Sanskrit as a Medium of Maldivian Buddhism

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Among the areas that pertain to the Indian Subcontinent, the Maldives are peculiar in many respects. In the course of their history, the islands have seen long periods of stability as well as radical changes, which were usually induced from abroad. The most radical change consisted, as far as we can tell from historical sources, in the conversion of the inhabitants from Buddhism to Islam, which took place by the middle of the 12th century. The cultural reorientation it brought about was strong enough to withstand the impact of both European (esp. Portuguese) colonisation and modern tourism until the present day.

While the circumstances of the Islamicisation can be established with confidence on the basis of contemporary documents (esp. copper plate grants, so-called *lōmāfanu*s, from the end of the 12th century) and historical records written either in the autochthonous Indo-Aryan language, Dhivehi[1] (esp. the so-called Kings' chronicle, the *rādavaḷi*) or in Arabic (esp. the so-called *tārīḫ*)[2], little has been known so far about the Buddhist times preceding it. The reason for this may well be found in the fact that during the conversion process, most remnants of the former Buddhist culture were deliberately destroyed[3], leaving but a few ruins of monasteries here and there under the coral sand[4]. The only written material from the Pre-Islamic period that had been unearthed until the end of the 20th century consists of inscriptions on two statues which were found in the islands' capital, Male, in the 1960ies and which have been stored in the National Museum eversince (cf. fig. 1)[5]. But even though the inscriptions they bear resemble the script of the early *lōmāfanu*s, a typical Southern-Brāhmī cursive clearly related to the Old-Sinhalese script, no attempt of decipherment has been successful so far[6],

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[1]   For a general historical account of the Dhivehi language now cf. Fritz (2002).
[2]   For a survey of the documents involved now cf. Gippert (2000).
[3]   Cp. the documents quoted in Gippert (2000).
[4]   Cf. Bell (1940) for a first account of the archaeology of the Maldives.
[5]   A third inscribed artefact of this type (obviously the head of a God's statue, as well preserved in the Male museum) has been damaged too much to admit of a reading, only a few *akṣara*s being visible.
[6]   The late Mr. Hasan Maniku, a Maldivian scholar who paved the way for thorough investigations into *lōmāfanu*s and other historical records, stated (in 1999) with resignation that these inscriptions "consist of unintelligible syllables only".

and it is only from the weapon-like symbols that are engraved in the artefacts that they have been regarded as pertaining to a Vajrayāna-type Buddhist environment[7].

This situation has now changed dramatically after an inscribed coral stone (shaped like a brick) was found in the remnants of a Buddhist monastery on the island of Landhoo in one of the northern atolls of the Maldives. By the script and the language it is written in, the inscription must be much older than those of the statues, presumably dating of the 6th-8th centuries, and by its contents it can clearly be shown that the Buddhism prevailing on the Maldives at that time was of the northern type, the text representing a *dhāraṇī*-like series of *mantras* for protection against demons such as *preta*s, *piśāca*s, or *kumbhāṇḍa*s[8]. In this way, it not only confirmed the assumption of Vajrayāna Buddhism being present on the islands in Pre-Islamic times but also paved the way for a reading and understanding of the later inscriptions, even though there is a fundamental difference between them: While the Landhoo inscription is basically written in an (Insular) Prakrit, with Sanskritisms appearing here and there, the texts on the statues are Sanskrit texts throughout, albeit written in a very cumbersome way (which has prevented former investigators from recognising this fact). In the following pages, I can give but a preliminary account of the statue inscriptions; my main concern will be to illustrate the problems that must be solved before a complete edition can be attempted[9].

It has hitherto remained unnoticed that the text of the two inscriptions is basically the same, even though the graphical differences remain notable. The main problem consists in the fact that the texts are engraved across the bodies of the statues in such a way that their beginnings, directions and ends are not easily determinable. In fig. 2, I have indicated the discernible text passages by colours and their respective starting points by numbers and arrows. It will be clear from these pictures that in the second inscription, equivalents of the initial part of the first one (1) and the phrase which is regarded as its closing passage here (7) are missing; whether this was intentional or due to damages, must remain open until further investigations into the surface of this statue have been undertaken.

In both inscriptions, we obviously deal with the invocation of a Vajrayānic deity. The text is very similar in its wording to some of the *mantra* (or *vidyā*) formulas collected in the so-called *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* (STTS), a tantric Mahayāna text (also known as *Vajraśekharasūtra*) that has been preserved in a Sanskrit manuscript from Nepal as well as in Chinese and Tibetan versions[10]. Of the "magical formulas" it contains, which were discussed at large by D.L.

