The Maldives as a Sport Space
Bridging an Archipelago through Soft Power

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Introduction and research question

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The inhabited islands of the Maldives archipelago are not very large in size, ranging from a few hundred meters to a few square kilometres. What emerges from a first glance in person is confirmed by subsequent spatial analyzes through satellites, namely that the space dedicated to sport is interesting. Often, on an island of a few hundred meters, one hundred of these are dedicated to a football field; on some islands, sports spaces cover almost a third of the entire surface area. This primary spatial element of the Maldivian islands opens a range of discussions that will be the subject of this thesis. These initial observations are what pushed me to investigate the connection between sport and space in the Maldivian context. Why is sport so important in the socio-territorial framework of the Maldives? Do only playful dimensions come into play, such as the dimension of spending time in an "isolated" context, or is the sportisation of space also promoted with political purposes? Does sport help build a local and/or national identity? Can it be considered a form of soft power? Internationally, does sport help promote the image of the Maldives in a context of glocalization? If yes, to what extent and in what way? This analysis is part of a broader reflection on the relationship between sport and soft power. To this end, the research question I asked myself is what role does sport have in the Maldives? Can it be considered to have a soft power dimension? Does this place the Maldives in a framework of regional trends, or it is something limited only to the local dimension? Moreover, what role does sport play in the international arena where the Maldives play?

The thesis is divided into four sections. Chapter 1 is aimed at providing a reconstruction of the concept of soft power, from its origins to its more recent interpretations, through the many meanings and different readings that have passed through and will continue to pass through it. After the first part, which aimed to exemplify how soft power is used and communicated in a "big" case like the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, I attempted to provide a common definition of soft power. Following this, starting from Nye's concept, I tried to summarise the path that led to the contemporary definition of soft power, distinguishing it from nation branding and reporting the main academic debates around its definition, actions, communication, limitations, and measurability. In conclusion, the concept of cultural diplomacy will be briefly developed

as an element of which soft power constitutes the political part and which can be used for aggressive purposes. Furthermore, since Nye has emphasized that soft power may be the means to success in world politics, the chapter aimed to analyze the concept from different angles and perspectives. The idea is to understand the applicability of soft power in the international scenario and its potential to be a substitute for the traditional use of hard power for achieving national interests and foreign policy objectives. The idea is to address the inconclusiveness of the term logically and the dynamism of the concept of soft power in its application, suggesting that further studies are neeeded for a better theoretical understanding of both the term and the contexts in which it is applied.

In chapter 2, I will primarily attempt to analyse the relationship between sports and culture, highlighting how this theme is extremely complex to fit into a single, unified definition (play/sport/spaces). I will provide one or more definitions of what is meant by sport, and then I will present some of the concepts through which sports can impact societies. These concepts include sportivisation, nationalisation, and parliamentarisation. I will refer to various authors like Huizinga, Risse, Strutt, Jusserland, Durkheim, Callois, and Guttmann. Additionally, I will explore the interplay of modernity and religion, drawing from Guttmann, Durkheim, and the concept of cathedrals to introduce the theme of spaces and stadiums. Subsequently, I will introduce various approaches to the study of sports, including structural functionalism, Simmel's perspective and interpretive sociology, Weber's sociology of action, and Marxist analyses as presented by Clarke.

I will then conclude this part by highlighting selected themes that will enhance the understanding of the subject under examination, although the specific theme are yet to be determined. In this second chapter, my aim is also to present a combined perspective on the relationship between power, soft power, and sports. In today's world, the international dimension of football (which will be frequently examined for numerical purposes) and its extension of power, including its political bodies (such as FIFA), have become significantly accentuated. The transcendence of traditional local and national boundaries represents one of the most visible aspects of contemporary football. Several studies have explored the

connections between sports and politics, sports and international relations, and sports and diplomacy, as sports inherently encompass elements of politics, economics, and mass media.

In this chapter, after introducing certain elements of football geopolitics, I will showcase the role of sports in nation-building dynamics and its influence on diplomacy. On one hand, it's challenging to imagine major sports events without television broadcasts, speeches by state leaders at opening ceremonies, and special advertising by major sports brands. On the other hand, despite the principle of "sports separate from politics," the history of the Olympic movement over more than a century demonstrates that it is not possible to maintain political neutrality in the context of political challenges and transformations in the global political system. Subsequently, by presenting an older concept in a new light, that of "sports diplomacy," I aim at demonstrating that while this practice is often used for noble purposes, careful attention must be paid to some of its secondary implications, going beyond overly positive conceptions and potentially leading to the soft disempowerment of a state. After introducing the concepts of "sportwashing" and "stadium diplomacy" and their contemporary applications (which have experienced unprecedented growth), I will explore their relationship to geopolitics and the strategic use of sports events. In conclusion, I will provide commentary observing that football serves as a tool not only for domestic politics but also for international relation and geopolitics, acting as a driver of globalisation, and its governing organizations are veritable para-diplomatic institutions. Furthermore, as an instrument of soft power, sport offer a means through which states, or even nations without a state, project their identity externally and reinforce it internally through well-defined strategies.

In chapter 3, I will begin by presenting the physical geography of the Maldives, emphasizing the unique territorial formation of the archipelago and its significant influence on human relationships, both constructive and destructive. I will explore three key phases in the analysis: Ameen's urban revolution of 1940, the 2010 decentralization law, and the contemporary situation. The notions of archipelagism and insularity, and their multifaceted characteristics within the Maldives will be discussed, demonstrating that these attributes exist simultaneously and interact on various levels. The concept of an archipelago is central to the construction of

the Maldivian state, predicated and reiterated within territorial boundaries through highly homogenizing control mechanisms. This analysis will lead to an exploration of the social implications arising from these relationships, with a focus on spatial dynamics and center-periphery models. I will delve into the distribution of the Maldivian population within the territory, resulting in the formation of a super-urban center and numerous peripheral islands. Attempts to address emerging spatial challenges, such as floating islands and land reclamation, will be introduced. I will explore the different types of islands found within the archipelago, including well-known cases linked to land reclamation: landfill islands (e.g., Thilafushi), islands created to address housing issues (e.g., Hulhumalé), islands formed due to tsunami-related erosion (e.g., Meedho), resort islands created from scratch for the promotion of the country (e.g., CrossRoads), and the duality of resort islands and inhabited islands, where other services for the population are located.

In the last chapter, I will explore the various forms that sports take on in the Maldives. After a brief history of sports in the country, I will investigate the role of sports in the spatial organization of the islands. I will examine which sports are most practiced by Maldivians and which ones are most watched and followed, whether live or on television. I will also analyze traditional sports and global sports, which have become increasingly prominent due to their British heritage. Furthermore, the chapter will illustrate how sports function within tourist spaces, who participates in these activities, and how sports influence the urban planning of these facilities. I will explore the dynamics of "bubbles" and alienation that are typical in resort environments, where sports facilities serve as the primary spaces for interaction among tourists and between tourists and staff. The chapter will also examine how sports are practiced in local islands, often without specific urban planning, and how sports activities vary between Malé, Hulhumalé, and the peripheral islands. Also, I will introduce the primary research context, the island of Magoodhoo, and discuss why it can be considered a typical Maldivian island. I will outline its characteristics, the key elements that constituted the research field, and its political structure. This will serve as a basis for analyzing the relationships that exist between Magoodhoo and the surrounding islands at the atoll level, as well as with Malé, the capital city.

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Additionally, I will present an illustrative case study involving the Ministry of Sports, which seeks to implement nation-building mechanisms on a peripheral island through a sports tournament, specifically the Atoll Raajje Volleyball Championship. Simultaneously, the peripheral island aims tutilize sports as a justification for land reclamation. We will also examine the relationships with the capital island of the atoll, Nilandhoo, and the dynamics that occur at this scale, and how sports relate to them. The conclusion of this chapter will highlight how sports have become one of the main drivers of cohesion in the Maldives in recent years and how they are used and experienced through the sot power of the nation. I will explore how the image of the national team is employed as a mechanism for nation-building between Malé and the peripheral islands, as a tool for nation branding, and how efforts are made to enhance soft power by attracting players from other countries and creating new sports facilities despite the limited available space, whether in local islands, resorts like CrossRoads, or sports resorts. Finally, in the end of the fourth chapter, I will change the scale of observation to analyse the events that connect Maldivian sporting activities with the geopolitical quadrant where the Maldives are located: India, China and the Persian Gulf countries.

Methodology

After a long pre-field period in which I spent several months non-continuously between the Maldivian islands starting from 2016, I faced a period of field research of about 6 months. During this PhD I concentrated mainly between the capital Malé, nearby Hulumalé and the outlying islands of Magoodhoo and Rinbodhoo, plus some periods of shorter visits to other islands in the Faaf Atoll and Dhall. To answer the research questions, different methodologies were used. First of all, I resorted to the examination of secondary contextual data, and the not very rich reference bibliography regarding sport in the Maldives. I then selected some of the islands that for different reasons were considered representative for this type of study, on which I collected and analyzed conventional and digital cartographic sources to get an in-depth idea of the context. Subsequently, I spent three months of field experience, implementing investigation practices on the ground, in which data were collected relating to the conformation

of the islands and the sports spaces that it occupies directly (the sports fields) or indirect ones (non-predetermined sports venues, such as swimming spaces). To these practices of targeted observation of phenomena, the qualitative investigation of participant observation has been added. As regards the case of Magoodhoo, for example, the social area was already very well known as I had already established a fieldwork during the drafting of the master's thesis and the following years where, therefore, the temporal depth is well delineated, while for other islands we had to start from the basis of observation of the natural context in which sporting events take shape. In order to complete the field investigation through a narrative account of the causal processes (Cardano, 2011; Becker, 1967; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998) I therefore tried to spend periods that allowed the establishment of relationships of trust, while in other islands I moved through short formal contacts as time was limited. During the fieldwork, where I had the opportunity to be more than just a lucky observer but also an active member of the sports community on several occasions, structural and semi-structured interviews were prepared and administered to key informants, trying to cover the greatest different number of people of interest to this study. First of all, men and women who practice sports within the contexts in which I moved were interviewed. Dynamics were observed in the different research contexts (Malé, Hulumalé, Magoodhoo) and in some cases where it was deemed necessary, I explored in depth through relevant interviews. An attempt was made to gather within the interview system both representatives of the political world (Minister of Sports, President of the Island Councils, Presidents of the Atoll Councils) but also personalities from the world of sport (Coaches of national and local teams, international and Maldivian players; male and female players, people members of sports associations, sports enthusiasts). Trying to separate the political level from the sporting level where possible and useful, I tried firstly to collect observations and generic data through discursive interviews and the observation of natural documents; secondly, specific actors were selected who, in my opinion, could best help me answer the research questions in relation to the context they belong to, but also to that of destination of the information, to whom structured interviews were asked on site.

In the periods following the fieldwork, the responses from these structured interviews were

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analyzed and in subsequent field periods an attempt was made in some situations to expand on some points that remained unnarrated, as often happens with structured interviews, or to better outline their contours to collect some additional information. Considering that much of this fieldwork was conditioned by the Covid-19 pandemic, I attempted to observe the context also "from a far" through two main channels. Firstly, the observation of online phenomena around the topic of sport in the Maldives, through Net-Etnography and the collection of contemporary and less recent data in some secondary online archives such as Facebook, Telegram or Viber groups dedicated to the reconstruction of the history of the Maldives or today's politics in the country. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were administered via Zoom/Skype platforms to try to gain otherwise unobtainable information, although the loss of information in the pre- and post-interviews in some cases would have been very valuable. In this thesis work, the methodology relating to visual research was also used through the collection and production of photographic and video material aimed at studying participation in sporting events, the establishment of stadium structures, marketing, nation branding and so on.

Chapter 1: The Notion of Soft Power

In this chapter, I will discuss the concept of *soft power*. I will begin by using the case of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar as an example to illustrate its use. In the central part of the chapter, I will delve into the academic debate surrounding soft power. Initially, I will provide a definition of soft power and differentiate it from other forms of power. Subsequently, I will address the primary limitations of soft power and the recurring ambiguities, referencing key scholars on the subject. After discussing the concept of power, specifically soft power, I will present the ways in which soft power relates to cultural diplomacy in the field of international relations.

1.1 What is "a Qatar"? An Exemplifying Case Study

The recent 2022 FIFA World Cup held in Qatar saw Lionel Messi's Argentina triumph over France and was hailed by various media outlets[1] as the "most beautiful World Cup ever". In this paragraph, we will summarize some facts and events that characterized this event in order to better introduce and define the central theme of this doctoral thesis: soft power. Further insights into the use of soft power related to sports will be presented in subsequent chapters.

In the past decade, the Gulf states in the Persian Gulf region have initiated significant investments aimed at presenting their countries as grand showcases. The ultimate goal of these countries is to diversify their investment strategies for their promotion through soft power, ensuring they are not solely reliant on oil or natural resources such as gas but become increasingly influential players in the tourism, film, entertainment, and sports industries. Therefore, is possible to describe Qatar and Saudi Arabia as two of the main actors that have implemented these mechanisms to promote the image of their countries as "syntagmatic actors." According to Claude Raffestin, syntagmatic actors can translate their interests into a

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[1] [2022 World Cup final: Argentina vs. France highlights and reactions](#), on espn.com, 18 december 2022. URL accessed 23 february 2023.
[Argentina beat France on penalties in best World Cup Final ever](#), on espn.com, 18 december 2022. URL accessed 23 february 2023.

program/project and can formulate a strategy to realize it. For these stakeholders, the ability to transition from one scale (global) to another (local) is crucial to defend their interests and ensure the execution of the program/action (1980). For the latter, the literature concurs that it is well-suited to be used by national politics to demonstrate a country's power through the organization of national and international events, the acquisition of clubs and companies, the sponsorship of tourism bodies, or the engagement of internationally recognized players to serve as brand ambassadors, as in the recent cases of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.

When FIFA awarded Qatar the hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup on December 2, 2010, defeating geopolitical giants like the United States and England, the small Persian Gulf state was "put on the map" according to a principle that can be described as "football, therefore I am" (Pallarès-Domènech, Postiglione, Mancini, 2021, p.95). Before the allocation of the 2022 World Cup, Qatar was not a country at the center of sports and social debates; in fact, it had a marginal role in organizing small regional events with some exceptions at the international level, such as a tennis open tournament and a MotoGP race. The allocation of the 2022 World Cup undoubtedly marked the beginning of Qatar's rise as an active participant in international sports. Football is part of a multidirectional strategy pursued by the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), a fund of the Al Thani royal family, which has promoted the acquisition of companies in various sectors: petrochemical in Malaysia, automotive in Germany, real estate in India, and an agreement with the Agricultural Bank of China[2]. This multi-investment has brought various benefits, including a growing annual tourist number, and increased foreign direct investments in Qatar, thanks to more open and privatization policies. In both sectors, there was a growth rate of about 10% in 2019 compared to the previous year[3]. However, it is not only through these investments that Qatar is working on improving its image. Figures like Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, along with other entertainment celebrities, are contributing to building and reinforcing international consensus for Gulf countries in the role of brand ambassadors and

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[2] For an overview of the Qatar Investment Authority's investments and portfolio, see the institutional website: https://www.qia.qa/en/Pages/default.aspx

[3] Qatar Economic Report https://pwstg02.blob.core.windows.net/pwfiles/Library/Files/d4399576-df5c-498e-9d53-7a56253b852f.pdf

sponsored tourists. For instance, the Fashion Trust Arabia event in March 2019 welcomed celebrities such as Naomi Campbell, Victoria Beckham, Carla Bruni, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Jose Mourinho, Johnny Depp, and many others.

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a scholar specializing in the Persian Gulf, reflects on the themes of the World Cup in Qatar, wondering whether these investments, which have characterized Qatar's domestic and foreign policies, are more akin to a desire to expand soft power, state branding, or nation-building (2023). When Qatar was preparing its bid for the 2022 World Cup in 2008, Qatari authorities also presented "Qatar National Vision 2030," a development plan aimed at "transforming Qatar into an advanced society capable of achieving sustainable development" by 2030, a project shared with other Persian Gulf countries[4]. Although most of the projects were successfully completed only after the allocation of the World Cup (Brannagan and Reiche, 2022), several issues remained unresolved. While Qatar's implementation of soft power has brought successes in terms of the country's fame, it is equally true that these policies have had rather apparent downsides. Using sports as a tool for nation branding on an international scale, as in the acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain in 2010 or the possibility to sponsor FC Barcelona, allows countries to reach new audiences. Nation branding is the narrower and more instrumental concept of soft power that borrows one of the most common marketing techniques of commercial companies to apply it to an entire nation. Its purpose is to "sell" an idea as if it were a brand. The concept is not new but is an indication of the increasingly intense competition among nations to assert their identity. This strategy, through the idea of soft power, can be observed in various contexts, from Morocco to Singapore, Senegal to the Walloon region of Belgium, the Maldives to China, with unprecedented diffusion.

The exposure of a country as a new actor in various sectors, however, not only attracts investments but also media attention. In the case of Qatar, attention was drawn to the endemic problems of the country: corruption, labor rights, women's rights, human rights, and so on (Ulrichsen, 2020). Strong debates and concerns were also raised about the extreme climatic

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[4] https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/national-vision2030/

conditions that led to moving the World Cup for the first time in history from the summer to November. In September 2019, Qatar hosted the World Athletics Championships, which had unsatisfactory image results: empty stadiums and climatic conditions with a high humidity rate unsuitable for sports competition (Knudsen, Malene & Krieger, Jörg & Duckworth, Austin, 2020).

The Qatar World Cup immediately came under the spotlight and garnered attention in the headlines due to the extremely tragic issue of thousands of immigrant workers who died during the construction of the stadiums. The International Observatory for Human Rights reported that around 1,400 people had lost their lives since the work began in 2010. For over a decade, with FIFA's non-intervention, Qatar operated under the *kafala* system, which tied immigrant workers to their sponsors for five years, with the confiscation of their passports. Despite continuous warnings from Amnesty International, which exposed the system of slavery and human rights discrimination in Qatar, only the football federations of England and Germany expressed their disappointment weakly, threatening to boycott the World Cup, a situation that did not have a significant impact on participation in the sports event (Blake & Calvert, 2015; Conn, 2017; Al Thani, 2021).

The decision by FIFA to award the World Cup to Qatar led to various reports (2010-2014) and investigations by different agencies regarding corruption. In June 2019, former UEFA president Michel Platini was taken into custody and interrogated as a result of the investigations by the European Investigative Consortium. According to reconstructions, Michel Platini had guaranteed his vote for Qatar, and in return, the Qatari royal fund committed to the acquisition of Paris Saint Germain (Bellinazzo, 2017). Additionally, the Gulf State invested in Lagardère, a historic French international group that would then focus on complementary activities in the sports sector (sports economy, sports law, sports site concessionaire), and entertainment. This is just the latest well-known chapter in the long history of corruption investigations related to the World Cup, which certainly did not positively impact Qatar's image. The practice of cleaning up a country's image, trying to divert international attention from internal problems through sports, is known as *sport washing* (Skey, 2023). The investments mentioned at the

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beginning of this narrative by the Gulf countries are part of a country's soft power strategies that seek to hide issues through sport washing to secure a prestigious role. The poor human rights situation and confirmed corruption issues faced timid opposition from the national and international political world; however, there is a risk of strong image repercussions through what is defined as soft disempowerment when certain maneuvers by political and non-political actors discredit or cast shadows on a country's soft power strategies.

Answering Coates Ulrichsen's question of whether the Qatar World Cup was part of a soft power, nation building, or nation branding strategy is not easy. In reality, it is very plausible that all three strategies were pursued through the actions briefly summarized here by Qatar, such as Vision 2030 (nation building), the acquisition of Qatar Airways, Paris Saint Germain, and sponsorship of FC Barcelona (nation branding), or participation in Operation *Unified Protector*, where Qatar intervened in the pacification operations in Libya under Gaddafi's regime in 2011 (soft power). Besides encapsulating these strategies into these three categories, it's interesting to understand whether the policies pursued by Qatar with the awarding of the 2022 World Cup have had a positive impact or undermined the image built up until that point as a "different" country in the Gulf region. As Coates Ulrichsen recalls in *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (2020), the organization of the World Cup led to a blockade against Qatar by neighboring Arab countries on terrorism charges from 2017 to 2021 during the Gulf crisis. In 2017, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries cut diplomatic ties, trying to cast Qatar in a negative light, fueling this climate of *soft disempowerment*. Over these four years, policies with neighboring Arab states have been extremely tough, but it's essential not only to analyze Qatar's 2022 Soft Power in the present but also when studying its evolution concerning the Asian Games in Doha in 2030 or potential Summer Olympics post-2030. Similarly, Saudi Arabia[5], using the same techniques of sport washing, has implemented its Soft Power strategies by presenting itself to the world as a reformist country as desired by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. As reported, football has been caught in the eye of the diplomatic storm in the Arabian Peninsula.

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[5] https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/08/10/saudi-arabia-is-spending-a-fortune-on-sport

In a last-ditch attempt to restore relations between the countries involved, Gianni Infantino, FIFA's president, acted through *sports diplomacy* and proposed to Qatar to expand the World Cup competition from 32 to 48 teams, involving neighboring countries, the opposing UAE and Saudi Arabia, and the neutral Kuwait and Oman, who were waiting for an opportunity to take a part of the World Cup from Qatar. In summary, Doha decided to go its own way and organize the World Cup independently. Only time will reveal the full significance of the Qatar World Cup event and its decoding within the various Soft Power strategies conducted. There is not enough space to narrate the events of Saudi Arabia here, a focus will be mentioned in the last chapter; it should be noted that, similarly to Qatar, Saudi Arabia is investing significant resources in sports and is dealing with issues of sport washing and soft disempowerment. Consider, for example, the organization of the Italian Super Cup played in Jeddah in 2019 for sponsorship and media coverage reasons, the complex situation of women's rights, or the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which have contributed to creating an image of a country significantly deficient in non-derogable human rights, which Saudi Arabia is trying to clean up through sports, along with the recent acquisition of Newcastle United and unprecedented investments in the history of football since 2021 to establish itself a credibility on the international geopolitical chessboard. This demonstrates that Soft Power is not just a matter of mere marketing but something much more complex. The purpose of this introduction is to demonstrate, through the example of "What is a Qatar," how certain features present in the analyses of scholars who have dealt with the World Cup are extremely common in the history of international politics and vice versa, how soft power tools very close to individual voters are used but also historically rooted with significant contemporary impacts on societies. I used a case study like the World Cup in Qatar to begin discussing Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment, as the topic, much like the sports subject of the next chapter, is accompanied by some definitional issues linked to its history and its implications, which, from a theoretical perspective, extend into the world of international relations. As exemplified by this Qatar case study, despite the emphasis of the concept's founder, Joseph Nye, being directed towards the United States and the ambiguity associated with it being a rather dynamic concept, soft power

has been embraced or adopted by countries worldwide as an increasingly prominent component of foreign policy strategy (Thussu, 2014). The term "soft power" has indeed gained global recognition and is commonly employed in political and academic literature, as well as in journalism. The ability of governments to make themselves attractive in a globalized marketplace of ideas and images, as well as the need to project a favorable image of a country in an era of global digital flows involving millions of people, has become an important aspect of current international relations.

1.2   Soft Power

1.2.1   The Binding Force of Societies as a Central Theme in Social Sciences: Power

As previously mentioned in the previous section, it is now necessary to clarify what is actually meant by soft power in order to grasp the various nuances of the notion when applying this concept to sports in general (Chapter 2) and sports in the Maldives (Chapters 3 and 4).

In this work, I do not attempt to develop a theoretical investigation into the foundations of power. However, in this part of the chapter, it is necessary to try to fix the concept of soft power conventionally to a common definition, and then understand the ambiguity of the notion itself. The chapter will continue to discuss the limits of the concept of soft power and its broader applicability in the international scenario.

The notion of power has had various interpretations throughout history, and many historians, politicians, and international relations experts have sought to provide a clear definition, illustration, and qualification. One of the key points that serve this thesis, however, is its relational power. Power is manifested in relationships, in a process of exchange or communication that establishes a connection between two poles (Raffestin, 1980). The concept of power is central in international relations, just as politics in the international system implies power. Since wars are part of human history, the understanding of power has become an important part of academic discourse. It is illustrative how David Baldwin opens his essay *Power and International Relations* (2013), quoting two authors, Hans J. Morgenthau and

Kenneth Waltz. Baldwin reports that Morgenthau, one of the prominent figures of the twentieth century and a leading exponent of realism, suggested that defining political power is a challenging task and a controversial issue in political science; Waltz, a renowned American political scientist and founder of neorealism, has additionally stated that "its correct definition remains a subject of controversy". Numerous scholars have tried to arrive at a common definition of power, such as whether it is a material good (a container, a *Thing Power)* or the relationship between individuals (Raffestin, 1980). In an attempt to simplify, power could be defined as the ability to obtain obedience (power over). As simple as the definition may seem, it has been the subject of rigorous academic discussions and debates. The result seems to be that power is a much broader concept that encompasses a wide range of topics beneath it, which become important to consider when understanding the application of power in the international system. Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan*, explains the origin of political power as the voluntary transfer of freedom and unconditional power by individuals through a mutual pact for self-preservation. In the absence of a state, in fact, humans have the right to everything and everyone *in omnia*, and without any limitation of the sphere of discretion, they find themselves in a condition of perpetual war. In politics, public power has been defined, among others, by the sociologist Raymond Aron as: "The assignment to one or some individuals of the capacity (recognized as legitimate) to establish rules for everyone, to impose respect for these rules on everyone, or, in conclusion, to make binding decisions, in fact or in law, for everyone" (1966).

Using the classic sociological definition of Max Weber, "Power is the possibility that an individual, acting within a social relationship, asserts their will even in the face of opposition". The disposition of power could be defined, at first analysis, as the ability of a social actor to exercise control over the behavior of others, even without their consent and/or using force, influencing their decisions (1922). Weber distinguishes, above all, between power in the strict sense or might (*Macht*), as the exercise of supremacy, and legitimized power (*Herrschaft*), in that it produces acceptance and obedience because it is considered valid. The first expression refers to a social relationship where the stronger subject manages to assert their will in all cases; the second expression refers to relationships where the weaker subject accepts others' decisions

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because they recognize them as valid and, therefore, legitimate. In this second concept, one can find a theorization of what will be defined as consensus. Force is the ability to assert one's will even in the face of opposition; consensus, on the other hand, is the ability to obtain obedience from certain individuals who are also interested in being led. This distinction had already been anticipated by Machiavelli with the metaphor of lions and foxes; the former would use only force to gain power (and are ultimately defeated), the latter use consensus (persuasion).

Throughout history, power has been particularly defined by political realists as *hard power*, where power would exclusively represent a country's military capability, resources, labor, etc. (Barnett & Duvall, 2005), while power as consensus would be understood as something softer. Two of the main theorists of this discipline, which is called contemporary realism, have been John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, who essentially agree that "power is based on the particular material capabilities that a state possesses," where these materials are "*tangible assets*" that determine a state's military strength (2001, p.55 & 1979, p.131).

I intentionally provided a simplified definition of the word power because, in line with Joseph Nye and as I tried to summarize earlier, power is an extremely contested concept (2021). Nye lists the main debates around the concept of power, noting that each author chooses a definition that is subjective and reflects their own values (Dahl, 1961; Bachrach & Baratz, 1963; March, 1966; Lukes, 2005). Some scholars have defined power as the ability to resist change, while others define it as the ability to get what one wants. Beyond what is considered as power, for the purpose of this thesis, the context in which power operates is interesting. As Downing (2008) recalls, humans live in a network of direct and indirect social forces, but above all, Nagel (1975) reminds us that power is a relational concept. We cannot say that an actor has "power" without specifying "to do what". It is always necessary to consider who is involved in the power relationship and what issues are addressed, that is, the purpose and scope, as the political scientist David Baldwin (2013) would say. There are multiple power relationships in which the target that is subjected to power is extremely significant, and as will be seen, this is a crucial point in the relations of Soft Power (Nye, 2021). Another issue of definition that Nye and other scholars raise is that policymakers, over time, have tried to superimpose the term "resource"

onto the word "power," i.e., the means through which power is exercised. Not always does having power lead to the desired outcome, but this depends on the context in which it is applied. Nye cites the example of tanks in Iraq during the Gulf War, where they proved to be very valuable resources, while they were much less so during the Vietnam War. Therefore, Nye reiterates that resources should not be underestimated but do not provide a sufficient definition of power because context and relationships are equally important. This was one of the main reasons that led the American author to develop a new concept of power that had great popularity, different from the usual realist approach of hard power: soft power.

1.2.2 *Defining Soft Power*

Based on what has been said about the theme of power, I will now analyze a particular type of power, namely soft power. This concept has become extremely popular in public and academic debates in recent decades. Undoubtedly, the significant attention that these studies on Soft Power have received reflects the changing landscape of international relations. In this case, theory is influenced by events. As Gallarotti recalls, "While history has shown soft power always to have been an important source of national influence, changes in modern world politics have raised its utility all the more" (2010a, 2010b).

The proliferation of studies on the concept of soft power, however, also shows how the issue is one of the most recognizable but at the same time one of the most problematic notion within the field of international relations. Just like the idea of power, there have been many different definitions attributed to the notion soft power since its first formulation in 1990. First, as will be seen shortly, the initial version formulated by the American political scientist Joseph Nye was criticized for being too focused on the United States, the state, and related to the Cold War. This is not the place to focus on finding a single definition of soft power; it is sufficient to know that it is a highly debated topic. The debate on the notion, which will be briefly summarized below, expresses an idea that, in turn, must adapt to increasingly flexible applications in terms of geography, sociology, chronology, actors involved, etc. The substantial growth and enrichment of academic discourse on soft power in recent times show how it is a highly dynamic

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and relevant subject. Although it is considered a Western construct, the notion of soft power dates back to the 7th century and is attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu. Several authors have accused Nye of merely updating political discourses of the past with the addition of new technologies (Demidov, 2014). Nye is not the only one who has sought to modernize the discourses of the Chinese philosopher; the Chinese Ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, used Lao Tsu's *The Art of War* to explain Chinese strategy and their *peaceful development policy* in a 2012 speech to the UK. Another precursor to the term soft power was E.H. Carr, who in 1939 distinguished international power into three categories: military, economic, and opinion. The latter pertains to a country's ability to influence the opinions of other nations, implying powers of attraction, persuasion, or diplomacy (Carr, 1939).

As anticipated in the conclusion of the previous section, in contemporary times, the concept of Soft Power has gained relevance thanks to Nye's studies, who, first in an article in the Atlantic magazine titled *The misleading metaphor of decline* (1990a) and later in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990b), began to describe the phenomenon by trying to delineate its boundaries. Nye is not only the main reference regarding the theme of soft power but also the most prolific author on the subject (Nye 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2020; 2021). The perspective on the notion of soft power developed by Nye is certainly influenced by the world of American politics, as he held positions as the former Vice Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (1994-95), was later the head of the National Intelligence Council (1993-1994) and served as an advisor and expert in the Obama administration (2014). However, this does not mean that the notion can only be applied to that context. Joseph Nye coined this term when he was trying to address some disciplinary and policy issues related to the theme of power just before his election in the United States as Foreign Affairs Policy Board and a member of the Defense Policy Board (2021). What is important for this thesis is that Nye never rejects the approach defined earlier by realist political scientists regarding hard power, but he considers it insufficient. Nye's definition of soft power is strongly linked to the post-9/11 era, when U.S. foreign policy had to explore new foreign policy terrains, or rather a "new public diplomacy" (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008), as excessive

reliance on hard power would have, according to Nye, compromised the United States' position in international arena. The issue raised by Joseph Nye is that in terms of a multivocal dialogue, where citizens have become the main actors of international politics in an increasingly interconnected world, new "winning" solutions are needed to acquire power. The adoption of a principle of reciprocity or cooperation is one of the most successful approaches in this field, even though, as will be discussed later, branding cultural elements is not sufficient to talk about soft power. Nye's concept of soft power has been further developed in his subsequent works, particularly discussed in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004b), but in the first publications it is defined as:

[...] the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own. This power tends to arise from such resources as cultural and ideological attraction as well as rules and institutions of international regimes (Nye 1990c, Foreign Policy).

In these early versions of 1990, there is a strong rejection of arguments coming from the realist political philosophy circles, aiming to expand the discussion beyond the dominant/dominated and what Nye calls the debate around "power over other countries and power over outcomes" (Nye, 1990b, p.156). The concept of soft power is further elaborated in Nye's book titled *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004a), where he writes:

[...] power means the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes you want. But there are different ways to influence the behavior of others: you can coerce them with threats, induce them with payments, or attract and co-opt them.

And:

What is soft power? It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our

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policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, soft power is enhanced.

Furthermore:

A country can achieve its aims in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness - want to follow it. In this sense in international politics, it is also important to set priorities to attract others, not just to force them to change by threatening them with military force or economic sanctions. [...] Soft power is about shaping the preferences of others.

Or:

A country's soft power rests primarily on three resources: its culture (when it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

Subsequently, in *The Future of Power* (2011), Nye sought to clarify his thoughts by presenting a more formal definition of the concept: "Hard power compels, soft power attracts. In its full definition, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, using cooption to get the outcomes you want". Joseph Nye, therefore, suggests that, in addition to hard power, soft power could be an essential means of attracting other nations to meet the interests of the state implementing these mechanisms. Nye argues that the ideal way to "charm" another nation is to spread cultural values, make an ideological appeal, which would bring one nation closer to another. He also suggests the use of literature, film, cultural diplomacy, and other means to create such "charm", believing that soft power can be an important means of success for U.S. foreign policy initiatives. In this view, the relevance of hard power in the international system diminishes, highlighting other factors such as economic interdependence, transnational actors, nationalism in weak states, technological diffusion, and changing political issues, making a nation's hard power appear less significant. Moreover, the

ability of hard power to influence other nations is questionable. In another article by Nye, Public *Diplomacy and Soft Power (*2008), it is stated that power can be exercised both by using "the stick," meaning threats of coercion, and by using "the carrot," with incentives and payments, to influence other nations as well as the power itself. What I want to address here is the reproductive capacity of power itself, as who is given the carrot effectively leads to a reproduction of power by the subordinate (Foucault, 1976).

In this thesis, I will use Nye's ideas, which also include aspects described by Foucault, while trying to focus specifically on soft power. However, none of these is effective on its own, and a new aspect of power, "soft power," can be an essential means of influencing other nations. This is understood as the ability to co-opt and attract, making others do what you want without resorting to carrots and sticks. Believing in changing the preferences of others, a form of attractive power is thus substantiated (Nye, 2008, pp. 94-95). Nye structures a nation's "soft power" on three essential and intangible resources: culture, which is a set of practices and values that can create attraction, both through high culture, which appeals to the elite and educated classes, and popular culture, such as film, music, etc., which attracts the masses; political values, elements of a nation's political structure and tradition, and its acceptance at home and abroad; foreign policy, which should be credible, legitimate, and have a high level of moral authority. Nye claims that these resources can be an essential means of capturing the attention of foreign audiences and creating attraction (Nye, 2008, pp.96-97). To clarify once and for all, for the purpose of this doctoral thesis, I can use Gallarotti's definition: "The main difference between hard and soft can be captured in the following manner: "hard power acquires power over tangible resources, often through coercive methods, while soft power nurtures qualities" (2011). Additionally, as Hall argues (1997, p. 405), it is important to remember that soft power is a "meta-power," embedded within some greater constellation of social relations.

Moreover, soft power not only represents the key to "success" in international politics but should lead to a radical revaluation of the very way of exercising power. While we may have some familiarity with brutal and coercive power, Nye suggests that we are less inclined to consider its "soft" version. Unlike hard power, which is based on the ability to change "what

others do," soft power is capable of changing "what others want." The common thread that ties the various stages of Nye's thesis development is "attraction": the ability to seduce through the three main resources of soft power, which, in contrast to Machiavelli's advice to "the Prince," lead to love rather than fear.

In addition to the multitude of voices that characterize this debate, Grix et al. (2019) report how some private institutions have attempted to measure soft power. Among these, the British company Monocle Media Group stands out, which annually publishes its survey of the most influential states in terms of soft power, categorizing nations based on themes such as cuisine, sports, governance, diplomacy, etc[6]. The popularity of soft power is evident from the fact that, as Grix et al. show, these rankings are commercially influenced and require payments to access them. As can be inferred from the evolution of the term in international relations and the case mentioned earlier regarding Qatar, the game of intangible power has become increasingly competitive. In an era where few can afford or feel the need to project hard power - military, political, economic - everyone wants to increase its own influence, if only to bolster exports, attract more tourists, increase foreign investments, and promote its interests.

1.2.3 Ambiguities, Limits, and Issues Surrounding the Concept of Soft Power

Strategies of soft power for enhancing a state's position on the international stage have been subject to a thorough and critical examination conducted by many experts and scholars. Numerous works have been undertaken to explore the ambiguity and limits of the concept of soft power as an essential means for success in world politics. The effectiveness of soft power has gained worldwide attention, and countries aim to use their resources to achieve their desired foreign policy objectives through this mode. Therefore, one recurring theme is whether soft power can, over time, somehow replace a state's hard power and how it is constructed, controlled, and how its influence is determined on the international stage.

As is it possible to notice through the brief review of the key scholars who have dealt with

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[6] https://monocle.com/film/affairs/soft-power-survey-2018-19/

soft power, we are dealing with an extremely problematic notion. As Bakalov summarizes in his work *Whither Soft Power? Divisions, Milestones, and Prospects of a Research Programme in the Making* (2019), the literature can be divided into two major themes: studies on the concept of soft power and empirical research where soft power "acts." However, Bakalov believes that there is often little profitable exchange between the two categories, and they frequently remain separate (2019). Bakalov demonstrates that the works of Giulio Gallarotti (2010a and 2010b) as well as Valentina Feklyunina (2008, 2016) are rare exceptions where the notion of soft power is debated in parallel with its application in a specific context. An interesting aspect that Bakalov addresses is the actual difference between hard and soft power, not so much in terms of their identification, but in their intensity (2019). In addition, the conception of how soft power operates is presented, according to Bakalov, in line with Nye, with two models: direct and indirect. In the direct model, politicians change their behavior in line with the desired objectives, and indirectly, public institutions exert pressure on their leaders to act in line with the preferences of the country exercising soft power (Bakalov, 2019; Nye, 2011b, p.94).

This characteristic is also related to another assumption of Nye but may be easily found in local politics: in the contemporary political context, soft power does not belong only to governments, unlike hard power (Nye, 2004a). In other words, citizens have little influence over hard power resources, whereas it can be said that they have more agency regarding culture and thus soft power. Despite this point by Bakalov, the question of "how" soft power works and whether there are direct consequences remains a subject of heated debate. The ideas put forth by some scholars in this regard have been summarized in the following sections, where their studies contribute to the critique of this concept and its better definition. The critical points presented by these authors contribute to the evolution of the concept by covering various countries, demonstrating how the concept of soft power is highly flexible and adaptable to various contexts, not just the American one.

One of the main criticisms about Nye's theory is offered by Chaubet (2022). In his work, Chaubet argues that Nye's concept of soft power has become disconnected from economic power over time, leading to a loss of consensus among international relations scholars due to

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being perceived as "disembodied." However, Nye responded to this criticism by proposing a further development of the concept, known as "Smart Power." Originally developed by Ernest Wilson (2008), the idea of smart power reconciles hard power with soft power, with the crucial element no longer being resources but rather the way they are used, whether coercive or cooperative. Chaubet uses the example of the Marshall Plan as a typical illustration of smart power, and similarly, the contemporary cultural industry, which is an example of a mixed industry that utilizes both hard and soft power, has become indispensable in the globalized world (2022).

Grix et al. (2019) list some of the issues that afflict the concept of soft power, problematizing it from multiple angles. Among the various arguments against Nye's Soft Power, they include:

1. Ambiguity and confusion in defining Soft Power, as it is often conflated with concepts like "nation branding" or "place marketing."

2. Nye's failure to provide a clear explanation of how a state accumulates soft power or forms attraction, often leading to confusion in academic literature.

3. The perception that Nye's concept of soft power is still too Western-centric to apply in many contexts, despite Nye's attempts to argue otherwise, citing the case of Saudi Arabia as a primary dispenser of values through soft power among Sunni Muslims (Gallarotti and Filali, 2012).

4. Some authors have argued that greater academic attention is needed to highlight potential shortcomings in the concept of soft power (Giulianotti & Brannagan, 2014, 2015).

Baumann (2017) proposes intriguing interpretations regarding normative and non-normative attraction. He also points out a lack of clarity in the causal mechanisms of attraction. In the case of normative attraction, the author refers to Nye's concept of the perceived or real legitimacy of a country's values, ideals, and culture. He shows that there isn't a clear relationship with power in Nye's works. While his studies are specific to the United States, the concepts can be attributed to soft power in general, along with the need for sincere persuasion. He suggests

that deceptive persuasion can lead to counterproductive results when based on manipulation and deceit. He does not deny the existence of normative authority – the power to gain consent for one's normative orientation – but like Nye, he states that hard power alone is insufficient. The provision of public goods by some governments, such as the United States to other countries, risks yielding distorted results where there is a perceived overly benevolent version of soft power strategies in relation to outcomes. Among the non-normative attractions mentioned by Nye and discussed by Baumann, prosperity is one of them. It is not so much a value in itself, but rather something that other states desire for themselves. Therefore, other states may act by emulation toward countries considered prosperous. However, this practice would mainly elicit acquiescence from the middle class to the leadership, and, as the two authors argue, it would be more of a promise of a reward rather than actual soft power. What is asserted is that although culture, especially popular culture, has been an important resource of soft power, such as in the case of the United States throughout its history, it remains less clear how the consumption of cultural products abroad (like Hollywood films) or the emulation of practices (like baseball) can directly strengthen the United States' ability to achieve its objectives. In a more recent intervention, Nye states that cultural attraction helps create a favorable environment, meaning it reduces resistance to cooperation. Therefore, persuasion is linked to attraction, but even here, there are conceptual challenges. How can a country's cultural attraction be a means to make others "want what we want" if it is based on the fact that others already share its deepest principles? According to the authors, it is not possible to establish a direct relationship between the soft power of the sending state and the receiving state. If the hypothesis is that the mechanisms of cultural attraction are a tool for shaping preferences through soft power, the differences with cultural imperialism often prove difficult to discern.

Another criticism of the concept of soft power comes from Takeshi Matsuda in his 2007 book *Soft Power and its Perils: US Cultural Policy in Early Postwar Japan and Permanent Dependency*. In this work, he identified a similar issue to Baumann and sought to assess soft power as a two-way exchange, rather than just a unilateral "cultural imperialism." One of the main themes discussed in the book is the cultural relations between Japan and the United States

in the postwar period. Matsuda argues that the United States adopted a relationship of dominance-subordination, where "dominance" would mean a one-way flow of influence and relationships. He believes that even though America had the means to introduce its culture and ideas into Japan, it did not result in passive acceptance by Japan. Matsuda reports that Japanese citizens selectively chose aspects of American culture that would be suitable for them (in a way that a cultural geographer would define "transculturation"). Furthermore, he suggests that the post-war occupation of Japan by the United States, followed by security agreements between the two countries, was probably part of a global effort led by the United States to export its human, cultural, and material capital abroad. The Japanese scholar seeks to raise awareness of the use of coercion by a country through cultural means, which he considers a representation of the same.

Janice Bially Mattern in her article *Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics*, (2005) questions whether attraction is a natural or constructed concept. She argues that there is a "representational force" behind language, which, though not physical, functions as a form of coercive power responsible for representing a nation. Mattern views soft power as a continuation of hard power but using different means. Taking a realist perspective, she believes that soft power isn't as "soft" as it may seem. Furthermore, her article reflects skepticism about the term "attraction," which is considered vague because it implies that "attraction" exists naturally without explaining what causes it and how it occurs. Mattern employs a constructivist sociolinguistic approach to argue that when a nation aims to make an idea attractive to foreign states, it uses strategies of communicative exchange to project the idea as "reality," or the truth. This "reality" can be evidence-based and can be won through arguments. The dissemination of ideas, or the proposed "reality," is typically achieved through language, which carries a "representational force." This force, according to Mattern, is a form of power that operates through the structure of narrative representation of "reality" by a speaker. To achieve positive outcomes, engaging in verbal combat, or making arguments using the representational force, for effective persuasion is common in today's global politics to create what is referred to as "attraction." Therefore, soft

power is rooted in hard power, and the attraction created by this "force" is sociolinguistic rather than physical but has an element of coercion. In summary, Mattern rejects the idea of "natural" attraction and presumes that "attraction" is a socially constructed "reality," not adequately explained by Nye. According to her research, soft power relies on the exchange of communications, involves verbal debates, and aims to persuade people who incorporate the representational force. Whether it pertains to culture, political values, or foreign policy, the communication strategy is key to spreading one's ideas and thoughts. In this regard, Nye agrees to some extent, but he argues that his work doesn't undermine hers since his distinction between hard and soft power is more a matter of degrees along a spectrum of behavior (Nye, 2021).

Niall Ferguson, in his article *Think Again: Power* (2009) argues that the United States is a superpower due to its military capabilities, i.e., hard power, which is once again a function of economic growth and political institutions. Regarding Nye's idea that the United States can exert influence in world affairs through its soft power, Ferguson disagrees. He states that soft power is simply too "soft" to serve national interests. Ferguson argues that although most multinational corporations come from the United States, they are not capable of creating "attraction" towards American culture. For example, while children in the Islamic world may enjoy Coca-Cola, McDonald's, American music, and movies, this doesn't make them love the United States (Ferguson, 2009). Towards the end of the article, Ferguson concludes that the essential elements of power are material factors like "guns, butter, people, money, and oil)." These are what matter when it comes to advancing U.S. interests. Ferguson also emphasizes the importance of faith in power, as he believes that "faith can't move mountains, but it can move people." Ideology and psychology play a significant role in understanding the effectiveness of power, as they can greatly amplify or diminish the ability to project power. As Ferguson later notes, power also involves morality; it should, therefore, have credibility and legitimacy (Ferguson, 2009).

