

Sociology and Social Anthropology in/for South Asia
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**Between Isolation and Diffidence: Possibilities
and Peculiarities in Contemporary Practices in
the Maldives**

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ABSTRACT: The Maldives is the only nation-state of South Asia that is exclusively oceanic and coralline. The country comprises a system of atolls, islands, lagoons and reefs as well as the surrounding sea. Since the amount of land is minimal, the ocean traditionally provided most of the daily sustenance as well as valuable export products for hundreds of small and closely-knit communities. From the physiographical point of view the only other area of South Asia that has extensive affinities with the Maldivian archipelago is the Lakshadweep, one of the Union Territories of India. The Chagos group located to the south of Maldives is also part of the coral island chain, but is now uninhabited. Both the Maldives and the Indian Union Territory of Lakshadweep share common geographic features as well as —to some degree— social, economic and religious patterns.

Even though it early felt the influence of the European seaborne empires, the island kingdom of Maldives was somehow overlooked by scholars. The only exception was HCP Bell, the Archaeological Commissioner of Ceylon, who first visited the Maldives towards the end of the 19th century. His earliest of a series of studies on the island nation was done around the time that the Maldives had become a British protectorate, when practically the whole region and the intervening seas were under the British rule. Even though mostly restricted to local archaeology and epigraphy, Bell's work provides critical insights of the hitherto unexplored societies of the Maldivian Islands and Minicoy.

The result of Bell's effort has been enduring and his influence would henceforth be felt in all 20th century academic works dealing even cursorily with sociology and social anthropology in the Maldives.

The Anthropological Survey of India began research in the nearby Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands by collecting field data only in mid-20th century; but even in that territory, studies on the local society are lacking —and these are essential in order to improve our knowledge of the social structure of those South Asian coral island communities. Also what is needed is comprehensive research of both the Maldives and the islands under Indian rule; such studies would provide a unique opportunity for comparative investigation on the affinities and dissimilarities in the island societies of these adjacent clusters of islands, throwing light as well on the extent to which they interacted with each other and with the neighbouring South Asian landmasses.

Exploring the possibilities of social anthropology in the Maldives will provide an exceptional opportunity to form the basis for the development of academic relationship with the other countries of South Asia on future research. Forthcoming projects could include cooperation between educational institutions in the Maldives and already established researchers of the society of the Maldivian archipelago and neighbouring island and coastal communities.

Background

Extending across the equator at its southern end, the Maldives is the southernmost nation of the South Asian region as well as the only one that is exclusively oceanic and coralline. Although it is currently the smallest independent state in South Asia both by population and land surface, it is spread over a large expanse of the Indian Ocean. The archipelago consists of a system of atolls, islands, lagoons and reefs. The former title of the rulers was "king of the land and the sea", a title that is also a fitting description of the country.¹ Since the amount of land is minimal and the fertility of the soil is low, in Maldivian history the ocean provided most of the daily sustenance as well as indispensable export products for the survival of hundreds of small and closely-knit island communities.

Inhabited since fairly ancient times, the people of this island realm have been sparsely studied and have remained in relative obscurity for many centuries. In the past the population in the Maldives was kept in check by periodic famines and epidemics, never

¹ The honorific title was written in Arabic as '*Sultan al-barr wa al-bahr*' on older Maldivian *lāri* coins

climbing, as far as data are available, above a maximum of approximately 100,000 before modern times.²

From the physiographical point of view the only other area of South Asia that has extensive affinities with the Maldivian archipelago is the Lakshadweep, located to the north and now one of the administrative divisions of India. Both the Maldives and that Indian Union Territory share common geographic features as well as —to a certain degree— social, economic and religious patterns.³ The Chagos Archipelago (BIOT) located to the south of the Maldives is also formed of atolls and is part of the same broader geographical chain, the Chagos-Laccadive Ridge. Spreading far to the south in the vast empty sector of the Central Indian Ocean, this coral atoll group was not settled by people from the Subcontinent in earlier times because of its remoteness, but was newly populated in the colonial era. The former inhabitants, the Chagossians or ‘*ilois*’, were the descendants of mostly African origin labourers brought in by the French in the 18th century. They were forcefully resettled in 1971 in Mauritius by the British government and the Chagos became again an uninhabited territory.⁴

Shipbuilding was essential in Maldivian society; originating in their need to fish and trade Maldivians developed solidly-built, sophisticated vessels. The oceanic location of the country and the relative vicinity of the southern end of the Subcontinent, as well as a wind pattern that facilitated periodic two way journeys, shaped a culture of fishermen and merchants.⁵ Islands where there were big ship owners had an access to wealth that other islands were excluded from. The same pattern applied to affluent households in the larger populated centres as compared to underprivileged ones. Historically it was a hierarchical social system where local rulers were connected to the elite of traders.

