

The Sinhalese of the Maldives

<http://legacy.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?rog3=MV&peo3=14196>

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INTRODUCTION/ HISTORY

In the Indian Ocean, there is a country that spans 498 miles north to south and 99 miles east to west with a total of 116 square miles. It is located southwest of Sri Lanka and near the southern tip of India.¹ This country is called Maldives. Maldives consist of 1,190 islands, which contain 26 natural atolls. Out of 1,190 islands, only 200 of them are inhabited and 87 “uninhabited” are set aside for tourists.² The most dominant people group who live in Maldives are the Sinhalese people. They descend from the early line of the Sinhalese people in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese have kept most of their ethnic heritage because they rarely amalgamate with other groups in Maldives. While most of the northern islands include a variety of people, such as Indian, Arab, and Sinhalese; in the southern islands, the Sinhalese people have continued to predominate.³

The Sinhalese people in Maldives have a legend: they believe that a Sinhalese prince from Sri Lanka named KoiMale was marooned on the Maldivian lagoon with the King’s daughter from Sri Lanka. Eventually the two got married and he became the first sultan of Maldives.⁴ Some also claim that the Sinhalese people are descendants of Prince Vijaya. From

¹ George Thomas Kurian, *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE WORLD’S NATIONS AND CULTURES: Volume 3* (New York: InfoBase Publishing, 2007), 1500.

² Joseph Gonzales and Thomas E. Sheer, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Geography* (USA: Penguin Group, 2004), 315.

³ James Minahan, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations: S-Z* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 1799.

⁴ IBP USA, *Maldives Country Study Guide- Strategic Information and Developments* (USA: International Business Publication, 2014), 23.

543 BC to 483 BC, he and his coalition of ships alighted in Sri Lanka and Maldives. According to legend, one of these ships drifted away and landed on the island of Maldives.

Around the 8th and 10th century, unwanted kings and their followers were banished from Sri Lanka and were shipped to Maldives. These kings would bring their culture, language, and religion with them, which would eventually be passed down for centuries.⁵

WHAT ARE THEIR LIVES LIKE?

The Sinhalese people continue traditions that have been passed from their ancestors in Sri Lanka, while of necessity obeying the laws of the Maldivian government. Most of the Sinhalese traditions on marriage center on a single nuclear family, consisting of a married couple and their children. Yet a Sinhalese man or woman might have four marriages in their lifetime, due to the influence of Islam.

After marriage, a Sinhalese woman typically moves in with her husband's family unless she and her husband can afford to set up their own house. In the past, a Sinhalese couple did not need a marriage certificate to say that they were married. Both the bride and groom would testify that they were living together.⁶ However, in the Maldives' constitution a couple must now have a marriage certificate or a license.⁷ Women do not accept their husband's names after marriage, but continue to maintain their maiden names. The man is considered the authority of the household, but both man and woman can inherit property.⁸

⁵ Clarence Maloney, "Where Did the Maldives Come From," IIAS, N/A. Accessed March 14, 2015, <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/iiasn5/insouasi/maloney.html>.

⁶ Russell R. Ross and Andrea Matles Salvada, *Sri Lanka* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1998) 200-204.

⁷ Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember, *Countries and Their Cultures: Volume 3* (USA: Macmillan Reference, 2001), 1380.

⁸ Helen Chaplin Metz, *Indian Ocean: Five Island Countries* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1995), 226-228.

Many Sinhalese people continue to wear a traditional sarong.⁹ They take part in the Maldivian tradition of *bodu beru* (big drum), in which music and dance are based on drumming. During a *bodu beru* performance, dancers sway to a drumbeat with ever-increasing intensity.¹⁰

The main industries that the Sinhalese people in the Maldives work in are farming, fishing and international tourism. Most of the people continue to make handcrafts with handmade tools, because the country is one of the poorest manufacturing countries in the world.¹¹

WHAT ARE THEIR BELIEFS?

Like the Sinhalese people in Sri Lanka, many Sinhalese in the Maldives follow the teachings of Buddhism, but with a blend of Hinduism, such as a belief in ancient gods and demons. Depending how an individual's life goes, he or she will alternate between following the Hindu gods and following Buddha.¹² The Sinhalese people believe that demons are real and alive. An individual must complete certain rituals to mollify a demon through exorcism.¹³

Though the Maldives country was founded on a mix of Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam has become the major religion of the present. Today non-Muslims are not acknowledged as citizens by the Maldivian government. The dominance of Islam in the country was made evident by the destruction of a shrine with an imprinted image of Buddha, without regard for its cultural or historical importance. Additionally, in 2012 35 Buddhist and Hindu relics were demolished in the National Museum of Maldives. Apparently Sinhalese people are either hiding their Buddhist

⁹ Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember, *Countries and Their Cultures: Volume 3*

¹⁰ N/A, "Sri Lanka and the Maldives," *School World*, N/A, accessed on March 12, 2015, <http://teachersites.schoolworld.com/webpages/DCrouse/files/chapter%2025%20section%204%20sri%20lanka%20and%20the%20maldives.pdf>.

¹¹ Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember, *Countries and Their Cultures: Volume 3*

¹² *Sri Lanka*, Russell R. Ross and Andrea Matles Salvada

¹³ N/A, "Sri Lanka," *Countries and their Cultures*, Last modified 2015, Accessed on March 16, 2015, <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Sri-Lanka.html>.

religion while living out the Islamic culture in their daily lives, or have become Sunni Muslims with some Buddhism ideas mixed in.¹⁴

WHAT ARE THEIR NEEDS?

The country of Maldives prevents any open practice of religion. It is believed to be the 6th most dangerous country for Christians.¹⁵ Spreading the gospel here is difficult because individuals seek to protect their families. In addition, the government assigns an Atoll Chief who administers everything that goes on in the atoll, including religion.¹⁶

The Sinhalese people need Bibles that are translated in their language. The only way for a Bible to come into Maldives is if arrives with an individual arriving for tourism, vacation, or business. The Bible has to leave with the individual before he or she can leave the country.¹⁷

PRAYER POINTS

- Ask God to make the hearts of Maldivian government administrators and officials open to having other religions in the country.
- Pray for missionaries to respond to the call to spread the gospel in a contextualized and creative way among the Sinhalese people.
- Pray for a way for Bibles to be transported to the Sinhalese people.
- Pray for Christians in Maldives who are going through persecution.

¹⁴ "Maldives," Silk: Countries of the World, N/A, accessed on March 13, 2015, <http://world.silk.co/page/Maldives>.

¹⁵ Jay Carlson, "Top 10 Most Dangerous Countries for Christians," listverse, last modified November 24, 2011, accessed on March 14, 2015, <http://listverse.com/2011/11/24/top-10-most-dangerous-countries-for-christians>.

¹⁶ Silk, "Maldives"

¹⁷ Silk, "Maldives"