Coconuts for Life!

Exploring the Change and Continuity of the Coconut Culture in the Maldives



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Dedication

*To **Mamma**, who always believed in my dreams*

*To **Dhombe**, for encouraging me to follow them*

*To **my family**, for their unconditional love and support*

*And in memory of **Bappa**, who sailed the seven seas…*

Shine on you crazy diamond.

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Abstract

The coconut palm is considered to be the tree of life due its versatility. It has played a significant role in the history of the Maldives, and its heavily embedded in the daily life of a Maldivian today. This study will establish the significance of the coconut culture in the past and present context and explore how it has evolved in the past years in order to adapt to the changing social and cultural lifestyles. Moreover, the coconut culture reflects the unique identity which defines a Maldivian, thus the safeguarding of the culture and heritage would also be outlined in this dissertation.



Figure 1: Map of the Maldives

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Located in the centre of the most well travelled ocean of the ancient times - the Indian Ocean - the Maldives has been inhabited for over 3000 years. The early settlers of the Maldives came from different regions of the world, bringing with them, a fusion of cultures. (Jameel, 2012). Despite being influenced by global cultures, especially from the neighbouring countries, India and Sri Lanka, the island culture remains 'distinctively Maldivian' (Litser, 2016: 14). The island landscapes which are dominated by coconut palms has affected every facet of the economy and society of the Maldivians (Maloney, 1980: 1), and this has allowed them to live in harmony with the natural environment (Jameel, 2012: 18). The rich intangible culture of the Maldives consists of their language, crafts, cuisine and music, providing them with a unique identity (Jameel, 2012: 18). However, it is an endangered culture today. Cultural traditions that are threatened by the consequences of globalisation are at risk of disappearing without a record - the Maldives is no exception. There is little written about the Maldives despite its distinctive culture. The Maldives has a culture and heritage that is in need of better identification and appreciation (Jameel, 2012: 15), and this outlines a main purpose of this study.

This dissertation is inspired by the coconut culture in the Maldives. The coconut palm is considered to be the national tree of the country, therefore it is heavily embedded within its culture. This research is underpinned by these objectives: (1) establishing the significance of coconuts; (2) exploring how the coconut culture is embedded in socio-economic activities of the Maldivians; (3) examining how the coconut culture has evolved over time in response to globalisation. The research questions are addressed through an ethnographic study in a rural island village, of B. Kihaadhoo, where a traditional lifestyle is still practiced to an extent. The impact of the modern world hit the Maldives quite late, as they were resisted by social and economic adaptation to a particular environment (Maloney, 1976: 671). However, the influences of globalisation are gradually becoming more and more apparent, even in

the rural island villages. Therefore, just as the early Maldivians adapted to a particular environment, present day Maldivians are adapting to social and cultural changes.

1.2 Background

The Maldives has been described as 'dots on the map in the Indian Ocean, which is an exhibition of green jade necklaces and scattered emerald jewellery placed on blue velvet' (Heyerdahl, 1988: 20).



Figure 2: A row of islands in Baa Atoll

The whole of the Maldives is a double row of atolls where 'coconut palms predominate, craning their long necks out over the water in competition for sunlight' (Maloney, 2013: 6). The total land area of the Maldives is 298 square kilometres, but the islands are spread over 90,000 square kilometres of ocean, with a population of about 400, 000 people (Orłowska, 2015: 17). Given the unique geographical formation of the islands, it is quite possible that different groups of people had reached these remote islands independently in prehistoric times (Heyerdahl, 1988: 19). Despite being inhabited for over 3000 years, the history of the Maldives 'remains shrouded in considerable mystery' (Forbes, 1979: 1). Therefore, the early settlers and the origin of the people is uncertain. However, it is evident that

people from different regions of the world (India, Sri Lanka, East Africa, Arabia, Persia) settled in the Maldives (Ahmad & Jameel, 2012: 2), as their influences are reflected heavily on the Maldivian culture.

The early settlers of the Maldives did not leave any archaeological remains. Artefacts would have been built with perishable materials such as wood or coconut palm fronds, which would have quickly decayed in the tropical climate (Jameel, 2012: 3). The earliest archaeological evidence found were coral stone structures of Buddhist monasteries, thus revealing Buddhism to be the former faith of the inhabitants (Bell, 1940; Mikkelsen, 2000). Additionally, they also provided evidence for the multicultural influences; the excavations by Bell (1940) and Mikkelsen (2000) suggest that Buddhism in the Maldives derived its roots from both India and Sri Lanka. The Maldives embraced Islam in 1153 CE when the reigning king of the time, Sultan Mohammed al-Adil accepted it (Jameel, 2012: 5). It is interesting to examine how and why the Maldives accepted Islam as its faith, as the neighbouring countries India and Sri Lanka, had its religious roots based within Buddhism and Hinduism. Maniku (1986-7: 80) suggested that 'it was the natural love of the Maldivian for detachment and isolation from his neighbours and surroundings that was the main cause for his adoption of Islam'. Today, there is a general lack of interest in the pre-Islamic history. Romero-Frias (2003: 26) notes that this disinterest and confusion arises from the sharp struggle between inherited customs and the Muslim ideology.

As the Maldives is located in an isolated location in the Indian Ocean, the country remained relatively untouched by the political and social tides that swept across the rest of southern Asia. What connected the small island nation to the larger Indian Ocean was the export of cowry shell for use as money and the trade of coir ropes (Bell, 1940; Maloney; 1976; Mikkelsen; 2000; Litser, 2016). Moreover, it was known to the rest of the world for its coconuts (Gnanadesikan, 2016: 16) and the picturesque island landscapes. It is evident that the natural heritage is the biggest resource of the country (Jameel, 2012: 18), therefore, these resources were heavily exploited. Tourism replaced fishing as the main source of income in 1972, and the tourist industry continues to be the essence of the local economy (Orłowska, 2015:

27). The industry consists of safari boats, cruise ships and approximately 100 private resorts that are scattered around the various islands bringing in about £240 million every year (Emerton, 2009: 11).

