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## Spectral Encounters on the Sinamale' Bridge

### Affective Infrastructure along a Watery Stretch of the Belt Road

This article focuses on one of the largest infrastructure projects in the Maldives, the Sinamale' ("China-Maldives Friendship") Bridge. The bridge affords a range of meanings, shaped to various degrees by both its global entanglements with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and local political contestation within the Maldives. Linking the national capital to its international airport and spanning across the three islands, the Sinamale' bridge quickly became the site of a diverse range of social and cultural experiences and interpretations—including encounters with the supernatural. The bridge has thus inadvertently become a space in which local experiences of modernity are elaborated by individuals through complex engagements with diverse elements of local cosmology, and symbolic expressions of locality and trespass that complicate any neat linear narratives of modernizing development and "progress."

Keywords: Indian Ocean—China—infrastructure—identity—sense of place—haunting

Ghostly matters are part of the “something more” because haunting is one of the most important places where meaning—comprehension—and force intersect. (Gordon 1997, 194)

Beyond its publicly expressed intentions to foster mobility, connection, and economic development, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its reconfiguration of maritime connections across the Indian Ocean has transformed the lived experiences of people all across the region in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways. The cultural dimensions of social change afforded by such mega-projects have attracted increasing attention from anthropologists in the burgeoning subfield of “infrastructure ethnography” (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Harvey and Hannah 2015; Larkin 2013). Despite this boom in scholarly attention, however, relatively little work has been done to explore the religious dimensions of the important and often unpredictable transformations that accompany the imagination, implementation, and aftermath of super-sized infrastructure projects.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we explore some of the ways in which narratives of supernatural beings familiar to traditional Maldivian Muslim cosmology have served to express nonmaterial experiences of a major BRI infrastructure project in the Maldives. Soon after its opening to the public, the Sinamale’ Bridge became the site of a diverse range of experiences and interpretations, including encounters with otherworldly beings. Attention to accounts of hauntings on the bridge affords analysis of affect and its narrative expression in and around this new infrastructure space in relation to a range of social, political, and cultural dimensions of everyday life as well as contestations over symbols of modernity.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, modernity, international tourism, and infrastructure development projects have shaped significant reconfigurations of culture and identity in the Maldives. While the country has seen a number of major infrastructure projects implemented over recent years, there has been a particular fascination about the Sinamale’ Bridge (figure 1). The bridge affords mobility and connection for one-third of the country’s population, centralized in the Greater Male’ Region (consisting of Male’, Hulhumale’, and Villimale’). The Sinamale’ Bridge has a complex and contested history, entangled within global contexts of its development, debt, and security concerns, while also complexly mired in local politics. The idea of a bridge connecting Male’ and Hulhumale’ was first floated in 2007 and was a



Figure 1. Image of the Sinamale' (China-Maldives Friendship) Bridge as it connects between Male', Hulhumale', and Hulhule' islands. Photograph by Thoiba Saeedh.

key promise of the unsuccessful presidential campaign of Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom in 2008, and subsequently during Mohamed Nasheed's government that followed (2008–12). The idea was only realized, however, during the presidency of Abdulla Yameen (2013–18), who seized the moment to locally co-opt aspects of China's ambitious BRI initiative to promote urban aspirations for a more concretely connected national capital.

The Sinamale' Bridge has also been at the center of the country's biggest corruption scandal, which resulted in the loss of the presidential election for Abdulla Yameen and his subsequent five-year prison sentence. In this contested political context, the transformation of the landscape, international entanglements, and foreign debt have all contributed to prevalent anxieties about threats to Maldivian national identity. By extension, and in consideration of the critical place of Islam in Maldivian nationalism, debt obligations compromising national sovereignty also strain contemporary understandings of religion and ways of being Muslim among the Dhivehin (Maldivian people). The social impact of these political and economic changes and the ways in which infrastructure projects associated with the BRI have impacted local aspirations and nationally promoted "dreams of development" are discussed by the authors of this article in another publication (Saeedh and Feener, forthcoming). Here we focus on one of the distinctive areas of cultural discourse that this massive new infrastructure affords beyond its technological function of interconnectivity and facilitating physical mobility.

The potential of the bridge to become a site of otherworldly experiences was manifest shortly after its official opening. Soon thereafter, Maldivian motorists began sharing stories of supernatural encounters along its span—situating this new infrastructural space within frameworks of localized Muslim cosmology in ways

that reflect contemporary imaginations of connections between islands, as well as between the visible and invisible worlds. Examining such narratives of personal encounters on the bridge can expand our understandings of the bridge's significance and social impact beyond the frameworks of geopolitics, mobility, and technology that have dominated international discourse on the so-called "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge" and its place within the broader global transformations that have accompanied the development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### *The Sinamale' Bridge*

Following a decade since the initial discussions surrounding the construction of a bridge, Dhivehi-language news outlets (Ali 2016) and social media posts by locals on Twitter, Pinterest, and Facebook reported the arrival of China's megaship *Hawk* on February 25, 2016. The posts were timestamped at 9:45 am, marking the moment the vessel docked at the Male' Harbour. The 64,900 MT, 223 m long semi-submersible vessel sailed into the waters of the Maldives carrying with it the largest shipment of machinery ever brought to the islands: a tugboat, four barges, two floating cranes, and materials needed for the construction of the bridge between Male', the capital seat of the country's administration, and Hulhumale', an artificial island ward belonging to Male' city but lying 5.3 km south of the capital. A highway connection to the bridge links the two islands to the Velana International Airport.

Each phase of the project's construction, beginning with the initial public announcement of its plans in 2015, then the signing and project commencement ceremony, followed by the actual construction of the bridge, and finally the formal opening on August 20, 2018, was widely celebrated by the Maldives government and the broader public. Progress through the various phases of the project (figure 2) was documented on social media by locals as well as foreign residents in Male', who expressed awe of the gigantic pillars, massive blocks of cement, and the extension



Figure 2. Construction work on the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.

of asphalt and metal across the ocean that provided surreal visions of a shimmering landscape melding nature and industrial construction together (Saeedh 2018).

The inauguration ceremony for the bridge was an elaborate spectacle followed by a display of fireworks with a total cost of US\$3 million (= 46 million Maldivian Rufiyaa [MVR]). Such lavish expenditure became the target of harsh criticism from the political opposition in the run-up to the 2018 presidential election (Rehan 2018).

