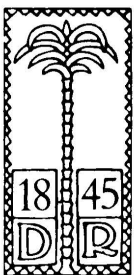


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Traces of castes and other social strata in the Maldives: A case study of social stratification in a diachronic perspective (Ethnographic, historic, and linguistic evidence)*

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Abstract. This paper explores the social stratification of Maldivian society, with particular focus on its history and traces of earlier alleged caste systems and slavery as well as their impact on Maldivian society, and the implications this fact had for their social structure. I will argue that some anthropologically remarkable traces of earlier social stratification, such as slavery and the caste system, can still be found on the islands. The same holds true for the social structure of the island Minicoy, part of the Sultanate Maldives until the beginning of the 16th century, which now belongs to India. I will demonstrate that while the middle castes have largely disappeared, the upper level of the caste hierarchy (which has survived in the local elite), the lower castes and certain groups of former slaves have been much more resistant to social developments and structural changes in the society.

[Maldives, Divehi, Minicoy, social stratification, caste, status-group, slavery, low caste, nobility, social elite, honorific forms, migration, cowrie trade]

1. Introductory remarks

The present paper deals with the stratification of Maldivian society, paying special attention to its history and evolution. I will particularly focus on traces of earlier (hypothetical) caste systems and slavery, analyzing this issue in a diachronic perspective. In what follows, I will concentrate on evidence for the development of social stratification available from the ethnic history of the Maldives as well as from the relevant social, cultural and linguistic features. Section 2 provides general definitions and the ne-

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cessary preliminaries relevant for a study of the ethnic and social history of the Maldives. Section 3 offers an overview of evidence indicating traces of the earlier stratification of Maldivian society that, presumably, points to earlier caste systems. Section 4 outlines the social stratification of the closely related, but in several respects, more traditional, society of the island Minicoy (India, Lakshadweep). Section 5 offers a brief sketch of the history of slavery in the Maldives, and Section 6 pays special attention to the importance of the Maldives as the main provider of cowrie shells (which used to serve as the universal currency in this area), and thus in the history of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean. Section 7 summarizes the main conclusions of the paper and outlines prospects for future research in the field.

2. The Maldives in the context of caste and slavery studies

2.1. *Caste and slavery: general definitions*

Caste can be defined as a form of social stratification (a particular social group, primarily in South Asian societies) which has several characteristic features, such as hereditary transmission of caste status, endogamy, and professional attachment (occupation), as well as a number of social interactional rules followed by the members of the caste and based primarily on cultural and/or religious notions of purity (see standard definitions and discussion of basic features, for instance, in Baines 1912:10 ff. et passim; Dumont 1970:21 ff.; Winthrop 1991:27 ff.; Jalali 2000).

Slavery can be described as a social system based on a relationship of possession established between humans (that is, one person is possessed by another as material property) that typically suggests unfree labor which the possessed person(s) is/are forced to perform (see, for instance, Flaig 2009).

Although the phenomena of caste and slavery are based on different conditions and parameters, the latter reveals some important features overlapping with caste hierarchy, such as, in particular, hereditary transmission of status as well as low social status (accompanied by corresponding social and behavioral regulations) shared by low castes and slaves (see, e. g., Leach 1967).

The social system of the Maldivian Republic is of particular value for a diachronic study of caste systems and slavery. In spite of the lack of both phenomena in the strict sense in contemporary Maldivian society, historic evidence and some other indirect ethnic, cultural and linguistic features point to the existence of a more elaborate social stratification systems in earlier times. This makes a case study of Maldivian society of special interest for research on the mechanisms and patterns of changes in social stratification – a particularly challenging domain of social history and historical anthropology (see, for instance, Sturtevant 1966; Macfarlane 1977; Smith 1977; Axtell 1979; Kalb, Marks and Tak 1996; Harkin 2010).

2.2. *Maldivians: Ethno-historic preliminaries*

The Maldives is a small island country to the south-west of Sri Lanka, inhabited by approximately 300,000 people. The Maldivian language (Divehi) belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, being most closely related to Sinhala, spoken in Sri Lanka. A dialect of Maldivian, Mahl, is also spoken on the island Minicoy (Maliku), today part of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep (India), which until the beginning of the 16th century belonged to the Maldivian Sultanate.

