

2017

Drowning in Rising Seas: Navigating Multiple Knowledge Systems and Responding to Climate Change in the Maldives

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Recommended Citation

Spiegel, Rachel Hannah, "Drowning in Rising Seas: Navigating Multiple Knowledge Systems and Responding to Climate Change in the Maldives" (2017). *Pitzer Senior Theses*. 76.
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Drowning in Rising Seas:
Navigating Multiple Knowledge Systems and
Responding to Climate Change in the Maldives

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In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in
Environmental Analysis and International/Intercultural Studies

April 2017

Pitzer College, Claremont, California

Readers:

Professor Joseph Parker and Professor Susan Phillips



Image: Maldivian Cabinet member and Minister of Fisheries & Agriculture Dr. Ibrahim Didi signs a document calling on the world to address global climate change October, 2009

ABSTRACT

The threat of global climate change increasingly influences the actions of human society. As world leaders have negotiated adaptation strategies over the past couple of decades, a certain discourse has emerged that privileges Western conceptions of environmental degradation. I argue that this framing of climate change inhibits the successful implementation of adaptation strategies. This thesis focuses on a case study of the Maldives, an island nation deemed one of the most vulnerable locations to the impacts of rising sea levels. I apply a postcolonial theoretical framework to examine how differing knowledge systems can both complement and contradict one another. By analyzing government-enforced relocation policies in the Maldives, I find that points of contradiction between Western and indigenous environmental epistemologies can create opportunities to bridge the gap between isolated viewpoints and serve as moments to resist the dominant climate change discourse.

Key Words: Climate Change, Discourse, Knowledge, Postcolonial, The Maldives

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project could not have been possible without the tremendous education I have received from Pitzer College. I would like to thank each individual who has served as a mentor and friend throughout my undergraduate career. I would like to acknowledge the indigenous community of this place, the Tongva people, who have hosted me on their land for the past four years.

I would like to thank my readers, Joe Parker and Susan Phillips, for their unceasing guidance throughout the entire thesis process. I would like to thank my academic advisors, Paul Faulstich and Lako Tongun, who have served as mentors during my time at Pitzer. I would also like to thank Professors Char Miller, Melinda Herrold-Menzies, Brinda Sarathy, Colin Robbins, Branwen Williams, and Arash Khazeni, who have all had a profound impact on my education and have shaped the way in which I conceive of the environment.

I couldn't have gotten through this process without the support and friendship of my thesis classmates. You are so intelligent and passionate, and I have learned so much from each of you over the past four months.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family. I am profoundly grateful for my older sister, Lauren, who has been and will always be my best friend. I would like to extend my gratitude to my parents for their endless support and love throughout my entire life. Your kindness, patience, and wisdom continues to inspire me. I am who I am today because of you.

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INTRODUCTION

In October of 2009, the Maldivian government convened at its historically lowest point—literally. Former President Mohamed Nasheed met with fellow ministers in the world’s first underwater cabinet meeting. Each politician donned a water mask and scuba gear. Nasheed organized the unique demonstration to send a message to world leaders ahead of the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, and to make an eye-catching plea for action. The 350,000 inhabitants of the 1,192 coral islands of the Republic of the Maldives reside at only 1.5 meters above the ocean, making it the country with the lowest average elevation (World Atlas). The small Indian Ocean archipelago is considered one of the most vulnerable nations to the impending impacts of global climate change.

Sea-level rise threatens the Maldives and its peoples’ very existence. It is not just the lush island landscape that will be lost as oceans continue to erode the palm tree-spotted beaches—the impacts of anthropogenic climate change place an entire nation at stake. It is a matter of life or death. As rising seas submerge the sandy shorelines, so too will they wipe away the Maldivian people and culture. Despite a long-fought struggle for survival, the lack of climate change mitigation progress at the international level will ultimately leave the country’s population with no choice but to migrate elsewhere.

Rather than accept this doomful fate, the government of the Maldives has spoken up in such a time of adversity. At former President Nasheed’s underwater cabinet meeting, ministers communicated via hand signals and white boards as they signed a document calling on all countries to cut their carbon emissions. Under the Maldivian emblem of the coconut tree, a symbol of national livelihood, the declaration read:

We must unite in a world war effort to halt further temperature rises. Climate change is happening and it threatens the rights and security of everyone on Earth. We have to have a better deal. We should be able to come out with an amicable understanding that everyone survives. If Maldives can't be saved today, we do not feel that there is much of a chance for the rest of the world (Maldivian Cabinet, 2009)

Despite this historical display of political advocacy from one of the planet's smallest countries, the negotiations at the following Copenhagen Climate Conference made very little progress in terms of saving the world, let alone the Maldives. Though beginning with widely held expectations that the summit would produce a legally binding treaty, the conference was plagued by negotiations deadlock and ultimately resulted in the non-legally enforceable "Copenhagen Accord." (Harrabin, 2009). Criticism fell upon both developed and developing nations. On the one hand, critics blamed Copenhagen's failure on the U.S. They argued that by negotiating the Accord with only a select group of leaders, most of the UN member-states were excluded, especially poorer nations (Monbiot, 2009). On the other hand, some critics claimed that India, China, and other emerging nations, in order to protect their economies, cooperated at Copenhagen to hinder attempts at establishing legally binding carbon emissions targets (Sara, 2009). The unconstructive outcome of the Copenhagen Conference revealed two major points about the nature of international environmental policy. For one, it is nearly impossible to formulate global-scale mitigation and adaptation solutions without taking the voices of the developing world into consideration. There is no universal consensus of the issue or how to solve it. The second, and perhaps less evident, is that the framing of international climate change dialogue has significant implications for how country leaders approach climate change solutions.

Eight years, seven international climate conferences, and one gunpoint-forced resignation later, Mohamed Nasheed remains one of the most highly regarded leaders in the fight against environmental degradation. While little progress has been made to save his island nation from its

“ultimate destruction,” the “Mandela of the Maldives” continues to pressure environmental officials of the global North to mitigate carbon emissions (Aitkenhead, 2012). Nasheed’s poignant words and actions are significant in the context of the global climate change discourse. His underwater cabinet meeting symbolizes an inversion of colonial power relations: Nasheed’s determined efforts successfully influenced climate change deliberations that are typically dominated by leaders of the global North. The former President’s attention-grabbing display of advocacy made it clear to the world that people of the Maldives would not give up in the fight against climate change. His actions accentuated the agency of the island nation, expressing that the Maldives would continue to strive for survival despite the negligence of the global North. In this thesis, I highlight the environmental knowledges, actions, and perspectives of those populations deemed the most vulnerable to climate change. It is important to emphasize that I do not *give* agency to indigenous and global South populations, but rather, I attempt to *highlight* the agency that already exists within these communities. Global South and indigenous responses to and understandings of climate change are recurrently excluded from the global discourse, an issue that I seek to address in this thesis.

The former President’s advocacy does not speak for all Maldivian’s views of environmental degradation. Conceptions of and responses to climate change vary amongst different members of the island community. I argue that such discrepancies tie back to a hierarchy of knowledge that fuels the global climate change narrative, a discourse rife with contradictions.

In this thesis, I analyze the complexities of the global climate change discourse. I draw attention to the contradictions present within this discourse, analyze how such contradictions relate to knowledge and power, and describe the implications for creating adaptation strategies. I

carry out a case study centered on responses to climate change in the Maldives. I focus on four central themes; the ocean, as a body of both cultural significance and imminent danger; greed, as an inherent factor of environmental degradation and a debated concept between differing epistemological systems; migration, as a contentious strategy towards climate change adaptation; and the coconut tree, as a Maldivian symbol of island survival. In the case study, I examine local environmental knowledges, conceptions of climate change, and discrepancies between island communities' approaches to adaptation and government-enforced relocation policies. The Maldives represents one of the most at-risk locations in the face of climate change due to the risk of rising sea levels (Leonhardt et al., 2014). At the international level, the country's government has been incredibly active in terms of advocating for survival in the face of rising sea levels. At the local level, responses to environmental degradation are much more nuanced. I argue that differing epistemologies inform a global climate change discourse filled with contradictions. Linked to colonial power relations, these contradictions hinder the effective implementation of climate change solutions. It is at these very points of contradiction where indigenous communities, environmental and social justice activists, and government officials can bridge the gap between isolated viewpoints and construct effective adaptation strategies. In such moments of rupture, communities can resist and subvert the dominant climate change discourse.

Methodology and Thesis Structure

In this thesis, I utilize a postcolonial theoretical framework to critically analyze the power dynamics inherent to and supported by the prevailing global climate change discourse. In Chapter One, I outline this methods approach. I apply concepts of subalternity, knowledge production, deterritorialization, resistance, and justice to examine how an enduring colonial

epistemological hierarchy informs the global climate change discourse. Chapter Two consists of a literature review that establishes where my thesis sits within the existing body of work on the intersection of global climate change policy and colonial power dynamics at both the international and national level. The central focus of the thesis is a case study on the Maldives. The analysis is divided into two chapters: in Chapter Three, I consider French navigator Francois Pyrard's colonial account (1619) of Maldivian society and Xavier Romero-Frias' (2012) translated anthology of the Maldivian oral tradition to provide a critical context of the Maldivian community's environmental knowledges and cultural practices. In Chapter Four, I bring these ideas into the contemporary context of climate change. Drawing upon interviews with both indigenous Maldivians and local intellectual activists, I examine how government adaptation policies both complement and conflict with island communities' understandings of and responses to climate change. I specifically highlight points of contradiction and the implications for creating successful adaptation strategies. In the conclusion, I propose an alternative approach to climate change that attempts to bridge the gap between isolated view points and encourage adaptation strategies that are both empirically grounded and culturally relevant. I conclude with a consideration of the global significance of this project, and how this research can constructively inform the manner in which climate change is discussed in the future.

A Case Study of the Maldives

At-risk populations, particularly nations of the global South, have received increasing attention for the fact that they will suffer the most from the impacts of climate change. The Maldives, a small island archipelago that lies at the lowest average elevation of any country in the world, is one of the most vulnerable locations in the face of climate change impacts. Rising

sea-levels threaten the nation's very existence, and scientists express that such outcomes are irreversible (Solomon et al., 2009). In response to this prognosis, political leaders of the Maldives work at both the international level, by advocating for countries of the global North to adopt more stringent mitigation policies, and the national level, by implementing adaptation measures based on a strategy of population relocation. The Maldivian government, and former President Nasheed in particular, has received global praise for progressive action on combating climate change. However, further analysis reveals that government-enforced adaptation policies are not always met with open arms. Conceptions of climate change and perspectives on how to best work towards adaptation vary widely across island communities. I argue that these points of contention result from a global climate change discourse that promotes a hierarchy of environmental knowledge systems. The following section will provide background on how this contentious climate change discourse came to be, how it is fueled by colonial power dynamics between the global North and South, and how it influences the manner in which environmental leaders approach adaptation.

Defining the Dominant Climate Change Discourse

From the offices of political leaders to the classrooms of elementary schools, the manner in which much of the world talks about climate change has traditionally been informed by a Western scientific understanding of global environmental degradation. I outline the underpinnings of the dominant climate change discourse. After briefly detailing the Western epistemological framing of the issue, I explain how prevailing understandings of and approaches to solving global environmental problems have been challenged by leaders of the global South. This is followed by a description of how divergent perspectives on climate change have played

out in the international policy arena, and how current conversations relate to power dynamics between the global North and South.

Climate Change as a Scientifically Defined Problem

The majority of scientists have repeatedly confirmed the irrefutable evidence that points to humans as responsible for climate change (IPCC, 2007). Carbon-emitting activities associated with industrial production continue to contribute to the greenhouse gas effect, warming our planet at an unprecedented rate. As such, many attribute climate change to globalization and its related processes. Perhaps ironically, globalization can also be used as a valuable tool to help address the causes and consequences of widespread environmental change. To a certain extent, world leaders have already begun to capitalize upon such advantages. In 1992, 197 member-states of the United Nations came together at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and negotiated an international environmental treaty known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The objective of the agreement is to “stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (United Nations, 1992). Since this initial meeting, the Conference of the Parties (COP) has convened twenty-two times, with the biggest achievement coming from COP21 in Paris in 2015. At this landmark meeting, member-countries established a goal of reaching zero net anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions by the latter half of the 21st century. This objective was set in the hopes of limiting global warming to under two degrees Celsius, a pivotal tipping point in terms of irreversible environmental degradation.

Despite the promising accomplishments of the Paris Conference, many concerned scientists, politicians, and environmental activists have recognized that these efforts will not be

enough to save the planet. The promises made in the various countries' intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) are part of a non-binding agreement. There is no global governance to enforce that everyone meets their emission-cutting objectives. Furthermore, even if every nation were to meet their commitments, further scientific analysis reveals that they would only limit global warming to 2.7 degrees Celsius by the year 2100 (UNFCCC, 2016). Throughout the deliberations, representatives from Small Island Developing States (SIDS), their homeland's very existence threatened by sea-level rise, strongly pushed for setting the goal at 1.5 degrees Celsius rather than 2. However, wealthy countries refused to concede to these requests.

Divergent conceptions of the natural world, coupled with stark economic divides, have resulted in ideological debates between developed and developing countries that persist to the current day. This overarching conflict is exacerbated by climate change, as geographical factors have rendered the global South disproportionately impacted by the consequences of changing temperatures and weather patterns. Local subsistence-based communities have been forced to alter their traditional agricultural practices, change their living habits, and even migrate from their homes in the most extreme cases. Geopolitical disparities in the experience of climate change impacts has shaped the international conversation for decades, and has had a significant influence on mitigation and adaptation policy formulation.

The Emergence of a Contentious Global Environmental Narrative

One of the most troubling aspects of the climate change crisis is that it knows no bounds: greenhouse gases care nothing about the socially-constructed borders between nation-states. While China and the United States together contribute 40% of the world's carbon emissions, the small low-lying island countries, such as the Maldives, have already begun to experience the

impacts of climate change (Harvey & Yuhas, 2016). Though global leaders have attempted to create policy solutions at the international level, deeper ideological conflicts embedded in an underlying colonial mindset have inhibited meaningful mitigation action.

At the international level, the topic of environmental protection and conservation tends to result in dialogue filled with debate. Differing epistemologies between the global North and South significantly contribute to the controversies surrounding global environmental governance. During the mid-to-late twentieth century, concerns about environmental issues became a much more prominent part of the popular sentiment within wealthy countries. With momentous national events during the 1960s such as the Civil Rights Movement and antiwar protests, communities across the globe began to put much more emphasis on matters of social justice. This, coupled with the publishing of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, culminated in a symbolic start of the modern environmental movement (Griswold, 2012). Developed countries around the world began to emphasize environmental protection and conservation, resulting in a variety of national movements and policies.

A significant ideological outcome of heightened environmental awareness was the concept of "deep ecology." This environmental philosophy promotes the intrinsic worth of all beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human need. It argues that "the natural world is a subtle balance of complex interrelationships in which the existence of organisms is dependent on the existence of others within the ecosystem" (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Human interference with or destruction of the natural world poses a great threat not only to humans, but to the entirety of the planet. The core principle of "deep ecology" thus states that the living environment as a whole should be respected and regarded as having "certain inalienable legal rights to live and flourish, independent of its utilitarian instrumental benefits for human use"

(Devall & Sessions). As this new conception of the natural world spread throughout the West during the 1960s and 1970s, it inspired increased environmental advocacy and calls for political action.

However, outside of the bubble of the global North, problems pertaining to the environment began to spark international concern. It became clear that national action alone was not enough to successfully solve these issues. Air pollution, for instance, would not only affect the countries that produce it, but would have a global impact with grave implications—human-induced climate change. Developed nations' fears of worldwide disaster prompted the 1972 U.N. Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden (Black, 2012).

While many wealthy countries eagerly awaited the opportunity to begin solving the world's environmental problems, communities of the global South did not share the same optimism. During the same time period, many developing countries remained focused on their newly gained independence and economic development. In preparation for the Stockholm Conference, Brazilian Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the UN João Augusto de Araújo Castro (1972) found it troubling that proposed solutions to the world's environmental problems were inspired solely by the global minority of wealthy nations. Such solutions, he argued, further perpetuate the existing gap in socioeconomic development between developed and developing countries (Araújo Castro, 1972). The origins of this divide, he stated, lie in the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. During this time, the countries now considered developed flourished in terms of technological advancement, which “soon translated into the establishment of a new international order... This new international order and the relatively uneven distribution of political power among states, based on the use and monopoly of advanced technologies, may be considered one of the most enduring effects of the Industrial Revolution” (Araújo Castro, 33).

Since this period, developed countries have actively maintained their economic and political power, while poorer nations have persistently attempted to develop and reach the same level of prosperity.

Developed nations, claimed Araújo Castro, fail to take the national priorities of developing nations into consideration. He argued that the global ecological crisis has resulted from the modern technological advancements within the developed nations. He found it ironic, and frankly unfair, that these same wealthy countries suggest measures that would stunt development within developing nations in order to preserve the environment. He stressed that during a time when so many of these countries are trying to rise to economic prominence, “the developing countries cannot accept, without further refinement, the ecological policy devised by the developed countries whose socioeconomic structure was deeply influenced by the unique phenomenon of the Industrial Revolution” (Araújo Castro, 37). Araújo Castro encouraged a political approach to international environmental issues that emphasizes “national sovereignty,” and that meets the needs of developing nations, particularly in regard to socioeconomic development.

Twenty years later, Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir bin Mohamad (1992) expressed a similar sentiment in his statement to the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development. He argued that because the rich exploited the poorer nations’ resources to such a great extent during the era of colonization, developing countries essentially funded the development of the wealthy countries. Mahathir asserted that wealthy nations forcefully impose Western environmental values on the poor. Denying poor nations of their own resources and ability to develop, he argued, will further impede their socioeconomic growth. In reference to his native Malaysia, Mahathir struggled with the fact that “in a world that has been won for

democracy, we find powerful nations laying down terms even for participating in a democratic process” (Mahathir, 326). Despite this, he finally expressed his optimism of the approaching U.N. Conference in Rio, and emphasized the need for the nations to cooperate on an equitable basis.

