’t seem to have a malevolent side. They are, however, preceded by a loud noise before they appear, as is often the case in the manifestation of certain spirits in the Maldives.

Besides Yoginīs and ḍākinīs, who have a kind of witchlike and sinister reputation, there are a number of women able to fly in Indic tradition. Foremost among them are the Apsaras, a class of female demi-goddesses or celestial damsels who reside in the sky. The meaning of the word ‘Apsara’ is “formed from the essence of water.” Hence ‘The Daughters of the King of the Thirty Three Kingdoms of the Sky’ are fond of bathing in a

⁵⁵⁵ W. Crooke, Op. cit.

⁵⁵⁶ Deō is a giant, ogre or titan, (Skt. daitya).</**\$>

large beautiful rectangular veyo pool with an open-sided pavilion at one end. The Apsaratīrtha is a sacred pool where the Apsaras bathe. These celestial nymphs are usually described as the servants of Indra, the king of the gods in Hindu tradition, who is also called ‘Apsarapati’ (Skt. Lord of the Apsaras). The five girls referred to as princesses in the story ‘The Daughters of the King of the Thirty Three Kingdoms of the Sky’, in all likelihood, Apsaras. Their kingly father, whose name is not mentioned in the Maldivian narrative, is probably Indra. Since the names ‘Apsara’ and ‘Indra’ have disappeared from Maldivian mythology, both are referred to by their long titles every time they are mentioned.

In the Indic tradition, Apsaras live in Indra’s palace in Swarga (Divehi Suvaruge) or heaven, hence the Maldivian title ‘King of the thirty-three kingdoms of the Sky.’ In the king’s title, the Divehi word ‘Suvaruge’ (heaven) has been replaced by the Arabic ‘Havā’ (air or sky), a word normally used only in poetry. The meaning of the number thirty-three in this context is not clear. In the Divehi narrative they are called initially ‘five girls looking like five full moons’ (fas handu kahala fas rīti kudīn), a common poetic resource to express the radiant beauty of a woman in the poetic speech of the islands that is also found in the traditional Indian lore. *“As he gazed upon those two women of equal beauty, Guhacandra felt as if the night had been illuminated by three moons.”*⁵⁵⁷ They are alternatively referred to by the storyteller as ‘parīn’, a name of Persian origin, meaning ‘fairy,’ which has crept into Maldivian folklore, probably owing to the fact that the original Divehi word for those creatures has been lost.

Apsaras are divine creatures endowed with such radiant grace and charm, that they proved an irresistible temptation for important sages (Skt. Ṛṣi) even while they were doing penance. Much like Hasanu, the hero in ‘The

⁵⁵⁷ Somadeva, ‘Kathāsaritsāgara.’

Daughters of the King of the Thirty Three Kingdoms of the Sky', mighty ascetics had to interrupt their severe austerities as a result of having fallen in love with an Apsara. Their proverbial beauty has a dangerous side to it, as it represents (along with the auspiciousness attached to female beauty in Indic tradition) an overpowering force which brings about distraction from the pursuit of higher goals. Even so, this dangerous side, inasmuch as it is restricted to mere sensual temptation, is not comparable with the fierce malevolence of Yoginīs or of goddesses in their terrifying (Skt. *krodhā*) form.

In Vajrayāna Buddhism, Yoginīs, and their related witch-like beings called *ḍākinīs*, are messengers between the practitioner of austerities (*yogi* or *sādhaka*) and the sphere of liberation. In the secondary literature, they are referred to as 'Initiation Goddesses' who fly through the air (even if they lack wings) and communicate the knowledge obtained from the Transcendent Buddhas, revealing it to the initiated. This knowledge will help the *sādhaka* to meditate, to understand the secrets of the Tantric texts and to obtain special powers (*siddhi*).⁵⁵⁸

Generally, in Vajrayāna iconography, Yoginīs are represented as beautiful girls surrounded by an arch of fire, which is one more example of the relationship between these demi-goddesses and fire. *Dākinīs*, however, are usually depicted as older women with a wrathful face. The main attribute of both these semi-divinities is the blood-filled skull and they are both generally represented in a dancing pose. Nevertheless, besides these iconographic differences, the boundaries between a *ḍākinī* and a Yoginī are not very clearly determined, to the extent that in some Tantric works, both Hindu and Buddhist, the terms *ḍākinī* and Yoginī are often interchangeable. This type of lesser goddesses, however, should not be confused with female ascetics or women undergoing austerities, who in

⁵⁵⁸ H. W. Schumann, 'Buddhistische Bilderwelt.'

the tradition of the Subcontinent are known as Yoginīs as well. In this case the term Yoginī is just the feminine form of Yogi, a practitioner of Yogic disciplines, and there is no reference to this type of Yoginī in Maldivian mythology.

In the Maldives there are still people who affirm having seen comparable fairy-like beings with their own eyes. One carpenter from Dūṇḍigamu village, SE Fua Mulaku, described such an experience:

“We had to stay here overnight guarding the toolbox at the shed while the boat was being built. Late one night we were sitting in the open close to the shed. It was a pleasant, starry night and me and other three men were idly chewing betel and talking. Suddenly, we saw a light in the sky towards the east, in the direction of the coconut trees fringing the beach.

All of us looked towards it thinking: “This cannot be the moon.” However, our vision was limited by the trees. To our surprise, when the light came closer to their range we saw that it was a round luminous disk shining pink and white. Inside it, or rather as a part of it, there was a beautiful naked girl smiling at us. It passed slowly across the sky in front of our eyes. Some of us got frightened and shouted at it. But it didn’t change speed and the young woman’s lovely face remained calm until it was lost from our field of vision among the dark tree branches.⁵⁵⁹

In spite of the mild climate, full nudity was never acceptable in traditional Maldivian society. Although men would often roll up their muṇḍu to its minimum expression, especially to climb trees, and average Divehi women would go through their daily tasks with bare upper bodies, limits were taken very seriously. The display of female thighs was considered extremely offensive and in verbal family feuds the brief display of sexual

⁵⁵⁹ This event allegedly happened in the eastern shore of Fua Mulaku in 1988. Narrated by Daisy Villa Sālihu, who was one of the witnesses, in presence of other three carpenters who saw it as well.

parts was interpreted as an insult to the opponent. Thus it can be affirmed that nakedness was an aberration from the general practice, especially since its purpose in the few exceptional cases mentioned further above was of a rather esoteric character.

Even so, mention should be made of a certain folkloric dance formerly practiced in Huvarafuṣi (Tiladummati Atoll), an island in the far North of Maldives. This dance was called 'findu beru' (bottom drum) and only females took part in it. Apparently, it was forbidden for men to watch it, because the island women would perform it in total or partial nakedness. Detailed descriptions of the dance not being available, the findu beru seemingly consisted in a series of movements marked by the rhythmic sound of the performers slapping their own buttocks. Even though it always took place in private, this type of female dance was banned by the Maldivian government in the 1970's.⁵⁶⁰

The original purpose of this popular dance having long been forgotten, present-day Maldivians claim that Huvarafuṣi women performed the findu beru for fun. The most likely hypothesis, however, is that this type of Divehi dance originated in an ancient ceremony to the village-goddess, the deity causing pestilence still worshipped in the Subcontinent.

In order to invoke the blessings of goddess Māri, the women of certain areas of Tamil Nāḍu still perform such nude dances during the dry season every year. Like in the Maldives, such performances have been forbidden by the local authorities. However, there are instances where the village women have defied the ban and have secretly staged the yearly dance despite police deployment. One well-known place for the performance of this dance is the village of Vellakadai, close to Yercaud. Despite the hostility of the authorities, this event is a serious religious occasion and it

⁵⁶⁰ Information by Ibrahīmu, from Kuḷuduffuṣi, barman at Halaveli tourist resort; and by Amīn Didi, Mānel, Male' in 1984

is part of the ancestral Dravidian culture of certain Tamil populations categorized as 'backward' or 'tribal' in India.

The dance is performed by eighteen women on the second day after Pongal (Karingal) in the local Māri Amman temple. Only females and boys below the age of four are allowed to watch this nude dance. Villagers believe that any grown-up male who watches the women dancing naked will incur the wrath of the goddess and become blind. Therefore, the men and the boys leave the village during the ceremony and return to it only after the dance is over. In the Salem area there is a legend that says that an Englishman who unwittingly watched the female dance to goddess Māri met with death before returning to his home. This is a description of such a ritual dance:

*"The Hindu women in the most curious way propitiate the goddess who brings the cholera ... They perform a most frantic sort of dance, forming themselves into a circle, while in the centre of the circle about five or six women dance entirely naked, beating their hands together over their heads, and then applying them behind with a great smack that keeps time with the music ...; they shriek and sing and smack and scream most marvelously."*⁵⁶¹

⁵⁶¹ Calcutta Review, XV; 486. Quoted by W. Crooke in 'An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of N. India.'

3.4.1 MONSTERS FROM THE SEA

In any island of the Maldives there are a number of grisly stories about kaṇḍufurēta (known as kaṇḍoferēta in the South), large evil spirits coming ashore from the dark ocean waters. The telling of these tales is not confined to storytellers, so they are widely known and shared by people of all ages and both sexes. The relevance of this corpus of stories lies in the fact that, despite their crudity, they form part of the main body of Divehi folk-narrative and are secondary in importance only to the legends about female spirits. Some of the kaṇḍufurēta tales are based on elements of the ancestral folklore, such as ancient angry deities. However, a number of them owe their origin to the freak occurrence of stray seals and crocodiles in the Maldivian beaches, which in the eyes of islanders supplied tangible proof of the existence of fearful monsters. In the Indian Ocean seals are common in the colder islands and island groups lying a few thousand kilometers further south from the Maldives. Lonely and uninhabited, New Amsterdam, St. Paul and Kerguelen are favorite haunts of seals and sea elephants, but these animals are extremely rare in the warm waters off the Maldivian Islands. The late Ibrāhīm Hilmi, Ākakāge, Male', described how in the 1950's he was called to Himiti Island, Nilande Atoll, to verify the presence of a monster which terrorized the local population. In his words: *"I walked up the beach and saw that it was a large seal calmly lying under the magū bushes fringing the coastline."*

In most of these sea-monster stories, in a manner which finds parallels in many other Divehi folk-tales, the crux of the whole narrative is the contact between the spirit world and the human realm. Mention has already been made to the fact that one should never say that a baby is fat or that one should never call the name of a person in the forest, as lurking spirits could bring about some affliction. Hence the main purpose of this story—beyond showing love, death or tragedy—is to draw attention to the catastrophic consequences that even apparently trivial human actions can have when the spirit world is not taken into account.

According to the average kaṇḍufurēta tale, when sea-demons happen to haunt an island they are a more of a threat to the careless individual than to the community. These creatures eat human flesh and delight in drinking blood. While they are on land, the sea monsters may temporarily dwell in graveyards or hide in the forest. Symptomatically, most of these stories have a bad end.

Blood imagery in the form of blood drops or blood stains, is a recurrent theme in the Maldivian folklore, especially in this kind of ghost stories. Certain local butterflies (*Papilio helenus* and *Atrophaneura hector*) are known by the islanders as *lē kokā* (blood butterfly). The vivid red spots on the black background of their hind wings are taken to be drops of human blood in popular imagination.

The terror that the spirits of the sea produce upon the Maldivian island folk is akin to the dread the Mukkuvar and Kaḍal Arayan fishing castes of coastal South India have of the spirits dwelling in the waters: *“They dread demons, specially the water-demon.”*⁵⁶² Since Maldivian spirits generally have a human origin, the fear that people may die at sea is connected with the possibility that, if their bodies are not found and given proper burial, they might become evil spirits that will add to the already worrisome number of existing ones.

Because of their probable human origin, some sea monsters can easily take human shape and behave like average Maldivians. Thus, they may even be able to engage into love-relationships with islanders and lead an apparently normal life married to an unsuspecting person. This type of story often ends with the faṇḍitaveriya unmasking and killing the evil spirit. The following tale is from Northern Maldives.⁵⁶³ Kaṭṭarufuṣi Island

⁵⁶² T.K. Krishna Menon, ‘History of Kerala,’ Vol III.

⁵⁶³ Told in 1987 by Husein Koi, Miladū Island, Miladummaḍulu South.

doesn't exist; it is an imaginary or nonsensical name which makes the sentence "Kaṭṭarufuṣi fuṭṭaru faraiy" (The ocean side of Kaṭṭarufuṣi) a tongue twister.

The Ocean Side of Kaṭṭarufuṣi

"Long ago a man called Rāveri Alibē lived on an island at the northern end of Maldives. Although he was a very good and respected faṇḍita man, he was not wealthy and had to work hard to make a living.

One day, this man was on his way to Male' to do some business. On the way the batteli trading vessel stopped in Uṅḡufaru, an island in Northern MāḷosMaḍuḷu Atoll where his good friend Ibrahimbē and his wife Havvā Manike resided. As the boat anchored there at sunset, Alibē went ashore and walked straight to Ibrahimbē's house. Both friends were happy to meet each other and, after chatting for a while, Ibrahimbē told Alibē that he had decided to entrust a shipment of diyahakuru (palm syrup) in rumbā (large glazed terracotta jars) and a big load of coconuts to him, to sell it in Male'. After eating dinner they spent some time chewing betel and talking until they became tired and went to sleep.

In the morning, Alibē loaded the syrup and the coconuts on the boat. Grateful to his friend Ibrahimbē for giving him this opportunity to make profitable trade in Male', Alibē gave him a beautiful casting net. "Here is a present for you!" he said.

Ibrahimbē was so impressed that he exclaimed aloud: "This is a beautiful net, Alibē. It is large and well-woven!"

His friend was happy and said, "Yes, but be careful with it! No matter where you go, never cast this net on the fuṭṭaru (ocean side) of Kaṭṭarufuṣi."

Ibrahimbē agreed to be careful as he bid him farewell. He remained on the beach until Alibē's batteli faded into the distance. When he went home, he carefully wrapped the casting net and put it away, thinking: "Now the boats are bringing a lot of tuna every day to our island. We have plenty of fish. I will keep this net for leaner times."

After a few months, the fishing season failed and the boats returned day after day without catch. Ibrahimbē's wife complained, "We have no fish at all. How can I cook?" Her husband was worried about the situation too. Then, he remembered the net Alibē gave him and went to the coral reef. He tried casting the net in different places, remembering not to go to the ocean side of Kaṭṭarufuṣi.

The sun was sinking towards the horizon, and the man had not caught anything. Not even a crab had scratched his net. Finally, in frustration, he forgot about his friend's warning and ventured to the ocean side of Kaṭṭarufuṣi. As he threw the net there, there was a sudden commotion in the water and he thought the fish were actually biting it. At the first try, it was full of goat fish.

By sunset Ibrahimbē had all the fish he could carry. Satisfied, he walked across the reef to the beach. Cutting a vaka (stem fiber) from a palm leaf, he strung the beautiful fish together, making six bunches. "My wife will be very happy", he thought, "it has been a long time since we have eaten fresh fish". Smiling to himself, Ibrahimbē put the net over his shoulder, and carried three bunches of fish in each hand. He was on the point of the island that was farthest from the village, and under the purple colors of dusk, the man headed home along the lonely beach.

On the way, he felt that one bunch was missing. "What is this?" he wondered. Soon in his other hand, there was also one bunch less. Astonished, he exclaimed, "Ahātakurā!"⁵⁶⁴ Then Ibrahimbē wound the

⁵⁶⁴ An expression of frustration and surprise.

strings tighter around his hands to prevent their slipping. Suddenly, while he was still far from his village, he felt something pull on one of his hands with an irresistible force.

It was getting dark and Ibrahimbē was sensing something evil at his heels, but he was too terrified to look back. Desperately, he made a sharp turn and went into the bushes in order to glance over his shoulder. However, the monster following him was so huge he had to bend his head far back to look up at it looming against the starry sky. The man's horrified scream died in his throat as the abominable thing grabbed him and devoured him on the spot.

Havvā Manike, Ibrahimbē's wife, became nervous when the sun set and he had not appeared. A hard working woman, she had already pounded the spices for cooking and was ready to cut the fish. She waited and waited, fearing something had happened to her husband.

It was dark when Ibrahimbē arrived with four bunches of goat fish. Immediately, he began cutting them open to clean them. His wife was so happy, she ran straight to him.

"Where did you get those beautiful fish, Iburā?" she asked smiling broadly at him.

He did not answer and didn't even look at her.

"What is wrong with you? You should be happy after coming with such a good catch."

"I am a bit sick," he mumbled. "I have a fever."

"Then, go quickly to rest, and leave this. I will cut the fish myself." Said Havvā Manike

Ignoring her, Ibrāhimbē finished the work himself. Then he went to lie down on the bed inside the house. Meanwhile Havvā Manike cooked some

baypperñ and brought it to him.⁵⁶⁵ As he saw her coming in, he turned onto his other side, saying “I can’t eat.” Then he covered himself with a blanket.

Sad, feeling rebuked, his wife silently left the room.

Weeks passed and people all over the island were dying in mysterious ways. Each day one family or another had to grieve over some horrible death.

A month later, Rāveri Alibē stopped on the island. As usual, he went straight to Ibrahimbē’s house. He felt that the atmosphere of the island looked sadder and was amazed to see that Havvā Manike, a cheerful woman who always used to have a big smile on her face, was sullen and sad. “Where is Ibrahimbē?”

“He is gone, but he may come back soon. Wait.” She said in a weary voice.

Alibē waited. After a while, he saw Ibrahimbē coming. But, Ibrahimbē seemed to be walking in a strange manner. Not his normal happy, friendly self, he had an ominous air about him. Alibē suspected something was very wrong.

Although he had planned to leave before sunset, he told the people on the batteli that it was better to stay overnight. So the vessel was anchored in a proper place. Later Alibē carried his box of belongings to Ibrahimbē’s house. Despite his apprehensions, he planned to stay there for the night.

At dinner, Ibrahimbē did not say a word. Marks of sadness creased Havvā Manike’s pretty face. This didn’t look like the same house; before, they were always cracking jokes. Alibē was relieved when dinner ended. Pleading tiredness from the sea trip, he went directly to his room.

⁵⁶⁵ Rice congee, a popular staple in South Māļosmađulu Atoll. Ēdafuši people are reputed for relishing this food.

At two o'clock, Alibē woke up. Soundlessly, he rose and left the room. Then he noticed a strange light reflecting against the peak of the pitched roof. It was coming from Ibrahimbē's room. Alibē made a strong faṇḍita to protect himself. Then he watched Ibrahimbē increase in size and pass through the roof, like a ghost. Swallowing his fear, Alibē followed him outside.

Now a huge glowing, repulsive furēta, Ibrahimbē went to the graveyard. There he dug out a newly-buried corpse, and ate it with hellish pleasure. Next, the monster walked around a house, reciting awful charms. Alibē knew that someone would soon die in that house. Pausing, the furēta looked around. The man kept hidden behind the bushes, fearing that the hideous being might know he was there, spying. Taking care not to make any sounds, Alibē heard only his own pounding heart.

At last, Alibē was relieved to see the monster move towards the beach, and plunge into the sea. To prevent the return of that horror, Alibē took a short stake he had brought with him. It was a thick section of kuredi (iron wood) sharpened at one end and engraved with powerful magic signs. Then, reciting mantras he thrust the stake into the sand at the point where the waves lapped the beach. After a little while the point where he had buried the stake began glowing oddly, like fire.

After this, Alibē woke everyone on the island and told them the whole story. At first many refused to believe him. But the eerie light coming out of the point at the fannu where the magic stake had been buried convinced them.

Meanwhile, Havvā Manike woke up and wondered where her husband was. "Where might he be?" She murmured, looking for him. When she went outside she saw the people gathering in the pale light of dawn. "Where is my husband?" she questioned Alibē.

"We thought it was Ibrahimbē," he replied," but it wasn't him after all."

“Who was he then?” she asked in alarm.

Alibē related what he saw to her, concluding, “Some evil monster from the sea devoured Ibrahimbē and took his appearance.”

The young widow wailed in sorrow, but the other islanders were relieved to see the fearful plague of violent deaths come to an end.

Deeply grieving over the loss of his good friend, Alibē brought Havvā Manike to his island, caring for her as if she were his own sister.

This story from the North of Maldives is a typical kaṇḍufurēta story. The spirit from the sea not only takes human form but is even able to live with the wife of the person he has supplanted. Like the Yoginī female spirits mentioned in another chapter, he cannot resist going to the graveyard to eat human bodies. The fact that the magician plays a heroic role is a common feature in all ancient Maldivian tales. This particular legend cautions against taking lightly the faṇḍita man’s advice. Ibrahimbē, the victim, brings about his own doom for not paying heed to the words of Alibē, the sorcerer.

Early in life, Maldivians were taught to obey the advice of their elders. In the old times there was a spirit known as kaṇḍu labari who used to grab children, taking them into the sea. Thus, boys and girls were warned against the dangers lurking in the ocean. Until they reached a certain age, Divehi children were not allowed to go alone to beaches located far from human settlements, especially at certain times of the day.

The following tale has many variants. Although changing slightly from atoll to atoll, or even from island to island, the basic structure of the different variations is very similar: A teenager meets a lover in some uninhabited corner of the island and they agree to get together secretly every night.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁶ Told in 1986 by Afifu, Ratafandū Island, Huvadu Atoll

Bloodshed under the Tree

“In Southern Huvadū Atoll there are two islands, Fares and Mātoḍā, lying on the same reef. Since they are less than one mile apart, it is easy to wade from one island to the other at low tide. Fares and Mātoḍā have been inhabited since ancient times; tradition says that there has always been a deep rivalry between the people of both islands.

Long ago, Kalō, a boy from Mātoḍā, was fishing with a harpoon on the reef in the morning. As he drew closer to Fares, he saw that there was no one on the beach. This was a lonely end of the island and he went ashore to rest for a while. The young man left his harpoon and his catch on the sand and sat down under the shade of a hirundu tree (Thespesia populnea). He was tired from wading in the waist-deep water under the hot sun and was enjoying the rest and the cool breeze. Suddenly, a girl came out of the bushes and went to the waterline to relieve herself. She was squatting close to him, but she hadn’t noticed that he was there. Suddenly, she happened to turn towards him and was startled.

She stood up embarrassed, because she just had unwittingly offered the boy a full-view of her bottom. But Kalō flashed a smile at her and put her at ease with soft, gentle words. The girl smiled back. A bit abashed, she said she was looking for firewood and walked slowly towards where the boy sat. She left her large kativaḷi (machete-knife) stuck by its tip on a low branch and sat close to him. They began to talk and soon it was past noontime but they didn’t notice. She told the boy her name was Rekibifānu and also told him where she lived. Then she giggled and asked him whether he would come to her home one day.

More hours passed and the two youngsters, fascinated by each other, kept chatting. Finally the sun was very low and Kalō decided that he had to go back to his island. He realized now that his catch had become rotten from lying so long in the sand and threw it away. The young man went then into

the water and started wading towards Mātoḍā. When he turned to look back, the girl smiled at him once more from the shore. She took the little firewood she had gathered, tied it together and, disappearing into the bushes, walked home with a light step. She was so happy!

Kalō barely had the time to catch two stingrays before it was so dark he couldn't see before him.⁵⁶⁷ When he arrived home, his parents were annoyed. "This is all you caught? What have you been doing? We thought you would bring a lot of fish after such a long time on the reef."

But the young man didn't care about their bad mood. He was only thinking about the girl he had met. He was not even hungry, even though he had not eaten since early morning. The next day in the afternoon, Kalō put his best muṇḍu on, combed his hair, perfumed himself, put talcum powder on his face and asked one of his friends to bring him across to Fares. The other boy agreed and punted him across on his small batteli to the other island.

Kalō headed straight to the girl's house, not looking to the right or left. But a few young men, who were sitting under the trees, wondered why he had come to Fares and followed him. He arrived to the girl's place and asked: "Where is Rekibīfānu?" to a woman there. The girl came out and was so glad to see him she opened her mouth to express her delight, but before she could utter a single word, her brother angrily told her to go into the kitchen. She wanted to protest, but then her mother and the other people in the house began to scream at her: "Who are you bringing here?" They were so aggressive that she backed away in shock and in fear.

Meanwhile the young men who had followed Kalō were closing in menacingly from his back. They spoke in a vicious tone: "You shouldn't have come to come to this island, we don't want you here." The boy was

⁵⁶⁷ Rays (maḍi) are poor food according to traditional Maldivian tastes.

scared. There were now many people around him, threatening and insulting him. Kalō turned and walked towards the jetty while they yelled: “That’s it, go! Next time we will beat you up!” His friend, seeing him coming, called in fear: “Jump aboard, fast!” Without looking back Kalō began to run and, as he hit the water, he waded as fast as he could towards the boat. In an instant he was on board and the other boy punted strongly away from the shore.

Meanwhile a large crowd had gathered on the beach, abusing them in the worst terms: “If you dare to come again we will kill you!” Some were even throwing pieces of sticks and stones at them. The two boys didn’t want to look back and were very relieved when they could not hear them anymore.

But during the following days, try as he might, Kalō could not take Rekibīfānu off his mind. So again he waded every day in the morning close to Fares, as he had done the first day he had met her. From there he scanned the beach, to see whether the girl appeared. Often he saw other people, and then he acted as if he was busy fishing, not looking towards the shore. Slowly he waded back towards Mātoḍā, finding relief in the fact that he was at a safe distance.

Finally, one day his patience was rewarded and he saw a silhouette coming out of the bushes down to the waterline. Kalō was sure it was her. He could make out Rekibīfānu’s broad smile even from where he was. She made signs with her hand, encouraging him to come closer. The boy waded quickly to where the girl stood and they met again under the large hirundu tree. Enlarging her eyes, she told him how angry the people in her island had been that day, and that they hadn’t cooled down even long after he left.

They were both delighted to see each other, but this time they didn’t relax. Nervously rubbing her hands, looking right and left, Rekibīfānu told the boy: “This is dangerous. You better leave. Anyone could happen to come here now and there will be trouble. You know, they even said they wanted

to kill you!" Kalō fell silent and sighed. After thinking for a while he asked her: "When can we meet again?"

With the corner of her eyes, Rekibīfānu looked towards the path in fear: "In the daylight it's easy to see you wading towards this island. Would you dare to come across during the night?" Kalō, full of enthusiasm answered: "Yes!" The girl then giggled in excitement and said: "All right. I will meet you late every night in this same spot, under this tree," then she ran into the island without even looking back and was lost in the vegetation. The young man hurriedly walked into the water and waded away from Fares as fast as he could.

That same night the boy waded again towards Fares. In the dark it was not as easy as he had thought. The tide was very high and the wind was strong. He prayed that he would step on no poisonous fish or that he would not meet any sea monster. Finally he arrived to the beach of the other island. He felt light walking on the sand after the difficult crossing. The black outline of the hirundu tree loomed before him in the starlight. This same spot, so pleasant and friendly in the daylight, was now a gloomy, windswept, desolate place. He walked towards the tree and entered into complete darkness. Kalō tried to get his eyes used to the gloom and, before long, realized Rekibīfānu was not there.