The common origin of the Maldivians and Sinhalese is beyond any doubt. In accordance with one widespread theory, the ancestors of the Maldivians could have come to the islands from Sri Lanka in the middle of the 1st millennium AD and assimilated the aboriginal (most probably, non-Indo-Aryan) population. According to another hypothesis (De Silva 1970 [1971]), the islands were populated simultaneously with Sri Lanka from the mainland several centuries earlier. For a survey of the literature, see Kulikov 1994. A 2003 expedition of geneticists from Leiden University collected valuable evidence for a study of the origins of the Maldivians, which points to their close connection with the Indian sub-continent (rather than with other areas of Asia); see Pijpe et al. 2013.

Originally, the Maldives were a Buddhist country. In the middle of the 12th century, the Maldives were islamized (the official date of conversion is 1153). Hinduism never was a dominant religion on the islands, but several traces of a Hindu presence are found (in particular, archaeological evidence from the 8th or 9th centuries as well as some motifs in Maldivian folklore; see Skjølsvold 1991; Romero-Frias 1999), and a considerable community of c. 10,000 Hindus (according to the 2000 census) is currently resident in the Maldives.

2.3. *Social stratification in the Maldives in a historic perspective*

First of all let it be noted that contemporary Maldivian society is not a caste society in the strict sense of the term, in contrast with Indian and Sri Lankan societies. In general, it shows quite a high degree of homogeneity, even compared to many societies without any caste distinctions (see, e. g., Faizal 2005:90).

Nevertheless, there is a plethora of social and anthropological features which point to earlier stratification and which, presumably, can be considered vestiges of a former system of castes. Of particular interest are those groups within the Maldivian society whose status has much in common with castes – ‘caste-like groups’, in Maloney’s (1980:274) terms, or ‘status-groups’¹ (an even more appropriate term for such social groups in the Maldives and Minicoy, according to Ellen Kattner, p. c.).²

¹ On this notion and its relationship to caste, see, in particular, Bétéille 1967; Sheth 1999.

² See also Dumont’s (1970:205 ff.) brief discussion of the notion of caste in Islamic societies, which is highly relevant for the case of Maldives.

Likewise, the Maldives differ from other South Asian countries as far as the issue of slavery is concerned. In the era of the Maldivian sultanate, a limited number of slaves were brought to the islands from East Africa (see Section 5 for details). However, since the country was never colonized in the proper sense of the word,³ slavery was never under the control of Europeans, in contrast to other areas of South Asia at that time. This is not to say, however, that the Europeans were totally outside the institute of slavery. Particularly the Dutch, during the period of Dutch influence (around the 17th century) and, to some extent, the Portuguese benefitted from and participated in the slave trade.

2.4. History of research

There is no exhaustive or even cursory description of the history of the stratification of the Maldivian social system. Even the monographic study of the Maldives by C. Maloney (1980), a sort of Maldivian encyclopaedia, only contains some brief facts pertaining to the traces of an alleged earlier caste system. Nevertheless, mentions of the existence of caste-like groups (status-groups) in Maldivian society can be found as early as in the early 17th century description of the islands written by the French adventurer Pyrard de Laval, who spent five years in the Maldives after a shipwreck in 1602.⁴ Some brief information about the original castes or caste-like groups can also be extracted from Rosset's (1887) essay and from the materials of the expedition of J. Gardiner (Duckworth 1914) as well as from several studies by H.C.P. Bell, the pioneer in systematic research on the Maldives (see especially Bell 1921:31 f.).

The issue of the relationship between the stratification of Maldivian society and the castes of India or Sri Lanka remained beyond the scope of scholarly research until recently. The detailed study of Sinhala castes by Gilbert contains some comparative data regarding Maldivian castes (Gilbert 1952:302), but they are primarily based on information from Pyrard, quoted by Bell (1917:64), and are therefore too uncertain, scarce and out-of-date to serve as the basis for comparative anthropological research.

My survey is mainly based on a comprehensive description of Maldivian society in Maloney 1980:274–308 as well as on other sources that provide evidence for the reconstruction of the history of social stratification in the Maldives.

³ There was a very short period in the 16th century (1558–1573), when, according to some sources, the Portuguese army had conquered the central atolls and the capital city Malé. Officially, the islands were under the British protectorate from the mid-19th century until 1965, but the United Kingdom only took control over foreign policy, essentially leaving domestic affairs to the Maldivians.

