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**Listening to the rhythm of ancestors' footsteps
I find my way to the future**

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I begin this essay with the opening verses of the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims. I do this because every gathering for discussion and debate at home begins with prayers and this is the most common prayer among Muslims.

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek.
Show us the straight way,
The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those
whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray. Amen
(Sura Fatiha, Qur'an)*

As I begin this essay, I wish to acknowledge and honour the people of Musqueam territory in Vancouver, Canada, and my lecturer Dr. Michael Marker at University of British Columbia as well as the First Nations students at UBC. They have helped me to realize that research done within indigenous communities using indigenous protocols and world views can result in an academic piece of work that is rigorous and stays true to indigenous

frameworks of ethics, respectfulness and reciprocity. They have also reminded me that maintaining our own spirituality and relationships are the commonality that binds indigenous peoples.

I am from Meedhoo, an island in the southern most atoll, Addu of the Maldivian Islands. My name is Sheema. It is the name of the daughter of Halima, the lady who nursed Prophet Muhammad as a child. The name was given to me on my seventh day by my paternal aunt. My name means character and combined with my Dad's name, it means a happy/good character. I try to live up to my name.



When I was a very young child, my grandfather taught me the Islamic prayer "Dear God, grant me knowledge, grant me understanding." This was at the beginning of my learning to read the Qur'an. As I learned to read the Qur'an I came across this verse that said "I reveal myself, to those who observe." My grand father also taught me a Hadith, a teaching by Prophet Muhammad, that says, "Seek knowledge even in China." These teachings have been the foundation on which my academic career is built, leading me to travel far in search of knowledge and understanding.

When I was eleven years old, my father and maternal grandfather decided that I should go away to the capital island to go to school. Prayers were said and a chicken slaughtered to celebrate my journey. As I left, I scrawled verses of the Qur'an on our gatepost to ensure that I would have a safe journey and return home one day. Since then every time I leave on another journey, I write the special prayers on the gatepost, and shake hands with every one in my family as they pray for a safe return.

Journey home, about five years ago – a memory

I am sitting in the back yard, gossiping when the topic turns to the eau de cologne drinking by the youth. One mother mentions that she suspects her son too is drinking this. She herself had not grown up in an environment where people used alcohol or narcotic drugs. Though she realizes that her child is doing some thing wrong, she does not know what the long-term damage of substance abuse might be for her child. Not knowing what to do with him, she asks for help from the people whom she knows and trusts, other women in her neighborhood. I grew up in a community where parents, grand parents, aunts, uncles, relatives and the whole community knew what to do with a child if she or her was going astray, such as stealing or lying. This time, the women have no solutions and remain silent in the face of this parent's predicament.

On a recent trip back home –

I learn that the women have been able to stop eau de cologne from being sold in some of the shops on the island, though not in all of them. It is as though a whole box of change is happening too suddenly; plugging one hole keeps on opening others where each leak is more intense and damaging. Returning home in January 2002, there are police looking for drug dealers. This time it isn't eau de cologne that the children are drinking. Homegrown drug dealers are peddling brown sugar, a form of cocaine, to the youth who are still at school. Several of the young men of the island are in jail for drug trafficking, leaving behind young children, wives and elderly family. I ask myself what is there for these young men, in our island, if they ever come out of jail? Would we be able to have a home where they could belong and contribute to their families with dignity?

Modern expectations of male youth on our island have changed. They are now expected to leave the community, and move to the capital island or to tourist resorts to make good money. Those who leave do not make enough to support the rising living expenses of a “developing island,” an island that now has twenty four hour electricity courtesy of imported diesel, indoor plumbing, televisions, and homes designed and equipped in a developed country's style of living. Sadly, though expectations of the youth have changed, the local environment is unable to supply neither the resources nor the jobs, to meet the

new expectations. The youth have had to find alternative ways of meeting their arising financial needs.

At present, some of us on the island choose drugs, some choose satellite TV, and some, like me, choose schooling. We are trying to escape the reality of our existence. We are trying to escape who we are, who we were, a people whose livelihood depended on a relationship of reciprocity with the environment in which we lived, for whom spirituality guided reverential and respectful relationships with the people and the environment around us.



Too many changes are happening too fast in our community. The state government in the capital island, with consultation and advice of people from even further places and ways of living, is doing its best to improve our island through development. A state funded school, an electric power plant, a health Care Center and a garment factory (sweatshop) are the visible signs of this development. All the equipment including building materials and expertise has been imported through foreign aid. As we have neither enough teachers to teach the imported curriculum nor enough doctors, they too have to be imported.

With state control of our schools comes state control of what gets taught in the schools. The curriculum is designed by curriculum developers living in the capital island, Male' with the help of foreign consultants. Education designed for our children is urban in its development portfolio, as questions of equity means that everyone gets the same curriculum as the children in Male'. The children's learning at school has no connection to the community's life, and hence, schooling is alienating children from their parents. Children know that their parents do not have the western knowledge that is expected to give them the comparable incomes to that of western middle class living. School is the place where this knowledge exists, not in the community.

