

the MALDIVE ISLANDS and their historical links with the coast of Eastern Africa



Andrew Forbes ——— Fawzia Ali



Adu Atoll, including former British air base at Gan, from the air.

Situated in the central Indian Ocean some 2,500 miles east north-east of Mombasa and some 400 miles south-west of Sri Lanka, the Maldivian Archipelago consists of nineteen coral atolls, stretching 470 miles from north to south and just spanning the equator. The Maldivian atolls are made up of just under 1,200 coral islands, none of which is more than three or four square miles in area, as well as innumerable reefs and banks which pose a constant threat to shipping.

The total land area of the Maldives is 112 square miles, although this belies the true size of the country, as the Maldivian government exercises exclusive economic control over a huge area of the central Indian Ocean stretching from Indian waters in the north to those of the Chagos archipelago in the south. At the most recent census the total population of the Maldives

was just under 150,000. The majority of the people live scattered throughout the atolls, where they make a living by coconut farming and fishing for bonito tuna and shark, but fully 20% of the population live crowded on Male, a tiny island less than a mile square, which is the capital and only town of the Maldives.

The Maldivian Islands are believed to have first been settled by Dravidian people from South Asia about half way through the first millenium B.C.; little is known of these first inhabitants who were soon followed by Indo-European people closely related to the Sinhalese population of Sri Lanka. For more than a thousand years the islanders remained under the influence of nearby Buddhist Sri Lanka, but in 1153 the Maldivian king was converted to Islam by a Moroccan Arab, Abu al-Barakat. The king



Minaret of Huruku Miskit (Friday Mosque), Male constructed 1674-5.

took the name Muhammad al-Adil and established an Islamic Sultanate which was to endure almost without interruption until 1968.

Today the Republic of Maldives is an independent nation with a seat at the U.N. Male has become a free port, and trade is primarily with Singapore, though some still takes place with Sri Lanka. Whilst the economy is orientated towards Southeast Asia, the spiritual life of the country remains staunchly Islamic, and many Maldivian scholars travel to Pakistan, Arabia and Egypt to complete their studies. European influence on the islands has been slight. Between 1558 and 1573 the Portuguese attempted to establish control over the Maldives, but although they succeeded in occupying Male, they were unable to dominate the outlying atolls, and were driven out of the islands by the Maldivians after a protracted guerilla war. Since that time no western nation has attempted to occupy the Maldives, although between 1887 and 1965 the Sultanate became a British protectorate and temporarily lost control of its independent foreign policy.

Throughout their long history the Maldivian people have retained a strong sense of their national and cultural identity. They speak a language called *Divehi* which is closely related to medieval Sinhalese, but contains a considerable admixture of Arabic, and they write in their own script, *Tana*, which is based on a mixture of Arabic and South Indian numerals. Although the islanders remain predominantly Indo-European, it is easy to detect in their physiognomy and culture the influence of many generations of travellers and settlers who have reached the remote archipelago from Southeast Asia, the Arab world, and the coast of eastern Africa.

Even though Africans have been visiting the Maldives for well over a thousand years, and although Maldivians are known to have sailed to eastern Africa on numerous occasions, no study of cultural and historical links between the Maldives and eastern Africa has ever been made. The present article represents a very brief summary of our knowledge of some aspects of these links.

The Maldivian Cowrie Trade

Links between eastern Africa and the Maldivian Islands, though never pronounced,

have been surprisingly long-standing. It has been tentatively suggested that the Maldives (and the Seychelles) may have played a role as mid-oceanic staging posts in the Indonesian migrations to eastern Africa and Madagascar thought to have occurred during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.; however, until concrete evidence of this can be produced, such evidence must remain purely speculative. Similarly, it is possible that the mid-Indian Ocean archipelagoes, including the Maldives, played a part in the westwards spread of such staple crops as the banana and the coconut. Of more certain significance to the whole of Africa, however, has been the trade in Maldivian cowries.

As early as the mid-ninth century A.D., the Maldivian Islands were known to the Arab merchant Sulayman as a producer of cowries (*Cypraea Moneta*), the tiny shells once used as a medium of exchange in Bengal, China, Southeast Asia, and throughout large parts of Africa. Although there are no indications of a *direct* trade in cowries between the Maldives and East Africa, it is known that huge quantities of these shells were taken to the ports of Southern Arabia as ballast in Arab dhows crossing the Indian Ocean from Southeast Asia by way of Male. These cowries must have been re-exported to Africa via Sinai, the Red Sea, and the ports of the Somali and Swahili coasts. It is also likely that dhows sailing directly from South Asia to eastern Africa carried cowries as ballast, doubtlessly exchanging them for local produce in ports such as Mogadishu, Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa and Kilwa.

The profits attached to the cowries trade were substantial. Ibn Battuta, who visited the Maldives in 1343-4 and again in 1346 (and who did some trading in cowries himself), records that cowries sold at Male for between 400,000 and 1,200,000 to the gold dinar. Seven years later this "Traveller of Islam" was to see similar cowries, almost certainly of Maldivian origin, selling at 1,150 to the gold dinar in the West African Kingdom of Mali.