This is a theme supported by Grix et al (2019) in the face of one of the definitional problems: soft power is not just the ability to persuade but the ability to "entice and attract, leading to imitation." An example is provided with the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Berlin, where Germany

greatly benefited from building a global reputation based on credibility and legitimacy (p.29).

Todd Hall, in "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category," (2010) offers his opinions on the ambiguity and limits of the concept. Hall asserts that because "soft power" is widely used by nations worldwide, it has become a category of practice rather than a category of analysis. Hall argues that to understand the mechanism of applying soft power, it is important to consider that the outcome of using soft power resources should be attraction. If attraction does not become a practical mechanism for soft power resources, then the notionitself needs to be reevaluated. Hall suggests that preferences for American cultural goods, whether high or low, do not necessarily indicate attraction towards national-cultural elements. Additionally, the idea that attraction to cultural values or products is an asset of foreign policy is an oversimplified model. Hall claims that Nye's idea of cultural attraction that can spill over into foreign policy should not be taken for granted (Hall, 2010, p.197). Regarding Nye's soft power resource of political values, Hall argues that a nation only adopts specific versions of values to project globally, which later become part of the nation's identity. These values then represent a specific national political culture. However, scholars should be cautious before accepting a "value" as a national identity, i.e., a national value. Moreover, if a nation emulates the same political values, it does not necessarily mean there is attraction. In terms of foreign policy, attraction to a state's policy exists only when there is a material gain involved. Support for a nation's foreign policy cannot be generated by immaterial motivations, such as simply shared values.

In recent decades, despite various criticisms and attempts to deconstruct the notion of soft power as outlined here, it is possible to observe an increased use of the term in public debates, albeit not always with precision. Furthermore, soft power can be seen as the successor to the old diplomatic concept of prestige, which, in the words of the E.H. Carr, allowed "prestigious" states to achieve their foreign policy objectives without the use of material pressures (Carr, 1939). In the contemporary world, through the pervasiveness of global models and information transmission, hard power is increasingly difficult to implement, at least without long-term consequences, as demonstrated in this chapter. In today's politics, states consciously and

meticulously manage their prestige, primarily using multimedia resources. As shown in the case of Qatar at the beginning of this chapter, nation branding uses marketing techniques typical of commercial companies applied to an entire nation to create a marketable brand. Therefore, soft power of states becomes a "laboratory" where, in addition to initiatives (public and private), the state's sphere of action expands. The goal is to engage small and large entities to attract resources and investments, to implement projects that create a positive image of the country initiating these actions, leading to an improved image and, therefore, an increase in soft power. Although it is not an easy notion to handle, and the results of its application are not easily predictable or measurable, soft power, as conceived by Nye, offers a solution in the face of an unstoppable change in the global context that is reshaping the boundaries of political power. In the contemporary political world, new powers are emerging at exponential rates. Moreover, in the political arena, governance is also negotiated with new social actors, often private or semi-private, with increasing political weight, such as NGOs, holdings, multinational corporations, or international social groups.

1.2.4 *Cultural Diplomacy*

In conclusion, I would like to focus on another notion, that of *cultural diplomacy*, which is a component of the soft power "approach". To better explain this notion that will be used in the field research context, I will refer to the works of Raymond Williams (1981), where cultural policies are understood as a set of actions that draw from social memory, knowledge, and national identity to establish new relationships and cooperation between states. Therefore, cultural diplomacy seeks to act towards a better mutual understanding of different countries through the exchange of ideas, information, visual representations, and other cultural expressions. The foundations of cultural diplomacy are the autonomy and independence given to cultural activities by their producers. These two characteristics are considered the best possible advertising to the rest of the world and amplify the values of social freedom.

It is also noted that despite having predominantly political goals, cultural diplomacy operates through non-political methodologies. Cultural diplomacy clearly operates within the

governmental sphere, but it is equally evident that the private sector largely preserves, promotes, and expresses culture, more or less freely. Therefore, cultural diplomacy allows access and export of these "cultural systems" for political and economic purposes, aiming to create a neutral context in which states can consolidate existing relationships. In the political sphere, culture, represents one of the main resources of soft power. Cultural diplomacy is used to support the credibility of foreign policy actions by creating a global system of shared values and norms within which to operate. Intercultural dialogue facilitates peaceful and productive coexistence among groups within a state or between different states, encouraging symmetrical relations among partners and overcoming the idea of a "zero-sum game." In these relationships, both parties can benefit and demonstrate willingness to change policies and positions, evolving through the process of interaction.

It is necessary here to clarify the difference between cultural hegemony and cultural diplomacy to understand another aspect: the possibility that soft power, as Bellinazzo shows in the case of the World Cup in Qatar, may not be as "soft" as it appears (2022). The study by Steven Lukes, *Power: a Radical View* (1974), presents a concept known as the third dimension of power, which is very similar to Nye's concept of soft power. In this third dimension of power, it is suggested that "A can exercise power over B not only by making him do what he does not want to do but also by shaping, forming, and determining his very desires." The key difference from Nye is that Lukes, inspired by Antonio Gramsci, aims at a more leftist analysis of power that shapes the consent of the dominated subjects. He suggests that the forces at work rely on hard power resources, such as the ability to control the flow of information. The issue is that the communicative ability used to "attract and persuade," in many situations, closely resembles hard power, closer to coercion than positive attraction.

With the concept of *cultural hegemony* outlined in the *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci (1948-1951) described a set of tools through which power imposes intellectual leadership and cultural dominance. Gramsci demonstrated a particular sensitivity to the issue of language and recognized the illusion of its neutrality. Language, due to its ambiguous nature, can influence the perception of reality, shape morality, share it, and insinuate it rather than impose it. It is

precisely in this context that he identifies the key through which ruling groups can establish deep relationships with the masses. Despite recognizing the existence of a non-violent form of domination based on persuasion and seduction, Gramsci does not downplay the coercive nature of the soft power that is implemented. Cultural and intellectual power represents an essential tool for the stability of a power system, but those subject to it are shaped by power itself.

At this point, the difference between Nye's position and that of Gramsci (and therefore Lukes) becomes clear. For Nye, soft power may seem amiable and benevolent. While acknowledging the importance of economic and military resources in exercising soft power, Nye initially overlooks the fact that these resources can also be used to annihilate cultural and moral systems alternative to the one exercising power. In short, it is essential to remember that the attractiveness of soft power can also be the ability to generate repulsion towards political opponents. It can be used as an invisible form of power that reaches contexts where physical violence cannot reach or could have more costs than benefits.

In response to the criticisms and arguments of the various authors mentioned, Nye has modified his positions on the power spectrum from hard to soft over time, opting for a more popular hypothesis. According to this perspective, the power to "make others do what you want" is often based on "hard" resources. However, Nye acknowledges the importance of "soft" resources in building and maintaining power in the international system. Nevertheless, the underlying causal mechanism remains somewhat vague and does not provide a fully convincing analysis of power phenomena.

A last comment should be added about the connection between "soft power" as a practice and propaganda as a device. Nye (2008) distinguishes the two notions:

The instruments of soft power are not fully under the control of governments. While governments control policy, culture and values are embedded in civil societies. Moreover, soft power depends on credibility, and when governments are seen as manipulative and information is perceived as propaganda, credibility is destroyed (Nye, 2008: xiii–xiv).

Zamorano (2016), on the contrary, observes that:

"there is also a neo-propagandist type reinforced by soft power theory. In this context, culture tends to be subjected to political and economic instrumentalization by various processes of government management of external cultural representation (Zamorano, 2016: 179).

The main difference, in Nye's perspective, is between civil society soft power, which cannot be seen as propaganda, and state-led soft power, which on the contrary may be associated with it. A second difference, however, may be in the goal of soft power. If it is aimed at convincing the other nation to reach some interests that are their same interest, it is not propaganda. But if the interests are just on the side that is exercising soft power, in that case we can recognize propaganda in it. As we will see, "These phenomena of the state use of soft power and blurred boundaries between public diplomacy, branding, and propaganda do not only occur in superpowers such as the United States, but also in middle-powered countries…" (Jang, 2018, p. 4) and in this perspective sports can be powerful tools.

Soft power and cultural diplomacy

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a reconstruction of the notion of soft power, from its origins to its numerous complexities through changes in meaning and debates on various topics that have passed through and will continue to pass through it. After the first part, which aimed to exemplify how soft power is used and communicated in a "big" case like the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, we attempted to provide a common definition of power. Following this, starting from Nye's concept, we tried to summarize the path that led to the contemporary definition of soft power, distinguishing it from nation branding and reporting the main academic debates around its definition, its actions, its communication, its limitations, and its measurability.

In conclusion, the concept of cultural diplomacy was briefly developed as an element of which soft power constitutes the political part and which can be used for aggressive purposes. Furthermore, since Nye has emphasized that soft power may be the means to success in world

politics, the chapter aimed to analyze the concept from different angles and perspectives. The idea is to understand the applicability of soft power in the international scenario and its potential to be a substitute for the traditional use of hard power for achieving national interests and foreign policy objectives. What is important is to address the dynamism of the notion of soft power in its application, suggesting that further studies are needed for a better theoretical understanding of it, and of its different nuances, from public and cultural diplomacy to propaganda.

Chapter 2: Sport, Society, Politics

2.1 Theoretical approaches

Sport, while it can be used as a key to analyze various aspects of society, both locally and internationally, has only recently assumed relevance as an object of research in the social sciences, although various sciences are concerned with it, beginning with psychology, pedagogy and sociology, and anthropology, moving from biomechanics to urban planning and, of course, geography. Indeed, talking about sport are sports physicians, researchers in biomechanics, psychologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, experts in economics, management, sports law and International Relations, agronomists, those who deal with sports construction, and those more theoretically with the political role of sport and its spaces. Various perspectives are studied, practical educational and training action, sociological and cultural reflection, the medical aspect; in short, we are faced with myriad approaches, trends, schools of thought and areas of research, which nevertheless often remain on the margins of the various disciplines, which often skim over the topic without it becoming a central part of their interests. In this chapter, I would like to look at some of the theories formulated in the social sciences regarding sports, to show the strength of the connection between sports, culture (and consequently power), society, and politics.

Less theoretical, and much less developed, but more focused on the concreteness of sport in public space, political construction, and political and geopolitical relations, is the geographical research devoted to sport. In the first part of the chapter, I will try to present the positions of the different authors who have tried to analyse sport within the academic context, to give scientific dignity to a very present but little studied phenomenon, attempting to bring back the main approaches developed by the social sciences around it. Next, recent studies on the globalization and glocalization of sport lead to show how much we are now facing a trans-national concept, and therefore a tool of geopolitics and soft power. In the last part of the chapter, I will highlight the notion of *Sport Diplomacy* in order to demonstrate its usefulness in relation to the case study that is the subject of this thesis.

2.1.1 An evanescent topic

The social role of contemporary sport is composed of a multitude of tiles, putting us in front of a multifaceted mosaic. Whether it is a practiced activity, or a merely watched spectacle, sport is at once a pastime, a mechanism for defining identity and creating imagined communities, a valve for economic development, an element of national iconography, an instrument of aggregation and division to a multitude of scales, a puppet on which to unload fears and other emotions. The result is a skein of discourses, notes, and reflections making sports a problematic object of study. There are several issues that affect the practice of sports, very often far removed from the real values of passion and enjoyment, just think of building abuses, the commercialization of sports rights, the mediatization of events, and scandals related to money laundering and stadium construction. All of this explains at least in part why sports is an elusive topic, not easily tamed in the traditional analytical categories of the social sciences. Sport is therefore to be considered in a multidimensional perspective. What is important to emphasize here is that sport is first and foremost culture and constitutes a key to understanding society, intimately connected to the welfare society, on a par with tourism and fashion, food and consumption.

Twentieth-century sports has been a socially unwieldy and sociologically submerged phenomenon, Porro (2001) argues. Undoubtedly it has been the main form of entertainment for billions of people on the planet in different places and spaces, participating in an emotion, a collective passion. Nevertheless, sport still suffers several biases to become a plausible object of research. In front of it, academic culture has long experienced a relationship of disorientation. As Porro argues, we are beginning to understand the paradox why such an unwieldy phenomenon was so lacking in interest and visibility in the eyes of scientific expertise that is not strictly technical- instrumental (Porro, 2001). Yet, sports, first and foremost, has great economic weight: in fact, its supply chain is worth 3.2% of Italy's Gross Domestic Product according to FIGC data, the professional soccer system alone generates a turnover of 5 billion

euros[7]. It is thus one of the main economic sectors in Italy, ranking ahead of productions such as textiles and clothing. If we consider soccer alone, there are about 28 million fans in Italy. About 2/3 of those are enrolled in a sports club, or a gymnasium, or play sports. In addition, soccer is a perfect model for the powers that want to impose their hegemony, as we will see more later. Over the past decade, turnovers around the world of football have multiplied, ensuring that managerial planning stands in front of a well-established and stable economic model. Since 2010, companies like PSG have had +672% in revenues, Manchester CITY +297%. The Italians remain a step behind, but the European Cups Champions rewards have increased from 764 million in 2009 to 2 billion in 2019. A further aspect highlighting the centrality of sports is its treatment during the Sars-Covid1pandemic. Taking the Italian case, leaving aside amateur sports for a moment, professional soccer in fact was the last popular activity to go into lockdown and the first to reopen. If we consider the satellite activities (transports, restaurants, merchandising, betting, TV rights, season tickets, and the pressure of publicly traded clubs such as Juve, Roma, and Lazio), we understand that Covid has hit a resilient sector. On average, in the last 20 years, a club has earned 5 times more than20 years ago. Just from these simple figures referring to professional soccer alone, it is possible to understand why there are billions of reasons why soccer and sports must be taken into account.

These figures speak for themselves making evident the contrast between the obvious cultural, economic and demographic dimensions of sports practices and the infinitesimal attention of social research to them. All of this also follows in the academic sphere, in which sport was, as far as Italy is concerned, given its dignity in the faculties of Sport Sciences only in 1999, placing the country abundantly in last place in Europe. Even, subdisciplines, such as Sociology and Sports Geography, are not widespread everywhere,1 even if sport is an extraordinary lens of social change as a manifestation of lifestyle, a pattern of behavior, an ideology, popular passion, technology, entertainment and leisure. These characteristics, on the contrary, have made sports increasingly attractive to the media, which, for the purpose of greater enjoyment, have exploited

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[7] https://www.sgieurope.com/market-statistics/italys-sports-economy-contributes-245-billion-to-national-gdp-a-19-increase/97550.article

its social and aggregating function. Following the footsteps of Marcel Mauss (1925), sport can be considered to be capable of focusing the attention of social and cultural diversity for political, religious, and cultural institutions as a total social fact. Using Mauss' concept, we can say that sport is an element that has implications throughout society, from the economic to the political and even the religious. This issue is fundamental in political terms because it is an element that creates a very strong sense of belonging and identity among individuals. With the nation-state (i.e., the quintessential modern state), states "steal" liturgies from the church. According to George Mosse (1975), sports is the theme most often used to nationalize the masses: patriotic hymns, hierarchy, respect for power, and fondness for the homeland. These elements are perfected under totalitarianisms: sport, in fact, like other pedagogical moments is connected to military culture, just think of its language and symbolic warfare.

Another explicitly political element found in soccer is the concept of territory, one of the constituent elements of the state, along with community and sovereignty. In soccer, the conquest of territory is a foundational moment. The transposition to the real is the defense of one's corner, one's city. As will be explored further, soccer has fulfilled the role of symbolic translation of violence, through which society arrives at pacification. Sport, however, has academically followed the same fate as other fundamental individual experiences, such as emotions, play or sexuality: all topics relegated to a shadow cone by the official social sciences. As Dunning (2013) argues, sport is among the most discussed but among the least understood [and studied] phenomena of our everyday lives.

2.1.2 *From play to sports*

In order to be able to study sports, is important first of all order the reasoning within meshes that allow one not to get lost in an already extremely nebulous field, as it is made evident by the current confusion between physical education and sports, between amateur and Olympic sports, *loisir*, fitness, wellness and so on. Trying to give a definition of sport is not easy. The term is of Latin derivation, from *deportare*, understood as leaving the city gates to engage in non-work activities. The term, from the Provençal *deportar*, later borrowed from Spanish and

French *desporter* (amusement, recreation) then originated in 14th century English disport, abbreviated in the 16th century into modern sport (in Italian, the expression "*diporto*" still applies, with the same derivation and meaning).

One grasps from the outset the sense of playful practice associated with the leisure character that sport carries with it. None of the theories that will be reported here will question the existence of a playful dimension within the determination of sport as a social phenomenon. It would not be possible to understand the value of sport as if the subject of leisure were not introduced. It should be considered as loisir, or leisure, that complex of individual and group activities unrelated to productive and reproductive needs to which one gives course and purpose to fulfill a need for self-realization, or to satisfy a sense of aesthetic or emotional pleasure (Ivo, 1980, p.32). The sociological analysis of play, and of the playful root of sport as a typical phenomenon of modernity, thus finds in the sociology of loisir an indispensable shore to analyze the issue. Indeed, it is from the most effective analysis of play as a model of human interaction that it is possible to derive expendable theoretical coordinates in the construction of a theory of sport. It becomes clear that if not all, many of the attributes that belong to the sphere of play also belong to that of sport; however, some boundaries must be drawn in order to better grasp their meaning. The opposition between play and sport, even though the concept of competition is decisive in the distinction between the two, has long been at the center of the debate in the sociology of sport, whereby there has been a need to move beyond definitions of sport such as those of pastime or ludic activity in order to consider it an institutionalized practical activity.

As mentioned earlier, the possibility of considering sport as an important context for the observation of social phenomena has only recently been recognized to some extent. For some years, in fact, there has been a growing interest in the scientific study of sports phenomena, although in Italy it is still a field of investigation that is more of an exception than a real field of study. In agreement with Tosi (2018), if part of the disinterest, sometimes a little snobbish, towards sports refers to the "light" character of the subject; it is instead in the playful character of the object much of its strength as a field of inquiry. Sports re often "just a game," but games

can have a great many meanings (Stenros, 2017), and within these meanings are mechanisms and aspects that can be of great interest in understanding the societies in which such games take place. Indeed, sport cannot be considered a sphere separate from the overall social system, either originally or in its present state. Sociology has borrowed the reflection of sport as a mirror of society through the aforementioned concept of total social fact (Mauss, 1925). A total social fact is a phenomenon capable of influencing and determining a number of phenomena of a similar nature, connecting to different aspects of the community, of performing a number of unexpected functions; in other words, it is a fact putting together many different traits of a culture: politics, society, economics, religion, media conception, language, fashion, and thought. Sports, like religion, is a human creation, cumbersome, pervasive and invasive to the point of conditioning human behavior by recognizing itself in the culture to which it belongs, as a product of the society that conditions it and is conditioned by it. Sport is nourished by characters, actions and relationships, which experience time, geography and history, and Mauss's concept is fundamental because sport becomes "thought action that manifests itself as a regulated interaction between an actor, the environment, and other actors, from a conventional and shared symbolic system" (Russo, 2004, p. 60).

2.1.3 At the dawn of the sociology of sport: Strutt, Risse, Huizinga

On the contemporary sports phenomenon, several authors have ventured along the boundary between quantitative social science and the ethnographic descriptivism of the 1800s. Joseph Strutt, for example, in *The sports and pastimes of the people of England* had begun to analyze the distinction between recreational activities and rural pastimes as early as 1801.

Among the various authors of the early 1900s who dealt with sports, Heinz Risse in his *Soziologie des Sports* (1921) provided an early example of a sociological analysis of the problem. Indeed, the German author intuits certain issues such as the relationship between space and movement and that between the environment and the "sporting body": it is with him that we begin to reflect on the transition from outdoor practices to increasingly specialized indoor facilities. Risse calls it the technification of sport, which is accompanied by increasing

bureaucratization and rationalization, such as the role of the referee in competitions. The city, therefore, begins to incorporate sports as a site for the production of events and symbols, in an otherwise counter-naturist view in which the stadium, a component of the city, poisons its surroundings. According to Risse, however, bourgeois sporting activities such as tennis and rowing are quite different from popular sports played outdoors on grass such as soccer, which incorporate the principles of working-class solidarism. A pedagogical voluntarism also survives in Risse, in which sport is a medium used for nationalist propaganda, an element abundantly manipulated by Nazi-fascism. Undoubtedly, Risse's analysis is one of the very first unbiased analyses of a mass society, anticipating fields of research that would not be analyzed until several decades later.

A milestone for the recognition not only of the cultural character of the game, but also of its ability to be itself a producer of culture is the work *Homo ludens*, (1938), by Johan Huizinga. Huizinga in particular was obsessed with the manipulation of sport, and the instrumental use of nationalism that the dictatorial regimes of the time were making of it. Play for Huizinga is inherent in the human being, so through his imaginative, ingenious, and creative virtues he is able to make different games. He states that through play "collectivity expresses its interpretation of life and the world," and that "play is older than culture, since the concept of culture, however insufficiently it may be defined, presupposes human coexistence in every way, and animals did not wait for humans to teach them how to play." For Huizinga, then, play, as a characteristic of animals and human beings, is at the origin of culture, "constituting a decisive manifestation for the deciphering of the modern homo ludens." For this research the relationship between culture and play is to be found where there is an ordered group and society. Thus, we do not mean the game as play, but as a game, that is, a set of recognized rules, of behavioral patterns that underlie the interactions of a given society. This can be observed by the distinction between professional and amateur players in that the professional does not assume a playful attitude, let alone play for pastime. Through his work Homo Ludens, Johan Huizinga thus provides a minimal definition of play, from a perspective where it is transfigured into a useful, indeed necessary activity: it takes place in a limited time, with rules, involves competition and

leaves room for a component of luck. Human activities all originate as playful activities according to Huizinga, and the human being is precisely a being who plays, a being ludens. "Huizinga's great merit is to have attributed to play a universal and eternal role" (Barba, 2021, p. 41). In summary, always and everywhere, every culture has contemplated ludic manifestations; culture since antiquity manifests itself as play. It is the same culture that arises already in ludic form, which is first of all played. Through play, each community expresses its interpretation of life and the world. Says Huizinga at the beginning of his text, "play is older than culture, because the concept of culture, however inadequately it may be defined, presupposes human coexistence in every way, and animals did not wait for humans to teach them how to play" (1938). Homo ludens is thus the work that enshrines the centrality of play, as the primary manifestation of culture and the ordering principle of human nature.

To delineate a clear distinction between what is sport and what is play, I have proceeded historically by successive approximations. For a distinction between playful and sporting activities, one initially went by the seriousness component that only the latter would have, but as demonstrated by Huizinga, this did not turn out to be a truthful argument (1938). More significant is the incidence of strenuousness, that is, a sequence of actions that affects subsequent ones in view of the final outcome. The cumulative nature of the interactions makes it possible to eliminate a substantial share of playful interactions from the analytical spectrum, but nevertheless it is found, for example, in a great many board games that are anything but sports. A step forward is taken by examining the component of physicality, especially hand in hand with competitive game, which are indispensable elements in the distinction between sports, where these two elements are necessary, or play, where they are optional (Russo, 2004, p.18). However, it is the outcome, as Isidori (2015, p. 47) explains, that provides the discriminating difference. Play does not always have it, because it does not need a defined and utilitarian end, while in sports it is indispensable with objective standards, needing therefore a "standardized and referable outcome" (Russo, 2004, p.20).

Based on what has been shown, it is possible to try to give here a definition of sport approximating the different aspects that have been expressed above: a system of practices and

interactions characterized by a seriousness of attitude of the actors, in a fateful context, marked by dynamics of competitive physicality formalized to the production of a result. Thus, we are faced witha peculiar activity, which involves the body in its entirety, since it is both play, it is performance and expression of personal creativity and free choice of behavior, as much as a game, which demands adherence to codified rules and organized in competitions involving the achievement of a goal (Isidori, 2015, pp. 47-48). As denoted through the approximations that have been shown, however, it often happens that play and game coexist, intersect, and overlap. It proves difficult to draw a clear boundary just as it is between play, sport, art, and performance-think of synchronized swimming, diving, and artistic gymnastics. If play has long been studied as a cultural factor, an element of mammalian growth and learning, if the examination of the playful aspects of a culture involves the study of the body and its techniques, if in short, physical practices have served to complete the knowledge of a community, the leap to sport as an element worthy of in-depth focus in its own right has been, for many social disciplines, rather occasional and intermittent. A decisive realization was belated: that sports practice could be a reflection of something more extensive, that it is culture, society, but also and above all the product of culture, an environment in which culture is produced, in which history is made.

2.1.4   Sportsmanship, civilization, nationalization: Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning

Next to focus on the study of sport were the so-called configurational sociologists. An important contribution regarding sports is that of Norbert Elias, who identifies the sportification of the new model of modern society as a privileged path of Western civilization, going so far as to bring sociological reflections on sports and loisir activities back into the sphere of a social theory of emotions. For the author, each social context presents a specific configuration, which can be grasped sociologically by observing relationships in the dialectic between cooperation and conflict; dance or play are manifestations capable of effectively highlighting the network of relationships between individuals and groups in a society (Porro, 2001). With their research on the sportsmanship of pastimes, Elias and Dunning (1986) completed their reconstruction of

the process of civilization, which had begun with Elias' broader analysis of the establishment of a "civilization of manners" in the transition from the end of the medieval age to the formation of monarchies and nation-states, in the framework of early modern societies. This civilization is associated with two essential processes. The first consists of a repressive actionon the instinctual sphere, strict control of emotions, aggression, and instincts, and assimilation ofnorms, whichbecomes functional to the formation of aspects of the individual's personality consistent with the new societal system. The second process, inspired by Weber's sociology (1905), concerns the political and institutional sphere. Western civilization and subsequently nationalization presuppose the transfer of the "monopoly of legalized violence" to public authority. The invention of the nation-state, a political institution of Western modernity, goes hand in hand with the consolidation of efficient means and organisms aimed at preserving order and social control. Civilization is not achieved solely through the strengthening of repressive tools but must also propose models of behavior, codes of social regulation. Their function is to make visible social hierarchies of status, highlighting the possession of skills and behavioral norms devoid of any practical utility and therefore indicative of a condition of superiority. With their analyses, Elias and Dunning demonstrate the importance of studying sports as a part of the civilizing process, involving the development of behavioral codes based on the conscious repression of impulses, feelings, and passions. According to Norbert Elias, this repression is one of the main foundations upon which the entire system of mass societies rests. Modern sports, in Elias's view, are a privileged object that distinguishes itself from competitive chivalrous traditions and rural folk games, giving rise to a new and unprecedented meaning. This particular process of civilization began in the 19th century, and in some cases, as early as the second half of the 18th century, particularly in England. Following the English model, certain leisure activities that required skill and physical strength adopted distinctive elements of sports in other countries as well. These pastimes were characterized by a civilizing influence on competitions, a restriction of violence through a system of rules that demanded a level of self-discipline that did not exist before. Circus games, for example, were based more on the spectacularization of violence than on rule-driven competition. In contrast, Elias's concept of

sport is a modern, mimetic phenomenon that does not erase violence but domesticates it, even though occasional incidents of uncontrolled violence, such as hooliganism, may resurface.

Summarising, civilized sports practices contribute to the internalization of social norms, playing a role in the development of Western modernity. The modern high-performance sport, an entirely new phenomenon, constitutes a particular subject of analysis for Elias, Dunning, and the configurational school. It differs from classical Greek and Roman agonism, as Greek sports, being non-amateur, involved spectacular competitions of professional athletes, mostly symbolic (Classical Olympics) with political significance and largely unregulated. Therefore, in addition to regulating the disciplines, modern sports activities also involve the development and dissemination of behavior that can represent models and expressions of everyday life. According to Porro (2001), the Victorian era (1837-1901) represents the culmination phase in which this sportification expands through colonialism but also acts internally, with the establishment of parliamentarism. An extremely interesting point emphasized by Porro is that sportification also fosters dynamics of social cohesion, giving rise to identity systems different from those characterizing traditional societies or aristocratic clubs. Towards the end of the 19th century in Great Britain, as well as elsewhere, a series of voluntary associations, clubs, and sports societies developed. One notable example is the parasport movement of Turnen in Germany, involving those non-competitive gymnastic exhibitions that Mosse (1975) considered one of the foundations of German nationalization. This aspect characterizes what Elias defined as the second wave of sportification, coinciding with the Victorian era. During this period, in addition to football and rugby, individual practices such as tennis and athletics also emerged. The first wave, around the 18th century, was seen as the dynamic transformation of ancient aristocratic leisure into rule-governed competitive practices. In the early 20th century, the third wave reconnects to the globalization of sport, placing the theme of globalization at the center of attention. This is a matter of global importance where the spectacularization and mediatization of modern sports gain the same relevance that the configurational school had attributed to the relationship between sportification and Western civilization. This phenomenon gives rise to a pervasive communication system among diverse

social and national cultures, developing significant economic interests and involving various social actors. The first institutions and international sporting events take shape, such as the Olympics or the World Cup, with their global influence, where the first competitive regulations are applied on a supranational level. The process of globalization is identified in the new role of sport as a media spectacle.

2.1.5 Guttmann e Durkheim

Sport in the twentieth century is a modern product that develops in radical discontinuity compared to previous models (Mandell, 1984). As Porro (2001) argues, those who attempt to reconstruct the genetic chain of the phenomenon from classical antiquity are doing nothing more than implementing a true invention of tradition. Significantly, the reflection of Max Weber serves as a guide for a more accurate analysis of the topic. The reconstruction is known as *From ritual to record* (1978) and is underlined by the work of Allen Guttmann, moving from original liturgical practices to Victorian British sports, through seven cultural ruptures: secularization, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucratization of records, and quantification. As explained earlier, the reason sociology, as well as economics, geography and politics, should concern themselves with sports is not merely about high-level competitions. Instead, it is about the immense cultural value of a phenomenon for which a rigorous approach has been lacking and continues to be lacking from the social sciences. In accordance with Barba (2021), the relationship between sport and religion demonstrates how thinking about the characteristics that distinguish each culture in terms of a total social fact can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, asserting that in any context everything is culture allows the tautology that sport, like religion, has citizenship everywhere. On the other hand, these continuous relationships make boundaries fluid, debatable, even eliminable. Hence the legitimacy of statements such as "sport is a religion," meaning a cult that involves a creed, an officiant, believers, and rituals. Despite Guttmann's assertion that modern sport is marked by "secularism," meaning it has emancipated itself from an archaic religious matrix contributing

to Weberian disenchantment, it cannot be denied that there are continuous contaminations. Pier Paolo Pasolini defined football as:

"...the last sacred representation of our time. It is ritual at its core, even if it is an escape. While other sacred representations, even the Mass, are in decline, football is the only one left. Football is the spectacle that has replaced the theater. Cinema could not replace it, but football could. Because the theater is a relationship between a live audience and flesh-and-blood characters on stage. While cinema is a relationship between a live audience and a screen, shadows. Instead, football is again a spectacle in which a real, flesh-and-blood world, that of the stadium stands, measures itself with real protagonists, the athletes on the field, who move and behave according to a precise ritual. Therefore, I consider football the only great ritual left in our time." (Il Giorno, 1971)

Considering sport as a collective expression of the human being and its deep involvement, a certain mysticism is noted that connects it to religious and artistic manifestations. Translating the concept by referring to a secular ritual is limiting, as sport is not merely a copy of symbolisms but a culturalphenomenon that absorbs a genuine faith (Barba, 2021). Pasolini's words fully reflect the increasing social importance of sport in contemporary society. This is easily observable from the moment when events like the Sunday football match began to take on increasingly religious connotations, emptying churches and filling stadiums. The power of sport, in this analysis, lies precisely in its characteristic of being, more than ever today, the most unifying among ideologies and the most identity-forming among religions (Tranquillo, 2021). Sunday gatherings, established for the affirmation of common ideals and group identity, are increasingly shifting to stadium stands, bars, clubs, affirming individuals as part of a community. In particular, this microphysics of belonging to a national and international football faith responds well to Benedict Anderson's (2018) definition of an imagined community, where in the case of communities larger than a neighborhood, the sense of belonging to a common identity and internal cohesion must be based on people's imagination that allows them to perceive themselves as members of that group.

The stadium, despite being a space where consensus is mobilized, also represents a place of assertion, if not even an awareness, of social oppositions. The "sports space" increasingly represents a specific model accompanied by cultural elements external to the mere sports arena, such as restaurants, museums, as well as a new system of city consumption (Tosi, 2018). The celebration that repeats in stadiums at every event is therefore a secular liturgy that allows those who participate to feel part of a group, to have a unique but ritualized experience, and also to transgress the rules generally imposed by the routinization of society and as noted by Elias (1978), to release one's inhibitions. Starting with the works of Huizinga (1938), with Elias' work *Sport and Violence"*(1978), a significant connection is established between civilization and sportification, with a particular emphasis on the control of violence. Some also highlight how, starting from the mid-19th century, the British Empire began to turn sport into a kind of exportable gospel. This model, exported with the expansion of the British Empire, would confirm the hypothesis that the existence of a range of playful practices in every society of any era would respond to the need to create a sort of behavioral reserve, in which to express models of emotional involvement that ordinary sociality represses or keeps under strict control (Porro, 2001, p. 36).

Gathering together in a stadium, similar to what happens in a church, means forgetting one's individuality, setting aside the social role played in life outside of leisure, to transform into a different person, a member of a different community. Such behavior allows individuals to find in festivals and gatherings those characteristics that in primitive societies allowed, by wearing masks or particular clothing, the erasure of each person's identity and the opportunity to assert oneself in a group without hierarchy. According to Durkheim, coming together in ceremonies allows for the continuation of a collective consciousness, "confirming to oneself and to others that we are part of the same group," asserting and remembering the group's dominance over the individual. It is with the occasion of "these common actions" that "society [...] becomes aware of itself," providing the desire to undertake a common path under the banner of a shared ideal. Durkheim's discourse is very relevant because his works, focused on social order and political continuity, emphasize how modern life tends to divide the community. Industrialization,

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urbanization, social speed, and geographic mobility, the more complex division of labor, are factors contributing to its erosion. Football and sports in general counteract this by their ability to repair the damage caused by changes in modern society and the development of individual presence. Establishing a football club, fan associations, creating rules, helps to counteract the effects of atomization and alienation that distort individuals within the large and impersonal cities of modern society. Participants in the game of football, whether players or fans, are integrated into the larger social system; thanks to the opportunity they have to meet and interact with people from other teams and cities. Quoting Escobar: "clubs help promote deep forms of common identity or solidarity, both at the civic and national levels" (1999). It may seem that football clubs, with their complex division of labor, are clear examples of Durkheim's "organic" solidarity. However, with a more nuanced use of his study, we can discern the strong connection of many clubs with the more traditional mechanistic model. Each club, bearing the symbolic name of a locality, establishes a kind of emotional bond with that specific place, thus proclaiming a certain local patriotism. The choice of social colors, symbols, banners, emblems, allows the feeling of being a soldier of this or that faction, of this or that fiefdom. In a football match, we find a periodic affirmation and actualization of the continuity of a collective consciousness, which is difficult to find in seemingly similar contexts. The unique characteristics of football, linking the "we" with "others," allow communication in other areas that are difficult to find, connecting the individual with the universal. Moreover, they allow a group to celebrate itself by representing itself in a section of a stadium. Each sector of this forms a ground where a common sense of belonging is rooted, which, rather than dissolving, is expressed in the collective fervor of noisy support. The strong sense of belonging that arises from a football spectacle can sometimes involve the entire community, an entire nation, even those who normally live without any involvement, especially on occasions of great events, victories, or clashes with traditionally rival factions. Those who attend a football match are aware of participating in a social spectacle, where an entire city showcases itself and seeks its revenges.

2.1.6 Other sociological approaches around sports

The influence of Durkheim's structural functionalism is evident in many authors. The previously analyzed focus on collective representation developed by Durkheim is a significant factor that, for sports practices, reinforces a sense of belonging to a community. Sports as a collective representation fully satisfies socio- emotional functions. Similarly, the cyclical ritualism of sports events, such as the World Cup, for example, creates a reassuring aura of sacredness, fostering social cohesion. For functionalists, elite groups have always recognized the potential of sports as a strategy for integration and control. Sports, in fact, effectively fulfills the task of promoting, in the symbolic sphere of daily life, the individual's identification with the social group. Unlike Guttmann's analysis, functionalists emphasize the religious significance that sports affiliations would retain. In addition, for functionalists, sports serve the preservation of the system of inequalities (Luschen & Sage, 1981). Simmel's sociology starts with the analysis of sports as a form of interaction between individuals, which, despite different contents, give rise to a societal system. Consider a sports team, where the contents could be different, but the same forms of interaction between individuals are observed: the superior-subordinate relationship, relations of antagonism and conflict, functional interdependence, representation (Secondini, 2006).

This approach is aimed at analyzing four key points: play, conflict, space, and leisure time. The first is represented by play, and Simmel refers to the "playful form of association" as an element of modernity, foreseeing the origin of a social form of sport. A modern conception of sport that enhances the notion of play because sport, more than play, is a source of socialization and, at the same time, is based on the relationship between freedom and discipline, a relationship that allows the individual to assimilate every single form if it belongs to the emotional realm. However, Simmel emphasizes the necessary characteristics of play, such as total commitment, symbolic content, a means to satisfy needs. Gambling, for example, is characterized not only by the pursuit of gain but also by the execution of an action and a possible risky outcome. In conclusion, by playing, everyone produces society, in addition to engaging in an activity that refers to the social context in which it is inserted (Simmel, 1983). The other key point is conflict,

understood as a factor of social change and as the symbolic place of predisposition of the norms underlying social life and therefore the basis of the relational system between individuals and groups. Simmel deals with conflict in theoretical terms and generally in relation to the class conflict that Marx discusses (Porro, 2001). Simmel's starting concept is that conflict should not be considered the opposite of social order. Conflict is nothing more than a form of vigorous interaction and, more than a normative social order, can unite individuals because it leads to a behavioral order.

Generally, the idea of self-limitation of conflict applies to some sports forms. Conflict is not destructive; rather, it tends to limit itself because the struggle consists of each competitor aiming for the same goal without using force against the opponent, thus containing the conflict (Porro, 2001). nly through the elaboration of rules can conflict be transformed into regulated competition. Thsports competition, especially in team games, can be an example of regulated conflict. Within the competition, both aspects of cooperation and tension are present. In two opposing teams, there is a mutual need to confront each other. Moreover, sports competition is characterized by emotional and sentimental aspects within a specific space-time. "In a certain sense, then, sport, an activity with strong emotional content, with unpredictable outcomes and at the same time governed by objective rules, is the most convincing metaphor for conflict and modernity itself" (Simmel, 1983).

Another contribution of Simmel's sociology comes from the concept of space (and city), understood as a form of society within which interactions represent the content. When reciprocal action begins among people, space is defined. One of the characteristics that sport possesses, like many other social practices, is exclusivity. In the urban context, belonging to an elitist club represents a form of symbolic distance from the society of others (Porro, 2001), including practices of exclusion and differentiation. The urban space described by Simmel has a particular symbolic meaning, clearly represented in the example of the stadium as a symbolic physical boundary associated with clear functions; consider the division between the stands and the curves or the ability to restrain (contain) and discipline (regulate) the "unruly manifestations of strength, enthusiasm, competition" (Simmel 1983). The relationship between sport and space

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can be understood in the perspective of containing violence, which is a distinctive element between modern sports and classical competitive games. The space between players and fans has become increasingly distant due to the growing number of riotous incidents on and off the field. At the same time, the violence contained in stadiums has spatially and symbolically shifted to urban centers, where clashes between opposing fan groups often occur. Simmel's contribution to the sociology of sport as a cultural phenomenon is also evident in the link between the social form of sport and leisure time, thanks to the role assumed by the latter in industrial societies. In a social structure characterized by routine and work uniformity, leisure activities gain relevance. These include not only sports but also art, dance, music, and travel. These sports practices allow an appreciation of the quality of time, both for oneself and as an opportunity to assert individuality and, consequently, a need for differentiation. Sport, like other leisure activities, expresses the need for belonging to a social group and identification with it. The fan base of a particular football team expresses this need for group belonging and differentiation because fans belong to that group, but at the same time, belonging distinguishes them from members of another club.

The Weberian model allows us to glimpse the characteristics of modern society, such as secularism, equality, specialization, rationalism, bureaucratic organization, quantification, and the pursuit of records, in modern sports (Weber, 1922) Sport has represented a significant aspect of modern society in terms of respecting rules and codified measures. Weber's analysis, however, starts from a factor other than the economic one, namely industrialization, although this was essential in interpreting the nature of modern sport. Weber analyzed sport, especially sports competition, starting from the relentless pursuit of gain in American society. His analysis also stems from Anglo-Saxon Calvinist Protestantism, which marks the transition to industrial modernity, ultimately incorporating stereotypes and prejudices of the observed object, rejecting anything that lacks rules or codifications. However, there is a certain correlation between Protestantism and participation in sports. Allen Guttmann will explain how English Protestant societies have taken hold of sports to reduce the threat of unregulated corporeality and expressiveness. They attributed social functions to agonistic sports, where competitions are

measured and compared, connected to the rational purpose of modernity creating forms of relaxation, encouraging physical activity. Through sport, the body has been secularized, detached from union with the sacred sphere, and medicalized, with specific skills directed towards technical performance and no longer tied to pleasure. The use of the body has been instrumentalized to produce money and success, so the rationalized sport of modernity has severed any connection with the corporeality and expressiveness typical of traditional societies. Sport is an integral part of that process of rationalization outlined by Weber that affects all major forms of expression in Western culture, where the logic of action is victory at any cost.

The Marxist approach has analyzed sport as an object of study starting from a materialistic conception. Rarely has it been thematized as a significant object of investigation, and when done so, it has often proposed a reading still rooted in classical postulates (Porro, 2001). According to the Marxist interpretation, sports are connected to different modes of production, products of a capitalist society, i.e., bourgeois society. The significant inequalities in the distribution of wealth resulting from industrial capitalism led to a distinction in sports practices between the rich and the poor. Specific sports like golf and tennis were reserved exclusively for the affluent class, while football and baseball were the prerogative of the working classes. These sports served to keep the workforce as productive as possible. As Vinnai puts it: "In capitalist society, everything that is done or allowed in the context of free time is determined by the need to reproduce the workforce" (Vinnai, 1971).

Elite sports represented a means of indispensable socialization for the ruling class to increase the character and authority necessary to exercise command. The socialization of working-class sports was different, mostly expressing team sports that indoctrinate submission and acceptance of command, represented by the figure of the coach. It follows that in England, the birthplace of industrial capitalism, modern sports originated. From the nineteenth century onwards, modern sports developed simultaneously with the rise of professionalism and commercialization, accompanied by intense forms of exploitation. In the hands of a new entrepreneurial class, owners of professional teams concentrated the control and management of the workforce, turning sports into objects of profit-driven, alienating logics. The product of

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this commercialization, however, does not go to the player but to the large enterprises managing it, subjecting the sports stars themselves to semi-servile conditions of capitalist exploitation (Porro, 2001). It would take the emergence of socialism to abolish exploitation between capitalist and worker and to make sports accessible to both sexes, every race, and all classes. In addition to being an essential means of socialization, sports served practical purposes: preparing the youth for work to raise the level of industrial production and contributing to the defense of socialist society.

In the last fifty years, the issue of football fan culture has been the focus of growing theoretical works and empirical research in the football world, particularly in the British context. John Clarke, delving into the Anglo-Saxon literature, emerges as a key figure among scholars seeking to combine mass spectacle with the turbulence and unruliness of the working-class. His work, rooted in a clear Marxist inspiration, explores football, violence, and their connection to the values and behaviors that underpin the culture of the English working class physical prowess, virility, and a sense of belonging. Clarke conducts a behavioral analysis, emphasizing the collective and class dimensions, examining attitudes and sociocultural scenarios across different epochs. Beyond the evolution of football in terms of structure and participation, he scrutinizes the thesis of violence as a suitable pretext for the growing concern of groups of young people around a particular conception of masculinity. In this deterministic reading of social practices and phenomena, Clarke places the violence within the framework of a Marxist perspective. According to Clarke, the progressive change in football post World War II provided the sons of the British working class with a pretext to express frustration and general discontent towards society. Football hooliganism emerged as a manifestation of resistance to the imposition of a football model that coercively shifted towards professionalization, commercialization, and spectacularization. This "formalized rage" can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim the eroded cultural roots of football, historically connected to the economic and political transformations in Western societies. The crisis of employment in the 1960s and 1970s, as explained by Clarke, marked the behavioral sphere of large sections of the workforce with increasingly conflictual elements. Young people, polarized in the outskirts, sought to

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valorize marginality and express their physicality and masculinity by congregating in the stands, coinciding with the dissolution of the social and productive context where past class struggles played out. Given these insights, the contemporary relevance of these arguments and Clarke's entire theoretical framework is considered crucial to developing a structuralist approach to the study of organized fan culture. Identifying the fundamental characteristics and mechanisms that shape football dynamics helps better understand whether ultras' radicalism and their sphere of influence are mere media or collective perception, amplified by communication and/or recurrent social anxiety, simplifying the heuristic process, or a real and dynamic phenomenon with new and interesting features. It results from a symbolic battle waged by those familiar with power dynamics, breaking free from the immobility that stifles the reasoning subject, guaranteeing resilience against environmental threats that gradually become part of history.