The traditional arts and crafts of the Maldives play a significant role in the tourist industry. This dissertation will focus on the arts and crafts which reflect the significance of coconuts, primarily in Baa Atoll. The atoll consists of 75 islands (13 inhabited islands; 6 private resorts) and is famous worldwide since UNESCO declared it as a Biosphere Reserve in 2011 (UNESCO, 2015). The vision of the project was to make Baa Atoll a 'world class model of atoll ecosystem conservation where sustainable use supports a prosperous economy and good quality of life for all' (Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Office, 2013). The resorts in Baa Atoll provide the locals with employment opportunities ranging from resort employment (usually young males) to cottage industries which are practiced by women. The activities of the cottage industries include the production of handicrafts and other materials using palm fronds, as their main source of income.

Following the introductory chapter (Chapter 1) is the methodology chapter (Chapter 2) where the chosen methods for data collection will be discussed. Their strengths and limitations in the assistance of this report will be analysed. Moreover, the importance of conformity to the ethical guidelines of American Anthropological Association guidelines will also be acknowledged. Chapter 3 will aim to establish the significance of coconut palms in the Maldives, moreover, outlining its use in the past and present and how it has changed over time. Chapter 4 will address the problems in question, which is globalisation and tourism, and the impacts they have on the coconut culture of the Maldives. Lastly, the concluding chapter (Chapter 5) will summarise the research, highlight its limitations, and address ideas for further study. The theoretical links will be tied throughout the chapters, and tied in with the discussions. All pictures in this dissertation are taken by me, unless sourced otherwise.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The research methodologies in anthropology have evolved much like the discipline itself in order to adapt itself to new ways of thinking. It has progressed from 19th century armchair anthropology to fieldwork becoming the basis of anthropological research (Rogers, 1978 :126), paving way for new methodologies to be established in the discipline. Although he did not invent it, Bronislaw Malinowski is responsible for developing participant observation as a serious research method (Bernard, 2006: 344). His work among the Trobriand Islanders revolutionised anthropology as it demonstrated life in the field where he took part in their everyday life:

I began to take part in a way, in the village life, to look forward to the important or festive events, to take personal interest in the gossip and the developments of the small village occurrences. (Malinowski, 1932: 7)

Participant observation is revolutionary as it 'forces one to question one's theoretical presuppositions about the world by an intimate long-term engagement with, and participation in, the lives of strangers' (Shah, 2017 :49). The move away from the armchair means more travel, and participant observation would mean 'active movement through the culturally worked and lived space (Okely, 2012: 108). The objective of this research is to explore the changes brought upon the coconut culture in the Maldives due to globalisation. Barad (2007: 185) states that "We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world". Thus participant observation was chosen as the primary qualitative method for data collection, combined with photography for visual data and unstructured interviews to provide evidence for observations. This chapter will outline the nature of mixed qualitative research methods such as participant observation and interviews, moreover discussing the key issues such as data analysis, limitations and ethical considerations.

2.2 The Research Setting

The role undertaken during fieldwork was the role of an observing participant, in which the self was assumed as an instrument for data collection through the field experience (Bernard, 2006: 360). In order to prepare for fieldwork, participatory mapping was carried out to locate the islands practising a traditional lifestyle that revolved around coconut palms. This provided a visual representation, identifying unique socio-cultural attributes known by the islanders of Baa Atoll. Participatory maps indicate what a community perceives as its place and the significant features within it (Corbett, 2009: 4). For instance, Kihaadhoo is famously known around the atoll for its work in palm leaf thatching and basketry; Kendhoo is well known for its traditional medicine (*Dhivehi beys*); and Thulhaadhoo is famous for its remarkable lacquerwork crafts (*liyelaajehun*). From the mapping, Kihaadhoo was the obvious choice to be chosen as the island of primary focus.

After considering the financial budget, a two week time period was set to undertake fieldwork. Travelling to Baa Atoll from Malé took about 45 minutes via domestic flight, and in atoll travelling was done on ferries which had fixed timetables.The first island visited was Eydhafushi, which is the capital island of Baa Atoll. The island consisted of the atoll hospital, atoll school, modern houses, cafés and a post office near the jetty area. People were seen out and about on vehicles, and vegetation was noticeably scarce, not unlike the capital city Malé. The urban development taking place in the island was evident, however, some parts of the island still demonstrated a traditional island lifestyle.

After two days at Eydhafushi, I finally travelled to Kihaadhoo, where I stayed for two weeks. Unlike the capital island, Kihaadhoo had a thick forest dominated by coconut palms. The total land area of the island is 2.6 ha (Emerson et al, 2009), with the total population consisting of approximately 500 people. The island community is located in the middle of the island, and the thick vegetation encircled the human settlements. Romero-Frias observed a reason for hiding human settlements.

"*Traditionally Maldivians didn't think that it was good for a person to look too much at the sea, because one's 'heart would turn to stone'. This sentence, in Dhivehi*

means that one would lose one's memory and become absent minded, finding it difficult to concentrate on, for example, reading, and not that one would become merciless." (Romero-Frias, 2003: 20)



Figure 3: Coconut palms at Kihaadhoo

Upon arrival, I was immediately greeted by islanders who were curious to know my purpose for visiting the island. From their reaction, it was evident that the island seldom had any outside visitors. The explanation of my purpose of visit and research was met with glee as they said "well, you have definitely come to the right island then!" I was introduced to an elderly man who was famous in the atoll for his work in weaving palm leaf products such as baskets and seives (*rukufathi masakkaiy*). The islanders stated that he was one of the few people left in the country who still practiced the traditional craft.