This article will explore how, along with its impressive cargo of machinery and construction materials, the *Hawk* carried with it dreams, hopes, and imaginations. The ship's arrival, in other words, signified both a literal and a symbolic "cementing" of relationships between China and the Maldives (Saeedh 2018).<sup>2</sup>

In a parliament briefing held on April 12, 2016, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, then minister of housing and infrastructure, estimated a US\$210 million budget for the project. The Chinese government provided US\$126 million in grant aid along with an additional loan component, the details of which were not made publicly available. The Maldives government funded the remaining US\$12 million. This is the largest foreign investment in the Maldives to date and has also carried with it significant obligations for the national debt. The financing of this megaproject and, as suggested at the outset, its political dimensions were inextricably bound to the rise and fall of Abdulla Yameen's presidency.

To mark the relationship between the two nations engendered by this massive infrastructure project, the bridge was formally named the "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge," although it is more often referred to locally as the Sinamale' Bridge. At the bridge's inauguration ceremony, then President Abdulla Yameen called special attention to the history of ties between the two countries in stressing that it is indeed symbolic that *the most important* and *the most historic* landmark of the Maldives will be named the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> At the same event, Mr. Wang Xiaotao, Chinese Government special envoy to Maldives, remarked:

The bridge is a landmark for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road under President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative. The bridge is also a new *symbol for continued friendship* between the two peoples and a new start in bilateral relations (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

The bridge is thus a key infrastructure investment project in the BRI.<sup>5</sup> As suggested, it is the most prominent developmental mega-project in the Maldives and has become an icon of China's rising profile in this Indian Ocean island nation.

### *Connecting islands*

The bridge and highway between Male' and Hulhumale' spans over two kilometers of land and water, where the atoll meets the broad open waters of the Indian Ocean, connecting the densely packed historic capital of the Maldives to Hulhule' Island, which is where the city's airport is located, and thence to the much larger artificial island, Hulhumale'. The last of these islands is popularly known as the "Youth City" and home to extensive new housing developments. The bridge has a pedestrian lane for a short portion of its span from the entry from Male', but that ends before the highway section of the bridge begins. Pedestrians thus are not able to use the bridge for travel between the islands on foot, although this was envisaged in the initial

drawings. The partial pedestrian path is separated from the vehicle lanes by metal railings. On either side is the ocean. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks is exaggerated late into the night when the traffic thins out.

When the bridge was first opened, a lack of regulation by the Transport Authority (TA) resulted in taxi drivers unanimously setting their own fares, charging up to MVR150.00 (US\$10.00) for trips across the bridge and highway connecting Male' to Hulhumale'. Under strong public pressure, the TA was forced to have public consultations, and against the protests of taxi drivers, it introduced set rates for taxi fares across the bridge. Several taxi drivers refused to comply at the beginning and imposed their own rules.

Maldives Ports Limited (MPL) began operating regular bus services (figure 3) over the bridge between Male', Hulhumale', and Hulhule' shortly after the bridge opened in September 2018. The new system was often unreliable, buses were delayed, bus stops were not clearly marked, and bus schedules were not available at the outset. For these reasons and more, taxis were the preferred mode of transport for many crossing the bridge, even though bus fares came to MVR10 (US\$0.65 cents) per trip, much less than the cost of taking a cab.



Figure 3. Residents at a Male' bus stop waiting to go to Hulhumale'. Photograph by Thoiba Saeedh.

The fast speeds that it became possible to attain across the long straight bridge were unprecedented and exhilarating to many Maldivian motorists. This afforded the emergence of a new kind of leisure experience: “*burujehun*” or joy rides (figure 4). The jarring sense of velocity at which wheeled vehicles have become able to travel in the Maldives over just the past few years may not be particularly easy to grasp for those living virtually anywhere else on the planet. Most inhabited islands outside the capital have few, if any, paved roads, and the streets of Male' are so tightly cramped and congested day and night that it is generally impossible to accelerate too much or to travel more than a few meters before inevitably having to stop to avoid hitting one obstacle or another. Until the completion of the two largest Chinese infrastructure



Figure 4 . Traffic on the Sinamale' Bridge during peak traffic on a weekday.  
Photograph by Thoiba Saeedh.

projects in the country—the Sinamale' bridge and the Laamu Link Road across three islands in the southern atoll of that name—there were very few roads in the country where one could drive at speed.

The physical infrastructure of BRI projects in the Maldives affords new freedom in the vectors and velocity of movement in some parts of the country (figure 5). With the opening of more than two kilometers of wide, multi-laned asphalt road across the Sinamale' Bridge (and the even longer sixteen-kilometer stretch of Chinese-built road across three islands in Laamu), motorists were presented with almost irresistible temptations to speed. That has, unfortunately, resulted in a tragic and ever-growing list of casualties. Compounded by the absence of lights on the bridge when it first



Figure 5. A typical narrow, congested street in Male'. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.

opened, faster speeds to which the locals were not accustomed, and the lack of safety gear, accidents—especially motorcycle accidents—on the bridge were frequent and at times quite severe.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting this dangerous reality, narratives of *jinnīn*<sup>7</sup> (ghosts)<sup>8</sup> on the bridge began to circulate alongside accident reports. Ghostly apparitions can cause sudden stops—or at least an occasional slowing down—along the way that can give pause to the careless crossing of formerly inaccessible spaces. Some victims related that they witnessed spectral sightings on the bridge, and that this caused them to either suddenly stop while driving at high speeds or forced the drivers in question to suddenly swerve so as not to run over pedestrians or collide with other vehicles.

Some locals accredit such narratives to the hallucinations of young drivers high on drugs. The stories were also reduced to mere fictions spread to deter young motorists from speeding across the bridge's asphalt road from Male' to Hulhumale' to enjoy faster speed limits. Nevertheless, reports of such supernatural encounters circulated on Maldivian social media and attracted considerable commentary in coffee shops and other spaces of casual conversation.

### *Ghostly encounters*

In 2019, *Vaguthu News*, a local online information outlet in the Maldives, posted the story: “a *Jinni* climbs on the backseat of a Policeman's motorcycle” (Rehan 2019). It recounted the experience of a policeman driving across the bridge on his motorcycle when he sensed that someone was sitting behind him. He turned to find a woman on the back of his bike. Startled, he immediately slowed down and stopped so he could take a better look behind him, but he saw no one. This scared him to the point that he could not continue his ride. As he was waiting halfway across the bridge, he saw the lights of another motorcyclist that stopped for him. After sharing his experience and that he was too scared to ride alone, he eventually rode to Male' side by side with the other rider for company, and later shared his experience with friends.

