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FROM SLAVERY TO INDENTURE: RACE AND CULTURE AMONGST
INDIANS IN FRENCH COLONIAL PLANTATION SOCIETIES, 1750-1888

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Abstract

This thesis examines the transition from slavery to indenture in the French plantation islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean and Réunion in the Indian Ocean. It considers how the lived experience of Indian indentured workers was shaped by racial ideologies and structures, and how these migrant communities in turn reshaped the societies of the three islands in the nineteenth century. Contrasts and comparisons are made between, on the one hand, Guadeloupe and Martinique, where before the first indentured workers arrived in the 1850s no Indians had ever set foot, and, on the other hand, Réunion, where a history of free and forced migration from India predated France's abolition of slavery in 1848. Chapter One examines French images of enslaved Indians in the Indian Ocean during the advent of Enlightenment racial theories and how race came to determine the parameters of freedom and enslavement in Réunion. Chapter Two charts the path to abolition in the French Caribbean, examining the legislation policing interactions between different racial groups in the eighteenth century and the social upheaval that grew as abolitionism and resistance by enslaved groups mounted in the first half of the nineteenth. Chapter Three turns to India, addressing how and why French planters and officials began to source labour from the subcontinent and what led Indian men and women to become indentured migrants. Chapter Four explores migrants' journeys, which marked the beginning of their interaction with agents of the French colonial empire and with each other. Chapter Five returns to Réunion, considering how the regime of indenture served to reverse previous stereotypes of enslaved Indians and how the established Indian presence facilitated social mobility within the expanded migrant community and the assertion of their cultural imprint onto the island. Chapter Six examines how both French colonial administrations and formerly enslaved communities in the Caribbean perceived Indians and how in turn the migrants forged new forms of culture and collective identity.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	2
List of abbreviations	4
Statement of chronology	5
Introduction	6
Chapter One Enslaved Indians and French perceptions of race in Réunion, 1750-1830	44
Chapter Two Race, slavery and revolution in the French Caribbean	81
Chapter Three Mapping indenture: roots, regulations and recruitment	124
Chapter Four The crossing	168
Chapter Five Créolité and Indianity during the period of indenture in Réunion	212
Chapter Six Strangers in strange lands: the Indian ‘other’ in the French Caribbean	264
Conclusion	306
Bibliography	312
Appendices	333

List of Abbreviations

ADG	Archives Départementales de la Guadeloupe
ADM	Archives Départementales de la Martinique
ADR	Archives Départementales de la Réunion
AHIOI	L'Association Historique Internationale de l'Océan Indien
AN	Archives Nationales
AM	Archives de l'île Maurice
ANOM	Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer
BNF	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
<i>Code Noir</i>	<i>Le Code Noir, ou Recueil des règlements rendus jusqu'à présent, concernant le gouvernement, l'administration de la justice, la police, la discipline et le commerce des nègres dans les colonies françoises et les conseils & compagnies établis à ce sujet.</i>
IHPOM	L'Institut d'Histoire des pays d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence, France)
J.O.M	Journal Officiel de la Martinique
TNA	Public Records Office, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK
R.D.	<i>Recueil de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l'histoire de la Réunion,</i> (Nérac, France: G. Couderc, no.1–4, 1954–1960)
R.T.	<i>Recueil trimestriel de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l'histoire des Mascareignes françaises,</i> Albert Lougnon ed., (Saint-Denis: Archives départementales de La Réunion, vols. 1–8, 1932–1946)

Statement of Chronology

- 1750 Emergence of pseudo-scientific racial theories in France, influencing colonial policies and attitudes toward different ethnic groups.
- 1791 The Haitian Revolution begins after enslaved people rebel in St Domingue
- 1794 Temporary abolition of slavery in French colonies during the French Revolution
- 1807 The Act to Abolish the Transatlantic Slave Trade is passed in British Parliament
- 1802 Restoration of slavery by Napoleon Bonaparte
- 1810 British capture of Mauritius from the French
- 1815 Congress of Vienna includes an agreement for France to end its participation in the slave trade and confirms British control over Mauritius
- 1826 France formally reinforced the ban on slave trading, although illegal trading persisted.
- 1828 Arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in Réunion.
- 1833 The Slavery Abolition Act is passed in British Parliament, taking effect in 1834
- 1848 Permanent abolition of slavery in French colonies
- 1848-1882 Increased importation of Indian indentured labourers to Réunion to replace slave labour
- 1853-1888 Transportation of Indian indentured labourers to Martinique and Guadeloupe
- 1882 Ban on indentured migration to Réunion
- 1888 Ban on indentured migration to French colonies in the Caribbean

Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, Indian indentured labourers were transported to French plantation islands in the Caribbean (Guadeloupe and Martinique) and to the Indian Ocean territory of Réunion. One of the most striking differences between the Antilles on the one hand and Réunion on the other is the more diverse ethnic composition of the latter's enslaved and free population prior to indenture. Indians were one of the enslaved ethnic groups in Réunion, albeit a minority, and a significant minority group amongst the free *gens de couleur*. Despite the potential implications of this poignant difference, historians have not undertaken comparative studies that cross both the geographic divide between the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean and the temporal boundary between the periods of slavery and indenture. With this, the thorough exploration of racialised French attitudes, their origins and practical application in plantation colonies, that has been undertaken in relation to slavery in the Antilles has not been carried forward into the period of indenture and has rarely been extended to the Indian Ocean, especially Réunion.

This thesis addresses this gap by tracing how ideas of racial hierarchy, initially constructed around African slavery, adapted to encompass Indian labourers within colonial racial frameworks. In doing so, it will argue that ideas around race and the application of these in each of the different colonies during the period of slavery shaped the experience of Indian indentured labourers in these islands. It will further contend, therefore, that a key difference between these experiences was due to the presence of free and bonded Indians in Réunion during slavery, which meant Indian identities were well-established and articulated within local

understandings of race when the nineteenth century migration of indentured labourers from the sub-continent began.

Within the broader racial categories imposed by colonial society, multiple ethnic identities existed, each with specific cultural, linguistic, and regional origins. This thesis will argue that these distinctions significantly influenced the treatment of different ethnic groups under colonial rule. Rather than being fixed, ethnicity was a dynamic identity, shaped by both internal group dynamics and the external pressures of colonial authorities. Notably, French colonial administrators constructed stereotypes about the labour capacities and behaviours of various ethnic groups, which in turn influenced their roles and treatment under slavery and indenture. These stereotypes affected how Indian (and African) labourers were perceived and how they were allocated to specific tasks on plantations, thereby shaping their experiences and adaptation to plantation society. Ethnic groups responded to these expectations in varied ways, both by conforming to and resisting these imposed identities. Thus, the construction and operation of ethnicity within the larger framework of race varied according to regional needs, racial hierarchies, and local circumstances.

In linking ethnic distinctions with broader racial structures, this thesis enhances understanding of colonial power by showing how ethnicity functioned as an additional layer of control and differentiation. This approach not only complicates notions of ‘Indianness’ and ‘Africanness’ as stable categories but also reveals how both collective identity formation and individual adaptation were influenced by the intricate interplay between ethnic markers and colonial expectations.

Throughout the thesis, race will be discussed in ways that respond to the thematic structure of each chapter, with attention to how colonial racial ideologies shaped labour practices, social interactions, and perceptions of Indian labourers in distinct contexts. Chapter one begins by contextualising the emergence of racial theories in the eighteenth century,

examining their origins in Enlightenment thought and tracing their influence on French colonial policy. It explores how these ideas interacted with localised understandings of enslavement, freedom and ethnicity in Réunion. Chapter two, which focuses on Guadeloupe and Martinique, extends this discussion to the abolition of slavery, explaining how the racialised logic that justified slavery became embedded in legal and social structures in the post-abolition period. Chapters three and four then show how these racial frameworks continued to shape colonial discussions around labour and interactions with Indian indentured migrants, including the regulation of labour, sea crossings, disease, and social hierarchy. By chapter five, the analysis will focus on the particularities of race and social stratification in Réunion during the indenture period, contrasting these with the Caribbean islands, which are explored in chapter six. This progression allows the thesis to reveal how race operated as both a common thread and a variable factor in shaping the lives of Indian migrants, reflecting the diverse colonial attitudes and policies in each region.

While race is a central theme, this study also delves into the social and cultural lives of Indian labourers, including their experiences of health and disease and adaptation to new environments. The focus on health not only reflects the physical and psychological toll of the journey from India to French colonies but serves as a lens through which to explore how colonial racial ideologies classified and regulated Indian bodies. By examining colonial health practices and labourers' responses to illness, this study reveals how health became another avenue through which colonial authorities sought to exert control, reinforcing racial stereotypes, and through which Indian labourers resisted and displayed agency. By weaving these aspects together, the thesis seeks to reveal how conceptions of race, colonial practices, and cultural adaptation collectively shaped the identities and lived realities of Indian labourers.

Today, these three ex-colonies are overseas departments of France, having been integrated into the Fourth Republic in the wake of the Second World War—a time when many

former British plantation colonies were gaining or moving towards independence. Departmentalisation and the assimilationist ideology that accompanied it have shaped Francophone scholarship on the people of these islands and their cultural trajectories. Until recently at least, this scholarship emphasised the formation of a universal French identity, based on language, culture and citizenship, at the expense of ethnic distinction. Less is known, therefore, about the identities of indentured Indians and the role they played in the creolisation process within the communities of these French islands. This thesis argues that, rather than shedding their previous identities through a cultural rupture, Indians engaged in an active re-imagining of a collective identity. This thesis challenges the traditional continuity-versus-creolisation framework that dominates studies of indenture and diaspora. Rather than presenting adaptation as a one-directional process, the study reveals how Indian labourers actively negotiated their identities within colonial structures, blending resistance with adaptation. As will be discussed, the concept of creolisation also does not carry a universal meaning across different colonial and postcolonial contexts.¹

Both Francophone and Anglophone scholarship have somewhat neglected the enslaved² men and women taken from India to the French settlements of Mauritius and Réunion, especially the latter. Although not nearly as numerous as the enslaved transported from Africa, about which much has been written, this thesis argues that the slave trade from India is important for understanding how identities and culture evolved during slavery and most crucially during the transition to indentured labour. As a result of the slave trade from India, alongside other forms of Indian migration, the enslaved and free population of Réunion were long accustomed to forms of Indian dress, to Indian languages, to Hinduism and Islam

¹ Stephan Palmié, 'Creolization and Its Discontents,' in *The Creolization Reader: Studies in Mixed Identities and Cultures*, eds. Robin Cohen and Paula Toninato, (London; New York, 2010), 49-67.

² Where possible this thesis uses the term 'enslaved' as a preference over 'slave'.

(particularly as the Muslim lascars had been granted freedom of religion), as well as to cultural and racial stereotypes attributed to Indians decades before the arrival of Indian indentured labourers on the island. Forms of Indian identities and representations of Indians on the part of others, albeit subject to reinvention, already existed and had various forms of outward cultural expression, with strongly defined significance attached to these both for Indians themselves and their colonial overlords, when indentured labourers arrived. This contrasts with the French Antilles, where very few if any Indians had ever set foot in the era of slavery. How then, did the cultural adaptation of Indian indentured labourers, their assimilation into creole societies and contribution to creole culture differ in these island communities in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean? To what extent were identities shaped by the perceptions of French officials and *colons*, and by former slave communities?

In seeking to address these questions, this is therefore a study neither of slavery nor of indentured labour per se, but rather a social and intellectual study of the transition between the two through the lens of one specific ethnic identity. It focuses on the period from 1750, when pseudo-scientific racial theories began to emerge, to 1888, when indentured migration from India to French colonies in the Caribbean was banned, six years after a ban on indentured migration to Réunion. The French plantation islands of Réunion and the Antilles form the focus of the study because of the lack of literature on these islands, particularly in terms of comparison. French Guiana, a further destination to which Indians were transported under the indenture system, is not included. Predominantly a penal colony, French Guiana had very different legal and social dynamics as well as an altogether different economic structure—based on labour camps and gold mining more than plantations—and a much more limited presence of Indian indentured labourers, resulting in far fewer sources. Although Mauritius is referenced as a secondary consideration for the period up until 1810, when it was still part of the French empire and its officials and society were closely entwined with that of Réunion, in

the later period it drops out of the picture, as subject to a related yet different process of transition. As Mauritius was a British colony from 1810 until its independence in 1968, it has already attracted much scholarly attention as part of the extensive literature on indentured labour in the British empire. There is no need to replicate this scholarship, but it may gain new significance when drawn into comparison with indentured labour in the French Empire.

Historical context

Indians were among the many ethnic groups sold or involuntarily conscripted into the economic and military service of the French East India Company. Notwithstanding the problems of identifying the regional origins and antecedent history of those immigrants whose incorporation into colonial society necessarily circumscribed much of their cultural expression, there is clear archival evidence of slave exportations from India to French settlements located elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, notably the Mascarene islands of Île Bourbon (Réunion) and Île de France (Mauritius),³ from the beginning of the eighteenth century. Despite growing enslaved populations—predominantly comprised of from sub-Saharan Africans and Madagascans—the economic structure of these islands differed from that of the French Caribbean islands. When Guadeloupe and Martinique were colonised in the 1630s, they were initially dominated by small-scale agriculture and tobacco farming, but by the mid- to late seventeenth century sugarcane became the mainstay of the Antilles' economies, requiring extensive enslaved labour and large plantations. In contrast, the plantation system in Réunion was established only at the start of the eighteenth century and operated on more modestly sized

³ Île Bourbon's name was changed to Réunion in 1794 while Île de France came under British control in 1810 and from 1815 officially became Mauritius (Île de Maurice in French). For simplicity this thesis uses the terms Réunion and Mauritius, apart from in official titles, archive references and quotations when it keeps the original term used by the author.

estates, initially focused on coffee cultivation before gradually shifting to sugar production in the nineteenth century.⁴

Estimates suggest that during the eighteenth century, between 20,000 and 24,000 enslaved Indians were transported from the French *comptoirs* of Yanam, Pondicherry and Karaikal in the present-day Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and from Bengal via the French possession of Chandernagore, to the Mascarenes.⁵ The precise regional origins of these enslaved individuals are difficult to determine from official correspondence and commercial slaver voyages records. Civil status records held in local and metropolitan archives offer rare glimpses of the place of origin of some enslaved people as well as the ethnicity, death rates and family lives of enslaved Indians overseas. By the mid-eighteenth century, the births of creole grandchildren of enslaved Indians were being recorded, but by this third generation, the traces of Indian origin become increasingly difficult to ascertain.

Reports of enslaved Indians in the Mascarenes, however, do attest to their elite role within the enslaved community. Censuses show that they were employed in domestic roles in disproportionate numbers, and also often as artisans. Enslaved Indians were reputed to be more loyal and more skilled than their African and Malagasy counterparts and French *colons* actively sought to recruit from India to fill these roles. Other qualities attributed to enslaved Indians were beauty, intelligence and docility. Travelogues and diaries by *colons* and officials also suggest their cultural mores—their forms of dress and religious practices—were compared favourably to other enslaved ethnic groups and often in a way that invoked mid-eighteenth-

⁴ Jean-François Géraud, 'Des habitations-sucreries aux usines sucrières : la "mise en sucre" de l'île Bourbon, 1783-1848,' PhD thesis, (University de La Réunion, La Réunion, 2002).

⁵ Richard Allen, 'Carrying Away the Unfortunate: The Exportation of Slaves from India during the Late Eighteenth Century', in Jacques Weber, ed., *Le monde créole: Peuplement, sociétés et condition humaine, XVIIe-XXe siècles. Mélanges offerts à Hubert Gerbeau* (Paris, 2005), 285-98

century ideas of racial hierarchy emanating from metropolitan France and from the French Antilles.

In addition, there was a significant number of free Indians in the Mascarenes. Indian women were brought from India to Réunion soon after the French colonised the island in the late seventeenth century—not as enslaved women but as wives. Other Indians voluntarily migrated throughout the eighteenth century, with some becoming successful as plantation owners or businessmen and women. Another group of Indians were brought to Réunion and Mauritius in the eighteenth century as *engagés* or indentured labourers, who worked in artisanal roles. Lascars, many of whom were Muslim, were also recruited and employed as sailors.⁶

Although there were efforts by missionaries to convert free Indians to Catholicism, this was relatively unsuccessful, particularly among the Muslim lascars. Records show conversions of enslaved Indians were more frequent, yet the extent to which they relinquished their previous religious and cultural practices can be questioned. Contemporary accounts describe ‘Malabar’ dances and funeral practices.⁷ By the beginning of the twentieth century, Réunion and Mauritius both had at least one mosque and one Hindu temple, along with Muslim and Hindu burial grounds.⁸

By the early nineteenth century, the overseas Indian enslaved population was in terminal decline. Anti-slavery activism and anti-slave trade legislation played their part in ending slaving voyages from India to the Mascarenes by around 1810.⁹ The small numbers of enslaved Indians accounted for in censuses from the early to mid-nineteenth century, however,

⁶ Urbain Lartin, ‘Les Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise (depuis les débuts du peuplement jusqu’en 1815)’, in AHIOI, *Relations historiques et culturelles entre la France et l’Inde, XVIIe-XXe siècles* (Actes de la Conférence internationale France-Inde de l’AHIOI, Saint-Denis, 21-28 juillet 1986), 2 vols. (Sainte-Clotilde, Archives Départementales de la Réunion, 1987), vol.2, 187-97.

⁷ Lartin, ‘Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise’, 191.

⁸ J.G. Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque à l’Ile de France, au Cap de Bonne Esperance et à l’Ile de Ténériffe* (Paris, 1812), 186.

⁹ Jean-Marie Filliot, *La traite des esclaves vers les Mascareignes au XVIII siècle* (Paris, 1974).

can also be attributed to the disproportionately large numbers who were manumitted in the Mascarenes, joining the free *gens de couleur* populations.¹⁰

Within a few years, the exportation of Indian labour had recommenced under the indenture system. The first group of around 2,000 Indian indentured labourers arrived in Réunion in 1828. More arrived in the early 1830s, before the British government suspended the transport of indentured labour to French colonies based on reports of maltreatment. After negotiations between the two imperial powers it soon recommenced in earnest. Some 118,000 Indians are estimated to have travelled to Réunion in total between 1828 and 1882.¹¹

The abolition of slavery in French colonies in 1848 also created a labour shortage on the plantations of the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, to which indentured migration offered a solution. Between 1839 and 1888, when the Indian Government banned the emigration of indentured labourers to French colonies,¹² around 40,000 Indians were transported to Guadeloupe and around 25,000 to Martinique.¹³ Indentured labourers were offered free passage, a fixed wage, free housing and medical services, in exchange for serving a five-year term of labour on a plantation. Estimates suggest that more than 11,000 Indians who travelled to Martinique under the indenture system and 9,000 from Guadeloupe had returned to India by the early years of the twentieth century, along with up to 88,000 from Réunion.¹⁴

¹⁰ Hubert Gerbeau, 'Des Minorites Mal Connues: Esclaves Indiens et Malais des Mascareignes au XIXe Siecle', in *Migrations, Minorites et Echanges en Ocean Indien* (Paris, 1978)

¹¹ A. Scherer, *Histoire de la Réunion, Que sais-je?* (Paris, 1980), 74.

¹² The Indian Government banned the emigration of indentured labourers to French Guiana in 1876 and to Réunion in 1882. The whole overseas indenture system was abolished in 1917. Across different European colonies, some two million Indians had migrated under this system between the 1830s and 1917.

¹³ Between 1856 and 1976 some 8,000 Indians were also transported to French Guiana (Guyane) in South America.

¹⁴ Pierre Singaravélou, 'Indians in the French Overseas Départements: Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion', in Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach, and Steven Vertovec, eds, *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge, 1990) 76. Figures for Réunion are particularly imprecise and, as will be discussed, some historians doubt so many returned to India.

French empire, slavery and race

Until recently, French histories of slavery were produced somewhat in isolation from English-language scholarship and focused mainly on the French empire. Early works concentrated on the metropole, based around regional port cities in France.¹⁵ Recent histories in the French language and of the French empire have merged more conceptually with the English-language historiography and centred more on the Americas and French Antilles.¹⁶ Some include Réunion, treating it more as a Caribbean island, despite its situation in the Indian Ocean. In the 1980s, the illegal trade of the nineteenth century, in which French ship-owners played a large role, became a popular field of study.¹⁷ Histories of slavery in the French empire have also focused on French revolution, including the temporary abolition of slavery under Napoleon, the wars with the British between 1809 and 1811 and the Haitian revolution.¹⁸ Others have engaged in the debates surrounding maroon communities, resistance, cultural transfer and identity in the French context.¹⁹

¹⁵ Nathalie Sannier, 'Nantes, la traite négrière et l'océan Indien au 18e siècle', *Cahiers des anneaux de la mémoire* (1999), 59-64.

¹⁶ Yves Benot, *La Guyane sous la Revolution ou l'impasse de la revolution pacifique*, (Kourou, 1997); Christian Bouyer, *Au temps des isles: les Antilles francaises de Louis XIII à Napoleon III* (Paris, 2005); Anne-Marie Bruleaux, Regine Calmont and Serge Mam Lam Fouck, *Deux siècles d'esclavage en Guyane française, 1652-1848* (Paris and Cayenne, 1986); Paul Butel, *Histoire des Antilles francaises*, (Paris, 2002); Gabriel Dubien, *Les esclaves aux Antilles francaises: XVII^e-XVIII^e siècle* (Cayenne, 1974).

¹⁷ Serge Daget, 'British Repression of the Illegal Slave Trade,' in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, eds, *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1979) 419-42, 'France, Suppression of the Illegal Trade, and England, 1817-1850', in David Eltis and James Walvin, eds, *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas* (Madison, 1981), 193-217, 'Révolution ajournée: Bourbon et la traite illégale française, 1815-1832', in Claude Wanquet and Benoit Jullien, eds, *Révolution française et océan Indien: Prémices, paroxysmes, héritages et déviances* (Paris, 1996) 333-46, and Jean Vidalenc *La traite négrière en France sous la Restauration, 1814-1830* (Paris, 1969).

¹⁸ Laennec Hurbon, *L'insurrection des esclaves de Saint-Domingue: 22-23 août 1791, actes de la table ronde internationale de Port-au-Prince, 8-10 dec. 1997* (Paris, 2000).

¹⁹ Mamadou Diouf, *Histoires et identités dans la Caraïbe: trajectoires plurielles* (Paris, 2004); Doris Y. Kadish, *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World: Distant Voices, Forgotten Acts, Forged Identities* (Athens, Ohio, 2000); Serge Mam Lam Fouck, *La Guyane au temps de l'esclavage, de l'or et de la francisation (1802-1946)* (Petit-Bourg, Guadeloupe, 1999); Jean

As part of this expansion of literature on the French slave trade, historians have turned to French colonial attitudes to Africans and slavery and to the evolution of a racial discourse.²⁰ Debate has centred on the question of timing. When did a sense of European superiority form, when did race become dominant? While some have argued that concepts of racial superiority grew out of the slave trade itself, Peabody conversely argues that:

the French case shows that racism did not develop in a single direction, from neutral attitudes to increasingly negative stereotypes as slavery became central to the colonial economy. Rather, negative images of blacks were available from the outset and could be adopted or moderated according to the needs of those who generated or manipulated the discourse.²¹

The codification of race within the law from 1685 under the *Code Noir* leads William Cohen to argue that race was dominant from as early as the end of the seventeenth century. However, Pierre Boule argues that ‘it was only in the mid-eighteenth century that [race] was systematised and given the aura of unimpeachable scientific authority, principally by its publication in Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*’.²² Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Anthony

Moomou, *Le monde des marrons du Maroni en Guyane française (1772-1860)*; Sally Price and Richard Price, *Les arts des Marrons* (La Roque, 2005).

²⁰ Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds, *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham and London, 2003); Michele Ducet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris, 1971); Pierre Boule, *Race et esclavage de la France de l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2007), and ‘In Defence of Slavery: Eighteenth-Century Opposition to Abolition and the Origins of Racist Ideology in France’, in Frederik Krantz, ed., *History from Below* (Oxford, 1988); Yvan Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté: Le jeu du critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste: vol. I, L’affranchi dans les possessions françaises de la Caraïbe (1635-1833)* (Paris, 1967), and ‘Le Marronage. Essai sur la désertion de l’esclave antillais’, *Année sociologique*, 1961; William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington, 1980); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000).

²¹ Peabody “‘A Nation Born to Slavery’”, 11.

²² Boule ‘In Defence of Slavery,’ 224.

Strugnell agree that Enlightenment racial theories became popularised in metropolitan France and in the colonies around this time through Buffon's work and later writings such by Raynal.²³ These works were not limited to academic circles but widely read and thus became popular convictions regarding other nations and racial order.

Yet these studies leave several questions unanswered. Notably, how did perceptions and stereotypes, including but not exclusive to the explicitly racial, of different ethnic groups impact upon their sense of identity? Most significantly, the task of tracing these shifting racial boundaries and their impact on slavery has generally focused on the Atlantic world and almost singularly on the French interaction with Africans.²⁴ One of the issues arising from Réunion being treated as an extension of the Caribbean is that these histories do not fully consider the implications of its geographic location, one of the most notable of which is a more ethnically diverse enslaved population. Yet, histories specifically addressing slavery in Réunion, or the Mascarenes have largely been neglected in the works of the likes of Cohen and Boule.

Slavery in the Indian Ocean and South Asia

The historiography of the Atlantic slave trade and the plantation systems of the Americas still dwarfs the work on Indian Ocean slave trades. Yet, the last thirty to forty years have seen Indian Ocean slave trade and labour migration become a cutting-edge topic for Africanists, South Asianists and Indian Ocean specialists. Key early works by Jean-Marie Filliot and Hubert Gerbeau in the 1970s have been expanded by Richard Allen, Gwyn Campbell, Marina Carter,

²³ Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Anthony Strugnell, *L'Histoire des deux Indes: réécriture et polygraphie*, (Oxford, 1995); Guillaume-Thomas François Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Amsterdam, 1770).