Suddenly he heard the cracking noise of dry twigs and he felt his heart beating fast. Almost immediately the girl was in front of him. She felt in the darkness with her extended hands and touched him. Rekibīfānu was startled and made a little squeak. He calmed her whispering: "It's me, Kalō!"

She asked: "Are you afraid?" He said: "No!" and she lied as well. Soon they were in deep conversation, talking in thrilled whispers. Afterwards they lost no time and were embracing each other.

Unfortunately time passed very fast and it was close to dawn. The two lovers parted and both felt that leaving each other hurt as much as

physical pain. The girl disappeared in the bush and the young man set out to cross over to his island. After the soft, warm body of the girl, Kalō found the reef water bitterly cold. As the tide was lower, it was easier to wade back, but it seemed more difficult. When he arrived at Mātoḍa, he washed himself with fresh water and went straight to his bed. He woke up in the forenoon and felt groggy during the rest of the day.

But as night fell, Kalō revived. This time he wanted to bring something to the girl, so he took some arecanuts and put them inside a maḍisīla (cloth bag). Then he waited for the late hours of the night when everyone went to sleep and he could sneak away from his home. When the time came, he took his bag, tied it to one shoulder and went to the beach to cross over to the other island. Once he was in Fares, under the dark hirundu tree, he realized the girl was already there. This time Rekibīfānu had brought something too. She had carefully prepared betel leaves with jasmine flowers, wrapping them delicately.⁵⁶⁸

The boy and the girl sat down full of excitement. They chewed and talked until they began to fondle each other lovingly. Like on the previous night, time passed very quickly and it was almost dawn again. In this manner Kalō and Rekibīfānu continued their nocturnal escapades. They passed their nights in joyful conversation and sweet caressing, without anyone else knowing what they were up to. Realizing that the animosity between both their native islands was a strong and ancient matter, the lovers kept their secret zealously. Weeks became months and both young persons kept meeting each other in the shadows, in spite of wind or rain, every single night. By now they had even built a little shelter and a swing, and that place under the hirundu tree didn't look as dreary as it did the first night they met.

⁵⁶⁸ Traditional presents between lovers having an oblique sexual meaning

One night Kalō was wading as usual towards Fares to meet his girl. He was carrying some kurumbas (tender coconuts) for her. Rekibīfānu had told him that her brother had found many turtle eggs the night before and she would bring fatafoḷi (sweet pancakes) that night. He was full of anticipation, thinking about the pleasures the night had in store for him. But, suddenly, as he walked up the beach towards the tree, Kalō heard muffled voices and giggles. Stealthily hiding in the bushes, the boy tried to reach a vantage point to be able to see who was there. He walked around from behind the tree until he saw two dark figures silhouetted against the starlit lagoon. One was Rekibīfānu, but he couldn't make out who the other was. Straining his ears, Kalō heard the girl talk: "Why don't you speak to me tonight? Are you angry? What have I done?" And he realized that the girl was confusing the mysterious shape with him.

Kalō was almost going to call her when he heard Rekibīfānu playfully saying: "Well, if you don't want to speak, at least eat!" and put a fatafoḷi close to the dark figure's lips. Suddenly the mouth opened wide and bit the pancake along with her fingers. The hapless girl had barely the time to give a scream of surprise and panic, when the monster jumped on her and devoured her all, crunching her bones and licking her blood.

This scene was too ghastly for the boy witnessing it. In sheer terror, Kalō fled inland along the path, but before he reached the first houses of the village he felt dizzy with fright and sorrow and collapsed. In the early morning, some local people found the young man fainted on the path and brought him to a house nearby. When he woke up, Kalō screamed as if the horror was still in front of him. Then he cried and fainted again. By noon he was able to tell among sobs what had happened.

When a group of islanders went to check the spot under the hirundu tree, they found only a pool of dry blood and Rekibīfānu's ring.

The strong rivalry between two neighboring islands is a common occurrence in the Maldives, where even the relationship between different villages on one same island is often soured by fierce antagonism. I have heard practically identical variant of this story set in Haddummati Atoll instead of Huvadū. In another version the evil monster bites the girl in the back of her neck, killing her instantly and dragging her body into the sea. The following story,⁵⁶⁹ set in a northern atoll, does away with the difficulty of the girl and the boy belonging to different islands and the enmity provoked by their relationship:

The Track of Blood

“Long ago, the Katibu (island headman) of an island in the far North of Maldives had two daughters whom he loved deeply. Wanting to make their life enjoyable, he had an undōlige, a swing within a small open-sided thatched pavilion, built for them close to the beach. The sisters went there frequently in the evenings, to enjoy the cool breeze, free from mosquitoes.

After a few months, the elder sister, Aisā Manike became friendly with a boy. He used to come every evening to meet her at the swing. While they were engaged in love games, the younger sister, Sanfā Manike, swung the undōli slowly. Sometimes Aisā Manike sent her to look for the guḍuguḍa (hookah), because her boyfriend liked to smoke.

One evening, when both sisters arrived at the undōlige, the boy was not there. While they waited, they looked around. Suddenly, Aisā Manike noticed him lying on the crossbar from which the swing was suspended. Relieved, the girl giggled exclaiming: “Come down! What are you doing up there?”

⁵⁶⁹ Told in 1987 by Fātumatu Naīma, Gāge, Māfannu, Male’.

But Sanfā Manike looked at the same figure and became frightened: “Dattā,” she whispered to her sister, “that’s not Ḷiambē. Let’s go home!”

Aisā Manike brushed aside her sister’s fears: “Don’t be silly. Of course it’s him!” Maybe he is angry because we came too late tonight and that is why he doesn’t want to talk to us. Let’s bring him the hookah, so he will smoke and calm down.”

Thus both girls went home and returned with the water pipe loaded with tobacco and fresh embers. The older sister, seeing her lover’s shape on the crossbar urged him: “Come down to smoke, the hookah is ready.”

But when the younger girl looked up, she exclaimed in terror: “Look Dattā! Foam comes out of his mouth! Look at his fangs! Every tooth is as big as a māḷoskeyo!”⁵⁷⁰

Aisā Manike chided her sister: “Don’t say such crazy things! He might get angry.”

But Sanfā Manike was too terrified to obey her sister: “Dattā, I am sure you can see this monster in Ḷiambē’s shape because he has devoured him, but I can see it in its hideous real shape!”

Now her sister lost her patience and was infuriated, but Sanfā Manike was unable to bear the sight of the dreadful furēta and cried out in horror: “Dattā, I cannot stay here; even if you don’t come I am going home.” And she ran away in panic.

Arriving home, the terrified girl stepped over the oḷigaṇḍu (raised doorsill) and froze there wailing: “Bappaē! Dattaē! (Father! Sister!).” Suddenly, she fainted.

⁵⁷⁰ Large banana variety used for cooking.

Her parents picked her up, laid her on her bed and put kola vaṭaru (eau de cologne) on her face. When Sanfā Manike came to her senses, they asked what had happened. Overcome with her memories, the girl's eyes widened in panic and she yelled: "Bappaē! Dattaē!" and fell back, unconscious. This happened several times until it dawned on her father that something bad had happened to Aisā Manike. He told his wife: "Let Sanfā Manike sleep. Our elder daughter must be in danger! Let's go to look for her!" and, taking some lamps, they ran out of the house.

It was late in the night and the streets were dark and deserted while husband and wife hurried towards the undōlige. When they arrived there, no one was to be seen. Then they looked better, lighting the place with their lamps, but all they found was a track of blood on the white sand. It was leading from the swing across the beach and into the water of the lagoon. The girl's blood was still fresh and red; and that was the last trace Aisā Manike left on her home island.

In this story the monster can be seen in its actual shape only by one of the sisters; many South Indian legends include spirits that can only be seen in their evil shape by certain persons, or when the proper mantra is recited.⁵⁷¹ Almost identical versions of this story exist in the South. However, in them the roles of the girl and the boy are reversed. In one of the variations, towards the end, the girl becomes a monster as tall as a coconut palm which catches the boy with her mouth full of huge sharp teeth and devours him in one gulp. And the blood, always the blood, in the form of stains or puddles on the ground is a constant in all these gory popular legends.

⁵⁷¹ See for example the legend of the terrible Yakṣi of Choṭṭanikara in K.R. Vaidyanathan, 'Temples and Legends of Kerala.'

The following story is about a demon of the Northern Atolls.⁵⁷² This spirit, known as *bēri*, is able assume the shape of a log and drift towards the island it wished to haunt. People might accidentally awaken it, causing it to assume human form, simply by using certain words or talking about particular subjects. There is an analogy here with the Subcontinental tradition, according to which there is a power in the repetition of certain words (mantra) that can be used for the invocation spirits. This *Bēri* story has variants set in different islands of North-central Maldives:

Bēri

“In the southern rim of Miladummaḍulu Atoll there is an uninhabited island named Kaṇḍūdū. Many years before it had a thriving population and the following tale attempts to throw light on the reason why it is now deserted.

Long ago, during a stormy night, a dark wooden log was tossed by the waves towards Kaṇḍūdū Island until it gently drifted to the beach. It seemed to have been carried about by the currents for a long time, because its surface was smooth and slimy except for some patches where the barnacles had established their colonies.

The following day there was no trace of the storm and in the soft early morning light three island girls walked along the path towards the beach joking and laughing in a carefree manner. They carried dirty pots and were going to scrub them with sand as they did every day at sunrise. These young women were very good friends and were always excited to spend time with each other. One of them was the Katibu’s (island headman’s) daughter and she was much prettier than her two companions.

⁵⁷² Told in 1991 by Husein Koyi Bē of Hoḷudū island, South Miladummaḍulu Atoll

Once on the beach, the girls saw the log laying there, one of its ends still within the waterline. They inspected the dark piece of wood, chattering all the while. In the middle of their titter, the young women soon forgot about it and, squatting on the wet sand, they began to scrub their pots thoroughly.

After she had finished, the Katibu's daughter left her clean pots on the ground and stood close to the log. Then, casually, with one foot on the smooth dark wood and the other planted in the sand, she spoke to the other girls about her secret sensual dreams. As none of them was yet married and they were full of curiosity, they ended up talking of sex. Later, when her companions had finished, she removed her foot from the log and it was time for the three young women to put their pots on their heads and carry them back home.

The following day, the three girls met again as usual and went to the beach. The log was still there, close to the place where they scrubbed their pots. After their task was over, they stood for a while talking close to it and, again, the Katibu's daughter, while talking about future marriage, ended up having a conversation about sexual matters with her friends while her foot was propped against the dark log.

On the third day, things happened in an identical manner. The three girls, exhilarated by each other's company, again had their secret conversation on the beach, while the Katibu's daughter nonchalantly leaned her foot against the now dry, and somewhat discolored, surface of the log that had drifted there.

That evening, the log, which was not a log after all, but some evil spirit, transformed itself into a handsome young man. Finding himself standing on the lonely windswept beach, the youth wiped off the sand that had stuck to his body and walked resolutely into the island. The village was in darkness and most of the houses had closed their doors, their occupants retiring for the night.

The young man headed straight towards the Katibu's house and found the door open. The inside was lit by the warm light of oil lamps. The Katibu was relaxing on the undōli (swingbed) in his verandah and, seeing the stranger, invited him to come in. The young man said that he had jumped from a northbound dōni. He explained that night had fallen, and that the captain, who was not familiar with this lagoon and its anchorage points, had not wanted to stop over at Kaṇḍūdū.

After some light talk, the newcomer mentioned that he had come to Kaṇḍūdū to marry. The Katibu then had a good look at him, as discreetly as possible, and decided the man was all right. He then said: "I have one daughter of marriageable age, she is now in the kitchen boiling fish," and he called the girl.

The young woman entered the lamp lit room and stood at the doorsill. As soon as her eyes fell upon the stranger, a weakness overcame her. Noticing that she liked the handsome young man, her father arranged the ceremony. Thus, the marriage was performed that same night.

Weeks passed and the pretty local girl lived very happily together with her handsome husband in her father's house.⁵⁷³ She was so much in love with her husband that she seemed to walk on a cloud the whole day. Her eyes seemed to look far away and she wore always a mild smile on her lips. The other two girls began to tease her. They found her new absent-minded attitude extremely annoying. From having been such a talkative girl, the Katibu's daughter, had suddenly become silent and had stopped sharing her secrets with the other two. Thus, the mutual friendship the three young women had previously enjoyed so much cooled beyond improvement.

⁵⁷³ There are versions in which the story ends here and nothing untoward happens in the island

One day, a kaḥveriyā from the South arrived to Kaṇḍūdū on a journey.⁵⁷⁴ He was put up at the Katību's house, as it was the best in the island. Soon he noticed the sullen young man and, when he had a chance to be alone with the Katību, he casually asked him: "Who is that handsome youth? Is he from this island?"

His host answered: "No, he is from another atoll. He is my son-in-law."

The kaḥveriyā said nothing. However, during the following days he eyed the young man with distrust all the time and observed him very closely in a furtive manner. Finally, one evening he took the Katību aside and addressed him in a very serious and urgent tone: "Katību, the young man living in your home is not a son of Adam. He is the bēri, a malevolent spirit coming from the sea who has taken the appearance of a man!"

The island chief was so shocked that he remained speechless for a while, but after pondering over the strange circumstances in which the young man had arrived to the island, late in the night, alone and wet, he sighed and asked the sorcerer: "What should I do?"

The kaḥveriyā said: "The most important thing is to act as if you don't know anything. Your son-in-law must not know that we are suspicious of him."

The Katību agreed and then the sorcerer continued: "Tomorrow, call the islanders and tell them to build a maulūdu haruge (a pavilion to perform a festival) with walls made of loose stones. When it is finished, call the entire island to celebrate a maulūdu." The next day the kaḥveriyā went from home to home, spoke secretly with every adult male in each

⁵⁷⁴ Kaḥveriyā is another word for faṇḍitaveriyā or sorcerer. Husein Koyi used this word while telling the story. In another version told in Male' the sorcerer in the story is Oḡitān Kalēge

household and concluded by reminding every man to be ready for his signal. Then the men went to build the *maulūdu haruge* (pavilion).

After the building was finished, that same evening, everything was prepared to celebrate the festival inside. The lamps were lit and lengths of cloth were hung to cover the walls. Unwittingly, the *Katibu's* son-in-law entered the *haruge* first and, finding that no one else had yet arrived, he sat there and waited. A man arrived after him, sat beside there for a moment and exclaimed: "Oh! So-and-so hasn't come!" and he got up and left. The next man came, sat briefly beside the young man and said: "So-and-so hasn't yet arrived. How strange! I'll go and fetch him." And he got up and left too. Thus, in the same manner, all the men of *Kaṇḍūdū* came and went.

But they didn't go far; they waited outside the *haruge* in silence while the stranger was sitting inside alone. Suddenly, at one signal from the *kaṇveriyā*, they all pushed the loose coral walls inwards and the whole building collapsed on the young man. Trapped inside the heap of stones, he began to howl and howl, telling the islanders surrounding it that he would leave to *Berīyanfaru* and remain there if they promised not to hurt him anymore.⁵⁷⁵ The islanders agreed and went back to their homes.

Later in the night, the stranger, now a hideous slimy *furēta* (monster) crept from under the stones and hurried towards the beach. Once he reached the same spot where the log had been, the monster crawled into the sea and disappeared. But it is always dangerous to hurt a spirit. Hence, many years later the *bēri* came back to *Kaṇḍūdū* to take revenge. The men, women and children of the island fell ill and died one after the other in quick succession. During those accursed days, the malignant monster roamed in the graveyard, close to the mosque, unearthing corpses, eating

⁵⁷⁵ A large reef without islands at the western end of *Mālosmaḍulu Atoll*. It is said that the *bēri* still haunts *Berīyanfaru*

their eyes and drinking their blood. The constant presence of this evil was making the island a frightening place to live.

Before long, the wretched and small group of survivors decided to leave Kaṇḍūdū. Sick, thin and terrified, they loaded all their belongings on their dōnis and left for good. They settled in another island of the same atoll and thrived there. Since those times, Kaṇḍūdū is considered a malevolent place and it has never again been inhabited.

This legend has some structural similarities with ‘Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā of Kāṣidū’ in the chapter ‘The Double Face of Femininity’ further above. However, while in Doṇ Kamaṇā the love-relationship between the human being and the spirit are central to the story, in ‘Bēri’, after the arrival of the kaṇveriyā, the Katību’s daughter drops out of the narrative. The speed with which their wedding was arranged may seem strange. However, in traditional Maldives, unlike birth, menarche and funerary rituals, marriage was a casual matter, not even worthy of being qualified as a ceremony. The usual practice in the Maldives was for the man to go to live with his in-laws and not the other way round.

Though initially the protagonist, the girl’s relevance is restricted to the first part of the story. The pretty young woman is instrumental in bringing the fearsome bēri to her island. She does so by talking about sex while making physical contact through her foot with the log. Inadvertently, she triggers the chain of events that will end up with massive deaths and the eventual depopulation of Kaṇḍūdū. And yet, towards the end she is totally sidelined by the tragic events that follow and we are left without knowing what became of her.

An explanation for the sudden change of focus in the narrative may lie in the fact that both the first part and the last part of this legend are sometimes narrated as two separate stories. Accordingly, the first part by itself would be a story with a happy ending known as ‘The Girl who married a Log.’ In this variant a pretty island girl marries a spirit from the

sea who is so much in love with her that he decides to abandon his evil ways forever and live a normal life. Such a plot is symmetrical to the stories of island men marrying a haṇḍi or female spirit and remains well within the mainstream of traditional Maldivian lore. Still, it is likely that the story above may be a merger of two stories that had been originally independent from each other and which were tied together some time in the past.

In the local folklore of Maldivians, the bēri is the only spirit that takes the appearance of a log, although sometimes it may take the appearance of an unmanned drifting ship or, more oddly, of a government vessel with lights, crew and all.⁵⁷⁶ The symbolism is not clear, unless the log somehow represents —or is haunted by— the body of a person having died at sea, which is reckoned to be the most inauspicious way to die. There are many chances that a corpse which has been floating with abandon, being carried about by the currents without having found rest, might end up becoming an evil demon when it finally drifts to an island.

However, it is also possible that the bēri legend may be an indication that logs might have had certain relevance as objects of worship in ancient times. The implicit message from the legend above is that “One should be careful with logs” and from respect to veneration there is only one step. This hypothesis is not far-fetched considering that the proper words, duly repeated at certain times, can invoke a spirit from the log. In this case the words are part of private sexual talk, which like a mantra, is usually secret.

Wooden logs found on Maldivian beaches were rarely coming from the Maldivian Atolls themselves, where every bit of wood is thoroughly exploited. Rather, they would drift for weeks on the Indian Ocean waters from the heavily forested areas of the Southern Subcontinent or from even

⁵⁷⁶ There is no parallel with the North-European ‘Flying Dutchman’ legend though, and no similar narrative exists in the Maldives. Cf. 1.6.3 ‘Mass Death.’

farther away, from Sumatra or the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. More recently, among the logs drifting to the Maldiv Islands there are some that have fallen from log-carrying merchant ships during storms; that is the reason for the occasional presence of pinewood logs (*orimas vakaru*) in the Islands. Logs drifting to beaches of the Maldives were traditionally considered 'baṇḍāra', i.e. government or royal property.

In Coastal South India's oral tradition there is some link between logs and spirits; for example, in the *Ceṅkeṇiyamman* myth of the *Paṭṭanavar* Tamil fishermen. According to this legend, once a man caught a log in his net and brought it home, keeping it there.⁵⁷⁷ One day his wife decided to split the log into smaller pieces for firewood. To her amazement, when she hit the wood with her cleaver, blood began to ooze out of it. Faced with this portent the woman shouted and the whole village assembled there. After this event it is said that this community began to worship the log. Some time later, the woman's husband had a dream in which the goddess appeared and told him that she had decided to bless the village with her presence in the form of a log. The goddess asked him to consecrate the log and build a shrine around it. Thus a temple was built in the village and was dedicated to goddess *Sri Ceṅkaḷunīr Amman*, 'The Mother-(Goddess) of the Red Water.'

The red waters are related to the goddess in her fierce aspect. One of the terrifying deities connected with *Skanda's* birth is called 'The Daughter of the Red Sea', referring not only to the color of the ocean's surface before sunrise or after sunset, but also to waters tainted red with blood.

⁵⁷⁷ His name has been recorded as *Veerarāgava Chettiyar*. See Religion, Belief System and Practices in S. Bhakthavatsala Bharati, 'Coromandel Fishermen.'

Part IV. A Showdown of Doctrines

Islam will always be victorious. (Hasan Al-Turabi, Sudanese religious leader in an interview to the German magazine 'Der Spiegel')

Venceréis, pero no convenceréis. (Miguel de Unamuno, Spanish writer and dean of Salamanca University, upon hearing the arrogant speeches of the victorious fascist legions at the end of the civil war. Following this declaration he was arrested and exiled to the island of Fuerteventura.)

4.1.1 TUTELARY SPIRITS

Maldivians have many beliefs akin to the rural populations of the Indian Subcontinent, where village people and tribals believe that they are surrounded by spirits. Throughout the Maldivian Islands, according to the local inhabitants, spirits use to dwell in the graveyard, in a forest, in a particular tree, in the ocean or in the coral reefs. Some of the major spirits are benevolent and their role is that of guardians against evil. Yet, unless duly propitiated, those same spirits may change their role and bring about the evil themselves, in the form of deaths, bad fishing, failure of crops and diseases.

Even so, for Divehi people the spirit world is something relevant, and indeed very real, only in their home islands. One Maldivian man who had traveled extensively abroad confessed that he was never afraid during the night in any other place on this earth, but that he was always overcome by intense fear when he walked close to the graveyard of his own island.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁸ Personal communication. Fua Mulaku 1986.

Generally, all Maldivian Islanders are aware that they can easily be made to look as fools if they acknowledge their strong belief in the spirit realm, so they themselves are quick to dismiss and make derogatory remarks about such beliefs, depending on their audience. Maldivians tend not to recognize their tales about spirits as anything worthy, or necessary, of being put into writing and even less into any art form, like painting. Therefore, it is not surprising that all of it is still kept only in the form of oral tradition.

As we have seen, in Maldives most of the main spirits are female. This is the case in the Dravidian popular tradition too. The basic idea is probably stemming from a deep reverence for motherhood as the origin of all life on earth. However, some turn-of-the-century British scholars who considered Dravidian religious expressions as dark, bloody and repulsive refuse to see any high ideal behind the paramountcy of female divinity: *“The reason for the Dravidian deities being female is probably nothing very profound, and is not especially complimentary to the female sex among the Dravidians. The qualities which bring these goddesses the worship of the people are their most undesirable ones ... quarrelsomeness, vindictiveness, jealousy, and similar attributes.”*⁵⁷⁹ However, as in the latter, there are also a number of male spirits in the island lore. A few shreds of legends, almost incoherent and without detail, talk about ancient male guardian spirits carrying weapons. Some people say that now forgotten ancient tales mentioned a man carrying a sword coming out of the sea. Like the dark Kudinge Biru female demon, which causes terror to children, this man with the sword is commonly linked to the haybōrāhi, the seven-headed snake. Despite their popularity, the essence of the spirits mentioned in those scattered fragments of traditional

⁵⁷⁹ W.T. Elmore, Op.cit.

narratives has either been lost or been adapted to a more recent version of the guardian spirit called Baḍi Ferēta or Baḍi Edurukalēfānu.⁵⁸⁰

There is no reference to this spirit in the very old lore. For example, in a notorious poem lambasting the folk traditions of Maldivians written by a local learned man called Ahmad Haji Edurukalēfānu at the beginning of the 18th century, the Baḍi Furēta is not even mentioned in the long list of spirits and local beliefs. This is hardly surprising, for the meaning of 'baḍi' in the Divehi language is 'gun', and a spirit carrying such a recent weapon as a gun, and who even wears an 18th-century military uniform, has to be perforce a modern spirit. Besides, it is said that Baḍi Edurukalēfānu is fluent in Arabic, writing and speaking the language to perfection, an unlikely feature for a spirit hailing from the ancestral popular Divehi background.

The fact that Baḍi Furēta carries a weapon though, tells us that this spirit has his origins in former Dravidian tutelary deities. The well-known South Indian god Murugan, a deity that originated in very ancient Dravidian village cults and was later incorporated into the Hindu pantheon, carries a deadly spear which he uses to kill demons. The male village divinities Māḍan and Ayyanār always carry weapons, usually a spear, club or sword, but sometimes bow and arrow as well. Māḍan is a fierce looking folk guardian-spirit sporting a large mustache, fangs and wild looks. He is very popular in Tamil Nāḍu and Kerala and often acts as a protector of the village goddess.

Often in Ayyanār shrines located at the edge of Tamil villages, side by side with the main traditional figures of clay horses (and in some cases elephants) which represent the animals that will serve him as vehicles in his nightly perambulations, Veeran (hero) guardian figures with swords

⁵⁸⁰ The first name is more common in the South and the latter in the North of Maldives. Edurukalēfānu is the title of a learned man, (Edu= Skt. Śāstri).

and, in a contemporary development, even policemen with guns are arrayed. The latter are bodyguards who help Ayyanār in his nocturnal rounds as watchman against the evil spirits threatening to invade the village to cause harm, such as damaging crops and spreading discord among villagers. H. Whitehead comments that Ayyanār seems to be an exception to the general rule that the village deities are female.⁵⁸¹ The more benevolent Ayyanār complements the function of Māri, the village goddess who keeps epidemics at bay by fighting evil demons too. Unlike Māri who has both a pleasant and a dangerous character, male guardian spirits have a consistent temperament.⁵⁸²

There is evidence though that other attributes of Baḍi Edurukalēfānu have their origin in other ancient mythical figures. Reading some relatively recent tales and poems about this Maldivian guardian spirit it emerges that his ancestry is largely based on that of the great mythical sorcerer Oḍitān Kalēge who corresponds to the great sage Vaśiṣṭha of the Subcontinental epics. Since some of those poems may be two or three centuries old, they may be reckoned to be ancient, but here the comparison is between a probably three-hundred years old gun-holding spirit, and a mythical figure from the ancient lore, who is thousands of years older.

In those traditions it is said that Baḍi Furēta's parents are the 'Queen of the Sunrays' and the 'Lord of Brilliance.' While, actually, in the ancient lore those two mythical personalities were Oḍitān Kalēge's parents. The Maldivian 'Queen of the Rays of the Sun' (Iru Dōdi Kamaṇā) corresponds in the Indian lore to Urvaśī, while the Maldivian Lord of Brilliance (Nūru kī Rasge) to the Vedic god Indra. According to the ṛg Veda, they both gave

⁵⁸¹ H. Whitehead, 'The Village Gods of South India.'

