

Coconut Palms

Dissertation Report

For my dissertation, I have decided to look into the significance of coconut palms by exploring the social relations in a close-knit community in the island of Kihaadhoo. The island is located in Baa Atoll (also known as South Maalhosmadulu) and is famous in the Maldives for its work in coconut palm leaves. The whole of Baa Atoll itself is known for its works in traditional crafts including lacquer work (*liyelaa jehun*) and thatch weaving (*fangi vinun*).

Before I started my fieldwork, I got advice from my mentor, Mauroof Jameel, who is currently doing his PhD in Heritage Architecture. He had previously conducted fieldwork in Baa Atoll and was able to give me contacts for my travels. Two of my friends accompanied me during my fieldwork trip to Kihaadhoo where we set camp for three weeks.

Kihaadhoo was very different from any other islands I have ever visited in the Maldives; the total population is less 500 people and it is a very close-knit community. I plan to talk about limitations and obstacles I faced doing fieldwork in my own country. I am currently focusing on the methodologies section of the dissertation, and discussing participant observation linking it to works from Ingold and Malinowski. Ingold says that the “ethnographer is changed by the experience, and this change is carried forward into his or her future work” (2013: 3). This quote was somehow stuck in my mind and it helped me a lot during fieldwork.

Photography was a key aspect of my fieldwork, therefore I am planning to explore theories of visual anthropology. Anna Grimshaw explains how Malinowski was a painter in the way he wrote after doing

participant observation, complimenting the “strikingly visual quality of his texts” (2001: 45). She says that the “readers of the Argonauts of the Western Pacific, above all, see the world of the Trobriand Islanders; and what they see in their mind’s eye are vivid concrete details, images of native life, rather than its abstract presentation” (2001: 45). This inspires me to follow a Malinowski style of writing to present my fieldwork findings.

As for theoretical links, I have only managed to link one theory so far. The concept of alienation can be applied to my findings where I will discuss how the women in the island are alienated from their labour product. The women are greatly exploited for their cheap labour by five star resorts around Baa Atoll, and are unaware of this. I plan to talk about four different concepts of alienation put forth by Marx, exploring when and where I can relate it to my research. Other theories I plan to focus on are social/kinship relations and the material culture of the coconut, perhaps making ethnoarchaeological links.

I faced a lot of problems in the initial process of doing my fieldwork. Because it is a patriarchal society, my family did not want to send me off to a far away island to do fieldwork by myself, which is why I had two of my male friends accompanying me. As soon as I reached the island, I immediately felt like an outsider, as all women and girls beyond the age of ten wore the hijab. The women gave me funny looks and I was afraid they were not going to take my research seriously. Even though they were friendly, it took them a while to talk to me properly, after asking me questions about myself. They made fun of me because I was from Malé, the capital city, calling me the “developed girl”. However, after I explained my research, they were really excited that I had chosen their island to do fieldwork in.

I kept a field journal with me and tried to write in it as frequently as possible. However, I found it challenging to carry the journal with me at times, so I switched to using my phone to make notes instead. This is one reason why I decided to use photography as a key tool for my fieldwork research. My progress so far is not much, as I have not done my presentation yet. I am hoping to get more feedback and ideas for theoretical links I can make after I do my presentation soon.

References:

- Grimshaw, A (2001). *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology*. Cambridge University Press
- Ingold, T (2013). *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. Routledge. New York
- Malinowski, B. (1932) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*. Routledge. London
- Marx, K and Engels, F. (1988) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*. Prometheus. New York