

Scientific observations on the live bait skipjack pole and line fishery in the Maldives Islands in 1604¹

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The most important and most extraordinary practice in the Maldives is fishing. Everybody does it, and throughout the Maldives. Fishing is carried out with complete liberty and everybody can fish where and what he wishes. It is an honest activity practiced by the noblest seigneurs and officers of the kings have officers who go fishing, fishing corresponds to hunting. There are 12 people (noble seigneurs) who fish on the royal fishing vessel and they pay a large amount for these very honorary posts. Each seigneur receives a silver bracelet from the king, while the captain receives a gold bracelet. These bracelets are carried when the king goes fishing with them.

Fishing in the Maldives is carried out in several ways. The most important fishing type is done in high seas about ten miles outside the atolls where the target fish are always found. Large quantities of large fish of 7 to 8 different species are fished there, always the same species, like skipjack, yellowfin and mahimahi (*fiyala*). They are all caught using the same method.

The sail-equipped dhonis³ only fish when the weather is fair, since their sails, made from coconut palms, resist the rain very poorly and the Maldivians are afraid the sails will be destroyed. Because maldivians fish in the nude, they fear the rain so much that they wait 8 days or more after the rains, before going fishing again!

To fish the skipjack, they use a thick cotton line, 2.50m long, attached to a robust fishing pole⁴ made of wood « thick and strong ». The same wood is also used in India for poles or levers. The hook at the bottom of the line is very different from those used in France: they are more open than ours, longer and sharp as pins, and they do not have barbs. No bait is actually attached to the hook, but the previous day large quantities of small fish are caught. They are about the size of small gardons⁵, which are common on the coral reefs and on the sand banks. They keep this live bait in “bags” made of coir rope with small meshes, and they trail them in the water behind their vessels, the sail equipped « dhonis ». The large fish then smell the small fish which are rare in the high seas; they approach in large numbers and are caught on the hooks. These hooks are well prepared and whitened in order to look like small fish. The skipjack are stupid and gluttonous fish, which throw themselves on the hooks, believing that they are white fish. The fisherman then only has to get the line up and the skipjack immediately falls into the boat since they are not really hooked (in the absence of barbs). The fisherman immediately returns his line to the water. Large quantities of skipjack are fished this way: in less than 3 or 4 hours their boats are full, noting that they fish with full sails. It can be noted that the first and the finest skipjack caught are always for the king, who then gives them to church people, the poor and his friends.

The skipjack, which is here called « *combolly masse* », are then unloaded, cooked in sea-water, and dried on racks over the fire until they dry and hard⁶. Thus prepared, it can be

¹ 1604 : in France, Henri IV was then the king

² Text taken from the ouvrage « Voyage de Pyrard de Laval aux Indes Orientales (1601-1611) », Editions Chandeigne, France

³ Dhonis : Doumenge 2005 notes that all dhonis have a length between 8 and 12 meters and that that are entirely build using coconut wood.

⁴ Probably in bamboo? Even if this is not explicit in our observer testimony

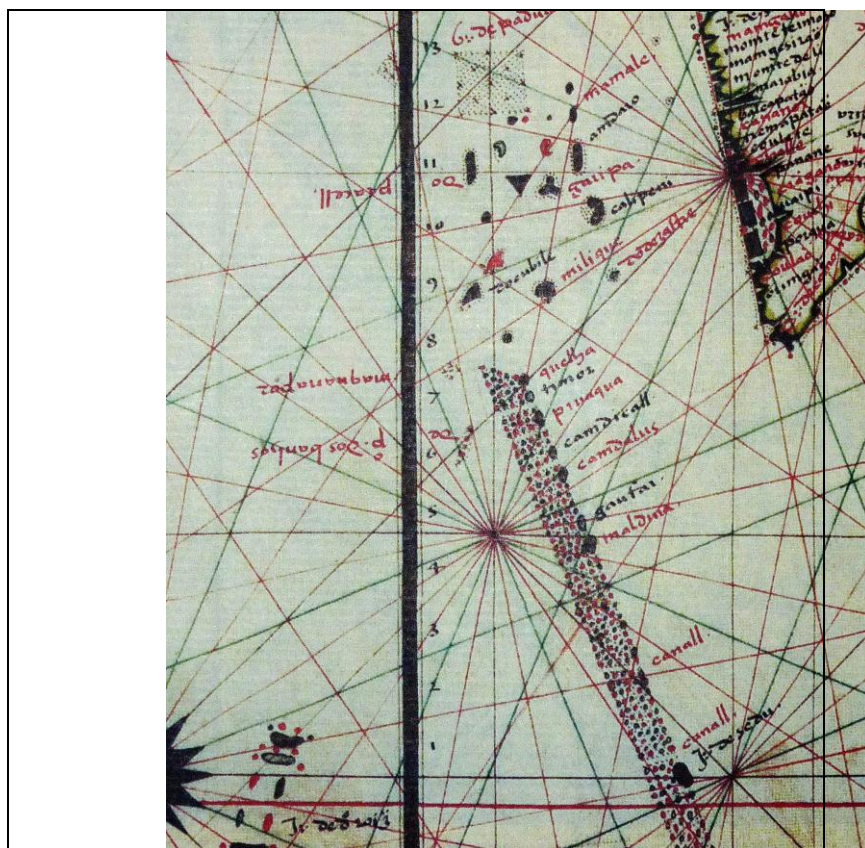
⁵ Gardons : small fishes, common in the lakes and rivers in Europe

⁶ Doumenge 2005 add this smoking/drying process takes place during a duration between 2 to 3 weeks.

kept for a long time under the Maldivian name of *masmin*⁷ and it is transported between the Maldives islands and also to India⁸, where this fish is much appreciated.

Reference :

Doumenge François 2005. L'halieutique maldivienne, une ethno culture millénaire. Archipel 70, Journal, numero spécial. 76 p.



Portuguese map of India and Maldivias Islands (Fernão Vaz Dourado, 1580)

NB: Mr Pyrard acknowledges the help of Mrs Vivi N, Sarah K. and Shiham A. in doing this translation of his French report

⁷ This Maldivian *masmin* is identical to the Japanese *Katsuobushi*. It can also be noted that this Japanese *katsuobushi* and the Japanese pole and line fishery were probably originated from Maldives and at least since 1607 (Doumenge 2005).

⁸ Doumenge 2005 is more explicit and probably more exact, making an historical reference to the international market of Maldivian *masmin* to various remote markets : in India, but also in Sri Lanka and in Indonesia and in other eastern countries, these exports being done on numerous large capacity sailing vessels (one hundred each year).