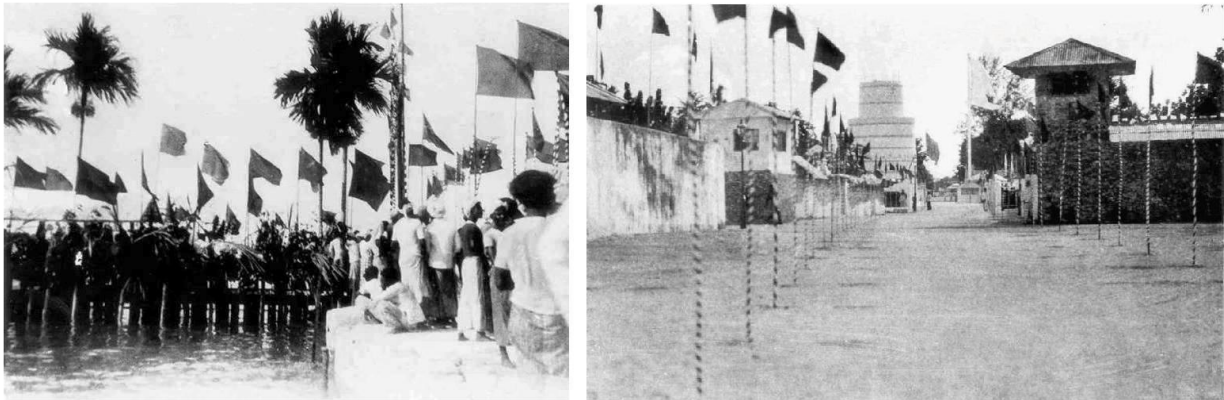


Ancient Flags of Maldives

Xavier Romero-Frias

In 1987 Mr. Ahmed Shafeeg told me that there was the need to issue a publication on all the flags of Maldives. He said that in the past the flags had been very important in the country. The Maldives had been formerly very poor and during royal visits or on important state occasions flags provided a decoration that was not expensive and a number of flags planted in specific locations could make a place look quite impressive. The flags and their poles also could be easily set up, then taken down and stored or transported somewhere else.

Mr. Shafeeg gave me all the assistance he could and I immediately set to task. But finding information about the old flags of the Maldives was difficult. Except a framed drawing at the Male' Museum there were not many documents available. I found some flags in a few old issues of *Khabaru*, a government newspaper, as well as in *Divehi Tārikhah Au Alikameh*, a book on Maldivian culture. The intellectuals and historians I asked remembered different flags or had heard old people talk about them but did not know about precise dates.