Traditional forms of knowing and teaching are losing their place in our changing society; thus, parents' and elders' knowledge is not considered worthy of respect and learning. In their hopes to make their children better than themselves, parents are being forced to sacrifice their own traditional place in

the children's upbringing. Traditionally, it was the parents' responsibility to ensure that the children knew how to survive and make a living within the community as well as to ensure how to live in the community in connection to each other.

I too have changed to the extent that I no longer can sleep in the equatorial climate without having the fan on. An imported fan, run on expensive imported diesel. I cringe at the thought of having to sink my feet into the swamp where my grandmother and mother regularly go to tend the yam fields. Though I love eating yam, I can't face the backbreaking labour associated with growing this food on the island. Yet, a voice whispers in my heart that my ancestors had lived on this island for over three thousand years. Their livelihood was based on what they earned from the environment around them. They were not continually dependent on foreign aid. Neither were they dependent on illegal drugs nor on diesel fuelled fans to stay sane or alive.

I feel that something is not quite right with the new paradigm of development. When I see that more than half the students in my classes are unable to comprehend school science, I have to do something about it. These are children keen to learn, keen to do well and to please their teachers and families through success in school science. I instinctively began to use my limited knowledge of indigenous science to make school science more real for these children. Yet, something was not quite working. I began to think; "How come I don't know much indigenous science yet I know a whole lot of scientific theories developed by Europeans?" Even when I used examples of indigenous science in the classroom, my ultimate goal was to build bridges between these experiences and the real science as is described in the school curriculum. I began to question the unquestionable, the foundation stone of development, the imported schooling that we, the educational leaders of the Maldives, were so keen to impose on our young, as well as the philosophy behind this schooling.

Questioning the dominant discourse of schooling is simple. I can see for myself the gaping holes created by schooling in the form of many school leaving certificates the youth carried home, that say "Failed." I can feel for myself, the vacuum inside me as to my own history, my lack of indigenous knowledge to draw from, in my teaching. But because I have lived for so long away from home, looking for a more home grown form of knowing and knowledge transfer is hard. On one hand, my grandmother tells me "if you want to know how to slice bread fruit, come and do it" and on the other hand, my mother tells me that I wouldn't be able to live the way she does on the island. She learned to be who she is at the side of my grandmother. I left home and learned to be who I am, at schools in the capital and then in Universities overseas. Despite my

mother's doubts, and my own struggles as a person of the community by birth and childhood experiences and an outsider as a result of my qualifications and academic experiences, I am learning to use research as a way to find my way back home. I feel that the only way to transform schooling to be more indigenous is through transformation of ourselves to live within indigenous worldviews and ways of living. At present, who we were, who we have been and continue to be, the only role model we have of sustainable living on our island is ignored in our plans for the present and for the future. This is the professional background on which I began to explore traditional ways of knowing and knowledge transfer back home.

When I went home with the intention to do research on ways of knowing and knowledge transmission, as part of a Ph.D. programme at University of British Columbia, I asked my Grand Dad if he would ask some of the elders to help me with the research. My grandfather is an elder in the community, and as a teacher himself, communicating through him was a more respectful approach to the participants. It is common for an elder to bring the student to the teacher and request for the student to be taught.

The first time we went to meet an elder, my Grand Dad asked me if I had brought a gift to give to the elder. Though it is common to take a gift of food when going to visit an elder, I had forgotten this custom of ours, in the alien concept of research. Ironically I had thought of giving a more expensive gift, when the elder had agreed to "participate in my research." The gift was not a payment for services rendered, it was a gift to demonstrate and strengthen the connections between us, a reminder of our relationships! So, we had to stop at a store and my Grand Dad, being smart, had brought some money with him. Once again this was a gentle reminder by him of proper behavior. He did not criticize me for having forgotten but gently corrected my oversight. Through the teachings I received from the elders, I am indebted to the elders and their families for life. Through the gifts, I acknowledge my gratitude in a small way. It is by no means a payment for services rendered. Reciprocal relations between the community members means that the only way I could give back, is by continuing the tradition of teaching the young people what they have taught me.

When we went to visit an elder, it was only towards the end of the visit, when we were ready to leave, my grandfather mentioned that I wanted to learn about old times, how things were like. They asked me to come back again and they would see if they could be of help. I went back on my own and the teaching began.

Having been trained to ask, to probe, to challenge, to take notes, it was difficult for me to listen attentively for long periods of time. I struggled with my own inadequate memory. Elders told me stories they were told years ago, as though they were talking of something happening right in front of their eyes. I couldn't remember the story even the day after! When I listened, my attention wandered: I had become dependent on my tape recorder, as a substitute for my own ears.

