



New Zealand

Majid's Pages

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THE MALDIVE ISLANDERS, A Study of the Popular Culture of an Ancient Ocean Kingdom. 1999

Introduction

One or two treasure ships of the Middle Kingdom went there too. They purchased ambergris, coconuts and other such things. It is but a small country.

(Ma Huan, The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores)

When I visited Maldives for the first time, in June 1979, I used to spend a lot of time in the Majeedi Library. It was the main one in the capital, Male', and it has since been renamed as the National Library. Back then, it was a very quiet place where there was a pleasant atmosphere and employees were friendly and helpful. As I wanted to know about the land, which incidentally is, like Siam, one of the few Asian countries which were spared foreign colonization, I read all that I could find there, which was not very much. I remember very clearly that what struck me most at the time was how few books of substance had been published about the Maldives, and the fact that most of them had been written long ago.



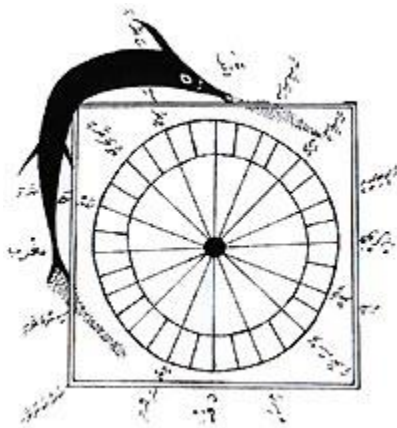
Photo: Ismail Abdulla

Those few old books dwelt at length on royal genealogies and life in the Sultan's court, where the few foreign travelers visiting the country (Ibn Batuta, Pyrard de Laval) had been entertained. Modern publications were little more than shallow statistical reports or glossy tourist guides. I felt that the country had been described but not understood. The Maldivian people, their way of life and their feelings had never been given a voice. They seemed to

have been dismissed as 'just a silent presence in the background,' like servants in a palace. Thus, vast areas of knowledge about this island country had still not come to the light.

As years went by, I became fluent in Divehi, the local language, and I developed a sense of perspective concerning the Maldivian cultural heritage. However, I was puzzled by the inconsistent Maldivian attitude towards history. A few gentlemen belonging to the educated elite were aware of an obscure and distant Buddhist past which, they would know little about. They claimed that the present country had nothing to do with it. Years later, a few Maldivians acknowledged a form of what they called 'mysticism' within the autochthonous culture. However, they treated it as an isolated, purely local phenomenon of 'mysterious' origins.

At a popular level things were even more clouded: most islanders didn't want to have anything to do with their Buddhist ancestors. They preferred to say that other folks had been Buddhist in their country, not them. It sounded as if the people of the Maldives had always been Muslim and could not have possibly been anything else. In what looks like a blind form of destructiveness, Maldivians, instead of acknowledging and giving due honor to their ancestral Buddhist heritage, in which most of their culture is still rooted, spared no effort to dissociate themselves as much as possible from their own past.



Cosmic diagram - 'These fish illustrations found in local astrology books are among the few zoomorphic representations made by Maldivians since their conversion to Islam.'

The Maldivian past is like a misty region, where even events of recent history seem to be far away in time. To the outsider, this gives the impression that the actual character of the Maldives is concealed behind a mask. At the same time, I could not avoid realizing that the visible face of the country was changing rapidly around me. During the 1980's the Maldivian Islands underwent a profound transformation. I witnessed how the new aggressive Islamization and modernization of the country, paradoxically happening simultaneously, upset the traditional Island society, stifling most forms of popular expression. In a scenario where the forces of Islamization and technological consumerism were poised for a combined onslaught on the Islands, the stresses for the concealed ancestral cultural heritage were so huge that I wondered whether any traces of it would survive at all.

The awareness about a whole country losing its true personality, gradually translated itself into concern. In the face of the general passivity, I felt responsible for keeping the fragile legacy of the ancestral Maldivian expressions alive, which led me to collect clues about the country's past. This book is the fruit of many years of observing and collecting samples not only of tales, but also of the iconography, popular beliefs, festivals, rituals and customs of the Maldivian Islanders. In the end I gathered such a vast amount of data that it took me almost as many years to analyze them, categorize them and evaluate them in the context of the art and traditions of the Indian Subcontinent. This comparison was necessary since the Maldivian folkways didn't just pop 'mysteriously' out of the blue and, certainly, it is not merely an 'Islamic Country' as the local authorities would like us to believe: The present work, by comparing myths and way of life, tries to establish that the first people settling the Maldives were fisher folk from the nearest maritime regions, the coastlines of South India and Ceylon.

Besides the racial affinity, we will see how below the Islamic veneer the folk culture of the whole area is still very similar.

There are clear indications that sometime in Maldivian antiquity (probably about two millennia ago) a kingly dynasty from the northern regions of the Subcontinent established their power in the Maldivian Islands without much local opposition. It is likely that those first 'noble rulers' brought the Buddhist Dharma in their wake, although there are legends that hint at a later conversion to Buddhism. In clear divergence from Sri Lankan myths, in the Maldives those northern kings perhaps became Buddhist centuries after beginning their rule over the Maldivian atolls. Next follows an analysis of the traces of Goddess-worship and the fear of spirits of the dead which are still present in Maldivian popular traditions. The Dravidian Devi cult and a form of tutelary spirit and ancestor worship are prevalent among the coastal peoples from the Tulu region of India (Coastal Karnataka) to the southern shores of Ceylon.

Maldivian archaeological remains and some inscriptions found therein, point to influences from 8th or 9th century Bengal, in the form of Vajrayāna Buddhist iconography and writing. This work describes the island world of esoterism and demonstrates how nowadays, to a certain extent, the Vajrayāna Tantric teachings have endured in the Maldives in a syncretistic form of occult magical practices, known locally as *faṇḍitaverikan*. Thus, the traditions described in this study are not yet a thing of the past. Many aspects of the ancient Divehi folkways remain alive and form a part of the present-day culture of most Maldivian individuals. This survival has not been easy, and towards the end of this book I describe how, since the thirteenth century, there have been quite a number of kings and 'holy men' who tried to make the Maldives more Islamicized disregarding local cultural needs and values in the process.

I am aware that quite a few aspects of this study may offend some readers. Folklore is close to the more immediate realities of life, the worries of the common man and woman, young or old. Thus, in the text there are many explicit references to blood, sex, defecation, disease and death. To add to the difficulty, this is a field where nothing seems to be holy, for folkways consistently display a casual lack of respect towards established religions and government authority. However, instead of being ingenuous and condemn, one must keep in mind that folklore is rooted in emotions and deviations that all human beings manifest. Reality doesn't leave much room for idealization, and those who may be dismayed by Maldivian popular culture should remember William Graham Sumner's testy dictum that anybody likely to be shocked by reading about folkways, of whatever sort, had better not read about folkways at all.

Since Maldivians were reluctant to talk about their popular beliefs, it was initially not easy for me to get to the core of their culture. It took years of patient work and living among the average folk, sharing one roof, their meals, their preoccupations, their joy and their pain, to finally be able to understand their ancestral soul. After spending a great part of my life among the Divehi people, I came to admire the way in which they have adapted to their environment. My hope is that this book will help them to recover their pride in their heritage.

Note: For the transcription of the Maldivian language the ISO 15919 transliteration of Indic scripts has been used, save a few exceptions.