2.1.7 *Geographies of sport*
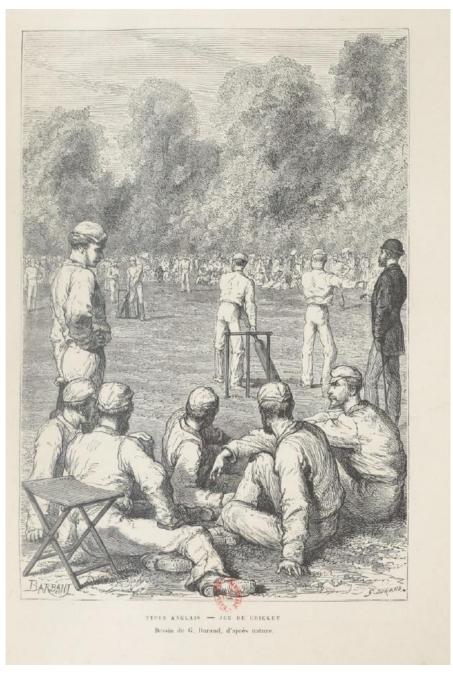
The geographical interest in sports, despite the evident spatial relevance of sports practices and the role of sports as an identity aggregator, is even more recent than that of sociology and much less sophisticated in theoretical terms. The text regularly referred to is John Bale's (1989) Sports Geography. Bale was not the first geographer to deal with sports; however, he was the first to systematize this area of research (Wise & Kohe, 2020). Bale himself mentions Reclus as the first geographer to have mentioned sports, referring to a text from 1879 (La Nouvelle Geographie Universelle). Still, in reality, Reclus had already talked about sports in 1866:

It is an excellent spectacle to see a game of cricket or a race between two rowing boats These slender handsome men with muscled arms and flexible and comfortable clothing who put so much passion into winning an honorary victory and who attend to the glances, wishes and encouragement of thousands of spectators - do they not look like the Greek heroes of the Olympic games whose glory posterity still celebrates? … And yet the young English athletes in no way yield in the courage, endurance, will-power and passion they put into their bodily education, to those of Greece. Under the direction of professional instructors, who train them like racing horses, they submit voluntarily to a long regime of abstinence

and endurance calculated to achieve a calmer outlook, stronger muscles and more energetic will. Thanks to such an education these people learn to rely on themselves on any occasion; they defy sickness, weariness and danger, they are afraid neither of open air, cold or heat nor of being left alone in a desert or on the ocean. They look at their inflexible will as a compass and so long as their task is not fulfilled they miss neither parents nor friends nor big cities where life is so easy. …One should only reproach them with the cold-blooded, brutal calm with which they discard anything foreign to them. While in the colonies the squatters pursue the natives like wild beasts and end up grabbing their land…". (E. Reclus, Du Sentiment de la nature dans les societies modernes, Revue des Deux Mondes, 63, 1866).

If rowing and cricket civilize the English in terms of muscle control, willpower, endurance, and discipline, they do not, however, make them more 'human' beings, at least in the context of colonization. The control of violence among equals, Reclus seems to suggest, does not entail control over violence against those considered inferior. Regarding cricket, in particular, Reclus returns to it in 1879, in the work mentioned by Bale, and he seems to be fascinated by it. So much so that the illustration dedicated to England (p. 373) depicts a cricket match.

Despite the sharpness of his observations, which partly anticipate those of Elias, Reclus unfortunately did not pave the way for a critical geography of sport. Significant contributions on the topic only emerged in the second half of the twentieth century with the work of John Rooney, author of *A Geography of American Sport: From Cabin Creek to Anaheim* (1974). Rooney aimed to identify and interpret the regional differences that characterize the sports geography of the United States, considering the economic, social, and political influences of sports on the American scene. While Rooney is considered the "father of sports geography," his approach did not contribute much to its thematic development. In an essay co-written with Trudo Dejonghe (2008), Bale emphasizes that, for a long time, sports remained just another social aspect to be mapped by geographers.

English Types: the game of cricket (source E. Reclus, Nouvelle géographie universelle – IV Northwestern Europe, Paris, Hachette, 1879, p. 373).

Interest in sports geography experienced a surge, particularly in the United States, with the founding of the journal "Sport Place: An International Journal of Sports Geography," published

from 1987 to 2000. However, this interest later waned, leading to the closure of the journal due to a lack of suitable articles. In reality, in a brief note in 1965 ("*A note on the geography of sport*," The Professional Geographer, 1965, p. 56), Burley already identified at least five research areas for sports geography:

"Five major fields of study within a geography of sport can be defined. These are illustrated in the form of possible research topics: (a) economic aspects - How important is major league baseball to the entertainment industry of the U.S.A.?; (b) social aspects -What are probable effects on social patterns of the recent introduction of American tenpin bowling to Australia and the United Kingdom?; (c) cultural origin -How far is the distribution of cricket and baseball an indication of the penetration of English and United States cultures, respectively; (d) physical conditions - To what degree do the opportunities for open air activity contribute to the per capita dominance of Australia in international sport?; and (e) urban land use - How great has been the role of the Olympic Games in modifying urban land use patterns?"

Bale (2000) proposes a model for the study of sports geography based on six different research paths, in addition to the economic and social consequences of sports, the analysis of cultural origins, physical conditions, and the use of urban spaces. These paths include:

1.   The spatial organization of sports at various levels of competition;
2.   The deterministic connection between the birthplace of sports and their spread;
3.   The spatial dynamics linking practitioners and their birthplace;
4.   The social repercussions of the spatial organization of sport;
5.   The relationship between the spatial organization of sports and the culture of the place;
6.   The environmental and landscape impacts produced by sports practice.

These research areas can expand even further when including the interests of political geography and analyzing the role of sports as an iconographic element in the construction of national identity despite the ancient rhetoric that "sports and politics should not mix," such

rhetoric can be dismissed as "an incredibly naive and simplistic view" (Chadwick, 2022, p. 691).

Over time, sports have been variously used as a means to propagate militarism, nationalism, and imperialism. In the 1920s and 1930s, sports in Italy were an expression of fascist ideology, and the 1936 Olympics solidified the union between Nazism and modern sports. After World War II, the United States and Western European states used sports to educate the masses, instilling values of militarism, nationalism, and imperialism. Sports, which create a mentality of "us versus them" while establishing equal competition rules for everyone, both unite and divide (Freeman, 2012). In colonial times, especially within the framework of the British Empire, sports functioned as a form of "cultural imperialism" (because "wherever the English went, they brought their games with them," Guttmann, 1994, p. 65) and as a tool of civilization (Connell, 2013). In the post-colonial era, sports have become, internally, a powerful iconographic adhesive for nation-building.

As Koch (2013, p. 44) writes: "Even a casual observer can easily notice that sports events share the same symbolic repertoire with nationalist politics; that is, the same flags, colors, and anthems are used both during national team sports events and in seemingly more serious political contexts." Sports are also a useful means to support national pride, highlighting a state's superiority in terms of athletic ability or political system compared to others. There is nothing like organizing a major sports event to put a place "symbolically" on the map (Koch, 2013). The mechanism of identification but also the construction of identity boundaries manifest at all scales. If the national football team or Olympic champions forcefully enter the construction of national iconography and join official elements (flag colors, anthems) in official events to strengthen national pride, at the local scale, sports, whether practiced or followed, become a civic or even neighborhood adhesive (think of the "local" dimension of major London football teams).

London football teams (source: https://www.vivasummercamp.it/2023/01/12/squadre-di-calcio-di-londra/

When it comes to the political geography of sport, and in connection to the main theme of this thesis, Natalie Koch's work (*Sport and Soft Authoritarian Nation-building*, 2013) is worth mentioning. She explores the role of sport in authoritarian regimes, particularly in "soft" authoritarian regimes, which rely less on openly violent tactics to maintain power and more on seemingly positive tactics of persuasion, as seen in Kazakhstan, for example. In a later work *Athletic Autocrats: Understanding Images of Authoritarian Leaders as Sportsmen*, in Natalie Koch (ed.), Critical Geographies of Sport, 2016), Koch revisits the relationship between sport and authoritarianism, analyzing the role of the sporting image that leaders of authoritarian regimes often cultivate, such as the famous image of Mussolini skiing shirtless on Terminillo, or Vladimir Putin showcasing himself shirtless while engaging in various sports like judo, ice hockey, and cycling. Sport can also be a subject of analysis within the framework of social geography. An emerging theme is the role of sport in community building, both locally and within migrant diasporas, and in social inclusion.

Map of stadium in England. @stavesart, IG

However, as Koch (2018) emphasizes, "there is no linear relationship between sport and inclusion/exclusion." Sporting practices can either facilitate the inclusion of minority groups, fostering a deeper sense of solidarity beyond ethnic, racial, or national divides, or contribute to hostilities and even community violence.

The economic geography, within the realm of development geography, also addresses sport, including Sport for Development (SFD) theories. According to SFD, sport has the potential to aid the development process, especially in low-income countries. Sport is believed to exhibit characteristics that support educational processes, highlight health awareness issues, bring diverse communities together, and promote gender equality. Sport can serve as a valuable tool for geographic education, as demonstrated by Lisa M. DeChano & Fred Shelley (2004) and, in the case of Italy, in the special issue of the Semestrale di Studi e Ricerche di Geografia dedicated to the Geography of Football (2007). Urban geography also delves into sports, and as we'll see later on, geopolitics must also engage with the realm of sports.

2.1.8 *The spaces of sport: urban geography and stadiums as "cathedrals."*

Sport is influenced by the spaces available to it, and vice versa. As Reiss (1989, p. 259) emphasizes, "Sport is not simply a recreational activity that takes place in cities, but an institution that has been shaped, remodeled, and further modeled by the interaction of the elements that make up the process of urbanization." Sports take place in specific constructions, and these constructions can have a significant impact on the political landscape of cities. A clear case is that of football stadiums.

The evolutionary path of policies revolving around football can be traced by analyzing the English case. In the 1970s in England, attending football matches was very inexpensive, with subsidized trains and rivers of beer in pubs. Here, the white working class expressed social anger. Hooliganism is the anger of the apolitical working class: Celtic FC against Rangers, Liverpool (Catholics and Irish) vs. Everton, the opposite. Stadiums were then a gathering place for the proletariat with various subcultures, punk, skinhead. There was later a gentrification of sports with the tragedy of the Heysel Stadium. On May 29, 1985, during the European Cup final between Liverpool and Juventus at Heysel Stadium in Brussels, a charge by Liverpool fans caused a collapse of a portion of the stadium (resulting in 39 deaths and 600 injuries). A discourse focused on the inherent danger and violence in certain fan practices gradually gained ground. Following this event, the government intensified repression, punished criminals, but

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transformed football from a working-class sport based on collective, territorial, and local logics into today's cosmopolitan spectacle. Clubs withdrew from European competitions, alcoholic beverages were restricted, and troublemakers were banned. In 1989, another tragedy occurred: 96 Liverpool fans died in the FA Cup at Sheffield, followed by a massive stadium modernization movement with new taxes, new structures, sophisticated complexes hosting elite audiences, and high-value branding. After the famous Taylor Report[8], a consequence of this event, football policy began to take on forms of social control and the configuration and organization of spaces and procedures for managing matches. Control through video surveillance, the counteraction of exaggerated fan behavior, the organization of access and stadium use procedures (turnstiles, prohibition of standing during matches), and fan control policies (such as the "fan card," etc.) spread first in England and later throughout Europe. The proletarian and dangerous classes were expelled to favor the transformation of football from low-consumption by urban masses to an expensive commodity for affluent classes. Looking at England, it can be observed how the shift from Fordist capitalism to financial capitalism of Emirati funds has occurred.

Football is, therefore, a social phenomenon deeply intertwined with the transformations of the societies in which it operates, and, clearly, the stadium reflects the typical processes of modernity. The stadium is, in fact, many things. The variety of its meanings, interpretations, and uses makes it a profoundly ambivalent, even ambiguous, object. The stadium incorporates opposite representations, even in terms of values. Stadiums are important urban resources. On the one hand, they are true urban "cathedrals" capable of synthetically expressing the characteristics of a city and its inhabitants. On the other hand, they provide competitive advantages to the city, attract tourists, and appear in travel guides. They are the basis for urban collective identification and affiliation. But they are also places of turbulence, danger, violence, and excess. Territories dominated by threatening ultras, where venturing entails risks. The term "cathedral" (or "new cathedral", Trumpbour, 2006) implicitly refers to a place of practicing a

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[8] https://www.jesip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Hillsborough-Stadium-Disaster-final-report.pdf

civil religion that can be a positive basis for social integration or, conversely, functional to power. The stadium is an urban enclave in which elements of space and power are combined. These are delimited areas where specific power devices prevail (Tosi, 2018). Another theme is the emergence and evolution of stadiums, showing functional specialization and the separation of social spaces, which has been typical of modernization processes. Pre-modern football, like many other sports, was played for a long time in spaces of daily life dedicated to non-sporting activities (squares, clearings, fields). Football took place in a porous space, with permeable barriers and weak or nonexistent exclusion norms. There were no spatial limits inside: players and spectators operated in the same space, ordinary and non-specialized. The birth of the modern stadium appears as a separation between the space of everyday life and the space of sport. This division also carves out the boundary between players and spectators in space. The stadium becomes a closed space where individuals occupy positions. Once the process of disciplining football within stadiums and establishing the separation between the public and players is completed, the process of fragmentation and distinction begins its path of dividing the audience. The first step is to establish a paid ticket for entry, following a trend toward the commodification of public space characteristic of the capitalist city. Since the late 1800s, stands and boxes have been constructed around playing fields, accessible through the payment of tickets with differentiated prices. The more expensive sectors are those that offer better views and greater comfort: they protect from rain and sun and provide more amenities. The stadium is now a highly specialized, planned, divided, and regulated space. From the period between the two World Wars, the physical separation between social classes, based on different spending capacities, is established within the stadium. From the 1960s onwards, the audience begins to be further divided based on affiliation with different fan groups. During this period, the first forms of organized fandom emerge, occupying fixed spaces within the stadium. The stands are now a mosaic of niches. From this moment, conflict, sometimes violent, grows between fan groups, and as a result, media attention to this type of phenomenon increases. (Tosi, 2018).

The modern stadium, far from being a place separated from the city, is instead a space whose nature and functions are closely connected and interact with those of the urban system to which

it belongs. This is a fundamental element of discontinuity compared to the traditional stadium. Separation was a characteristic feature of the ritual that took place in traditional football and its stadium. This separateness allowed for the "suspension" that underpinned the "carnivalesque" aura of the stadium, the inversion of the city's daily routines and urban order. With the rise of the modern stadium, these traits have gradually declined. The stadium has aligned itself with the standards that prevail in the rest of the city: consumption, safety, rationalized order.

2.1.9 *Cultural Studies: Gramsci, A first real approach to soft power.*

The growing attention to sport as a cultural process by Cultural Studies has been fueled by a reinterpretation of the ideas of one of the greatest Marxists of the 20th century, Antonio Gramsci. For the italian scholar, class conflict increasingly takes on the contours of a struggle for hegemony, where the superstructure dimension of Marx (values, ideas, common sense) gains greater autonomy and relevance over time. "The interest of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in sports was seemingly "almost nil" (Guttmann, 1994, p. 6) nevertheless, his ideas have been highly influential in the social analysis of sports (Rowe, 2004). As Rowe emphasizes (2004, p. 103), from the Gramscian perspective, "The meaning and practice of sports are seen as contested by social classes and other social groups, and the outcome of this contest is seen as less certain, as tends to be the case in classical Marxism, with the inevitable defeat of the proletariat and other subaltern groups unless a complete workers' revolution is achieved. Gramsci's most influential concept, hegemony, challenges this monolithic and deterministic scenario, emphasizing that power relations must be sustained by something more than brute force and economic domination."

Gramsci, a fan of the Torino football club and an observer of football as a popular passion, recognizes the dialectical potential of the sports phenomenon. The ruling class certainly uses sport as a tool for gaining consensus and social control, and Gramsci begins to outline the production of a popular culture and a circuit of emotions, feelings, and passions that cannot be solely attributed to capitalist manipulation. Placing sport in the arena of cultural conflict, Gramsci and Cultural Studies will start representing sport as a fundamental crossroads for the

relationship between sport and power. Attention will be directed towards the dynamics of persistence, resistance, assimilation, and innovation that sportification and globalization allow to highlight. Sports and leisure will become the subject of studies aimed at understanding global and local conflicts, freeing the analysis from biases and ideological perspectives.

2.2 Sport, Identity and Globalisation

2.2.1 Identity

Allen Guttmann, in his classic *From Ritual to Record* (1978), traced a series of characteristics typical of modern sport. Among them, the theme of bureaucratization stands out for this analysis. This element coincides with the establishment of structures for the organization and regulation of sporting practice, which would otherwise be dispersed in countless streams. Federations, leagues and committees have the task of certifying the results of the competition, distributing rewards and penalties and so on. This theme had the strategic element in the nation-state and its institutional articulations. The widespread diffusion of sports disciplines has moved considering the territorial- institutional realities that have been produced by modernity, and the related identities. The starting point is connected to the choice of the most effective channel for organizing sports activities. This channel was identified, organizational units that went from educational institutions to gymnastic associations. In English colleges, as in the German turnen or in the Italian gymnastic associations, the recreational-physical activity was structured according to a modality that at a later stage would be refined into the model of the sports club: an association with sporting purposes.

The establishment of clubs as the dominant associative model for the organization of sports activities finds enormous impetus from the coincidence between it and a territorial reality of reference, strengthened by the impulse that the industrial revolution impressed on urbanization processes. Within the urbanized realities, the unruly club was an element of organization of sporting activity but also of crystallization of local identities (Bromberger, 1992; Magnier and Russo, 2002), often based on invented or readapted traditions (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983). Regarding team sports, the sports club imposed itself as an element of identification of the entire

local society or of certain sectors of it, which may be different in terms of class, ethnicity or religion. The establishment of this principle of territoriality was the premise for the emergence of an institutional structure model based on the territorial supply chain, as if on a continuous line of territorial levels ranging from the simplest to the most complex. The foundation of the national sports federations reflects an organizational logic that combines the principle of territoriality and the principle of nationality. Starting from this close link with the nation-state and its political and administrative articulations, the sport reached the peak of its intertwining with modernity and its development towards the mature phase coincided with the highest point of the nation-state parabola as a pivotal institution of political, economic and social processes. And the declination of this relationship took place following the most significant sociological profile that was produced by the nation-state: citizenship. The theme of citizenship (Marshall, 1949) has been around for a long time.

2.2.2 *Globalisation and Citizenship*

The characteristic of modern sport was shown as the one that designated its organizational criteria starting from the figure of the nation-state and the territorial map to which it gives rise. The construction of an institutional structure that reproduces the administrative political articulations of the central State inside and in the system of international relations based on external borders has constituted for almost the whole of the twentieth century ordering principle of competitions and the conferral of membership of the actors. This scheme, centred around the figure of the nation-state, began to be put into crisis at the end of the 1980s, coinciding with the processes of globalization of the economy and communication flows. The transnational mobility of goods and capital has put the model of the nation-state in default starting from the principle of nationality.

Nationality is, in the postmodern age, increasingly linked to the acquisition circuits; in fact naturalization practices are generally facilitated by national legislation. This change has seen in sport   a privileged field of expression, breaking down what in the twentieth century had been a taboo: the non-selection of foreign athletes, especially in the case in which the athlete had

already competed with the national representative of the country of origin. Until the end of the 80s, the solutions concerned the status of "oriundo". From the 90s onwards the balance has shifted in the direction of citizenship by acquisition determined not only by the growth of migratory flows, that have affected the athletes, but also by the decay of the principle that the national federations wanted to act on the level of training, leaving the duty of the recruitment to sporting clubs. Sports systems centred on the centrality of the nation-state had a particular declination of the national interest which was intended as coordination of intentions and forces for a collective goal, identified by a single Federation or by the Olympic committee. The change induced in the processes of globalization and the establishing of glocal dynamics nullified the value of national interest as a factor of orientation by the actors, including those who become the bearers of strategies linked to the world of sport.

In the world of sport, citizenship has assumed the value of an asset to be marketed on the market, subject to a relationship between supply and demand that involves the Olympic committees and federations on the one hand and individual athletes on the other hand. So, a process of commodification of citizenship is achieved with athletes who unscrupulously change passports in search of economic and sporting achievement, and sports institutions willing to negotiate a package of economic beneficial rights. The principle that spreads is that of the association of citizen membership by choice is outlined not only by a set of rights but also by the elements of identity. The dynamic of separation of citizenship from nationality meant that they were invested by a change in the contents in reciprocal relationship. The outbreak of migratory flows and the spread of global profiles citizenship expresses a turning point in the relationship between ownership of a membership and the feeling of membership. The clarification of the four points of observation about the idea of citizenship and the analysis of its development read through the world of sport, have made it possible to project a beam of light on the postmodernity of sport and on the depth of a change that cannot be interpreted as simple evolution.

2.2.3 Imperialism, Globalization and Sport: Giulianotti and Robertson's five phases.

Globalisation one of the social sciences most prominent research theme, and the subject of major public debate. We can be neither 'for' nor 'against' globalization. Rather, globalisation has become an ontological dimension of social life, a kind of multi-faceted social fact. Globalisation has historically, economically, culturally, politically, and socially significant characteristics. Modern sporting events, such as the Olympics, exemplify these characteristics. Giulianotti and Robertson (2004) documented certain aspects of football globalization in five areas, illustrating the links between sport and globalization. The first is the Football germinal phase, up to the early nineteenth century, before its formal codification in 1863. Urbanization, industrialization, and British colonial and trade expansion provided the socio-cultural and administrative infrastructures for football's future diffusion. The incipient phase covers the early nineteenth up to the 1870s, as English schools. Stronger unitary nation-states and a growing international society allowed the British to exhibit football abroad, and diffusion began. The Football take-off phase spans the 1870s to the 1920s, establishing a massively popular sport across Europe and South America, Africa colonies and parts of Asia and North America. The four elemental reference points gained prominence; individuals practised the game, the best becoming local and national heroes; nations were ritually sustained through national tournaments or international fixtures; FIFA's foundation in 1904 institutionalised football international system; and humankind questions arose over the right of disadvantaged groups (women- non-whites, working-class players) to participate. During the struggle for hegemony phase, the football international Systema acquired complexity, with large continental governing bodies and tournaments established. During Football uncertainty phase there are more political struggles as a result of a more complicated situation involving a growing number of collective acts such as FIFA, continental bodies, national associations, clubs, and sponsors. Sport is an important subject for examining how cultural imperialism is represented. Undoubtedly, the global spread of games was intrinsically linked to British empire (Mangan, 1986). The more well- known cultural imperialism debate, on the other hand, has long centred around the alleged "Americanization of foreign culture." American sports icons and the

products they endorse dominated world sport headlines and retail markets, reflecting that international power, American sports appear remarkably ethnocentric in competitive logic: only American teams compete to win baseball's World Series. Yet all of this is more than negated by counter-evidence. While American media content is internationally available, just as non-American television audience favour local, so most continent favour local and national sports. Football remains the world most popular sport. Non-American sports produce nation and global icons, but America's economic and political power impedes global cultural dialogue, thereby undermining (not promoting) the international popularization of American sports (Martin and Reeves, 2001). One significant strain of the americanization thesis emerges from Ritzer's McDonaldization argument, according to which the standardized production and marketing of American fast foods have spread globally into all domains of everyday life. Yet, research in East Asia suggests that local practices and cultural taste still influence production and ranges within McDonald's outlets (Robertson and White, 2003). This vision exaggerates the extent to which local cultures passively absorb powerful cultural images, beliefs and tradition. We need to put forward an alternative model that can explain the heterogeneous consequences of cultural communication.

2.2.4. Cultural heterogenity and local global relations

Through concepts like glocalization, several theories of globalization emphasize the socio-cultural complexity of local-global relations and the heterogeneity of cultural forms and practices that result. Appadurai (1990) differentiates local-global cultural flows according to their specific 'scapes'. Wecan apply these classifications to sport to explain, for example, the globalization of a football club like Glasgow's Celtic. In terms of ethnoscapes, the club was founded in Scotland by Irish-Catholic immigrants. In terms of financescape, Celtic purchase players from across Europe and other continents while gaining international television revenues and sponsorship from TNCs. Through the technoscape, Celtic use specialist training equipment that is tested and manufactured overseas. Through the mediascape Celtic fixtures have beamed us on satellite television across the world, while internet communications facilitate other kinds

of information diffusions. Roberson (1992) rejects the simple local versus global argument by noting two parallel processes of globalization. First, the particularization of universalism involves the world becoming more concrete socio-politically, through the creation of world time zones or global calendars. Second, the universalization of particularism describes the greater relativization of cultural identity and difference (Robertson 1992) at world sports events, each nation asserts its relative particularity through differences in dress, anthem, social demeanour and sporting style. The concept of glocalisation is the constitutive feature of contemporary globalization (Robertson 1992). Glocalization describes how local social actors interpret global processes or phenomena to suit their particular need or cultural contexts. Thus, global sports events are framed by local television stations or newspapers in accord with particular interest's ad tastes. Sports historical diffusion has reflected glocalization as particular cultures amend and adapt the playing techniques, rules and organization of sport to suit local need.

In conclusion, is possible to assume, starting from the 5 phases of Giulianotti and Roberston (2004), through the americanization model, that we are in front of a process that in contemporary globalization is transforming the local in four specific ways. Firstly, globalization is reshaping social relationships celebrity-focused fandom, as defined by non-reciprocal relations of intimacy with a distant other (Thompson, 1995). For such fans, community occurs within a virtual locality, a kind of imagined community, such as internet chat rooms or specialist websites. Second, globalisation moulds fresh geopolitical and cultural identities alongside new, post national institutes. PGA European tour highlight globalisations deterritorializing impulses by including tournament outside Europe on its official itinerary. Third, globalisation geminates postmodern forms of mediated nostalgia (Robertson, 1990), postmodern nostalgia is more media centred and schizophrenic in confusing the past and present, such as through retro television production techniques. Contemporary nostalgia also mixes the global culture with the national societal in appeal to the content. in sports media, while nostalgic programmes may recall past national success and failures, they also appeal to the global popular by recalling the glories of global celebrities, such as Ali, Jordan. Forth, while recognizing cultural glocalization,

it is important to remember that political economy issues must not be forgotten. Africans and Latin Americans develop their cultural understandings of football, but their cultural contact with this and other global sport is rooted in colonial and post- colonial relations.

2.3 Sport as a tool of diplomacy

2.3.1. Sport diplomacy: a more and more popular notion

On 28 June 2023, the Italian government organized a meeting entitled "Sports diplomacy: a tool for growth" at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The initiative[9], aimed at promoting action in this direction starting from 2024, may seem innovative in relation to the national scenario, but it is based on trends consolidated for decades at a global level. The ancient rhetoric according to which "sport and politics should not mix" can only be dismissed as "an incredibly naive and simplistic vision" (Chadwick, 2022, p. 691): the (geo)political role of sport, in building ties and alliances, creating "neutral" meeting spaces or even punishing those who do not behave according to the rules of the game at an international level, has in fact been established for some time (Murray, 2012), both in the academic field, in the framework of political sciences and International Relations[10], both in the context of formal geopolitical discourse, where the expression sport diplomacy (or sometimes sports diplomacy. Murray, 2018) has become current.

Thus, Google Scholar reports over 900 articles and academic volumes published since 2019 which, in the title or text, talk about sports diplomacy (and 1700 about "sports diplomacy"), there are universities (especially Australian, British and US) that they offer courses on the topic,

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[9] https://www.youtube.com/live/W8s-tiMNZW4?feature=share

[10] However, not from geographical-political literature, where so far not much space has been given to sport as an instrument of geopolitical action. In the magazine Geopolitics, for example, there is, as of August 2023, no article with the word "sport" in the title; in Political Geography there is one, from 2013, by Natalie Koch (also editor of a volume in 2016). John Connell (2013) has discussed the geopolitical role of football. As regards Italy, the volume edited by Anna Maria Pioletti and Giuseppe Bettoni (2020) and the special issue of Gnosis (4, 2022), edited by Paolo Sellari and dedicated to the geopolitical dimension of sport, deserve to be remembered, as well as some sporadic articles by Corinto and Pioletti (2015), Sellari (2018) and Ricci (2023).

and government websites and those of large supranational organizations also talk about sport diplomacy. For example, the US State Department established a division called Sports United, later renamed Sports Diplomacy, in 2002 with the aim of "reaching young people around the world through sports[11]". The British Council has a page dedicated to the soft power of sport, where it lists the various reasons why "sport matters" in the UK's international relations[12]. Since 2015, sport diplomacy has also officially entered the framework of European Union policies, with the creation of a specific High-Level Group on Sport Diplomacy by the European Commission (Mancoš & Gura, 2022); also in 2015, an Australian Sport Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18 was launched in Australia, managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade - then renewed with an Australian Sport Diplomacy 2030[13]. A page dedicated to sport diplomacy is also present on the Ministry's website of Foreign Affairs of Qatar[14], a state known for its economic commitments in the sporting sector. Returning to the opening speech at the beginning of the first chapter, even Saudi Arabia, which has a Ministry of Sport, but not a page explicitly dedicated to Sport Diplomacy, has emerged, in the space of a few years, as one of the main players in global sport, hosting events, purchasing well-known foreign teams, attracting famous athletes (such as Cristiano Ronaldo) with very economically advantageous contracts. In fact, sport constitutes an important step in achieving the Saudi National Vision 2030, built in order to diversify the economy and change the country's image for the better (Leveille, 2023), within the framework of "a broader strategy of connection and socialization of the West with Saudi national interests" (Ettinger, 2023, p. 12). It is generally considered that the inventors of this practice (initially defined as "friendship sport") were the Chinese, who, already in the 1950s, favored exchanges of athletes with countries of similar political orientation to consolidate

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[11] https://sportsenvoy.org/about/sports-diplomacy/

[12] https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/playing-game-soft-power-sport

[13] For UE strategies: 2016, *Report to Commissioner Tibor Navracsics*) and 2018 (*Sport Diplomacy: Identifying good practices. A final report to the European Commission*) in https://www.eusportdiplomacy.info/sport_diplomacy_resources, for Australia: Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18.

[14] https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/foreign-policy/international-cooperation/sports-diplomacy

mutual ties; in the 1970s, the Chinese also launched the so-called "ping pong diplomacy[15]", and then began to attribute great importance to sports-related assistance in their foreign aid programs (Wang, 2003). Specifically, during that period, "China sent numerous sports delegations and coaches to countries and regions in Asia, Africa and Latin America, to help train local athletes, providing them with free sports facilities despite the difficulties local economies…" (An, Wang and Xiang (2021, p. 75).

Therefore, even if the expression "sport diplomacy" is relatively recent (Murray, 2020), the practice has long permeated international relations. In formal geopolitical discourse, and in much literature, the view offered is usually positive (see Murray, 2018). The goals of sport diplomacy, however, can be very complex and deserve to be evaluated in a more nuanced way. Even if they present themselves as disinterested aid for the construction of a network of peaceful relations and cultural exchanges, some interventions imply a certain exploitation of sport. On the one hand, sport can in fact be used to mitigate the negative image repercussions linked to forms of corruption or other behaviors that can be sanctioned at an international level (with the risk, in reality, that a phenomenon of disempowerment manifests itself, in the case of failure objectives: in this case, Qatar is often cited, see Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016; Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Ulrichsen, 2023). On the other hand, sport can be used as a transfer (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1937), within a "propaganda" activity aimed at ingratiating public opinion with the geopolitical realities that one wants to hegemonize. In this paragraph, I will try to highlight how sport diplomacy, in addition to being an instrument of peace and cultural harmony, can represent a means of acquiring power, capable of promoting asymmetric relations between states (Dubinsky, 2018), guaranteeing a position of supremacy to those who implement it. Then focusing on the case of the Maldives, I will show how the small island state is located at the center of a scenario of growing geopolitical importance, such as the Indian Ocean.

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[15] The expression refers to the invitation made by China to the US table tennis delegation to visit the country during the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in Japan in 1971, which interrupted a diplomatic rift that had lasted for decades.

2.3.2   What is Sport Diplomacy?

For a long time, geopolitical literature has remained on the sidelines of the "sport + international politics" issue and has not given much space to sports as a tool of geopolitical action. As of August 2023, for example, there is no article with the word "sport" in the title in the Geopolitics journal, and in Political Geography, there is only one, the one mentioned from 2013 by Natalie Koch. In other disciplinary fields, studies exploring the connections between sports and politics, sports and international relations, and sports and diplomacy are more numerous. Authors like Barrie Houlihan and Stuart Murray have made significant contributions to this field. Houlihan argues that it is appropriate to study sports in international relations through theoretical approaches such as realism, globalization theory, and neoliberalism. He demonstrates that different states use sports as a tool of soft power both in domestic and foreign policies. Murray focuses on Sport Diplomacy as a tool for cooperation between states to enhance their international image. Sports combine elements of politics, economy, and mass media. It seems challenging to imagine major sports events without television broadcasts, state leaders' speeches at the opening ceremonies, and special advertising by major sports brands. However, overcoming the old theory of "sport separate from politics," the history of the Olympic movement for over a century shows that it has not been able to maintain political neutrality amid global political challenges.

Winning many medals in major international competitions can certainly be an occasion for political boasting, and sports can be used to "punish" those who engage in unacceptable behavior through boycotts. For instance, apartheid cost South Africa the inability to participate in the Olympic Games from 1964 to 1992. During the Cold War, the United States and other countries boycotted the 1980 Moscow Games, and Moscow, along with other countries, reciprocated by boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Games. The U.S. and Australia refused to officially participate in the 2022 Winter Olympics in China to protest against abuses in Xinjiang, and China accused the U.S. of violating the "political neutrality of sports".

   Generally, when discussing international relations woven through sports, the emphasis tends to be on the idea that sports can be a useful tool to ease otherwise conflicting relationships,

creating alternative spaces for communication, and building common values. For example, Sport Diplomacy's most common strategic objectives are seen as providing an unofficial reason and context for international leaders to meet and start a dialogue, offering information about the host country, bridging cultural and linguistic differences, creating a platform for new trade agreements or common legislation, fostering awareness for international relations through sports ambassadors, giving the host country a positive image worldwide, and using sports to provide legitimacy to a "young" nation. This perspective acknowledges the potential of sports to serve as a diplomatic tool, transcending political differences and fostering cooperation on various levels. This generally positive view of Sport Diplomacy is also shared by documents drafted by the European Union, emphasizing the value of sports in building a more cohesive community and highlighting the significant role that sports can and should play in the EU's external relations (see the 2016 report). The events most often referred to in this context are the "ping pong diplomacy," which in 1971-72 led to the rapprochement between China and the United States through a series of encounters between Chinese and American players, and "cricket diplomacy," which has repeatedly seen sports at the center of easing tensions between India and Pakistan (Murray and Pigman, 2014). In addition to providing "neutral" meeting spaces, the international role of sports also unfolds in the form of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy, generally defined within the framework of soft power relations (Nye, 2008), refers to the actions taken by a state to win the favor of the public opinion of other states. Sport diplomacy and public diplomacy coincide when sports are used as branding for a given political reality (Kobierecki and Strożek, 2017). According to the indicated information, the role of sports in international relations is articulated along three purposes: in addition to the attempts of states to normalize their relations or use sports to convey negative messages to other international actors, such as boycotting sports events, it can also be aimed at evoking positive emotions towards the state that pursues it (Kobierecki and Strożek, 2017, p. 700). Regarding this last dimension (that of Public Diplomacy), the practice involves the use of athletes, sports spaces, and sports events "to create a favorable image among the public and foreign

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organizations and shape their perceptions more favorably towards the foreign policy goals of the government implementing it" (Murray, 2013, p. 12).

Two additional dimensions of Sport Diplomacy, however, deserve analytical consideration. The first involves the distinction between traditional Sport Diplomacy, implemented by traditional geopolitical actors, namely states, and the more recent type implemented by non-state actors (corporations, international organizations like FIFA, etc.) (Murray, 2020). The second makes a further distinction within traditional Sport Diplomacy as Public Diplomacy, with reference to the targets. In the case of a powerful political entity providing "sports" aid to weaker entities, the practice may be aimed at creating potential for the exploitation of resources or favorable strategic relationships primarily for the entity implementing it. We could define this form of Sport Diplomacy as "asymmetric sport diplomacy" (or "extractive diplomacy"). If, on the other hand, the entity implementing Sport Diplomacy does not promise aid but engages in highly visible economic operations (buying athletes, football teams, and internationally renowned coaches, organizing tournaments and mega-events, etc.), it can be considered that the practice is primarily aimed at satisfying domestic pride and promoting the image of the state among other "powers of the world." In this case, one could speak of "symmetric sport diplomacy" (or "nation branding").

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Sport diplomacy Symmetrical (without money flows)	Ping pong diplomacy, cricket diplomacy	Boycotts
Symmetrical sports diplomacy (with international investments aimed at strengthening national sport at international level, and organisation of mega-events)	Nation-branding	Sportwashing
Sport diplomacy Symmetrical (with investment in international teams already affirmed)	Nation-branding	Sportwashing
Asymmetric sport diplomacy and international loans to countries economically weaker)	Development Cooperation	Debt trap

Tab 1. The two faces of Sport Diplomacy. Author's elaboration
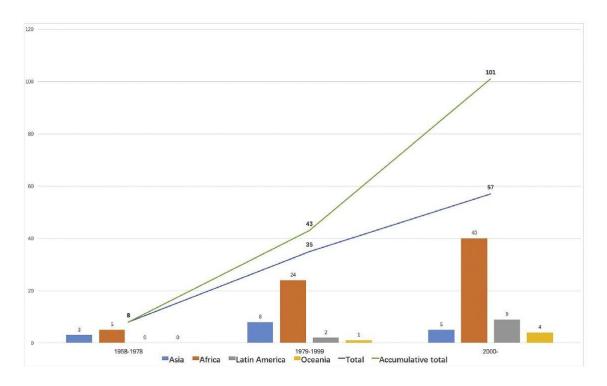
Reflecting on Sport Diplomacy as Public Diplomacy, that is, as a form of soft power, should therefore suggest some further considerations. When referring to soft power, which is defined as the "power of persuasion y which an actor, in a non-coercive manner, convinces another to want the same things they want" (Nygård and Gates, 2013, p. 235), it is not specified whether "the same things they want" are also in the interest of those subject to soft power or only in the interest of those exercising it. In the latter case, soft power closely resembles propaganda. There are specific risks: firstly, that sport is instrumentalized to create a positive image even where

this positive image does not correspond to reality; secondly, that interstate relations, which in this context should be limited to the exercise of positive influence in intercultural relations, pave the way for hegemonic dominance and economic exploitation.

To emphasize sporting events (or even the acquisition of very prestigious international clubs and teams) aimed at covering up the consequences in terms of the image of sanctionable behavior (i.e., to "distract, minimize, or normalize moral violations through sport": Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz, 2023, p. 107), diverting the attention of the public and international actors (Chadwick, 2022), the term "sportswashing" has been coined (Skey, 2023). For the past, the most glaring example is the 1936 Olympic Games organized by Hitler's Germany. For the present, the behavior of some Gulf countries in relation to their involvement in football, with the purchase of world-renowned teams such as Manchester City, Newcastle, and Paris-Saint Germain, or the organization of the 2022 World Cup (Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia), or the economic interest expressed in Formula 1 (Bahrain) is considered paradigmatic (Chadwick and Widdop, 2023). Sportswashing is a form of propaganda[16] (Skey, 2023), relying on the use of multiple devices: on the one hand, it constitutes a transfer, projecting the positive qualities of one object (in this case, sports practice or the team) in a logically unsupported way onto another object (in this case, the political regime or the state); on the other hand, it relies on testimonials, exploiting the popularity of well-known and positive figures to advertise activities that have little to do with them (thus, Cristiano Ronaldo becomes a testimonial for Saudi Arabia, even for esports). Not all attempts at sportwashing are successful: if the game is too overt, there is a risk of "disturbing, offending, or alienating others, resulting in a loss of attractiveness or influence" (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014), thus triggering mechanisms of disempowerment.

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[16] Propaganda is defined as the dissemination of images and information aimed at influencing the feelings, behaviors and opinions of a target group, with the aim of benefiting those who provide the information and not those who receive it. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, active from 1937 to 1942, was an American organization aimed at developing the public's critical thinking skills and their ability to defend themselves from propaganda. In a 1937 publication, *How to detect propaganda*, they identified the seven main techniques of propaganda communication. One of these is the transfer.

An example of sport diplomacy as a practice aimed at gaining hegemonic positions, i.e., as asymmetric sport diplomacy, is offered by stadium diplomacy, that is, aid provided to low-income countries (but often rich in resources) for the construction of stadiums and other sports facilities (Will, 2012; Kellison and Cintron, 2017; Dubinsky, 2021). These operations are intended to leave a lasting impression within any component of the local population (Will, 2012), tangible visible signs of the "friendship" between those who have provided the funds and the country where the facilities have been built (many of these stadiums are called "friendship stadium"[17]) (Ross, 2014). From a landscape perspective, stadiums are landmarks that stand out for their visibility (Khajuria, 2023).

Number of stadiums built by China, by geographical area (source: Chang and Xue, 2019, p. 616)

[17] Thus writes Chadwick (2017) in a comment on a Policy Forum of Asia and the Pacific Policy Society: "Let's go back a little further, to Ghana 2008: four structures, two brand new and two renovated - all of which involved China, through provision of 'soft loans' (loans issued at below-market rates) to finance costs of nearly $200 million. Ghana's main export? You guessed it: crude oil (closely followed by gold). Ghana's main export market since the late 2000s? Do we need to say anything else?" (https://www.policyforum.net/china-fuelling-african-cup-nations/

Stadium diplomacy has a long history, and it also began in China. The first stadium subsidized by China was the National Sports Stadium in Ulaanbaatar, built in 1958; in 1963 and 1966, stadiums were also donated to Indonesia and Cambodia (Chang and Xue, 2019). The first stadium built in Africa with Chinese money was constructed in Zanzibar, Tanzania, in 1970. Chinese-funded stadiums have been added to Africa, and dozens of others have been built in Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. In exchange for these aids, China does not demand internal regime changes but may ask for votes in its favor in international organizations, support for trade, or permission for its technicians to explore territorial waters or forests (Khajuria, 2023). The beneficiary countries, far from being chosen randomly, are all areas that can be of interest in terms of mineral, agricultural, and strategic resources (Ross, 2014). As Chadwick (2017) writes in a comment on a Policy Forum by Asia and the Pacific Policy Society: "Let's go back a bit, to Ghana 2008: four facilities, two brand new and two refurbished - all involved China, through the provision of 'soft loans' (loans issued at rates lower than market rates) to fund costs of nearly $200 million. Ghana's main export? You guessed it: crude oil (closely followed by gold). Ghana's main export market since the late 2000s? Need I say more?" (https://www.policyforum.net/china-fuelling-african-cup-nations/)

2.3.3 Football, therefore, I am: the geopolitical role of football

As evident from the previous paragraphs, nowadays, the international dimension of football has become significantly pronounced. Overcoming traditional local and national boundaries is one of the most visible features of contemporary football. In this regard, several indicators point to this global shift. Firstly, the multinational composition of the majority of football clubs is notable. In Serie A, for instance, the presence of foreign players is well-known, and it's not uncommon for teams to field lineups with a limited number of Italian players. The growing significance of international football matches further supports the argument that football has become globally expansive. Revenues generated by clubs from participating in European competitions can surpass the earnings from an entire domestic league (AREL-FIGC, 2017). Moreover, the ownership structures of football clubs also reflect this trend. In contrast to a

history dominated by local owners (or at most, nationally prominent figures), it's now common for ownership to be significantly delocalized. In Italy, three out of 20 Serie A clubs are foreign-owned. This number increases in other countries' leagues: 5 out of 20 in France's Ligue 1, 4 out of 20 in Spain's LaLiga. The English Premier League stands out with 15 foreign-owned clubs out of 20, and 13 out of 24 in the second division (AREL-FIGC, 2017). Faced with these changes, the need for international bodies to regulate the sport becomes understandable. FIFA is the United Nations of football, but at the same time, it's also the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. FIFA is an organization that guides investments, promotes the development of a country, or legitimizes geopolitical claims of powers: a diplomatic giant. Considering that football accounts for 40% of the profits of all sports and the World Cup has recorded an audience share of 10% of the entire world, the influence of FIFA is extensive. Gianni Infantino, the FIFA president, attended the G20 summit in Argentina in 2018, underlining FIFA's diplomatic reach. In essence, FIFA's power has deep roots, dating back to 1904 in Paris. It recognizes six confederations (AFC, CAF, CONCACAF, CONMEBOL OFC UEFA) Additionally, FIFA admits non-state territories with complex legal statuses, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Cook Islands, the Cayman Islands, Anguilla, Bermuda, and Kurdistan.

In this ongoing process of decolonization, many former colonial empires still hold islands or significant territories. Numerous territories are designated by the United Nations as non-self-governing, yet they have national football teams. None of these national teams are accidental. Transnistria, a Russophone enclave in Moldova that participated in the Champions League this year, is a clear example of this. Many countries are part of CONIFA, the Confederation of Independent Football Associations, which includes states vying for involvement or recognition (62 teams as of 2022). For many of these states, nationalism and an "imagined" identity have developed primarily through sports. In essence, football can be seen as a map of nations. The FIFA national teams encompass 211 teams across 6 confederations, while the United Nations recognizes 193 countries. From this perspective, FIFA operates to create a true atlas of micro-nations, colonies, autonomous regions, and ethnic minorities. One can read latent geopolitical conflicts or contested geographical spaces. The spirit of national cohesion is crucial for

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constructing a national narrative, for putting oneself on the map. The NF BOARD, the league of non-aligned nations, emerged in 2003 as an NGO for minorities, aiming to use football to shed light on these realities a kind of waiting room for FIFA.

2.3.4   Football as (soft) power

Football is indeed a true instrument of soft power for various states and, in itself, a global geopolitical actor. With a business turnover of 28.4 billion euros, football's economic dominance surpasses that of entire nations. It transcends major monotheistic religions and liberal democracy in terms of global reach and influence. The sport boasts an audience of 3.57 billion viewers during the last World Cup, more than half of the population aged four and above. States strategically use football to project themselves geopolitically, such as the World Cup in Japan and South Korea, which was essentially designed to emphasize the centrality of the Pacific. Recent World Cups have been organized by the BRICS countries (Brazil, South Africa, Russia), showcasing their geopolitical prominence. The Qatar World Cup underscores the influence of Gulf nations (PSG, former Barcelona players) in contrast to Arab and Emirati nations, exemplified by teams like City and Arsenal. This becomes evident when examining the reasons behind holding the Italian Supercoppa finals in Jedda, a showcase of Islamic places of worship.