The implications of international environmental policy deliberations span far beyond those that impact the physical environment. Measures proposed to preserve the global ecosystem carry great political significance, often negatively impacting the socioeconomic development of developing nations. Attempting to find a balance between these two issues remains a frequent topic of conversation today, particularly within the context of international climate change negotiations. I argue that the same conflicting perspectives of climate change that both Araújo Castro and Mahathir alluded to persist to the present day. However, the debate spans beyond the global North-global South divide. By carrying out a case study of responses to climate change in the Maldives, I highlight how conflicting environmental knowledges influence the implementation of effective adaptation strategies. Recognizing the nuances and contradictions at play in the global climate change discourse, I argue that it is at these very points of contradiction that indigenous communities, environmental activists, and political leaders can bridge the gap between knowledge systems and construct effective and just adaptation strategies.

In the following section, I describe the manner in which the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been utilized as the primary mechanism for combating global environmental degradation. I outline how it has shaped the prevailing discourse on climate change within a context of conflicting perspectives between the global North and South.

The Global Solution: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Deliberations held at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), dominated by leaders of the global North, have ultimately determined the manner in which the world approaches and understands climate change. Conversations are fueled by a colonial knowledge hierarchy that favors a Western epistemological framework. Throughout its twenty-five years as the chief mechanism for international climate change negotiations, the UNFCCC has been subject to extensive analysis (Lohmann, 2006; Lander et al., 2009; Ewing, 2013; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014). Following widespread criticism of the failure of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (Böhringer & Finus, 2005; Breidenich et al., 1998; Victor, 2001), recent literature focuses on the UNFCCC process in a more holistic manner. Scholars write in response to the lack of significant progress in formulating climate change mitigation and adaptation policies.

In *Democratizing Global Climate Governance*, Hayley Stevenson and John S. Dryzek (2014) maintain that the UNFCCC has failed to deliver upon its goals. This current form of governance, they claim, that emphasizes national sovereignty, is inadequately equipped to deal with an issue of such a magnitude or on such a timescale as climate change (Stevenson & Dryzek, 4). Multilateral negotiations are plagued by disputes over which states are responsible for global environmental degradation, how fast greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced, and who should bear the burden of that reduction. Once some level of consensus is reached on these matters, party leaders disagree about what policies and practices are best suited to meet reduction goals. The UNFCCC process is “paralyzed” by deep conflict, a “paralysis [that] is not surprising given that dominant forms of government and governance were not designed, and did

not evolve, to cope with challenges anything like those presented by climate change” (Stevenson & Dryzek, 4).

Stevenson and Dryzek define the UNFCCC as an “institutionalized empowered space,” a space where public authority is exercised and collective decisions are made (Stevenson & Dryzek, 28). In their critical analysis, they conduct interviews with senior level negotiators to evaluate the UNFCCC’s authenticity and level of inclusivity.¹ Measuring “authenticity” in terms of truthfulness, respect, justification, common-interest appeals, persuasion without coercion, and constructive politics, findings suggest that UNFCCC negotiations are quite civil, respectful, and mostly non-coercive. However, many negotiators, prioritizing the needs and desires of the party they represent, lack the ability to be persuaded and to change their entrenched positions in response to arguments and appeals. This degree of entrenchment means that “instead of constructive politics, we often see constructive ambiguities—which, however functional they might be in keeping negotiating texts alive, need resolving if any decisive agreement is to be reached” (Stevenson & Dryzek, 72). In terms of inclusivity, all sovereign states, theoretically, have the opportunity to participate at the UNFCCC, but enormous inequalities in state capacity remain, particularly along North-South lines. Developing countries are frequently disenfranchised, “deprived of the capability to participate and to influence agenda-setting and decision-making” (Fisher and Green, 2004, 69). Furthermore, effective inclusion of a state or member-party does not necessarily translate to effective inclusion of the full range of concerns of those that the state seeks to represent. The UNFCCC, therefore, is ill-equipped to address global

¹ 18 negotiators were interviewed either in person or by telephone between September 2009 and July 2010. Anonymity was assured. Interviewees represented 13 different parties; however, several spoke from the perspective of their negotiating bloc rather than their individual party. (Stevenson & Dryzek, 66)

climate change in an authentic and inclusive manner, and remains stuck in problematic procedural norms that were established at its inception.

Environmental and political leaders of the North do not only dominate discussions of how global South nations should combat climate change: a bias towards a Western epistemological framework also delineates how climate change is understood in the first place. Within this framework of “eco-imperialism” (Shiva, 2015, 14) UNFCCC leaders recurrently define “dangerous” climate change in terms of scientific measures, threats to the continued function of the physical function of the non-human world, or potential risk or reduction in economic welfare. Dessai et. al (2004) contend that this blatant emphasis on empirical data has led to “de-contextualized information produced by ‘experts’ which ignores the fundamental human aspects” of climate change, including the impacts on livelihood, psychology, and culture (Dessai et al., 20; Irwin, 1995; Lash et al.1996). Publically published documents and materials from UNFCCC conferences reflect such tendencies. Reports focus on calculating greenhouse gas emissions, average temperature increase, the degree of sea-level rise, and how much political and financial investment will be required to mitigate environmental degradation (UNFCCC, 2016). A global climate change discourse that favors scientific understandings of the natural world encourages a colonial hierarchy of knowledge. This epistemological conflict, particularly between Western and indigenous environmental knowledges, plays out at both the international and national level. This thesis centers on a case study of the Maldives to demonstrate how divergent conceptions of climate change result in contradictions that inhibit the formulation of successful adaptation strategies. I argue that recognizing these points of contradiction can inform alternative approaches that encompass multiple forms of knowledge and maintain a level of historical and cultural relevancy.

In Chapter One, I introduce the theoretical framework through which I analyze climate change discourse. I apply a postcolonial studies methodology to examine the connection between knowledge, discourse, and power and analyze the colonial relations that underlie differing environmental understandings. This theoretical consideration provides context for evaluating how knowledge and power construct the climate change discourse and how this results in points of contradiction within adaptation discussions.

CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY

Postcolonial Theory and the Climate Change Discourse

Introduction

The implications of climate change span far beyond its detrimental environmental impacts. Measures and actions that aim to preserve global ecological stability carry great political and social significance, often at the expense of both the indigenous and communities in the global South (Araujo Castro, 1972; Mohamad, 1992; Shiva, 2007). At the international level, leaders of the global North typically dominate mitigation and adaptation conversations. Not only do they determine policy outcomes, but Western scientists, politicians, and environmentalists often claim expert knowledge on climate change. Global North leaders utilize this knowledge to exert power over the global South and to justify interventions in the name of environmental stability. Communities and leaders of the global South do not passively accept colonial relations. Mohamed Nasheed's advocacy in the Maldives, for example, subverts enduring colonial power dynamics by influencing UNFCCC policy deliberations. However, a hierarchy of environmental knowledge persists, one that has significant implications for creating effective adaptation strategies.

To consider such repercussions within a theoretical framework, I employ the interdisciplinary methodology of postcolonial critique. The methodology is wide-ranging in terms of application. The postcolonial theoretical framework appeals to those interested in the study of racial, ethnic, and national minorities due to its attention to racial and national politics (Parker, 2008, 271). Postcolonial critique is a "highly contingent term" that, despite its connotations, "is neither positive nor negative," but rather, "descriptive" (Chakravorty et al., 2006, 60). While predominantly focused on topics of colonialism and post-colonialism, postcolonial studies can also apply more broadly to analyze cultural and political relations

between more powerful and less powerful nations and peoples. In the context of this thesis, I will draw upon concepts related to postcolonial theory to analyze the power dynamics between both leaders of the global North and the Maldives as a small island developing state, and between the government of the Maldives and the broader island population.

In the context of global environmental issues, postcolonial theory can also engage with ecocriticism (Maxwell, 2009). Professor of Culture and Communication Anne Maxwell (2009) remarks that postcolonial theory is a powerful tool for “analyzing new forms of colonialism that have sprung up in the wake of globalization” (Maxwell, 16). She argues that “criticism that combines postcolonial and ecocritical concepts is not only able to expose late capitalism’s crucial role in global warming, but also to show readers that the political choices they make now will have lasting consequences for the lifestyles of coming generations” (Maxwell, 15). Maxwell draws multiple parallels between postcolonialism and ecocriticism. First, both theoretical methodologies highlight the exploitative aspects of globalization. Both work to counter the effects of Eurocentric, objectifying discourses that encourage Western expansion. They do so by attempting to “deliver up colonized and Indigenous people,” or the natural environment, “from the control of global markets and corporations as well as neocolonial governments that continue to exploit and oppress them for economic or cultural gain” (Maxwell, 19). Second, Maxwell argues that ecocriticism and postcolonialism are concerned with representation, mutually recognizing the sensibleness of the demands made by “the Other,” either a cultural or racial Other, or simply other life forms. These considerations move toward an extension of ethics, broadening humans’ conception of the global community (Branch, 1998). This is significant, Maxwell concludes, as “in an increasingly interconnected world, to do violence to the ‘Other’... is to effectively damage the self” (Maxwell, 24). Within the context of global environmental

degradation, this argument could not be more applicable. To continuously exploit natural resources, particularly from the global South, and to thoughtlessly emit harmful greenhouse gases into the atmosphere has already proven to result in widespread social, economic, political, and ecological damage (Bachram, 2004; Fisher and Green, 2004; Lohmann, 2006; Lander et al., 2009; Ewing, 2013; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014).

Various aspects of postcolonial theory underlie the relationships between and discussions amongst the world's nations as they attempt to formulate solutions to climate change. In this methods section, I introduce the relevant notions of agency, subalternity, essentialism, knowledge, citizenship, resistance, and justice, all concepts that are central to examining the implications of the dominant climate change discourse on global South and indigenous communities. It is important to note that I do not use "global South" and "indigenous" as interchangeable terms. Although the two identities overlap in terms of shared oppression, many indigenous communities reside within the global North, and many communities within the global South do not call themselves indigenous. In Chapter Four, I expand on these distinctions in the context of the Maldives, where differing epistemologies influence efforts to implement climate change adaptation strategies.

In this chapter, I review the philosophies of prominent postcolonial, poststructuralist, feminist, and indigenous scholars. The methodology overview serves as a foundation for understanding the various interpretations of key terms in the context of postcolonial theory. I illuminate how these concepts apply to analyzing the prevailing discourse on climate change, how the discourse is tied to an epistemological hierarchy, and how the relationship between discourse, knowledge, and power influences the formulation of climate change adaptation strategies. I also consider the notion of resistance, and examine how the points of contradiction

between different environmental knowledge systems can serve at points of resistance to the dominant climate change discourse.

Subalternity, Agency, Resistance, and Power

A consideration of subalternity, agency, resistance, and power is inherent to any discussion on the actions of global South and indigenous communities (Spivak, 1988). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar who writes extensively on these concepts, is considered “one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals” (Simons, 2010, 210). Trained in literary theory, feminist criticism, deconstruction, and Marxist theory, Spivak is best known for her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), in which she investigates the manner in which the West understands and responds to the Other, or Third World subject (Spivak, 1988). Referring to the British outlawing of the Hindu practice of *Sati*, the tradition whereby a widow throws herself onto her husband’s funeral pyre, Spivak conveys her concern for the potential of condescension when well-intentioned people attempt to represent the oppressed. While the British intervention saved some lives and may have granted women a certain degree of free choice, it simultaneously served to secure British power in India and to underscore the asserted difference between British “civilization” and Indian “barbarism” (Spivak, 276-7). *Sati* ostensibly falls out of the dominant discourse of what is considered just or morally acceptable. In her work, Spivak seeks to interrogate the ethical problems of investigating a different culture based on such universal concepts and frameworks. Postcolonial studies can be employed to liberate the Other. This liberation does not come from enabling the Other to speak, as the subaltern “always already” has agency. Rather, this liberation occurs when those indoctrinated within the Euro-Enlightenment epistemology open their ears to hear and recognize the agency of the Other. In this instance, the

subaltern articulates those parts of themselves that exist outside of what the dominant discourse has constituted their subjecthood.

Spivak defines the subaltern as someone blocked from social mobility. The main problem lies in the subaltern's lack of access to the public sphere, so that "their resistance," or agency, "can be recognized as such" (Chakravorty, et al., 2006, 73). Furthermore, Spivak asserts that no subaltern claims the distinction of subalternity. Identifying with the position of subaltern can be appealing as it is "interesting to be seen seemingly as a victim" or to "seem completely sympathetic to [the subaltern] as a victim" (Chakravorty et al., 65). The subaltern, however, either thinks that this lack of access to social mobility is the norm, or they "want to get the hell out" of subalternity (Chakravorty et al., 66). Spivak is critical of the intellectual, activist, or INGO worker who claims to hear and understand subalternity. This objective, Spivak argues, is misguided. The attempt of the "so-called international civil society" is really to "earn the right, which is altogether effortful, to be in subaltern normality in such a way that you can intervene in it and be heard yourself" (Chakravorty et al., 66). However, Spivak contends that, ultimately, subalternity "is not about subjects. It is about a position without identity...It is about agency" (Chakravorty et al., 74).

Spivak's interpretation implies that the subaltern is defined by their lack of access to the structures of civil society, rendering their actions untranslatable within the dominant discourse. Agency, like any term, is contingent. In Australian scholar Bronwyn Davies' (1991) analysis of agency through a feminist poststructuralist framework, she critiques the humanist definition that predominates the social sciences. Within this individualistic model, agency is synonymous with concepts of freedom, autonomy, rationality, and moral authority. In poststructuralist theory, however, "the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web

of social practices, discourses and subjectivity” (Henriques et al., 1984, 117). In this model, a person must draw on the terms of the available discourse to reverse or renegotiate power and force relations. Davies argues for an alternate model, in which persons are “multiple rather than unitary beings” whose “patterns of desire,” that are assumed to be “fundamental indicators of [the] essential self (such as the desire for freedom or autonomy or for moral rightness) signify little more than the discourses and the subject positions made available within them, to which [a person] may have access” (Davies, 1991, 42; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989).

It is worth noting that the definition of discourse goes beyond the constructs of speech and language. According to philosopher Michel Foucault, discourse is always a power-knowledge relation. He argues that since the Enlightenment, “the pattern of discourse and its constitution of knowledge reflect the common interest or ‘desire’ of modernity for domination and control through systematic objectification of experience” (Schneck, 1987, 20). Contemporary discourse is seen to reflect the realities of dominance and repression existing in current relations of power. Poststructuralist theory reveals how agency is “fundamentally illusory”—decisions and actions are understood as more akin to “forced choices, since the subject’s positioning within particular discourses makes the ‘chosen’ line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one’s placement within that discourse to *want* that line of action” (Davies, 46). Davies argues that this can actually open up opportunities to regain another type of agency: the “speaking/writing subject” can move within and between discourses, can understand how they discursively subject her, and can use the terms of one discourse to go beyond the other, “both in terms of her own experienced subjectivity and in the way in which she chooses to speak in relation to the subjectivities of others” (Davies, 46). Agency can be defined

as the capacity to recognize the discursive constitution of the self and to “resist, subvert, and change” the discourses through which one is constituted (Davies, 51).

Davies outlines her argument from a feminist perspective, in which she seeks to “respeak” the male/female dualism that is embedded in all discourses. She concludes, evocative of Spivak, that the authority of people in power (the authority of maleness), needs to be “reconceptualized as *authority*, with emphasis on *authorship*, the capacity to speak/write and be heard, to have voice, to articulate meanings from within the collective discourses and beyond them” (Davies, 52). Expanding on this poststructuralist concern with destabilizing established and restrictive identities, feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham and economist David F. Ruccio (2001) attempt to produce a new discourse on class in which it is no longer understood as a central aspect to an individual or collective’s identity, but rather as a multiplicity of processes. Drawing from the work of anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995), they critique “capitalocentrism” and examine postdevelopment theory, which defines development as a discourse that produces a specific kind of knowledge of the Third World—one of “underdevelopment” (Gibson-Graham & Ruccio, 160, 2001). Development discourse has served as a means to homogenize the Third World, subjecting developing countries to economic, cultural, and political transformations in the name of ushering them into modernization. In this manner, “power is exercised over the peoples of the Third World...through normalizing the condition of underdevelopment and naturalizing the need for development” (Gibson-Graham & Ruccio, 161). This produces a dualistic developed/underdeveloped subjectivity that constitutes the subaltern Third World Other as the one in whose name development projects have been formulated and carried out.

Within the context of global climate change, the Third World is trapped in a paradox of fueling the capitalist system by adopting a path towards economic modernization while simultaneously being encouraged to do so in a sustainable manner, as to be mindful of the environment that capitalism has tirelessly exploited and degraded in the first place. Development, a result of capitalism, has served to “colonize reality, to circumscribe local cultural constructions, to break down local communities and expose them to the vicissitudes of the global economy” (Gibson-Graham & Ruccio, 164). Within a modernization discourse, those colonized lack agency in that Third World societies undergoing transition are seen as producing a new capitalist class which serves to reinforce the hegemony of the existing capitalist economic order.

Davies’ examination of the discursive constitutionality of subaltern identity and Gibson-Graham and Ruccio’s critique of the predominant development discourse brings the discussion back to Spivak’s initial question: can the subaltern speak? In the context of global climate change, do the indigenous and communities of the global South have agency? In what ways can or do these communities already subvert, resist, and change the prevailing colonial climate change discourse? In his writings, noted French philosopher Michel Foucault discusses several different types of agency, namely how subjects can resist the ever-present character of the “discursive regime,” or dominant discourse. Foucault argues that power, the way force relations are produced, can be strengthened or reversed at possible moments of rupture, or resistance to the dominant discourse. He believes that where there is power, resistance is always at work. This resistance, present where force relations are unstable, takes the form of stepping outside the discursive regime, by “performing, embodying, or enacting less dominant modes of the accepted discourse” (Foucault, 1976). In this thesis, I argue that resistance is possible at the points of

contradiction between differing environmental knowledge systems where force relations are unstable. I consider how people in the Maldives can formulate adaptation strategies that bridge the gap between isolated viewpoints, and in turn subvert the dominant climate change discourse that promotes a colonial epistemological hierarchy.

