

## From cowrie to rupee

**Trade in cowries in the Maldives dates back to the mid-9th Century and was established through a complex network of maritime trade routes**

The Indian Ocean region has had foundations for intra-regional trade for at least 4,000 years, establishing a complex network of maritime trade routes, linking earliest civilizations in the Mediterranean, the Gulf littoral, South Asia and China. This led to the cross-fertilization of cultures, ideas, beliefs, ethnic technologies, politics and economies.

The Maldives lies on the crossroads linking the sea trade routes between Southeast Asia/China and the East African coastline. History reveals that the Maldives has had a number of differing ethnic contacts with the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) countries, dating as far back as the 5th Century AD. It has been tentatively suggested that the Maldives (and Seychelles) may have played a key role as mid-ocean staging posts in the Indonesian migrations to eastern Africa and Madagascar, thought to have occurred during the 4th and 5th Centuries AD. Of more certain significance to the whole of Africa has been the trade in Maldivian cowries (*Cypraea moneta*).

As early as the mid-9th Century AD, the Maldives was known to the Arab merchant Sulaiyman as a producer of cowries, the tiny shells once used as a medium of exchange in Bengal, China, Southeast Asia and throughout large parts of Africa. Although there are no indications of a direct trade in cowries with East Africa, it is known that large quantities of these shells were taken to the ports of southern Arabia as ballast in Arab dhows crossing the Indian Ocean from Southeast Asia by way of the Maldives. These cowries must have been re-exported to Africa via Sinai, or sailing directly to ports such as Mogadishu, Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Zanzibar and Kilwa.

Trade in cowries lasted more than 700 years. The profits attached to the cowrie trade were substantial. Ibn Batuta, who visited Maldives in 1343-44 and again in 1346 (and who was himself also involved in some cowrie trading) records that cowries sold at Malé for between 400,000 and 1,200,000 to the gold dinar. Seven years later, this same traveller saw Maldivian cowries sold at the Kingdom of Mali in West Africa, 1,150 cowries to a gold dinar.

Interaction with the IOR countries have been, to a large extent, limited to the monsoon winds as well as the transport of pottery between China and the Persian Gulf communities. Thus, seafarers, merchants and travellers have interacted in various atolls at various periods. Due to the nature of the monsoon and the currents in the Indian Ocean, most of the Arab travellers had contacts with the northern atolls, while the Southeast Asians visited the southern atolls. This aspect is still visible within the communities of these regions of the Maldives. During these contacts, which could last up to a full monsoon, exchange of goods, ideas and culture developed micro-communities in small low-lying islands within a larger atoll system to the macro-level of a State or an independent nation called the Maldives.

### **Skilled craftsmen**

The unique ocean space occupied by the Maldives archipelago provided favourable conditions for maintaining a regularity of trade and transport; thus, Maldives became a major player of this historical trade. The cultural contacts developed fisheries, agriculture, manufacturing and trade. Skills in repairing seagoing craft were highly developed, due to the repairs done on these vessels by the craftsmen of the atolls.

This craftsmanship remains highly developed, compared to other coastal States in the Indian Ocean Region.

**T**hese contacts greatly influenced those communities that began to emerge with collective ideas—religious and political—as well as their arts and crafts, transforming them to adapt to the local environment. Ethnic technologies were developed to cater for the influx of traders. Processing of tuna meat has been well documented by Chinese travellers during the 12th Century.

Due to such early contacts in ancient times with the world's earliest urban civilizations in the Middle East, the Gulf littoral, East African coastline, and South and Southeast Asia, linked by sea-borne commerce, the Indian Ocean was a thriving network of trade and community links. By the time Maldives embraced Islam during the mid-12th Century AD, it had developed a unique form of governance, highly adapted to the archipelagic conditions of the Maldives. Each atoll had highly developed autonomous governance, whereby the resources were shared within the immediate community as well as the State.

Following trade, peoples and ideas spread across the Indian Ocean, leading to a cross-fertilization of cultures and technologies. From South Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism spread to Southeast and East Asia; similarly, from the 7th Century, Islam spread across the Indian Ocean and was vital to the integration of eastern Africa and Southeast Asia into an Indian Ocean economic and cultural world, which stretched from the South China Sea to the South African coasts.

The coming of the Europeans during the 15th-16th Century was a significant period for the old countries to become new nations. A largely self-contained, self-sustaining, tightly interwoven economic and political and cultural identity began to unravel.

Following the process of colonization, the natural resource base of nations had to accommodate the extra demands placed

on them. Arab domination of the cowrie trade between the Maldives and east Africa was taken over by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch.

During the 16th and early 17th Centuries, Maldivian cowries were shipped in bulk to the west coast of India, often on board Maldivian vessels, and then re-exported in European ships to both the east and west coasts of Africa. During the latter half of the 17th Century, the Maldivian cowrie trade was largely routed through Sri Lanka, which had fallen under Dutch control. This trade went on fuelling the slave trade that was expanding on the west coast of Africa. By the middle of the 18th Century, when the West African slave trade was at its peak, the Dutch had taken full control of the cowrie trade from the Maldives. Due to this change of hands and the market, Maldivian cowries made less impact on the east coast of Africa, which started its own cowrie trade. By the 19th Century, even though Zanzibar and some of the small coastal States had developed a cowrie industry, it was short-lived, mainly because of the small size of the cowrie, compared to the cowries of the Maldives. This trade continued until about 1921, when it was replaced by the rupee. 3

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