The tradition of religious studies in the Maldives most likely had its origins in Buddhist society. Indigenous scholars in the island kingdom were always men and they hailed from families belonging to the higher strata. Those who were selected for education based on religious texts followed a long standing practice uninterrupted since the era of the Maldivian Buddhist culture that had existed in the atolls prior to the conversion to Islam. Learned individuals were part of a small group that was customarily assigned

² Presently it is above 340,000 (2014 census).

³ HCP Bell, *The Maldivian Islands: An Account of the Physical Features, Climate, History, Inhabitants, Productions, and Trade*. 1882

⁴ The only inhabited place is the Diego Garcia Atoll, a US-UK shared military base.

⁵ Romero-Frias, Xavier. *The Maldivian Islanders: A Study of the Popular Culture of an Ancient Ocean Kingdom*. (1999)

positions of honour and who viewed themselves as having the mission to bring their knowledge of religious precepts to their centre of population instead of studying and writing about their own society. In modern times the prevalence of this restrictive traditional trend became an obstacle to innovative, scientific studies.

Despite their local importance Maldivian scholars remained anonymous until a few centuries ago. One of the first to leave historical traces was Nāibu Tuttu, a learned man from Vādū in Huvadū Atoll, who wrote the *Boḍu Tartību* a treatise written in the Maldivian language and Arabic on practical guidelines for matters such as prayers, cleansings, burials, etc. which was based on the Shafī' Islamic school of thought.⁶ By and large, the subsequent publications by Maldivian scholars in the centuries that would follow would be on religious subjects too.

Practices

Foreign geographers and travellers back in time, such as Al Dimasqi (1325)⁷ and Ibn Batuta (ca. 1347), provided the —not always accurate— first descriptions of the Maldives. These occasional visitors reported aspects of the culture that they found curious or worth mentioning when describing the people they encountered in the country during their visit. For the social anthropologist, however, the sporadic reports on the society the travellers had before their eyes are erratic and unfocused; details are muddled within the background of the main narrative.

Some of the most valuable ancient travellers' remarks on the island society were made with a censorious spirit, i.e. when they found certain local customs unacceptable. The Maldives were likely a matrifocal and matrilineal society in former times where the women owned the family house, which entailed that the Maldivian society was matrilineal as it is still in Minicoy. Thus Ibn Batuta's concerns, when he was given the post of judge during his prolonged stay in the island kingdom, give a glimpse into the former Maldivian social structure:

“When I was appointed I strove my utmost to establish the prescriptions of the Sharī'a. 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

⁶ This late 16th century scholar, who had spent part of his life in Hadhramaut, was also known as Vādū Dannakalēgefānu after his home island, among other names. Romero-Frias. (1999)

⁷ *Tuhfat al-Dhahab fi Aja'ib al-Barr wa al-Bahr*, by geographer Al Dimasqi. Previously Al Idrisi also had provided descriptions he had gathered from Arab travelers in the Indian Ocean in his *Kitāb Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi ikhtirāq al-āfāq*

*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 paraded in the marketplaces, and instructed that their women be separated from them.*⁸

Until the arrival of the Portuguese there was a long silent period. The observations of Portuguese seafarers are very much in line with the ones made by Arab travellers in previous centuries. Even though Duarte Barbosa highlights the widespread practice of sorcery—which still endures nowadays in Maldivian society—he hardly tells anything else that is new.⁹

The largest amount of notes on Maldivian society would be written by François Pyrard de Laval, a shipwrecked French nobleman in 1602.¹⁰ Unlike previous documented visitors, Pyrard did not stay initially in the capital, but in Fehendū (Pandoue) an island of Māļosmaḍulu Atoll, located far to the north of Male'. Unfortunately, even though he lived there for about three months, he makes no description of the local village or the islanders' way of life in his work. Much of the information in Pyrard's writings is restricted to the anxiety and the daily difficulties he and the French sailors had to endure.

