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# SLAVERY AND COLONIAL IDENTITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MAURITIUS

By Megan Vaughan

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ON 25 May 1785, a M. Lousteau arrived at the police station in Port Louis, Isle de France (now Mauritius) to complain that his slave Jouan had been abducted.<sup>1</sup> He described Jouan as an 'Indien', 'Lascar' and 'Malabar', and said that he had learned that he had been smuggled on to the royal ship *Le Brillant*, bound for Pondicherry in southern India, by one Bernard (whom Lousteau describes as a 'creol libre' but who later is described as 'Malabar, soi-disant libre' and 'Topa Libre'). The story of the escape had been told to him by a 'Bengalie' slave called Modeste, who belonged to the 'Lascar' fisherman, Bacou. A number of people had apparently assisted Jouan's escape in other ways—most importantly his trunk of belongings had been moved secretly from hut to hut before being embarked with him. Lousteau was a member of that ever-growing professional group of eighteenth-century France and its colonies: the lawyers. He was clerk to the island's supreme court, the Conseil Superieur.<sup>2</sup> He supported a large family, he said, and the loss of Jouan represented a serious loss to their welfare. Jouan, it turned out, was no ordinary slave. He was a skilled carpenter who earned his master a significant sum every month; he was highly valued, and Lousteau had refused an offer of 5,000 livres for him. What is more, he could be easily recognised, for he was always exceptionally well turned-out and well-groomed. To facilitate in the search for his slave, Lousteau provided the following description of him:

He declares that his fugitive slave is of the *Lascar* caste, a *Malabar*, *dark black* in colour, short in height, with a handsome, slightly thin face, a *gentle appearance, with long hair* . . . that he is very well dressed, *abundantly endowed with clothes*, such as jackets and shorts . . . wearing *small gold earrings*, a pin with a gold heart on his shirt, and on the arm a mark on the skin which he thinks reads DM. He can be easily

<sup>1</sup> National Archives of Mauritius (hereafter NAM) JB 47, Procedure Criminelle, 1785: Evasion of Jouan, slave of M. Lousteau.

<sup>2</sup> Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter AOM), E293 (Personnel): Lousteau, contains further information on Lousteau's career.

recognised by his *gentle demeanour and cleanliness*. (emphasis in original)

Lousteau, like any attentive slave-owner, knew intimately the qualities, physical and otherwise, of one of his most valued possessions. The story, however, deepens. For this we must thank the obsessive attention to detail, and prurient interest in gossip, which the court officers of Isle de France so often displayed. Not that the gossip was irrelevant to the case, far from it. For Lousteau to have any chance of either recovering his slave, or of receiving compensation for the loss of his slave, it was necessary to find out where, exactly, he had gone, and who, exactly, had incited or facilitated his escape. Plenty of Jouan and Bernard's erstwhile friends appeared more than willing to provide information.<sup>3</sup> Modeste, for example: she was summoned to the police station on 27 May, two days after Lousteau had made his initial complaint. Before Modeste is interviewed, her exact identity must be established, and so we are given the following description of who she is:

Bengalie negress (*negresse*) concubine of Jouan and so-called slave of Bacou Caremy, free black, Lascar, to whom she pays each day a sum of two livres, despite the fact that she claims to have bought her freedom with the help of a certain sailor.

If this were not complicated enough, Modeste is said to live in the house of her former master, Sieur la Vasseur. Modeste confirms, 'purely and simply', Lousteau's complaint. Indeed, it was Modeste who had alerted Lousteau in the first place. She says that she had been arguing with Jouan for some days and had separated from him, but she wanted to get back from him various clothes and jewellery which were in his trunk in her house, but which was removed, in her absence, the previous Tuesday. She adds that she is certain that Jouan escaped on the *Le Brillant* because he was very close to (*tres lié avec*) Bernard, a free black, Topa, a cook by profession, whom she believes went as a servant to one of the vessel's officers. And his (Bernard's) departure had been confirmed by the butcher, Bellegarde, who was the former master of the negress Louise who he had married to Bernard.

Five months later, in October, Jouan is still missing. Lousteau reiterates his complaint. 'My slave, the carpenter Jouan, escaped on the King's vessel, *Le Brillant*, which left port on 20 May, and this Jouan is living in intimacy (*en liaison intime*) with one Bernard, noir Topas'. Lousteau gets specific. This Bernard, he says, has 'debauched' (*debauché*) or led

<sup>3</sup> Of course in analysing such court cases we cannot exclude the possibility that some or all of the witnesses were pressurised, intimidated or otherwise persuaded to give evidence—particularly in this slave-holding society.

astray Jouan and arranged his escape on the vessel by passing him off as free, and by saying that they were brothers. Jouan, he understands, had been known aboard ship as Joseph, and had been taken on as a servant by one of the officers of the Regiment of the Isle de France, with whom he had disembarked at Pondicherry, the French possession in southern India. Bernard, meanwhile, had returned to the island and could be seen around town wearing a hat, a shirt, and a handkerchief, all of which Lousteau recognised as belonging to Jouan, a fact which, in his view, went to prove the great intimacy (*grand intimité*) which existed between the two men.

Other witnesses corroborate this story. Pierre Moussa, a 'Bambara' slave, belonging to the King, who had been involved in the smuggling away of Jouan's trunk, says that the two men had lived for some time in 'intelligence et d'amitié' and that they called each other 'brothers'. Modeste, too, has elaborated her story. She says that Jouan and Bernard had been involved 'intimately' for some time. Furthermore, she too has seen Bernard, since his return, sporting Jouan's shirt, handkerchief, and even the hat which he had had bordered with gold: sure sign of their great intimacy. Lindor, another slave, had known Jouan on the island, and had also been on the same ship, the *Le Brillant*. He had recognised Jouan on board and asked him what he was doing. He had replied that he was going to find his liberty. Lindor says that Jouan and Bernard lived together intimately and ate together on board ship, and called each other brothers. Lindor had asked Bernard if they were really brothers, to which Bernard had replied that they were indeed, from birth. Jouan had given Lindor a blue shirt, in the pocket of which he had found a golden pin with a heart on it.

On 18 October Bernard is arrested. On 8 November he is interrogated by the court. Described as 'black', 'so called free' (*soi-disant libre*) Malabar, and 48 years old, Bernard (who is literate enough to be able to sign his name), says that he usually lives in the area of Port Louis called the Quartier des Yolofs. Asked if he knows how Jouan had managed to board the *Le Brillant*, Bernard replies that about a month before the ship's departure, Jouan had expressed a wish to embark. Bernard had replied that he could organise it if Jouan obtained permission from his master, M. Lousteau. Jouan had replied that his master would never give him permission, and asked Bernard if he could come aboard as his brother. Bernard had asked him if he had a ticket, to which he had replied, no, but that he could get one by selling some merchandise. Bernard is asked why he had not reported this to the Bureau de Police, to which he answers that he was not acquainted with the ways (*usages*) of this colony. He is then asked if it is true that he is 'tres lié' with the said Jouan, and that they sometimes refer to each other as 'brothers', to which Bernard says that they do sometimes call

each other brothers, but that he had only known Jouan well for two months, during which period he had let his house to Jouan. The case stagnates. Lousteau reiterates his complaint on 16 December 1785, having now received information on the whereabouts of Jouan. He is, apparently, in the employ of a lieutenant of the Regiment of Isle de France, one M. Brousse, who had employed him on board the *Le Brillant*, and who now continued to employ him in Pondicherry. No doubt, says Lousteau, the Lieutenant had believed that Jouan was a free man but, 'on this island, no black can call himself free who does not have proof of that condition, and it is impudent of him to believe the word of a black whom he does not know . . . and thus to compromise the property of the "habitants"'. For this reason, Lousteau believes that Brousse is obliged to pay him damages. In September 1786 Bernard is still in prison and he writes to the Judge protesting his innocence and asking to be freed for the rest of the duration of the case, promising that he will present himself to the court whenever required. On 17 October he is freed. The case appears to have fizzled out. Lieutenant Brousse writes to Lousteau saying that he is distressed to discover that Jouan had deceived him into thinking he was a free man, and he would willingly return Jouan to his rightful owner, but he lacks the means to do so. Bernard, meanwhile, has also said that Jouan is not happy in Pondicherry, that he is unable to practice his profession there for want of tools, and that he would willingly come back to the island, but lacks the means to do so.

