

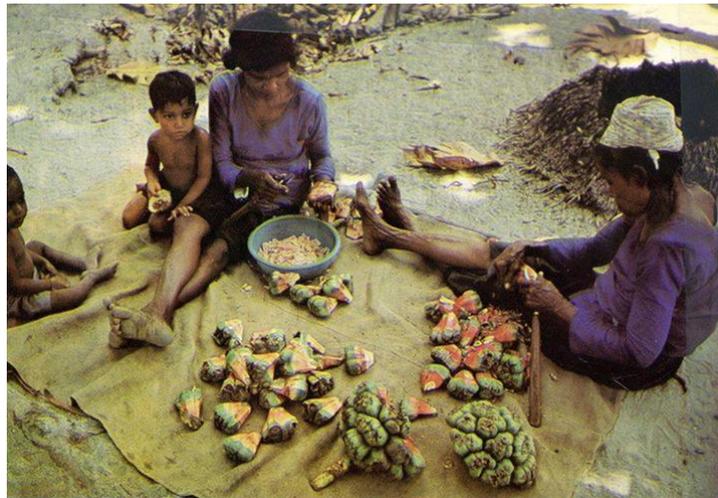
A passion to preserve the “Divehi civilization of the Maldives”; the work of Bernard Koechlin

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French ethnologist Bernard Koechlin (1928–2007) was one of the earliest persons doing serious research about the Maldives. He came to the country in 1976 as a member of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). Since he didn't know the language I assisted him translating Maldivian poetry in the early 1980s. Koechlin implored Maldivian authorities to promote their own cultural heritage, which he rightly saw as under threat. But Maldivian officials were not interested and he died in 2007 without seeing any success in his endeavor.

Although his surname is from Alsatian origin, Bernard Koechlin was from Normandy. He had worked for many years in the Messageries Maritimes shipping company. His ship often travelled along the southwestern coast of Madagascar and Koechlin became fascinated by the Vezo fishermen and their pirogues. One day he took a radical step, he left the merchant navy and went to live among this ethnic group, studying their language and music. Around that time he also became part of the CNRS.

While he was with the Vezo people one day, looking at a map of the vast Indian Ocean, Koechlin's eyes fell on the Maldives. He searched for ethnological studies on the people of the archipelago but soon realized that there were next to none. Thus he decided to pay a long visit to the then obscure and out-of-the-way island country.



In the Maldives his initial aim had been to cover all the atolls, but he was taken aback at the complexity of travelling from one atoll to the other. He bitterly commented that while on island A he looked at nearby island B in the horizon and found out that it was easier to go from island A to distant Male' and then from Male' to B than from A to B. This hampered his project of making a systematic study.

In the face of the difficulties regarding travel within the country Koechlin finally had to come to terms with the reality. Whenever a dōni was available he travelled to the atolls he could, visiting various islands and taking hundreds of pictures. This involved the inconvenience of having to depend from the whims of the captain or from the weather. In some islands his visit was suddenly curtailed because the boat was ready to leave and in others prolonged until a boat was available or the bad weather cleared.

In some atolls Koechlin was driven close to despair when locals kept assuring him that a boat would come soon, but days and even weeks passed and no boat ever came. He didn't fail to notice that often islanders became amused at seeing him nervous and impatient. He was told to relax and take things easy; islanders smiled at him and said: "The boat will come." And finally when the boat indeed came he did feel foolish at having been so impatient.

Although he realized that the Maldives was a linguistically unexplored territory, Koechlin desisted from studying the language. In 1980 we met at Beruge Don Tuttu's home in Male'. Beruge Don Tuttu and Maizan Hasan Maniku were his main friends in Male'. Shortly after the formal introductions Koechlin told me that there was nothing he wished more than being able to speak the Maldivian language. But he lamented that he was getting old and that he had found the Vezo language very difficult, so his morale regarding learning a new language was anything but high. Thus he asked me to work for him translating Maldivian poetry.



