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Îliens, Mozambiques, and the Ethnogenesis of the Chagos Population:

Reassessing Islander Identity and Colonial Misclassification in the Western Indian Ocean

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Abstract

The population today identified as "Chagossian" has commonly been described in British and Mauritian narratives as a community formed primarily through African slave importation during the French and British plantation periods. This paper challenges that assumption through a close examination of colonial terminology and classification practices in the western Indian Ocean. It demonstrates that French administrative and maritime sources repeatedly referred to the inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago as *îliens* (islanders), a category distinct from African or mainland slave classifications. By contrast, British authorities routinely employed the label "Mozambiques" as an administratively expedient and legally evasive category, frequently obscuring non-African and non-Mozambican origins. Drawing on established scholarship in Indian Ocean slavery, maritime history, and colonial ethnography, this paper argues that the Chagos population emerged from an islander substrate closely aligned with Maldivian maritime communities, subsequently overlaid by colonial labor additions and later misclassified under British rule. The analysis has direct implications for contemporary debates on decolonization, self–determination, and sovereignty in the Chagos Archipelago.

Keywords: Chagos, Maldives, îliens, Mozambiques, Indian Ocean slavery, ethnogenesis, colonial classification, decolonization

1. Introduction

The question of who the Chagossians are is not merely anthropological. It is foundational to contemporary legal and political disputes concerning sovereignty, decolonization, and self–determination in the Chagos Archipelago. Prevailing narratives, particularly those advanced by Mauritius, describe the Chagossian population as a derivative plantation society formed through French-era African slave importation and later consolidated under British colonial administration. This paper contends that such narratives rest on a selective and often uncritical reading of colonial records.

Colonial vocabularies were not neutral descriptors. They functioned as administrative instruments shaped by legal regimes, economic interests, and imperial convenience. Differences between French and British classification practices in the Indian Ocean were not semantic quirks but reflected fundamentally different approaches to ethnographic recording and colonial governance. Examining these differences is essential to reconstructing the ethnogenesis of the Chagos population.

This analysis does not advance claims of racial exclusivity or genetic purity, but addresses ethnogenesis as a historically contingent process shaped by maritime geography and colonial administration.

2. Methodology: Colonial Lexicons as Historical Evidence

Historical anthropology and colonial historiography have long recognized that terminological choices in administrative records carry evidentiary weight (Dirks, 2001; Stoler, 2009). In slave societies, labels assigned to populations often determined legal status, taxation, mobility, and treatment under law. Consequently, terminological consistency or inconsistency across colonial regimes provides insight into how populations were perceived and managed.

This paper adopts a comparative lexical methodology, examining how French and British authorities classified populations in the western Indian Ocean and what those classifications imply about perceived origin, settlement, and identity. The focus is not on racial essentialism but on ethnogenesis: the historical formation of a people through geography, culture, and colonial interaction.

The study relies on published archival syntheses rather than unpublished colonial records, reflecting the constraints of access that continue to affect Indian Ocean historiography.

3. French Colonial Classifications in the Western Indian Ocean

French colonial administration in the Mascarenes and surrounding islands employed relatively stable and differentiated ethnographic categories. Scholars have documented consistent distinctions between:

- Africains, Cafres, or Mozambiques, referring to mainland African captives or enslaved persons;
- Malabars and related terms for South Asian laborers;
- Îliens, îliotes, or îlioses, referring to island-based populations understood as locally rooted rather than recently imported (Allen, 2015; Campbell, 2004).

The term îlien denoted a relationship to island geography and ecology. It was not used to describe newly arrived enslaved Africans, whose continental origin was explicitly marked. In notarial records, censuses, and correspondence, the application of îlien signaled recognition of an established island community rather than a transient or imported labor force.

When French sources applied islander terminology to inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago, they were situating them within a category of island peoples analogous to Seychellois or other Indian Ocean Island communities, not mainland Africans.