On her way across the highway portion of the bridge to a meeting with Michael Feener, Thoiba Saeedh heard another ghost story on the Sinamale' Bridge. Taxi rides, albeit short, are often occasions for conversational entertainment. Over the course of Thoiba's short trip across the bridge, the driver (Rasheed—name changed for anonymity) made several remarks about traffic congestion in Male', the cost of petrol, and his complaints against the set taxi fares mandated by the Transport Authority. Rasheed drives his own refurbished car. A number of taxi centers operate in the Maldives, although registered, privately owned cars also offer taxi services. He says, “The bridge offers faster journeys and an easier and smoother connection between Male' and Hulhumale'.”<sup>9</sup> Talk of the bridge eventually led to mention of the “bridge *jinni*” (the local designation for the ghosts at the center of stories about spectral encounters on the Sinamale' Bridge). Such stories had been making the rounds in the news. Unexpectedly, when asked for any corroboration of the bridge *jinni* stories, after an assessing glance through the rearview mirror, Rasheed shared with Thoiba his own encounter with the *jinni* in the following account:

It was a rainy night, close to midnight. I was taking three female passengers from Male' to Hulhumale'. At the time, the lights installed on the bridge were not fully



operational. Beyond the headlights from the taxi, there was no other source of light. Everything else was pitch black as the car sped across the bridge. When I reached the center of the bridge, where the arch is at its highest point above the sea, I was forced to suddenly hit the brakes. I was going at 60 miles per hour on a rainy night over asphalt, so stopping suddenly like that is very dangerous. Someone had rushed past, not caring for the car. To avoid hitting the pedestrian I had to stop. The women sitting in the back were startled by the sudden brakes. They said something about selfish young people under the influence of drugs and substances risking other people's safety. [He paused for a moment of pensive reflection.] It was a *jinni*!

I didn't want to scare my passengers, so I said nothing, but the women saw someone, and so did I. It was not a human. I had to slow down so as to not run "it" over. . . . I come from a family where my father does *fandita* [magic], which is why I did not get scared. I recited some verses from the Qur'an and made a *du'a* [prayer of supplication]. What I saw was a *jinni*. They share the same space with us. There might be a *jinni* sitting next to us. We just don't know. Maybe this was where they were living, where we have built a bridge, we are just using the space because we have built a bridge here. Maybe it is really *we who are using the space belonging to the jinni*.<sup>10</sup> So maybe they are just retaliating or showing us that we have *trespassed* and are *occupying their home*.

In the comments section to the *Vaguthu News* article about the policeman's story of a "bridge *jinni*," the public voiced a number of suggestions to avoid ghostly encounters. To have protection from such encounters, one must read prayers for protection. Some suggestions even alluded to *sihuru* (black magic) having purportedly been performed during the construction of the bridge. Incidents of engaging with supernatural beings are frequently associated in the Maldives with seeking illicit political, social, or material gain, resulting in the present "haunting" of the bridge.<sup>11</sup> Some stated that the spirit was the daughter of Hulhule' Bodu Meehaa, or the "big man of Hulhule' (*bodu mihā*).<sup>12</sup> References were also made to similar stories from Maamigili Island, where female ghosts were said to hitch rides on passing motorcycles during the night.

Similar experiences as well as imaginations of such encounters with otherworldly beings began circulating among Maldivian users on a number of social media platforms. Encounters with *jinnin* and visions of such encounters on the bridge were soon rendered as photoshopped images and other artistic visualizations and circulated on social media. Beyond such traditional depictions of *jinnin*, contemporary circulations of ghost stories in the Maldives incorporate images drawn from and playing upon the modern cultural references of globalized media. Their depictions thus ranged in form from elaborations on traditional Maldivian specters to visualizations drawing on a global repertoire of ghostly images.

The bridge *jinni* eventually had its own Facebook page with a cover photo depicting a female *jinni*, along with a sea demon, a kind of a *furēta* (figure 6), rising from the water under the bridge. One Twitter user shared photoshopped images of Casper-like ghosts on the bridge, time-stamped past midnight, with the words "It's true" (figure 7). Other depictions include a typical *jinni* "bride," a traditional depiction of a *jinni* in



Figure 6. Screenshot of a Facebook page with the username “Bridge Jinni” (bridge ghost).

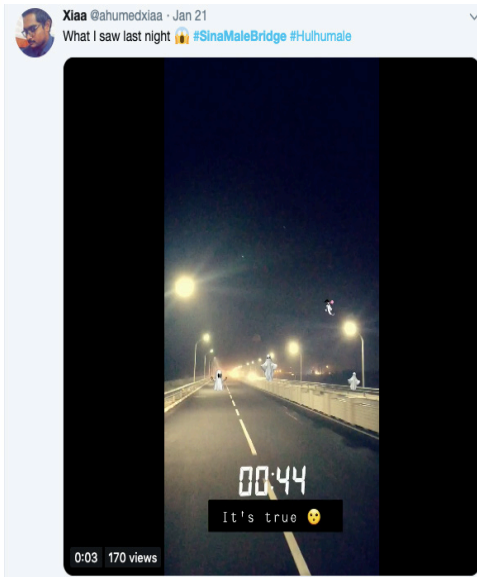


Figure 7. Screenshot of a Twitter user’s rendition of “Casper-like” ghosts on the bridge, time-stamped past midnight.

the form of a woman with long black hair flowing down past her hips and dressed in a red *libās*, a traditional Maldivian dress. Popular images of *jinnīn* are almost always female, if not nongendered in local accounts. Some contemporary Maldivian artistic renditions resembling female spirits prominent in Asian horror movies such as *Ju-On: The Grudge*, which was popular in the Maldives, also began to appear. Such mass-mediated images of feminine Asian spirits compelled some local commentators ask if the ghosts were therefore Chinese.

Belief in ghosts and the realm of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) is an integral component of Islamic cosmology, and the reality of its existence is established firmly in the Qur’ān. A belief in the existence of multiple worlds is broadly shared by Maldivian Muslims, with the corporeal and noncorporeal worlds coexisting in harmony on the condition that humans do not intervene or disrupt the world of the spirits.