Even after he moved to the capital, Pyrard was practically a hostage in the country until he was able to leave five years later. In the same manner as Ibn Batuta, he lived among the elite as soon as he reached the capital of the island kingdom where he was most of the time under the protection of the king. Although Pyrard's account is more reliable than Ibn Batuta's, as an aristocrat himself, he shares the contempt of the Maldivian nobility for the majority of the population of the islands, the lower strata of society. Even after he learned the language, he concentrates on the customs and the habits of the ruling class in the palace, and to a lesser extent, of the traders. Hence, the average Maldivian population is ignored and, despite the volume of his writings, data that are useful for the social anthropologist and sociologist to elucidate the configuration of the society as a whole are wanting.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many documents on the Maldives are related to trade, especially in cowries, merchandise that reached a boom around that time. Maldivians preferred to bring their goods on their own smaller ships to certain

⁸ Ibn Batūta, *Rihlat Ibn Batūta*, 'Travels in Asia and Africa'.

⁹ Barbosa, Duarte, *Livro de Duarte Barbosa* (1518)

¹⁰ Pyrard de Laval, François. *Voyage aux Indes Orientales, les années 1601 et les suivantes*. Paris 1666. Translated into English as *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil*, from the 1619 third French edition, edited by Albert Gray, assisted by HCP Bell.

harbours of the Indian coast and Ceylon, usually buying rice and cloth with the profits. Though the capital Male' sporadically functioned as a sort of "port-of-trade" selling merchandise—notably cowry shells—directly to visiting ships, local authorities were mostly irritated by the occasional large foreign ship visiting their island kingdom and coercing them to sell cowries there. In general, visits by foreigners—especially the Dutch—were not welcome by Maldivian kings.¹¹

Long term foreign visitors arrived again over two centuries after Pyrard. During the British Raj, a hydrographical expedition was undertaken in order to draw the Admiralty Charts of the Maldiva Islands. The survey had been prompted by veteran hydrographer of the East India Company James Horsburgh.¹² Led by Captain Robert Moresby, the Government Surveyor of the Indian Navy who had previously charted the Red Sea, the laborious task of mapping accurately the complex system of the atolls of the Maldives would be completed only in 1836.¹³

In November 1834 when the HMS Benares arrived to Male' Robert Moresby went first to meet the authorities in the capital to request permission to travel freely around the uncharted waters of the archipelago. However, he encountered distrustful officials who were apprehensive that the information a foreign captain would gather could be used for the benefit of a certain political opponent in exile. Not wishing to waste time, Moresby began the survey regardless and the permission was duly granted later. At that time the assistants of the survey Lieutenants I. A. Young and W. Christopher took some notes on the inhabitants of the islands in their journal. The published memoir begins thus:

*Owing to the want of accurate and particular information respecting the position and dangers of the groups composing the Maldiva Islands, any near approach to them is generally avoided by navigators, except in passing through one wide channel, in the parallel of 1' 30" North latitude. Hence the islands being seldom visited, their productions, and resources, the language, disposition, customs, etc. of the inhabitants, have remained nearly unknown.*¹⁴

Since Young and Christopher had visited all the islands of the archipelago during their protracted hydrographical work, they provide interesting statistical data. For the first time

¹¹ Jan Hogendorn & Marion Johnson. *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1986) p. 50

¹² James Horsburgh, *Geography of the Maldiva Islands*, (1832)

¹³ Sarah Searight, *The Charting of the Red Sea*. History Today, 2003

¹⁴ Lieutenant I. A. Young and Mr. W. Christopher, *Memoir on the Inhabitants of the Maldiva Islands 1834-1835*, in *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society from 1836 to 1838*, pp.54-86

the accurate number of inhabited islands in the archipelago is given, which at that time was established at 175, out of the roughly 1,200 islands and islets of the kingdom. Even so, these British officers' notes are short and their observations on the local society remain largely superficial. They had volunteered to stay longer at the capital in order to learn the Maldivian language and make meteorological observations, but ill-health — attributed to an unhealthy climate prevailing on the island kingdom deemed unsuitable for Europeans— prevented them from doing so.¹⁵

The proverbial “Maldive fever” was a kind of malaria of the vivax type. It had prompted early French navigators to brand the islands as unhealthy (*malsaines*) for Europeans and it kept, and would keep, visitors to the archipelago at bay. The fever had slowed down the drawing of the Admiralty Charts of Maldives by grounding regularly most of the members of the crew of the surveying ships, and it also attacked both Christopher and Young when they tried to study better the customs and laws of Maldivians.