⁵⁸² See the chapter "Village Deities" in H. Krishna Sastri 'Southern Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses'.

birth to Vaśiṣṭa. Urvaśī was an Apsara, a celestial female, born out of the ethereal vapors made into clouds by the rays of the sun, hence Iru Dōdi Kamaṇā. Indra is the Lord of the East, where the sun rises (hence Nūru kī Rasge) and is also the chief of gods, carrier of the vajra or thunderbolt weapon.⁵⁸³

Since most poems about Baḍi Furēta are written in a scornful tone, where the mythical figure is dismissed as an unbeliever guilty of incest and other abominations, the confusion above was probably deliberate, with the intention of discrediting figures of the traditional island lore. Oḍitān Kalēge, the mighty faṇḍita man, whose exploits had been hitherto the favorite stories of Maldivians, had its image tarnished as a Kāfir —a derogatory term for “heathen” or “unbeliever” — since the 18th century.

Ever since modern technology facilitated speedy travel and two-way communication with the Arabian Peninsula, Maldivian religious men became increasingly aware of the sharp antagonism between the official religion they sought to enforce and the popular spirituality in their island country. When steam navigation was introduced, Maldivian learned men or nobles going to Arabia for the Hajj ceremonies were able to come back to Male’ within a relatively short period of time. Until then many of the few Maldivian Hajj pilgrims had settled in Arabia or died there, owing to their old age and the length and difficulty of the trip. Thus, returning Hajj pilgrims were able to compare the contradictory, and mutually exclusive, forms of spirituality prevalent in their Island Kingdom with the “Pristine Islam” of Arab lands.

From that time onwards practically all the writings of Maldivian learned men reflect their increasing impatience and intolerance towards the presence of lingering non-Islamic traditions in the Island Kingdom. Therefore, it is not surprising that from having been a source of

⁵⁸³ R.N. Saletore, Op. cit.

admiration in the traditional lore, a tantric hero like Oḍitān Kalēge became an accursed furēta (monster) within the changed scenario. On the other hand, since most Divehi spirits were already of a terrifying nature, the task to make them appear as devils was easy.

In order to increase their personal influence upon their countrymen, Maldivian learned men have consistently sought to create an artificial “tradition” by thoroughly searching, examining and weeding out all the true traditions of their own country. Although it is widely claimed that Islam is a religion without priesthood, in practice, individuals having religious knowledge time and again stake a claim to social and political authority in their society. One of the most successful ways of reinforcing their personal power is through striving permanently to conform to the main Arab religious pattern. This dynamic trend is largely responsible for the apparent uniformity among Muslim societies throughout the world. The consequence of their relentless activity was that new cultural structures were built upon the ruins of the old identity of the Maldivians. These intrusive structures bred alien values that created insecurity among the common folk.

The insecurity imbued upon the Maldivian people had a definite purpose, as from then onwards average islanders had to refer to their ‘learned men’ to know what was right or wrong in every circumstance. Thereby the power of the religious elite was enormously strengthened. Since islanders were assumed to be ignorant, savage folks, no feedback was needed from them. The only choice left before the common people was to obey their Islamic masters or be punished.

Maldivian learned men still claim that they have invested their energy in disinterestedly ‘educating’ their own ‘ignorant’ fellow islanders during the last few centuries. But in reality, their actual goal was to establish their own tyranny by asserting the hegemony of ‘purified’ Islam, with themselves as its representatives, in their own society. This trend led to the slow death of Maldivian culture as an independent entity.

Since the King's conversion to Islam in the 12th century AD, the permanent threat of harsh Islamic punishments introduced a new atmosphere of tangible terror in the mellow island surroundings. True, the ancestral spirits had been also a source of fear for the Maldivians. But these belonged to the supernatural world and the old beliefs had never really succeeded in bringing them to life. On the other hand, the masters of the new doctrine—which invests political authority with the halo of religion—were not ghosts anymore. They were, and still are, very real. Their presence cannot be ignored. To make matters worse, they have been allowed to monopolize a netherworld which adds its weight to the already wearisome burden of the average daily life of the islanders.

It may be argued that one should not judge too harshly the Maldivian learned, or religious, men. Since they viewed their own native culture as pernicious, they didn't see themselves as doing anything harmful. After all, they did what they thought was best in their eyes and, in their zeal for Islamization, they were not aware that they were undermining the civilizational foundations of their own country.

If we accept this point of view, though, we have necessarily to condone the destruction of the Maldivian culture as a wholesome, beneficial activity. Hence, it should go on with our blessings until the last vestiges of the cultural heritage of Maldivians have been obliterated.

In the present time, the damage is of such magnitude that it cannot be repaired. However, in spite of the generalized cultural blindness, oral myths of great antiquity—which have been handed down from parents to children—still reflect the ancient lore. Thanks to those stories, it is sometimes possible to catch glimpses of the past, enabling a reconstruction of the historical pattern of former Maldivian folk traditions.

In the original Maldivian mythology, the line between divinities (goddesses and guardian spirits) and *furētas* (ghosts, monsters and goblins) was probably clearer and there was not much confusion between them.

Nowadays, we find a jumble of confused accounts and it is not easy to establish a pattern, but there is little doubt that such a pattern existed before Maldivian learned men began to express their disapproval of the local spirit world. According to Fua Mulaku lore⁵⁸⁴ the origin of the Baḍi Ferēta legend is thus:

Baḍi Ferēta

“Long ago, a young nobleman from Male’ was banished to Fua Mulaku. (It was an ancient royal custom to exile people of royal blood to this lonely island if they had been causing trouble in the court). This man was very arrogant and openly despised the islanders. He made no friends and always wanted to be alone. Therefore, everyone avoided him.

He was allowed to carry a gun around and, as no one knew it was unloaded, he used it to scare people. At night, when the streets were empty, he prowled around the island. In the daytime he often went into the forest with his gun and tried to molest and rape the young women gathering firewood there.

Owing to his ways this young aristocrat earned a reputation of being a dangerous lunatic and, in time, everyone feared him. It seems that he loved to hide in dark, humid places and when somebody came close he suddenly would jump out and scare them.

Apparently, this man died of unnatural causes before he became old. After his death he became a nocturnal spirit known as Baḍi Ferēta who roams around Fua Mulaku Island to this day. Islanders say that now this spirits lurks in the darkness in damp, dirty spots where people defecate (like gūfīṣi, mounds surrounded by taro fields), near wells or ponds where there

⁵⁸⁴ Narrated in 1986 by Hasan Dīdī, Finifenmāge, Fua Mulaku.

is a smell of urine, where refuse is thrown or under the branches where chickens sleep.

He squats in silence, holding his gun tightly. On moonlit nights, if he happens to be looking towards the moon when one meets him, no harm will follow. However, if he happens to turn towards the person unwarily approaching him, he will fire his gun, loaded with kirufeliḥuni (coconut flakes from which the milk has been extracted). The victim will thus be covered with coconut dust and, no matter how much the skin is washed, on the following morning that person will have a terrible skin disease with very itchy pimples covering the whole body. To make matters worse, the pimples often degenerate into nauseating, oozing wounds, because the victim will not be able to avoid scratching his or herself madly.

After reading this one would expect that spirit to be confined to Fua Mulaku. Oddly though, the Baḍi Furēta is not a mere local spirit, as one would infer from his legend. It is present in many of the Maldivé Atolls, where it is known by slightly different names. Owing to his firing dry coconut flakes with his gun, this spirit is also known as Kirufeliḥuni Husēnkalēge in other islands. In Male', local people say that he used to live in a house called Keyoge, whose garden was shady, humid and overgrown, full of large banana trees. This household doesn't exist now and its location is unknown. Perhaps the name refers to a mythical house.

Girls avoided his home, not only because of his habit of molesting women, a habit Baḍi Furēta shares with some demons of the Dravidian lore, but also because of his perverse sexual inclinations, as he is reputed to have even committed incest. Sometimes women in certain islands are said to be possessed by this spirit. Compare his habits with those of the male spirits known as Bhūt (Skt. Bhūta= Spirit of the dead) in Bengal: *"They prefer dirty places to those which are clean ... and are fond of women,*

whom they possess and abduct.”⁵⁸⁵ Commenting on the few Dravidian divinities that are male, W.T. Elmore quotes: “(Besides Ayyanār) the demon Kattan is another male-god of importance ... He violated all the women in his region. The men could not catch him, so he impaled himself on a stake, and becoming a terrible devil was made a servant of Māri Amma (the smallpox goddess)⁵⁸⁶”.

The connection between this armed spirit and a lush growth of trees and plants is akin to the relationship between guardian spirits and good crops in the Subcontinent. In traditional South Indian rural areas, crop blights were blamed on the activity of evil spirits. Tutelary divinities, if propitiated according to the proper rites, would protect the cultivated plants against those demons that could harm them. The Maldivian spirit Baḍi Edurukalēfānu, like the South Indian deity Ayyanār mentioned above carries a weapon and wanders around in the night. Ayyanār is a very ancient village god of South India. His complexion is dark, he has long, curly hair, wears a crown and his throne is under a banyan tree, a dark and shady place. This deity is sometimes represented displaying clear military features, riding a horse (or an elephant), in full military uniform, wearing a large moustache, and holding a sword. By his side sit his attendants (veerans, bhūtas and piśācas) and horses in full battle gear.⁵⁸⁷

Although most of the legends about Baḍi Edurukalēfānu stress his malevolent character, the following Divehi story introduces us to the role of this spirit as protector and benefactor.⁵⁸⁸ Like the crops under the protection of guardian spirits in the Tamil countryside, in this case, thanks

⁵⁸⁵ W. Crooke, Op. cit.

⁵⁸⁶ W.T. Elmore, Op. cit.

⁵⁸⁷ H. Krishna Sastri, 'South Indian Gods & Goddesses.'

⁵⁸⁸ Told in 1990 by Dombeage Muhammad Dīdī, Funāḍo village, Fua Mulaku Island

to the Baḍi Ferēta's influence, crops are able to grow healthy and strong in an out-of-the-way location in the jungle, where evil spirits abound:

The Broken Covenant

“Long ago, a very poor young couple, Mariyā and Ahumadu, lived in the large island of Fua Mulaku. Neither of them owned anything and they had neither family nor friends. They had to toil hard for other people in order not to starve, weeding fields, digging wells and doing other harsh, unpleasant jobs. Every day, from dawn to dusk, husband and wife did very heavy work together. Although they did their job well, none of their employers were ever grateful or kind to them. Usually, after their hard day's labor, the young man and woman were given just a little food and were sent away in contempt.

Mariyā and Ahumadu were both black people.⁵⁸⁹ Their bodies were lean and their complexion, which was already very dark, became pitch black from working all the time under the hot sun, drenched in their own sweat. The poverty of this young man and woman was such, that they both went about half naked. A worn piece of cloth around their waist, so small it didn't even reach halfway to their knees, was all each of them possessed.

This young couple lived in a little hut in an unused corner of land fringing the forest. They had no furnishings inside and they both were used to sleep on the bare earth. But not even that ramshackle dwelling could they call their home. Every now and then, somebody fearing that they would claim that bit of land, became angry with these poor, dispossessed people and

⁵⁸⁹ This doesn't mean that they belonged to a special race or group. It is just a statement of a fact, for among the Maldivian population there is a wide spectrum of different skin colors, from very dark to very fair.

burned their flimsy hut, chasing them away yelling: “Get out of this place! The trees here belong to me!”

Abased, the girl and her husband would pick up the wretched remainders of their home and would leave quietly to build another shack somewhere else.⁵⁹⁰ They knew very well that, if they complained, no one would support them nor feel any pity for their plight. But in Mariya’s eyes there were tears and Ahamadu would have to be especially gentle and loving with his wife during the bitter days that followed, to wipe out the humiliation, until they chose another spot and their new hut was completed.

In spite of all the hardships, these two young persons loved each other very much and always stuck together. Time passed and Mariyā became pregnant. Even so, during the months that followed, the girl kept doing the same amount of brutish labor along with her husband. Ahumadu was unhappy that his wife had to work so hard, for rest during pregnancy is a very important matter for island women. But Mariyā’s hands were always busy and she never grumbled. One day, while they were clearing a field invaded by weeds, the young man took a brief pause from his labor. He then looked towards his wife and was overcome with pity for her. Mariyā was bent over her work, actively toiling, carrying her large round belly. Thick drops of sweat rolled over her dark skin.

The girl didn’t realize her husband was staring at her. Suddenly, she raised her head and, when her eyes met his, she stood up and flashed a broad smile at Ahumadu. “Don’t look at me like that! I am not a pretty, fair woman!” she teased him. “If you keep sitting for such a long time, the sun is going to set and we will not have finished the task. Then Daitā will be angry at us and we will get no food.” She pouted her lips and her voice

⁵⁹⁰ Even though in theory all land in Maldives belonged to the king and no one could own land, people could lay a claim to the use of the land if the trees planted there belonged to them

became beguilingly childish and whiny: "Aļē, I don't want to go to sleep with an empty stomach, after working so much."

She had expected her husband to smile back at her, but his expression was grave. When he spoke he was very serious: "Mariyā, this is not a life! We have nothing and we are working the whole day so hard, but what do we get in exchange? Only scorn. On top of that, we still have to beg for our food and even then we never get enough to eat. Every night we go to sleep so exhausted on the bare earthen floor, but while it is still dark we already have to get up and start all over again."

Mariyā's smile was gone. Now she looked at him with a sideway glance. She was frowning and didn't say a word. The young man paused briefly and lamented, "You know Mariyā. We are always doing what other people in this island tell us, yet even being so obedient, they still are never well-disposed towards us. We never get any respect from them. It seems that anyone can throw abuse at us and humiliate us with impunity as if we were beasts. We are nobody; we don't even own a home!"

Then Ahumadu pointed gently towards his wife's big black belly and said: "How can we look after this child? What life will our offspring have? Are they going to live like us? I don't want them to live like this!"

Mariyā refused to be drawn into her husband's mood. She bit her lips, looked upwards as if fed up, and sighed deeply in weariness: "I know all this very well. But what is the use of talking like this? What can we do?"

Ahumadu's eyes now lit up: "Please listen Mariyā. I have an idea. Working as we do, we know the forest well. My plan is to go deep into the jungle, clear a place away from anyone else's reach and plant bananas, papayas, pumpkins and other things there. Then we will sell our harvest and we will become rich."

Mariyā's skepticism was not easily shaken. She raised her eyebrows, narrowed her eyes and spoke to the point: "During the days you spend

clearing a field and planting it, we will go hungry. Besides, the things you plant in the forest will not grow. The haṇḍi will draw their blood out and stunt them or kill them.”⁵⁹¹

Ahamadu was confident: “I know. But I also have thought about that. Listen! I have noticed that the places haunted by the Baḍi Ferēta during the night are very lush, fertile places. I am going to plant a big field by myself and I will ask him to haunt it. Then he will keep the haṇḍi away and make our plants grow.” As he needed her support, his expression betrayed deep anxiety when he pleaded with her: “Please Mariyā! Let’s do this. We will work there every second day only.”

Maryā silently agreed, yet she didn’t look very enthusiastic. The truth is that she had no hope at all in the future, and her husband’s talk had only one effect: It made her conscious of their miserable existence, which she tried hard to ignore by being cheerful at all times, by joking continually and by finding joy in little things. Now she was full of sorrow.

Noticing his wife’s gloomy face and wide open eyes, Ahamadu had to smile. He brought his face close to hers, sniffed one side of her nose in deep affection and said: “It will be all right Kāñlō.”⁵⁹² Then they took up their work again.

*Thus, the couple toiled very hard on every alternate day, preparing their own field at a hidden place in the heart of the forest. After clearing and weeding, they dug the earth and planted banana stalks and kahanala (giant taro, *Colocasia spp.*) They also cultivated little patches where they*

⁵⁹¹ Islanders believe that cultivated trees growing far from human habitation are haunted by the bloodthirsty female spirit called haṇḍi who draws the life (lit. ‘blood’) out of them. Thus, stunted banana trees growing close to the forest producing very small fruits are called haṇḍikēl in the South of Maldives

⁵⁹² The traditional Maldivian way of kissing. Kāñlō is a term of endearment, Kambulō in the Male’ form of Divehi.

carefully buried different kinds of seeds. Those were hard days for the young husband and wife. They could not work for the rich people and went to sleep with hungry stomachs. On the next day, when they resumed toiling for their unmerciful employers, they felt extremely weak.

The exhausting work-rhythm became sheer agony for the heavily pregnant girl and her husband. They were almost starving. To make matters worse they received threats when they went to beg for their only meal in the evening: "What is this? Now you work less than before. You have become very cunning, you two!" Mariyā and Ahumadu patiently swallowed the insults, waited until their employers' anger had been vented, and silently ate their food.

One night, in the middle of all the severe hardships, Mariyā gave birth to a baby girl. The young woman had been working as arduously that day as ever. And yet the very next day, carrying her daughter along with her, she got up and went to work. She left her newborn child on a bed of large leaves in a shady place close to her while she was working. When her little baby cried, Mariyā would briefly interrupt her strenuous toil and give her milk. Ahumadu, working beside her, could see how trying it was for his wife to live like this, but he never heard her complain. She always laughed, sang or cracked jokes.

Not being able to ignore her distress, tears came to Ahumadu's eyes easily during all that period. He felt very sorry that his young wife couldn't get a single day of rest even after childbirth. Mercifully, this dire situation improved somewhat once their own field was ready. From that time onwards they were able to go to work for other people every day. At least then Mariyā and Ahumadu could have a meal every evening.

The full moon was approaching and, on the eve of the eleventh lunar night, Ahumadu, after a hard day of work as usual, went after dusk to a foul, dirty place full of chicken droppings, under a palm frond on which the chickens slept. He squatted there and sat very still, waiting for the Baḍi

Ferēta to appear. But time wore on and the spirit didn't come. The moon set and Ahumadu went home. The next day he was depressed. Mariyā tried to cheer him up: "Come on! The moon was not yet completely full last night anyway."

Ahumadu steadfastly visited the same smelly spot for the following three nights, waiting for hours, fighting against sleep, without meeting the Baḍi Ferēta. He almost gave up, but Mariyā, who could not stand to see her husband so dejected—and was privately irritated about his continual long face—kept encouraging him: "Maybe he has been somewhere else. Try again tonight."

Finally, on the 15th lunar night, while he was sitting concealed in his hiding post and the moon was full and round, Ahumadu was so tired that he fell asleep. When he woke up the vile stench of the place hit his nostrils. Realizing at once where he was, the young man kept very still.

Suddenly, in the clear moonlight, a few paces away from him, he saw the Baḍi Ferēta. The moon was high overhead and the spirit was sitting quietly, looking towards it. His gun was on his back and the young man looked at it with respect, because this nocturnal demon has the custom of firing a mixture of kirufelīhuni (dry coconut flakes), sand and feces at anyone coming too close to him.

Ahumadu, stealthily crawling under the large kahanala leaves, went up to where the spirit was. He surprised him by grabbing onto his gun and said: "Oh Sāhib! Have mercy! This humble slave didn't want to steal your gun. This miserable slave only wishes to talk to you."⁵⁹³ Then, the young man

⁵⁹³ Aḷugaṇḍu (lit. 'slave lump'). First person pronouns are avoided in Divehi formal speech, as it is deemed that 'I' is too strong a word to address an aristocrat. The term 'aḷu' (slave) is connected to worship, dating perhaps from the time of the God Kings prior to conversion

bowed low to him touching the ground in respect, for the Baḍi Ferēta is of royal lineage.

The dark spirit stood up. He was wearing an impressive military coat which was black (or dark blue) with red braids, chevrons and shoulder patches. Owing to his noble birth, he valued courtesy highly. After calmly considering the black, skinny man in front of him, he put his gun down and enquired: "What do you want to tell me?"

Ahamadu was relieved as the tension relaxed: "It is well known that your highness knows the art of making trees grow well. This miserable slave has recently planted a field and humbly asks your highness to bless that grove with your beneficial presence."

The Baḍi Ferēta, pleased with Ahumadu's excellent manners, readily agreed: "I will go to your field every twelfth and thirteenth night of each lunar month, when the moon is full. However, you must commit yourself to do something for me too."

The young man, caught off guard, mumbled: "What?" And the spirit replied: "Not now, but one day I will come to you asking for some favor, and then you will have to grant it to me as well."

Before Ahumadu could reply, the Baḍi Ferēta took a leaf and a sharp ileiṣi (the central nerve of the palm leaf) and wrote something on the shiny surface of the leaf. When he had finished writing he handed over both leaf and ileiṣi to Ahumadu and told him: "This will be our covenant. If you agree, sign here."

The young man, in the moonlight knew only that the leaf was covered in Arabic letters, but he couldn't read a word. He signed with a scribble, the same scrawl he had secretly practiced to mark his future trees,⁵⁹⁴ and

⁵⁹⁴ It is customary for Maldivians to mark their own trees with a particular combination of letters or a symbol by either painting it or etching it on the bark.

handed it back to the spirit. The Baḍi Ferēta folded it carefully, put it inside his coat and went away.

As the weeks passed, Ahumadu's grove inside the jungle became the lushest in the island. Within a few months he harvested his first bananas, papayas and taro tubers. They were so large and beautiful that he bartered them easily for other goods. Thus, Mariyā and her husband stopped working for other people and could cook their own food without having to beg for it. Some of their former employers now came to them humbly, saying that they had some heavy work to do. They assured the young couple that they would provide three meals now, and even gifts, but Ahumadu and his wife would tell them: "We will not go. You hardly gave us anything back then. There is no need to give us anything now."

Now the young man and Mariyā went to toil in their own field and planted other crops, like chilies, cassava, pumpkins and sorghum. Everything grew very well and, with their hard work and the fertility of the garden plots, the young couple soon became valued by many islanders who were eager to trade to obtain their fruits and vegetables. As the months went by, their fortune increased.

Years went by and Mariyā and Ahumadu became wealthy people. They lived now in their own home. Their daughter was five years old and, having known no hardships and no hunger, she was a very pretty, fat little girl. As Mariyā never again became pregnant, they were very fond of her and gave their child all their attention. They insisted on giving her a good education too, because they didn't want her to be illiterate as they were. Thus, every day she went to the eduruge to learn and she became a bright student, bringing them much happiness in return for their love.

Despite having become a person of good reputation, Ahumadu felt sorry that he was so ignorant when he saw that his daughter, though still a small girl, was much more educated than him. Thus, he went again one full-moon night to his own field to look for the Baḍi Ferēta. When he met

the spirit, as usual, in a humid, foul-smelling spot, the young man, after the formal introductory salutations, told him that he now occupied an important position in the island thanks to him. The Baḍi Ferēta felt flattered by the polite display of gratefulness.

Ahumadu then told him about the heaviness in his heart: “O noble and illustrious Edurukalēfānu, having reached a high rank in society, now this abject slave feels extremely humiliated by being so illiterate.” And the young man went on explaining how he had not been educated by his parents, who died when he was a little child, how he spent all his time, as far as he could remember, working from dawn to evening for a plate of food.

The Baḍi Ferēta listened attentively and then Ahumadu went on telling him how, barely out of childhood, he had married Mariyā, almost a child too, who was herself an orphan, as steeped in ignorance as him. Finally, he formally asked the Baḍi Ferēta to be his teacher. The eminent spirit, disarmed by the fact that the humble young man before him, in spite of his rude past, had managed to learn such exquisite manners, obliged.

During the years that followed, Ahumadu went to his field every twelfth and thirteenth night of the lunar month, as soon as the moon rose, to meet the Baḍi Ferēta. The spirit had insisted that he wanted no lamps. Thus, in the clear full moon light he taught his eager disciple how to read and write Arabic and how to recite the Qurān, except for a few sections, which the ferēta, as Kāfiru couldn’t recite. He taught him poetry and storytelling too, except for a poem called Farehe Mituru.⁵⁹⁵ The young man sat very attentively during the long lessons, straining his eyes to be able to read in the moonlight. Every one of those nights Ahumadu went

⁵⁹⁵ The parts of the Quran that the ghost could not recite as Kafir were the ‘Alhamdu’ or Exordium, ‘Fanara Āyā’, Kāfirūn Sūrā and Muhammadu Sūrā. Farehe Mituru (Farihi Mituru’ in Male’ Bas) is probably a Muslim devotional narrative, but I was unable to elucidate further information about it.

back home when the moon set, took a bath to get rid of the stench, and went to sleep until noon.

The remaining days of the month Ahumadu taught his wife Mariyā how to read and write too. He also borrowed books and learned more about religion and faṇḍita by himself. Those were prosperous years for the once-despised couple. Since their fields kept producing more and better fruits, tubers and vegetables, they could employ people to work for them, but Mariyā and Ahumadu were used to hard labor and became bored if they stayed at home. They now enjoyed going to work to the fields every day and there was nothing that would dissuade their daughter from going along with them.

After almost ten years of learning Ahumadu was now a wealthy, respected and successful person. But, as his wife Mariyā never became pregnant again, some evil tongues whispered behind her back. On a number of occasions, people would come to Ahumadu and speak to him in private. In a flattering way they would tell him that a man of his status could easily find fair and fat women who would bear kids for him. They didn't understand why he, who was so learned and affluent, would stick to that black and thin woman who could have no more children. Finally they bluntly suggested that it would be better for him to divorce his wife and send her away. These people usually hinted that one of their sisters, or a daughter or a cousin, would be ready to marry him anytime.

Ahumadu firmly, yet politely, ignored those people. However, secretly he was aggrieved, for they were speaking slightly of his dear Mariyā. He would always remain a trustworthy husband and he kept valuing his wife highly until his death. How could he forget the way she had cheered him up and kept him faithful company during the hardest years of his life? Besides, he knew she was not so ugly anyway.

Meanwhile their daughter had grown into a very attractive young woman having an excellent character. In spite of her fortune and her learning, she

didn't become arrogant. She was a hard-working girl who loved to work in the house and help in the fields. Thanks to her presence, her parents' home was a happier place.

One night, when Ahumadu went to his well to wash himself, the Baḍi Ferēta appeared in front of him and startled him. The spirit, showing him the now dry leaf written in Arabic which he had kept hidden in his clothes, pointed at the scribbled signature demanding: "Do you remember our agreement?" Ahumadu politely nodded.

The Baḍi Ferēta continued: "Well, this is the time to honor it. . . You have to give me your daughter. I don't want anything else."

It took time for Ahumadu to recover from the shock. Finally he said: "No! She is my only child! Please ask for anything else. But not for her."

The Baḍi Ferēta was offended, but as befits a grand spirit belonging to a very ancient royal dynasty, he kept very calm and didn't display any emotion. After a while he simply said: "All right. All right." ("Heu! Heu!") And he was gone.

After a few days the trees and crops that belonged to Mariyā and Ahumadu became sick. All the leaves were covered with hideous blisters and quickly decayed. The disaster that befell their groves was such that they could not get a single healthy fruit or vegetable from them. Ahumadu's face was grim. He sighed and decided to make faṇḍita, so he took a piece of kiredi wood and sharpened one end.⁵⁹⁶ Then he carefully wrote on it all the parts of the Qurān that Baḍi Ferēta had refused to teach him and buried it thrusting it in the exact spot where he had met the spirit on the first night, fourteen years before.

⁵⁹⁶ Pemphis acidula. A type of hard mangrove wood known as kuredi in Male' Bas.