The 'evasion' of Jouan is a minor and incomplete footnote to the history of the Indian Ocean in the eighteenth century. But in some ways it seems a good place to start a discussion of colonial identities. To begin with, it challenges us, I think, to examine what we mean by 'identities' in the first place. A commonplace of social historical writing, and perhaps particularly of recent analyses of the colonial and the post-colonial world, the term 'identity' allows us to hang certain narratives together, and yet its meaning is often implicit, assumed. When I employ the term 'identity' in any attempt to reconstruct the social history of eighteenth-century Mauritius, I may be using it in a number of different ways. It may refer to what appear, in the historical records, to be consciously affirmed identities on the part of historical agents, their self-identifications, and changes to these over time. It may refer to the ascription of identities by one group of people to their contemporaries. Or it may refer to my retrospective reconstruction of identities which contemporaries themselves may never have articulated, my piecing together of the components (language, dress, social behaviour, religious practice) which seem to me to have constituted some kind of meaningful demarcation between one group and another: identities which are

perhaps 'lived' in the body, but which do not have a discursive equivalent. And what if we place the term 'identity' next to some other categories frequently used by social historians: 'mentalité', for example, or 'community'?

It would be possible to focus our analysis of the case on issues of sexuality and write Jouan and Bernard's relationship and attempted escape to 'freedom' as a chapter of a gay history of the Indian Ocean. Certainly their former friends and acquaintances appear to have noted a degree of closeness which they considered unusual between men. Not all were convinced by the cover of kinship or brotherhood. Lousteau the Frenchman is more articulate on this point than any of the witnesses of Indian or African origin, claiming that Jouan had been 'debauched' by Bernard. Yet the term 'debauchery' was a loose and wide one in the eighteenth century. Historians of France argue that it was only in the nineteenth century<sup>4</sup> that the concept of the 'homosexual' came into being in France, yet there were many other terms which Lousteau could have used if he had wished to be more explicit about the physical nature of Jouan and Bernard's relationship. He chose instead an ambiguous term. And although the prosecutor, in his interrogation of Bernard on the nature of his relationship with Jouan, seems to be pushing him to 'own up' to something, that something is never defined. It may well be that Jouan and Bernard were not only close friends, but were involved in a sexual relationship. It is also possible that they possessed no term, either in an Indian language, or in the French creole spoken on the island, to describe this relationship to themselves.<sup>5</sup> We might nevertheless decide to ascribe to them the term 'homosexual' (or, given the evidence for their relationships with women, 'bisexual'), since limiting our reconstructions to the terms which contemporaries applied to themselves would certainly make for a limited kind of social history. Or we may decide that the central message of this story is ambiguity, and ambiguous it must remain. These issues of identity and identification have been well rehearsed by historians of sexuality, but in fact, they may be equally relevant to other social categories and designations, as the history of slavery and of creolisation demonstrates.

<sup>4</sup>Chronologies differ. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1981); Lynn Hunt discusses homosexuality in the writings of Sade in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992), 45–6; Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour in Modern France* (New York and Oxford, 1993); Roddey Reid, *Families in Jeopardy: Regulating the Social Body in France, 1750–1910* (Stanford, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>This raises the question of whether an 'identity' can exist without contemporaries possessing a term for it. For this debate as it relates to sexuality, see John Boswell, 'Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories' in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York, 1989), 17–36; Nye, *Masculinity*, Introduction.

For it is not only in relation to questions of sexuality that both contemporaries and historians may experience some confusion. Though the evidence brought to bear in the case of Jouan and Bernard is unusual in some respects, in others it is quite typical of cases in this period. Eighteenth-century Isle de France, and particularly in its capital, Port Louis, was a fluid and complex place: one in which, despite the rigidities of colonial life, the binary divisions between slave and free, black and white, it was not always easy to know just who everyone was.

Contemporary French observers perceived colonial identities to be closely connected with economic functions and activities.<sup>6</sup> The precise role of the colony of Isle de France had been a subject of considerable discussion amongst administrators in the Ministère de la Marine in Paris since the moment it was first occupied by the French in 1721.<sup>7</sup> Its main function had always been as a strategic base in the Indian Ocean and as an entrepot for trade, initially governed by the *Compagnie des Indes*. The dissolution of Company rule, the introduction of free trade in the 1760s, and the wars with England over India brought wealth to the island, but further emphasised the transitory nature of much of the population. Though a small French elite had established itself under Company rule as landowners and merchants, in general, the 'white' population of the island was an unsettled and unsettling one. Amidst the small numbers of nobles and bourgeois, who kept houses in Port Louis and *habitations* in the country, there were larger numbers of French men and women of much lowlier origins—sailors, craftsmen and labourers from poverty-stricken rural Brittany being the most evident. The social hierarchies imported from the *métropole*, though important, were inevitably modified, challenged and compromised in this colonial setting. Here, as elsewhere in the colonial world, the term 'creole' was first used to describe the identity of those whose ancestry lay in the *métropole*, but who had been born in the colonies: in this case, those permanent settlers on Isle de France who both looked to France for their political and cultural bearings, and simultaneously kicked against this distant authority, its corruption, venality and monopolistic economic exploitation.

In the eighteenth century there was no shortage of commentators on the society of Isle de France. The Enlightenment produced a string of more or less famous philosophers, geographers, astronomers, and botanists passing through or stranded for longer periods of time, with

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this see Megan Vaughan, 'The Character of the Market: Social Identities in Colonial Economies,' *Oxford Development Studies* vol. 24, no. 1 (1995), 61–77.

<sup>7</sup> Isle de France was first appropriated by the French in 1715. In the seventeenth century it had been briefly colonised by the Dutch. In 1810 it became the British colony of Mauritius.

a passion for comparative social commentary.<sup>8</sup> Their accounts of 'identities' in eighteenth-century Isle de France can be read both as evidence for the nature of identities as complex lived realities, and simultaneously as evidence of the compulsion to order a less than orderly world.

Some like the botanist Pierre Poivre (who was later to become Intendant of the island), heavily influenced by Physiocratic thought, were distressed by the island's dependence on trade and its lack of attention to agriculture. For Poivre, this obsession with the world of goods as opposed to the 'arts' of agriculture was bound to produce an inferior society, and he employs the idiom of slavery to make his point: men who do not practice the arts are 'enslaved', he wrote.<sup>9</sup> Many compared the 'white' society of Isle de France with that of the neighbouring Isle Bourbon. This island, settled from the seventeenth century by a group of colonists from Madagascar and later from France, had evolved into a sleepy agricultural backwater next to its fast-moving trading neighbour. Whilst the colonists of Isle de France were described as largely concerned to get rich quick and move on, those of Isle Bourbon were settled, relatively small-scale agriculturalists whose families and slaves were employed on the land. The constant flow of people, goods and news in and out of Port Louis meant that the elite of that city (and some of the lower orders) could at least attempt to keep up with the 'manners and fashions' of the metropole, and indeed, of other parts of the world. By contrast, major shipping traffic bypassed Isle Bourbon, where the colonists were in any case too poor even to pretend to be replicating the changing fashions of Paris. Some commentators admired the 'simplicity' of the Bourbon creoles, their rustic ways and their established family lives, and though their origins in the French possessions and piratic communities of Madagascar meant that all were of 'sang mêlé', yet they were apparently eager to profess their loyalty to France. As one missionary wrote in 1732, 'despite the fact that both their hair and their manners resemble those of the blacks, they have a distinct aversion to the latter and call themselves French'.<sup>10</sup> Though eighteenth-century visitors inevitably patronised these distant and dark French men and women, in general they compared their society favourably with that of Isle de France, more commonly described in terms of the social disorder which trade, money and war could bring. Opinions certainly differed on the merits and

<sup>8</sup> Amongst whom were the Abbe de la Caille, Bernardin de St Pierre, Pierre Poivre, M. J. Milbert, Guillaume le Gentil, J. Bory de St Vincent, M. Sonnerat.

