

The Maldives were such an unknown place back then: Nils Finn Munch-Petersen, a true pioneer

By Xavier Romero-Frias

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Nils Finn Munch-Petersen, a Danish scholar, is nothing less than a real pioneer as regards the research on Maldivian culture. Although modern studies on the Maldives had been set in motion by British colonial officer H.C.P. Bell, who visited the islands in the late 19th and the early 20th century, they remained incomplete. Eventually, over four decades would pass before someone would again travel to the islands with a plan to fill the void. Nils first arrived in Male' in January 1974 and became the first person in recent times to begin methodical research on the Maldivian people. In the decades that followed he carried out extensive studies on the Maldives and Minicoy. Uncannily, it was as if he had opened a door, for other researchers such as Clarence Maloney would follow almost right away. Having a deep and accurate understanding of Maldives, he has sobering things to say about the current state of the country.

The door to contemporary Maldivian scholarly studies had been first opened by H.C.P. Bell, a British archaeologist who made three visits to the Maldivian Islands between 1879 and the 1920s. However, there would be no one to continue in his steps and a long period of occlusion followed Bell's last trip to the archipelago and the publication of his works—the knowledge of which had remained very restricted. Despite a few foreign contacts lifting the shroud of obscurity in which the islands dwelt, such as the British presence at the military base in Addu Atoll, as well as having been a stopover in Hans Hass' *Xarifa* expedition, nobody chose to study the Maldives in depth for a period of many decades in the heart of the 20th century.

World War II gave way to the Cold War and the long coral archipelago remained a backwater, one of the last few remote, forbidding regions on the planet, less known than Tibet. Meanwhile in the 1970s in Denmark scholar Finn Munch-Petersen looked at maps and wondered about the enigmatical stretch of small dots on the Indian Ocean. The mysterious archipelago was so near to Sri Lanka, but quite different according to what could be inferred from what Bell had written about the place, as well as from the scant, seldom more detailed, earlier accounts.

Initially Nils and his wife Annagrethe went to South India. In 1973 they stayed at the coastal village of Thirumullaivasal, in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu in order to do research. Their eyes, however, were actually set on nearby Maldives. What was intriguing for Nils as an anthropologist was that he could find not even a hint of a description of the social structure of the country.

Nils particularly recalls that the Maldivian Islands were quite unknown by the outside world at the time. Before his departure for India Nils had called the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen and asked for information about the Republic of Maldives.

A friendly person on the line assured him that he would call him back. About half an hour later the phone rang indeed, but unfortunately his call was a disappointment. The man said: "I'm sorry - telling the truth, we have no information of any kind as to the Maldives".

After a time in India, Nils and his wife continued to Sri Lanka —then known as Ceylon— where they immediately paid a visit to the tiny Maldivian High Commission, the first official Maldivian place they set their feet on. There they were informed that in order to be allowed to sail to the Islands they would need permission from Malship, the Maldivian shipping Company. They went then to the Malship office where they were told that permission could not be issued without prior agreement from the High Commission.

Thus, in a from pillar-to-post fashion, the Danish couple went back to the Maldivian High Commission, where they again were told to contact Malship. But with Maldivians it definitely pays to be patient and not to lose one's temper. While Nils was sitting opposite the first secretary keeping calm and pondering over the situation, all of a sudden the phone rang. Somehow from the secretary's conversation in Divehi Nils guessed that the caller was from Malship. Boldly, he interrupted his conversation and said:

—"If this is from Malship, we could ask them now..!"

The secretary seemed quite taken aback and talked again with the other person on the line, mentioning the word Denmark, then he turned to Nils and his wife and said: "it's ok, there is a ship leaving next week".