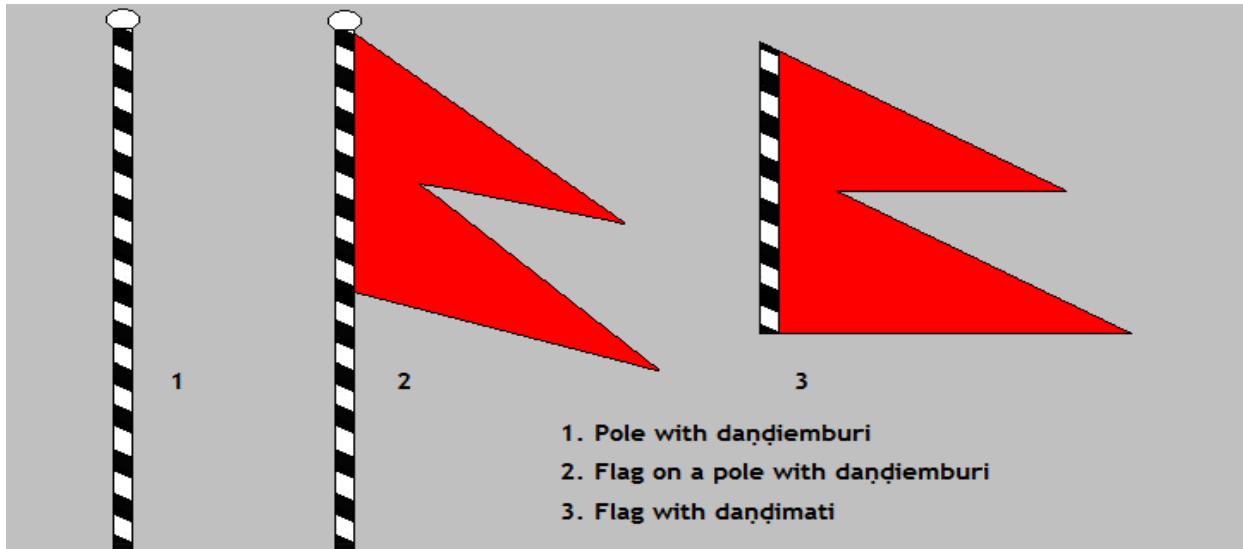


Display of flags and decorated masts on the streets in Male'. 1938

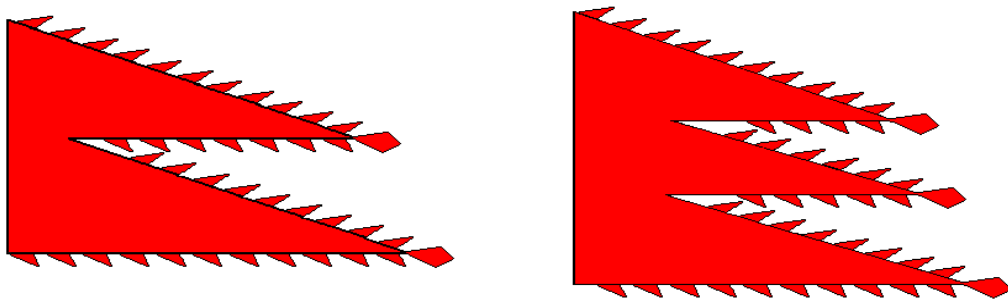
What could quickly be established is that old flags were red and that many used the black and white *daṇḍimati*, a characteristic Maldivian feature that would be also found in the former national flag. Intrigued by this pattern I was explained that it had originated sometime in the mid nineteenth century, although neither the king nor the exact year were known.

According to a tradition heard by Mr. Shafeeg, one day the king of Maldives saw his red royal flag flying from a white mast that had been decorated with a black ribbon wrapped around it at a descending angle (*daṇḍiemburi*). It is said that the king very much liked the effect of the little diagonal black and white lines at the hoist of the flag and issued a decree by which the *daṇḍimati*, a vertical band of cloth made of small black and white

parallelograms, should be henceforth added to the hoist of all Maldivian flags. That particular decree, which would have furnished details about the date, has unfortunately been lost.



The colour of the Maldivian Royal House was red since very old times, a dye that allegedly had been selected because of its visibility when contrasted with the blue backdrop of the sea. According to Mr. Kolige Hassan A. Maniku, this was a perfectly normal choice, a signal colour, red had also been chosen for the symbols of other seafaring countries such as Oman and Bahrain.

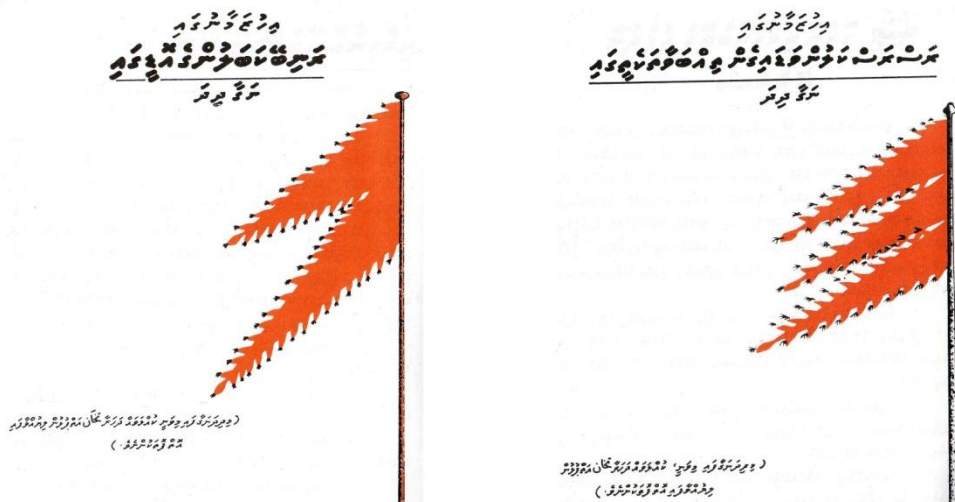


The flags that were used exclusively by the Royal house consisted in triangular flags or combinations of pennons. Often these standards had added fringes made of very small triangular pieces of cloth stitched along the edge. The colour of these triangular pieces could be either red or also alternate black and white in the latter versions of the same flags with '*daṅḍimati*'.

The special royal flags or standards that were hoisted on ships signalled the Commodore or *Mirubahuru* ('Commander of the sea') whether there was an important passenger in a ship approaching Male harbour, or the ship with the most important

passenger in a group of vessels. Members of the Royal family and certain nobles were permitted to fly a distinctive flag on ships on which they were passengers so that upon landing they could be given the particular welcome ceremonies they were entitled to. On certain formal days these same flags were also flown on special masts inside the palace compound until in the 1930's when a new rectangular standard with a crescent and star was designed for the king replacing the former pennons.

According to two images appearing in the book 'Divehi Tārīkhah Au Alikameh' printed in 1958 in Male', the king's flag was a combination of three pennons, while the queen's flag was a combination of two. These two flags are said to have been copied from a book that had been written by Kullhavah Dhahara Takkan, a man who lived in Male' in the late 18th century.



