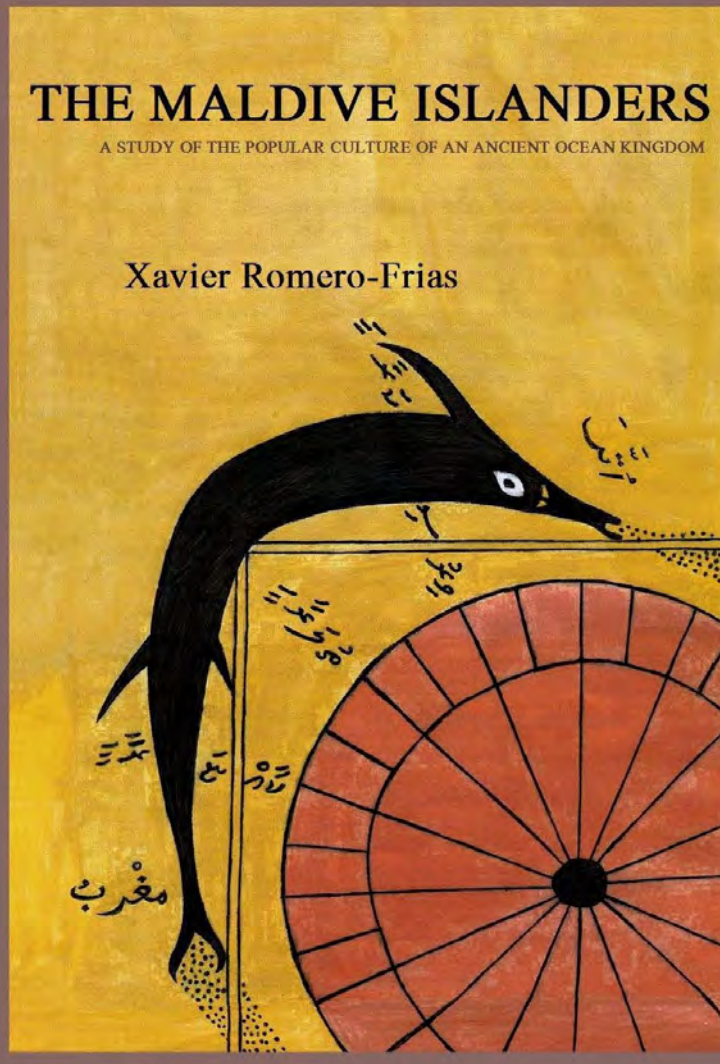
THE MALDIVE ISLANDERS

A STUDY OF THE POPULAR CULTURE OF AN ANCIENT OCEAN KINGDOM

Xavier Romero-Frias



NOVA ETHNOGRAPHIA INDICA

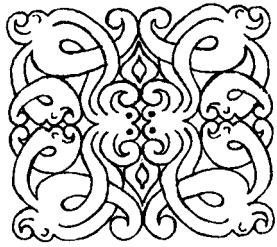
Photo: Haviru

THE MALDIVE ISLANDERS

A STUDY OF THE POPULAR CULTURE OF AN ANCIENT OCEAN KINGDOM

by

Xavier Romero-Frias



NOVA ETHNOGRAPHIA INDICA

1999

NOVA ETHNOGRAPHIA INDICA

ethnoind@hotmail.com

ISBN 84 7254 801 5

"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

Contents

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 Maldive 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 Maldive 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 Maldive 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 Maldive 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 Maldive 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; Nuḍalhī (Mādaḍibeage) Nasīmu, 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.

I have to give also special thanks to Rohan Gunaratna for providing access to the Maldivian Section in the National Archives in Colombo; Prof. V. Sudarsen of the Department of Anthropology, Madras University for his generous assistance by providing rare books and documents on Minicoy island; Bernard Koechlin of the C.N.R.S. for encouraging me to study the Maldive island poetry; R. Ramachandran Nair, the former Vice Chancellor of Sri Sankaracharya Sanskrit University (Trivandrum Branch) for graciously waiving the proverbial Indian red tape and getting me admitted as a student without further ado, and the campus director Bernard Feng for his kind assistance with the problems I always faced as a foreign (in all the senses) student in India; my classmate S. Neelakanta for his help and also for his zeal in making sure I did learn Sanskrit.

