



## The Maldives

### Overview

The Republic of the Maldives, (*Divehi Raajje*, "Island kingdom"), comprises a 500-mile north–south archipelago of almost two thousand low-lying islands and islets which form part of a series of nineteen coral atolls lying to the west below the southern tip of India. Approximately 200 of these islands are inhabited. Many of the islands, with the coral lagoons that surround them, are exquisitely beautiful. Some are small enough to conform to the stereotype of the sun-drenched desert island containing nothing but white sand and a few coconut palms. Many of the islands rise only a few metres above sea-level, and the Maldivian government is an active lobbyist against global warming: even small rises in sea-level would have very serious consequences for the Maldives.

The rapid growth of the tourist market since the 1960s has meant that it is now possible to reach the Maldives directly by international air travel. But in the past, travellers usually reached the islands by sea from the south-west coast of India, from Sri Lanka, or after crossing the Indian Ocean. The treacherous submerged coral reefs surrounding the atolls have been responsible for countless shipwrecks, and we owe most of our rare early accounts of the islands to visitors who arrived there quite unintentionally.

Divehi is the national language of the Republic of the Maldives. It is an Indo-European language, related historically to Sinhala, the language of Sri Lanka. Divehi today uses a script that was invented by an Arab Muslim traveller in about 1200, and is written right-to-left with Perso-Arabic numerals acting as consonants, and vowels being marked with diacritics more or less in the style of the Indian Devanāgarī script used for Hindī (but with different signs). Thus, the script appears, superficially, Semitic. Pre-1200 copper-plate grants and inscriptions are in an earlier and quite different script which is historically related to the Sinhala script (Reynolds 1993:41–45). There is ample archaeological evidence in the Maldives archipelago of a long Buddhist history before 1200, strongly influenced by Sri Lanka. Today the Republic of the Maldives is a Sunni Muslim state; no non-Muslim may be a Maldivian citizen. Maldivian religious and political authorities have in the past preferred to focus attention exclusively on the Islamic history of the Maldives, which is after all responsible for most of its present culture and traditions. However, the Buddhist pre-history of the islands, which has sometimes been viewed almost with

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chagrin, is becoming more interesting to a new generation of archaeologists and historians. For example, several Maldivian mosques face East, not towards Mecca, a fact which becomes comprehensible only when it is realized that some mosques are built on pre-modern foundations.

The Lakshadweep (formerly "Laccadive") islands to the north of the Maldives are part of the same undersea volcanic structure as the Maldives, a geological feature first correctly described by Charles Darwin (1889). The people of the Lakshadweep islands speak a variant of Malayalam, the language of Kerala in India. They are also Sunni Muslims, probably by conversion from Hinduism by mainland Muslims from Kerala, rather than by Arab Indian Ocean travellers, as in the case of the Maldivians (Singh *et al.* 1993:49–52). But curiously, the Keralan Nair system of matrilineal descent still survives amongst sections the Lakshadweep people. This combination of Malabar-style matrilineality with a fundamentally Muslim patriarchal ideology is unexpected. At the present time, matrilineality is on the decline in the islands (Singh *et al.* 1993:43–49).

The island of Maluku (Minicoy in atlases), exactly between the Lakshadweep islands to the North and the Maldives to the south, is culturally a special case. During its early history it was part of the Maldives, and Divehi is still spoken there. In fishing and other traditions the island is closely aligned with the Maldives. But in the eighteenth century a Maldivian Sultan ceded the island to Keralan rajas and it is today part of India. - family ki

## Folk traditions

A century ago, the distinguished archaeologist Bell witnessed a number of sports in the Maldives, including hand-to-hand combat with swords, shields, and quarter-staffs (Bell and Bell 1993:18). Another recreation Bell witnessed was stick dancing (*dandi jehun*), in which men tapped tiny sticks to create a pleasing rhythm. Chess is widely enjoyed, and sports popular in more recent times include a game of wrestling tag (*bai bala*), a lacrosse-like game played with a small stick (*mandi*), a baseball-like game which has been played for over 400 years (*thin mugoali*), and the ubiquitous games of soccer and cricket (Farook 1985; Balla and Willox 1993). (in 1940s)