²⁴ Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*; Sue Peabody "'A Nation Born to Slavery": Missionaries and Racial Discourse in Seventeenth-Century French Antilles', *Journal of Social History*, 38, (2004).

and Deryck Scarr.²⁵ They seek to redress the idea that the Indian Ocean slave trade should be seen as secondary to that of the Atlantic and to deal with the problematic application of Atlantic terms and conceptions onto the Indian Ocean, demonstrating the distinctiveness of the Indian Ocean world and its slaving network. Focusing on South Asia, Indrani Chatterjee writes that ‘scholars must contend with the overwhelming, even hegemonic influence exerted on slavery studies by the Atlantic plantation model’.²⁶ Distinguishing Indian Ocean slavery from Atlantic slavery, Campbell draws on K.N. Chaudhuri’s premise of a ‘global system’ in the Indian Ocean to argue that indigenous slaving networks had been in operation in the Indian Ocean world for centuries at the time the Atlantic slave trade took off.²⁷ Equally, the slave trades within the Indian Ocean were far more multi-directional than in the Atlantic. Campbell, Edward Alpers, Michael Salman, Ignace Rakoto, Shihan de S. Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst all explore the export of enslaved people from eastern Africa by indigenous peoples and Arabs to Madagascar and the Middle East.²⁸ Filliot and Pier Larson examine the trade to the Mascarenes

²⁵ Filliot, *La Traite des Esclaves*; Gerbeau, ‘Minorites Mal Connues’; ‘The Mascarene Slave-Trade and Labour Migration in the Indian Ocean during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 24 (2003); Richard Allen ‘The Constant Demand of the French: The Mascarene Slave Trade and the Worlds of the Indian Ocean and Atlantic During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Journal of African History*, 49 (2008); ‘Satisfying the “Want for Labouring People”’: European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850’, *Journal of World History*, 21, 1 (2010); Gwyn Campbell, ed., *The Structure of Slavery in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia* (London, 2004), and *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London and New York, 2005); Marina Carter, ‘Slavery and Unfree Labour in the Indian Ocean’, *History Compass*, 4, 5 (2006); Deryck Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (London, 1998).

²⁶ Indrani Chatterjee, ‘Introduction’, in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds, *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2006), 2.

²⁷ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985), and *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1992).

²⁸ Edward Alpers, Gwyn Campbell and Michael Salman, eds, *Slavery and Resistance in Africa and Asia* (London, 2004); Ignace Rakoto, ed., *L’Esclavage à Madagascar: Aspects historiques et résurgence contemporaines* (Antananarivo, 2000); Shihan de S. Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, eds, *The Africa Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ, 2003).

in general, but with a focus on enslaved Africans and Malagasies.²⁹ While Joseph Harris has investigated the export of enslaved Africans to Asia, Gerbeau has explored the trade of enslaved Asians (Indian and Malay) to the Mascarenes.³⁰ Scholars such as Benedicte Hjejle have also focused on the overland slave trades as a significant point of difference from the Atlantic.³¹ Indian Ocean labour migration is also defined against the Atlantic slave trade by its principally incidental nature; in general, enslaved people were transported as cargo amongst other goods traded and transported throughout the Indian Ocean World. The structure and economics of the Indian Ocean Slave trade therefore differed, as William Clarence Smith argues.³²

The diversity of enslaved people's origins and destinations, and of the slaving systems themselves with their various middlemen and distinct yet intertwined economies, renders problematic the Atlantic concept and terminology around slaving and, to a lesser extent, indenture. As Campbell notes, 'slave' in an Atlantic context means someone, almost always of African origin, working in a labour-intensive role, typically on a plantation as a field-hand.³³ This definition is often inapplicable to those in bonded labour in the Indian Ocean World, where 'slaves' could find themselves in a variety of roles, including domestic service, and they thus had different opportunities of social mobility. Equally, the gender bias of slavery differed significantly: the majority of those enslaved in the Indian Ocean were women.. Within these

²⁹ Pier Larson, 'A Census of Slaves Exported from Central Madagascar to the Mascarenes between 1769 and 1829', in Rakoto, *L'Esclavage à Madagascar*; Jean-Marie Filliot, 'La traite africaine vers les Mascareignes', in *Mouvements de populations dans l'Océan Indien: Actes du Quatrième Congrès de l'AHIOI et du Quatorzième Colloque de la Commission Internationale d'Histoire Maritime tenu à Saint-Denis-de-la-Reunion du 4 au 9 Septembre 1972* (Paris, 1980).

³⁰ Joseph E. Harris, *The African Presence in Asia* (Evanston, 1971); Gerbeau, 'Minorités Mal Connues'.

³¹ Benedicte Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in the Nineteenth Century', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 15 (1967).

³² W.G. Clarence-Smith, ed., *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the 19th Century* (London, 2013).

³³ Gwyn Campbell, ed, *The Structure of Slavery in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia* (London, 2004).

contexts, therefore, Indian Ocean historians have reconsidered the concept of freedom amongst the enslaved, and as such the means of resistance they took. In short, the greater diversity within the Indian Ocean slaving networks and slave systems created very different lived experiences for enslaved and bonded labourers in terms of their interaction with each other, their cultural lives, independence, sense of identity, marital relations, relations with partners and means to escape slavery.

One particularly key area of recent Indian Ocean slave trade literature is that surrounding the paths that Indians took into slavery. Were they already in some form of bondage system in India? Or was their first step into enslavement upon boarding the ship to the Mascarenes? Until the publication of the works noted above, slave trading and slavery have been conspicuously absent from histories of South Asia, despite its long and enduring presence in the region.³⁴ Particularly instructive regarding these issues is the collection of essays edited by Richard Eaton and Indrani Chatterjee, who set out to put an end to the ‘amnesia about slave pasts’ in South Asia.³⁵ Chatterjee and Eaton emphasise the lack of coherence in systems of slavery across the various regions of the subcontinent and throughout time. The essays cover instances of slavery from the tenth to twentieth century, including military, domestic and agricultural slavery. Although none address the French *comptoirs*, and despite this lack of temporal and regional coherency in South Asian slaving systems, some common themes regarding paths into slavery are evident: many Indians, similarly to many Africans, were enslaved as captives of war, through debt bondage or to avoid impoverishment and starvation in times of famine. Those enslaved through debt bondage or to avoid famine tended to be sold by their families directly into richer households or indirectly via a local market.

³⁴ One notable exception is Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney, eds, *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (Madras, 1985).

³⁵ Chatterjee, ‘Introduction’, in Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History*, 25.

Given that the numbers of enslaved Indians transported to the Mascarenes increased during famines it seems reasonable to hypothesise that, during these years at least, Indians from a range of caste backgrounds sold themselves or were sold by their families into slavery as a preference to starvation; this would further suggest that those transported to the Mascarenes entered into slavery in the same way, initially, as those who remained within India. Carter and M. Vink both suggest that European slavers operating in India bought enslaved people from indigenous suppliers.³⁶ A further clue given in records of the French East India Company are a handful of cases of enslaved people sent to the islands as a form of penal punishment.³⁷

The similarities in terms of entry into bondage do not, however, necessarily translate into experiences of slavery. As Chatterjee notes, people in India ‘entering slavery from impoverishment were usually cultural “insiders”, since their masters tended to be nearby patron, chiefs, moneylenders, or tax farmers’.³⁸ Those who found themselves in the Mascarenes were detached from their cultures and places of origins from the moment they boarded the ship, if not before. As cultural outsiders in the Mascarenes, they had to learn new linguistic as well as cultural and societal practices. While people captured and enslaved through war in South Asia were often from external communities, within the subcontinent the status of ‘slave’ was not always permanent and enslaved people could ‘resist’ enslavement through assimilation and the adaption of new identities, as Chatterjee emphasises. Equally, although slavery sometimes passed from parent to child, it was not always hereditary. The aim of this thesis, however, is

³⁶ Marina Carter, ‘India Slaves in Mauritius (1729-1834)’, *Indian Historical Review*, 15 (1988-89), 237; M. Vink, ‘“The World’s Oldest Trade”: Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century,’ *Journal of World History*, 14 (2003), 153.

³⁷ Albert Lougnon, ed., *Correspondance du Conseil Supérieur de Pondichéry et de la Compagnie des Indes*, 14 février 1729, tome 1 1724-1731 (Paris, 1933); and Albert Lougnon, ed., *Correspondance du Conseil supérieur de Bourbon et de la Compagnie des Indes*, tome V 1746-1759 (Paris, 1949).

³⁸ Indrani Chatterjee, ‘Introduction’, in Chatterjee and Eaton, eds, *Slavery and South Asian History*, 25.

not to compare South Asian slavery and Mascarene slavery but it is noteworthy that in the Mascarenes, while there were numbers of free Indians, the status of 'slave' was permanent and hereditary unless the enslaved person was awarded legal manumission through marriage or other means.

The structural, economic and social differences of slavery in the Indian Ocean have also been used to demonstrate how inapplicable traditional abolitionist discourse focused on the Atlantic trade is to the region. The Indian Ocean slave trade peaked much later than the Atlantic, in the nineteenth century. Thus, it was as the trade was peaking that European powers set out to curb slave trading and later slavery. Scarr views this process as part of the rise of British dominance in the Indian Ocean. It was a long-drawn-out process, however, and often involved complicity on part of the British officials who were tasked with regulating slaving ships. The French had little taste for abolition, Scarr suggests, and the illegal trade of enslaved people into Réunion soared after the official ban.³⁹ Even slave trading into newly British-governed Mauritius continued to an extent, as the French *colon* class remained defiant and British officials turned a blind eye, sometimes even engaging themselves in the illegal trade.⁴⁰ As part of this literature on the politics of abolition, Clarence-Smith explores the non-European abolitionist impulses in the Islamic world, while Campbell considers abolition in Madagascar and the treaties made with Malagasy rulers.⁴¹ Scarr explores similar treaties in relation to Arab

³⁹ Hubert Gerbeau, 'Quelques aspects de la traite illégale des esclaves à l'Ile Bourbon au XIX^e siècle', in *Mouvements de populations dans l'océan Indien*, (Paris, 1979), 273-308; Richard Allen, 'Licentious and Unbridled Proceedings: The Illegal Slave Trade to Mauritius and the Seychelles during the Early Nineteenth Century', *Journal of African History*, 42 (2001), 91-116.

⁴⁰ A. J. Barker, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery in Mauritius: Conflict Between Economic Expansion and Humanitarian Reform under British Rule*, (New York, 1996).

⁴¹ William Gervase Clarence-Smith, 'Islam and the Abolition of the Slave Trade and Slavery in the Indian Ocean' and Gwyn Campbell, 'Abolition and its Aftermath in Madagascar, 1877-1949' both in Campbell, ed., *Abolition and Its Aftermath in the Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*

and East African rulers' agreements with the British as part of their rise to dominance.⁴² Martin A. Klein equally addresses the end of slavery in India and the import of Africans as slaves.⁴³

Yet, the point at which histories of abolition and indentured labour interact is mostly in the political and economic motives and imperatives which were behind bringing in indentured labourers as slavery ended. The transition from slavery to indenture in the Indian Ocean has been left largely unexplained in terms of social and intellectual history. One could ask in the Mascarene context, did abolitionist discourse impact upon the diverse ethnic groups of slaves differently?

Slavery in the Atlantic and the creolisation debate

There is a wealth of literature on slave trading and slavery in world history, but the historiography until recently has been dominated by the trans-Atlantic trade, which saw around 12 million Africans transported to the Americas between the sixteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries.⁴⁴ Enslaved people did many kinds of work, but most laboured on European-settler plantations, producing commodities such as sugar in Brazil and the Caribbean or cotton in North America, to be sold largely to European or North American consumers. Historians have written extensively on the triangular formation of the Atlantic slave trade as well as the quest for expansion and profit evident in European activities. Early imperial histories focused on the European metropolises, dealing with other continental territories only as a periphery to this.⁴⁵ Following the Second World War a new approach attempted to consider the wider Atlantic world, concentrating on maritime rather than continental regions. Still, the focus remained

⁴² Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery*, 128-155.

⁴³ Martin A. Klein, 'The Emancipation of Slaves in the Indian Ocean', in Campbell, *Abolition and Its Aftermath*.

⁴⁴ Patrick Manning, *Slave Trades, 1500–1800: Globalisation of Forced Labour* (Aldershot, 1996).

⁴⁵ Thomas Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* (London, 1840).

largely Eurocentric, examining European migrations or often more explicitly Europe's superior economic development that drove it to maritime exploration and expansion. These concerns rendered the trans-Atlantic slave trade significant only as part of this European economic model.⁴⁶ By the early 1990s, attempts to address this Eurocentrism were led by Paul Gilroy with his cultural history of what he dubbed 'the Black Atlantic'.⁴⁷ This nonetheless looked beyond the trans-Atlantic slave trade era for its starting point. In the era of African independence, from the 1950s onwards, nationalist historians challenged Eurocentric histories, seeking to reinstate Africa's place in the Atlantic world.⁴⁸ Such narratives were reinforced by economic histories arguing that African development had been hindered by exploitative Europeans.⁴⁹ While the North Atlantic dominated this early scholarship, from the 1970s more attention has been paid to the South Atlantic, particularly Brazil.⁵⁰ Since then this South Atlantic focus has been extended significantly with works by historians such as Manolo Florentino and Luiz Felipe de Alencastro.⁵¹

From the 1970s, a new school of thought sought to move beyond the portrayal of Africa merely as the source of labour and to consider the human and economic impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Philip Curtin, Robin Law, John Thornton, David Eltis and Joseph Miller

⁴⁶ Alison F. Games, *Migration and the Origin of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 1999); Pierre and Hugette Chaunu, *Seville et l'Atlantique, 1504–1650*, 9 vols. (Paris, 1955–60); *L'expansion européenne du XIIIe à XVe siècles* (Paris, 1969).

⁴⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁴⁸ Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: The Atlantic Slave Trade* (London, 1961).

⁴⁹ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 1972).

⁵⁰ For example, Herbert S. Klein, 'The Trade in African Slaves to Rio de Janeiro, 1795–1811: Estimates of Mortality and Patterns of Voyages,' *Journal of African History*, 10, 4 (1969); Pierre Verger, *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (La Haye, 1968).

⁵¹ Manolo Florentino, *Em costas negras: uma história do tráfico atlântico de escravos entre a África e o Rio de Janeiro (séculos XVIII e XIX)* (Rio de Janeiro, 1995); Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *O trato dos viventes: formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul, séculos XVI e XVII* (São Paulo, 2010).

began to consider African participation in the slave trade.⁵² It is to these scholars we can attribute the ‘discovery’ of African agency. Yet understanding of African agency has itself evolved from Curtin’s seminal work on the political agency of African rulers and elites, with African resistance becoming a focus. Early studies on resistance looked to organised rebellion and run-away maroon communities, particularly in the Caribbean. A second strand considered everyday acts of resistance as a form of agency. Related to this, a further strand have examined resistance as a means for detecting the transfer of African cultures.

The so-called continuity versus creolisation debate dates back to the 1930s to Melville and Francis Herskovits’s ethnographic studies of maroon communities in Surinam which Melville then used to argue for the definitive survival of African cultures in the New World.⁵³ In doing so, he opposed the arguments of E. Franklin Frazer for the destruction of all culture as a result of the brutal conditions of the Middle Passage and slavery itself. This rupture versus survival debate was revived in a new form during the 1960s with the development of the theory of New World creolisation.⁵⁴ Using the same maroon communities in Suriname that Herskovits had used to demonstrate the transplantation of ‘pure’ African cultures, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price argued that these communities exhibited early developments of a ‘creolised’ culture.⁵⁵ They explained these developments by the conditions of the Americas, and especially of maroon communities and their isolation. The emphasis in such arguments lies on Africans’

⁵² Philip Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1975); Joseph Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade* (Madison, 1988); Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Slave Trade on An African Society* (Oxford, 1991); John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (second edition, New York, 1998); Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*.

⁵³ Melville Herkovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, 1941); Melville and Frances Herskovits, *Suriname Folk Lore* (New York, 1936).

⁵⁴ The rest of this section is drawn from John Parker, ‘The African Diaspora’, in John Parker and Richard Reid, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* (Oxford, 2013).

⁵⁵ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1992).

power of creativity, in rebuilding and adapting identities in their new ethnically and linguistically diverse African communities.

At the same time a new generation of Africanists set out to demonstrate trans-Atlantic continuity. Thornton's work, which brought attention back to Africa itself, focused on black cultural resistance and the survival of African cultures. Thornton paved the way for a shift in scholarship towards arguments for the survival of African ethnicities and cultures, which were highly critical of the New World creolisation theories. More recently, revisionist arguments have sought a reconciliation between these two polarities, focusing on Afro-Atlantic religions. As Parker notes, the recent use of the term 'Afro-Atlantic' rather than 'Afro-American' marks a critique of scholarship's bias towards the western hemisphere of the Atlantic. Parker defines this shift as a 'narrative of transformation rather than one of conservation with a growing awareness of the agency and creativity of local practitioners and their interlocutors in the invention of tradition'.⁵⁶ In particular, Stephane Palmié and David Brown's work on African-American religions in Cuba emphasises fusions and reinventions rather than simple transplantation from Africa.⁵⁷ This thesis draws heavily on the creolisation versus continuity debate, but applies these ideas to South Asian cultures and identities in both the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean contexts.

The Mascarenes: a special case

Many scholars have acknowledged that the Mascarenes constitute something of a problematic exception in the history of Indian Ocean slave trading and slavery. Campbell writes:

⁵⁶ Parker, 'The African Diaspora', 139.

⁵⁷ Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, N.C., 2002); David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago, 2003).

Certainly, in most [Indian Ocean World] societies there was little correspondence with the conventional image from the Americas of chattel slaves overwhelmingly assigned to field and mining labour. An exception was the Mascarene islands (Mauritius and Réunion) in the western Indian Ocean. These possessed no indigenous population at the time of European settlement and formed a European-dominated enclave characterised by Caribbean-style sugar plantation economy and chattel slavery.⁵⁸

The Mascarenes are often either characterised as an Atlantic-type enclave cut out from the ancient and varied slaving networks of the Indian Ocean or written into Atlantic world slavery and migration studies in such a way that the implications of their geopolitical position are downplayed or neglected entirely. The particular space occupied by the Mascarenes between these two worlds therefore warrants further investigation. These islands were undoubtedly modelled partly on an Atlantic world plantation system and social structure. As Scarr emphasises, the Atlantic plantation islands and the Mascarenes were linked through the networks of French families that inhabited them as well as the colonial policy that ruled them.⁵⁹ Yet the Mascarenes, uninhabited before the arrival of Europeans in the mid-seventeenth century, became part of the thriving system of trade and commerce that characterised the Indian Ocean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the most obvious consequences is that, despite the bridge between the Atlantic and Mascarene world, Mascarene society, including but not limited to its enslaved population, was ethnically far more diverse. This was symptomatic of its firm roots in the ancient ‘global’ Indian Ocean network.

If the Mascarenes are considered neither as totally Atlantic-style plantation systems nor as comfortably fitting within conceptions of Indian Ocean slavery, what other features of their slaving systems can be detected as resulting from this unique positioning? To what extent was

⁵⁸ Gwyn Campbell, ‘Introduction’, in Campbell, ed., *The Structure of Slavery*, 10.

⁵⁹ Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery*, 14.

the work assigned to enslaved groups distinctive? In light of Scarr's point regarding the circulation of ideas between the Antilles and the Mascarenes, did this include ideas about race? If so, to what extent were such ideas altered by the reality of the Mascarene plantation societies, notably their diverse ethnic make-up? One important ethnic group that existed in the Mascarenes but not the Antilles was free and enslaved Indians. The paths that the latter took into slavery as incidental cargo aboard ships trading to the Mascarenes are rooted in the unique characteristics of Indian Ocean commerce. Yet on the islands themselves they were subject to an Atlantic-style plantation regime and European ideas of enslavement. Perceptions of this group by others as well as their self-perceived identity were affected by the racial notions and social conceptions that were transmitted in exchanges with the Atlantic but also by the particular conditions of plantation life in the Mascarenes.

As already noted, histories of slavery in the French empire tend not to go into much explanatory depth regarding the different ethnic composition of the Mascarenes' enslaved (and free) population.⁶⁰ Sudel Fuma's examination of Réunion's racialised slaving system is one exception.⁶¹ Megan Vaughan also offers a sophisticated history of slavery on Mauritius, arguing that race was constructed through colonial power dynamics and economic interests, and that these constructions in turn influenced social relations, legal systems, and labour practices.⁶² Other studies have dealt specifically with one or other of these enslaved groups.

⁶⁰ Another exception is Jean Barassin, 'Aperçu general sur l'évolution des groupes ethniques a l'Ile Bourbon depuis les origines jusqu'en 1848', in *Mouvements de populations dans l'Océan Indien*.

⁶¹ Sudel Fuma, *L'esclavagisme à la Réunion 1794-1848* (Paris, 1992) 40.

⁶² Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC, 2005).

Alpers has looked at the ‘Mozambique’ community in Mauritius,⁶³ Carter at Indians in Mauritius and Gerbeau at Indians in Réunion.⁶⁴

The question of cultural transfer, which has been addressed within a Caribbean context, has proved harder to answer due to the relative lack of sources. The edited volume *Relations historiques et culturelles entre la France et l’Inde* has highlighted aspects of enslaved Indians’ cultural lives, but equally demonstrated the difficulties involved in finding sources related to this, particularly for Réunion.⁶⁵ Moreover, the same difficulty in considering forms of cultural expression as a straightforward transfer of culture exists in the Indian Ocean as it does in the Caribbean. The existence of distinct outward cultural identities among different ethnic groups is clearly as likely to be subject to reinvention. Yet, as historians such as Vaughan note, different ethnic groups did adopt distinct forms of cultural expression such as religious practices and dress. Gerbeau shows that Malagasies, Africans, Indians and Malays were conceived of as distinct cultural groups, despite intermarriage, by their colonial masters. As such, they were also attributed with different characteristics, positive and negative, with different roles becoming typical for each group. Vaughan and Claude Wanquet, writing on

⁶³ Edward Alpers, ‘Becoming “Mozambique”: Diaspora and Identity’, in Vijayalakshmi Teelock and Edward Alpers, eds, *History, Memory and Identity* (Port-Louis, 2001).

⁶⁴ Marina Carter, *Servants, Sidars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1875* (Delhi, 1995); Gerbeau, ‘Minorités Mal Connues’, ‘Quelques aspects de la traite illégale’; ‘Les esclaves asiatiques des Mascareignes au XIXe siècle: enquêtes et hypothèses’, *Annuaire des pays de l’océan indien* 7 (1980), and ‘Les Indiens des Mascareignes: Simples jalons pour l’histoire d’une réussite (XVIIe-XXe siècle)’, *Annuaire des pays de l’Océan indien* 12 (1990-91) 15-45; Marina Carter and Hubert Gerbeau, ‘Covert slaves and coveted coolies in the early-nineteenth-century Mascareignes’, in William Gervase Clarence-Smith, ed., *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1989).

⁶⁵ Prosper Ève, ‘Les péripéties d’une insertion: les indo-musulmans à la Réunion de la fin du XIXe siècle à 1939’; M. Jumier, ‘Les Affranchis et les Indiens libres à l’Ile de France au XVIIIe siècle (1721-1803)’; Lartin, ‘Les Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise’; J. C. Laval, ‘Les problèmes liés à la ‘criminalité indienne’ pendant la période de l’engagisme à la Réunion’; A. Nagapen, ‘Les Indiens à l’Ile de France: acculturation ou déculturation?’ in *Relations historiques et culturelles entre la France et l’Inde, XVIIe-XXe siècles* (actes de la Conférence internationale France-Inde de l’AHIOI, Saint-Denis, 21-28 juillet 1986), 2 vols. (Sainte-Clotilde, 1987).

Mauritius and Réunion respectively, allude to but do not elaborate upon the idea that a hierarchy based on ethnicity equally existed amongst manumitted slaves and *gens de couleur*.⁶⁶ Testimonies from officials and visitors to the Mascarenes also refer to animosity between different enslaved groups, so as to suggest that these perceptions fed into their own sense of identity and particularly status vis-à-vis each other. In the case of enslaved Indians, Prosper Ève highlights their tendency to marry within their own loose ethnic group. This seems to suggest a sense of Indian identity and its preservation over time.⁶⁷

The continuity versus creolisation debate centred on the Americas has to some degree been extended to the Indian Ocean. The creolisation paradigm, however, has been more dominant among Indian Ocean scholars than their Atlantic counterparts. An apparent paucity of evidence for the explicit identification with African origins on the part of enslaved peoples in the Indian Ocean has resulted in their characterisation as a ‘creolised’ rather than a self-consciously ‘diaspora’ community. In the Mascarene context, creolisation has almost amounted to ‘francification’, with the French language identified as the only means of intercommunity communication and the dominant cultural identity in the creolisation process, towards which or rather into which other identities gradually merged. Since the period of departmentalisation starting with Réunion in 1944, the French Republic’s ideology, which, as Larson writes, rejects ‘ethnic politics’ in favour of ‘a universal French cultural identity, citizenship and language’, makes this tendency even more pronounced in the historiography of Réunion, as well as of Guadeloupe and Martinique.⁶⁸

Opposing this historiographical trend are Alpers and Patrick Harries, who have identified an enduring connection with Mozambique origins amongst enslaved people in the

⁶⁶ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 275; Claude Wanquet, *Histoire d'une Révolution, la Réunion (1789-1803)*, vol.1 (Paris, 1980) 279-502.