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

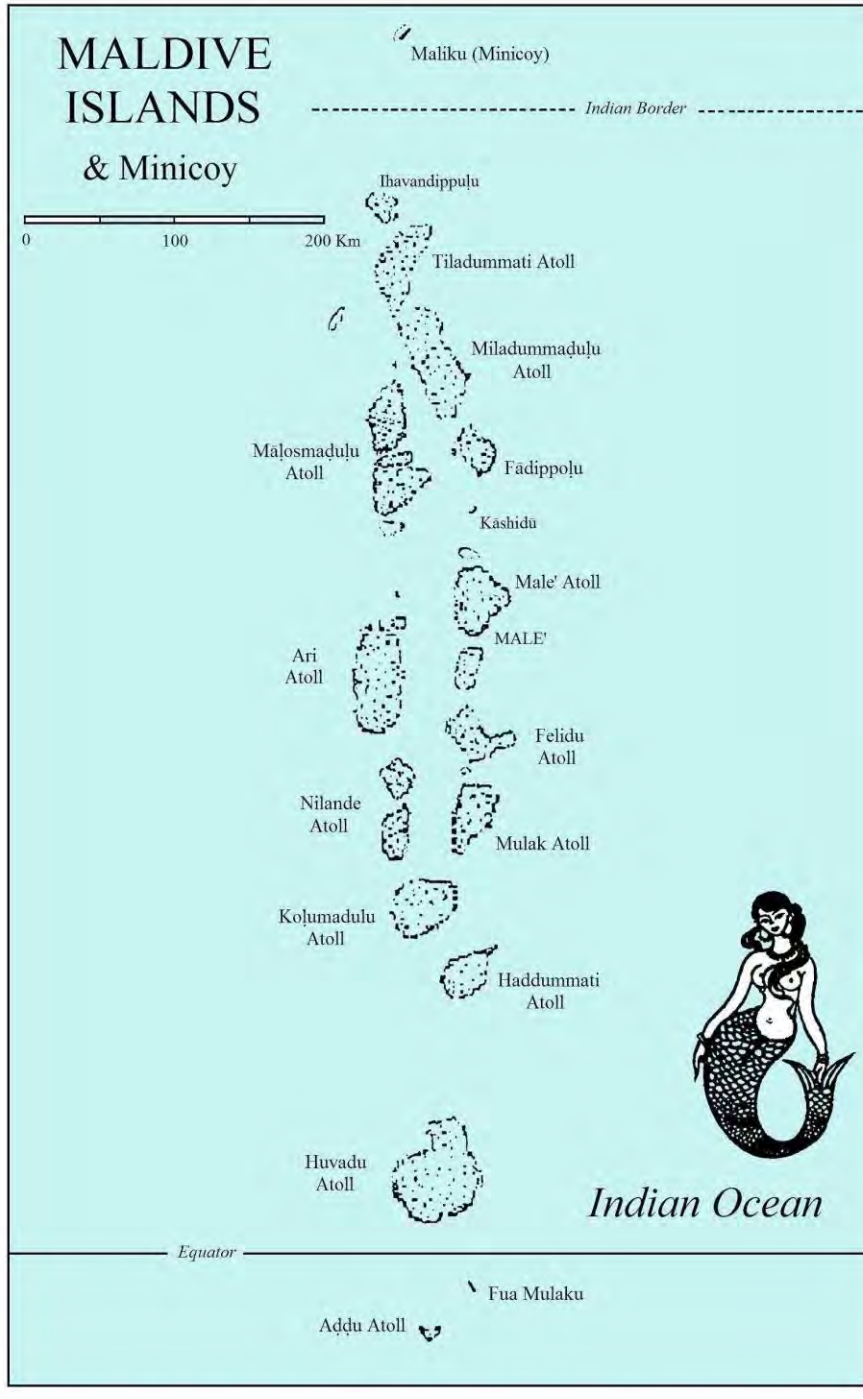
Minicoy; Paul Johnson, from the U.S. Navy, who was based at Diego Garcia in the 80's and sent me information and pictures of the little-known Chagos; Habeeba Husain Habib from the National Library in Male' for allowing me to photocopy certain books and M. Loutfi for giving me permission to take a few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

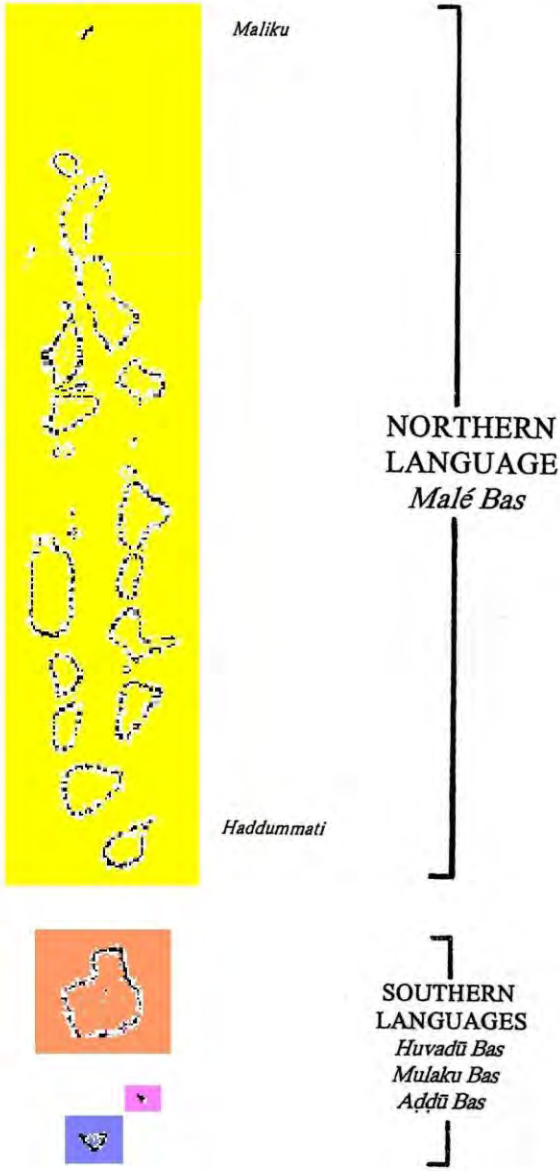
Last but not least, I have to thank certain people who provided me with books when I was in a very isolated environment. First my friend Manolo Martinez Marti and his wife Mercedes Sanchez Lodares, who even went all the way to Paris, to the French National Library, to photocopy a very rare manuscript, 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 Maldive 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.