The island community was close-knit, and women were sat outside their houses weaving palm thatches (*fangi vinun*) or preparing food whilst the children played nearby. Not a lot of men were seen during the day as most were employed at the local island council, island school or at private resorts nearby. The houses were built out of concrete, and each one had a huge front and backyard. By the forest, there

were allocated lands for agricultural purposes where they grew different types of crops. The island had a majestic beach, where the turquoise blue water sparkled under the sunlight. The youth community of the island had built a little over-water hut where the islanders went to relax.

What was most noticeable though, was the construction site that highly contrasted with the green environment that surrounded it. When inquired about it, the islanders explained that the land was being cleared under the approval of the Ministry of Education, in order to build a Vocational Training Centre which would mainly focus on tourism studies. Some of the islanders expressed their displeasure at the deforestation that was taking place, as their economic activities (such as handicraft work) were being affected.

2.3 Fieldwork

Participant Observation

Participant observation is considered to be the foundation of cultural anthropology (Bernard, 2006: 342). By participating with others, the lived, sensed, experienced and emotional worlds are better understood (Watson & Till, 2010: 134; Okely, 2012). Ingold (2013: 5) argues that there is 'no contradiction between participation and observation, but rather, the one depends on the other'. As it is a way of knowing from the inside, (Ingold, 2013: 5) observations from the fieldwork experience from direct involvement in the social life and activities of the islanders at Kihaadhoo provided evidence for the discussion of this dissertation.

Participating in the day to day social activities modified my position as a complete outsider and helped me 'become part of the crowd'. (Okely, 2012: 115). For instance, the women at the time were practising traditional dances for Eid celebrations in different groups. The groups were sorted into different age groups, and I was put in a group of young women between the ages of 20 and 30, who I became fast friends with. However, I also kept in mind that even though I was trying to experience the life of my informants by taking part in their social activities, I

would not become a fully accepted member of the community (Bernard, 2006: 390). Nevertheless, I was able to establish a rapport so that people went about their business as usual when I showed up (Bernard, 2006: 344).

Okely (2012: 112) states that anthropologists learn through embodied participation. Therefore, taking part in the work was essential to my research to understand the role of coconuts and how they are embedded in the daily lives of islanders. Fieldwork is an embodied experience (Okely, 2012; Coffey, 1999). Therefore, taking part in the work was essential to my research to understand the role of coconuts and how they are embedded in the daily lives of islanders. Observing body work is essential, bodily performance, how they sat. Fieldwork includes the observance and use of the body in everyday social life as an embodiment of culture. (Coffey, 1999: 68) We are observing, interpreting and analysing the bodies and body perspectives of others (Coffey, 1999: 75).

Unstructured Interviews

Often known as ethnographic interviewing, Bernard (2006: 213) states that unstructured interviewing cannot be beaten when it comes to wanting to know about the lived experience of fellow human beings. Unstructured interviewing was conducted with three different people; a woman who practiced thatch weaving; a member of my host family; and a local man who was planning to start up a guest-house business. The interviews were tape recorded, so I could return to the data in its original form if I wished to later (Silverman, 2005: 175). Moreover, I made notes as they described the different uses for different parts of the coconut palm, letting the informants lead. Bernard (2006: 215) suggests that before an unstructured interview, we should tell the informants that we are trying to learn from them. Through the unstructured interviews I conducted, I realised that I was not just trying to learn from them, I *was* learning from them - it was a part of my culture too.

Field Notes & Photography

As I had completely immersed myself in the community, it felt uncomfortable carrying a notebook around with me. I was conscious of the fact that carrying a notebook and writing in public would be treating 'people as objects of knowledge' (Watson & Till, 2010: 127). Judith Okely (2012: 78) noted that 'we don't necessarily have to write notes in the middle of the action but just before the memory filters and fades'. Hence, I wrote my field notes in the evening after everyone retired for the day. For making quick notes, it was easier to take a picture on my phone than writing notes on the spot. Therefore, I created a private Instagram account which I saved as a photo journal to save all my pictures from the fieldwork. Not only did it allow me to instantly take a picture and make quick notes, it also helped with the data analysis. Using the hashtag feature on Instagram, I was able to categorise the pictures; for instance, everything related to food was categorised under #coconutcuisine and all the products were categorised under #coconutcommodities and so on. From the photographs, I was able to create rich descriptive accounts of the everyday setting and routine interactions (Watson & Till, 2010: 126). Moreover, Sontag (2005: 7) suggests that 'photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something or for giving an appearance of participation'.

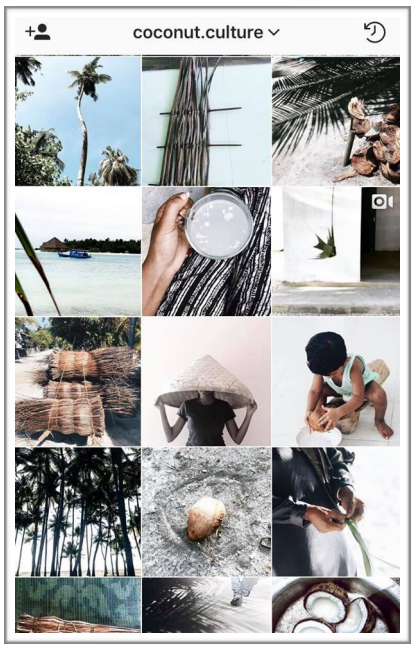


Figure 4 : Screenshot of Instagram profile



Figure 5 : Screenshot of Instagram profile

2.4 Conclusion

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations have to be made in anthropological research, especially when participants are involved. Working with human participants always raises issues about how you treat them (Walliman, 2011: 42). Participant observation as a qualitative research methodology could be viewed as Foucault's vision of the Panopticon. In other words, it acts as 'the instrument of surveillance and social control that grants power to those observing' (Banks, 2001: 128) thus, subordinating those who are being observed. Under the American Anthropological Association (AAA) guidelines, ethics forms were approved by the lecturers prior to fieldwork. Considering the fact that some islanders may not speak English, the consent forms were translated to Dhivehi to maintain the honesty of my work and research purpose. Informed consent was given by all participants during the process of this research, however, no names will be mentioned in respect to their wishes to remain anonymous.