Despite local adaptation actions, the international conversation typically concentrates on the concern of “giving” indigenous and global South populations agency by building capacity to adapt to the impacts of climate change through logistical and financial support. Recently, these conversations have also focused on giving the subaltern a voice via representation in the international environmental policy fora. However, such efforts may be in vain, as representation is not the goal. Over recent decades, leaders of the global South have actively participated in global climate change discussions. For example, former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed’s advocacy brought his small island nation to international attention. His underwater cabinet meeting notably influenced conversations at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. While some Western leaders may claim to give agency by listening to the needs of the Maldives in this context, they fail to hear, or recognize, the agency that “always already” exists within the broader Maldivian community. While the island nation’s government has successfully brought concerns over sea-level rise to international attention, they simultaneously have implemented adaptation measures that at times contradict Maldivian environmental knowledges. It is important to acknowledge that the government’s actions and policies do not speak for the entirety of the island community. Responding to the impacts of climate change is a nuanced and complex process that incorporates multiple perspectives and knowledge systems. There is, therefore, a level of urgency attached to the task of “trying always harder to interpret, to listen, and to translate” subaltern agency, in this case that of the greater

Maldivian population (Jazeel, 2014, 95). Doing so exposes the “dissimulation” of subaltern agency whenever we try to speak for it (Birla, 2010, 89). For Spivak, the attempt to recuperate an “authentic” subaltern agency is problematic because by doing so, she observes, the tendency to essentialize subaltern agency is practically unavoidable (Spivak, 1988, 254).

Essentialism

As this thesis discusses global South and indigenous epistemologies, it is important to consider how non-Western environmental knowledges are subject to essentialism. Focusing on a case study of the Maldives, I demonstrate how conceptions of and responses to climate change are nuanced and complex, and vary across the island community. Influenced by deconstructionism, literary scholar Homi Bhabha argues that “the problem with stereotypes [essentialism] is not their [its] inaccuracy but instead their [its] fixity, [its] their denial of the play of signifiers” as fixity “denies variation and change” (Parker, 2008, 282). Examining literary scholar Edward Said’s argument about Orientalism, Professor of English Robert Dale Parker (2008) expresses that the West, as a colonizing power, constructs a colonial discourse that produces widely accepted ideas about the East. This is largely due to the West thinking in terms of universal truths, essentializing the East as culturally inferior and reinforcing the hierarchical binary between the colonizer and the colonized.

Examining essentialism in the context of poststructural and feminist theory, intellectuals have argued against claims made by earlier generations of feminists. Specifically, scholars have opposed statements that women as a group are different because their “essence as women [is] fundamentally, undeniably different, and that therefore their ‘sisterhood’ would be a natural meeting place for all women” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, 76). Theorists attacked this essentialism

because of its assumption that one has to be a woman and experience life as a woman before one can analyze or understand women's oppression. Furthermore, Third World women and women of color criticized this assumption for its lack of intersectionality, denying the impact of imperialism, racism, and local histories that fundamentally differ from white women who live in the global North. Postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) claims that despite the intent to improve the lives of women in the Third World, Western feminist discourse often works as a colonizing force. Inherent essentialization produces a hierarchy, wherein Western women are conceived of as free and possessing agency, while Third World women are viewed as unfree and lacking agency (Mohanty, 1991, 72). Mohanty argues that in order to generate effective political strategies, Western feminist scholars must approach Third World women through a "context-specific differentiated analysis." She cites Muslim women of the Middle East's practice of wearing the veil as an example of this approach. As most women within this region wear some kind of veil, scholars from the West may interpret that this indicates that the sexual control of these women is a universal fact. However, as Mohanty states, "while there may be a physical similarity in the veils worn by women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the specific meaning attached to this practice varies according to the cultural and ideological context" (Mohanty, 67). Iranian middle-class women, she explains, veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution as a form of resistance to show their solidarity with working-class women. Mohanty's example reveals the shortcomings of essentialism, highlighting that resistance and agency are frequently subject to misinterpretation, or worse, lack of recognition and interpretation at all. Mohanty's critique of Western feminism also emphasizes the embodied and material effects of power/force relations. Foucault investigates the embodiment of social practices, and believes that "the body is molded by a great many distinct regimes" (Foucault,

1984, 87). While embodiment suggests a biological dimension, Foucault's sense of the body can be understood as more akin to a site of power or justice (Weiss et. al., 1999, 4). In Mohanty's critique, the veiled Iranian woman is the personification of subjugation from a Western feminist perspective. Her body represents a superiority of Western knowledge and value systems that claim to support equality and justice.

Politicians, activists, and scholars of the global North often hold peripheral understandings of the global South within a specific discourse, related to a colonial knowledge-power hierarchy. These conceptualizations, according to indigenous methodologies scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), are often "appropriated by the media and popular press to serve a more blatant ideological and racist agenda" (Tuhiwai Smith, 76). In the context of the climate change discourse in the Maldives, this agenda is two-fold. On the one hand, the Maldivian government has applied an environmental narrative of imminent deterritorialization to bring the threat of sea-level rise to international attention. Further analysis, however, reveals that at times, motivations of capitalist greed and economic prosperity influence the government's adaptation strategies. As I expand upon in Chapter Four, some Maldivian activists and scholars argue that the government utilizes an essentialized climate change discourse to promote adaptation policies that can contradict the actions and knowledges of island communities.

The concept of essentialism is discussed in different ways in the colonized, indigenous world. Tuhiwai Smith explains that the term is accepted as relating to humanism. In this use of the word, "claiming essential characteristics is as much strategic as anything else, because it has been about claiming human rights and indigenous rights" (Tuhiwai Smith, 77). However, in an indigenous framework, the essence of a person is also discussed in relation to concepts of spirituality. In this view, the essence of a person can be traced back to an Earth Mother. The

human person does not stand alone, but rather shares a relationship based on a shared “essence of life” with other animate and, in the Western epistemology, “inanimate” beings. Place, land, landscape, and other things in the universe are intrinsic to defining the very essence of a people, making for “a very different rendering of the term essentialism as used by indigenous peoples” (Tuhiwai Smith, 77).

Arguments of indigenous communities based on spirituality and environmental knowledge have been difficult for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. This contributes to the power-knowledge hierarchy that favors Enlightenment rationality. However, indigenous activists argue that imperialism cannot be struggled over only at the abstract level. “Imperialism still hurts,” asserts Tuhiwai Smith, as “the lived experiences of imperialism and colonialism contributes to another dimension... that indigenous people know and understand well” (Tuhiwai Smith, 20). Ultimately, the indigenous peoples’ project’s major priority is survival. This has entailed “survival from the effects of a sustained war with the colonizers, from the devastation of diseases, from the dislocation from lands and territories, [and] from the oppressions of living under unjust regimes; survival at a sheer basic physical level and as peoples with [our] own distinctive languages and cultures” (Tuhiwai Smith, 111). Focusing on indigenous epistemologies sheds light on the varying world views and alternative ways of knowing and being that still endure, despite Western attempts to undermine them in the name of rationality, progress, and development—in the name of capitalist greed.

Knowledge

In the context of international climate change discourse, the concept of knowledge invariably plays a role in shaping conversations on mitigation and adaptation policies. Referring

again to the work of Spivak, the basic claim and opening statement of “Can the Suabaltern Speak?” is that Western academic and scientific thinking is produced in order to support Western economic, or capitalist, objectives. Knowledge is “never innocent,” as it expresses the interests of its producers (Spivak, 1998). In the international environmental realm, this has consistently proven to be the case. Climate change deliberations at the global scale rely on empirical data as truth, considering scientists, economists, and politicians as the experts in determining the most effective avenue towards mitigation and adaptation solutions (Irwin, 1995; Lash et al. 1996; Dessai et al., 2004). The concept of climate change itself is thought of along these terms, with a heightened emphasis on how it will impact ecological viability, national economies, and political stability. Conversations at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are deadlocked in an excessive focus on greenhouse gas emissions, often ignoring the fundamental human aspects of the issue. Furthermore, the designated expertise of scientists, economists, and politicians creates an epistemological hierarchy, with indigenous knowledge systems considered as inferior to Western knowledge systems. A colonial hierarchy of knowledge persists, favoring Western conceptualizations of the individual, time, space, and the world.

Differences between indigenous and Western conceptions of the world have always provided stark contrasts (Tuhiwai Smith, 45). Within a framework of perpetual colonial power, indigenous beliefs are often regarded as mythological, abhorrent, and barbaric, in need of reformation to align with Western thought. However, perceptions of indigenous peoples are not always correlated with such negative connotations. In terms of environmental knowledge, indigenous peoples are often regarded in a highly romanticized and idealized manner. Viewing indigenous peoples as the “noble savage,” an idea attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-

1778), the natural world is linked to an interpretation of innocence and purity, and the developed world to corruption and decay. It is often thought that people who live close to nature would “possess ‘noble’ qualities from which the West could relearn and rediscover what had been lost” (Tuhiwai Smith, 51).

Indigenous considerations of the relationship between human beings and their natural world can contrast traditional Western Enlightenment epistemologies, in that they are commonly tied to a naturalistic explanation that links nature and life as one. Individual persons’ accounts are based on ideas which “often [begin] with a creation story to explain the presence of people in their specific environment and on understandings of human behavior as being connected to some form of external force, such as spiritually powerful beings, ‘gods,’ or sacred objects” (Tuhiwai Smith, 49). By contrast, within Western philosophy, human and nature are often seen to be in opposition to each other. Along similar lines, concepts such as time and space differ between indigenous and Western epistemologies. These concepts are significant for some indigenous languages because the language makes no clear or absolute distinction between the two. For example, the Maori word for time or space is the same (Tuhiwai Smith, 52). Western ideas compartmentalize time and space, with “mathematics [constructing] a language which attempts to define with absolute exactness the parameters, dimensions, qualities and possibilities” of these terms (Tuhiwai Smith, 53). Not only is the indigenous world represented in a particular way back to the West, but the indigenous world is “radically transformed” in the spatial image of the West. From a Western knowledge perspective, where human and nature are conceived of as separate, the land is viewed as something wild and untamed, something to be brought under control by Man. This dominance physically materializes as Man exploits the earth of its natural resources. Ideologically, by renaming the land, the West colonizes the indigenous people and the space they

have lived for generations. Throughout the world, land has been appropriated from indigenous cultures and then gifted back as reservations, “reserved pockets of land for indigenous people who once possessed all of it” (Tuhiwai Smith, 54). Knowledge systems, conceptions of the environment, and the land itself are intrinsic to the understanding of the self. The modern Western definition of space in terms of physical boundaries and political borders undermines this aspect of indigenous identity and allows the West to perpetuate colonial power relations in the present.

Citizenship, Deterritorialization, and Statelessness

In addition to one’s conception of the world, another significant component of an individual’s identity is the sense of belonging to a community. In the Westphalian model of the nation-state, this belonging translates to citizenship (Dower & Williams, 2002). Professor of international law Richard Falk (2002) argues that despite the influence of globalization, the individual “overwhelmingly continues to be caught in a statist web of rights, duties, and identities” (Falk, 21). This takes place at multiple levels: at one level, the right to mobility, to travel across borders, requires a passport issued by states to their citizens and to none others. The legality of mobility rests on Westphalian notions of territorial sovereignty. At another level, the duty to defend a country relates to the reciprocal privilege of citizenship status. Furthermore, citizenship allows individuals to participate in political action by granting the right to vote and engage in the electoral process. Finally, even in non-democratic states where power is exercised without constitutional constraint, “those who are treated as citizens are beneficiaries of certain rights of movement, travel and eligibility for government and military service that are generally denied to non-citizens” (Falk, 22). Although the concept of international human rights has received heightened attention over the past couple of decades, it is “impossible to deny the

centrality of Westphalian citizenship,” meaning that the state ultimately determines the quality of citizenship (Falk, 23).

While Falk maintains that this model of international world order persists, other authors claim that the Westphalian model of the state no longer holds much analytical weight, especially in light of emerging mobility systems (Blitz, 2011). In the context of global climate change, international politics scholar Brad Blitz (2011) considers the concept of deterritorialization. This term takes on specific meanings given the threat of environmental displacement and the creation of stateless populations in low-lying islands, such as the Maldives. Deterritorialization not only translates to the loss of national sovereignty in Westphalian terms, but also relates to the loss of the land itself, of connection, culture, and heritage (Blitz, 446). Blitz argues that the existing literature fails to consider environmental displacement in these terms, remaining “locked into a fundamentally statist discourse which emphasizes the relationship between individual rights and state protection of those rights” (Blitz, 438).

The work of Hannah Arendt is intimately tied to concepts of climate change-induced deterritorialization and the implications for citizenship. Arendt, a world-renowned political theorist, touches on the notion of statelessness in her first major book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt describes the rise of anti-Semitism and analyzes Nazism and Stalinism, two major totalitarian political movements of the first half of the 20th century. In one section, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” she considers the implications of denationalization for human rights in light of the European political climate post-WWI. Arendt contemplates how, when thousands of people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state, “the Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable” proved to be unenforceable (Arendt, 1951, 293). “No paradox [of contemporary politics],” she argues, “is

filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist” on the legitimacy of such rights, “which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves” (Arendt, 279). The rightless, or stateless, suffer two great losses; first, the loss of their homes, which means the loss of their entire social network into which they were born and in which they established their unique place in the world. The most detrimental aspect of losing a home, however, is the “impossibility of finding a new one” (Arendt, 293). The second great loss is that of government protection, not just the loss of legal status in their own, but in all countries (Arendt, 294). Arendt interprets this as a failing of the Westphalian model of world order, that for the first time in history, one could find themselves “thrown out of the family of nations altogether” (Arendt, 293).

As Arendt discusses the failings of the nation-state system, Tuhiwai Smith focuses on ways in which indigenous peoples resist this model’s inherent colonization through an indigenous research agenda (Tuhiwai Smith, 119-122). The “modern indigenous peoples’ project” is not focused on attaining equal rights through the statist mechanism of citizenship, but rather on the goal of “self-determination” for indigenous peoples. In a research agenda, self-determination becomes an objective of social justice “which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains” (Tuhiwai Smith, 120). This involves processes of transformation, decolonization, healing, and mobilization. Supporting Arendt’s claim of the decline of the nation-state, the declarations of indigenous peoples to a right of self-determination “further dilutes the notion of territorial sovereignty, establishing zones of self-government and autonomy within the boundaries of existing states” (Falk, 2002).

Despite the apparent weakening of the Westphalian system, international issues such as climate change are still discussed in a nation-state framework. Populations from low-lying island nations will have to work within this mechanism when they face inevitable deterritorialization. The prospect of statelessness “remains a status of severe deprivation, the very term implying the persistence of statism” (Falk, 22). Arendt maintains that the greatest calamity of this deprivation is the lack of belonging to a community altogether. The stateless’ dilemma is not that they are unequal before the law, “but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed by that nobody wants even to oppress them” (Arendt, 295). Those who find themselves stateless are not a liability or an “image of shame” for any particular government. They are nothing but human beings whose very innocence is their greatest misfortune: “innocence, in the sense of complete lack of responsibility [as a citizen], [is] the mark of their rightlessness as it [is] the seal of their loss of political status” (Arendt, 294). In the section that follows, I expand upon the notion of responsibility and how it relates to achieving justice for those who find themselves disproportionately impacted by climate change.

Responsibility and Justice

Though Arendt speaks of a loss of reciprocal responsibility between people and the state in the absence of citizenship status, other authors analyze responsibility to others in the modern era of globalization (Corbridge 1998; Smith, 2002; Massey, 2004; Ilcan, 2009; Noxolo et al., 2012). Scholars of geography Noxolo et al. (2012) define responsibility as a route to living ethically in a postcolonial world. They seek to “unsettle and complicate both linear/top-down versions of responsibility and more relational approaches, precisely because responsibility is messy, uncertain, and can be refused” (Noxolo et al., 419). In the era of globalization, various

meanings of the term have emerged: responsibility to those in the future, especially in relation to the environment (Armstrong, 2006; Hobson 2006; Pickerill, 2009); responsibility as accountability to a constituency, often “embedded in judicial notions or with a strongly political bent” (Atkins et al., 2006; Bickerstaff et al., 2008); and responsibility as postcolonial relationality, tuned to past and present inequalities of a postcolonial world (Power, 2009). Taking responsibility, claim Noxolo et al., is an ethical disposition that offers a way of taking account of inequalities and confronting the dynamics of power in an unequal world. However, it is precisely because of these conditions “that it is worth considering not only the possibilities of transcending these power differentials but also the problems associated with doing so” (Noxolo et al., 420). Philosopher Allen Thompson (2010) does just that as he morally evaluates the political actions related to climate negotiations. He asks whether the production of international treaties on global climate change overrides other duties towards the global poor. He contemplates if the position of “good enough responsibility,” establishing international environmental regulations that are essentially unenforceable, is better than doing nothing at all (Thompson, 195). Noxolo et al. expand on this, claiming that calls of responsibility in a “universal ethic of sameness” is often bolstered by problems of agency. The focus on moral agency “rests with the active giver at the cost of the receiver, who is thereby rendered a rather passive subject” which further perpetuates asymmetrical power relations (Barnett & Land, 2007; Noxolo et al., 2012). From a geographical and postcolonial perspective, Noxolo et al. interrogate this Eurocentric version of responsibility, arguing for an “intersubjective, place-based reading...which highlights that responsibilities ourselves over ‘here’ and to others over ‘there’ are not clearly demarcated” (Noxolo et al., 420).

Analyzing responsibility through the lens of postcolonial theory complicates dominant conceptualizations of the term, revealing how it may involve denial, refusal, and withdrawal

(Noxolo et al.). The global North's "desire to intervene" may be rejected in response to the inequality of postcolonial political connections. Noxolo et al. explain how "the greatest violence that colonialism did" was to render the colonized irresponsible by placing them in a position of dependence. The indigenous and communities of the global South can reclaim agency by "taking responsibility for one's self thorough refusal...by not permitting others to take responsibility for you" (Noxolo et al., 423). Establishing agency in this manner requires dialogue and constitutes a demand for a new form of connection to produce "new collectives." It "argues for inclusion into the collective of collective responsibility" which has "a spatial stretch and reaches beyond the individual to the wider world. This is a responsibility in which everyone is implicated," and cannot be passed on (Noxolo et al., 427).