Moreover, there is an undeniable growth in the economic relevance of football. This aligns with the broader context of globalization as interpreted by post-modernist and post-industrialist theses. Football demonstrates significant economic dynamism with robust performances and clear growth trends. European football alone generates a turnover exceeding 25 billion euros. The sport's financialization is evident, with many clubs now publicly traded entities with complex ownership structures spanning diverse economic sectors. Popularity in football helps in politics: cases like Gigi Riva, who became a member of the Italian parliament, George Weah, President of Liberia, and Andrij Shevchenko, former coach of the Ukrainian national team and now advisor to the president, highlight the intersection of sports and politics. Football is emerging as a political force, and individuals within the sport are assuming roles with political

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significance. The ability of football to garner public support and manipulate masses is age-old, from the "bread and circuses" of ancient Rome to Mussolini's black-shirted national team in 1934 and the colossal investments of today. Football is both a tool of domestic politics and international geopolitics, a driver of globalization, and its organizations serve as true para-diplomatic institutions. As a soft power tool, football allows states, or even stateless nations, to project their identity externally, while powerful countries or those aspiring to be gain sympathies and support on the international stage, albeit with occasional failures.

Football players/politicians-actors/footballers-politicians (Source:
https://tg24.sky.it/mondo/2023/09/27/shevchenko-consigliere-zelensky

Chapter 3: The Maldives, an Archipelago of Power Relations

In this chapter, I will first introduce the interpretive categories that will be used in this thesis. I will describe and discuss the physical geography through the concepts of insularity and decentralization of power, as it plays a highly significant role in the country's politics. The relationships that form on the peripheral islands and their connection with the capital, Malé, take on unique forms that require particularly careful analysis.

Secondly, I will address the topic of political geography and population distribution, which finds its place in this geographic configuration or adapts to change (tourist flows, dependence on oil, climate emergency) through land reclamation processes – a rapidly expanding practice. I will describe and interpret various types of islands that can be found in the Maldives, especially those affected by land reclamation, such as resorts, dumps, airports.

I will then present an example of spatial policy, which, along with the decentralization of power, constitutes contemporary Maldivian political reality, namely the urban restructuring of the islands. In conclusion, following a brief historical overview of the Maldives, I will address the theme of power in the country, how it has evolved, its interaction with Islam, and how it is currently manifested in spaces of power, such as resorts or, in the peripheral islands, within the island administrative councils through the influence of local leaders or "big men."

3.1 Physical Geography and the Political Administration of the Maldives: Insularity and Decentralization

The Republic of Maldives is an archipelagic state[18] (Ferro, 2004) in the Indian Ocean, composed of 1,192 coral islands (Shaig, 2006), located 600 km south of India and southwest of Sri Lanka. The territory extends approximately 900 km from north to south along the 15th parallel and 120 km from east to west along the 73rd meridian. Together with two other Indian

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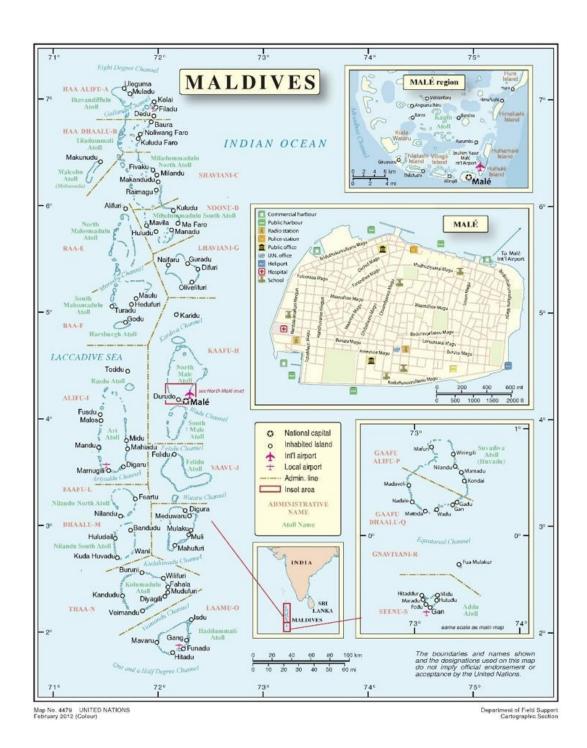
[18] It will be used in this work the definition of archipelagic state of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), according to which an archipelagic state is composed of a group of islands that form a state and represent a single unit. Furthermore, the waters around, in between or connecting islands even beyond 3 miles from the coast, are part of the internal waters and are therefore subject to exclusive state sovereignty.

Ocean archipelagos, Chagos and Laccadive, the Maldives form the ecoregion with the largest coral atoll system on the planet. As Zahir (2021) emphasizes, while there is no strict definition of a "small state," there is no doubt that the Maldives are indeed small, both in terms of population (according to the 2022 census, they have 515,132 inhabitants) and land area (only 297.8 square kilometers of emerged land). They are also small in terms of GDP (about 6.19 million dollars in 2022, according to World Bank data). Not only are they small, but they are also fragmented. The emerged land is scattered across a thousand small islands, with the largest, which hosts the capital, Malé, being only 1.87 km long and 1.5 km wide. It is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. The majority of the Maldivian national territory is made up of maritime space. The country's official name, "Dhivehi Raajjeyge Jumhooriyya" (Maloney, 2013, p. X), literally means the "Kingdom of Islands" or "Kingdom of the Dhivehi People" (Romero-Frias, 2012, p. XXI). Therefore, insularity is a fundamental category for understanding the geography and politics of the country. Only nine islands have a natural land area greater than two square kilometers (Ghina 2003), although many of them are implementing land reclamation projects to increase their land area. The Maldivian government has divided the 1,192 islands into 26 natural atolls and 19 administrative districts labeled using the letters of the Maldivian alphabet. This approach was further confirmed in 2010 through what is considered a revolutionary legislative decree. Specifically, in 2010, the government of Mohamed Nasheed enacted a law on the decentralization of state power in the Maldives, making each island a separate administrative division. In addition to the redistribution of administrative geography, the law provides for the election of island chiefs by the inhabitants (rather than, as customary, through government designation from the capital, Malé) and greater autonomy from the central state. For example, in addition to council elections and the management of administrative buildings, island administrative divisions now independently manage various areas of governance such as land policies and waste management. The Decentralization Act[19] is highly relevant because it places the Maldives within a multi-level

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[19] The Act on Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives, Local Government Authority, 2010.

administrative framework, which we will explore further through the social analysis of sports in Chapter 4.

The administrative organization of the country is thus divided into local levels, where an island elects its own council for territorial management, finances, and services on a "municipal" scale. Secondly, some councilors and representatives from islands within a given atoll converge in the Atoll Council, which is responsible for administering uninhabited islands (about a thousand throughout the archipelago), relations with surrounding resorts, and with Malé. The provincial or zonal level groups several atolls into seven macro-zones, and finally, the level of the central state in Malé, where the Parliament (Majlis), ministries, and government bodies are located.

Map of the Maldives, Map. No. 4479, 2012. Source: United Nations, 2012, link available here:
https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/721108.

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3.1.1 *Archipelago and Insularity*

The first element to consider in this analysis is the geographical configuration of the Maldivian state. As known, the word "atoll" is derived from the Dhivehi word "atolu," but it can also be a phenomenological spatial interpretation of island regions. The archipelagic nature, understood as a collection of atolls, produces a series of adaptations that become central in the political construction of the nation. In this region, a millennia-old dialectic between water and land has always been experienced, in a delicate ecosystem woven across 1,200 islands, upon which the identity of a nation and its people have built. The insular nature of the Maldives also influences the linguistic aspect. As Maloney (1976) suggests, this is probably the only civilization in the world that does not have words like "village," "town," or "country" in its vocabulary. All are simply "islands" (p. 660). The island thus constitutes the basic administrative unit of the Maldives. This is why it is essential to define what an island is and how to count them. Even the precise count of the land masses that make up the archipelago has been a subject of discussion. Immanuel Kant, in his pre-critical writings on islands and earthquakes, referred to the news that the Maldives consisted of 12,000 islands as an "Asian exaggeration." His Enlightenment skepticism led him to consider such numbers impossible, suggesting that most of these islands were actually sandbars. The Austrian naturalist Irenaeus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, in 1966, titled his work on the natural history and fish fauna of the Maldives "The Land of a Thousand Atolls," narrowing down Kant's debated number but still suggesting an indefinite yet very high number of islands. Subsequently, *2000 Happy Islands* by Corbin and Bernini was published in 1972, launching the country's tourism image. The number of islands is always an estimate, as when reporting the extent of archipelagos of this kind, definitive data are rarely available. A more precise count entails numerous issues. First, there are various debates about the very definition of an island (Hache, 1987; McCall, 1994; Moles, 1982; Selwyn, 1980; Baldacchino, 2005; Hayward, 2016, 2019, Kopaka, 2008) because the meaning of an island changes depending on how it is observed. In this work, the purely ecological version of the definition will be used, where the criterion is the type of plant colonization from which the ecosystem consolidates. In the case of coral islands, especially in the Maldives, the palm tree

plays this role[20]. According to this definition, "an island is a portion of land entirely surrounded by water where at least one coconut palm grows." If we were to include sandbars and coral outcrops in the count, the number would be around 2,000 units. Furthermore, coral islands themselves undergo significant structural movements compared to continental areas: some join together, some split in two, and, in certain circumstances, some land sections occasionally emerge from the coral reefs. With this introduction, I want to clarify that throughout this thesis, the metaphor of a prism has been used to approach the topic of soft power through sports in the Maldives. Indeed, there are various perspectives, methods, and interpretations for reading a space that is layered, surrounded by the sea, and poses multiple issues. Among these, preliminary and somewhat unexpected, there is the definition of an island itself (Turco, 1980, p.45), for which there is clearly no unambiguous definition. In *Geography of Small Islands: Outposts of Globalization*, Ratter begins his work by asking, "What is an island?" (2018, p.5). The argument I aim to make here is that small islands, attempting to move beyond the definition of a "laboratory," which considers them as closed spaces of elaboration starting from the margins, are geographic places from which we can grasp the "grand processes" on a manageable scale (Baldacchino, 2008). Analyzing Cavallo's work (2007, p.18), we can identify two minimal coordinates for defining an island: isolation due to water and relatively small dimensions, enabling the climatic action of the waters to be felt within the island's territory. Although Moles, in 1982, defined the island as a closed place, defined by a frontier, as a local place that contrasts with the continental, one should not idealize them as closed cultural niches (Ratter, 2018). Thus, insularity is a fundamental concept in this work and for Island Studies, where it is common to consider the scarcity of resources as a cause of conflicts, tensions, or discussions within a territory: "Island is geographically finite, total, discrete, sharply precise physical entity which accentuates clear and holistic notions of location and identity […] it exacerbates species

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[20] Dhivehi Ruh, the coconut palm (Cocos nucifera), was declared a national tree in 1985 and is represented on the national coat of arms of the flag and occupies the first place among the plants of the Maldives).

interactions in conditions of relatively higher densities and indices a more acute competition for more limited and less diverse resources" (Baldacchino, 2004, p.272).

In this work, the main focus is on the idea that space is a resource. Peter Hay, in his quest to construct a theory of insularity, argues that it is not so important to find a unique definition but to identify the problems that afflict it. Small islands are, in fact, contested territories that contain objects that can be interpreted in dialectical (sea-land, island-island, etc.) or prismatic terms. It is not so simple to identify and trace the boundaries of a single island, assuming they exist, or to assert whether they are connected or disconnected (and if so, to what). One small example of the complexity, layering, and prismatic nature of these micro-worlds is the island of Diego Garcia in the Chagos archipelago, south of the Maldives, where the world's largest Marine base is located, which NATO has used to control the region for interventions in the Iraq war or the invasion of Afghanistan. On this island, where the local population was deported to make way for the military base, the island was "masked" as a marine protected area to hide the main objective and justify the relocation of the inhabitants to other islands. The theme, therefore, is that following Peter Hay's idea, one must open, expand, relate, rather than "close" and try to give it boundaries. After discussing what an island is and showing how their number is not straightforward, there needs to be a reflection on the very definition of an archipelago. The most common of these definitions is the one established by UNCLOS, as previously mentioned, in which an archipelago can be identified as a "group of islands." For reasons of space, it is not possible in this work to thoroughly question the definition. However, it should be kept in mind that a notion like this is a construct that, albeit apparently simple, is very powerful in defining the spaces and identities of those who inhabit the islands, to the extent that relationships in archipelagos offer a model that is defined as a "world in process" (Stratford et al, 2011, p.120), in which fluidity and negotiations convey the idea of a horizon free and open to endless possibilities, as Nietzsche would describe it. Simplifying an archipelago to its lowest common denominator, it can be argued that the image of an island is often the result of an imposition by powerful historically determined narratives. Elaine Stratford described islands as "paradoxical spaces" capable of incorporating sets of antithetical geographic characteristics: they are spaces

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"limited but porous, isolated yet connected, colonized, postcolonial; vulnerable to linguistic, cultural, and environmental changes; robust yet capable of absorbing and altering, located in paradisiacal, utopian and dystopian regions, tourist meccas, ecological refuges" (2003, p. 495). Stratford emphasizes the binary nature of the creation of island places in her perspective: both are the result of cultural, scientific, and ideological systems of the continent and the assertion of islands as subjects through cultural heritage, languages, images, and practices.

3.1.2 An Archipelago of Relations

Regarding this work, it is useful to focus on the definition of an archipelago not as an object in itself but as an interweaving of power relationships within it. A group of islands can be observed as a constellation of individual objects with a distinct shape, history, and culture, different from neighboring realities. Still, they can also be seen as portions of a larger, supra-insular entity, places where situated relationships between land and sea are negotiated. Throughout this work, it is important to keep in mind that we are dealing with a structure that Williams calls "a contradictory geography" (2010, p. 290). According to Williams, indeed, the concept of an island always contains three levels of binary relationships that interact with each other in different ways: island-island, island-continent, land-water. The attempt to trace archipelagic relationships can constitute a kind of counter-mapping, which DeLoughrey (2007) defines as "archipelagraphy," a mechanism that re-presents identity, interaction, space, and places that come through different combinations of effects, materiality, performance, and things (Stratford et al, p.114, 2011). Within an archipelago, very fluid cultural processes are present, where relations, both abstract and concrete, are constructed, changed, or destroyed always on at least three levels. To use Baumann's terminology, these relations can be described as "liquid," fluid, at a level where:

> No island is an isolated island and [that] the archipelagic system - a historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relation with their surrounding seas, islands, and

continents - provides a more appropriate metaphor for reading island cultures. (DeLoughrey, 2001, p. 23).

In the Maldives, the archipelagic character is noticeable on multiple levels that act simultaneously and interact with each other. In addition to a local definition of an archipelago, the Maldivian archipelago is encompassed within a larger one, in which other states interact, such as Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Papua New Guinea. Add to this the Chinese, Arab, and Indian influences. The idea of an "archipelago within the archipelago" has often emerged in my interviews with Maldivians as an expression of pride in belonging to a very large archipelago (or multiple archipelagos) with weight on the international stage. Indeed, the Maldives have historically held and continue to maintain a prominent strategic role in the Indian Ocean. In this work, in Chapter 4, I will attempt to relate the role that the Maldivian archipelago plays in international politics to the soft power exercised through sports.

3.1.3   The Social Consequences of the Maldivian Archipelagic Relationship

The geographical configuration of the Maldives, through its maritime social space, has various consequences on the country's social and relational structure, giving it particular characteristics. These characteristics pertain to a sense of identity, territorial homogenization, and the construction of a nation-state that must represent and self-represent across all inhabited islands in the archipelago. The sea, in particular, serves as a space of interaction that brings substantial economic revenue. While the fishing sector was only surpassed by tourism in recent decades, it's essential to remember that over 40% of the population is employed in the fishing sector and related activities such as fish drying and export to India, Sri Lanka, and the Arabian coasts.

The sea's flexible capacity for movement produces a complex fluidity that is challenging for a state to control. The flow of goods arriving by sea is more difficult to monitor, particularly regarding illegal trafficking. Besides the risks of accidents caused by shipwrecks, storms, and the pollution of waters and fish, the delayed acquisition of technologies for controlling maritime

passages has created various issues related to the control of internal and external criminal activities. Significant issues are linked to the importation of drugs via large boats, primarily originating from Pakistan. These vessels often transport human beings, including those involved in modern slavery, working in high-risk economic sectors in the Maldives, such as waste management on landfill islands and manufacturing. Additionally, piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling are widespread issues in the country. Efforts to combat these challenges by the state are often undermined by the high level of corruption, which is prevalent at various levels of the social hierarchy. This widespread corruption exacerbates criminal activities, making them almost a structural element of the political system. The immigration of laborers attracted to the country often utilizes these less controlled channels to enter the Maldives, primarily consisting of young men. They face various challenges, including fraudulent recruitment, debt, exploitation, and poor living conditions, which are often facilitated by corrupt intermediaries:

In Maldives, there were only 2422 migrant workers in 1985 but the numbers increased to 180,000 in 2020, of which 63,000 are undocumented. These numbers vary between 145,000 to 230,000.2 Currently, migrant workers are in large part a majority of the workforce and constitute one third of the population. They are mostly young men between 20 and 34 years old from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka (one in four migrants). Most of the migrant workers at the lower skill levels are employed in the construction industry (and some waiters). (Guy Ryder, Protecting Migrant Workers in Maldives, ILO, 2021).

The Maldives tourists' resorts, famed all over the world for their exotic overwater bungalows, hide tragic stories. They are built by the lood, sweat, tears, and even lives of Bangladeshi workers. (Selina Mohsin, former ambassador of the Bangladesh government).

Bangladeshi job-seekers pay USD 2,500-3,000 to the brokers who paint a promising picture of employment in the Maldives. Bangladeshi brokers collude with Maldivian agents to facilitate fraudulent recruitment and forced labour. The workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. On arrival their passports and documents are often seized by the agents and they are forced to work in arduous conditions. Expatriate labourers, mostly Bangladeshis, constitute a significant part of the population. They are mostly unskilled and forced to work over 14 hours a day in the construction industry and the service sector. They get the lowest wage of USD 100-150 per month, which is usually not paid regularly. (The Daily Star, 2017)

Furthermore, it should be noted that many Bangladeshi workers arrive in the Maldives burdened with debt, especially to recruitment agencies in Dhaka, which act as intermediaries. Consequently, they often find themselves accepting any type of work without the necessary information from these agencies, which reinforces the mechanism of discrimination, low living conditions, and low wages (Suzuki, 2021). The open expanse of the sea, perceived as more "free" and challenging for the state to control all the flows compared to the land, is ambivalent. On one hand, the sea is one of the country's primary sources of income. On the other hand, interviews have revealed that citizens, both in Malé and on the outlying islands, perceive it as a source of problems that make the state vulnerable. In addition to crime associated with illegal imports and human trafficking, unwanted elements have historically arrived from the sea, including Portuguese invaders (1558-1573), Dutch colonists (1658-1796), and British colonial rule (1887-1965), as well as significant amounts of plastic waste that pose complex disposal challenges. In addition to the substantial plastic waste that is burdening the Maldivian environment, the sea is undeniably linked to various issues related to environmental fragility. Alongside phenomena such as El Niño, which have altered the appearance of coral reefs and had a significant impact on the economic and tourism sectors, rising sea levels are a central concern for a country that holds the record for being the world's lowest-lying state. This situation has compelled the Maldives to consider drastic measures, such as proposals to relocate the entire population by leasing portions of other countries in the coming decades (Nicholss, 2018).

Mohamed Nasheed, who served as the President of the Maldives from 2008 to 2012, is undoubtedly the individual most associated with environmental advocacy. His policy was marked by the ambition to make the Maldives the world's first carbon-neutral country. He initiated a series of actions and initiatives to transform the nation into a sustainability paradise and prevent its people from becoming climate refugees. Shortly after taking office in March 2009, Nasheed promoted several measures aimed at increasing the use of renewable energies and minimizing the emissions of greenhouse gases responsible for atmospheric pollution.

Despite being widely criticized for the high costs of eco-friendly operations, Nasheed established a fund, financed by tourism revenue, with the aforementioned goal of securing new territory in case the measures proved insufficient to halt rising sea levels. He also developed a comprehensive plan for significant investments in alternative energy sources, including wind power, photovoltaics, and biochar (organic charcoal produced from coconut waste). Nasheed gained international attention for his occasionally dramatic actions, such as personally installing solar panels on his rooftop and convening an underwater special session of the Cabinet (at a depth of six meters) to endorse an international appeal. A documentary on Nasheed's efforts to combat climate change, titled "The Island President," was filmed between 2009 and 2010.

Mohamed Nasheed during the cabinet of the Maldives government held a meeting 20ft underwater to publicise 'rising sea-levels'. Source: Wenn.com

It is also important to note that the concept of "archipelagism" is a spatial category that, for many scholars, implies an idea of separation, which might result in a fragile, artificial, almost imaginary national unity (Cribb, 1999). Taking the example of the Caribbean, where over 7,000 islands with a long colonial history are divided into 27 independent territories, the evident effect

is a clear separation into many small entities that are politically, economically, and culturally distinct. In this case, the sea can seem like a divisive element. The geographic layout of the archipelago generates two clear governance issues. Firstly, the division of territory into islands creates significant problems in communication and long-distance transportation, which, in turn, poses challenges for the central government in coordinating initiatives and policies. In addition to the greater difficulties in intervening in an archipelagic constellation compared to a nation with a higher percentage of land, there's also the fact that not only is it a fragmented space but it also needs to be governed.

The administration of marine space, in the Maldives as well as in other archipelagic states, is of paramount importance, as it coincides with the most significant domestic economic factor. To provide an example, looking at Indonesia, the world's largest archipelagic state, governing many small entities may appear more fragile than a non-fragmented state with an extensive mainland. However, there is no evidence that a state with a vast landmass, like Russia, is inherently more governable than Indonesia simply because it's not an archipelago. As will be demonstrated later, the sense of national identity arising from the physical geography is constructed through various initiatives, and the purpose of this thesis is to understand how and in what ways sports can facilitate this process.
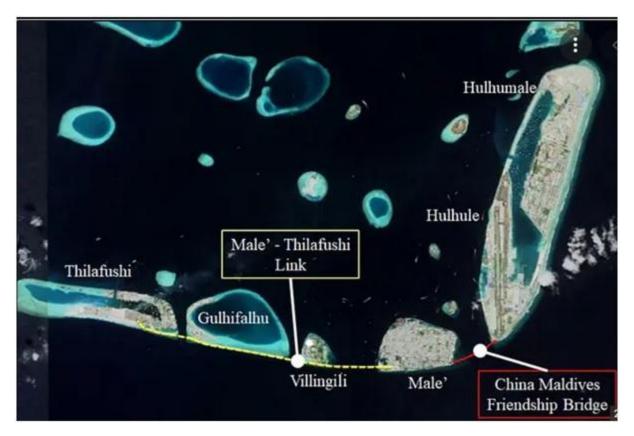
The concept of the archipelago is, therefore, central to the very construction of the Maldivian state, to the extent that it is reiterated within national borders through extremely homogenizing control mechanisms. People, islands, and institutions are intrinsically connected, but to constitute a common national identity, substantial differences must be well regulated and maintained. In terms of politics and the construction of the Maldivian national identity, the model adopted is that of a state that replicates itself in many small realities through highly comprehensive laws that homogenize spaces and people while granting autonomy to island councils for local matters. This will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs when the homogenizing urban planning of the Ameen government is presented.

3.2 Centres, Peripheries, and Spatiality

3.2.1 Population Distribution
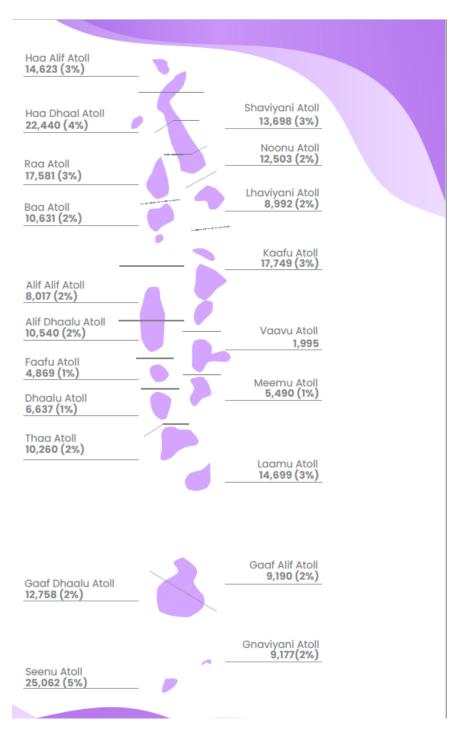
In the Maldives, the territory's configuration and population distribution are so unique and relevant to this study that it's important to examine the data with special attention. According to the latest census data from 2022, which is the most comprehensive to date and has been confirmed by various organizations involved in demographic statistics in the Maldives, some trends can be identified[21]. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there are 515.132 inhabitants in an area of approximately 300 square kilometers. Delving further, one can observe that for the first time, a distinction has been made between the resident Maldivian population, totaling 382.639 individuals, and foreign residents, numbering 132.493. This data represents an initial effort by the Maldivian government to track the migrant flows from other countries, such as Bangladesh and Nepal, who historically (and continue to do so) make up a significant portion of the submerged population seeking better conditions in the Maldives. According to the 2022 census, it's apparent that 41% of the residents have chosen to live in the Greater Malé Region, comprising the capital island of Malé, the nearby Hulumalé and Vilingili, and the airport island of Hululé. This region serves as the hub for key public services and is the financial and economic center.

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[21] World Bank United Nations, CIA

Map of Greater Malé Region. In this photo it is also possible to see briefly two projects: China Maldives Friendship Bridge and Malé-Thilafushi Link. Source: Maldives' Largest Ever Infra Project, Funded By India: All You Should Know About The Greater Male Connectivity Project.

The remaining 46% of residents live on the "administrative" islands, distributed quite evenly, with some peaks in larger population centers like the island of Addu in the south and the Seenu Atoll (5%), as well as smaller islands with only a few hundred inhabitants. Only nine islands are larger than two square kilometers, and many of them have ongoing land reclamation projects to increase their surface area.

Haa Alif Atoll
14,623 (3%)

Haa Dhaal Atoll
22,440 (4%)

Shaviyani Atoll
13,698 (3%)

Noonu Atoll
12,503 (2%)

Raa Atoll
17,581 (3%)

Lhaviyani Atoll
8,992 (2%)

Baa Atoll
10,631 (2%)

Kaafu Atoll
17,749 (3%)

Alif Alif Atoll
8,017 (2%)

Alif Dhaalu Atoll
10,540 (2%)

Vaavu Atoll
1,995

Faafu Atoll
4,869 (1%)

Meemu Atoll
5,490 (1%)

Dhaalu Atoll
6,637 (1%)

Thaa Atoll
10,260 (2%)

Laamu Atoll
14,699 (3%)

Gaaf Alif Atoll
9,190 (2%)

Gaaf Dhaalu Atoll
12,758 (2%)

Gnaviyani Atoll
9,177 (2%)

Seenu Atoll
25,062 (5%)

Population in administrative islands. Source: Census 2022, Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023.

The remaining portion of the population resides on the so-called "non-administrative islands," which includes resort islands and islands used for industrial or agricultural purposes. About 10% of the population lives on resort islands, and 3% in those used for industrial purposes. These data make it very clear that the relationship between the capital island and the administrative islands plays a key role in the social life of the Maldivians, especially in terms of the socio-economic sector, the religious sphere, and the construction of national identity. Further analyzing the data from the 2022 Census in light of the distribution of the islands, it's evident that the 211.908 citizens of the Greater Malé Area occupy a very small portion of space, totaling 8.30 square kilometers (with 103.693 people residing in just 2 square kilometers in the city of Malé). Without adding the submerged population of irregular foreign migrant workers who usually settle in this area, it's clear that if nearly half of the population lives in this area due to its attractiveness, the population density is so high that it ranks among the highest in the world when considering population density per square kilometer. As shown in Map number 2, the remaining population is distributed quite evenly across the other 187 inhabited islands or temporarily on the 172 islands with resorts[22]. As Malatesta and Schmidt di Friedberg (2017) state: "the human geography of the Maldives is characterized by the spatial antithesis between concentration and dispersion and by center/periphery relationships and imbalances." These spatial patterns act and interact within the geography of the archipelago in relation to population distribution, capital accumulation, resource management, and accessibility to services. This description vividly paints the picture of a nation compelled to manage a high concentration of inhabitants and services in its capital, while the peripheral islands represent almost half of the population (46%), retaining their local importance and specificity. However, they remain challenging and uneconomical to serve due to their geographical characteristics. To confirm this dual trend of dispersion and concentration, it's noteworthy that the two atolls with the fewest inhabitants (Faaf and Felidhoo), comprising a total of only 10 inhabited islands, are located in

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[22] Ministry of Tourism, 2023. Source: https://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/yearbook/2023/

the central region, less than 80 nautical miles from the capital, the most significant economic, demographic, and political center. In contrast, the two most inhabited atolls (Seenu and Haa, the southernmost and northernmost of the archipelago, respectively) are both very distant from the capital. A similar trend is observed, for example, in the distribution of tourist facilities (Malatesta & Schmidt di Friedberg, 2017). These distinctive features of the Maldivian archipelago necessarily have political consequences, both at the local and large scales. The city of Malé acts as a supercenter where "everything happens," and it is the site of the most important socio-economic and political developments. It is evident that, from a political perspective, the population's attention shifts towards Malé. This dynamic of a city where "only important things happen[23]" is well demonstrated in the Maldives by the fact that withdrawing from the national political stage often coincides with moving away from Malé (Colton, 1995) to return to one's birth island or engage in other activities abroad. On the contrary, as a consequence of the Act of Decentralization, politics in the peripheral islands is managed through small-scale resources that are often entirely separate from the mechanisms at work in the capital. The polarity between Malé and the periphery translates into a view of the residents outside the Greater Male Region as inhabitants of a different, separate world. The periphery is not just the "far from Malé," but it is often an indefinite, suburban place where money is earned and considered just to spend in Malé. This notion, in which the center of power assumes absolute relevance, results in spaces outside it being referred to with colloquially derogatory expressions. During my interviews, I found the expression "those from the islands" to be very common in referring to someone not living in Malé. This term is used to create distance between a Malé resident and one from the periphery and is accompanied by strong attitudes of contempt or judgments of certain behaviors as outdated and no longer fitting the way of life in Malé. In cases where an individual from the periphery comes from a very distant island, "being from the islands" is also used to stigmatize based on the type of dialect or inflection present in their speech. It is clear how these derogatory

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[23] Malé understood as a city where "everything happens" and "political events only happen here" are points of view widely shared by a large part of the Maldivian population; in more than one interview this point of view was brought up by both citizens living on the outlying islands and residents in Malé.

expressions are largely used (and instrumentalized) to fuel the prejudices that weigh heavily within a hierarchical system of government that relies on stigma and envy as social regulators. As a direct consequence, it is interesting to observe how the mechanisms of exclusion used to keep people away from the center (which can be Malé or the council seat of an island) pose a problem for the established order. "One from the islands" is a term that carries all the negative connotations of being a citizen of a Maldivian island, including the prejudice of living in a bygone era. The concept, in some ways, recalls the notion of allocronia by J. Fabian (2000), in which a rhetorical strategy is employed to elude the coeval nature of the interactive relationship between historical subjects, obliterating the institutional, political, and historically human framework within which the encounter or interaction takes place. The prejudice brings with it a complete lack of understanding of why someone might prefer to live on a peripheral island rather than in Malé, where transportation and communication are inconvenient and slow, thus excluding those from the periphery from a world where everything happens and where political discussions take place. Those who are referred to as "those from the islands" are also considered by the citizens of Malé to be the least affluent, least educated, and with limited abilities. A clear example is the stigmatization of those living outside of Malé as persistently using outdated technology and having poor money management. Often, even traditional knowledge is stigmatized, such as the type of fishing or beliefs considered archaic, like fandita[24]. Since all political and social dynamics concentrate in Malé, living elsewhere means cutting oneself off from the competitive and frenetic part of the nation, a city for the young, entrepreneurs, those who want to engage in politics, or, in general, assert themselves individually. Additionally, in the capital, Western and financial models have a much more pervasive influence on daily life than in the islands. These models, however, often generate problems when they need to be reconciled with the prevailing system of sharia.

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[24] By fandita we mean widespread beliefs linked to a magical-religious system that complement Islam. Through interaction with some spirits, Jinni or other entities, it is considered possible to wish for good weather, the outcome of a harvest, increase birth fertility, catch fish or divination (Melli, 2020).

The Maldives is a nation strongly characterized by regional inequalities, with its capital strategically located at the center of the archipelago, attracting all representatives of political, administrative, economic, and social power. Members of this small subgroup with well-defined social boundaries are considered (and consider themselves) as the most important, influential, and authoritative people in the archipelago. Without a doubt, the composition of these small circles of people with a predominant role compared to the rest of the population and their interactions (and distinctions) create a hierarchical system, particularly an elitist one. This community, which occupies the highest level of the Maldivian social stratification system (daraaja), has chosen Malé as its obvious residence, effectively creating a model of supercentrism. The residents of the peripheral islands, constituting the "peripheral" area where the "ordinary people" live, are at a lower subordinate level, defined as miihun (Colton, 1995, p.71). Within the political heart located in the city of Malé, from where the entire territory is governed, the true organizing principle of the elites is not of a parental nature but political.
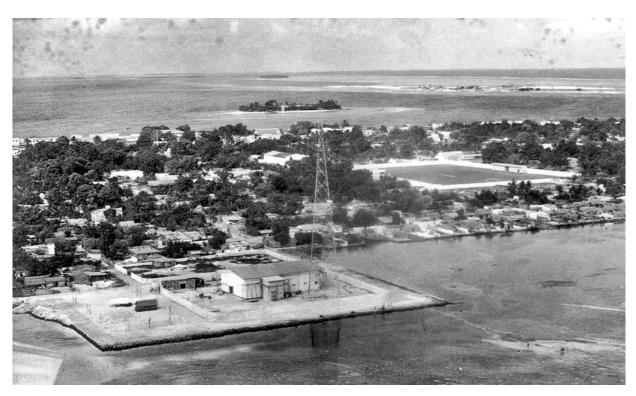
Furthermore, the scarcity of land (*bing*) heavily influences the climate of general suspicion and distrust (Colton, 1995, p.71). The customary method of land distribution, which was nominal and exercised by the sultan, has fueled, exacerbated, and systematized the climate of jealousy and tension within social groups regarding the acquisition of power. Many of the mechanisms found today in the Maldivian Constitution or unwritten bureaucratic systems, typical of British-influenced nations, originate from this appointment system where one could lose everything based on mere suspicions or distrust towards the nominee. In a territory where it is not possible to isolate or banish a wrongdoer from the community's perspective, one of the methods applied to deprive an individual of power is the system of exile, called *aruvaalun* (Colton, 1995, p.218). The latter is of a personal nature and is almost never extended to family members. It has a more significant impact when applied to a citizen belonging to the elite residing in the capital. Since, as mentioned earlier, it is a common belief that nothing politically relevant happens outside of Malé, a system like exile primarily applied to members of the elite is considered a very burdensome measure. It cuts off the subject from the center of political and social life, effectively putting them in the condition of living like "one from the islands."

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However, while politics enjoys more prominence in the daily life of the capital, where the res publica is managed, and attention is often directed towards international issues, it would be superficial to determine that the political weight of the peripheral islands is secondary. In the last political elections, which marked the transition from the government of Abdulla Yameen to that of Ibrahim Solih, the votes from the peripheral islands played a significant role. The gap that, in 2018, ensured the victory to the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) after days of parity and runoffs was secured by islands far from the capital, where the speeches of Solih and his political team were most convincing.

One of the main points of this thesis is spatial analysis through on-site investigations. Before I delve into the sports spaces, it's important to highlight the significance of space in the Maldives. As previously mentioned, the total land area of the Maldives is approximately 297 square kilometers. Over the past few decades, according to the 2022 Census, the 2010 Assessment of Development Results by the UNDP, reports from the Central Intelligence Agency in 2014, and a specific sector study covering the years from the 1950s to 2000 (Veron et al, 2008), the population has steadily increased. In parallel, the tourism industry has become more defined and expanded its services. Life expectancy has increased, and there have been greater inflows of workers and tourists. Particularly around the Greater Malé Area, there has been a significant demand for space. Taking the example of Malé, the capital city of the Maldives, the British archaeologist Harry Charles Bell, in the 1920s, returned after 40 years from his previous visit and described it as "overcrowded" with its 5,000 inhabitants (Bell, 1940). Alan Villiers, writing for National Geographic 30 years later, reported a population of around 8,000 and noted the absence of foreigners in the country, even representatives of the British government, as they exercised their control from Ceylon (1957). As in neighboring India, the population began to grow dramatically from the 1980s, resulting in a doubling of the population between 1984 and 1990. Here is a small gallery of images showing how the island of Malé has changed in tandem with the rapid increase in its population.

A Street of Malé in 1903. Source: National Archives of UK. Photo colorized by Mohamed Zaim.

An aerial photo of Māle in the late 1970's. This was when the first Television station was established in Maldives. Source: Dhivehi Archives, in Dhiveheen ދިވެހީން Group on Facebook.

Aerial view of Malé, 2014. Source: Social Media.

Aerial view of Malé, 2023. Source: Social Media.

To address the population growth and congestion challenges, the Maldivian government has implemented various strategies. First and foremost, every inch of available land has been used for construction. As evident from the photo, the only green spaces left are the sports fields, while the rest has been urbanized with the proliferation of symbolic buildings of power and religion, residences, ports, and service facilities. Additional space has been utilized through road planning, which consists of very narrow roads, often with only one lane and no parking facilities. As one can imagine, this precious land space comes at a rapidly increasing price per square meter, and the real estate market is highly dynamic. For example, in July 2022, apartment rental prices in the center of Malé were on par with real estate markets in cities like Milan when considering the same square meterage. The attraction to the capital's services is so strong that the approximately 100.000 residents during the day double with work-related inflows. Once the land space on the ground was exhausted, the government proposed two solutions starting from the 2000s. Firstly, they started utilizing the sky by constructing and expanding skyscrapers for both private and public purposes, such as the hospital. The second solution to address the lack of space, which will be further analyzed in Chapter 6 through a specific sports event that took place on the island where I spent more time, is the land reclamation process from the sea. There is no scientific literature on land reclamation in the Maldives, so in this work, I aim to provide an idea of the ongoing and recent processes. Implementing land reclamation in the archipelago means bringing about often extreme changes in the daily lives of people, their businesses, and their lifestyles, and land reclamation has become part of the common language of the population. Furthermore, the Maldivian government, in addition to raising the building height limit to 45 meters, has initiated the construction and reclamation of satellite islands to the capital, capable of accommodating thousands of residents and essential services. They are, in fact, completing a "second Malé" to the north of the international airport, known as Hulhumalé, to alleviate the congestion in the capital. In the next paragraph, you will see some steps of this island construction process.

In this thesis, I define 'land reclamation' as an engineering process through which an area with natural characteristics that would not otherwise be exploitable for such purposes is made

fit for agricultural, industrial, or urban use. Through physical intervention such as the draining of a marine area and the construction of various kinds of infrastructures, it is possible to create new spaces or enable new uses. Land reclamation is a common practice in many archipelagic regions (J. Zhu, Y. Yao, L. Li, W. Guan, 2022 & Wittezaele, C., 2021). In the Maldives, this operation consists of dredging sand from shallow lagoons. Although making new land available facilitates new development and infrastructural projects and represents an attempt to ease the pressure of immigration to Malé, it can also highly damage coral reefs or create vast plumes of sediment that travel to other reef platforms.

The Maldives is also on the lowest states in the world, making it extremely prone to climate change effects. Indeed, at these latitudes, land space is also claimed back from marine space in response to rising sea levels, a factor that features prominently in the political discourse. "We are one of the most vulnerable countries on Earth and therefore need to adapt", Maldives Vice President Mohamed Waheed Hassan stated in 2010 in the World Bank Report, warning the world that around 200 islands in the Maldives are projected to be submerged by 2100. Thus, land reclamation fulfils a primary function as an adaptive response to climate change, but also bears prominent social, political, and economic implications. In the next section, I briefly present some cases that illustrate different outcomes and implications of land reclamation processes in the Maldives to understand the significance, or lack thereof, of space in the Maldives, it's important to consider three major urban centers in the archipelago: Addu, Hulumalé, and Meedho. These centers will serve as exemplars to illustrate the various functions of the islands and highlight the critical role of space.

3.2.2 *Land Reclamation Processes as Urban Resilience*

In this section, I intend to briefly discuss how spaces in the Maldives are used according to various needs, purposes, and adaptations to emphasize the importance of space as a valuable resource. Issues related to space scarcity and the high dispersion of the population across the archipelago are critical aspects of local administration and central government's management of flows. As mentioned earlier, administrative decentralization began in 2010, so there are still

adaptation mechanisms in the territory. Additionally, climate change and overpopulation complicate adaptation solutions due to the extreme vulnerability of the Maldivian ecosystem, often resulting in the relocation of entire villages to other islands deemed safer.

If one word were to be chosen to describe the policies (environmental, political, socioeconomic) in the Maldives, that word would undoubtedly be "change." In the following analysis, I will explore typical spaces in the Maldives that are utilized in response to the limited space. This discussion aims to emphasize how the lack of space is a common theme in both political and everyday discourse. I have included examples of islands that have all been involved in land reclamation processes to underline the significance of space issues.

Land reclamation in the Maldives is a complex process that encompasses economic, social, engineering, urban planning, and political elements. It can be considered a total social fact, as described by Mauss in 2016. Reclamation statistics from the Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure indicate that by 2015, over 14 square kilometers of land had been reclaimed. This represents a 9.5% increase in the total area of inhabited islands, a percentage that is expected to rise with new economic developments and climate change. However, it's important to note that coral reef reclamation poses a significant threat to the marine biodiversity of the Maldives, potentially leading to a substantial loss of ecological habitat in the affected areas. While individual impact and risk assessments have been conducted for each coral reef reclamation project, there has been limited assessment of the cumulative risk to the overall biodiversity of the country and the health of coral reefs due to increasing development (Stevens & Froman, 2019). Here is a brief overview of some "typical" island cases in the Maldives:

1. **Sinking Maldives**: Refers to the overarching challenge of sea-level rise and the gradual submersion of low-lying islands due to climate change.

2. **The "Unique" Case of Addu and the Need for Southern Growth**: Discusses the unique situation of Addu Atoll in the southern part of the country and its efforts to expand as a regional hub.

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3.   **Garbage → Thilafushi**: Explores Thilafushi, often referred to as "Garbage Island," which is used as a landfill for the Malé region and has raised environmental concerns.

4.   **Demographic Density → Hulumalé and Floating City**: Examines Hulumalé, an artificial island created to alleviate population density in Malé, and the concept of floating cities as a potential solution.

5.   **Consolidating the Territory after Tsunami → Meedhoo**: Discusses the challenges faced by Meedhoo Island in rebuilding and consolidating the territory after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

6.   **Tourism Opportunity → CrossRoads**: Explores CrossRoads, a major integrated resort project, highlighting the significance of tourism in the Maldivian economy.

7.   **Resort Islands and Inhabited Islands**: Distinguishes between resort islands, which cater to tourists, and inhabited islands where local communities reside.

These examples provide insight into the diverse spatial challenges and opportunities in the Maldives, reflecting the multifaceted nature of space utilization in the archipelago.

1.Sinking Maldives

I would like to begin by mentioning that in this brief summary of the "typical" islands that make up the Maldives, I will not cover cases related to island protection or coastal interventions. This is not to diminish the importance of the efforts made throughout the archipelago but rather to emphasize their resilience, adaptability, and the dynamic nature of Maldivian policies. Additionally, this approach helps in better understanding one of the case studies presented in this work.

As mentioned earlier, in the first multiparty elections of 2008, Mohamed Nasheed emerged as the winner. The "environmental issue" became central to his government's agenda, positioning the Maldives as a symbol of island vulnerability to climate change. This political move increased the international visibility of the Maldives as a symbol of the fight against

climate change, further emphasized during the 2009 Conference of Parties in Copenhagen and in the film "The Island President" mentioned earlier. Following this, there was an unprecedented articulation of state regulations aimed at environmental protection, local development, and sustainable management across the entire archipelago, in an attempt to mitigate the effects of climate change. "We are one of the most vulnerable countries on Earth, and therefore, we have to adapt," declared Mohamed Waheed Hassan, Vice President of the Maldives, in a 2010 World Bank report[25], warning the world that it is predicted that approximately 200 Maldivian islands will be submerged by 2100. Many have identified the Republic of Maldives as one of the states most at risk of "disappearing" due to rising sea levels and climate change. In response to this, the Maldives has pursued a territorial strategy in the opposite direction: territorial expansion through land reclamation. Maldivian governments are intervening where possible to prevent and raise awareness on the international stage about the vulnerability of their territory. Analyzing the current global situation, it appears that the Maldives is moving toward what seems like an inevitable fate. Global warming is causing rapid glacial melt, and it is predicted that the 26 atolls in the northern Indian Ocean will become uninhabitable by 2050, making them among the world's first places to be submerged. Therefore, the correct question now is when, not if, the Maldives will be submerged. More than asking whether the Maldives are truly sinking or not, the Maldivian government is attempting to respond to the rapid changes in the short term through land reclamation. This strategy is crucial for various aspects of governance and, more importantly, for safeguarding their islands.

