

# **Clarence Maloney, his vision, his work and the ancient underlying cultural influences in the Maldives**

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*There were hardly any references to the Maldives in academic works after HCP Bell's visit to the country at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bell's work was not widely circulated and the country was ignored by scholars until the last quarter of the century. I was curious to know about the reasons that made someone go to the Maldives during the years of obscurity. Clarence Maloney, an anthropologist from the USA and the writer of *People of the Maldivian Islands*, is one of the few researchers of Maldivian culture who broke the long academic silence that weighed on the archipelago. He made three visits to the Maldives between 1974 and 1976.*

Clarence Maloney hailed from an American family and was raised in India, in the Kerala and Tamil Nadu area where his parents were working. He developed a keen interest in South Indian culture early on and became fluent in the Tamil language. As a child he attended Kodaikanal International School, graduating in 1952, following which he went to the USA for college education. There he attended New York University for his MA in Social Studies Secondary Education, and then returned to India for social work, beginning in a rural industrial school.

While in India this time Maloney developed a thirst for academic knowledge about the large and complex Subcontinent, thus he enrolled for regional studies in the University of Pennsylvania. Then he would spend a long period, lasting about a decade, in the USA where he taught anthropology, culture history, and Asian studies in universities.

His attention was drawn to the Maldives as an extension of his work on early South Indian culture history. He emphasizes that his curiosity took off from the research he did for his dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Regional Studies Department, which was "The effect of early seafaring on the development of civilization in South India."

In his study Maloney argues that civilizational influences from Gujarat to Sri Lanka from the 5th century BCE were well known. Based on this he sought to confirm that the same cultural influences by sea also impacted the Tamil area opposite Sri Lanka, and that these later extended further east to Southeast Asia. The latter is a subject that has been widely written about in 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship, nevertheless Maloney wondered about the effect on the Maldives —located to the Southwest of the Subcontinent— of all this early seafaring and cultural diffusion. He realized that there was hardly anything written about it and became restless, wishing to research this blank space in the map of knowledge on his own.

Finally an opportunity arose for Maloney in the mid 1970s when there was an economic down-turn and he could not continue his university teaching in the United States. Thus he decided return to South Asia to study and carry out research in depth on the obscure island nation. He made a brief exploratory visit to the Maldives in 1974 and evokes that at that time one could fly there from Colombo or Trivandrum and travel around Maldives without a visa, and easily meet people.

His first impressions on the island country were that the local people were relaxed or even lethargic, as they could sit in rope chairs for hours in the evening exchanging what seemed to him just bursts of boring, sporadic talk. Most islands except Male had small populations and there were hardly any shops. Daily activities were few beyond those related to subsistence. People had narrow interests, and this American anthropologist had to even explain to some what a mountain was and how to go up it. He was also surprised at the strength of conservative Islam, as compared with the rest of South Asia.



*The relaxed and casual atmosphere of an island in the Maldives in the mid 1970s (picture Clarence Maloney)*

One year later, in 1975, Maloney returned to the Maldives. He had decided to stay for a longer period this time in order to carry out an intensive study on the country, but could not stay longer than 6 months. Though this was too short for a full anthropological study, Maloney deemed that because of his extensive knowledge of South Asian —and especially of South Indian and Sri Lankan culture, languages and linguistics, and history— he could quickly put in context everything he would encounter in the new country that lay before him.

This was not long after independence when the Maldives had barely opened its doors to the world and, timidly at first, had become part of international organizations. Although tourism had just begun in some islands close to the capital, its effects were still not felt by most of the local population.

After renting a little room in Male, Maloney read everything available on the country—which unfortunately didn't amount to much. He also conducted extensive interviews. Since he decided that he did not have time to learn to converse in the language, Maloney employed a translator, Abdul Zameer, who knew good English and had recently graduated from a local government-supported English-medium school with teachers from Sri Lanka. Maloney reckons that without Abdul Zameer's knowledge, understanding and the contacts he willingly facilitated, the research he did on the hitherto isolated nation could not have been half as successful.

In and around Male, Maloney met a wide range of common people and local officials. He recorded the views of the resident Sri Lankan teachers, which he considered valuable for his study. He also went to meet the people of Giraavaru, who had abandoned their ancestral abode and were then living on Hulule, the airport island. Maloney pondered on the fact that they were considered as a somewhat inferior or earlier group, and that they even sometimes called themselves '*Tamilas*', which tied in with his findings about the Dravidian-speaking culture underlying the Sri Lankan and later Arab influence.

The stay in the Maldives of this modern anthropologist was not like that of HCP Bell, the early explorer of the Maldives, who had the King's schooner to travel to the atolls he wished to visit. Maloney had to travel to the scattered islands of the archipelago by getting rides on any local transport or fishing vessels, eating whatever could be had there and sleeping on the deck like the local folk.

In this manner he travelled southward, stopping at the Mulaku, Nilande, and Huvadhu atolls on the way, finally reaching the island of Gan in Addu, the southernmost atoll of the Maldives where the British had a military base. Maloney lingered for a few weeks in that atoll, for he found more people who had wider knowledge than on most of the smaller and more austere islands he had previously visited.

After returning to Male' from his journey to the southern part of the country he decided to visit some islands located north of the capital. Maloney was used to the varied and mostly vegetarian cuisine of South India, but during his stay in the Maldives he endured the almost total lack of vegetables and of the array of Indian masalas. He remembers the dullness of the cuisine and found *rihakuru* unpleasant but sometimes had to eat a little of it as there wasn't much else.