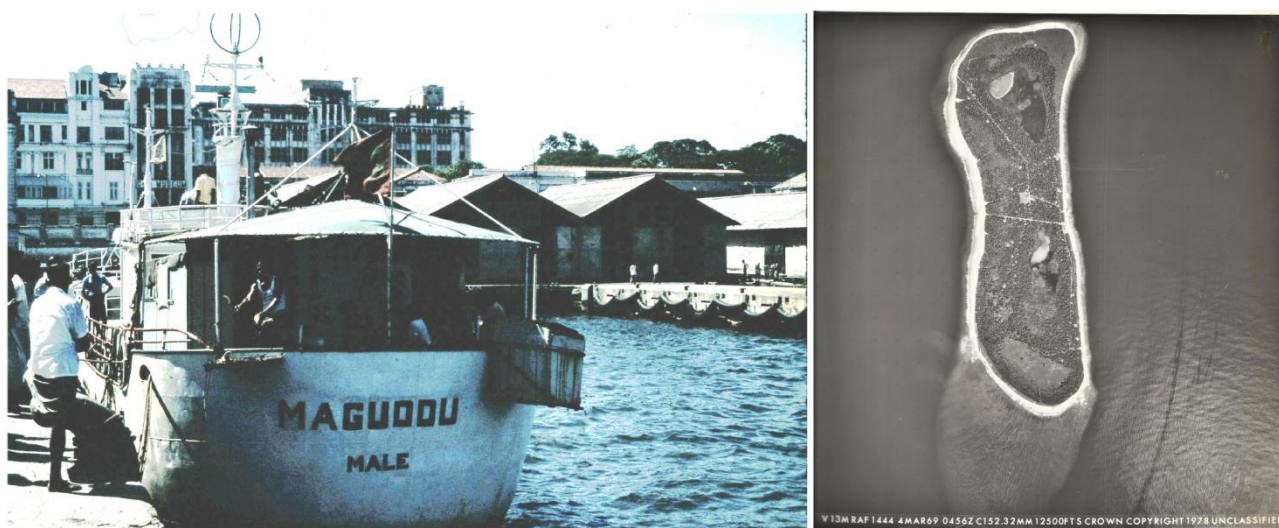
While waiting for the ship Nils made use of his idle days and visited several times the National Archives in Colombo, mainly in order to study the notes of H.C.P. Bell. He visited as well the National Museum where among other things he found —actually one could say that he rediscovered— Bell's collection of stone artefacts from the Maldives. These invaluable archaeological remains of Maldivian ancient history had been brought from Male' five decades earlier and had been stored away deep down in the Museum cellar where they had been languishing in oblivion ever since.

The ship to the Maldives was a reconverted Korean fishing boat which had run aground on one of the treacherous reefs of the archipelago during illegal fishing, following which it had been confiscated by the Maldivian government, being renamed Maguddu. The trip took one and a half days and —ever wanting to quench his curiosity about the country— Nils thought that he was lucky that the radio operator, Hamid, actually spoke English. Once at sea, in one of their conversations on the deck of the Maguddu Hamid suggested that Nils and his wife should visit his home when in Male'.

At long last, on 14 January 1974, the two Danish passengers arrived to the capital of the Maldives where their passports were stamped by a non-uniformed immigration officer. Upon landing at the Male' harbour front Nils was immediately struck by the cleanliness and the silence of the place. This was obviously a very different atmosphere from India and Sri Lanka. Nils remembers the low white buildings, clean swept streets of intensely white coral

sand, people quietly walking, talking in low voices and a few bicycles —each displaying its small license plate. In fact there were four sizeable vehicles in the island at the time, three trucks and the President's car, but they neither were to be seen nor heard when Nils disembarked that day in the late afternoon.

At immigration Nils and Annagrethe —who later would be known by Maldivians as 'Anna'— had been told to go to the customs building on the harbour front. When they reached it they found the small office open but there was no-one inside. So they left their backpacks on the desk and went to find the government guesthouse, an informal-looking scruffy building where they easily got a room —there were no other guests. Then in the same evening at sunset they decided to check again the customs office. The office was open, but still eerily empty and the rucksacks were still standing untouched where they had left them. Nils and his wife loathed to leave their belongings exposed in the desolate office during the night, so they took them home to the guesthouse, and ended up never seeing a Maldivian customs officer.