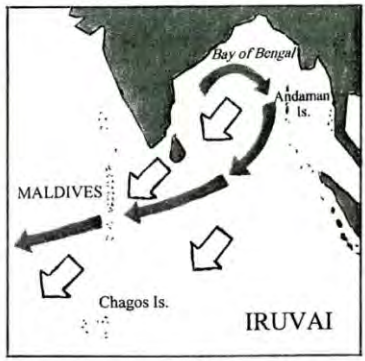
Finally, I have to express my deep gratitude to many Maldivian men and women that, unfortunately, I have not mentioned above. Time has passed and it is impossible now for me to recall all names and faces. However, I do remember clearly that many people kindly shared their time with me, putting up with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

Trivandrum, October 1999


MALDIVE ISLANDS
& Minicoy
Maliku (Minicoy)
Indian Border
Ihavandippuḷu
0
100
200 Km
Tiladummati Atoll
Miladummaḍuḷu Atoll
Māḷosmaḍuḷu Atoll
Fādippoḷu
Kāshidū
Male' Atoll
MALE'
Ari Atoll
Felidu Atoll
Nilande Atoll
Mulak Atoll
Koḷumadulu Atoll
Haddummati Atoll
Huvadu Atoll
Indian Ocean
Equator
Fua Mulaku
Aḍḍu Atoll



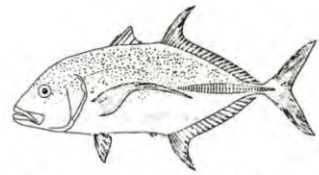
Linguistic map of the Maldive Islands showing the different forms of the Divehi language and their geographic distribution. In spite of its general homogeneity, the northern (or official) form of Divehi has slight regional variations *(Maliku, Haddummati)*. Owing to its special political status and its recent isolation, the Minicoy (*Maliku*) way of speaking contains a few archaisms and some Malayalam words, but it is still a form of the *Malé (Mahl)* language. On the other hand, the Southern languages differ widely from each other in spite of greater geographical proximity.



Iruvai season. The crisp Northeastern monsoon winds (broad white arrows) bring dry air and pleasant temperatures from the cooler northern landmasses. The oceanic currents (grey arrows) used to bring the trading fleets back to the islands. Average pattern at the height of the *iruvai* season in the month of January.

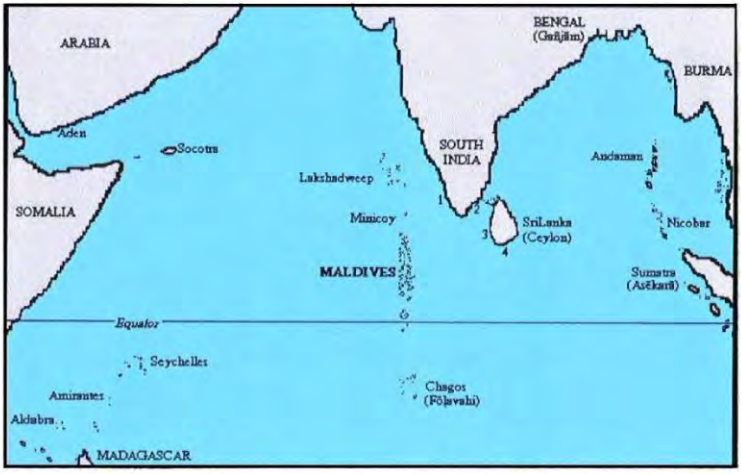
Huḷaṅgu season. The Southwestern monsoon winds bring humid, warm air from the central expanses of the Indian Ocean. Powerful oceanic currents carried the trading fleets to Ceylon and the neighboring Subcontinent. Storms are quite frequent during the *huḷaṅgu* season, especially from mid-May through September.

Wahoo (Acanthocybium solandri). Closely related to the tuna it is one of the favorites at every Maldivian table. This long fish is oddly enough called *kurumas* (short fish) in *Malé Bas.* But in the Southern Atolls it is more plausibly known as *digimaha* or *digimas* (long fish).



Handi, the Bluefin Jack (Caranx spp.). Jacks are very common close to the reef edges and often enter the lagoon to feed on the shoals of small fish living there. Chased by greedy jacks, the latter occasionally jump over the surface scrambling for life. Maldivians love to watch how this sudden rush of small fishes disturbs the calm lagoon waters.

A game of *kōḍi keṇḍuń.* During popular Maldivian festivals there was very little segregation between sexes. Island men and women of all ages used to participate together in those traditional celebrations. Gań Island, Haddummati Atoll.