*Maldive Fever. — Europeans seem especially liable to this fatal scourge of the Islands. Many have been the ill-fated survivors of wrecks on the Atolls who have but exchanged “a watery grave”; for a slower death from this insidious pest.*¹⁶

Almost immediately hit by the fever, Young remained exhausted in bed for the length of his stay in Male'. Very soon, and together with Christopher, he was sent to Colombo by the king on his own vessel —despite very bad weather conditions, for the local monarch feared that both British officers would die if they stayed any longer in the Maldives.

Thus, even though it had felt previously the influence of the European seaborne empires in the Age of Exploration, the unhealthy reputation of the Maldives kept away the kind of scholars that would have lived in the country and undertaken deeper studies. As a result quite close to the 20th century the society of the large Maldive archipelago remained essentially unexplored.

At last in 1882 HCP Bell, who would later become the Archaeological Commissioner of Ceylon, visited the oceanic kingdom. Bell's zeal is evident to anyone having even cursorily studied his work. He did a preparatory research and collected all the available manuscripts on the Maldive Islands, as well as the northern group of the Amindivi, Laccadive and Minicoy. Excerpts of these rare texts were then published by him along with his own studies, observations and reflections. After he had embarked on the task

¹⁵ Charles Rathbone Low, *The History of the Indian Navy (1613-1863)*, Cambridge University Press (2012) pp. 76-79

¹⁶ Taylor's Sailing Directory, Part L, p. 569.)

to fill the vacuum of information on the society and customs of this kingdom of atolls, he observed:

*The notices regarding the Maldive Islands are so few and far between, so dispersed up and down scarce works, mostly travels, difficult of reference, that it is hoped an effort to collect and bring into one focus the scattered rays of information on the subject may serve some useful purpose.*¹⁷

His earliest of a series of studies on the islands would be done around the time that the Maldives had become a British protectorate, when practically the whole region and the intervening seas were long under the British rule. Bell, looking back at the roughly 80 year-long expansion and consolidation of British power in the southern area of the Indian Subcontinent —that had followed the defeat of the Kingdom of Mysore at Srirangapatnam— was puzzled that the Maldives still remained a backwater. He pondered about the lack of studies on the country in the intervening decades, except for the one made in the 1830s led by Captain Moresby, and which was mostly restricted to hydrography.

It cannot but be a matter of surprise that a political connection with the English Government in Ceylon, extending over eighty years, has tended to throw little or no light either on the internal administration of the Islands or on the habits of the people.

Bell visited again the Maldives in the 1920s, after a time gap of over thirty years, when he was already in his old age. Because of his life-long attachment to the Maldives he had earned the affection of the Maldivian King to such an extent that he was granted the use of the royal schooner in his trips to various atolls. His last publication, a large monograph on the history, archaeology and epigraphy, was printed after his death.¹⁸

The outcome of the final phase of his research, when he had retired from active government service, Bell's last in-depth study was a fitting conclusion to his life-long commitment to the culture of the Maldive Islands. Mainly circumscribed to the study of Buddhist ruins, ancient inscriptions, and history, Bell's detailed writings provide critical insights into the previously little explored societies of the Maldive Islands and Minicoy. There is a big volume of data in the books that HCP Bell published. Even though somewhat unwieldy and lacking overall structure, a great amount of information can be gleaned from the text, as well as the detailed footnotes and appendixes.

A long period of occlusion followed Bell's last trip to the place. Further studies on the communities of the Maldives were held back by the remoteness and inhospitable

¹⁷ HCP Bell (1882)

¹⁸ H.C.P. Bell, *The Maldive islands: Monograph on the History, Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Colombo 1940

reputation of the archipelago as well as by the lack of home-grown scholars, the few Maldivians who had access to higher studies not having directed their interest to the anthropological field. Beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the sons of well to do families from Male', mostly connected to the local nobility, had been sent to Colombo to British-run schools for higher studies. There was, however no local academic who felt curiosity about his own society in the first half of the 20th century. Those who pursued further studies did so in the well-established tradition of becoming religious scholars or joining government service.

While HCP Bell had hoped to pave the way for systematic and continued research of the island kingdom —as the appeal to future researchers contained in his work expresses, after his death not a single person would continue in his steps for many decades. The publication of Bell's works did not produce a breed of modern researchers who would expand on what he had written. Neither did his effort awaken the intellectual curiosity of Maldivians. His books were not translated into the Maldivian language and, for many years, did not lead to studies and commentaries by scholars of the islands. The few copies that were printed remained hidden in libraries and quickly became old books covered in dust.