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[7]   Cf. Naseema (1999, 5 and 19) and Tholal (2002, 13 f.) for details.
[8]   Cf. Gippert (forthcoming 2003) for a detailed study of this inscription.
[9]   The publication of a first edition is envisaged for 2005.
[10] Cf. Yamada (1981, 5-6); a facsimile edition of the Nepal manuscript is provided by Lokesh Chandra / Snellgrove (1981).

Snellgrove in his account of "Indo-Tibetan Buddhism" (1987, p. 141ff.), the one pertaining to (and uttered by) "the Bodhisattva Vajraviśva" alone contains at least ten elements that are also present in our inscriptions. The formula runs as follows (with punctuation marks added according to the meaning):

> *oṃ vajra-karmottama, vajra-dhara-samayam anusmara!*
> *śumbha-niśumbha, ākarṣaya, pravéśaya, āvéśaya, bandhaya!*
> *samayaṃ grahaya! sarva-karmāṇi me kuru, mahā-sattva!*
> *huṃ! phaṭ!*

Cp. Snellgrove's translation (1987, p. 142):
> 'O vajra-action, most excellent, bear in mind the pledge of Vajradhara.
> *Śumbha niśumbha*[11] – coerce, induce, prevail, bind,
> hold to the pledge, affect all actions for me, O Vajrasattva.'

What we find in our inscriptions is, first of all, the *bīja* syllables *oṃ, huṃ,* and *phaṭ,* which are in quite likewise manner exposed to the beginnings and ends, resp., of given text passages; we thus read *oṃ* (written *omu* or *oṃ̆*) at the beginning of the sections marked (2) and (7) in the figures, *huṃ* (written in this way) in the middle of (1) and at the end of (7), and *huṃ huṃ huṃ phaṭ phaṭ* (written *huṃ̆ huṃ̆ huṃ̆ paṭ\ paṭ* in both inscriptions) at the end of (4). In the latter passage, *huṃ̆* is preceded by a sequence of *akṣara*s that must be read as *sa-ma-ya-ma-nu-ṣma-ra,* thus clearly representing the clause *samayam anuṣmara* 'bear in mind the pledge' of the STTS formula. The imperatives *ākarṣaya* 'coerce, draw near' and *pravéśaya* 'induce, let enter' are met with in passage (2), written *a-ka-rṣa-ya* and *pra/ā-ve-sa-ya* on the two statues (orange and pink color sections). Instead of *sarva-karmāni me kuru,* we find ... *ka-ra ka-ra ku-ru ku-ru ma-ma ka-rm(m)ā-n(i)* 'causer / doer, do / perform my actions' in (3), and *sarva-* 'all' is met with as a compound member in, among others, *sa-rvva-pa-ra-ma-ntra* in (2), which must be read as *sarva-para-mantrān* 'all *mantra*s (uttered) by others' here[12], given that it is clearly the object of the double imperative *bhi-nda bhi-nda* 'smash, destroy' following, just as *para-mantrān* appears as an object of *bhañja, marda,* and *khāda* 'break, crush, and devour' in another formula of the STTS (p. 178, l. 14). As in several further *mantra*s of this *sūtra* (e.g., p. 293, l. 8 and 3), the imperative *bhinda* is put in a rhyming contrast with its quasi-synonym *chinda* 'cut, split', written *ṣinda* or *sinda* in our inscriptions (section 2).

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[11]   According to Snellgrove (1987, p. 141 n. 50), "*Niśumbha* and *śumbha* ... are the names of two titans famous in Hindu tradition for their prolonged austerities and magical powers."

[12]   This compound must be distinguished from *para-mantra* appearing in other Buddhist texts which is regarded as a *varia lectio* of *para-mātră* denoting 'a high number'; this alone is documented in the dictionaries (Monier-Williams, SED, p. 587a; Edgerton, BHSD, p. 319ab).