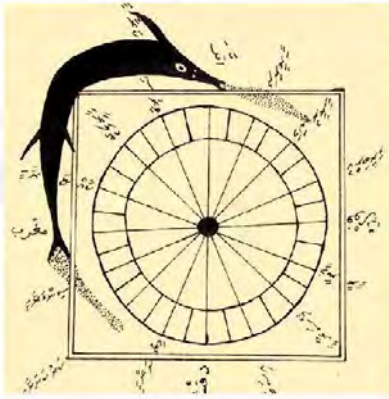
Map of the Central Indian Ocean showing the area surrounding the Maldives, the main island groups and the closest landmasses. The ancient trade route to Bengal left Ceylon *(Oḷudūkara)* and India *(Uturukarā)* on the West, after which Maldive boats sailed an almost straight northern course. 1.Cochin (*Kocce*), 2.Tuticorin (*Sūtukuḷi)*, 3.Colombo (*Koḷambu*) and 4.Galle (*Gāli*) were the closest trading harbors.

A *muḷōsi* in the foreground. These practical and easily-made palm-frond baskets were widely used before plastic bags appeared.

While most Divehi women favored gold-and-silver embroidery and thick bangles, Girāvaru women used to wear a distinct style of white bands around the neck of their *libās*, along with thin silver bangles. Contemporary picture of a girl in the traditional Girāvaru dress. (Photo: Mûsa Ismaïl)

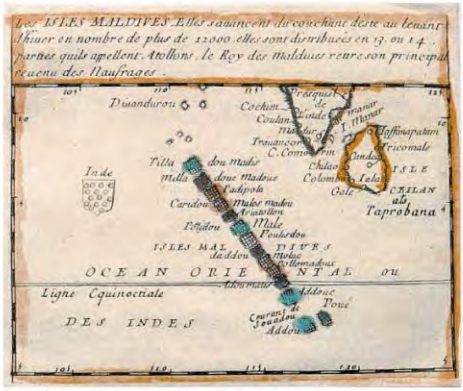
Maldivian ritual knife (*masdayffiohi*). It has a handle made of a sperm-whale tooth and a blade of 'seven metals' and is mainly used in *faṇḍita* with the purpose of bringing demons under control. (Photo: N.F. Munch-Petersen)

A *bokkura*. The small but sturdy local dinghy. Maldivian vessels were built without plans but with utmost care. While the boat was being built, the master carpenter would turn around it holding a length of rope or a palm leaf, taking measurements and giving instructions to the carpenters.

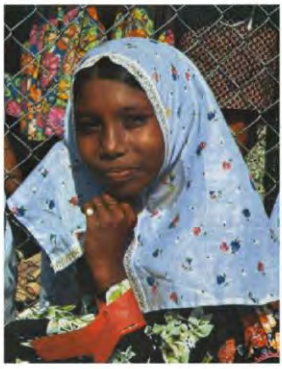


Cosmic diagrams were used by Divehi *nakaiyttcrin* to project the stellar ecliptic onto the geographic cardinal points. According to the particular stellar season, the astrologer could discern the corresponding malefic or auspicious directions of the compass. Correct orientation was important in house and boatbuilding. These fish illustrations found in local astrology books are among the few zoomorphic representations made by Maldivians since their conversion to Islam.

A traditional Maldivian kitchen is located in a separate building to keep a possible fire hazard from spreading to the main house. The hearth is made up of large stones that are periodically covered with a mixture of ashes and saltwater to reduce cracking. (Photo: B. Koechlin)



17th century French map of the Maldives. This long island-chain was feared by ancient mariners plying along the spice route. Many heavy-laden ships ran aground in its treacherous shallow reefs. In centuries past, it was widely believed that the king of Maldives derived his main income from the plunder of shipwrecks and that Europeans died quickly in an unhealthy Maldivian climate.



A woman from Minicoy. The people of this lonely island have managed to preserve their Divehi identity in spite of having been incorporated into the Malayalam-speaking Lakshadweep territory of India. (Photo: Omesh Saigal)

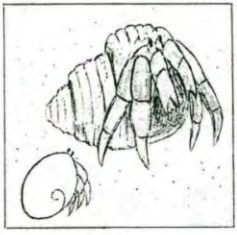
The wild screwpine (Pandanus spp.). The dense clumps of this plant are said to be evil spots *(nāmān taṅtaṅ)* haunted by *haṇḍi* spirits. The places where the wild screwpine grows are usually far away from cultivated areas.

A pair of *maruvali*. In former times footwear was a privilege of the nobles. Maldivian commoners had to go barefoot. Male' Museum. (Photo: Ismail Abdulla)

*Kaṣikeyo (*or *Kēvah),* the fruit of the cultivated screwpine. Formerly this was an important staple in the Maldivian diet. The red core was cut in very fine slices to break its strong fibrous texture.

A man casting his net on a reef. This low-key fishing style ensured the supply of small reef-fish. Their white flesh was deemed a necessary complement to the average Maldivian diet of Tuna and other large pelagic fishes. (Photo: Ismaīl Abdulla)

There are many different varieties of hermit crabs *(baraveli)* in the Maldives. The most common ones abound under the bushes bordering the waterline, while other species live in the sea. Since most of the Maldivian hermit crabs are rather small and unassuming, it is not clear what is the origin of the monstrous giant hermit crab so often mentioned in Divehi folklore.