⁴ See Pyrard 1619/1887 as well as the new French edition of Pyrard's account of the Maldives in Pyrard 1998.

3. Social stratification and caste-like groups (status-groups) in Maldivian society

3.1. *Traces of lower castes*

The most remarkable traces of the original caste system can be found among the few groups which are situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy. One such group includes girāvarus. Before 1972 they inhabited the island Girāvaru, but later they were resettled to the capital Malé. Here they are constantly being assimilated with other social groups. Yet until recently, due to endogamy (which is particularly common in caste societies) and the conservatism of their habits, the girāvarus crucially differed from the rest of the population. They exhibit a patrilineal system of kinship, the freedom of women is heavily limited, divorces and remarriages are virtually impossible (and the attitude towards them is very negative), and the virginity of the bride before marriage is considered a virtually obligatory condition of the wedding. These features are clearly at odds with other groups in Maldivian society, which is characterized by the fairly independent status of women, especially as compared to many other Islamic countries.

Suffice it to mention here that women repeatedly ruled the islands: the official Maldivian chronicle *Tarikh* (from Arabic *tarikḥ* 'history') mentions four female sultans. The Maldivians originally had a matrilineal tradition (later changed to patrilineal and patrilocal), which is confirmed by genetic studies, e.g. in reduced female-mediated gene flow between atolls (see Pijpe et al. 2013). It is also worth noting that the Maldives occupies the first place in the world in the statistics for divorces: 85% of the marriages end in divorce, on some atolls people may get married and divorced as often as two or three times per year, and the average Maldivian woman is married four times (see most recently Marcus 2012). Finally, the virginity of the bride is never considered important (see Maloney 1980:345–346 and, in general, Ch. 10–12; Status 1989:5–7, 42 et passim).

There are also several other features which distinguish the girāvarus from other Maldivians in clothing, women's coiffures, and superstitions.⁵ There are some reasons to believe that in earlier times the ancestors of the girāvarus ruled the islands and that this (most probably non-Indo-Aryan) tribe populated the islands before the arrival of Indo-Aryans (presumably dated to the first half of the 1st millennium AD). The peculiar anthropological features of modern giravārus may go back as far as these early times. Until recently this sub-ethnic group may have also inhabited some other islands in the North Malé atoll, Hura and Hummafushi.

Another interesting group, the status of which resembles that of low castes of India and Sri Lanka, includes rāveris, the coconut palm-sap tappers, who also take care of

⁵ In particular, the girāvarus are usually afraid of evil eye – considerably more often than other Maldivians are.

coconut tree plantations. Like girāvarus, rāveris are endogamous. According to some historical sources, in earlier times it was impossible for other Maldivians to eat together with rāveris or drink from one vessel; on some islands, it is probably impossible even today. It is interesting to note that girāvarus never use the services of rāveris. On the basis of this fact, Maloney (1980:278) suggested that rāveris represent the aboriginal pre-Indo-Aryan population as well. After the arrival of the Indo-Aryans, they were largely assimilated by them throughout the archipelago, except for Girāvaru and some other islands, becoming a low caste or status-group. A similar mechanism in the formation of lower castes has been observed in some areas of India, in particular in Kerala (on the caste system in Kerala and its genesis, see, for instance, Kurien 1994; Mencher 1966:145 et passim; cf. also von Ehrenfels 1964) or in South India in general (see Mukerjee 1937:378 ff.).

It is also worth mentioning that the status of the members of a lower caste in Kerala, the tīyar, whose occupation is related to coconut trees, is fairly close to that of the rāveris in the Maldives. This prompted Maloney (1980:115) to assume genetic affinity between the tīyars and rāveris. His hypothesis is indirectly supported by the etymology of the Kerala caste name (*tīvu* means “island”).

There are of course many other professional groups, such as fishermen⁶ (nearly a half of the active male population are involved into this occupation), carpenters, musicians etc.,⁷ but they are organized according to purely professional principles and have few or no caste features.

3.2. *The Maldivian nobility and traces of upper castes*

Another peculiar feature of the Maldivian society, also probably reflecting the traces of an earlier caste system, is the elaborated structure of the social elite (which is partially preserved until now) and the existence of the inherited nobility. The traditional Maldivian elite consists of several groups (didi, rasan, manikku, manipuḷu etc.); see Bell 1921:31 f.; Maloney 1980:300 f.; Phadnis/Luithui 1985:12.