<sup>9</sup> M. le Poivre, *The Travels of a Philosopher, Being Observations on the Customs, Manners, Arts, Agriculture and Trade of Several Nations in Asia and Africa* (trans. London, 1769), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Congregation de la Mission (Paris), receuil 1504, f. 171: Voyage des trois missionnaires, 1732.



demerits of free trade, but many shared the view of one missionary that 'in according freedom of commerce they had also accorded freedom to all sorts of deprivations'.<sup>11</sup> Though the colonists of Isle Bourbon might be recognised as less than 'white', this 'mélange' had at least arrived at some kind of stability. Bourbon creole women were described as 'well built, well-made and beautiful' despite being 'brown'. On Isle de France, by contrast, the moral consequences and context of sexual relations between the 'races' were perceived as far more dangerous:

It causes great disorder on Isle de France to see men of a certain rank publicly associating themselves with negresses whom they treat as wives and with whom they have children who will one day become a bastardised and dangerous race. This shameful *mélange* has been introduced by the *sejours* of troops and sailors ... In this respect it is not so much the established residents who were the most guilty but a vice once introduced by outsiders, does not leave with them, but stays and grows larger.<sup>12</sup>

Attempts to stabilise 'white' family life had been made on Isle de France almost since its birth as a colony. Girls from religious communities in Brittany had been shipped out in the 1730s with the intention that they would marry the single working men who had signed up for a few years in the colony, and whom the Company hoped would stay and settle on the land. The experiment ended quickly when serious doubts were cast on the health and morality of the girls. Concubinage would remain common throughout the century, giving rise, as the missionaries and others warned, to a small community of *metis* who would find a voice during and after the Revolution. Meanwhile, a commentator such as Bernardin de St Pierre (who was to go on to write the best-seller *Paul et Virginie*, which was set on the island) romanticised and idealised the role of the 'white' creole woman whom he erected as an emblem of colonial simplicity, and whose attachment to her children, closeness to nature, and creation of an ordered household (all these tasks, in fact, performed by her slaves), stood in contrast to the disorder of port life.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the discourse of immorality and disorder which so permeated observations of life on Isle de France must be treated with caution—the trope of the dissolute colonist was a well-worn one—yet it does appear that the constant comings and goings of troops and

<sup>11</sup> Congregation de la Mission, Recueil 1504, f. 195, Caulier(?), 1765.

<sup>12</sup> Congregation de la Mission, Recueil 1504, ff. 189, Teste, 1764.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions of gender and sexual politics in *Paul et Virginie* see Hunt, *Family Romance*, 29–32; Reid, *Families in Jeopardy*, 101–36.

sailors, of slave ships and merchandise, produced a place which was simultaneously very small and very large, which was parochial in the extreme in some of its politics, but which also stood in the middle of an immensely cosmopolitan world. In this way it was possible both for Jouan to escape on the *Le Brillant*, and for him to be traced to Pondicherry. Though he was wealthy enough to indulge his taste for fashion, for gold-rimmed hats and jewellery, yet he was still a slave. In this world social categories were no sooner invented than they strained at the seams, but the invention of those categories went on nevertheless. For the colonial administration here as elsewhere, it was important to continue to struggle to determine a method of knowing who, exactly, everyone was, in part because 'race' was such an unreliable marker. Jouan had no doubt appeared to be very plausible when he presented himself on board ship with his fine clothes and gentle manners. A slave was not always recognisable as a slave which is why, as Lousteau reminded Lieutenant Brousse, skin colour, if not definitive proof of social and legal status, was nevertheless a kind of warning sign: 'no black can call himself free who does not have proof of that condition'. Here, as elsewhere in the colonial world of slavery, though the binary divisions of black and white, slave and free, formed the backdrop, the basic contours of the social landscape, in practice many more subdivisions, differentiations and compromises to principles were necessary if the place were to function at all. Some of these elaborations, of divisions of labour and of ethnicity, were to become more than mere colonial labels and to endure as lived identities, whilst others were overtaken by the constant process of change which characterised the creole world. The invention of social categories and characterisations was not, of course, solely the domain of the authorities—otherwise their task would have been easier, their world less uncertain. Slaves, for example, were well aware of the divisions which existed within the 'white' society of the island, and when they designated white sailors as 'li negres blancs',<sup>14</sup> they alluded both to the fragility of the category 'white' and to the potential breadth of the category 'slave'.

The complexity of social categories and identities on the island, as this example indicates, and as contemporaries observed, derived in some part from the nature of its economy. Isle de France did not become a major plantation economy until it became Mauritius under the British in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Slavery, then, was a differentiated sort of affair, with many slaves trained and employed as skilled workers

<sup>14</sup> M. J. Milbert, *Voyage Pittoresque a l'Île de France, au Cap de Bonne-Esperance et a l'Île de Tenerife* 2 vols. (Paris, 1812), vol. 1: 274.

<sup>15</sup> Though the production of sugar did begin to expand in the 1790s: M. D. North-Coombes, 'Labour Problems in the Sugar Industry of Ile de France or Mauritius, 1790–1842' (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1978), Chapter 1.

and artisans whose function was to build the infrastructure of the island, to build the city of Port Louis, to build and repair ships, to service the transient white population.<sup>16</sup> Not all were as successful as Jouan, but many, both men and women, had undertaken apprenticeships through which they had acquired highly marketable skills as masons, carpenters, seamstresses, wig-makers, domestic servants and cooks. Mobility of employment and of residence was common amongst this slave elite, since it often made economic sense for a smaller slave-owner to 'hire out' a skilled slave for a period, or to put a slave in charge of a small business enterprise such as a bar or canteen. This practice is probably what made the court suspicious of Modeste's claim that she had bought her freedom, for if that were so it would be unlikely that she would be paying Bacou the sum of 2 *livres* per day. Slaves, 'free blacks' and poor whites lived in close proximity in the narrow streets of Port Louis, and to a lesser extent on some rural *habitations*. Urban planning throughout the century had attempted to assign certain groups of people to certain urban spaces<sup>17</sup>—there was a Camp des Yolofs and a Camp des Malabars,<sup>18</sup> for example—but the people of Port Louis were not so easily ordered, at least not unless they had acquired their own pieces of property.<sup>19</sup> We have seen that Bernard, a 'Malabar', was living in the Camp des Yolofs. Surviving daily diaries of the Port Louis police station give us a sense of life on the street—the disputes between neighbours who might be technically 'free' or enslaved, and the uncertainty attached to both of these labels; the fights occasioned by newly arrived soldiers and sailors drinking and sleeping in the brothels, or simply renting rooms from 'free black' women; the abandoned babies (about which more later); the frequent arguments about money.<sup>20</sup>

Legal categories of the person were hard to enforce, and ethnic and 'racial' categories often slippery. Yet it was not the case that 'anything goes' in eighteenth-century Isle de France—there were some enduring

<sup>16</sup> On the history of slavery on Isle de France and Mauritius see R. B. Allen, 'Creoles, Indian Immigrants and the Restructuring of Society and Economy in Mauritius' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1983); Muslim Jumeer, 'Les Affranchis et les Indiens Libres a l'Île de France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle' (Doctoral thesis, Université de Poitiers, 1984); Vijaya Teelock, 'Bitter Sugar: Slavery and Emancipation in Nineteenth Century Mauritius' (D.Phil., University of London, 1993); M. D. E. Nwulia, *The History of Slavery in Mauritius and the Seychelles, 1810–1875* (London and Toronto, 1981); Anthony Barker, *Slavery and Antislavery in Mauritius 1810–33* (Basingstoke and New York, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> A. Toussaint, *Port Louis. Deux Siècles d'Histoire (1735–1935)* (Port Louis, 1936).