⁶⁷ Prosper Ève, *Naître et mourir à l'île Bourbon à l'époque de l'esclavage* (Paris, 2000).

⁶⁸ Pier M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolisation in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2009), 18.

Mascarenes.⁶⁹ Larson, too, seeks to reconcile the continuity and creolisation arguments in the Indian Ocean context, setting out as one of his objectives to uncover whether ‘slaves and ex-slaves and their descendants identified with African and Malagasy origins in the various sites of their dispersion, as we know they tended to do in the Americas’.⁷⁰ He looks to changes in identification and consciousness expressed through Malagasy language use to argue not for either cultural survival or rupture, but for creolised pluralism. Larson contends that the processes of *creolité* and cultural and linguistic hybridisation can, and did, occur simultaneously with ‘processes of ethnic distinction’, and that for a substantial part of the colonial era there was cultural and linguistic plurality, even as *creolité* as a process was well underway.⁷¹ He suggests that the multitude of social contexts involving different linguistic and ethnic exchanges would have allowed for some contexts to be francophone creole while others would not. To extend this further, it seems plausible that the Mascarene plantation societies had not just different contexts but a multitude of social spaces. In some spaces, particularly where native French speakers were present, it would have been a creole linguistic and also cultural space. Yet other spaces could simultaneously have been the domains of alternative linguistic and cultural identities. Moving away from what Larson defines as ‘*creolité*-as-hybridity’ he uses the term ‘*creolité*-as-agility’, which suggests that francophone *creolité* and, in the case of his study, Malagasy identities, occurred simultaneously but also that they were intertwined.⁷² There was a certain fluidity, in other words, between identities which the enslaved practiced on a day-to-day basis. This study draws on these ideas to investigate the

⁶⁹ Edward Alpers, ‘Becoming “Mozambique”’: Diaspora and Identity’, in Vijayalakshmi Teelock and Edward Alpers, eds, *History, Memory and Identity* (Port-Louis, 2001); Patrick Harries, ‘Making Mozbiekers: History, Memory and the African Diaspora at the Cape’, in Benigna Zimba, Edward Alpers, and Allen Isaacman. eds., *Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa* (Maputo, 2005).

⁷⁰ Larson, *Ocean of Letters*, 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 23-4.

particular Indian ethnic identities and cultures present in the French colonial societies in question and how these co-existed with but were entwined with the processes of creolisation.

Palmié critiques the overly broad application of the term ‘creolisation’, emphasising that its meaning differs greatly depending on the historical, geographic, and cultural context in which it is used. He argues that in the Caribbean, particularly in the context of the plantation economy, creolisation is deeply tied to the violent histories of the transatlantic slave trade, African enslavement, and European colonisation.⁷³ In this region, creolisation represents a process of forced cultural amalgamation, where African, European, and Indigenous cultures were blended under oppressive conditions. This creolisation resulted in new languages, religions, and social identities, such as the emergence of creole languages and syncretic religious practices like Vodou and Santería.

Creolisation in the Indian Ocean, however, unfolded under different historical circumstances, which gives the term a different meaning. Here, it also reflects the longer, more fluid processes of cultural exchange and adaptation that predate European colonialism. The Indian Ocean, a major hub for maritime trade, saw interactions between Africans, Arabs, Indians, Southeast Asians, and Europeans. In this context, creolisation was less about the violent imposition of European rule and more about intercultural exchanges between free and enslaved people, labour migration, and religious pluralism. Thus, in places like Réunion, creolisation involved a different set of cultural negotiations, where the blending of African, Malagasy, Indian, and European cultural practices resulted in distinct, regionally specific forms of creolised societies. This thesis pays particular attention to these processes of creolisation unique to the Mascarenes—and the involvement of Indians in them—that predated the indenture period.

⁷³ Palmié, ‘Creolization and Its Discontents’.

In positioning the understanding of creolisation in relation to Indian migrants, alongside Larson's 'creolité-as-agility', the thesis draws on the concept of interculturalisation—the continuous, negotiated process of cultural exchange and adaptation. This concept is particularly useful for examining how Indian migrants, while holding onto elements of their own cultural practices, simultaneously adapted to their new colonial environments. This form of syncretism is visible in religious festivals, culinary practices, and social customs that evolved as part of the indenture experience. However, the creolisation of Indian communities was not simply a replication of African-European creolisation patterns; it was shaped by pre-existing practices of religious and cultural syncretism within the colonies and India itself, as demonstrated in areas like Pondicherry, where the French colonial encounter led to early forms of creolisation before Indians were transported to overseas colonies.

Despite the relatively little attention paid to enslaved Indians by historians of the Indian Ocean, one thing most do note is that Indians formed an enslaved 'elite' in the Mascarenes, who 'benefitted' from positive racial stereotyping. 'These slaves were remarkable amongst all those that were imported. They represented the elite', writes Filliot.⁷⁴ Vaughan and Anthony Barker also refer to official correspondence suggesting that *gens de couleur* of Indian ethnicity held a higher status than other groups.⁷⁵ Such was the positive racial identity attributed to enslaved Indians by the early nineteenth century that we know of two cases at least where enslaved Indians claimed their freedom based, in part at least, on their ethnicity. Although Sue Peabody has assessed these cases, she has done so predominantly from a legal perspective and in terms of the free-soil principle operating in France, rather than contemporary racial theories

⁷⁴ Filliot, *La Traite vers les Mascareignes*, 175.

⁷⁵ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*; Anthony J. Barker, *Slavery and Antislavery in Mauritius, 1810-33* (London, 1996). Also see: *France* (Ile Maurice, 1965); Marina Carter, 'Indian Slaves in Mauritius (1729-1834)', *Indian Historical Review*, 15 (1988-89).

and the significance of racial perceptions in the colonies.⁷⁶ Yet, just as studies on France, race and slavery that focus on the French Caribbean consider Africans rather than enslaved Indians, these studies on the Mascarenes do not fully consider how perceptions of enslaved Indians were affected by the evolution of racial discourse.

The chapters which follow draw on the scholarship on French understandings of race in the Atlantic to examine the evolution of conceptions of race and slavery in the Mascarenes. Eltis analyses, for example, how conceptions of different groups' 'eligibility for slavery' changed over time in the Atlantic world, but this has not yet fully been considered by historians of the Indian Ocean beyond an observed shift from predominantly enslaved Asians to Africans from the 1760s.⁷⁷ A key question to be considered is the connection, if any, between racial attitudes towards ethnic groups, including targeting for enslavement, and the development of these groups' own sense of identity. That enslaved Indians themselves seem to have developed a certain sense of racial superiority vis-à-vis their African and Malagasy counterparts currently has been left unaddressed. Colonial racial perceptions, it will be argued, played an important role in the reinvention of culture.⁷⁸ Just as understanding slave systems seems vital for understanding subsequent indenture, so the era of indentured labour, with the greater volume and variety of sources available, could shed light on questions of identity in the period that preceded it.

⁷⁶ Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France': The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (New York, 1996) 57-72, and 'La question raciale et le "sol libre de France": l'affaire Furcy,' *Annales* 6 (2009).

⁷⁷ Nigel Worden, 'Indian Ocean slavery and its demise in the Cape Colony', in Campbell, ed., *Abolition and Its Aftermath*, 32.

⁷⁸ On this process in one region of colonial India, see Richard G. Fox *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley, 1985).

Indentured labour in the Caribbean

Several histories of indentured labour with a global scope have been written in the past forty years, most notably Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*. Drawing on the contemporary framing of Lord John Russell, Tinker argues that the Indian indenture system was essentially a continuation of slavery under a new name.⁷⁹ This argument has since come under considerable scrutiny, with the emergence of a revisionist school of thought which emphasises the voluntary rather than the coercive nature of indentured migration and the opportunities created by it.⁸⁰ B.V. Lal writing about Fiji, criticises Tinker's reliance on official correspondence, using quantitative data to dispel Tinker's idea that the minority number of females who migrated from India were treated as little better than prostitutes or concubines.⁸¹ While Carter argues that Tinker and those who have accepted his premise 'present a largely ahistorical or static analysis of the indenture system', she differentiates herself from revisionists such as P. Emmer and R. Reddock who she claims overestimate the opportunities available to Indian indentured labourers.⁸² In a recent survey, David Northrup criticises previous analyses for separating the nineteenth-century movement of Africans, Southeast Asians and South Asians from that of European indentured labourers in previous centuries.⁸³ Recognising that systems of indenture varied considerably from region to region and throughout time, Northrup argues that the experiences of nineteenth-century indentured labourers were more akin to those of earlier European indentured labourers than enslaved Africans.

⁷⁹ Hugh Tinker, *The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, (London, 1974).

⁸⁰ See, for example, B.V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983); P. C. Emmer, ed., *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Dordrecht, 1985); R. Reddock, 'Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917', *Economic and Political Weekly* 10 (1985).

⁸¹ Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 155.

⁸² Carter, *Servants, Sidars and Settlers*, 2.

⁸³ David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge, 1995).

Scholarship on Indian indentured labourers focuses mainly on the British empire, particularly the Caribbean, British Guiana, Mauritius and Fiji, which were the primary locations of indentured migration.⁸⁴ Focusing on Guyana and Trinidad, David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo argue that indentured labour played a key role in shaping the racial and cultural identities of post-colonial societies. The system brought together people from various regions of India, each with different linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, creating complex and often strained relationships, they contend. The indentured labourers were frequently racialised and marginalised, which contributed to the development of a distinct Indo-Caribbean identity. Dabydeen and Samaroo, along with other authors in their edited works, examine how these identities evolved in the face of colonialism and the challenges of assimilation into the wider Caribbean society.⁸⁵ Interestingly, Walter Look Lai considers the different ethnic and regional origins of the Indian and Chinese recruits and how this impacted their adaption to Caribbean life, along with the perceptions of these groups.⁸⁶ Look Lai also considers how they were perceived by, and interacted with, the existing black populations. These are themes this thesis will examine in the analysis of the French plantation islands.

More recently, Reshaad Durgahee has highlighted the global dimensions of indentured migration.⁸⁷ Critiquing the methodological nationalism prevalent in much of the scholarship—which often confines analysis to specific colonies—Durgahee introduces the concept of the ‘indentured archipelago’ to examine the interconnections among various recipient colonies and emphasise the shared experiences of migrants. He focuses particularly on patterns of re-

⁸⁴ K.O. Laurence, *A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875-1917*. (Kingston, 1994); Anton L. Allahar and T. Varadarajan, ‘Differential Creolization: East Indians in Trinidad and Guyana,’ *Indo-Caribbean Review* 1 (1994).

⁸⁵ David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, eds. *Across the Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean*, (London, 1996).

⁸⁶ See Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore, 2004).

⁸⁷ Reshaad Durgahee, *The Indentured Archipelago: Experiences of Indian Labour in Mauritius and Fiji, 1871–1916*, (New Delhi, 2021).

emigration and re-indenture, from which some recipient colonies emerged as regional hubs for remigration. Building on Durgahee's framework, this thesis extends the analysis by integrating temporal considerations alongside spatial dynamics. It explores the evolution of regional and pan-regional networks across the transition from slavery to indenture, while addressing a notable gap in existing scholarship by more fully incorporating France into the discussion.

Unlike the indenture system in the British Caribbean, the neighbouring French Antilles remain a neglected area.⁸⁸ Northrup, one exception, argues the contrasts that emerged between the situation of Indian indentured labourers in French and British colonies suggest that the formers' mark on creole culture is less significant than the latter. A comparative approach to the lived experience and creolisation process of Indian indentured labourers in the French Antilles and Réunion will therefore be particularly fruitful.

In general, indentured labour and slavery have been treated as two separate entities, with little or no bearing on each other outside of Tinker's emphasis on their fundamental similarity. The disconnect between the era of slavery and indenture is particularly pronounced in terms of discussions regarding cultural transfer and perceptions of ethnic and racial difference. Toni Arno and Claude Orian's work on Mauritius established that the possibility for greater social mobility and equality created by abolition and indenture led different ethnic groups within the free *hommes du couleur* group to redefine themselves and put up barriers to outsiders.⁸⁹ Their account has nonetheless received criticism for underestimating the areas where ex-apprentices and indentured labourers would have been drawn together by common interest and for overestimating the extent to which *hommes de couleur* sought to distinguish

⁸⁸ Although see M. Sengaravélou, 'Indians in the French Overseas Départements: Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion,' in Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach, and Steven Vertovec, eds, *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge, 1990); and David Northrup, 'Indentured Indians in the French Antilles/ Les immigrants indiens engagés aux Antilles françaises' *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, tome 87, n°326-327, 1er semestre (2000).

⁸⁹ Toni Arno and Claude Orian, *Ile Maurice: Une Société Multiculturelle* (Paris, 1986).

themselves from ex-apprentices.⁹⁰ Yet, such work instigates a new line of questioning regarding the impact of abolition and indenture on racial attitudes and identity among different groups. The many studies into the conception and practical application of race in the French Caribbean during the era of slavery have not been used to consider these themes in light of the subsequent indenture system. Histories of indenture in general convey the disdain of officials towards Indian labourers, including racialised depictions and negative stereotypes attached to their cultural practices, but there is little or no attempt to investigate how or if such attitudes evolved from existing ideas of race and slavery. How did the *Code Noir* and racialised ideas of African inferiority bear upon the Indian indentured labourer in the French Antilles? How did this compare to the different context of the Mascarenes? This thesis aims to explore these key questions.

Indentured Labour in the Indian Ocean

Indentured labour in the Indian Ocean, particularly the Mascarenes, has received significantly more attention than slavery in the same region. This field, however, is dominated by studies of Mauritius.⁹¹ The literature on indentured labour in the Indian Ocean has been gripped by similar debates to that on the Caribbean, namely over continuation and rupture from slavery and push versus pull factors. One reason for the greater wealth of literature on indentured labour may be the greater availability and range of archival material, which has allowed historians more

⁹⁰ Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 274.

⁹¹ See Carter, *Servants, Sidars and Settlers*, and *Voices from Indenture*; K. Hazareesingh, *The History of Indians in Mauritius* (London, 1975); P. Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour, 1834-1890* (Delhi, 1970); R. Sooriamorthy, *Les Tamouls à l'Île Maurice* (Port Louis, 1977); R. Sowamber, *Les Soldats Indiens à l'Île Maurice* (Port Louis, 1951). For exceptions which include or focus on Réunion, see Sarita Boodhoo, 'Leisure and the Indian Migrants in Mauritius and Reunion', *World Leisure & Recreation* 37 (1995); Huguette Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo, 'Aperçu d'une immigration forcée: L'importation d'africains libérés aux Mascareignes et aux Seychelles, 1840-1880', in *Minorités et gens de mer en océan Indien, XIXe-XXe siècles*, Etudes et Documents No. 12 (Aix-en-Provence: Institut d'Histoire des Pays d'Outre-Mer, 1979).

recently to move beyond such debates. Records provide us with far deeper insights into the lives of Indian migrants, which has meant historians such as Carter and Clare Anderson have been able to construct detailed social histories. Carter lays out her aim to move beyond the debate over continuity and to produce a subaltern history of indentured labourers using notarial and legal records.⁹² Anderson's study of Indian convicts in Mauritius, while focusing on a different labour category, also uses these sources to shed light on the complexities of identity, agency, and the socio-political dynamics of colonial rule.

Turning to the smaller body of literature on Réunion, essays by Gerbeau and Michèle Marimoutou-Oberlé are instructive.⁹³ Both highlight what has been neglected elsewhere: that indentured labourers first arrived in Réunion in 1828, twenty years before the abolition of slavery in French colonies. Based on this, Gerbeau and Marimoutou-Oberlé assert that these labourers not only lived under the same conditions as the enslaved, but also that statutes relating to both groups were almost identical and in practice the two groups were mixed together.

This thesis seeks to develop this analysis by considering how processes of cultural adaptation took place and what factors influenced their direction. Important comparisons will also be drawn between the cultural lives of indentured labourers in Réunion and those in the French Antilles, about which hitherto little is known. It will also consider how indentured Indian labourers interacted with the formerly enslaved, apprentices and 'free coloureds'. Did these groups integrate at all? How did they perceive each other? Were the differences based on a sense of economic role and social position or on ethnicity?

Philosophical movements

⁹² Carter, *Voices from Indenture*; Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (London, 2000).

⁹³ Michèle Marimoutou-Oberlé, 'Cabanons et danse du feu: la vie privée des engagés indiens dans les camps réunionnais du XIX^e siècle,' in Claude Wanquet, ed., *Economies et sociétés de plantation à La Réunion* (Saint-Denis, 1989), 225-50.

From the 1930s the Négritude movement emerged as a response to European colonial denigration of African culture and identity. Thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas sought to reclaim and celebrate African heritage and the shared cultural experiences of African-descended peoples.⁹⁴ Négritude was subsequently critiqued, however, for its essentialised vision of African culture and exclusion of other groups. Édouard Glissant, one of the movement's critics, argued that identity—particularly in the Caribbean—was more complex than the return to an 'authentic' African heritage.⁹⁵ He contended that the Caribbean identity was shaped by the ongoing interactions between African, European, Indigenous, and Asian influences and that, as such, it was not fixed but always in flux. Glissant thus developed the concept of creolisation to describe the dynamic and open-ended process of cultural mixing. In the late 1980s, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé—known as the Créolistes—built on Glissant's notion of cultural blending but they argued that the Caribbean people had moved beyond the phase of creolisation into the formation of a stable creole identity (créolité) that embodied the blending of African, European, and Indigenous influences into something new and distinct.⁹⁶

Indianité emerged in response to both Négritude and créolité. Particularly in the works of Ernest Moutoussamy, Indianité critiques créolité for subsuming the Indian experience into the broader creole identity and argues instead for the recognition of Indian cultural distinctiveness within the Caribbean, emphasising the importance of preserving Indian religious, social, and cultural practices.⁹⁷ But Moutoussamy's work, which has revolved around

⁹⁴ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris, 1955) and *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris, 1956); Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Oeuvre poétique* (Paris, 1990); Léon-Gontran Damas, *Pigments* (Paris, 1937).

⁹⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais* (Paris, 1981), and *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris, 1990).

⁹⁶ Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé, *Éloge de la Créolité* (Paris, 1989).

⁹⁷ Ernest Moutoussamy, *Indianité dans la littérature des Antilles: Amérique et Océan Indien*, (Paris, 1987).

the image of the maternal homeland and often portrayed Indian women's bodies as cultural symbols, has been criticised for leaning towards essentialism.⁹⁸

The concept of Coolitude, developed by poet and scholar Khal Torabully, provides another lens through which to view the experience of Indian indentured labourers and their descendants.⁹⁹ Similarly to Négritude, Coolitude reclaims the term 'coolie'—historically used derogatorily—and reframes it to imbue it with dignity and pride. It recognises the cultural and historical specificity of the Indian diaspora while acknowledging the mixing and creolisation that occurred. While Indianité focuses on the preservation of a pure Indian identity, Coolitude highlights the creative syncretism that emerged from the interactions between Indian, African, and European cultures in the colonial plantation setting. Torabully emphasises that indentured labourers were not passive victims of cultural erasure but active agents in the creation of new, creolised identities that reflected their Indian heritage and their experiences in diaspora.

This thesis rejects the Créolistes' focus on créolité as a stable identity, which suggests a tension between the creole identity and the retention of Indian cultural practices and draws on Glissant's notion of creolisation as an open-ended process. It argues that in the context of both Réunion and the French Antilles, Indian communities engaged in simultaneous processes of creolisation and ethnic distinction. While they participated in the creolised social world, adapting to the cultural dynamics around them, they also maintained their distinct ethnic identities through Indianisation. While Indianité refers to the political and cultural assertion of Indian identity and implies the existence of a clear cultural boundary between Indian and creole

⁹⁸ See, for example, Lisa Outar, 'L'Inde Perdue, L'Inde Retrouvée (India lost, India found): representations of Francophone Indo-Caribbeans in Maryse Condé's *Crossing the mangrove* and Ernest Moutoussamy's *A la recherche de l'Inde perdue*,' *South Asian Diaspora*, 6, 1 (2013), 47-61.

⁹⁹ Khal Torabully and Marina Carter, *Coolitude: Anthologie de la diaspora indienne* (Paris, 1996).

identities, this study views Indianisation as referring to the dynamic and evolving processes of cultural adaptation and revival among Indian communities in specific colonial contexts, such as Réunion and the French Antilles, and the influence of Indian culture on creole populations. It draws on *Coolitude*, seeking to move beyond understandings of Indian identity that focus on the motherland and authenticity and the binary notion of victim and oppressor, instead exploring Indian agency. It stresses, however, the need to maintain historical specificity and avoid homogenising the experience of indenture labourers, which varied between regions and based on gender, caste and regional origins. This thesis argues that key differences are discernible between Réunion and the Antilles, reflecting both temporal lags and colonial contexts.

Sources

For the period of slavery, French East India Company records will be a key source, including shipping records and correspondence between the governors of Réunion and company officials in Paris. Official reports on the islands, most significantly censuses and legal records such as birth, deaths, marriage, and manumission certificates, are also crucial. Criminal trial records provide insight, especially due to their occasional recording of enslaved and indentured voices, despite their mediation by colonial translators and officials. In addition, travelogues written by visitors to Réunion offer extensive observations about life on the island, particularly about interactions between the enslaved and their enslavers, and the perceived differences between Indian, Malagasy, African and Creole enslaved peoples. Lastly, missionary records give detailed accounts of the religious practices of the island's enslaved inhabitants and the processes of their conversion to Christianity.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations of these sources. The archival records often reflect the biases and perspectives of colonial officials, missionaries, and European travellers, and rarely provide direct voices of the enslaved and indentured Indians

themselves. Issues of transliteration and translation further complicate the interpretation of these sources, as names, places, and cultural practices may have been misrecorded or misunderstood by those documenting them. Recognising these limitations, this thesis adopts a critical approach to the sources, reading against the grain to uncover the experiences and agency of Indian labourers where possible.

In terms of indentured labourers, the amount and range of source material is greater, including shipping, notarial, and police records as well as official correspondence. The indenture system also brought with it systematic inspections by both British and French authorities. Nevertheless, detailed personal records, such as letters from indentured labourers themselves, are scarce, especially in the French colonies. In general, much less material exists regarding the French colonies to which Indians were transported compared with British colonies. The thesis uses other records to try and answer some of the questions left unaddressed. Each French ship transporting indentured labourers carried a doctor; their notes often went beyond medical details. These medical reports, while providing valuable information on health and disease, also reflect the colonial gaze and racialised perceptions of Indian bodies. The nineteenth century also saw renewed rigour in operations by French Catholic missionaries in the colonies. Records such as these, which hitherto have been little used, offer valuable insight into the lives of Indian indentured labourers. In engaging with these sources, the thesis remains mindful of the inherent biases and silences within the archives. The challenge of accessing the perspectives of Indian labourers themselves necessitates a careful and critical methodology, attempting to reconstruct their experiences through the fragments available, while acknowledging what cannot be known.

CHAPTER ONE

Enslaved Indians and French perceptions of race in Réunion 1750-1830

In 1817, a man named Furcy legally challenged his enslavement in the French colony of Réunion. Furcy lost his case, and an appeal the following year, but finally won his freedom in Paris in 1843. The publication of a novel, *l’Affaire de l’esclave Furcy*, in 2010 and its subsequent theatre adaptation have given Furcy a symbolic place in Réunion’s history.¹⁰⁰ On both page and stage he is depicted as an enslaved African. Furcy, however, is identified in records as an Indian. Of the 380,000 enslaved people taken to the Mascarene Islands (today known as Réunion and Mauritius, and Rodrigues), 24,000 were not Africans but Indians.¹⁰¹ Not only has scholarship on the Indian Ocean slave trade neglected the exportation of enslaved people from India to the French settlements of Mauritius and Réunion, but little is known today about their lived experience in the communities of these islands.

This chapter investigates the image of enslaved Indians on Réunion and explores how this image was influenced by, and itself influenced, racial theories. It seeks to demonstrate that Indian ethnic identities, which have tended to be attributed to indentured labourers, have a longer trajectory in Réunion’s history. Indeed, the use of this identity in a legal battle for freedom by Furcy suggests that even among a supposedly creolised enslaved population, ethnic

¹⁰⁰ Mohammed Aïssaoui, *l’Affaire de l’esclave Furcy* (Paris, 2010).

¹⁰¹ Richard B. Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850* (Athens, Ohio, 2015), 19 and 23. Allen has revised Filliot’s estimate of 20,800, in *La traite des esclaves*.

identities and their defining cultural markers were not just present but significant in the colony's social dynamics before the indenture period.

Colonised later than the French Antilles in the 1630s, Réunion received its first enslaved Indians as early as 1672, when fifteen 'prisoners'—enslaved men from Tamil Nadu captured in the siege of San Thomé—were disembarked from the *Jules*.¹⁰² A further 13 'Indiennes' were listed that same year and more in 1678.¹⁰³ The first documented sale of an enslaved Indian on Réunion was in 1687, when a Portuguese monk sold an enslaved Indian boy, age 12, to a local man described as creole.¹⁰⁴ The Indian trade intensified from 1703 when, 'so that the inhabitants would not have cause to complain', the French East India Company ordered 'that slaves from India' be 'brought in its vessels to be sold to the inhabitants'.¹⁰⁵ These enslaved individuals mainly originated from the French *comptoirs* in south India: Mahé, Yanam, Pondicherry and Karaikal in present-day Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu states. Some also came from Bengal via the French possession of Chandernagore.

In 1704, Antoine Boucher (Réunion's 'garde-magasin') recorded 45 'Indian slaves,' and by 1709 the census shows that 36 per cent of the male enslaved population was Indian, the island's largest enslaved ethnic group.¹⁰⁶ The number of enslaved Indians grew under Pierre-Benoit Dumas's governorship (1728-1731) with over a hundred transported to Réunion.¹⁰⁷ This

¹⁰² B.-F. Mahé de La Bourdonnais, *Mémoires historiques des îles de France et de la Réunion*, A.-C. Mahé de La Bourdonnais, ed., (Paris, 1890), 133.