The Maldivian language provides perhaps the most remarkable evidence for the relevance of the social hierarchy. It preserves a fairly complicated system of honorific degrees, which brings everyday speech in line with this complicated social stratification. A number of forms have several variants which are chosen depending on the social status of the participants in the dialogue. The forms of the first degree are neutral, employed in the conversations between the members of non-elite groups, as well as

⁶ It is interesting to note that the Maldivian term denoting the captain of a fisher boat, *keolu*, corresponds to the name of the fishermen's caste in Sinhala, *kevulu*.

⁷ Quite importantly, musicians and dancers do not have the low social status typical of the corresponding castes in South India (Maloney 1980:304 f.).

when a person of high social status addresses a person of lower status. The forms of the second degree are used when members of the aristocracy are talking to each other, as well as when members of other groups are addressing them. The forms of the third degree used to be employed when addressing the Sultan and his wife, and, until recently, were used when addressing the President as well as a few government officials of the highest rank (Fritz 1993:28 f.). Consider examples of this threefold opposition for pronominal forms in the dialect of the capital Malé: 2nd person singular pronouns (Engl. *you*, Germ. *du/Sie*): 1st degree – *kalē*, 2nd degree – *tia bēkalā*, *tia bēkalē*, 3rd degree – *tia bēfulā*, *tia manikufānu*; 2nd person plural pronouns (Engl. *you*, Germ. *ihr/Sie*): 1st degree – *kalēmen*, 2nd degree – *tia bēkalun*, 3rd degree – *tia bēfulun*; etc. (see Fritz 2002:128 ff.). Fritz (1993:29) characterizes this complicated system as “the linguistic mirror of the caste system”.

Although the system described above was fully observed only in the capital, where the Sultan resided, its reduced versions also existed outside Malé. On the southern atolls we find such groups as the *didi* or *manikufanu*. On many islands members of aristocratic families still consider themselves elite. The members of different elite groups occupy different places in mosques, *didis* can eat together with *manikufanus* and fishermen but not with *rāveris*, etc.

Finally, anthropometric data show the existence of some differences between the caste-like groups; in particular, the members of the elite groups are taller and usually have bigger skulls (Duckworth 1914:23 f.⁸).

3.3. Historical evidence for the existence of castes

As mentioned above, this, fairly complicated, social structure can be seen at full scale only in the capital Malé. After the establishment of the republic in 1968, this structure was largely abolished; only some of its traces are preserved until today.

In earlier times, Maldivian society had more features typical of a caste system. At the end of the 19th century, Rosset (1887:172) noticed that in Malé, there are several castes which differ in jewelry, household goods, etc.⁹ He also observed that several activities can only be performed by members of lower castes. People of lower castes should give the way to members of higher castes, could not remain sitting in their presence, or eat before the higher castes finished their meal (Rosset 1887:168).

⁸ The author uses the term ‘caste’ and counts among the upper caste *didis* and clerks of high rank in Malé as well as *didis* and *manikufanus* on the Addu atoll.

⁹ Thus, the author noticed that the material for chains or ropes used to suspend the bed from the roof depended on the caste of the proprietor of house: high castes used brass chains, middle castes employed iron chains, and low castes coir ropes. Of course this observation might equally pertain to the high, middle and low classes, respectively, rather than to castes in the strict sense of term.

Furthermore, on the basis of his observations, Rosset (1887:168) assumed that in his times (that is, at the end of the 19th century), the differences between the castes were less pronounced than a few centuries earlier. The members of different groups differed in clothes, jewelry, and place of residence (in particular, the families belonging to the inherited aristocracy lived in the direct vicinity of the Sultan's palace). Thus, the ban on wearing jewelry otherwise only allowed for women of upper castes was quite strict in earlier times; in Rosset's times this ban was often neglected (Rosset 1887: 172).¹⁰

The stratification of Maldivian society is also mentioned by Pyrard at the beginning of the 17th century. He listed several groups, the names of which (*quilague, callo, camulo* and some others) can easily be identified with those mentioned in later sources (Pyrard 1619/1887:208–218; see also Bell 1917:64). Both Rosset and Pyrard noticed that the members of different castes were not allowed to take meals together or even to sit at the same table. In Pyrard's time, the connection between profession (and caste) and place of residence was probably even more rigid.