*Jinnīn* are believed to linger in places that are generally unfrequented by humans, including jungles (*valutere*), beach points (*fuṭṭaru farāi*), and boundaries marking the separation of land from sea, particularly when such locations are enveloped in the dark of night. Maldivian traditions warn of the grave risks that come with disrupting the spaces occupied by ghostly *jinnīn*. The corporeal and noncorporeal worlds thus may exist in harmony, so long as human beings do not intervene or disrupt the supernatural spirit world. There is a pervasive sense of places that hold the potential for ghostly encounters, including forests, beaches, the ocean, and always in the dark of night. Imbalances in the cosmic system could result in spirits possessing human bodies as vessels in retaliation, or even on occasions of amorous encounters. While there are risks associated with disrupting the spaces owned by ghosts, at the same

time there is no empirical “map” that marks geographic locations known as ghost dwellings.

Stretching across the water between islands at a considerable height above sea level, the bridge between Male’ and Hulhumale’ falls into the category of places (generally unfrequented liminal spaces) that are dwellings of *jinnīn*, surrounded by the ocean, dark and eerie in the night. Negotiating space with *jinnīn* has long been central to the Maldivian Muslim experience and has been repeatedly reframed in line with changing historical contexts. Unique to the ghost stories told of the Sinamale’ Bridge is the incorporation of foreign ghosts, alluding to the presence of Chinese spirits.

### *Jinnīn, fanḍita, and Islamic cosmology in the Maldives*

The central theological doctrine of Islam is monotheism (*tawḥīd*). The recognition of this orthodox formulation as definitive of the tradition has, however, historically been understood by Muslims in ways that were nonexclusive to recognizing the existence of a number of nonphysical beings inhabiting the universe God has created. The Qur’ān makes specific mention of such entities. Indeed, it is held that revelations received by the Prophet were conveyed, at least in part, by way of angels. Beyond its shared participation in this cosmology with other Abrahamic faiths, the Qur’ān also references the existence of a class of creatures known in Arabic as *jinn*. These beings are widely held to be created of fire, not earth, and thus not to possess stable physical forms. As creatures of God endowed with a level of agency, *jinn* can be either Muslim or non-Muslim and may interact with human beings in range of different ways that could be benevolent, mischievous, or threatening. The wide range of possible manifestations and modes of interaction with *jinn* have facilitated the integration of elements of pre-Islamic local cultures from Morocco to Malaysia, and from the Caucasus to Cape Town, into a complex mosaic of Muslim cosmologies. In this, the Maldives is not an exception, as evidenced in the characterization of a range of noncorporeal beings as *dhevi* (Maniku 1988, 7).

In Arabic Islamic traditions, *jinn* exist within a cosmology of noncorporeal beings that have been categorized into diverse types (El-Zein 2009). While the general term used for such creatures is of Arabic origin and was brought to the Maldives with Islam, many of the beings classed as such have proper names derived from Indic and island sources (Maloney 2013, 51–52, 246–52). In the Dhivehi vernacular of Maldivian Muslim traditions, a range of different types of spirits have come to be classed as *jinnīn* (Maniku 1988, 2). Traditional narratives of the conversion of the islands to Islam prominently feature a supernatural being—the sea demon Ranna Maari, whose predations are ended by the power of an itinerant Islamic saint employing the power of the recited Qur’ān. The fearsome Ranna Maari, however, is but one “spirit from among the Jinn” (Romero-Frias 2012, 74–75).

The world of spirits and that of human beings are, moreover, permeable not only by *jinnīn* manifesting themselves to us here, but also by those of our world who master the secret knowledge of *fanḍita* often glossed in English as “magic” or “sorcery.”<sup>13</sup> *Fanḍita* is a term of Indic, rather than Arabic, etymology that serves as a portmanteau for a diverse assemblage of practices associated with the supernatural that could be used for protection, healing, or more nefarious purposes. The position of *fanḍita*

within Maldivian culture had traditionally come to be thoroughly integrated within a broadly Islamic framework. For, while certain practices of “black magic” (*sihuru*) are castigated by Islamic authorities, their existence and potency are not denied. In his encyclopedic prolegomenon to a universal history, for example, the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldun notes that even though Islamic law forbids the pursuit of “false sciences” of alchemy and astrology, they are nonetheless forms of knowledge to be reckoned with. As he writes, “no intelligent person doubts the existence of sorcery, because of . . . the influence which sorcery exercises. The Qur’ān refers to it” (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 393).

With the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean world, such conceptions of magic took root alongside other cultural influences in the Maldives (Feener et al. 2021). Major medieval manuals of Islamic magic, such as the *Shams al-ma ‘arif*, in fact, remained popular in many Muslim societies across and beyond the Arab lands of the Middle East well into the modern period. Through such works, the science of letters (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) for the preparation of magic spells and talismans was integrated into diverse local practices to present “legitimate” forms of magic that drew on the language of the Qur’ān as a source of power.

The positioning of *fanḍita* within a traditional Divehi cosmology was summed up by one of Clarence Maloney’s interlocutors in the 1970s, who informed the visiting anthropologist that “*Fanḍita* is not *dīn* . . . but *dīn* permits it” (Maloney 2013, 243). This conception of magic as a science compatible with the belief and practice of Islam has, however, come under increasingly strident critique by modern religious reformers. The modern government of the Maldives no longer regulates the legitimate practice of *fanḍita* in the ways that were historically established under the sultanate, and today those suspected of such practice are condemned by upholders of contemporary conceptions of orthodoxy. This has not, however, driven *fanḍita* to extinction, and across the islands one continues to encounter diverse methods of attempting to access supernatural sources of power for healing, love magic, and other ends. Along with the practice of *fanḍita*, lively traditions of ritual observance—including shrine visits, the ritual recitation of non-Qur’ānic devotional texts, the use of protective amulets, divination, and belief in spirits such as *jinnīn*—were prominent features of religious life across the islands for centuries but disappeared precipitously over the second half of the twentieth century (Feener 2021a).

Following the abolition of the sultanate and the establishment of the Republic of the Maldives in 1968, the country’s engagement with public expressions of Islam turned to new directions. Under the presidency of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978–2008), the Maldives became increasingly engaged with transnational Islamic religious currents of *da’wa*-oriented modernist reform. Gayoom was a graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo and, in line with his own commitment to modern reformist ideology, he opened the country to modern international Islamic organizations, which eventually came to channel influences from Islamic reform movements in Pakistan, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia into the Maldives (Amir 2011, 48). Gayoom’s agenda to centralize the state administration of Islam in the Maldives was, however, increasingly undermined as the number of Maldivian students sent abroad to study Islam swelled in the 1990s (Naseem 2020). Upon their return, some of them served to

channel different visions of “purified” Islam inspired by Salafi scripturalism, which has in the early twenty-first century come to be the dominant understanding of Islam in the Maldives.