<sup>18</sup> 'Yolof' or 'Wolof' referred to slaves of West African origin who had been imported in the early part of the eighteenth century (of which more later), while 'Malabar' referred to those, slave or free, who were of South Indian origin.

<sup>19</sup> On the acquisition of property by manumitted slaves, see especially Allen, 'Creoles'.

<sup>20</sup> NAM. OA 58: Bureau de Police, Journal pour la consignation des rapports de police, 15 avril 1785–31 mars 1787; Z2B/6: Journal de police, 1 juillet 1790–29 juillet 1791.

patterns to social interactions and the disputes occasioned by them. To begin with, ethnic labels, though frequently inaccurate, were not always meaningless, particularly when they functioned to reinforce divisions of labour. The extent to which slaves of Indian origin formed an elite within Isle de France slave society may have been exaggerated,<sup>21</sup> but there is nevertheless substantial evidence that certain occupations were more common amongst them than in the slave body as a whole.<sup>22</sup> So, a female 'Bengalie' slave, such as Modeste, or one designated 'Malabar', was very likely to be employed as a domestic servant. The frequency of sexual relationships between them and their masters may have led in turn to higher rates of manumission,<sup>23</sup> and so women of Indian origin came to form an important core of the small 'free black' population of the eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> This kind of evidence from Port Louis reminds us that 'globalisation', and the complex social identities created by it, has a long and varied history.

The extent to which ex-slaves of Indian origin retained any cultural identity deriving from their backgrounds is hard to discern in the records. Some of the free 'Malabar' living in that part of Port Louis designated as 'Camp Malabar' married within their community. 'Malabar' was a broad colonial label used to refer to Indians from the Malabar south-west coast of India, but also to South Indians in general. Some 'Malabar' families appear to have retained this identity over generations; others were absorbed into a more general 'free black' population of mixed African, Indian, Malagasy and European origin, and might appear in the colonial records of property transactions and marriage as 'noir libre creol', or simply 'creol libre'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Marina Carter, 'Indian Slaves in Mauritius, 1729–1834', *Indian Historical Review*, XV (1–2): 239.

<sup>22</sup> Indian slaves were always a small minority within the slave population as a whole. In 1761 they formed 7 per cent of the slave population: Carter, 'Indian Slaves': 233–4; D. Napal, *Les Indiens à l'Île de France* (Port Louis, 1965).

<sup>23</sup> Though Carter argues that the large free 'Malabar' community (rather than 'white' masters) may have been responsible for the growth in manumitted Indians: Carter, 'Indian Slaves': 240.

<sup>24</sup> This is documented by Richard Allen in 'Creoles'. This property-owning class of women of Indian origin was, on a very small scale, not unlike the more famous and enduring 'signares' of eighteenth-century Senegal, also under French Company rule. The origins of this latter group, however, lay in an earlier period of Portuguese influence. See James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: the Senegal River Valley, 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> This issue is discussed by Benjamin Moutou in his history of the Christian population of Mauritius. Moutou refers to this Indian free population of the eighteenth century as the 'Pondicheriens' and takes issue with Hazareesingh's claim that they became completely Christianised and Europeanised. The documentary evidence is, in fact, contradictory, indicating perhaps that within the population of Indian origin different responses existed to the circumstances of life on Isle de France. Benjamin Moutou, *Les Chrétiens de l'Île Maurice* (Port Louis, 1996), 160–1.

Evidence presented in the case of Jouan and Bernard points to the diversity which may have existed within the population of Indian origin in Isle de France. In order that Jouan might be recognised, Lousteau supplies a number of terms to describe him. He is, firstly, an 'Indien'. Secondly, he is a 'Malabar' from south or south-west India. Thirdly, he is a 'Lascar', a term also used in this case to describe the owner of Modeste, the fisherman, Bacou. In early eighteenth-century Isle de France 'Lascar' was both an occupational and a religious category. The first 'Lascars' to arrive on the island were not slaves, but technically free Muslim sailors imported by Governor Labourdonnais in the 1730s as skilled alternatives to more expensive French labour. Their insistence on practising their religion caused deep offence to the clergy on the island, but Labourdonnais (and subsequent governors) valued them highly and defended their right to a degree of religious freedom.<sup>26</sup> As the century wore on, the meaning of this category undoubtedly shifted. The 'Lascar' Bacou was both free and a fisherman, whilst the Lascar 'Jouan' was a slave and a carpenter. Perhaps they still had in common some degree of Muslim identity—we cannot be sure, but Lousteau insists that they conspired together, speaking what he calls the 'Lascar' language. 'Lascar' was one of those categories, or identities, which carried real meaning, though that meaning was never stable. Behind it lay a longer history of cultural change, of 'creolisation' in the cultural sense. 'Lascar' was in fact a category originating in an earlier period of interaction between the peoples of India and Europeans, in this case the Portuguese. Arab traders and navigators, supported by west Asian trading peoples, had spread the Sufi tradition of the Islamic faith along the southern coast of India from the eighth or ninth centuries AD, while elite groups of Sunni Muslims dominated the maritime towns and trading centres of the region.<sup>27</sup> When, from the late fifteenth century, the Portuguese founded their trading stations and settlements on the coast of South India they found Asian Muslims dominating trade, in conjunction with ruling Hindus. Groups such as the 'Lascars' were the product of this and earlier interactions—they arrived into the new context of French eighteenth-century colonialism with a long and

<sup>26</sup> See the entry in Governor Dumas' diary in 1768: 'There are, on Isle de France, several Asian families of the Muslim religion, from two different nations—the Malabars and the Lascars—the former are workers, the latter fishermen.' The Prefet Apostolique (M. Igou) had complained to Dumas about their public practice of the Muslim religion. Dumas observed that: 'these Asians are connected by bonds of blood, of nationality and of religion to the peoples inhabiting the coasts of Coromandel, of Malabar and of Orissa and asked whether it might not be impolitic to remove from those who come to Isle de France their freedom to practice their religious ceremonies'. Archives Nationales, Paris [AN] C/4/21.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73–9.

varied history behind them. In addition to the Muslim Lascars, there may well have been Christians amongst the early Indians recruited or enslaved to work on Isle de France.<sup>28</sup> Christianity in South India also pre-dated the Portuguese by many centuries, and these 'Syrian' Christian communities were obvious, though contested, allies for the Portuguese.<sup>29</sup> More straightforwardly the product of earlier Portuguese influence in south India were those who, like Bernard, were described as 'Topas'. The 'Topas' or 'Topasses' were a 'Eurasian' population, mostly Catholic, and mostly of mixed Portuguese and Tamil origin:

These Eurasian Christians are rarely thought of as a group with a distinctive identity or status in south Indian society: it is usually assumed that they were a 'degenerate' and marginalised appendage of the European powers. In fact, though, the Tamilnad topasses constituted a remarkably large part of the region's military population during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. They too had a reputation for martial prowess, and like the Syrians, they were widely recruited into the armies of the south Indian regional powers.<sup>30</sup>

These two ethnic labels—'Lascar' and 'Topa'—in addition to the wider categories referring to geographical origin—'Malabar', 'Bengali', 'Talinga' and so on—indicate that the religious, cultural and occupational distinctiveness of different groups of people of Indian origin was at least acknowledged on Isle de France by administrators, by slave-owners like Lousteau and by the people themselves. For slaves like Jouan, the label 'Lascar' may well have added to the value he represented to his master.<sup>31</sup> It also appears to be the case that some groups of Indians—the 'Lascars', the Christians, the 'Topas'—were in fact the product of earlier waves of immigration, of colonisation and of cultural interaction resulting from the ancient trading systems of the Indian Ocean.<sup>32</sup>

An important and enduring feature of the colonial system on Isle de France was that cultural and religious differences amongst slaves of African origin were rarely recognised or commented upon. Differences amongst Africans from different sources on the continent were largely described in terms of physique and supposed suitability for certain types of manual work. Whilst Indians, even those who were enslaved, were recognised as having a culture of some sort, one could say that Africans

<sup>28</sup> Carter, 'Indian Slaves', 242.