Limitations

The research had to be completed in a short time span with limited finances. Considering the limitations of participant observation, I was worried that being observed may affect people's behaviour or that my own opinions may enter the research (Silverman, 2005: 32). However, Okely (2012: 77) argued that total immersion brings unique knowledge, therefore there is no need to worry about the individual contaminating by involvement. Moreover, I was worried about the fact that I would be labelled as a 'city girl' as I was from Malé. People from Malé are often perceived to be ill-mannered and arrogant by islanders, therefore, I had to make the extra effort when immersing myself into the community. This was noted by the participants as they stated that they appreciated my respect for their values and morals and the effort I made to be 'one of them', unlike most people from Malé when they visited the island.

After undertaking fieldwork, I understood that fieldwork was both a physical and emotional experience. As Coffey (1999: 56) states, qualitative research is by its very nature, interpersonal and intimate. Moreover, the relationships formed in the field gives research its 'intensity, quality and insight into the everyday social world' (Coffey, 1999: 56). Furthermore, Ingold (2014: 186) states that the field is only truly experienced when you have left it far behind and begin to write about it. Moreover, as a researcher, I felt like a part of the world being studied, and not as a detached observer (Emerson et al, 1995: 215) as I was learning about my own culture everyday. It is true what Ingold (2013: 3) said: 'ethnography is transformational: the ethnographer is changed by the experience, and this change is carried forward into his or her future work'.



Figure 6 : Freshly cracked coconut ready for scraping

Chapter 3 - Coconut Culture

3.1 Introduction

"*There is no tree which serves so many purposes of the nourishment and convenience of man as the tree which produces the cocos." (François Pyrard, 1887: 372)*

The coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*), also known as 'The Tree of Life' due to its multiple uses, is the symbol of tropical islands. It is the principle crop throughout the Maldives (Maloney, 2013: 24); if asked about the the tree, most Maldivians would beam and reply, "there is nothing you cannot do with that tree!" or "it is the tree that gave us life". Thick towards the roots, but the rest quite straight and smooth, the coconut palm towers above all other trees in the Maldives, and is in season all year round (Pyrard, 1887: 374). In the past, the value of an island was determined by the number of coconuts cultivated (Maloney, 2013: 235), therefore, its significance in the past is evident.

François Pyrard was a French navigator of the 15th century who was among the first to write about the Maldives. Maloney (2013) observes that this book was the first detailed book of anthropology and culture history of the Maldives, which was written like an ethnography before the concept of 'ethnography' was invented. Commenting on the coconut palms in the Maldives, Pyrard (1887: 373) notes that it was 'more abundant than in all of the rest of the world together'. The Maldivians are highly reliant on natural resources, therefore, the coconut palm was exploited extensively (Romero-Frias, 1999). This meant that their identity was deeply tied to the local environment (Litser, 2016: 257). Moreover, Romero-Frias (2012: 3) states that survival would have been impossible for the ancestors without the coconut palm. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the coconut palm was declared



Figure 7: National Emblem of the Maldives

as the national tree of the Maldives in 1985. It also appears on the national emblem of the Maldives highlighting the livelihood of the ancestors.

The Maldivian language categorises the coconut palm separately. In Dhivehi (the Maldivian language) it is known as *ruh*, whilst all other trees are labelled *gus* under one category (Litser, 2016: 65). The Maldives is the only civilisation in the world with no words in the language for 'village', 'town' or 'city' (Maloney, 1976: 660), however there is a word for every single part of the coconut palm in the language, thus indicating its significance. Linguist and anthropologist, Dell Hymes states that cultural knowledge is transmitted largely through the medium of language. He argues that language, like other cultural traits, 'will be found to vary in the degree and nature of their integration into the societies and cultures in which they occur' (1964: 19).

Moreover, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis developed by American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, suggests that language moulds thinking, and is the medium of expression for the society; 'The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached… We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do, because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation (Sapir, 1958 [1929]: 69). Hence, if there is no word for something in the language, it does not exist in the community's world. Likewise, if something is of great significance, the vocabulary is rich and this is evident in the case of the Maldives and coconut palms.



Figure 8 : Sunset at Kihaadhoo

3.2 Coconuts: Past & Present

The coconut palm was exploited extensively by traditional Maldivians. It was the 'chief source of wealth, food and all commodities' and the Maldivians were highly experienced in applying it to all amenities of life (Pyrard: 1887: 386). Therefore, no parts of the tree went wasted as every single part of the tree finds important uses (Maloney, 2013: 24). Commodities from the tree, - especially the coir rope (made from coconut fibre) - was highly popular amongst ancient travellers (Pyrard: 1887: 560). It was valued above all other coir because of its strength, durability and lighter colour (Maloney, 2013; Ahmad & Jameel, 2016). Moreover, in the 1920s, half a million coconuts were exported yearly to Bengal alone (Maloney, 2013).

Housing & Boatbuilding

Traditional Maldivian houses were made of coconut thatch combined with coconut palm timber (Jameel, 2012). The woven coconut palm fronds were tied on solid wood frames (Maloney, 2013) and the thatched palm leaves were doubled up to use for lining and closing up of the houses. Pyrard (1887: 377) observed that they resisted water so well that not a single drop passed through, thus demonstrating the excellent craftsmanship of traditional Maldivians. Due to the scarcity of durable materials, only structures of great importance (such as mosques) were built with hard material such as coral stones (Jameel, 2012: 27). However, the roof of the traditional mosques were also covered with finely woven coconut thatching (Jameel, 2012: 28). Today, the thatched huts have been replaced by houses built from coral rubble, lime (Heyerdahl, 1988: 193) and concrete. Moreover, it is now an important commodity product in tourism, where the weaved thatches are used for roofing of the huts in the tourist resorts.