In international scholarship, the story of Salafi ascendance in the country is generally framed in political science terms: from its oppositional stance and repression under Gayoom, to its flourishing in the more open democratic atmosphere of the country after the election of Mohamed Nasheed in 2008 and its institutionalization within the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, to its renewed independent opposition, and more extreme manifestations since the 2010s (for example, Amir 2011; Waha 2020).<sup>14</sup> What this dominant discourse centered on political contestation tends to miss, however, is the broader cultural impact that these changes in dominant conceptions of Islam have had across the island. This has included significant transformations in the ways in which modern Maldivians understand and imagine the range of ways in which humans might interact with *jinnīn*. It is in this context that stories about bridge *jinnīn* express images of the idea of the bridge as a fluid and complex space of potential encounter with the unknown.

#### *Connections to a foreign other*

In the physical realm, the construction of the bridge also afforded the entrance of outsiders to the islands. While the burgeoning number of arrivals from China—inclusive of laborers, managerial expats, and tourists—is a rather recent development, the Maldives have been connected to China, albeit somewhat sporadically, for centuries through circulations of cultural and commercial exchange. Since at least the fourteenth century, Chinese ships are recorded to have visited the Maldives, and Chinese government treasuries reportedly held caches of cowrie shells during the Yuan and Ming Periods (Yang 2019, 29–33). In the Maldives, traces of this trade are evidenced by the distribution of Chinese ceramic sherds (Carswell 1977).<sup>15</sup> Participation in Indian Ocean exchange networks that carried such ceramics facilitated the integration of the Maldives into an expanding medieval maritime Muslim world (Rockhill 1915, 67–79).

The significance of a Muslim identity for the Maldives for maritime trade with China is particularly pronounced in the account compiled by Ma Huan of the fifteenth-century visit to the islands by the armada under Zheng He. Like that commander of the Chinese armada on which he traveled, Ma Huan was a Chinese Muslim. He thus writes approvingly of the situation he found in the Islamicized islands of the Maldives, “the king, the chiefs, and the populace are all Muslims. Their customs are pure and excellent; [and] therefore they all obey the regulations of their religion” (Ma 1970, 149). This account focusing specifically on the Chinese Muslim dimension was, however, apparently the exception rather than the norm, particularly in reconfigurations of the Maldives’ maritime connections over the medieval and early modern periods.

Today, images of Chinese by the exclusively Muslim population of the Maldives do not reflect the same solidarity we read from Ma Huan’s account of shared cultural or religious space, despite the intensification of infrastructure investment and state-level ties. Chinese investment in development projects in the country has increased



Figure 8. Foreign labor at work on the construction of the Sinamale' Bridge. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.

dramatically since the proclamation of the Belt and Road Initiative by Xi Jinping in 2013. At the same time, there has been a massive influx of Chinese tourists—who today comprise the largest single national source of tourist revenue. While these short-term visitors to the country are largely isolated on resort islands, the economic boom that—together with PRC infrastructure investment—they help to fuel has also facilitated wider increases in labor migration to the country, including Bangladeshi laborers, Southeast Asian retail and hospitality staff, and white-collar expatriates from around the world. However, there are also longer-term Chinese residents in the Maldives, including thousands of laborers working on infrastructure projects (figure 8).

Chinese laborers still remain largely isolated from day-to-day interactions with Maldivians, thus fostering forms of distancing by exoticizing the other. One Maldivian news outlet, for example, described a small section of the Usfagandu district of the nation's capital as the “Chinatown of the Maldives,” depicting an image of foreign men eating with chopsticks (Moosa 2016). In other reports, this minority migrant worker community has been the object of public allegations of being disruptive to the biodiversity and natural environment of the islands, with, for example, tensions over incidents such as the circulation of photographs of shark fins hung out to dry on the walls of Chinese workers' barracks in clear violation of a ban that has been in place on shark fishing in the country since 2010.<sup>16</sup>

The Chinese government, for its part, generally seeks to avoid public perceptions of foreign interventions in local Maldivian affairs. Growing interactions with Chinese tourists visiting the country have nonetheless afforded complex and, at times, problematic interactions with Maldivians both in and around the resorts where most foreigners stay while visiting the region. On a much smaller scale, there have also been some efforts from the Chinese side that have been made toward the management of public perceptions, including the support of youth volunteers making short sojourns to introduce island communities to Chinese language and culture. These, however, have been rather limited in their scope and impact, and thus today for many Maldivians the most high-profile symbol of “friendship” between the two nations remains the Sinamale' bridge.

Popular Maldivian images of China today are dominated by images of tourist groups<sup>17</sup> as well as images of massive new—but already locally iconic—infrastructure projects like the Sinamale’ bridge. Nevertheless, Maldivians do not generally experience the bridge as in any way specifically “Chinese,” which is in contrast, say, to the way in which Naveeda Khan (2006) has characterized the effects of cultural preference expressed by Pakistanis in relation to the Lahore-Islamabad motorway.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the Sinamale’ Bridge has more often given rise to anxieties about the presence of the foreign and a perceived threat to national independence and sovereignty. The national debt to China, Chinese control of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota International Port, and accusations of China’s repression of its own Muslim population are topics that get reported in local newspapers and media and are frequent reminders to the Maldivian Muslim public of a constant threat to sovereignty and a consequent loss of a national identity rooted in Islam.

### *The geopolitics of infrastructure in the Maldives*

Emerging prevalent anxieties over interactions with outside “others” become manifest in experiences such as ghostly encounters, which also reflect broader geopolitical contexts involving a range of international players with sometimes complementary—but other times conflicting—interests both within and beyond the Maldives.<sup>19</sup> The tandem expansion of foreign investment in infrastructure and development projects by both China and Saudi Arabia over recent years has served to displace established relations between the islands and India, while at the same time introducing new entanglements.<sup>20</sup> James Dorsey (2018, 50) has highlighted the significance of increased cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in both economic and military spheres, as both countries have expanded their strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, and both of these nations have had an increasingly pronounced impact upon domestic developments in the Maldives.

The tandem expansion of both Chinese and Saudi Arabian interests in the Maldives is significant and complicated (Kivimäki 2017). Major investment along with construction projects by both countries in recent years further reflects the evolution of their respective overlapping interests in the region. On one end of the bridge is a major Saudi construction project, where by late 2023 work was nearly complete on the King Salman Mosque. This 41,500-square-foot, six-storey mosque replaces the thirty-four-year-old Islamic Centre. Named Masjid-al-Sultan Muhammad Thakurufaanu Al Auzam, it is the largest mosque in the country, complete with an auditorium, multipurpose hall, library, classrooms, and seminar rooms. It also provides new facilities for the Maldives Centre for Qur’ān.