Five days later, Ahumadu was sitting on the swing in his verandah late in the evening. Mariyā and the girl were already sleeping, but he was enjoying the cool breeze, chewing betel and nut when, all of a sudden, the Baḍi Ferēta arrived at his gate. The stately spirit had become gaunt; he was pitifully thin and looked very sad. The contortions of his face showed that he was suffering intensely. He spoke in a humble voice now, with no more trace of the nobleman's pride: "Ahumadu! What have you done to me? I cannot endure this pain any longer. Remember that I made you rich. I also made you a learned man. You signed an agreement with me, then you broke it; and now you are the cause of my agony. This is not fair."

Ahumadu replied: "O noble Edurukalēfānu! Please believe what I am going to say: I truly appreciate all that you have done for me and my wife. I will not forget your kind favors as long as I live; and I don't enjoy harming you. In fact, seeing you suffer now fills me with sorrow. However, I cannot let you take away my child. It is useless for Mariyā and me to be rich if our daughter is taken away from our home. Life would be unbearable for us. Please let's make a new agreement. If you let my crops grow again, I will heal you."

The Baḍi Ferēta agreed and, while he was standing there, Ahumadu walked in the darkness to the stinking place where he had buried his magic charm, unearthed it and brought it home. Then he wrote some magic words with the soot of a candle on a white dish, put some water in it, dissolved the words and gave the water to the spirit to drink. Thus, the Baḍi Ferēta was instantly healed; and true to his word, as one would expect from a ghost of aristocratic origin, he never came back to bother Ahumadu and his family again.

A general feature in ancient Maldivian stories about married couples is that the husband and wife stick with each other against all odds. Back then, since this type of story used to be told by parents to their children to communicate ancient wisdom to them, role models for solid marriages were commonly found in the Island lore. Stories with faithful, stable,

mutually dedicated couples are ‘Donhiyalā and Alifuḷu’ (Cf. 1 The Evil King) and also ‘Khālīd and Sitti’ and ‘Haṇḍi Doṇ Kamaṇā’ (Cf. 2 The Double Face of Femininity), among others. The latter even contains a warning about the disastrous effects even a little indiscretion or small betrayal by the husband will have on the mutual trust on which a marriage is based.

In the tale above, Ahumadu doesn’t hesitate to break his contract with the Baḍi Ferēta, but he never leaves his wife. It is noteworthy that he does so although she could bear no more children, even after they became wealthy. As monogamy and the fidelity of both husband and wife towards each other are topmost in the scale of Dravidian social values, these stories reflect ancestral standards of morality. Those standards became upset, and eventually decayed, with the introduction —and increasing enforcement— of the Islamic system.

In a one-sided way, the Brahmanical or Vedic system insisted in the total submission of the wife to the husband, regardless how outrageous the husband’s behavior may be. Contrarily, the Dravidian system stressed the importance of mutual faithfulness in a married couple.⁵⁹⁷

Except perhaps for the royal family, ancient Maldivians used to be monogamous until their ideals adapted to the changes introduced through the new religion into their former scale of values. Polygamy, easy divorce, and the effective disadvantageous position of the wife versus the husband in Islamic law, have brought about the highly volatile relationships which have been the norm in the Maldives since the second half of the 20th century.

There are a great number of theories about the equality of men and women in Islam, but they are empty rhetoric used for ideological and propagandistic purposes. In practice, a mere cursory glance at the Sharīa’

⁵⁹⁷ C. J. Jayadev, ‘The Tali in Relation to South Indian Initiation Rites.’

laws and at Fiqh quickly dispels any notion about the supposed equality between the sexes in this religion. Hence, today the Maldives is counted among the countries having the highest divorce rates in the world. For some reason, however, Minicoy Island has been spared this incongruity and marriages are more stable and enduring in that isolated atoll.

4.1.2 THE BIG MAN

Throughout the Maldives there are stories about a certain male spirit who haunts the islands in the night. This demon usually resembles a tall man and is simply called Raṣu Etere Mīha or Boḍu Mīha, meaning simply the ‘man of the island’ or the ‘big man’. Sometimes it is called furēta as well and it has affinities with the guardian spirit of Puhār described in the Tamil epic Manimekhalai. This spirit invariably comes out late at night and walks behind the person daring to step out at such hours. It seems that, like in Mābē’s case, the only function of this spirit is to frighten people, since nobody has been caught or hurt by the Boḍu Mīha. According to most descriptions it has a scary face with a mouth full of large teeth, characteristics which would link this spirit with the fearsome Vignāntakas described further above in this book.

Apparently, there is no connection between the Boḍu Mīha and sickness or premature death. People sometimes see him in the middle of the night, walking silently, ominously, along the island paths. There are quite a number of Maldivians who insist that they have been followed by this spirit until they hid somewhere or ran away in panic from him.

Although there are a lot of islanders, from different atolls, who claim that they have seen the Boḍu Mīha, he still remains an elusive spirit. This tall man is never to be seen in the daytime and has never been captured. People seem to see him only in the darkness, when they are alone and everyone else is sleeping. Stories about this spirit may be told with the purpose of frightening children in order to keep them indoors during the night. However, one should not overlook the fact that, even though they are not so famous, the Divehi stories about the Boḍu Mīha, ‘The Abominable Man of the Coral Islands’, are also strikingly similar to the Tibetan legends about the Yeti, the mysterious man of the snowy Himalayas.

In Fua Mulaku there is an ancient spirit known as Mābē, who might have had his origins in an ancestral guardian divinity. This spirit's presence is acknowledged to be an essential feature of the island and, as such, he is the subject of a few verses in a local folk-poem called Raṣoveṣi which describes all the landmarks around Fua Mulaku, where it is said to be confined under a coral rock of the Porites type (hirigal), a dense type of coral growing in massive clumps.⁵⁹⁸

Matimagi Mābē

“A long time ago, in Fua Mulaku Island Mābē was a very important spirit. However, people got together and complained that he was wandering too freely around the island, scaring everybody. Then they summoned Edurutakkānge Muhammad Dīdī, an eminent faṇḍita man (Cf. ‘Mighty Sorcerers’) and, giving him the proper amount of gifts, asked him for help to get rid of this spirit.

Thus, the great sorcerer went to Matimago, a street parallel to the eastern shore, close to the beach and made a very powerful magic ritual. He compelled Mābē to become very small and banished him under a round coral block at a place on the northeastern edge of the coral reef surrounding the island.

Since then, Mābē was no longer free to roam at will around Fua Mulaku. However, it is said that he is still able to come out secretly at night. Hidden by darkness he will go to a house and choose a victim. Mābē attacks both men and women while they are in deep sleep. He sits on the unwary person and holds the limbs and the mouth very tight, squeezing the whole body. Right then the victim will have a horrible nightmare, dreaming that he or she is going to die immediately.

⁵⁹⁸ Told by Maryam Fāruḡu, granddaughter of the late Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī

Owing to Mābē's firm grip, the victim will not be able to move or scream at all and panic will set in. After making what seems like an extraordinary effort, the affected individual, thinking that he or she is fighting against imminent death, will try very hard to yell within the dream. Finally, after emitting a weak sound and move one or two limbs, the victim will wake up. Then he or she will be able to move freely and everything will be over.

Nevertheless, after this terrible experience most people do not want to sleep anymore. Usually, the afflicted person will fight against sleep, fearing the spirit's return, and will stay awake until dawn.

The Mābē leaves no trace and no lasting sickness. He simply scares people in their dreams, a common occurrence afflicting not only among Fua Mulaku people, but also outsiders staying for some time in that island—I myself went through the experience—. Apparently the symptoms are similar to a disease called Ciguatera, caused by consumption of pelagic fish having eaten a certain type of plankton. Some people in the island claim that Mābē is a good spirit, but others say that he cannot be good, because he makes one feel as if one is almost dying. Compare with similar beliefs in the Subcontinent: *"The Bhuiyārs have adopted from the Hindu mythology Jam or Yama, the God of Death, as one of their dream ghosts. He sits on his victim's breast in sleep, and it is impossible to shake him off or make an alarm."*⁵⁹⁹

One intriguing fact about this spirit is that Mābē means 'maternal uncle' in the local language; and the maternal uncle, the brother of one's mother, is a figure worthy of the highest respect in the Divehi family structure. Hence, it is possible that Mābē might have been originally a revered tutelary figure in the ancestral folklore of that island.

⁵⁹⁹ W. Crooke, Op. Cit. above.

4.2.1 TRACES OF SYNCRETISM

The evidence of Tantrism found in Maldivian sorcery or *faṇḍitaverikaṇ*, hints at an enduring influence of local, non-Arab, doctrines. All these residual practices have withstood the passage of time owing to their widespread popularity and their strictly clandestine nature. As such, they have been handed down from master sorcerer (*faṇḍitaveriyā*) to apprentice sorcerer for over eight centuries. But, transcending the realm of popular esoterism, the question that eventually arises is: Did the rich and complex Buddhist philosophy, which became a civilizational force in so many Asian countries, leave any trace in the Maldives?

In a situation parallel with Afghanistan, Maldivian Buddhism, which once enjoyed royal patronage and inspired the construction of great Stupas and monasteries throughout the islands, seems to have totally disappeared without further manifestations. Its scant and battered remainders are apparently confined to the archaeological field. A summary reading of the *lōmāfānu* copperplates, the only trustworthy records of the time, shows that, at the time of conversion to Islam, things were much like in Afghanistan at the time of that country's conversion. When Afghanistan was converted, *"Buddhist monasteries and shrines were razed to the ground and the monks had either to court sword or accept Islam. It was a torrential sweep over this great Buddhist land and Buddhism disappeared from the country forever."*⁶⁰⁰ The similarities, however, end there: While in Afghanistan Buddhism and its culture disappeared owing to a foreign invasion, in Maldives the destruction was inflicted by a local monarch.

This is certainly true on the surface, although some authors believe that the general non-violent disposition of Maldivians is a remainder of the values embedded in their Buddhist past.⁶⁰¹ But such speculations about

⁶⁰⁰ C.S. Upasak, 'History of Buddhism in Afghanistan.'

⁶⁰¹ See C. Maloney, Op. cit.

traces of Buddhist attitudes in the Maldivian psyche lack credibility. Owing to their elusive, insubstantial quality, they can easily be dismissed as mere subjective conjectures and one is then again left to conclude that nothing has remained, that the ancient religion has been effectively obliterated. During my first years in Maldives, I myself arrived at this conclusion and held on to it for a long time.

Nevertheless, after spending more time studying Maldivian art, astrology, magic and myths, very lightly at first, a suggestion to the contrary set in. Suddenly, one day, stumbling upon some strange words which nobody could explain, it dawned on me that, even though in a very small degree, more tangible, non-subjective proofs of the endurance of Buddhist doctrines existed.

Old Maldivian astrological texts contain certain puzzling words derived from Sanskrit. Although their meaning is very deep —as will be shown shortly— they are not in use anymore in the Divehi language in its present form. Further investigation revealed that these terms are found exclusively in certain tables used by *nakatterin* (astrologers), but nowhere else.⁶⁰²

Those mysterious words correspond to the chain of interdependent conditions of the Buddhist wheel of life. Although there are no iconographic remains of a Maldivian Bhavacakra or wheel of life, tables containing the twelve stages of the chain of interdependent conditions or *Pratītyasamutpāda*⁶⁰³ are easy to find in most Divehi astrological texts,

⁶⁰² Or *nakaiyyterin* in the Male' form of Divehi. In this book the Southern form has been used because most of the astrologers interviewed were from Addu or Fua Mulaku. The astrologers are named after the Indic *nakay* (Skt. *nakṣatra*) calendar, made up of 27 constellations

⁶⁰³ This is an abbreviation; the complete name in its correct form is 'dvadaśaṅga-pratītya-samutpāda,' which can also be translated as the 'twelve-linked chain of dependent origination.' Shu Hikosaka, 'Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.'

even in recently copied books. While this scale appears in practically all Maldivian astrological books, some of the spellings are not always consistent. For example, the word Avindāna is written in some texts as Aviddāna.

Local astrologers, however, no longer know the meaning of this chain. They call each one of the elements by the generic name ‘aṅga’, which means ‘mouth’ in Divehi, but they do not know what they describe or refer to. A clear and convincing explanation about the relationship between astrological calculations and the different stages of the chain of interdependent conditions was not forthcoming.

On the following table we can see the twelve links of the chain, as they appear in the Maldive nakatteri texts, with their corresponding Sanskrit name and the English translation:

Divehi/ Sanskrit/ English

Avindāna/ Avidyā/ Ignorance (Vidya = Knowledge)

Haṅgiskāra/ Samskāra/ Intentional actions

Vinnāna/ Vijñāna/ Consciousness

Nāmarūpa/ Namarūpa/ Name and Body

Haḍāgatana/ ṣaḍāyatana/ Six senses (Ayatana = Senses)

Isfarūha/ Sparśa/ Contact

Vedāna/ Vedanā/ Sensation

Tiruna/ Tṛṣṇā/ Desire

Ufadāna/ Upādāna/ Attachment

Bava/ Bhava/ Existence

Dāti/ Jāti/ Birth

Darumuranu/ Jarāmaraṇa/ Old Age and Death

After long talks with astrologers, I became convinced that they use this scale without having any idea about its purpose. However, while trying to investigate whether there had been any belief about reincarnation in the past, there was some kind of response. It seems that, although nowadays nobody connects this table with reincarnation, belief in reincarnation was widespread in the Maldives up to the 19th century. Since they normally use two sets of constellations in their tables (the twelve zodiacal ones and the twenty seven nakay), some present-day nakkaterin assume the aṅga to be merely the names of a third set of constellations, but astrology has now become so irrelevant that most think it is pointless to find out.

Anyway, most astrologers I interviewed, were old men who complained that their skill was irremediably dying out as every day less and less people were interested in their trade. They claimed that in former times, all islanders used to ask for their services at every event or undertaking in their lives. From naming a child to building a boat, from knowing in which angle of the compass the main door of a new house should be placed, to planting a tree, or starting a trading journey, the nakatteriyā's advice was sought, valued and dearly paid for.

Astrologers were categorized as 'astronomers' in the 1931 Census of Male' Island, the first census ever undertaken in the country.⁶⁰⁴ According to the Table of Occupations of the census, there were three astronomers in Male' in 1931 and all of them were male. It was a respectable profession in the old times and the king's astrologer was an influential person within the country.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁴ 'Report on the Census of the Maldive Islands 1931.' Reedited by the Dpt. of Information and Broadcasting, Male' in 1979

⁶⁰⁵ See H.C.P. Bell's Monograph for more information about the position of the astrologer in the Maldivian court.

While enquiring why Divehi people stopped using astrology, the answer of a certain old man was most revealing.⁶⁰⁶ After giving thought to the matter for a while, he concluded:

“These are other times and people don’t like to wait. Everyone wants things to be done as soon as possible. One day, in my youth me and my uncle went to the astrologer and asked him what would be a good date to prepare a lime pit; and the nakatteriyā told us —here Alī Dīdī chuckles at the absurd answer— that it should not be done within that year.”

Understandably, he and his uncle disregarded the advice of the astrologer and went ahead. They set up the lime pit and burned it straight away. Alī Dīdī explained that they couldn’t wait until the following year. Since they wanted to build a house and the wood and the stones were ready, they needed the lime as fast as possible.

Beyyāge Beyyā, an old astrologer from Funāḍo village, Fua Mulaku, was one of the few Maldivians who could identify the nakay constellations in the night sky, for other astrologers merely had knowledge of them as names in the books. He claimed that the great Maldivian astrologers, the people who had written the books he was perusing, were in the distant past. The manuscripts he owned had been copied by hand from texts written by people who didn’t even remember who the original writer of the books was, nor the person who had made additions enlarging the text. He recognized that, as some things had been copied without adequate explanation, the astrological knowledge had slowly died out. Thus, the meaning of many of the tables of the books they were using, including the Pratītyasamutpāda, was obscure for them. In a symptomatic development of the present times, when Beyyāge Beyyā died, his grandson took his books and threw them away in a marsh. Mercifully, I had been able to copy some of the beautiful cosmic diagrams Beyyāge

⁶⁰⁶ Vaijehēge (Unakeḍe) Alī Dīdī in 1990.

Beyyā's books contained before their destruction. Those diagrams were known as *hakurā* (Skt. *cakram*) in old Divehi.

Alī Najību, an old gentleman from the capital, well versed in Maldivian traditions and culture, commenting about the twilight of astrology in Maldives, emphasized the fact that it was very ancient knowledge.⁶⁰⁷ He reckoned that part of it was very useful, for it was based on careful observation and on trial-and-error methods, like the best date to catch certain bait fish, to bury seeds, to cut certain trees so that the wood wouldn't rot, etc. This man decried the general rashness and lack of wisdom of present-day Maldivians and he argued that Maldivian astrology should not have been discarded in such a wholesale and denigrating manner as it had been done.

Even if here and there in the Maldivian Islands a few of the hand-copied *nakkatteri* texts have been saved from the systematic destruction of recent times, most of what is written in those books makes no sense anymore. The reason being that the old people who would have understood every table and item, the astrologers of the last days of the heyday of astrology in Maldives —around the 1930s—, have all died out. Moreover, the general disinterest which preceded the irreversible decline of astrology in the islands, made sure that when only the books were left, their meaning had faded into oblivion. And yet the importance of the mere presence of the *Pratītyasamutpāda* in old Divehi texts lies in providing evidence that some kind of belief in reincarnation must have persisted well past the annihilation of Buddhism in the Islands.

In their paradoxical drive to create a new “Maldivian tradition” upon the ruins of the former traditions of the Maldives, local learned men in the recent past, knowledgeable in Arabic but not in their own customs, were suspicious about the clearly non-Islamic origin of this scale. Thus, most of

⁶⁰⁷ Nedunge, M. Male', the man behind the translation of the *Isdū lōmāfānu*.

its names were included in a poem composed in the first half of the 18th century with the purpose of denouncing a number of non-Muslim beliefs common among the Maldivian Islanders. In that particular composition, written in classical Arabic by Haji Ahumadu Edurukalēfānu the names of the different links of the chain, with the exception of Aviddāna (Avidyā), were indiscriminately mixed up with names of spirits. Haji Ahumadu Edurukalēfānu was a local scholar well-versed in Arabic who died in 1747.

While this composition reveals the excellent command of the Arabic language by this local learned man, it makes also apparent his utter ignorance of his own country's mythology and folk traditions. This is the reason for the confusion, which persists today, of assuming that some of the terms on the aṅga table are actually names of spirits. Such mistakes arose from the deep contempt that local learned men displayed towards their own island lore.

As has been mentioned above, the relationship between the Pratītyasamutpāda and astrology is obscure. Hence the reason why it is found in Maldivian nakatterī books remains an enigma.⁶⁰⁸ According to Buddhist texts, this chain has an altogether different purpose. The chain of interdependent conditions ventures to explain the Buddhist view of man in terms of the relationship between his birth and death. The central point of Pratītya (dependent) samutpāda (origination) is that anything that comes into being, originates dependently. In the origin of the life of an individual there are twelve conditions (pratītyaya), or causal stages, which Buddha is said to have stated as follows (the words in italics are the Divehi astrological terms):

"Before my enlightenment, monks, when I was unenlightened and still a bodhisattva, I thought: "Into wretchedness, alas, has this world fallen; it is

⁶⁰⁸ Possibly a careful reading of the Kālacakra Tantra (10th- 11th century) and other similar Buddhist texts, which include Astrology in the path towards liberation, could help to elucidate this matter.

born, grows old, dies, passes away, and is reborn. But from this pain it knows no escape, from old age and death (Darumuranu). When indeed from this pain shall an escape be known, from old age and death?"

Then, monks, I thought, "Now, among what exists, old age and death do exist, so what is the cause of old age and death?" And as I duly reflected there came the comprehension of full knowledge: It is when there is becoming that there is rebirth (Dāti), rebirth has the longing to exist (Bava) as cause.

[In the same way this yearning to be (Bava) is said to be caused by attachment (Ufadāna), attachment by desire (Tiruna), desire by feeling (Vedāna), feeling by contact (Isfarūha) or stimulation of any of the six senses (Haḍāgatana) by the mind and the body (Namarūfa), mind-and-body by consciousness (Vinnāna), consciousness by accumulation of intentional actions (Haṅgiskāra) and these in turn by ignorance (Aviddāna).]

Thus, with ignorance (Aviddāna) as cause there is accumulation of deeds (Haṅgiskāra), with accumulation of deeds as cause there is consciousness (Vinnāna), consciousness by mind-and-body (Namarūfa) [Here the chain is reversed down to] rebirth (Dāti) as a cause of old age and death (Darumuranu). This is the origin of this whole mass of pain.

*This is the origin indeed. Thus, as I duly reflected on these things unheard before, vision arose, knowledge arose, full knowledge arose, understanding arose, light arose.*⁶⁰⁹

Those words and the concepts they relate to have lost all practical relevance in the Maldives nowadays. It is not clear whether, after conversion to Islam, Maldivian astrologers continued to pass on the

⁶⁰⁹ Śramana Vidya; Studies in Buddhism. Ed. by N.H. Samtani. Central Inst. of Higher Tibetan Studies. Varanasi 1987.

understanding of the philosophic principles behind the Chain of Interdependent Conditions; and if they did so, it is not known for how long. Even though I tried hard, I couldn't find a consistent explanation as to why those tables were still present in Maldivian books, when the very meaning of the terms they contain has, apparently, long been forgotten. In modern Divehi, for example, no one knows the meaning of 'tiruna' anymore. Therefore, to express the concept of 'desire' the Arabic term 'šauq' has been introduced in relatively recent times (probably during the last two centuries).

There are nonetheless indications that, even after centuries of conversion, some learned men did follow doctrines condemned by Islam. Those activities were performed in a secret manner, as the following account of a real event proves.⁶¹⁰ Another interesting point this story illustrates is the mutual suspicion between the powerful elite and the meek average Maldivian regarding whose vices are more repulsive:

The Lonely Mosque

Alī Takkān was a man from Aḍḍu Atoll who went to Male' to learn how to weave. While in the capital he stayed with his in-laws. After many days learning how to master the skill, he told his host: "Ḷiyambē,⁶¹¹ send me North! I have never visited the northern Atolls."

His host obliged and got a fare for him in a batteli merchant boat sailing northwards. He gave Alī Takkān a letter of recommendation for the Tiladummati Atoll chief, Sayyid Sayyid. Following an uneventful journey, the Aḍḍu man disembarked in Noḷivaramfaru, the island where the Atoll

⁶¹⁰ Told by the late Vaijehēge (Unakeḍege) Alī Dīdī in 1990.

⁶¹¹ Lit. 'brother-in-law,' often also a colloquial way to address any non blood related male friend.

Chief had his residence. After showing his letter, Alī Takkān was put up at the Atoll Chief's own home.

During the idle days he spent on the island Alī Takkān made many friends who were glad to have his company. Whether he stayed at home or entered local people's houses, they wanted him to talk all the time. People in Noḷivaramfaru rarely got to meet anyone from that far South, so the local men and women were curious about him and kept asking him many questions. However, Alī Takkān was not a talkative man. Besides, he spoke Divehi in the Aḍḍu way and was feeling awkward in the northern dialect of Divehi spoken by the locals. Therefore, he mostly enjoyed walking alone; so he spent many days of leisure strolling around the island.

At that time, the Friday mosque of Noḷivaramfaru was in the middle of a forest. One evening, during one of his walks after sunset, Alī Takkān decided to go there for the ishā evening prayer. He expected the mosque to be deserted at that time, but he heard the bangi (prayer call) while he was within the mosque area making his ablutions. When he entered the mosque, he looked towards the spot where the imam should have been. Straining his eyes, Alī Takkān didn't see anyone there and went closer. There was only the faint light of a small oil lamp and he saw that on the imam's mat there was a small heap of clothes.

Sitting on the ground there was a half-naked man engaged in some strange ritual. It was certainly not the Muslim form of worship and the man was so absorbed in his gesticulation, that he didn't notice Alī Takkān's presence. Going to the farthest corner of the mosque, Alī Takkān hurriedly made his prayers and left. He avoided looking again in the direction of the man engaged in mysterious observances, because it frightened him.

Walking back home in the cool night air, Alī Takkān felt better. When he arrived to the Atoll Chief's house, he was careful to act as if nothing was wrong and didn't tell anybody what he had seen in the mosque. They had

been very kind to him and he didn't want to be perceived as a troublemaker. He was apprehensive that the women of the house would notice a change in his face while they were serving dinner, but nothing happened and, saying that he didn't feel well, he went early to sleep.

The next morning, Alī Takkān chose two people he considered to be trustworthy among the friends he had made during his stay in Noḷivaramfaru, and asked them to come with him for the ishā prayer that same evening. They agreed and, after making ablutions in a small mosque in the village, Alī Takkān suggested that it would be a pleasant walk to the lonely mosque in the jungle. They knew he loved to go for long walks, so they exchanged glances and smiling in a patronizing way, agreed to go with him. Shortly before arriving, they could hear the prayer call.

The three men entered the mosque without making much noise and, upon approaching the imam's place, clearly saw the man sitting on the floor entranced in strange movements. Alī Takkān winked to his friends and, quietly, they left the mosque. They walked towards the village in the darkness. After a while, on the path across the forest he suddenly asked the other two men: "Who is that man? What was he doing?" One of his friends answered: "The man we saw there is Mudīmbē, the Mudīmu (caretaker) of the Friday Mosque. He is an important person in this island, learned and respected. We don't know what he was doing. I think we should tell the Atoll Chief."

Thus, the three of them went to Sayyid Sayyid and told him about the strange scene they had witnessed in the dim light of the solitary mosque. The Atoll Chief calmed them and assured them that he would talk about it to Mudīmbē. On the next morning the Atoll chief called the Mudīmu to his home in Ali Takkān's presence. The caretaker of the mosque listened to all the accusations but, to Alī Takkān's surprise, didn't show the slightest emotion or regret. The Atoll Chief said he would write a report and send it to the government in Male'. However, Mudīmbē didn't seem to be struck with fear upon hearing those words.

When the Atoll Chief ordered the Mudīmu's house to be searched, two boxes full of books were seized and brought to Sayyid Sayyid's home. They were not usual Muslim books and were full of frightening Kāfir drawings. Most were written in scripts Alī Takkān couldn't read, although a few were written in Arabic or Persian. Sayyid Sayyid ordered that the boxes with the offensive texts be thrown into the ocean and a dōni was sent especially to do this job. Alī Takkān had assumed Mudīmbe would be swiftly and harshly punished, but people in Noḷivaramfaru told him: "No matter what he has done, nothing will happen to Mudīmbe."

Even though The Atoll Chief had acted swiftly he didn't seem to be unduly upset that such things were happening in his island. His manner had been rather bureaucratic all along and he seemed to be merely doing his duty as Atoll Chief. After the initial enquiry and the search of his home, the Mudīmu was merely warned not to leave Noḷivaramfaru until the case was over. Alī Takkān found that odd.