<sup>29</sup> Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, chapter 7.

<sup>30</sup> Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 395.

<sup>31</sup> Carter, 'Indian Slaves', 246.

<sup>32</sup> For this point I am indebted to participants in the Imperial and Commonwealth History Seminar, University of Cambridge, and in particular to Timothy Harper and Chris Bayly.

were thought to possess only bodies of varying degrees of usefulness. There were some exceptions, however. Bernard, though a Malabar, lived in that part of Port Louis which is still designated 'Camp des Yoloofs'. In the early part of the eighteenth century the 'Wolof' or 'Yolof' slaves, imported from the coast of West Africa, were highly valued, particularly by the Company itself, and were described in terms of an 'aristocracy' of Africans. They came from the Company's possessions on the coast of Senegal, and although one should be careful not to read too much into this ethnic designation (since 'Wolof', like other terms used to label slaves, was undoubtedly somewhat inaccurate), nevertheless the evidence for the role of this group is interesting and suggestive of some similarities with the situation in eighteenth-century south India. As in south India, so on the West coast of Africa, the French were by no means the first outsiders to make their impact felt. The Portuguese had traded here long before the French and English chartered companies came into existence in the late seventeenth century. A creolised group, which Philip Curtin refers to as the 'Afro-Portuguese', had come into being, acting as a trade diaspora in the region.<sup>33</sup> But there were other factors at work in this region too. The 'Wolof' people of the Senegal river valley in the seventeenth century were partially Islamicised, had developed a centralised monarchy and lived under what one historian has described as 'aristocratic despotism'.<sup>34</sup> They also had a highly developed system of slavery, with an elite of royal slaves at court being used as advisors and administrators, and later as warriors. The Wolof also had a 'caste' system—a subdivision of the people into free persons, hereditary occupational groups (notably blacksmiths and 'griots') and slaves, and rules of endogamy designed to maintain social divisions.

By the late seventeenth century the Wolof polity and system of slavery was being influenced by the new demands of the Atlantic slave economy, and by the increasing influence of the French as opposed to the Portuguese. The trading diaspora was now not so much 'Afro-Portuguese' as 'Afro-French' or 'Franco-Wolof', operating from the island of Gorée.<sup>35</sup> The French in Senegal at this time relied heavily on a range of intermediaries in order to pursue the trade in slaves. An elaborate diplomacy of trade existed between them and local political leaders. Markets were controlled and the sale of slaves was taxed. One important group of intermediaries for the French was that of the 'laptots' (from the Wolof words 'lappato bi'). In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries most of this group were free rather

<sup>33</sup> Philip Curtin, *Economic Change in Pre-Colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> James Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> Curtin, *Economic Change*, 107.

than enslaved. They were skilled sailors, but also interpreters and intermediaries, who worked alongside French officials and sailors on the river fleets.<sup>36</sup> On Isle de France the role of the Wolof (in this case slaves rather than free persons) exhibited some continuity with that on the West African coast.<sup>37</sup> In 1753 administrators on Isle de France emphasised the importance of the 'noirs de Senegal' for the island, particularly for the 'marine' where they could 'substitute to a large extent for the sailors and carpenters of Europe, and for the Lascars of India'.<sup>38</sup> In some of the documentation on Isle de France the terms 'Wolof' and 'Guinée' are used interchangeably, though in theory the latter came from an area extending from the Senegal River, eastwards to Cape Palmas (now on the Liberia/Ivory Coast border). Slaves described variously as 'Guinée' and 'Yolof' were employed on a privately owned forge on the island in the 1750s and much valued for their skills.<sup>39</sup> This is suggestive, given the existence of a 'caste' of blacksmiths amongst the Wolof people. In a 1761 census of slaves owned and employed by the Company, those of 'Guinée' continued to dominate as blacksmiths, carpenters, and in marine-related activities such as caulking.<sup>40</sup> Though in general the proportion of West Africans in the Isle de France slave population had declined by mid-century, they still formed a majority within the slave elite created by the Company.

The 'Wolof' and 'Guinée' of West Africa, then, though enslaved rather than free, were not unlike the 'Lascars' of south India in terms of the specialist roles accorded to them in the slave system, and in terms of the histories of their original societies. Of course, the coasts of West Africa and of South India were very different places in this period, but nevertheless there were some similarities. Against the ancient trading systems of the Indian Ocean, the trade of coastal West Africa seems relatively shallow, but both regions had experienced interaction with the Portuguese, and the creation of creolised groups (the 'Topas' in India; the 'Afro-Portuguese' in Senegambia), as a result. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries French colonial and commercial ventures, operating through a succession of chartered companies, reproduced this pattern and extended it inland as the influence of the Atlantic slave trade made itself felt. The French needed intermediaries,

<sup>36</sup> Searing, *West African Slavery*, 71–2.

<sup>37</sup> M. David, Governor of Isle de France in the 1750s, had in fact been Company director in Senegal in the 1740s.

<sup>38</sup> AOM: C4/7: Lozier-Bouvet, 31 decembre 1753.

<sup>39</sup> AOM: C4/86: Diary of M. Magon, Governor, July 1756, referring to the forge owned by M. M. Rostaing and Hermans.

<sup>40</sup> In the latter case, this group included more women than men: AOM: G1/505, piece 7: recensement general des noirs, negresses et enfants appartenant a la Compagnie, existant au 20 avril 1761.



just as had the Portuguese, and so the 'Lascars' of South India were recognised by French administrators as indispensable allies in their commercial and political confrontation with the British; on the coast and up the river valleys of Senegambia the 'laptots' performed a similar function as skilled sailors and as intermediaries with powerful and sophisticated African rulers. In both regions Islam was a powerful force—established for centuries in South India, its populist character and incorporationist qualities helped ensure its survival there, while in eighteenth-century Senegambia the ravages of the slave trade, civil war, and a crisis of subsistence paved the way for a powerful and enduring Islamic revival movement beginning at the end of the century. By then, few if any West African slaves were being imported into Isle de France: the newer and nearer markets of the East African coast and of Madagascar now provided the major sources of slaves.

Musleem Jumeer has shown that some 'Lascars' continued to play an important role in the Indian and 'free black' communities throughout the century.<sup>41</sup> On the continuum of creolisation<sup>42</sup> at one end were those who preserved as much as they could of their cultural and religious origins; at the other were those who had converted to Christianity, and had been absorbed into the 'free black' population. Probably most lay somewhere in the middle. Evidence for the continuity of a Wolof ethnicity is so scant as to be almost non-existent. Given the high mortality rates amongst slaves in Isle de France it seems unlikely that even a slave elite would have managed to pass on their culture and traditions in the face of the dramatic decline in slave imports from their region of origin.<sup>43</sup> It is generally thought that when the court artist

<sup>41</sup> Musleem Jumeer, 'Les Affranchis et les Indiens Libres a l'Île de France au XVIIIe siècle' (Doctoral thesis, Université de Poitiers, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> I have taken this way of conceptualising creolisation from the very illuminating work of Richard Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> In any case, as we have noted, the term 'Wolof', and that of 'Guinée', as used to describe slaves in Isle de France was a broad one which was likely to have incorporated and blurred other West African identities. Although in the court case on Jouan we are introduced to a witness, Pierre Moussa, who is described as 'Bambara', it is also the case that many ethnically Bambara slaves were counted amongst the 'Wolof' and 'Guinée'. Fear of Wolof insubordination and disloyalty led the French on the island of Gorée to rely for some purposes on slaves who came from further up-river, most notably those known as 'Bambara': Searing, *West African Slavery*, 29, 60. An additional complication is the presence on Isle de France of slaves exported from the French post of Ouidah on the Bight of Benin. These slaves were likely to have been culturally very different from those exported from Senegambia and the Guinée coast. Evidence for the presence of slaves from Ouidah in the first half of the eighteenth century is provided by Philip Baker and Chris Corne in their study of the evolution of a creole language on Isle de France: *Isle de France Creole: Affinities and Origins* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, Karoma, 1982): 180–1. On the French slave trade see also J. M. Filliot, *La Traite des Esclaves vers les Mascareignes au*