¹⁰³ J.M. Desport, *L'Inde et la Réunion*, (Sainte-Clotilde, 1986), 3.

¹⁰⁴ J. Barassin, 'L'Esclavage à Bourbon avant l'application du Code Noir de 1723' in *Recueil de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l'histoire de la Réunion*, no.2, (Nérac, France, 1957), 11-59.

¹⁰⁵ ANOM, col.C3- 2, Ordre de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales au sieur Feuillet, 20 December 1703.

¹⁰⁶ ANOM, col. G1-477, Recensements, 1678-1719; ADR col.C6-2, Recensement de 1709. Also see Prosper Ève, *Naître et mourir à l'Île Bourbon à l'époque de l'esclavage* (Paris, 1999), 34.

¹⁰⁷ ADR, R.T. vol.1 304-8, Correspondance.

increase was probably related to famine in and around Pondicherry: in 1731 Dumas complained of the difficulty he had in sourcing labour from Pondicherry now the famine had eased.¹⁰⁸ In 1731, moreover, administrators in French India banned the trade.¹⁰⁹ The *Conseil de Bourbon* complained that ‘it is a considerable wrongdoing to the colony to deprive it of the slaves that could be sent from India’.¹¹⁰ The Indian trade carried on clandestinely until eventually the French administration in Pondicherry conceded, allowing the trade to continue as a private enterprise.¹¹¹ Numbers fluctuated throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, but by 1808 Indians constituted only 3 per cent of the enslaved population. Just 1,800 of 62,600 enslaved people were Indians in 1826, two years before mass Indian labour migration begun under the indenture system.¹¹² Furcy’s case draws attention to Réunion’s little-known enslaved Indians, but it also raises further questions about the colony’s enslaved labour system and the attitudes towards the different groups within it. Not only was Furcy Indian but it was partly based on his Indian ethnicity—or rather his perceived racial identity—that he was finally awarded his freedom in a Paris court.

Historians such as Peabody and Eltis identify periods of change in discursive understandings of who was deemed ‘eligible’ for enslavement. Eltis, examining changes in the conceptions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, which initiated the transition from Europeans enslaving each other to enslaving Africans, writes that ‘the truly interesting question is not why slavery (or abolition) per se but rather which groups are considered eligible for enslavement and why this eligibility changes over time’.¹¹³ It seems that attitudes to various groups changed at

¹⁰⁸ ADR, R.T. vol.7 105-205, Correspondance Bourbon-Indes, Le Conseil de Pondichéry à celui de Bourbon, 14 February 1729, 30 September 1730 and 15 February 1731.

¹⁰⁹ ANOM, col.C3-5 (1727-1731).

¹¹⁰ ANOM, col.F3-206, Code histoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon (1712-1768).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gerbeau, ‘Minorités mal connues’, 12.

¹¹³ Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*, 58.

different speeds, different times and for different reasons. However, the task of tracing these shifting racial boundaries and their impact on slavery has focused on the Atlantic world and almost singularly on the French interaction with Africans.¹¹⁴ An exploration of French attitudes towards enslaved Indians, despite their relatively small numbers, is important for understanding wider attitudes to race and ethnic identities among Indians during the period of transition from slavery to indentured labour. Did the perceived ‘eligibility’ of Indians for enslavement change over time, and if so, why? Gerbeau and Urbain Lartin examine the lives of enslaved Indians in Réunion, and, to some extent, French colonial attitudes towards them.¹¹⁵ Gerbeau infers the roots of these attitudes are to be found in Réunion’s experience of slavery, but neither Gerbeau nor Lartin fully investigate how perceptions of enslaved Indians were affected by the evolution of racial discourse or how these perceptions further developed in the subsequent period of indenture. In terms of understanding French attitudes towards enslaved Indians, that is to argue, the realities of the plantation experience on the one hand and racial theories on the other cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. As Peabody writes, ‘It is not enough to show the influence of one notable intellect’ but this needs to be explored in terms of ‘the immediate and dynamic relations of people in their social worlds’, in which racial ideology became embedded.¹¹⁶

This chapter investigates how enslaved Indians were perceived and described and the racial arguments challenging their enslavement, with a view to shedding light on the evolution

¹¹⁴ Eltis and Peabody do, however, consider Amerindians in the Atlantic world: *ibid.*; Peabody, “‘A Nation Born to Slavery’”, 113-26.

¹¹⁵ Gerbeau ‘Minorités mal connues’; *idem*, ‘Les esclaves asiatiques des Mascareignes au XIXe siècle: enquêtes et hypothèses’, *l’Annuaire des pays de l’océan Indien, vol. 7 (1980)* (Aix-en-Provence, 1982); *idem*, ‘Les Indiens des Mascareignes: simples jalons pour l’histoire d’une réussite (XVIIe-XXe siècle)’, *l’Annuaire des pays de l’océan indien, vol. 12 (1990-1991)* (Aix-en-Provence, 1992) 15-45; Lartin, ‘Les Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise’.

¹¹⁶ Peabody, “‘A Nation Born to Slavery’”, 114.

of racial boundaries within colonial perceptions and the existence of ethnic identity and consciousness of racial and cultural difference among the enslaved themselves.

From India to Réunion

Some details about French colonialism in India are helpful to contextualise French perceptions of Indians as they evolved across time and space.¹¹⁷ After the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb granted the French permission to trade in the subcontinent in 1666, the French pivoted their commercial operations in the Indian Ocean away from Madagascar to Surat in western India. In 1673, the French East India company set up operations in Pondicherry on the coast of modern-day Tamil Nadu. Pondicherry became the chief French *comptoir*, with Yanam, Karaikal and Mahé also in southern India. It was Chandernagore in Bengal, the sole French *comptoir* in the north, that prospered most, however, by the 1740s becoming a trade hub linking Bengal, Pondicherry, Réunion, Mauritius and Madagascar in the Indian Ocean as well as China, Southeast Asia and Europe. It was via these trade links that enslaved Indians were often transported to the Mascarenes, alongside cargoes of goods.

In the battle between the British and French for commercial dominance in India the French ultimately lost. Chandernagore fell increasingly into decline and in 1769 the French East India Company was forced into liquidation. The following year, the French *comptoirs* in India came under control of the Royal Administration and in 1785 they were brought into one governing unit, under the authority of the Governor-General in Mauritius. With the Ministry of the Marine focused on the Caribbean sugar colonies, the French Indian *comptoirs* were increasingly neglected. Yet France successfully retained its Indian territories officially until 1962.

¹¹⁷ For a history of French colonialism in India see: M. Devèze, *Histoire de la colonisation française en Amérique et aux Indes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1951); K.S Mathew, *French in India and Indian Nationalism, 1700-1963* (Delhi, 1999).

From the 1740s, French interest in India grew, driven by the French presence on the subcontinent and the activities of figures such as Joseph-François Dupleix, Governor-General of French India, whose ambitions ended in 1754. French missionaries, whose presence grew in tandem with France's commercial presence, played a particularly key role in shaping French perceptions of Indians and their religions. This period also saw a proliferation of travelogues and fictional writing about the sub-continent, as Kate Marsh shows in her examination of French representations of India between 1754 and 1815.¹¹⁸ These developed an existing European narrative about oriental despotism, adding India-specific nuances and details.¹¹⁹ By the mid-eighteenth century, Marsh demonstrates, thinkers like Voltaire played a significant role in shaping French perceptions. His works portrayed India, and especially Hinduism, as an ancient, rational civilisation. Emphasising the philosophical depth of Hinduism, he cast it as a precursor to Western civilisation and a symbol of natural law and reason.¹²⁰ The idealised depiction of the Brahmin, a symbol of rational religion, provided a contrast to European Christianity and clericalism, particularly Catholicism, which Voltaire critiqued for its perceived superstition and corruption. Other works, however, while similarly exalting the noble and ancient religion of the Brahmans, depicted modern-day Hindu practices as having decayed and become corrupted over time.¹²¹

The framing of Hinduism as the core of Indian civilisation often led to the marginalisation of other Indian religions, including Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism, according

¹¹⁸ Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754–1815* (New York, 2009).

¹¹⁹ See Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹²⁰ See Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations, I–IV (1756–78)*, in *Œuvres de Voltaire*, ed. M. Beuchot, 72 vols (Paris, 1829–34), vols 15–18 and Voltaire, 'Fragments sur quelques révolutions dans l'Inde, sur la mort du comte de Lally, et sur plusieurs autres sujets' (1773), in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 20 vols (Paris, 1858) vol. 6.

¹²¹ Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, 41–8 and 114–139.

to Marsh.¹²² French perceptions frequently pitted Hinduism against Islam, reflecting a broader anti-Muslim sentiment within European thought. Hindus were often perceived as passive, philosophical, and capable of being ‘civilised’, while Muslims were characterised as despotic and resistant. Marsh notes how Abbé Roubaud, writing in 1768, characterised British rule in India as a continuation of Mughal tyranny, reinforcing the dichotomy between ‘benign’ Hinduism and ‘oppressive’ Islam.¹²³ This contrast also aligned with France’s anti-British sentiment, framing the British East India Company as inheritors of oriental despotism.

The French loss of Indian territories to the British after the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Marsh argues, contributed to a Gallo-centric vision of India, positioning the French as potential liberators from British oppression.¹²⁴ The depiction of British colonial practices, particularly in Bengal after the 1770 famine, as exploitative and cruel, allowed French thinkers to present their own potential colonial rule as more equitable and ‘enlightened’. This vision of French colonial benevolence eventually fed into the development of the *mission civilisatrice*, the French imperial policy that sought to portray French rule as a civilising force for its colonies.¹²⁵

Adrian Carton also argues that the construction and marking of racial difference in the eighteenth century also diverged between British and French rule in India.¹²⁶ He highlights the role of religion and Catholic conversion in legitimising interracial marriage and forming colonial subjects in French India, contrasting this with the increasing racialisation of the colonial state in British India. Portuguese settlers in Goa, arriving 150 years before the French, were accompanied by missionaries focused on converting local communities. Many of these settlers, mostly single men, married Indian women who converted to Catholicism, giving rise

¹²² Ibid., 140.

¹²³ Ibid., 132-133. Also see: Abbé Roubaud, *Le Politique Indien ou considérations sur les colonies des Indes orientales*, (Amsterdam and Paris, 1768).

¹²⁴ See: Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique*.

¹²⁵ Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, 137-8.

¹²⁶ Adrian Carton, *Mixed-race and Modernity in Colonial India: Changing concepts of hybridity across empires*, (New York, 2012),

to Eurasian and Topas communities. While varying in different contexts, the term ‘Eurasian’ evolved to refer to Catholic Indians who had some easily traceable European heritage, while the separate term ‘Topas’ was often used to refer to Catholicised Indians, who claimed European heritage, but which could not so easily be traced—or not in the eyes of colonial officials at least. When Frenchmen arrived, also without French women, they sought wives among these already Catholicised communities. These French unions with ‘Portuguese girls, who were not black, but métis or mulatto,’ were observed by Robert Challe, a Frenchman travelling in India in 1690.¹²⁷ Unlike its British counterpart, the French East India company allied with Catholic missionaries, making proselytising an explicit goal. Some Frenchmen married among this converted Indigenous community, with class playing a key role: high-ranking Frenchmen prioritised wives who were Catholic and of elite status, often property or slave owners. Given the low salaries of many lower-ranking Company men, however, this afforded the women greater power in marriage decisions.¹²⁸ These conditions shaped the evolution of French identity in India, according to Carton. ‘It was, indeed, a highly cosmopolitan and hybridised population where the elasticity of Catholic affiliation, the role of Portuguese Eurasian women, and the class structure of the majority of the male settlers were factors that created different shades of symbolic whiteness.’¹²⁹

It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the systems of enslavement in South Asia at the time of European colonisation, which were complex and varied considerably across regions as well as religious, cultural and socio-economic contexts.¹³⁰ It is noteworthy, however, that the majority of enslaved Indians within the subcontinent were women and children, enslaved within Indian households, and as domestic or skilled household servants, rather than

¹²⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 68-70.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹³⁰ For this see: Chatterjee and Eaton, eds, *Slavery and South Asian History* and Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843*, (New Delhi, 2017), 189-230.

as agricultural field-hands. While some Indians were enslaved as captives of war during Mughal incursions from the eleventh century onwards—a status which was then inherited by their offspring—the most common entry into slavery was debt bondage, whereby families in times of famine pawned their children to richer households. Europeans in India tapped into existing Indigenous networks of enslavement, often staffing their households with enslaved Indians. Some of those enslaved as domestic servants in European households within India were among those transported to Réunion and Mauritius, where they continued to be enslaved domestics. This route appears to have been how Madeleine, Furcy's mother, ended up enslaved and living in Réunion.¹³¹

Some of these perceptions of Indians on the subcontinent and fluid understandings of racial boundaries appear to have been transferred to Réunion in its early years of colonisation, shaping the evolution of the island's social structures. As noted, historians have tended to categorise Réunion as a Caribbean plantation island transplanted into the Indian Ocean but in some ways, especially in these years, Réunion resembled Chandernagore or Pondicherry more than Guadeloupe or Martinique. While the Antilles were colonised by Frenchmen, who arrived with their families, Réunion, from its origins, was ethnically diverse, with many of the original settlers coming as free immigrants from India and Madagascar as well as Europe. As in the French Indian *comptoirs*, Réunion had a much smaller and more male population of European colonists, some of whom came from or via India, or else they sought a wife there. Records show that the first French settlers were married to women from Madagascar and soon after India. Before 1700, less than a third of marriages were between a European man and woman, and over 85 per cent involved a European and a spouse of a different ethnic origin.¹³² By 1750

¹³¹ Sue Peabody, *Madeleine's Children, Family, Freedom, Secrets and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies*, (New York, 2017), 11-15.

¹³² Jacques Houdaille, 'Le métissage dans les anciennes colonies françaises,' *Population*, 36, (1981), 282.

many of the colonists born on the island, were the result of these interethnic unions. Against this backdrop, some subtle but significant differences evolved in Réunion compared with Guadeloupe and Martinique. Regarding the use of language, the term ‘creole’ (referring to the people not the language) passed from the Spanish to the French language during the seventeenth century and in French slave colonies originally signified white people born in the island. Its usage evolved differently in each island, however, and in Réunion it quickly came to refer to anyone, of any colour, born on the island. The term could be used to describe enslaved individuals within the same parameters. In Réunion the terms ‘noir’ and ‘blanc’ also often referred to the status of the person, free or enslaved, rather than always being a descriptor of ethnic origin. Many of the colonists mentioned above were thus described as white while in fact they were descendants of migrants from South Asia or Africa.¹³³ This meant that when colonial administrators in Paris issued restrictions based on race, usually with Caribbean racial categories in mind, in Réunion they were largely ignored.¹³⁴

This variance allowed for considerable fluidity compared with the Caribbean colonies.¹³⁵ This fluidity is evident in the many ways that, at different times, Indians, who were part of both free and enslaved communities, were described and categorised and also identified themselves. The term ‘Malabar’ was adopted to refer to people of Indian origin. Some of those who arrived in Réunion from India were from the Malabar coast, a region, now part of the state of Kerala, which was associated in European colonial discourse on the subcontinent with agricultural slavery and slave castes.¹³⁶ Many, however, were not. Nonetheless ‘Malabar’ or

¹³³ R. Chaudenson, *Des îles, des hommes, des langues: essai sur la créolisation linguistique et culturelle* (Paris, 1992).

¹³⁴ Peabody, *Madeleine's Children*, 8.

¹³⁵ In reality, it was mostly free people identified as of European origin who controlled how this fluidity was exercised, as in the case of the three Ranga sisters, one was described as ‘black’ or *noir*, because she was a slave, one as ‘*libre de couleur*’, and the last one as ‘*blanche*’, because she was married to a white man, Sieur Mallot. ADR AJ 25, d.9.

¹³⁶ Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*, 189-230.

‘malbar’ became a common way to refer to all people of South Asian descent in Réunion. Those born on the island at times were referred to and referred to themselves as creole, while at other times, they identified themselves as Indian or ‘Malabar’. The latter perhaps mirrors how, as Edward Alpers writes, ‘slave owners disregarded recognised differences in the actual origins of these bondsmen and imposed on them a new identity, that of ‘Mozambiques,’ as a form of shorthand for a broad category of servile labour from eastern Africa for the Mauritian market,’ which was then used to draw distinctions with different enslaved groups.¹³⁷

‘A slave elite’

From the arrival of the first enslaved workers on Réunion at the end of the seventeenth century to the abolition of slavery in 1848, contemporary accounts distinguish between enslaved Indian, Malagasy and sub-Saharan African people, the latter of whom were referred to in contemporary accounts as ‘African’. Although early accounts were not necessarily racialised in a modern sense, French colonial administrators and observers alike keenly differentiated between these groups, evoking both negative and positive stereotypes. To some extent, these stereotypes were adaptable according to the situation. Yet, as the characteristics attributed to these different groups were used to define their roles and position within households and on plantations, they became self-reinforcing and relatively consistent. As such, it seems that enslaved Indians were generally viewed as intelligent, loyal and docile and were perceived as an enslaved elite.¹³⁸ One early description of enslaved Indians comes from Père Bernardin, a Capuchin priest who acted as the island’s Governor from 1680 to 1686. ‘The Indians do not

¹³⁷ Edward Alpers, ‘Becoming “Mozambique”’: Diaspora and Identity’, in Vijayalakshmi Teelock and Edward Alpers, eds, *History, Memory and Identity* (Port-Louis, 2001).

¹³⁸ Although most studies on the Indian Ocean trade dedicate little attention to enslaved Indians, all note this point. See Filliot *La Traite*, 175; J.M. Desport, *De la servitude à la liberté: Bourbon des origines à 1848*, (Saint-André, 1989); D. Napal, *Les Indien à l’Île de France*, (Port Louis, 1965); Marina Carter ‘Indian Slaves in Mauritius’.

have the strength of those from Madagascar’, Bernardin wrote, ‘but they ‘are even-tempered’ and not hot-headed like those from Madagascar’.¹³⁹ Although some early enslaved Indians were sent from the French *comptoirs* in India by the French East India Company as a penal punishment, Indians were specifically sought and ‘acquired’ because of their perceived aptitude in domestic and artisanal roles.¹⁴⁰ Réunion’s first Commandant, Etienne Regnault argued the only place to find enslaved people with artisanal skills was India.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Mahé de La Bourdonnais described how he brought over ‘tailors from India’ at personal cost.¹⁴² As a result, while 80 per cent of Réunion’s total enslaved population worked the fields, only around half of enslaved Indians did; a far greater proportion, comparatively, worked in domestic roles.¹⁴³ Indians’ elite status and their preponderance in domestic roles is further attested by the higher prices paid for them. ‘One Indian is easily worth 600 livres, a Malagasy not more than 250’, wrote Governor Dumas in 1729.¹⁴⁴

The characteristics attached to this social position clearly became attached to an Indian enslaved identity in French perceptions. In 1734, Réunion’s administrators described how ‘the Indians in their country are weak and lazy, but in another climate become more robust and hard working. They are skilful and docile. They are more suitable for domestic service inside a house, and less dirty than the Malagasies’.¹⁴⁵ Indians, the administrators continued, ‘are in

¹³⁹ ADR, R.T. vol.4, 63, *Mémoire du père Bernardin sur l’Ile de Bourbon*, (Paris, 1687).

¹⁴⁰ See Albert Lougnon, ed., *Le Conseil Supérieur de Pondichery et de la Compagnie des Indes, 14 février 1729*, vol. 1 1724-1731, and vol. V 1746-1759, (Pondicherry, 1933).

¹⁴¹ *Mémoire d’Etienne Regnault, premier commandant de l’Ile Bourbon, July-August 1665-June 1671*, in R.T. vol.1.

¹⁴² Marc Serge Riviere, ed., *La Plume et l’épée: mémoires de Mahé de La Bourdonnais (1740-1742)* (Vacoas, 2005).

¹⁴³ Gerbeau, ‘Minorités mal connus’, 14.

¹⁴⁴ ADR, R.T., vol.7, 107, *Correspondance Bourbon-Indes, Le Conseil de Pondichéry à celui de Bourbon*, 19 February 1729.

¹⁴⁵ ANOM, col.F3-206, *Lettre des administrateurs de Bourbon à la Compagnie*, 15 December 1734.

general incapable of any evil enterprise against their masters..., are fine and joyful, and...have as much interest as the whites in opposing the endeavours of the Malagasies, who are ferocious, bold and enterprising'.¹⁴⁶

The image of the weak but honest, gentle and intelligent Indian endured into the nineteenth century. Jacques-Gérard Milbert, an artist visiting Réunion around 1800, wrote that 'their address and their intelligence surpasses by leaps and bounds their physical strength', which as a result meant they were engaged in 'work which demanded more care and reasoning' than brute strength. He also asserted that Indians were 'cleaner and more docile than the other races of slave...more loyal and sober'.¹⁴⁷ In 1812, Milbert similarly wrote that 'we prefer the Indians as domestics' because 'many of them know how to read'.¹⁴⁸ Pierre-Philippe-Urbain Thomas, a statistician and civil servant on Réunion between 1817 and 1824, further that the Indian 'is a weak species of man...but in general they are honest and trustworthy'.¹⁴⁹

The French perception of Indian beauty also endured, transferring from descriptions of India to Réunion. While travelling in India during the 1650s and 1660s, the physician François Bernier asserted that with 'their clear complexions and fine forms...[Indians] are as well made as Europeans'.¹⁵⁰ Nearly a century later, Admiral Kempenfelt, when visiting the Mascarenes in 1757, recorded how Baron d'Unienville explained that enslaved Bengalis 'were valued not only for their gentleness, good manners and cleanliness but also for their hair and features, which were similar to those of Europeans, differing only in colour from a light tan to very

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Jacques-Gérard Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque à l'Île de France, au cap de Bonne Esperance et à l'Île de Ténériffe*, (Paris, 1812), vol.1, 218 and vol. 2, 170.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, 170.

¹⁴⁹ Pierre Philippe Urbain Thomas, *Essai de statistique de l'Île Bourbon* (Paris, 1828), vol.1, 208.

¹⁵⁰ François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, (New Delhi, 2010), 404.

dark'.¹⁵¹ Milbert echoed this some forty years later: 'These slaves are the most beautiful and the best made...only the scissors of Phidias could carve from marble forms as elegant and as perfect'.¹⁵²

These perceived differences between ethnic groups served a practical social function. Gerbeau asks why the French looked as far as India when Africa's closer shores offered an inexhaustible supply of enslaved people.¹⁵³ There was a need for enslaved people with specific skills, but also a perceived need to divide and rule. Réunion's administrators in 1734 described how enslaved Indians were '[t]he last consequence of mixing the slaves of the Island in order to prevent plots which could come afoot'.¹⁵⁴ The slave trade from India was thus a deliberate attempt to diversify the enslaved population to prevent rebellions. To this end divisions were also intentionally fostered 'in the interest of tranquillity'. Auguste Billiard, a civil servant, observed that 'Our slaves are divided by race, with each race the enemy of the other: the Indian and the Malagasy see themselves as much above the *Cafre* (African)'.¹⁵⁵

Maillard, reflecting on this, wrote:

The colonists took the precaution of diversifying their recruitment of enslaved people to prevent risks of rebellion amongst their work force. The quasi-doctrinal principle adopted by Bourbon's *colons* has contributed a lot to the tranquillity of the island. Thus,

¹⁵¹ 'Observations on the Isle Bourbon, by the Admiral Kampenfelt in the year 1758', in Charles Grant, Viscount de Vaux, ed., *The History of Mauritius and the Neighbouring Islands* (London, 1801), 159.

¹⁵² Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque*, 170-72.

¹⁵³ Gerbeau 'Minorités mal connus', 15-16.

¹⁵⁴ ANOM, col.F3 d.206, Lettre des administrateurs de Bourbon à la Compagnie, 15 December 1734.

¹⁵⁵ Auguste Billiard, *Voyage aux colonies orientales ou lettres aux Iles de France et de Bourbon pendant les années 1817-1820* (Paris, 1822), 122.

the Indians and the Malays do not get on with the *Cafres* and the Malagasies, who they consider inferior races.¹⁵⁶

Milbert's descriptions further suggest that slave-owners recognised and manipulated the antagonism between different enslaved groups in other ways. He described how 'the greatest punishment' that one can inflict upon an enslaved Indian is to cut his hair. To execute the punishment, you choose a black man, usually from Mozambique, because this 'race' is the one for which Indians have 'the most aversion'.¹⁵⁷ This divide and rule strategy seems to have had some success. The *Gazette de l'Île Bourbon* attributed the failure of the 1811 Saint-Leu slave revolt to the lack of unity amongst the 'insurgents, composed of four castes who fear and hate each other'.¹⁵⁸ The four castes were 'the Indians', 'the Malagasies', 'the Creoles' and 'the *Cafres* (Africans)'.¹⁵⁹

The divisions in the enslaved community drawn by French enslavers are clear. To a lesser extent it is also evident that these divisions affected dynamics between different ethnic groups. Yet how the enslaved themselves, and in this case particularly enslaved Indians, were able to draw their own identity boundaries and to assert and preserve these identities is harder to establish due to the limited evidence of slave cultures in Réunion. But there is some indication of cultural practices linked to a form or forms of Indian identity.

In 1800, Milbert described 'Malabar' slaves' funeral processions with their Hindu burial rites, and of Muslims reading from the Koran.¹⁵⁹ A brief look at attempts to convert Réunion's diverse enslaved population to Catholicism corroborates the potential existence of non-Christian religious practices. While an ordinance in 1767 compelled slave-owners to have non-Christian enslaved people baptised, it was met with reluctance or resistance from

¹⁵⁶ L. Maillard, *Notes sur l'Île de Bourbon* (Paris, 1862), 182.