Weeks passed and one day an official letter arrived from the government in Male'. It was an order that Mudīmbe should be brought to the capital. After a few days, he left on a boat and the Atoll Chief went to see him off.

In the end, what the people in Noḷivaramfaru had predicted became true. After staying six months quietly living in Male', Mudīmbe was sent back to his island. A few months later, the government sent a letter to the Tiladummati Atoll Chief, Sayyid Sayyid, stripping Mudīmbe of his Mudīmu rank and transferring it to his son. That was all the punishment he received.

This account reflects the contrast between two opposing attitudes: on one hand the general passive acceptance and, on the other, the puzzlement among a few average folks when they realize that their Mudīmu was "doing things Muslims shouldn't do". These are the reactions that commonly arise among Divehi people when confronted

with the fact that the very people supposed to enforce Islamic orthodoxy are guilty of straying from the doctrine they preach.

Besides their administrative functions, Island chiefs are responsible for leading prayers and read religious sermons at the Friday hukuru namādu celebrations. This is one of the reasons why women in the Maldivian Islands are unable to reach positions of substantial authority in the local administration. Despite the pious façade of the Maldivian authorities and the open display of mildness and obedience expected from the common folk, strong undercurrents are at hand under the smooth surface. There is a prevalent suspicion between the ruling and the lower classes as regards secret practices, morality and the keeping of the Islamic rules. Generally both social levels have a deep distaste for each other's habits and the accusations of immorality and unbelief are mutual.

Traditionally, Divehi common people have been pessimistic regarding their ability to follow strictly the Islamic system and average islanders went about their daily lives without thinking about religion. Popular spirituality compelled Divehi people to think about fearful spirits and magic only occasionally and in an erratic pattern, as needs and problems arose. The regular discipline of the official religion is alien to their tradition. They tend to see in the limitations of their own human failures, for example in the common inability to follow the strict prayer discipline, a lack of personal commitment.

This pessimism among Maldivians has, in turn, bred an inferiority complex, which expresses itself in their unlimited capacity to dismiss themselves as "people who are not able to be good Muslims." The same is valid for the restrictions imposed by their own environment, like the impossibility of enforcing effectively the puritanical segregation of sexes in the reduced spaces available in the islands. The symptoms of this intimate ill-feeling are either anxiety, among people who try Islamic perfection against all odds, or cynicism, among those who just give up trying.

Within the framework of Islamic history, one of the most common assertions is that *“before Islam there was Jāhiliya,”* and by ‘Jāhiliya’ utter ignorance and darkness is implied. Consequently, history is rewritten in a black-and-white, Orwellian manner where truth and serious historical enquiry become irrelevant. The only crucial guideline is to bend all facts towards the fulfillment of the Islamic structure. Hence, in Maldivé ‘historical’ chronicles, the first settlement of the country, spanning centuries or perhaps even millennia of Dravidian fisherman background, along with the arrival of a kingly Buddhist dynasty, which ruled the country for over thousand years, bringing influences from the North of the Subcontinent, are dealt with in a few sentences. This incredibly reduced summary is invariably followed by the sweeping statement that: *“And the King and all the inhabitants of the Maldivé Islands became Muslim”*. Officially, only then “real history of the Maldives” begins. The flourishing of a genuinely Maldivé Buddhist civilization, on which still the actual Divehi language, customs, manners and ceremonies are largely based, goes not only ignored, but, what is worse, even despised.

However, ancient Maldivé ruins testify that none of the buildings built after the twelfth century is as grand as the Stupas that dotted the country at the end of the first millennium. We know that the king’s first impulse after conversion was to make the Maldives a cultural ‘tabula rasa’ by erasing all the manifestations of the former Maldivé civilization. But we also know that some of the old skills were allowed to continue for a few centuries, well into the Maldivé Islamic period. Thus, mosques built in a syncretistic style, with beautiful Maṇḍalas carved and lacquered in their wooden ceilings, still manage to give us a glimpse of the ancient cultural splendor of the Maldivians.

Irreversibly, during the centuries that followed, even those few remainders of the past were deleted. But in recent history the behavior that ruined the ancient Maldivé cultural achievements, found willing accomplices among the people ruling the islands. This behavior often claimed the finest local cultural traits as its own as long as they were in

accordance with its ideology. During the last few centuries there are no known instances of Maldivian scholars openly challenging the imported ideology that distorts local history beyond recognition. Consequently, the dismantling of the Maldivian cultural heritage increased at an alarming pace, as more and more Maldivians became 'religiously aware' and set out to search and efface all traces of local flavor from their own nation. Ironically, the ancient, well-established local customs were referred to as "bid'ā" (innovations).

The totality of the intellectual and ruling elite having defected en masse to the promotion of alien cultural values, the weight of defending the local cultural identity fell on the shoulders of the common folk. Whether consciously or not, some Maldivian people have performed this task by means of a resilient attitude, which amounts to an effective, albeit unorganized, cultural resistance. This resistance expressed itself in the form of a good measure of silent common sense and by stubbornly ignoring some of the harsher Arab injunctions that are incompatible with their character and their mellow island environment. One example can be found in the attitude of the spartan islanders of Maḍaveli (Huvadū Atoll), who earned the reputation of being kāfirs (unbelievers) because they went about their daily lives ignoring the Islamic religion. In a common 'bandi' poem of Southern Huvadū Atoll, Maḍaveli is mentioned as 'kufūrunge raṣē', the island of unbelievers.

Apparently, until well into the second half of the twentieth century, the men of Maḍaveli refused to perform the regular five daily prayers and their womenfolk didn't wear the libās covering the upper part of their bodies. Islanders from the nearby islands of Havaru Tinadū and Vādū, where a certain elite was acquainted with Arabic and religion, used to take advantage of this situation. With easy conceit they made the Maḍaveli islanders the butt of their jokes, claiming that they were half-naked, uncivilized savages who didn't even know 'shahāda,' a sarcastic comment often made about people who have no education. Maḍaveli people though, asserted that their island was very poor and they had no

time for such frivolities. They claimed that they were all day working very hard and life was difficult enough already as it was.⁶¹² In reference to this issue, Mr. Ahumadu Shafigu, a respected Maldivian scholar, affirmed: *"You cannot imagine how poor some islands were back then."* The disparity between mores in different islands, however, ended after Muhammad Amīn's rule in the 1950's. Since then, owing to an increased interference of the government in local affairs, no island can escape the intense influence of the central administration.

E.A.H. Dīdī, an aristocratic Maldivian official who was in charge of the census in 1931, openly manifested the contempt and frustration traditionally displayed by Maldivian rulers towards their subjects. While writing about the difficulty of gathering the information needed in the Census, Mr. Dīdī expressed his initial feelings in this manner: *"... these informations are sought for from a people steeped in ignorance and unjustifiably (sic) suspicious of anything having the semblance of authority."* Later he acknowledged, though, that people ended up being helpful by *"showing no opposition towards the taking of a census."*⁶¹³ This patronizing attitude towards the common people is prevalent even now. One comment I often heard from exasperated high Maldivian government officials during the 1980's was: *"The people of this country don't know what is good for them!"* A Saudi-educated Maldivian, who back then was on his way to become Minister, was blunt: *"These people are so stupid!"*

The main goal of the successive generations of Maldivian learned men has been to keep alive the slogan of the Maldives being a "hundred percent Islamic country." Thus, it is not surprising that, as the rulers and the people were so different in their outlook and mores, Portuguese

⁶¹² This information is from Karānge Hasan Dīdī and Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī from Fua Mulaku, as well as Afīfu from Ratafandū and Tuttu from Fares, Huvadu Atoll. Data collected along the 1980's.

⁶¹³ 'Report on the Census of the Maldivian Islands 1931.' Op. Cit. above.

castaways in the 16th century thought that the Maldivian Kings were people of a totally different country. Manoel Rangel, who, after having been shipwrecked in the Chagos Islands, ended up in Maldives in the year 1557, comments in his memoirs: "After we had left the island, the natives that took charge of us, brought us to another island on which **a Moor** was ruling as King..."⁶¹⁴ Hence, the rulers of Maldives, by behaving like an alien force of occupation ended up looking like one.

⁶¹⁴ Emphasis mine. Although Arab foreigners held the kingship in Maldives on three occasions in history, no Arab was the king in Male' when Manoel Rangel and the other castaways arrived to the capital.

4.2.2 FOLK WISDOM

For generations Maldivian parents used to educate their children by means of their ancestral oral tradition. Elders would tell stories and sing certain songs that expressed local ideals of behavior and reflected traditional moral standards. They did so in order to transmit to the next generation the Islands' scale of values and social norms. For example, a father would sit with his daughter on the swing in the evening on the verandah, swinging fast to keep the mosquitoes away, while singing a certain song saying:

“Laughing to the young men and making jokes with them is a wrong thing my child. Nā, Nā, Nā.”

This type of songs is made up of unwritten compositions, reflecting values of much greater antiquity than Islam. The melody of this particular song⁶¹⁵ is identical with the tune of devotional Buddhist songs, which means that the musical tune —along with probably most of the words— has been transmitted from parents to children for centuries without change.

Some of the tales, whose contents didn't contradict or which were seen as complementing the Muslim doctrine, have been transmitted in this manner for generations. They are either a remainder of very ancient South Indian folk stories, or local adaptations of Jātaka tales, the stories of the Buddha's former births. For example, a story called “Kullavah Falu Rāni” (The Queen of the Mangrove Forest), reckoned to be a very old, traditional Divehi tale, is in fact a Buddhist tale, the Sujāta Jātaka, adapted to a Maldivian context.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁵ Sung by Al Hasanu, Shabnamvilla, Funāḍo, Fua Mulaku, in 1983.

⁶¹⁶ ‘The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births,’ edited by E.B. Cowell; Vol. 3

Kuḷḷavah is the fruit of a certain kind of mangrove tree (*Sonneratia caseolaris*). Its size is like a small apple and its color is pale green with a trace of scarlet forming a ring close to the stem. It can be eaten boiled or raw, and many islanders claim that its taste is rather rough and cheesy. A great part of the surface of some very low but large islands⁶¹⁷ in the Northern Atolls is covered by salty swamps, and this type of mangrove grows very well there. Those marshes are too salty to cultivate manioc, taro or yams, and only other mangrove kinds, such as kaṇḍū (*Bruguiera cylindrica*), which has edible pods, can be grown for food there.

Those swampy islands were considered bad, infertile, places to live and they were sparsely populated. Since they were damp, hot and infested by mosquitoes, they were mostly inhabited by people living in conditions of abject poverty. Being so poor, those islanders could not afford to buy rice or flour, so their staple food consisted of kuḷḷavah and coarse kaṇḍū pods, which need a long time of cooking and changing of water to soften them and take away their bitterness. Kuḷḷavah was considered to be at the bottom of the traditional Maldivian food scale and refined islanders find the smell of the fruit in its ripe stage highly unpleasant. The following story revolves around that fruit:

Kuḷḷavah Falu Rani

“Once upon a time, a humble young couple lived at one end of a large island fringing one of the Atolls located at the northern end of the Maldivian Kingdom. On this island there was a vast mangrove forest (kuḷḷavah falu), covering more than half of its swampy surface. Since it was infested by hordes of mosquitoes, this was considered a very unhealthy place to live

⁶¹⁷ Islands in Maldives are small in size and, by Maldivian standards an island of about four kilometers in length would be considered large

and most people would avoid it. However, precisely there, in the middle of the mangroves, there was a small hut where this man and woman lived.

They were so poor they lived a hand-to-mouth existence and were constantly foraging for food. The couple subsisted mainly on the kullavah fruit they picked from the surrounding mangroves. These smelly fruits were so important in their diet, that except for a few small coconuts from the stunted palm trees growing close to their marshy wooded area, and a few reef fish the husband used to catch in the shallow lagoon close by, they seldom had the chance to eat anything else.

In spite of their poverty, this man and his wife lived very happily together in that lonely place. It is true that at the other end of the island there was a small village, but they rarely went there and seldom had visitors. They enjoyed their simple life and thanked God for whatever they had.

One day, the woman became pregnant. She had prayed for a good child and was rewarded with a beautiful girl who brought laughter and joy to their home. The baby used to play or sleep under the shade of the mangrove trees while her parents were busy picking the fruit. A few months later the woman decided that the milk from her breasts was not enough and that her daughter needed some food. So, the first thing the little girl was fed was a fine paste lovingly made by her mother by squeezing very ripe kullavah fruit with her hands.

As years went by, the child grew and her parents let her run about the mangrove forest as she pleased. She used to wander quite far away from her home, wading in the mud through the mosquito-infested swamps, but in each direction there was only mangrove. The girl ended up being very familiar with those trees and spent long hours perched in their branches idly munching kullavah fruit. When she went back home, she invariably had a plate of mashed kullavah mixed with grated coconut. before going to sleep.

More years passed and this lonely girl became a ravishing young woman. The mangrove forest had no secrets for her anymore. By now she was so skilled she knew how to climb even the most difficult trees. She also knew very well which ones gave the best fruit and could easily identify the different varieties of kullavah by their shape, color and smell. Some had a sweeter taste when ripe and others had a stronger, slightly acid and pungent flavor, which she knew how to appreciate. The girl also found pleasure in eating the fruit in its last stage, when it was very soft, so ripe that it was almost decaying. She loved its intense putrid smell, which many refined islanders find extremely offensive. Thus, in her early adolescence, this striking young woman lived alone, hidden from the rest of the world inside the mangrove forest. She didn't find the steamy heat of the marshes unpleasant and the mosquitoes didn't bother her. The girl was happy there, gathering kullavah and playing under the trees and in the muddy swamps from dawn to dusk. After nightfall she would go to meet her loving parents in their tiny hut, where they would all eat kullavah for dinner. That was one of her favorite times, when they would talk, sing and make jokes until she fell asleep. This girl was completely illiterate and had no higher dreams and aspirations than to spend her life in that place like her parents had done. Little she knew that her life was going to change very soon.

One afternoon, the royal ship anchored close to this island. The girl was sitting on a mangrove tree close to the lagoon and was completely hidden by the dense leaves of its branches. She watched the large vessel in awe and disbelief, for she had often seen sails in the horizon, but this was the first time she had seen such a large boat so near.

Aboard the royal ship, the Radun, on a journey to the northernmost atolls of his kingdom, inspected the long, densely wooded island and spoke to his minister: "Which trees are those?"

The minister answered: "These are mangrove trees, O Radun! This island is very poor and pest-ridden, but it has the largest mangrove forest in the whole Maldives."

The king was a young man and he was sick of being on board. Welcoming the opportunity of breaking the monotony of the trip, he enthusiastically exclaimed: "Let's go ashore for a visit then! I have never been in such a forest and I would enjoy a walk now."

Thus, everything was made ready for the Radun to disembark on that island with his retinue. He began by paying a brief visit to the humble, nondescript village located at one end. After exchanging the usual formalities with the local authority, the king decided to walk northwards, towards the other end. The island chief was nervous and tried to prevent the young monarch from going there, saying it was not real land, but a very large muddy place without paths, blighted by mosquitoes and other pests.

The king had made up his mind though. Seeing that his ministers were not enthused either by the idea of accompanying him to the forest he told them to remain at the village with the rest of his escort. Ignoring their protests, he walked into the bush with only two personal guards. Soon the ground became marshy, the usual island vegetation gave way to mangrove trees and the Radun entered into the Kullavah Falu, a huge, dismal-looking swampy area.

The young monarch, tired of protocol, found it exhilarating to be alone in this great silent forest, without umbrella-bearer and other cumbersome attendants surrounding him.⁶¹⁸ In spite of the difficulty of the terrain, he

⁶¹⁸ Formerly the Maldivian king was always escorted by a man holding a large white umbrella (hakkoļu) over his head whenever he walked out of the palace. Other attendants close to him were carrying a box with betel and arecanut, a fan, standards (koḍikāli) and weapons.

walked valiantly on, with his feet in the mud, avoiding the low branches. However, owing to the absence of paths, the place was a labyrinth and soon the Radun and his two soldiers got lost. They wandered in the forest without knowing where they were going.

The king was leading the way, followed by his guards, when he heard a sound. He thought it was some bird, and not wanting to scare it, he whispered to the soldiers to be quiet and walked stealthily in the direction of the noise. Carefully, he lifted some twigs and, all of a sudden, he was stunned. There, before his eyes was the gorgeous girl who lived there.

She was squatting very close to him, calmly filling a muļōši (palm frond basket) with the kuļļavah she had just picked from the surrounding trees. The sunlight filtering in thin shafts through the high green branches fell on the lovely young woman, giving an eerie quality to the scene. The king, his heart beating fast, remained very quiet, enthralled by the beauty of the forest girl. The vision in front of him looked so unreal that he began to fear he was seeing a spirit, an event not at all unlikely in such a dark and deep forest. Thus, the Radun backed up one step and a dry stick cracked under his foot.

Startled, the girl stood up and froze. She opened her large eyes and her beautiful mouth wide in amazement. Since she had never seen anybody in such fine dress in all her life, the king was for her an impressive, awesome sight.

All of a sudden, the young woman became conscious that she herself wore only a length of cheap, half-torn cloth around her waist. Quickly, she covered her breasts with her arms, and then she turned around and ran away.

The king immediately ordered his guards to follow her and hurried after them. As the girl moved with such swiftness and ease within the thick, swampy woods, they soon lost sight of her. But the men pressed ahead and followed the tracks her feet left in the mud. Thus they were led to a

meek shack in the heart of the mangrove forest where they found the poor wretch trying to hide inside, trembling like a leaf.

Feeling frightened and exposed, the mangrove girl was screaming and shaking like a wild cat when she was taken by force out of her parents' hut. Finally, the soldiers managed to calm her and she was brought whimpering aboard the royal ship. Meanwhile, the king, turning to one of his ministers, declared: "Verily, this is the most charming young woman in my whole kingdom! We will bring her along with us to Male'. I have decided to marry her." In this way, for the first time in her life, the lonely child born in the salty swamps left the mangrove forest that had sheltered her since her birth.

As she sailed towards the capital to become a queen, the young woman was terrified by the rolling seas and the creaking ship. She had never felt so homesick and miserable in all her life. Wondering what she had done to deserve this, she was sobbing all the time, but she never let anyone come close to her and yelled like a madwoman if somebody did. Since there were no kullavah on board, she wouldn't eat anything, she would only drink some rice water and, anyway, she was so seasick that she was constantly throwing up during the long journey. The king was worried seeing the half-naked, filthy girl huddled constantly into a corner with fear in her reddened eyes like a cornered cat. She was reeking of vomit, with tears streaming down her dirty face, and didn't speak a word to anybody. The Radun kept away from her. He seriously doubted that the young woman would survive and was beginning to repent of having brought her along with him.

But things went better after the arrival to the capital island. Once inside the palace compound, the pitiful wretch was immediately surrounded by pretty girl attendants who pampered her and treated her like a child. After a few days of rest, the girl of the mangrove forest began to smile again. She was now eating good meals and was being bathed and perfumed by her servants. They found her rude ways exhilarating and joked with her all

the time. Dressed in fine silks and wearing expensive jewellery, the young woman now looked dashing. Everyone in the palace was amazed to see how beautiful the future queen was, in spite of her execrable manners.

Time passed and the mangrove-forest girl was formally wedded to the king, but her husband found it difficult to put up with his wife's gross behavior. Thus, at the Radun's strict orders, the girl spent busy days learning from morning till evening. The coarse young queen was not willing at first and threw terrible tantrums. However, before long she was taught how to read and write, how to dress properly and how to talk and behave in the court as befits a Maldivian queen.

A few years later, a group of people from the small village at the end of the great mangrove forest island happened to arrive to Male' on a trading journey. They went to the palace and asked for an audience, saying that they were bringing a present for the queen. The audience was granted and the lovely young queen received them in her best dress and finest jewellery. "What has brought you here?" she enquired haughtily.

The people produced a muļōṣi full of kuļlavah, opened it in front of her and said meekly: "O Queen! We are people from your island, friends of your parents. Don't you remember us?"

Coldly, she ignored their question and asked: "What is inside that muļōṣi?"

A bit abashed, but smiling, one of the men in front explained: "This is our gift for you. We thought that you would be very happy to eat some kuļlavah, as they don't grow here in the capital."

Feigning surprise by raising her eyebrows high, the queen gracefully took one of the fruits and held it in front of her. She turned it slowly in her hand, squinting. Then, without taking her eyes off the kuļlavah, she exclaimed: "This is a very interesting fruit! Is it attached to the tree from this side or from this other side?"

Some versions of the Kuḷḷavah Falu Rāni story don't end here and continue with the king punishing his wife for having forgotten her humble origin. Depending on the variant, the young monarch orders that she be given hundred lashes, and then either divorces her or sends her back to her island in shame. In the original version in the Jātakas this story ends with the humiliation of the queen as well.

Even so, usually Maldivian storytellers prefer to end this tale with the question posed by the queen as a punch line, imitating her expression. This emphatic end rarely fails to make listeners smile. Since this is a very popular story, even today in the Maldives Islands, when somebody, after suddenly making fortune, forgets about his former friends and becomes a snob, people would say: *"This person is like the Kuḷḷavah Falu Rāni."*

As it has been mentioned above, other short stories transmitted from parents to children in the Maldives, are based on very old South Indian popular lore. This is evident in some of the tales because they include exotic animals like tigers, monkeys or elephants. Although tigers are present in many Divehi tales, there have never been any tigers in this island country. The only land mammals of the Maldives are four: the cat, the rat, the shrew and the bat. Of these probably the first two were brought from the mainland in ancient times by Maldivians. More recently a kind of small mouse has been introduced and has become a pest.

The following story is 'Beru Hamunā', the Maldivian version of a very well-known Tamil fable called 'The Brahmin and the Tiger'.⁶¹⁹ The fact that in Maldives the Brahmin has become a pretty young woman is not so surprising. Firstly, despite that the Maldivian country is located close to the Indian coast and despite the many cultural affinities, Maldivians are not familiar with the Vedic Hindu system and who is a Brahmin would not be

⁶¹⁹ Told by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Male'. For the Tamil story see K.A. Seethalakshmi, 'Folk Tales of Tamil Nadu'

readily understood by every Divehi listener. Secondly, Maldivian popular culture is pervaded by a strong feminine element and most of the favorite Divehi stories display a predilection for female main characters. Even so, it is also worth observing that 'Beru Hamunā', the name of the girl, has retained exactly the same consonants as the word 'Brahmin', namely the letters B, R and H, M, N.

Beru Hamunā

"Long ago there lived in Male', the capital of the Maldivian Islands, a girl called Beru Hamunā. She was a coquettish young woman who loved to be well dressed. Her most special days were when she went out of the house for a long walk. On those days, after taking a bath in the afternoon, Beru Hamunā combed her hair well. Then she put her best dress on, and carefully drew lines of anduñ (kohl) on her eyelids and eyebrows. After this she powdered her face and sprinkled perfume on herself, put on her bangles and earrings and went out for a walk until nightfall. This is what Male' people traditionally like to do, because it is the most pleasant time of the day to be out in the street or walking along the seashore, enjoying the cool ocean breeze and the beautiful colors of the sunset.

One day, Beru Hamunā walked proudly along a side-street, prettily dressed in the golden late-afternoon light, when she saw a big cage there. It so happened that at that time there was no one else on the street and, drawn by curiosity, the girl walked close to the cage. With the corner of her eye, she noticed that a tiger with a sad face was locked inside. Her curiosity satisfied, Beru Hamunā was about to walk by, towards the main street, when the tiger called: "Ēh, mañje, stop, please!"

This startled the girl, "Why should I stop?" Turning her head towards the cage she said: "Tell me what you have to say quickly! I have got to go."

With sorrowful voice the tiger spoke: "I have been sitting locked in this cage for three days. They left me here and forgot about me. I don't even get any food. The key is hanging there, please open the door of the cage and let me out. I will give you such a good present that you will never forget me."

"All right." The young woman said softly, her kindness aroused by the plight of the tiger. "But you must promise that I will get that present you just told me about". With these words Beru Hamunā unlocked the cage, opened the door and with a swift leap the tiger was free.

"Where is my present?" the young woman asked.

Ferociously the tiger roared: "Your present? I am going to eat you!"

Beru Hamunā was unfazed. She coolly raised her eyebrows and tilted her head. "Ah! So that is the present! You are going to eat me."

The tiger roared again: "Yes!"

Then the girl narrowed her eyes and spoke slowly, stressing every word. "All right! But first you must do something for me, as I have done something for you."

"What is that?" the tiger wondered.

"I want to see again how you looked when you were inside the cage. Please show me."

The tiger thought that her request was easy and entered the cage. With a quick movement, the young woman closed the door, turned the key, and locked the animal inside again. Holding the key upright between her thumb and forefinger the girl laughed. "Who is smartest? Now you are again a prisoner! You will get no food and you are going to die. As for me, I'm not going to be sorry this time. I am leaving."

The tiger now cried. "Please, don't leave me here! Open the cage; I will not eat you this time. I promise."

But Beru Hamunā walked away a few steps and then, turning her head, yelled at the animal: "Don't complain! You didn't keep your first promise! Now there is no way I can believe you." Then the young woman turned around a corner and the tiger lost sight of her.

4.3.1 HONOR AND PRIVILEGE

Maldivians, whether belonging to the elite or the common folk, have shown great regard for people perceived as ‘holy men’ all through their history. On a number of occasions, they even have allowed that type of people —no matter how arrogant or self-righteous— to lord it over them without any resistance. The following story⁶²⁰ illustrates the extent to which islanders are willing to put up with the excesses of a ‘holy man’:

The False King of the Sea

“Long ago, in one of the Maldivian islands, there was a sly and lazy middle-aged character called Husēn, who instead of working, lived off other people. One day the men and women of his island went to the Katību (headman) and said: “We are fed up with Husēn’s cunning ways. He is a liar and a loafer and he is always cheating, stealing and molesting women. He has become a nuisance. Let’s get rid of him!”⁶²¹

The Katību addressed the gathering saying that he would deal with the matter. To calm the crowd, he promised that he would see that Husēn was sent away as soon as possible. Satisfied, the people left. But it so happened that while the Katību pondered about how to tell this disgusting character to leave, Husēn himself was thinking that it was time for him to go. He had become aware that the people of his home island knew and

⁶²⁰ A variant of this story was put into writing in the 1970’s by Kopee M. Rasheed. This is the version told in 1990 by Husein Takkān, Ratamalāna, Fua Mulaku

⁶²¹ In Fua Mulaku’s history there is an instance where the people of a village called Hōdaḍo got rid of such a nasty character by themselves. This person, called Soru, was originally from a Northern Atoll. When the authorities arrived to enquire about who had killed Soru, the whole village answered at once: “Hōdaḍo killed him!”

resented all his sleazy tricks. Therefore, it was no longer profitable for him to remain there.