On the artificial island of Hulhumale’ at the other end of the Sinamale’ Bridge, in late 2023 the airport was also undergoing a major expansion. A new runway was built by Chinese contractors, and a new international terminal was built by the Saudi Binlادن Group, who came in after the Maldives dropped ongoing negotiations with an Indian company for the contract.<sup>21</sup>

The public profiles of these two major international players in the foreign investment of infrastructure in the Maldives are, however, very different. As clearly symbolized by the Salman Mosque, and actively promoted in various other

ways across the islands, Saudi projects come packaged within an imaginary façade of Islamic solidarity with significant religious benefits, as was demonstrated, for example, when the Maldives *hajj* quota was raised in 2016. Saudi Arabia has invested considerably in both religious and educational institutions in the country, while also providing generous scholarships for Maldivians to study religion in Mecca and Medina (Dorsey 2018, 51).

The strategic positioning of the Saudis and Maldivians as Muslim co-religionists can, to a degree, mitigate the sense of otherness applied to the Chinese and legitimize the overseas funding of Saudi projects in the eyes of some Maldivians. Consequently, Saudi investments have been somewhat less politicized in the national media than have those of China and India. In contrast, foreign investments by China and India receive significant public expressions of opposition at times. In the eyes of their critics, India's military arrangements with the Maldives can be cast as compromising national security and sovereignty, while the looming debt to China incurred as a result of its infrastructure investment is eyed by some as a potential threat to national independence and, by extension, the country's Islamic identity.

Anxieties resulting from the expansion of major foreign investment projects by Saudi Arabia, China, and India in the Maldives, as well as the geopolitical rivalry caused by it, get increasingly discussed in relation to religion and religious nationalism in journalistic and popular discourse. This has simultaneously prompted a renewed and active promotion of a Maldivian national identity framed within the "one nation, one religion, one language" concept, with emphasis on "one religion" dominant in many settings (Saeedh 2018; Wille 2021). In this context, stories of encounters with *jinnīn* on the Sinamale' bridge can be viewed as components of complex place-making processes that are subconscious efforts to claim ownership of this massive piece of infrastructure by reclaiming both the physical space of the bridge as well as the "abstract spaces" (Lefebvre 1991) of supernatural encounters through an exercise of affective appropriation.

#### *Infrastructures of affect and supernatural encounters*

Stories of bridge *jinnīn* present a unique way of claiming ownership of the bridge by locals through conceptualizing this new space as one of encounters with entities already familiar from local tradition. This provides one way for local residents to ascribe culturally contextualized narratives to their relation with the bridge and some of the ways in which the liminal space it creates is experienced. These "hauntings of past inhabitation" (Cresswell 2015, 7) along the Sinamale' Bridge populate a space of modern infrastructure with supernatural agents long resident in traditional Maldivian imaginaries.

Infrastructures are "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space" (Larkin 2013, 328). The Sinamale' Bridge does that, and at the same time affords a space for negotiating new relationships and understandings of the connections between individual Maldivians and much larger worlds lying far beyond their immediate maritime realm. As these encounters are sometimes narrativized with reference to elements from Maldivian folklore, the bridge is also a space where a pre-developmental past reflecting traditional



cosmology and associated practices is re-engaged in a new, modern context. Ghost stories and accounts of uncanny experiences that are narrated across generations by many Maldivian Muslims are published locally and performed in school plays and cinematic productions. One popular *jinni* story passed down orally and later documented is that of the Araamagu Dhonkamana (*arāmagu donkamana*), a story rooted in the island of Kaafu Atoll Kaashidhoo, of a man who is seduced by the voice of a woman he comes across while in the forest (Sadiq 2010).

One day, a man was cutting wood in the *valutere* (wooded area of the island) and reciting a particular genre of Divehi poetry known as *raivaru* as he went about his work. He began to hear a woman's voice beautifully reciting in response to the lines of his poem. Intrigued, he looked around and found the woman seated on a fallen tree branch. He was so entranced by the woman that he took her home and married her. The couple was then blessed with several children over the years that followed. One day, a religious man visited them at home, and upon seeing the woman immediately recognized her for what she was, a *jinni* in human form. The religious man later advised the husband to secretly (1) observe her as she gathered food for the house, (2) observe her in the kitchen, and (3) observe her when she walked. These are the three things that the woman, Araamagu Dhonkamana, had made the husband promise never to do as a condition for their marriage.

Nevertheless, the husband spied upon his wife while she was taking her bath and saw that she was dropping her long black hair into the open well and pulling out fresh fish, which explained how they always had such an abundance of food in the house. He then surreptitiously watched her as she was cooking and was astonished to see her using her feet—instead of wood—to fuel the fire. Finally, he watched carefully when she walked. He noticed that she had two thorns on the back of her heel and that her feet did not actually touch the ground as she moved. When the wife realized that her husband had broken his vows and observed these things, she was saddened and confronted him. She then assumed her actual form and took their children away to the world of the *jinnīn*. In his misery the husband lost consciousness and woke up to find men praying over him (Sadiq 2010).

Such intimate affairs between humans and *jinnīn* are considered to be very real possibilities within traditional Maldivian cosmology. Similar stories of relationships with *jinnīn* attracted to human beings can still be heard today. Many spirit entities known from Maldivian folklore are female, with one of the most popular images being that of a *handī*, which takes the form of a type of female figure with long black tresses wearing the red *libās* worn by Maldivian women (Maniku 1988, 18). She, along with other Maldivian *jinnīn*, is known to appear under the cover of darkness, often in spaces of transgression. When humans find themselves trespassing (accidentally or on purpose) into haunted spaces where the worlds of the everyday and the supernatural overlap, *jinnīn* can make their presence known in ways that may temporarily challenge, but ultimately assert, the demarcations of distinct realms.

As with the story of the female *jinni* recounted in *Vaguthu News* cited at the outset and Rasheed's taxi-driving tale of his encounter with a *jinni* on the bridge, supernatural narratives are framed within well-established paradigms of Islamic cosmology and Maldivian tradition. Such tales comprise elements of a cultural repertoire for

interpreting the eeriness and unease of trespass that can come with some of the new mobility afforded by megaprojects undertaken to improve infrastructure.