Ancient Royal Flags. Illustration by Kullhavah Dhahara Takkan

Mr. Shafeeg disagreed with the information in the book, claiming that the last flag used in the 19th century as the flag of the king of Maldives was a two-triangle red flag. Other Maldivian historians claimed that it is difficult to know with certainty which flag was the king's and which flag the queen's for flags and their use had not been standardized at the time that Kullhavah Dhahara Takkan lived. Thus the images in the book may not be accurate and the information in it should be taken with caution.

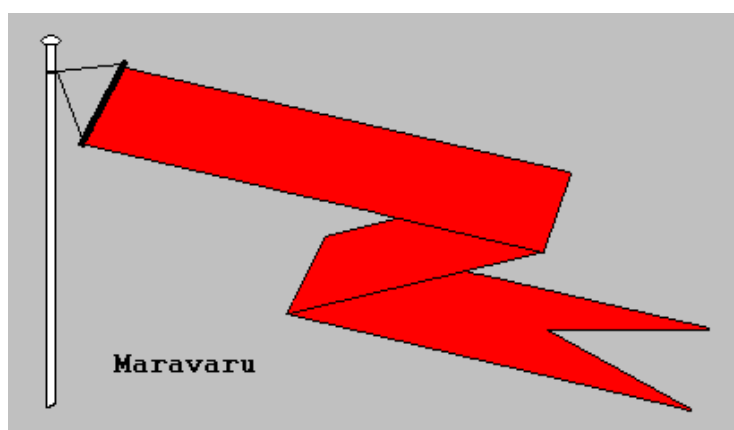
According to Mr. M. Loutfy, perhaps the queen had had a three-tailed red flag instead of the king. He specifically remembered that old people had told him that they had seen the two-triangle red flag flown as the flag of the king in the palace in Male' as the last such royal standard. In that case the queen's flag would have been specifically that of the queen consort (*rani kambalun*) as opposed to a queen in her own right (*rehendi*).

Mr. Hasan A. Maniku pointed out that the two flags illustrated by Kullhavah Dhahara Takkan might have been used indistinctly by the royals. This view was supported by Mr. Shafeeg who said that these would have been naval flags, to be flown on ships and that the three pointed flag was perhaps a combination of pennons indicating that both the king and the queen were on a royal vessel. Maldivian scholars I consulted granted though that perhaps the three-triangle red flag was a much older one since there was no memory of its use in their time.



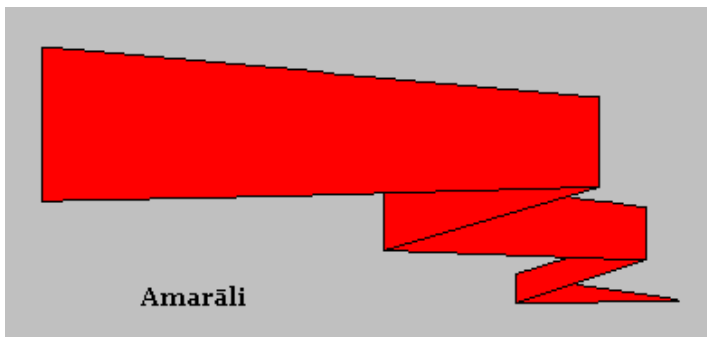
Illustrations of Ancient Royal Flags in astrology books

Flags portrayed in Maldivian astrology books are usually two-pointed. These books had been copied by hand from books that had fallen apart. The first one is from Addu Atoll, the second one from Fua Mulaku. Another royal flag with two points that was flown in Male' until mid 20th century was the 'Maravaru', a long swallow-tailed red streamer.



Formerly in Male' there were two tall masts on the fort, known locally as *Koṭṭe*. From one of those masts a very long two-tailed streamer in the royal red colour was flown. This mast stood on top of the *Aa-koṭṭe* inside the *Eterekoilu*, the King's residence within the palace compound, and the large flag flown on it was known as *Maravaru*. Note how it was attached to the mast.

The *Koṭṭe* and *Buruzu* fortifications around Male', which gave a picturesque air to the island, were destroyed during the 1960's and 1970's. Flying of the *Maravaru* was probably discontinued much earlier, but the date in which this large red streamer was flown for the last time is not known.



