Souvenir Magazine
180th Anniversary
of the Arrival of
Indentured Labourers in Mauritius

Indenture: from Prejudice to Pride
Souvenir Magazine - 180th Anniversary of the Arrival of Indentured Labourers in Mauritius

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**The “Archaeology of Indenture”: Mauritius as a Case-Study for a Global Investigation**

Krish Seetah, Saša Čaval & Diego Calaon.

1 Stanford University, Dept. of Anthropology and Archaeology Center, Stanford, USA.
2 Scientific-Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia.
3 IDEAS, Ca’Foscari, Venice.

Since 2008, the Mauritian Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (MACH) project has been working with the AGTF on numerous research ventures focused on indentured sites. In more recent years, this collaboration has given birth to an appreciation for the extensive potential that archaeology could have for understanding the complexities of the indentured diaspora. What has become apparent is that the sites represent a collective of points within a theoretical framework that has stimulated a wholly new research agenda for the discipline: the “archaeology of indenture”. A range of important sites, marking the quarantining (Flat Island), disembarkation (Aapravasi Ghat), habitation (Trianon Barracks) and final resting place (Bois Marchand Cemetery) of incoming migrant workers offers unique potential for an assessment of labourer life-ways through bioarchaeological and material signatures.

A first view of the ‘Archaeology of indenture’

Mauritius’ archaeology has utility for a greater impact on the development of ‘global archaeological practice’ through investigations of indenture. Considered by one historian as ‘a new system of slavery’ (Tinker 1974), others have emphasised the considerable and nuanced differences (Allen 1999: 57-58). More so than slavery, this facet of the past has remained virtually untouched by archaeologists; to our knowledge, no program of excavation currently exists into this globally significant diaspora (as distinct from convict labour or movements of indentured Europeans). Though still very much in its infancy, the outcomes are already revealing. In essence, indentured archaeology reflects social aspects of the difference between slaves and labourers. One of the most visible such facets are architectural features in the form of religious structures that dot the landscape. They represent the consequence of indenture labourers, in contrast to slavery, being allowed to keep their religions. Among other elements, regional and religious varieties of sacred structures helped immigrants to nurture their original identity. However, akin to slavery, there are few material signatures, even from sites that are tied closely to the indentured system (Calaon, 2011).

In AD 1834, on the heels of abolition, Britain turned to south-Asia, and India in particular, to find workers to replace the labour void. The evident success of this system catalysed the displacement of over two million people from Asia, Africa and Melanesia (Carter et al, 2003) around the Indian Ocean, and to islands in the Pacific and Caribbean. The role played by Mauritius gained international recognition in 2006, with the inscription of the Aapravasi Ghat as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As the ‘laboratory’ where the system was initiated and implemented, few places are more appropriate for commencing an archaeological interrogation of the indentured labour diaspora. Above all else, why this transition was necessary may have underlying drivers that archaeology is well equipped to address. Economic factors, principally the removal of preferential tariffs for West Indian sugar, intensified production in Mauritius, ostensibly requiring more labour. However, a number of factors complicate the simplicity of this reasoning. A rife illegal slave trade continued well into the 1850s (Allen 2010). Coupled with the apprenticeship system, which required six years’ service by emancipated slaves, these should have provided a buffer, which they no doubt did to a certain extent.

Nonetheless, an archaeological viewpoint suggests that nuances existed and a range of issues were likely to have impacted on the need for labour. In this regards, Bois Marchand Cemetery may be pointing us in the right direction. Bois Marchand was some 400 acres when established in 1867 (Pike 183: 401), and was created to accommodate the massive death toll resulting from epidemics of malaria and cholera. In 1867, 41,000 people (ibid: 110), 10% of the entire population, died from these conditions. Thus, the
role of disease, while figuring strongly in Atlantic research on labour provision (Pearson et al. 2012: 155), has (with notable exceptions, see Arnold 1991, and more recently, Boodoo 2010) remained heavily understudied within an Indian Ocean context, and could prove highly relevant to our understanding of this particular labour diaspora.

Excavations at Bois Marchand have unearthed a unique snap-shot of the island’s population at that time, and in combination with other sites, will help us draw a more complete picture in the future. Within the indentured paradigm, viewing the ‘island as site’ is proving particularly relevant. A landscape archaeological approach allows us to connect different nodes within the colonial administration. Connections and relations between Flat Island, a quarantine base complete with hospital and cemetery (Figure 1); Aapravasi Ghat, the landing point of immigrants (Figure 2), again, complete with hospital block and administrative centres; Trianon, a set of barracks situated on a plantation and likely
the dwelling of sirdars (Figure 3) (Calaon et al. 2012), the Vagrant Depot, a prison for labourers, and Bois Marchand (Figure 4), a cemetery with sections dedicated specifically to indentured workers, effectively encapsulate the entire trajectory of this labour diaspora within a geographically contained and highly relevant test case.

We can begin to tease out the details of administration, for example with dependence on quarantine and expansion of burial grounds to deal with disease, or the reaction to absenteeism, the development and expansion of the indenture religious networks, as well as more typical details of contract-labour-life: health, diet, and social practice. This also allows for an assessment of colonial mind-sets, e.g., how the process of accepting labour onto the island changed from one administration to the next (Calaon 2011). On a greater scale, facets of indentured archaeology being discovered on the island serve as an exemplar for regions around the world, where similar system of indenture were applied as widely as Trinidad and Guyana, South Africa and Fiji. In this way, Mauritius sets the precedent for what promises to be a fascinating new chapter in archaeological endeavour.

Figure 4: Bois Marchand Cemetery
Source: K. Seetah et Al

NB: This article is based on a journal manuscript currently under-review for Antiquity.