¹⁵⁷ Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque*, vol.2, 187.

¹⁵⁸ *Gazette de l'Île Bourbon* of 4 December 1811, cited in Gérard 'La Guerre', 46.

¹⁵⁹ Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque*, 186.

plantation owners. From 1738 officially they had been required to afford Christian and married enslaved workers ‘the freedom and the time to come to mass on the necessary days, each in turn, considering the distance from the locations, at least once a month’.¹⁶⁰ This did not suit plantation owners, nor colonial authorities who readily banished overzealous missionaries in both Réunion and Mauritius.¹⁶¹ Conversion of enslaved people to Christianity was also hindered by language barriers. In 1772, Father Caulier, a Lazarist missionary, classified the island’s enslaved into ‘castes or tribes’, writing:

‘the Guinean Kaffirs, Yollofs, Bambaras, Senegalese, Widaliens; Kaffirs from the East Coast, Monomotapas, Monoomurgis, Kerimbins, and Mozambiques, all speaking different languages...Indians from the mainland or islands, Bengalis, Bancouliens, Lascars, Malabars, Malays, and Moors, all equally speaking different languages; Malagasies or Madagascarians who form the largest group with the Creole blacks born in the colony, among all these foreign slaves...It would take a second Pentecost to speak all these barbaric languages...’¹⁶²

Caulier also expressed doubt over the value of baptising some enslaved and free people in the colony who failed to change their habits after baptism, turning up to ‘confession only once a year’.¹⁶³ Robert Bousquet also finds evidence that newly enslaved people were baptised on arrival.¹⁶⁴ Officially, he notes, four or five years were needed for adequate religious instruction before baptism. As such, Boucary, an enslaved Indian (‘Malabar’ in the records), was baptised

¹⁶⁰ ADR, C.2520, d.95. Arrêt de règlement qui défend à tous propriétaires d’esclaves de laisser les noirs et négresses vivre en concubinage.

¹⁶¹ Amédée Nagapen, *Histoire de l’Église: isle de France, île Maurice 1721-1968* (Port-Louis, Mauritius, 1996), 54.

¹⁶² Archives des Lazaristes, vol. 1506 (1746-1779). Rapport de M. Caulier sur la situation religieuse de l’île Bourbon, 169. Also see Prosper Eve *Naître et mourir à Île Bourbon à l’époque de l’esclavage* (Paris, 1999), 75.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Bousquet, *Les esclaves et leurs maîtres à Bourbon, au temps de la Compagnie des Indes, 1665-1767*, 4 vols, vol.4, 127. Published online.

in 1713, five years after his arrival in 1708, and given the name ‘Christophe’.¹⁶⁵ It seems this man continued to use two names, one officially, and one privately or in everyday life. Boucary married one Françoise Lauret; perhaps his conversion to Catholicism was for this marriage, which would have been a prerequisite. Sometimes, writes Bousquet these baptisms were done forcibly. An enslaved Indian, Francisque, is recorded as having been baptised aged 14 in 1743 but records up to 1751 show him listed as a ‘Moor’ (Muslim), suggesting resistance on his part.¹⁶⁶

Caulier singled out Muslim Indians as the least willing to convert to Catholicism:

Among these various nations and languages found in the islands, there is usually, except on the part of the Moors and Lascars, who retain something of the Mohammedans, no resistance to adopting our belief; most of them are without worship, merely infatuated with some superstitions, which they call “gris-gris”, or sorcery, or enchantment. They willingly embrace the first one presented to them.¹⁶⁷

Somewhat contradicting his earlier comments, this description reveals the derogatory perception held by European missionaries, and Europeans more broadly, of other world regions’ cultural and religious practices. It also, however, suggests that Islam was viewed in a different light and corroborates that some Indian Muslims did not, even officially, relinquish their religion. While most other groups, according to him, were relatively receptive to conversion due to their lack of structured religious practices (relying more on superstitions or ‘gris-gris’ and sorcery), the Muslim Indians actively resisted. The use of ‘gris-gris’ is illuminating in terms of the complexities of creolisation. An amulet or charm with protective powers, typically used in West African spiritual traditions, a gris-gris was typically associated

¹⁶⁵ ADR, GG. 1, Saint-Paul, n° 795, n° 820, 1708, cited in *Ibid*, 127.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 127. Bousquet does not give a separate archival reference for this example.

¹⁶⁷ Archives des Lazaristes, vol. 1506 (1746-1779). Rapport de M. Caulier sur la situation religieuse de l’île Bourbon, 171.

in the Atlantic context with enslaved communities comprised largely of West Africans. Megan Vaughn shows, however, that in eighteenth-century Mauritius visitors almost without fail observed the Malagasies' fondness for gris-gris. 'The word comes, almost certainly, from a West African language but on Ile de France it acquires a Malagasy identity,' she writes. 'This is creole culture in the making.'¹⁶⁸

Returning to resistance to conversion, Prudhomme also notes that missionaries were most troubled by Indians, 'a small number' of whom were Catholic, but 'the immense majority' refused to renounce their 'false religion'.¹⁶⁹ He suggests, however, that these missionary accounts may well refer to free Indian workers as well as to enslaved Indians. The confusion suggests that enslaved and free Indians were assimilated through the perception of a shared culture as well as a shared ethnicity. The presence of non-enslaved Indians, and their links to enslaved people of the same ethnicity, offers further indication of an ethnic identity.

Free Indians

Réunion was home to a significant number of free Indians. As noted above, many of the first Indian inhabitants arrived as European colonisers' wives.¹⁷⁰ Almost certainly Catholicised, these women and their descendants were probably referred to as 'white', rather than 'Malabar' or Indian. While slavery persisted, and many Indians remained enslaved, increasing numbers of free Indians also migrated voluntarily to Réunion, often bringing their families.¹⁷¹ Records show the arrival of one Thola in 1789, who became a servant, and Marie Casaubon, who arrived

¹⁶⁸ Vaughn, *Creating the Creole Island*, 122.

¹⁶⁹ C. Prudhomme, *Histoire religieuse de la Réunion*, (Paris, 1984), 97.

¹⁷⁰ J. Barassin, 'Etude sur les origines extérieures de la population libre de Bourbon', in R.D., no.4 (1960): 28-32, cited in Gerbeau 'Les indiens des Mascareignes: simples jalons pour l'histoire d'une réussite (XVIIe-XXe siècle)', *l'Annuaire des pays de l'océan Indien*, vol.12, 1990-1991 (Aix-en-Provence, 1992), 18.

¹⁷¹ Gerbeau, 'Les Indiens,' 17.

in 1794 from Bengal and by 1815 was a couturier and the owner of six enslaved people.¹⁷² Free labourers were also brought to the island, often simultaneously with enslaved Indians. When Dumas personally recruited ‘300 labourers in 1729, they were a mixture of free and enslaved; 99 of them were described as Malabar workers.’¹⁷³

Indians were further recruited as ‘*matelots*’ (sailors) both on naval and commercial ships. Again, there were free and enslaved Indian *matelots*. Strikingly, in 1767 free *matelots* were paid 25 livres a month and enslaved *matelots* five.¹⁷⁴ This is significant not because of the difference but because the enslaved people were paid at all. It seems a marked recognition that they possessed a valuable skill and suggests that enslaved Indians’ association with free Indians strengthened the perception of the enslaved people as skilled. Muslim Indians, known as lascars, were particularly recruited (as free, paid labour) for maritime service in the Mascarenes. The term was originally used to describe the many sailors of various Asian origins who were employed by Europeans in the Indian Ocean and beyond from the sixteenth century, but by the latter half of the seventeenth century it was used solely for seafarers from the South Asian subcontinent, many of whom were Muslim.¹⁷⁵ Governor Mahé de la Bourdonnais wrote in 1744: ‘we need...almost 55 men. Since this expense went far with Europeans, I brought in Lascars.’¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Lartin, ‘Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise’, 192.

¹⁷³ ADR, col.C5-96 Le conseil de Pondichéry à celui de Bourbon, par la “Sirène”, 14 February 1729.

¹⁷⁴ AM, OC-3, fol.51, État des sommes qui ont été payées à divers employés, lascards et malabards libres et esclaves attachés au service du Roy sur l’isle de Rodrigues à compter du 1er Aoust 1767 jusques et compris le der(nier) avril 1769, cited in Gerbeau ‘Les Indiens’, 13.

¹⁷⁵ See Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell Hobson-Jobson, *The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (Ware, 1996 [orig. 1886]), and Conrad Dixon, ‘Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen’, in R. Ommer and G. Panting, eds., *The Working Men Who Got Wet* (St. Johns’, Newfoundland, 1980).

¹⁷⁶ Mahé de la Bourdonnais, *Mémoire des Iles de France et de Bourbon*, in Albert Lounon, ed., (Paris, 1937), 30-32.

Notably, as Réunion's population grew, Indians tended to marry other Indians, as was the case with 76 per cent of their marriages between 1756 and 1830.¹⁷⁷ This collective Indian identity seems to have encompassed enslaved as well as free Indians. Records indicate large numbers of female enslaved Indians married free Indian *engagés* (contract labourers) and lascars, probably due to smaller numbers of free Indian women. For an enslaved person to marry a free person he or she had first to be manumitted.¹⁷⁸ Marital records show that in 1743, Bernard Largourgue wrote to the *Conseil Supérieur* requesting the emancipation of his slave Madeleine (of Indian origin) so that she could marry Patirs, described as a 'mahometan lascar', working for the French East India Company.¹⁷⁹ In 1734, Andresse, an enslaved Indian, was 'given her freedom' 'in favour of her marriage with François, a free Malabar worker in the service of the *Compagnie*'.¹⁸⁰ Of course many Indians married non-Indians, but the preference some clearly had for marrying other Indians suggests a sense of shared identity.

The degree of cultural continuity and agency among free Indians is notable. After *engagés* complained about the misspelling of their names, La Bourdonnais ordered local authorities to write them in Indian script. Free Indians, particularly *matelots*, also exercised religious freedom. The records suggest that they did not abstain from public exercises of their worship. A 1767 ruling ordered Indians to stop their '*danses du TamTam*' at 11pm, testifying to the common existence of such practices.¹⁸¹ Milbert's observations support this. Distinguishing Indian from African dances, he described: 'the Indians carry in their dances an

¹⁷⁷ ADR, Tables Annuelles des Mariages, 1745-1830. Published online. Also see Ève, *Naître et Mourir*, 61.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁷⁹ ADR, C.2521, d,3, Homologation de la requête en affranchissement présentée par Bernard Lagourgue, 7 August 1743. *Idem.* ANOM, no. 2046, Rubert, Affranchissement de Madeleine, esclave de Bernard Laforgue, 9 August 1743.

¹⁸⁰ ADR, col.GG3-2506, 29 December 1734. Published online.

¹⁸¹ Lartin, 'Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise', 191.

air of noble and gentle gravity.’¹⁸² Even more tellingly, a Lazarist missionary, Pierre-Joseph Teste, in the colony from 1723 and the apostolic prefect there from 1746 to 1772, wrote in a report in 1764: ‘The Indians dressed in tiger and lion skins organise processions for their deities. The Lascars and other idolaters publicly exercise their worship in Réunion, on certain days of the year; they cover themselves with lion and tiger skins and parade in grandeur through all the streets of Saint-Denis and Saint-Paul. Moreover, a garrison accompanies them as in triumph.’¹⁸³ This appears to describe the Muslim festival known as Yamsé, Muharram or Taziya (and Ghoon in Mauritius).¹⁸⁴ This is a commemoration of the death of Imam Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammed. Traditionally celebrated in South Asia over ten days, this involves the construction of an ornately decorated *Taziya*, a replica of Husain’s mausoleum, which devotees carry through the surrounding neighbourhoods in a procession led by drummers and dancers, often disguised as tigers, sometimes thought to represent the guards of Husayn’s tomb. On the final day this procession usually leads to the sea or some water source, where the *Taziya* is immersed in the water.¹⁸⁵ Some argue this practice, and other parts of the celebration, were originally incorporated from Hindu religious practices, such as the immersing of goddess Durga during Durga Puja.¹⁸⁶ In India, Hindus also participated in the celebrations, a mark of the sub-continent’s high degree of religious syncretism at this time.¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, Teste’s mention of ‘lascars *and other idolaters*’ seems to suggest in Réunion; too Hindu Indians

¹⁸² Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque*, 181.

¹⁸³ Cited in Prosper Ève, *La laïcité en terre réunionnaise: origine et originalité* (Saint-André, Réunion, 2005), 29.

¹⁸⁴ Commemorated in places where Indian indentured labourers were transported in the following century, it is known by *Taziya* in Trinidad and Fiji and *Tadjah* in Suriname and Guyana. See: Frank J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*, (Philadelphia, 2003).

¹⁸⁵ Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (New Delhi, 1999), 157 and 211.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Chelskowski, ‘Art for Twenty-four Hours’, in Doria Behrens-Abouself and Stephen Vernoit, eds, *Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation and Eclecticism*, (Leiden, 2005), 414.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

may have joined in the celebrations. Also striking from this is that these celebrations were public, ‘through all the streets’, and accompanied by a garrison. This suggests that the religious festival did not take place on the fringes of society, but had a degree of public acceptance, if not participation. Records suggest the festival was celebrated in much the same way by Indians in Mauritius at this time.¹⁸⁸

Within a few years there were attempts to stop this. A letter from the Duke of Praslin dated April 1, 1769, as well as the memorandum signed by the King at Versailles on February 26, 1781, addressed to the Governor of the two islands, stated: ‘although the Catholic religion is the only one allowed in Mauritius and Réunion, His Majesty has been pleased to permit those who profess any other religion not to be troubled in their beliefs, provided they cause no scandal and abstain from any public exercise of their worship.’¹⁸⁹ But a shortage of these skilled workers meant such a policy was not possible. The French East India Company wrote to Mauritius and Réunion’s administrators: ‘It is not possible to prevent the people from these nations, who are only in the islands for a short time, from practicing their religion or to compel them to change it, as it would be a way to lack sailors.’¹⁹⁰ As shall be discussed, the celebration of Yamsé among Indians in the eighteenth century foreshadowed Indian religious festivities in the following century.

‘An intelligent race’

No contradiction appears to have been perceived in the co-existence of free and enslaved Indians; rather, Réunion’s social structures permitted that Indians could be enslaved, paid workers and slave-owners within the same society. The presence of free Indians, and their

¹⁸⁸ Mayila Paroomal, ‘Le Muharram (Ghoun ou Yamseh) à Port-Louis depuis le xviii^e siècle: enjeux identitaires, pratiques populaires et interculturelité,’ in Faranirina V. Rajaonah ed. *Cultures citadines dans l’océan Indien occidental (XVIII^e- XXI^e siècles)* (Saint-Louis, Mauritius, 2011), 289-309.

¹⁸⁹ Cited by Lartin, ‘Les Indiens dans la société bourbonnaise’, 93-4.

¹⁹⁰ ANOM, col.F5A, vol.8, Folios 70-71.

assimilation with enslaved Indians, did not, in this period, mean that Indians were perceived as ineligible for enslavement. As Gerbeau emphasises, it is unlikely that slave-owners liberated their enslaved Indians due to their perceived potential as free men, but rather due to their qualities as enslaved people.¹⁹¹ The image of Indians as an intelligent and beautiful elite among the enslaved with a recognised and distinct culture, however, contributed to French racial discourse, which rendered this contradiction problematic and thus also Indians' enslavement itself.

Perceptions of enslaved Indians were not just driven by circumstances within the island, but by ideas that circulated throughout the French empire. The island's apparent geographical isolation is deceptive in terms of the impact that events and ideas across the French empire and beyond had on its population across various social echelons. The planters were a relatively stable presence, and many large plantation-owning families had connections not just to mainland France but also to India and the Americas. Equally, officials often moved between the colonies. Both groups watched the French Caribbean intently, as it was there that first saw the implementation of the *Code Noir*—which was not implemented in Réunion until 1723. The 1791 revolution in St Domingue (Haiti) and subsequent smaller slave rebellions caused reverberations throughout the plantation world. Jean Baptiste-Renoyal de Lescouble wrote in his diary in 1832 of the 'total destruction of Jamaica caused by a large-scale revolt of the blacks'.¹⁹² He imagined that 'the other English colonies in the West are at this very moment suffering the same catastrophe'.¹⁹³

In this context, the Enlightenment's scientific theories on race were quickly circulated in Réunion and are evident in descriptions of enslaved populations. The most widely

¹⁹¹ Gerbeau 'Minorités mal-connus', 66.

¹⁹² Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, 1983).

¹⁹³ Jean-Baptiste Renoyal de Lescouble, *Journal d'un colon de l'île Bourbon* 3, no. 1 (1811-1825), (Paris, 1990), 165.

popularised of these writings was that by Georges-Louis-Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. Buffon's discourse on '*Variétés dans l'espèce humaine*', part of his *Histoire naturelle* of 1747, explained the variations between races of man according to climate. A proponent of monogenesis, Buffon argued that white people were the point from which other races degenerated according to climate and physical conditions.¹⁹⁴ He described Africans as the most 'degenerated', attributing their 'blackness' to 'constant and excessive heat', 'transferred to children by their mothers and fathers'.¹⁹⁵ This purported hereditary aspect seems to have pertained specifically to Africans. Buffon's analysis divided humanity into the 'civilised world', which included lighter-skinned populations and the second 'the race of blacks', characterised by physical attributes and what Buffon saw as associated primitive qualities.¹⁹⁶

Significantly, Buffon included Indians among the civilised.¹⁹⁷ Although not within the European zone 'that one should take as the model' and thus 'brown and tanned', they were, he wrote, 'at the same time quite beautiful and well made' and 'civilised', particularly noting North Indians as close to Europeans.¹⁹⁸

Where did Buffon acquire his ideas about the peoples he classified? As Michel Ducet notes, it is from l'*Histoire de Saint-Domingue* by père Charlevoix and not descriptions of Africa itself that Buffon draws 'the elements of a portrait' of Africans.¹⁹⁹ Buffon's negative image of Africans was derived from pre-slave trade images but also from images of plantations, well-established by the time he was writing. The conditions of Africans enslaved on plantations informed Buffon's classification of Africans, and in turn his classification buttressed this

¹⁹⁴ 'Variétés dans l'espèce humaine', in Georges-Louis-Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, vol.3, (Paris, 1749), 371-530.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 522-3.

¹⁹⁶ Ducet, *Anthropologie*, 207.

¹⁹⁷ Buffon, 'Variétés', 432.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁹⁹ Ducet, *Anthropologie*, 208.

institution. Just as slavery had previously been justified by the need to Christianise Africans, it was now justified by the need to ‘civilise’ them and prepare them for freedom. The condition of slavery, viewed as a symptom of primitiveness, was thus embedded into the characterisation of Africans as a ‘race’. In contrast the comparatively tiny number of Indians enslaved within French colonies meant their characterisation was drawn less from the condition of slavery than from writings on India itself.²⁰⁰ Although such writings contained their own negative images, exotifying Indians, they nonetheless also tended to emphasise the ancient civilisation of India.²⁰¹ Buffon may have drawn on François Bernier’s observations from India and works on ‘species’ of man from the previous century. Bernier espoused a strong admiration for Mughal India and aligned Indians with Europeans, writing:

It is true that most Indians differ somewhat from us in the shape of their face and in their colour, which leans toward the yellow, but this does not seem sufficient reason to make them into a separate species; otherwise, we would have to turn the Spaniards into one as well, and the Germans into another, and so on...²⁰²

The roots of Buffon’s theory meant that its popularisation within France and its colonies stood to impact differently on perceptions of Indians as enslaved people, compared with their African counterparts. In seeking to justify the enslavement of the latter, it created ambiguity around the former.

From the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, descriptions of Réunion’s enslaved Indians remained remarkably consistent, depicting them as honest, loyal, intelligent and

²⁰⁰ See Antoine-François Prévost d’Exiles, *Histoire générale des voyages*, 18 vols. (La Haye, 1747-1763).

²⁰¹ Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, 19.

²⁰² ‘Nouvelle Division De La Terre, par les différentes Espèces ou Races d’hommes qui l’habitent, envoyée par un fameux voyageur à M. l’Abbe de la **** à peu près en ces termes’, in *Journal des sçavans*, 24 April 1684. Published online.

beautiful. On closer analysis, however, from the mid-eighteenth century the increasing influence of racial theories is evident. Firstly, the use of the word ‘race’ to describe the different enslaved groups became more common. As already noted, Billiard referred to enslaved people as being ‘divided into enemy *races*’.²⁰³ Secondly, regarding enslaved Indians in particular, early references to them commonly employed ‘*nègre*’, or ‘*négresses*’. In 1678 père Bernardin listed twelve ‘*négresses indo-portugaises*’.²⁰⁴ Yet, by 1769, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre wrote:

This people [of India] is of a softer taint than the islanders of Madagascar, who are real *nègres*... [the Indians’] features are regular like those of Europeans, and they do not have woolly hair; they are sober and economical. Their head is dressed with a turban, and they wear long dresses of muslin with large gold earrings and silver bracelets around their wrists.²⁰⁵

The drive within racial theories to classify different groups according to their physical features and character traits solidified these distinctions. This not only reinforced enslaved Indians’ perceived superiority, but with the features used to classify each group meticulously identified from around 1750, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and others were able to doubt the ‘eligibility’ for enslavement of those who did not fit this classification.

The influence of racial theories is also evident in Billiard’s description of the ‘distance’ between ‘races’:

Surrounded by Indians, *Cafres*, and Malagasies, it is impossible to not notice, amongst these different races, the greater and lesser aptitude towards the arts and civilisation.

The distance is great between the black man of *Caferie* and he from the interior of

²⁰³ Billiard, *Voyage aux colonies*.

²⁰⁴ Desport, *L’Inde et la Réunion*, 3.

²⁰⁵ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Voyage à l’Isle de France, à l’Isle de Bourbon*, 11.

Madagascar; the distance is hardly noticeable between the latter and the Asiatic or the European.²⁰⁶

Notably, by the end of the eighteenth-century polygenesis had become far more popular than the monogenesis theory. Voltaire and other advocates for polygenesis contended that the racial groups were so different they bore no relation to each other and can never have been connected.²⁰⁷

Billiard further implied racial superiority through clothing, observing that, compared with other enslaved groups, ‘the Indians take much better to clothes’,²⁰⁸ and commenting: ‘The oriental costumes...have a grace and a nobility...: I like this Malabar, all tanned he might be, with his wide trousers, his muslin tunic, his turban, his *schall-scarf*’.²⁰⁹ Such descriptions evoked Buffon’s connections between climate, race and civilisation as well as contemporary discourse on India’s ancient and ‘noble’ civilisation.²¹⁰

Most striking is how this racialised perception impacted on ideas of legitimacy for enslavement in practice. Billiard’s description of the ‘Cafre’ distances him from the European, as part of a justification for his enslavement. The more physically like Europeans one ‘race’ was perceived to be, the more civilised and intelligent and the less ‘in need’ of slavery as a civilising institution. In this way, slavery became racially coded, rendering ambiguous the status of those enslaved people whose did not hail from Africa.

When visiting Réunion in 1840, Dr M. Yvan openly questioned the enslavement of Indians, explicitly because they were not ‘African’ but an ‘intelligent race’. ‘Enslavement of Africans is generally accepted in Europe as an everyday fact’, he wrote. Yet,

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 30.

²⁰⁷ See: Francois-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Traité de métaphysique* [1734] in L. Moland, ed., *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols. (Paris, 1877-85), vol.22, 189-230.

²⁰⁸ Billiard, *Voyage aux colonies*, 124.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 40.

²¹⁰ Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*.

[w]hen one observes with some attention the slave population of Bourbon, one realises with surprise that it is not made up just of *nègres* but of Malays, of Bengalis, of Malabars, and even whites... the Malabars and the Bengalis held in slavery were brought to the colony by hardy adventurers ...[and sold]... on the field of planters, who did not trouble themselves with the physical differences that existed between the individuals of these intelligent races and the idiot *nègres*.²¹¹

Yvan's description of clandestine slavers suggests a belief that there was never any official slave trade from India. His perception that Indians are not 'designed' for slavery is clearly affected by their lesser association with slavery, but also by the image of the 'intelligent slave', which is rationalised incontestably through scientific racial theories.²¹² Physicality was not only linked to intelligence and civilisation but to the right to freedom. Yet, the division is not necessarily 'black and white'; Indians are not white men yet are racially characterised as intelligent and civilised and thus, theoretically at least, entitled to freedom:

Why to this day has no one responded that *nègres* are not the only individuals reduced to slavery in our colonies? Why is no one ... in favour of the Malays, the Bengalis and the Malabars, descendants of intelligent races, who do not misuse their right to freedom...?²¹³

As racial theories solidified perceived differences between races, this instilled existing prejudices and stereotypes with 'scientific proof'. The predominance of enslaved Indians in skilled roles, their reputed intelligence and beauty and integration with free Indians gained greater significance in a world that divided its people into 'civilised' and 'savage', 'intelligent' and 'stupid'. The drive for classification itself, although designed to distance Europeans from

²¹¹ Le Docteur Melchior Yvan, *Voyages et récits* (Brussels, 1853), 251-2.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 252.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

Africans, meant that observations of differences between enslaved Indians and enslaved Africans, scrutinised in minute detail and attached to values as elevated as the capacity for freedom, impacted upon Indians' eligibility for enslavement. Alongside Réunion's slave hierarchy in which Indians were elite, authors like Buffon established a theoretical hierarchy of *all* men based on race, in which the very same characteristics that rendered enslaved Indians elite in practice were paradoxically attached to the theoretical right to freedom.