When the Katību met Husēn and, struggling with words, began to tell him that he had decided to send him far away on the next boat touching the island, the roguish fellow hid his relief. The headman, surprised at having asserted his authority so easily, was delighted. A few days later, when a batteli (travelling vessel) threw anchor in the lagoon, the Katību and Husēn went on a bokkurā (dinghy) and jumped aboard. After the island chief had talked briefly with the captain, Husēn finally left the island. Meanwhile the Katību, immensely relieved, watched the batteli leave the lagoon and enter the channel leading to the ocean.

The captain carried a letter from the Katību for the headman of another island, giving him instructions to keep an eye on Husēn. However, once on board Husēn could not keep quiet. He worked his deceitful schemes on the unwary traders and crew until they were full of loathing and conspired to get rid of him as soon as possible. But Husēn was not stupid and sensed their enmity. Fearing that they might throw him overboard that very night, he quickly improvised a plan. Seeing a small sandbank ahead shortly before sunset, Husēn asked the captain to drop him there with his things. The captain obliged and he and the traders calmed down when they left him astern, standing alone on the sandbank.

Husēn sat down on the sand and watched for a while the batteli's sail becoming smaller and smaller. Then he buried his box and his pillow deeply in the sand. He kept with him only his mat and two sets of clothes, one old and one new. After this it was dark and he lay down to sleep as well as he could. He slept miserably because the wind was chilly and crabs came now and then to pinch him, checking whether he was a lump of food. Waking before dawn, Husēn got up, dressed first in his good clothes and pulled his old, torn clothes over them.

Not long afterwards, in the pale early morning light, Husēn saw a fishing dōni approaching and he spread his mat neatly before him. Then he began ostentatiously to make namādu (Muslim prayers) for the fishermen to see. When the dōni drew closer, the men aboard started to point at him and talk loudly. In an authoritarian voice, Husēn commanded them to keep still and let him finish his prayers. He could hear the excited fishermen whispering to each other. One of them observed, "Look! This is a very important man. See his fine clothes. You can make them out through the torn holes of his outer garments."

"That's because he is trying to conceal the fact that he is an important person," another deduced. "He must be a very mighty man indeed."

"Where did he come from? Who took care of his nice clothes here? Perhaps he is the King of the Sea," a third concluded.⁶²²

Another noted, "He looks well fed, too. How could he find anything to eat in this barren tiny sandbank? He must possess great magic powers. Definitely he is the King of the Sea."

Finally, one suggested, "This is a very bad fishing season. I'm tired of returning home empty handed every day. Let's ask the King of the Sea to bring big schools of fish close to our island with his powers."

At that moment, Husēn finished praying. Looking at the fishermen he asked haughtily, "Why have you come here? Why do you bother me during my prayers?"

⁶²² Kaṇḍu Rasgefānu, a mythical Maldivian king said to dwell at the bottom of the sea. I couldn't find descriptions of the Kaṇḍu Rasgefānu, beyond the fact that he usually displays the ancient symbols of South Asian royalty, like having constantly an attendant carrying a large white umbrella (hakkolu) by his side. However, whenever rural Maldivians are shown the picture of a mermaid, they spontaneously exclaim: "The daughter of the King of the Sea!"

Fearfully one man answered: "Please forgive us for disturbing you, O King of the Sea! We are sorry for our bad manners, but we have a very urgent request. If your majesty would come to our island to send fish close to our fishing grounds, it would be a very big favor for us."

"It is not easy to send fish to your island." Husēn replied fastidiously. "I would have to stay there for some time, but you don't know how to treat a king."

The fishermen begged, "Please come your Majesty. Although our island is poor, all your needs will be met."

Husēn kept acting as if he refused to leave the sandbank, but the fishermen pressed their request, until he finally boarded their fishing dōni. When Husēn arrived at the island, he was put up in the best house and given choice food every day. But after some time, he demanded a better house at a certain distance from the village, claiming that he was not used to live among people.

Eager to fulfill his every wish, the islanders cleared an area in the forest and built him a very nice house there. Once it was completed they brought to it the best furnishings in the island. Then Husēn complained that he was feeling lonesome, for the Queen of the Sea and his concubines were far away. He demanded no less than thirty female attendants. Thus, the most beautiful young women of the island were brought to him.

It so happened that before long, the island's fishermen began catching a lot of fish. Eventually, the good fishing season would have come anyway, but the islanders attributed their luck to their 'King of the Sea.' They were proud of him, so they became talkative. Husēn warned the islanders not to tell any outsider that he was there, for if they did, the spell would be broken and they would never catch fish again. Although it was difficult for them not to boast about the King of the Sea when people from other islands came for a visit, they kept the secret.

As the months passed, Husēn lived a lazy, luxurious life. He became fat and his skin was now smooth. When some of his attendant girls became pregnant, he sent them back home and ordered the islanders to replace them with other young pretty girls.

One day, the batteli which had left Husēn on the sandbank the previous year happened to anchor close to that island and the captain went ashore. He had friends there and wanted to take a bath and spend the night in their home. Once he arrived to his friends' house he was dismayed at seeing their young daughter heavily pregnant. With a sad face, the captain told her parents: "This is a great misfortune. For a long time I desired to have a strong bond with you. I always thought that your daughter was very attractive, but she had not yet come of age. This time I came to your island with the sole purpose of marrying her. But tell me, who is she married to?"

The parents looked at each other uneasily. Her mother quickly muttered, "Nobody!" But the father thought this didn't sound right, so he anxiously corrected his wife, "Well, she married somebody, but we cannot tell you about him."

The captain was puzzled. Sensing that these uncanny answers indicated that his friends had grown cold towards him, he took the girl's father aside. "I know your daughter is not a loose, immoral girl. How could she become pregnant without being married? And if she is married as you said, why can you not tell me who her husband is? Are you not my friends anymore?"

His friend became nervous and avoided his eyes, "I am your friend, but ask me anything else. If you value our friendship, don't ask me that."

Now the captain was alarmed and, thinking something was very wrong, he spoke to his friend's wife. "What has happened? You were my friends for many years. Even your parents and my parents were good friends.

What has gone wrong? I fear it has to do with your daughter's big belly. You must tell me."

With tears in her eyes, the woman pled, "It has nothing to do with you. We want to be your friends. But, please don't ask us those questions. This entire island must keep a big secret."

Deeply hurt, the captain said, "What secret? If you don't tell me that secret, I will never talk to you again. You will no longer exist for me!"

After crying loudly for a while, the woman acquiesced. Wiping her tears she said "Well, I think that in this case, I must tell you the secret: Our daughter was a slave attendant to the King of the Sea. The child she carries in her womb is from His Majesty." While she spoke, a hint of pride crept into her voice.

The captain was baffled. He stuttered, "Th-th-the wha-what? The Ki-King offofof the Sea?"

She was relieved. Beaming with excitement at being able to boast, the woman continued, "Our fishermen found him months ago making namādu on a sandbank. Right then the fishing was very bad, but thanks to his great spiritual powers, we have plenty of fish every day."

Suddenly the captain tightened his lips, drew air in and his face began to look very angry. The woman didn't notice and went on, "We built a little palace for the King of the Sea. He lives in our island now, in the middle of the forest. The thirty prettiest girls of our community are his attendants and we bring him food and gifts every day." Suddenly her expression became worried, "Oh no! We swore to keep the secret! Now disgrace might befall our island."

The captain's eyes shone like those of a madman. Making a great effort to control his temper he asked the woman: "You found him on a sandbank? About nine months ago, isn't it?"

Amazed, she answered, "Yes! How could you know?"

Now the captain was so furious he was frightening to behold: "Where is that palace?"

She meekly pointed outwards: "Take the path into the forest and you will see the lights. But now the sun has set and His Majesty would be very angry. It is forbidden to go there at night because that is when he is using his magic powers to attract the fish shoals to our island."

Ignoring the woman's cautions the captain ran out of the house along the dark path into the forest. Panting and feverish with rage, he arrived to the palace, broke the door and rushed in, finding 'The King of the Sea' in the midst of a sexual orgy with his female attendants. Husēn froze in embarrassment and surprise while the naked girls scurried away and hid.

The captain roared: "Husēn, you black dog! I will kill you!" Suddenly recognizing him, Husēn opened his eyes wide in terror and, before the angry captain could jump on him, bolted out of the room and escaped through the back door. Dashing naked through the gloomy forest, he fled oblivious to the pain when his feet hit roots or stones. Realizing he would not find him in the darkness, the captain yelled: "Husēn! Some day I will find you; and I swear I will kill you!"

Unflaggingly, Husēn waded from one island to another across the coral reef until he hid at the far end. However, the words of the captain became embedded in Husēn's mind and for the rest of his life he kept hiding in fear. Although the captain never found him, he lived miserably, full of anxiety, until he died.

The storyteller pointed out that in those days —without radio communication and motorized vessels— people could easily live in hiding in the far-flung atolls of the Maldives. Now this is no longer possible, for every suspicious person is duly reported to the nearest island chief, who is in daily radio contact with the capital.

The 'King of the Sea' impersonated by the swindler in this story was a key figure in the Maldivian lore. He was believed to live under the sea in a beautiful palace and was reputed to be a powerful monarch, being able to control the ocean and its creatures at will. Long ago, in order to calm the winds and smooth the seas, Maldivians sought to placate the King of the Sea by writing the Sūra Al-A'nam of the Qura'n on three pieces of paper or cloth. These were then dropped into the choppy waters one after the other. Average fishermen and sailors used to be in awe of this mythical king because of the great powers attributed to him.

There is also a story named 'Gabuḷi Bāḍalu' about a crook impersonating a Southern faṇḍita man who arrives to a northern island and escapes after cheating everyone. While 'The False King of the Sea' is probably fictitious, 'Gabuḷi Bāḍalu' is based on a real event which took place during the reign of Sultān Rannabaṇḍēri Kilēgefānu.

In a similar manner, Maldivians believed that Arab 'holy men' were a superior kind of human beings too. Owing to their greater proximity to God, they were deemed to possess special spiritual powers. Thus, when confronted with Sayyids from Arabia, all islanders, including the King, used to behave meekly. Paralyzed by their awe for Arab saints, all Maldivians have developed an inferiority complex concerning their own culture and their own spirituality. For the last eight centuries, this collective lack of self-esteem has led them to believe that any unknown traveler or adventurer impersonating the role of an Arab religious figure was better fit to rule them than even the best of their own people.

In the 14th century, when the Moroccan traveler Ibn Batūta arrived in the Maldivian Islands, he was immediately given a very high post in the government and was appointed faṇḍiyāru (chief judge) by the prime minister himself. This is indeed a very high post for a newcomer. And, considering that he was somebody completely ignorant of the country's habits, customs and ceremonies, it is absurd to assume that he would be able to do a good job.

However, such things did happen in the Maldives, and I believe in other places in Asia also, like Aceh, where Arab visitors were assumed to be endowed with some sort of mystical power. Talking with characteristic hubris about the Divehi prime minister, who incidentally had been instrumental in procuring this foreign traveler the high post he was occupying in the local government, Ibn Batūta commented that: *“Anyway, he never did anything properly,”*⁶²³ ...when this very prime minister had appointed him faṇḍiyāru in the first place!

Ibn Batūta’s office as faṇḍiyāru was marred by the pharisaic and contemptuous manner in which he acted. He thought nothing of censoring and ridiculing the island culture as soon as he took office. However, I find that this was not entirely his fault, but of the indifference of the local authorities towards the fate of their subjects. After all it was the Maldivian prime minister who had put him, right from the onset, in such a delicate position.

How could Ibn Batūta, a foreigner who had just set foot on the country, be expected to be aware of and respect Divehi customs when the Maldivian rulers themselves thought nothing of them? Did they give him any set of instructions advising him not to tread on ancestral Maldivian ways? The answer is negative. Hence, the Moroccan traveler, with his own ideas of “good” and “bad”, had no choice but to do the only thing he knew, even if it meant annihilating local mores:

“When I was appointed I strove my utmost to establish the prescriptions of the Sharīa’t. There are no lawsuits there (in the Maldives) like those in my country. The first bad custom I changed was the practice of divorced wives of staying in the houses of their former husbands, for they all do so till they marry another husband. I soon put that to rights. About twenty-five men who had acted thus were brought before me; I had them beaten and

⁶²³ Ibn Batūta, ‘Travels in Asia and Africa’.

paraded in the marketplaces, and instructed that their women be separated from them. (Ibn Batūta, Op. cit.)

Here Ibn Batūta, as expected, takes Maldivian society as if it were a blank page for him to write upon, and doesn't even try to understand Divehi family structure. Having their origin in the Dravidian matrilineal kinship system, Maldivian customs in this field had, naturally, very little to do with Arab mores. According to Island tradition, it is the man who would go to live to the girl's house after marriage. This is a Divehi custom widely reflected in popular narrative, for example, in an ancient local legend about the 'Kaṇḍu Rasgefānu' whose plot has superficial similarities with the European 'Little Mermaid' tale. While in 'The Little Mermaid' it is the girl who goes ashore to meet the prince she is in love with, in the Maldivian legend the plot is based on the diametrically opposite situation: The island boy goes under the ocean to live with the girl he loves, the daughter of the King of the Sea.

Hence, in Maldivian families, parents were happy to have daughters because they would bring boys into their home, whereas sons would 'bring fish to someone else's house', meaning that even before marrying, while courting a girl, their interests would be in someone else's household.

Consequently, a Maldivian former husband, as a mark of consideration towards his divorced wife's parents, would see nothing wrong in lingering for a while in their home. Even after divorce, all the links towards the ex-wife's household would not be abruptly severed. Usually the divorcing husband would try to keep a friendly relationship towards his ex-in-laws, especially if there were children from the broken marriage. Therefore, in the Islands, it was considered no evil for men to linger in their former wife's house until they found a new bride. The latter, in turn, would bring about a radical change in the situation, by bringing her husband to her own household.

Another thing that Ibn Batūta, in his zeal for Islamic doctrinal purity, found very wrong was the laxity with which Maldivians performed the five obligatory Muslim daily prayers:

“Afterwards I gave strict injunctions that the prayers were to be observed, and ordered men to go swiftly to the streets and marketplaces after the Friday service; anyone whom they found not having prayed I had beaten and paraded. I compelled the salaried imāmus (prayer-leaders) and Mudīmus (caretakers of mosques) to be assiduous in their duties and send letters to all the islands to the same effect. (Ibn Batūta, Op. cit.)

Owing to their relaxed humid and tropical environment, Maldivian Islanders are of rather mellow and laid-back disposition. Traditionally they have always resisted regimentation and the five daily obligatory prayers of the invasive politico-religious system were not performed by everyone in their ancestral society, for irregular worship was one of the main characteristics of Dravidian popular spirituality.⁶²⁴ Rather, it was the custom to send only a few of the island men, wearing clean white clothes, regularly to the mosque. Hence, island mosques used to be very small buildings.

The excuse most people gave for not performing regularly the five prayers, was that it was difficult for them, as fishermen, palm-climbers and housewives, to be regularly clean enough to perform all of them. I found that the attitude of many island people revealed that they considered that these regular prayers were something meant for the elite, which they perceived as idle, and not for them, the hard-working folks. One very informative comment I happened to overhear was: *“If we were as rich as them (here they specifically mentioned a house of wealthy, religious people) we would be saying ‘Allahu Akbaru’ all day long too.”*

⁶²⁴ See W.T. Elmore, and H. Whitehead, op. cit.

Meanwhile, among the elite the expression: “These are people who don’t even know Shahāda!” was often heard in reference to the common folk, reflecting fussiness about the fact that they were surrounded by people “who didn’t care about Islam”.

However, the main reason for not sending all the men of the island—including children—to the mosque five times a day, was most probably because of a traditional condition that required a high specialization of the island labor field pattern. Owing to this determining factor, labor divisions were always of paramount importance in Divehi society and ancestral customs dictated that the person doing a job be recognized as an authority (*veriyā*) in his or her field. A Maldivian fisherman is a ‘*masveriyā*’, the leader of the fish; a palm-sap tapper, a ‘*rāveriyā*’, the leader of the palm-sap, and so on.

Hence, within this socio-laboral framework, Maldivians had been used since very ancient times to trust that the *aļuveriyā* (leader of worship) would fulfill the spiritual needs of the whole community. The *aļuveriñ* were a group of males whose function was to permanently ‘keep in a pure state’ by reading holy books, performing prayers, funerary rituals and other ceremonies. Their duty demanded from them to be always neatly dressed in white and to keep away from heavy manual work. Thus, the traditional ‘*Zātu pāku bēkaluñ*’ or *aļuveriñ* played an identical role as the monks had performed in the ancient Buddhist Maldivian social structure.⁶²⁵

The *aļuverin* were usually elderly people owing to the expected behavior in old age. The traditional Maldivian classification of behavioral patterns according to age, dictated that wisdom was expected to increase as age increased. Foolishness and sin were considered to be a characteristic of young age, while old people were expected to steadily cut their links with

⁶²⁵ ‘Gentlemen in a state of purity’. This is a term used in local poetry. *Aļuveriñ* is the plural of *aļuveriyā*.

the material world and prepare themselves for death. Typically, a person eligible to be an aļuveriā would be an old, physically weak, man who was fit for this activity after becoming unable to do the average hard jobs —like fishing or coconut-palm climbing— that other island males had to do. Usually, the island authorities and learned men were included in the informal category of aļuveriñ as well. Besides being paid for their services, in important celebrations, like funerary ceremonies and maulūdu festivals, aļuveriñ would occupy the positions of honor, and would have the benefit of eating special meals prepared for them.

The labor division outlined above was not as rigid as in other South Asian communities, its structure being somewhat fluid, owing to the clash of cultures within Divehi society. This conflict has been simmering for the past eight hundred years, with the autochthonous Maldivian Indic culture on the one hand and the alien Arab Semitic hegemonism on the other. The trauma of this silent confrontation has never been resolved —and is nowhere near resolution— since the intruding religious thought demands utter allegiance and submission to foreign ‘holy places’ and ideological leaders in order to gain access to heaven after death.

Even though enjoying what is described by islanders as ‘full power’, meaning official government backing, the foreign doctrine often acts as an irritant. The reason for this lies in its persistence in seeking to replace time-tested island mores by an imported scale of values that subverts existing local social norms. This deaf, bitter struggle makes the Maldivian social structure look ‘amorphous, almost featureless’ in the eyes of an observer. (C. Maloney, *Op. cit*)

In the capital island, owing to stronger Arab influence, periodical enforcement of the rule that all people without exception should perform the five daily prayers was more common. Therefore, the local informal labor division was not as manifest as in the outer Atolls. As a result of the virulent decrees inspired by Arab visitors of old, even as recently as mid-twentieth century, a government official carrying a whip, would

periodically walk around Male' at prayer time, or to appear in common people's houses by surprise, to give an instant flogging to the folks who had not gone to prayer.⁶²⁶

But Ibn Batūta's problems didn't end with the prayer issue. One of his most difficult tasks would prove to be the implementation of his decision to impose desert dress on coral-island women. In his memoirs, he doesn't describe the methods he tried nor the punishments that he inflicted to convince Maldivian women to wear Arab clothes. However, it is known that he met with stiff opposition, which he candidly acknowledges in the following episode:

"Their womenfolk wear only an apron from their waists to the ground, the rest of their bodies being uncovered. When I held the qāzīship there, I tried to put an end to this practice and ordered them to wear clothes, but I met with no success. No woman was admitted to my presence in a lawsuit unless her body was covered, but apart from that I was unable to effect anything. (Ibn Batūta, Op. cit.)

His lack of success in his endeavor would keep haunting him later on in his life. Somewhere else in his writings he mentions again: *"I tried also to make the (Maldivian) women wear clothes, but I could not manage that."* (Ibn Batūta, Op. cit.)

Ibn Batūta's own four Maldivian wives, and his unspecified number of local concubines, had to wear the full Muslim dress, complete with head covering. As he himself confesses, this heavy dress didn't suit their features and the poor wretches looked disfigured. Moreover, their Delhi-style burqas made them feel awkward and very uncomfortable in the humid and salty equatorial heat of the Maldive atolls.

⁶²⁶ Source: 'Baṇḍērī' Abdurrahmānu, Male'.

Unlike their counterparts in most Asian cultures, Maldivian women feel at ease and relaxed in the company of men and this group of local women would remain in the Moroccan traveler's memory. Accordingly, many years after having abandoned them in their islands, Ibn Batūta pays a compliment to the Maldivian females he lived with, by mentioning in his travel writings that their company was extremely pleasant. One wonders whether, before he died, it ever came to his mind to attribute the pleasantness of Divehi women to having been bred precisely in their native ways; the very ways which he so fiercely hated and spent so much effort to annihilate.

*"Dress is part of the culture of a people like its language and script. If these are given up the qaum (nation) melts away into the general mass. In fact for a qaum to adopt the dress of another qaum is a reflection of an inferiority complex. It means that the nation considers itself base, downtrodden and backward, that it believes it has nothing of which it can be proud, that its forbears were not capable of leaving anything which it could retain without feeling ashamed. It shows that the nature of the qaum has fallen so low, that its social mind is so counterfeit, that it is so bereft of constructive thought that it cannot forge a better life for itself; that to show itself to be cultured it borrows everything from others, and without any shame it announces to the world that culture, civilization, etiquette, beauty, lustre, whatever is worthwhile is the life of others (Arab ways in the case of Maldives) and that whatever is with others is the standard of all progress; and that this nation has spent thousands of years of its existence in a jungli (wild) condition, that it could not produce anything which was worthwhile and worthy of respect."*⁶²⁷

⁶²⁷ Abul A'la Maududi, 'Libas ka Masla', Dar-ul-Ishat, Hyderabad 1947. A hard-line Islamic ideologue from Pakistan, he was obviously not referring to the Maldives in this interesting note.

In their environment Maldivians have been always confined to reduced spaces: Their small islands, their boats. As they live their lives in full view of each other, the concept of privacy has never been part of their culture. Women were never secluded and, except for the time they spent cooking or sleeping, they lived in the open air, like the men. As a consequence, in Divehi tradition, as opposed to Semitic tradition, shame was in the eyes of the person engaging in voyeurism, especially during activities such as bathing and answering calls of nature. Instead of hinging on the covering of different parts of the woman's body, traditional Maldivian decorum demanded from males an active restraint of their personal lustful behavior.

Again, even if his censorious injunctions as a faṇḍiyāru, bred from a weird admixture of conceit, naivety and ruthlessness, clashed with local customs, this traveler from Tangiers —about 10,000 Km away from Male'— enjoyed the full support of the highest authorities in the exercise of his function. During his sojourn in the islands Ibn Batūta asserted that:

“(In Maldives) the Qāzī (faṇḍiyāru) is held in higher respect among the people than all the other functionaries; his orders are obeyed as implicitly as those of the ruler or even more so. (Ibn Batuta. Op. cit.)

In most countries, jurisprudence is based on custom. Local ways, having been bred and nurtured within the indigenous environment, are highly valued. Hence, what makes the Maldivian legal framework so strange is its unquestioning readiness to throw away its own whole system of old, time-tested, general usages, which had been the fruit of centuries of trial and error. Without any previous discussion, these local practices which constituted an effective Divehi consuetudinary law were exchanged for an alien doctrinal system whose effects on the island social system could not be fathomed.

There are probably very few countries in the world, where one could find such a lack of appreciation of the positive role of ancestral mores. This

attitude has made Maldivians careless. Not having been able to develop something like a 'national conscience' they have allowed 'holy men' who didn't know the island society well enough to tamper with their own national heritage at will. Unprepared to withstand the adamant and aggressive qualities of the encroaching doctrine, islanders have developed a collective lack of self-respect; which has resulted in the squandering of the riches of their cultural treasure. This waste is self-inflicted. The royal palace in Male' was destroyed and its art treasures dispersed as recently as the late 1960's. As a comparison, not even the worst revolutionary excesses in China or Russia brought about the destruction of the ancient imperial palaces in Beijing and St. Petersburg respectively.

Proof of this waste is the absurd willingness to sacrifice venerable and homely ancient Maldivian ways, bred on their native soil and handed over down the generations, to the latest whim of the ruling politician or newly-arrived faultfinding Arab traveler. The following excerpt from an interview of Girāvaru women (an island of North Male' Atoll) by Clarence Maloney, made in mid-1970's, illustrates this general eagerness of Maldivians to recklessly sacrifice local time-honored customs at the altar of, often fickle, government decrees:

"... Girāvaru women also wear a distinct style of wide white embroidery bands around the neck of their dresses, and thin silver bangles. Upon enquiry, one woman said: "It's just nicer." Another said: "We won't change our dress unless the Government orders it." (C. Maloney, Op. cit.)

Ethnologist J.C. Lévi Strauss sees in this radical renunciation of traditional values observed by him among certain South American Indians the tragic fate of a fragile way of life that crumbles easily because the loss of certain elements brings about the immediate depreciation of all the others.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁸ J.C. Lévi Strauss, Op. cit. above

4.3.2 FOREIGN MASTERS

Although during the past eight hundred years many Arab travelers and religious men must have visited the Maldives, most of them left no records. However, certain Arab individuals who reached a prominent position in the Islands have been mentioned in the Maldivian Royal Chronicles (Tārīkh).

Over a hundred years after Ibn Batūta's visit to the Maldives, Sayyid Muhammad (named as Sīdī Muhammad in the Rādaḥali royal chronicles), a foreign Muslim from Arabia, seized and held the kingship of the Maldivian Islands in AD 1466-68, while the rightful local king was on the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁶²⁹ The reactions of the local elite to a foreigner usurping the throne of a native king are not known, but most likely there was no open resistance. After all he was an Arab 'holy man', speaking the 'sacred language' and, had there been widespread unrest and opposition to his rule, it is doubtful that they would have gone unrecorded in the royal chronicles.

Almost fifty years later another obscure Arab, whose name according to the Tārīkh was Sharīf Ahmad, became king of the Maldives for two years and nine months (1510-13). Nothing is known about how he came to the Maldives, how he gained accession to the throne, or how he reigned. About the man as well, little is known, except that he was from Mecca and belonged to the Sharīf (or Quraish) race, affirming to be a descendant of Muhammad through either of the sons of Hasan, son of Alī, the Prophet's son-in-law. Again, it is not known whether there was any local reaction to this non-Maldivian's accession to the highest position of power in the Islands.

⁶²⁹ From the Tārīkh, quoted in H.C.P. Bell, 'The Maldivian Islands'.

At the beginning of the 17th century, while the French castaway, François Pyrard de Laval was living in Male', the faṇḍiyāru (supreme judge) of the Maldives was an Arab. This person, again, belonged to the Sharīf race, claiming to be a direct descendant of Muhammad. Strangely enough, this Arab 'holy man' who held, albeit temporarily, such a high post is not even mentioned in the Tārīkh and his name remains unknown. This is what Pyrard told about him:

"He was quite a good man and the king liked him very much. He held foreigners in high esteem and blamed the king for the bad treatment he had inflicted upon us, as we were their friends, thus enemies of the Portuguese as well. (He claimed that the Muslim) kings of Aceh, Java and other places used to give a good reception to people like the Frenchmen, the English and the Dutch, as he had noticed while he was there. The king answered to the faṇḍiyāru that he was confused, that he himself was not to blame, since the (poor welcome) was owing to the (hostile attitude) of the noblemen and elders of (Male') island.