As if under a curse, the knowledge of Bell's books remained very limited, and for half a century there was hardly any transmission of the data contained therein. Despite a few foreign contacts lifting the shroud of obscurity in which the islands dwelt, no scholar chose to display an interest in the social organization of the Maldives for a long period in the heart of the 20th century. The British presence at the Gan military base in Addu Atoll after the Second World War hardly contributed anything new. Later, at the beginning of the Cold War era, even after having been a stopover in the 1957-58 *Xarifa* expedition to the Maldives and Nicobar —in which Austrian zoologist Hans Hass led a group of scientists— the culture of this South Asian coral archipelago remained practically unknown to the world's academic community.

Sometime in the early 1970s Danish scholar Nils Finn Munch-Petersen realized that the Maldivian archipelago had been little-studied and developed an interest in the place. He looked at maps and wondered about the enigmatic stretch of small dots on the Indian Ocean. The Maldivian Islands were so near to Sri Lanka, but quite different according to what he could infer from what Bell had written about the place, as well as from the scant and incomplete earlier accounts. Although a good quarry for a modern researcher, the bulky amount of scattered data that had been painstakingly gathered by HCP Bell was often frustrating. The cluster contained many single bits of information, but these remained vague. They did not translate themselves readily into structures that could fit available patterns of the sociology of the South Asian region. Munch-Petersen then tried to obtain updated information about the Maldives, but to his amazement soon realized that there was none and thus he determined to go there and see the place by himself.

Deeming that geographic proximity would be helpful to elucidate the matter, Munch-Petersen began anthropological research in South India in 1973. While doing preliminary field studies at the coastal village of Thirumullaivasal, in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, he kept trying to gather fresh scholarly data about Maldives. However, even though he had been poring over all the documents that were available on the archipelago; he could find not even a hint of a description of the social structure of the country.

Finally, after some difficulties in obtaining permission to travel to his destination, Munch-Petersen reached the Maldives in 1973. Following his arrival he stayed first in the capital, where he was given hospitality by families belonging to the high class. The first scholar that had set foot in the islands with the purpose of studying the country since HCP Bell, Nils faced the difficulty of where to start. He chose Fua Mulaku, a large island for Maldivian standards, located close to the equator.

Munch-Petersen observed that the Maldivian society was quite homogeneous owing to being mono-religious and practically mono-lingual. Compared to other societies of South Asia it was characterized by bilateral kinship, an open marriage system, a lack of caste, and a high degree of sexual independence. He also found remarkable the fact that there was a very high literacy rate, the rate for women at the time being higher —or as high as for men, particularly in the islands away from Male'. Subsequently he published an 80-page book in the Danish language with an English appendix about his ground-breaking research, which included illustrations of the way of life and the crafts of islanders.¹⁹

Furthermore, during his stay in the archipelago, Munch-Petersen was active in gathering a unique collection of Maldivian artefacts which became part of the collection of the Moesgård Museum in Denmark. Many of these objects were the fruit of skills that were already extinct in the early 1970s when they were obtained, and their preservation will be beneficial for future researchers.²⁰

Clarence Maloney was an American anthropologist who came to the Maldives in the wake of Munch-Petersen. He had spent his childhood in South India and was familiar with the Tamil language and culture. Focusing on a description of the society, his work 'People of the Maldive Islands' would be the first book exclusively devoted to the anthropology of the country. It contains chapters on history and linguistics, as well as, for the first time in history, an attempt to describe the syncretistic beliefs of Maldivians.

¹⁹ Annagrethe Ottovar, Nils Finn Munch-Petersen, *Maldiverne: Et Øsamfund i Det Indiske Ocean*. Kunstindustriemuseet, Copenhagen. 1980

²⁰ The Moesgård Museum is the Aarhus University Museum.

Throughout his study Maloney was aware that the society was in transition and he observed well the process of the Maldives opening itself to the outside world and the growing influence of tourism in the island economy. He also observed the alarming trend of a very high population growth as infant mortality declined owing to local improvements in sanitation and health services.