M.J. Milbert noted, at the turn of the century, a distinct group of 'Wolof' on Isle de France, he must have been mistaken—imports of West African slaves having long dried up. Yet it remains possible that a small group of West African slaves maintained their privileged role within Government service and their status within the slave economy, as well as some modified and creolised form of their ethnicity. Milbert's description is perhaps a little fanciful, but in some details appears quite plausible:

Les Africains sont les plus propres au travail de la terre. Les Yolofs sont plus grands, plus forts et mieux faits: ce sont les negres par excellence; ils ont plus d'intelligence que tous ceux qui viennent de Mozambique ou de la cote adjacente. Un grand nombre d'Yolofs sont menuisiers, charpentiers, ou exercent d'autres professions mecaniques. Le gouvernement possede plusieurs centaines d'hommes de cette espece; ils se font remarquer au tatouage bizarre par lequel ils s'imaginent decorer certaines parties du corps: ainsi, par exemple, ils se dessinent sur le ventre un large soleil qui le recouvre tout entier, et ressemble a une espece de cuirasse.<sup>44</sup>

If it were the case that a distinct, if small, group of West Africans survived to the turn of the century on Isle de France, they would have done so, not because they had managed to preserve some elemental or originary identity, but rather because they were, like the 'Lascars', already a creolised group, adapted to the circumstances of colonialism, who had created for themselves a specialised role and occupational niche within the slave economy. The story of the 'Wolofs' of Isle de France, then, is not one which traces the survival of what are sometimes called 'Africanisms', but one of the uneven and unequal processes which went to make a new creole culture on the island.

Many of the factors at work which had gone to create these specialised groups were also present in other areas from which Isle de France began increasingly to source its slaves from the middle of the century—that is the coast of East Africa, and the island of Madagascar. Slaves who had been exported from either the Portuguese-controlled area of the east coast of Africa (running roughly from Delegoa Bay to Cap Delgado), or from those ports controlled by the Arabs (from Cap

*XVIIIe siècle*, ORSTROM (Paris, 1974) and Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: an Old Regime Business* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

<sup>44</sup>M.J. Milbert, *Voyage Pittoresque a l'Île de France, Au Cap de Bonne Esperance et a l'Île de Teneriffe* (Paris: A. Nepven, 1812), vol. 11: 163. Milbert's observations were made in 1801. Gamble's ethnographic study of the Wolof makes no mention of any tradition of body tattooing, though this is noted as a feature of Serer culture—the Serer being an ethnic group partially incorporated by the Wolof: David P. Gamble, *The Wolof of Senegambia* (1957) 103.

Delgado to the Gulf of Aden) were known generically as 'les Mozambiques', and although they came from a wide range of east and central African societies, cultural or ethnic divisions amongst them are rarely remarked upon in the documentation.<sup>45</sup> There was no equivalent of the 'Wolof' slave elite amongst the East African slaves, despite the fact that the coastal societies of East Africa had a history not dissimilar in some respects to that of coastal West Africa, or indeed to that of the south coast of India. East African slaves, whose numbers in Isle de France rose rapidly in the 1770s and 1780s, arrived into a society which, though still fluid, had developed some degree of stability and identity of its own. The creole language, for example, though still evolving, had acquired some basic features by this period<sup>46</sup> though East African slaves certainly contributed to its vocabulary.<sup>47</sup> In the hierarchy of the slave economy 'les Mozambiques' lay at the bottom. Valued, not for their skills, but for the strength of their bodies, French commentators and administrators did not recognise them as having any distinct culture. If we think of the process of creolisation as one of losing and learning, but an unequal one, then we can imagine that, despite their numbers, 'les Mozambiques' lost more than others and had to learn fast the ways of this already established island colony. Meanwhile, slaves of Malagasy origin occupied an ambiguous position in the evolving creole culture of Isle de France. The relative proximity of Madagascar and the history of French interests and influence there made it an obvious choice as a source of slaves for Isle de France. Although early governors placed a high value on the services of West African slaves, they also recognised that much could be gained from exploiting a nearer market—not least a lower rate of mortality in passage. As on the coast of West Africa, so in Madagascar, the French relied heavily on intermediaries to negotiate the terms of the slave trade. Madagascar had a long history of interaction with 'outsiders' (Arabs, Portuguese) some of whom had traded in slaves. In the seventeenth century, however, a new set of

<sup>45</sup> Though once again it was Milbert who noted that 'Parmi les Mozambiques, il y en a qui sont originaires de l'établissement portugais de ce nom; d'autres de Querimbas, sur la même cote; d'autres de Quiloa et de Zanzibar, parmi lesquels se trouvent quelques Abyssins. Cette classe, selon M. de Cossigny, forme quinze divisions de peuples qui ne s'entendent point, et qui étaient destinés à se combattre.' Milbert, *Voyage Pittoresque*, vol. 11: 162. In the records of the ships which transported East African slaves to Isle de France the ethnicities of slaves were noted, though no doubt they were very rough categories. See for example NAM: OC71 Bureau de Contrôle de la Marine: Pièces relatives aux opérations de traite de la flûte Roi Les Bons Amis sur la cote orientale de l'Afrique, 1779–85.

<sup>46</sup> Baker dates the first identification of Mauritian creole in an advertisement of 1773: Baker and Corne, *Isle de France Creole*: 248.

<sup>47</sup> See entries of 'Bantu' derivation in Philip Baker and Vinesh Y. Hookoomsing, *Diksyoner Kreol Morisyen* (Paris: Editors L'Harmattan, 1987).

foreigners (the Dutch, English and French) began to make their influence felt, stimulating the trade in slaves and offering firearms in return. In the same period three movements towards state formation took place within Madagascar, the most successful being that of the highland Merina who, between 1780 and 1820, came to conquer most of the island. The French had tried unsuccessfully to colonise Madagascar in the seventeenth century from their base at Fort Dauphin, and in the process developed a healthy respect for Malagasy rulers. 'La grande île' was vitally important to the development of the French Indian Ocean islands, not only as a source of slaves, but also as a source of foodstuffs: the fleet of boats which made the journey to Madagascar from Isle de France came back loaded with men, cattle and rice. They also exhibited a grudging respect for the slaves of Malagasy origin who were transported to Isle de France. Though in general 'les malgaches' or 'madecasses' were treated as one group within the slave economy, French administrators and observers recognised divisions within them, particularly between the 'light-skinned' highlanders and the more 'African'-looking lowlanders. It was particularly noted that those from the highland populations had straight, rather than curly hair, a fact which apparently led some to classify them, occupationally, as one group with slaves of Indian origin.<sup>48</sup> The 'malgaches' certainly captured the somewhat feverish imaginations of the white population. Some wore talismans, reinforcing their reputation for sorcery. Even when not numerically dominant amongst the population of escaped 'maron' slaves in the mountains at the centre of the island, they were always thought of as having a particular propensity to both violence and flight. Indeed, every year some Malagasy slaves escaped the island altogether in stolen boats, or ones they had secretly manufactured themselves. In some cases they were recaptured in Madagascar and sold again, reappearing in Isle de France. The determination of the Malagasy to escape was understood to have been linked to their particular attachment to their ancestors, and a dread of dying away from home.<sup>49</sup>

Very occasionally in the trials of runaway slaves, or 'marons', we find evidence for what might be called cultural resistance amongst slaves of Malagasy, and, to a lesser extent, African origin. Escaped

<sup>48</sup> At least this is what Milbert seems to imply: 'La population de Madagascar s'étant formée par le concours de plusieurs nations, il en résulte que ces insulaires n'ont pas tous, a beaucoup pres, les meme caracteres physiques; leur couleur est tres variée, tous n'ont point les cheveux crepus. Ces insulaires font, avec les Indiens, un tier des esclaves de l'île de France. Quoiqu'ils apprennent facilement toute espèce de metiers, on prefere les employer comme domestiques.' Milbert, *Voyage Pittoresque*, vol. 11: 164.