4. Social stratification on Minicoy (Maliku)

The earlier social stratification (and, presumably, some elements of the original caste society) is better preserved on the neighboring island Minicoy (Maliku), where the social structure is more conservative in several respects (see Kattner 1996; Forbes 2004:149). Contemporary Minicoy society consists of four status-groups: *boduṅ* (land- and shipowners), *niamiṅ* (captains and navigators), *medukembiṅ* (ships' crews), and *ra-veriṅ* (jaggery tappers and coconut harvesters); see Kattner 2010:170 ff. At the beginning of the 20th century, Ellis (1924:76) also reported four groups in the population on Minicoy, two groups of the upper layer: (i) *mālikhan* (aristocracy, cf. Mald. *maniku, manike*) and (ii) *mālimi* (sailors and navigators, cf. Tamil *mālumī* "seafarer"); and two groups of the lower layer: (iii) *takkrus* (this group mostly includes fishermen, but also some seamen) and (iv) *rāveri*. Only people who belonged to the two upper groups or to the two lower groups, that is, either *mālikhan* and *mālimi*, or *takkrus* and *rāveri*, could reportedly take meals together and marry each other. Children born into mixed marriages received the higher caste status.

As in the case of the Maldives, the Minicoy caste system was constantly being simplified. Half a century before Ellis, Basevi (1872) listed five castes, which included Malkoofan, or Manikoofan (the women of this caste were called Manika), Thuckoo-

¹⁰ According to Basevi (1872:307), such bans still existed on the island Minicoy at the end of the 19th century. Women of the upper caste, Malkoofan or Manikoofan, wore golden rings in the form of a flower in their noses; women of the next caste, Thuckooroofan, had rings made of golden thread with beads; women of other castes wore rings made of black threads.

roofan, Thuckooroo, Kulloo and Raviree. These terms can easily be identified with the Maldivian words *Manikufanu* and *Manike*, *Takurufanu*, *Kalo* and *Rāveri*; Thuckooroo likely corresponds with *takkrus* in Ellis 1924. Both Basevi and Ellis mentioned 'pair-wise' endogamy, which groups the first and second castes together on the one hand, and the third and fourth castes on the other. This pairwise endogamy appears to have been a stable social parameter on Minicoy. Today, endogamous marriages are more common and, in the case of exogamous marriages, only women can marry up, but only into the adjoining status-group (Ellen Kattner, p. c.).

5. Slavery and its relationships with castes

The slaves are, strictly speaking, beyond the social structure described above. Slavery was known in the Maldives, first of all in the capital city Malé, as well on those islands where large groups of the aristocracy were living. In fact, however, the impact of slaves on the social structure should not be underestimated.

Already by the 14th century, when one of the earliest descriptions of the islands, written by the famous Arab traveller Ibn Battūta, appeared, slaves formed a part of the Maldivian population. Most of them were brought to the Maldives on Arab boats (see de Silva Jayasuriya 2008b:134 ff. and especially de Silva Jayasuriya 2008a:28 ff. et passim, which is the most exhaustive and detailed survey of African migration to the Maldives as well as other areas of South Asia). These routes of the slave trade mostly started in East Africa, continuing further via Zanzibar and the Omani port of Muscat. A relatively large number of slaves (70) are reported to have been bought in the Saudi Arabian port Jeddah, ordered by Sultan Hasan III in the mid-15th century. This Sultan is mentioned again in the historical chronicle *Ta'rikh* because of his refusal to let a slave (apparently of high value to him) be punished for having killed a Maldivian.

In general, African slaves settled peacefully on the northern and central atolls. Mixed marriages were not impossible, and slaves often intermarried with the local population (see, in particular, Forbes/Ali 1980:19). Working most often as *rāveris*, i. e. as keepers of coconut plantations, the slaves were ultimately absorbed by several social groups or castes, but foremost by the lower castes such as the *rāveri*. However, from the chronicles we even know of a sultan who married a slave woman (Phadnis/Luithui 1985:13 f.). Another story, told by Ibn Battūta, who was appointed the chief judge of the islands, mentions an African slave accused of an affair with a lady of the Sultan's harem. Ibn Battūta was invited to deal with this case.

Lower caste work was, however, not the only occupation possible for Africans. According to some sources, some of them could serve in the Sultan's guard.