There were no legal hurdles in place for researchers in the Maldives during Ibrahim Nasir's rule in the 1970s —before the tourist boom set in and masses of foreigners began arriving to the islands. Neither Munch-Petersen nor other subsequent scholars such as Maloney, Elizabeth Colton or Xavier Romero Frias experienced government interference, or attempt at controlling, their work. However, although Maloney had not been put any obstacles to do his study while in the country, his work was ignored and his book 'People of the Maldivian Islands' was cold-shouldered by Maldivian authorities after its publication in 1980.²¹

Being forbidden to be sold and distributed in the Maldives, Maloney's first work of reference on the anthropology of the archipelago would see no diffusion. Hence the overall situation regarding how information on the country might be used had not changed much since Robert Moresby's surveys were viewed with suspicion by the Maldivian rulers in the early 19th century. A similar fate would lie in wait for other researchers in the last quarter of the 20th century: Colton's study on the elite of the Maldives —even though she had been on friendly terms with high placed government officials,²² as well as Romero Frias' compilation of the oral tradition of the islands,²³ both initiated in the late 1970s, were firmly suppressed by the authorities.

A few copies of these books on Maldivian culture are kept within the country, but only in a few locations that are off-limits for the general Maldivian public —and where solely privileged officials of the cultural departments of the government are allowed to peruse them. Ironically, one of the few works on Maldives promoted by the government, and thus freely available in the Maldives, is by Thor Heyerdahl who tried to undo the findings and research by HCP Bell on Maldivian archaeology by putting forward far-fetched theories, such as referring to the Gan Huvadhu stupa as a Sun Temple.²⁴

²¹ Clarence Maloney. *People of the Maldivian Islands*. Madras: Orient Longmans, 1980 (partly updated reprint published by Orient Blackswan 2013).

²² Elizabeth Colton, *The elite of the Maldives: Sociopolitical Organisation and Change*. London School of Economics and Political Science, 1995.

²³ Romero-Frias. *Folktales of the Maldives*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012

²⁴ Thor Heyerdahl, *The Maldivian Mystery*, 1987.

In the 1980's the Maldives became an important tourist destination and experienced an economic boom. At the same time, the role of the Islamic religion in society passed from having been a venerable tradition intertwined with local mores to a government-enforced political ideology that had to be cleansed from 'errors'. While tourism boomed the government widely used the local media —mainly radio and television— to preach and propagate its officially-endorsed form of religion in the island society. Some Maldivian officers though, such as Habeeba Hussain Habeeb, were aware that in the face of the vast economic, cultural and political changes there was a need to preserve the genuine Maldivian cultural pattern by gathering information from every single inhabited island, a plan that had also been put forward by visiting French ethnographer Bernard Koechlin in 1981.

By the beginning of the 1980s the country became divided into three quite well-defined zones: The tourist islands, 'urban' Male', and the 'rural' islands inhabited by local people. The latter became a restricted area and new regulations were set up by the Ministry of Atolls Administration (formerly Provincial Affairs) to control visits by foreigners to 'rural' places ruling out casual visits. In 1984 strict controls for foreigners to travel to and to stay in the Atolls were put in place. Local guest houses were banned and permits had to be obtained by scholars before travelling to island villages, a process that required a detailed explanation of the purposes and objectives of the study or survey in question. In that period, a well-timed expedition from the Historical Museum of Bern visited a number of Atolls and gathered samples of local crafts. The scholars who were part of the group later published an illustrated volume that became available as the catalogue of an exhibition of Maldivian items and ethnographic pictures in Bern in 1986,²⁵ but not all those who asked permission to visit the atolls were successful.

The first Maldivian population statistics in English had been printed in 1921 in Colombo by the Ceylon Census Report.²⁶ Later census figures show that the population reached 100,883 in 1966 —first time above 100,000. But roughly at the same time that the tourism-fueled economic boom began, international organizations affiliated to the United Nations, such as UNDP, together with foreign NGOs, began issuing more detailed broader reports and more detailed statistics. As early as February 1980 a 'Report on the Survey of Island Women' was published by the National Planning Agency in collaboration with the Overseas Education Fund of the USA. This survey was completed by Helen Seidler under a USAID grant, and is based on data gathered in 1979 in interviews with 600 people on 40 islands of the Maldives. Also some foreign scholars,

²⁵ Ernst J. Kläy & Daniel Kessler, *Trauminseln - Inselträume: Die Republik der Malediven (Indischer Ozean) im Spiegel westlicher Vorstellungen*, Bernisches Historisches Museum, Bern 1986

²⁶ *Ceylon Census Report*, Colombo 1921. Maldives, pp. 94-108.

albeit very few, made localized studies in the islands such as French doctors Belig and Riolacci on the population and medical services available in Maldives,²⁷ but large areas of possible studies on the Maldivian society remained neglected.