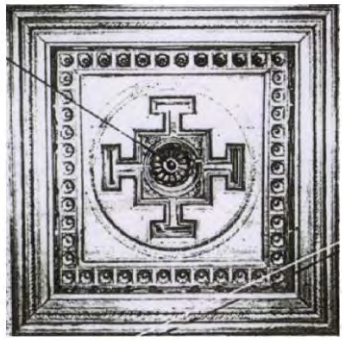


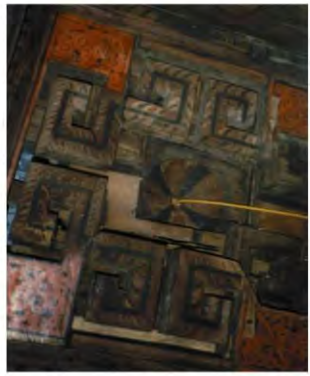
Kandoḷu or *kenduḷu* (Crinum asiaticum). This plant is used by Maldivian sorcerers to demarcate the areas to be protected from the attacks by evil spirits.

Hibaru, the Black Marlin (Makaira indica). Reaching sizes of almost 5 m, this powerful swimmer could drag fishing boats very far away into the ocean until it got tired; and it would then take many hours for the fishermen to row or sail back home. If they were not sighted after sunset, the people of the island would get together to light big fires at the shore to make sure their boat didn't get lost. It was an awesome sight to see the boat arriving late at night, the exhausted but happy fishermen, the huge black fish with its tail like a half-moon, and all men, women and children carrying lamps gathering to meet them at the beach.

Maldivian mangoes are of a small variety which has a very pleasant and sweet taste when ripe. However, the sour and hard unripe mangoes are commonly used as a cooking ingredient or may also be eaten raw with *rihākuru* (salty tuna paste) and chilli powder. (Photo: Ismail Abdulla)

A Divehi woman sitting on an *undōli*. These large swingbeds were present in all traditional dwellings of the Maldive Kingdom. Every *undōli* had its own special qualities, from the rough-and-ready ones of the humbler households, to the large, heavy, slow-rocking ones of the mansions belonging to the nobility. An *undōli* used to hang from its own special beam *(vas)* and most houses had one *undōli* outside on the verandah and another inside the house proper. For a Maldivian mother the *undōli* used to be the best spot to lull a baby until it slept, especially on warm, sticky nights when the rocking movement of the swingbed provided a much-welcome breeze and kept mosquitoes at bay.





Maṇḍala carvings from old Maldivian mosques. (Clockwise from top left corner):
a + b. Hukuru Miskiy, Malé (ceilings).
c. Mā Miskī' , Rasgefanno, Fua Mulaku (door)
d. Īdu Miskiy, Malé (ceiling)
e.Kaḷuhurāge Miskiy, Malé (ceiling)
The latter is badly damaged.

Haṇḍi Doṅ Kamaṇā. Illustration from a commercial booklet printed in the mid-nineteen seventies. This is a contemporary interpretation of a very popular and ancient Divehi mythical figure.

A young mother using her *kativaḷi* to chop dry wood. Looking for firewood was formerly one of the main female tasks. In order to gather enough of it, women used to spend a great part of their time in the forest. Dūṇḍigamu, Fua Mulaku.

Branches of the *kiṁbi* tree. Its fist-sized fruit *(kiṁbikāṣi)* has no known commercial value locally. In *kiṁbi* forests, the stench of decaying vegetable matter can be overwhelming. The ripe *kiṁbikāṣi*, falling on thick layers of rottening leaves, sprout new trees that make these spirit-haunted places dense, dark, and often impassable.

One of the most exciting moments in the lives of the islanders: A boat arrives. Some people go to the reef edge at low tide to get as close as possible. Fua Mulaku Island.

Kuḷḷavah, a small lacquered wooden container made in Tuḷādu, South Māḷosmaḍulu Atoll. Its name is based on the mangrove fruit that it is deemed to resemble. Tuḷādu craftsmen used to supply the Maldivian nobility with such beautiful crafts, but today their skill is mainly oriented towards the tourist market.
(Photo: Stefan Rebsamen, BHE)

A girl grinding spices on a *dāiy*. All of these heavy black grindstones have been brought to the Islands from abroad owing to the non-existence of hard rocks in the coralline Atolls of the Maldives. Māḷos Island, Ari Atoll.

The evil spirit *Safaru Kaiddā* as portrayed on the cover of a book of Maldive popular tales. This is a contemporary interpretation of an orally-transmitted tradition painted by Nāsif, a local artist, towards the end of the 1980's.

Island path leading from an inhabited cluster of houses to a *fannu*. Hañji Eḷe, Fua Mulaku.

Maldivian nobles at a palace ceremony. The outlandish appearance of the Maldivian elite at Malé, contrasted heavily with the traditional way of life of the common islander, which was based on time-tested Divehi ways. Moorish customs and ceremonies remained restricted to the court for centuries. (Photo: Bā)

President Afīfu, leader of the short-lived government of the Suvadive Islands. Note the secessionist flag in the background. (Photo: Bā)

Safe channels in the shallow coral reefs are marked with stakes. Sometimes palm fronds are attached to these signals in order to make them visible from afar. Diddū, Tiladummati Atoll. (Photo: Āsim)

Details of a Vighnāntaka block. Besides the terrifying faces, these coral stones are inscribed with powerful mantras to keep away evil spirits. Note the Buddhist tantric symbols, like the goad (aṅkuśa), bow (dhanu), vajra, and the sword of learning. Male' Museum.

