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REDISCOVERING THE MALDIVIAN NIGHT SKY: RECLAIMING A LOST LOCAL
ASTROCULTURE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF SPACEFARERS

Abstract

Maldivians have always looked to the stars. For a geographically isolated island chain, the night sky holds substantial cultural significance. It provided early settlers with a reliable tool for navigation, time telling, and calendar systems. The symbol of the star is woven into the fabric of the country, on coral stone grave markers and mosques, wooden doors, painted on boats and even as the beacon of government itself. However, as the Maldives has modernised, vivid and vibrant oral traditions are not being passed down. Without further action, this knowledge is dying out to the point where it has almost entirely faded from the local zeitgeist. Through local engagement, interviews with local communities and government representatives, the Maldives Space Research Organisation (MSRO) is working to consolidate and preserve this endangered local knowledge.

This paper presents the preliminary results of this research, including maps and diagrams of rediscovered traditional Maldivian constellations and an exploration of how these differ from Western conceptions of the night skies. These have been categorised into three groups; the Maldivian, Arabic, and Urdu variations, alongside pre-Islamic and reference names as used by local sources. Celestial events in the context of Maldivian history are also explored alongside their historical significance over time.

This paper also presents the integration of findings into MSRO's ongoing outreach efforts and modern visualisations through community-led cultural and heritage knowledge-sharing sessions, youth education, as well as tourism applications such as guest experiences. With a restored bank of astrocultural heritage, MSRO looks to reinforce traditional links between space and wider society, for this legacy to inform and inspire, to take on new life in art and media, and to encourage the uptake of new skills and profound local relationships to the cosmos as the Maldives moves towards becoming a spacefaring nation.