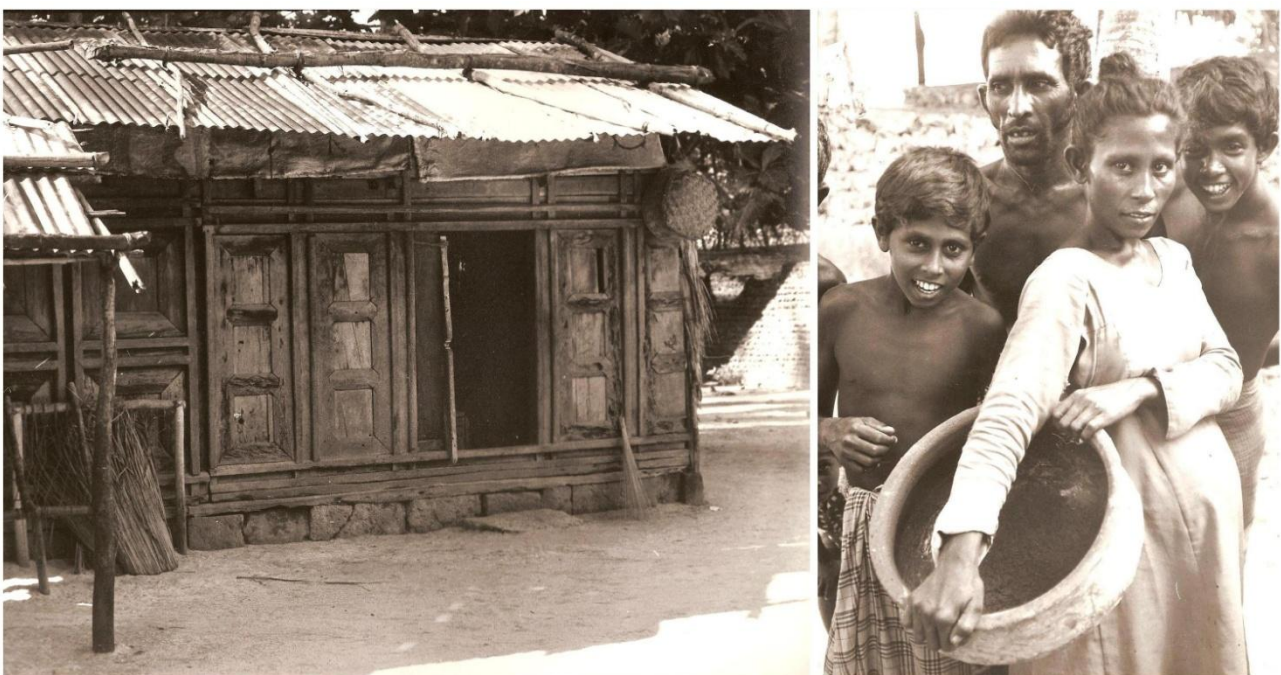
The Maguddu boat anchored at Colombo Harbour in January 1974 and a 1969 aerial picture of Fua Mulaku, taken at a time when the island's nature had still not been destroyed.

The next day Nils went out in search of Hamid, the boat's radio operator. Walking in the glare of the sandy white streets Nils asked people on the way and expected to find a house of moderate size. Hamid had told him that his house, named Athireege, should be on Ameer Ahmed Magu, near the harbour area. To his amazement Nils found himself in front of an impressive aristocratic building with a large garden. This could not possibly be it, he thought. Luckily a smiling man was standing at the gate of the house opposite it, another grand, imposing home. When Nils asked him the man replied in good English —later he would find out that the man was Hilmy Didi, the then Minister of Fisheries. He said that this was indeed the home of Hamid and his wife Amina. Amina was the only daughter of Mohamed Amin, the president of the first Maldivian Republic, and the house was next to the then brand-new residence of President Ibrahim Nasir.

Upon meeting the two Danish visitors Amina let them know that she could find a better place for them to stay in Male'. She immediately contacted Kamal-ud-din, the former attorney general and grandson of two kings both from the mother's and his father's side. A hospitable elderly man who spoke some English, Kamal-ud-din was now retired; while his son Abdullah—who would later hold a number of different minister posts— was then in his last year at school and spoke the language fluently.

Nils and his wife thus went to live to a room in Kamal-ud-din's home and for a while they found it hard to believe that, so soon after having arrived to the country, they were already rubbing shoulders with the highest ranks of Maldivian society. At that time there was only one European residing in Male'; he was the British head of the High School. But the country was large and Nils decided not to stay all the time in the capital.

The Danish researchers sailed south to Haddummati (Laamu), Huvadū, Fua Mulaku and Addu. Fua Mulaku, an island lacking a natural harbour and ever beaten by the oceanic waves, had been described as "the most verdant island" by HCP Bell, a description that would cause quite an impression on the Danish researcher. Eventually Nils stayed a little over two months in the Maldives in that ground-breaking 1974 trip.