Intimately tied to the notion of responsibility, particularly in the context of postcolonial relationships, is the concept of justice. The top-down liberal-humanist version of responsibility is framed within a global North idealized model of addressing injustices experienced by the Other (Thompson). In the context of climate change, these injustices are not bounded by time. They incorporate past and enduring colonial power relations, current degradation of the world's ecosystems, and the implications for future generations' access to natural resources and quality of life. Philosopher Alain Badiou (2005) asserts that justice cannot be defined, but is a philosophical word conditioned by politics, that "through which a philosophy designates the possible truth of a politics" (Badiou, 2005, 97). It can be conceived of as a theoretical name "for an axiom of equality" or "for the statist and social inconsistency of all egalitarian politics" (Badiou, 100; 104). Badiou claims that justice has nothing to do with the state. On the one hand, the state is indifferent to justice: in an effort for unification and consensus of thought, the state is opposed to politics that contain truth by defining truth for the collective (Badiou, 100). On the

other hand, justice is “serious trouble for the state,” as “political truth always shows up in moments of trial and turmoil” (Badiou, 101). For Badiou, justice is an abstract idea that is best imagined as a moment of being overcome by a truth. This moment is “always in subjectivity: ...in matters of justice, where inconsistency provides the sole support, it is true, as true as truth can be, that this depends on you” (Badiou, 105). In the context of climate change discourse, I build off Badiou’s conception of justice by considering the connection between truth and knowledge. In the case of the Maldives, I focus on the differing epistemologies between the state and the broader island community, and argue that the point at which conflicting truths contradict is the moment where justice is possible.

Conclusion

Reviewing the notions of subalternity, agency, resistance, power, essentialism, indigenous knowledge, citizenship, statelessness, responsibility, and justice in a postcolonial framework reveals that they are open to interpretation. Prominent theoretical scholars draw varying conclusions about what these terms mean, and how they can be applied to understanding the global communities’ most critical issues. This methodology section has skimmed the surface of this vast body of literature, laying the foundation for applying these concepts to an analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power in the context of the prevailing environmental discourse. The following section consists of a literature review that expands on these theoretical considerations in the context of global climate change.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Achieving Climate Justice within a Colonial Knowledge Hierarchy

Introduction

A growing number of scholars, environmentalists, scientists, and politicians have contributed to the growing body of literature on global climate change, given its increasing severity and urgency (Bachram, 2004; Fisher and Green, 2004; Lohmann, 2006; Lander et al., 2009; Ewing, 2013; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014). In response to a lack of meaningful outcomes from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), much of the recent literature critiques current international climate negotiation mechanisms and offers recommendations for how to improve efforts to formulate mitigation and adaptation policy (Lohmann, 2006; Lander et al., 2009; Ewing, 2013; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014). Scholars comment on the inherent colonial power relations embedded within international fora, with an emphasis on matters such as agency and environmental knowledge systems (Irwin, 1995; Lash et al., 1996; Dessai et al., 2004; Adger et al., 2009; Djoudi et al., 2016; Bachram, 2004; Chakrabarty, 2012; Oladipo, 2016; Stringer et al., 2008). Expanding on these concerns, other scholars highlight the tendency to victimize the global South within the dominant global climate change discourse (Kapur, 2002; Popovski & Mundy, 2012; Baldwin, 2012; Djoudi et al., 2016).

In this literature review, I present an overview of the scholarship on the role of developing nations in international climate change deliberations. I do so by first discussing the influence of colonial power relationships, particularly focusing on concepts of agency and conflicting knowledge systems. Drawing on these concepts, I consider the existing academic writing on victimization in the context of climate change, touching on concepts of citizenship, human rights, and justice. This review highlights both the most significant conclusions from the literature, and also illuminates its gaps. I reveal that the literature lacks an in depth critique of

how a hierarchy of environmental knowledge influences the dominant climate change discourse and results in contradiction. Furthermore, the existing academic scholarship pays scant attention to how communities located in the global South already exercise their agency in response to the threat of ecological degradation, and how communities can work at points of contradiction to resist the global climate change discourse.

Colonial Power Dynamics: A Consideration of Agency and Knowledge

Scholars, environmentalists, and political leaders alike have long critiqued the enduring colonial power dynamics inherent to international environmental policy discussions (Araujo Castro, 1972; Mohamad, 1992; Shiva, 2007). Political theorists Hayley Stevenson and John Dryzek (2014) argue that successful collective climate action can be achieved by reforming the current multilateral negotiation process, through what they call a “deliberative system” approach (Stevenson & Dryzek, 7). They advocate for a “deliberative democracy” in which “deliberation is...ideally non-coercive, capable of inducing reflection, connecting any particular claims to more general principles, and featuring a reciprocal effort to make sense of those who do not share one’s conceptual framework.” This communication must be “authentic, inclusive, and consequential,” where those affected by the collective decision, all parties, have the “right, opportunity, and capacity to participate (or be represented) in...[the] deliberation about the content of that decision” (Stevenson & Dryzek, 12). From their analysis of international climate policy negotiations, Stevenson and Dryzek conclude that uneven representation “emerges from material inequalities between the North and South,” and therefore some states are better resourced to participate in negotiations than others (Stevenson & Dryzek, 127). Pakistani scholar of international relations Adil Najam (2005), claims that this disparity creates a relational

identity of “the South” that is based on a sense of political exclusion rather than only material deprivation:

...these are countries that believe they have been ‘bypassed’ and view themselves as existing ‘on the periphery.’ Viewed as such, the South is not simply a raggedy bunch of poorer countries, it is a collective of countries that consider themselves to have been disempowered, marginalized and disenfranchised by the international system (Najam, 2005, 305).

Considering Spivak’s postcolonial philosophies, Najam’s perspective implies that the South experiences subalternity as a collective. Barred from international negotiations, they are blocked from the public sphere, disempowered by the inability to express agency (Chakravorty, et al., 73). While I agree that representatives of the global South have been disproportionately excluded from climate policy conversations, I challenge Najam’s inclination to classify the countries as a collective. In this thesis, I focus on the relationship between the Maldivian government and the broader island community, arguing that politicians’ actions can contradict the environmental knowledges of local Maldivians, and in turn perpetuate colonial power dynamics at the national level.

Echoing Najam, Heidi Bachram (2004), a founder of Carbon Trade Watch², deems the multilateral climate negotiation forum as a mechanism of colonialism (Bachram, 2004, 10). In addition to disenfranchisement, she explains that nations in the global South face extensive pressure to simultaneously mitigate climate change by developing their economies in a sustainable manner, while also adapting to the impacts of environmental degradation.

Developing nations, she argues, are expected to accept the aid and guidance of countries in the

² Carbon Trade Watch (CTW) is an organization that monitors emissions trading and supports movements impacted by the trade in greenhouse gases. CTW centers its work on bottom-up community-led projects and campaigns, with the objective of providing a durable body of research which ensures a holistic and justice-based analysis of climate change and environmental policies.

global North. This new form of “climate colonialism,” just as with the colonialism of old, “forces its interference through moral rhetoric” (Bachram, 2004, 19). Environmental leaders and politicians, primarily those from the global North, claim that encouraging the South to adopt sustainable practices provides the best avenue to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions and combating climate change.

In various critiques of international environmental policy discussions, scholars highlight that the unequal distribution of power hinders progress in developing successful mitigation and adaptation measures (Stevenson & Dryzek; Dessai et. al; Adger et. al, 2009; Djoudi et al., 2016; Bachram, 2004; Chakrabarty, 2012; Oladipo, 2016; Stringer et al., 2008). Djoudi et al. (2016) contend that because enduring colonial relations determine access to resources, information, and availability of options, such power dynamics influence communities’ ability to adapt to and respond to environmental change (Djoudi et al., 247; Tschakert 2012; Djoudi et al. 2013). “The recognition of unbalanced power relations must also necessarily involve acknowledging the resistance, contestation, and emancipation patterns that are intertwined with power” (Djoudi et al., 2016, 250). I argue that unbalanced power relations inform the climate change discourse, in which a hierarchy of knowledge favors a Western, scientific framework. Utilizing a case study of the Maldives in Chapter Four, I examine how the points at which multiple knowledge systems contradict one another is the point where resistance is possible, and where communities can subvert the dominant climate change discourse.

Knowledge and Agency

Conflicting environmental knowledge systems underlie much of the debate surrounding international climate policy (Araujo Castro, 1972; Guha, 1989; Mohamad, 1992; Shiva, 2015).

However, in recent literature, the discussion shifts towards a sort of validation of and appreciation for epistemologies that challenge the dominant Western environmental discourse (Robbins, 2000; Dessai et al., 2004; Stringer, et al., 2008; Adger et al., 2009; Chakravarty, 2012; Lauer & Matera, 2016). International climate change deliberations customarily establish empirical data as truth, regarding scientists and politicians as the experts in the decision-making process (Dessai et al., 2004).

According to geographer Paul Robbins (2000), the modern nation-state maintains a relationship with contemporary scientific thought that undermines non-modern, or indigenous, systems of environmental knowledge. The knowledge that prevails as truth dictates who controls resources, who dominates multilateral climate negotiations, and, ultimately, what form of strategy will be implemented to address global climate change (Robbins, 2000, 141).

To confront this disparity, some scholars seek to validate the environmental epistemologies of the South (Stringer et al., 2008; Lauer & Matera, 2016). Analyzing and encouraging a South-North knowledge flow, sustainability researcher Lindsay Stringer and geographers Chasca Twyman and Leah Gibbs (2008) draw on data from a workshop³ held in the UK to assess whether experiences in addressing agricultural hardships in the global South may be used to inform solutions to similar challenges in the North. Findings of the study suggest increasing evidence of the gains to be made in looking more widely to experiences and responses to environmental change from different sectors of society and parts of the world. The authors

³ This study draws from a workshop with the aim to assess whether experiences of addressing challenges faced by small-scale farmers in the global South may be used to inform solutions to similar challenges in the UK. The workshop involved the participation of 25 people from a variety of different groups, including academics, representatives of INGOs, small-scale grassroots farming NGOs from Europe, policymakers, and representatives from international institutions.

conclude that “harnessing this potential” could lead to new and creative solutions (Stringer et al., 248). While this position recognizes the value of alternative knowledge systems, Stringer et al.’s study fails in that it perpetuates the modern/scientific vs. traditional/indigenous knowledge dichotomy it seeks to challenge. The workshop upon which the authors draw their conclusions fails to adequately represent the voices of small-scale farmers from the global South. Taking place in the UK, the discussion-based workshop involved the participation of representatives from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) rather than the farmers themselves. This study serves as just one example of where the current literature on incorporating developing world epistemologies into global climate change discussions falls short. Employing experts from political, environmental, and non-profit organizations to speak for communities of the global South obscures the knowledges and agency of those communities. This in turn perpetuates an image of the global South as the naïve, vulnerable, and dependent Other in the face of combating climate change.

Other scholars seek to challenge the North-South epistemological dichotomy. In their study,⁴ anthropologists Matthew Lauer and Jaime Matera (2016) counter common conceptualizations of indigenous knowledge that “emphasize its normative, shared, inter-generationally transmitted characteristics rather than its heterogeneity, emergence, and practical application” (Lauer & Matera, 2016, 33). Lauer and Matera examine indigenous island communities’, specifically within the Solomon Islands, perceptions of environmental change.

⁴ “This study empirically assesses individual variation in the ability of Solomon Islanders to detect ecological change following the alteration of local, shallow-water, marine environments by a major tsunami. Authors compare the results of marine science surveys with local ecological knowledge. Results show that villagers with salaried work who are at the intersection of local and global knowledge were the most adept at detecting tsunami-induced changes” (Lauer & Matera, 2016)

Their findings suggest that *some* local people are highly capable of detecting ecological change. However, they caution against “importing assumptions” about the nature of indigenous ecological knowledge and who are the most knowledgeable local experts. Understanding indigenous ecological knowledge is a complex, multifaceted process. Keeping this in mind can help encourage more inclusive, sensitive, and effective environmental policies that contribute to the resilience of indigenous communities. While Lauer and Matera’s study seeks to challenge the essentialization of indigenous knowledge, it does so by drawing a comparison with Western scientific understandings of ecological change. This approach, again, perpetuates the epistemological dichotomy between environmental knowledges of the global North and global South. It measures the validity of Solomon Islanders’ ability to detect ecological change by its congruency with scientific surveys. This implies that in order for communities of the South to successfully combat climate change, they must do so in a manner which is recognizable within a framework of Western empirical understanding.

Intimately tied to the recognition of differing epistemologies, human agency plays a fundamental role in the overarching matter of environmental degradation. Many environmental scholars now consider that we live in the age of the “Anthropocene”—a geological epoch in which humans act as a consequential geophysical force that determines the stability of the global ecosystem (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) reiterates this statement, but questions how we think of this “collective” human agency in the era of the Anthropocene: who is the we in this process? Does this humanity, as a geophysical force, include populations of the global South (Chakrabarty, 10)? In the recent critical literature on international environmental policy, authors increasingly highlight the important role that the perspectives and actions of people from developing nations can play in climate negotiations

(Kapur, 2002; Chakravarty, 2012; Popovski & Mundy, 2012; Jorgensen, 2014; Oladipo, 2016). Drawing upon focus group discussions he held with farmers in Nigeria, scholar of business Jimoh Ayanda Oladipo (2016) investigates local perspectives of climate change. He claims that farmers are said to represent a class of people at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, and that they “can...be expected to be at the lowest level of awareness of [the *causes* of] climate change” in terms of how the issue is scientifically defined at the international level (Oladipo, 2016, 123). However, analysis of focus group discussions reveals that farmers possess a remarkable perceptiveness to the *impacts* of climate change, ostensibly due to the phenomenon’s direct effect on their survival. “Farmers identified their own responsibility” as critical in safeguarding their source of livelihood, sustenance, and economy, and as the most effective avenue towards implementing adaptation policies (Oladipo, 128).

Cultural anthropologist Nanna Jordt Jorgensen (2014) echoes this call for self-determination, but reconsiders Oladipo’s characterization of farmers as unable to comprehend the origins of environmental degradation. Labeling communities of the global South as marginalized, she argues, risks concealing their agency and the ways in which they navigate their position of marginality and indigeneity (Jorgensen, 2014, 98). In the context of ecological understanding, vulnerable populations enact their agency in two distinct ways: first, they challenge the dichotomy between modern and traditional knowledge by finding value in both positions. What people do in these gaps between modern Western and traditional indigenous knowledge “challenges our views of marginalization, demonstrating that while the label ‘marginalized’ can be constraining, it can also be enabling, opening new opportunities for individuals and groups” (Jorgensen, 98). Second, they utilize knowledge of historical and contemporary political developments to gain access to resources and influence. This may mean

embracing the prescribed identity of helpless vulnerability in order to receive financial and material aid. After all, Jorgenson conveys, indigenous communities should be “expected [to act] just as other humans, sometimes in self-interest and sometimes defending idealistic values” (Jorgensen, 108). In the context of climate change discourse, I focus on similar gaps between modern Western and traditional indigenous knowledge. Building off Jorgensen’s argument that moments of struggle between the two can be enabling and open up new opportunities, I argue that these opportunities can serve as points of resistance to the dominant climate change discourse, a discourse founded in a hierarchy of Western knowledge. In these moments, those most marginalized exercise their agency, challenging conceptions of climate vulnerability.

Citizenship, Human Rights, and Justice

In recent academic literature, scholars writing on the consequences of climate change increasingly critique the normalization of defining developing nation communities as vulnerable and defenseless peoples in desperate need of assistance from the global North (Kapur, 2002; Popovski & Mundy, 2012; Baldwin, 2012; Djoudi et al., 2016). Legal scholar Ratna Kapur (2002) comments on the manner in which the “Third World subject” is commonly understood as the “real/authentic victim subject” (Kapur, 2002, 2). Climate victimization is further displaced onto a “Third World and First World” divide, which, she argues, resurrects the native subject and justifies imperialist interventions. There are both positive and negative aspects to this tendency. On the one hand, the identity of the victim subject provides a shared location to speak from (Kapur, 5). At the international level, this has proven to be the case. The Maldives and other Small Developing Island States (SIDS) have been incredibly vocal and have increasingly raised international awareness of the impending risks they face due to rising sea levels. On the other

hand, however, the perception of the victim subject is one that is based on essentialism and overgeneralized claims about the Third World. This conceptualization “invites remedies and responses that have little to do with promoting” the interests and needs of specific communities. Interventions of this kind “risk denying [the subject] the agency that they in fact demonstrate” (Kapur, 36).

Legal scholar Vesselin Popovski and victimologist Kieran Mundy (2012) expand on this notion of the Third World victim subject in a paper in which they seek to define the “climate change victim.” The actual harm from an environmental assault, they claim, “only becomes a victimization when escalating personal insecurity and vulnerability block the normal potential of the affected person to resist intervention” (Popovski & Mundy, 2012, 8). Along these lines, the climate change victim can also be regarded as a victim of human rights violations, perpetrated by state action or inaction. The climate change victim’s behavior, although restricted by environmental and political assaults, “can be instrumental.” Affected people may strengthen their resilience, resist displacement, or adapt to weather extremes on their own terms. In addition, “climate change victimhood can claim personal identity— “I am a victim of changed climate conditions” as a bottom-up statement that exists independently of normative or institutional structure” (Popovski & Mundy, 14). Kapur, Popovski and Mundy highlight the significance of recognizing and protecting individual and community agency in the context of responding to environmental degradation. The victim can, in turn, be an agent of their own de-victimization by adopting measures to secure their behavioral space.

Geographer Andrew Baldwin (2012) considers the struggle of the climate victim under severe circumstances. He writes about the situations in which the victim loses the very physical space that they fight to protect, the endangered space that constructs their very identity as the

victim subject in the first place. Baldwin seeks to address this paradox by considering “environmental citizenship.” This concept can be understood “through normative political theory,” framed by notions such as duty, rights, and justice. The environmental citizen’s political meaning is “constituted in relation to some form of colonial ‘Other’” (Baldwin, 2012, 626). Who is this Other in the context of the environmental and global climate change? Baldwin argues that the climate migrant represents the environmental citizen’s alterity. Given the prospect of rising sea levels, increased drought conditions, and heightened intensity of natural disasters, the climate change migrant, says Baldwin, has become an important figure in climate change discourse. However, many of these scientific predictions have proven unreliable, meaning that the figure itself remains an ambiguous and hard-to-define identity (Baldwin, 628). This suggests that the climate change migrant is not only a subject without a physical home, and therefore without citizenship status in the context of the nation-state. The climate change migrant is also a subject without an outwardly comprehensible identity. This adversity becomes internalized when a person loses the land upon which their ancestral and personal identity was founded, further perpetuating their Otherness. Baldwin concludes with a reflection of the climate migrants’ place in the world. As a destabilizing subject, the climate migrant “bears down on the present from the future” (Baldwin, 637). The threat of statelessness leaves the rest of the world to confront questions of human rights, identity, and belonging that are assumed a given of the territorially-defined nation-state. This is deeply troubling as this stateless Other, or “enemy—the very personification of potential—has committed no wrongs” (Baldwin, 637). The climate migrant finds themselves in a unique position of inevitable deterritorialization, in conflict with environmental citizenship, and political ambiguity that undermines the inalienability of basic human rights.