Testing the law: Indians 'eligibility for slavery'

Although it did not take place in Réunion, Francisque's case demonstrates how scientific racism, combined with the image of the elite Indian slave, impacted upon the legal status of enslaved Indians from as early as 1759.²¹⁴ Allain-Francois-Ignace Brignon purchased Francisque, aged 8, in Pondicherry in 1747. Some years later, in Paris, Francisque sought work elsewhere as a valet, prompting a legal battle between Francisque and Brignon. After the Admiralty Court declared Francisque free, Brignon appealed to the Parliament of Paris. Francisque's lawyer, Antoine-Joseph Collet, had previously represented other enslaved people against slave-owners who infringed the 1716 and 1738 edicts, which respectively removed the automatic emancipation afforded to enslaved people upon them 'touching the soil of France' and decreed that they would be returned to the colonies. These laws also established restrictions for enslavers.²¹⁵ Francisque's case was special, however, not only because he was Indian, but because his ethnicity formed a crucial part of his claim to legal freedom.

Collet sought to demonstrate that as an Indian, Francisque was not a '*nègre*', and therefore laws and established practices regarding enslavement did not apply to him. In effect

²¹⁴ Peabody examines this case in '*There Are No Slaves in France*', 57-72.

²¹⁵ Edit du Roi, *Concernant les Esclaves Nègres des Colonies*. Donné à Paris au mois d'Octobre mil sept cent seize, in *Code Noir*, 169-81; Déclaration du Roi, *Concernant les Nègres Esclaves des Colonies*. Donne à Versailles le 15 Décembre 1738, in *Code Noir*, 372-85.

Collet sought to establish that Indians were ineligible for enslavement. He thus distinguished Indians from Africans in terms of their role, evoking the idea of Indians as intelligent domestics rather than field-hands: ‘we know that the *Noirs Indiens*, very different from the *Nègres* of Africa, are ordinarily good domestics’.²¹⁶ Like Buffon and Bernier, Collet played on the image from contemporary literature that exotified but celebrated India as an evolved civilisation: ‘the city of Pondichéry, Francisque’s homeland, has more than 120,000 citizens ... The Indians of these countries know how to value the land, conduct commerce, begin and maintain manufactures’.²¹⁷ India was thus aligned with European civilisation and contrasted with the countries ‘recently populated’ of the Americas. Again, the image of Africans is drawn from the colonies where they were enslaved, and the image of Indians from India.

Collet also emphasised the physical differences between Indians and Africans, utilising Buffon’s notion of climate:

If, by the colour of their skin, the individuals who are born on the banks of the Indus and the rivers which feed it, bear some resemblance to the *negres* of Africa, they at least differ from the latter in that they don’t have such a flat nose, such thick, protruding lips, and, instead of the woolly, frizzy down which covers the heads of Africans, they have long and beautiful heads of hair, similar to those which decorate European heads...Such is *Francisque*. It suffices to see him to know that he has never spent a day on the burning sands of Guinea or Senegal. It is true that his nose is a bit large, his lips a little fat. But, disregarding his colour, he looks more European than many Europeans who need only black skin to appear African.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ BNF, 36765365, 6, Joly de Fleury, de la Roue, and Collet, *Mémoire signifié pour le nommé, Francisque, Indien de Nation, Néophyte de l’Eglise Romaine, Intime; contre le Sieur Allain-Francois-Ignance Brignon, se disant Ecuyer, Appelant* (Paris, 1759).

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

This mirrors contemporary descriptions of Réunion's enslaved Indians, which were also highly sensitive to any physiognomic differences and attached great significance to these. Although Francisque won his case, it did not solve whether Indians could be enslaved. Nevertheless, the fact that the question was posed at all is significant, as is the fact that it became a tangible legal issue when Buffon's 'Variétés dans l'espèce humaine' and similar texts were in circulation, and when descriptions of enslaved Indians as superior were becoming increasingly racialised.

Another case of an enslaved Indian protesting his status appeared in Réunion itself. Furcy was born 'in the colony' around 1786. His mother Madeleine²¹⁹ was born in Chandernagor and 'was bought...by a nun, Mademoiselle Dispense, who brought her to France ...Mademoiselle Dispense, closely connected to Madame Routier, who was also in France, gave her this slave in 1771'.²²⁰ Furcy and his mother, until her 1787 emancipation, were owned by creole-born Monsieur Routier. In 1812, with Madeleine deceased, Furcy's ownership was transferred to Routier's son-in-law, Monsieur Lory. Furcy started court proceedings against Lory in 1817 with the help of Louis-Gilbert Boucher, Réunion's *procureur général*. He claimed his freedom because 'his mother Madeleine was free as someone originally from India and having touched the soil of liberty (France) where freedom is an imprescriptible right'.²²¹

Aside from Furcy's Indian origins, his mother Madeleine's time in France meant that he was able to evoke the 'French soil principle'.²²² Although Furcy lost the first court hearing and his appeal in 1818, resulting in his banishment to Mauritius, his case received much attention in Réunion.²²³ Attitudes were divided: whilst Desbassayns de Richemont,

²¹⁹ Sometimes spelt Madeleine and others Magdeleine in the records.

²²⁰ ANOM, col.97-684, Du commissaire ordonnateur général Desbassayns à son Excellence le Ministre de la Marine des Colonies, 21 December 1817, No.75.

²²¹ Ibid. (emphasis in original).

²²² Sue Peabody's study of Furcy's case emphasises this: 'La question raciale et le "sol libre de France": l'affaire Furcy', *Annales* 6 (2009), 1305-34.

²²³ ANOM, col.F5B-7, 'Furcy noir à M. Lory' departed on the 'Clélie' on 26 Octobre 1818.

commissaire ordonnateur général, called for the need to ‘hush up and put an end to this affair’, he described the ‘invincible resistance in [Boucher] who claimed that the rights of Furcy to him seemed incontestable’.²²⁴ According to Desbassayns, Boucher ‘brought together all the officers of the Prosecutor’s department’ and asked: ‘Are not the Indians free by the very fact that they were born in India...and if they are free, are their children not free also ?’

Boucher’s conviction seems to have pivoted more on the notion that it was illegal for Indians to be enslaved than on the ‘French soil principle’. Equally, Desbassayns wrote that ‘I am most alarmed by this, seeing well that it is not just Mr Furcy’s freedom that Mr Boucher is seeking, but clearly that of all the Indians. Desbassayns recognised that ‘amongst other things it proposes that Indians...cannot, in any way, shape or form, be assimilated with the *nègres* from the coast of Africa and Madagascar’. Despite his opposition, Desbassayns’s use of ‘*nègres*’ indicates he did not conceive of Indians as ‘*nègres*’. His opposition to the suggestion that this should exclude them from enslavement seems based more upon the threat it posed to Réunion’s social order than upon a conviction that Indians could be legitimately ‘assimilated with *nègres*’:

a demand for freedom which establishes in principle that Indians are free and could never have been bonded in slavery, causes me a great deal of worry, as in this Colony, there are more than 12 thousand individuals of this caste, this category in which Furcy finds himself, descendant of an Indian woman.²²⁵

There is a tension between preserving a system of slavery in which all non-Europeans could be enslaved, and the contemporary racial thinking that limited this eligibility to Africans. While Desbassayns seems to have recognised the superiority of enslaved Indians, expediency made

²²⁴ANOM, col.97-684, Du commissaire ordonnateur général Desbassayns à son Excellence le Ministre de la Marine des Colonies, 21 December 1817, No.75.

²²⁵ Ibid., 29 November 1817, No.5.

him reluctant to concede that this superiority necessitated the right to freedom. He described Boucher as ‘a man entirely foreign to the colonial system of a country where a quarter of the slave population is composed of this class of man [Indians]’.²²⁶

Interestingly, Desbassayns was born in Réunion, while Boucher was ‘newly arrived’.²²⁷ Similarly Dr M. Yvan, who also condemned Indian enslavement, was a visitor to Réunion. While within the colony, the small numbers of enslaved Indians helped produce their elite status, their lesser association with slavery more broadly, beyond Réunion, contributed to their classification within racial theories as an ‘intelligent race’. Desbassayns may have recognised enslaved Indians as an enslaved elite, yet he refused to challenge their enslavement, while, as a visitor and a newcomer, Yvan and Boucher, using enslaved Indians’ ‘elite’ attributes to put racial theories into practice, were able to challenge the legality and morality of Indian enslavement. Despite losing the 1817 trial and 1818 appeal, Furcy later won his emancipation in a Paris court. Arguably, metropolitan opinions were more likely to have been aligned with those of Yvan and Boucher than Desbassayns. This is reinforced by the fact Francisque also won his freedom not in a colony, but in Paris. Peabody’s study of the 1843 trial, however, concludes that Furcy did not win due to the racial argument, as this would have seen thousands of enslaved Indians liberated. This clearly did not happen. Yet, despite Furcy’s 1843 victory being attributed to the ‘free soil principle’ in the legal record, a further, temporal, distinction must be drawn between the court hearings in Réunion and in Paris. Key laws moving France towards ending slavery were enacted between 1817 and 1834. In the 1815 treaty of Paris, France promised to abolish the slave trade within five years and two years later Louis XVIII issued a ban on the trade which was passed by the Chamber of Deputies in 1818. The Minister of Justice then removed Napoleon’s ban on interracial marriage and in 1833 ‘*libres de couleur*’

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ ADR, col.GG3 d.2506, Tableaux de Naissances, 3 February 1774. Published online.

were given the same rights as ‘Blancs’. Most significantly, an 1836 law revoked the 1716 and 1738 edicts so that enslaved people ‘touching the soil of France’ were once again freed.²²⁸ In 1843, not only was slavery as an institution potentially on its deathbed, but the more ethnically universal case for emancipating enslaved people who touched French soil had gained currency among the growing abolitionist movement and been legally recognised. It is understandable, therefore, that this was the reason cited for Furcy’s freedom in that year’s legal documents. While in 1817 and 1843 racial attitudes that differentiated Indians from Africans were present and decisive, in 1817 this was a more powerful justification for emancipation than the ‘free soil principle’ for Furcy and his lawyers, and a far more real threat for their opposition, Desbassayns and his plantation-owner supporters, who were still fighting for slavery’s survival.

Arguably, this was because the perception of Indians as an enslaved elite had been reinforced by the Enlightenment’s scientific racial theories. These theories, due to their need to justify Africans’ enslavement, and subsequent attempts to codify their inferiority in pseudo-science, had elevated the characteristics of Indians, and as such enslaved Indians, above those characteristics that they sought to attribute to the ‘natural’ condition of enslavement. Consequently, in practice Réunion’s enslaved Indians were *perceived* as tangibly different enough from what was scientifically prescribed in such theories as a ‘savage race’ that their ‘racial’ and legal classification as ‘*nègres*’ and thus as ‘slaves’ could legitimately be questioned.

The legal challenge to the enslavement of Indians also offers some clues to understanding the social dynamics surrounding ethnic identities among the enslaved population. To return to a previous point, while visitors noted the ‘civilised’ nature and ‘superiority’ of Indians, *colons* and missionaries were more likely to value those born on the

²²⁸ Frédéric Régent, *La France et ses Esclaves* (Paris, 2007), 3.

island, who were creolised, or rather ‘francified’, namely Catholic and francophone. This preference within the island is evidenced by the price of enslaved people, particularly in the early nineteenth century, with creole people reaching higher prices than newcomers.²²⁹ Interestingly, Furcy was not a newcomer, but he was ‘born a slave’ on the island in 1786 and inherited his status from his mother. His father is unknown, although Peabody speculates his father may well not have been Indian and was almost certainly enslaved. His half-sister, Constance, who was ‘born of a free father’ and ‘bought by him’, was consequently free. Evidently, although Furcy and his mother were creolised, francophone and even baptised, and although Furcy may in fact only have had one Indian parent, he retained a sense of Indian identity. In general, by 1830 most enslaved Indians were not newcomers but a long-established group, integrated into Réunion, its society and its customs and therefore, in many situations, most likely referred to as ‘creole’. Yet Desbassayn’s fears regarding the impact of Furcy’s emancipation would have had on the rest of this ‘category’ suggests Furcy was not alone in retaining a sense of an Indian identity. How this identity manifested itself throughout Réunion’s slaving history is hard to decipher. It is, however, clear that well into the nineteenth century, enslaved Indians born in Réunion, despite being creolised, also self-identified as Indian. By the turn of the century, moreover, racial theories had given this Indian identity new significance. Furcy at least was sufficiently conscious both of his origins and their potential significance regarding his status to exploit this.

²²⁹ Marrier, baron d’Unienville, *Statistique de l’Ile Maurice et ses dépendances suivie d’une notice historique sur cette colonie et d’un essai sur l’Ile de Madagascar* (Paris, 1838). The price of enslaved Indians in the nineteenth century fell in comparison with its earlier heights as their average age increased and planters moving from coffee to sugar production sought enslaved people deemed more suited to field work.

Conclusion

The advent of pseudo-scientific racial theories from the 1750s created the possibility for the elite status of enslaved Indians in Réunion to be used to support a *racialised* legal argument against their enslavement. The fact that it was a possibility, not a necessity or foregone conclusion, indicates the complexity of French colonial ideas of ‘race’ and their deployment in practice. It seems that the questioning of Indian enslavement was possible due to a small window in time, during which early racial theories threw Réunion’s slave plantation’s status-quo into ambiguity. By around 1830, just as racism was hardening into the nineteenth-century form with which it is now principally associated and questions over the legitimacy of enslavement were reaching a more universal tone and scope, this window closed.

The division of labour among enslaved people according to ethnicity and later attempts to racially classify different groups of enslaved people indicate that at the same time as processes of creolisation were taking place, ethnic identities also endured. That is not to suggest that these identities constituted a direct transfer of culture from Indian homelands to Réunion, but rather that adapted and reinvented ethnic identities, which consciously connected to an imagined as much as a real homeland, not only existed far later than has been assumed but were manipulated and called upon in everyday life. In fact, these evolved and took on new significance in Réunion’s social system according to circumstance. In the cases described in this chapter, as racial theories developed, identities as experienced and projected by enslaved people themselves took on racialised boundaries in some respects, despite the inevitable integration and assimilation necessitated by living in a creole society.

How then did the arrival of indentured labourers *en masse* from India impact upon racial perceptions of Indians in Réunion, and how did these Indians adapt to their new environment and form a culture in the face of such ideas? As will be seen, once slavery was drawing to an end and Indians gradually became the major labouring ethnic group, rather than a minority, not

only did most of them work in the fields, a task their slaving kin had been deemed less suited to, but some of the very same racial stereotypes which had once distinguished them as elite, and which Furcy's lawyer used to argue for his freedom, were used to vilify them. Race and racial theories were as malleable to changes in circumstances, and resultant evolutions in perception, as circumstances and perception were driven by racial theories. Réunion's enslaved class of Indians thus went from an intelligent race, whose eligibility for enslavement could be contested, to a criminal race unable to relinquish their 'decrepit' culture and merge into the island's creole world.²³⁰ In the face of these racial stereotypes, however, Indian indentured labourers were able to find elements of a shared culture within an existing Indian-creole identity and themselves to leave their mark on this identity. In the Antilles, however, where French slave-owners' racial divisions were along the same lines as social position and degree of assimilation, the experience of Indian indentured labourers and their identity formation was considerably different.

²³⁰ J. C. Laval, 'Les problèmes liés à la 'criminalité indienne' pendant la période de l'engagisme à la Réunion,' in AHIOI, *Relations historiques et culturelles*, vol.2, 301-16.

CHAPTER TWO

Race, slavery and revolution in the French Caribbean

French colonisers arrived in the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the 1630s. Initially, they produced cocoa and coffee, using mostly European indentured labourers, as on neighbouring English islands. Unlike Réunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe had existing Indigenous populations. They were largely excluded from enslavement after brief attempts (although many were killed as the French broke treaties and encroached on their land).²³¹ Concomitantly with indentured labourers from Europe, enslaved Africans began to be transported across the Atlantic to work on Guadeloupe and Martinique's plantations. While indenture contracts were for a limited period, enslaved Africans were bound for life. Cohen notes, however, that there was, theoretically and legally, little difference between the two groups' working conditions. Yet negative stereotypes about Africans shaped their treatment at the hands of white enslavers.²³² Although it was not clear yet that the French Antilles would source labourers predominantly from Africa, by around 1700 the islands had largely moved to sugar production, the requirements of which suited larger plantations, typically worked by enslaved Africans.²³³

Throughout the eighteenth century, the plantation economy crystallised into what is now commonly associated with slave societies. The majority of both islands' populations

²³¹ Hilary McDonald Beckles, 'Kalinafgo (Carib) Resistance to European Colonisation of the Caribbean', *Caribbean Quarterly* 38 (1992).

²³² Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 37.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

comprised of enslaved Africans—newly arrived and born in the Caribbean. Martinique had 10,343 enslaved people in 1685, compared with only 5,743 around that time in Guadeloupe. But by the start of the nineteenth century both had large, enslaved populations numbering some 90,000.²³⁴ The number of mixed-race free people called *libres du couleur* or *gens de couleur*, also grew. This group formed the focus of many of the debates around race, freedom and citizenship. The social hierarchy was more stratified along racial lines in Martinique and Guadeloupe than in Réunion, for reasons already discussed—largely the greater diversity among Réunion’s original inhabitants and the greater prevalence of interracial marriages. Yet, as Jean-Pierre Sainton emphasises, and as will be discussed, these racial groups in Guadeloupe and Martinique were neither homogenous nor necessarily unified in their interests.²³⁵

Many historians argue that the increasingly central role that race came to play in the eighteenth century reflected economic necessity: the social order supported the plantation economy.²³⁶ Yet this argument is contested. Boulle and Cohen show that race was enacted as a means of social control, going far beyond creating order.²³⁷ The barrage of legislation governing interactions between different racial groups (particularly mixed-race groups) and prescribing what these racial groups were coincided with the proliferation in the mid-eighteenth century of the works of the *philosophes*, some of which were described in the previous chapter. As in Réunion, the ways in which these works were both understood and mobilised were neither straightforward nor consistent. Differences in understanding and in economic and

²³⁴ Jean-Pierre Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation de la Caraïbe vol.2, Le temps des matrices: économie et cadres sociaux du long XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2012), 240.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 242

²³⁶ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944); Oscar and Mary F. Handlin, ‘Origins of the Southern Labor System’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, ser.3, 7 (1950); Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York, 1964); Russel Menard, ‘From Servants to Slaves: The Transformation of the Chesapeake Labor System’, *Southern Studies*, 16 (1971); Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Lucien Abenon, *La Guadeloupe de 1671 à 1759*, vol. 2 (Paris, 2022).

²³⁷ Boulle, *Race et esclavage*; Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 52-3.

political motives between and among the groups noted above—as well as between the colonies and the metropole (and those sent from the metropole to govern)—ensured this. The French revolution and the subsequent decades leading to emancipation tended to increase a suspicion of non-whites and to harden racial boundaries in the colonies.

This chapter discusses developments over the eighteenth century, focusing on the latter half and particularly the years following the French revolution in 1789. This, alongside the Haitian revolution in 1791, engendered considerable upheaval throughout the French empire, but particularly Guadeloupe and Martinique, the latter becoming the empire's most important sugar-producing island following the loss of Haiti. These were turbulent years: both Martinique and Guadeloupe were invaded by British forces and experienced rebellions by enslaved populations. Martinique remained under British control until 1802, and Guadeloupe saw a six-year period in which slavery was abolished, prompting many white planters to flee to neighbouring islands or the United States, while others were killed. Once slavery was reinstated in Guadeloupe in 1802 and Martinique returned to the French, the next half a century saw several regime changes in the metropole, each bringing new ideologies and policies in the colonies, which interacted in different ways with the realities of Antillean slave societies. This period was one during which these various regimes sought to establish the boundaries of French citizenship, a process which intersected with debates around racial identity. As Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss argues regarding Martinique, with each shift in policy different groups sought to push the boundaries and 'redefine racial, class, gender, and national identities'.²³⁸

Social and racial boundaries in eighteenth-century Guadeloupe and Martinique

²³⁸ Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia, 2009), 4.

Guadeloupe and Martinique's populations surged during the eighteenth century. In 1683, Guadeloupe's population was 8,136; by 1803, it was 115,291.²³⁹ Martinique had some 20,000 inhabitants in 1696 and 96,153 in 1804.²⁴⁰ Enslaved people made up increasing proportions, rising from 55 to 85 per cent in Guadeloupe and from 66 to 83 per cent in Martinique.²⁴¹ Throughout this period, the number of *gens de couleur* also soared.²⁴² In Martinique, from just 477 registered in 1694 their numbers reached 6,578 in 1804.²⁴³ A disproportionate percentage of this group were adult women as they had a greater chance of being manumitted, often as the mistresses of their enslavers.²⁴⁴ Birth rates, too, were high among *gens de couleur*.

These groups were far from homogenous. As in the Spanish empire, a plethora of terms distinguished mixed-race individuals based on their percentage of 'whiteness' and 'blackness', including the commonly known *mulâtre* for people with one black and one white parent and *mestif* or *mestre* for people descended from a *mulâtresse* and a white man.²⁴⁵ Such terms, which varied between French colonies, attest to the understanding of race as biological rather than merely physical. In Réunion, however, the globally diverse origins of the enslaved population meant ethnic origin was used as the main descriptor, rather than percentage of African and European blood. As such, many of these terms seldom appear in archival records, if at all. 'Gens de couleur' became the term adopted for non-white individuals who were manumitted. Although most *gens de couleur* were mixed-race, not all mixed-race individuals were *gens de*

²³⁹ Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 228.

²⁴⁰ A. Moreau de Jonnés, *Recherches statistiques sur l'esclavage colonial et sur les moyens de le supprimer* (Paris, 1842), 17.

²⁴¹ Léo Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise aux xvii^e et xviii^e siècles* (Fort-de-France and Paris, 2003), 33-4.

²⁴² Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 244.

²⁴³ Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise*, 28-9.

²⁴⁴ Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 283; Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise*, 116.

²⁴⁵ Victor Schoelcher, *Des Colonies françaises: Abolition immédiate de l'esclavage* (Basse-Terre, 1976 [1842]), 153, cited in Schloss, *Sweet Liberty*, 9, and in Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 309. Although relationships did form between white women and non-white men, these were far rarer.

couleur; some African individuals with no European lineage also won their freedom. Racial stratification, therefore, crossed the boundary between free and unfree. It was accompanied by other divisions within groups. The enslaved population was divided by role and status and by gender and ethnicity.²⁴⁶

The majority worked in the fields of coffee, indigo and—increasingly towards the end of the century—sugar plantations in rural Martinique and Guadeloupe, but the plantation also contained its own hierarchies. *Cultivateurs* (field hands) made up the overwhelming majority of the enslaved population, yet some were overseers endowed with considerable authority. This did not always align overseers more closely with plantation owners, however: overseers were often the orchestrators of rebellions and resistance.²⁴⁷ The plantation was also home to enslaved workers with particular skills (called *esclaves ouvriers* or *esclaves à talents*) and enslaved domestics. Domestics comprised a high number of women and mixed-race individuals and were typically at the top of the hierarchy because of proximity to slave-owners and greater access to material privileges.²⁴⁸ They were most likely to be manumitted. Alongside the advantages, however, came a heightened risk of abuse, including sexual violence.

As in Réunion, newly enslaved people (*'nègres nouveaux'*) were less valued. Poyen de Sainte Marie, a planter in Guadeloupe wrote of newly arrived Africans: 'We should not therefore count on their work but take care of their education until the moment that, made in the country, they can be regarded as creolised'.²⁴⁹ Although planters measured this in terms of their labour, part of this education was religious instruction. Among the existing creolised

²⁴⁶ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 59.

²⁴⁷ Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 333.

²⁴⁸ Around 5 per cent of Guadeloupe's enslaved population worked as domestics by 1800: Nicole Vanoury-Frisch, 'Les Esclaves de la Guadeloupe à la fin de l'Ancien Régime', *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe* (1985), 63-4, cited in Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 328.

²⁴⁹ J.B. Poyen de Sainte Marie, *De l'exploitation des sucreries ou Conseils d'un vieux planteur aux jeunes agriculteurs des colonies* (Paris, 1792), 26.

enslaved population religion may have held significance too. Poyen de Sainte Marie wrote that newly enslaved people who were not baptised would be ‘continually insulted by the other slaves’ and that those ‘who are already baptised treat them like a lowly dog, not wanting to eat with them nor let touch them’. Such a reaction may not have resulted singularly from the religious status of newly enslaved people, however. In the French Caribbean colonies, more so than in British ones, ethnic groups of enslaved Africans tended to be kept together.²⁵⁰ It is therefore possible that such tensions resulted from a new ethnic group arriving *en masse* in a plantation where another ethnic group was already dominant.

Historians have extensively explored the role of African ethnicity and of religious change in shaping the identities of enslaved peoples. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, a proponent of the argument for continuity of culture among enslaved Africans, explores the formation of African and Afro-Creole communities and the potential for tensions between different groups in Louisiana. Ira Berlin explores how African ethnic identities persisted and influenced social relations among enslaved populations in the American South more broadly.²⁵¹ The implications of these tensions on social dynamics, resistance, and solidarity within the enslaved population in the French Antilles, however, remain underexplored.

David Geggus shows that many of those enslaved in eighteenth-century Martinique came from the Bight of Benin.²⁵² Guadeloupe’s enslaved population, in contrast, came more from Sierra Leone and the Bight of Biafra, regions which ‘supplied far more females and children than any other’.²⁵³ Different ethnic groups were perceived as suitable for certain tasks,

²⁵⁰ Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 196.

²⁵¹ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1995); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

²⁵² David Geggus, ‘The Demographic Composition of the French Caribbean Slave Trade’, *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 13/14 (1990).

²⁵³ Women and children were five to six times as numerous in Guadeloupe as in Martinique: *ibid.*, 20. Also see: Thornton, *Africa and Africans* and Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*.

shaping the ethnic make-up of individual islands and structuring the plantation hierarchy and social system.