2.The "Unique" Case of Addu and the Need for Southern Growth

Here i want to present the case of Addu, the second-largest city in the country. This island is

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[25] https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2010/04/06/climate-change-in-the-maldives

unique in its characteristics. Addu City consists of the inhabited islands of Addu Atoll, the southernmost atoll of the archipelago, and has some of the earliest settlements in the Maldives.

The culture and language of this area are different compared to all other parts of the Maldives. Addu City is the second-largest urban area in the Maldives in terms of population and is one of the two urban areas, apart from the capital city, Malé, and Fuvahmulah, to receive the status of a "city."

The Addu area has always been significant throughout history. For instance, it's where the only internal secession attempt in the history of the Maldives took place. The United Suvadive Republic was a short-lived breakaway nation in the remote Southern Atolls of the Maldive Islands. This secession occurred in the context of the struggle of the Maldives emerging as a modern nation. The alleged causes were the centralist policies of the government in Malé and the recent independence of neighboring countries, India and Ceylon. The Suvadives declared independence on 3 January 1959 but later rejoined the rest of the nation on 23 September 1963. Additionally, during World War II, the Royal Navy established a base on the island of Gan in Addu City. It was a British military airbase used as a staging post for RAF aircraft transiting to the Far East. In 1976, the RAF left Gan, and it was handed back to the Maldives government. After a period of abandonment, the island and airfield were developed and became a civilian domestic airport.

Historically, the island of Addu has displayed significant tendencies towards relatively independent territory management. Its position as a "center" in a region considered remote, such as the south of the Maldives, has allowed it to centralize investments and services within its territory. Recently, Maldivian President Ibrahim Solih approved a $150 million investment for

a land reclamation project on the island, initiated in June 2023. The project aims to create approximately 228 hectares of land for residential, commercial, and industrial development[26]. The proposal has generated mixed reactions. While inhabitants have welcomed the initiative, anticipating improved living and working conditions, it has also sparked a significant debate regarding the irreversible environmental damage the project may cause to the lagoon and surrounding reefs. Dutch marine contractor Van Oord is involved in creating 194 hectares of land, including three new island resorts, as part of a government project[27] to stimulate the local economy, address land shortages, and protect the coastline.

Van Oord's suction dredger off the Maldives, where it was involved in a previous land reclamation project. Source: Van Oord in https://www.vanoord.com/en/expertise/land-reclamation/

The Mayor of Addu, Ali Nizar, has defended his government's choice, trying to reconcile hopes for the future with the well-documented lack of space. In an interview with The Guardian, he said, "*This would cause less environmental damage than repeated small projects and give the region an economic future and land for the next generation. Addu doesn't have land for other*

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[26] More specifically, the areas concerned are Hithadhoo, Hulhudhoo/Meedhoo (38 hectares including two island resorts of 5 hectares each), and Maradhoo/Maradhoo-Feydhoo (75 hectares).
[27] https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/bc6264e026ad4fa3afbf6f8b1c794cf1

economic activities and industrial use at the moment. With this project, we will have enough land for the next 50-100 years. Any kind of project would have damage to the environment, but what we have to do is take measures to minimize it[28]."
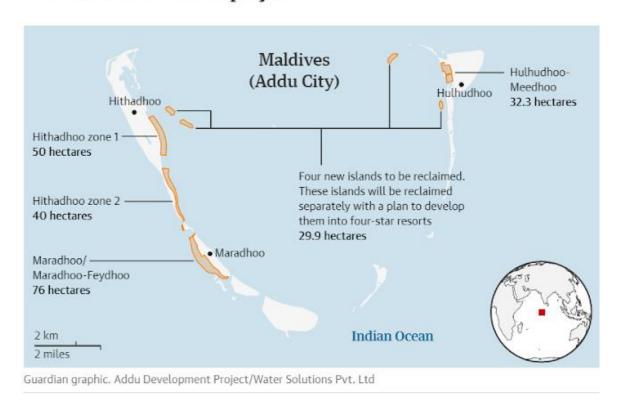
Despite public support for the project, concerns have been raised through an environmental impact assessment. The Addu Atoll was designated a UNESCO reserve in 2020 due to its seagrass beds and mangrove forests, which act as carbon sinks and provide locals with a livelihood through diving tourism and fishing. Due to the magnitude of the project and concerns about its environmental impact, the public debate is heated[29]. The report indicates that the reclamation could bury 21 hectares of corals and 120 hectares of seagrass meadows, raising sediment that could affect nearby ecosystems' ability to recover in the long term, impacting local fishing and marine life, including dolphins. A group of local environmental agencies has demanded that the Maldives government halt the project, and a local civil court case is also seeking to stop the development.

[28] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/may/23/maldives-plan-to-reclaim-land-for-tourism-could-choke-the-ecosystem
[29] https://savemaldives.net/addu-ecocide/

Addu land reclamation project

Guardian graphic. Addu Development Project/Water Solutions Pvt. Ltd

3. Garbage Island: Thilafushi

The economic development of the Greater Malé Region and urban areas in the peripheries has been closely tied to the need to cater to the increasing number of tourists who choose the Maldivian archipelago as their vacation destination. When these factors of unsustainable consumption models are combined with the consequences of a disastrous event like the 2004 tsunami that hit the archipelago (to say the tsunami made a significant impact would be an understatement), it becomes clear that the problem of waste disposal and management is of primary concern.

Before the tsunami, the archipelago's freshwater reserves were dependent on rainwater collection and groundwater. However, the tsunami's destruction of main aquifers in most of the islands led to saltwater intrusion and an increase in pollution levels, spreading single-use plastic

bottles across the archipelago. In the inhabited islands with a local population, a mixed waste management system is in place. It often involves a top-down system that must contend with informal practices. Specific areas on the island are designated for waste accumulation and later incineration, while other "special" waste is transported to the capital or nearby resorts. The situation in Malé operates differently. To deal with the vast amount of waste produced by tourists who visit the beaches and resorts on the atolls year-round, as well as the city's residents following the economic boom, the Maldivian government chose a somewhat controversial solution in 1991: Thilafushi Island. This waste island was created in 1991 by the Maldivian government and serves as the municipal landfill for the capital, Malé. The island was formed by reclaiming land from the Thilafalhu lagoon, where over 300 tons of waste are dumped every day for more than 30 years[30]. This open-air landfill is 3.5 km long and 200 meters wide and continues to grow due to the amount of waste brought to it. It is part of the Kaafu Atoll and is located 7 km from Malé. Various types of waste, including single-use plastics, diapers, clothing, and hazardous materials like batteries, asbestos, medical waste, mercury, and discarded refrigerators, are incinerated on this island, with pits dug into the sand for the purpose. The workers at the landfill are mostly unprotected immigrants who risk their lives by breathing the air contaminated by toxic residues left out in the sun and the fumes from the burnt waste. Over time, other industrial activities, such as cement factories, boat-building factories, and methane gas bottling plants, have also emerged on Thilafushi, producing pollutant emissions. To address this "waste crisis," the Maldivian government is promoting the concept of sustainable tourism, implemented in numerous luxury resorts and villages on the small islands of the Indian Ocean. Many training initiatives have been put in place to raise awareness among the local population and luxury resort staff about daily best practices, which can accompany the new wave of sustainable tourism. Beach and coral reef cleanups and the adoption of sustainable fishing practices are just the first steps, along with recommendations to minimize waste dispersion into the sea and reduce the use of PET bottles. Shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic,

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[30] https://www.businessinsider.com/thilafushi-trash-island-maldives-photos-2013-3?r=US&IR=T#thats-more-than-330-tons-of-garbage-every-day-6

President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih announced his intention to gradually phase out single-use plastic items from commerce, aiming to reach zero plastic by 2023, with no more plastic bags or PET bottles, which are widely used today to transport drinking water on the atolls.

Thilafushi. Source: Social Media.

Although it is now 2023, and single-use plastics continue to be widespread on the islands, one of the most resonating initiatives related to environmental conservation and sustainable tourism is the 2019 Zero Plastic Run. This event, specifically a 5 km run, usually organized in February on the reclaimed island of Hulhumalé, raised funds to be donated to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in the fight against plastic pollution. The organizers have pledged to repeat it over the years until the Maldives achieves the title of a "zero plastic" nation.

Zero plastic Run 2020. Source: Zero Plastic Run Facebook Page.

4. Demographic density. Hulumalé and the Floating City

Hulumalé, the largest land reclamation area in the Maldives and is the best example to explain the hunger of space in the country. The island has been entirely reclaimed from the sea, obtaining 4.3 sq. km of land intended to reduce the demographic pressure on Malé. The project

was launched in 1997 and is still ongoing. As I said in the previous paragraph, the rapid population growth that has affected Malé in recent decades l'ha fatta diventare one of the most densely populated cities on the planet. In order to meet existing and future demands for housing and productive development in the Malé region and as a response to the threat posed by rising sea levels, the government began to seek additional "outer" space via extensive land reclamation interventions (Naylor, 2015). The island of Hulumalé represents an extraordinary case of land reclamation that has enabled a large-scale extension of the city. As a result, Malé has remained the administrative centre of the country, while relying on the neighbouring reclaimed island for its additional space requirements. The first phase of the reclamation of Hulhumalé, leading to the recovery of 188 hectares, began in 1997 and was completed in 2002. Two years later, the island celebrated the arrival of its first 1.000 residents. Reclamation of a further 244 hectares of land was completed in 2015, and by late 2019, over 50.000 people were living on Hulumalé. Hulumalé was reclaimed by pumping in millions of cubic metres of sand, bringing the island to sit about 2 metres above sea level as an initial solution to the imminent rise in sea level. Areen Ahmed, director of business development at the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) that oversees the entire Hulumalé project told BBC Travel that "*After the 2004 tsunami, a programme for enhancing resiliency through safer islands was introduced. Hulumalé is being developed through careful considerations of climate change in its architecture and communities. Buildings are oriented north-south to reduce heat gain and improve thermal comfort. Streets are designed to optimise wind penetration, reducing reliance on air conditioning. And schools, mosques and neighbourhood parks are within 100-200m walking distance of residential developments, reducing car use.*"

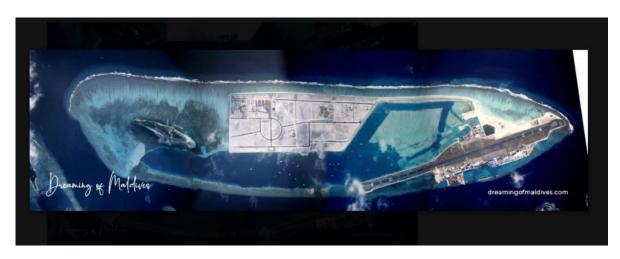*The artificial island of Hulumalé, built using millions of cubic metres of sand pumped from the seabed (Credit: Hassan Mohamed).*

After land reclamation, it starts the building. Here a small gallery pick up from website Dreaming of Maldives that represent "Building artificial islands to alleviate the demographic density of Malé: Creating Hulumalé":

1997

2002

2004

2012

125

2018

2020

2021
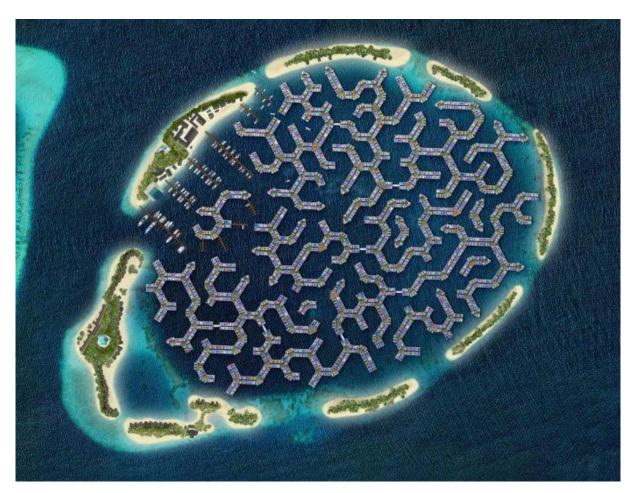
The Maldives Floating City (MFC) project is a notable initiative developed in parallel with urban development in the city of Hulumalé. The project aims to address the issues related to overpopulation and the high cost of housing in the Maldives by creating a floating city. This concept has gained attention as a new alternative that will facilitate the relocation of around 20.000 people to a vast floating area, covering 200 hectares, which will accommodate 5.000 housing units. This city will be located just a 10-minute boat ride away from the capital, Malé. The entire project of the floating city has been designed with a strong emphasis on sustainability because it impacts such a fragile and valuable ecosystem, particularly the coral reefs. The Maldives Floating City is expected to be completed by 2027, and construction work is already in an advanced stage, with the first residents expected to arrive in the next two years. The housing units, as seen in the accompanying photo, are designed in the shape of hexagonal islands inspired by the structure of corals. They will house all the amenities of a modern city, including residences, schools, shops, restaurants, and government buildings. The islands in the

project are connected by an intricate system of bridges and docks. The floating units, constructed in local shipyards, are towed and transported to their designated locations, where they are anchored to a large concrete hull securely positioned on the seabed. To prevent damage to the typical coral formations of the atoll, artificial sandbanks have been created where coral formations can develop, forming the foundation of the city.

Maldives Floating City. Source: Travel Trade Maldives

The Maldives Floating City is envisioned as a living organism that inevitably generates waste. To minimize the impact on the marine environment and its inhabitants, strict distances have been maintained between the interconnected islands, allowing light to filter through the water

and reach the seabed. The city's energy will be clean and derived from renewable sources, made available to all through a "smart grid," which constantly monitors and distributes electrical energy. Waste disposal will also be managed sustainably. Within the city, mobility will exclude automobiles, and people will move around on foot, bicycles, and electric motorcycles. It's important to note that this project is still in its very early stages, and the intentions of the Dutch construction company and the Maldivian government are summarized in this paragraph. The development will continue to be monitored closely.

5. Consolidating the territory after tsunami. Meedhoo

The case of the island of Meedhoo effectively demonstrates how land reclamation projects are initiated to claim space from the sea, justifying them as necessary for housing, while also presenting a more defensive perspective on the national political stage. Land reclamation projects are part of the relationship between the central authority (Malé) and the peripheral islands. These projects require a formal request to the government and adherence to all relevant regulations to be implemented. The case that follows is representative of what has occurred in various Maldivian islands, but it stands out regarding safeguarding against the risks of future tsunamis.

In the island of Meedhoo, located in the Dhaalu Atoll, the limited land surface was identified as the main vulnerability following the damage caused by the 2004 tsunami. The tsunami hit the Maldives from a "sideways" angle, affecting the islands more than their inhabitants or structures. In particular, the Dhaal Atoll was one of the most impacted areas in terms of erosion and destruction of housing. Consequently, there was a need for artificial expansion of the land area, which was considered a political necessity and a large-scale defensive land reclamation project was proposed as an adaptive climate change strategy. As mentioned earlier, the small size of the inhabited area was the primary factor contributing to its vulnerability to rising sea levels and significant events like tsunamis. However, there were additional reasons for the development, including reducing the risk of overpopulation by creating spaces for future settlements and providing secure shelter for the local fishing fleet, one of the largest in the

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region. The harbor, protected by reclaimed land areas, serves as both a shipyard and storage area. As is possible to see from the photos and information gathered from interviews, local policymakers leveraged the events of 2004 to create as much space as possible between the city center, now situated in the "new" center of Meedhoo, and the sea, not only in Meedhoo but in other islands as well.

Aerial View of Meedhoo. Source: Dutch Water Sector.
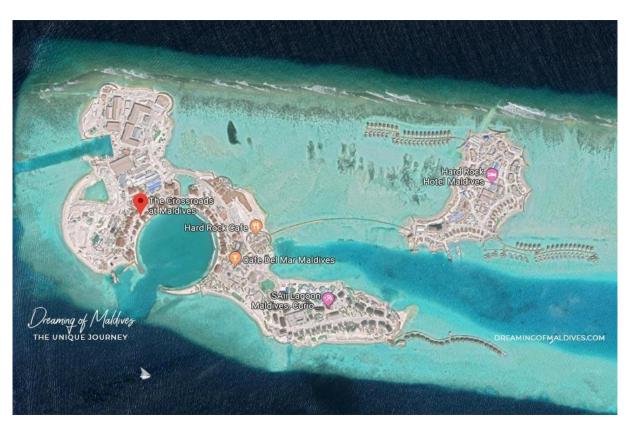
6. Tourism opportunity: CrossRoads

This is how CrossRoads presents itself, as the first artificial complex in the Maldives:

"NOT A RESORT...A WORLD-CLASS DESTINATION. Just 15 minutes from Velana International Airport and Malé, CROSSROADS Maldives invites you to go beyond the typical "one-island, one-resort" experience and enter a fully integrated lifestyle destination. With three resorts, a 30-berth quay, the legendary Hard Rock Cafe, diverse retail and dining, thrilling excursions and blissful spa offerings, this is where memories are made".

Located in the Emboodhoo Lagoon, a 7-kilometer-long artificial lagoon composed of nine reclaimed islands, it has not been without its critics from an environmental standpoint. Phase 1 and 2 of CrossRoads cost $696 million. CrossRoads is an extremely relevant case because it represents a new (literally) space designed to meet new needs. The CrossRoads complex was

built to create a luxury multipurpose space. Tourists can stay at a resort even for one-day experiences (although not at a popular price) due to its proximity to Malé. It is primarily used as a space for events, meetings, and conventions. Several political meetings have taken place at this resort, as well as gala events that require ample space but also need to be close to Malé. Historically, the first resorts were built in the vicinity of the island of Malé for logistical reasons, so they are less new and well-established structures. The new structures, however, are looking to tap into new markets to the north and south of the country, in step with the development and improvement of transportation. CrossRoads aims to meet new luxury needs by focusing on specific luxury spaces that are constructed differently on other islands while still remaining close to Malé. This allows for hosting international guests, even for events lasting only a few days.

CrossRoads complex. Source: Dreaming of Maldives.

7. Resorts: Pictures of "Paradise" used to create a Myth as a fuel for develop the Maldives and local islands

In the glossy brochures, the Maldives are primarily famous for their magnificent beaches, considered to be among the most beautiful on the planet. The image held in the minds of the millions of visitors who reach these shores each year is shaped by endless stretches of pure white sand, a crystal-clear sea, clusters of luxuriant coconut palms and luxury amenities. Tour operators compete with each other to offer tourists a Robinson Crusoe-type experience; in fact, the Maldives are one of the most popular honeymoon destinations. Indeed, tourism has become the primary economic activity in the Maldives, accounting for approximately 20% of its GDP, and the number of tourist arrivals in the Maldives is continuously increasing. In 2022, there were nearly 1.675.299 tourists (MOT). The Maldives now embody the Western model of luxury tourism.

In contemporary popular culture, the concept of an island as a tropical paradise is closely linked to the idea of returning to primordial natura, an "elsewhere" removed from civilization and the monotony of day-to-day life. The Maldives, seen as remote, pristine, and sparsely inhabited, are considered the opposite of contemporary urban congestion. As Elena dell'Agnese points out, the Maldives are regarded as a "stereotype of natural beauty," a place where expectations and characteristics are pigeonholed, even in visual terms. The myth of the paradise island represents a rich literary trope, influenced by the colonial experience, where certain spaces on the islands reflect typical legacies of that period. This myth serves as the prevailing framework for interpreting the Maldivian landscape. Those responsible for managing these idyllic destinations go to great lengths to shape and mold the islands with urban planning schemes designed to evoke happiness and recreate the same imagery. Maldivian icons such as pristine beaches, crystal-clear seas, and coconut palm trees must adhere to exceptionally high standards to convey the unique sense of "no shoes, no news" relaxation. This quest for perfection, however, often comes at the cost of morphological alterations to the environment. Additionally, a brief visit to some of the islands inhabited by the local population is enough to realize that maintaining the pristine sands of a beach resort requires an astonishing amount of

effort. This maintenance involves not only the removal of large quantities of rubbish that accumulate on the beaches every day but also extensive land reclamation efforts (Schmidt di Friedberg et al., 2021). High standards are equally essential in the beachside areas of a resort, where various elements like "water villas" and snorkeling areas must be meticulously maintained and inspected. The same level of care and maintenance applies to the island's vegetation, which is often groomed and treated to create a visually striking impact. Additionally, the countless devices deployed around the resort to keep mosquitoes and other nuisances at bay may not be immediately evident (Domroes, 2001). Resorts are meticulously designed to create magical environments, with architects and designers paying attention to every detail, from the type of timber used to the color of air conditioning units. This meticulous attention to detail aims to develop an architecture of pleasure (King 1997). The development of the Maldives is intrinsically linked to the development of not only tourism but also the cultivation and curation of this image (Schmidt di Friedberg, Malatesta, Pecorelli, 2016). This image has been nurtured throughout the five acts that have regulated tourism in the country from 1982 to 2023, known as the Tourism Masterplan. In his *publication Ladies and Gentlemen ... The Maldives Islands!* (1953), Mohamed Amin Didi, the president of the first Maldivian republic, presented the Maldives as "Silhouetted against an expansive horizon, green palm trees toss their heads against the skies [...] it is a country, which is more sea than land. It is the enchanted Isles of the Maldives!" This vision can be related to Godfrey Baldacchino's perspective, where he stated, "Islanders... may be justifiably confused, even resentful, by how their homes are seen and objectified as 'paradises' by mainlanders; by how their homes, as well as themselves, continue to be ritually aestheticized, sanitized, and anaesthetized" (2012).While much of the Maldives' tourism industry is centered around the sun, sea, and the image of an idyllic desert island, it's important to note that luxury amenities play a crucial role in making the experience truly captivating. The efforts invested in maintaining the image of these pristine resort islands might give rise to the perception of non-places, but these meticulous endeavors are largely absent outside of the resort islands. Depending on the category of visitors a resort aims to attract, there are tailored experiences catering to different forms of ego tourism. In this

concept, the opulence lies not in sipping champagne but in doing so in a place where even potable water might be scarce. Enclave tourism of this type creates the illusion of being in a cultural context that is entirely distinct from the tourist's place of origin, and it offers a different temporal reality, a departure from the routines of everyday life. This is what Fabian described as "allochronism." The simplicity of everyday life in the Maldives evokes a sense of a bygone era, yet this is coupled with the trappings of luxury that form an "environmental bubble" (Cohen, 1972). In essence, the Maldives epitomize the popular idea of Paradise: a collection of romantic islands surrounded by stunning beaches, turquoise waters, and coconut trees, all set against the backdrop of the well-known advertising slogan that characterizes the Maldives as the land of the "sunny side of life."

The advent of tourism: brief history of tourism in Maldives
The tourist space in the Maldives, regulated by specific political acts, is an interesting lens through which to interpret the current dynamics in the country. This is because the hospitality structures of the resorts accumulate significant wealth, primarily managed by the Maldivian elite or foreign investors. Nowadays, Maldivian resorts are either owned by or have influences from members of the Maldivian government, where power is concentrated. These resorts are used for a variety of purposes, including hosting national and international events, tournaments, accommodating prominent personalities, investments, import-export activities, serving as power hubs, and hosting events that cannot be held in the local islands. This has led to the emergence of an oligarchy of tourism, where elite members use these structures for both consolidating and displaying their power.

An interesting case is that of Ahmed Sun Siyan, a former member of the Maldivian Parliament, who, through President Yameen, received $130 million from the Bank of China for the construction of his resorts. The peculiarity was the ability to contract state funds as a safety net in case of investment loss, which caused a political earthquake and raised concerns about a

potential Chinese debt trap[31]. Tourism in the Maldives is not only the leading economic sector but also a powerful political force. It has distinct characteristics and a specific birthdate. In the early 1970s, the Maldivian islands were not easily accessible and required multiple layovers in a journey that was not served by commercial airlines. However, in October 1971, George Corbin, an Italo-Englishman, arrived on a Maldivian island via a cargo ship, bringing back the imagery of an archipelago lost in the vast Indian Ocean, inhabited by fishermen and their families, with small wooden boats called dhonis. There was no electricity, hotels, banks, telephones, police, or even roads. Within a few years, Corbin, through the imagery constructed in a volume published with Italian photographer Franco Bernini titled *Maldive. 2000 isole felici* (Maldives: 2000 Happy Islands), created a new type of destination: a virgin, new, paradisiacal, remote, and peaceful one. In the early days of this "new world," tourists primarily flocked to structures around Malé, like the one financed by Corbin (Kurumba in Vihamanaafushi). These were "only" 30 wooden huts with palm leaf roofs, sand floors, and a cuisine predominantly based on fish. Yet, the dream of a Robinson Crusoe-like vacation was possible and destined for success. By 1981, when Malé's airport became international, the Maldives boasted 25 resorts, and visitor numbers surged from 1.097 in 1972 to nearly 75.000 in 1982. In the 1990s, there was a true tourism boom, with the advent of all-inclusive tourism. There was a slight dip in 1998 due to El Niño, which raised sea temperatures, causing coral bleaching and affecting some reef systems.

The birth of the "one island, one resort" tourism model
In these early years, tourism development in the Maldives was not yet regulated. Tourists could visit local islands, stay in fishermen's houses, and there was even an island for naturists (Shakeela & Weaver, 2017). However, President Gayoom's government (in power since 1978) had to define the boundaries of this sector from legal, economic, and social perspectives, effectively ending this laissez-faire period. First, measures were needed to counter the risks of

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[31] https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/China-debt-trap-fear-haunts-Maldives-government

land and population exploitation. In 1978, the precursor to the Ministry of Tourism was established. In 1979, the first Maldivian tourism law was introduced to initiate a strategy for quality tourism. It included measures such as taxing beds instead of structures, increasing government revenue, and imposing restrictions on the number of beds at higher prices. Additionally, laws were introduced to protect the land, such as limiting resort buildings' height to that of palm trees and mandating resort administrations to independently manage waste, water, and energy resources. The criteria for leasing islands and concessions through bidding processes were ratified in 1995. During President Gayoom's tenure, a principle known as "one island, one resort" was established, which is still in effect today and shapes tourism and the economy, albeit differently from that time. According to this political act, only one hospitality structure, the resort, can be built on Maldivian islands, and its extension covers the entire island. The "one island, one resort" principle, therefore, establishes the necessary rules for granting authorization to establish mixed-capital companies, Maldivian and foreign, and it creates isolated realities from the local population, who can only access them for work, and for guests who cannot leave. One of these rules is the prohibition of constructing tourist facilities where the Maldivian population permanently resides. This restriction has been subject to increasing exceptions, and it was ultimately bypassed in 2011 by the Third Tourism Masterplan, which timidly opened up the possibility of some islands participating in the national tourism market. In the vast majority of cases, a clear separation is maintained between areas belonging to Maldivian citizens, subject to Sharia law, and bubbles where exceptions are permitted. Through a system of nested spaces, small areas where Islamic norms are not enforced within a Muslim country are inserted into the tourism reality, allowing activities like the sale of alcohol, consumption of pork, and attire for beach activities that would otherwise not comply with Islamic laws.

Until a few years ago, this separation was quite distinct, creating isolated and secluded situations where two worlds did not interact. Tourist islands, despite being functionally connected to the capital, represented economically isolated enclaves separate from the rest of the country, without a resident population (thus adhering to a principle of extraterritoriality).

This isolation extends beyond the administrative structure of the atolls and the nomenclature, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, where activities typically prohibited in other parts of the Maldives, such as drinking alcohol, eating pork or lobsters, or wearing bathing costumes, are permitted. The resort islands of the Maldives can be categorized as "heterotopias" as defined by Foucault, creating "enclave spaces" (dell'Agnese, 2018) that are different from the surrounding territory from administrative, cultural, and economic perspectives and where access is not free. This rule, which has been heavily criticized for its limitations, effectively segregates tourists and locals, creating spatial segregation. It ultimately offers enclosed and sanitized spaces that protect tourists from the harsh surrounding reality in a kind of luxury quarantine while crafting an exotically constructed landscape. However, there are significant limitations to various aspects of this model. The Maldivian population was excluded from the resorts to preserve the integrity of its culture, and all labor was imported from nearby foreign countries, leading to issues of overpopulation on certain islands. Over the decades, there has been a growing desire among tourists to escape the environmental bubble artificially created by physical segregation. Furthermore, as Freitag mentioned, "the enclave resorts [were] not intended to promote an economic impact among the local communities," causing increasing discontent in the local population in recent years due to the profits of the resorts being shared among a small number of businessmen, exacerbating social inequalities (dell'Agnese, 2018a).

The interpretation of Malatesta et al. (2014) views tourist islands as strategically integral and attached peripheries, meaning they are socio-spatial classes where the center, represented in this case by areas from which tourist flows originate and most of the capital required to support this tourism model is exported, exports some of its functions because they are less profitable and strategic and/or require particular environmental conditions (2014, p.12). Thus, the resort islands are small islands that can be far from the center (Malé) but have extensive interactions with it, involving flows coming and going in that direction, making the resort island an "integrated but associated periphery" (Reynaud, 1984). If the relationships between socio-spatial classes are manifested in flows, these flows can include:

- People: with a massive emigration to Malé.

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- Financial: involving the issuance of money to the islands in the form of investments that later return as capital gains.

- Goods: moving towards the small islands and competing with local production.

- Services: provided top-down, such as transportation, hospitals, and schools.

- Information: flowing from the center to the periphery in the form of political directives, culture, ways of life, consumption models, values, ideologies. This applies to islands inhabited by the local population as well.

With the advent of guesthouses and the opening of local islands, there is an attempt to change the perception of this relationship that has been considered improperly "isolated" between peripheries and the center. The central government is working to reduce the asymmetric condition that Reynaud calls "exploited and assisted peripheries," where concrete inequalities exist between the center and the periphery. In the scalar model that will be analyzed, islands-atolls-provinces-capital, some islands are the center of some and the periphery of others. The government is striving to make the peripheries more attractive by investing in structures, housing, employment, sports, land reclamation, and healthier lifestyles.

The development of independent tourism and its consequences

One of the main issues associated with this economic model is the common practice of having the capital for construction, and therefore the profits, come in and go out of the country, leaving only a very small portion of the earnings for the Maldivian population. Often, locals have only the role of serving as a figurehead in the establishment of a Joint Venture to bypass various regulations that require a Maldivian to be involved in the formation of a company. These local figureheads either own or directly compose an economy in which only a few members of the Malé elite who have privately invested in this sector can benefit. The question of whether tourism is a resource or exploitation for the local population remains an extremely interesting field of study in these parts. In 1983, following the First Tourism Masterplan (1983-1992), in

order to find a solution to the socio-cultural problems brought about by the presence of tourists, the permission for international tourists to stay in guesthouses was revoked, effectively segregating them. The objectives were multiple: to protect the resort market, ensure the quality of the tourism offer, and preserve the cultural specificity of the region (dell'Agnese, 2018, p.33). The various limitations of this model have created economic segregation due to the primarily foreign investment that fuels tourism income. As highlighted in the Maldives Human Development Report, an estimated 80% of the revenues do not stay within the country but are transferred to other nations (Sobir et al, 2014). In 2007, with the Third Tourism Master Plan: 2007-2011 (MTCA, 2007), the government addressed these issues. The aim was to expand the tourism industry across the entire country, and as a result, the ban on opening guesthouses on islands other than Malé was lifted, thereby reopening opportunities for community-based tourism or what Zubair & Bowen referred to as a "new wave of tourism development" (2021). Until the Third Tourism Master Plan of 2007-2011, a foreigner who wanted to stay outside of a resort or the capital had to obtain written permission from the government. The local indigenous population only encountered the outside world when groups of tourists arrived to purchase souvenirs, provided that their own resort store lacked such items. With the increasing number of independently managed guesthouses in villages and towns across the archipelago, tourists can now stay almost anywhere. Images and imaginations intermingle in the encounter between locals and visitors, constituting an increasingly prevalent and widespread reality.

According to the Ministry of Tourism (MOT), guesthouses now make up 65% of the accommodation establishments in the Maldives (2019). The management of guesthouses in the Maldives is dynamic and incentivized by the government, leading to an unprecedented number of openings in recent years. In 2016 alone, more than 10% of tourists opted to stay in a guesthouse instead of a resort, confirming their growing popularity (MOT, 2017b). Guesthouses are typically small hotels or hostels owned by locals on fishermen's islands, allowing tourists to interact with residents and experience their lifestyle and customs.These accommodations, which have a very different impact on the resort population, are largely locally owned and cater to a mid-range to low-end market. This is a significant change because

guesthouses cannot offer tourists the exemption from the religious Sharia rules allowed by resorts in separate spaces. Tourists' behaviors during their vacations, where they clash with the sacred laws of Islam, may accentuate cultural differences rather than bridging them (dell'Agnese, 2018a, p. 162). The islands inhabited by locals still adhere to the dictates of the Muslim diet, especially during the month of Ramadan. Alcoholic beverages are prohibited, and a certain level of modest dress is required. The island becomes a contested space between those who want to promote tourism, those who hope to preserve its purity, and those seeking the "real Maldives" without giving up swimming in swimsuits. To address this, the system of Bikini beaches is being established on the islands inhabited by Maldivians, creating a new form of segregation (dell'Agnese, 2018). The intended use of the Maldivian islands is a crucial starting point for this study, as it profoundly shapes the very forms of the islands. Resort islands, from the moment they are built, have a well-regulated urban planning and spatial organization, characterized by "a semi-limiting regimentation of time and leisure spaces, with a micro-geography of movement and activities of individuals" (Minca, 2010).

In contrast, local islands have more flexible boundaries, and the local population adapts to changes based on their needs and the decisions of the Island Council, depending on whether the island serves as a guesthouse location or provides services (such as being the commercial hub of the atoll, hosting an airport, hospital, agricultural hub, etc.). Following President Ameen's urban planning overhaul, local islands have a standardized form. Older houses are primarily constructed with grayish-colored corals that are then painted in vibrant colors. Urban planning extends from the center of the island toward the beaches, which are becoming the "gardens" of some homes as they continue to develop. The roads are unpaved, often narrow, and frequently without cars; instead, motorcycles and bicycles are commonly used. It is not uncommon for Maldivians, historically men, living on local islands to work on other islands or at sea, fishing and returning home after their shifts. Moreover, if local islands exceed a certain number of residents, they are entitled to a medical facility (Health Center), a mosque, a preschool, and an elementary school. As will be explored in the 6th chapter, the spatialization, interaction on islands hosting guesthouses or tourism on local islands (and the lack of interaction on resort

islands) have led to the development of certain forms of sports facilities and interactions relevant to this study.

A Resort Island. Source: Sheraton Full Moon Maldives & Spa Social Media.

Local life, Magoodhoo. Sources: Workshop of Sustainable Tourism, 2022.

Aerial View of Magoodhoo, Faaf Atoll. Source: Siraj'Ammadaj Nasir Photo

3.2.3 New Layouts, New Spaces

For this thesis, I believe that the political changes that have had the greatest impact on the spaces of the islands can be summarized into three main factors: firstly, the dynamic focus on the capital city, Malé, and its role as the supercenter, especially in contemporary times; secondly, the decentralization of power in 2010; and lastly, the decree implemented by Mohamed Ameen between the 1940s and 1950s, which could be described as a "game-changer," as it was a political act that literally and physically altered the political landscape and the associated rules in the peripheral islands. While the first two points of this socio-spatial evolution have been

briefly mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, it is now necessary to provide a more detailed description of Ameen's decree and its effects on the territory.

In this context, the work of Malatesta, Schmidt di Friedberg, Squarcina, Cajiao, and Di Pietro (2014) is particularly relevant and useful. They seek to employ a political geography approach to interpret the changes in the Maldives over the past decades. This study, through a socio-spatial analysis, demonstrates how despite transformative exogenous pressures significantly altering certain aspects of island governance (such as the internationalization of the tourism market, dependence on crude oil, and the fragility of the ecosystem), the Central State remains the main driver for the socio-spatial organization of both peripheral and non-peripheral islands. Within the work of Malatesta, Schmidt di Friedberg, Squarcina, Cajiao, and Di Pietro, they also reference the famous studies of Xavier Romero Frias (1999) and Clarence Maloney (2012), two classic works in cultural literature for those interested in the Maldives (which, among other things, contain reflections on the complex pre-Islamic history and a concerned view of contemporary politics and are therefore banned from the archipelago). Romero Frias and Maloney identify the most influential political act that transformed the island landscape as the "restructuring of the layouts of inhabited centers" by the government of Mohamed Ameen in the 1940s and 1950s. Through this maneuver, the traditional built environment, historically composed of small clusters concentrated in the center of the islands with very little space between houses and a very limited number of accesses to the coast, was revolutionized. The transformation imposed by the Ameen government de facto introduced an orthogonal layout in inhabited centers and the construction of spaces suitable for gatherings and public parades. Simultaneously, roads were introduced or widened, and the islands were adorned with symbols of central power, such as schools, municipal buildings, and squares. In agreement with Malatesta, Schmidt di Friedberg, Squarcina, Cajiao, and Di Pietro, this model of spatial homogenization of the islands was an extremely successful government maneuver that is still visible today. It serves as an exemplification of how the construction of a "political landscape" is a direct consequence of the control exercised by the government in Malé over the peripheral islands and represents a continuation of this control. The newly created open spaces by the

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central government, such as avenues, roads, and squares adorned with material symbols of political power (such as government buildings and party symbols, etc.), in line with the Jacksonian (1984) and Lacostian (1990) readings proposed by the authors, have practical consequences on the resident population. Over time, these inhabitants change their habits of political aggregation and the expression of dissent or celebration of central government. These new spaces become the venues where politics is expressed and "made." Compatibly with the geography of the islands, this tendency can be observed in all peripheral islands.

Looking ahead to what will be part of Chapters 3 and 4, a research question that I have posed is whether sports facilities were present within this urban restructuring, considering their extent. Continuing the study by Malatesta et al and adapting it to the topic of sports sociology, it is clear that sports spaces play a political role as a unifying and homogenizing force. Therefore, during my fieldwork, I often wondered whether the large soccer fields that I encountered in the limited space of the Maldivian islands were places where the emphasis on sports was a deliberate policy by the central government or whether it simply followed the globalizing trend of a sport. On one hand, as reported in this chapter, the key state-level transitions were Ameen's homogenization-oriented urban restructuring in the 1940s, the 2010 decentralization law, and the role of Malé as the supercenter. Locally, a research question that has guided this thesis is how sports in the islands were affected by these two legislative decrees and dependence on the capital, in what manner, when, and through what modalities. This theme will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.

3.3 *Power in the Country*

3.3.1 *Brief Political History of the Maldivian Archipelago*

In this section, I will provide a historiographical overview to better understand the characteristics of the political and social mechanisms in contemporary Maldives. To do this, I started gathering and analyzing primary and secondary sources from key historical periods: pre-Islamic, Muslim rule, the age of European exploration, and contemporary history.

The Problem of Sources

Discussing the history of the Maldives is not straightforward because there are not many sources available about these islands. One reason is the small size of the archipelago and the limited land area. The physical characteristics of the territory made the Maldives primarily known as a central transit point, making them less interesting for historical chronicles and accounts of the time. Another reason for the scarcity of sources is the type of resources available in this region. Agricultural and mineral resources that were highly sought after in the medieval world were not present in the Maldivian territory. This led explorers and chroniclers of the time to limit their explorations of the archipelago. Furthermore, the hot and humid climate is extremely unfavorable for the preservation of artifacts. The same issue also affects archaeological sites, which degrade quickly, making it particularly challenging to reconstruct history based on findings, especially for ancient periods. Regarding Material Sources, the history of the Maldives is intimately tied to the history of Islam, which was introduced to the islands in the mid-12th century, and this is why the official historiography begins with the date of the archipelago's conversion in 1153. In 1922, an expedition led by H.C.P. Bell, the Superintendent of Ceylon at the time, unearthed various artifacts, mainly in the southern atolls, which testify to a flourishing pre-Islamic Buddhist past preceding the 12th century. The memory of this era is now very vague, as argued by Maloney, one of the most important contemporary scholars of the Maldives: "there is no longer a 'dhivehi' identity untarnished by Islam" (1976). The primary sources for the ancient history of Islamic Maldives are mainly literary and epigraphic. Among the literary sources, the two most important are Tarick and Raadavali. Tarick is a document written in Arabic, preserved in the Malé Museum, which narrates the history of Maldivian rulers from their conversion to Islam in 1153 until 1822, spanning a period of seven centuries. According to these chronicles (Disanayake & Wijayawardhana, 1986, p.62), the first king to embrace Islam was Sultan Muhammad-Ul-Adil of the Theemuge dynasty. The primary epigraphic sources include two documents called Fat-kolu and Loamafaanu. The former is a collection of royal decrees dating back to the 16th century, written on paper or engraved on wood, which Bell extensively discusses in his monographs. The second source, Loamafaanu or

Moamafaanu, is the most important and famous written artifact pertaining to the ancient history of the Maldives, dating from the last decade of the 12th century. It consists of copper plates on which royal decrees are engraved, which deal with the state of mosques, daily life, and government activities under a specific sultan (Knoll, 2018, p.18). Due to the lack of additional sources for ancient history, we are forced to formulate hypotheses based on clues contained in oral sources, transcribed sources, or others recorded in contemporary times. Faced with the limitations that materials of this type inevitably carry, a significant deficiency of documents with solid scientific rigor, and the complete absence of secondary scientific literature, the key points that scholars generally rely on for Maldivian history include a wide range of sources. These sources differ significantly from the typical documents used due to their substantial fragmentary nature. Researchers commonly use not only the accounts of colonial officials but also biographies, private collections, folklore collections, travel guides, and compilations of fragments of handwritten works from various authors.

Over time, various scholars have collected different types of material regarding the origins of the Maldivian people. Some presume that the first settlements were built by people originally from Ceylon, emphasizing Sinhalese descent, while others assert that the archipelago was inhabited by populations falling under the Dravidian linguistic group, emphasizing the Tamil influence. Maloney reports legends about the Giraavaru, one of the native peoples of the Maldives, who probably came from Kerala before the Buddhist era. Naseema Mohamed, on the other hand, recounts oral stories written in Arabic that suggest a much older settlement of the archipelago, dating back to the Indus Valley Civilization (2005). Additionally, several fragments of Chinese terracotta dating between the 6th and 9th centuries AD have been found.

In general, authoritative sources such as Maloney, Bell, and Forbes (1987) agree that these areas have been continuously inhabited for 2500 years and that the ancestors of modern Maldivians came from Sri Lanka and Kerala. They began to form an archipelagic population with common characteristics different from those of the neighboring lands around the 4th century AD. However, the sense of contemporary identity solidified during the eight centuries of Islamization, during which the social structure was profoundly transformed. The theoretical

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issues of the pre-Islamic period are highly interconnected with current Islam and the political, moral, and economic systems.

The scant information that has come down to us regarding the ancient pre-Islamic period generally describes a stratified matriarchal society with myths and a magical religious system. It was organized in a way that Maloney and Mohamed believe has affinities with a caste system. There was a supreme authority on the territory, a king, and a legal system that, as Maniku reports, embodied the traditions of the time (1993). After some Tamil populations from Kerala settled, different waves of Sinhalese groups populated these islands, bringing their language and, most importantly, their religion, Buddhism. Hinduism present in the early Giraavaru settlements, which do not seem to have survived colonization, was entirely replaced in all the Maldives.

The Process of Islamization

The presence of Arab traders or shipwrecked sailors played a decisive role in the conversion of the last Buddhist king. The spread of Islam seemed to provide a modern and suitable religion, offering answers deemed appropriate in a timely and proper manner. In fact, the diffusion of the word of Muhammad led to the resolution of questions that were present earlier, in a historically favorable moment for Islam in these latitudes, thanks to the fact that it was a religion one could choose rather than being born into. Moreover, it is an individualistic faith in which the believer is accountable only to Allah, placing the self and free will at the center. The Tarikh Dhivehi, the Maldivian state chronicle, records the year 1153 AD as the date of conversion to Islam and the subsequent transformation of the form of government from the Kingdom of the Maldives to an independent Islamic Sultanate.

The historical events that led to the conversion to Islam have significantly entered the local imagination and folklore. The myths and legends related to these events are numerous. It is undoubtedly the single most significant event with far-reaching consequences in Maldivian history from a socio-political and cultural perspective. One of the most famous Maldivian foundation myths tells of a sea monster in some versions, a demon (a Jinni) in others, called

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Rannamaari. The monster roamed the archipelago, demanding the sacrifice of a virgin each month. This cycle continued for decades until the legend recounts that an Islamic scholar (in some versions, the man who converted the islands to Islam) managed to defeat Rannamaari by disguising himself as a virgin and reciting the Quran, with the help of Allah.

The Maldives was ruled by a series of sultans from various dynasties, with a total of 93 sultans, until 1968. The sultanate era began with the conversion of the Buddhist Kingdom to Islam in 1153, marked by the abdication of the Buddhist king Koimala in favor of the Theemuge dynasty. This sultanate continued for centuries, lasting until 1968 when the Maldives transitioned into a presidential republic. The Maldives has a long history of practicing and adhering to Sharia law, maintaining a moderate degree of religious homogeneity in the society. The daily rhythm of life is defined by the five daily prayers, which are observed by all citizens. Mosques are found on every inhabited island, and they often have separate areas for men and women. However, it's relatively rare to see women praying outside of their homes. Although the practice of Islam in the Maldives aligns with the global trend of Arabized models in other Muslim countries, it retains unique features influenced by the local cultural context. Additionally, Islam in the Maldives serves as a tool for interaction with the country's contemporary realities, filtered through interpretations that accommodate the political and economic aspects, with tourism playing a particularly significant role.

A new Constitution.

