

# *History of Giraavrau Island*



According to tradition and the claims of the Giraavaru people, they were the ancient owners and rulers of the Maldives. Then a visiting foreign prince (Koimala Kalo) and his entourage asked for and were given their permission to settle on the neighboring island of Male".

Giraavaru island was much bigger, housing magnificent buildings and temples in those days, as the surrounding lagoon still testifies. Changing weather patterns gradually eroded the bulk of the island, which was once the capital of a proud and civilized people.

Giraavaru island is on the western side of the lagoon of North Male' Atoll. It is not clear whether or not Giraavaru was its original name. Giraa means 'eroding' in the Maldivian language. It was thought that the island was called Giraavaru because it was gradually being eroded away into the sea. It is quite possible that the name proceeded the word. Indeed the word 'giraa' may have been coined as a result of the natural calamity that was claiming an important island.



Giraavaru woman

## *Overtaken by Immigrants*

The descendants of the foreign settlers soon took advantage of the environmental plight of the Giraavaru people and subjected them to their rule. Until the twentieth century, the Giraavaru people displayed recognisable physical, linguistic and cultural differences to the rest of the Maldivian islanders.

## Social Differences

The most celebrated difference was that while the rest of the Maldivian islanders were polygamous according to Islamic custom, and boasted the highest divorce rate in the world, the Giraavaru people were strictly monogamous and did not permit divorce.

The Giraavaru dialect was very unusual for a community that lived only a few kilometres from Male'. They had a slightly different vocabulary and some consonants were different from the standard Maldivian language. For instance, they used the sound r instead of the sound lh.

They put the accent on different syllables and because of this, the other Maldivians thought they had shrill voices. Their folklore was preserved in song and dance. Their music was audibly different from that of the other islanders.

## Giraavaru Attire

The attire of the women was similar to the rest of the Maldivian islanders, particularly that of the Male' middle classes. However there were visible differences. They tied their hair in a bun on the left hand side, while most of the other Maldivian islanders tied theirs on the right hand side or the back. They wore unusual jewellery.

The most distinct items were necklaces of tiny blue beads which no other Maldivian islanders wore. They also wore a number of silver bangles on both wrists. These were made of strips of metal about 8 millimeters in width bent into circular bangles with the ends left without being soldered together. They wore four to five per wrist.

## Political System

The Giraavaru people were a community headed always by a woman. It was the only island in the Maldives where the sultan's civil authority was deputized always to a woman.

A female-dominated monogamous culture in a world of Male'-dominated polygamy

The sultans of the Maldives seemed to recognize the autonomy of the Giraavaru people and

did not apply quite the same laws on them as they did on the rest of their realm. The Giraavaru people never seemed to fully recognize the sovereignty of the sultans.

In the presence of the Male' nobility, the Giraavaru people were self-assured and never showed any signs of intimidation as did the lower classes of Male' and the other Maldivian islanders. The Giraavaru people had ready access to those who were in power and thought of themselves as equals with the ruling elite.

### Language Status

Ordinary Maldivians were required to address the Male' nobility in a different level of speech. The Giraavaru people did not observe this custom and addressed the Male' nobility as they would address themselves. The nobility did not challenge this attitude and always chose to ignore it. Any other lesser Maldivian who displayed this type of self-assured confidence would have found him or herself in deep trouble.

Common citizens of Male', who regarded the Giraavaru people as an inferior race, seemed to resent the apparent privileges enjoyed by them under the sultans, and mocked them mercilessly. It was believed that the Giraavaru people were mortally scared of frogs. In order to tease and victimize them, Male' folk would throw frogs at them.

### Final Change

Things changed since 1932 when a written constitution was adopted. The customary rights of the indigenous Giraavaru people were not recognized in that document. Any rights they seemed to have enjoyed under the absolute rule of the sultans were extinguished by default.

In 1968 they were forced to abandon their Island under an Islamic regulation that did not recognize communities with less than 40 adult Male's who

Dr Abdullah Waheed MD offered the following genetic evidence:

The Maldivian population has an 18% thalassemia carrier rate. But the Giraavaru population has a rate of almost 0. This shows that they are not only a separate group, but also that they have managed to preserve their racial characteristics intact throughout the ages against all odds.

could form a quorum at the Friday prayers. The Giraavaru people were ferried across the lagoon to Hulhule' island. When the airport there was extended they were shifted across to Male' and housed in a few blocks in newly reclaimed areas in the Maafanu district.

### *Irreversible Extinction*

The proud Giraavaru elders tried very hard to preserve their culture, but their youth very quickly lost their sense of identity and were soon assimilated into the Male' culture. The former headwoman (Fooruma-dhaita) of Giraavaru lamented to me when I was visiting Male' in 1977, that the first ever Giraavaru divorce was registered recently. She was appalled. An ancient and proud culture was thus wiped from the face of the earth in the latter years of the twentieth century.

The island of Giraavaru is now a tourist resort managed by Centara Hotels & Resorts