*This (man, before he occupied the post of) faṇḍiyāru was on his way from Aceh to Arabia and he had been very well received there (among the Acenese), having accumulated a great number of costly presents, which he was taking back to his country. As the king knew (about his great wealth) while he stopped over in the Maldives, he asked him to stay, insisting so much that (the Arab holy man) finally acquiesced. He became so close to the king that he had always his meals along with him, which is a favour no one else enjoyed.*⁶³⁰

The French nobleman then goes on to describe in grisly detail some of the barbarous punishments imposed by this unidentified Arab faṇḍiyāru on the Maldivian people, such as public humiliations, beatings until death,

⁶³⁰ François Pyrard de Laval, 'Voyage aux Indes Orientales'. Even in ancient times wealth was a source of respect in South Asia, as the Sanskrit proverb expresses: 'Sarvaguṇa kañcanam aśrayanti' (All virtues reside in gold)

mutations of hands and feet, and feudal-style executions. Finally Pyrard concludes:

“But, going back to the faṇḍiyāru who ordered so many executions; after having remained some time in the (Maldiv) Islands, he was finally ready to go back to Arabia, with a ship fully loaded with treasures. At his departure the king, as well as the common people, made a big show of crying. They were sad to see him leave, for they were considering him to be a great saint. He promised to come back, but the truth is that he was not wishing at all to do so. (François Pyrard de Laval, Op. cit.)

According to the Maldiv historical chronicles (Tārīkh), less than half a century later, in 1686, Sayyid Muhammad Shams-ud-Dīn of Hamavi, another such Arab ‘holy man’ arrived to the Maldives. He claimed also to be a descendant of the Prophet through his grandsons Hasan and Husain. The Tārīkh relates how this Sayyid and his brother, after studying at Cairo, visited Mecca and Medina, and subsequently traveled to Mangalore in India.

The Arab Sayyid then toured the whole of the Malabar Coast, in Southwestern India, making numerous converts to Islam. From there he sailed eastwards to Aceh —located at the northern end of Sumatra, this country is known as Asē Karā, the coast of Aceh, in Divehi— and carried on vigorous proselytism there too. This ‘holy man’ exhibited all the while great personal pomp and splendor, being carried around by slaves on a palanquin and having a green flag borne ahead. This is how he arrived to the Maldiv Islands:

“Learning that the people of the Maldives were much less instructed in the (Muslim) faith than the Achinese (the people from Aceh), the Sayyid embarked for the Islands. He reached Male’ in Rabī-ul-Awwal AH 1097 (AD 1686), and was received with special honour, being met by the Sultān (Ibrahīm Iskandar I) himself in person.

Invited (by the king) to teach orthodoxy, the Sayyid introduced several drastic reforms into existing customs. Every man was ordered to grow a beard; and women appearing in public made to wear veils. The use of silver belts (faṭṭaru) was strictly banned. (H.C.P. Bell, op. cit.)

Thus, again we have a foreign ‘holy man’, fuming with disapproval, arbitrarily interfering with Maldivian customs without anybody speaking out in defense of the local ways. This instance sadly illustrates one more time the manner in which the Maldivian people are victims of a subversion of values. They are trapped in such a manner that they have no choice but to constantly display veneration towards the encroaching Semitic doctrine which treads with contempt upon their own national heritage.

Apparently the veil was enforced off and on during Maldivian history, but after being compulsory for a time it gradually disappeared when the initial fervor waned. More recently, since the early 1980’s, school uniforms with veils —compulsory for girls attending Arab schools— have served as a catalyst for the enforcement of female Arab dress in the Maldives. The faṭṭaru silver girdle, holding the waistcloth in place, was part of the traditional Maldivian female dress. Actually it was banned because women would often raise their long shirt (libās) in order to display it.

Things went well with this Sayyid as long as he was teaching orthodoxy to the common people, but as soon as he directed his scrupulously strict religious zeal towards the Maldivian king himself —here drastic reforms were not welcome— he ran into trouble. After having been accused of a number of gross misdemeanors by the Arab saint, King Ibrahīm Iskandar flew into a rage and his relationship with the ‘holy man’ became strained beyond improvement. Thus, after a mere six-month stay in the Maldivian Islands, Sayyid Muhammad Sams-ud-Dīn of Hamavi left the Maldives and settled in India.

History repeated itself in 1986, when the Saudi-funded Wahhabi movement —which since 1978 had initially been blessed and encouraged

by the Maldivian government — ran into trouble as soon as it began directing its venom towards the country's rulers for allegedly 'not being Islamic enough.' The government acted swiftly and ruthlessly. There was a big crackdown which began in Rimbudū Island, South Nilande Atoll. Books and tapes were seized; many Wahhabi leaders were arrested and imprisoned and from then onwards their activities were restricted. This is a case of a group becoming 'Plus royaliste que le Roi.' Even so ever since then the Wahhabi groups have steadily grown in power and influence within Maldivian society. A few years later, in 1687, King Ibrahīm Iskandar died. After another Radun rose and fell in between, Muhammad Muhi-ud-Dīn gained accession to the Maldive throne. This new king, who was exacting in his own religious life to quite an extreme degree, wrote a letter to the Sayyid of Hamavi and invited him to come again to Male'. The Arab 'holy man', who was living at that time in Hugli (Calcutta), obliged and prepared to sail to the Islands.

Meanwhile, in the Maldives, king Muhi-ud-Dīn had fallen prey to intense Arabophillia and during his reign he sought to enforce both severe legalism and rigorous puritanism among his hapless subjects. It is worth noticing that in this instance it was an indigenous Maldivian king, instead of a 'holy man' from Arabia, who became an enforcer of alien, culturally intrusive, rules:

"(During the reign of King Muhammad Muhi-ud-Dīn-ul-Ādil) the observance of (the five) regular prayers, the giving of Zakāt (charity-tax), and adherence to other Muslim precepts, were strictly enforced. Women were required to cover their bodies and faces, and the meeting of the two sexes in public prohibited. On the other hand, the wearing by men of shirts, turbans, and shoes (hitherto limited to certain high government officials) was permitted generally. (H.C.P. Bell, op. cit.)

In Divehi tradition there was never segregation of sexes in public. Thus, the rule imposed by the king was in conflict with the customary norm in Maldives of separation of work, but not of sexes. This foreign attire had

been hitherto limited to certain high government officials. The Arab-style attire formerly worn by the elite was the very dress that made some Portuguese visitors think that the rulers of the Islands were ‘Mouros’ (a generic term for Moors or Arabs).⁶³¹

According to the Tārīkh those months of harsh puritanical intransigence were “*the happiest days experienced at the Maldives.*” This remark reflects where the interests of the writer of the royal chronicles, undoubtedly a member of the religious elite, lay. Comments about this same period would have been decidedly different if any ‘Popular Chronicles of the Maldives’ had existed.

But it so happened that right when the Arab ‘holy man’ arrived, the zealous monarch who had been such a staunch supporter of Arab interests in the Maldives, was in his deathbed. King Muhi-ud-Dīn died within three days following the Sayyid’s arrival, after having reigned for less than one year.

Acting swiftly, the very next day after the death of the Radun who had been his fervent admirer, the Sayyid claimed that he had a right to the throne, as a descendant of the Quraish tribe, in accordance with the Muslim Hadīth (sayings of the Prophet). Thus, without further ado he had himself proclaimed king under the name Sultān Sayyid Muhammad Shams-ud-Dīn. Once again, an Arab foreigner rose to the Maldive throne leaving everyone around him stupefied.

In the same manner as Ibn Batūta had done three centuries before, Sultān Sayyid, enforced a strict system of attendance at the mosques for the five daily Muslim prayers and was equally full of condemnation towards the local mores of Maldivians. Living up to his image of a ‘holy man’ even after he had become a king, the Radun Sayyid Muhammad Shams-ud-Dīn

⁶³¹ B. Gomes de Brito, *Historia Tragico Maritima. Berichte aus der Grossen Zeit der Portugiesischen Seefahrt.*

preached and gave Islamic religious instruction at the palace in Male'. Since he fell deathly ill very soon after attaining kingship, the Arab Sayyid's reign lasted only a very short period (1691-92). Nevertheless, he was honored even after his death by being buried as a saint:

"He had intended to enlarge the Hukuru Miskit (Friday Mosque), but falling sick in Ramazān of fever and dysentery, he died ... after reigning 5 months less 5 days. He was buried with special honours within the Medu Ziyārai enclosure, to the West of the grave of Shaikh Yūsūf Shams-ud-Dīn, Muslim apostle to the Maldives. (H.C.P. Bell, op. cit.)

The Tārīkh concludes the narrative concerning the Arab king with a rather dry, although intriguing, statement suggesting that the Sayyid developed an eleventh-hour fondness towards a local lady:

"Almost on his death-bed he married Kambā Maryam, widow of Sultān Muhī-ud-Dīn. (H.C.P. Bell, op. cit.)

4.3.3 UNEQUAL PARTNERS

As has been previously pointed out, throughout the history of the islands, Maldivians gave excellent hospitality to visiting Arab religious figures. They consistently made them feel that the whole island country was at their feet; and, to top it all, showered them with costly presents and much treasure at their departure. And yet, the welcoming manner in which Maldivians, high and low, consistently have treated Arab visitors—who more often than not were rather vain and aloof—was not reciprocated by the people of peninsular Arabia when Maldivians happened to visit that territory. The fatal ordeal of king Nūr-ud-Dīn's during his Hajj pilgrimage in 1799 brings home the fact that the welcoming attitude and the hospitality were a purely one-sided affair. This story was narrated in the 'Tārīkh' and was included in H.C.P. Bell's monograph 'The Maldive Islands'.

"In the year 1799, the king of Maldives, Sultān Nūr-ud-Dīn, named his son Muhammad Muīn-ud-Dīn Prince Regent and sailed to Mecca in a large ship built at Male'. Usually all Maldivian kings, when they went on Hajj, profited from the occasion by buying many slaves at the markets in Mecca, therefore the royal vessel was loaded with much treasure in gold coins and jewellery.⁶³² Escorting their Radun, a retinue of about three-hundred Maldivians, in a number of other ships, sailed the same day from Male' to take part in the royal pilgrimage.

After entering the Red Sea, the king's vessel called at Hudaida harbor, in Yemen, and then proceeded northwards towards the port of Jeddah, in Hejaz, from where the Maldivian king and his retinue continued by caravan inland towards Mecca, carrying the royal treasure on camelback. Once in the sacred city, the king duly visited the Ka'aba and performed the other pilgrimage rituals, as stipulated by the Muslim religion. However,

⁶³² Most of the valuables the king brought to Arabia along with him came from a plundered shipwreck. H.C.P. Bell, Op. cit.

upon his return from visiting the holy site of Arafat, the Arab ruler of Mecca, Sharīf Ghālib, with a jealous eye on the Maldivian king's treasures, arrested king Nūr-ud-Dīn and prevented him and the members of his court from returning to Jeddah.

Then followed a nasty showdown between the avaricious ruler of Mecca and the outraged Maldivian monarch, out of which Sharīf Ghālib, having no scruples against using violent methods, emerged victorious; the king of Maldives had to leave Mecca in shame, stripped of all his possessions. But king Nūr-ud-Dīn's woes were not over, and even before he arrived to Jeddah, he was greeted by very bad news. Some battered members of his crew, informed him that the rapacious Sharīf of Mecca had plundered the rest of the royal treasure, the guns and whatever else he could grab from the Maldivian royal ship while it lay anchored at Jeddah harbor.

*Full of bitterness at his humiliation and deep disappointment, king Nūr-ud-Dīn, became depressed. Before he could make a decision about what to do next the dejected monarch fell ill of smallpox. Having lost his will to live, death overcame him swiftly in the unbearably hot and unhealthy air of Jeddah. Thus, a mere four months since he had left Maldives in pomp and splendor, the Maldivian king died and was buried miserably in that bleak Arab seaport.*⁶³³

The Radun passed away so unexpectedly, that he left the members of his retinue completely distraught. Penniless in the middle of a vast, strange and hostile desert country, without an adequate knowledge of the language the situation of these Maldivian courtiers was pitiable—for, although familiar with the Arabic script, most Maldivians didn't know how to speak the Arabic language—. Even though they tried to stay together, the frightened group of Divehi aristocrats and their attendants ended up

⁶³³ The spot where the tomb of the Maldivian king is located is not even known.

being dispersed in the confusion that followed the king's untimely death and the savage plundering of all their wealth.

A very large number of Maldivian men and women disappeared, including many noble ladies and other members of the island elite. Some of them died of diseases and others were badly mistreated and killed by local Arabs. Still, other Maldivians were abducted by treacherous Arab slave traders, who had been very much aware of their utter helplessness all along and profited from this chance. These were taken somewhere else and never seen again.

A few Maldivians of the original party, amidst the humiliations of cramping poverty, sailed from port to port and gradually managed to reach Muscat on the coast of Omān. Fortunately, there the ruler was of a friendly disposition and he had the decency to assist the Maldivians in distress. From that Omani harbor, the survivors finally were able to get back to the Maldivian Islands.

Only seventy worn-out and hollow-eyed Maldivian men and women returned to Male' after their ordeal, eleven months after they had left Male' for the pilgrimage. A full two-hundred and thirty of the original three hundred members of the Maldivian royal retinue either died or disappeared without trace during those fateful days spent in the dangerous Arab peninsula. Among the people who lost their lives in this ill-fated journey, a large number belonged to Maldivian noble families, including a son and a daughter of king Nūr-ud-Dīn, as well as his trusted Prime Minister, Muhammadu Handēgiri Takurufānu.

After this tragic experience, and other similar ones which have not been properly recorded, it is not surprising that Arab lands were rated quite low in the unofficial 'list of safe countries' of Maldivian navigators. The safest country on the list is the island of Ceylon, which owing to the friendly disposition of its inhabitants and a number of cultural affinities, such as its Sinhalese language being close to Divehi, earned the nickname

‘Oḷudū’, the ‘tame’ or ‘domesticated’ island. This name was used by island traders making the yearly trip there, because they felt very much at home in that island. Even since ancient times, quite a number of Maldivians have settled in Colombo or Gāli (Galle).

The next on the list would be Southern India, the harbors of Koccē (Cochin) and Sūtukuḷi (Tuticorin), being the favorite among Maldivian traders; then follows Bengal, a former favorite destination of the royal trading vessels which carried the copra from the King’s islands to the Bengali markets. However, a long time has passed since then and direct trade with Bengal has dwindled considerably. The trips to South India, Ceylon and Bengal were made once yearly, the heavy-loaded ships leaving Maldives in August or September, having the SW monsoon winds in their favor, and returning with the crisp, dry winds of the NE monsoon.

The royal trading vessels were mostly brigs and schooners, large ships known generally as nākoḷu, used to travel almost exclusively to Bengal. The profit of this trade was for the royal treasure. Other types of vessels, such as the baghala and ḍangi (bouv), were used in the trade with South India and Ceylon. Most bagala were used by the Borah merchants. The Borahs were wealthy Shia’ Muslim traders from Bombay and Gujarat who had shops in Male’ and who built the mosque known as Bandara Miskiy that still stands. They were accused of unfair trading practices and expelled by Muhammad Amīn around mid 20th century for allegedly monopolizing commerce.

Lower on the ‘list of safe countries’ would be places where Maldivians felt like foreigners, such as Burma, Siam, Somalia or the Yemeni coast. Maldivians only visited those places by accident, when their ships strayed off course during their annual trading journey. Finally, at the bottom end are countries considered wild places, foremost of which were the Andaman Islands, the notorious Minikā Rāḷje (‘Kingdom of Cannibalism’) of Island lore.

Asking Maldivians about where they would place Arabia in this list, reactions are mixed. Some people are very outspoken, privately claiming that “the Arabs are the worst people on earth.” And in the light of what happened to King Nūr-ud-Dīn and his party two hundred years ago, one may guess that rumors about the abysmal way Arabs treat visiting Maldivians, whether in that particular instance or in others, have endured in the popular memory. Therefore, even though Arabia is the land of the Muslim holy places, it has some sinister fame preceding it.

Nowadays, most Maldivian seamen have stories about being mistreated in Arab harbors. I have also talked in different occasions to young Maldivians who had studied, or still were pursuing their studies, in Saudi Arabia. They commented that they were never able to make any meaningful friendships with local Arabs. None of them were ever invited to Saudi homes and all agreed that the locals were arrogant and treated them with contempt, keeping them always at a distance. However, in spite of this widespread sentiment, no Maldivian would dare to tarnish the image of the Arabs in public. It seems that there are laws in Maldives forbidding ‘to speak poorly about Arabs’. I never could get written confirmation of whether this is a fact or a rumor, but many people in Male’ affirm it is so.

During the centuries that followed the arrival of the first Sayyids to Male’, word must have gone around in Arabian lands of the abundance of presents and flattery showered upon Arabs impersonating ‘holy men’ in places like the Maldives and Aceh. People like the faṇḍiḃāru of Pyrrard’s time and other unrecorded Sayyids, arriving back to their country with ships full of Maldivian treasures, must have caused quite an impact within their society. Unfortunately, we don’t have the means to check whether the Sayyids and other Arab travelers who periodically visited the Maldives all along the last six centuries were spurious characters or not.

If indeed those ‘holy men’ were respectable within their country, it is very likely that they settled for a life of ease with their fortune —which anyway

would secure them a degree of credibility—, spending their last days in their home-town. There, they would not be able to avoid telling their friends and family how they were treated like supermen by the gullible Indian Ocean Islanders, after merely flogging and executing a few of them and cutting a few hands and feet here and there. Their boastful talk, in turn, must have left a deep and lasting impression on their town folks, already amazed at seeing the large amount of costly presents so-and-so had brought from the wonderful islands in the East. The myth endured and developed, firing the imagination of all sorts of people in Arab lands. Thus, in the years that followed, a number of cheeky Arabs, seeing their once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a fortune, were able to exploit this situation. There is at least one such recorded incident:

“In the year 1893, when King Muhammad Imad-ud-Dīn IV was ruling the Maldives, an Arab named Ahmad Hatbullah sailed to from Cochin to the islands on a small schooner, looking smooth and newly painted. When he arrived to Male’ he publicly announced that he had arrived sailing on his beautiful brand-new ship with the special purpose of offering it as a present to the honorable Maldivian king. Following this he was promptly called to the palace and was received by the king himself with great pomp and splendor.

After talking about religious issues —it is not known whether he also claimed to be from the Prophet’s lineage— the Arab traveler said, amid much adulation, that he was offering his excellent schooner as a fitting addition to the merchant fleet of the Maldivian king, for such a great Muslim monarch amply deserved such a wonderful present. Sultān Imad-ud-Dīn, feeling enormously flattered declared that such a courteous and generous Arab ‘holy man’ should not leave the Maldives without receiving a fitting present from the king in return.

Thus the Maldivian monarch personally offered the Arab visitor a gift of no less than five thousand silver Rupees —a fortune at that time— out of his royal treasure. After making a big fuss about refusing the money, Ahmad

Hatbullah declared that he was humbly accepting the monetary favor bestowed upon him only to please the king. Then he walked out of the palace and promptly disappeared in the crowded alleys of the harbor area. That same night he left Male' aboard an Indian trading ship, having previously struck a deal with its captain to weigh anchor and to clear as fast as possible.

"The next day, king Imād-ud-Dīn ordered that the new schooner should be given the name 'Nasr-ul-Hamīd I' and went to have a look at it at the harbor.⁶³⁴ However, when the ship was carefully inspected by the Commodore, it was found to be an old vessel which had been cleverly patched up with boards and small nails. The king was rather disappointed because his gift was not as good as he had expected.

"This new addition to the royal fleet proved to be extremely short-lived. When sail was set for a test-trip the 'Nasr-ul-Hamīd I', while sailing northwards, overturned barely a couple of miles after leaving Male' harbor, close to Dūnidū Island. Some other ships had to come immediately to the rescue, and it was with difficulty that the vessel could finally be brought to Fālandoru, in the inner Male' harbor. There, the captain realized that the ship's hull was completely rotten. After checking it he declared that the supposedly new schooner was in such a hopeless state, that it was beyond repair. Thus, the 'Nasr-ul-Hamīd I' was pulled ashore and broken up.⁶³⁵

The story of Ahmad Hatbulla's fraud sheds some light on the true nature of the relationship between the Arabs and the Maldivian Islanders and given the fatuous attitude of Maldivians towards self-asserting Arab 'holy

⁶³⁴ It was common for all ships belonging to the Maldivian Royal Fleet to carry long, and somewhat pompous, Arabic names

⁶³⁵ Folder 'Maldivian Vessels' from the collection of Maldivian documents. National Archives, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

men', it is unlikely that we are dealing with an isolated case in this context. Similar events, which went unfortunately unrecorded, must have taken place all along the history of the Islands. However, such instances are eventually hushed up with determined thoroughness. Maldivians are still optimistic concerning that unequal partnership and would refuse to admit that they have been —and are still being— taken advantage of.

In olden times, it was possible for Maldivian men to settle in Hejaz, in the Arabian Peninsula, in order to be close to the Muslim holy sites, and, if they so desired, even to marry there. All this, of course, provided that they adapted to the climate and the society, and certainly Maldivians —like the members of King Nūr-ud-Dīn's court— who were kidnapped and sold as slaves in centuries past, or some very old pilgrims who felt too weak to make the return trip, had no choice but to stay there. However, since the introduction of rigorous immigration laws in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Maldivian Islanders go there strictly on a pilgrimage visa and have to leave the country before its date of expiry.

Even Maldivians studying in Arab religious schools have to return to the Islands as soon as their period of study is over. The times when, as Muslim brothers, they could linger indefinitely in the sacred land are definitely over. I heard one case about a Maldivian who was ignominiously expelled from the stern Saudi Kingdom, after he tried to overstay once his studies were finished. Even though he had learned how to speak Arabic fluently, and even though he was a great admirer of his hosts, displaying great fervor in the religion whose holy places are in that land, he was sent unceremoniously away, back to the Islands, all the same.⁶³⁶

In the Maldives, there still lingers a vague idea of the Ummā, the elusive and ill-defined community to which all Muslims are supposed to belong. Certainly the unshakable Maldivian historical habit of giving a red-carpet

⁶³⁶ Source: Zāhidu, Daḍimago village, Fua Mulaku.

welcome to every Arab 'holy man' is very Ummā-like. However, nationalism has proved to be a tough bone to crack for this lofty philosophical Islamic concept. Reality dictates the tone and, in the age of nation-states, the Ummā remains a distant mirage, an impractical abstraction. Belief in this myth is little more than wishful thinking. The bare fact is that, in spite of much talk about universal Islamic brotherhood, nowadays Maldivians in the land of the Sacred Muslim Places are no less treated as foreigners than Maldivians in Peru.

4.3.4 A POLICY OF DESTRUCTION

The relentless effort to promote Arabic cultural values within the Maldivian island society is allegedly made with very good intentions. Its supporters claim to hold the monopoly of moral and spiritual values, and steadfastly affirm that their aim is to create a more virtuous society. However, local resistance against the arbitrary imposition of an alien desert culture on this equatorial oceanic nation has never been officially defined —or at least assessed— and has rather been stubbornly ignored. Hence, as the saying goes “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” and, humans the world over being who they are, as soon as a new law to promote virtue is enforced, a new trick to circumvent that very law pops up.

The result is that the country has become a virtual police state, but certainly the society is not becoming any more virtuous. Lacking perspective of their cultural identity, average island people are simply helpless to fight back the cultural forgery imposed on them. The state religion has been Islam for the past eight centuries and, in the eyes of the islanders, Islam is synonymous with a formidable machine of power and authority which cannot be contested. Thus, Maldivians have to put up with the role of remaining passive onlookers when freshly arrived Arabic teachers or ‘holy men’ harshly criticize their own island traditions with impunity.

It is a secretly acknowledged fact, though, that among the island people there are many who feel that they are traveling on a boat which is going in the opposite course they wish to go, but they feel helpless to do anything about it. This conflict is, if anything, compounded by the intense propagation of hard-line Islamic ideologies, including the construction of mosques and Arabic religious schools throughout the country since 1978. Decades before the murderous spree led by religious hard-liners in Algeria, and long before the opening of those schools in the Maldives, Algerian writers such as Rachid Mimouni had already questioned the

wisdom of mass-religious indoctrination. *“What do they want? A country of muezzins? Or a country of pious unemployed people (chomeurs)?”*⁶³⁷

The Arab religious schools, fruit of the petrodollar wealth, were first opened in the capital Male’ in 1983 and they set a pattern of cultural and political indoctrination for schools all across the Maldivian Islands. Paraphrasing Vivekananda, in those schools the first thing a Maldivian child is taught is that his father is a fool because he can’t understand the Qurān as he doesn’t know Arabic, the second that his grandfather was a lunatic because he held on to many folk beliefs that were unislamic, the third that his mother is shameless because she doesn’t cover her hair, the fourth that his grandmother was a whore because her form of dress revealed too much of her body, the fifth that all the old Maldivian books and stories are lies, and the sixth that Divehi courtesy is rude because Maldivians don’t go around saying ‘Assalām alaykum’ at all times —the traditional Maldivian way being to ask: “Where are you going?”— as Arab courtesy dictates. Vivekananda, a well-known Indian reformist, denounced British education in the schools of the Raj for giving Indians a false perspective of their own culture.

Boys or girls attending the new religious schools have problems having pride in their own culture because they have been pitched against the basic Maldivian cultural values ever since their first classes. One unavoidable side-effect of Islamic education is that students end up admiring the Arab culture and despising their own traditions. Children—who are unaware of causing any harm—are made willing accomplices in the dismantlement of their own cultural heritage.

With the media in the hands of an Islamizing government and the spread of Arabic madrasahs throughout the country, the pace and depth of Arab influence is growing fast. During the 1970’s, except for a few modern

⁶³⁷ Rachid Mimouni, ‘Le Fleuve détourné’, 1982

schools in Male', most Divehi children were taught Qurānic reading in the small traditional 'maktabas.' However, this situation changed in the 1980's, when two heavily funded Arabic schools 'Mawhad Dirāsāt-ul-Islamiyya' and 'Madrasat-ul-Arabiyya-al-Islamiyya' opened in Male'. These schools, teaching undiluted Islam, were instrumental in introducing the Arab veil among girls and in the crystallization of Arabic mores within the Maldivian society.

Even the phonetic sounds of the Divehi language are changing. Local letters are abandoned and disappear. The indigenous sound 'p' has been replaced by the Arabic letter 'f' during the last couple of centuries; and the autochthonous retroflex 'ṇ' (ṇaviyani) has been slowly vanishing to the point of having been deleted from the local written alphabet by Muhammad Amīn in mid-20th century.