As the Maldives was a great seafaring nation, all 'Maldivian vessels have been highly sophisticated' (Romero-Frias, 2003: 12). Boat construction *dhoani banun*, was influenced by foreign boats that were anchored around the archipelago; for instance, traditional Maldivian boats (*dhoani*) resembled dhows of East Africa (Ahmad & Jameel, 2016: 40). Pyrard (1887: 385) demonstrates the significance of coconut palms in boat building: "Seen an infinite number of ships of 100 or 120 tons, built

entirely out of this timber, with no other materials except what this tree produces; even the anchors are made out of it (excellent and handy). They were loaded with merchandise from the same tree, such as mats, sails, oil, wine, sugar and other goods". The planked boats and their sails were tied together with coir rope and lasted about four to five years (Pyrard, 1887: 385; Romero-Frias, 2003: 12; Ahmad & Jameel, 2016: 40).



Figure 9 : Overwater bungalows at a tourist resort

Cuisine

The traditional Maldivian diet was mainly based on fish and coconuts. The early Maldivians mastered the preparation of preserved foods to suit the seafaring culture and the long distance travels (Ahmad & Jameel, 2016: 38). The coconut, in all its stages were used for different food purposes. It is proudly said by Maldivians that every part of the coconut palm (except the trunk of the tree), is edible. It provided the islanders with the basic food necessities ranging from milk (*kaashi kiru*) to vinegar (*raa huiy*) and sugar (*dhiyaa hakuru*). Pyrard (1887: 385), during his time in the Maldives, mentions how he ate the fruit and 'lived upon it regularly' and gives a detailed account of the various produces of the fruit. The coconut sap was drunk for breakfast (Maloney, 2013: 24) and it was boiled to make syrup and sugar. Pyrard (1887: 385) observed that due to the abundance of coconut palms, certain trees were

set apart solely for the production of coconut wine (*ruku raa*) However, this is not the case today as the whole population consumes all the coconuts produced for the basic necessities (Maloney, 2013). Therefore, coconut treacles, sugar and syrup are now a rarity. Moreover, the islanders at Kihaadhoo noted that in the past, each family owned up to 40-50 trees each, however, the number has currently decreased to less than 10 trees per family, thus highlighting the increasing scarcity of coconut palms.

Nevertheless, coconuts still play an important role in the cuisine today, and is consumed on a daily basis by present day Maldivians. Desiccated coconut or scraped coconut-meat (*kaashi huni*) from either a young coconut (*gabulhi*) or mature brown coconut (*kaashi*) is used in curries, chilli paste (*lonu mirus*) and various type of short-eats, both sweet and savoury. Moreover, it is a key ingredient in the traditional breakfast dish (*mas huni*), which is mixed with tuna, chilli, lime and onions. Coconut milk (*kaashi kiru*) extracted from the scraped coconut-meat is still used widely in islands to cook rice and different curries, however, most households in Malé tend to use imported or dry coconut milk today. The coconut-meat extracted from different stages of the coconut (*miri*, *kihaa kaashi*, *kurolhi*) are eaten as snacks, usually paired with dried fish. During fieldwork, I observed a child being fed the sweet meat of the coconut (*kurumba hevaa*) straight from the source as his afternoon snack. Coconut water (*kurumba fen*) is famous for being a refreshing healthy drink, and is still a popular drink in the Maldives. It is widely consumed by pregnant women or people when they feel unwell, as it is believed to have healing powers. Moreover, it is served as a welcome drink, especially in the resorts, official ceremonies and local weddings. The drink is also considered to be a way of socialising, this can even be observed in the capital city Malé. Whilst doing fieldwork, I would frequently be invited for a *kurumba* (coconut juice/water). According to the islanders at Kihaadhoo, it was also used as an alternative to the intravenous therapy (IV) in the past.



Figure 10 : Child being fed *kurumba hevaa* (coconut meat)

Coconut oil was used for cooking and frying in the past, however, this has now been replaced by cheaper alternatives such as vegetable oil or olive oil. The production of coconut wine, or toddy (*ruku raa*) is practiced by coconut tree climbers or toddy tappers (Maloney, 2013), locally known as *raaverin.* Through a long process, the toddy tappers cut the flower buds and hang a pot - made from coconut shells (*raa bandhi*) - over night to collect the tap. The collected toddy has to be consumed within 48 hours before it undergoes fermentation. After 48 hours, it then becomes an illegal product as it is alcoholic. However, after 40 days of fermentation, it can be used again since it would have turned to vinegar (*raa huiy*). Coconut vinegar was popularly used in the past for traditional medicine and healing purposes.

Household Uses

Different parts of the coconut palm were utilised to fashion household tools needed for daily use; dry palm leaves and strips obtained from the midrib of the leaf or palm fiber (*ruku fathi*) were woven diagonally to produce mats, baskets (*mulhoashi*) and a 'thousand other manufactures' (Pyrard, 1887: 377). The man who famous for his palm fiber handicrafts noted that in the past, there was a great demand

for products such as mats, baskets and lampshades from the resorts. However, there is a decline in the business today as the resorts opt for cheaper mass produced items. Nevertheless, almost all the households in Kihaadhoo had food covers plaited from the palm fiber. Other products such as brooms made from the stalk of the palm leaf were observed. They are commonly known as eakel brooms (ilosho fathi) These are still common in islands as they were practical for sweeping.



Figure 11: Plaited food cover



Figure 12: Household items



Figure 13: Man getting ready to weave crafts using palm fibre

3.4 Coconut commodities and the process of making

Coir Rope (roanu veshun)

As mentioned before, the Maldivian coir rope was in great demand in the Indian Ocean travel due its strength and durability (Pyrard, 1887; Maloney, 2013; Ahmad & Jameel, 2016), providing evidence that it was the earliest coconut commodity. Maloney (2013: 235) noted that in the past, the coir rope was made in every island due to its great demand by the ancient travellers. Moreover, it was essential in daily household uses as coir rope was needed for boatbuilding and thatch weaving. Furthermore, it was used in traditional furniture such as chairs (*joali fathi*) and beds (*roanu endhu*). However, there is a decline in the business as it has been replaced by other products; therefore, only a few islands practice the art of coir rope making today.