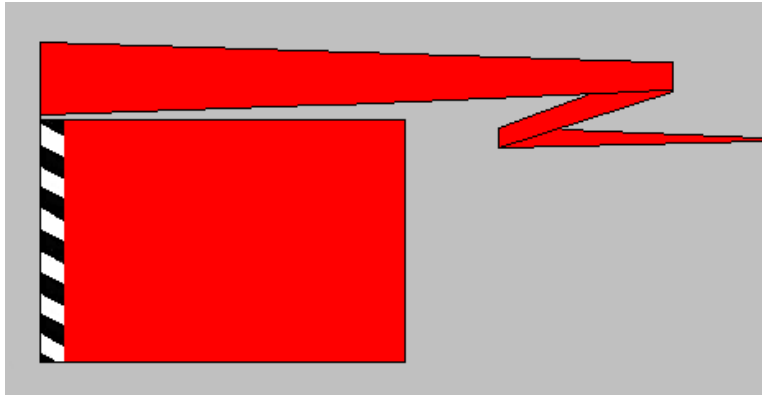
The *Amarāli* was a long pennon in the Maldivian royal colour. It could be flown alongside other flags, usually at the top of the masts of the royal '*naakolhu*' brigs or schooners. It is worth noting that this plain red pennant never had had the black-and-white *daṇḍimati* feature close to its hoist, even in its latest version.



Before the beginning of the 20th century there was no such thing as a national flag of the Maldives. Flags used in the royal ships of Maldives and in certain locations in Male, the King's island, were either personal flags of the king or royal standards used in particular ceremonies.

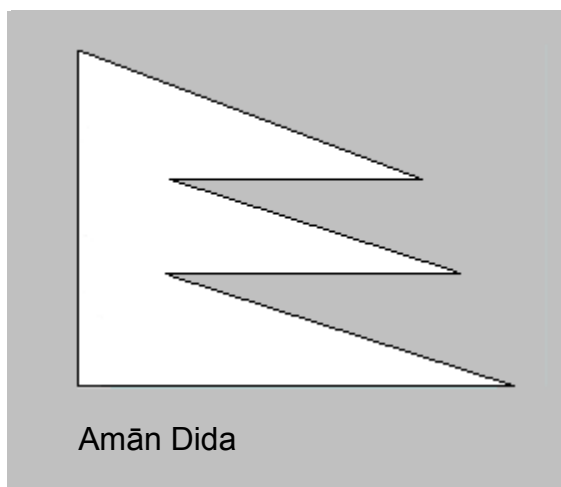
Plain red rectangular flags had historically been used either as decorations or as the colours identifying a ship as Maldivian in the yearly trade with the closest coasts. Rule number two of the 'Rules for Maldivian Trading Ships' issued by the Maldivian Royal Government in 1925 states that every foreign bound Maldivian vessel should be equipped with the red Maldivian flag (*divehirājjēge zātuge raiy dida*), as well as the yellow flag to be displayed as a signal of quarantine.

Towards the year 1903, when the Maldivian rulers decided that a national flag was needed, a rectangular flag with the red colour of the Maldivian royal house and the black-white *daṇḍimati* at the hoist was designed and approved. This became the first national flag of the Maldives.



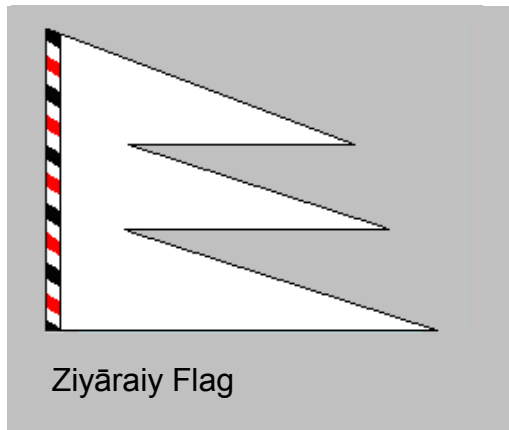
The national flag was often flown with the *Amarāli* on top, mainly on festive occasions. This particular combination of flags was said to have been chosen by the king. When the royal ships were decorated for some celebration the national flag was flown in this manner on the mast tops (*fēskali*).

The royal three-tailed flags that existed according to historians were white. These were the *Amān Dida* and the flags flown on the *ziyaray* funerary buildings.



In certain royal processions in Male a notable preceding the king carried a ceremonial three-tailed flag which was all white. It was known as *Amān Dida*, the flag of surrender, as a signal from the king to his subjects that his intentions were peaceful.

The *Amān Dida* was carried by an official whose designation was *jādibu*. This flag was completely white and had no *daṇḍimati*, but it used to have a fringe of small white triangular pieces of cloth. Photographs of this flag being carried in royal processions are available in the archives of the Maldivian government.



A giant white flag, the last with a *daṇḍimati*, was flown from a tall pole at the *Medu Ziyārai*, the tomb said to contain the buried remains of the saint who converted the Maldivians to Islam. It used to have a fringe of small triangular pieces of cloth like the ancient Maldivian flags. The use of this flag was discontinued in the late 1980's without any public explanation but the tall pole is still there.

Similar white flags were flown as well at Ali Rasgefānu's *ziyaray* and other important graves of holy men. All those tombs were formerly important landmarks in Male' that were valued as national symbols.

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