Enthralled by boats, Koechlin filmed Fua Mulaku fishermen fishing in the middle of the Central Indian Ocean on their six-oared (hafali) dōnis. Powered by square sails and oars, this way of fishing was on the brink of extinction, as increasingly Maldivian sailboats were being fitted with Japanese engines.

About a year later Koechlin showed the film in Male' and set up an ethnographic exhibition with his fine pictures and some local artifacts. But he was taken aback when he realized that no one among the Maldivian public showed much interest. The second screening of the 50 minute film was suspended because those who had come left the hall after but a few minutes. Puzzled, Koechlin asked the officials present: "How come these people are not interested in their own culture?" Some of those leaving the place said that they found the film boring. But Maldivians were not aware that their culture was disappearing only Koechlin with his perceptive vision was.

He also was interested in the larger boats that did a yearly travel to the closest coasts of Ceylon or South India loaded with dry tuna and local sweets, which led him to write a paper named 'Notes about the history of the now disappeared odi long-haul vessel of the Maldives'. The last of such vessels sailed to Colombo from Fua Mulaku in 1979.

I kept working for him translating poetry, taking pictures and making drawings of local coral mosques. Koechlin said that one of his goals, if he could ensure the cooperation of the Maldivian government, was to establish a way to collect all the information of local cultural elements from each and every island gathering it into an archive, together with all his field notes, photographs and drawings in order to make an encyclopedia of what he defined as the "Divehi Civilization" (*La Civilisation Divehi des Maldives*). He was enthusiastic about this grand scheme then and sought to inspire others with his zeal, all the while emphasizing the urgency of the project.



In 1983, while I was working in the tourist industry, Koechlin sent me a box full of postcards and asked me to place them in local shops for sale. These fine postcards were part of a small series of ethnographic pictures that he had selected from his large collection and had printed in order to sell them in Maldives. But a month passed and I was upset when I realized that no one was interested in them. Actually the pictures and their subject didn't correspond with the image Maldivians sought of themselves at that

time. Average islanders would not buy these postcards because they claimed the subject made them look unsophisticated. Meanwhile, owners of souvenir shops told me that tourists favored pictures of lagoons, coconut palms and white beaches. In the end the almost intact batch of unsold postcards was returned to me and I sent it back to him.

We kept in contact for about a few years longer, but Koechlin never came back. He told me he was quite disappointed at the lack of cooperation from the Maldivian authorities in setting up a system to gather all the cultural traditions that were visibly getting lost day by day. As years went by his former fervor gradually faded and his letters became more spaced. Then his interest in the Maldives vanished and I lost track of him.

Last year, in May 2014, Hervé Thomas, another Frenchman interested in Maldivian culture, told me during a conversation that Mr. Bernard Koechlin had passed away in Villers-sur-Mer, in his native Normandy years ago. I told Hervé that he must have had a big archive of pictures, written documents and small artifacts of the Maldives and immediately wondered what could have happened to that Maldivian treasure trove. Hervé told me that in his last years Koechlin had been married to Xiu, a Chinese poetess. He wrote to her and she replied with a letter in Chinese.

Karo, a friend of mine from Sichuan University, translated the letter and we got to know that Xiu had donated part of her husband's materials, particularly the films on Madagascar and Maldives to the French National Centre for Scientific Research. She also said that she was ready to give copies of the materials to serious researchers on the Maldives. I am grateful to Hervé Thomas for having brought these pictures back from oblivion. But I sense that some of those irreplaceable materials have been lost.

Selected works by Bernard Koechlin

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Maldives/1 - Chants et Percussions des Maldives (LP, Album)

Bateaux et modes de pêche aux Maldives (Fishing boats and methods in the Maldives) 50 min color film, CNRS Images; 1979

Le pourtour et le tour intérieur de l'île de Fua Mulaku - Aperçu ethnoécologique sur une île du sud des Maldives et sa population, à partir d'une poésie épique orale, Ethnoscience ; Dialogue et Coopération ; CeDRASEMI Valbonne, 1983

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