The process of making coir rope (*roanu veshun*) is a lengthy one which could take up to months to complete. It is made from the coconut husks, which is removed whilst the coconut is still young and green with the use of an iron stick sharpened at the end. Afterwards, the husks are made tender by laying it to steep in the sea and covered with sand for about 3 weeks or a month (Pyrard, 1887: 377). This process is locally known as *bombi faakurun*, which is then followed by *bombi thelhun* - the process in which the tendered husks are beaten to loosen the strands. The loose strands are then twisted and spun together by women to produce bundles and bundles of coir rope.



Figure 14: Coir rope bundle



Figure 15: Coconuts ready to be de-husked



Figure 16: The art of coir rope making *(roanu veshun)*

Thatch Weaving (fangi vinun)

Thatch (fangi) is a panel of weaved palm fronds which were traditionally used for lining and closing up of fences and houses (Pyrard, 1887: 377). However, today it is mainly used for roofing in the huts in the tourist resorts. The thatch weaving business takes place in the form of cottage industries and employ women across different atolls. Due to decreases in demand and limited resources available, the women at Kihaadhoo do thatch weaving as a part time employment. They currently produce orders for these resorts: Dusit Thani, Four Seasons at Landaa Giraavaru and Reethi Beach. Contracts are made with the resorts who demand the product, and they often order in bulk. The roofing has to be replaced every few months, therefore, it is considered to be a great expense. Whilst some resorts still order the products in order to support local communities and the production of cultural handicrafts, other resorts have started opting for synthetic palm leaves which are ironically, naturally cheaper.
The production of thatch is also a process which takes a lot of time and effort. In order to collect the dry palm fronds needed for thatch weaving, the women wait till they have fallen from the palm tree to the ground. A constant eye is kept out for fallen palm fronds, and the minute one is spotted, they put a tie around it. The tie indicates that someone has already claimed it, therefore, it was to be remained untouched until the person who claimed it came to collect it.

After the dry palm leaves have been acquired, they are plaited neatly into a panel using weaving sticks (traditionally made out of wood) and held together with coir rope. During thatch weaving, women are not usually alone; they are usually sat together catching up on daily gossip. Moreover, with the limited availability of coconut palms in the island, women usually go in groups to uninhabited islands in order to collect dry palm fronds. Thus, thatch weaving can be seen as an economic as well as social activity which strengthens community bonds and relations.



Figure 17: Woman collecting dried up palm frond



Figure 18: Tied bunch of dried leaves



Figure 19: Thatch weaving in progress



Figure 20: Thatch weaving in progress

The amount of work which goes into each product is incredible. As Ingold (2013: 122) state, 'handmade' is now a mark of distinction in today's world which 'connotes a kind of authenticity and devotion'. Moreover, it is famously said around the islands that even though these products were made in neighbouring countries of the region, the Maldivian way of making these were different. This could again be related to the unique cultural identity of the Maldivians; the culture evolved with different regional influences, but somehow remains distinctively Maldivian, and this is reflected from various products.

The process and art of making of the coconut commodities have been linked to Ingold's theories from his book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology Art and Architecture* (2013). Ingold himself gives an account of making rope from palm fibre, to which I can relate from my own fieldwork experience in learning coir rope making. After explaining the process, he suggests that we learn four things:

'How the hands get to know the materials, or acquire a 'feel' for them; about how they impart a rhythm to these materials in the iteration of their own movements, and how the materials, in turn, carry a memory of their manipulation; about how the forces and energies bound into the materials through these gestural movements hold them together - that is, how the friction of opposed torsions makes things stick; and about the correspondence of materials in making' (Ingold, 2013: 118).

The process of making reinforced the relationship I had with my surrounding environment. Moreover, with both the hand and coconut material in play, the sensory awareness of its texture and the material flow of the coconut was brought to life (Ingold, 2013: 120). In this embodied experience, I learnt about the social system in which I was living through, by imitating the bodily posture and movements of the island women (Okely, 2012: 115).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has established the significance of coconut palms in the past and present lives of the Maldivians. Moreover, the changes in the coconut culture have also been explored after reviewing literature on the Maldives history and culture, and also during fieldwork at Kihaadhoo. It is evident that the changes to the coconut culture have taken place as adaptation to social culture and change due to modernisation. Furthermore, the art of making of some coconut commodities have been demonstrated in order to show appreciation for the unique process which ties to the identity of the Maldivians.

Chapter 4 - Tourism & Globalisation

4.1 Introduction

Globalisation can be theorised as a current ongoing process. Tourism is very much part of the globalisation process; it involves the exchange and flow of economic and intellectual items in terms of goods, knowledge, values and images, as well as people on a global scale' (Macleod, 2004: 4). International tourism has been promoted as a major component of economic development and 'modernisation' strategies since the 1960s (World Travel Organisation, 2004). Mass tourism increased with the establishment of cheap aircraft travel (Hampton, 2015: 736); as a result, countries seeking economic advancement through foreign exchange income flourished from this development. (Hall et al, 1995: 2). However, despite its significance for economic development, tourism has major impacts on the developing host countries (Hall et al, 1995: 3).

Tourism studies is multidisciplinary in its origin, however, the social and cultural impacts caused by tourism has been a concern for the anthropology of tourism (Selwyn, 1996: 4). On the other side of the consumed culture 'lies the subordination of local people to projects which seem to depend on the mythical reconstitution or reconstruction of those senses of traditions uprooted by globalisation' (Selwyn, 1996: 2). Whilst tourism can help renew the interest in traditional arts and crafts (Mathieson and Wall, 1982) it could also result in the degradation of local cultures. Inevitably, the culture becomes commodified due to increasing tourist demands, thus, altering the local culture and making the culture meaningless to its own people (Shepherd, 2003: 188). As Marie-Françoise Lanfant (1995: 37) notes, 'once heritage is transformed into a tourist product, its cultural value is also transformed into a commercial value'.