4. British Reclassification and the "Mozambiques" Category

British colonial practice differed markedly. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, British naval and colonial authorities increasingly employed ambiguous or generic labels to classify detained or relocated populations. The term "Mozambiques" became a particularly elastic category.

Scholarship has demonstrated that "Mozambique" in British records often functioned less as a geographic descriptor than as an administrative convenience (Campbell, 2004; Vink, 2003). Individuals from diverse origins, including Madagascar, South Asia, and island communities, were frequently recorded as "Mozambiques," especially when precise origin was inconvenient or legally problematic.

Allen (2015) notes that British officials routinely collapsed complex origins into simplified labels to facilitate management and avoid scrutiny. As a result, British terminology is widely regarded as unreliable for reconstructing precise ethnographic origins in the Indian Ocean context.

5. Îliens versus Mozambiques: A Historiographical Contrast

The divergence between French and British classifications is not trivial. French îliens and British "Mozambiques" are not interchangeable categories. The former reflects an ethnographic recognition of island-rooted populations; the latter reflects administrative obfuscation.

Where two colonial vocabularies conflict, historiographical practice favors the classification that is:

1. More internally differentiated,
2. More consistent across records, and
3. Less entangled with legal evasion.

On all three counts, French terminology carries greater evidentiary weight for questions of origin and settlement in the Chagos Archipelago.

6. Maldivian Islanders in European Maritime Thought

European maritime literature from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries consistently described Maldivians as a distinct island people, characterized by seafaring expertise and dispersed settlement across the central Indian Ocean (Pearson, 2003). Portuguese, Dutch, and French sources alike recognized Maldivians as *peuple insulaire* rather than continental Asians or Africans.

Maldivian sailors, fishers, and pilots were present across Indian Ocean trade routes, including peripheral atolls. Their mobility did not negate island identity; rather, it reinforced it. In European classifications, Maldivians were archetypal islanders.

Given this context, the application of îliens to Chagos inhabitants aligns closely with existing European conceptions of Maldivians and poorly with classifications applied to African captives.

7. Chagos as an Islander Corridor, Not a Plantation Frontier

Geographically and historically, the Chagos Archipelago lies along a maritime corridor linking the Maldives with the Mascarenes. Long before formal plantation economies emerged, the atolls functioned as navigational waypoints and resource zones for islander seafarers.

Viewing Chagos solely as a plantation outpost imposes a continental colonial model on an inherently maritime space. The islander classification used by French sources is consistent with a model of gradual island settlement and interaction, rather than wholesale population importation.

8. Ethnogenesis of the Chagos Population

This evidence supports an ethnogenetic model in which the Chagos population emerged from a Maldivian islander substrate, later incorporating individuals of diverse origins through colonial labor practices. British reclassification obscured this layered history by collapsing origins into generic categories.

Such processes are well documented elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, where island communities formed through maritime connectivity rather than single-source migration (Campbell, 2004).

9. Implications for Decolonization and Sovereignty

If the Chagos population is understood as an islander community with roots predating Mauritian colonial administration, then narratives portraying it as a purely derivative plantation society are historically incomplete. This has direct implications for decolonization frameworks that rely on colonial-era misclassifications.

Recognizing misclassification does not negate Chagossian identity or rights. It clarifies their historical formation and challenges the assumption that Mauritius represents the sole or natural successor authority.

Where population identity and territorial administration have been shaped by colonial misclassification, the application of decolonisation frameworks under Article 73(e) of the UN Charter risks reproducing, rather than remedying, colonial error.

10. Conclusion

French references to Chagos inhabitants as îliens are not incidental. They reflect an ethnographic recognition incompatible with the notion of a population formed exclusively through African slave importation. British use of “Mozambiques,” by contrast, reflects administrative expediency rather than ethnographic precision.

Taken together, the evidence supports a reclassification of the Chagos population as an islander community whose origins align most closely with Maldivian maritime society, subsequently reshaped but not created by colonial labor systems. This conclusion warrants serious consideration in academic and UN deliberations on the future of the Chagos Archipelago.

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