Human Rights and Climate Justice

The prospect of wide-spread environmental degradation, increased agricultural hardship, and deterritorialization has brought scholars to further consider the role of human rights and justice (Posner et al., 2000; Limon, 2009; Chakrabarty, 2012; Fisher, 2015; Shiva, 2015). Geographer Susannah Fisher (2015) calls for an attentiveness to the “emerging geographies of climate justice,” particularly in the global South where climate change impacts intersect with uneven development and environmental concerns (Fisher, 2015, 73). This requires a reexamination of the scale upon which climate change is conceptualized. Fisher argues that the disparity between global and local discourses on adaptation and mitigation solutions inhibits climate justice. “The space for climate justice claims,” she argues, is shaped within an international framework, “both in terms of it being a global problem, and having global solutions, whereas the justice claims arising from the communities would be better scaled at other levels of governance” (Fisher, 80). Despite the world-wide span of climate change, its impacts are mediated through local adversities including rising sea levels, drought, and food scarcity. The existence of other explanations, such as freak weather events or inequitable resource distribution, means that climate change may not always stand as a mobilizing discourse at the grassroots level. This highlights a tension in “negotiating the reality of local-based struggles” while “using a global narrative that can supersede struggles and construct a wider politics” (Fisher, 76). To support this claim, Fisher draws upon her study that evaluates how environmental narratives are translated across scales.⁵ When written charters summarizing local

⁵ The study is based on 10 months of fieldwork in India in 2008-2009, and 2 weeks of research during COP15 in Copenhagen. The stakeholder testimonies and focus group discussions from a set of participatory events before COP15 were analyzed to identify key themes across the events and testimonies. This analysis was compared with political documents and charters coming from the events to identify differences in emphasis between the local stories and political translation.

ecosystem hearings in Delhi were brought to the UNFCCC deliberations, the documents introduced two concepts that were not mentioned in the original testimonials; “local people as resilient” and “local people as living in harmony with nature.” Fisher attributes this to the charters’ authors’ awareness that the hearings would feed into the UNFCCC process and specific organizational ideologies and histories. This alteration of framing from the local to the global scale can “lead to perceived local injustices being redefined as part of a wider national injustices (per capita emissions, for example) to ensure a match with the global discourses of the UNFCCC” (Fisher, 79). Multiple claims for developmental and environmental justice are sidelined, as the re-scaling privileges those framings that will resonate with an international audience. To overcome the obstacle of developing adaptation and mitigation solutions across conflicting scales, Fisher suggests a reconceiving of climate justices as “multi-scalar with multiple entry points” where the interaction between these scales is made explicit (Fisher, 80). This opens up the space for global climate change to be conceptualized as a local problem with the possibility of local solutions, and for the international negotiation process to be viewed as a mechanism to safeguard human lives, homes, rights, and livelihoods. Furthermore, a local lens can highlight the agency that communities of the global South already exercise in the face of ecological degradation.

Conclusion

A vast amount of academic literature comments on the relationship between the global North and South in the context of the dominant climate change discourse. In this thesis, I draw attention to the manner in which this discourse is informed by and promotes a colonial epistemological hierarchy. Focusing on a case study of the Maldives, I argue that differing

environmental knowledges result in contradictory views and actions towards adaptation strategies. The existing scholarship lacks an explicit critique how a hierarchy of environmental knowledge influences the dominant climate change discourse and results in contradiction. There remains a hole in the academic literature in terms of locating agency in response to environmental degradation that may not be recognized as such, and how recognition of this agency can disrupt the dominant discourse. This thesis will fill this gap by considering how communities can work at points of contradiction to resist the global climate change discourse. To do so, I examine a case study of local perceptions, actions, and voices in response to the impacts of climate change in the Maldives. Focusing on differing adaptation strategies between the government and the broader island population, I will highlight the points of contradiction that stem from a colonial hierarchy of environmental knowledge, and how adaptation strategies that bridge the gap between isolated viewpoints can serve as a means of resistance to the dominant climate change discourse.

CHAPTER 3: Understanding the Maldives from Multiple Epistemological Frameworks

Introduction

The primary case study of this thesis returns to where the paper began; at the planet's first underwater cabinet meeting. On October 17, 2009, former President of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, convened with other government officials to sign a declaration calling for global carbon emissions reductions. The unique plea for climate change action drew world-wide attention. Though some commentators brushed the meeting off as a media stunt, it nonetheless highlighted the scientific consensus that the Maldives, and other low-lying island nations, may become uninhabitable by the end of the 21st century due to climate change (Gagain, 2012).

The Maldivian government has implemented various mitigation and adaptation strategies throughout past years. These include a declaration to become carbon neutral by 2020, the construction of an artificial island in 2004, and relocation policies to move communities from outlying islands to safer sites throughout the past few decades. The Maldivian government has been internationally lauded for such a progressive approach to climate change. However, these actions have, at times, contradicted the environmental knowledges of the broader island community (Kothari, 2014; Mohamed, 2017). Concealed by the guise of addressing climate change, the Maldivian government has arguably implemented certain policies, such as forced relocation, to meet their own capitalism-fueled development agenda. This disrupts the livelihoods of island communities by forcing them from their homes, and perpetuates colonial power relations at the national level.

Expanding on this case study, I argue that the dominant climate change discourse, fueled by a hierarchy of environmental knowledges, promotes colonial power relations and results in points of contradiction. The research is split into two parts: in this chapter, I will provide

background of the Maldives' political history and experience of climate change. I will then analyze two primary sources to provide a context for understanding certain aspects of the Maldivian society within differing epistemological frameworks. The first document, Francois Pyrard's travel log of the Maldives, serves as an outsider's perspective of the 17th century island society. Pyrard's writings provide a historical account of the Maldives through a colonial perspective. The second source, an anthology of the Maldivian oral tradition from 2012, serves as a contemporary lens to understand how Maldivian communities transmit oral knowledge. In Chapter Four, I apply these sources to explicate how certain Maldivian knowledges, traditions, and values come into conflict with government-enforced adaptation strategies.

Background

The Republic of the Maldives, located southwest of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, is comprised of twenty-six major atolls and 1,192 small islands. With an average elevation of only 1.5 meters above sea-level, the Maldives has the lowest average elevation of any country in the world (Gagain, 2012, 84). The Maldivian people are known as *Dhivehin*, or "islanders," in the native language of *Dhivehi* (Romero-Frias, 2012, xxi). The roughly 380,000 individuals are unevenly dispersed among 200 islands. 38% reside in the congested capital of Malé, and only twenty islands comprise of more than 2,000 inhabitants (Romero-Frias, xxi). Apart from the government's monumental underwater meeting, the Maldives is best known for its tropical shores and stunning coral reefs. The marine ecosystems are home to over 1,000 species of fish, over twenty-one species of whales and dolphins, and five species of sea turtles (Shareef, 2010). The shores are dotted with lush coconut trees, white sandy beaches, and vibrant flowers (Sujanapal & Sankaran, 2016). The archipelago's beautiful scenery draws visitors from around

the world. In 2015, more than 1.2 million people visited the Maldives (Ministry of Tourism, 2015). The economy is heavily dependent on tourism, which accounts for almost 30% of the GDP (Arnall & Kothari, 2015, 201).

Political History

Despite the Maldives' reputation of immaculate paradise, the country faces a number of socioeconomic and political challenges. 16% of *Dhivehis* live below the poverty line, with an unemployment rate of 20% (Arnall & Kothari, 2015). The recent history of the Maldives has been defined by political turmoil and corruption. In 1978, ten years after the island nation gained independence from the British protectorate, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom began his thirty-year tenure as president. Under Gayoom's rule, tourism flourished and foreign contact increased, granting the ruler the nickname "CEO of the Maldives" as he "ran the country like a giant tourism corporation" (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). Gayoom's economic achievements, however, were coupled with police brutality and human rights abuses. The President won six consecutive elections without opposition. His regime strictly limited citizens' freedom of expression and assembly. During the first three months of the regime's rule, the government arrested more than 480 political prisoners (Shenk, 2011). Following a series of coup attempts (in 1980, 1983, and 1988), public disdain for the government reached a tipping point in 2003, spurring the democracy movement. When prison guards beat a young prisoner to death, the brutally tortured corpse of 19-year-old Evan Naseem was left on display, resulting in widespread public outcry (Shenk). The capital city of Malé erupted in riots. Angry mobs stoned the Parliament building and burned police stations. The government responded by using tanks to control the crowds and declaring a state of emergency due to the unrest. The "darkest moment"

of the democracy movement, now known as “Black Friday,” took place on August 13, 2004, when reformists and prodemocracy campaigners gathered in the capital’s main square with the apparent blessing of Gayoom. Suddenly, the National Security Service cleared the square, arresting and beating thousands of people in the process. Women and children were savagely beaten, and many were taken into solitary confinement, where they remained for months (Shenk).

Four months later, in the midst of political turmoil, the Maldives endured yet another calamity. On the morning of December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami ravaged the island nation. The large wave temporarily submerged an estimated 40% of the country’s land mass, killed eighty-two people, and destroyed the homes of some 15,000 *Dhivehins* (Gagain, 84). The catastrophic event virtually eliminated the basic infrastructure of many inhabited islands. Within an hour, the damages wiped out around 50% of the national GDP (Shenk). Though the Gayoom regime’s humanitarian abuses persisted throughout previous decades, the tsunami is what ultimately brought international attention to the Maldivian government’s corruption. European donors responded to the natural disaster by offering \$100 million in aid, conditional on subsequent political reform (Shenk). President Gayoom surprised many by following through with his reform package and a new constitution that was ratified in August of 2008. The country’s first freely contested elections were held later that year. Mohamed Nasheed, an outspoken journalist and activist of democracy who had been arrested sixteen times under Gayoom’s rule, won 53.65% of the vote and become the Maldives’ first democratically elected leader (Brechenmacher & Mendis, 2015).

The Maldives and Climate Change

The 2004 tsunami did not only serve as a political turning point, but also provided an important reminder of the archipelago's environmental situation. Scientists, environmentalists, and political leaders have deemed the Maldives one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change in the world (Swanson, 2015). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) expects that sea-level rise will exacerbate inundation, storm surge, erosion, and other coastal hazards that island nations face on a regular basis (Gagain, 85). These impacts would undoubtedly threaten vital infrastructure, settlements, and facilities that support the livelihood of island communities. For the Maldives specifically, a 0.49 meter rise in sea-level would mean that significant portions of the country would be severely flooded by 2100 (Gagain, 80). At such a rate of sea-level rise, 15% of the capital island of Malé would be submerged by 2025, with 50% submerged by 2100 (Gagain, 80).

Given the threats posed by climate change, former President Mohamed Nasheed assertively advocated for global action throughout his four years in office. In 2009, Nasheed proclaimed that the Maldives would become carbon-neutral within the following decade by switching completely to renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power (Clark, 2009). Leading by example, the Maldives, which accounts for only 0.003% of global greenhouse gas emissions, wanted to prove that "carbon-neutral development is not just possible, it is in the economic self-interest" (Jaschik, 2014, 281). During his presidency, Nasheed attended various international environmental negotiation meetings to advocate for his nation's survival. At the 2009 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), he tirelessly pushed country leaders to take the Maldives' sinking fate into consideration (Shenk, 2011).

In light of slow global progress at the international level, the Maldivian government has promoted various climate change adaptation strategies. In 2004, former President Gayoom inaugurated Hulhumalé, an artificial island constructed by the government and developed by a government owned corporation called Housing Development Corporation (Housing Development Corporation). Hulhumalé cost roughly \$63 million to build. Short-term goals include expanding the Maldives' fishing and tourism industries, as well as remedying intense population congestion in nearby Malé (Gagain, 86). In the long-term, the artificial island is considered a potential refuge for *Dhivehins* whose homes become uninhabitable due to rising sea levels (Housing Development Corporation).

In addition to the construction of Hulhumalé, the Maldivian government has promoted a variety of relocation policies to remove those living on at-risk islands. In his first public address, former President Nasheed announced the establishment of the "Sovereign Wealth Fund" to purchase a new homeland for Maldivians as an insurance policy in the event of wholesale displacement (Kothari, 2014, 135). The leader's speech received widespread backlash, as many *Dhivehins* voiced concerns about leaving their homeland (Kothari; Arnall & Kothari, 2015; Betzold, 2015). The government has also implemented initiatives that involve internal population relocation. Nasheed re-packaged the previous administration's "Safe Island Strategy," which was met by considerable resistance, as the "Resilient Island Approach," in which communities would be encouraged to migrate to safer islands through incentives of improved social services and transportation networks (Kothari, 2014, 136). The policy has been met by similar opposition. Some local activists and scholars assert that the government utilizes global environmental narratives to promote unfavorable relocation programs as climate change adaptation measures (Farbotko, 2005; Sovacool, 2011; Kothari, 2014; Mohamed, 2017). These arguments will be

outlined in Chapter Four. However, to build context for understanding *Dhivehin*'s perspectives and actions in response to climate change in the present, this chapter will provide a critical introduction to understanding aspects of Maldivian culture, values, and local understandings of the natural world.

Narratives of the Maldives

In order to build a historical and cultural context for understanding *Dhivehin* responses to and perspectives on climate change, I critically analyze two primary documents; François Pyrard's (1619) 17th century travel log of the Maldives and Xavier Romero-Frias' (2012) anthology of the Maldivian oral tradition. I draw upon their similarities and differences to examine themes such as responses to the environment, societal values, island mobility, and perspectives on material wealth. I hold that neither Pyrard nor Romero-Frias' account is more authentic than the other. Both documents are accompanied by their own distinct limitations. I utilize the documents to understand Maldivian society through two divergent epistemological lenses.

Pyrard's early 17th century account of the Maldives serves as a historical record of life on the islands. Given Pyrard's position as an outsider from a Western nation, I treat his writing as a narrative of Maldivian society, rather than an objective truth. In the context of my thesis, Pyrard's travel log represents an understanding of the *Dhivehin* people from a Western epistemological framework. It is worth noting that Pyrard's account comes 400 years before any conversations on global climate change. Though his writings undoubtedly contain colonial undertones, I analyze this source in comparison with the Maldivian oral tradition to understand the Maldives from the lens of multiple knowledge systems, to examine how the dominant

climate change discourse influences power relations, and to build context for understanding local responses to the forces of nature.

Though mediated by an outsider, Romero-Frias' anthology of the indigenous Maldivian oral tradition provides a lens for understanding how certain *Dhivehin* communities speak about their societal traditions, values, and contemporary issues. Critically analyzing Pyrdard and Romero-Frias' works, I focus on recurrent themes, including the force of the ocean, the concept of greed, patterns of migration, and the significance of the coconut palm. I establish differences and similarities between the two works, and argue that both accounts are pivotal to understanding current responses to environmental adversity in the Maldives. In doing so, I demonstrate how approaching a topic through multiple epistemological frameworks results in points of both overlap and contradiction. Neither account serves as an objective truth, nor is one more authentic than the other. Each encompass their own limitations. Both are constructs of their time, mediated through differing epistemological frameworks. I use the documents to build a narrative about how communities in the Maldives have confronted nature as a force in the past, and to examine current conceptions of and responses to climate change in the Maldives.

In the following section, I demonstrate how Pyrdard's colonial perspective of Maldivian history informs the present, examining the manner in which it corresponds with and juxtaposes certain *Dhivehin* values in the context of the dominant climate change discourse. This critical analysis will begin with a review of the environmental themes of Pyrdard's writings.

Colonial Knowledge: François Pyrdard's 17th Century Account of the Maldives

One of the earliest accounts of the Maldives is found in the travel journal "The Voyage of François Pyrdard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil" (1619).

The journal documents the French navigator's ten-year sojourn (1601-1611) through the title countries. On July 2, 1602, Pyrdard and a small group of sailors were shipwrecked on South Maalhosmadulu Atoll of the Maldives. After being "taken captive" by the Maldivians, they lived five years as "unwilling guests" on the islands, spending most of their time on Malé (Oaten, 1991, 123). During his stay, Pyrdard learned the local *Dhivehi* language, allowing him a unique insight into Maldivian society never before experienced by a European. In his travel log, he wrote extensive notes on the island environment and *Dhivehin* people, customs, and history (Ames & Love, 2003).

Many of Pyrdard's observations of the Maldivian inhabitants focus on their interaction with the natural environment. In terms of natural resources found on the islands, Pyrdard was particularly impressed by the coco or Indian nut, which the locals call *ruh*. "The islands supply many neighboring countries" with the *ruh*, he explains, "and the natives there know better than others how to extract its substance and the commodities it yields. It is, indeed, the most wondrous manna imaginable; for this single tree can supply everything necessary to man, furnishing him in plenty" (Pyrdard, 1619, 113). Pyrdard's appreciation for the *Dhivehin*'s resourcefulness is further evident in his account of their interaction with the marine ecosystem. He notes fishing as the "chief and most common employment" of the locals, "wherein all the people indifferently in all parts of the Maldives take part; nor are there only certain persons of this employment, nor certain places for it, reserved from the public" (Pyrdard, 188). The French voyager conveys his astonishment of the *Dhivehin*'s remarkable awareness of their ocean environment. He is impressed that the locals do not fear the sea, and are "exceedingly adroit in managing...their boats, being brought up to it from their youth, as well the great lords as the poorest of the people; not to understand these matters would be esteemed a disgrace" (Pyrdard,

100). “In truth,” Pyrrard claims, the people of the Maldives are “half fish, so accustomed are they to the sea” (Pyrrard, 101). The French navigator’s impressions of the *Dhivehin*’s intimate understanding of the natural world speaks to the divergence between Western and indigenous knowledge systems (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). As opposed to Pyrrard’s colonial epistemological framework where humans and nature are perceived of as separate entities, his writings suggest that *Dhivehin*’s lives are closely linked with their surroundings. The *ruh*, fish, and other natural commodities not only sustain their livelihoods, but also play an intrinsic role in Maldivian identity. Differing environmental knowledge systems continue to influence life in the Maldives, particularly within the context of climate change. In a Chapter Four, I elaborate on how conflicting epistemologies contribute to a knowledge hierarchy motivated by the dominant climate change discourse. I argue that this hierarchy perpetuates colonial power relations and contradicts certain *Dhivehin* responses to environmental adversity.

