
Scripts of Maldives - Eveyla Akuru, Dhives Akuru and Thaana - Naseema Mohamed 2004

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Introduction

Ancient Maldives was known by many different names, among them Mahiladvipika, Diva Mahal, Maldiva and the Cowrie Islands, but the traditional name for these islands is Dhivehi Raajje, the inhabitants are Dhivehin, and their language is Dhivehi.

The Dhivehi civilization dates back more than two thousand years. Cowrie shells from the Maldives travelled the ancient world, from Africa and the Middle East to South East Asia and China. If the history of the ancient Maldivian cowrie shell trade could be traced, historians could perhaps go back even further in time. The identity of the first settlers in the archipelago remains unknown, but the language and old place-names show Aryan and Dravidian origins, suggesting early migrations from the Indian subcontinent.

The Dhivehi people built places of worship out of coral stone, cutting the blocks and fitting them together with amazing mastery. Regrettably, all that exists now of the oldest of these buildings are only the foundations, or at most, only the lower parts of what must once have been strong edifices. What existed of the old structures have been covered with the soil and vegetation of the passing centuries, so that these places now exist in the form of mounds or gentle hillocks, still to be seen in many islands of the Maldives.

The history of writing in these islands is more than 1400 years old. Inscriptions have been found on some of the artifacts discovered at heritage sites and on artifacts unearthed in various islands. The Dhivehi scribes of long ago carved their inscriptions on soft coral, probably using a metal instrument. The coral stone inscriptions that have been found are religious mantras of the Vajrayana Buddhist sect; the earliest is dated to the 6th century AD.

In Dhivehi, letters of an alphabet are called akuru, the word originating from the Sanskrit akshara or from the Pali akkhara. Three main scripts or akuru were used in Maldives over different periods of history. These were Eveyla, Dhives and Thaana. Until the late 18th century AD, Dhivehi was written in a script that had strong similarities to South Asian scripts such as Grantha, Elu and Vatteluttu. Although there were differences between earlier and later forms of the letters used in Maldivian writing, Dhivehin (Maldivians) called the old scripts Dhivehi or Dhives Akuru, literally meaning 'letters of island people'.

Ancient Scripts

A recently discovered inscription from the Maabudhuge archeological site, on the island of Landhoo in South Miladhunmadulu Atoll, is now thought to be the oldest script found in Maldives. The letters are inscribed on four sides of a block of coral, in a version of the Southern Brahmi script of the Pallava period, estimated to date back to the 6th century AD (shown below).

Southern

Brahmi script of the Pallava period, 6th century AD, found on the island of Landhoo in South Miladhunmadulu (Noonu) atoll

Photo: Yassin Hameed

- f8 Professional Photography

The

inscription is a mantra of Vajrayana Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that had existed in Maldives in ancient times.(Gippert 2003). The stone may have been buried in the foundation of a religious building to ensure safety from evil spirits, a practice known to have been used during the pre-Islamic period. The letters show some resemblance to the later Eveyla Akuru leading to the theory that this early script may have played a part in the formation of the first known Dhivehi alphabet.

Some letters

of this script are similar to letters inscribed on relics found in 1962 in Aifaanu Magu in Male'. Another palaeographically datable legend was inscribed on the cover of a coral stone casket found in Maalhos in Ari Atoll. This is a Vajrayana Buddhist inscription in Sanskrit and dates back to the 9th or 10th century AD. This inscription is written in an early form of Nagari (Ragupathy 1994). The same Nagari script is also found in some parts of the old copperplate grant called Isdhoo loamaafaanu, written in 1195/96 AD. This is the oldest loamaafaanu (copperplate grant) found so far in Maldives.

A gold leaf found in a relic casket on Veymandoo Island of Kolhumadulu Atoll has a very interesting inscription (shown below).

Similarities to Grantha script and affinities to Sinhala and Tamil Vatteluttu scripts, on gold leaf found in Veymandoo island, Kolhumadulu (Thaa) atoll.