In contrast to this carelessness towards their own phonetics, young Maldivian students are very particular in their efforts to reproduce with fidelity Arabic phonetic sounds, alien to their own language, in order to win Qurān-reading contests promoted by their government. This trend is to blame for the growing tendency towards the abandonment of retroflex sounds not existing in Arab phonetics. Those retroflex sounds —'ḷ' (ḷaviyani), 'ḍ' (ḍaviyani) and 'ṭ' (ṭaviyani) and 'ṇ' (ṇaviyani)— made by flapping the tongue against the palate are a characteristic feature of the Indic languages. However, they were the bane of some highly fastidious, Arabophilic local 'holy men' who sought to replace the local Divehi Akuru with the Arabic script in the past.⁶³⁸

After many unsuccessful attempts, the 'Tāna' alphabet now in use was devised as a compromise. This three-century-old —although some present-day documents propagated by the government claim that it is

⁶³⁸ Divehi Akuru , the traditional Maldivian writing whose most ancient manuscripts (in the form called 'Evēla' by H.C.P. Bell) go as far back as the 7th century AD. The last manuscripts written in Divehi Akuru are from mid-19th century

older in order to fit it into their particular vision of history— artificial alphabet is based mostly on the Arabic numerals and diacritical signs and, more importantly, is written from right to left like Arabic; the claim that the Tāna script was devised in the 16th century not supported by historical documents. The oldest writing specimens in that alphabet, interspersed with Arabic, are from the 18th century. These are the Īdu Miskit Doroṣi inscriptions, dated AH 1170 (AD 1757).

The abandonment of the Divehi Akuru and the introduction of the Tāna form of writing was a decisive step towards a greater Arabization of Divehi culture. The new form of writing could easily accommodate words—and even whole sentences—in Arabic within texts in the local language. Therefore, in practice, the Tāna alphabet became a wedge for the further introduction of a foreign Semitic tongue into the written form of Divehi.

During the past five or six centuries, Maldivian identity has steadily lost its color and vitality. Local dances, songs, festivals and ceremonies that were deemed un-Islamic have been weeded out and repressed with almost sadistic ruthlessness. Hence, most autochthonous ancestral cultural expressions have degenerated or have disappeared. Kite-flying and mutual water-splashing (feñ kuḷi), are among the popular festivals that were forbidden by the Maldivian government during the latter half of the twentieth century .

Since the early 1980's, during a government drive to promote Islam in the Atolls called 'Dīnuge Hēlunterikañ', Islamic preachers sailed from island to island, to scold the islanders with fiery speeches. Acting with the same zeal characteristic of the former Sayyids, these enforcers of religious ideology saw sin and depravation in the normal sexual dimorphism of dress and behavior and in the open expression of youthful joy by means of dances and songs, which are a vital part of any healthy society.

Devoid of popular entertainment, except for modern sports, island atmosphere has become extremely dull and most islanders agree that the

only excitement is to be found in secret illicit relationships. Despite the introduction of consumerism and the relative economic buoyancy of the last two decades of the 20th century, things have not changed very much since C. Maloney reported in the mid-1970's that:

“This particular island appeared ... as an enervating place, with almost no games, no music or scheduled events, except prayers, and few surprises Only the changing of seasons, (the Muslim month of) Ramzān and the two Īd (Muslim festivals) broke the passage of time. The Katību (government official) ruled in a tyrannical way.... There is no crack in the shell of orthodoxy, at least in appearance. The majority of citizens of the Maldives pass their time on such islands as this ... scarcely touched at all by the civilisational vibrancy of the outer world. (C. Maloney, Op. cit.)

Since 1979 Arab preachers have been periodically invited to the Maldivian Islands by the government and given VIP treatment. Conferences where those ‘holy men’ are the star figures are organized in the evenings during their stay. Government officials and schoolchildren from the capital are forced to go to listen to their religious speeches. These aggressive sermons in Arabic are not only broadcast live in the national radio, but their recordings are routinely aired during the following months.

However, an Egyptian friend of mine who knew well that type of person, Mahmoud Salama, told me that no one in Egypt would pay so much respect to those cheap preachers. According to him, they were totally unimaginative types, from a mediocre background who were basking in the exaggerated attention they were receiving. “These are backward characters. What good can the Maldivians learn from them?” another Egyptian friend, Amīn ‘Pako’, one day commented. And yet, during the last twenty years, these Egyptian preachers have been let loose in the Maldives to indoctrinate the local people under special orders from the President’s office.

These brash preachers seize with glee their unearned high status in the Islands. Often they use to grow quite passionate and eloquent in their speeches about the torments of hell, probably provoked by the un-Islamic appearance of the crowds who are gathered in to listen to them. For the fact is that Maldives got most of its Islamic façade —mosques with minarets, Moorish arches and veiled women— only from the year 1981 onwards, when the petrodollars began pouring abundantly into the country. And there are many locals who have not adopted the Arab look.

Initially these Egyptian propagandists were not liked by Maldivians at all. They appeared rude and gross to them, terribly lacking in manners. The calm, monotonous voice of the Divehi translator contrasted sharply with the impassionate, hysterical screams and violent gesticulation of the Arab religious preacher. To make them more palatable, in later years, the indoctrinators were coached by government officials regarding how to behave in front of the Maldivian public and they learned how to talk in a more culturally sensitive cool and regular tone. And yet, the crude content of their sermons remained the same; for instance, in a sermon by an Arab guest preacher in Divehi Rājjege Aḍu (Radio Maldives) translated from the Arabic into Divehi and broadcast during the month of Ramzān in 1990 Maldivian women were coaxed to cover their hair: *“Every single hair of a woman not covered by the veil will become a poisonous snake in hell.”*

Throughout Divehi history, Arabs were still viewed as foreigners by the average Maldivian. However, the last quarter of the twentieth century has seen a new phenomenon appear in the Island society’s horizon: The ‘Arab wannabe.’ These are Maldivians who leave the islands in their childhood and are sent to Arab countries or to Pakistan to receive Islamic training. Eventually, when they return to their country as adults, they behave exactly like the Arab Sayyids of old. These uprooted Arab impersonators put much effort into weeding out the last remnants of true Maldivian national identity. Since the end of the 1970’s, many very high government posts in the Maldives are held by such ‘Arab wannabes’ and their number is increasing.

In the outer Atolls, the average attitude of these young, but religious-wise highly trained people is, at best, arrogant and insensitive. They are usually contemptuous towards the 'aļuveriñ', or old religious males of the island, whose time-tested combination of folk-wisdom and religion, is too unislamic for their taste. At the same time, their position as young persons and religious learned men simultaneously is still highly incongruous. Within the ancestral island society, there was a role for old religious men, but none for inexperienced youngsters happening to be well-versed in Arabic and religion.

Traditionally, one was supposed to acquire knowledge —along with wisdom— with age. Hence, young aļuveriñ, or young learned men, simply didn't exist. The result is that these brazen young 'Arab wannabes', full of Islamic zeal, put much effort into discrediting their elders, slandering them for not being orthodox enough. In this manner they have led people not to pay attention to the old local aļuveriñ and have ended up destroying the traditional hierarchical system, in which old people had to be respected. This is paving the way for a break-up of the moral fabric of Divehi society.

It is a well-known fact that presently in Maldives, there is a secret hostility to excessive arabization, but it is leading nowhere. This 'resistance', if it even may be called so, is not only unorganized, but its goals are not defined and it has no visible leadership. Moreover, there seems to be nowhere else to go in the other direction, for the ancestral Divehi culture is effectively lost.

Commenting on the power of the government and the power of Islam in turn-of-the-millennium Algeria, Mohammed Arkoun, director of the Institute of Arab-Islamic Studies at Paris-III University, wrote:

"The nationalist vision insists on the continuity in time of the Arab-Islamic culture and, consequently, of the state. Thus, the social spirit dominating today is directly connected with the official thesis that refuses to make the

*indispensable room to the scientific analysis of facts and problems. Intellectuals who, like Mustafa Lacheraf, invest their efforts into the separation between the functions of the official ideology, which pretends to mobilize national construction, and the critical knowledge of the ingredients that have fashioned real Algerian society, are extremely rare.*⁶³⁹

⁶³⁹ M. Arkoun, 'Une Spiritualité qui dépasse la Religion d'État' (GEO n 114).

Epilogue - STUCK IN THE SANDS OF ARABIA

I believe, in fact, that there is no greater suffering for man than to feel his cultural foundations giving way beneath his feet.

Alberto Moravia.

Is the fate of gradually becoming an Arab nation the Maldivians' only option? This is the dilemma of Maldivians since they made the decision to accept the Arabs as their undisputed cultural masters and began to sever their links with their own past. Nowadays Maldivians are culturally restless people who can never be at ease. The intense indoctrination of the 1980s and 90s, when Islamization was imposed on the islands at a much higher gear than at any time in the nation's history, has made Maldivians feel uncozy in their own country. The changes brought about have been of such magnitude and in such a short time, that there is now a whole young generation of Divehi people who, having not known how things were previously, take for granted that their home nation has always been so orthodox and impersonal.

Although in ethnically Arab countries it may not be so, in the Maldives Islam is an elitist religion. Traditionally, only a very powerful sector of the elite, for various reasons, has cherished the strict Islamic rules. Furthermore, in the enforcement of orthodoxy downwards, it is precisely this very elite who, often hand-in-hand with visiting Arabs, has repressed or wiped out most Maldivian popular expressions leaving in its wake a bleak, unsmiling, hieratic ideology.

The relentless campaign to promote Islam spearheaded by the government since 1979 has been quite successful. In between, many Maldivians have adopted the Arab way of life and the Arab dress and more recently some even have gone so far as to adopt the Arab language as their own. The atmosphere in the capital Male', although the city looks now more modern and wealthy than before, is heavily charged with religion. Young people born during the last two decades only know the

hard-line religious environment and most don't even know an independent Divehi cultural identity not attached to religious propaganda. Thus, they have grown accustomed to the prevailing cultural forgery and the ensuing loss of personal freedom. Since they didn't experience the mellower times preceding the year 1980, when for example, shops didn't have to close at prayer times and there were popular discotheques in Male', this is only natural.

Maldivian people opposing arabization are in a very vulnerable position, because they are easily, and conveniently, singled out as opponents of Islam. In a perverse paradox, the alien-based ideology of Islam is equaled with patriotism in the Maldivian government propaganda. The government repeatedly (and somewhat unimaginatively) claims that the Maldives is a '100% Muslim country'. This means different things to different people, but it plainly comes down to the fact that there is no freedom of religion, no freedom of thought and no freedom of expression. Within this perverted context, someone who is against Arab cultural intrusion is easily made to look like a person lacking patriotic fervor. As a consequence, the bitter irony is that Maldivians are misled into believing that the only way to become better citizens is by distancing themselves more and more from their own true national identity and become Arab look-alikes.

Most of the youth opposing arabization have despaired of protecting their own ethnicity, because the Maldivian or Divehi identity has been dishonestly usurped by an Arabicized elite who pretends that it is equal to Islam. Sadly, finding it impossible to express their frustrations, many keen idealistic youngsters became victims of drug addiction in the last decades.

The very governmental organization whose duty in the 1980's was, in theory, to protect and promote Maldivian culture had a long name made up of mostly Arabic words. A clear indication of this council's abysmal record in protecting the autochthonous culture is the fact that even its main publication (Faiytura) was used by the government as its mouthpiece for the further promotion of the cause of Arabization of the Maldives.

Therefore, in the Maldives one is confronted with the patent absurdity that the people who are most active in destroying the national cultural heritage are hailed as patriots.

Confronted with this farce, non-conformist young Maldivians have no choice left but becoming cynical and many have jumped into the bandwagon of contemporary consumerism. They choose foreign values that are more attractive to them because most are only vaguely aware that they have a culture of their own. These frustrated young men and women are very keen to display progressive, modern views, which they perceive to be neater and smarter, as a potent form of protest.

The modernity that inspires and gives hope to this section of the Maldivian youth comes to the Maldives nowadays from the influence of a multitude of sources. However, the greater role in fashions, tastes and new attitudes is played probably by the comparatively more democratic societies of urban East and South-East Asia, like Singapore, Japan and Thailand, towards which they display great affinity.

Is the only choice left for Maldivians now to further dismantle the cultural heritage they have been handed over from the previous generations?

Glossary

Note: Maldivian language words are in italics. For the transcription of the Maldivian language the ISO 15919 transliteration of Indic scripts has been used, save exceptions.

Arabi Bas (Arabic language). The fact that Arabic is the language of the prevailing religion has endowed it with special significance in the Maldivian society, for it is also the language of political and social power. Arabic in Maldives was traditionally restricted to religious purposes, hence only a handful of learned men were able to speak it. Most Maldivians didn't know how to speak the Arabic language, although they were familiar with its script. Divehi has affinities with some North Indian languages and Sinhala but not with Arabic, from which it merely has borrowed words. In addition, some Arabic letters have sounds that don't come naturally to the Divehi people and are, thus, very difficult to pronounce for them. Even so, much effort is invested among Maldivians since childhood in order to achieve the correct pronunciation

Ashi. A raised platform found in traditional houses or built under a shade to rest or above the hearth to dry fish

Baṇḍia. A large aluminium pot used mainly by women to carry water

Batteli. A locally-built wooden sailing boat, while in the North of Maldives this word used to refer to a relatively large two-masted trading vessel, in Huvadu Atoll a '*batteli*' was a small sailing boat, corresponding to a small *dōni*, used for short trips within the atoll's lagoon

Bēbē. Form of addressing any older male person.

Bileiy. The leaf of the betel vine (*Piper sarmentosum*), betel leaf is chewed along with arecanut (*fōh*). Formerly arecanut and betel were very

important as gifts and to give to guests after the meals in funerary ceremonies

Bokkurā. A small dinghy without mast powered by one set of oars

Dāiy. A heavy flat grindstone with a cylindrical roller (*fō*) of the same stone. *Dāiy* were made of dark basalt, a dense igneous rock not available in the Maldives, where all stone is coralline. They used to be imported from South India or Ceylon. These grindstones were common household implements used in traditional Maldivian kitchens to grind spices and medicinal mixtures. *Dāiy* were also used to grind glass for popular kite competitions until the early 1960s when kite combats were outlawed

Datta. Form of addressing any older female person. This is an endearing and respectful term used to address certain older females, such as older sisters, aunts and even other women not part of one's immediate kin. While in Maldivian tradition absolute age in numbers had no relevance, relative age was of the utmost importance.

Dekunu atoḷutah'. The Southern Atolls, Southern Maldives or simply 'the South'. Huvadu, Fua Mulaku and Aḍḍu, the atolls lying below the Suvadiva Channel (*Huvadu Kaṇḍu*). These atolls have distinct language variants broadly differing from *Māle Bas*, the official form of Divehi

Divehi. This epithet means 'from the islands' and is used in the same sense as 'native'. It is found in '*Divehi Raajje*', the name of the country; '*Divehi Bas*', the Maldivian language; '*Divehi akuru*', a generic name for the ancient Maldivian scripts (later rechristened by HCP Bell as 'Evēla akuru' for the older forms and 'Dives akuru' for the later form). The verb '*Divehi vuṇ*' refers to the fact of becoming naturalized

Divehi ata. The sugar-apple (*Annona squamosa*)

Divehi bēs. The traditional Maldivian herbal medicine

Divehi hakuru. The thick sweet syrup obtained after boiling the sap of the coconut palm

Divehi ruh'. The coconut palm

Dōni. A small or medium-sized fishing boat

Eterevaru. The side of the coral reef facing the lagoon in an atoll.

Faṇḍita (*fanditha*). Local sorcery or magic; in modern Divehi language 'faṇḍita' is homonymous with esoteric learning, sorcery or magic. It is never used as the word 'Paṇḍit' in Sanskrit and its derived forms in other Indian languages, where it is meant to be the title of a learned person or the respectful form of addressing that particular individual.

Faṇḍitaveriyā. The practitioner of *faṇḍita* or sorcerer

Faṇḍiyāru (*Fandiyāaru*). The chief judge, the highest official in the country below the royal family

Fannu. The place where an island path meets the sea

Faru. The coral reef. *Faro* in the Southern languages

Faṭṭaru (*faṭṭaro*). A long chain made of silver (or gold in women of very high status) wound many times around the waist over the cotton cloth traditionally worn by Divehi women. Ibn Batūta mentions that in the 13th century all Maldivian women, including the queen didn't cover the upper part of their bodies. Pyrard de Laval, in the 17th century, comments that although high class women wore elaborate dresses, islanders from outer Atolls and low-class women were still not wearing an upper garment. As more centuries passed and the dress code changed across class divisions, the more recent libās, or loose shirt reaching down to the knees, completely covered the area around the waist. Thus, the faṭṭaru became an unseen piece of Maldivian female jewellery. Not to be confused with the faṭṭarubay of gold coins worn around the neck.

Fātihā. A funerary ceremony featuring the ceremonial reading of the exordium of the Quran. It is usually celebrated yearly, with special cooking and feasting, to commemorate a deceased close relative's death.

Fēli. A cotton waistcloth with black and white bands worn by the noble ladies, as well as by the soldiers, in ancient times; often the black bands could be dark brown. Women not belonging to the aristocracy wore a plain black waist cloth known as *kaṇḍikī* in Male' and *alfakā* in the South. The vertical embroidered band at one end would be worn in the front by soldiers and in the back by ladies

Fōh. Arecanut, the fruit of the Areca palm (*Areca catechu*) chewed with betel leaf; when eaten dry this nut is sliced with a special scissor-like instrument. Known as *fuah* in the Southern languages

Fōlavahi. The Maldivian name for the Chagos Archipelago located to the south of the Maldives. Known as *Hol!lavai* in the Southern languages

Furēta, ferēta. A monster or demon, usually ugly and scary

Fuṭṭaru. The ocean side of the coral reef that is incessantly pounded by the waves

Garudiyā. The broth obtained cooking tuna fish that is eaten along with the main staples. Known as *lono* in the southern languages, it is perhaps the most valued item in Maldivian cuisine

Haṇḍi. An ambivalent spirit that appears either in the form of a beautiful woman or in a hideous, terrifying shape. It is usually connected to certain trees growing in the forest

Hunigoṇḍi. A long, low chair used to grate coconut with a serrated metal blade at one end. It used to be a normal kitchen implement in Maldives and it was used in some ceremonies such as *Libās levvuṇ*.

Iloshi (iloṭi, ileishi or lieshi). The thin nerves of the coconut palm, used to make brooms and toothpicks. They are separated from the palm-leaf blade (*fanvah*) using a knife. Short sections of ilōṣi are used as toothpicks.

Kaṇḍumas (Tuna). The favorite fish of Maldivians; the preferred species is Skipjack tuna (*Katsuwonus pelamis*). In former times the dry cured Maldivian fish was one of the main sources of income for Maldivian traders

Kaṣikeyo (Kēva'). The cultivated screwpine (*Pandanus* spp.); the wild varieties are known as *bōkeyo* (Male' Bas) or *kēgehe* (Fua Mulaku)

Kativali. A large machete knife or cleaver normally used to cut firewood

Keuḷu (*Keyolhu*). The master fisherman in a fishing boat

Kokko. Form of addressing any younger person

Libās. Also known as '*Divehi libās*', was a dress part of the female Maldivian costume worn over the waistcloth. It used to be a loose shirt in bright colors, such as red, purple or blue, that reached down to the knees. The '*karufehi libās*' displayed elaborate embroidery in the part around the neck. Formerly Maldivian women wore no upper garment until they reached puberty. '*Libās levvuṇ*' was a ceremony for women which took place at the time of their first menstruation.

Lōmāfānu. Royal edicts written on long copper plates held together by a ring. The oldest *lōmāfānu* that have hitherto been found and preserved are from the end of the twelfth century AD and were issued in Male', the royal capital. Other *lōmāfānu* have been found in the islands of Gan, Isdū and Dambidū in Haddummati Atoll.

Magū. (*Scaevola taccada*), known as *gera* in the Southern variants of the Maldivian language, a bush growing close to the waterline common in every Maldivian island that just needs coral sand and seawater to grow. Its fresh-looking leaves were used as famine food in the past

Mākana (Maakana). The Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), a ubiquitous bird in Maldivian folklore; one of its main traits is obstination (*goiy dūnukurun*), a feature attributed to this bird in the Panchatantra as well

Māle Bas (Male' language). The official form of Divehi, named after the capital of the Maldives. It is also the most extended of the varieties of Maldivian and the only variant that has traditionally been put into writing and that has been subject to standardization. Diglossia is common in the communities of the Southern Atolls, including Haddummati, where two language variants coexist in the same island, the suitable variety used within its appropriate context. Over there *Māle Bas* has a specialized official function, whereas the vernacular is used for 'lower' purposes. While the local language is acquired within the household, *Māle Bas* is learned through schooling

Maliku. Also known as Minicoy, it is an isolated atoll part of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, India, with a large island (Maliku, population about 8.000) and a small uninhabited island (Vilingili). Although the ethnic and linguistic background of the Maliku islanders is identical to the Maldives, Minicoy has been under different Indian administrations for the past few centuries. Geographically this atoll is much closer to the northernmost Maldivian Island (Turākunu), than to the southernmost Lakshadweep Island (Kalpeni). In contrast with the other islands of the U.T. Lakshadweep, where the inhabitants speak Malayalam, the language known locally as 'Mahl' spoken in Minicoy is akin to the official form of Divehi or *Māle Bas*

Mālimi. The navigator in an ocean-going trading ship. In large oceangoing vessels he would have an assistant or helper known as *Koḍa mālimi*.

Māmuli, Māmeli or *Mēliya*. A middle-aged fairy-like woman (Daita or Dhaitha) having seven children. She is said to live at the "end of the island" (*Rakkolhu*)

Masdaiyffiyohi. Literally meaning “fish-tooth knife”, a special knife used in *faṇḍita* with a handle made of sperm whale tooth ivory; the blade of the masdayffiohi knife is allegedly made of an alloy of seven metals (*haylō*). All *faṇḍita* men owned these knives in the past

Maulūdu. Also known as ‘rah maulūdu’, is a traditional Muslim religious festival that involved chanting devotional songs in praise of the Messenger of Allah. The celebration took place in an open-sided decorated pavilion known as *haruge* (*harege* in *Aḍḍu* and *Fua Mulaku*). This festival also involved much cooking of special food

Midili. A local tree (*Terminalia catappa*); the ripe fruit has a bit of pulp on the outside and a large kernel inside of which there is a small nut. Maldivians said that after eating the pulp any water tastes better

Minikā Rājje. The traditional Maldivian name for the Andaman Islands, meaning the “Land of the Cannibals”

Muḷōṣi (muḍeiṣi). Easy-made basket made with two short sections of coconut palm fronds

Muṇḍu. A light cotton lungi or sarong worn around the waist. It was the traditional essential piece of men’s clothing. Usually Maldivians favored checkered colored pattern with a broad vertical darker band (*fasba*). It was a simple, light and very sensible way of dressing in the tropical heat until it was replaced by trousers. Formerly one of the most important shops in Male’ was the ‘Haji Mundu Shop’ that closed down in early 1979

Nakaiy. The Nakshatra constellations that were used in the traditional Maldivian calendar to identify seasons, especially concerning weather, fishing and travelling. According to the *nakaiy* schedule the year was divided in periods of roughly thirteen days. *Nakaiyterikaṇ* is astrology, the knowledge of the *nakaiy* and their influence upon daily affairs.

Oḍi, veḍi or voḍḍa. A long-range bulky wooden merchant sailing vessel used mainly in the yearly trading journey with harbors in foreign coasts. It usually had a large central mast and two smaller masts

Oḍitān Kalēge. A famous sorcerer in Maldivian tradition. He was said to reside at a house known as *Keyoge* (banana house) while residing in Male'. He is mentioned in ancient written poems

Radun. The traditional way of referring to the Maldivian monarch; Rasgefānu, another local term, was also often used. The Arabic term 'Sultān' would be favored in official documents though. Queens would be addressed as *Rānī*.

Rihākuru. A salty and thick paste made by cooking tuna fish until most of the water evaporates. Known as *garede* in the southern languages, it is one of the most important items in Maldivian cuisine

Undōli (indōli). A large swingbed typical of island homesteads

Valī. In the Maldivian Islands every woman has a *valīveriyā* (guardian), usually the father, who needs to give *valī*, permission for the girl or woman to be married

Vāru (vāro). The royal taxes; the Vāroveriyā or Royal Tax Administrator was the main beneficiary of the taxes that he collected in the name of the king and was formerly the main ruler of an island

Veyo (veu). A bathing pool with stone steps usually located in the backyards of houses or close to a mosque. In the 1940's Muhammad Amīn's government ordered that they be filled with earth. Islanders were required to build small wells and bathing by the side of the well was promoted for health reasons in a drive to keep communicable diseases under control

Ziyārai (ziyārat). A small building erected over the tomb of a revered person. It usually looks like a low, small house within a walled enclosure

that was kept clean from vegetation and swept regularly. Little white flags used to be planted around the main construction and a lamp was kept always burning during the night, a shrine erected over the tomb of a saint or a person of power. Devotees would recite, pray and put new flags, lamps or simply pebbles within the precinct of the ziyārai. It was deemed that the powerful spirit of the departed person, now in the spiritual realm of the ancestors, could help those living with his powers, now increased by having his abode in the spiritual world.

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About the author:

Xavier Romero-Frias (born 1954), is a Spanish writer and scholar, an expert in anthropology and linguistics. He lived in the Maldives over a 13-year period. His present residence is in Thailand.

Xavier Romero-Frias is an authority on the folklore and oral tradition of the Maldives. He began his research in 1979, compiling the island traditions at a time when the ancestral customs were quickly disappearing in the Maldives. He is fluent in two dialects of the Maldivian language, having mastered Maldivian writing and Arabic as well.

Before Romero-Frias did this work, very few of the Maldivian stories and legends were in written form.

The author spent twelve years in India studying Sanskrit and researching the origins of the Maldivian cultural heritage. During this time he published this extensive monograph with his research on the Maldivian ancestral identity, which includes not only legends, but also observations on folk religion, drawings of boats and samples of local art, among other ancient Maldivian traditions.

According to Sri Lankan scholar Rohan Gunaratna, Xavier Romero-Frias "followed the steps of British scholar HCP Bell." Dr Roland Silva, the Director of the Archaeology Department of Sri Lanka between 1983 and 1992 compared the pioneering work of Romero Frías with that of Henry Parker, a British anthropologist who compiled the folk tales of the villages of Sri Lanka around 1880.

Xavier Romero-Frias gave lectures at the University of Madras in the 1980's invited by Professor V. Sudarsan, head of the Department of Anthropology. As an artist he has illustrated books for the EDC (Educational Development Center) of the Ministry of Education in Male', Maldives and painted the fish of the Maldivian waters, as well as the legends of the Maldives and the sailships of previous times. There was an exhibition of some of Xavier Romero-Frias, paintings in Vienna, Austria, in 1987. In the early 1990's Romero-Frias became a designer and supervisor of an International Labor Organization (ILO) Project for the development of local handicraft industries, teaching ancient art skills to Maldivian handicraft workers and training them to produce handicrafts for the tourist market. The project was carried out by the Ministry of Trade and Industries, Government of the Maldives and was funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

During the past thirty years Romero-Frias has also written many articles and commentaries.