

Maldivian history- an outline

Xavier Romero-Frias

Maldivian history is not taught to Maldivians in a straightforward, accurate way. The door of systematic, rational and honest enquiry into their nation's past and its meaning is shut for Maldivian citizens by their own authorities. History in the Maldives is mostly reduced to exalting the Islamisation of the country and the defence of Islam.

The Buddhist past is steadfastly wished away, for it has no role in this scenario. This government-promoted attitude is at the root of the senseless destruction in February 2012 of the archaeological remains of the ancient Maldivian cultural heritage that were kept in the National Museum in the capital, as well as of the near-official protection of the vandals.

The Maldives were populated probably many thousands of years ago. The oral tradition of the Maldives doesn't have any reference concerning how or where the original inhabitants came from. But it is most likely that the first settlers came from the nearest landmasses, the coastal regions of India and Sri Lanka.

Some of the oldest legends of the Maldivian lore tell that some people came from the North and became kings, but these legends also mention that there were Maldivians already living in their islands at the time. The native inhabitants that welcomed the newcomers are part of the legends as background, for little details are given about them.

Thanks to a great number of archaeological remains, it is known that there was a prolonged Buddhist period in the Maldives. The Buddhist ruins are massive and reveal a great deal of the skill and craftsmanship of their makers. This Maldivian Buddhist civilization reached its height during the 9th century AD, and by then the Divehi culture, as we know it now, was already formed. The Divehi language, its script and the cultural values and practices that are the foundation of present-day Maldivian culture were a product of that period.



A Maldivian Buddhist sculpture in bas relief



A Maldive Buddha head

Islam came relatively late to the Maldives. The region of Sind and the Malabar Coast already had Muslim communities by the 7th century AD. However, the Maldivians remained still Buddhist for a long time after that, and it would be more than five hundred years later that the inhabitants of the archipelago converted to Islam.

The Islamic religion, however, is given the star role in all Divehi chronicles. When one reads books written by Islamic historians, one of the most common assertions is that in a particular country “before Islam there was *Jahiliya*”, the age of ignorance. According to this method of interpreting facts, history is rewritten in a manner where truth and serious historical inquiry become irrelevant. The revision is done whether by honest or dishonest means, the

only crucial guideline being to make Islam appear victorious at all times, as well as beneficial for the country, tarnishing the non-Islamic past as much as possible.

In this way history becomes something flexible that can be tampered with at will. Facts are rewritten in such a manner that no other period of the nation’s history seems more glorious than the Islamic one. Hence in Maldivian “historical” chronicles, the first settlement of the country, spanning millennia of a background of fisher folk who were probably of Dravidian origin, followed by the arrival of a kingly Buddhist dynasty, which ruled the country for over a thousand years, bringing influences from the North of the Subcontinent, are dealt with in a few sentences.

This extremely reduced summary is invariably followed by the following sweeping statement: “...And the King and all the inhabitants of the Maldivian Islands became Muslim.” Officially only then the “real history” of the Maldives begins: The history of the Islamic Nation. The account of the Maldives as an Islamic country is given so much weight, that all the previous periods of Maldivian history are made to become irrelevant.

The flourishing of a genuinely Maldivian Buddhist civilization, on which the present-day Divehi language, customs, manners and ceremonies are still largely based, is deliberately ignored. Solid historical evidence goes unheeded, even though ancient Maldivian ruins plainly testify that none of the buildings built after the twelfth century is anywhere near as grand as the stupas that were built by Maldivians in most of the main inhabited islands towards the last quarter of the first millennium AD.



A Maldivian cross-legged Buddha



A sculpture of the Buddhist period

Books written about the history or the anthropology of Maldives from a scientific or factual angle are forbidden in the country. The books written by writers such as shipwrecked French nobleman François Pyrard de Laval and by American anthropologist Clarence Maloney are not freely available in the Maldives in their original versions.

A highly placed Maldivian official who contacted this site stated, under condition of strict anonymity, that the few copies existing currently in the Maldives are restricted to places such as public libraries where they are allowed for the perusal of certain people –a kind of 'for insiders only' arrangement.

Excerpts of the books mentioned have been translated and published in other publications, but Maloney's book is never openly on sale in Maldivian bookstores, even though it is quite easily and cheaply available in India. If someone gets caught with copies at the Male' airport, they would be confiscated.

These books are outlawed in a quiet way. The authorities do not want to be overt about any official ban in order not to draw more attention upon them. But it is quite obvious that distribution inside the Maldives is forbidden and that they are not openly available either in bookstores or in libraries in the Maldives even now. The same well-placed official mentioned above once pointed out in a government meeting that everything written about the Maldives should be published as it is- good or bad. However most of the intellectuals and writers in government positions favour bowdlerization and censorship.

Still, some of the old skills were allowed to continue for a few centuries, well into the Maldivian Islamic period. Thus, mosques built in a syncretistic style, with beautiful woodcarvings and lacquer work still manage to give us a glimpse of the ancient cultural splendour of the Maldivians. Nevertheless during the centuries that followed, even those few remainders of the wealthy cultural past were neglected, which paved their way for their obliteration. The main guideline has been giving the Maldives an Islamic appearance. The history of the Maldivian Islands had to be emphasized in Islamic terms, and in the new framework national heroes had to be heroes of Islam; after all the Maldivian Islands are a "100% Muslim country."

During the last few centuries there are no known instances of Maldivian scholars of integrity having openly challenged the falsehoods imposed by this trend. On the contrary, many historians have pandered to the steep Islamisation of Maldivian history, and have rewritten the stories of historical Maldivian figures in order to make them appear even more Islamic. On the other hand, accounts that challenged this view have been suppressed with determination.



A Maldivian Buddhist sculpture

One example is the contrast between the stories regarding Bodu Takurufaanu as they appear in François Pyrard de Laval's book, written in the seventeenth century by a castaway French nobleman, and the recent versions of the same story endorsed by the Maldivian government. This distortion of history is widely propagated in the school texts used in all Maldivian educational institutions, as well as via the government-controlled media, so that it has deep and far-reaching influence on all the population of the country.

Books that straightforwardly tell true facts about the Maldives, such as *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval aux Indes Orientales*, both in its 17th century original edition and in its English translation, as well as Clarence Maloney's anthropological survey *People of the Maldivian Islands* first printed in 1980, are forbidden in the Maldives by the government and local students have no access to them. Pyrard's book in its original French edition candidly exposes some very tough facts about life in the royal palace in Male' in the seventeenth century. These were bowdlerized even in Gray's English translation.

Lacking a balanced view of their own history and being fed only Islamic propaganda, Maldivian people are made to believe that the history of their nation is at its most glorious height during its Islamic period. This "age of glory" includes the present days and in it the Maldivian nation is portrayed as being constantly under the threat of foreign influences that are perceived through the narrow prism of Islamic religious obsession.

As a consequence, the well-being of this island country is attached to its ability to preserve Islam, and thus the men and women of the Maldives are put on guard against any influence that may upset the "triumphant Islamic period the nation is enjoying." In such an atmosphere, openness of mind and scientific enquiry are thwarted at their root. Therefore, the display of hostility against other religions, especially Christianity, is seen as a patriotic duty in the Maldives.



Santo Antonio, now St Francis, Church built in 1546 in Cochin, India, where convert Maldivian King Siri Dhrikusa Loka (Hassan IX) was baptised on 14 January 1552