Brian Larkin has characterized the aesthetics of infrastructure in terms that go beyond representation to explore dimensions of “embodied experience governed by the ways infrastructures produce the ambient conditions of everyday life” (Larkin 2013, 336). Through a range of embodied practices, material cultural production, and discursive formulations, which would include the narration and interpretation of ghost stories, collective memory is formed in ways that Jan Assman (1995) has demonstrated can be deployed as tools for creating communal connections in new and unfamiliar landscapes.

As Saeedh (2018) has argued elsewhere, examining the ideas, emotions, and values played out in the physical and abstract spaces of infrastructure projects in the Maldives provides ample opportunity for understanding some of the complex ways individuals negotiate their lived experiences and senses of belonging in relation to the changing landscapes around them. Ghost stories such as those presented here help to map the novel space of the Sinamale’ within familiar cosmological and narrative frameworks. This kind of place-making serves as a “way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world” (Cresswell 2015, 18). The multifaceted ways that conceptions of modernity and development are internalized, interpreted, and shaped through everyday articulations in such discursive deployments demonstrate the power infrastructure commands in the conceptualization of identity with relation to place. It is through such powerful and haunting narratives that the bridge is made meaningful not just as infrastructure, but as a place with social and cultural meaning.

#### *Reconfiguring place: Haunted infrastructure*

Haunted infrastructures, such as the bridge and the myths around it, speak to existing anxieties of the specter of the foreign, the outside other introduced by modernity and development. Discourses around the invasion of the time-space continuum of noncorporeal beings by humans and vice versa, along with the supposed disruption of cosmologies and the balance between the spirit world and the human world—or more precisely the balance between the shared world of the spirits and humans—could be argued to be native methods of claiming ownership of new and burgeoning infrastructures that transform the known landscapes.

Building upon Jacques Derrida (1994), Stephen Frosh (2012) has argued that hauntings and encounters with otherworldly beings are manifestations of repressed memories from the past that are transmitted to the present. From his perspective, *jinnīn* serve as vessels through which connections to the past are engaged in the present. By considering haunting ghostly encounters’ relationship with infrastructures along such lines of temporal metaphor, theoretical attention is drawn to connecting historical imaginations to contemporary experiences, thereby literally “bridging” the past and the present to a possible future. However, the appearance of specters on the Sinamale’ Bridge, a new infrastructure space with no tangible history attached to it, presents a somewhat different context from that often associated with ruins, which have featured at the center of the work of Ann L. Stoler (2008), Emma Varley, and Saiba Varma (2018) on the spaces of spectral encounters. In the case

of the Sinamale' Bridge, however, we are dealing with a "new space" that does not carry such historical weight. As Andrew Alan Jonson (2014) has said of the hauntings of abandoned modern developments in Chiang Mai, such spaces too can become inhabited by the denizens of traditional cosmologies during times of disruptive transition. Our approach here to such ghostly encounters is likewise oriented toward mapping spaces where human actors can articulate a range of desires, anxieties, and ideological motivations arising even in newly constructed infrastructure spaces.

In her studies of ritual gift exchange, Nancy Munn (1977, 1990) highlights the symbolic work through which people continuously remake themselves through processing their experiences, while at the same time reconfiguring the spatial and temporal dimensions of the world they inhabit. Places with historical significance and subjective meanings imposed upon them by people represent deep-rooted connections between humans and their aspirational dreams, desires, and hopes. New infrastructures can have historical meanings placed upon them through such exercises of reconfiguration. As Gordon (1977, xvi) evocatively highlights, "Haunting raises spectres, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future." Discourses around the dialogic invasion and disruption of the time-space continuum inhabited by noncorporeal beings as well as by their human counterparts allow for defining the shared world of humans and spirits. They also provide a space for an exploration of the ways in which some Maldivians attempt to make sense of the new materiality of the built environment and how their bodies engage one another within these spaces.

As adumbrated above and as María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013, 395) have noted, haunted spaces are, by their very nature, "anything but empty." Judith Richardson's study of the haunted landscapes of the Hudson Valley highlights in particular the ways in which places of passage become sites of disconcerting encounter. For her, zones of movement are "profoundly reflected in the frequent haunting of sites of transition, such as roads [and] bridges . . ." (Richardson 2013, 496). In our case study, populating the vast and previously untraversable span between two islands with *jinnīn* serves to enfold the new structure within narratives that can be drawn upon to frame some of the complex ways in which the bridge space is experienced. As is highlighted by recent cultural studies work on what is now labeled as "spectralities," accounts of the haunting of desolate landscapes demonstrate that such spaces are far from being void spaces, since unseen forces may animate them (Blanco and Peeren 2013). In fact, ghosts and haunting are actively invoked to challenge the production of new power regimes that come with development, as Joshua Comaroff (2007) has shown to be the case with Singapore's Sago Lane.

The distinct social and cultural character of the Sinamale' Bridge described by its users gives it distinct properties that are uniquely perceived by those who move across the liminal space it creates. The affective extension of this massive new infrastructure space also extends beyond the physical location of the bridge, to a conception of place constructed through mediated discourses in ways that contribute to the shaping of both public narratives and personal experiences of the bridge locale (Agnew 1987). Social media circulations of *jinnīn* depictions in the comments sections of news articles, as well as personal stories like that of our taxi driver,

contribute to the reconfiguration of sense of place and belonging. Places are “socially constructed by the people who live in them and know them; they are politicized, culturally relative, and historically specific multiple constructions” (Rodman 1992, 164). Timelines framing interpretation are, moreover, complexly configured. Akhil Gupta has prompted us to think about the temporality of infrastructure beyond the telos of project completion to its phases of decay, ruination, and repair. He writes, “Once finished, infrastructures occupy a dead time, an inertial existence . . .” (Gupta 2018, 73). As Edward S. Casey (1996) points out, place *happens* through the actions and interactions of bodies. Affective dimensions of infrastructure produced in the built environment allude to notions of community, sociality, religion, and nationalism. In the context of uncertainties created by new political and economic developments, the Sinamale’ Bridge facilitates the carriage not only of cars and commodities but also hopes, dreams, and fears.

