A history of Maldivian architecture: Part 3—Shelters

In Part 1 of this series of articles, I discussed the architectural records of foreign visitors to the Maldives. Part 2 was dedicated to a discussion of traditional lineal measures. In this Part 3, an outline of major shelters of the Maldives is given, together with the construction details of basic huts. Substantial shelters deserving of the term “homes” are discussed in Part 4.

There are not many books written on Maldivian architecture of the past. In fact, I have come across only two. The first one was written by Ali Moosa Didi, a former contractor and a historian. His book entitled, “Dhivehi Hiyaavahi,” briefly discusses 45 types of Maldivian shelters. The book was published in 2011 by Novelty Printers and Publishers. The author outlines each of the structures in one half or a full page of an A5 sized book (73 pages). The other book is entitled “Dhiveheenge Dhiriulhun”. It is written by a well known author of literary works named Adam Abdul Rahman. The book, published in 2013 by the same publisher, devotes a few pages to the construction of traditional house in the context of Maldivian material culture. A recourse to this publication will be made in Part 4.

The shelters discussed in the book, Dhivehi Hiyaavahi, are listed below.

[table id=2 ]

As the reader may observe, the above are essentially brief descriptions of the named shelter. Architectural details are very sketchy. In the reference some photographs were shown but they lack clarity. However, from other sources photographs and descriptions of a few are available. The author himself notes that the list is not comprehensive. In fact, certain types of shelters, for example, ziyaaraiy or mausoleum are not included. Some included ones are one-of-a-kind shelter. Next, photos of some of the shelters named in the book as well as some not mentioned therein are shown. None of the photographs of shelters are from that book.
**Buruzu** (fort) was not listed in the book referred to above. The photo shows the largest buruzu in Male’. This buruzu was facing North to the sea near the official jetty of Male’. *Photo: Dhivehi Digest, No. 52, 14 March 2016, p. 13.*

**Boanuge** was used mainly for storage in the Maldives. In the second World War, the huts were also used for living quarters, mess and hospitals. War time tropical boanuge had a raised area at the top though this type was not seen in the Maldives. They are usually 16, 20, 36 or 40 feet wide though other sizes were possibly used. This photograph is of one in Addu. Can you tell how wide it is? The photograph was from the FB page, Vonadhaana Raajje.

**Odiharuge** where boats are built.

**Faalan** (hiyaakuri). A sheltered jetty. Most islands have them. However, sheltering the jetty from rain and sun is rare. The one shown is Bodu Faalan or Big Jetty built during the time of President Ameen. It was featured in the first 2-Rufiyaa bank note because of its architectural significance. The faalan was dismantled later.

**Kulhibalaage** is a sheltered and raised room or platform on which womenfolk stand to watch street events. In the photo, the tall structures on either the side of the street are kulhibalaage. The kulhibalaage can be the top storey of a two-storey structure.


**Koshaaru** is a store for grains (granary) or other goods. They are sometimes raised from the ground. The doorway is shut by inserting a number of slats into grooves of the door jambs. Only the topmost slat is locked. Colour photos of koshaaru are on internet (e.g. [https://laafenn.wordpress.com/tag/fables/](https://laafenn.wordpress.com/tag/fables/)).

Construction of Temporary Huts

Temporary huts, such as *ban'daha* are made of tree branches and boughs. The huts are around 16 feet wide by 27 feet long. Coconut timbers are never used as they are hardy and dressing them is complicated. Wood from coastal forest trees, such as *Thespesia populnea*, is usually used instead.

One construction practice worthy of note is that the roof and sides are covered with a thinner covering of woven coconut leaves called *thoshali*. Thoshali is not used in more permanent shelters. The diagrams below show the general construction practices.

*Thoshali* is usually woven from untreated coconut leaves which discompose in the humid environment of the Maldives within a year. Coir ropes are used for binding the poles, branches and *thoshali*. The following diagrams show how *thoshali* is woven. The diagrams can be enlarged by clicking them.

Double weaving of *thoshali* is shown below. It can be made from a single leaf by bending the opposite side leaflets.
The covering for the ridge is specially made. The following diagrams show the process.

If you, the reader, could think of other shelters, please name them so that they could be included. Alternatively, if you can take more detailed photos in your visits to the rural islands, do send it for inclusion. Due reference will be given to you.

In Part 4, the design and construction of more permanent houses are discussed.