



New Zealand

# Majid's Pages

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## VILLAGES IN THE OCEAN

In the low, lush tropical coral islands of the Maldivé 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 (Fādippoḷu Atoll) and Kandoḷudu (Māḷosmaḷulu 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.<sup>1</sup> 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*).<sup>2</sup> They are common in the shore of every Maldivé island and just need sand and 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

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<sup>1</sup> Source Magieduruge Ibrahīm Dīdī (1982).

<sup>2</sup> Magū, bōshi and ḷos leaves could be used as food in times of famine.

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:<sup>3</sup>

*“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 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 shirking 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.

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<sup>3</sup> H.C.P. Bell's Monograph, 'The Maldivian Islands.'

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 than the one we have ascribed to it from the sociological point of view."*<sup>4</sup>

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 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 island 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> J.C. Levi-Strauss, "Tristes Tropiques." Cf. 1.4.1 'The First Mosques'.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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.

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 Duvahi' —the days of the republic— in the collective memory of Fua Mulaku people. According to one islander who lived through those times:<sup>6</sup>

*"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*

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to protect this person's identity.

*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.<sup>7</sup>*

*“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 veđi 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 kođi (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.*

*“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.

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<sup>7</sup> Certain leaves such as digutiyara (*Senna occidentalis*), muranga (*Moringa oleifera*) massāgu (*Amaranthus* spp.) and kullaḥḥila or gōramfau (*Launaea sarmentosa*), among others, were traditionally valued by Maldivians as food, especially when fish was scarce.

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.<sup>8</sup>

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 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 Huvadū 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.

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

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 bōḷu?' have been perpetuated in many tongue-in-cheek local sayings, enriching the island lore.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

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<sup>9</sup>'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'llikah.' (Like Mannān's trip).

<sup>10</sup> 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'