As we can see from the examples quoted so far, the graphical representation of the Sanskrit words is unusual, to say the least. To explain this, we have to assume that the Dhivehi language as spoken at the time when the inscriptions were written (probably the 10-12th century A.D.) must have interferred with the "correct" pronunciation of Sanskrit in many ways, thus yielding "irregular" spellings. This may well be be responsible for the addition of an *-u* vowel to word-final consonants (as in *omu* standing for *oṃ*), which has remained a feature typical of Dhivehi until the present day; cp., e.g., the modern word *xādimu* 'servant' representing Arabic *ḫādim* 'id.'[13]. Another feature that can be explained by assuming an interference of spoken Dhivehi is the confusion observable in the spelling of sibilants (cp. the doublet of *sinda* and *ṣinda* quoted above). This reflects the fact that at an early stage of the prehistory of Dhivehi, all three sibilants of Old Indic as well as the two palatals *c* and *ch* fell together into one /s/, which later even tended to develop into [h] (or Ø) depending on its position in a given word (as in Sinhalese)[14]. At the same time, the distinction of aspirated and non-aspirated sounds was lost so that *paṭ* became an equivalent spelling of the "regular" *phaṭ*[15]. Likewise, the confusion of short and long vowels manifesting itself in the spellings of *a-karṣaya* (instead of *ā-°*) and *prā-vesaya* (instead of *pra-veśaya*) must reflect the early merger of short and long vowels which was another characteristic trait of the Prakrits underlying Dhivehi and Sinhalese[16].

The latter observations conceal the clue to several other problematical elements of the two inscriptions. First, we must state that of the many compounds containing the term *vajra* that occur in the STTS (and similar texts)[17], none is met with on the statues. What we do find, is a sequence *a-ra-kṣī-tta-va-jra* which might be read as a vocative *a-rakṣita-vajra*, 'unguarded Vajra!', in the introductory formula (1) of statue 1 (*namas samanta a°*, '(your) praise (be) forever, u.V.'); and a sequence written *va-jra-ki-nṣi-ra-ya* (and *°-nsi-°*, resp.) at the beginning of section (6) in both inscriptions. At first glance, one might suggest that this sequence consists of three words, *vajra kiṃ-ci raya*, with *kiṃ-ci* equivalent to *kaś-ci* appearing, instead of "regular" *kaś-cid* 'whoever', in one of the Gilgit Buddhist texts, viz. the *Sarva-tathāgatādhiṣṭhānavyūha* (p. 75, l. 12: *yaḥ kaści rājā vā rājñī vā* ...; similar ib. 76, 14: *yaḥ kaści māṃ svarūpeṅābʰikāṃkṣī bʰave tena* ...). This, however, would

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[13]   Cp. Fritz (2002, p. 133).
[14]   Cf. Fritz/Gippert (1999, p. 40f.) and Fritz (2002, p. 32).
[15]   This rule may also be seen at work in the *bīja* syllables *ka-kka ka-ka ka-i ka-i* if these reflect a sequence such as *kha kha kha kha khai khai* appearing in the Chinese transcripts of several *dhāraṇī* texts contained in the Taishō canon (e.g., T. 963: 338a 3; T. 964: 338b 25; T. 997: 568c 11; citations from the Taishō are here and elsewhere quoted from CBETA 2000).
[16]   For the sound changes concerned, cf. also Fritz/Gippert (1999, p. 32) and Fritz (2002, p. 28f.).
[17]   Cf., e.g., the list given in Snellgrove (1987, p. 210).

leave no explanation for *raya* (which cannot represent *rājā* 'king' in any case[18]). The same holds true for the assumption that *(vajra-)kiṃci* might be the (compound) name of a deity. This assumption is suggested by N. Dutt's summary of the contents of another Gilgit text, viz. the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra* (BGS; Dutt 1984, p. 57) where one *Kiṃca* is mentioned as a chief of the *rākṣasas* alongside "*Vajra, Sanila, Indraloka, Pāyila, Vidala,* etc.". The text passage in question does not contain a *kiṃca*, however, but a 'general of demons' (*mahāyakṣasenāpati*) named *kiṃbʰīra*; cf. the text edition, p. 26, l. 13 (similarly in the edition of BGS in Vaidya 1961, p. 172, l. 24). This latter reading is also confirmed by the Chinese version of the BGS pertaining to the Taishō canon (T. 449) which has *Gung-pi-lo da-jiang* 宮毘羅大將, i.e. 'General *Kiṃbhīra*', in the given passage (p. 404, l. 11)[19]. Instead of an unattested name †*kiṃca*, it is then probable that we have a similar expression here as the one we find in STTS 166[20] which reads:

> *kapālamālālaṃkṛtasarvakāye kiṃ cirāyasi *vajrakhaṭvāṅgadʰāriṇi* [21] *pretamānuṣaśarīre śīghram āveśaya praveśaya bandha[ya vaśī-kuru māraya vajra-rākṣasī hūṃ hūṃ hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ ||]*

It is clear that *kiṃ cirāyasi* must be a verbal phrase meaning 'what are you late for?' here:

> 'Oh (deity provided with a) body all adorned with a garland of bowls, why are you late? Oh *holder of a club with a skull at the top, having the body of both

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[18] In Dhivehi, O.I. *rājā* is represented both by the inherited word *ras* and by the loan *rāda*. The regular outcome of O.I. *-j-* is *s*. Cf. Fritz (2002, p. 50).