Photo: Yassin Hameed

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The general appearance of the letters is in the category of the Grantha alphabet evolved to write Sanskrit, and belongs to the Grantha of 10th-11th centuries AD which was used by the Cholas of South India. However, the nature of the writing in some of the letters show affinities to the Sinhala alphabet and Tamil Vatteluttu of that period and to Maldivian Eveyla Akuru of the later period (Mohamed, Ragupathy 2005:10-12).

This inscription on the gold leaf may show a stage in the development of Eveyla Akuru, the first truly Dhivehi script. Examples of similar letters can be seen on an old coral stone casket found in Nilandhoo in North Nilandhoo atoll. Here, the legends are written in a mixed script containing elements of the Kannada-Telegu alphabet of the Western and Eastern Chalukyas dated to the 10th-11th century AD. A marked influence of the Sinhala alphabet and elements of the Grantha-Tamil and Vatteluttu scripts are to be seen. Some of the letters are closer to Eveyla Akuru. All these seem to show a stage in the evolution of Eveyla Akuru. (Mohamed, Ragupathy 2005:24-27). The coral stone casket has been tentatively dated to the 10th-11th century AD. It should be noted

that during the latter part of the 10th century and the 11th century AD, two of the Maldives northernmost atolls, Thiladhummathi and Malikatholhu, were occupied by the Cholas of South India

Eveyla
Akuru

When Mr. H. C. P. Bell came to Male' in 1922, he collected all the available documents containing old scripts. At that time, Maldivians referred to all the old scripts found in these documents as Dhivehi Akuru. Among the material collected by Mr. Bell were old documents from past centuries. He found great variation in these scripts, mainly due to changes brought to the scripts over a long period of time. To distinguish the early form of the scripts from the later variant, Mr. Bell named the early form of the letters, Eveyla Akuru .(Bell 1940:166). Eveyla means 'ancient' in the Maldivian language. The word e means 'that' and veyla is 'time' or 'period', thus together eveyla means 'that time', or 'ancient'. Eveyla Akuru, therefore simply means 'ancient letters'.

The Eveyla Akuru alphabet had twenty-seven consonants and nine symbols representing vowels, and was written from left to right. A consonant written by itself had the inherent a sound, and vowels written in non-initial positions were represented by vowel strokes called fili. Early forms of Eveyla Akuru have been found inscribed on some of the Buddhist relics found at sites in Male' and the atolls.

Eveyla Akuru script inscribed on a Buddhist relic found in Male'.

Photo: Yassin Hameed

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The later form of Eveyla is found in the old loamaafaanu, official records of grants made for the upkeep of mosques. These were narrow plates of copper on which these records were inscribed. The inscribed plates were threaded on a metal ring and hung inside the mosque. Each mosque is said to have had one of these grants, but very few remained at the beginning of the 20th century. The existing copperplate grants are from the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries AD, and reveal several variations in letter forms. Of these, the Bodugalu Miskithu Loamaafaanu, written in 1356 AD, the sixteenth year in the reign of Sultana Rehendhi Khadheeja, has been described by Mr. H .C. P. Bell as showing 'distinct modification from the characters of the earlier Haddummati, and Palace Loamaafaanu , belonging as it does, to a period nearly two hundred years later and already exhibits clear tendency towards the later evolution into Dives Akuru." (Bell 1940:182-186). No paper or parchment documents with the Eveyla script have been found.

Isdhoo Loamaafaanu 1195-96, Male'.

Photo: Yassin Hameed

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Dhives Akuru script used in official document, Male' 18th century.

Photo: NCLHR Collection.

Dhives Akuru

Eveyla Akuru underwent many changes over the centuries and evolved into the later form, now called Dhives Akuru or Dhivehi Akuru. Many features of Eveyla Akuru were retained in Dhives Akuru. As in the earlier Eveyla Akuru, Dhives also had vowels and consonants, and vowel strokes or fili. It was also written from left to right, and consonant characters standing on their own had the inherent a sound. Many modifications had been made to the shapes of letters and new symbols had been incorporated into the Dhives alphabet, to represent new sounds.