Related to a familiarity with the marine environment, Pyrrard also remarks on the *Dhivehin*’s movement across the ocean and impressive ability to traverse the treacherous waters. According to Pyrrard, the islanders frequently traveled throughout the atolls to trade crafts and connect with distant communities. Each island had its unique specialty to offer, and craftsmen would sometimes leave their home for more than a year to deal their goods (Pyrrard, 114). He expresses bewilderment, describing the Maldivians as “wondrous clever at avoiding [shallow reefs] and in getting out of the most dangerous passages without harm. I have often seen” he describes, “them pass through the midst of reefs, shoals, and rocks, by channels so narrow that there was room only for the boat” (Pyrrard, 99). Pyrrard attributes impressive navigation skills to the *Dhivehins* themselves, noting that “they steer only by eyesight and without compass, except when they go beyond their own islands on a long voyage” (Pyrrard, 100). The historically-bound

nature of *Dhivehin* mobility holds significant weight in the context of contemporary climate change discussions. The prevailing narrative portrays the Maldivian community as vulnerable in the face of sea-level rise-induced deterritorialization. This framing ignores the fact that the *Dhivehin* people have migrated throughout the island region for centuries (Kapur, 2002; Baldwin, 2012; Popovski & Mundy, 2012). I argue that this outwardly imposed climate refugee identity obscures the agency of local Maldivians, excluding the significance of their actions from the climate change adaptation conversation.

For the locals, Pyrrard observes, ocean migration is linked with ritual and spirituality. When Maldivians are at sea and caught in a storm, “they make vows to him who rules the winds, who is called not God, but King... and there is no island but has a *siare*, which is a place dedicated to the King of the winds, where those who have escaped from danger come to make offering daily” (Pyrrard, 175). Furthermore, if they had difficulties launching their ships, the islanders would make an animal offering, usually a bird, to the King of the sea. While on voyages they would partake in various prayers and ceremonies, for “they dread above all things to offend the kings of the winds and of the sea” (Pyrrard, 178). Pyrrard comments on the significance of prayer not only in terms of sea faring success, but more broadly in the context of *Dhivehin* daily life:

Every day of the week they go at daybreak to the temple, and for this they give a reason according to their belief, that the world is flat, and not round, and that there is a wall of copper all around which prevents the world from being submerged by the waters which encompass it, and that the devil, the enemy of the human race, is at hand all night trying to pierce and undermine this work, and when the day breaks he must nearly have worked a hole. By reason whereof all men...go at break of the day to the mesquites to make their orisons, for without prayers the world would perish (Pyrrard, 127).

Completing this daily prayer was extremely important, for “if it were known that a man did not say the prayers at all, no one would eat or hold intercourse with him: that is all the punishment

that would befall him, and such a one, they would say, was not a good Mussulman [Muslim]” (Pyrard, 128). The vast majority of *Dhivehins* therefore, went out of their way to make these rituals a part of their daily routine, no matter their other priorities.

Pyrard’s description not only highlights the significance of spirituality in Maldivian society, but also conveys a certain *Dhivehin* worldview pertaining to humans’ place in the global environment. The wall of copper story expresses a long-held understanding that the ocean, as a force of nature, has the potential to submerge the islands. It requires active human work, in this case daily prayer, to prevent such a catastrophe from occurring. Though 400 years before any discussion of climate change, the story reveals that throughout history, people of the Maldives have maintained a key awareness of the perilousness of their island environment. In the present, *Dhivehins* continue to struggle for survival in the face of rising sea levels. However, the ocean no longer represents a pure force of nature. The fight in the Maldives is not one of humans versus nature, but rather one of humans versus humans. It is due to the consequences of human work that *Dhivehins* find themselves in the current calamitous situation. Intimately linked to colonial power relations, the image of a drowning island nation now represents the careless actions of the global North. It will require a different type of active human work to prevent wholesale submergence.

Throughout his travel account, Pyrard expresses his fond impression of the Maldivian people. He notes various positive attributes, claiming that “they are valiant, and courageous, and skilled in arms” (Pyrard, 106). He describes them as “adroit,” “industrious,” “quick and apprehensive, subtle and crafty in most of their actions” (Pyrard, 190). Pyrard speaks from a place of admiration when he writes about Maldivian’s remarkable knowledge of the ocean and ability to traverse the rough waters. He recognizes the differences between his home culture and

Dhivehin society, and for the most part conveys a positive view of the people who “held him captive” for five years (Pyrard, xxv).

Despite Pyrard’s intimate integration with and knowledge of *Dhivehin* culture, his writings reveal a pervasive colonial imaginary. He acknowledges the large number of foreigners that inhabit some of the northern islands who “enrich the country and tend to civilize it” (Pyrard, 105). A colonial notion of Maldivian inferiority is evident throughout the travel account. Discussing his observations of the island nation’s natural resources, Pyrard proclaims that “this great abundance makes living easy, and everything cheap... so that there is no country in India where foreigners enrich themselves so fast” (Pyrard, 117). The *Dhivehins* have a proverb, he explains, that “they themselves will never get rich, but only the foreigners. In my opinion, it is the easy means of living which renders them indolent and negligent, and this prevents them getting rich; for the most of them care only for the wherewithal to live, without ambition, desire, or trouble for aught beside” (Pyrard, 117). This colonial discourse portrays the native as lazy and unwilling to improve their livelihood conditions, and thus inferior to Western culture and knowledge. Furthermore, Pyrard’s description highlights divergent conceptions of property and wealth. He comes from a Western individualistic perspective that understands a person’s value in terms of material accumulation. Within this epistemological framework, one’s position in society is frequently dictated by their personal property (Hobbes, 1651). In *Dhivehin* culture, expressed in the Maldivian oral tradition, land and natural goods are often conceived of as a common resource. The stories in Romero-Frias’ anthology condemn greed as an undesirable and dangerous personal attribute. Pyrard’s bias contributes to colonial undertones of Western superiority throughout his travel account. Though he provides a remarkable historical narrative

of *Dhivehin* society, it is important to recognize the manner in which contradicting epistemologies contribute to unequal power relations, both in Pyrard's time and in the present.

Pyrard's colonial motifs persist in contemporary climate change discussions.

Communities of the global South are often regarded as ignorant to the causes of environmental degradation, and in need of expert guidance in formulating adaptation strategies. In the case of the Maldives, this discourse plays out at the national level. Government officials have laid forth certain policies that dictate how island communities should respond to the impacts of climate change. In Chapter Four, I argue that some of these strategies are grounded in a Western epistemological mindset that prioritizes development and economic prosperity. Before analyzing these policies, such as those that enforce migration, I examine the Maldives through the lens of a different knowledge system. The following section provides an overview of the *Dhivehin* oral tradition, an insight into the way knowledge is transmitted amongst Maldivian communities. This will provide context for contemporary Maldivian responses to climate change and resistance to government adaptation policies.

Local Knowledge: The Maldivian Oral Tradition

The Maldivian oral tradition serves as both a complement and as a counterpoint to Pyrard's historical account of the Maldives. Given the colonial overtones of outsider interpretations of the *Dhivehin* society, I examine certain aspects of the culture and values through local stories. The Maldivian Islands—known by Maldivians as *Dhivehi Raaje*, the “Kingdom of Islands” or “Kingdom of the Dhivehi People”—have been continuously populated for millennia; their orations are “very ancient” (Romero-Frias, 2012). Traditional tales, however, were not written down. Tales were customarily told by storytellers who entertained at household

gatherings to an audience made up of multiple generations. On a number of occasions, stories were also told spontaneously, such as on the decks of ships during long journeys.

During the 1980s, simultaneous influences of Western modernity and militant Islam minimized the importance of ancient local stories. Even though they were “an inseparable part of the national identity,” Maldivian stories came to be regarded as contradictory to the emergent “Islamic modern nation” (Romero-Frias, xxiii). In response to this decline, Spanish writer and scholar Xavier Romero-Frias (2012) made it his mission to transcribe the *Dhivehin* oral tradition. Spending thirteen years on the islands, Romero-Frias learned two dialects of the Maldivian language. He built strong relationships with local elders, collected their stories, and compiled them into a book, “Folk Tales of the Maldives,” that contains eighty tales translated into English. As the only anthology of this sort, Romero-Frias’ book provides insight into how *Dhivehins* speak about the world. Given the number of islands in the Maldivian Archipelago, many of the local legends have different versions (Romero-Frias, xxii). The stories include themes such as tales of spirits or monsters, explanations of natural phenomena, long fairy-tale style myths, stories involving humorous characters, fables with local animals, seafaring stories, and chronicles of semi-historical events (Romero-Frias, xxvii). Stories were intended to be passed down from the older generation to the younger generation, and most accounts contain a moral lesson in some form.

Many of the stories have been retold throughout history. The stories continue to hold significance in the Maldives, as they have resonance with contemporary issues. Interpreting the Maldivian oral tradition in the context of the current climate change discourse allows for a deeper understanding of local knowledge, agency, and resistance in response to environmental degradation and government adaptation policies. In this section, I highlight stories that touch

upon certain *Dhivehin* conceptions of the world. Maldivian society has undoubtedly transformed from the early 1600s when Pyrard observed the islands and its peoples. I do not contend that the oral tradition is a more authentic account of Maldivian society than Pyrard's travel log. Rather, Romero-Frias' anthology, mediated through an outsider, takes on an alternative approach to examining the *Dhivehin* community. By naming the individuals from which he heard these stories, Romero-Frias lays out an anti-essentialist narrative of the island society. Each tale conveys the storyteller's unique knowledge, as opposed to Pyrard's account that refers to Maldivians as a homogenous people. The oral tradition offers a glimpse of how the island environment is spoken about within the indigenous community. After analyzing the oral tradition in comparison with Pyrard's historical account, I examine how both narratives apply to *Dhivehin* conceptions and approaches to climate change in the present.

Dhivehin Stories

The *Dhivehin* story of origin reflects an intimate connection with the natural world. Romero-Frias translates the tale "The First Coconuts," as was told to him by Vaijehēge Alī Dīdī of Dūndigan, Fua Mulaku Island. As the legend goes, the first inhabitants of the islands could not survive because there were no coconut palms. The people died in great numbers until a *fandita* (sorcerer) made coconut trees grow out of the skulls of deceased settlers. The people were able to increase in numbers by utilizing the trees, and set coconuts from every tree aside to plant new ones. From that time onwards, "the future looked bright and pleasant for the islanders of that nation, for there is no better wealth that a Maldivian father can give as a legacy to his children than a great number of coconut palms planted by his own efforts" (Romero-Frias, 3). In this account, the coconut palm, known by Maldivians as *Dhivehi ruh* (Maldivian palm), has an

anthropomorphic origin, and remains intimately linked to the lives of island inhabitants. Echoing Pyrrard's observations of the significance of the coconut palm, *Dhivehins* use the tree for almost every aspect of daily life. Food, drink, shelter, shade, medicines, cooking oil, lighting oil, brooms, rope, and wood for boatbuilding, firewood, utensils, toys for children, whistles, and baskets are just a few among other benefits the *Dhivehi ruh* has to offer. The coconut palm occupies a position of honor in the Maldivian national emblem, representing the livelihood of the nation (Embassy of the Republic of Maldives, Japan).

The Maldivian oral tradition also conveys a deep connection to the islands as a homeland and place of origin. The island where a person lives, and the section, village or quarter in large islands, is important and often included in the name of an individual. Romero-Frias explains that to demean a person, Maldivians often would say "*taneh doreh neiy miheh*" (a person without location and door), "emphasizing the fact of the person not belonging to a place and house" (Romero-Frias, xiv). In the story "Kullavah Falu Rani" (Queen of the Mangrove Forest), told by Aishath Naazneen, Gāge, Malé, the protagonist, a beautiful woman, grows up alone in a mangrove forest, living off the *kullavah* fruit. One day, a royal ship arrives and the young king falls in love with the woman. He brings her back to Malé, where she becomes queen and learns how to read, talk, and behave "properly." A few years later, people of the queen's home island visit her, bearing a basket of the *kullavah* fruit. Not only does the queen coldly ignore the people's generosity, but she fails to recognize the very fruit that sustained her throughout the early years of her life. In Maldivian culture, Romero-Frias explains, if one "too quickly [forgets] about one's origins, people would say, "this person is like the queen of the mangrove forest" (Romero-Frias, 140). The islands as a sense of home and community are an intrinsic part of *Dhivehin* identity. Maldivians' morals, proverbs, and ways of knowing their place in the world

come from this connection to the land and sea, as evident in each of the eighty tales in Romero-Frias' anthology.

Many other traditional stories in Romero-Frias' book touch upon the Maldivians' knowledge of their environment. In one of the tales, "Telabagudi Koe" told by Gāge Naima, Malé, a young girl is considered a "good Maldivian" because she "knew the names of all the trees growing in the islands" (Romero-Frias, 66). *Dhivehin's* knowledge about their terrestrial surroundings, however, are surpassed by their tremendous understanding of the marine ecosystem. Countless local stories incorporate tales of seafaring and warn about the hazards of interacting with the ocean environment. In "Ukunumana and Līmana," told by Katībuge Ibrahīm Saīdu, Diguvāndo Village, Fua Malaku, the two title characters spend all of their time picking lice and nits from each other's unkempt hair. The other women on the island unceasingly advise them to maintain their appearance and focus on more important matters, but the girls pay scant attention. One day, Ukunumana and Līmana notice that the beach had changed shape during a storm and a new sandbar had formed way offshore at the edge of the reef.⁶ They decide to go to the sandbar to search each other's heads, "so other people will not bother us." While sitting, the ocean currents start to change and the sandbar begins to erode away. Although some people try to warn them, Ukunumana and Līmana are too far away to hear, oblivious to the danger until the last minute. The sandbar dissolves from under them, and the girls drown in the sea (Romero-Frias, 73). This story demonstrates the strong value that *Dhivehins* place upon having a strong understanding of their natural surroundings. It is looked down upon to distract oneself with trivial matters. Most importantly, the story advocates for a strong sense of community and

⁶ A *Kandobissaveli* is a quickly-forming and quickly-eroding sandbar, a very rare phenomenon. It forms occasionally at the northern end of the Fua Mulaku island (Romero-Frias, 72).

appreciation for collective knowledge. The girls meet their terminal fate as they attempt to isolate themselves from the village and ignore the wisdom of their elders. “Ukunumana and Līmana” also echoes the call of the copper wall story that Pyrard outlines in his account, where it requires daily prayer in order to maintain a safe sea level. Survival, specifically preventing ocean erosion, requires active daily work. Despite warnings from their community, Ukunumama and Līmana fail to participate in village life, and are submerged by the forces of the marine environment.

Other stories caution against the dangers of the ocean. In “Delikolu and Alikolu,” told by Aminat Didi, Vadige, Fua Mulaku, the two title characters meet their deadly fate after daring each other to jump into the rough waters at high tide (Romero-Frias, 170). In some tales (“Arruffanno Ferēta,” told by Mariyam Fārūgu, Funādo, Fua Mulaku; “Bēri,” told by Huseinkoibē, Holudū Island, Southern Miladummadulu Atoll) monster or demon-like characters emerge from the sea to wreak havoc upon or punish the people of the islands for their sins (Romero-Frias, 173;133). In the Maldivian oral tradition, the ocean plays a fundamental role in shaping the lives of *Dhivehins*. It is a place that offers life and opportunity but simultaneously can bring death and despair. The ocean is thus a force to understand and be mindful of, and a body worthy of the utmost respect.

The vast majority of the *Dhivehin* tales contain some sort of moral, proverb, or convey core values of Maldivian society. In “The Obstinate *Mākana*,” the story of a popular song by Jēmu Donkamana, *Mākana* (a grey heron, a ubiquitous bird in the Maldivian oral tradition) stands at the edge of the reef for days, determined to catch a particularly delectable-looking fish. *Mākana* dies on the spot, exhausted after never eating the fish. Though he never gets what he wants, his persistence is perceived as a virtue, as he never gives up on his goal (Romero-Frias,

204-5). Many other tales conclude with popular Maldivian proverbs, including; “thousand days a robber, one day under the power of the ruler,” which means that offenders eventually always end up being brought to justice (from “The Man Who Burned the Mosque,” told by Rafīgu, Dadimago, Fua Mulaku); and “it is foolish and dangerous to begin a quarrel with a person who is more powerful than oneself” (from “Fanvakkolu and Valikolu,” told by Don Kambulō, Maavashu island, Haddummati Atoll) (Romero-Frias, 44; 275). Muhammadu Rashīdu, Bashimāge, Malé, tells the tale of “Rōnu Eduru,” in which the title character obnoxiously brags about his mundane observation that the sun patterns change with the seasons. In the Maldives, when someone with limited knowledge “blows his own trumpet and meddles in fields that are beyond his competence,” people say “that person is like Rōnu Eduru.” In these examples, the Maldivian oral tradition incorporates various life lessons and teachings of how to conduct oneself in the culture. The morals expressed in the oral tradition reflect certain Maldivian values through the lens a local knowledge framework. Comparing Romero-Frias’ anthology with Pyrrard’s account reflects both complementary and contradictory depictions of Maldivian values. This analysis reveals the nuances of examining a topic through multiple knowledge systems. In Chapter Four, I bring this analysis into the context of climate change.

One of the most prominent life values conveyed through *Dhivehin* stories is an admonishment for greed. In “The Fruits of Greed,” told by Don Kokko, Hirunduge, Malé, a *handi* (female spirit) gifts a poor couple with gold coins to build a boat so they can fish every day and provide for their family. However, when they return to ask for more coins so they can build a lavish home, the *handi* casts misfortune upon the couple, who become as miserable as they were before (Romero-Frias, 59-62). A young Maldivian, Angagadamituru, is similarly punished for his gluttony in “Santimariyambu,” told by Muhammadu Rashīdu, Bashimāge, Malé.

One morning, Angagadamituru awakens to find that a fairy has visited his friend in the night and gifted him with beautiful new teeth. The next night, when the fairy, Santimariyambu, visits Angagadamituru, he impatiently tells the fairy “give me a beautiful set of teeth!” Offended, Santimariyambu takes her sack of teeth and empties them onto Angagadamituru’s face. The next morning, he awakens and realizes that he has teeth sticking out all over his face (Romero-Frias, 222-3). As evident in the *Dhivehin* stories, a person who follows their gluttonous desires is almost always punished for their behavior.