With the arrival of European vessels in eastern waters during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Arab domination of the cowrie trade between the Maldivian Islands and eastern Africa was rapidly superseded first by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Maldivian cowries were generally shipped in bulk to Bengal,

often aboard Maldivian vessels, and then re-exported in European ships to both the east and west coasts of Africa.

During the latter half of the seventeenth century the Maldivian cowrie trade was largely re-routed via Ceylon, which had fallen under Dutch control between 1640 and 1658. The Dutch did very well out of this trade, and each successive governor of Ceylon was urged by the Dutch authorities at Batavia to supply larger quantities of Maldivian cowries for the rapidly expanding slave trade on the West African coast. By the middle of the eighteenth century, when the West African slave trade was at its peak, Dutch control of the traffic in Maldivian cowries was long-established and their value in West Africa, although still substantial, had started to fall. An anonymous Dutch account published in 1747 draws attention to this development in the following matter-of-fact terms:

Formerly twelve thousandweight of these cowries would purchase a cargo of five or six hundred negroes; but those lucrative times are now no more; and the negroes now set such a value on their countrymen that there is no such thing as having a cargo under twelve or fourteen tons of cowries.

Maldivian cowries made less of an impact on the east coast of Africa, probably because they faced two serious rivals in the local cowries (*Cypraea annulus*) and in the established cattle standard of the interior — for in cattle areas, especially where iron was fairly abundant, there was less demand for imported currencies such as money cowrie. When, however, Maldivian cowries first made their appearance in the lake regions of eastern Africa the Arab slave-traders from Zanzibar and Bagamoyo were briefly able to make staggering profits; thus according to Roscoe, writing in 1911, at the beginning of the nineteenth century it was possible to buy a woman for two cowries in the Buganda region. The high value placed on cowries in this area was short-lived, nevertheless, and by 1860, following several decades of cowrie importation, it required 2,500 cowries to purchase a cow at the capital or on the main trade routes of Buganda, whilst a woman was valued at between four and five cows in the same places.

Although during the nineteenth century Zanzibar and other places on the East African coast developed a cowrie industry of their own based on the indigenous *cypraea annulus*, Maldivian cowries

continued to find a good market in eastern Africa. This was probably because the blue Zanzibari cowries are larger than the white Maldivian cowries and the latter were reckoned considerably more valuable, both because of the higher cost of transport to the East African coast and also because, once in Africa, they could be transported more easily and cheaply owing to their smaller weight. Maldivian cowries continued to be used as currency in parts of eastern Africa until about 1921 when they were finally displaced by the rupee.



Eastern African Influences on the Maldivian Islands

Eastern Africa contacts with the Maldivian Islands date back at least 700 years, to the time of the conversion of the Maldivian Islanders to Islam, and probably considerably further. During Ibn Battuta's first visit to the remote archipelago in 1343-4 he noted that the inhabitants annointed themselves with musk from Mogadishu. Later during the same visit he was presented with five sheep by the Maldivian vizier, which he noted were: "rare animals with the islanders, having to be brought from Ma'bar, Malabar and Mogadishu." By Ibn Battuta's time African slaves already formed a part of the Maldivian population, and the learned Moroccan, who was appointed chief judge of the islands during his stay there, was called upon on one occasion to preside over the trial of an African slave accused of conducting an "adulterous intrigue" with a lady of the Maldivian Sultan's harem. Not all the Africans present in the Maldives at this time were slaves, however, for when Ibn Battuta returned to the Maldives in 1346 he landed at Kinalos Island in Malosmadulu Atoll and was "welcomed with respect" by the island chief whose name, Abd al-Aziz al-Makdashawi (i.e. of Mogadishu), indicates a connection with the Somali coast, though not necessarily African ethnic

origin. Of more importance, Ibn Battuta records visiting "a hermitage situated at the extremity of the island (Male) and founded by the virtuous Shaykh Najib". This is a clear reference to the *Habshigefanu Magan*, or "Shrine of the African Worthy," a memorial erected to a certain Shaykh Najib who is believed by the Maldivians to have travelled through the Maldivian Archipelago spreading the faith of Islam before dying at Karendu Island in Fadiffolu Atoll. The *Habshigefanu Magan* survived in the precincts of the Lonu Ziyare at Male until the latter's demolition at the beginning of this century.

African slaves continued to be brought to the Maldives, chiefly aboard Arab dhows, until about the middle of the nineteenth century. The number of Africans brought to the islands in this way was never great, but the physiognomy of their descendants is still clearly distinguishable amongst some of the inhabitants of Male and the northern atolls. Most such slaves are reported to have

come directly from eastern Africa via Zanzibar and the Omani port of Muscat, but others were bought in Jeddah, on one occasion by the Maldivian Sultan Hasan III, who brought 70 slaves from the Hejaz to Male in the mid-fifteenth century. According to the Maldivian *Ta'rikh*, an historical chronicle written in the early nineteenth century, trouble arose following the return of this sultan to Male when a slave killed a Maldivian. If the *Ta'rikh* is to be believed, the sultan must have thought very highly of this slave, for when the chief judge of the Islands demanded that the murder be punished, Hasan III refused and had the judge burned at the stake instead. Generally speaking, however, African slaves brought to the Maldives settled peacefully in the northern and central atolls, intermarrying with the local people and working chiefly as *raveris*, or keepers of coconut plantations. The trade in African slaves had largely died out by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in 1834 two British naval lieutenants who visited Male were able to report that:

From the information we were able to collect... it appears that Muscat vessels do not often visit this place: when they do, they generally bring a cargo of slaves. Five years ago one came and sold about twenty-five lads, at an average price of about 80 rupees each.