Drumming has a long history in the Maldives, and the virtuoso drum (*beru*) performance was sometimes integrated into royal processions and celebrations (Bell and Bell 1993:227). Perhaps the most popular traditional song and dance performance in the Maldives today is the *bodu beru*, which often takes place as the high point of the festivities following the circumcision of a young boy. To the accompaniment of drumming and clapping, a - such a

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singer chants in Arabic, or Divehi, and dancers both young and old gradually work themselves into a rapt frenzy of free-form dancing which ends abruptly. Sometimes some of the the dancers fall into a trance state (Farook 1985:49). The lyrics of these songs usually concern familiar folk themes of love and loss. Although the *bodu beru* has in the past traditionally been sung and danced only by men, some women are beginning to participate.<sup>1</sup>

A rare dance form probably introduced from the Middle East about four hundred years ago is the *thaara*. The external form of this dance is similar to the *bodu beru*, with lines of men sitting on the ground beating hand drums, while others dance and sing in Arabic. However, the *thaara* dance is distinguished by the violence that sometimes characterizes its wilder forms, and which is banned by the Maldivian government. At the peak of a dancing frenzy, the dancer may stab himself in the back of the neck with an iron spike. Such practices are perhaps to be compared with the head-wounding of the Keralan "oracle men" (*velichapadu*) and other forms of ecstatic self-wounding which are known from South Asia (Seth 1998: 25-29, fig. 25; Amin 1993: 246).

Another song tradition in the Maldives is that of the *raivaru*, a slow lament which is cast in a strict metrical pattern, sometimes in difficult coded languages. These are sometimes sung by fishermen returning at the end of the day, or used by mothers as lullabies (Amin 1993; Farook 1985).

Many Maldivian people are convinced of the existence of various spirits (*jinni*), and such forces as the evil eye. A person capable of cursing another is termed a *ravaabeena*, and even a compliment from such a person can be dangerous. A form of astrological magic whose practitioners are called 'fanditha men' is still practiced in the islands. These practices are strongly influenced by similar Indian traditions: for example, the heavens are read on the basis of twenty-eight star constellations which correspond to the Indian 'nakshatra' groups.<sup>2</sup> Magical *fanditha* practices such as gaining the love of another's wife (*varitholhi*), *jinni* exorcism, or communicating with the dead, are all services offered by different *fandithas*. Their practices also include the treatment of a wide range of illnesses, and the Maldivian government sanctions such traditional healing practices through granting licences to *fanditha* (Hussain 1991). As one might expect in an archipelago of tiny islands, traditional medical practice (*divehi bais*) draws on the use of sea creatures of various kinds Farook (1985:60). For example, the white innards of the sea-cucumber are pasted onto a broken arm; this sets hard

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are called . . . .

<sup>1</sup>Some photographs of performances are published by Amin (1993:246-47).

<sup>2</sup>Hussain (1991:103-110) shows photographs of a *fanditha*'s astrological almanac.

in the sun and provides an effective bandage and splint. In the eighteenth century, Bontius (1769:206) recorded that “sweet-smelling rush [ . . . ] is carefully cultivated in the gardens by the Maldivian women, and is highly beneficial against female disorders, in baths and fomentations.” However, Islamic “prophetic” traditions of healing are also common: Forbes and Ali (1980:19) shows a photograph taken on Fedu Island, Addu Atoll, of a young girl with a *sura* from the Quran pasted to her forehead to cure a headache.

In Maldivian villages, one of the most enjoyable evening activities is the telling of stories. These range from tales about *jinnis* and other supernatural beings to accounts of seafaring, health and sickness, and animal fables. A rich fund of such folk tales exists, and in recent years efforts have begun to record and publish them (Hussain 1988–).

Today, organizations such as the Esjehi Gallery in Malé are working to preserve and promote Maldivian artistic and creative traditions through providing a platform for the exhibition of craft work, as well as documenting the islands’ history in the face of rapid modernization.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Esjehi Gallery, Medhuziyaraiy Magu, Malé, Republic of the Maldives.

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