Fath-ul-Bāri, a brig used by the Maldivian Royal House during the 1930's. These large sailships carried cargoes of copra from the King's plantations in uninhabited islands to Calcutta. Most kept in service for several decades, but the largest one, Atīyat-ur-Rahman, sunk in one of the violent storms that often hit the Bay of Bengal. (Photo: Bā)

Graveyard at the northern shore of Mīdū, Aḍḍu Atoll. Here lie buried some of the people who died shortly after fleeing the last great epidemic that swept Fua Mulaku Island. Note the well with its *vaḷudāni* to scoop water in the foreground.

The *eterevaru* or lagoon-side at one of the Maldive Islands. The resilient bushes growing above the waterline protected the interior. In the background an inhabited island. Usually no human habitations could be discerned from the sea. (Photo: Ismaīl Abdulla.)

Island woman preparing thatch *(faṅgi)* by weaving coconut-palm leaves *(faṅivah)* and coir rope. Nowadays local houses have corrugated iron roofs, but *faṅgi* is still in great demand to thatch buildings at most tourist resorts. Keṇḍikuḷudū Island, North Miladummaḍulu Atoll. (Photo: Habib)

Locally handcrafted model of a *dōni*, the Maldivian boat par excellence. In this small model (length 28 cm) the sophisticated design of the prow and the rudder are further brought into evidence by a shortening of its hull. Keudū Island, Felidū Atoll. (Photo: Ramon Faura Cunill)

Unlike their counterparts in most South Asian societies, Maldivian females don't have to bear the tremendous burden of being expected to be the only ones to uphold the continuity of cultural tradition in their community. The position of pride Divehi women occupy in their own society is perhaps the factor that makes the Maldives stand out most clearly as a separate nation among its neighboring countries. Women in Hoḷudū, South Miladummaḍulu Atoll.

Ceremonial vessel decorating the former RAF officers' mess at Gan, Addu Atoll. This type of small ships were used in the *Bali furuvāluṅ* ritual to get rid of the evil spirits causing a disease in an island.
(Photo: Sally)

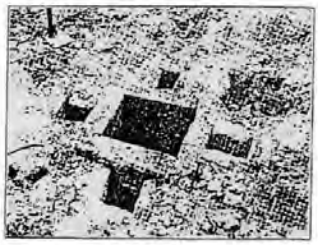
The *fuṭṭaru* or ocean side of a Maldive island. The large oceanic waves hit the reef in the background and only their ripples reach the shore. On this side the lagoon is usually shallow and the island coastline is fringed by boulders or coral rock darkened by algae growth. The thick green bushes keep the salty seaspray from reaching the gardens of the inhabited areas. (Photo: Muhammadu Najibu)

Papaya tree (*Ṭafōgas*); the first tree planted in Malé according to local myths. This tree and the blood in the waters (*Mahalē*) represented a prelude to the future prosperity of the capital island. In South Indian tradition the papaya tree and its fruits are a symbol of goddess Bhadrakali.

Goddess Nidhilakśmī as represented on a 9th century coral block. She is in the standing position and wears a crown that can only partially be seen. The fingers of her left hand gently squeeze her right breast while her right hand dispenses gold coins. Limbs lack proportion and the etching is somewhat crude. Malé Museum.

In former times it was customary for Maldivian babies to have their heads shaven and to wear kohl markings imitating eyebrows. Miskimmago, Fua Mulaku.

Cover of a Divehi book from Minicoy. Callygraphical rules concerning the *Tsana* script are followed less strictly among Minicoy people owing to a lack of regular contact with the other Maldivian atolls during the last decades.



Garbha pit of Toḍḍu Stūpa.
Notice the clear Maṇḍala shape.
(Photo: Royal Asiatic Society)

Ritual Yoni (female sexual organ) with Divehi *"evēla" akuru* inscriptions. This Yoni and the figure of Tārā below are on the same block, the Yoni forming the upper part. Liquid poured on it would fall through the hole of the left on the surface where goddess Tārā had been etched. Both this Yoni and the figure of the goddess must have been the main features of the rites for which this cube had been used. Carved coral. Malé Museum.

Lid of a 9th century Buddhist relic casket. Note the square inscribed with Prakrit mantras written in a Protobengali script and the viśvavajra. The sides of this coral-stone casket are inscribed with other Vajrayana Buddhist symbols of power, like vajra, vajra + pillar + viśvavajra, padmacakra, and cakra. Found in Mājos, Ari Atoll in 1991.
(Photo: Steve Holloway)

Green Tārā (Śyāmatārā) sitting on a lotus. Her right hand is in the varadamudrā and her left hand in the abhayamudrā gesture, while two fingers are holding an open lotus. She wears the five-pointed crown of the transcendent beings, large cardisks and her coiffure consists of two bulging knots overhead (a type of Kalinga coiffure common in Orissa and Bengal about 900 AD). The legs are in the ardhaparyaṅka position and it is not clear whether her right leg is resting on a small lotus pedestal (karṇikāpīṭha). In spite of the crudity of its execution, this Maldivian Tārā is the most graceful female figure of the pre-conversion period found to date. Etching on coral stone. Malé Museum

A woman from Mālos, Ari Atoll, proudly displaying her daughters. In Divehi tradition, the man would go to live to the girl's house after marriage. Accordingly, Maldivian parents were happy to have daughters because they would attract boys and the fruit of their work into their home. This custom has its roots in the Dravidian matrilineal kinship system.