[19] The Tibetan text referred to by Dutt (1984, p. 26, n. 13) has *jiṃ'jigasa* instead of *kiṃbʰīra*.

[20] Fol. 42b l. 1 in the facsimile edition, p. 307 in Yamada's edition (1981).

[21] Yamada's edition (1981, p. 307, l. 1) has KAPĀLA MĀLĀ LAṄKṚTA SARVA-KAYE KIṂCI RĀYASI VAJRA-KAHTVĀṄGA-DHĀRIṆI. This reading can hardly be maintained with respect to the word boundaries it contains, letting alone the curious ligature *-htv-* which it implies in KAHTVĀNGA. For the latter word, the facsimile edition of the Sanskrit manuscript (fol. 166b, l. 1: Lokesh Chandra / Snellgrove 1981, p. 42) rather suggests an abbreviated *vajrakhaṭvāṅga, with *-dhāriṇī* 'bearer' missing (there being but five akṣaras visible after *vajra-* and before the following *preta-*); the restitution yielding the meaning '(bearer) of a club shaped like the foot of a bedstead', i.e., 'a club or staff with a skull at the top', is nevertheless supported by the Chinese transcript (Dānapāla's version, Taishō no. T. 882: vol. 18, p. 398a, l. 7) where the word in question (*-khaṭva-*) is rendered by the syllables *kie-chun* (*kie:* Rüdenberg 1963, p. 159, no. 2023: 'hingehen; tapfer, mutig', missing in Karlgren 1923, p. 55f. under no. 73; *chun:* Rüdenberg 1963, p. 599, no. 7426: 'eine Art Zeder; Vater'; Karlgren 1923, p. 359 under no. 1268). By the use of Chinese *chun*, the alternative reading *vajrakhaḍga '(holder of a) Vajra sword' as suggested by Yamada for another occurrence of the same word within a close context (o.c. p. 305, l. 4; facsimile edition, fol. 165b, l. 3; Chinese transcript T. 18, 397b l. 24) can be ruled out as well. For *khaṭvāṅga-* cf. Monier-Williams, SED, 335b and Snellgrove (1987, 154).

*preta*s and *mānuṣa*s, come quickly, enter[22], bind, subjugate, kill, oh *Vajra-rākṣasī*.'

In quite a similar way, the *Hayagrīvavidyā*, a magic spell devoted to a horse-neck shaped deity, comprises the phrase *gʰorapiśācasarvagraheṣv apratihato mama varavajradaṃṣṭra kiṃ cirāpayasi*[23], with *cirāpayasi* reflecting not the plain denominative present 'to be absent or delayed for long'[24] of *cira-* 'long lasting' but its (secondary) causative[25]: 'Unimpaired by all the possessions (caused by) terrific *piśāca*s, my favourite Vajra-tusk, why do you waste time?'

In contrast to the two indicative forms of the passages quoted above, the Maldivian statues seem to show an imperative: *vajra kiṃ ciraya*. It is true that this would yield an awkward translation ('V., why (lit. what [for]) delay!'), but there is no indication whatsoever of a second person singular indicative ending (-*si*) following. Instead, the text continues with *ma-ma sa-(r)vv/bba-ya-(r)ttha sa-dya sva-ha* which must be restored as *mama sarva:arthān sadyaḥ svāha*. Taking this all together, we arrive at the conclusion that the interrogative pronoun, *kiṃ*, was reinterpreted as if it were a negation particle here, yielding a meaning like 'Vajra, accelerate (≈ don't delay) my (reaching) all (my) aims immediately, hail!' All this presupposes, of course, that the knowledge of Sanskrit the engravers of the inscriptions relied upon was rather limited.