I felt inadequate, as an indigenous person, having to rely on technology, rather than my own ears and memory. I continued to struggle with my ability to listen to the elders, and to listen to myself for guidance in research. Luckily for me, the elders were eager to teach a young person from the community. It has been a long time since a young person had come asking them to teach. For them, I was a young person who had to be taught how to come back home. The stories they chose to tell spoke to me directly, of my position as a young person, a daughter, a woman of the community. The elders told me stories of how it was, and how they think it will be. They told me stories that made me proud to be from Addu Meedhoo, and they told me stories that helped me to imagine a Meedhoo that is safe and economically sound the way it always was.

In the elders' perspective, our island is not an underdeveloped third world poverty ridden rural village. It is our home and it has sustained our ancestors for millennia. Our stories and our history celebrate our existence, our successes and achievements. I was shocked that schooling had helped me to forget my own history and my own heritage, a remarkable heritage of continuity, success and wellbeing. As I live with these stories and narratives, reading and rereading them, I am enthralled by the power of stories to retain forgotten histories of our people as well as teach the young people to live a good life, knowing the life lead by their ancestors.

One such story is a story told to me by Mahdiyyage Aminath Didi in Meedhoo. It is a story told often and I think the original story may be from Huvadhu atoll of the Maldives. In the story, a crane goes around helping people in need. The story describes life in the island. Then it ends dramatically telling how the snatcher came and took away the Kubus (rice cake) from the crane and the crane's request to the snatcher to give him a drum.

I think of myself as the crane who takes the drum to the people who weave stories, and tells them of what the snatcher did to the crane's rice cake. The snatcher put tooth marks on the rice cake and ate it. We no longer bake these ceremonial rice cakes that were gifted on special occasions of celebration, like when a new boat is built and is put to sea, or when a house foundation is laid

or people move into a new house. The taking away of the rice cake is symbolic of the erosion of spiritual cultural heritage in many indigenous communities. The snatcher takes many forms; the satellite television is one of them, depicting a utopian way of life that is alien to our own way of life. The snatcher takes the shape of modern schooling at times, leading us to believe in a future of eternal progress and development, leading us to dream of a future that is alien to our way of living. As I listen to the story, I wonder who the snatcher was in the earlier times, a forgotten memory, in the eradication of our own history and our own memory!

The story tells me of other forgotten memories. The drum is no longer present in the community. I had never seen a drum on our island, though one elder told me he remembered the use of drumming on a special occasion of celebration. I would not have known the significance of the drum unless the elder had told me they were used before, thus this story keeps an old memory alive while the practice of it has been forgotten, for a while.

The story also reminds me of the dependency of our existence on nature and each other. It reminds me that I have to give back for what I was given by the community. Every time, the crane gave something, the recipients gave him back something worthwhile. I have taken so many stories of our people, for my own learning, I am reminded of my responsibility to give back to the community for this valuable gift of their time, their wisdom and their stories.

Through these stories and elders' teachings, I am learning to return home. Through the elders, I am learning a new vocation as a teacher. It feels good to be home and watch the faces of young children as I tell them stories I was told as a young child. I want them to know that we have these stories, even if we forget at times. I want them to know who they are, who they were, so they can be proud of themselves the way I am. Acknowledgement and honouring of my history and identity enable me to feel successful as a human being. That identity gives me courage to say we had something good before. The goodness and well being of our future can be predicted by acknowledging and honouring who we were and are.

The prayers written on the gatepost for a safe return keeps bringing me back. Every time I return home, my mum takes me walking around the island, telling and retelling me the names of the places that I had walked as a child, showing me the changes that have been happening since I last left. I used to wonder why my mother kept on telling me of these places, kept on taking me walking around the island. Through research into indigenous ways of knowing, I finally realized that this telling and retelling of the land is my mother's way of bringing me home, not only physically but with my whole being. It is through the knowing of the land intimately, like the inside of my palm, that I could continue to know that I am home in a place where I feel connected and belong. As I walk along the beach, if I listen, I can hear my ancestors' footsteps, the many grandmothers' footsteps that had walked on these beaches before me. Sometimes, they had gone there, to pray for the safe return of their relatives who had left home. Perhaps, those prayers are with me today, as I struggle with finding my way back, so that I can find my way forward to the future.



I live with hope that one day all of us who have left home will find our way back. May our spirits guide us to home, and through our stories of rupture, change, evolution, help the young people to find their own roots and their own futures.

My thinking for this paper has been guided by the reading of the following books and documents.

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About the Author

Sheema Saeed is a graduate student at the Center for Studies in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of British Columbia. She began her academic journey through reading the land, the ocean and the sky of her home island in the Maldives. Her quest for reading initiated her into the western education system. The new learning led her to a Bachelor of Education degree from Oxford Brooks University in England and a Masters degree in Science Education from the University of Waikato in New Zealand. When at home, she continues to work as a school-teacher, curriculum developer and in-service teacher educator. Though she is afraid of sinking her feet into the swamps of her home island, she hopes to bring cultural ways of knowing and teaching into the lives of the Maldivian children and the Maldivian education system.

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