<sup>49</sup> For Malagasy veneration of ancestors and burial practices see M. Bloch, *Placing the Dead. Tombs, Ancestral Villas and Kinship Organisation in Madagascar* (London, Seminar Press, 1971). For an overview of the complexity of Malagasy history and culture see John Mack, *Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors* (London: British Museum Publications, 1986).

slaves of Malagasy origin sometimes testified that they had reverted to their pre-slave names. In a case of 1746, for example, a captured slave of Malagasy origin, known as Louison, when asked if this is her real name, replies that her Malagasy name is Fonovola and that this is the name she used with other maroon slaves, but that she was known to her various slave-masters as Louison.<sup>50</sup> In a case of 1750 the Malagasy slave Magdalene Marena, who had been a member of the 'Bande de Grande Barbe' says in reply to questions that she practises the 'religion of her country'.<sup>51</sup>

As this brief discussion has made clear, delineating the nature of 'identities' on Isle de France in the eighteenth century is a far from straightforward task. All identities are the product of cultural work, and all are thus in some sense continually coming into being. This is more true of places such as Isle de France in the eighteenth century, where the rigidities of the ideology of slavery came up against the fluidity of a society in the making. This was clearly a highly unequal process in which some groups (notably the French colonial elite) retained much of their history, culture and language, albeit transformed by the experience of being colonists, whilst others (most notably the slaves of East African origin) were rarely recognised as having any culture to lose. The task is of course made doubly difficult by the nature of the evidence at our disposal. Any account of slave identities must be read against the grain of the representations of certain groups produced by French observers, supplemented by whatever fragments of evidence survive in the legal documentation, often produced as asides to the central narrative. In contrast, the colonial elite, though deeply divided, was deeply self-conscious, endlessly reflecting on its own identity.

That the identity of this elite was centrally influenced by their ownership of slaves is not only a retrospective observation, but was frequently remarked upon by contemporaries. In the course of the eighteenth century, the belief grew that slavery was an 'unnatural' state, and one which had the potential to corrupt or barbarise the slave owner. Within Isle de France 'white' society, riven as it was by social tensions, jealousies, and rivalries, 'reputation' was all important. Cases in which reputation was at stake can tell us something about the limits of identities, the boundary markers which social groups placed between themselves and others in an often vain attempt to present to the outside world the picture of themselves which they cherished within. Such cases often revolved around issues of sexuality, of family life, and of the

<sup>50</sup> NAM: JB4: Procedure Criminelle, 1746.

<sup>51</sup> NAM: JB6: Procedure Criminelle, 1750-1.

treatment of slaves. Though slaves who attempted to bring their masters and mistresses to book for ill-treatment were rarely successful, nevertheless, the alleged ill-treatment of slaves was a powerful weapon with which one slave-owner could insult another. As the eighteenth century progressed, so 'respectable' people held the view that the survival of the institution of slavery depended on it moving more definitively from the private to the public domain. Though the institution of slavery had in theory been regulated since 1723 by a version of the Code Noir, in practice the treatment of slaves on the island was largely a private affair. Slaves were private property and many slave-owners guarded jealously what they regarded as an inviolable right to do what they would with that property. But as the eighteenth century progressed, and as the view that slavery was an 'unnatural' state became more widespread, so also did the argument that the punishment of slaves must be removed from the private domain and regulated by public authority. Reason was to be applied to this very unreasonable institution. Allegations of ill-treatment of slaves were much like allegations of wife beating—they only came to the fore under certain circumstances, either because the ill-treatment has caused public disorder, or because there was already some underlying resentment or jealousy against the slave-owner on the part of another. More frequent were charges by a slave-owner against a third party for beating or injuring a slave belonging to the complainant. One such case from 1777 is revealing, not only of norms around the 'proper' treatment of slaves, but also of the degree to which male slaves were regarded as having some right to respect, even from whites, when it came to their own sexual and familial relations.

In November 1777 one *Sieur de Clonard*, who was a Lieutenant in the King's navy, complained to the police of the 'excès' committed by a certain 'white' against his slave, Joseph, a Malagasy domestic servant, who had received a blow to the head resulting in a great deal of bleeding.<sup>52</sup> *Sieur de Clonard* presents his complaint in the following terms, arguing that 'such excessive acts are all the more worthy of the attention of the law and all the more reprehensible since, being committed against a slave, they cause the latter to forget, in the first moments of pain and sensitivity, the singular respect which they must show to whites'. *De Clonard's* argument was a familiar one—that there were limits beyond which it was not reasonable for a slave to maintain the appropriate respect for whites, and that excessively harsh or provocative treatment therefore threatened the whole institution of slavery. In Joseph's case, the original provocation appears to have been an insult or at least an unwarranted intrusion into his private life.

<sup>52</sup> NAM: JB29: Procedure Criminelle 1777, cases against Joseph and against la Poeze.

Joseph, when interviewed by the examining judge, gives the following account. The previous day he had been in the Rue des Limittes with Perrine, a slave belonging to Sieur Bellerose, when a white man, whom he did not recognise, accosted him and demanded to know if this woman was his 'wife', to which he replied that she was his 'wife'. At this the white man said 'So you sleep with her then', to which he had replied, 'yes'. At this point the white man told him to stand back, but Perrine had stopped him from doing this, saying 'don't' and held him by the shirt. The next thing he knew was that the white man had raised the parasol he had in his hand and had begun hitting him hard on the head, neck and left arm. He had then gone to report the incident to his master. Perrine, when asked to recount the event, adds that in response to the white man's questions Joseph had replied that 'ce que cela lui f . . . ' and that it was at this point that the man (whom she names as la Poeze) lifted his parasol against him. La Poeze, described simply as an employee of the King and 26 years old, is brought in for questioning. He has himself simultaneously brought a case against Joseph, accusing him of insulting and menacing him on the street and arguing for the danger represented by blacks who dare to insult whites, causing 'disagreeable scenes on the street every day'. His case against Joseph is merged with that against him. He denies that he ever asked Joseph whether he was married to, or slept with, Perrine. The interrogator persists: 'Was it not the case that Joseph's indecent and improper response was not in fact a reply to his own improper question when he had asked Joseph if the woman was his wife and if he slept with her?' La Poeze continues to deny that he ever asked such a question. As was usual in these cases, no action was taken against him and Joseph was reminded of his duty to pay respect to whites, but the message of the proceedings was already clear—that slaves were persons enough to experience insult.

Such cases were rare. More common were those involving the reputation of 'free blacks' and free persons of colour, or 'metis'.<sup>53</sup> Amongst this small group a self-conscious awareness of the rights, and a demand to be recognised as equal to 'whites', becomes more evident towards the end of the century and is further enhanced by the Revolution.<sup>54</sup> These cases remind us that, in the complex melting-pot

<sup>53</sup> There are many such examples: e.g. in 1784 that of Louis Bergincourt, a 'free black' carpenter, who complains to the police that two brothers (the brothers Sieurs le Goy) have composed a song which defames his family and have pinned the text of this song to the door of his house.

<sup>54</sup> My impression (but this is only an impression) is that cases involving the reputations of 'free blacks' increased in the revolutionary years. This would not be surprising given the importance of the issue of 'free blacks' in revolutionary politics and the debate which led to the abolition of slavery in 1794.

of people and identities which was eighteenth-century Isle de France, 'race' could still act as the ultimate arbiter, the bottom line. Though, as I have argued, 'race' was never a reliable or sufficient marker of social difference, neither was it far beneath the surface and could be appealed to at any moment. 'Race' was far from irrelevant when it could be connected to property and inheritance, for example, as many women knew. Cases of abandoned new-born babies were frequent in Isle de France as they were in France itself at the time. Investigations into the circumstances of abandonment sometimes revealed that the baby had been left by its slave or 'free black' mother at the door of a white man, the supposed father, in the early hours of the morning. Though an illegitimate child would have no formal claim to support from the father, a degree of moral pressure could nevertheless be exerted, sometimes with success. In episodes of high tragic-comedy, surgeons were dispatched to examine the new borns and to determine whether they might be in any degree 'white' ('blanchatre').