This chapter will outline the impacts of tourism and globalisation on the Maldives to examine the changing roles of the coconut culture in the country.

4.2 Tourism in the Maldives

In the 1970s, tourism was introduced to the Maldives when an Italian tour organiser, George Corbin - who is considered to be a pioneer of tourism in the Maldives - came across the country 'in search of new destinations in untouched tropical places' (Ministry of Tourism, 2013: 10; Orłowska, 2015: 28). Two tourist resorts, Kurumba and Bandos, were established in 1972 which were visited by 1000 tourists. With its initial success, the tourist industry soon became the essence of the Maldivian economy, accounting for 30 percent of the direct Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country (Ministry of Tourism, 2013).

Under the First Tourism Masterplan of 1982, tourism in the Maldives developed on the principle of isolation (one resort per one uninhabited island), which strictly separated local islanders and tourists. Inaz et al (2005: 39) suggests this isolation was a deliberate move by the government in their primary motive to avoid negative influences on the religious and cultural values of the Maldives. However, the isolation was softened with the introduction of the Third Master Plan 2007-11 which allowed for the 'guesthouse' business to thrive, thus promoting decentralisation and community-based tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2013). Moreover, there was an emphasis on the protection of culture and local heritage and participation of local communities in the industry.

Kihaadhoo is one of the few islands in the country which does not yet have a guest-house business. However, as outlined in Chapter 3, some locals had their guest-house projects at the proposal stage and had already allocated plots for construction. Through an unstructured interview, they shared their ideas and plans for the management of the guest-house. Instead of hiring 'outsiders' they planned to employ local islanders and introduce the local culture to the tourists where they could 'eat, sleep and live local'. When asked about the coconut culture, they explained that coconuts would be incorporated in the cuisine and decoration of the guest-houses. Moreover, it was in their plan to host thatch-weaving workshops which would sell the art of making, whilst simultaneously employing women. However, they mentioned that it would greatly rely on the availability of resources, which would limit the role of coconuts in the guest-house business as coconut

palms were becoming scarce. Nevertheless, from their proposals, it was evident that they had taken employment of the locals, empowerment of women and safeguarding of the local culture and heritage into consideration.

4.3 The Consequences

Impacts on the environment

The natural beauty of the Maldives such as the tropical vegetation, white sandy beaches and underwater coral reefs is integral to its tourist industry. Therefore, key policies such as the conservation of biodiversity and protection of coral reefs have been implemented by the government. Moreover, the Maldives has signed agreements with international conventions that deal sustainable development such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change - UNFCCC (Ministry of Tourism, 2013: 146). In 2011, the Maldives experienced a sudden rise in the price of coconuts due to high levels of deforestation taking place. Therefore, during his presidency, Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) inaugurated the Coconut Planting Programme to encourage cultivation of coconut palms. In his speech, he highlighted the versatility of the coconut palm and the need to capitalise the resource to fulfil daily requirements of the Maldivians (Presidency Maldives, 2011).

Although there are measures being taken by the government to conserve the environment and biodiversity of the Maldives, it must be acknowledged that globalisation causes irreversible damage. For instance, deforestation at Kihaadhoo causes a shortage of coconut palms in the island, thus limited the employment opportunities. The women are forced to travel miles to various uninhabited islands in order to gather the dry palm fronds required for thatch weaving.

Impacts on local communities and culture

As a consequence of globalisation and increased tourism, production of fake culture and inauthentic images are created, which the local people have no say over (Burns, 1999: 127). Claude Lévi Strauss (1972: 40-45) in *Tristes Topiques* state that genuine travel has been replaced by 'movement through a monoculture in a fruitless search for a vanished reality'. This is evident in the case of the Maldivian identity; the thatched roofing in the tourist resorts illustrate a 'vanished reality' of the Maldivian culture history. Moreover, the traditionally woven thatch roofs are slowly being replaced by synthetic palm roofs, thus creating an 'inauthentic image' ironically fuelled by the need to recreate the authentic Maldivian lifestyle.

The objectification and commoditisation of culture is inevitable in a small island nation facing the consequences of globalisation. Marx (1988[1844]) in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts state that once a commodity assumes a money form, the social character of its labour is concealed. As a result, the workers are alienated from the products of their own labour, eventually becoming a slave of the object produced. "The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him" (Marx, 1988 [1844]: 72). This is highly evident in the case of the coconut commodities in the Maldives, especially the weaved thatches sold to the tourist resorts. As mentioned before, the women had to resort to travelling to uninhabited islands in order to gather the dry palm fronds needed for thatch weaving. However, another problem that should be highlighted is the increasing worry of the islanders of Kihaadhoo at the disappearing uninhabited islands. Due to an increase in tourism, more and more uninhabited islands are being developed into private tourist resorts. For instance, the islanders mentioned that the new resort Finolhu was once an uninhabited they went to, on picnics or to collect palm fronds. What was once their picnic island, is now a part of the tourist industry.

Carrier's (1992: 543) 'putting out' industry can be used to an extent to describe the cottage industries run by the women at Kihaadhoo. The control over production was taken over by the merchants at the resort as they exercised control over the

timings and pace of production. However, Carrier (1992: 544) explained that alienation was only partially visible as the workers were still able to use their own tools and equipment. Nevertheless, Marx's concept of alienation is highly evident in the case of the islanders at Kihaadhoo; they have been alienated from their own labour (Archibald, 1992: 63), and are furthermore left with a 'sense of separation' where they have little control over the ongoing activities (Carrier, 1992: 540).

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the impacts of tourism and globalisation on a rural island community in the Maldives. As a result of cultural erosion because of the increasing demands of tourism, the aesthetic and authentic quality of the products are lost, thus leading to the irreversible process of cultural commodification. Consequently, the islanders are being alienated from their own labour product, thus creating a sense of separation and loss of identity.