Hafūli dōni. Six-oared fishing vessels. Their mast, light and easily detachable, is lowered to pass across the breaker zone. Ambul, NE Fua Mulaku.

Formerly Maldivians had their own calligraphic style for the Arabic script. A sample of red-and-black lacquered Arabic lettering from Kaḷuhurāge Miskiy, Henvēru, Malé.

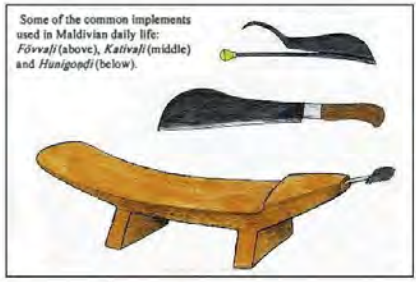
Maldivians have been traditionally a monogamous society. The Islamization that began in the 1980's saw an upsurge in poligamous marriages that upset local values. *"Hagu An'bi"* (Second Wife), the title of the Divehi movie announced on this Malé streetboard, reflects female concern towards what they perceive as hostile trends.

Kandumas, the Skipjack tuna (Katsuwonus pelamis). This fish is the single most important item in Divehi food. All Maldivians love its firm, red flesh. Traditionally, the wealth and well-being of an island were measured in terms of the average tuna amount fished. Large specimens of this same fish are called *goda* in Divehi. (Photo: Habib)

A young woman peeling *iḷōsi* stems of the palm leaves while she watches her child. Islanders like to perform most tasks outdoors and in a relaxed manner.
Māḷos island, Ari Atoll.

Young man masqueraded as a spirit during a popular celebration. The caption reads that he proceeds to eat the liver of a corpse. (Photo: Havīru)

The large fish-shaped mask which is the centerpiece of the *Bodu Mas* festival. This celebration takes place at night during Īdu days and it was hard to get good pictures. North Malé Atoll. (Photo: Havīru)



A picture of the Īdu Miskiy in Malé taken in the 1910's. Note the smallness of the mosque building in the background, the covered gate, the *ziyaraty* with its prayer flags and the *veyo* (bathing tank) in the foreground. The architecture and decoration of Maldivian mosques followed its own pattern until the influence of petrodollar wealth. (Photo: A. Dubreuil)

Most *dōni* rudder decorations (*bolu*) are inspired on Maṇḍala and cakra shapes. These simple designs are but a remainder of former rich and varied patterns which used to decorate Maldivian fishing boats.

A palm-leaf costume for a celebration called *Māli neṣuṅ*. This type of costumes are found not only in popular festivals of the Northern Maldives, but also in the neighboring Kerala region of India. The main items involved in their make-up are coconut-palm fronds, sackcloth and dry banana leaves. Tiladummati Atoll.
(Photo: B. Koechlin)

Muhammad Amīn Doṣimēna Kilēgefānu, the controversial leader hailed by some as the modernizer of the country. (Photo: Bā)

The *tuṇḍi* area of an island. Most islands of the Maldives have these sandspits at one end. A *tuṇḍi* often changes shape according to the seasonal flow of the currents on the reef. (Photo: Ismail Abdulla)

Depiction of a ship in a *nakatteri* book. Astrology and magic were widely used by Divehi shipbuilders and fishermen along the centuries.

An old teacher (*eduru*) writing on a wooden board sections of the Qurān that his pupils had to learn by heart. The girl in the foreground is wearing the ancient type of Maldivian dress which so upset visiting Arab 'holy men' in the centuries following conversion. This way of dressing disappeared during the 1980's when the demands of newly-introduced ideological intransigency highlighted the contradictions between traditional Divehi lifestyle and Islamic orthodoxy. Miskimmago, Fua Mulaku. (Photo: B. Koechlin)

An old mosque with the burial ground surrounding it. Notice the white pebble 'offerings' along the low-wall surrounding the tomb of the lower right corner, perhaps the grave of a 'person of power'. This mosque is close to the beach. Kedēre Miski' Fua Mulaku.

Two schoolgirls of mixed African ancestry. African slaves bought by Maldivian nobles in Mecca during Hajj journeys used to work at the royal court in Malé. After having served for a period of time they were often formally released before a king's death as a matter of charity. Feridū, Ari Atoll.

Decorations on *dōni* sternposts. Red and black were the main colors used by Maldivian craftsmen until the availability of synthetic enamel. Most of the designs below are from Fenfushi Island, Ari Atoll.