It is important to note that slavery was virtually limited to Africans. In the Middle Ages, some aristocratic families employed common people from the local population as slaves and, sometimes, even sell them. The situation changed during the reign of Sultan Mohamed Ibn Al-Hajj Ali Thukkalaa, whose Divehi title was *Siri Kularanmani*

Mahaaradhun (1692–1701). As early as in 1692, the judge of the islands, Hassan Thaaajuddheen, prohibited the employment of free women without payment as if they were slaves. Selling people (which was not uncommon among the elite) was prohibited as well. If a person addressed the judge complaining about his/her status, s/he should be freed for a symbolic payment. Hassan Thaaajuddheen was the first person who declared the slavery to be shameful and, as a matter of fact, contributed to its abolishment.

After the 18th century, the number of slaves being brought to the islands was heavily reduced, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century the already tiny stream of African slaves had virtually died out. Two British navy lieutenants, Young and Christopher, who visited Malé in 1834, reported that (Young/Christopher 1836:82):

From the information we were able to collect [...], it appears that Muscat vessels do not often visit this place: when they do, they generally bring a cargo of slaves. Five years ago one came and sold about twenty-five lads, at an average price of about 80 rupees each.

The last first-generation slave was a woman called Baburu ('negro') Amina Fulu, who died in the 1940s.

In spite of their limited presence on the islands, the anthropometrical features of the descendants of African slaves can still be recognized among the local population, particularly in the capital city Malé as well as on the northern atolls.

One possible contribution of African slaves to the local culture includes *babaru lava*, or "negro songs" (which, presumably, are rhythmically similar to Zanzibari and Omani music; see de Silva Jayasuriya 2008a:94 f.; de Silva Jayasuriya 2008b:135 f.). They typically accompany traditional Maldivian *bodu beru* dances (i. e. dances accompanied by a "big drum"). This style of dancing and singing was probably introduced by African settlers (foremost by slaves from East Africa) during the 12th century.

To summarize, even in spite of the presence of some anthropometric features pointing to their African ancestors, slaves eventually merged with the local population, mainly with the lower castes. The phenomenon of merging of (former) slaves with lower castes is not unknown in sub-continental India as well (see, for instance, Reddy 2005:544 on the historical relationships between India's lower castes and African slaves) and results, in fact, in the ethnicization of caste (see Jaffrelot 2000 and case studies in Matchett 1989 and Ali 2001).

6. Maldivian cowrie shells and their role in the slave trade in the Indian Ocean

In spite of the rather limited role of slavery in Maldivian history, the country was nevertheless actively involved in the history and development of the slave trade in the

Indian Ocean. As is well-known, the Maldives were the main provider of cowrie shells (*Cypraea monetae*), the main currency of the Indian ocean in the Middle Age and the most important mechanism of the slave trade (for details, see Hogendorn 1981). In the middle of the 17th century, when the Maldivian cowrie trade, controlled by the Dutch administration, was directed through Ceylon, the African slave trade flourished, and the number of slaves sold and bought for cowries was very high. As late as the beginning of the 19th century, cowries could successfully be used for purchasing slaves in Africa. A woman could at that time be bought for two cowries in the Buganda region. By the middle of the 19th century, the value of the cowries had decreased considerably, and the price of a woman became as much as 10,000–12,000 cowries.

7. Social stratification in the Maldives in a diachronic perspective: Concluding remarks

There are good reasons to assume that, in ancient times, a system of castes (or status-groups) existed in the Maldives, which also incorporated, to some extent, slaves and the children of mixed marriages, partly integrated into the social structure of Maldivian society. This system was gradually eroding, losing the features peculiar to the caste societies of mainland India and South Asia, and, eventually, transforming into a system of professional groups. Slaves eventually shared the lot of the lower castes, becoming smoothly incorporated into them, and thus also found their way into the developing Maldivian society. However, the caste-like status of these groups (Mald. *bai*), particularly of those originating in the lower and upper castes, has been perceptible until more recent times.

It is difficult to determine even the approximate date when the deterioration of the original caste system could have started, or the date when Maldivian society ceased to be a caste society. Yet there are some reasons to assume the existence of some crucial features of a caste society as late as the times of Pyrard de Laval, i. e. in the early 17th century. Accordingly, the opinion of Andrew Forbes (1981:59¹¹), who believed that the Maldives no longer had a caste society after the conversion to Islam, that is from the middle of the 12th century onwards, should probably be seen as too categorical.