The social and cultural impacts on the host countries must be acknowledged in order to boost tourism in a successful manner. Plog (1994) offers an idealistic approach which recognises that a problem exists (Burns, 1999: 116): restore the natural and historical; retain the sense of heritage, continuity and community; value the local culture and traditions to protect local populations, their heritage and culture.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This research has shed light on the rich culture and history of the Maldives. As the Maldives was influenced by different regions of the world, we 'must be prepared to accept that the culture history of the Maldives is more complicated than previously thought (Maloney, 2013: 65). Through the exposure to the ancient Indian Ocean trade, a distinct Maldivian culture emerged 'illustrating that globalisations have shaped human cultural diversity'. (Litser, 2016: 15). The distinct culture that emerged is still an important part of a Maldivian's identity, which, in the present day is reflected by the intangible culture heritage (traditional arts and crafts, cuisine, fishing, local festivals and folk dances) and tangible heritage such as the material culture. It has been established that the Maldivian culture is an endangered one, therefore, needs urgent documentation and protection before it disappears without a record.

The research aims of this dissertation was addressed through an ethnographic study in the rural island of Kihaadhoo, by using the qualitative method of participant observation. As discussed in Chapter 2, Participant observation was an embodied experience through which I learnt the social and cultural values and traditions of the islanders at Kihaadhoo by participating in their social activities. Moreover, through experiencing a traditional island life, I was able to appreciate the significance of coconut palms and how much of a role they play in the daily life of a Maldivian. Furthermore, the changing roles of the coconut culture was easy to analyse where a traditional island lifestyle was still practiced to an extent. The islanders faced new challenges everyday, however, they adapted to the changes, thus the coconut culture evolved as a result of these changes. For instance, to deal with the increasing demands of tourism, locals came up with the project to establish the guest-house business in the island. The dying culture of thatch weaving was taken into consideration, therefore, it was in their plan to safeguard the intangible culture of it by hosting workshops to illustrate the art of making. This demonstrates that the coconut culture is perceived to be important by the locals.

During fieldwork, I learnt that what remained most consistent in the coconut culture was the cuisine. Although products such as coconut treacles are rare in the

present day Maldives, coconuts still continue to play an important role in the traditional cuisine of the country, therefore the change and continuity is evident. Traditional dishes are not just popular in the islands, but in the city as well. After my research question was approved, I found myself unconsciously observing my diet, and the diet of my family. I observed that whilst I was home in Malé, not a single day went by without eating a coconut-free dish. Hence, the importance of coconuts in the present day Maldives can be highlighted from my own example as a Maldivian.

Today, the hints of the Maldives past is reflected in the tourist resorts. Tourism, to an extent has turned the Maldivian culture into a commodity, where it is packaged and sold to tourists, resulting in a loss of authenticity (Cole, 2007: 3). The discussion of the impacts of tourism and globalisation is outlined in Chapter 4, with an analysis focusing o the impacts on the environment, culture and community of the local people of the Maldives. Whilst tourism has its benefits, like renewing the interest of the locals to appreciate their lost culture and identity, its negative impacts are more visible as the affects are irreversible. For instance, deforestation causes the islands to lose the coconut palm trees which are natural barriers protecting the island from soil and beach erosion. Moreover, deforestation causes unalterable changes in the climate, and this is already a major problem faced by the Maldives. Furthermore, as a result of the culture being commodified, the authentic Maldivian handicrafts lose their value, as mass produced objects come into play. Therefore, the authenticity of the Maldivian culture along with the Maldivian identity is in question. However, the locals today are in search for authenticity, this fuelling the new trend of guest-house businesses in the Maldives. The main market slogan of the new trend is “preservation of the local culture while allowing tourists to have contact with island populations” (Orłowska, 2015: 11). In the future, this would eliminate alienation and the sense of separation felt by the local islanders as they would have authority over the products being manufactured, as well as the process of production.

Overall, the study showed patterns of change in the coconut culture in response to the forces of tourism and globalisation. However, due to its importance, the coconut palm continues to be heavily embedded in the daily life of a Maldivian, especially in terms of cuisine. It is evident that the forces of globalisation was responsible for the creation of the unique Maldivian identity. Furthermore, it is also the force that is changing and recreating the culture in order to adapt to new lifestyles and modernity. Although it is not exploited as heavily as it was in the past, it is without a doubt that the coconut culture will continue to be significant in the Maldives. Its importance is reflected from the evolving of culture in the Maldives; despite the fact that modernisation and imported products have replaced a lot of the coconut products used in the past, some aspects of the coconut culture have continued to exist, similarly to as it was in the past. This dissertation will be concluded, once again, highlighting the significance of coconut palms in the Maldives, how much they are embedded in the daily life of a Maldivian, and how the coconut culture has changed but continued in response to the impacts of tourism and globalisation.

The biggest challenge faced in the process of this research was the translation of notes from Dhivehi to English. The notes taken during the interviews were written in Dhivehi, as I felt it rude to write in English, when they spoke in Dhivehi. Although my Dhivehi is fluent, I struggled in the translation, especially when writing up about the different parts of the coconut palm as there were no specific English words for them. Moreover, little is known about the history and culture of the Maldives despite its rich history dating back almost 3000 years, therefore, the literature on the Maldives remains quite limited. Another challenge faced during the write up of this research is the many areas of focus there were to be explored. My research focus kept changing throughout the writing process, which was rather challenging in terms of concentrating on one area of research.

However, these challenges faced have the potential to become something bigger in further research. Through the research process, I understood the importance and urgency of safeguarding the intangible culture heritage of the Maldives before it disappeared without a trace. The coconut palm is one important area of the Maldivian

culture, however, there are many more that need to be addressed. Writing this dissertation felt like a huge pressure, as I felt I was writing to the people of the Maldives. However, with the written piece complete, I feel confident that this piece of research would raise awareness about the importance of safe guarding the Maldivian culture and heritage.

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