Symbols of the Suvadive State

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Historical background

Traditionally the kings of the Maldives did not treat all the atolls as one homogeneous mass. Certain atolls, such as Huvadu, had customary rights which gave them certain privileges even over the ordinary subjects in Male'. Huvadu Atoll, whose Atoll Chief was said to have even his own flag, and the other southern atolls, such as Addu, certainly fell into this category, as did some single islands like Girāvaru. Formerly Addu atoll did not have vaaruverin (tax collectors) or atolhuverin (Atoll Chiefs) as did the other atolls. The Addu high official was a kuḍa banḍeyri (junior treasurer or a junior minister). Huvadu Atoll and the broad channel north of it separating it from the atolls of central Maldives were known also as Suvadiva, from Suvadvipa, an ancient Sanskrit name.

An old Dutch map of Suvadiva (Huvadu) Atoll
Brief history of the Suvadive Republic

The United Suvadive Republic (1959-1963) was formed by the three southernmost atolls of Maldives (Huvadu, Fua Mulaku and Aḍḍu). It would never be recognized by any other government.

The breakaway republic would have only one president, Abdullah Aff, hailing from a high-status family of Hitadu Island, Addu Atoll. This state lasted from 1959, two days after the new year, until the 23d September 1963 when Aff went into exile to the Seychelles on a Royal Navy ship. Fua Mulaku leaders received the news two days later, on the 25th September. The Suvadive President lived quietly with his family in the Seychellois capital Mahé until his death in 1993.

It is interesting that a proposition acceptable to the Suvadivians around late 1962 and early 1963 that was seriously considered even by Male', was recognizing a separate self-ruling government in Hitadu under the sovereign control of the king in the capital. The parliament and the government in Male' would have had absolutely no control over the Suvadive state, with the king exercising sovereign power through his privy council, which obviously would include Suvadive members. Although this was good enough for the Suvadive representatives, Maldiv
Prime Minister Ibrahim Nasir ruled it out because the solution would have entrenched the Maldive Islands’ kingdom. Nasir had already decided to dispose of the monarchy by then.

**Symbols of the Suvadives**

According to an image appearing in the book ‘Divehi Tārīkhah Au Alikameh’ printed in 1958 in Male’, the Atoll Chief of Huvadu Atoll had a particular flag. The text in the book says that this flag had been copied from a book made by Kullhavah Dhahara Takkan in the 18th century. There are no other sources for this flag and neither its design nor its color pattern were revived when the Suvadive state felt the need of national symbols following the secession.

The Suvadive government had few symbols, only a national flag and a coat of arms. They were designed by people close to President Afif. No documents regarding sketches of original patterns or drawings have survived and no particular person has claimed having come up with the original designs, which thus appear to be a collective effort.

The flag’s three ascending stars represented the three atolls forming the nation and the crescent the Islamic religion. It is not clear though what the meaning of each color was. Some Hitadu people ventured that the blue, the uppermost color, stood for freedom, as in the French flag, while the green and the red would represent the two bastions of the islands’ economy.¹

Green was said to stand for what the land produced, such as coconuts and the leaves of other edible items such as taro, screwpines and sweet potatoes, of the bushes that gave firewood, as well as the leaves of the trees that were necessary to obtain wood for house and ship building. Red symbolized fishing, the other mainstay of the economy, either owing to the red color of tuna flesh, the blood in the water after washing tunas on a good fishing day or the color of the sails of fishing boats, which were treated with catechu, a red substance locally known as kaḍi.

¹The heading of the Addu Times, the official Suvadive newspaper, included two small drawings representing fishing (a swordfish with tunas) and local agricultural products (bananas, coconuts, etc.).
This product, an extract of Acacia, was imported from Ceylon on the yearly trip to the nearest coasts to the Northeast and was used to prevent the deterioration of the cloth. The curtailment of direct external trade on local ships known as vedi or voḍda was one of the main causes of the discontentment that led to the secession from the Kingdom of the Maldive Islands.

The photo on the left shows the Suvadive flag behind President Afif at an official ceremony; on the right a drawing of the flag appearing in the picture.

The flag below is another version of the flag of the Suvadive Islands with smaller stars that are tilted at a different angle than the stars of the other flag depicted above.