However, even though certain government departments had collected vast amounts of written data concerning the local inhabitants, the headquarters of the Maldivian administration did not undertake sociological surveys on their own. Since population facts and figures have been gathered nationwide for many decades, bundles of official documents on paper are available from all the island offices. Thus in the future the archives that have not been destroyed in the interim may become a valuable quarry for sociologists and anthropologists.

Nevertheless certain statistics regarding crime, for example, may not be freely available for researchers. It was not uncommon in the 1980s for officials of the judiciary to deny that there was such a thing in their country when approached by foreign academics regarding statistics of adultery. But in private conversation, a judge would easily acknowledge that the most common punishment throughout the Maldives was the flogging and banishment of adulterers, typically inflicted only on the women.

Peculiarities

For the social anthropologist the Maldivian archipelago by its nature lends itself to quantitative analysis consisting in surveys requiring questionnaires and brief field visits, but difficulties lie ahead. There are government bureaus in every inhabited island, although access to local statistics may be problematic to obtain. The response of the local people to researchers of international organizations that reached for the first time far-flung island communities in the late 20th century likewise was often hampered or conditioned by the fact that these came accompanied by high government officers.

In this constraint there was almost no improvement from HCP Bell's stopovers six decades earlier on the Sultan's schooner, when a great part of the time was consumed in hospitality procedures led by the local authorities. Even in modern times the sudden visit would become intimidating and islanders would feel under pressure, their first priority being to cause a good impression and to follow certain strict protocol procedures in welcoming and giving a good accommodation to their guests.

Qualitative surveys are even more problematic to undertake, the first obstacle every researcher wishing to make a systematic field study would find would be the difficulty in

²⁷Amet Belig and Jacques Riolacci, *Enquete sur l'organisation Sanitaire et la Pathologie de la Population aux Maldives*. Nice, 1983

covering the society of every one of the basic units of island society in the archipelago. Although Munch-Petersen travelling by local boats managed to visit —staying overnight or longer— 120 inhabited islands during the protracted periods of his stays, even the most ambitious researchers rarely visited more than sixty of the over two hundred populated island localities that are there. Mostly those doing so chartered a boat with living quarters and anchored it near the island in question during their study. But such a method is costly and does not lend itself to protracted stopovers.

Since reaching and finding somewhere to stay in an island was —and even though now some islands have guest houses to a certain extent still is— a time-consuming procedure, most scholars ended up compromising and focusing on particular communities that were deemed to be representative. As a consequence of this practically insurmountable problem the goals of a visiting scholar had, or have, to be changed or adjusted when faced with the reality of the country. In recent years domestic airports have made access easier to certain atolls, but still the difficulty to reach the smaller and scattered centres of population persists.

Possibilities

At long last, at the turn of the 21st century, young local scholars arose who directed their interest towards their own society from a scientific angle. A few Maldivian students graduating in universities abroad began to write on issues and trends in Maldivian society as part of academic dissertations, such as Husna Razee's *'Being a Good Woman': Suffering and Distress through the voices of women in the Maldives*. These papers provide a very useful insider viewpoint for the researcher, but much is yet to be done in the area. A number of selected papers and articles on cultural and women topics, as well as some other inedited material, were published online at websites on Maldivian culture and politics run by Michael O'Shea and by Ahmed Shafeeq.²⁸

In the last two decades the country has gone through a dramatic transformation as a result of political restlessness with demonstrations, low-level violence and the sporadic disappearance of opposition political figures. Since the last two decades there is also a substantial population of foreign workers —consisting mainly of Bangladeshis with only temporary residence status— that has settled in the Maldives. Their numbers possibly exceeding 100,000, the amount of migrants has been steadily growing while feeding the demand for unskilled workforce. The pervasiveness of these imported labourers has altered local traditional patterns in the work field, as well as drawing multiple social

²⁸ Maldives Culture and Minivan News, among others.

issues in its wake, such as their being often mistreated and denied rights, as well as limiting employment opportunity for younger Maldivians.²⁹

Recent trends that have come in the wake of the islamization of the country in the preceding years are the growth of religious fanaticism and militant jihadism in certain sectors of the society. In some cases this development has resulted in violent incidents, leading also a number of local young males joining foreign insurgent networks.³⁰ Corresponding changes in female dress that have been imposed in recent years have resulted in increased verbal and physical attacks on women wearing traditional Maldivian dress.³¹ Other intractable current phenomena are the spread of drug addiction and the activity of street gangs in the main islands.³²

