

The Destruction of the Cultural Heritage of the Maldives

By Xavier Romero-Frias

For the past forty years there has been an effort by some sectors of the Maldivian society to destroy the national cultural patrimony with impunity. This movement is spearheaded by certain groups and individuals that are either part of the government or that have its tacit approval.

Months before the February 2012 political turmoil that overthrew President Mohamed Nasheed, members of religious hardline organizations staged numerous public meetings in which they attacked government policies for being irreligious. In such venues certain leaflets were handed out of which a copy is translated and analyzed here. Ostensibly, no effort was made from the part of the Maldivian authorities at the time to prevent the rallies or to moderate the virulent tone of the speeches. Also, there was no criticism of the leaflets themselves and no attempt to hamper their distribution.



Side one of the tract distributed in 2011 by the Islamic Foundation of the Maldives.

The flier was printed by the Islamic Foundation of Maldives, a religious organization operating in the country which was established in 2009 and that is legally registered at the Maldivian Ministry of Home Affairs. On the front the leaflet has pictures where randomly five ancient coral stone images of the national archaeological heritage appear together with two statues of national lion symbols of India and Sri Lanka, two fellow SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation) countries, as well as three items sold in souvenir shops. On the backside there are two pictures showing details of a banyan tree with small cloth pieces tied to the aerial roots.



The other side of the same pamphlet.

The flier begins with a war cry:

For Allah’s sake let’s get rid of all the idols!

To practice idolatry, to promote idolatry, to call others to idolatry and to keep signs of idolatry in different corners of these Islamic islands are highly criminal acts according to the Islamic Foundation of Maldives.

The leaflet goes on to stress that the Maldivian government should remove the “idols” at the base of the monument gifted by the government of Pakistan during the SAARC Summit held in Addu, at the southern end of the country. Additionally, the foundation has noticed that there are many other idols in the capital Male’, as well as other islands and demands from the government of Maldives and its citizens that they should participate directly in their destruction, invoking the platitudinous statement that “we are a 100 percent Islamic country.” And that “since ancient times no chance has been given to any other religion.”

The leaflet goes on preaching that citizens should be saved from hell by protecting them from the temptation of polytheism induced by idols of various kinds that can be bought in stores and

those that have been excavated and displayed at the National Museum. The claim is also made that young Maldivians visiting the museum may be tempted to fall into idolatry.

The writer of the pamphlet laments that everyone is witnessing this alleged promotion of polytheism without taking any decisive action. The tying of knots in the banyan tree of the Sultan Park near the National Museum is compared to ancient forms of polytheism (stone, sun, moon and star worship) in which both foreigners and locals engage.

The leaflet continues with a call to action, asking shopkeepers to stop selling idols and repent, and calls for Maldivians and the authorities to destroy all the idols. In the name of a campaign for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, it identifies all archaeological remains and sites as targets to be destroyed. The destruction of archaeological sites includes the complete annihilation of ancient Buddhist sculptures, temple and stupa structures and their foundations, as well as tombs of saints (*ziyaray*) of the local religious tradition.

Finally the leaflet threatens Maldivians with the wrath of Allah, in the form of a tsunami, as well as with the sudden transformation of people into monkeys and pigs.

Aftermath

On 7 February 2012 a group of Maldivians armed with hammers entered the premises of the National Museum in the capital and engaged in the systematic destruction of the ancient Buddhist artifacts preserved there. Made of coral stone, most of the exhibits were pulverized and very little remains of the collection of the archaeological heritage of the nation.

No action was taken against the vandals that entered the museum and, since then, the suspects have not been identified. The inventory of the damage caused by the destruction was not published in the press and few details were given about it elsewhere. After the initial outburst of indignation and the publishing of a few articles about the destruction of the National Maldivian archaeological heritage by vandals, the matter was slowly buried. Currently the National Museum emphasizes the more recent history of the country. The collection of Buddhist artifacts, even photographs of them, is not on display and the archaeological pieces of ancient history that escaped the destruction of February 2012 have been quietly stowed away.

Further reading

Vandalism at Maldives Museum Stirs Fears of Extremism, Vikas Bajaj, The New York Times, February 13, 2012

Mob Storms Maldives National Museum, Destroys Buddhist Statues, Havva Lubna, Archaeology News Network, 2/11/2012

Islamists destroy some 30 Buddhist statues, Asia News, 02/15/2012

Maldives mob smashes Buddhist statues in national museum, Al Arabiya News, 08 February 2012