Traditional wooden house with sliding door in Maalhosmaḡulu Atoll and local people in Diggaru, Mulak Atoll.

Later in the same year Nils came back to the Maldives for another period that lasted from 24 August until 5 November. This time he travelled north to Maalhosmadulu Atoll (Raa and Baa), where he visited ten local islands taking numerous pictures of their inhabitants, as well as of their boats, their houses and their wells. These pictures would later become invaluable documents, evidence of a relaxed and environmentally sound way of life that was unfortunately poised to disappear.

Back then the Male' Post Office was the only one in the whole archipelago and local boats mooring at the capital were required to take mail to other islands whenever they sailed. Accordingly —having decided to avoid anything more complicated— Nils' postal address became "*Petersen, Maldives*". In the years that followed Nils visited all atolls in the country, including more than 120 inhabited islands, and would never fail to be pleasantly surprised every time a piece of mail addressed in this manner found its way to his hands wherever he would happen to be in the vast oceanic realm.



A mother carrying her baby in the customary way in an island of Ari Atoll and people living on a boat from Haddummati Atoll while anchored at Male' Harbour.

Roughly two years passed, and on 9 January 1977 Nils returned to the Maldives. Having decided that it was important for his research to learn Divehi, he planned to settle for a protracted period in Fua Mulaku in order to be able to learn the language well. When they arrived to the large, beautiful island Nils and Anna were put up in a house in Miskimmago, located roughly at the centre, where they soon became an unending source of curiosity for the local men, women and children. After a week, following some disagreements with their landlord they moved to Dađimago, the village at the northern end of Fua Mulaku, close to a wilderness that included an inshore lake surrounded by reeds and taro fields.

As weeks went by and —in spite of the ever-present throng of women and children surrounding them whenever they went out for a walk— the two Danish visitors ended up feeling very lonely owing to the oddity and remoteness of the place. But they were lucky, for their new landlord, Rafeeq, was an affable man who did not spare efforts to make his Danish guests feel at home in their new location. Thanks to Rafeeq's benevolence and ever-cheerful mood, in the end Nils and Anna truly felt that they had become an integral part of his family. Nils fondly reminisces that in Rafeeq's home he and Anna had their own separate room, with a small garden and their own chickens.

During his long stay in Fua Mulaku Nils functioned informally as a medic, sharing the stock of medicines he and Anna had brought. As time went by people would hold him in high regard and he would feel welcome wherever he went in the island. Not having still been influenced by religious political ideologies, religion was a very calm issue in the Maldives at the time.

Nils remembers that he was never asked about his religion and also that he and his wife did not experience being shown any disregard for not being Muslims. Although Nils never pretended to be a Muslim, people would sometimes visit him in the evening, approaching him directly with questions about Islamic law:

—“We know you are not a believer, but we also know you have read the Koran – we have a question.”Nils then answered according to his academic knowledge of the Koran and the Hadith.



Fua Mulaku: A woman working in a partly flooded taro field and a girl dressed in the traditional way holding a special knife to cut screw pine.

While immersed in the discipline of studying the language Nils admits that his wife Anna was a far better learner. In the years that followed Rafeeq would remain a very good friend of Nils, for whom he had developed great admiration and respect. Nils long gone,

Rafeeq would always recall his Danish friend with a warm smile in his face. He would point at the thatched roof in his home and tell me:

—“Now every house has corrugated-iron roofing, but I kept this old-fashioned thatched roof in this part of the house because Nils told me that it was much better.”

Indeed the house was much cooler and the high pitched roof was beautiful, but his wife added that it was not easy to find the woven coconut fronds anymore and they would rot every so often, needing to be replaced.

Nils' nine month stay in Fua Mulaku between February and November 1977 would be his longest residence in a single island in all his visits to the Maldives. He used the large equatorial island—which would be my home in the 1980s— as a base for short trips to neighbouring Addu and Huvaduu atolls. In addition, on the way to the island and back to Male' Nils and Anna had visited all atolls located in between. Finally they left the Maldives via Hulule airport on 29 December 1977.