The same conclusion suggests itself if we consider the expression *ma-hā-vi-la-mba* which occurs two times in both inscriptions, introducing section (4) and immediately preceding the formula *samayam anusmara* we have discussed above. In the light of the related passages quoted from the STTS, *mahāvilamba* seems to represent a name (viz. of a deity addressed) again. There is good evidence, however, that we have to see a negated imperative *mā vilamba* with the meaning 'don't be late, don't waste time' here instead; this is suggested by the manifold occurrence of this formulaic imperative in the Gilgit manuscripts and other Buddhist Sanskrit texts[26]. If this is correct, *mahā* must represent a hyper-sanskritised spelling of the

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[22]   Note the re-occurrence of these two imperatives in the given context.

[23]   p. 443, l. 16 f. of the edition in Dutt 1984.

[24]   Monier-Williams, SED p. 399a notes the two present stems *ciraya* and *cirāya* side by side, with the same meaning of 'to act slowly, delay, be absent a long while'. *cirāyati* is also supposed to be reflected by Pkt. (Mg.) *cilāadi* 'he is (will be) absent for long' as appearing in Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā (VI, 1, 14 ed. Pischel 1922; 124 (68, 20) ed. Capeller 1909), cf. Pischel-Jha (1981, 447, §558).

[25]   Cp. the causative formation *likʰāpayitum* (inf.) occurring in the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānavyūha* (Dutt 1984, p. 62, l. 2) side by side with *likʰāyitum* (ib., 68, 11).

[26]   In the *Hayagrīva* (Dutt 1984, p. 44, l. 1) and the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānavyūha* (ib., 58, 5 and 74, 13). For the use of imperatives with negative *mā* cp. *mā karotu* (ib. 67, 6-7). — In the Chinese Taishō canon, the same formula occurs, e.g., in T. 230 (p. 685b, 8).

prohibitive particle, *mā*, which was triggered by the regular equivalence of Skt. *mahā* and Insular Pkt. *mā* 'big' emerging from the early loss of intervocalic *-h-*.

As a last example of this type, I quote the sequence *vya-gra-sa-rmma-ni-vā-sa-k(uru)* which is attested within section (2) of both inscriptions. For this sequence, too, we find a parallel in the STTS, in the formula *vyāghra-carma nivasana*[27]. Whether this is about 'wearing a tiger's skin' (of *ni-√4.vas* 'to clothe, dress oneself') or, rather, 'residing on' it (of *ni-√5.vas* 'to sojourn, dwell, inhabit')[28] must remain open. It can be taken for granted, however, that we have an imperative construction of the same expression here, sc. *vyāghra-carma nivāsa(m) kuru,* 'wear' or 'reside on a tiger's skin!'[29].

The parallels quoted above are not only decisive for the establishment of the texts underlying the inscriptions but also for a general account of late Maldivian Buddhism and its affinities. The fact that we have Vajrayānic texts of the *dhāraṇī* genre written in Sanskrit here leaves no room for the wide-spread assumption that Maldivian culture was, at the time in question, a mere off-shoot of its Srī Lankan counterpart. This is all the more true since no traces whatsoever of Pāli texts or even words have been found on the Maldives so far. Instead, the Maldives must from now on be taken seriously as one more region where we can expect to find texts written in Buddhist Sanskrit, thus adding a new area of concern to Klaus Mylius' statement according to whom "the importance of *dhāraṇī*s in the cultural history ... of large areas of Asia must not be underestimated"[30].

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[27] Ed. Yamada (1981, p. 324, l. 11; cf. the Chinese transcript by Dānapāla in T. 882, 400c 14f.); the same formula is contained in the "Essential Dharaṇi of the Blue-Necked Bodhisattva who Contemplates Spontaneously", transcribed by Amoghavajra, Taishō canon text T. 1111 (p. 490a, 22).

[28] Cf. Monier-Williams, SED p. 559a for the two lemmas.

[29] In the latter meaning, we would have to assume a haplographical loss of the locative ending in *carmani.* That this was understood as underlying is perhaps suggested by the Tibetan version which reads "VYAGHRA CARRMANI and omits -VASANA" (Yamada 1981, 324 n. 3).

[30] K. Mylius, Geschichte der Literatur im alten Indien, Leipzig 1983, 415: „Dagegen darf nicht verschwiegen werden, daß die kulturgeschichtliche Bedeutung der Dhāraṇīs, besonders für die außerindischen Länder des Mahāyāna-Buddhismus und damit für große Teile Asiens, nicht unterschätzt werden sollte."

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Fig. 1:
Buddhist statue, found in the islands' capital, Male, in the 1960ies.
National Museum of the Maldives.

Fig. 2: Same statue with inscriptions marked