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The Maldivian Graves of Diego Garcia:

A Sailor's Discovery That Rewrites Colonial History

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An Indian Ocean decolonisation initiative

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Abstract

This paper presents and analyses the discovery of Dhivehi gravestones on Diego Garcia by Maldivian Electrical Officer (EO) Thabah Adnan in 1985. His observation of funerary architecture and archaic Thaana inscriptions demonstrates Maldivian cultural presence on the island long before European settlement and contradicts the orthodox narrative that Chagos was "uninhabited" prior to plantation development. Using maritime anthropology, Indian Ocean historiography, epigraphic analysis and international law doctrines - particularly effectivités and decolonisation principles - this article argues that the discovery constitutes material evidence of Maldivian sovereignty memory and warrants incorporation into contemporary disputes surrounding Chagos decolonisation.

Keywords: Chagos Archipelago; Maldives; Diego Garcia; Dhivehi epigraphy; Indian Ocean maritime history; decolonisation; sovereignty evidence

1. Introduction

The Chagos Archipelago stands at the intersection of European naval mapping and Indian Ocean indigenous geography. Dominant narratives, largely British and Mauritian, frame the islands as historically uninhabited until imported plantation labor appeared under French enterprise.[1] This represents a classic case of colonial silence, wherein indigenous memory, contact and occupation are erased to justify later territorial claims.

Maldivian oral geography recognizes Diego Garcia as Foalhavahi or Fehendheeb, a name preserved in southern maritime culture.[2] Naming is not casual; it denotes spatial cognition, contact and belonging. EO Thabah Adnan's accidental yet revelatory 1985 encounter with Dhivehi grave markers on Diego Garcia corroborates this oral geography and complicates the accepted historiography of Chagos.

2. Witness Profile: Maritime Professional as Historical Agent

Electrical Officer Thabah Adnan entered merchant navy service in 1969, trained in electrical systems for ocean-going vessels. His position involved navigation instrumentation, power generation, and emergency circuitry, functions requiring competency and detail orientation. His career saw service under Yugoslav, Cypriot and Panamanian registries at a time when international fleets shifted under open-registry flags.

In 1983, he travelled from Rijeka to Mauritius and Diego Garcia before the vessel was scrapped in India.[3] Maldivian crew advised him that Diego Garcia corresponded to Foalhavahi, known within Dhivehi maritime folklore.[4] Two years later, he returned aboard MV World Shelter (formerly MV Kudu) during an emergency layover on Diego Garcia on 16 February 1985, precipitated by hull leakage requiring dive repairs.[5] It was this enforced stop that would produce epigraphic evidence.

3. First Encounter with Diego Garcia (1983)

In 1983, Adnan passed Diego Garcia without landing, but he learned that the island aligned with a known Dhivehi placename. This recognition demonstrates that Maldivians did not discover Diego Garcia via colonial record; rather, they already possessed its identity in oral culture. Literary anthropologists like Romero-Frias note that Foalhavahi was referenced by elders in Addu, though much knowledge had faded by the late twentieth century.[6] Oral maps remain valid cultural cartography and serve as memory markers in sovereignty disputes.

4. Second Encounter and Landing (1985)

Upon arrival in 1985, Adnan sought permission for shore liberty from US military port staff. Initially denied, he persisted and was eventually granted one hour escorted ashore. His motivations were personal and cultural, not investigative, making his testimony particularly valuable as non-contrived evidence.

Walking only minutes inland, he entered a cemetery whose architecture he immediately identified as Maldivian: coral-carved headstones, crest-bearing male markers, smooth female markers and epitaphs incorporating Dhivehi naming architecture.[7]

5. The Epigraphic Record

1. His transcriptions are as follows:
2. Elhebyaage Hasanaage Kaburafuthaa Thakurufaanu
3. Dhekenage Aboo Rahaage Kadhdha Dhiye Rahaa
4. Boda Maga Kaanimaa Idhreehu Hassan Manikufaanu
5. Korekunaage Thaadhiru Madheebaage Bahaadheraa Badurudhdheen
6. Maliku Rehendhi Kadhdha Faanuge Moosa Thakura

These names embody the Dhivehi ge-system: house-name + personal identifier + rank/lineage suffix.[8] Titles such as Thakurufaanu, Manikufaanu and Badurudhdheen cannot be manufactured outside Dhivehi society; they are socio-political artefacts embedded in hierarchy,

kinship and Islamic inheritance traditions particular to the Maldives. The archaic Thaana script observed on the stones further supports antiquity and indigenous continuity.[9]

6. Maritime Anthropology and Indigenous Sea Scapes

The Maldives is historically a maritime civilization rather than a land-bounded state. From Bell's early ethnographies to more recent Maldivian scholarship, southern sailors are recorded venturing as far as Comoros, Zanzibar and Ceylon.[10] Ocean space, currents and reefs formed part of social landscapes.

Within this context, Foalhavahi represents indigenous spatial memory. Oral topography is recognised academically as legitimate knowledge construction in seafaring societies.[11] The Dhivehi naming of Diego Garcia predates western mapping, indicating cognitive possession.

7. Burial as Jurisdictional Performance

Under Islamic jurisprudence, particularly the Shafi'i school, burials require ritual sanction and consecrated ground.[12] Human remains interred under Dhivehi names and funerary architecture reflect a community exercising authority over space. Burial is therefore a sovereign gesture.

International legal doctrine recognizes such acts. The ICJ in the Minquiers and Ecrehos case considered graveyards as evidence of jurisdiction and authority.[13] Similarly, the Clipperton Island Arbitration weighed inscriptions and habitation traces as proof of title.[14] EO Adnan's discovery parallels these evidentiary precedents.

8. Colonial Erasure and Manufactured Absence

European cartography consistently erased Maldivian presence in Chagos. Gwyn Campbell's work demonstrates how Maldivian captives were reclassified as "Mozambiques" to avoid anti-slavery scrutiny.[15] This semantic concealment aligns with efforts to frame Chagos as a cultural vacuum.

By suppressing indigenous traces, colonial histories could justify later detachment actions (1965) and handover negotiations (UK–Mauritius arrangements). The presence of Dhivehi dead undermines this narrative.

9. Application to Decolonisation and Sovereignty Doctrine

UNGA Resolution 1514 prohibits partition of dependent territories without the consent of affected peoples, while 1541 outlines the principles governing non-self-governing territories.[16] The Maldives was excluded from listing, but Chagos was detached without indigenous consultation, violating decolonisation principles.

The Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso v Mali) decision affirmed that pre-colonial presence cannot be expunged for post-colonial boundary construction.[17] Dhivehi gravestones corroborate pre-colonial presence. Coupled with oral toponymy, they constitute a convergence of physical and cultural evidence, probative in sovereignty disputes.[18]

10. Conclusion

Electrical Officer Thabah Adnan's ephemeral walk ashore produced enduring evidence. His transcription of Dhivehi gravestones at Diego Garcia interrupts colonial amnesia, reinstating Maldivian memory into Chagos historiography. Burial, epigraphy, naming and architecture signal not mythic contact but actual jurisdictional behavior.

This discovery merits systematic archival recovery, archaeological survey and inclusion in international proceedings. For Maldivians, it does more than strengthen a legal claim; it reasserts identity, belonging and historical continuity, inscribed in coral, visible to anyone willing to read the stones.

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