As urban markets expanded in the eighteenth century, a new category of enslaved individuals grew in number: enslaved day-labourers (*nègres de journée*) or rentable enslaved workers (*nègres à loyer*), clustered in Guadeloupe and Martinique's urban centres, especially the port city of Saint-Pierre of the latter. As early as 1701, a Jesuit priest visiting Martinique remarked on enslaved men who had '*en peu de temps*' grown rich working as confectioners.²⁵⁴ By 1800, day-labourers accounted for a tenth of the enslaved population.²⁵⁵ Among them were domestics, apprentices, enslaved workers with specialised skills (*à talents*), dockers and canoe-drivers. In Saint-Pierre, this group, despite their enslaved status, were paid a wage and in 1783 the sovereign council fixed the rate of pay for each task.²⁵⁶ This arrangement, which was common in many slave societies in the Americas, also holds some similarities with the South Asian lascars in Réunion, as well as *matelots* and artisans, among whom South Asians were disproportionately represented.²⁵⁷

Enslaved women in urban areas were mostly engaged in domestic chores within the walls of their master's or mistress's townhouses, but some worked as washerwomen, seamstresses or confectioners.²⁵⁸ These professions afford the enslaved a degree of freedom, at least in some part of their daily lives. 'The majority of slave *ouvriers* enjoy a de facto freedom, in the sense that, while paying a remuneration to their enslaver (the average is 20 francs per month), they work wherever they want, provide for their own food, lodging, and maintenance

²⁵⁴ 'Relation de la Martinique par un R. P. Jésuite en 1701', *Annales des Antilles* 1(1955), cited in Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 323.

²⁵⁵ Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 319.

²⁵⁶ ADM, B.14, Fol.79, Tarif concernant les negres de journée qui sera suivi dans l'île de la Martinique (25 Février 1783), Conseil Souverain.

²⁵⁷ See Philip D. Morgan, 'The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Low Country', in *Journal of Southern History*, 49 (1983).

²⁵⁸ Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 316.

at their own expense’, noted a report in 1844.²⁵⁹ ‘It is almost the same for day labourers, who, however, require greater supervision’, the report went on.²⁶⁰ These urban populations were connected with rural enslaved communities, with some of the latter selling their surplus produce in urban markets on the ‘*samedi nègre*’. Towns also hosted festivals and processions attended by enslaved people and *gens de couleurs*, despite legislation forbidding such gatherings.²⁶¹

The diversity within Guadeloupe and Martinique’s enslaved populations indicates the complexity and dynamism of these plantation societies belying their strict racial stratification. The material condition of an enslaved domestic or artisan could often exceed that of a free person of colour, and even, on rarer occasions, of a *petit blanc*. As Sainton notes, it was ‘at the same time rigid in its social and institutional norms, and plastic in its real textures’.²⁶² While a rigid social structure imposed through laws and social mores and shaped by *esclavagiste* ideology and economic imperatives enforced boundaries, social reality in all its diversity and dynamism pushed against these.

Contrary to some revisionist histories that emphasise the agency and social mobility of enslaved people, the dominance of this ideology, social mores and legal framework in the French Caribbean meant that cases evidencing mobility and material comfort were exceptional and often precarious.²⁶³ As evidence from the eighteenth century shows, each transgression,

²⁵⁹ Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies, *Exposé général des résultats du patronage des esclaves dans les colonies françaises* (Paris, 1844), 119.

²⁶⁰ For more on nineteenth-century urban slave communities see: Jacques Adélaïde-Merlande, ‘Problématique d’une histoire de l’esclavage urbain. Guadeloupe - Guyane - Martinique (vers 1815-1848),’ *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe* 65-66, 3-23.

²⁶¹ Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise*, 31.

²⁶² Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 311.

²⁶³ See: Sidney W. Mintz and Douglas Hall, ‘The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System,’ *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 57 (1960); Mary Turner, ‘Chattel Slaves into Wage Slaves: A Jamaican Case Study’, in Malcom Cross and Gad Heuman, eds., *Labour in the Caribbean: From Emancipation to Independence*, (London, 1988). Post-revisionists have also focused on enslaved people’s agency and social mobility, while often distancing themselves from revisionist arguments that overstated slave autonomy. See

especially on anything greater than an individual level, was quickly responded to with fresh legislation and greater enforcement.

The white population was equally varied. The *Békés*, a class of rich whites often of aristocratic lineage, was relatively small but in possession of the islands' largest plantations. As well as economic control, they also wielded judicial and political authority. But not all of them owned sugar plantations, and some of the largest sugar plantations were owned by those with less blue blood. Traders were another wealthy group of free whites (although as the century progressed *gens de couleur* increasingly started to join their ranks.) In rural areas, *petit blancs*, mostly descendants of indentured labourers along with other poor European migrants, often worked as small-scale planters, producing coffee and vegetable crops or rearing livestock. In urban areas, they worked as small-scale merchants, shopkeepers or dockers. As among other groups, social status and material condition were not always synonymous. A *Béké*, also called *grand blanc*, could be indebted to a trader. Their interactions with other groups, as well as with each other, varied. In towns, the wealthier whites lived together while in commercial quarters artisans, merchants and shopkeepers often lived by side-by-side with *gens de couleur*.²⁶⁴

The *gens de couleur* population was divided between those free from birth (*libres de naissance*) and *les affranchis*. *Libres de naissance* included those born of a black mother and white father—often enslaved and enslaver respectively—and declared free at birth, but also, particularly as their numbers grew, those born from two *gens de couleur* parents.²⁶⁵ *Les affranchis* were at one time enslaved but were manumitted by their enslavers or able to access legal freedom through self-purchase or military service. Other enslaved people, mixed-race and African, exercised such a degree of agency over their own lives that they became free in all but

Philip D. Morgan, 'The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Low Country', in *Journal of Southern History* 49 (1983); Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan, eds, *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London, 1991).

²⁶⁴ Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 288.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

law. While some slipped into the class of *gens de couleurs*, others were labelled *libres de savane* (many of whom were among the quasi-free urban population described above).

Even within the community of *gens de couleur*, however, exact racial make-up was identified and held great significance. While there are instances of solidarity between *gens de couleur* and enslaved people—family ties often existed between groups—some *gens de couleur* were also enslavers. The same was true of patterns of enslavement in Réunion, as noted in chapter one. Equally, there was a high level of endogamy among all groups based not just on social status but also on the conception of race. Unlike in Réunion, marriages between European men and women of African or Carib descent, even in the earlier years of colonisation, were uncommon, and unions between European women and men of either origin unheard of.²⁶⁶

As Léo Elisabeth argues, white elites had considerable power over who wed and to whom and were therefore able to shape society—or to try to, at least—according to their values.²⁶⁷ As a result, both enslaved people and free people of colour encountered many difficulties in forming families under the law due to the hurdles put in place by colonial legislation and by social mores. White elites' fervour to safeguard racial divisions—both between *gens de couleur* and enslaved Africans and between 'whites' and 'blacks'—also manifested itself even in non-marital unions.

The relationships non-white groups entered into—whether marital or not—tended, therefore, to be within their social and racial group. While birth rates among the enslaved population remained low, among *gens de couleur* they were high. Most of these children were registered as illegitimate, suggesting few marriages occurred but a large number of unions. *Libres de naissance* even tended to marry or enter relationships with other *libres de naissance* rather than with *affranchis*. Mixed-race individuals tended to partner with other mixed-race

²⁶⁶ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 50.

²⁶⁷ Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise*, 174.

individuals. According to Régent, mixed-race *gens de couleur* deliberately sought to find partners with lighter skin. In this way, some families sought over generations to redefine themselves as white. Jessica Pierre-Louis and Régent have found that in Martinique some mixed-race individuals were assimilated into the category of ‘white’ on official censuses. Their numbers were relatively small in the Antilles (381 according to Sainton), and the practice appears to have been limited to the early colonial period and to individuals who closely resembled Europeans. By comparison in Réunion this phenomenon was very common, continued much later, and was not limited to those who had European features—to such an extent that, as mentioned elsewhere, ‘blanc’ remained a descriptor of status rather than skin colour in the nineteenth century. As such, by 1848 the number of those recorded on Réunion’s official censuses as *gens de couleur* was far smaller than in Martinique and Guadeloupe, only around 11 per cent.²⁶⁸

The laws of the *Ancien Régime*

When it became clear that French Caribbean plantations would be worked mostly by enslaved Africans, Louis XIV sought to legislate on the rights of both slaveholders and enslaved people, and the on the treatment of the latter by the former. In 1685, he issued the *Code Noir*. The key tenets of the *Code*, which was based on Roman law, were equal status and treatment for all free men (not women) before the law, whether they were born free or obtained freedom. It permitted marriage between enslavers and enslaved people but only within certain parameters (the enslaved woman and her children were deemed free). It prescribed that if an enslaver bore children out of wedlock with one of his enslaved women, she and the children would be given to the crown. It also allowed marriages between free people of European and African origin.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 182; Jessica Pierre-Louis, “‘Les libres de couleur à Basse-Pointe, au Macouba et au Prêcheur’ de 1665 à 1774”, in *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe* 161-2 (2012); Frédéric Régent, *Esclavage, métissage, liberté* (Paris, 2004), 182.

Yet, by the time the *Code Noir* was issued, relationships between slave-owners and enslaved individuals had had several decades to evolve. Sovereign councils in each of these colonies were also tasked with implementing and enforcing the law.²⁶⁹ Guadeloupe's sovereign council had sought to deter mixed marriage in the 1660s. The island became the first French colony in the Americas to outlaw it in 1711.²⁷⁰ The equality afforded to free men of any origin in the *Code Noir* also overlooked discriminatory measures already in place in the colonies, including a hefty poll tax levied against *libres de couleur*.²⁷¹ Moreover, even the *Code Noir*, pertaining to uphold equality, contained contradictions. While it sought to punish slaveholders who had sexual relations with enslaved African women, it ensured, according to Roman law, that children inherited their status (free or enslaved) from their mothers not their fathers, thus guaranteeing an increasing enslaved population as well as permitting 'indiscretions' by white men.

The course of the eighteenth century saw a steady stream of legislation that governed with increasing strictness racial boundaries throughout the French empire, which included by this time Saint-Domingue (Haiti). With laws written with the French Antilles in mind, officials in Réunion and Mauritius were often left unsure of their application. As previously noted, the *Code Noir* was not applied to these islands until 1723. Legislation often represented the considerable influence the Antilles' *colons* wielded in Paris as well as in the islands. For example, colon anger about the *clause* guaranteeing that enslaved people would be manumitted upon touching French soil led to an amendment to the *Code Noir* in 1716. The amendment allowed *colons* to travel to France with their enslaved companions for the latter's religious

²⁶⁹ Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, eds., *Slavery, Freedom and the Law in the Atlantic World* (New York, 2008), 5.

²⁷⁰ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 50.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 50-55.

instruction or their apprenticeship in a profession. These measures were reinforced once again in 1738 in a *declaration du roi*.²⁷²

Many laws pertained to *libres de couleur*, reflecting both fears among white planters of their growing numbers and the rise of eighteenth-century racial ideology. *Libres de couleur* having at one time, on paper at least, been more closely associated with free white people, were referred to by a royal ordinance in 1713 instead as ‘*Nègres*’. This differs from Réunion, where the word ‘*blanc*’ referred more to status than skin colour well into the nineteenth century. In 1705, it was ruled that any *libres de couleur* who helped maroon enslaved people would be sentenced, along with their families, to re-enslavement.²⁷³ In 1711, the laws for manumission were tightened, requiring government authorisation.²⁷⁴ It seems this was based on dual a desire to maintain the enslaved workforce and to limit the number of *libres de couleur* in relation to dwindling or stagnating free white populations. In 1720, people of colour were forbidden from dressing as whites and ordered to wear ‘clothes of little value’.²⁷⁵ Six years later, *libres de couleur* were prevented from inheriting property.²⁷⁶

From around 1750 these laws accelerated. In 1764, the year after the Seven Years’ War ended and France lost its North American empire, the number of professions open to *gens de couleur* was further limited by barring them from medicine and from working as clerks of the court, notaries or bailiffs. People of African origin were forbidden to use the names of whites and from assembling for feasts, weddings or other celebrations. In 1778, mixed-race marriages were forbidden in continental France. In 1781, non-whites were prohibited from using the titles

²⁷² Boule, *Race et esclavage*, 24-5.

²⁷³ Lucien Peytraud, *L’esclavage aux Antilles francaises* (Paris, 1987), 369.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 407; Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise*, 137-42; Garbiel Debien, ‘Les affranchissement aux Antilles françaises aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles’, *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 23 (1958), 1180; Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 54.

²⁷⁵ ANOM, F3, 236, 701; ANOM, 6DPPC, 1323; also see Auguste LeBeau, *De la condition des gens de couleur libres sous l’ancien regime* (Paris, 1903), 78.

²⁷⁶ ANOM, A25, f.59.

'*Madame*' or '*Monsieur*' throughout mainland France and its colonies.²⁷⁷ Through local acts Guadeloupe in 1763 and Martinique and Saint-Domingue in 1773 also prohibited *gens de couleur* from using 'white' surnames. This was never formally decreed in Réunion, where recognised mixed-race children continued to take their fathers' surnames. In general, these rules, despite being applicable to all French colonies, including Réunion, were less stringently applied in the Indian Ocean colony, if at all.²⁷⁸

As the eighteenth century drew tumultuously to a close, race and racial division were both a legal and a social reality in France and the Antilles. This was partly due to the white elite's desire to impose order on an increasingly complicated slave society in which social boundaries were constantly transgressed, contested and blurred by the complex realities of people's lives. The increasing preoccupation with *gens de couleur* reflected their growing numbers and, in some cases, social advancement. Whites were increasingly outnumbered by enslaved people and by *gens de couleur*, who presented a double threat to the racial hierarchy. *Colons* often emphasised that *gens de couleur* maintained relationships with enslaved populations, spurring anxiety about free men and women assisting enslaved people in maroonage and rebellion. They also feared *gens de couleur*'s success and rising status because the breaking down of the distinction between 'black' and 'white' could give enslaved people the ideas that they, too, could break free of their chains. This threatened the very institution of slavery—and therefore the colonies' economic survival.

Racial thought

Keeping the slave plantation system in check, however, was not the only driving force behind the proliferation of racial legislation. 'If French officials thought a racially defined society had to be maintained to preserve slavery', Cohen writes, 'some also took the view that slavery

²⁷⁷ For all of the above see: Sainton, *Histoire et civilisation*, 353-4.

²⁷⁸ See Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté*, 69-71; Peabody, *Madeleine's Children*, 59.

should be preserved to maintain a racially separate society'.²⁷⁹ The pre-occupation with enforcing white superiority and obsession with the evils of miscegenation seem to also reflect the growing discourse emerging from Enlightenment thought.

As discussed,, the point at which race became dominant and started to evolve into what we would identify as modern racism is contested. For Cohen, it was the codification of race within the *Code Noir* that marks the beginning of the domination of racist ideas in French colonial thinking. He argues that discriminatory policies against mixed-race individuals and free men of colour in the *Code Noir* cannot simply be explained by the need to uphold the plantation system. Due to the demographic imbalance in the Caribbean, it would have been in the interest of the small white minority to ally with the growing group of free mixed-race—as happened in the Iberian colonies. This did not happen in French colonies, Cohen argues, because of a nascent racism that drew on earlier negative stereotypes Frenchmen held towards Africans.²⁸⁰

In opposition to this analysis, Boule argues that the *Code Noir* and subsequent eighteenth-century laws were concerned with maintaining control and public order. He describes the *Declaration du Roi* of 15 December 1738 which banned interracial marriage in France as not 'the beginning of a fear of miscegenation' but rather as 'a way to encourage masters to send their slaves back to the colonies'.²⁸¹ Yet, Boule deciphers a change around the middle of the eighteenth century, citing the difference between the wording of the 1738 declaration and a letter published by the Duc de Choiseul, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Navy, in 1763. The latter went a step further in ordering all enslaved people to leave France and return to the colonies, not only to avoid the depletion of the work force but to 'put an end

²⁷⁹ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 112.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸¹ Boule, *Race et esclavage*, 25.

to the disorder which they [blacks] have introduced into the Kingdom through their contact with whites, resulting in a mixed blood which increases daily'.²⁸²

By around 1750, when the laws imposing racial hierarchy proliferated, reasons given for maintaining the slave system were nearly always underpinned by fear of racial mixing. This not only concerned the 'eligibility' of Africans for enslavement, but also centred on *gens de couleur*. In 1771 the Secretary of State to the Navy wrote to Saint Domingue's administrators: 'His Majesty is determined to maintain forever the principle which must exclude people of colour and their posterity from all the advantages attached to whites... It is important not to lessen the state of humiliation attached to the black species, in any degree'.²⁸³ While the metropolitan *Code Noir* represented in some ways a more liberal view of race relations than that espoused by *colons* in the Antilles in the 1680s, by the second half of the eighteenth century it is evident that officials and writers in the metropole also began to espouse a more overtly racist ideology.

Under the *Ancien Régime* *colons* held a great deal of influence throughout the empire. Planters and their relations were part of the ruling elite, connected to members of the government or even, in some cases, themselves employed in government service. They were, therefore, able to influence metropolitan policy. The increase in racial legislation from metropolitan France was, moreover, in many ways because of rather than in spite of the rise of Enlightenment thought. As discussed, even though many *philosophes* were part of France's small abolitionist movement in the eighteenth century, their fixation on order, hierarchy and classification was used to justify racial segregation between freed people of African descent and whites as well as to legitimise the enslavement of Africans. Enlightenment thinkers like

²⁸² Cited in *ibid.*, 26.

²⁸³ *Depêche du 27 mai 1771 du secrétaire d'État à la marine aux administrateurs de Saint-Domingue*, cited in Médéric-Louis-Élie (M.L.E.) Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1958 [1797]).

Condorcet and Julien Raimond, the latter himself a *homme de couleur*, while calling for abolition, imbued their political ideologies with racialised ideas.²⁸⁴ Although in this case Condorcet's views were shaped by the perceived horrors of the Haitian Revolution.

The ideas of the Enlightenment also spilled over into the scientific community and by the late 1700s the foundations of pseudo-scientific racism were increasingly taking shape in France. Intellectuals and scientists, like Georges Cabanis, were particularly influential in developing theories about racial difference and its significance. The connection between physical differences and moral and intellectual differences was not new, yet while in earlier times physical appearance was thought to be a manifestation of the soul, Cabanis claimed to prove through science that physical differences led to moral and intellectual differences.²⁸⁵ France's scientific community also rushed toward physiology and physical anthropology earlier than elsewhere, including England.²⁸⁶ German scientist Franz Gall's works published between 1800 and 1820 were especially influential. Focusing on head shape instead of skin colour, he asserted that Africans' brains were smaller than those of Europeans, resulting in a reduced intelligence.²⁸⁷ This was a springboard for many of the dominant ideas that shaped nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific racism. In the shorter term, such ideas and scientific justifications filtered back into the political ideologies of Enlightenment thinkers and revolutionaries.

The contradictions inherent in the Enlightenment drive to classify (including its move toward ascribing significance to different racial classifications) and its call for equality for all culminated in the revolutionary period in the Antilles, especially in Guadeloupe. Here, censuses

²⁸⁴ Julien Raimond Condorcet, *Reflexions sur les veritables causes des troubles et des desastres de nos colonis, notamment sur ceux de St Domingue* (Paris, 1793).

²⁸⁵ P.J.G. Cabanis, *Rapports du physique et du moral*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1802).

²⁸⁶ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 219-20.

²⁸⁷ F.J. Gall and Johann Caspar Spurzheim, *Anatomie et physiologie du système nerveux en général*, vol.2 (Paris, 1810) and vol.3 (Paris, 1818).

for each of the three distinct racial groups, more detailed than ever before, helped maintain and reinforce racial demarcations, endowing them with growing racialised thinking at the same time that a Jacobin leadership preached equality and declared the abolition of slavery.²⁸⁸

Two Revolutions

Not one but two revolutions shook France and its remaining colonial empire at the end of the eighteenth century: that in the metropole in 1789 and the great slave uprising in Saint-Domingue in 1791. These upheavals had significant impact upon Guadeloupe and Martinique, and events in the two islands' revolutionary years served to transform racial boundaries and notions of eligibility for enslavement and for French republican citizenship.²⁸⁹

The revolutionary declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen on 26 August 1789, ending the old regime of privilege and feudalism in France, also had reverberations throughout her overseas colonies. In slave plantation islands, the words 'men are born free and equal' took a particular and profound meaning. At the meeting of the Estates General in Paris, *gens de couleur* petitioned the Revolutionary Assembly in 1789 for full citizenship. Fearful of offending planters, the Assembly rejected the petition. Planter lobbying again ensured that when the law of 28 March 1790 extended the right to vote to '*toutes les personnes*' in the colonies, *gens de couleur* were deliberately not specified, creating legal ambiguity. Evidently, the revolutionary principles of equality and liberty were intended neither for *gens de couleur* nor enslaved populations.

Nonetheless, in Saint-Domingue and nearby Martinique and Guadeloupe—and even in faraway Réunion and Mauritius—republican ideals spurred hopes (as well as expectations and eventually demands) for equality among *gens de couleur* and for freedom among the enslaved.

²⁸⁸ Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 253.

²⁸⁹ The following section is drawn from Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*.

In Martinique in June 1790, *gens de couleur*, invigorated by news of the declaration and the March 28 law, were rumoured to be plotting to claim their rights by force. White elites responded brutally, killing 200 alleged plotters. In Saint-Domingue the following year, when a *homme de couleur* named Ogé returned from Paris and led an uprising of *gens de couleur*, it was crushed with force. Only in the face of the uprising of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue did the Assembly relent and, in early 1792, grant full citizenship and political to *gens de couleur* throughout the colonies.

Enslaved people revolted on a massive scale in August 1791 in the north of Saint-Domingue, killing hundreds of whites. In response planters entered an uneasy alliance with the island's *gens de couleur*—an alliance which frequently broke down, in large part because of white racism. These ruptures led some *gens de couleur* to form new alliances with the black enslaved population, another fractious union, again, in part, because *gens de couleur* were not immune to the racist attitudes themselves. Many were slaveholders and therefore felt a greater proximity to white planters, who had after all delivered equal rights. It was also understandings of race that divided *gens de couleur*, the majority of whom were mixed-race, from the enslaved African population; some articulated that their superiority to Africans derived from their 'white blood'. The relationship between *gens de couleur* and ex-slave armies, led by different leaders, eventually culminated in a bitter war between the two sides.

In Paris, meanwhile, revolutionary forces were gaining momentum and taking an increasingly radical bent, which scared planters in the colonies. By the time military forces from metropolitan France arrived in Saint-Domingue in early 1792 to quell the revolt, not only did they encounter highly organised ex-slave armies, but a military offensive mounted by white planters who sought to establish Saint-Domingue as an independent state. Although the voices calling for the abolition of slavery in Paris had grown louder during the revolutionary period, it was the risk of losing Saint-Domingue, France's most profitable colony, that led the

republican forces, under Sonthonax, to issue a decree emancipating the island's enslaved population—a desperate measure which bought him a sizeable (African) army with which to put down the white planters.

In Martinique, on 16 September 1793 white planters rose up in a pro-monarchy counter-revolution, as they did around this time in Guadeloupe. Interestingly, in Guadeloupe they were joined by *gens de couleur* but not by *petits blancs*, who seized on the revolutionary fervour to remonstrate against the material and political inequalities they faced. Then, on 4 February 1794, the National Convention (the constituent assembly of the First Republic) abolished slavery in all of France's colonies and sent Commissaire Rochambeau to Martinique to ensure that this was carried out. Martinique's Constituent Assembly agreed to enact the law but prevented Rochambeau from disembarking. British forces blockaded Martinique and by 16 February the British occupied Saint-Pierre. On 19 February, royalist counter-revolutionary forces signed a treaty with the British. The abolition of slavery, therefore, never happened. Given the circulation of information and rumour around the islands, one can only imagine the disappointment felt by the enslaved population, especially as the British set about reinstating and reinforcing the pre-revolutionary status quo.

The British also succeeded in taking Guadeloupe but ousted from the island by French revolutionary forces, led by Victor Hugues, by the end of 1794. As in Saint-Domingue, Hugues's military success was owed largely to his decree abolishing slavery, that enabled him to amass an army of formerly enslaved men.²⁹⁰ Despite his emancipation decree, Hugues's rule of Guadeloupe and position concerning formerly enslaved people encapsulated the contradictions apparent in Enlightenment and revolutionary ideas with regard to race, equality and freedom.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ April 1793, Slave uprising in Trois Rivières; see *ibid.*, 142.

²⁹¹ See: Laurent Dubois, "'The Price of Liberty': Victor Hugues and the Administration of Freedom in Guadeloupe, 1794-1798", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999).

Known for his iron fist—at least according to reports from his monarchist planter class adversaries—Hugues’s first action was a purge of counterrevolutionaries. When the constitution was changed in Paris in 1795 granting full equality to *noirs*, however, Hugues (along with Réunion’s and Mauritius’s Governors) refused to implement it, instead proclaiming that black citizens must continue to work on plantations or join the army. As formerly enslaved people, embracing their prescribed legal freedom and citizenship, evaded being tied to plantations or forced to work without payment, Hugues responded forcefully, issuing a decree that ordered the municipality ‘to use armed forces to break up mobs and force the black citizens to return to their respective plantations in order to provide provisions’.²⁹²

In justifying why Africans should continue to work on plantations, Hugues simultaneously suggested that each citizen had a duty to the nation but that each racial group had inherent characteristics and thus intellectual and moral capabilities which dictated how they could best serve. His insistence that the only way for the formerly enslaved to fulfil their duty as citizens was to work on plantations or in the army thus drew on perceived racial characterisations of Africans. Hugues argued that Africans’ freedom was a privilege granted in exchange for their service to the new republican nation.