## Conclusion

Viewing the bridge from the historical shore of the ancient “Sultan’s Island,” one traces its long straight lines across the water to another major element of the modern infrastructure of the Maldives: Velana International Airport. The Sinamale’ Bridge has inadvertently created a space in which local experiences of infrastructure are elaborated by individuals through complex engagements with diverse elements of Maldivian Muslim cosmology and symbolic elaborations of locality and transgression that complicate any neat linear narratives about modernizing development and “progress.” Ethnographic explorations of the social and religious dimensions of the bridge can reveal some of the critical spaces for inquiry and social critique opened up by infrastructure projects, forming a vital part of the interdisciplinary tool kit required to inform nuanced analyses of the multifaceted impact that such massive interventions can have on local communities and individuals beyond the oft-discussed issues of mobility, connection, and development.<sup>22</sup>

Material forms of infrastructure features such as water meters, power cables, and post offices have been studied to explore the ways material transformations impact and shape social worlds to create and open new spaces of engagement (Mrázek 2002; Harvey and Knox 2012; Pederson 2011; Anand 2011). Looking at certain intersecting spaces such as that of a haunted Sinamale’ Bridge offers something like a wormhole through which elements of the past are conjured into the present, which then allows for ideas, thoughts, values, and belief systems to be reconstituted into contemporary and even future contexts. In so doing, our haunting approach may help to highlight the affective and cultural qualities of built structures, technological innovations, and financial investments. The ethnographic study of ghost stories coupled with historical inquiry associated with haunted infrastructure and their meditated circulations should, therefore, be considered an integral part of the interdisciplinary toolkit necessary for the exploration of the impacts of development on understandings and experiences of religion, and vice-versa (Feener and Fountain 2018). More proximately, recognizing the creative deployment of elements from premodern cosmologies and local narrative traditions in processes of the contemporary making of place around

the Sinamale' Bridge reveals significant but understudied aspects of contemporary Maldivian experiences and imaginations of development, religion, and identity.

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#### NOTES

1. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team at *Asian Ethnology* for many valuable comments that went into the final revision of this article. The research for this article was supported by the "Infrastructures of Faith: Religious Mobilities on the Belt and Road" (BRINFAITH) project, based at the University of Hong Kong with the support of the Hong Kong Research Grants Council (CRF grant no. C7052-18G). Under the direction of principal investigator David Palmer, the BRINFAITH project incorporates new empirical studies of development at sites of new infrastructure along the Belt Road with critical perspectives on their implications for understandings and experience of religion across diverse traditions and faith communities.
2. This is reworked from Saeedh (2018).
3. President of the Republic of Maldives Mr. Abdulla Yameen, as reported in *Maldives Independent* (2015). The speech can be viewed on YouTube (see Presidency Maldives 2018).
4. Mr. Wang Xiaotao, Chinese government special envoy, as reported in *China Daily HK*, August 31, 2018. See also the press release issued by the President's Office of the Republic of Maldives (2018).
5. There is a massive and continuously expanding literature on the BRI, and it is not within the scope of this article to systematically review even the sub-section of that touching on the Maldives. Despite its small landmass and lack of export commodities, the small island nation is of particular foreign policy interest to China for the strategic deep-water channels that cut through its sovereign territory facilitating direct routes from East Africa and Arabia to the Bay of Bengal.

6. In an effort to control the increasing number of accidents, the government made helmets mandatory, which did significantly reduce the traffic on the bridge to only essential riders, as well as leisure riders. The experience of wearing helmets was novel to many locals and diminished the experience of *burujehun* (joy rides), which subsequently reduced the bridge traffic during the day to more utilitarian purposes.
7. In the Dhivehi language, the plural form of *jinni* is marked by the elongation of the terminal vowel and the addition of a silent /n/ (*nūn sukūn*). Here *jinni* will be used for the singular and *jinnīn* to indicate a plural.
8. In the Maldives the word *jinni* is used inclusively to refer to a wide range of supernatural beings, including what we would commonly describe as “ghosts” in English. This includes ghosts believed to be manifestations of a deceased person, or ghosts that are a nonhuman, spirit, or demon—namely, not the spirit of a deceased person (Baker and Bader 2014). This article also discusses the place of *jinnīn* in Maldivian Muslim cosmology in more detail.
9. Translated from Dhivehi to English based on Thoiba Saeedh’s field notes.
10. In the Maldivian culture, *jinni* refers to the supernatural beings or spirits below the level of angels and devils, drawing from Islamic cosmology. There are several classes of *jinni* and other supernatural beings in Maldivian folklore, including *furēta* (demons), *avattehi kujjaa* (shape shifters), *baburu kujjaa* (“black child”), and various forms of *Dhevi* (Manik 1988).
11. Black magic (*sihuru*) and occultism (*fanḍita*) have been established within Maldivian Muslim traditions for centuries. The relation to such practices and the belief in *jinni* are discussed further in Rehan (2019).
12. A local legend of a supernatural creature inhabiting Hulhumale’ that is described in terms reminiscent of the American mythical creature named Bigfoot.
13. *Fanḍita* is a magic-religious belief system in the Maldives, drawing on local island beliefs and traditional medicine practices (*dhivehibeys*) that were incorporated into Muslim cosmology following the conversion of the islands in the twelfth century. Maloney (2013) describes *Fanḍita* in the Maldives as magic or religious science, of both “white” and “black” varieties, performed by magicians, herbalists, astrologers, or witches, and sometimes involving the conjuring of *jinni*.
14. This includes both the establishment of puritan separatist religious communities such as that on R. Maduvvari (Naseem 2020), and the enthusiasm that a number of Maldivians have expressed in joining violent Islamist campaigns abroad—as is often remarked upon in analyses of ISIS volunteerism.
15. The Carswell study collection of ceramics from the Maldives held at the Ashmolean Museum has been fully digitized by the Maritime Asia Heritage Survey; see Feener (2021b).
16. For more on this, see *Maldives Independent* (2018).
17. On the rapid rise in Chinese tourism to the Maldives, see Robinson (2015, 91–93).
18. Khan’s insights here have been discussed and further developed by Larkin (2018, 196).
19. As Andrew Johnson (2014, 8) has remarked in his work on the ruins of progress in Chiang Mai, one may view “stories of ghosts and hauntings as expressing anxiety about the possibility of knowing for sure whether one has actually attained progress.”

20. This development of a 6.74 km over-water bridge aims to connect Male' City with three other islands in the Greater Male' Region in what is to date the single largest infrastructure project in the country, and will eventually surpass the Sinamale' bridge project in both scale and cost.
21. See ProTenders (2018) and *Maldives Independent* (2016). We will be discussing aspects of Indian infrastructure projects in the Maldives in another article.
22. For more on the politics of mobility and its manipulation by island elites in the Maldives, see Wille (2018).

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