Two final stories of the Maldivian oral tradition touch on this notion of greed, and convey local responses to the forces of nature. I apply both to understand contemporary issues of climate change and forced migration. The first, “Debō Dūnige Vāhaka,” told by Hasan Didi, Karange, Fua Mulaku, explains the reason why the two-headed bird, “endowed with keen wisdom,” went extinct. One day, while the bird sits happily on a branch, a young man with an axe enters the forest and begins to cut down a tall palm. The man makes such an ear-splitting noise that he wakes a tiger sleeping nearby. The tiger threatens to kill the man for “coming into [his] forest and disturbing [him].” The man apologizes, explaining that he only came to the forest to collect wood, and offers to build the tiger a home if he promises not to eat him. The tiger agrees, but once the man builds the *koshāru* (a small, strong barn), he traps the tiger inside. Later, the man’s wife arrives, and through a crack in the ceiling pours hot water on the trapped tiger while shouting, “you mean tiger! You wanted to eat my husband, eh? Here, take this!” The scalded tiger howls in pain, and is left alone to die a slow and miserable death. The two-headed bird, who had been watching the whole situation play out, thinks in abhorrence, “What a cunning, mean, and clever creature man is.” After uneasily pondering the issue for a while, he gathers all of the two-headed birds of the world and laments to them,

Oh birds of my kind! Having seen with my own four eyes how crafty man is, I am telling you very seriously one thing. I don't want to share the same world with such a smart and wicked creature. Therefore, in order to spare our offspring much suffering at the hands of man in the future, I propose that we all leave this world right now.

The other two-headed birds agree with this sentiment, and fly upwards until they “go out of this world” (Romero-Frias, 94-6). Condemning attributes of greed and deviousness, “Debō Dūnige Vāhaka” comments on how humans experience tunnel vision when it comes to individual prosperity. Humans express blatant disregard for how the Other will be impacted by such actions, whether that Other be an indigenous community or animal species.

Magieduruge Ibrahim Didi's (Fua Mulaku) story, “*Mākana's Treachery*,” similarly parallels the current implications of climate change that Maldivians experience. One day, a sly heron (*Mākana*) observes a shallow pool filled with fish and exclaims, “Those fish look very foolish. I have an idea how to eat them all without much effort.” *Mākana* speaks to the fish: “You look very tight swimming so closely in this small puddle. This doesn't look like a good place.” In the same pool, a crab tells the fish, “Don't talk to him. He is dangerous, he wants to eat you.” *Mākana* tells the fish he will take them one by one in his beak “to a beautiful blue pool” where the water is deeper, cooler, and “a much more pleasant place for fish to live.” Despite the crab's repeated warnings, the fish agree, and are devoured by the bird. With his cunning words, *Mākana* is even able to convince the crab to go along with his scheme. While they are flying, the crab feels that the bird was holding him too tight, so he protests, “You are hurting me! Hold me in a gentler way if you please.” *Mākana* refuses. When the betrayal dawns on the crab, he becomes full of indignation, and severs the bird's neck from the inside. As the crab falls, he thinks, “We are over the reef and I may hit a rock. I don't mind if I die. At least I

am glad that this unrighteous bird got the lesson he deserved.” Fortunately, the crab ends up falling unhurt into a beautiful pool where he spends the rest of his life in happiness (Romero-Frias, 161-3). “*Mākana’s Treachery*” parallels contemporary government adaptation policies of forced relocation. *Mākana* attempts to take advantage of what he perceives as the fish’s lack of knowledge, underestimating the ingenuity of the crab. He betrays the crab and disregards the crab’s livelihood for his own advantage. Ultimately, *Mākana* is punished for his greed. The following chapter will elaborate the manner in which these themes underlie the colonial power dynamics of contemporary climate adaptation policy in the Maldives.

Conclusion

The Maldives faces a unique predicament as the population combats the impacts of climate change. Recognizing *Dhivehin* environmental knowledges and moral values is critical in any attempt to formulate adaptation solutions. According to Pyrard and Romero-Frias’ narratives, the indigenous population of the Maldives maintain a certain understanding of their natural environment. *Dhivehins* have a rich history of ocean migration while simultaneously identifying with their island of origin, and strongly condemn human attributes of deceitfulness and material greed.

Interpreting narratives of the Maldives through the lens of postcolonial theory reveals themes that parallel the challenges of operating within the contemporary global climate change discourse. This discourse is informed by multiple knowledge systems. I argue that navigating between differing epistemological frameworks results in points of contradiction, particularly within the context of climate change adaptation. In Chapter Four, I examine how contemporary capitalist motivations have influenced certain government actions in response to climate change

in the Maldives. Government enforced adaptation policies can contradict *Dhivehin* values. I argue that the foundation of such struggles lie in divergent conceptions of natural resource ownership, material wealth, and greed.

Critically engaging with Pyrrard's travel log and the Maldivian oral tradition reveals the complexities that emerge when examining an issue through different epistemological frameworks. In the following chapter, I argue that the dominant climate change discourse promotes a hierarchy of environmental knowledge that inhibits successful adaptation strategies in the Maldives. At times, this has caused Maldivian political leaders to impose unfavorable policies that arguably benefit their own capitalist-motivated development agendas. These measures contradict certain values, livelihood interests, and environmental knowledges of the *Dhivehin* community.

CHAPTER 4: Climate Change Adaptation in the Maldives in the Context of Multiple Knowledge Systems

Introduction

The necessity of climate change adaptation measures is an inevitable reality in the Maldives. Despite calls upon the rest of the world to reduce carbon emissions, scientists have determined that a certain degree of sea-level rise is irreversible (Solomon et al., 2009). Implementing widespread policies is a complex and nuanced process. Communities throughout the islands respond to climate change in various ways, influenced by unique environmental knowledges. Applying a postcolonial theoretical framework, I argue that the colonial epistemological hierarchy embedded within the dominant climate change discourse inhibits the successful implementation of adaptation strategies in the Maldives.

Drawing from the previous chapter's critical analysis of narratives on *Dhivehin* society, this section will bring the study into the context of the contemporary climate change conversation. After a brief overview of how understandings of the issue differ between different members of Maldivian society, I describe how the government's relocation policies can contradict the values and livelihood interests of the greater *Dhivehin* community. I conduct interviews with two individuals; Uma Kothari, a professor of postcolonial studies and development at the University of Manchester, who focuses on small island development; and Muna Mohamed, a Maldivian environmental and social justice activist who has written extensively on government relocation policies. Through my analysis, I argue that the Maldivian government works from a position where multiple climate change discourses intertwine. On the one hand, officials advocate for the survival of the islands, enacting mitigation policies and setting an example for the rest of the world in the fight against environmental degradation. On

the other hand, the Maldivian government utilizes the dominant global climate change discourse to perpetuate colonial power dynamics, in turn concealing *Dhivehin* agency and resilience, and silencing them from the adaptation conversation. I argue that in order to create effective adaptation strategies, the people of the Maldives must work at the points where multiple environmental epistemologies contradict to bridge the gap between isolated viewpoints. These moments serve as opportunities to resist the dominant climate change discourse and subvert inherent colonial power dynamics.

Divergent Conceptions of Climate Change

Discussing present-day Maldivians' conceptions of global climate change, it is necessary to examine the perceptions, experiences and responses of those considered the most immediately and directly affected. The environmental understandings of those who fall into the "elite" category of Maldivian society—politicians, scientists, and those educated within a Western epistemological framework—greatly differ from those who are identified as "non-elite." I argue that Maldivian elite perceptions that are privileged in the global climate change discourse have promoted the development of policies that are, at times, inappropriate, unsustainable, and through their dominance, obscure more immediate local priorities.

A significant discrepancy exists between local *Dhivehin*'s perspectives on climate change and the mitigation and adaptation policies employed by the Maldivian government. According to environment and development scholars Alex Arnall and Uma Kothari (2015), the differences between Maldivian elite and non-elite perspectives are in large part based on "diverse knowledge, priorities, and agendas" as related to forming response strategies to climate change (Arnall & Kothari, 2015). Specifically, elites tend to focus on a distant future, which is generally

abstracted from people's everyday lived realities. Elites also utilize the language of a climate change-induced migration crisis in their discussion about impacts, "in a manner not envisaged by non-elites" (Arnall, & Kothari, 199). Arnall and Kothari support their argument by referencing interviews they conducted with both elite and non-elite Maldivians. Responses reveal how non-elite conceptions of climate change can clash with those who understand the issue within a strict Western knowledge framework.

Comments of non-elite *Dhivehins*—the subaltern, which in this case can be defined as individuals with limited influence over policymaking but who are likely to be the most immediately and directly affected by climate change, such as fishermen—reflect a recognition of environmental change. "It is hotter now [and] rains are delayed" expressed one fisherman. "In my younger days, rains came by May. Now they are slow in coming. Older people could predict high seas to avoid fishing, now our calculations have failed as things have changed" (Arnall & Kothari, 203). Another fisherman stated, "I have heard that the islands are sinking but I do not believe this. It is not something that I have noticed. The rainfall changes and the beaches too but this has always happened. It is not an emergency" (Arnall & Kothari, 203). Responses reflect the intimate knowledge of the natural environment as expressed in the Maldivian oral tradition. Interviewees echo this sentiment, in that they focus on everyday experiences and the impacts of ecological change on livelihood activities. When asked about his thoughts on global climate change, another fisherman remarked that "the Maldives is already a hot place and the sea has a lot of energy... [the sea] rises and it falls almost day to day, but we don't see it causing any problem to us. If there is more water, then there is more fish to catch" (Arnall & Kothari, 203). The fishermen's responses link a long-term knowledge of the seas with the present situation of

climate change. As reflected in both Pyrrard's account and the Maldivian oral tradition, the ocean simultaneously represents a source of livelihood and an ominous force of nature.

Interpretations of rising sea-levels vary between differing epistemological frameworks. This can result in points of contradiction. Analyzing climate change from a strict Western knowledge system based in scientific reasoning may deduce the views of fishermen as naïve and incorrect. This can contribute to the marginalization of indigenous voices. Kothari asserts that this "exclusivity of knowledge is reinforced when the environment is framed by policymakers as an overly complex system that can only be understood by experts" (Kothari, 133). For example, a Maldivian government officer argued that local *Dhivehins* "do not know and don't understand what TV or newspapers have to say about [climate change]" (Arnall & Kothari, 202). Others sought to explain why *Dhivehin* perspectives on the environment juxtapose the prevailing global discourse that depicts climate change as an obvious crisis. "[Though] people see and feel the impacts of environmental change," an international donor commented, "they can't see climate change, so they don't know why they have to think about it" (Arnall & Kothari, 202). An employee from an international environmental NGO based in the Maldives explained that "local people cannot imagine what a glacier or iceberg is and that it is melting far away due to climate change and causing sea levels to rise" (Arnall & Kothari, 203).

Arnall and Kothari's interviews reveal that one of the greatest differences between elite and non-elite conceptions of climate change is how individuals consider the spatial framing of the issue. As evident in the fishermen's responses, many *Dhivehin* concerns lie in how environmental change impacts daily livelihood activities. Comparing these comments with those of elites exposes an isolation of viewpoints between differing knowledge frameworks. The opinions of the government official and international donor convey a belief that the indigenous

communities' conceptions must align with those held by elites in order to understand how to approach climate change adaptation. In this point of contradiction, both sides are fighting for the same thing—survival. I argue that such moments can serve as opportunities to bridge isolated viewpoints and create adaptation strategies that are informed by multiple knowledge systems.

In Arnall and Kothari's interviews, some *Dhivehins* conveyed a confidence in Maldivian ability to withstand any impending environmental adversities. Referencing the 2004 tsunami, one individual attested, "I don't believe there is any crisis coming [due to climate change]. We survived the tsunami and we will also survive anything else that comes our way" (Arnall & Kothari, 203). "We have always managed," claimed another *Dhivehin*. "Nothing bad has happened to us. We will always survive by building sea walls, floating islands, underwater homes, whatever we need to do" (Arnall & Kothari, 203). Such comments echo the resilience that former President Nasheed expressed in his call to climate mitigation action. However, I argue that this level of local resilience is overlooked within the dominant global climate change discourse. At the international level, a Western framing often depicts populations of the global South as vulnerable victims in the face of environmental degradation. In the following section, I examine how the Maldivian government has utilized the prevailing environmental narrative to implement adaptation policies. These strategies, informed by a discourse that favors Western conceptions of climate change, can contradict other *Dhivehin* responses to the issue. This isolation of viewpoints obscures the fact that both all Maldivians are fighting for the same thing—*island survival*.

Forced Adaptation: Government Relocation Policies

Over the past couple of decades, Maldivian political leaders have expressed that the small island nation must do whatever it can to adapt to the impacts of climate change. While advocating for the archipelago's survival, the government has, at times, neglected to take the actions, voices, and resiliency of the *Dhivehin* community into consideration. I argue that this struggle is constituted by a dominant climate change discourse that promotes an epistemological hierarchy. The points at which differing knowledge systems converge creates moments of contradiction that inhibit the successful implementation of adaptation strategies. In this section, I outline how forced relocation policies contradict certain *Dhivehin* environmental knowledges, and then describe how these measures can undermine the livelihood needs they intend to support.

Adaptation Policy

Over the past two decades, the government of the Maldives has been internationally lauded for its forward action in response to environmental degradation. Most notably, former President Mohamed Nasheed has received worldwide recognition as a “hero” for his unshakable leadership and dedication to contesting his island's doomful fate (Goodman, 2016). In 2011, American director Jon Shenk released *The Island President*, a feature-length documentary that highlights Nasheed's efforts to tackle rising sea levels resulting from global warming. Mohamed Nasheed was born in 1967 in Malé, where he lived until age fourteen. After attending high school abroad in Sri Lanka and England, Nasheed received a degree in maritime studies from Liverpool's John Moores University in 1989. Upon returning to his home islands, Nasheed created a political publication called *Sangu*, which condemned the Gayoom regime for corruption and human rights abuses (Shenk, 2011). Throughout the following twenty years,

Nasheed was arrested twelve times and tortured twice for his relentless public criticism of the Maldivian government (Shenk). As a result of his increasing political motivations, Nasheed became the first democratically elected leader of the Maldives in 2008, ending three decades of rule by former strongman Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

From the outset of his presidency, Nasheed regarded climate change mitigation and adaptation as the top political priority for the island nation. As one of his first actions in office, the President announced that the Maldives would become the first country to go carbon neutral. Nasheed unveiled the plan in March of 2009 after working with British climate change specialists Chris Goodall and Mark Lynas. The package of measures aimed to virtually eliminate fossil fuel use on the Maldivian archipelago by 2020, including new renewable electricity generation and transmission infrastructure with 155 large wind turbines, half a square kilometer of rooftop solar panels, and a biomass plant burning coconut husks (Clark, 2009). International environmental activists commended Nasheed for his bold commitments. Lynas recognized that although “the Maldives... is perhaps the most vulnerable country in the world [to climate change] ...here we have a government that is throwing down the gauntlet to the rich, high polluting countries” (Clark). Perhaps the most memorable event of Nasheed’s presidency, however, occurred in October of 2009, when he held the Maldivian cabinet meeting underwater. The action sparked worldwide media attention. Photos of the archipelago’s politicians signing documents while donning scuba masks became a representational image of both small island nation vulnerability and resilience in the face of climate change.

Apart from Nasheed’s landmark mitigation measures, his administration proposed two specific climate change adaptation policies. In his first public address following his election in 2008, Nasheed announced his first initiative. The government proposed to establish a “Sovereign

Wealth Fund” to purchase a new homeland for the Maldivians as an insurance policy in the event of wholesale displacement (Kothari, 2014, 135). The plan included measures to divert a portion of the nation’s annual tourist revenue into buying land in either India, Sri Lanka, or Australia. The former President aimed to demonstrate a position of victimhood to serve as a warning for the rest of the world: “if the Maldives is not saved today,” he asserted, “we do not feel there is much chance for the rest of the world” (BBC News, 2009). The second government initiative approaches climate change adaptation through internal relocation policies. Nasheed introduced the “Resilient Island Approach,” in which the government encouraged the *Dhivehin* population to migrate to less at-risk islands through incentives of improved social services and transportation networks (Kothari, 2014, 136).

Both internal and transnational relocation policies of the Maldivian government have provoked a significant amount of disapproval within recent years. Many *Dhivehin* responses to climate change contradict such adaptation strategies. When asked about the matter in Arnall and Kothari’s study, interviewees expressed a deep connection to the islands. One woman noted, “people here live in particular tradition and belief systems, and I believe that these will save us. I want to live and die here” (Arnall & Kothari, 204). Reiterating the sentiments of stories such as “The First Coconuts” and “Queen of the Mangrove Forest,” notions of home and connection to land play an important role in *Dhivehin* identity. A person’s place of origin and familiarity with its nature and culture shapes feelings of belonging. Another woman commented, “people who are born and brought up here don’t like it anywhere else. I moved [to Malé] for seven months but quit my job in the mainland and came back [to my native island]” (Arnall and Kothari, 205). Forced relocation is commonly perceived as socially, economically, and culturally disruptive. While the government’s adaptation strategies benefit the long-term survival of island peoples,

they often neglect these factors. I argue that the government's policies are grounded in a Western epistemological framework that prioritizes the physical impacts of environmental degradation. In the Maldives, this use of the dominant climate change discourse results in points of struggle where Western and indigenous conceptions contradict one another.

While Maldivians value attachment to homeland, this is not to say that they have remained entirely stationary. *Dhivehins*, and island populations in general, have a long history of migration that is overlooked by global climate change narratives (Arnall & Kothari, 204; Farbotko, 2005). Anthropologist Liisa Malkki (1992) argues that the construction of islander identity “in terms of environmental displacement draws on notions of sedentarism entrenched in mainland and Western psyches, in which particular constituencies of people in place are often unquestioningly perceived as natural” (Malkki, 1992). For decades, *Dhivehins* have migrated between islands, particularly to and from the capital, in search of employment, healthcare and education opportunities. This history of inter-island migration is evident in both Pyrrard's account and within the Maldivian oral tradition. However, in the context of climate change, the geographical scope of migration has extended beyond national borders.