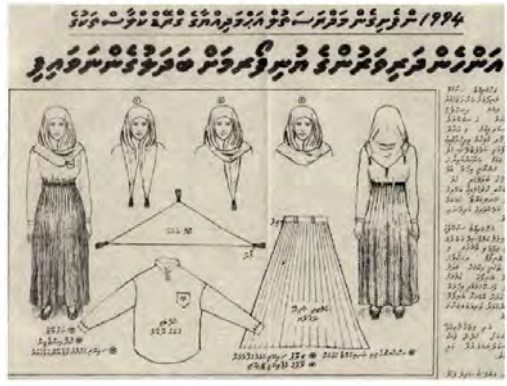
Deria Amān, an *oḍi (veḍi)* from Aḍḍu Atoll in full sail. These heavy ships made a yearly trip to South India or Ceylon loaded with Maldivian products. If they happened to stray from their usual course, they could end up in very distant shores. (Photo: Bā)

Since the 12th century Maldivians followed the Islamic injunction of not representing human and animal figures in their arts very strictly. Even so, certain *faṇḍita* drawings, like the one on the lower left *(vagu anhenrū)*, look anthropomorphic. Others have zoomorphic shapes like the *hahurārū* (upper left) which looks like a scorpion and the *isrū* (not represented) looking vaguely like an octopus. The most common in this category are the ones on the right which are used to improve fishing and are known as *masrū*. This type of drawings are copied on paper and kept hidden.

The *Vaṣoveu*, an ancient circular bath located in an area of the forest said to be haunted by evil spirits. Observe the thick screwpine trees in the background. Fua Mulaku.

A *batteli* in full sail. This is a medium-sized sailing vessel used for transport and trade in the Northern Atolls of the Maldives. (Photo: C. Verge)

Formerly a non-issue in the Maldives, female dress and self-righteousness suddenly made an impact on Divehi women throughout the country. An artificial form of prudishness was contrived when government-sponsored Arabic schools spearheaded the introduction of compulsory 'proper Islamic' uniforms for girls from mid-1980's onwards. (Haviru News)



The desolate and windswept southern coastline of Fua Mulaku, not far from the place called *Havva Dīdī Bēvi Tan*. The continuous wave action has piled up a high barrier of large coral boulders called *'hata'* in the local language.

Cover of the book 'Divehi Akuru' by Boḍu Fenvaḷuge Sīdī. The former Divehi alphabet was based on characters which originated in the ancient Brahmi script. In order to accommodate Arabic writing the *Divehi Akuru* were replaced by the 'Tāna' script from the eighteenth century onwards.

The white royal parasol *(hakkoḷu)* was one of the most important symbols of ancient Maldivian royalty. Whenever the Maldivian king left the palace or a covered enclosure, like his royal ship, an attendant followed him holding the white royal umbrella over his head. (Photo: Ismail Abdulla)

A local calendar-picture of a woman dressed with a *karu fehi libās* on a *fēli*, the black and white waistcloth worn formerly by Maldivian noble ladies and soldiers. She is holding an aluminium *baṇḍiyā*, the vessel commonly used by island women to fetch water. This type of dress has been revived as the traditional Divehi female dress and is nowadays a common sight in school celebrations and national-day parades. The bun was worn on the side and was covered with a cloth with glittery material and pins called *esjehi rumāfaḷi*. (Photo: Mūsa Ismaīl)

Although the *Uniyā* (Gerres acinaces) is a small and quite unimportant fish for islanders, the legendary hero Oḍitān Kalēge had predicted that such a humble fish would be the cause of his death. According to the Northern Maldivian lore, after a whole lifetime of escaping from many dangers unharmed, the mighty magician died when he was stung by one of the sharp spines the little *uniyā* has in its ventral fins.

The *magū* (Scaevola taccada) grows close to the waterline and under its cool shade a great variety of seabirds and crabs find refuge. Although its branches, filled with a light white pith, seem brittle, this is probably one of the toughest bushes in the Maldives. It resists severe storms and protects the interior of the island from the salty ocean-spray. In bygone days *magū* leaves were used as emergency food in times of severe famine.

Maldivian oarblades have a beautiful shape reminding of a heraldic coat-of-arms. Formerly they were decorated in black (based on the charcoal of dry *uni* fruits), and red pigments (based on a poisonous substance called *kaḍi*). But presently the favorite patterns are painted in white on blue or green synthetic enamel.

Kaṭṭēli (Promethichtys prometheus). A long, slimy black fish very much valued as food in Fua Mulaku island, especially during certain doldrum spells in which the oceanic winds die down and tuna is scarce. *Kaṭṭēli* fishing is done on calm nights by releasing a weighted long line into depths that lie quite close to the island shore. When the fishermen come back well past midnight, or in the early morning hours, the women wake up to cook the *kaṭṭēli*. Often the whole family gets up right then to relish this special meal which tastes delicious after weeks of bad fishing.

The ancient stories of the Maldive oral tradition were pervaded by feminine characters. Even nowadays, the graphics of contemporary Divehi novelettes sold in local bookstores prominently display pictures of beautiful women.

Men on the street in Fua Mulaku, an island with a population of many thousands. Maldivians say that in islands where only about thirty people lived, families got along very well with each other. However, the government wanted every inhabited island to have at least 40 adult males in order to enforce the regular performance of the Islamic Jamā' prayers every Friday. Thus, during the last half of the 20th century all the inhabitants of small settlements were forcibly removed from their abode and resettled in other islands with a larger population.