

The Evolution of Culture in Maldives (18th to 20th Centuries)

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Abstract

Maldives, situated in the central Indian Ocean, some 2500 miles north-east of Mombasa and some 400 miles south-west of Sri Lanka, is both geographically and culturally closer to South and Southeast Asia than it is to Africa. Nevertheless, despite the vast distances involved, commercial and cultural links between the Maldives and the Swahili Coast have existed for many centuries.

From the 18th century till the twentieth century Maldives is known to have experienced considerable changes in its historical and traditional culture. The reason for these changes to occur is believed to be the ease of travelling experienced across the world during the time. Many people travelled abroad in order to gain their higher education which in some cases required that they spend years on foreign land. On their return, these people often brought with them the culture of these countries to some extent. Likewise they shared the Maldivian culture with foreigners during their stay in that country. This resulted in some of the practices learned abroad becoming popular and accepted among the domestic community thus paving way for a permanent change in the local culture.

The Evolution of Culture in Maldives

The island nation of Maldives consists of thousands of small islands scattered along the equator in the middle of the Indian Ocean, southwest of Sri Lanka and India. The gem like islands of the Maldives portrays the rare vision of a tropical paradise.

Palm fringed islands with sparkling white beaches, turquoise lagoons, clear warm waters and coral reefs teeming with abundant varieties of marine flora and fauna continue to fascinate tourists, as it has fascinated others in the past for thousands of years. Marco Polo referred to the Maldives as the 'Flower of the Indies', and Ibn Batuta the famous Arab traveller called her in his chronicles 'one of the wonders of the world.' The 1190 islands, geographically consisting of 26 atoll formations, are spread over an area about 1,000,000 km². Measuring 820 km north to south and 120 km east to west at its greatest width, the closest neighbours of Maldives are India and Sri Lanka.

Despite the vast distances involved, commercial and cultural links between the Maldives and the Swahili Coast have existed for many centuries. The origins of the Maldivians are lost in ancient history. There are historical and archaeological records which indicate the islands to have been inhabited for over 5000 years. There are also indications that the Maldives, positioned along an important trade route, was inhabited by people from all over the world. This leaves the origins of the people enshrined in mystery. The first settlers may well have been from Sri Lanka and southern India. However, the main stock of the Maldivian people, as seen from physical features and supported by historical evidence of migration, is predominantly Aryan or Dravidian. Archaeological evidence suggests the existence of Hinduism and Buddhism before the country embraced Islam in 1153 CE. The faces of today's Maldivians resemble the features of various races that inhabit the lands along the Indian Ocean's shipping and maritime routes.

The earliest known history of the Maldives is recorded in copper plates known as *loamaafaanu*, according to which it seems that the islands of Maldives were first settled by Aryan immigrants who are believed to have colonised Sri Lanka at the same time (around 500 BCE). Further migration from South India, as well as Sri Lanka followed. The latest archaeological findings suggest the islands were inhabited as early as 1500 BCE. The culture of Maldives is influenced by the cultures of the surrounding countries, the most prominent of which are those of India and Sri Lanka. But after Maldives embraced Islam, several changes took place in the culture in the process of adapting to the new religion. Due to this reason, even though Maldives was inhabited by people of different races some of their practices were abandoned while others were continued. Hence the culture of Maldives today is based on the practices of the original inhabitants which have been adjusted according to the changes that took place gradually. *Dhivehi*, a language which belongs to the Indo-Iranian group is spoken throughout the Maldives. It has a strong Arabic influence. *Dhivehi*, written from right to left, is the official language of the country. As a second working language, English is widely used. The origin of the Maldivian language is a mixture of languages from the first inhabitants. Some of the earliest texts found in Maldives include *southern brahmi* and *nagaari* scripts. These are languages that are still used in some of the surrounding countries on a spoken basis. Some of the ancient writings in Maldives have letters of Tamil and Sinhalese script. Apart from the scripts mentioned before, there are three main scripts used in Maldives referred to as *eveyla*, *dhives* and *gabulhi thaana*. These scripts are endemic to Maldives. The *eveyla* script is known to include *nagaari*, *eylu*, *granthaa* and *vetteluttu*, scripts from South India and Sri Lanka. The *dhives* script is said to have evolved from *eveyla*.