President Afif had also an official car, a Ford Zephyr 4 Mark III which flew a small pennant at the front end of the bonnet. The Suvadive President’s car pennant had only one star and the crescent within a broader green central band.
"There were many versions of the Suvadive flag. Originally I had one I got from a flag site (with a large crescent overlapping the three bands).\(^2\) Ibrahim Affi Didi wrote back to say that it was not the flag he remembered. Subsequently I was able to get an actual photograph of the last flag to fly over Maaranga (Secretariat building) in Hitadu from Mohamed Saeed who was a member of the Suvadive Parliament. This is the one now in my site and Ibrahim Affi Didi says it is the authentic version he remembers..." (Majid Abdul Wahhab, maldivesroyalfamily.com)

About the extinction of the Suvadive Republic Majid says: "...That the Suvadive republic was a neo-colonialist entity created by the British for their own ends was the Male’ government line at that time. In the light of what I have said I don’t feel that that claim is totally justifiable. However if you take only the events of 1957-63 it would appear to be so."

In a further, rather dubious, variant the stars appear to be of different size, with the central star in the crescent smaller than the other two. Addu people claim that the three stars should have been the same size and if they were not on certain flags, the woman or man who stitched the flag was to blame. Note in Affi’s picture above the three stars look the same size. However, in the coat of arms of the Suvadive government the central star is much larger.

The design of the coat of arms was based on a vignette that appeared in the first series of banknotes issued in the Maldives around 1948. The notes had been drawn by a Male’ artist named Sayyid Saeed. In the banknote drawing appears a lateen-rigged dōni, while in the Suvadive coat of arms this northern-style fishing boat is replaced by a square-sailed dōni typical of the equatorial atolls of Fua Mulaku and Addu.

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\(^2\) This depiction was likely based on a description of the flag in Hammond Innes’ novel, *The Strode Venturer*
The coconut palm in the coat of arms was reduced in size compared to the vignette of the banknote to make the landscape look more natural and to make space for an additional smaller circle at the top. Also coconuts, an important item in the former island economy but almost absent in the Maldivian banknote, were added to the palm in a more conspicuous way. The scroll in the upper part below the thin crescent and the stars bears the name “Assembly – Suvadive Republic” (Majlis Suvadib Jumhūrī) in the Nastaʿlīq script style. It is worth noting that no human figures are depicted on the fishing vessel, not even the required helmsman at the tiller, for anthropomorphic representations were absent in traditional Maldivian iconography.

At the time of designing the symbols, the use of the image of a local axe was discussed. The axe of the southern atolls has a characteristic shape, but it was finally not included in the symbology. The People’s Council of Addu Atoll would have its own version of the Suvadive coat of arms bearing a broad scroll covering its lower part with the name both in English and Divehi, the latter in the Arabitāna writing that includes Tāna and Arabic script.

Finally, another altogether different type of symbol of the Suvadives was the tomb or ziyāray of a Muslim saint known as Yūsuf Naib of Midū Island in Addu Atoll. This local saint, said to have been born around 1242 AD, was chosen in order to replace the long-established devotion to the Medu Ziyārāi, the tomb of the saint who converted the Maldives to Islam in the 12th century. Since the burial place of the latter was located in Male’ and was officially-sponsored by the royal government, it was not compatible with the goal of the new state of having its national symbols located within its own territory.
Aftermath

Only in Addu did some people keep a few documents and symbols of the Suvadives after the demise of the republic. These have become now rare memorabilia. In Huvadu Atoll most of the items of the Suvadive State having a symbolic or representative value were destroyed by the military sent from Male’ to quell the secession, especially in Havaru Tinadu, an island that was razed to the ground.

In relatively isolated Fua Mulaku the Suvadive flag, after being taken down from the mast at Ravverige, was folded by Beyyagebeyyāge Tawīg who was employed there. He brought the flag, a wooden board with a painted coat-of-arms, documents and other emblematic items of the defunct republic, even the drawings made by mādrūsā children, to a lonely spot in the northeastern shore of the island. Other people followed him with objects they were afraid to keep at home. They dug a pit under the bushes close to the beach and buried all the items.

The spot of the burial was similar to the place that would have been chosen in the past for a person having died from a disease causing fear, such as leprosy, hydropsy or cholera. In the Raṣoveṣi, a lengthy poem describing the landmarks around Fua Mulaku Island, the lonely tomb of a long-deceased person named Rekkā is the subject of the following verse:

Rekkā hamatā mi vī/ Mula miheke duḷa balī
Vaki ko’ mmi atirimati/ o’ vvā nimi avadivī

(We) have arrived to (the place called) Rekkā, (named after) a dead person afflicted by the swollen body sickness (hydropsy). He was left isolated on this shore until he perished.

Bibliography


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