The sultans of the Maldives have always exercised their power in an autocratic form until 1932, when a rebellion in the palace was quelled only with the stipulation of an act that limited the powers of the sovereigns. In this act the first Maldivian Constitution was promulgated, in which the office of sultan, until then of a hereditary nature, became elective, and a first group of ministers was envisaged. Starting from 1932, the Maldives began the road towards a government totally free of external interference, at least formally, given that the office of minister was always the subject of controversy and more or less veiled corruption, often leaving the country's government in chaos, under the non-participatory observation of the British. In

1934 the sultan was dethroned for trying to abrogate the Constitution and his successor, Hassan Nur-ud-din, promulgated a new, more detailed Constitution. In 1941 a Royal Air Force base was established on Addu Atoll (on the island of Gan) and maintained for many years. The sultan's popularity gradually collapsed, and he was forced to abdicate in 1943. During the Second World War, with the same goal of independence achieved in both India and Sri Lanka, the Maldives gained a leading strategic position, offering the declining English colonial empire an important bridgehead in the Indian Ocean. The tenuous but enduring connection between the two states ended in 1965, when the Maldives gained independence from the Europeans in favor of joining the United Nations. Great Britain recognized the full sovereignty of the islands and ceased to be responsible for their defense, although it continued to pay the rent of the Gan base until 1976. The Maldivians do not ideologically consider this period of formal British domination as a negation of their sovereignty, considering it very different from the much more intrusive Portuguese one.

Towards the end of the sultanate

We have seen how the history of the Maldives makes use of discontinuous sources. In the modern era, it should also be added that the republican history of the Maldives is very complex to grasp in every nuance, given that it has often undergone considerable censorship during the tortuous period of transition from the sultanate, a process that has largely not occurred today. concluded. Maloney does not hesitate to argue that the Maldives are a Republic in name only (Maloney, 1976, p.656), due to the continuous power games, the ease with which the Constitution was abrogated in the past, in addition to the very high rate of corruption and the repeated electoral fraud that followed one another in the various years of presidencies, often lasting only a few months. When Hassan Nur-ud-din's rule came to an end, Abdul Majeed was elected sultan. He was much loved until his death in 1952 in Colombo, and still today for many he is considered the "true father of the nation". The process of "modernization" and connection with international development began actively in 1950, and led Majeed's prime minister, Mohamed Amin Didi, upon the sultan's death to promote a motion aimed at abolishing the

institution of the sultanate. Elections were called, in which Didi won with 98% of the vote. However, the first Maldivian Republic only lasted a few months. Some unpopular reforms and the very harsh post-war period in which maritime traffic was drastically reduced, causing a very serious shortage of basic necessities, were responsible for Didi's dismissal, and the republic fell with him. Despite the historical period, Didi is still much loved today, and it is not uncommon to find several of his photographs hanging on the walls of many towns. He promoted women's education and the urban reorganization of the islands, the construction of many police stations, government monopoly centers in the Malé district and also wrote the book in Dhivehi with some stories mentioned previously. Didi's figure was, however, overshadowed by some murky events. After trying to impose a ban on cigarettes, he was accused of having carried out some deals with figures linked to the underworld and of having given many public speeches steeped in intolerance. Due to these discrediting episodes, he was stoned to death in the port of Malé.

The question of Gan and Independence.

The holder of the throne Mohamed Farhid Didi only had a regency role from 1953 to 1968 when his prime minister since 1957, Ibrahim Nasir, significantly increased his power and was recognized by the people with the title of "architect of the modern Maldives". The decade 1958-1968 was a period in which various tensions were present within the Maldivian political landscape. The most significant issue concerned the terms of concession for the Royal Air Force (RAF) air base on the island of Gan in the Addu Atoll, which created many disagreements between the Maldivian government and the British. Between 1958 and 1962, a secessionist movement, according to many sources, supported by the British military, declared the birth of the unrecognized Suvadive state. The neo-republic included the southernmost islands of the archipelago, south of the One and Half Degree Channel, namely the atolls of Suvadiva, Gan and Addu as well as a series of smaller islets, headed by Afeef Didi. The affair ended with the reabsorption of the secessionists and the withdrawal of the protectorate status by the British on 26 July 1965, effectively proclaiming the independence of the Maldives. This date, central to national history, is considered the true beginning of Maldivian republican history, with Nasir's

promulgation of a new Constitution. De facto power remained in the hands of Prime Minister Nasir until 1968 when, following some political conspiracies and assassination attempts, he was forced to call free elections to guarantee his own security. The referendum of November 11, 1968, saw Nasir as the winner, without finding much opposition, given that political parties remained illegal under the Constitution. This presidency is remembered by Maldivians as a happy period, during which various public health problems were resolved, numerous malaria and tuberculosis outbreaks in the country were eradicated, and the foundations of economic development were laid. It is in this period, in fact, that the first air connections with Colombo began, allowing tourism to come into contact with this portion of the globe, injecting the first capital from abroad into the often-exhausted state coffers.

The Gayoom presidency (1978-2008).

1972 is considered the date of large-scale introduction of tourism to the Maldives; the first resorts opened, and many connections were improved. A very serious cholera epidemic, however, together with discontent with the fact that tourism revenues ended up in the hands of a few members of the elite, damaged the mood of the population in this period, which began to be increasingly punctuated by expulsions, conspiracies and riots. In 1978, President Nasir surprised his citizens by announcing his retirement from political life after a 21-year career (as prime minister for 11 years and as president for 10) and by going into voluntary exile in Singapore on 7 December. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Maldivian ambassador to the United Nations and previously minister of transport, was elected as his successor. During the new government, Nasir's actions were harshly criticized and disqualified. The strategy of defamation, which Gayoom repeatedly used against various figures, was the main means of obtaining consensus among a people tired of the political figures of the time. In 1981, Gayoom launched accusations against Nasir and ensured that he was convicted in absentia, for crimes of corruption, a suspected coup d'état against the Maldivian republic and for theft from state coffers after his term as president. None of these charges were ever proven. Hailed as a reformer, Gayoom promised a much more open style of government than his predecessor. At

the head of one of the twenty poorest states on the planet, Gayoom ruled for three decades, becoming the man who held the presidential office longer than any other in Asia. After having condemned the abuses of the previous government, in 1980 a coup was foiled against him by some mercenaries belonging to PLOTE, a branch of the militant group the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. His presidency also saw the effects of the New Year on its reefs in 1998 and the devastating effects of the Tsunami in 2004. Gayoom built his own consensus, if you can call it that since there were never free elections, thanks to the tourism and fishing. The economy, which was constantly growing also on an international level, saw the wealth produced concentrated in a few hands. In 2003, as soon as he was confirmed as leader of the country, Gayoom was subjected to various pressures from the younger segment of the population, who called for new constitutional reforms and an opening towards a multi-party democratic system. The president found himself forced to give in to pressure and convened a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Constitution. The works began in June 2004 and ended in 2008, after 4 years of disputes. Despite this political environment, the Constitution contained within it all the ingredients to constitute a fully democratic nation. In fact, within it there were legislation on the separation of powers, on political multi-party politics, on the number of members of independent commissions and on respect for human rights, which were included in a constitutional document in line with the British Bill of Rights.

The Nasheed government

Following the promulgation of the new Constitution, after the thirty-year experience of Maumoon Gayoom's government, the presidency was won in the run-off by Mohamed Nasheed, founder of the Maldivian Democratic Party. Nasheed, an open critic of Gayoom and its policies, so much so that he was arrested and convicted several times, became the spokesperson for a policy aimed at the dignity of the citizen and environmental protection. Numerous health, social security and tax reforms were promulgated, which brought the Maldives to an unprecedented level of international dignity. This period was interrupted in 2012, following an attempted coup by the country's armed forces. On 8 October of that year,

while preparing his campaign for the 2013 elections, Nasheed was arrested by the local police together with some MPs from his party for refusing to appear before a court on charges of abuse of power. During the 2013 elections, he obtained 45.5%, but the vote was annulled by the Supreme Court and was repeated. The following month, he won 46.9% in the run-off against Abdulla Yameen, Maumoon's half-brother. Mohammed Waheed Hassan, Vice President during Nasheed's term, was finally elected president. In 2015, after joining the opposition, Nasheed was arrested on charges of terrorism, for having ordered the arrest of a judge in 2012. Sentenced to 13 years in prison, in 2016 he obtained political asylum in the United Kingdom, where he he had gone to undergo a medical procedure. The political developments of 2012-2013 are difficult to interpret, due to suspected electoral fraud and repeated complaints by Nasheed, who claimed to have been forced at gunpoint to sign his resignation. Several businessmen, including Gayoom, were identified as the instigators of what the world press was quick to define as a coup d'état. In fact, power passed into the hands of Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, Gayoom's son-in-law.

The current political scene: Yameen and Solih.

The transition that concentrated presidential power in the hands of Yameen was punctuated by continuous moves aimed at the cult of personality against the backdrop of scenarios in which corruption and fraud were much more than a suspicion (3 months of state of emergency were declared during his presidency). Supporter of a pro-Chinese and pro-Arab government, the Sinamalé Bridge was built and Hulumalé was expanded to the maximum. In addition, economic agreements were signed with the Saudis, a severe anti-India policy and exclusion from the Commonwealth. The historical interpretation of Yameen's government gives the impression of a huge step backwards from a democratic point of view. Remembering that free elections are a completely recent feature in Maldivian history, the scenario saw a contest for power in 2018 through a two-party dialectic, between the Progressive Party of Maldives, led by Gayoom's family members, and the Maldivian Democratic Party, built around to Nasheed's leadership. The tension between Malé and the islands is also central to understanding the political and

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social life of the Maldives. In the vote for the new president of the republic, the outgoing president Yameen, obtained the support of the inhabitants of Malé, the place where his policies of concentrating money flows (especially Chinese) are destined. In addition to the discontent of non-residents in Malé, Yameen has been accused of wanting to establish an authoritarian regime in the country also thanks to various illegal emergency maneuvers to maintain power. However, the majority of Maldivians preferred the opposition leader of the Democratic Party Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, who politically belongs to Nasheed's entourage. Solih was supported by 58% of the population, in an election that saw the turnout of more than 90% of Maldivians. Just like Nasheed, Solih came to power with huge expectations to fulfill the desire for radical change expressed by their respective electorate. For the Maldives it was a delicate period, in which it had to deal with the diversity present in the new government front, and the new balance found with the governments that supported Gayoom. In addition, with Solih we have returned to a pro-Indian government trying to obtain funds and investments from Indian companies that consider the Maldives of primary importance in today's international scene in the Indian Ocean. Although the momentum of Solih's government seems to exclude the Maldives from the main international political discourses, it has been the government of the management of Covid-free tourist corridors with emergency management in a very limited space and of the practice of land reclamation in the archipelago, with unprecedented intensity and extent. Furthermore, it can be said that the Solih government is a government that, in continuity with the latest acts of the Yameen government, has promoted local autonomies. In 2019, a new version of the decentralization act was ratified where it is declared that waste management and land reclamation are managed at a local level, as well as more inclusive and democratic rules for local votes on the composition of councils.

3.3.2 Power through the decades

The first settlements.

By retracing the history of the first migrations in the Maldives archipelago, through the studies of Husnu Al Suood (2014) and Naseema Mohamed (2005), it is possible to carry out some analyzes around the evolution of local mechanisms for the exercise of power. The various flows of people from South India and Sri Lanka, after having settled permanently in the Maldives, soon constituted a kingdom that covered only a small portion of today's territory, called Dheeva Maari. Although there are no reliable sources regarding the first centuries, there is a large volume of commercial relations with India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Arabia and East Africa over time (Romero-Frias, 2012, pp. 11-14).

Starting from the 3rd century BC Buddhism began to spread in the Maldives, even if scholars did not agree on the ways in which it was introduced. The most accredited hypothesis refers to the Maldives as one of the states influenced by the expansion campaign of Buddhism by the ruler of the Maurya empire, Ashoka the Great. Although H.C.P. Bell hypothesized that the first Maldivians followed Theravada Buddhism, Xavier Romero-Frias and other scholars underline how the archaeological finds preserved in the Malé museum show Mahayana and Vajrayana iconography (Romero-Frias, 2012, p.56). As already mentioned, in 1153 AD. for reasons still debated among scholars (Maloney, 2013, p.101), the conversion to Islam and the difficult transition from monarchy to sultanate took place. The reunification by the ruler Koimala of all the islands that today make up the Maldivian archipelago also dates back to this period.

The political structures of the Maldives have been largely influenced by the Buddhist millennium and the Islamic period. Over the course of their history, the Maldivians have developed a state system adapted to the particular geographical conformation and distribution of the population on the islands. According to Maloney, the political system of the Maldives was modeled on the tradition of centralized politics of Sri Lanka, "where hours of travel are counted in weeks, where external influences can easily take root, where it is common thought that political unity of the nation can only be preserved through a well-ordered chain of command, supported by a good dose of fear" (Maloney, 1976, p.659).

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Administration of the ancient kingdoms.

The main needs that the first kingdoms had revolved around the defense of the territory from external aggression, the collection of taxes and the resolution of disputes between the inhabitants. The king or queen, through careful management of the clergy (Pyrard, 1611, pp.198-207), guaranteed the correct carrying out of religious activities. According to Pyrard, (1611, p. 197) the king's authority was absolute within the national territory. Furthermore, a ruler was a figure feared and respected by his subjects as he had unlimited legislative power, and was also the social body on which decisions regarding the application of justice and national security depended.

According to Pyrard (1611) and Battuta (1983) the second most important position within the kingdom was that of Grand Vizier, who replaced the king during periods of absence. Although the king's power was absolute, Battuta tells how a Council made up of the Ameerun (the nobility) and the Furadhaa (the ministers) was consulted for the most important decisions. Alongside the Ameerun nobility, the most important people in the kingdom were the Kilege, official advisors appointed within the royal family. Generally, a Kilege went to the portion of territory to which he was assigned, where he collected taxes and administered the jurisdiction. The king also had the title Ras Kilege, or Head of the Council of Heads of State.

Atoll management.

The islands were grouped into thirteen atolls at the beginning of the 16th century. Each was led by a chief called naib (Pyrard, 1611, 197-200), appointed by the sultan, who had the task of supervising administrative and legal affairs, as well as those relating to education within the atoll. The naib received directives from members of the highest elite, the Chief Justices of the Kingdom, the Fandiyaru, who resided in Malé (Al Suood, 2014). Assigned to each island and directly dependent on the naib, the Katheeb held the position of political and religious leader in the territory. Their task was to administer the island and direct the ulama, who were entrusted with the management of the mosques. The figure of the Atholhuverin (atholhuveriya), also appointed by the sultan, initially had a role limited to the collection of taxes in the territory.

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Although it was a position held in high esteem, Pyrard reports that in the early 17th century the Atholhuverin were less influential than the naib.

This data is confirmed by Bell who, traveling in the Maldives at the end of the 19th century, claimed that Atholhuverin's position was the most sought after by those wishing to undertake a political career; the role of naib, in fact, was limited to providing consultancy on judicial matters. At the beginning of the 80s of the following century, with the transition to the Presidential Republic, the role of Atholhuverin was filled by the most senior representative of the government of each atoll, who resided in the capital in state housing and was supported in his functions by appointed deputies personally (Haifa Naeem, 2019, p.10).

With the promulgation of the Constitution, the scope of responsibilities of atoll leaders gradually expanded from maintaining law and order to assisting Ministries in coordinating development projects. The Katheebs were extended the task of supervising administrative affairs (Haifa Naeem, 2019, p.10; Maloney, 2013, p.183), which became a highly coveted position to compete for the role of chief of the atoll, although often obtained through nepotistic appointments or through political calculations. The role of atoll chief was formalized in Article 109 of the 1997 Constitution, which required the President of the Republic of Maldives to appoint one for each jurisdiction. According to the Constitution, he reported directly and solely to the President through his Ministers. The term of office was at the discretion of the President, who held the sole authority to appoint and fire him.

The role of atoll chief was also relevant for his knowledge and competence on administrative matters, as well as for the authority held within the communities. As an example, while the 1997 Constitution was in force, atoll chiefs played a key role in maintaining a smooth conduct of presidential elections. Even in the 2003 elections, during which the Electoral Commission at the time did not have the human resources to ensure a lawful conduct of the elections, the government had to rely on the atoll chiefs to control voting and the transport of ballot boxes from the islands to the capital. According to my experience without generalising, vast power has very often been concentrated in this position, which was soon transformed into nepotism which contributed to increasing social friction. Several interlocutors in the outlying islands

reported being threatened with repercussions if they voted against a candidate supported by the government. Furthermore, according to other interviews, it emerged that Katheeb's role was very influential, which resulted in fierce competition that resulted in family rivalries and conflicts more often than not. In general, I found for various reasons a common feeling of discontent towards the hereditary administrations of the islands from the 1970s until their dismissal in 2010. In the areas where I carried out research activities, in fact, it is a common opinion that the positions held by these power nuclei were a corrupt extension of the central government rather than representing the interests of the community. These positions, therefore, were distributed based on political alliances rather than merit, in a power game where corruption would have been very present, as well as difficult to trace. Furthermore, the position did not guarantee a minimum period of administration. There are numerous cases where the role was held for very short periods, with rapid dismissals without appeal, contributing to the idea of a position aimed at political and personal rather than administrative purposes. Moving up the ladder of power to the national level, the Maldivian Constitution was adopted in 2008. The Head of State and Government is the President, assisted by a Vice President and a Cabinet. The President and Vice President are directly elected by universal suffrage for a maximum of two five-year terms. The cabinet is composed of the Vice President, Government Ministers and the Attorney General. With the exception of the Vice President, cabinet members are appointed by the President. The unicameral legislative body, called the People's Majlis, meets at least three times a year. Its members are elected for a five-year term from the island of Malé and from each of the 20 atoll groups into which the country is divided for administrative purposes. The number of representatives from each administrative division is determined by population, with a minimum of two per division. The 2008 Constitution established Islam as the official state religion. Non-Muslims cannot become citizens and the People's Majlis is prohibited from enacting any law that contravenes the principles of Islam. Other government bodies include the civil service and human rights commissions.

The decentralization of power.

In the Maldivian archipelago, almost half of the population resides in the capital, where the control of power flows and the allocation of services for the rest of the country is concentrated. The President of the Republic of the Maldives Solih recently criticized the lack of decentralization in the political programs of the previous administration, denouncing how the powers currently vested in the Island Councils and the choices they can make are few and ineffective, a consequence of a so centralized. The idea of political decentralization in the Maldives began to make headway around 1980, in order to allow on the one hand the communities and their representatives to hold effective decision-making power in local politics, and on the other to empower the inhabitants of the peripheral islands regarding public issues. After a period of limited political reforms starting in 1999, the ratification of a new Constitution and the first democratic election of a President of the Maldives after 30 years of Gayoom rule have radically changed national politics. The newly elected Nasheed government of 2008, in parallel with green initiatives, began to take steps to increase citizen engagement in politics. Faced with the factors I described previously, such as the accentuated geographical and demographic dispersion in the almost 200 inhabited islands, the Nasheed government worked to reorganize and make local officials responsible. The policies that followed were a great act of trust towards the population and a desire to demonstrate a transparency that had been too lacking in the decades of authoritarian government of President Gayoom. Nasheed's objective was to convey these ideas and measures within a decisive program of political decentralization, in which to be able to offer direct representatives of citizens greater decision-making power at a local level, for a better functioning of services and a timelier response to community needs. Political decentralization in the Maldives was formalized with the ratification of a legislative decree that determined the decentralization of state power, the aforementioned Act on Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives (2010). Through this act, the Nasheed government first decentralized power in the 7 macro-areas similar to provinces described in the first chapter. The 7 administrative compartments, representing an intermediate level of administration between the local and the national, were intended to manage the supra-

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local services previously administered by the national ministries, marking a significant transfer of power from the capital since the establishment of the Koimala kingdom, in 1117 AD. The law also established a system of 19 democratically elected councils for the administration of the atolls, resulting from that moment also on a different perception on the part of citizens towards power, distributed in roles carried out by familiar faces of the local communities and no longer by national bodies seen as detached and distant. The Katheeb imposed up to that point by the President of the Republic were therefore replaced by a council and a locally elected president. The 19 atoll management boards are authorized to develop five-year development plans in full consultation with their constituencies. Each island, therefore, corresponds to an administrative sector on which the state political-administrative geography is organised, with significant community involvement, making development plans probably more effective and relevant to the needs of the communities themselves.

Yameen and contemporaneity

At the actual level, the decentralization of state power envisaged by the Nasheed government never fully occurred. Although through The Act on Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives (2010) local councils have received specific governance powers and budget, in practice they had to struggle to establish themselves as financially independent and self-sufficient entities due to numerous political and institutional obstacle When Abdulla Yameen became President of the Republic of the Maldives in 2013, through a combination of executive actions and amendments to The Act on Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives (2010), the powers of the island councils were largely reduced. First, the number of island councils was reduced and much of the funding was redirected to the central administration. Furthermore, laws establishing the partial independence and administration of the islands' councils were revoked, placing power back in the hands of national ministries. Understanding the operating mechanics of an island's administration is fundamental for the political implications that these may have on multiple levels. The control of the islands' councils, in the dialectical perspective of the national parties, had a central role. Since

opposition parties had numerous seats in local councils, the latter became urgent targets of the Yameen government. Following some amendments dating back to 2015 approved by Parliament, the government was able to unilaterally change the powers and responsibilities held by the islands' councils. In the following years, many of Yameen's political actions went in the direction of a total reduction of the power of local councils, to which the sole function of providing registration services and issuing birth and death certificates was delegated. The hypercentralization of resources under Yameen's administration has created not only several obstacles in the development of the peripheral islands, but also endemic and rampant corruption. The elections of 23 September 2018 of a coalition government led by Ibrahim Solih led to a reversal of the trend. Solih promised in campaign speeches to restore the powers that Yameen had stripped from local councils by increasing their independence and the responsibilities of their representatives. The current governing coalition has formalized these plans with the ratification of the 2019 act of decentralization, which completes and strengthens the 2010 act, seeking to facilitate the full implementation of decentralized governance. In light of how power is administered on the different levels of the Maldivian political scale, it is evident that it is important for the understanding of the entire nation to analyze the functioning of the government of the peripheral islands. Outside of Malé, where the influences of the great elites are less perceptible in small politics but have enormous weight regarding the destinies of the country, the councils of the islands that today administer power hold very important roles and balances for politics national. In fact, within the governments of peripheral islands, it is interesting to observe the process of building local authority, and how it has varied over the decades, following the attempt to decentralize power. This can be seen very well with the Solih government, in which policies such as land reclamation and, as in the case of this thesis, sport, have largely been delegated to the island councils.

3.3.3 The Big Men

Within Maldivian politics considering what has just been said, of the peripheral islands and the relationship with the capital Malé, of the system of "small" islands that must communicate with

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each other and with the atoll government, the theme of local political leadership is a relevant topic. Firstly, leadership understood as a component that is part of social and political processes is a collective product of interaction and organizational activity; a leader, to be considered such, must have a following. As regards the Maldivian case, the notion of big men is well suited and, through the concentration of power in their hands, they are the subjects who exercise leadership in the territory. In a nation with a population of around 350.000, only a small number of people belong to the Maldivian elite. Colton estimated that, between the 1970s and 1980s, "the elites of the Maldives numbered between a thousand people, including wives and children, with an effective core of around one hundred elements (Colton, 1995, p. 98. Translation by the author)". Approximating similar estimates regarding the number of members of the elite in 2020, it is presumable, with reference to contemporary politics, that the members of this hierarchy of people know each other personally and, very often, are in business with each other. Belonging to this political elite allows a high level of fame and wealth and is the goal that all men within the political world aspire to. The theme of big men is very recurrent in scientific literature, particularly in that linked to insular studies (here I refer to the studies of Sahlins, 1963; Godelier, 1982; Godelier & Strathern, 1991). In this doctoral thesis, however, I will not try to apply the anthropological category of big men to the Maldivian environment, but to use a notion, which the Maldivians themselves use, to describe their elites and the processes of building authority and for concentration of power. The notion of big man described in the essay *Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia* of Marshall Sahlins, in 1963, is well suited to the Maldives, where there are prominent political figures who are described as of leaders building their power and following through manipulation and persuasion. By convincing friends, allies and relatives, the big man accumulates resources which he then redistributes, creating a network of debtors within the community. Such a system is largely competitive and open. Every individual in the community can aspire to become a big man, trying to get to the top of the political prestige system. Big men are able to influence multiple followers, and their leadership entails respect, honor, and deference. In the exercise of power, the big man does not use coercive or threatening methods, trying to assert his leadership through

his influence rather than direct force. Having to manage "limited" leadership, big men must continually ensure the economic well-being of their subordinates, in order to maintain their role within the community.

Bodung

In the Dhivehi language, bodung is the most appropriate term for big men. According to Colton, the term has a broader connotation, which includes "the nobles, the elite, those involved in the exercise of power" (1995, p. 98). Through the study of Boris Willie (2018), several elements of continuity are found in the figure of the big men in the transition from the sultanate to the promulgation of the Constitution in 1932. Analyzing some observations of President Nasheed (2003), Willie shows how the bodungs of the 19th century they all came from the Maldivian nobility. In most cases, the title of bodung was inherited or claimed through marital ties to an elite clan. However, there were several cases of "people outside the royal family or the court, such as playmates, servants and slaves who had achieved this coveted position" (Nasheed, 2003, p. 3). This suggests a certain degree of flexibility within the bodung charge accessibility system. Another element of continuity with the past is the ability to maintain one's system of alliances, even if he held a hereditary position (Willie, 2018, p.295). At each level of the hierarchical ladder, a bodung had to constantly secure the support of other members of the community to avoid being ousted by a rival. The history of the Maldives is full of examples where a bodung overthrew the existing power through a more generous performance of redistribution of goods. These bonds and alliance systems are still present today. The creation or appointment of certain positions within the islands or political systems will later be institutionalized into public offices (Nasheed, 2003, p.23). Consequently, over the course of governments, the bodung found themselves playing not only the roles of mediators between the state and the economy, but also between the king and his subjects, as well as between Malé, the atolls and the islands. The bodung were individuals who connected outlying islands and neighboring Indian Ocean states to the capital (Willie, 2018, p.297). Additionally, they were people with the ability to blend political skill with charisma to create a following. However, if in the past they represented the

nobility, today they reflect to a greater extent a social class of capitalists (Willie, 2018, p.297). The characteristics of the figure of the bodung listed above are still observable today in the different levels of administration of power.

At a local level, in fact, we observe the same mechanisms, albeit to a lesser extent, of building authority and exercising leadership as on a national scale. For this reason, examining these dynamics at a local level can be a useful key to a trans-scalar analysis. Furthermore, the decentralization of power in 2010 produced substantial changes in the processes of acquiring consensus and building authority by local big men. In the islands' councils, as has been mentioned, seats on an elective basis have been implemented. Consequently, this change has opened up a new type of competition for power, fairer and more regulated, where corruption is fought more effectively, and nepotism is no longer a guarantee for obtaining political office. According to the data collected in the interviews, the impression shared by people is that, before decentralization, political systems were corrupt potentates, while today the leadership dynamics of big men play an even more central role, as it is necessary to obtain an effective consensus to win the elections. In this thesis, it is interesting to report a 2004 article by Abdou Maliq Simone, analyzed by Willie (2018, p.297), where the idea of extending the concept of infrastructure to people is explored, which contains within it countless relationships between objects, spaces, and practices where it will be seen that - for sport in particular - it is a fundamental step. Willie's analysis underlines how the processes activated by big men are comparable to this concept, where a bodung, with its ability to create, maintain and manipulate leadership, composes a hub within the activated networks (Willie, 2018, p.300). In other words, big men are figures who manage the needs and relationships of different subjects. In agreement with Willie, this role assumed by those who seek to exercise leadership in the Maldives perfectly follows the system of the big men. Furthermore, the idea of infrastructure applied to big men is particularly apt to describe how the ambition is to be an important hub, one of the main points of social and political affirmation. In addition, Willie shows how in the context of the island nation of the Maldives, the concept of big men is a particularly effective method of describing the mechanisms of authority creation, supporting Utas' thesis that "Big Men appear in structural

voids of the state, skillfully combining network governance, social control and economic activities" (Utas 2012, 14).

In other words, big men provide facilities and services that the state does not provide, allowing them to rework their big man status. Consequently, the concept of bigmanity depends and feeds heavily on the absence of the State, in particular on the most peripheral islands and far from the services provided by Malé. To conclude, there are three aspects that connect the insularity of the Maldivian state to the concept of the big man. Willie (2018. 291), reports how the first is related to the maritime environment of island spaces. In an archipelagic state like the Republic of Maldives, shipping and cargo flows are of utmost importance. Consequently, it is through the control of these trades that a big man acquires a position of influence and can exercise his leadership. Secondly, the relationship with the multiplicity of relationships that can be concentrated in the small terrestrial spaces is decisive. In these contexts, the big man is facilitated by the insular context to simultaneously establish numerous networks present in a small space, considering the islands as spaces that as already mentioned from Baldacchino as a "finite geograph[ies]" (2007, p. 4). The third aspect concerns insularity as a means that facilitates big men in establishing themselves as a hub of social networks, where with different qualities and resources, it is possible to control many relationships at the same time.

Still a paradise?

In this chapter I first showed the interpretative categories that will be used in this thesis in the following chapters for the analysis of the case studies. In particular, physical geography was described and problematized through the concepts of insularity and decentralization of power, as it covers an extremely relevant level in the country's politics. The relationships that form on the peripheral islands and their relationship with the capital, Malé, in fact take on particular forms that require particularly careful analysis. Secondly, the theme of political geography and the distribution of the population was addressed, which finds its place in this geographical conformation or tries to respond to change (tourist flows, dependence on crude oil, climate emergency) through land reclamation processes - policy in great expansion -, adapting the

islands to their needs. After the description and interpretation of the various types of islands that can be found in the Maldives (in particular those affected by land reclamation, such as resorts, landfills, airports) an example of spatial politics was presented which constitutes the contemporary Maldivian political reality together to the decentralization of power, or the urban reorganization of the islands. In conclusion, following a short history of the Maldives, the theme of power in the country was addressed, how it was established, how it interacted with Islam and how today it is expressed in spaces of power, such as resorts or, in the peripheral islands, inside the administrative councils of the islands through the big men.

Chapter 4. Sport in the Maldives: between Community Building, Nation Building and Sport Diplomacy

This chapter will be divided into two. In the first part, I will focus on the forms of sport within the Maldives and how these are configured. Through an analysis of the sports most practiced by Maldivians, both traditional and modern, the analysis will then focus on the sporting spaces within the tourist offer; firstly, analyzing the over-planned spaces of resorts, while secondly I will introduce a case study related to the guesthouse islands sport spaces. Subsequently, sport will be analyzed as a tool used in schools or on the islands as an element for Community and Nation Building. Subsequently, the emphasis that the current government is having on the construction of stadiums and sports spaces will be analysed, if not also through the use of sport as a mechanism for requesting land reclamation and the mechanisms that the government uses to promote the sports in the country. Finally, in the second section, it will be analyzed the relations through sport diplomacy in the case of the Maldives, where the Archipelago find themselves having to juggle a game of alliances between China, India and Saudi Arabia in the maritime One Belt One Road.

4.1   Sport within the Maldives. At the intersection of tourism, development, and power relations

> *Our job is to nurture a generation of productive young leaders, revitalize communities and promote sports as an essential tool for nation-building.*
>
> *Opening quote on the Official Website of Ministry of Youth, Sports & Community Empowerment*

Sport can provide useful insights into various aspects of societies. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth analysis and the geographical characteristics of the Maldives. Specifically, the case study presented in the end of this chapter illustrates how sports tourism interacts with soft power at both the local and national levels. It is also of value to study sports tourism in the

Maldivian archipelago considering the country's distinctive characteristics; its fragmentation, centre-periphery paradigm, and isolated image among those who do not live there, all make it a privileged territory for observing relationality. Sport is a key resource for local development, largely on account of its visibility and tourist attractiveness. Alongside this "manifest function", it fulfils several "latent functions". First, it drives employment, mutual alliances, and politics; second, it offers a focus for economic strategies (land reclamation, urban development, land use); finally, as a key factor in the contemporary geopolitics of the Maldives, it contributes to the country's internal cohesion policies (at different scalar levels: island, atoll, etc.) as well as its international positioning.

Sport is a pivotal interpretative key to understanding current tourism policy in the Maldives. Experts have investigated the social importance of sport and the fact that it is far more than a leisure activity. Sport plays a central role in the production of culture: it is intertwined with power relations, processes of social integration, and the economic sector. It is of great interest to analyse these dimensions in local places such as small islands, because they contribute to our understanding of manifold contemporary processes. In the Maldivian archipelago, sports tourism is one of the main new sectors of development being pushed for expansion by the government. An expansion that demands the "creation" or "invention" of a physical territory if it is to materialise. This chapter examines firstly the caracteristics of the sport in the country - with a particular distinction between sport for tourist and sport for locals – and the role of sport as a driver of development in the case of an insular state, and the interconnectedness of tourism, economy, and soft power. In contrast with common preconceptions, sports activities are not merely recreational but rather play a central role in the production of culture. Sport is intertwined with power relations, integration processes, the transmission of culture, and representations of identity, as well as market and communications.

4.1.1 Sports in "Paradise"

In the Maldives, sports play a significant role in the lives of the people, offering both recreation and competition. While the Maldives is more widely known for its stunning beaches, crystal-

clear waters, and vibrant marine life, sports also contribute to the country's cultural and recreational activities. The nation's natural beauty provides a stunning backdrop for outdoor activities, making sports an integral part of both local culture and the tourist experience. Here I resume some of the most widespreaded sports in the Maldives:

Football (Soccer): Football is the most popular sport in the Maldives. The country has its own domestic football league, and football matches draw considerable attention from the local population. The Maldives national football team competes in regional and international competitions. Football in the Maldives is not just a sport; it's a cultural phenomenon. The local football leagues are not just about competition but serve as communal events that bring people together. The passion for the sport is palpable in the streets and extends to the national team, which becomes a symbol of national pride during international competitions.

Everyday Football pitch on local islands host a football match. Source: Jakko's Photography.

Volleyball: Volleyball is another widely played sport in the Maldives. Local communities often organize volleyball tournaments, and the sport is popular at both amateur and professional levels. Beyond being a physical activity, volleyball serves as a social glue in Maldivian communities. Tournaments aren't merely about winning; they become platforms for social interaction and celebration.

Volleyball Match in Hulumalé. Photo by the author

Futsal: Futsal, a variant of football played on a smaller, indoor pitch, has gained popularity in recent years. It is played at both recreational and competitive levels. Its popularity is not just

about the game but also the accessibility it offers. Indoor spaces become hubs of social interaction, fostering a sense of community among players and spectators. According to my interviews, futsal is also the sport that is most used in the Maldives within the prison system as an element of leisure and sociability. This aspect is particularly interesting as the island of Maafushi, home to the main prison in the Maldives, hosts this year the first local tournament with a team of women from jail as part of their correction.

Match where Maafushi's Prison Club was beaten in the local Eighteen Thirty Classic 2023 tournament. Prison Club Social Media.

Badminton: Badminton is a popular racket sport in the Maldives, played both recreationally and competitively. Many schools and communities have badminton facilities. It's not uncommon to find badminton being played in the evenings, with the sound of shuttlecocks echoing through local neighbourhoods involving people in both a physical and mental game that demands strategy and precision.

Table Tennis: Table tennis is enjoyed by people of various age groups in the Maldives. The sport is played in schools, sports clubs, and recreational centers often played in leagues where individuals come together not just for competition but for the joy of the sport.

Water Sports: Given the country's unique geography, water sports are naturally prevalent. Snorkeling, diving, and surfing are popular activities among locals and tourists alike. The Maldives has become a destination for water sports enthusiasts from around the world.

Resorts Social Media are full of images with Water Sports facilities trying to attract tourists in their structures.

Traditional Sports: Some traditional Maldivian sports are still practiced, although they may not be as widespread. These include games like Baibala (a traditional form of wrestling) and Dhandi Kunaa (similar to field hockey) or Bashi (similar to tennis). These traditional sports are a living testament to the continuity of cultural practices in a rapidly changing world. In the next paragrafh I will analyse this aspect with more attention.

Cricket: Cricket is played in the Maldives, although it may not be as popular as football. The country has a national cricket team that participates in regional competitions. Cricket also tells a story of multiculturalism because the sport's presence is a reminder of the diverse influences that have shaped the Maldivian identity and before the implement of football it was the dominant sport in the country.

Milo Ramadam Cricket Carnival 2022. Source: Milo Ramadam Social Media

Athletics: Track and field events, such as running and long jump, are part of school competitions and other local sporting events.

Basketball: While not as popular as some other sports, basketball is played in schools and communities. Some institutions have basketball facilities for enthusiasts.

3x3 Basketball Tournament during Ramadam Challenge 2023. Source: Social Media.

In essence, sports in the Maldives go beyond the physical realm. They are threads in the intricate tapestry of Maldivian culture, weaving together stories of community, identity, and a deep connection with nature. Each sport becomes a vessel for expressing the unique spirit of the Maldives, making the nation not just a destination for relaxation but a canvas for the vibrant palette of its sporting culture.

There is no national sport in the Maldives, but as mentioned sea sports such as snorkelling, fishing, and surfing are widespread. On the islands inhabited by local communities, sport practised on land is of scholarly interest due to its various interactions with political establishment. Limited resources and infrastructure are challenges for the development of sports in the Maldives; as mentioned in the previous chapters, the limited spaces and the emphasis to those underline the importance of soft power around the sport grounds. The scattered nature of the islands and their relatively small population present logistical difficulties for organizing and sustaining sports at the highest level. Despite these challenges, the Maldives has embraced a diverse range of sports, with an emphasis on water-based activities for tourist and land-based sports for tourist and locals and continues to promote its unique sporting culture while embracing modern sports trends.

4.1.2 Traditional Games and Sports in the Maldives: A Cultural Heritage Perspective

Games and sports have been integral to the culture and traditions of societies across the world and the Maldives, of course, is no exception. The Maldives' history of trade and cultural interactions with neighboring countries like India and Sri Lanka has influenced its sporting culture. Games like *Dhimaali* (similar to cricket) and *Maakanaa* (a form of wrestling) have been part of the Maldivian sporting landscape for many years. In this thesis, is useful to divide the scenario between Traditional Sports and Modern Sports. The first category has a long history. One of the most popular is *Bodu Beru*, a form of drumming and dancing. Boduberu is similar to some of the songs and dances found in east and Southwest Africa but seems that was introduced to the Maldives by sailors from the Indian Ocean region. Boduberu is usually sung after a hard day's work. The location is up to the dancers and nowadays there are professional

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performers that are booked by local islands during the main festivities and resorts. Today, Boduberu is an important item of entertainment at stage shows, special occasions, and as mentioned during national celebrations and festivals. In addition, the Maldivian martial art known as *Faanuveri* is another traditional sport that has been practiced for centuries.

As recently as the 1970's the big Bodu Beru drum was brought out for entertainment in the evening. It was played exclusively by the menfolk of the village, to accompany their singing and dancing. Source: Maldives, the very best of Michael Friedel.

Bodu Beru: literally, Big Drum. (Source: Sunny Side of Life https://visitmaldives.com/it/experience/the-hypnotizing-rhythms-of-boduberu)

Bodu Beru dance performed in resort with traditional dresses.
Source: https://maldives.net.mv/39877/local-livelihood-games-activities-in-maldives

The Maldivian heritage is rich with traditional games and sporting activities, many of which have been passed down through generations. These activities serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as vehicles for mental stimulation and social interaction within local communities. While some of these sports have declined in popularity in recent years, they continue to be cherished and enjoyed during festive occasions, such as Eid. This part delves into a selection of traditional Maldivian games and sporting activities, shedding light on their historical significance and cultural relevance.

1. Bashi: A Distinctive Cultural Sport

Bashi, once the national sport of the Maldives, bears resemblance to tennis and dodgeball but is uniquely Maldivian in its execution. It is typically played on sand pitches, in contrast to the grass courts of traditional tennis. A Bashi game consists of two innings, involving teams of seven or eleven players. During the game, players from both teams take turns throwing and catching the ball, with one member of the pitching team facing the net, serving the ball over their head and net. The objective for the opposing team is to capture the ball. Successful catches eliminate the server, with each pitcher allotted twelve chances. Should a pitcher manage to continue without losing, they are awarded additional points. Bashi tournaments are occasionally organized at the island or atoll level to mark national holidays and other festive occasions. Originally played with balls made from rolled coconut palm leaves and wooden or metal rackets, the modern version employs tennis balls and rackets. A sport traditionally practiced by women, as men historically spend large periods of their lives away from their islands of origin, nowadays bashi is a sport practiced on some festive occasions. During the year and in schools the tradition of Bashi was supplanted by handball and volleyball.

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In the past, the most widely practised games were the 'traditional' sports of bashi, thinmugoali, vaadhemun, and baibala; nowadays globally-inspired, competitive sports such as football and volleyball are becoming increasingly popular. Photo by Ahmed Ibrahim: Bashi match, Kalaidhoo Vs Dhanbidhoo, 30th November 2012.

Nowadays Bashi has been supplanted by handball and volleyball. Handball Academy of Maagodhoo, Photo of the author.

2. Baibalaa: A Test of Physical Prowess

Baibalaa is a physically demanding outdoor sport in which two teams engage in a battle of speed, strength, and agility. This sport draws inspiration from the Indian game of Kabaddi and Turkish Oil Wrestling, with a notable distinction being that Baibalaa is played on a ring field while Kabaddi takes place on a rectangular field. During a Baibalaa match, one team remains within the ring, while the other is outside. Players from the outside team enter the ring to tag members of the inside team by physically touching them. The inside team's objective is to prevent outsiders from tagging their members and ensure their security. Captured players are held inside the ring until they signal surrender, after which they can no longer participate in that

round. Baibalaa is typically played on soft sandy beaches to minimize the risk of injuries. The sport has evolved over the years, and an annual national-level tournament is organized by the Maldives Baibalaa Association during Eid al-Adha, with smaller tournaments being held on islands and between atolls.
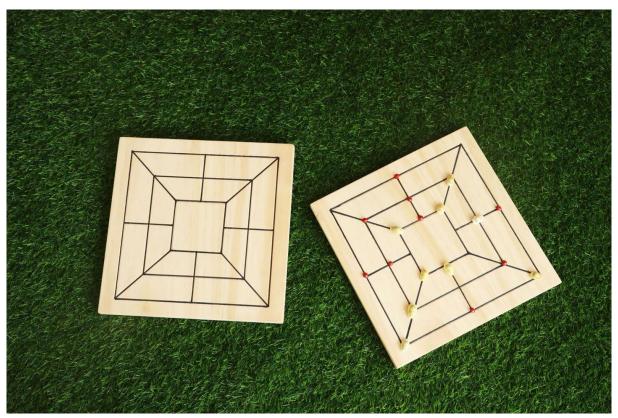
Baibalaa Tournament. Source: MC Sport Club Social Media

3.Thin Hama: a thought-provoking game

Thin Hama, a multi-generational indoor game for two players, closely resembles chess in terms of strategic thinking and planning. Participants must anticipate and counter their opponent's moves, striving to decipher their strategy and plan their own movements accordingly. The traditional version of this game involves marking out a square play area on wood, cardboard, paper, or even the ground. Players begin with 18 pieces, historically using shells as playing

pieces. These pieces are individually positioned at various intersections on the board, with the aim of getting three pieces in a row or preventing the opponent from achieving this feat. Players can remove an opponent's piece once they have three in a row, and the game continues until only two pieces remain. During my thesis but also in my interview, there are lot of variables from North to South in the Archipelago.

Traditional Thin Hama game boards from a shop in Malé.

4. *Raazuvaa: The Maldivian Chess*

Raazuvaa, the Maldivian version of chess, exhibits unique rules compared to the original game. While the pieces and board are akin to conventional chess, the movement rules differ, especially regarding pawns. The ultimate objective, however, remains the same – to checkmate the opponent's king. A traditional Raazuvaa board, characterized by wooden construction and Maldivian lacquer work, is a prized souvenir often available in resort shops and local markets.

Notably, the patterns on the board can feature various dark and light themes, diverging from the typical black and white scheme. The pieces also bear a distinctive Maldivian design, lending Raazuvaa its unique island flavor and making it an engaging pastime for developing strategic thinking and concentration.

Maldivian Raazuvaaa Board. Source: https://lovethemaldives.com/traditional-maldivian-games/

5. *Ohvalhu Gondi: The Game of Eight Holes*

Ohvalhu Gondi, despite its name, is not akin to mini-golf but rather an ancient game rooted in the traditions of the Maldives. It draws inspiration from the Congkak and Dakon games of Indonesia, with distinct Maldivian rules. The game typically involves eight holes and is played with cowrie shells or small pebbles. Players aim to empty their side of the board while trying to place as many shells or pebbles into their designated keyhole, which is situated at the end of the board. Each player moves counterclockwise and has a designated 'home' hole on their left

side. The first player to empty their eight holes emerges as the victor. Ohvalhu Gondi is a popular game enjoyed by people of all ages, and in the absence of a board, improvised versions are crafted on beach grounds using coconut shells and other readily available materials.

Eight Holes game. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CC5xY9Lpla0/?img_index=1

As already mentioned, these sports during the recent generational transitions have been systemized within the festive celebrations, so much so that the sports minister Ahmed Malhoof

and his cabinet have declared in the interviews that I collected that, as the years pass, these sports will probably become part of the Ministry of the Art, Culture and Heritage. During Eid held in July 2022, I was able to participate in the games held in Magoodhoo, especially tug of war and some smaller competitions. During the Eid in which I participated (July 2022 in Magoodhoo; is possible to see better the event in the documentary that I participate as scientific committee in *Inside the Bodumas*), sport was in fact an extremely present element. Eid is in fact the opportunity for families to reunite in their islands of birth. primarily for celebratory matches during official events, but also for traditional sports that took place in a friendly manner in people's homes, particularly between different generations. As for the spaces, sport is a main element here too. During daily prayers (which are different during Eid) and during official events, the designated place is usually the football pitch. As told in the paragraph where I mentioned Ameen's plan reworking, the football field becomes a place of power where the soft power of the island council (and the nearby islands) is forcefully exercised. Furthermore, the complicated relationship between Magoodhoo and the nearby island of Nilandhoo (which will be explored further later) was tempered by the organization of a friendly theatrical football match.

