

CHAPTER EIGHT

MIGRANTS AND THE MALDIVES: AFRICAN CONNECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Asian migrants have left an indelible imprint on Divēhi, the language of the Maldives. The Islamic wave that swept in with the rising Arab trade, washed over the Maldives. Forms of music and dance reveal cultural contact with other Indian Oceanic peoples. African migrants have introduced a form of music which has become popular in the Maldives. By considering historical accounts and oral traditions, this paper demonstrates how African culture spilt into the Maldives.

Introduction

The Maldives is a part of an Indian Ocean maritime economy and migration is an essential part of the overall activities that take place. This is the consequence of its geographic location, but it is also reflected in the economy. Diversity makes the Maldives a special case in the Indian Ocean, but it also complicates the analysis of Maldivian culture.

Consisting of 1,190 islands in total, the Maldives are situated in the Indian Ocean, southwest of Sri Lanka. These islands are in an area 470 miles long and 70 miles wide. There are 300,000 Maldivians today who call their country *Divēhi Rajje* which means 'Island Kingdom' in their language Divēhi. These coral islands are geological formations and each has a distinct name. For administrative purposes, these are grouped into 20 Atolls.

Today, the main income generator for the Maldives is tourism. The Maldivians have ensured that the tourists do not upset their way of

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life. Some islands have been designated “tourist islands”. Non-Maldivians cannot go to the other islands unless they are accompanied by a Maldivian. Roland Silva (1983) made some recommendations on preserving the heritage of the Maldives whilst, at the same time, making them attractive to the tourists.

The Maldives are believed to have been populated for about 2,000 years. Therefore an analysis of the migrant groups to these islands becomes complex. Each island could have been populated at a different time. This is complicated further by there being no recorded history of the Maldives until 1153, when conversion to Islam took place. Its recorded history begins with the *Tarikh* (State Chronicle). Today, all Maldivians are Muslims of the Sunni sect.

According to oral history, a Sri Lankan Prince, “Koimala Kalo” and his princess sailed to Rasgetimu, in the North Malosmadulu Atoll, in the 12th century. They were invited to live there. Their son, Kalaminja was crowned as King of the Maldives. Kalaminja ruled for 12 years as a Buddhist King and for a further 13 years as a Muslim after conversion to Islam. It is undisputed that the Maldivians were Buddhists before conversion to Islam (Reynolds 1978: 155). H C P Bell’s expedition to the Maldives, in 1922, and his monograph (1940) confirms this.

Ancient historical chronicles make references to the Maldives. For example, in 300 BC, a Buddhist inscription, and in 200 BC, the *Mahavansa*, the ancient chronicle of Sri Lanka, refer to these islands. As the Maldives has been a stopover point for explorers and sailors, several travellers have mentioned these islands. They are referred to by Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Persians, Arabs, Portuguese and French. I have listed the dates of some recordings and also the names of the travellers (see below).

Year of Record Traveller

150 AD	Ptolemy, Greek Astronomer, Mathematician and Geographer
362 AD	Ammianus Marcellinus, Roman
412 AD	Fa-Hsien, Chinese Buddhist Monk
6th century	Cosmas Indicopleustus, Greek
629–645 AD	Hsuan Tsang, Chinese Buddhist Monk
851 AD	Sulaiman the Persian Merchant of Siraf
916 AD	Al-Masudi, Arab
11th century	Al-Biruni, Arab
12th century	Al-Idrisi, Arab
1349 AD	Wang Ta-Yuan, Chinese writer