The *gabulhi thaana* script is believed to have evolved from Arabic numerals by using vowels on them.

From the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, Maldives is known to have experienced considerable changes in its traditional culture. The reason for these changes to occur is believed to be the ease of travelling experienced over the world during that time. Many people travelled abroad in order to gain higher education which in some cases required they spend years on foreign land. When returning, these people often brought with them the culture of these countries to some extent. Likewise they shared the Maldivian culture with foreigners during their stay in that country. This resulted in some of the practices learned becoming popular and accepted among the domestic community thus bringing permanent changes to the local culture.

Historically Maldivians used a variety of foods and it is observed that between the eighteenth century and twentieth century, many changes had taken place that slowly replaced commonly used staple foods with those used in the surrounding countries. Foods like yam, pumpkin, bread fruit etc., which were used as staple food are now prepared only for special occasions and imported food such as rice, wheat and flour became staple food of Maldivians. Though the traditional foods are not commonly consumed now, they are delicacies for travellers and tourists. Packed and freshly made varieties of such foods are sold while some products are shipped abroad. Fried yam and bread fruit chips are famous delicacies among tourists.

During the past three decades or so, significant changes in the attire of both genders in Maldives can be observed. Unique *Feyli*, *Kasabu Boavalhu Libaas* with *Bolurumaa* worn by women along with *Feyli*, *Bolufeyli* and *Bolurumaa* worn by men

have become attires only used on special occasions. One can find some similarities between attire used in the Maldives and Africa which shows the exchange of culture between the two places. Maldivians who go abroad for higher studies and other purposes bring with them cultural changes which have resulted in Maldivians developing a liking to modern 'fashionable attires' like shirts, blouses, long sleeved dresses and jeans.

Traditional performing arts practiced in Maldives also share similar characteristics with other South Asian countries, particularly India and Sri Lanka. Cinema movies, stage dramas and music styles are also of the same origin. Traditional poems, folk songs and other forms of oral and written literature have been slowly erased and are now a thing of the past. It must be brought to attention that many of these practices are endemic to Maldives. Some of the performing arts on the verge of been lost are *dhan dijehun* (stick dance), and *Boduberu* and *Thaara jehun* (tambourine dance).

In the eighteenth century, Maldivians used *Bokkura* (a small rowing boat) as a vessel to transport goods and people within short distances such as from the land to ship or from one ship to another. These types of travelling vessels are also seen in Africa. Maldivians started using the *Riyalu dhoani* (sailing boat), an improved version of the Bokkura. These have similarities with the vessels used in Swahili coast during that period. This is evidence for the fact that people from Africa also migrated to Maldives and shared their way of life with the Maldivians. With advances in technology, the mechanised *dhoni* came into existence which made travelling much easier.

In the early eighteenth century people of Maldives used to live in thatched houses. These thatched roofs were made locally with the coconut palm leaves that were freely available.

However, due to growing foreign presence in the country that owed much to increased trade relations and cultural exchanges, Maldivian living standards changed and people in Maldives also started to build their houses with coral stone which was of a higher quality than the thatched roof houses.

A study of the changes in culture and traditions during this time period reveals that many of the practices seen in Maldives today reflect Indian and Sri Lankan influence. Maldivian families living in Sri Lanka and India are the driving force behind such influence. In the same way Maldivians change, so do people of the surrounding countries as communities from neighbouring countries also live in the Maldives. Any new culture and tradition formed in Maldives within this time period was due to modernisation and technological developments throughout the world which linked countries together paving way for the sharing of likes and dislikes. This can especially be observed in twentieth century Maldives, where there is documentary evidence to prove the diasporic influence on changing life styles, architecture and education.

Reference

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