Tag of war during Eid in July 2022. Photo by Giulio Pedretti

Football Match against Magoodhoo and Nilandhoo. As you can see, the theatral and comic aspect of the event was the main part of the celebration. Photo by the author.

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Mandi game held during Nilandhoo Eid Festival. It is a traditional now few widespreaded, it is nowadays a sport typical from this island. Photo by the author.

Futsal pitch used as an extension of the nearby mosque. People praying in the direction of the Mecca during the Eid festival in Magoodhoo. Photo by the author.

In conclusion, traditional games and sports of the Maldives reflect a rich cultural heritage and offer unique insights into the historical and social dynamics of this island nation. These activities, once staples of Maldivian recreation, continue to be celebrated during festive occasions and offer tourists a glimpse into the vibrant and diverse cultural tapestry of the Maldives. As they endure through the generations, these traditional games and sports contribute to the preservation of the Maldives' cultural identity and offer engaging avenues for communal interaction and mental engagement.

4.1.2 Modern Sports

The introduction of modern sports, particularly by British colonial influence and global exposure, has led to the inclusion of sports like soccer (football), volleyball, badminton, and table tennis in the Maldives. While not a traditional Maldivian sport, football has earned the status of the national sport in the Maldives and enjoys widespread popularity among the local populace. Football is deeply embedded in Maldivian society, with island, atoll, and national-level competitions held throughout the year. Almost every Maldivian island boasts its own football field, providing a visible testament to the sport's significance. Even resorts offer football facilities for staff and tourists, fostering a sense of community and competition. The allure of football transcends the boundaries of age and social background, making it a sport that unites and captivates Maldivians. According to my interviews, but also with internet resources as personal blogs or journalistic news and magazine articles (Musthafa 2016, Kathleen 2023), the first documented instances of football in the Maldives date back to the 1920s when British administrators and expatriates organized friendly matches among themselves. The curiosity and interest these matches generated within the local population marked the embryonic stages of football's introduction to the Maldives. The popularization of football in the Maldives can be primarily attributed to the passion and dedication of early pioneers and enthusiasts. Local Maldivians who observed football being played by the British administrators and expatriates became fervent advocates for the sport. They took the initiative to organize informal matches, encourage participation, and disseminate the joy of football throughout the islands. Among these pioneers, Kathleen but also my interviers often quote Hassan Manik, known as "Kuda Hassan Manik". He played a pivotal role in introducing football to the capital island of Malé and was instrumental in the formation of the first football clubs in the Maldives. These clubs provided a platform for aspiring players to refine their skills and engage in competitive matches, thus fostering the growth of the sport. Despite the growing enthusiasm for football, several challenges hindered its popularization in the Maldives. The main challenge was the scarcity of proper infrastructure and facilities. The absence of dedicated football grounds compelled matches to be held on open fields or even sandy beaches, posing unique challenges for the

players. However, the fervor of football enthusiasts spurred them to adapt to the limited resources available. Another challenge was the limited exposure to international football. In the early years, access to global football tournaments and matches was limited, obstructing Maldivian players' ability to learn from and be inspired by the world's best. Nevertheless, their passion and determination compelled them to improve their skills through self-training, friendly matches, and occasional visits from foreign teams. The establishment of organized competitions faced financial constraints and logistical challenges. The Football Association of Maldives (FAM), established in 1982, played a pivotal role in addressing these obstacles. FAM tirelessly worked to secure sponsorships, enhance infrastructure, and develop football programs at various levels, thereby facilitating the growth and professionalization of football in the Maldives. In the following parts I will go deeply inside the main topic in which FAM has invested, like infrastructures, promotion and attraction.

Step by step

As I metioned, "structured" sport in the Maldives was introduced in the 19th century following the arrival of the British. This led to the gradual spread and uptake of different sports on various islands across the archipelago. Initially, sports and sports clubs were started by voluntary associations that aspired to more systematic management of facilities and training. According to Musthafa (2016), cricket was the first imported sport practised in the Maldives and football followed soon after. The introduction of organised sports in the 1940s led to the creation of football teams and the first national tournament was held in 1948. With the growing interest in sports, an administrative office was inaugurated in 1950 to co-ordinate sports in the capital Malé, leading to a gradual introduction of other sports such as tennis, volleyball, basketball, athletics, and table tennis. In 1977, the first office specifically created for this purpose was formed. In 1983 a consultative body was formed to advise the government and in 1988 the Ministry of Home Affairs and Sports was established with a new focus on making sport an integral part of national development. The sport portfolio has been assigned to different

Government ministries since then, but the focus has been on providing administrative and governance support to sports development.

Taking form from 1988, Ministry of Sports was established in Malé with the aim of incorporating the practice of sports as an integral part of the nation's development, and in the same year, the Maldives took part in the Olympics for the first time at Seoul. The organisation of sports in the Maldives is centrally controlled by the government through the Ministry of Sports Youth and Development, which is under the aegis of the President. This is the government organisation responsible for overseeing all sporting activities in the Maldives and promoting a culture of sport in Maldivian society. All sports-related associations and federations come under this Ministry, which seeks to support their activities on the ground, internationally, nationally, and locally on the islands. Under the Ministry of Youth and Development are the *National Sports Council*, the *Maldives National Sports Institute* and the *Maldives National Olympics Committee*. The first of these bodies is the main governmental and funding authority for the national sports associations. The council's main role is to guide its member organisations in the development of sports. The Maldives National Institute of Sport was officially established in 2012 and is responsible for the training of sports personnel by providing high-quality education, training and research to enhance the competence of those who work in the sports sector. Its stated objectives include the development of specialised sports services to ensure that athletes receive professional treatment for injuries and obtain scientific support throughout their development so that they can achieve peak performance. The mission is to improve sport in the Maldives by attaining sporting excellence, enhancing the national image, and fostering the development of sports professionals through sports education and scientific approaches.

The National Olympic Committee was established in 1985 and recognised by the International Olympic Committee in the same year. This organisation played an important role in raising the sporting profile of the Maldives to a higher level, as it facilitated the Maldives' participation in sporting events and competitions outside the country, such as the Indian Ocean Games in 1979, where a first international prize (a silver medal) was obtained in badminton

(Musthafa, 2016). Referred by former President of Maldives Mohamed Abdul Gayoom as "the father of sports in the Maldives", the late Dr Mohamed Zahir Naseer, played a huge role in the development of sports in the Maldives. Naseer was the first President of the National Olympic Committee, he served as president until 2008. He was the longest-serving president of the Maldives Olympic Committee. Maldives represented at the Olympics for the first time under his leadership and the association become a member of the Olympic Council of Asia. The current president of the committee is Ibrahim Ismail Ali, while the position of secretary general is occupied by Ahmed Maezooq. The National Olympic Committee has played an important role in raising the sporting profile of the Maldives internationally as it has facilitated the participation of the Maldives in international sporting events and competitions like Athens 2004.

The Maldivian Olympic team at Athens 2004. https://olympics.com/ioc/maldives.

Prince Charles, representing Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, declared official the opening of the XXII Commonwealth Games on the 28 of July 2022 at the Alexander Stadium in Birmingham.

Maldives Olympics committee. (Official website, 2022)

After 1981, the associations slowly increased in number, modern sports were also introduced in schools and consolidated over the 1990s. Children were introduced to athletics, table tennis, badminton, football, netball, volleyball, and basketball and local and inter-school tournaments were organised. Although some of the new sports have become highly popular, such as football for men and netball among women, they continue to receive little recognition at national and international level today. As stated on thw website of Maldives Parliament (2015)[32], the sports bill was ratified by the President of the Maldives. The key purpose of the Sports Act is assisting the promotion of competitive sports and cultural activities at international level, national level and island level. The Sports Act outlines guidelines and policies formulated so that through the participation of the public will boost the development of the country. "The Sports Bill was revised to aid the development of individuals associating in the sports sector and support the advancement of the Maldives National Institute of Sports, sports associations and clubs"[33]. The Sports Act specifies the authorities of national sports associations, federations and the Maldives Olympic Committee. Official permission was given in the Sports Act for the establishment and regulation of a modernized National Sports Council and Maldives National Institute of Sports. In addiction to the Sports Act (a new one will be ratified in the next months) the Government has recently moved to address these gaps in its policy agenda. Through multiple projects and the investment of a significant amount of funds in sports, the Minister of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment, Ahmed Mahloof, is attempting to lead the Maldives onto the international chessboard, by wielding soft power in the domain of sports. Some of the main strategies have included: the recruitment of Francesco Moriero and Simao Costa, a pair of internationally recognised coaches for the Maldivian National Football Team; the purchase of footballers with foreign experience at a high level; the creation and expansion of sports spaces in the capital and on many of the outlying islands, including the goal of having a football pitch on every inhabited island and a projector in bars throughout the country for sports broadcasting; the organisation of the Beach Volleyball Pro Tour Challenge 2022 at the Sun Island Resort; the
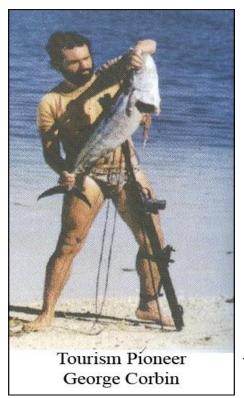
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[32] https://majlis.gov.mv/en/19-parliament/parliament-work/647
[33] https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/15912

Maldives Sports Awards at CrossRoads resort with an audience of eminent sportspeople such as Roberto Carlos, Charles Puyol, Giba, in an effort to showcase the country's present and aspired-to future sporting achievements. I will show the main of those strategies in the following paragraphs.

4.1.3 Sport for Tourists: Out of the bubble

The Maldives are well-known for the rich Underwater life of the Indian Ocean that surrounds them. Much of this fame is due to the Maldivian government's policy of protecting the islands' waters by carefully regulating the activities on offer. For this reason, sports fishing is a complement to the traditional "3S" (sun, sea and sand) holiday, and this makes these islands a favourite with many tourists who can practice various forms of the sport in a unique setting. Although fishing was one of the first attractions of the Maldives, the islands now offer a wide array of recreational water-based activities for tourists, including snorkelling, windsurfing, kite surfing, sailing and water-skiing. As metioned in the previous chapter, since the 1970s resorts have been the most iconic and successful tourism facilities in the Maldives (dell'Agnese 2018) and, from the early beginning, sport has played a significant role. The first tourists in the country began to combine leisure activities with a specific type of sport that won immediate success in the archipelago, spearfishing. Such a connection between travel destinations and practising sports gives rise to what we call sports tourism, in particular because Sport tourism requires travel in order to have a sporting experience. The destination is where the sport experience will take place (Ciampicacigli & Maresca, 2004).

Tourism Pioneer
George Corbin

Within their marketing, the proposed healthy lifestyle is characterised by various sports activities that can be practised both on water and on land. For the tourist, combining relaxation with the practice of one or more sports conditions the choice of destination, and also shapes the form of the accommodation facilities; sport plays a central role in the mechanisms of spatial and territorial planning and development as well, being "measurable". The role of sports in the recent/current development of tourism in the Maldives appears particularly relevant. Historically, in the period when Maldivian tourism was confined to resorts, sports were just another component of the overall tourism product (particularly water sports, but not only), which served above all to increase the variety of leisure activities.

Out of the bubble: Sports Spaces in Resort Planning: An Urban and Strategic Perspective
Resorts, often viewed as paradisiacal escapes from the tourist point of view, meticulously plan their spaces to fit the desires and preferences of their customers. This meticulous planning extends to the design and maintenance of sports spaces, which encompass facilities such as gyms, football pitches, tennis courts, and volleyball courts. The construction and upkeep of these sports spaces in resorts must be carefully considered from both an urban planning and strategic perspective, in the theory as I mentioned before as "architecture of pleasure" (King, 1997). From an urban planning standpoint, the creation of sports spaces in resorts necessitates meticulous thought. These spaces should not only be designed to function optimally but should also be maintained to always ensure usability in every season and adapt for different uses.

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Hurawali Resort Sport facilities. Source: https://www.hurawalhi.com/recreation/

This requirement becomes particularly even more important when a resort positions itself as a "sporty" destination, where a variety of sports activities are integral to the guest experience. Looking Shangri-La Resort in nearby Addu, for instance, strategically markets itself as a golf-centric destination, with the primary aim of attracting the American market. In such cases, sports spaces must align with the resort's core identity and provide guests with opportunities to engage in their preferred activities year-round.

Nine-hole golf Course designed and managed by Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts located at the southern end of Villingili Island. Source: https://www.1golf.eu/en/club/villingili-golf-course/

Secondly, a sports field in a resort can be an important marketing tool, as in the case of VIP hosting. Sports fields within resorts carry a strategic dimension, playing a pivotal role in enhancing the overall guest experience. It is not uncommon for exclusive resorts to offer guests the opportunity to interact and play with renowned athletes like Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic or footballers such as Icardi and Totti during their stay. These encounters, facilitated by well-designed sports spaces, add an exclusive and memorable dimension to the guest experience, aligning with the resort's premium positioning.

In Soneva Fushi Resort it was possible to be coached and have friendly match against #3 ranked tennis player Daniil Medveded. Source: https://www.dreamingofmaldives.com/maldives-blog/play-tennis-at-soneva-fushi-with-open-champion-daniil-medvedev/

During a holiday in the Maldives, resort services are increasingly trying to provide the most exclusive holiday possible. Apart from extremely luxurious solutions, where personalities of the caliber of sheikhs or superstars usually rent entire islands, privacy is fundamental in medium-high level resorts.

While luxurious services like in-villa dining and private massages are the hallmark of such exclusivity, the demand to break away from the confines of one's private sanctuary eventually arises. The bubble needs to be broken. Restaurants, although offering brief respites, only partially fulfill this necessity. Sports fields, on the other hand, become vibrant hubs where guests gather to socialize and engage in activities, becaming frequently the preferred spaces for guest socialization. After the initial days of relaxation, guests often gravitate towards beach volleyball, futsal, and watersports courts to meet fellow guests. These sports spaces serve as

natural points of socialization and often offer a sense of community within the resort environment.

Paradise Islands Resort: people playing in the "natural" point of socialization: the beach volleyball court. Photo by the author.

The social interaction within resorts transcends guest-to-guest encounters. Structures are often established to enable guests to engage with resort workers, providing a perception of authenticity (dell'Agnese, 2018). In some instances, resorts offer dual sports fields, one for guests and another for resort workers, creating opportunities for interaction.

Iru Veli Football pitch, used by the staff as recreational area. Photo by the author.

Manchester City star Ederson joined staff and guests at the Kandima resort. Source: The Sun.

Alternatively, when space is limited and is not possible to provide a space for a football ground, matches are organized on the beach.

Angsana Velavaru, a Resort without a football pitch. Match are organized on the beach. Photo by the author.

Moreover, within the sphere (or the bubble) of resort workers, an internal community thrives. Championship tournaments and cups involving resort employees are common, some lasting several days. From direct experience and also during the interview, I can say that for some of them, these tournaments are the only occasions they can temporarily leave the confines of the resort where they work. Such sporting tournaments serve as critical social outlets, offering workers respite and a sense of belonging.

Fihalhohi and Olhuveli compete at 2015 Sonee Sports Inter Resort Volleyball Tournament Final.
Source: https://hoteliermaldives.com/fihalhohi-and-olhuveli-compete-at-2015-sonee-sports-inter-
resort-volleyball-tournament-final/

In this analysis, I try to show that sports spaces within resorts play a multifaceted role, extending beyond their primary function. They serve as pivotal elements in both urban planning and strategic marketing, aligning with the resort's identity and offering unique experiences to guests. Furthermore, these spaces facilitate socialization among guests and provide an avenue for genuine interaction between guests and resort workers. Recognizing the significance of sports spaces in the resort landscape underscores the importance of meticulous planning and continuous maintenance to enrich the overall resort experience.

4.1.4 The Sports Ground as a Place for Meeting and Cultural Exchange: the case of Maldivian Gueshouse

Tourism is often considered as an example of the anthropological definition of a "Mauss's total social fact" (1922), to describe the complexity of its mechanisms, the interactions it creates, and the behaviours adopted by the guest and host communities. Tourism is thus a phenomenon whereby an intercultural encounter becomes a global question (Barberani, p. 57), or a "global cultural encounter" as defined by Goffman (1969) and Mac Cannell (2005). In the Maldives, using a global-to-local perspective, it is possible to notice that the relationship between host and guest has two specific boundaries: segregation in the resorts, or the growing "controlled interaction" in the guesthouses. Clearly, the total social fact of tourism influences the host-guest relationship to a greater extent in the guesthouse model. Travellers and the local population represent a kind of metonymic incarnation of their respective cultures (Barberani, 2006, p.58), in which the first category has an increasingly intrusive, curious attitude towards the host communities. The second one uses defence tactics to respond with gossip and comments, often taking a position similar to anti-tourism (dell'Agnese, 2018a, p. 17).

There are various reasons why a visitor might decide to stay in a guesthouse on the Maldives instead of in a resort. On the one hand, a dividing line is drawn by income, which limits access to the resorts. On the other hand, it is evident that the guesthouse market is targeting a different kind of tourism, the experiential holiday, creating a sensation of *depaysement* in the traveller (Bagnoli, 2016, p. 88). Those who opt for a stay in a Maldivian guesthouse are seeking an escape from the environmental bubble proposed by the resorts in search of the myth of an authentic experience which, until a few decades ago, was not possible (dell'Agnese, 2018c). The desire to encounter and interact with the local population has been seized upon by local tourist agencies, who propose trips outside of the protected space of the resort, to discover the "real" Maldives. Tourists choose this more dynamic type of holiday also with the aim of supporting local trade, both by consuming meals on-site and by staying at the guesthouses. Although this decision does not always mean taking a stand against the multinationals of the tourism industry, it is clear that all the resort's facilities cannot be found on the fishermen's

islands. Those have none of the luxury engineering found in the resorts, which means that a tourist will frequently encounter various inconveniences: mosquitoes, litter, and beaches without the usual amenities, to name a few. As highlighted, a characteristic of guesthouse tourism is the possibility of meeting locals outside of the work sphera. Tourists and locals have a different timetable, generally assumed in leisure and work time, causing a conflicting scenario with an evident ethical clash. As highlighted by Barberani (2006, p. 75), this difference can increase friction or lead to gradual but profound changes between the two groups. For example, a lack of respect for local moral norms is a significant issue in the Maldives, for reasons related to Islam. The potential strain caused by interactions between guest and host requires a policy of compromise and empathy. As remarked by Ellis, "An old brochure published by the Ministry of Tourism reads: your holiday in the Maldives will be memorable and happy if you remain in harmony with our traditions" (2008, p. 41). The interaction between the tourist community and locals usually consists of very short windows of time. Due to the cultural factors interwined with the tourist timetable, most of these encounters take place in the late afternoon, for example, during the "Maldivian" evenings hosted by staff. In this type of situation, sports activities and the spatial context become extremely important, as they are the places in which the exchange between tourists and locals is most successful.
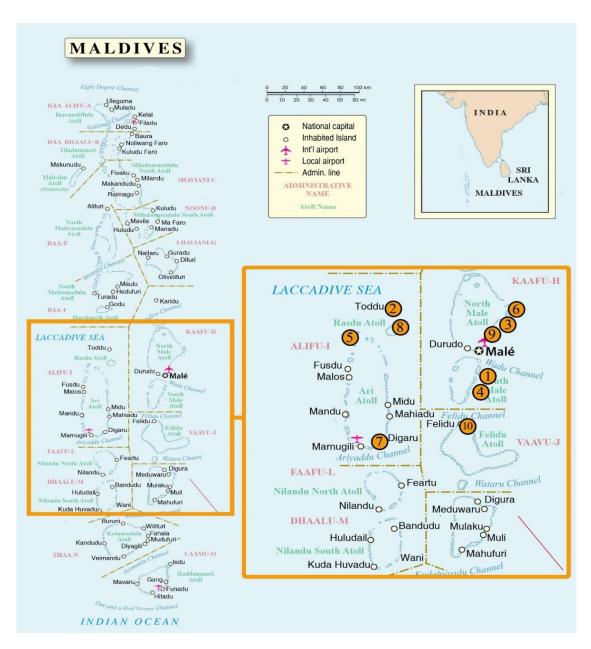
According to Zubair & Bowen, there is a strong dynamism within this growing guesthouse market and, at the same time, a great uncertainty regarding its management (2021). An interesting interpretative key to understanding this ever-changing sector can be sport, one of the great total social facts of the contemporary world. The interconnected sociological and anthropological aspects of sport are linked with the world of tourism and present a world full of gestures, rituals and dense phenomena (Geertz, 1987). As mentioned in chapter 2, despite certain prejudices, sports activities are not merely recreational because they play a central role in the production of culture; they are intertwined with power relations, integration, the transmission of culture, the representations of identity, as well as the market and communication. (Barba, 2021). Considering the structural planning and promotion of these resorts, in the previous paragraph I shown that sport emerges as an important part of marketing.

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A quick glance at the website Mondo Maldive[34] clearly shows that the average resort devotes a large amount of space to sports grounds, which are central points and venues for sports tourism. On the other hand, the impact of sports facilities on guesthouses has not been studied yet. Similar but different as in resort, sport on the fishermen's islands is often the preferred route out of the "ghettos" to which tourists are relegated. After the first few days of settling in, the effects of the *shari'a*[35] law and access limited to only the "bikini beaches" often means that tourists have exhausted the extent of what the island has to offer. Sport thus becomes an opportunity to encounter and talk to people. After a preliminary investigation of sport in guesthouse islands, I set up an empirical study involving the collection of data about land-based sports tourism on the guesthouse islands. Water sports are present, but they are practised independently, without any real contact with the local population. Since there is no sector literature, I have collected data about ten islands, which have been summarised in Table 1. Firstly, I analysed guesthouses with a minimum of 200 beds, in order to better test the effects of the availability of non-aquatic sports facilities in attracting tourists. Malé and Hulumalé have been excluded from Table 1 since they deserve a separate study for their peculiarities. The second filter I used was the time variable with regard to the detection of comments from tourists, taking into consideration only the period of 2014-2019, which represents the most rapid period of expansion of the guesthouse model, and thus excluding the Covid-19 period.

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[34] https://mondomaldive.it/it/
[35] Those details are given to tourist during their short brief at their arrival. Many oh them, does not even know Maldives is an Islamic country.

Map of Maldives with the location on the 10 guesthouses analysed. Source: United Nations, 2012, http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/. Edited by the author, 2021.

Finally, in the absence of any direct sources, I attempted to collect the percentages of interactions between tourism and sport through visual materials (such as Google Maps and Mondo Maldive) as well as from the main tourism industry databases such as Booking and Agoda. These sites were chosen because of their relevance for anyone arranging a holiday in

the Maldives; the first is for the European market and the second is for Asia. Along with these sites, I examined additional data from Tripadvisor, Expedia and Google Reviews. From this research, it was possible to note that land-based sports areas cover large areas of land.

This image shows the extension of a playground that generally occupies an island with guesthouses (Kurendhoo, in Lhaviyani Atoll. Source: https://www.booking.com/hotel/mv/explore-island-inn.it.html.

A search using filters and keywords such as "sport", "ground", "football" and "activities" etc., but also examining the facilities and the pictures on the official websites, brought up very low numbers with regard to cross-cultural encounters that take place during land-based sports and the promotion of encounters between tourists and locals. I have summarised this data in Table 1. The column for sports facilities refers to the space dedicated to non-water sports, which are found in all of the guesthouses. After collecting data from Booking and Agoda, using feedback from tourists that gives information about sports played with the local people, and after studying various photos and comments posted on relevant social media groups, I have noticed that there is a slowly-growing trend in sports advertising, among the guesthouses.

	Name of island and the atoll to which it belongs	Beds	Total number of guest houses	Land-based sport in the promotion of guest house	Land-based sport as tourist attraction listed in booking sites / total number of reviews	Percentage
1	Maafushi (Kaafu)	1348	41	49	63/5128	1,22%
2	Thodhoo (Alif-Alif)	412	20	0	6/1648	0,36%
3	Thulusdhoo (Kaafu)	395	17	15	17/2044	0,83%
4	Guraidhoo (Kaafu)	382	15	1	9/745	1,20%
5	Ukulhas (Alif-Alif)	332	25	53	34/3129	1,08%
6	Dhiffushi (Kaafu)	328	18	3	20/1919	1,04%
7	Dhigurha (Alif-Dhaal)	308	15	5	10/1555	0,64%
8	Rasdhoo (Alif-Alif)	284	21	17	22/1440	1,52%
9	Huraa (Kaafu)	210	13	0	6/924	0,64%
10	Fulidhoo (Vaavu)	202	15	1	4/683	0,58%

Table 1. Interaction between land-based sport and tourism on guesthouse islands, 2021 (MOT, 2019; data updated in 2019).

From the table, it can be seen that on these ten islands, which have a good number of beds, numerous reviews and a steady flow of tourists, sports facilities are present; yet the space dedicated to them in the marketing material is almost nil, approximately 1% of the total number. In the few comments available regarding sports, however, there is a notable mention of the use of these land sports facilities, a detail which will be investigated more carefully in the future, specifically through interviews with residents. Despite this factor, the sports areas in the guesthouses I analysed not only cover large areas of land, but they are also an active part of local development. For example, on some of the islands I visited between 2017 and 2023, such as Magoodhoo (Faaf Atoll), and Rinbodhoo (Dhaal Atoll), the island's sport facilities have recently been refurbished and extended, with the approval of the local people but also the owners of the guesthouses, who indirectly benefit from the venue and its use as a tourist attraction. During my fieldwork on the archipelago over recent years (2016-2023), I have noticed that the international language of sport enables a profitable exchange between tourists and locals on the sports grounds of the guesthouse islands. These areas are generally used after the locals have finished work for the day, and also by tourists who are looking to break up the

slow passing of relaxing time: in both cases, people meet up at the sports ground, which is the venue for a longtime ritual encounter. The main sport is football, which Maldivians have incorporated into their national identity through the formation of imagined communities across the archipelago (Anderson, 2018). At the same time, tourists also enjoy this sport and spend several hours playing it in the late afternoon. Football, as elsewhere, is a carrier of symbols, signs and rituals, a game that mediates the cultural encounter between locals and tourists. In fact, in the Maldives, football is the only sport played successfully outside national borders, as the local dimension is projected both actively and passively into the macrocosm of international football. It is possible to claim, in contrast to the non-place of the resorts, the sports grounds on the islands can be seen as hyper-place: they are areas whose own identity is easy to see, but more than that, they are areas that build an identity becoming referential markers that are recognised, and with which people can easily identify (Lassault, 2017). Considering the collected data, it would be interesting to take this analysis further with an ethnographic study, which could give us a better understanding of how this type of venue, despite being an identity marker, is not promoted in guesthouse marketing. This lack of advertising appears in opposition with the real situation, in which both the sports grounds and the time spent playing on them are relevant. Through additional field interviews, it would be possible to define the characteristics of an encounter on the sports pitch, and its particular significance as a privileged setting for cultural exchange between locals and tourists.

4.1.5 Sport for locals: Tournaments, Youth, School, Health, Community and Nation Building
Sport plays several important functions in the local islands of the Maldives, serving both as a source of entertainment and a means of cultural expression. In this paragraph I will present some of those functions, with the aim of enlight the sociological aspect with the particular geographical conformation of the country. As already explained, traditional sports and games are an essential part of Maldivian culture and heritage. Many of these activities, such as *dhandi biyaa* (a traditional stick-fighting game) and dhoni race (traditional boat racing), have been

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passed down through generations. Participating in and preserving these traditional sports helps maintain a connection to the rich cultural history of the Maldives.

Moreover sports, particularly in local islands that are frequented by tourists, offer economic opportunities. The presence of tourists provides the local population with avenues to engage in sports-related businesses (in particular with watersports). These opportunities include renting equipment, providing coaching and training services, organizing events and tournaments, and selling sports-related merchandise. As such, sports contribute to the economic diversification of local island communities often integrating the offer of local tourism with sport event. Traditional – or modern, it depends about resort facilities and the consequent bubble - sports and cultural events serve as unique attractions for tourists visiting local islands. These events add value to the tourism industry by offering tourists the opportunity to engage in and experience local customs and traditions. Tourism-driven sports activities create economic benefits for local communities and encourage cultural exchange between residents and visitors.

In addition to the functions of conservation of the heritage and economic opportunities, sport of course serves as a primary form of recreation and entertainment for residents of Maldivian local islands. People participate in various sports and physical activities to unwind, have fun, and maintain a healthy lifestyle. These recreational sports provide a break from daily routines and offer moments of joy and relaxation. In addiction, in particular after Covid-19 pandemic, schools and social centers promotes sport to develop physical fitness and good health encouraging an active lifestyle and helps individuals maintain their overall well-being.

In Maldives, schools are a particularly powerful institution. Alongside the schools' curricula, sports activity for children are encouraged and promoted. Interschool cups and championship, but also during everyday activities, sports provide an educational platform for local island residents. It imparts valuable life skills, including teamwork, leadership, discipline, and perseverance. These skills transcend the realm of sports and are transferable to other aspects of life. Sporting activities serve as a form of experiential education, helping individuals develop essential life skills that contribute to personal growth and social adaptability.

Another important function of sport in Maldives is the social inclusion. Sport promotes this by bringing people of all ages and backgrounds together. It offers a platform where individuals from diverse backgrounds can interact and build relationships, fostering a more inclusive and cohesive community. Is also very common in Maldivian Islands that when people grow up, generally take part in sport association as players, supporters, or just to be a part of something. Sports act as a social adhesive, bringing individuals within the local island communities together. Participation in sports events, whether as players or spectators, fosters a sense of camaraderie and social cohesion. Sporting competitions and gatherings create a shared space for community interaction and bonding, transcending age, gender, and social divides. Depending on the island, it is possible to notice how sports associations are sponsored by local but also from national politicians, providing jerseys, prizes for tournaments and so on. Another characteristic is how the teams are divided: for example, is possible to have islands with associations divided by the type of work or with less formal divisions.

Majeediyya School Under 12 football team, 1988. Photo from Majeediyya School FB group.

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Volleyball Tournament between local associations in Magoodhoo. Photo by the author.

Volleyball Tournament between local associations in Rinbodhoo (divided by works: Police against Social Center). Photo by the author.

Local sports provide a platform for talent identification and development. Emerging athletes often start their sporting journeys in local communities, where they are discovered and nurtured. The identification of sporting talent within these islands contributes to the broader national and international representation of the Maldives in various sports. It also serves as a source of inspiration for younger generations which can lead to successful sporting careers. The Maldives, however, even at the highest levels of each sport, do not have a real professional apparatus. The best athletes who play in the top leagues or in the national teams have a salary that is provided by some state offices, in which they must work during the hours not dedicated to sport. According to my interviewers in my fieldwork, many talents for this reason prefer to stay in local islands, where life is considered better and less expensive than Malé (where the major championships are held) and where they earn considerable sums in local or interatollary

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tournaments. Local tournaments, but also regional and atoll level, very often reach very high levels of competition. It is not uncommon for, as has been said, several members of a national team play for the local team or talents from different countries to be recruited.

Two big personalities, former national player Mohamed Nadheem and Youth national player Uushau Hassan are hired from President of Magoodhoo Council Abdulla Waheed to participate a regional tournament. Photo by the author.

Furthermore, maldivian local islands have produced talented athletes who have gone on to represent the Maldives at the national and international levels. Through this analysis, sports play a multifaceted role in the local islands of the Maldives, encompassing recreational, cultural, economic, and social functions. They are an integral part of the fabric of these communities, contributing to their well-being and cultural identity. Basically, sports bring local

communities together, and sporting events and competitions serve as opportunities for people to socialize, bond, and strengthen community ties. Whether it's a friendly football match or a traditional bodu beru competition, these events create a community bonding that is relevant in the Nation Building process. As I said in the previous chapter, the Maldives are made up of very small and fragmented islands. The creation of a sense of National Identity which feels the need, after the important changes in the economic and social sphere, to be strengthened and consolidated involves sport. As I mentioned football is the sport closer to be the national sport in Maldives, so I will take it as an example because is easier to show and discuss in my analysis. Football in the Maldives has witnessed significant development and growth, marked by notable milestones, evolving infrastructure, and a profound impact on the cultural and social fabric of the nation. Maldivian football has achieved discrete successes both domestically and internationally. In previous paragraphs I presented the starts of widespreading of football in the country. In front of those arising challenges, in 1982 the FAM, the Maldives Football Association, was born, and the following year the first Dhivehi Premier League, the highest state football championship, was played. Even today we will face eight teams: the first four of the previous tournaments, the two winners of zone 9 (the area of the capital Malè) and the two finalists of the mini tournaments involving the other islets (zone 1-8).

Match of Dhivehi Premier League. FAM Social Media.

The national team, affectionately known as the Red Snappers, has displayed commendable performances in various competitions. Notably, the Maldives national team clinched the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship in 2008, a historic triumph showcasing the talent and potential of Maldivian footballers on the regional stage. Furthermore, the Maldives has participated in numerous international tournaments, including the AFC Asian Cup qualifiers, underlining the country's growing stature in Asian football. More than other sports, football in Maldives creates Imagined Community (Anderson, 2008) serving as a unifying force, bringing people together and fostering a sense of pride and uniqueness as a Nation. Football pitches on islands throughout the archipelago have become communal spaces where people gather to support their local teams, nurturing a strong sense of community spirit but also to recognise themselves as maldivians serving as a common language that unites people, sparking conversations and fostering a sense of belonging. Football in the Maldives boasts a diverse range of leagues and competitions. At its zenith is the Dhivehi Premier League, the nation's top-tier tournament, renowned for its intense competition and role in determining the

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national champions. The Maldives FA Cup, a knockout tournament featuring teams from various divisions, adds an element of excitement to the football calendar. Noteworthy clubs like New Radiant Sports Club, Victory Sports Club, and Maziya Sports & Recreation Club have left a significant mark on the domestic football landscape. The dynamic and promising football scene in the Maldives continues to witness a growing passion for the sport. Football matches bring communities together, with supporters gathering in cafes, homes, and public venues to watch games, fostering a sense of unity and celebration becaming a Catalyst for National Unity and Community Development. The sport also acts as a catalyst for community development initiatives, inspiring youth engagement, promoting healthy lifestyles, and providing an avenue for talent identification and development.

Maldives National Football Team 1958. Photo in Dhiveen FB group by Sikka Mohamed Naseem.

Maldivian football team who went to LaReunion in 1979 to participate in Indian Ocean Island Games. Photo in Dhiveen Facebook group

In this sense it is useful to reflect on how sporting practice can be part of the process of governmentality theorized by Michel Foucault: for many political groups sport was seen as the means to create a new dimension of social space, in which to frame and organize the population; the means through which the State could organize "biopower", understood as planning of the individual through the care of the body, but also through the manipulation of the imagination (Nilsson, Wallestein 2013). Although this manipulation has hardly materialized in nations, it is evident that the political classes have tried to use sport as a tool for the construction of national identity. This has happened for two reasons: sport helps to create pedagogically the new man - an individual that could represent the stereotypes of a nation at home and abroad - of a specific nation state (Mosse, 1975). Secondly, the sporting spectacle through the media strengthens national unity around the symbol of the victory of a champion or a team that flaunts the symbols of the homeland: one's own imagined community is made tangible through what Billig

understands as banal nationalism (1995), or a feeling of belonging created thanks to the daily presence of symbolic objects (flags, scarves, posters, t-shirts). To conclude, the role of sport as an "iconographic glue" in the nation building process is well known (Koch, 2013). Sport functions as I mentioned as "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995), as it displays the symbols of the nation on shirts and in sports facilities, symbols that the media then bounce into everyone's homes. The participation of athletes and national teams in international competitions can also trigger collective emotions that lead to identity mechanisms. Just think of the "affective atmosphere" that is created when the national team wins a world tournament and the sense of togetherness that arises from it (Dittmer and Bos, 2019, p. 121). However, an identification mechanism at a national level can be triggered even in the absence of great successes. This is what is happening in this archipelago, which does not have an exceptional track record at a sporting level (indeed, which has never won practically anything), but which, nevertheless, gives sport ever greater weight and space, both at a national level, both at island level. In fact, as the Ministry of Sports website states, "Our task is to nurture a generation of productive young leaders, revitalize communities and promote sport as an essential tool for nation-building".

Most commong Maldivian banknote with a football player: a typical example of what is a banal nationalism. Source: https://en.numista.com/catalogue/note202014.html

4.1.6 Stadiums and sports spaces in small islands: strategies to promote sports in the Maldives

The Maldives, despite being a small island nation, boasts a few stadiums and sports facilities that play a crucial role in hosting various sporting events and promoting physical activities. While not as extensive as stadiums in larger countries, these facilities are essential for local sports and international competitions. In this paragraph I divide the discussion into two: the stadiums proper and the sports fields.

Stadiums

These stadiums and sports venues are essential for the development of sports and physical activities in the Maldives. They host a range of sports events, promote sports at the community level, and contribute to the country's sports culture. While the Maldives may not have the extensive sporting infrastructure of larger nations, these facilities are integral to the nation's sporting landscape. The construction of state-of-the-art stadiums and training facilities has been pivotal in the development of football in the Maldives. The Maldives National Football Stadium, also known as the Galolhu National Stadium, exemplifies the nation's commitment to the sport. With a seating capacity of over 11.000 spectators, it serves as the home ground for the national team and hosts various domestic and international competitions. Additionally, regional stadiums and training centers have been established across the archipelago, providing aspiring talents with world-class facilities for skill development.

National Football Stadium: Source: https://www.soccerbible.com/design/residence/residence-56-rasmee-dhandu-stadium-maldives/

Maldives National Team during a tournament in Kuredu. Source: https://raajje.mv/108452

Again, an aerial view of Malé from Social Media. This time, the focus will be on the two main stadiums: cricket and football. As it is possible to notice, those are the only 2 green spaces and the surface of the stadiums are remarkable in comparison to the island. The other green areas are the futsal Stadium and spaces for practicising sport (used mostly by schools).

Stadiums in Maldives due to their territory are widespread with the function to develop regional football. In this thesis, I will enlight the main ones before the analysis of Galolhu National Stadium. First of all, in Malé City in addition to the main stadium is notable the area of Dharubaaruge Indoor Stadium. Dharubaaruge is a multipurpose indoor stadium in Malé, primarily used for indoor sports such as badminton, table tennis, and basketball. It hosts various sports events and exhibitions, contributing to the development of indoor sports in the Maldives but also have an outdoor arena, in which Cricket Associations could train and host the national championship in Ekuveni Cricket Ground. As mentioned in the previous chapter, another social and political pole of the country in addition to Malé is Addu atoll. In this area, two are the main sport spaces: Addu Football Stadium, with a capacity of approximately 6,000 spectators and is

used for various domestic and international football matches and tournaments. Addu Sport Complex is a multifunctional sports facility that accommodates various sports, in addition to the nearby Shahid Mohamed Rameez Stadium (in the city of Hithadhoo). Those stadiums serve as a venue for various sports, including football, athletics, and volleyball but mostly those facilities are an important hub for sports activities in the southern region of the Maldives.

Others main stadiums in the country include Kanifing Football Ground in the northern region, Eydhafushi Football Ground and Nilandhoo Football Ground, that are a very famous hubs in promoting football and physical activities in their regions but also with a national echo, due to the success of their teams, and Koodoo Sports Arena in Gaafu Alifu Atoll, that play a significant role in fostering sports activities and competitions on the island. As it will develop in the next part, stadiums and sport spaces are part of the soft power of the Maldivian Parliament Strategy to consolidate the Nation Building in the archipelago. Stadiums, in fact, make up what is a constellation of sporting spaces where, as has been said, after Ameen's territorial planning they are extremely important political spaces in a fragmented country. As can be easily seen, these structures very often cover very large portions of the territory, a territory which has been said to be made up of 97% water and is therefore extremely important or, in most of the islands, a disputed place with tourism structures (instead of a Football Stadium, in the same space it can be possible to built several guesthouses, but sport spaces are strongly defended by the population). Government, particularly in the last mandate, has decided to build stadiums and sports facilities throughout the country as a part of a very specific strategy. First, to consolidate the soft power of the current government within the Maldives with the aim of strengthening its imagined communities. Secondly, as I was able to see from the interviews collected by Sport Minister Mahloof and various insiders, with these constructions governement is trying to alleviate overpopulation in Malé by investing in services in the peripheral islands. One example of this is the building of Laamu Stadium in Gan Atoll[36], a governative process with the with the

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[36] https://raajje.mv/91634

aim of decentralizing football in the Maldives. the stadium in the capital of Malé, in fact, urgently needs to be renovated and equipped with the services typical of new stadiums, typical of the English integrated (Tosi, 2018) model. For this reason, this stadium was built and official matches will be hosted by the Maldivian national team. In the coming years, however, for reasons of logic, a move of the stadium to the nearby island of Hulumalé is expected, both to have an integrated stadium and to be able to host demonstrations or socio-political events more easily.

Rendering of new football pitch in Malé City. Source: https://avas.mv/en/116503

In this thesis I am interested in returning to the football stadium in Malé. As has been noted, the stadium is urbanistically important, almost cumbersome, on an island of just a few square kilometres. However, as was presented in chapter 2, stadiums are and are part of the political landscape, to show one's status, as he calls them (Trumpbour, 2006) stadiums are the new cathedrals. What I would like to underline here, however, is the geopolitical dimension. The stadium where the Maldivian national team plays, in fact, was sponsored by the pro-Chinese

government of President Yameen. The stadium, therefore, forcefully becomes part of a geopolitical landscape. It is usual to consider donation/collaboration in the construction of a monument, a highway, not a stadium, within soft power and alliances. What I want to say is that the Maldives stadium is part of a political and geopolitical landscape, where this concrete gift is a landmark of an interest on the part of a great power towards an insular reality, not very large, but of great interest for the China. As will be shown in the next paragraph, in fact, China is one of the contenders trying to impose its soft power in the Maldives. The Maldives, from their point of view, are states seeking "safe haven alliances", where a small state seeks to benefit from policies delivered by larger states. Among the various projects in which the Maldives have been incorporated by China, we have the stadium, the extension of the airport and the China-Maldives friendship bridge, renamed Sinamalé Bridge. This bridge, shown in the previous chapter, connects the islands of Hulumalé and Malé. However, through the stadium, the bridge takes on another level of meaning, that is, a bridge that "imposes" the Chinese presence in the Maldives. Just like in other countries such as Tanzania, Angola, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Laos, Chinese stadium diplomacy is an effective geopolitical tool, where the stadium forms strategic partnership and enhance public image (Kellison & Cintron, 2017).

4.1.7 Strategies to promote sport in Maldives

In continuity with what was said above, the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Community Empowerment is trying to use sport as a means of soft power within the country on the one hand, but also to consolidate nation building and to promote sport even outside of on the island of Malé, trying to distinguish itself from Yameen's government which is more centralizing services in the capital. Firstly, the promotion has a great echo through communication. In the islands, it is very common to go into shops and see televisions with or the streaming of Indian TV series, otherwise sports, usually English-inspired such as cricket or football. The Maldives, which as mentioned above does not have a winning tradition on the international scene, however, insists a lot on sports communication. An example above all is the Hululé Airport, where football videos and/or English Premier League matches are shown in the waiting room

instead of the traditional daily news. Precisely for this reason, the government in the person of Ahmed Mahloof is trying to spread this process even further, through a plan that will have the aim of distributing a projector in every inhabited island (and in every café) to be able to broadcast football matches.

Furthermore, the promotion of sport passes through the peripheral islands. This government, as has been said, is trying to further accelerate decentralization. A great example is the work of sports minister Mahloof who in recent years has implemented English-inspired academies in several peripheral islands. Within the local islands, therefore, government projects are part of educational projects aimed at searching for young talents but also at creating sports facilities on the islands where they are not yet foreseen.

Minister of Youth, Sport and Community Empowerment Ahmed Malhoof inaugurating football and handball academy in Magoodhoo island. Source: Magoodhoo Council Social Media.

Regarding the structures, not only the stadiums have been built and have had a great impact in recent years. In the last government in particular, many islands were involved in projects for

the construction or reconstruction of sports spaces, both on the resort islands and on the local islands. the opening of new sports fields on the local islands, as has been said, are planned differently from a resort, although they are nevertheless political spaces in the same way. Football fields, as I will show in the following images, very often occupy very significant portions of islands in a country where space is an essential element and the fact that it is given to sport shows how it is an important factor in the current politics of the Maldives.

K.Gureidhoo football court. Source: https://sports.gov.mv/en/publications

Implementing of tuft during the building of new football court on local island. Source: Ministry of Sport Ahmed Mahloof personal page of Instagram

Rasdhoo football pitch. Source: Social Media.

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Male tennis complex surface has been completely changed with a new surface to ATP standards (MOYSCE)

4.1.8 From Malé, to Magoodhoo and back

To conclude this section, I would like to show here a specific case study of my fieldwork. within this example, I try to illustrate how sport can justify spatial extension mechanisms such as land reclamation. In the third chapter, I outlined the scope and importance of land reclamation in the Maldives, which is driven by the need to promote sustainability first and foremost (in terms of protecting against the adverse effects of climate change) and economic development. The reclaimed sections of the islands move the core of settlements away from the sea (thus making them safer during events such as tsunamis, strong winds, and violent monsoons) and also raise the island above sea level, in preparation for projected future rises. These factors, together with the growing need for housing and global challenges such as tourism, underpin the drive to reclaim land.

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As I will show now, sport is a significant ingredient in the political and communications dynamics related to land reclamation programmes. The reading offered here focuses on one of the main implications of this practice, namely the creation of new spaces for sporting activities and sports facilities, which are built as a result of the new urban landscape and the politics of consensus that is implemented in it. Sport is at the centre of multiple interweaving dynamics, including tourism policy, identity-related and social dimensions, local branding and territorial development strategies, and political relations. Sport lends support for land reclamation by contributing to promoting local areas and offers a mechanism whereby local political leaders and councils can enhance their relations with the superordinate territorial scales.