After concluding his trip to the northern atolls of the Maldives Maloney returned to the capital. By now he had lived continuously in the Maldives for almost half a year and was certainly the first American in history having done so. He was moved by the general relaxed atmosphere of local hospitality, for he was welcomed in many homes and given food without discussion of payment wherever he went. Even though most people had very little even for themselves, they felt honored when a foreigner from a far-away country took interest in their community. His experiences with casual hospitality were not restricted to Maldivians; he also was very kindly treated while he stayed in the home of a Sri Lankan teacher family in Male’.

Finally Maloney was ready to bring to a close his long stay in the island nation. After packing his belongings, which included voluminous notes and precious negatives of pictures of ancestral island scenes, he left to South India and from there to the USA.

Maloney paid a third visit to the Maldives in 1976; on this occasion with two children. He observed that tourism was definitely growing and several new —formerly uninhabited— islands were attracting Europeans during their winter vacations. But he consciously avoided direct contact with these tourists and did not wish to be identified with one of them. He wondered about the disturbing effect of their shallow lifestyle on traditional Maldivian culture, so marked by insularity and a local kind of Islamic conservatism.



*Young Maldivians dancing and enjoying the brief liberalization of mores among the youth in the 1970s. (picture Clarence Maloney)*

More importantly Maloney also was able to observe on his last trip the fleeting phase of President Ibrahim Nasir’s drive to modernize the nation that included relatively liberal policies. Although limited mainly to Male, during that stage the mood of the country was

being shaken. In that little-studied period of the nation's history Maldivian society began quite visibly to be subject to the sway of modernity in the form of fashions and dancing among the youth.

But the storm clouds were already gathering and less than two years later the brief age of awakening of the half-forgotten sleepy collection of tiny coral islands would abruptly be slashed by newly-installed President Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom. Favoring religious rule, his Islamization policies which would welcome tourism and the wealth it provided, would selectively outlaw most intellectual and artistic modern influences in Maldivian society.

Clarence Maloney never returned to the Maldives, but on account of his visits and the painstaking organization of his copious field notes, he wrote the substantial *People of the Maldive Islands*, a 400 page book. Published in 1980, it was the first in-depth anthropological and culture history study of the country. In his work Maloney included a section reflecting on how the country was beginning to experience the new stresses of a nation becoming established in the map of world. He predicted that thereafter the Maldives would become known not just for its tuna exports, but for its tourism as well as for duty-free trade.

Since Maloney's book was dedicated exclusively to the Maldivian nation, it naturally should have been an object of pride for the state that was busy establishing links in the international sphere. Oddly enough, however, Maloney's work was given a cold shoulder by the authorities.

A couple of years following my own arrival to the Maldives I found out that Maloney's *People of the Maldive Islands* was next to impossible to find in the country itself. It was as if this important book had been buried deeply in the ground right after birth. Most local English-speaking intellectuals didn't know about it. It was also not among the works on the Maldivian nation kept at the Majeedi Library —now renamed as the National Library— when I went there in the early 1980s. The only place where it could be found was under lock and key in a bookcase with glass doors at the small Ismāīl Dīdī Library in Amir Ahmad Magu. One had to pay 50 Rufiya —a substantial sum in the Maldives at the time— in order to be able to read that particular volume.

Maloney reasons that some of the chapters of his book, especially '*The Political System*', '*Islam and Social Control*,' and '*The Old Religion*' —dealing mainly with *fanḍita*, the Maldivian version of shamanism—, might not have been appreciated by local authorities. History for most Maldivian people back then was viewed through an Islamic prism, beginning with the conversion to Islam in the 12th century, and there was little interest in anything earlier. The book revealed the far more ancient underlying cultural influence of Tamil culture from South India —as in kinship systems and gender

roles, place names, and customs— linking geographically with nearby Kerala and historically with the Tamil classical Sangam era.

His book also exposed the dominant impact from Sri Lanka from which probably came the Divehi language and Buddhism, and the later contact with Persia, Indonesia, and other countries. However, the Maldivian powers that be were then not ready to accept the evidence displayed by Maloney in his work about the background that was underlying the history of their culture, as well as his findings beyond their repetitive government-approved legends.

Still under the spell of the island country and his long stay there, Maloney went on to write an article on the changing Maldives' culture in the *Journal of Asian Studies* and participated in a few conferences, but was not able find an opportunity to return to the Maldives. In addition, following his meticulous work dedicated to the small island nation he was not invited by the authorities of the country.

Years passed and Maloney became busy elsewhere, becoming engaged as a social scientist in numerous internationally-funded development projects, ranging from Bangladesh to Afghanistan. Most of these projects were related to the management of water resources in rural areas. Currently he is volunteering to promote environment interests in his old school in Kodaikanal in South India. Maloney's former translator, Zameer, now lives in England and still remains in contact with him.

*People of the Maldive Islands* was long out of print but in response to demand —being there so few works about the Maldives— it was republished in 2013 by Orient Blackswan in Hyderabad. The new book has a brief foreword written by myself and another by former President Nasheed who wrote that he had “read it many times.”

Clarence Maloney's *People of the Maldive Islands* constitutes a priceless sample of anthropological work. It is especially valuable as a record of the many aspects of traditional culture and history of an ancient nation that have faded and about which the young people of the Maldives now may know too little or nothing.