Group of island people in Daandu, Huvaduu Atoll, in 1977

Nils and Anna returned to the Maldives on 5 June 1978. On this occasion they did not go to the South, for their project was to make a grand tour of all northern atolls. Their journey began on 25 August and they travelled together with Heidi Eckel, who they had met the previous year. Heidi had spent a year in Maldives and was fluent in the Northern form of the Maldivian language. After having visited a total of 63 islands they returned to the capital on 15 December, leaving Male' shortly thereafter on Christmas Day.

At the time Nils had funding from the Moesgård Museum, Aarhus University to collect Maldivian art and utensils. Since the Royal Palace had been destroyed not long before and tourists had still not depleted the local shops of true antiquities, Nils was able to collect a wide range of Maldivian artefacts, including local lacquerware, reed mats, textiles and brass utensils. Most of the valuable objects he acquired were unique pieces, such as the many items from the old Sultan Palace. Eventually when they were gathered at the Moesgård Museum they became the largest existing collection of Maldiviana.

Nils collected as well an almost exhaustive collection of samples of the Maldivian flora. These are now kept at the Danish National Herbarium. He also collected over hundred different fish and mollusc species, many of them through Rafeeq who proudly showed me the way Nils had instructed him to preserve any unusual fish that he would find on the Fua Mulaku reef. Although most of these marine animals had been recorded in the Maldives for the first time, no endemic species were found.

In 1980 Nils published a superbly-illustrated book in Danish with an English summary *Maldiverne: Et Øsamfund i Det Indiske Ocean*, Kunstindustrimuseet, Copenhagen. For some reason an old Maldivian trader who owned a shop right by the firewood market in Male' got a large batch which he sold slowly to tourists during the 1980s. Since there were many Maldivians at that time who didn't understand about ethnography I found many people who were peeved, claiming that foreigners who saw the pictures on the book would think of the Maldives as an out-of-date, unrefined country, with scruffy thatched houses and children without shirts. I was told that:

—“If he had wanted to make us look good Nils should have included pictures of our modern buildings, engine-fitted boats and smartly-dressed people in his book.”

Unlike Clarence Maloney,¹ another scholar that visited the Maldives in the late 1970s to do research but who later never travelled to the islands again, Nils kept visiting the country at regular intervals in the years that followed. He worked for the United Nations, GTZ—a German company specializing in international development—the European Union and the World Bank on projects in the Maldives. Most of these development ventures had to do with environment, tourism, water and sanitation, as well as with the fisheries and the agriculture sectors.

Between 1977 and 1983 this Danish researcher came every year to the island nation, then following a five year absence, he returned in 1989 as well as in the two years that followed. After this he was absent from the islands for well over a decade, but came back in 2006 and 2008. His more recent visits were in 2011 and 2012.

Nils is very concerned with the severe issues affecting the island country today. He believes it is disastrous that the Maldives of old has been forgotten. Having experienced

¹ Together with Clarence Maloney Nils wrote the small chapter on the Divehi Culture in the *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, Vol. III, Asia, Yale University Press 1992

the harmony of a thrifty society where nothing was thrown away, and the quietness of island streets, he is now overwhelmed by the nightmarish accumulation of garbage and the irritating din of vehicles in every island.



Present-day Maldives: Garbage accumulated on the shoreline of an island in a northern atoll and a street in Male', a city described by Nils as "a strange, ultra-dense town".²

This benevolent Danish scholar, who experienced being surrounded by the goodwill of the island people in past decades, also grieves over what he sees as a growing atmosphere of malevolence among Maldivians: the hatred of the outside world represented by the tourists on one side and by the Bangladeshi workers on the other. Formerly absent but now found everywhere in the country the Bangladeshis provide cheap labour but are generally mistreated by Maldivians as if they were third-rate beings.

Nils sees the present-day state of affairs in the Maldives as nothing short of a tragedy, where people who have lost their identity are putting a political ideology assumed to be "Islam" in the place of history. With the traditional culture dead, he deems that ordinary Maldivians have nothing left to hold on to and fears that in such a situation imported Arab extremism has the upper hand.

² *The Maldives — victim of uncontrolled growth*. By Nils Finn Munch-Petersen, NIAS Associate, senior expert. In: Research. NIAS Review 2008/2009. pp. 8-9