Maldivian society exemplifies a social system which has relatively recently lost a number of stratification features, presumably still preserving some traces of the earlier caste society. Interestingly, most prominent are traces observed in the social groups which belong to the highest layer of the contemporary society (aristocracy), on the one hand, and to the low status-groups, such as *rāveri*, on the other. In contrast to many early social groups belonging to the middle layer, the lower castes have left some

¹¹ See also Boulinier/Bouez 1976:21 f.

vestiges in the contemporary social structure. In that sense, we can say that indirect traces of slavery and the concomitant socio-cultural features can still be found in the modern Maldivian social system, in spite of their limited role in the social hierarchy.

This allows for an important generalization which may also be relevant for the history of other caste societies. There are good reasons to assume that, in general, the borders between castes in the middle part of the social structure disappear earlier than the distinctions at the top or at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The middle class groups are susceptible to changes resulting from several social developments, and movements of large groups of population to new places of residence with the subsequent change in occupation. By contrast, both the upper level groups and castes and the lower strata (incorporating some groups of former slaves and their descendants) appear to be more resistant to social developments and structural changes in the society, preserving their special status for a much longer time. In other words, the erosion of caste systems¹² starts in the middle of the social structure and affects the top and the bottom much later, as shown in Figure 1 below.

The last few years have been marked by dramatic political and social changes in the Maldives. A multi-party system was legalized in 2005. Several parties explicitly include leveling the imbalances within the social structure in their political programs.¹³ In 2008, the Maldives witnessed their first democratic president elections, when President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who was the head of state since 1978, was defeated by Mohammed Nasheed (see Bonofer 2010; Benjamin 2010). Mohammed Nasheed

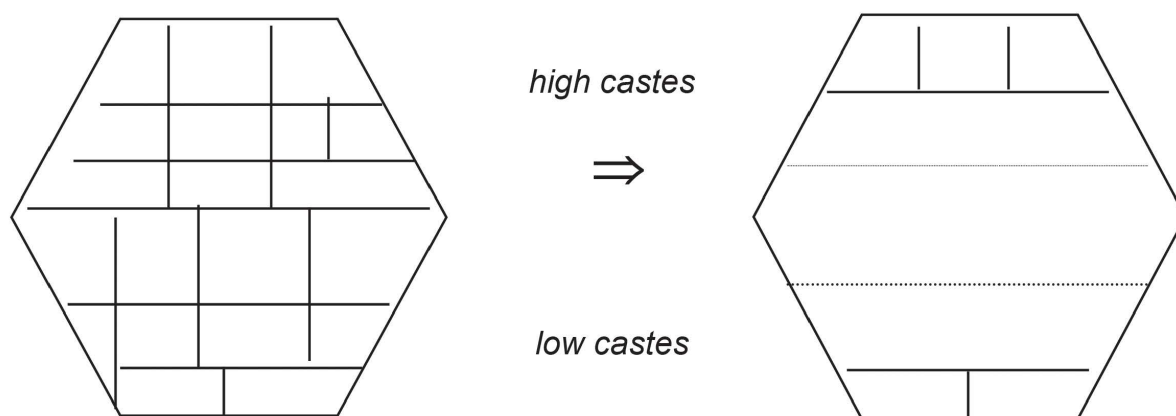


Figure 1 Erosion of caste systems

¹² On the phenomenon of vanishing and erosion of caste systems in general, see, for instance, Fuller 1997; Srinivas 2003; Shah 2007; Desai/Dubey 2011.

¹³ Thus, the Manifesto (draft) of the Maldivian Democratic Party (published at <http://www.dhivehiobserver.com/reports/draft-manifesto-english.pdf>), which was founded in 2001, mentions the necessity of reforms aimed at leveling the social stratification and imbalances in regional development. On the most recent social and political developments in the Maldives, see, in particular, Didi 2013; Zubair 2013; Musthaq 2014.

acted as President from 2008 until 2012; in November 2013 a new President, Abdulla Yameen, was elected. Does this mean that in the nearest future even the scant traces of earlier social stratification and the ancient caste system(s) may disappear? It seems, however, that the conservative features of traditional Maldivian society will prevent too drastic and rapid developments. It may take several generations before crucial changes in its social structure will occur.

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