There were also moments of high drama on the streets of and bars of Isle de France even before the Revolution, when the mythology of 'freedom' could be seen in head-on collision with the reality of racism; in which identification by others was radically at odds with the identity which individuals had created for themselves and which they held internally; in which the simple question 'who are you?' could reveal the both the power and the fragility of an entire colonial system and the fraught nature of colonial identities. I shall end this paper with a discussion of one such case.

In Port Louis in August 1777, a crowd gathered to watch the hanging of a man named Benoit Giraud, also known as 'Hector the Mulatto'.<sup>55</sup> Giraud was described as a 'free-born black' from another island on the other side of the French colonial empire, Martinique. More proximately he came from Paris where, after a spell in the notorious Châtelet prison, he had been, to his immense outrage, exiled to Isle de France by order of the Ministère de la Marine. Arriving on the island in May 1777, Giraud was immediately placed in chains and imprisoned. On 15 August, in the late afternoon, he and another prisoner, a young boy named Cezar, were digging a trench close to the island's administrative headquarters. Benoit Giraud and Cezar were chained together. At about 5 o'clock senior government officials crossed the square in formation, passing as they did so close to the trench where the two men were digging. Amongst them were the Intendant of the colony, M. Maillart Dumesle, and one M. Foucault, the Intendant-elect, due shortly to replace Dumesle. As they walked passed in a group, so a number of witnesses saw Benoit Giraud hurl an object in the direction

<sup>55</sup> NAM: JB27, Procedure Criminelle, 1777 no. 14.



of M. Foucault, the force of which was deflected by M. Dumesle's cane. Having apparently missed his target, Giraud then leapt at Foucault (dragging the unfortunate Cezar with him), and attacked him both physically and with insults. Words in this eighteenth-century world, as we have seen, were barbed weapons. The precise words of the insult reported by witnesses varied somewhat, but most recalled hearing something along the lines of 'You fucking villain, you are the cause of all my misfortunes and you will pay for it.' Finally Giraud was removed by the other officers and he and Cezar were returned to jail, where his ranting and raving could be heard by all. In his testimony the jailer, M. Blanchteste, reported that on being returned to the jail and admonished for the terrible thing he had done, Giraud had replied: 'I have only one thing to say—I promised myself that I would do what I did—let them hang me.' The next day he stood trial.

Giraud's first examination by the judge followed the prescribed form. His answer to the question 'Who are you?' was critical. Giraud stated that he was 37 years of age, that he had been a domestic servant in Martinique, where he had been born, and in Europe, in the service of M. Foucault. He was, he emphasised, of free birth. Asked if he had ever been convicted of a crime, Giraud answered that he had never been subject to a 'punition infamante',<sup>56</sup> but that he had spent fifteen days in the Châtelet prison in Paris following a quarrel with the person with whom he was boarding. Admitting readily that he had thrown something at M. Foucault, he disputed the evidence that this was a stone. In his fury, he said, he had picked up whatever was to hand, and that had been mud. In fact, he went on, he was not entirely sure what he had done the previous day because as soon as he set eyes on Foucault his blood had boiled so much that he had not known what he was doing or saying. But, yes, he had called him a number of names—that he did recall. Asked if he had intended to kill M. Foucault he replied that he had not, but that given the terrible things that Foucault had done to him, he had wanted to humiliate him.<sup>57</sup> He was certain, he said, that his imprisonment had not been at the orders of the Ministère de la Marine. He demanded justice.

On 18 August Giraud was examined again and confronted with the witnesses. Asked if he had not insulted and menaced M. Foucault after having hurled a rock at him, he replied that he had hurled earth and not a rock, and that he had indeed insulted Foucault, but only in

<sup>56</sup> A 'punition infamante' was one which involved the loss of civil rights. In using this term Giraud demonstrates that not only is he well-versed in French law, but that he is a free man with rights which could be lost.

<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately I have not been able to discover from the surviving documentation what had gone on between Giraud and Foucault in the past, though details on Foucault's career can be found in AOM: E Series (Personnel Colonial Ancien): E 190.

response to Foucault's own insults, for Foucault had referred to him as a slave. Asked whether he did not know that M. Foucault had been named by the King as the successor to M. Maillart Dumesle as Intendant of the colony, Giraud replied that he had not known this, and even if he had been told it he would not have believed it, since Foucault had been dressed in plain grey and not in uniform. Asked whether he was not aware of the laws which ordained that free blacks and liberated slaves show particular respect to whites, Giraud responded that he was familiar with the Code Noir, and he had seen the chapter which said that 'noirs mulâtres' enjoyed the same rights and privileges as other free persons.<sup>58</sup> His own case, he went on, was that of a free person who had insulted a 'bourgeois', for M. Foucault could not be regarded as anything but a 'bourgeois', having been dressed as one, and not in uniform.

Giraud was found guilty of assault and hanged on the same day. In this case Isle de France justice worked fast—in most other cases people stayed festering in jail for months, if not years. Writing after the event to the Ministère de la Marine, Maillart Dumesle expressed something of the sense of scandal which this case had occasioned. Imagine, he wrote, that even in his last interrogation, this man admitted that he knew M. Foucault, that he had indeed intended to hit him, but that as far as he was concerned this was just a quarrel between one free individual and another. 'You can well see,' he went on, 'how these small pretexts can serve as excuses.' The case only served to underline how important it was that officers of the state should bear marks of distinction, especially in this island where the streets were 'continually full of slaves, of free blacks and mulattoes, of workers and foreigners, such that under the pretext of not recognising an official, anything might be thought permissible'.

Giraud's defence had rested on his identity. He knew that as a 'free-born mulatto' he was entitled, under the Code Noir, to the same rights and privileges as any other free person. His blood had boiled at the sight of his former employer, not only because he attributed to Foucault the injustice of his imprisonment and exile, but because he had heard Foucault refer to him as a 'slave'. He was not a slave, and so he insisted that his dispute with Foucault was merely a dispute between one free-born person and another. When told that Foucault was much more than a 'bourgeois', Giraud's defence was one of mis-recognition. How was he to know that he was the Intendant-elect (and thus about to become a kind of embodiment of the King) when he wore no uniform, no marks of office? Giraud had read the Code Noir and had believed

<sup>58</sup> Here Giraud appears to be emphasising not only his legal status as a free person, but his 'racial' origins as a 'mulatto'.

in the myth of freedom. He had failed to grasp that freedom, truth and culpability were all relative concepts in this eighteenth-century world—everything depended on who you were, and who you were was a great deal more complex than the interdependent ideologies of freedom and slavery implied. Indeed, under Ancien Regime criminal law the importance of who you were in determining the severity of a crime was formally recognised. There were, for example, seven circumstances of the person which could be held to aggravate an offence, a number of which could have been applied in this case.<sup>59</sup> What Giraud had also failed to grasp, or was refusing to recognise, was that who he was still ultimately rested on the colour of his skin. Whilst correctly identifying M. Foucault might, as Giraud argued, depend on what M. Foucault was wearing, in Giraud's own case his identity was written on his body; it was his non-whiteness which set the limits of his freedom in the colonial world. But for Giraud this identification of him as 'black' was a mis-recognition, and it was this which made his blood boil. Nearly two hundred years later, another citizen of Martinique would experience a similar sense of fury as a result of the gap between his own sense of identity and that attributed to him by whites. This was Frantz Fanon.

<sup>59</sup> There were seven circumstances of the person or of the offence which could aggravate culpability and penal severity. These included 'rank or social condition, if the offended was infamous ...'; 'if the victim was an illustrious personage ...'; 'if the crime was committed in ... a public square ...'; 'if the crime was committed by assault or surprise ... or with blatant scandal'. Richard Mowery Andrews, *Law, Magistracy and Crime in Old Regime Paris, 1735-1789* (Cambridge, 1994), vol. 1, 498.