In the Dhives Akuru alphabet, the consonant symbols numbered forty-one and there were fifteen symbols for vowels, including in some cases, more than one symbol for the same vowel. In documentation written in Dhives Akuru, verses from the Quran as well as all Arabic words, including Arabic names and words commonly used in Dhivehi, were always written in the Arabic script. This often led to difficulties since Dhives was written from left to right and Arabic from right to left. Very beautiful examples of Dhives Akuru can be seen in the inscriptions on the walls of the Hukuru Miskiy, on ancient tombstones carved from coral slabs, and in some finely written official land grants, inscribed on wood or parchment.

This script was used extensively for all official purposes until the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century. A few copperplates written in later years have been written in this script.

Thaana Akuru

Thaana is a system of writing developed to meet the needs of the Dhivehi language. Although the influence of Arabic and Persian can be seen clearly, vestiges of the early Dhives Akuru writing system can still be found in its basic rules (Mohamed 1999:39).

Early Dhivehi scripts were written in the left to right direction, unlike scripts used in many Islamic countries. Arabic, Persian and Urdu, languages used by Muslims in the Middle East and India, were written from right to left. The late 16th to the 18th centuries was a period when trade was well-established between Maldives and other countries, and Maldivians were in constant contact with people from these countries. Trading ships came regularly to Maldives to buy cowries and other products, and learned Muslim teachers often arrived on these vessels. By the 15th and 16th centuries, Maldivians too were travelling to Arabia for religious studies and some of them were well-versed in Arabic. The religious awareness of the time, and a desire to belong to the community of other Islamic nations, may have been one of the chief reasons for the change to Thaana.

Wilmott Christopher who stayed in Male' from 4th June to 9th September 1835 AD, writing in his memoirs of his visit to the Maldives, spoke of the scripts then in use. He writes thus of Thaana, which was in extensive use at that time:

'The modern alphabet contains eighteen letters, and is called by the natives Gabuli-Tana (early Thaana). There are some auxiliary letters in it, derived from the Arabic and Persian, in common use but not included in the alphabet. It is written from the right hand, and was introduced when the Portuguese garrison were overcome and Mahomedanism (Islam) reestablished by a chief and men from the Northern Atolls, and is now used throughout the islands.'

The chief and men from the Northern atolls referred to in this context were Muhammad Thakurufaanu and his companions from Utheem in Thiladhummathi. This is the story told in oral tradition, which says that Thaana was introduced to Male' by Muhammad Thakurufaanu.

There are different theories about the origin of the name Thaana. Since many Dhivehi words have their origins in old Sanskrit and a few in old Indonesian as well as some other languages, one of the following derivations might be possible:

Tana (Sanskrit), meaning offspring or posterity;

Tanah(

Indonesian), meaning land or country;

Than (Dhivehi), meaning place.

Thaana

Akuru would then mean 'script of the country', or 'script of the people'.

The

Thaana alphabet consists of twenty-four letters, the first nine of which are derived from the first nine Arabic numerals, and the next nine from a set of old Dhivehi numerals (Salahuddin, 1928). The last six letters of the alphabet are adaptations of existing letters to accommodate the remaining sounds. In early Thaana, the term viyani was also used to indicate the letters of the alphabet.

In

the mid-twentieth century, more letters were added to this original alphabet, to enable the phonologically correct writing of names and loan words. mostly from Arabic. These were formed using a system of placing dots on individual letters.

Unlike

the earlier Dhivehi scripts, the Thaana script is written from right to left. On examination of early Thaana documents, it seems probable that the existing Thaana script of the 17th century was modified for official use during the early 18th century. Early Thaana writing shows a strong Arabic influence in the use of vowel strokes and in the shapes of individual letters. The script shows a radical change in the form of the letters, and the system of Dhivehi writing. This script did not evolve from Dhives or Eveyla Akuru, but was developed from other existing sources to fit the needs of the Dhivehi language. It does not have the inherent a sound as in Eveyla and Dhives Akuru, and is written from right to left unlike the earlier scripts, showing the Arabic and Persian influence of the post-Islamic era.