In this section, I will go deep in a specific case that illustrates how sport can function as an effective vehicle for soft power on a Maldivian Island, Faaf-Magoodhoo. Scrutiny of sport and its infrastructures can shed light on social ties, and political and economic relations and narratives, thus enhancing our understanding of local contexts. Tournaments and sporting events help to define the status of specific places/islands within the atolls where they are situated, as well as vis-à-vis the central government. Soft power mechanisms and relationships in the Maldives are shaped by insularity given the country's archipelagic geographical conformation. Indeed, political relationships from the local to the international level are often the outcome of the interaction between sport, business, and power.

The case study of Faaf-Magoodhoo that I present here is particularly emblematic. First, because it is an example of a Maldivian island that has been focusing on a certain type of urban development. It has been also the main location of the authors' fieldwork for the past several years. Faaf-Magoodhoo Council has invested in the development of the island mainly via port and land reclamation projects. The island hosts the MaRHE Centre (Marine Research and High Education), which was officially inaugurated on 28 January 2009 in the presence of former President Mohamed Nasheed, a research centre whose mission is to conduct fieldwork in the areas of tourism, human geography, and the environmental, marine and biological sciences[37].

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[37] https://marhe.unimib.it

Combining the approaches of cultural, island, and sports studies, our research entailed the integration of several techniques: participant observation; analysis of visual materials (images, video, and maps) and government documents; semi-structured interviews with local community actors on the island of Magoodhoo and with local/national actors involved in sports (politicians, players, coaches, ministry officials); analysis of secondary data made available by the Maldives government and local authorities; and direct involvement on the part of one of the authors as an assistant coach of the Magoodhoo men's volleyball team in 2022.
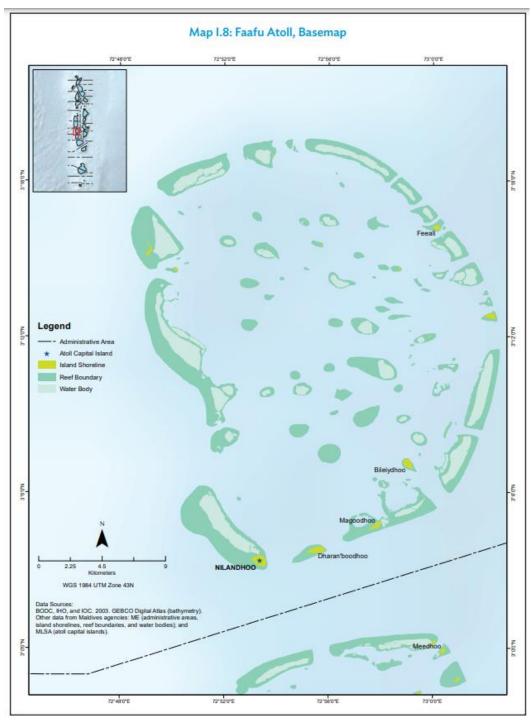
Why in Magoodhoo?
*"*During the past decade, the Maldives changed too. The implementation of the Decentralization Act in 2010 that afforded more powers to local island councils, allowing guesthouse tourism in inhabited islands (something that was banned under the 1978–2008 regime), as well as improving ferry services between islands, has all transformed hitherto remote and often impoverished islands into much wealthier and attractive places to live. No longer are Maldivians forced to move to Malé to seek work: many can now earn a good income working in their home islands." (Mohamed Nasheed, in Malatesta et al, 2021). This small portion of a speech by former President of the Republic, Mohamed Nasheed, emphasises that the recent opening up of the guesthouse market and the Decentralisation Act have given an unprecedented boost to local development on the islands. The island of Magoodhoo is located in the Faaf Atoll, 135 km South-West of Malé. The name of the atoll may be translated as 'North Nilandhoo Atoll'. It is over 30 km long and 25 km wide and is the second least populous atoll in the country after Vaavu Atoll, with about 6,000 inhabitants (2021).
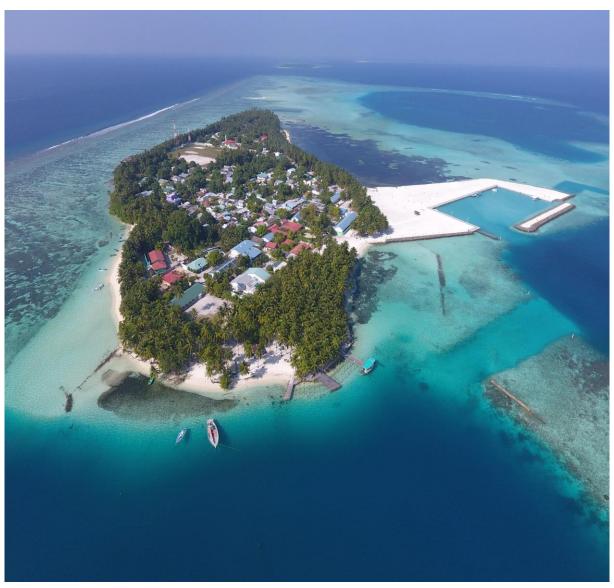
A first glance at the map reveals that inhabited islands are concentrated along the 'half-moon' of the southern border, in Nilandhoo, Faaf-Magoodhoo and Bilehdhoo, thus facilitating the flow of people and goods in this area. These three islands the majority of the atoll's population, along with its schools, healthcare centres, main moorings for deep-sea fishing fleets, local transport network, and, of course, sports facilities. In light of this basic consideration, we can already

deduce that Faaf-Magoodhoo occupies a hierarchically significant position within the political and social life of the atoll.

A further consideration is that until 1999 Faaf-Magoodhoo was the administrative capital of the atoll and the seat of the supra-local government. This brought about the construction of infrastructure to house officials and the celebration of public functions, the main hospital for the entire atoll, the largest school in the region, and the main docking point for commercial traffic. Faaf-Magoodhoo underwent significant phases of transformation during the final decades of the 20th century, which allowed it to establish a hegemonic position underpinned by its function as the capital and visibility in the construction of public spaces (Malatesta et al., 2016). It is evident from the photograph below that the island's institutional spaces, such as its office and administrative complexes, the research centre, or sports and religious facilities occupy a significant portion of the built-up area.

Map I.8: Faafu Atoll, Basemap

Legend
- − − Administrative Area
- ★ Atoll Capital Island
- Island Shoreline
- Reef Boundary
- Water Body

Feeali

Bileiydhoo

Magoodhoo

Dharan'boodhoo

NILANDHOO

Meedhoo

N

0   2.25   4.5   9
Kilometers

WGS 1984 UTM Zone 43N

Data Sources:
BODC, IHO, and IOC. 2003. GEBCO Digital Atlas (bathymetry).
Other data from Maldives agencies: ME (administrative areas,
island shorelines, reef boundaries, and water bodies); and
MLSA (atoll capital islands).

Map of Faaf Atoll. (Maldives Atlas Multi-hazard Risk 2020).

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A photograph of Faaf-Magoodhoo island illustrating that the institutional buildings and football pitch take up a disproportionate share of the inhabited space (Photo by Luca Fallati).

The island in 2023, following the most recent land reclamation interventions (Photo by Ammadaj Siraj, 2022).

This position allowed Faaf-Magoodhoo to benefit for a number of years from privileged channels for selling local products and accessing public transport, conferring it with advantages over neighbouring islands: "in this sense, the island … found itself for years at the centre of a network of very relevant relations on a supra-local and regional scale'" (Malatesta et al, 2016, p.14).

Consideration of the island's administrative status is particularly key to our analysis here because Faaf-Magoodhoo has a peculiar relationship with Nilandhoo, its main counterpart within the social, political, and economic life of the atoll. In 1999, as part of a broader transfer of power, Nilandhoo was appointed capital of the atoll instead of Faaf-Magoodhoo, a move that clearly led to the enhancement of the two islands' administrative and political status.

Indeed, as a result of the change, the central hospital, the atoll's new government buildings, the leading school hubs, the main fishing docks, public transport terminals, and fish processing facilities were all relocated to Nilandhoo. The economic and political downgrade imposed by the central government has shaped the current political status of the island.

Sport in Faaf-Magoodhoo

I would want now to examine the use of sport by leaders and councils to promote development projects, soft power in consensus building, and sport as a bargaining tool in Faaf-Magoodhoo. Faaf-Magoodhoo Councils have launched several projects involving sport. In keeping with the nation as a whole, the men in the island community have displayed a keen interest in football since the 1970s, thanks to the British influence, while the women continued to play the traditional sport of *bashi*, although the latter has died out recently.

   The football pitch is the main landmark in the area, which is of great importance in terms of urban planning. Furthermore, it is due to be renovated over the next few months (early 2023) with a view to better 'showcasing' Magoodhoo to its neighbouring islands, both as a key island within the atoll. Several other facilities have recently been upgraded along with the football pitch: work on a new volleyball court was initiated towards the end of 2022, and a new guesthouse was opened close the football grounds. In addition, in spring 2023, the school's

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kindergarten building is due to be reduced in size, making way for a multi-sports field for the pupils. Over the past two years, volleyball has become one of the main sports practised on the island. This is due to an initial project to promote and invest in the local team as a means of boosting the local area, with the full support of the Island Council. There is also renewed interest in the upkeep of the sports fields, the expansion of the outdoor fitness area, and the daily practice of volleyball, which has largely replaced football. This shift in sports activity is also reflected in the construction of a beach volleyball court just off the MarHE Centre campus, with a view to providing a softer surface to play on and facilitating matches between residents and students.

Faaf-Magoodhoo sports grounds. (Ammaday Siraj, 2022)

The recent construction of sports facilities feeds into an ongoing relevance of sports in the local agenda. Magoodhoo Island has exploited a range soft power dynamics within the domain of sport. This has included the co-opting of international level actors. An example is the hiring in 2018 the author as the coach of the women's volleyball team and subsequently as coach to the men's soccer team in preparation for the qualifying round of the *Minivan Championship 2018 cup*. In light of the new enthusiasm for volleyball, the island council realised that this sport offers a potential means of challenging Nilandhoo, which has a stronger tradition of soccer. This led in the following years to the setting up of various volleyball associations, and especially a men's volleyball team that trains intensively, thus moving into a space that was previously predominantly female.

Upcoming political and administrative elections are at the heart of consensus-building projects surrounding sport, especially over the past six years, as born out by the lively sports scene in Faaf-Magoodhoo[38]. Recent projects have seen new initiatives, including the expansion of five local sports associations (both male and female) as well as the further development of the Island's Youth Centre.

Rajjee Atoll Volleyball Championship 2022

The Rajjee Atoll Volleyball Championship 2022 was a tournament that took place over almost a month across the different atolls of the Maldives. The subtitle of the tournament, "a tournament for all Islands", emphasised the government's will to involve the outlying islands. This competition proceeded by administrative-geographical levels, with teams initially playing off against the others from their own atoll, and proceeding to higher territorial levels, with the final being played at the national level. In Magoodhoo, the Council did remarkable work, bidding successfully against Nilandhoo, the capital of the atoll, to host the local stage of the tournament. The local matches began on 11 March 2022 and the preparatory work for the event saw strong involvement on the part of the entire island population. First, the sports facilities

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[38] The reading offered here should be viewed in light of the various electoral contests that are held in the country. The next general elections are due to be held in September 2023.

were significantly modified: spaces were enlarged nearby the court, access for security and emergency personnel was enhanced, and a broadcasting stage and official gallery with executive seats for the national and local authorities were built. Subsequently, work was done on the surface of the court, while the nets, balls, lines, and other technical equipment were replaced, using financial support from the Government. In addition to the preparation of the space and infrastructural interventions, key emphasis was also laid on the sporting outcome. Magoodhoo Island Council invested relevant energies and adopted several strategies to get the highest possible standard.

Event Poster

First, the council set out to optimise the preparation of the team from a technical point of view. Its primary move was hiring a coach of national calibre to lead the men's team, Mohamed

Nadheem, a former national player of both volleyball and soccer in the 1990s, with one of the authors of this chapter as assistant coach. For the women's team, the council engaged former player Shaira Adam, who had also played volleyball at the national level in the Maldives. Players who usually reside in Malé were also invited to participate. For the occasion, they negotiated time off work to be able to train with the local team at least twice a day. In some cases, the services of semi-professional players were purchased. Thanks to sponsorship and state funding, event T-shirts were also provided to all the players and their entourages. Interestingly, a former player on the National Youth Team, despite residing in the nearby (and competing) island of Feeali, preferred to play with the Magoodhoo colours. This raises the theme of relational tensions between the islands, and the role of sport as a key means of communication. In the context of sporting competitions, the residents of different islands invite one other over, compete, fight, unite or fall out, as in any "derby" among local sports teams. Players residing in given islands of the atoll but registered in others were the object of debate, whistling during matches, and gossip, which in the Maldives functions as a true social regulator (Colton, 1995). In some cases, matches were suspended or a team withdrew, not showing up to the final prize-giving ceremony, as in the case of the aforementioned Feeali. All the teams from the atoll's islands attended the Volley Rajjee Atoll Tournament on Magoodhoo: Magoodhoo, Feeali, Byledhoo, Nilandhoo and Dharaboodhoo. The Island Council also inaugurated a male Football Academy and a female Handball Academy at the opening ceremony of the volleyball tournament. Underlying this move is the fact that Nilandhoo already had its own Football Academy. Furthermore, the ceremonies were in keeping with the agenda of the Minister of Sport: to encourage the practice of sport on every inhabited island.

   The event also triggered multiple other related dynamics. In the first place, as already outlined, it prompted the improvement of the sports facilities and the reorganisation of urban areas with relevance to the tournament. The small number of accommodation facilities were placed under severe stress in attempting to host, often with little notice, entire teams and their back-up squads. Undoubtedly, such an important tournament also influenced the local tourist sector, or the hosting of Maldivians by other Maldivians. Much of the accommodation was in

guesthouses paid for by the Island Council, but these could not cope with the number of guests generated by a tournament of this size. The visit of the Minister of Sport, the Presidents of the Volleyball Federations, national referees and their entourage of almost 60 people, alone absorbed all the accommodation laid on by the council. Consequently, various alternative strategies were deployed to accommodate the large influx of people. Support was requested from "external" institutions, such as the MaRHE Center, or overnight stays were set up informally with friends residing on the Island. In addition, public transport was intensified to allow the teams and their supporters to move easily to and from Magoodhoo, with the provision of an almost daily service instead of the usual weekly one. In sum, embedded in a sporting fixture, we can observe differential relationships among islands, infrastructural development, and political agenda.

Long waves

Describing land reclamation processes in the Maldives, sport, and one key event such as the Atoll Rajje Tournament, allows me to observe several connections:

-The relationships between islands and local actors

A sports tournament such as the Rajjee Atoll Volleyball Championship 2022 points up the political relations inherent in sport. For example, we may note the case of Feeali, which throughout this tournament expressed internal tensions with Magoodhoo or some of its players. Nilandhoo on the other hand, although it is the current capital of the atoll, did not host the tournament. Sport, in this sense, is a tool that can re-shape the balance among islands, giving, even for a short lapse of time, Magoodhoo a new centrality. The relationships at different scales that were on display during this tournament convey the notion that the local islands, albeit peripheral and distant from Malé, can have considerable impact on national politics, as borne out by the publicity received by the event and the visit of the Sports Minister to the Island. In addition, intra-archipelagic relations and political negotiations show that relationality, connections, and local alliances are what truly define islands politics. In the case of Faafu Atoll,

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one of the least populated atolls with the smallest number of inhabited islands, it is clear that the relationship between Magoodhoo and the capital Nilandhoo is emblematic of this complex network of connections. The sports tournaments that are organised in the atoll with variable frequency contribute significantly to maintaining more constructive political relations that would otherwise be compromised by frictions that are still very much alive. Tournaments between these two islands and exchanges of players may be seen as largely reflecting a policy of pacification (Melli, 2020). Sports tournaments are also one of the few if not the only reason to travel to a neighbouring island to support one's local team. This leads to the renewal of family ties, increased uptake of car hire and accommodation services, and a general boost to the local economy. However, it can also serve the purposes of claiming or defending one's local territory or reaffirming established political hierarchies.

-The infrastructure

Thanks to both national and local policies, sports spaces were built or renovated and a short-term boost was provided to the construction of other spaces. Possible knock-on benefits of this emphasis may relate to future infrastructural development on Magoodhoo. Furthermore, sports policies for young people such as setting up of dedicated academies have great impact in a country like the Maldives, constituting one of the cornerstones of building consensus in the local islands. Moreover, the Rajjee Atoll Volleyball Championship 2022 has been, for Faaf-Magoodhoo, one of the leading national-level events of recent years. Indeed, the visits to the island of "legends of Maldivian Sport" and the Minister of Sport Ahmed Mahloof boosted the competitiveness of the tournament and the participation, as well as offering an opportunity to players seeking more lucrative contracts in Malé to show off their talent. Some of the players that took part in the tournament have since participated in other events and are attempting to become pros on the main island.

A sporting event of this type also intertwines with the dynamics of tourism. The accommodation and food hospitality offered (a bar and a bakery/pizza restaurant were opened during the tournament), the additional visitor services, the press and social media coverage, the

enhancement of local transport services, and the embellishment of the port all bear the potential to foster the growth of both local and international tourism.

In terms of its medium-term spin offs, the case of the Atoll Rajje Tournament is even more interesting. The strategies implemented by the Faaf-Magoodhoo Council leverage sport to attain more ambitious aims than the mere "promoting of sport on the Island". Advocating for a large land reclamation project that will involve the whole island, the Council is seeking a solution, as in Hulumalé, to respond to local people's needs for more stable job opportunities and a better housing situation. The tournament was an opportunity to show the Minister of Sport the island of Magoodhoo needs a new and large-scale reclamation project to follow the development of the new port in 2017. Therefore, this tournament served as a valuable showcase not only for the players, but above all for the island, pointing up the fact that its living space and facilities are currently at the limit of their capacity, but that it offers potential centrality in the atoll. After the tournament, the reclamation project was approved with great enthusiasm by the local administration. The reclamation intervention that began in September 2022 involves the pumping of sand to clear 17 hectares of land to be used for housing or public facilities that will generate employment. Magoodhoo's land reclamation project, however, does not end there. Indeed, not only the area adjacent to the port will be enlarged, but also the far end of the island. Here the Magoodhoo Island Council, again soon after the volleyball tournament, won a public tender for the construction of a domestic airport. Under a recent scenario, every atoll must have an airport, and Faafu was one of the last to get one. Again, with great political acumen, the Council, guided by Abdulla Waheed, got the approval for an even more extensive reclamation project: airport reclamation operations over 30.8 hectares, construction of a 3.339 sp. m revetment, and a 90 sq. m cave. The value of the project is MVR 206.88 million (source: Maldives Transport and Contracting Company Plc).

A project of this type will place Faaf-Magoodhoo and the nearby areas on a new communications level, as well as enhancing local accommodation facilities and transport. Furthermore, these policies have brought visibility to the island, which has recovered a political

role that it had not filled for a long time. The importance of Faaf-Magoodhoo within the insular dynamics of the atoll and on the national political chessboard could be re-visited.

-An "in progress" reclamation project and some future ideas

Sport offers a lens for learning about multiple aspects of a society. The innovative approach of this study lies in its in-depth analysis and focus on the peculiar geographical characteristics of the Maldives. More specifically, our case study shows how sports tourism interacts with soft power at both the local and national levels. It is also of value to study sports tourism in the Maldivian archipelago in light of the country's distinctive characteristics; its fragmentation, centre-periphery paradigm, and isolated image among those who do not live there all make it a privileged territory for observing relational dynamics. Sport is a resource for local development, largely thanks to its high visibility and attractiveness to tourists. Alongside this "manifest function", it fulfills various "latent functions". First, it drives employment, mutual alliances, and political manoeuvring; second, it offers a focus for economic strategies (land reclamation, urban development, land use); finally, as a key factor in the contemporary geopolitics of the Maldives, it contributes to the country's internal cohesion policies (at different scalar levels: island, atoll, archipelago) as well as its international positioning.

The case study of the Faaf-Magoodhoo stage of the Rajjee Atoll Volleyball Championship 2022 produced several outcomes. First, it certainly enhanced the island's image within the atoll and contributed to a rearrangement of the local chessboards. Also, at the end of the event, the Magoodhoo women's team won their category (and got into the next stage) while the men's team ranked second, with the (potential) effect of temporarily quelling enthusiasm for the sport. While the football and handball academies undoubtedly generated an initial boost in interest among young people, this has waned over time, as the teenage population typically moves to Nilandhoo or Malé to pursue their education and given the total absence of a management structure in terms of coaches, staff, and players. An interesting ongoing process is that the strategies deployed to date in conjunction with sport have both incentivised sports spaces (such as the beach) and at the same time left them empty. A clear reflection of this is Faaf-

Magoodhoo's preclusion, due to a lack of players, from the inter-zonal football tournament, which is relatively important at the national level. Finally, I should report an interesting turn in the Faaf-Magoodhoo reclamation project: sports spaces share their previous central role with the project of the new airport. These latter considerations show how land reclamation is becoming increasingly central to the political agendas of the local islands and how it should be understood not only as an engineering strategy, but also as one of the constantly evolving forces that define the geography of the archipelago.

Maagodhoo Sports Arena during Rajjee Atoll Volleyball tournament. Source: Magoodhoo Social Club

Magoodhoo football pitch (as volleyball court) after reclamation was involved in project of rebuilding. Source: Council's Social Media

4.2 Sport diplomacy between China, India and Saudi Arabia

Size sometimes doesn't matter. But location matters. Therefore, it does not matter whether the Maldives have a truly limited surface area of land or whether they boast a population barely larger than that of a neighborhood in Milan. Or at least, it doesn't have a lot of it. What matters instead is that they are in the middle of the Indian Ocean, straddling important maritime communication routes between East Asia and the Middle East (Zahir, 2021), such as the east-west shipping route that transports oil from the Middle East to East Asia; expect them to be a few hundred nautical miles from India; it is also important that, just to the south, there is the US base of Diego Garcia (Schmidt and Malatesta, 2020). Given the growing importance of the Indian Ocean in the context of the increasingly marked strategic rivalry between India and China (Frankel, 2011), the position attributes considerable importance to the Maldivian state as

a potential military piece, and makes it a fundamental stage of the monumental project of transcontinental infrastructural development, promoted by Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a result, the foreign policy of the Maldives is heavily influenced by the strategies of China and India, even if the weight of the two powers fluctuates, in relation to local political fluctuations (Ranjan, 2021). Since gaining independence (1965), the Maldives have essentially remained aligned with a pro-Western position (so much so that they opened relations with China only in 1972), until the end of the 1980s, when India did not hesitate to intervene militarily to eradicate an attempted coup (1988), and then to award, less than a decade later, significant economic aid in the fields of health and education (Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, 1995; Maldives Institute of Technical Education, 1996). In those years, even if not in a strategically formalized way, the idea began to emerge that India was the natural ally for the Maldives, so much so that, in the first decade of the 2000s, it also allowed the deepening of relations in terms of defense and security (Kumar, 2016), but also sport[39].

As regards China, however, relations have become very significant since 2013, following the rise to power of Abdullah Yameen: then there was the visit of Xi Jinping (14-16 September 2014, the consequent support guaranteed from the Maldives to the BRI, the construction of the China-Maldive Friendship Bridge, later renamed Sinamalé, which connects the capital island with the residential suburb of Hulumalé, as well as the signing, in 2017, of a Free Trade Agreement, the first bilateral agreement signed by the Maldives). Subsequently, after Yameen was (perhaps only momentarily) ousted from Maldivian politics, India began to be privileged again over China by the new president, Ibrahim Solih, elected in 2018, and official government policy returned to being " India First". Solih's policy, which aims to favor India for economic and defense partnerships, has however triggered an "India Out" campaign, conducted by opposition parties via media and social media (many of the comments characterized by the hashtag #indiaout on Twitter accused India of having a military presence in the country, or of having rigged the elections; others insinuated that the Indians present in the Maldives had

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[39] https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/sport-others/india-extends-usd-40-million-for-bolstering-sports-infrastructure-in-maldives-eam-jaishankar-8392148/

increased the local crime rate, or replaced Maldivians in some employment sectors) (Shivamurthy , 2022[40]). In April 2022, the campaign was blocked by decree by Solih. Apparently, the Maldives' relations with China are, for now, only commercial and financial, while those with India also touch on more sensitive dimensions, linked to national security and defence. However, relations with the third privileged actor on the Maldivian scenarios, Saudi Arabia, are of a different nature. Again, relations consolidated during Yameen's presidency. Thus, in 2014 an initial loan was given for the construction of ten mosques, then a subsequent, much more substantial one, for the construction of a large mosque, in Malé, dedicated to King Salman and inaugurated in 2021; student exchanges, scholarships, madrassas have also arrived; in 2017, even the project relating to the purchase of an entire atoll (that of Faafu), which then faded away. In those years, the Maldives followed in the footsteps of Saudi foreign policy, closing its diplomatic relations with Iran and Qatar. With the return of Solih's pro-India line, relations with both countries have instead been reopened (Ranjan, 2023[41]).

In this phase, the Maldives have ventured into the creation of a new infrastructure connection project (the largest, after Sinamalé), in this case financed by India: the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP), a system of roads and bridges 6.74 km long, of which 3.6 km are over water, which will connect Malé with the nearby islands of Villingli, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi (the Sinamalé bridge, after all, is only 1.4 km long).

From ping pong tables to stadiums: sport diplomacy arrives in the Maldives

"Foreign Affairs Minister Abdulla Shahid said that the Hulhumalé National Stadium, built with the help of China, will be considered the symbol of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Maldives and China." Thus opens an article, published on

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[40] Some reflections about India's dilemma or India out in: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/maldives-india-first-or-india-out

[41] Cfr. also in: https://edition.mv/diplomatic_relations/21350. On Maldives- Saudi Arabia connections https://edition.mv/diplomatic_relations/21350.

January 9, 2022 on a Maldivian online news channel[42]. According to the same article, the stadium, which "represents the friendship between the Maldives and China", adds to other interventions "generously assisted by China", such as the Sinamalé bridge, the housing units in Hulhumalé and the expansion of Velana International Airport. This "assistance" was not free: in 2018, the Maldives' debt to China reached 1.5 billion dollars (Kugelman, 2021), so much so that China was accused (by former president Nasheed) of having dragged the Maldives into its debt trap. India, if it can build a longer bridge, cannot build another football stadium. He has to play cricket. In April 2019, President Solih was invited on a private visit to India, to attend an Indian Premier League match between the Royal Challengers Bangalore and the Chennai Super Kings (who then signed a cricket shirt and bat and the gifted to the Maldivian head of state) and to meet some representatives of the Indian Cricket Board, "regarding the cricket stadium that India is developing in the Maldives, in an attempt to promote this sport in the island nation"[43]. To welcome the re-establishment of privileged friendly relations, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came on an official visit at Maldives a few months later, bringing Maldivian President Solih a cricket shovel, with the signature of the Indian national champions[44]. Modi, during his 2019 visit, also declared that his country would help promote cricket in the Maldives "to strengthen people-to-people relations"[45]. The project for a large cricket stadium, built to the highest international standards and built (like the football stadium promoted by the Chinese) on the artificial island of Hulhumalé, was thus approved in 2020.

India, therefore, has also launched a cricket version of stadium diplomacy in the Maldives. With some additional difficulties: while the love for football on the part of the Maldivians seems difficult to counteract, given that almost all the islands have a football pitch, and that both men and women play football, the love for cricket, despite the existence of a Cricket Board of Maldives since 1983 appears to be rather limited. So much so that some define the operation as

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[42] https://en.sun.mv/71668
[43] https://oneonline.mv/en/8578
[44] So Modi said in a tweet: "My friend, President [Ibrahim Mohamed Solih] is an ardent cricket fan, so I presented him a cricket bat that has been signed by #TeamIndia playing at the #CWC19". https://oneonline.mv/en/10653
[45] https://www.cnbctv18.com/politics/focus-on-cricket-diplomacy-as-pm-modi-gifts-bat-to-maldives-president-solih-signed-by-the-indian-cricket-team-3624971.htm

a new, major test, aimed at exerting cultural pressure on India's part. From this point of view, China seems to have scored a goal. India has no choice but to turn to alternative sports: an announced loan of 40 million dollars should help the Maldives develop synthetic tracks on some islands, as well as facilities for badminton, volleyball, table tennis and basketball, also on the islands, and to create the first national centers for basketball and volleyball. The Maldivian sports minister, Ahmed Mahloof, declares in this regard that "the history of sporting ties between the Maldives and India is being written"[46].

However, diplomacy does not only pass through ministerial channels and central levels of the state. In the case of sports diplomacy, agreements can also be made between private entrepreneurs and important teams (and the fact that Chinese entrepreneurs own some important football teams in the European championships, so loved by the Maldivians, may not go unnoticed even on the islands). This also involves minor sports: in the case of the Maldives, for example, agreements between the Chinese Province of Yunnan and the Maldivian table tennis association were signed in the spring of 2023. In July 2023, some members of the first team of Maldivian players who participated in a tournament in China (in 1973) were invited back to China to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the event (following which, in 1975, the Chinese then gifted ping pong tables and equipment to the Maldivians, and sent a coach; this initial form of ping pong diplomacy led the Maldives to win their first international sporting title: the bronze medal in the 1978 Indian Ocean Island Games[47]).

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[46] https://www.wionews.com/india-news/we-are-writing-history-in-maldives-india-sports-ties-maldives-sports-minister-367522
[47] https://edition.mv/sports/28444

Table tennis ge raajjeyge qawmee team China gai, 1973. Source: Mohamed Musthafa Hussain

While China and India are spending their money on the sporting front, Saudi Arabia seems more focused on other issues: perhaps to remind it of the importance of sporting relations, the president of the Maldives, Solih, has awarded a sporting recognition in 2022 in the framework of an official and very important event, (the Maldives Sports Awards[48]) to the Saudi Minister of Sports, Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal "in recognition of his efforts for the development of Saudi sport to achieve the objectives of the Vision 2030 of the kingdom".

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[48] https://imtmonline.com/2022/03/20/the-maldives-sports-awards-a-new-pillar-for-sports-tourism-in-maldives/

However, the Saudi minister sent a substitute to receive the award[49]. From this point of view, the Maldives are trying to establish themselves on the international stage also through the hospitality of International Sporting Events: primarily in water sports like surfing and windsurfing (like "Savaadheeththa Dhathuru" Maldives Yacht Rally). These events have helped promote the Maldives as a sports and tourism destination. Maldives Sports Awards was born with the same idea, that is to host prominent personalities from the world of football within the reclaimed crossroads resort, where various VIPs can promote the country through advertising on their social networks.

Superstar Charles Puyol and Hassan Naiz, player of National Team and from Rinbodhoo Island, at Maldives Sports Awards 2023.

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[49] https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/618283   In addition, in August 2023, the Saudis signed Roberto Mancini, previously coach of the Italian national football team, also winner of a European title in this capacity, as technical commissioner of their national team, thus demonstrating notable ambitions towards a team, which it already presents itself as one of the strongest in the Asian world.

Furthermore, marketing of this type has also been intercepted through the replanning of some resorts, for example to host a stage of the Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour and the stars of international ranking. Similar initiatives have been those to establish oneself on the international stage through FIFA. The Maldives, for example, were among the nations that named their stadium after the death of Pelé, as requested by FIFA. The attractiveness and special status of the Maldives are in fact not in discussion. Although the level of football in the country is at a non-professional level, there is no shortage of hiring foreign coaches or players. However, precisely because of the situation that football is experiencing in the Maldives, similar to China, many of these testimonials return to other leagues due to problems with payments or use the Maldives as a gateway to the Asian market.

Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour - Maldives Challenge - 2022 (Photo Credit: Volleyball World).

Creating new volleyball court for Maldives Challenge 2022 in Sun Island Resort & Spa.(MOYSE)

Francesco Moriero, former player of Inter Milan, Roma and Naples, was the trainer of the Maldives Football Team during the periodo of my fieldwork. In that situation, I Had the chance to participate and watch many games and training. Source: Social Media.

From this point of view, football in the Maldives is going through different moments. Although football is watched everywhere in the country and is widely followed, only the English Premier League enjoys extraordinary success, a different case is made for the Maldivian national team, where the matches have very few audiences and the stadium is often deserted. The current state of football and the current President of the FAM, Bassam Adeel Jaeel, are in fact extremely criticized within the country. There have been several moments in which members of the national football team have had problems with the payment of their salaries, or the disappearance of various prize money resulting from tournaments won. As proof of this, the very recent scandal that hit the federation shows its state of health: in October 2023, the Police closed the federation's offices to investigate various crimes that had been committed within those offices. Extraordinarily, the intervention of a geopolitical giant like Gianni Infantino allowed the unraveling of the police maneuvers and access to the offices by the federation's staff.

In conclusion, the current state of Maldivian football presents both promising prospects and significant challenges for the future. While the sport has made notable progress, there are areas that require attention and improvement in order to elevate Maldivian football to new heights. If is it true that Maldivian football has witnessed commendable growth, with the national team achieving some successes on the international stage, the Dhivehi Premier League serves as the top-tier domestic competition, showcasing the talents of local players and providing a platform for clubs to compete for the championship and the league has garnered increased attention and support from fans, contributing to the overall popularity of the sport in the Maldives, a lot of work still needs to be done. Despite the advancements, there are key challenges that Maldivian football faces, hindering its full potential. These challenges encompass various aspects, including infrastructure, funding, and talent development.

- Infrastructure: While there have been significant investments in football infrastructure, the need for modern stadiums and training facilities remains. The development of state-

of-the-art venues would not only enhance the playing experience but also attract more high-profile events, generating increased interest and revenue.

- Funding: Adequate financial resources are crucial for the sustainable growth of football in the Maldives. Securing sponsorships, partnerships, and investments will provide the necessary funds to improve training programs, support grassroots initiatives, and facilitate international exposure for the national team. As seems from the interview, lot of money comes from international sponsor to FAM, but only a minimal amount is invested in sport.

- Talent Development: Nurturing and developing young talent is paramount to the future success of Maldivian football. Establishing comprehensive youth development programs, talent identification systems, and academies will create a solid foundation for producing skilled players who can compete at national and international levels.

Recognizing the importance of addressing these challenges, the Maldivian Football Association has outlined initiatives and plans to further develop and promote football in the country.

- Infrastructure Development: The FAM is actively seeking partnerships with government and private entities to upgrade existing stadiums and construct new facilities. These endeavors aim to provide modern training grounds, enhanced spectator experiences, and increased capacity to host national and international competitions.
- Grassroots and Youth Development: The FAM is focusing on grassroots initiatives to engage young aspiring footballers. Programs that target schools, communities, and local clubs aim to foster a passion for the sport from an early age, nurturing talent and building a strong pipeline of players for the future.
- Coaching and Education: The FAM is investing in coaching education programs to enhance the quality of coaching across all levels. By providing opportunities for coaches

to acquire advanced training and certifications, the MFA aims to raise the overall standard of coaching in the country, thereby improving player development.

Interwining Community and Nation building in Sport Diplomacy

In this chapter it is possible to notice how sport in the Maldives takes on specific connotations. firstly, the places and times of traditional sports seem to have become linked to festive celebrations, while more modern sports have become part of everyday life in an all-encompassing way in the Maldivian islands. In the case of resort islands, but also in the islands hosting guesthouses, the sports fields take on the characteristics of being meeting points, the only effective and long-lasting ones within the bubble system that characterizes tourism in the Maldives. as regards the guesthouse market, although we cannot strictly speak of a bubble, it is true that sports fields become places of meeting and exchange with the local population, where due to logistical issues and different habits, the meeting is not always is favored. After analyzing the great work implemented by the Maldivian government to counter the globalizing dynamics that are impacting the country through sport as nation building, I concentrated on the peculiar construction of stadiums and sports fields in the Maldives. These spaces, in fact, are real centers of power within islands where the little space makes these fields relevant. Finally, analyzing the promotion of sport and its pervasiveness within the country, the discussion will move to the analysis of the sport diplomacy of the Maldives within the international scenario, where the Maldives have been moving for decades within a very multifaceted, between India, China and Saudi Arabia.

The last section would want to go deeper inside the topic of sport diplomacy in the Maldives. The notion of sport diplomacy, which in the last decade has established itself both at an academic level and in formal geopolitical discourse, refers, in a generic way, to the growing importance attributed to sport in international relations. Generally used in a positive sense, in connection with the concept of soft power and public diplomacy practices, it however hides, in some circumstances, clearly asymmetric power dynamics. As the case study examined in this paper demonstrates, both China and India have a strategic interest in the Maldives, linked to the

centrality of the archipelagic state in the geopolitical quadrant of the Indian Ocean. In both cases, the two Asian giants played on Maldivian home soil using (also) the tools of sports diplomacy, focusing (respectively) on football and cricket. For now, the game of stadium diplomacy seems to be won by China, which has grabbed a leading role in the sport most loved by the Maldivians. However, there is no shortage of those who accuse it of having brought the Maldives into an adverse field, that of the debt trap. Saudi Arabia remains on the sidelines for now. Its sport diplomacy aims above all at nation-branding and is aimed mainly at the Western world. Evidently, the kingdom, which also attributes a decidedly important political role to sport in terms of image, prefers to spread religion in the Maldives.

Where there is a land, there is football

I have argued throughout this work that space in Maldives is a fundamental resource for various aspects: geopolitical, geographic, territorial, social, economic and the fact that a portion of this preciousness is destined for sporting use - which in many cases has a cumbersome spatial characteristic - gives back the image of a unique combination between the (geo)political use of space and sport as practices, beliefs, identities, vectors of values where a huge diffusion and governmental effort for the same contrast with a rather empty list of winners. In particular, I demonstrated that sport is a well-known factor in the education of citizens, from school to real mechanisms of nation building and nation branding. Going into more detail, the spatial revolution in the Maldives passes through 3 main stages: Ameen in 1940, decentralization starting from 2010 and contemporary land reclamation processes. Within these processes, the soft power of sport in the Maldives is reaching unprecedented peaks of diffusion, intensity, economic proportions and social impacts. Sport, in fact, as in the example of the Magoodhoo Island, is used in the local islands to manage, control, the precious space and the political processes behind them. In the same way, sport may represent a spin-off that strengthens the transport system; may be an evident factor of attraction for tourism at the international level, but also at the national, atoll and municipal level in a scalar perspective. Furthermore, the soft power of sport analyzed in this thesis reflects and delves into the transformation that modern sport has had in the last twenty years, that is, an extraordinary economic and technological development, overcoming every type of crisis and increasing its turnover. and its penetration into international markets. The Maldives, in fact, like other archipelagic states, find themselves in the position of an "alliance state" where, within the "Belt Road and Ball", they find themselves in the "cold war" epicenter of the Indian Ocean.

The Maldivian archipelago, in fact, in the contemporary world is using sport like never before to attract capital, investments and creating a terrain where the various actors can exploit the potential of the Maldives, creating sports corporations, creating new markets, differentiating and strengthening existing sports facilities or, as in the main cases, building sports facilities from scratch in the precious spaces reclaimed by the sea through Stadium Diplomacy. As in

other contexts, the growth of the sports market has generated strong polarizations, fueling inequalities within the country. Sport in the Maldives, undergoing Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern influences, but also and above all English football, is following the wave of becoming an object of desire of governments, interested in making them media platforms to legitimize themselves on a geopolitical level, fueling often episodes of sportwashing.

In the end of this work, I briefly reviewed the key points of the sections. The purpose of chapter 1 was to provide a reconstruction of the concept of soft power, from its origins to its numerous complexities through changes in meaning and debates on various topics that have passed through and will continue to pass through it. In conclusion, the concept of cultural diplomacy was briefly developed as an element of which soft power constitutes the political part and which can be used for aggressive purposes. The idea is to understand the applicability of soft power in the international scenario and its potential to be a substitute for the traditional use of hard power for achieving national interests and foreign policy objectives. Through this work, I would want to argue the dynamism of the concept of soft power in its application, suggesting that further studies are needed for a better theoretical understanding of both the term and the contexts in which it is applied. In chapter 2, my aim was primarily to analyse the relationship between sports and culture, highlighting how this theme is extremely complex to fit into a single, unified definition (play/sport/spaces). I provided one or more definitions of what is meant by sport, and then I presented some of the concepts through which sports can impact societies. These concepts include sportivisation, nationalisation, and parliamentarisation. I referred to various authors like Huizinga, Risse, Strutt, Jusserland, Durkheim, Callois, and Guttmann and the more recent analysis of Giulianotti, Koch, Chadwick and Murray. Subsequently, I introduced various approaches to the study of sports, including structural functionalism, Simmel's perspective and interpretive sociology, Weber's sociology of action, and Marxist analyses as presented by Clarke. I concluded this part by highlighting selected themes that will enhance the understanding of the subject under examination, although the specific themes are yet to be determined. In the second chapter, my aim was also to present a combined perspective on the relationship between power, soft power, and sports. In today's

world, the international dimension of football (which is usually examined for numerical purposes) and its extension of power, including its political bodies (such as FIFA), have become significantly accentuated. The transcendence of traditional local and national boundaries represents one of the most visible aspects of contemporary football. Several studies have explored the connections between sports and politics, sports and international relations, and sports and diplomacy, as sports inherently encompass elements of politics, economics, and mass media. In this chapter, after introducing some elements of football geopolitics, I showcased the role of sports in nation-building dynamics and its influence on diplomacy. On one hand, it is challenging to imagine major sports events without television broadcasts, speeches by state leaders at opening ceremonies, and special advertising by major sports brands. On the other hand, despite the old principle of "sports separate from politics," the history of the Olympic movement over more than a century demonstrates that it has not been able to maintain political neutrality in the context of political challenges and transformations in the global political system. Subsequently, by presenting an older concept in a new light, that of "sports diplomacy," my aim was to demonstrated that while it is often used for noble purposes, careful attention must be paid to some of its secondary implications, going beyond overly positive conceptions and potentially leading to the soft disempowerment of a state. After introduced the concepts of "sportwashing" and "stadium diplomacy" and their contemporary applications (which have experienced unprecedented growth), I explored their relationship to geopolitics and the strategic use of sports events. In conclusion, I provided commentary observing that football serves as a tool not only for domestic politics but also for national geopolitics, acting as a driver of globalisation, and its governing organizations are veritable para-diplomatic institutions. Furthermore, as an instrument of soft power, sports offer a means through which states, or even nations without a state, project their identity externally and reinforce it internally through well-defined strategies. In chapter 3, I began by presenting the physical geography of the Maldives, emphasizing the unique territorial formation of the archipelago and its significant influence on human relationships, both constructive and destructive. I explored three key phases in the analysis: Ameen's urban revolution of 1940, the 2010 decentralization law, and the

contemporary situation. The notion of archipelagism, insularity, and their multifaceted characteristics within the Maldives were analysed, demonstrating that these attributes exist simultaneously and interact on various levels. The concept of an archipelago is central to the construction of the Maldivian state, predicated and reiterated within territorial boundaries through highly homogenizing control mechanisms. This analysis leaded to an exploration of the social implications arising from these relationships, with a focus on spatial dynamics and center-periphery models. I explored the different types of islands found within the archipelago, including well-known cases linked to land reclamation: landfill islands (e.g., Thilafushi), islands created to address housing issues (e.g., Hulhumalé), islands formed due to tsunami-related erosion (e.g., Meedho), resort islands created from scratch for the promotion of the country (e.g., CrossRoads), and the duality of resort islands and inhabited islands, where other services for the population are located because sport, in those places, is a resource that in future needs to be analysed with particular attention. In the last chapter, I explored the various forms that sports take on in the Maldives. After a brief history of sports in the country, I investigated the role of sports in the spatial organization of the islands. Furthermore, the chapter illustrated how sports function within tourist spaces, who participates in these activities, and how sports influence the urban planning of these facilities. I explored the dynamics of "bubbles" and alienation that are typical in resort environments, where sports facilities serve as the primary spaces for interaction among tourists and between tourists and staff. The chapter also examined how sports are practiced in local islands, presenting an illustrative case study involving the Ministry of Sports, which seeks to implement nation-building mechanisms on a peripheral island through a sports tournament, specifically the Atoll Raajje Volleyball Championship. Finally, in the end of the fourth chapter, I changed the scale of observation to analyse the events that connect Maldivian sporting activities with the geopolitical quadrant where the Maldives are located: India, China and the Persian Gulf countries.

The contribution is part of a sector of international scientific literature on the effects and role of sport within geopolitics through soft power, but also in Island Studies with regards to archipelagic uniqueness and geographical conformation in relation to growing importance of

sport in the country. Starting from a consolidated theoretical framework, which includes Sport Studies, studies on the Maldives and the research conducted on the impact of sporting events and territorial transformations (Stadium Diplomacy) and the field work carried out on the ground, I tried to reconstruct an image of what was listed above.

The case study of Magoodhoo and the reality of the Greater Malé Region are relevant for the resulting analysis because, in addition to being the substance of a little if not absent scientific literature on the Maldives, we attempted to investigate the scenario of Stadium diplomacy in the Maldives, a sector still in extreme evolution full of dynamism, politics of change and territoriality negotiated at an international level. In a country where space is essential, building bridges and stadiums seems to be the future, although this subject is not being investigated yet in the Maldives. Although there are several studies around the Indo-Chinese conflict in the Indian Ocean, further studies will have to be carried out on sport at a local and national level, to expand a scientific literature on sport in the Maldives which, due to its complexity and its facets, deserves space most relevant within the academic landscape. The Tourism Studies that have dealt with the Maldives, for example, in the future could also deal with the market that moves sport towards the country, but also and above all, as in the case of local events, even within it, with the tourism of Maldivians for the Maldivians, an extremely interesting sector not investigated in this study. A further sector that deserves further investigation is the evolution of the geopolitics of sport in the Maldives, with the recent attempt at a shift towards a more Middle Eastern football center of gravity, where the analysis could be deepened on the effects of sports and football in the archipelago, in capital and peripheral islands.

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