Amongst the possible cultural contributions of eastern Africa to the Maldives are the *babaru lava* or "negro songs" which are performed to traditional Maldivian *bodu beru* ("big drum") dances. Maldivians believe that the *bodu beru* style of dancing and singing was introduced to their country by African settlers and slaves during the twelfth century. *Bodu beru* is played with three drums, accompanied by a small bell and an *onugadu*, or piece of bamboo on which horizontal lines have been cut and which is scraped with a pointed stick, producing a rasping sound. Including the three drummers and a lead singer, about 15 people usually participate in the choruses and dancing. The songs are preceded by a slow rhythmic beating of the drums which is accompanied by dancing. As the songs reach a crescendo, one or two dancers keep the beat with their frantic movements, and sometimes go into a trance. The songs vary in tempo and are variously in Divehi, Arabic and, according to Maldivian sources, in some of the languages of eastern Africa - however, much research remains to be done in this field.



Maldivian woman of Fedu Island, Addu Atoll, curing headache with sura from Qur'an pasted to her forehead.

Possible Maldivian Influences on Eastern Africa

Possible Maldivian contributors to the history of eastern Africa remains shrouded in obscurity and, with the single exception of the cowrie trade, are considerably less easy to trace than African influences on the Maldivian Islands.

It has been widely suggested that the *Wadiba*, a sea-borne people who, according to Swahili oral tradition, conquered parts of the East African coast including Pemba and possibly Mombasa, were in fact Maldivians. The *Wadiba*, whose name is thought to mean "from the islands" (based on the Sanskrit for island, *dvīpa*, a term applied by the medieval Arab navigators to the Maldivian and Laccadive Islands), are believed to have ruled over Pemba during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. According to some traditions the infamous *Mkame Mdume* ("Milker of Men"), who is credited with having built and lived at Pujini on Pemba, was a *Wadiba*. *Mkame Mdume*, whose real name is sometimes given as Muhammad bin Abd al-Rahman, was clearly a Muslim and is remembered as having been fiercely orthodox in his observance of the faith. The *Wadiba* in general and *Mkame Mdume* in particular are remembered for their proselytism of Islam, building of mosques, and proficiency in the construction of *mtepe* sewn-boats - all possible indications of Maldivian identity. However, the *Wadiba* are remembered above all for their terrible cruelty, and this alone is enough to dissociate them from the Maldivians, who are amongst the mildest and most gentle of people and were so even in Ibn Battuta's time, when half the audience had fainted away on hearing the Moroccan judge order that a thief's hand should be cut off. The Maldivians have never attacked any neighbouring territories other than, on rare occasions, the Laccadive Islands, and although willing and able to defend

themselves against foreign invaders, are otherwise generally loathe to take any higher form of life, whether human or animal.

Another Swahili oral tradition, which comes from the Lamu area and is far more likely to be associated with the inhabitants of the Maldivian islands than is the *Mkame Mdume* legend, records that a number of foreign vessels were wrecked off Kiwayu Island, some 35 miles north of Lamu, at about the beginning of the sixteenth century. The survivors of this catastrophe, who are similarly styled *Wadiba* or "islanders", were treated hospitably by the local Bajun people with whom they subsequently intermarried. The Lamu tradition goes on to relate how the *Wadiba* taught the Bajun, who until this time had used only dugout canoes, to build vessels after their own fashion. The Bajun were pleased with the new design, and adopted it for themselves, substituting local mangrove wood for the coconut planks with which the original *Wadiba* vessels were reportedly built.

If the Lamu tradition of the *Wadiba* is based on any element of fact, the possibility that shipwrecked Maldivian sailors introduced some improvements to the sailing vessels of the Bajun cannot be ruled out. Certainly, similarities between smaller Maldivian craft and the East African *mtepe* exist, particularly in their common use of a square sail rig. The Maldivian Islanders have long held a well-deserved reputation as intrepid mariners. Their traditional maritime trade routes carried them as far afield as Singapore, Bengal, the Arabian Peninsula and Mauritius, and whilst the coast of eastern Africa lay outside their normal circle of trade, numerous instances of Maldivian vessels reaching East Africa having been driven out of their course by adverse weather and customs have been recorded.

Andrew Forbes is a Visiting Fellow of the Centre of International and Area Studies, University of London, and Fawzia Ali is a teacher from Guyana. They have travelled and carried out research in both eastern Africa and the Maldivian islands.

(The authors are currently working on a detailed study of historical links between eastern Africa and the Maldivian Islands, and would be pleased to receive any related correspondence through the editorial office of Kenya Past and Present).