It can be clearly seen that some of the characteristics of Arabic writing had been modified, indicating that the creators of this system of writing were well versed in Arabic as well as Dhivehi. Early Thaana was known as Gabulhi Thaana. In Dhivehi, the word gabulhi was frequently used as a derogatory term to indicate incompleteness, or a lack of finish. Thus it can be conjectured that the gabulhi here refers to the incomplete stage of the script, taking the term from the Dhivehi word for the in-between stage of the coconut, when it is neither the ripe nut nor quite tender, meaning that it is not fully developed.

Early

in the 20th century, the script became known simply as Thaana. From the early years of the 18th century until about 1780 AD, Dhives and Thaana Akuru were both used for official documentation, but at the end of this period, Dhives Akuru was superseded by Thaana.

At the time of Christopher's arrival in Male' in 1835, Dhives Akuru had been almost forgotten in Male'; only a few individuals were able to write the script, but it was still in use in the Southern atolls.

Pyrard

de Laval's Observations

Pyrard de Laval and his companions

were shipwrecked in Maldives on 2nd July 1602. following which Pyrrard spent about seven years in Maldives, until his departure in February 1609. During this time, he made a number of observations on the people, their culture and the country.

He observed that there were three scripts in use in Maldives at that time. Among the observations he made was the following:
'Their letters are of three sorts:
the Arabic, with some letters and points which they have been added to express their language; another, whose characters are peculiar to the Maldivian language; and a third, which is common to Ceylon and to the greater part of India.'

Pyrrard's eyewitness account proves that three scripts were in use at the time. The first of these, 'the Arabic, with some points added to express their language', is clearly the script known to Maldivians as Hedhi Akuru, a less common script, which used the Arabic alphabet and had additional letters included, to express sounds not present in that alphabet. These additional letters were formed by placing a dot (point) or dots at different positions on particular letters. This script was used mainly to write names, and continued to be used until the 20th century.

The second script, which Pyrrard says is peculiar to the Maldivian language, could only be the very early Thaana Akuru. This is the script that eventually superseded Dhives Akuru in the late 18th century. The earliest records of Thaana found so far date from 1705 AD. According to oral tradition, the Thaana script was introduced by the national hero Muhammad Thakurufaan in the 16th century. Pyrrard's account shows that this script was in use at the beginning of the 17th century, suggesting that oral tradition may be correct in saying that Thaana was in fact introduced by Muhammad Thakurufaan. His son Ibrahim III (Kalaafaanu), was the reigning sultan at the time of Pyrrard's stay in Maldives.

The third script referred to by Pyrrard as, 'common to Ceylon and the greater part of India', must be the Dhives Akuru script which was in common use during the 16th and 17th centuries. This script has a marked resemblance to the Malayalam script of South West India, and also to the Sinhalese script of Ceylon (Sri Lanka); therefore, it is quite possible that Pyrrard made the mistake of thinking that they were the same.

Conclusion

If civilization is to be measured by the time when writing started in a culture, Maldivians had achieved this almost one and a half thousand years ago, the earliest existing inscription being dated to the 6th century AD. The evidence from the following centuries show experiments at different stages in the evolution of a script that became part of the nation's identity. This script Eveyla Akuru was further developed with additional letters to facilitate the writing of the new sounds in words that were constantly being introduced into Dhivehi. The script eventually became the elegant Dhives Akuru.

In later years, when it became necessary to break with the old traditional way of writing, the learned Dhivehi scholars formed a totally new alphabet that suited the demands of the time and was capable of adaptation. Modern Thaana has changed considerably from its early style. The rules of writing have been modified to meet changing needs, and may have to evolve still further, to accommodate future demands of the Information Technology age.

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