Though past relocation occurred within the archipelago, younger generations are more open to moving abroad in order to improve their livelihood elsewhere. A 25-year-old interviewee named Yauqoob, who was traveling back and forth between Malaysia for catering college told Arnall and Kothari, “I have heard of climate change from the television but I am not so worried...if sea-level rise occurs then I will go to Dubai because there is work there and good socioeconomic conditions. Then I'll be able to provide support to my parents and family. Here [in Dhuvafaaru] there is not so much for me as there are no jobs” (Arnall & Kothari, 204). Though this perspective departs from older generations' desire to remain on their home islands,

it also subverts the depiction of migration as an inevitable worst-scenario adaptation strategy for the people of the Maldives. Furthermore, Yauqoob's comments reveal the manner in which climate change intersects with capitalist motivations. Both causes for migration ultimately link back to a desire for survival.

Implicating climate-induced migration in the identity of people constitutes *Dhivehins* as victims. Marginalizing discourses of adaptation silence alternative constructions of Maldivian identity that emphasize resilience and resourcefulness. Though outsiders conceive *Dhivehin* relocation as an inescapable outcome, this perception obscures the agency of island communities. Considering the history and certain level openness to islander migration reveals that many *Dhivehins* make the conscious choice to find a new home to improve livelihood conditions. This degree of decision-making and agency is excluded from the dominant climate change discourse that portrays the Maldivian community as victim subjects (Kapur, 2002; Baldwin, 2012; Popovski & Mundy, 2012). I argue that Maldivian government has utilized this discourse of victimization to promote adaptation policies that, at times, meets their own economic agenda as opposed to the needs of the broader island community. This perpetuates the colonial power dynamics that are embedded in the dominant climate change discourse.

The Economics of Island Relocation

Nasheed established the Sovereign Wealth Fund and Resilient Island Approach as mechanisms to ensure island survival in the face of rising sea-levels. However, the Maldivian government's relocation policies not only contradict certain environmental knowledge systems, but also have undermined the very livelihood needs they intend to support. Diverting portions of tourism revenue to fund purchasing new land abroad would significantly impact the population,

given almost 30% of the nation's GDP comes from the tourism industry (Arnall & Kothari, 201). Such a financial shift would consequentially perpetuate income disparities between those living on the capital island of Malé and those who inhabit outlying atolls. Development in the Maldives has predominantly occurred in Malé, while islands outside the capital continue to experience high poverty rates, low per-capita income, lower employment, and limited access to social services (Ministry of Finance and Treasury & UNDP Maldives, 2014). The government's \$63 million project to construct the artificial island of Hulhumalé further contributes to this issue. In an online resistance publication, *Dhivehi Sitee*, Salma Fikry, an advocate of sustainable development through community empowerment, speaks against the senseless scheme: "these projects at creating artificial islands took place while there remained already existing natural land, undeveloped and underdeveloped, in the north, mid and south of Maldives" (Fikry, 2016). Fikry argues that the Maldivian cabinet formulated development policies such that *Dhivehins* were forced to abandon their home islands and migrate to a more central part of the archipelago, a "trend that continues even today and at a much more alarming pace" (Fikry).

In February 2017, current President Abdulla Yameen, the half-brother of former President Gayoom, revealed that Saudi Arabia had formulated plans for a massive integrated development project in the Maldives. The announcement fuels growing speculation of the Maldivian government's plans to sell Faafu Atoll to the Saudis and relocate its 4,365 people to an urban center under development near Malé (Moosa, 2017). Countless islanders have expressed frustrations over social media. On Twitter, people vented their anger using the hashtag #SaveFaafu: "We, the people of Maldives are totally opposed to a sale or lease of #Maldives land to another country. #SaveFaafu" wrote Hussain Shareef (Shareef, H., 2017). Aishath Ali Naaz proclaimed, "time to store a few grains of sands from the beaches of Faafu Atoll. A

reminder of when our foot freely ran across it. That's when we owned it" (Naaz, 2017). Other *Dhivehins* reflected on the matter as a call to action: "All the powers of the State of the #Maldives are derived from, & remain with, the citizens. #SaveFaafu" tweeted Shamau Shareef (Shareef, S., 2017). Aisha Hussain Rasheed, a local social activist, pushed civilian responsibility further in a Facebook status: "Maldivians, today, are suffering the consequences of allowing political elites make decisions on our behalf without any accountability; getting behind decisions made by political leaders based only on short term personal benefits, partisan political interests and empty nationalistic, religious or political rhetoric... It's on all of us, for allowing this system and atmosphere to continue" (Rasheed, A.H., 2017). In an attempt to promote a capitalist development scheme, the Maldivian government continues to implement unfavorable forced migration measures, failing to take the concerns of *Dhivehins* into consideration (Kothari, 2014; Filkry, 2016). While development schemes may be implemented in the interest of long-term national prosperity, I contend that such initiatives obscure the more immediate livelihood needs of the broader island community.

In conducting research on the Maldives, I repeatedly came across the writings of Muna Mohamed, a *Dhivehin* who focuses on issues of forced migration and development. In 2014, she published the book on the subject, *Falhu Aliran Mui*. Given that the work is written in the *Dhivehi* language, I reached out to Muna via Twitter to discuss the content of her book as well as her thoughts on how the government has promoted relocation policies. Muna grew up in her family's native Thiladhunmathi Atoll on Dhidhdhoo Island in the northern region of the country. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in commerce from Murdoch University in Australia, after which she received an MBA from the University of Adelaide. Elaborating on her upbringing, Muna shared that she was a health migrant to Malé, as her home island lacked proper

hospital facilities. She had planned to return to Thiladhunmathi Atoll after completing her treatment and receiving a decent education abroad. However, she told me, “due to education, health and job prospects, me and mostly 1/3 of [the] Maldivian population is congested in capital Malé where such opportunities are provided” (Muna Mohamed, personal communications, March 20th 2017). Irrespective of the services available in the capital, Muna expressed that life in Malé is hardly a happy alternative. Urban poverty runs rampant in the overcrowded city. Living there is difficult, as “mostly 80% of your income may have to be spent on rent. Rented places are not monitored to ensure decent living conditions leading extortion, exploitation, and crime” (Muna Mohamed). Ultimately, Muna lamented, the people of the Maldives face a central dilemma:

If you want to enjoy the best services in the country, you tolerate those conditions and live in Malé (‘service centralization’), or go back home to live in [the] natural, beautiful environment of the Maldives without access to such services... what we are advocating is sustainable development and living, where services are decentralized in selected regions, and where we can live in harmony with our natural environment, preserving and protecting it. (Muna Mohamed)

Though no policies explicitly require inhabitants of outlying atolls to resettle, Muna emphasized that government-encouraged migration is indeed forced, as the population is left with no choice but to seek livelihood necessities elsewhere. In addition to restricting goods and services to the central islands of the archipelago, Muna expressed that politicians take advantage of the *Dhivehin* population in a number of other ways. For years, the government has inhibited island communities from utilizing resources within their own atolls. In 1984, a measure passed that banned guesthouses in islands other than Malé to protect resort investments (Muna Mohamed). The government has also prevented the empowerment of *Dhivehin* communities by restricting decentralization laws, “even though it is recommended by most donors and [outside] experts” (Muna Mohamed). Recently, the Yameen administration announced plans to

consolidate 70% of the population to the Greater Malé region, including the capital city and its satellite artificial island, Hulhumalé (Muna Mohamed). Emphasis on the centralization of development and services, Muna expressed, has led to forced urbanization at the cost of more traditional island livelihoods.

According to Muna, there is little, if any, consultation between island communities and other state bodies on strategies and policies to adapt to climate change or development. She stated that “a more top down approach is used rather than participatory dialogue for policy formulation” (Muna Mohamed). The Maldivian government policies and agenda are dominated by few elites who control the tourism industry. Muna recognizes, however, that enacting interventions that may benefit society as a whole, by encouraging more distributive power and economic development, is extraordinarily challenging. Given the country’s history of political corruption and instability, “politicians, or head[s] of state, may... face coups or political disruptions if they deviate from the [conventional development] path” (Muna Mohamed). Recently, the government has continued to prioritize economic prosperity over the needs of *Dhivehins* by supporting foreign powers, such as Saudi Arabia, in their efforts to develop land in the Maldives. Muna suggests that the President’s announcement to consolidate 70% of the population in Greater Malé “shows that most islands would be emptied of locals in the long run, paving way for [the land] to be used [for] tourism (local elite and foreigners) and military purposes by foreign powers” (Muna Mohamed).

Indoctrinated within a development discourse that emphasizes capital gain, the Maldivian government repeatedly promotes measures that undermine the livelihoods of *Dhivehins*. Political leaders of the Maldives have adopted a Western enlightenment ideal of individualism that encourages a desire to attain the same economic prosperity of the global North. Despite the

repercussions, the motivation of government actions ultimately lies in a goal for long-term survival. I argue that the people of the Maldives must navigate multiple knowledge systems to prevent policies that contradict certain *Dhivehin* responses to climate change. This will require acknowledging the validity of both the scientific and indigenous conceptions of environmental degradation.

Some argue that in order to justify relocation policies, the government utilizes the prevailing discourse of climate victimhood to support its own economic agenda. Uma Kothari, a professor of postcolonial studies and development, argues that colonial imaginaries are evident in contemporary environmental discourses around climate change and migration, “but the global discourse around climate change and migration is also justifying colonialist interventions...they are being invoked in order to implement unfavorable policies” (Kothari, *Colonial Representations and Island Imaginaries*, 2014). By maintaining an image of the archipelago’s vulnerability to environmental degradation, the Maldivian government validates relocation policies that benefit the government. According to Kothari, consecutive administrations have attempted to consolidate the population, spread out over 200 islands, onto about fifteen (Kothari, 2014). She asserts that the government “has long thought it economically, rather than environmentally, unsustainable to provide services and resources to a dispersed population, and has for many years muted policies to move people in order to reduce the costs on government. Today, the same initiatives are gaining renewed leverage by being couched in environmental terms” (Kothari, 130). However, Kothari claims that relocation strategies have never been fully implemented because of overwhelming resistance from the wider population. Kothari has “not carried out detailed research on forms of local resistance to relocation” (Uma Kothari, personal communications, March 27th 2017). In the following section, I examine the work of a Maldivian

environmental NGO as a form of resistance not only to unfavorable government policies, but also to the overarching dominant discourse on climate change.

***Dhivehin* Resistance: Local Responses to Environmental Degradation**

Despite the government's attempts to implement relocation policies, *Dhivehin* communities continue to fight for the ecological stability of their island homes. I argue that certain local adaptation strategies that take both Western and indigenous environmental frameworks into account are the most successful avenues towards fighting for island survival. Working at this point of convergence subverts the colonial power dynamics that are inherent to the dominant climate change discourse.

Recent decades have seen a notable increase in local NGOs committed to advocating for the environment, human rights, and social justice (ECOCARE Maldives). In 1994, local journalist Mohamed Zahir and educator Ibrahim Whaeed "Ogaru" founded ECOCARE Maldives in response to the environmental concerns they could no longer ignore (ECOCARE Maldives). The NGO works for the protection and sustainable development of the environment by raising awareness, implementing campaigns, and serving as a resource for learning about various ecological threats.

One of ECOCARE's most foundational goals is to incorporate an environmental education into the lives of young Maldivians. In this manner, ECOCARE bridges the gap between differing knowledge systems and brings ecological subjects into the context of the culture. The organization runs a small library that is "extensively used by school children" and foreign experts alike to learn about the local ecosystem (ECOCARE Maldives). In 2000, ECOCARE established an ongoing environmental awareness program for school children. The

“Soneva Nature Trip” brings elementary-aged students from Malè to Baa Atoll, located ninety-six miles north of the capital island. Children from Malè and Baa Atoll work as colleagues to study coral reefs, beach erosion, and local flora and fauna. The project grants “children who are deprived and robbed of the opportunity to experience and appreciate what [they have been missing in] the dusty, smoke-laden concrete city of Malè, a place totally devoid of any greenery” (ECOCARE Maldives). During the week long program, the students engage with one another to learn what can be done to protect and preserve the environment for a sustainable future development. Those from Malè experience first-hand the dependence both the fishing and tourism industry have on the natural ecosystem. Through this partnership, school children and the community in the islands of Baa Atoll learn of the extent of environmental degradation on Malè due to rapid urbanization. ECOCARE organizers hope that this will serve as a “warning” for inhabitants of Baa Atoll to avoid the same path of development. Ultimately, ECOCARE view student participants as “the political figures of tomorrow [who must] shoulder the burden of protecting the environment” (ECOCARE Maldives). The NGO actively resists government relocation and development policies by educating children about their vital dependence on the fragile island ecosystem.

ECOCARE Maldives also challenges government adaptation measures in a more direct manner by speaking out against unfavorable policies. In 2014, the organization released a press statement condemning the government’s decision to develop an Airport in H.Dh. Kulhuduffushi (Administrator, ECOCARE Maldives, 2014). ECOCARE wrote that the President, Cabinet, and related ministries were in violation of Article 22 of the Maldivian Constitution, which says that “the State has a fundamental duty to protect and preserve the natural environment, biodiversity, resources and beauty of the country for the benefit of future generations” (Hussain, D., 2008, 5).

By reclaiming the H.Dh. Kulhuduffushi Mangrove area for the development of an “economically less viable Airport in the region,” the Press Statement argues, “the government [dishonors]” the very language of the Constitution (Administrator, 2014). ECO CARE recommends that authorities rather focus on the development of much-needed transportation networks between the islands to meet the needs of locals. The NGO reminds senior government officials that it is development that should not be an obstacle to nature, and not the other way around. “As responsible adults” the press statement concludes, “we request all actors to collectively work for the conservation and preservation of our very fragile environment” (Administrator).

By speaking against government development policies, members of ECO CARE, “as responsible adults,” subvert paternalistic colonial power dynamics. Local *Dhivehis* demonstrate that government decisions can contradict the best needs of both the people and the environment of the Maldives. In an effort to fulfill Western capitalist desires of economic prosperity, the government has prioritized certain development schemes that benefit the tourism industry, foreign actors, and their own wallets. Those involved with ECO CARE recognize that maintaining ecological stability requires active human work, just as reflected in both Pyard and Romero-Frias’ narratives of the Maldives. Focusing on school children, ECO CARE creates ecologically-conscious future leaders to carry on this work. Furthermore, by bringing together students from both Malè and Baa Atoll, the NGO bridges the gap between differing experiences of the environment to promote a broader understanding on both sides. On a larger scale, I argue that such an approach to adaptation subverts the colonial knowledge hierarchy. Working at the point of contradictory epistemological frameworks serves as a moment of resistance to the dominant climate change discourse that favors Western conceptions of environmental degradation. This act of resistance undermines the global environmental discourse that often

depicts *Dhivehins* as passive victims. It recognizes that island communities can take into their own hands and ultimately exercise their own agency.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the process of knowledge production and its use reveals the enormous political power of environmental narratives. The discursive production of knowledge on climate change enables the government to promote certain domestic and foreign policy agendas that can contradict the environmental epistemologies of *Dhivehin* communities. “Even if the interests of climate vulnerable populations are ostensibly at the heart of the crisis discourse,” state Farbotko and Lazrus (2012), “their voices are effectively marginalized by the imposition of alien conceptual frameworks” (Farbotko & Lazrus, 383). While the vast majority of Maldivians seek to address a mutual goal of survival, they do so from divergent knowledge frameworks. Differing approaches to adaptation often contradict one another. This inhibits the successful implementation of strategies that acknowledge the validity of both scientific and indigenous knowledge systems. Referring to the actions of ECO CARE Maldives, I argue that government officials, environmental activists, and island communities can work at points of contradiction to formulate adaptation strategies. By bridging the gap between isolated viewpoints, such actions can ultimately serve as a form of resistance to the colonial power dynamics embedded within the dominant climate change discourse.

The Maldives must navigate the multiple knowledge systems that inform adaptation strategies in order to implement effective policies. In the conclusion that follows, I consider the global implications of this study, and how it can inform widespread approaches to climate change adaptation.

CONCLUSION

Climate change will undoubtedly persist as a global concern for generations to come. As environmental officials remain deadlocked in policy negotiations, it is evident that current approaches will not generate effective solutions. Political leaders, primarily those of the global North, have constructed a climate change discourse through an epistemological framework of Western knowledge. This lens emphasizes the urgency and global-span of environmental degradation. In recent decades, representatives of the global North have attempted to resolve long-standing ideological divisions by implementing measures to ensure that representatives of the global South participate in international environmental policy deliberations. In the case of the Maldives, leaders such as Mohamed Nasheed have subverted colonial power relations by influencing international climate deliberations. However, as I have examined, the dominant climate change discourse continues to perpetuate a colonial hierarchy of knowledge. This has resulted in relocation policies that contradict certain aspects of *Dhivehin* responses to environmental adversity. I argue that adaptation strategies that bridge the gap between isolated viewpoints can effectively address the impacts of climate change and resist the colonial power dynamics embedded within the dominant discourse.

I have repeatedly drawn attention to the inequities that stem from a hierarchy of Western epistemologies over indigenous knowledge systems. This is not to invalidate the necessity of the science on climate change. A solid empirical foundation is vital to any sort of international mitigation or adaptation policy discussion. However, world leaders must realize that Western epistemological conceptions of the environment are not the only or objective truth. There remains a need for a more collaborative approach to climate change that reframes the global conversation as a convergence of multiple environmental knowledge systems.

I confront my own complicity as I seek to pursue a career in international environmental policy. I must navigate how to do so without perpetuating colonial aspects of the dominant climate change discourse. This not only requires listening to the subaltern, but actually *hearing* what they have to say, and recognizing their knowledge and agency. Referring back to the Maldives, this hearing requires an understanding of local environmental discourses. The oral tradition is an alive and powerful resource that can serve as an avenue towards an empirically grounded and historically and culturally relevant form of climate change adaptation.

The coconut palm, or *Dhivehi ruh*, serves as a national symbol of livelihood and survival. In his travel log, Pyrdard notes the various practical uses of the tree. Romero-Frias recounts the *Dhivehin* story of origin, in which the first inhabitants of the Maldives rely on this vital island resource. Current carbon-cutting ambitions include plans to construct a biomass plant that burns coconut husks. Even the declaration for climate action, signed by the Maldivian cabinet in their underwater meeting, was marked by the national emblem of the *Dhivehi ruh*. Viewed through multiple epistemological frameworks, the coconut palm maintains its symbolism of survival. Fighting for long-term island survival will require a similar navigation of multiple knowledge systems. The Maldives serves an example for the rest of the world as the impacts of climate change spread across the globe.

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