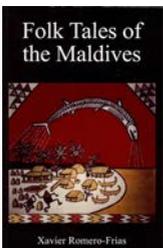


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## Maldives

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**Xavier Romero-Frias, collector and trans., *Folk Tales of the Maldives***

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012. 240 pages. Preface, names of Maldivians, glossary, introduction, bibliography, index. Hardback, £50.00; paperback, £16.99. ISBN 978-87-7694-104-8 (hardback); 978-87-7694-105-5 (paperback).

AROUND THE WORLD the Maldives are known as one of the countries most likely to disappear given a rise in the sea level. A legend in this book (no. 19) foreshadows that disaster: when the sea rises to cover the sandbar where two girls are relaxing, they drown. The former president of the country was obliged to resign after (and perhaps not because of) calling the world's attention to the threat. In *Folk Tales of the Maldives*, Xavier Romero-Frias calls his eighty pieces "folktales," but some are

legends. In a story the author credits to both the *Panchatantra* and the narrative of Ibn Battuta, the Maldives are converted to Islam (no. 20). No doubt it is orally transmitted, but it is hardly a folktale. A few others are personal experience narratives, such as a first-person visit to an island of hospitable lepers (no. 26). One is a folktale framed into a pseudo-myth: a man overcomes the threats of a tiger by tricking him into entering a house he builds for him; then, when scalding water is poured on the tiger and he howls, a mythical two-headed bird observing it all states that man is the craftiest of all animals; out of fear, all two-headed birds leave the earth permanently; now they dwell in the *dagas* tree (no. 26). Some of the pieces are animal fables: by biting the king in bed, a flea causes a hospitable bedbug to be killed (no. 79).

No doubt most of the stories are orally transmitted for most are credited to named narrators by their village and place. But once the author has listened to them, he has not literally transcribed their words. What I know about oral storytelling (admittedly in languages other than Divehi) suggests that he is supplying phrasing: “Already the visitors had become so familiar with [the character] that they were calling the boy by name, and talking and joking with him. He felt so flattered being addressed by such refined people as if he was one of them that his chest swelled with pride” (199). This pseudo-literary style is visible in passages like this: “She was a very pretty girl and her manners and learning were excellent, for her parents had looked after her very well. But she felt that they were always protecting her too much and she wanted to have more freedom, like the other girls on the island” (164). Oral storytellers seldom talk like that.

The rewriting aims the collection at “those people interested to learn more about the Maldives and with luck visit that beautiful country.” The prospective tourist is given guidebook information: “Nadalla is an island on the long coral reef fringing the western side of Huvadū Atoll” (184); “Land crabs [who are characters in the story being introduced] used to be very common in the Maldives. They are curious and intrusive. Unlike most crustaceans, they don’t live in the sea, but on land” (202). Or the reader is guided in how to understand a story: “The following story shows how important it is for children to respect and obey the advice of their mother” (84). Occasionally an italicized paragraph introduces and classifies the tale: “On the southern rim of Miladummaḍulu Atoll there is an uninhabited island called Kaṇḍudu that many years before had a thriving population. The following tale endeavors to throw light on the reason why it is now deserted” (128). Such information is no doubt helpful to the prospective tourist, but frequently it intervenes in the narration. A person interested in learning more about the Maldives might well want more concrete detail about how storytellers use language.

The effect of rewriting is to show that folktales in the Maldives are obsolescent: “Usually folk tales were told by storytellers who were invited to entertain the audience of an island household, where several generations were living together under one roof. Storytellers used to be men” (xxii). “There was no effort to preserve and popularize the native stories in their original form,” on Radio Maldives or by this author, whereas in other Indian Ocean islands like the Seychelles and Mauritius, national radio has often broadcast traditional performances. “The end of the 20th

century saw the steady decline of oral Maldivian folklore” (xxiii), the author says, making his book a kind of obituary. Certain islands, he writes, “are renowned because not much happens there ever. They are sleepy places where life is numbed by a sense of tranquillity and tediousness and only very rarely does something take place that shakes the islanders out of their peaceful stupor” (56). Stepping into the past, before the sea rises, may appeal to some tourists, but not others.

To classify the stories, the author makes his own system out of jumbled criteria. Nonhuman characters make “tales of spirits or monsters”; humorous characters make another category; a mixture of two genres yields “long fairy-tale style myths”; animal stories are called fables, under the influence of European literature; the setting makes another category, “seafaring stories”; and some legends are called “chronicles of semi-historical events” (xxvii). Some are historical, such as the raid by a trading ship on a Maldivian vessel attacked in World War Two. Others show the well-known connection between story and proverb (no. 71) or proverbial phrase (nos. 72, 73, 75, 76). One (no. 78) is even a reversal of a favorite legend from Madagascar: a woman is magically provided with a daily supply of fish through having delivered a grandchild for the King of the Sea, then loses her good fortune through revealing the secret to her husband.

By avoiding received systems of classifying oral tales and substituting his own literary performance, the author has not done well by the other audience he envisages, the “anthropologist, folklorist, linguist, or Islamic scholar” (xi). Such a reader would want transcriptions in Divehi, interlinear translations, and free but faithful translations. As a visitor to the study of folklore, this author associates himself with the many before him who treat folklore as anybody’s property and hence available for any unfaithful handling. The Maldives entry in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge 2003, 372–74) shows the existence of other kinds of folklore in these threatened islands. The prospective tourist would learn much from it.

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