Ecological problems also have social components, such as the excessive accumulation of solid and chemical waste owing to imported consumer habits, in addition to the new pattern of urbanization resulting in inadequate sanitation which places a stress on the natural island water resources. The ad-hoc disposal of waste also causes extensive pollution of coral reefs, while the Maldives—in clear contrast to the Lakshadweep and the Chagos— have no truly protected areas, whether marine or terrestrial. In 1979 when presented with the first Nature Conservation Plan for the Maldives then President Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom emphatically stated:

*We don't need anything like this. GOD has always provided, and GOD will always provide...*³³

Other potential research topics in social anthropology could include the power dynamics in the island communities --how customary patterns of control affect decision making, as well as the study of Maldivian communities living abroad. Although small groups of Maldivians had lived in neighbouring countries in the last few centuries, including students and exiles, by the turn of the 21st century some of these groups in Sri Lanka and South India had become sizeable communities. Austrian ethnologist Eva-Maria

²⁹ Munch-Petersen, *The Maldives, victim of Uncontrolled Growth*, Nias Review 1, 2008-09, p. 8-9.

³⁰ Hasan Amir. *Islamism and Radicalism in the Maldives*. Monterey, CA Naval Postgraduate School, 2011

³¹ Nils Finn Munch-Petersen, *The Maldives tragedy – losing its culture and history*. SASNET Lecture, 2012.

³² Aishath Ali Naaz. *Rapid Situation Assessment of Gangs in Male*. Malé The Asia Foundation, 2012

³³ Munch-Petersen, *Nature as a Tourism Resource*, 4th Nordic Symposium on Tourism Research, Handelshøjskolen, Copenhagen, 1995, p. 3.

Knoll included these expatriate communities in her study of the incidence of thalassemia among Maldivian populations.³⁴

At the time of the British Raj HCP Bell had included the islands of Amindivi, Laccadive and Minicoy together with the Maldives in his ground-breaking research, but later studies have treated both groups separately. The island groups to the north of Maldives had been included in the Imperial Gazetteer of India, a work whose compilation had begun in 1869 and in which the Maldives themselves for some reason are only cursorily mentioned.³⁵ After the independence of the Indian Union the Anthropological Survey of India began research in the nearby Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands by collecting field data only in the last decades of the 20th century; but even in that territory, studies on the local society are lacking —and these are essential in order to improve our knowledge of the social structure of those South Asian island communities.

The Lakshadweep and the Maldives not only share an identical oceanic and coralline environment, but in the case of the atoll known as Minicoy or Maluku, they share the same cultural and linguistic background. While German anthropologist Ellen Kattner made a circumscribed research on the society of the atoll of Minicoy,³⁶ what is lacking is comprehensive research of both the Maldives and the islands under Indian rule. New studies would provide a unique opportunity for comparative investigation on the many affinities, as well as the dissimilarities —Minicoy, Laccadive and Amindivi are matrilineal and matrilocal, as opposed to Maldives which are ambilineal/bilateral and ambilocal— in the island societies of these adjacent clusters of islands, throwing light as well on the extent to which they interacted with each other and with their neighbouring South Asian coastal areas.

In this decade, and for the first time in Maldivian history, university education became available within the country. The Maldives National University was officially established in 2011 and, along with other upcoming higher educational institutions in the island nation, could be a platform for a new outlook on research, as well as an instrument for the development of academic relationship with the other countries of South Asia on future studies.

³⁴Eva-Maria Knoll, *Male' as a Hub for Health-Related Mobilities Institute for Social Anthropology - ISA, Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW)*, (unpubl.)

³⁵ William Wilson Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 16, p. 85-88.

³⁶ Ellen Kattner, *The Social Structure of Maluku*. International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter n. 10, pp 19-20. Leiden 1996

The overcoming of reticence and the support of Maldivian establishments, both educational and governmental, may perhaps be instrumental in opening the gates to more efficient and up-to-date study methods. The new approach would necessarily include cooperating with, instead of ostracising, established researchers —both foreign and local— of the society of the Maldivian archipelago as well as of the comparable island and coastal communities of neighbouring South Asian countries.

Picture

A beauty contest in Male' in the early 1970s, by Nils Finn Munch-Petersen.

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