Hugues’s refusal to implement the new constitution seems to have stemmed from a belief that Africans were not ready to enjoy these freedoms. He also refused to extend the right to vote without paying the poll tax to *noirs* who had served in the armed forces, despite the constitution’s decree that this should be universally applied. ‘The African’s natural ferocity is strengthened by one desire, for vengeance,’ he wrote. ‘I have not believed it my duty to assemble the black people to name deputies and I never will: honour and my conscience forbid it’. This thinking was expressed when, in inviting white planters who had fled to the United

²⁹² ANOM, C7A, 47.14.

States to return, he wrote: ‘blacks have only been granted that portion of liberty that could be accorded to unfortunates who have barely surpassed the limits of instinct’.²⁹³

These contradictory attitudes typified the gradualist ideas regarding emancipation that characterised the dominant school of thought among French abolitionists. Hugues, along with figures such as Abbé Raynal, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet and Abbé Gregoire, argued that Africans were not yet ready for freedom and that removing them suddenly from servitude would be dangerous, for them and for their white neighbours: not only might they seek revenge but they lacked the education, intelligence and ‘civilisation’ to make the most of freedom and to uphold the duties that come with being a free man. (Women were rarely mentioned.) They contended that it was necessary for enslaved Africans to be kept in servitude while they were gradually educated, following the example of so-called ‘civilised’ whites. These ideas about Africans seem to have directly come from the works discussed in the previous chapter and others inspired by them, propagating negative stereotypes of people of African descent. Three commissioners sent from Guadeloupe to Paris in 1795 drew on the *philosophes* who ‘have for many years studied the behaviour and character of the blacks’,²⁹⁴ using these arguments to push for a gradualist approach to abolition—despite a full and immediate abolition having already been decreed.

Yet, this period did allow certain freedoms, social mobility and social integration to expand. With this came the growth of a self-conscious French—albeit creolised—republican identity, which was intertwined with a notion of citizenship and related rights. The army, although in many ways coercive, created a new path for social mobility. Their numbers are few, but records show cases of formerly enslaved men who became officers, including Joseph

²⁹³ ANOM, C.74, d.48, 34, Proclamation aux citoyens français des îles du vent actuellement aux états unis, 27 Brumaire, An 4, 18 November 1775.

²⁹⁴ ANOM, C7A, 48, 72-76, ‘Les envoyées des commissants au près du comité du salut public’, 22 Thermidor, An 3, 9 August 1795, cited in Dubois, ‘The Price of Liberty’, 385.

Ignace, a Guadeloupien maroon, and Louis Delgres, a former enslaved *cultivateur* from Martinique who managed to reach Guadeloupe.

Despite Hugues's measures the formerly enslaved left plantations in droves for urban areas, which had become spaces of opportunity for social mobility in the years before the revolution. Amidst the rising revolutionary turmoil, formerly enslaved individuals found new opportunities for economic and social advancement. As Laurent Dubois writes, they experienced 'rapid social change', extending 'economic rights and familial rights that they had developed and maintained during bondage'.²⁹⁵ Dubois also highlights the extensive use of legal instruments by recently emancipated individuals, suggesting that they were keenly aware of the need to have their newly extended rights documented in official records. The records reveal a sudden proliferation in marriages registered, which would guarantee lines of inheritance, along with contracts regarding ownership land and material goods.²⁹⁶ Recognising that to exist legally meant to exist on paper, formerly enslaved people not sought to guarantee their newfound freedom. The significance of official documents is also evident in the processes adopted for new arrivals from the African continent, writes Dubois, noting that they were taken by formerly enslaved individuals to municipal officers to register their French names, 'marking their social existence and rebirth as French citizens'.²⁹⁷

Citizenship, however, would not last. With Napoleon's rise came the end of France's policy of abolition. In July 1802, Napoleon wrote to the Minister of the Navy, Decrès: 'The first thing is to re-establish slavery in Guadeloupe as in Martinique'.²⁹⁸ Black soldiers had already been disbanded in 1801, giving advance warning. Under the ex-slave officer Delgres,

²⁹⁵ Dubois, 'The Price of Liberty', 391.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ ANOM, *Etat Civil, Basseterre (Births 1797)*, nos. 64, 65, 71-73, cited in Dubois, 'The Price of Liberty', 40.

²⁹⁸ BNF, *Correspondance de Napoléon 1er.... Tome VII*, p. 519. Au contre-amiral Decrès, 24 messidor an X, 13 July 1802.

disbanded black soldiers confronted forces sent from the metropole.²⁹⁹ Delgres's forces were eventually overcome by General Richepance's army, and thousands died. Notably, despite the resistance and rebellion from *gens de couleur* across the Caribbean, Richepance's forces were largely made up of *gens de couleur*. Slavery was re-established in Guadeloupe, just as in Martinique—where the emancipation decree of 1794 had never reached—and the island was returned from British to French control under the Peace of Amiens.

The post-revolutionary period, 1802-1849

In the years immediately following Napoleon's ascension, white planters, scarred by the memories of Saint-Domingue, made a concerted effort to reassert racial hierarchy. In Guadeloupe, the newly appointed Governor Richepance brutally reinstated slavery and reimposed pre-1789 laws restricting the rights of *gens de couleur*, stripping most of them of their citizenship.³⁰⁰ Nearly 2,000 *gens de couleur* were exiled, almost all of whom had fought in the army during Hugues's tenure as Governor. Further restrictions under Richepance included the 1802 introduction of a *carte de sûreté*, which inhabitants of Basse-Terre and Pointe-à-Pitre had to carry at all times, and which amounted to a proof of freedom. Large numbers lost their legal liberty and became *libres de savane*, described as belonging 'neither to the class of the free nor to that of slaves'.³⁰¹ Re-enslaved individuals were forbidden from moving from one commune to another without obtaining written permission from the slave-owner or plantation manager.³⁰²

The memories of Saint-Domingue and the continuing battles being waged there also played on the minds of Guadeloupe's enslaved population, which had, universally in law and

²⁹⁹ See: G. Lafleur, 'La Guadeloupe de 1803 à 1816: de l'Empire à la Restauration', *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe* 172 (2015).

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³⁰¹ ADG, 5J162: Recueil des documents...15 March 1815, 49-51.

³⁰² Précis pour Hypolite Defrasans, habitant propriétaire de la Guadeloupe et défenseur avoué près les tribunaux de cette colonie, Paris, 1803, 53. BNF, 8-LK12-79.

to varying degrees in reality, experienced freedom for eight years. Some continued to resist. One report noted that a battalion commander and ten of his men were attacked in the middle of the night by ‘50 armed blacks’ who set fire to their hut. According to General Ménard, there remained around 600 rebels across the islands.³⁰³ In Martinique, despite the absence of emancipation, fears as to whether the ephemeral British administration had upheld the island’s racial demarcation meant that when Louis Thomas Villaret-Joyeuse, the Captain General, re-imposed pre-1789 laws he enforced them with similar if not greater rigour than in Guadeloupe and supplemented them with additional restrictions.

Gens de couleur, seen as forming a trans-Atlantic network of revolutionary conspirators, were viewed with particular suspicion. Many policies pertained to the status, rights and liberties of this group. Administrators on both islands exercised a carrot and stick approach to contain them. Villaret-Joyeuse reorganised Martinique’s postal service, decreeing that a free person of colour be appointed as post officer in each parish—partly a reward for the loyalty of the island’s *gens de couleur* amid the revolutionary turmoil and an incentive for their continued amenability.

Yet Villaret-Joyeuse accompanied these conciliatory measure with increasing restrictions, vigorously entrenching the boundaries around the perceived markers of whiteness, such as education. As well as being historically reserved for whites, and an attribute that distinguished this group and served to buttress their claimed superiority, the education of *gens de couleur* and enslaved people was directly linked to the spread of revolutionary ideas and rebellion. One of Villaret-Joyeuse’s first actions was to close public schools for *gens de couleur* and enslaved people.³⁰⁴ Napoleon’s civil code of 1805 further limited social mobility by

³⁰³ ANOM, C7A82, Rapport au Premier Consul, Vendemiaire, An XI, October 1802.

³⁰⁴ ADM, Conseil Général (CG) C.8A, d.105, Villaret-Joyeuse au gouverne de la mare et des colonies, 29 October 1802, fol.24, and 10 November 1802, fol.26.

forbidding the white population from leaving money or valuables to *gens de couleur*.³⁰⁵ Villaret-Joyeuse also strengthened other parts of the code, arguing it was in the best interest of the colony and therefore France to further demarcate racial categories. For example, he decreed that the code's laws relating to marriage should be applied only between whites and whites, and between *gens de couleur* and *gens de couleur*. A similar decision was taken in Guadeloupe.³⁰⁶ As in Guadeloupe, Martinique's *gens de couleur* were forced to prove their freedom and came under increased surveillance amid an intensified fear of plots against whites. Villaret-Joyeuse also announced plans to expel *gens du couleur* 'miscreants' to Venezuela.³⁰⁷ Within two years this population had halved, from 12,000 in 1804 to 6,254 in 1806.³⁰⁸

Fears of violence from the enslaved majority—already a deep-set paranoia among planters—were also exacerbated after the events in Saint-Domingue.³⁰⁹ This anxiety continued to centre significantly on fears of poisoning. Villaret-Joyeuse expanded surveillance of the enslaved population and established a tribunal to try non-white people charged with poisoning. It was used by the *grand blancs* who presided over it to discourage dissent by employing extreme punishments. When in 1806 the tribunal found an enslaved woman named Emilie guilty of attempting to poison and kill her mistress, it sentenced her 'to be tied by the executor of high justice to a pyre to be set up in the most visible part of the town to be burned alive, her body reduced to ashes and thrown into the wind.'³¹⁰ The following morning she was executed.

³⁰⁵ ADM, Code la Martinique (CM) (1805-1813), no.1158, Arrêté colonial qui autorise les donations en faveur des blancs fait par des de couleur, 12 March 1806.

³⁰⁶ ADG, 5J162, Recueil des documents relatifs à la législation locale, 1790-1819. Vol. IV, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Marine.

³⁰⁷ ADM, CG, C8A, 105 (1802), fo.22, Villaret-Joyeuse au conseiller d'État Bertin, préfet colonial de la Martinique et de Sainte-Lucie, 30 October 1802; see also Schloss, *Sweet Liberty*, 23.

³⁰⁸ ANOM, C8B, 25 (1790-1808), Aperçu général de la situation de la Martinique, 1804.

³⁰⁹ Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, 2006).

³¹⁰ ADM, CM, CG, C8A, 114 (1806), fol.165, Interrogatoire de la métive Emile, accusée de tentative d'empoisonnement sur la personne de sa maîtresse Madame de La Pagerie, 7 June

In many of their endeavours, Guadeloupe and Martinique's planters were supported by Napoleon's government in metropolitan France, which had little tolerance for abolitionism nor any enthusiasm for granting *gens de couleur* the same rights as white men. Nonetheless, under Napoleon the *colons* lost to metropolitan officials a large amount of administrative and judicial power, which, alongside economic clout, they were accustomed to wielding. The brutal punishment the creole-led court doled out to Emilie prompted new legislation issued from Paris limiting the judicial power of *colons*. This erosion of power meant that when metropolitan opinion gradually started to shift towards abolitionism, Martinique and Guadeloupe's white elites would have less power to resist change.

The frenzy of paranoia around poisonings in 1820s Martinique is part of wider historical discourses around poison and resistance in the Atlantic world. Historians of the eighteenth century have written extensively about enslaved Africans' use of traditional medicine, which in numerous cases involved substances imbued with spiritual qualities, and about how different colonial societies came to understand and interpret these practices—invariably with fear, paranoia and repression.³¹¹ Other scholars have documented a rise in enslaved resistance and in the concomitant levels of anxiety on the part of the slave-owning elite during this period of emerging abolitionism.³¹² John Savage contends that the poisoning scares in Martinique during the 1820s served to justify the need to enforce 'greater plantation discipline' and to 'demarcate races'—both of which became more essential once the slave trade abolished and the institution

1806; ADM, CG C8A 112 (1806), fol.174, Copie du jugement rendu contre la métive Emilie, 9 June 1806; ANOM, Col, C8A, 112, fol.210, Correspondance, 9 June 1806.

³¹¹ Sylviane Anna Diouf, 'Devils or Sorcerers, Muslims or Studs: Manding in the Americas', in Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, eds., *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora* (London, 2003); Diana Paton, 'Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery', *William and Mary Quarterly* 69 (2012); Yvan Debbasch, 'Le Crime d'empoisonnement aux îles pendant la période esclavagiste', *Revue d'Histoire d'Outre-mer* 51 (1963).

³¹² See Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, 2009).

of slavery itself was on its deathbed.³¹³ Europe's growing abolition movement in the early nineteenth century combined with the fallout of the Haitian revolution to send waves of hope through the Caribbean's enslaved populations. Rumours of the coming end of slavery acted as a catalyst for resistance, which in Martinique culminated in the uprising of 20 May 1848, when the French government officially abolished slavery in its colonies. In the decades prior to this, however, growing resistance was met with increasing paranoia and repression from the slave-owning elite and colonial officials.

The abolition movement in Britain gained the greatest momentum, leading to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and the emancipation of enslaved people in British colonies in 1834. As news of these developments spread, enslaved Africans in the British Caribbean were emboldened to challenge their servitude; they also created a sense of insecurity and fear among enslavers in neighbouring islands. As Britain headed for abolition and the French abolitionist movement too gained momentum, many slave-owning elites and officials across the Caribbean feared that their economic and social order was under threat.

Steps towards emancipation: new legislation and abolitionism

Abolitionism experienced a resurgence in metropolitan France by the 1820s. The French slave trade was abolished in 1815, although the wars between Britain and France over the previous two decades had already stifled the trade in the Caribbean. Clandestine slave-trading, however, continued long after 1815, particularly in the Indian Ocean.³¹⁴ The restoration government, which replaced Napoleon in 1815, also censored abolitionists and promoted pro-slavery advocates and their works.³¹⁵ Yet, as abolitionism gained traction, changes to racially based

³¹³ John Savage, "'Black Magic' and White Terror: Slave Poisoning and Colonial Society in Early 19th Century Martinique', *Journal of Social History* 40 (2007).

³¹⁴ Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean*.

³¹⁵ Jean Vidalenc, 'La Traite négrière en France sous la Restauration, 1814-1830', *Actes du 91^e congrès national des sociétés savantes*, Rennes 1966, section d'histoire contemporaine (Paris, 1969).

laws did take place. Restrictions on *gens de couleur* were loosened: an 1818 decree granted free mixed-race individuals the right to leave the colonies to travel abroad or to continental France. The following year, metropolitan officials formally lifted the 1803 decree banning marriage between blacks and whites in France. In 1821, the *Société de la Morale Chrétienne* was created along with its committee against slave trafficking and slavery.³¹⁶ Importantly, the resurgence of abolitionism and calls for racial equality were not independent of but fuelled by the actions of enslaved people and *gens de couleurs* in overseas colonies—as demonstrated by the successful petitioning of the King’s envoy Guillaume Delamardelle by *gens de couleur* in Martinique.³¹⁷

Change was also spurred by high-profile trials involving *gens de couleur*, the most celebrated of which was the Bisette affair. Cyrille-Charles Auguste Bisette and two other mixed-race men were charged and sentenced to exile in 1823 for having circulated a pamphlet in Martinique that advocated equality for *gens de couleur*.³¹⁸ In Martinique and neighbouring Guadeloupe, the case roused fears that the pamphlet was part of a wider plot by *gens de couleur* to challenge the racial hierarchy. In the metropole, where Bisette sought to appeal the conviction, it prompted a flurry of newspaper articles deploring the treatment of *gens de couleur* in the colonies, spurred by the arguments of their influential barristers, Isambert, Gatine and Chauveau-Lagarde. Eventually, the case was heard by the Court of Cassation in Paris, which overturned the verdict against Bisette in 1827.

Abolitionism gathered further pace particularly under the liberalising July Monarchy from 1830, as its advocates in France were given influential roles in the new administration.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Schloss, *Sweet Liberty*, 93.

³¹⁷ ANOM, SG-M-Police, 140/1265, Rapport sur la réorganisation judiciaire, 9 January 1821.

³¹⁸ ANOM, SG-M Affaires politiques, 51/409, Copie de la lettre écrite à son excellence monsieur le gouverneur de la Martinique par les habitants commissaires commandants des paroisses de Macouba, du la Basse Pointe, et de la Grand’Anse.

³¹⁹ Seymour Drescher, ‘British Way, French Way: Opinion Building and Revolution in the Second French Slave Emancipation’, *American Historical Review* 96 (1991); Lawrence C.

Within a few months, a commission on colonial legislation had been created to consider reform. In February 1831, a royal ordinance granted complete civil liberties to all *gens de couleur*, abrogating all previous decrees that discriminated against them. In Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion, mixed-race men and women were now able to inherit from whites to practice professions previously forbidden to them, to visit mainland France and to access education. The latter point was extended under the Guizot law a few years later, which required each commune in France and its colonies to provide secular primary education (although only in 1845, under the Mackau laws, was this fully enforced in Martinique and Guadeloupe). The only thing *gens de couleur* remained legally barred from was the right to vote, although this too was technically extended to them two years later under a law abolishing ‘all restrictions or exclusions pronounced against the civil or political rights of *hommes de couleur libres*’. In 1835, the July Monarchy eroded another marker of white superiority, by giving *libres de couleur* the right to adopt last names (although it forbade them from using the last names of *grand blancs* without permission). On paper at least, there was no longer a distinction between a free white man and a free man of colour.³²⁰

New laws also made manumission easier. An 1832 royal decree removed manumission tax for those wanting to emancipate an enslaved person. When the British announced the abolition of slavery in 1834, with a four-year transition period, it seemed that slavery in French colonies was finally on its deathbed.³²¹ The new measures that proliferated certainly seemed designed to unwind centuries of legal and social restrictions—the latter determinedly held on to by the white colonial elites. Emphasis was placed on education and especially religion as

Jennings *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848*, (Cambridge, 2000), 24-47; Alyssa Goldstien Sepinwall, *The Abbé Gregoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley, 2005).

³²⁰ Records indicate in 1838 *gens de couleur* owned approximately 11 per cent of Martinique’s land and nearly one third of all urban property. See: Schloss, *Sweet Liberty*, 168.

³²¹ ADM, Bulletin Officiel de la Martinique, July 1839, ordinance, 288, 11 June 1839.

vital prerequisites for social integration of formerly enslaved people and their right to French citizenship as well as an assumed safeguard against violence and vengeance. In 1840, an increase in the colonial budget of 200,000 francs was introduced to provide Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion with more priests to proselytise enslaved populations. The number of priests thus rose from 29 to 45 in Guadeloupe, 15 to 42 in Martinique and 19 to 26 in Réunion.³²²

In 1836, arguably as a result in part of the Furcy case discussed, the French legislature authorised the liberation of all enslaved individuals before their embarkation for France and freed any enslaved person who then found himself or herself on continental French territory.³²³ Three years later, manumissions were once again extended by an ordinance that declared free any enslaved person who married or is married to a free person (with the consent of their owner), the children born to such couples before the emancipation, any enslaved person legally adopted by a free person, any enslaved person named universal guardian or executor by their owner and enslaved people who were direct family members and slaves of a freed person, children born outside of wedlock who were enslaved by and recognised by at least one of their freed parents.³²⁴ The 1845 Mackau laws, named because they were instigated by Ange de Mackau, Minister of the Navy and the Colonies, then extended access to education and religious instruction to enslaved children and legalised self-purchase and saving for self-purchase.³²⁵

This was all much to the horror of white planters, who saw these measures as an infringement of their right as French citizens to have their property (enslaved people)

³²² See J. Rennard, '1848-1949, Centenaire de la liberté', *RHCF* 35 (1948), 44-5; Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 199.

³²³ Ordinance of 29 April 1836; on Furcy, see Sue Peabody, 'Microhistory, Biography, Fiction', *Transatlantica* 2 (2012).

³²⁴ ADM, Bulletin officiel de la Martinique, July 1839, ordinance, 88, 11 June 1839.

³²⁵ See Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*, 214-28; P. Motylewski, *La Société française pour l'abolition de l'esclavage: 1834-1850* (Paris, 1998), 87-93.

safeguarded by the state. Yet, while legislation extended new rights to enslaved individuals in the 1830s, the gap in advances in this direction before the Mackau laws in 1845 represented a slowing of momentum. As such, the Mackau laws were interpreted by some as a final concession to abolitionists rather than prefiguring abolition itself.³²⁶ Neither was the situation simply one of recalcitrant white planters pitted against egalitarian metropolitan abolitionists. As in Britain, the abolitionist movement was not homogenous nor without economic motives; it was sensitive to the potential impact of abolition on the property rights of planters.³²⁷ During the 1820s and 1830s, it was loosely divided into two camps. The first, represented by Bisette and his newspaper, *Revue des colonies*, advocated for immediate emancipation. The second, represented by other leading abolitionists including Condorcet and Victor Schœlcher and publications such as *Le siècle*, called for a more gradualist approach. This argued that decades of preparation for abolition were necessary to ‘civilise’ enslaved Africans and to avoid another Saint-Domingue.³²⁸

Unlike in Britain, however, French abolitionism neither generated mass participation nor engaged in nationalist triumphalism. It was also in this period a largely atheist endeavour, connected to the science of the Enlightenment rather than to the Christian evangelicalism that spurred on the British and American movements.³²⁹ Because of the fears of Saint-Domingue and the movement’s own elitist character and lack of religious appeal, French abolitionism was more cautious in nature. During the 1830s, when abolitionists held positions of real power, part

³²⁶ Drescher, ‘British Way, French Way’, 720.

³²⁷ See: *ibid.*, for historiography of changing interpretations of French abolition, especially in comparison to British ideas.

³²⁸ In 1833, Schœlcher called for abolition over a 40 to 60 year period to allow enslaved Africans time to be ‘civilised’ but by 1840 he argued instead for an immediate abolition, having recognised that planters would never provide the necessary education and religious instruction: Victor Schœlcher, *De l’esclavage des noirs et de la législation colonial* (Paris, 1833), 84; *idem*, *Abolition de l’esclavage: Examen critique du préjugé contre la couleur des Africains et sangs-mêlés* (Paris, 1840), 156.

³²⁹ This section is drawn from Drescher, ‘British Way, French Way’, and Jennings, ‘The Revolution of 1830 and the Colonies’.

of the reason behind the movement's resurgence was a feeling that it was better to steer a controlled abolition than allow revolutionary ideas to either seep in from British colonies or be enforced in the event of further Anglo-French conflict. French abolitionists focused on the need to guarantee plantation labour and gave significant consideration to planters' arguments that abolition infringed on their property rights—they were, after all, a part of the same French elite as planters and their metropolitan allies. Many called for the amelioration of slavery rather than a total abolition.

Only after the four-year transition period of 'apprenticeship' in British colonies from 1834 to 1838 demonstrated that abolition could be achieved without violence did calls for complete abolition grow more vociferous and prominent advocates of gradualism such as Schœlcher begin arguing instead for immediate abolition. A government commission in the early 1840s composed of leading abolitionists nonetheless advocated for a delayed abolition and indemnity for planters as well as ensuring other means to preserve plantation labour, including ideas around *organisation du travail* as well as immigration.

Neither the July Monarchy nor abolitionists themselves, however, were immune to the racist ideas that had gathered pace over the previous century.³³⁰ This seeming contradiction is explained by Cohen as resulting from the fact that they were motivated less by 'the plight of Africans' than by their belief that the institution of slavery was 'profoundly at variance with the basic principles of liberalism'.³³¹ The same contradiction was apparent in British abolitionism, but in that case the abolitionist impulse derived from a hard-headed notion of the greater efficiency of wage labour, rather than the idea of liberalism.³³² In France, the calls for

³³⁰ As well as excluding women and workers from the *Société*, Cyrille Bisette, the famed abolitionist, was denied entry because he was mixed-race: Drescher, 'British Way, French Way', 715.

³³¹ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 191.

³³² See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (New York, 1999).

a gradual abolition often reflected contemporaneous ideas about race, drawing on notions of ‘uncivilised’ Africans who were unprepared for freedom. Alexis de Tocqueville expressed doubt about the possibility of free blacks and whites being able to coexist in the same society.³³³

Even Schœlcher, while arguing that blacks were not inferior because of inherent racial differences, did not refute their inferiority entirely, instead attributing it to the condition of slavery and environmental factors.³³⁴ At a time when pseudo-scientific theory had evolved to argue that racial differences were inherent and immutable, some of Schœlcher’s ideas simply echoed an earlier period in which a chain of being based on race was perceived as a reality, but one in which changing environments and exposure to civilisation made these differences changeable; Africans could eventually reach the civilisation of Europeans. Schœlcher also espoused some of the contemporary phrenological ideas on head size, intellect and race. He suggested that physical conditions (especially transporting heavy loads on their heads) and lack of intellectual exercise had impacted the size of Africans’ heads but that exposure to civilisation led to a physical change and, therefore, an intellectual improvement. Africans in the Antilles, Schœlcher asserted, had ‘a facial angle more open’ than in Africa due to their exposure to European civilisation.³³⁵

On the eve of abolition, the July Monarchy remained reluctant to consider any form of abolition that would incur heavy financial losses. Despite the rising demand for immediate abolition the delegates of the four slave colonies (Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique and Réunion) were well coordinated and had a strong lobby at the Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies. Their arguments were supported by the mass bankruptcies that started to unfold throughout the British West Indies in 1847. Against this backdrop, it is uncertain whether

³³³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve I (New York, 1899), 383.

³³⁴ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 198.

³³⁵ Victor Schœlcher, *Des Colonies françaises: Abolition immédiate de l’esclavage* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1842), 146-7, cited in Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 198.

abolition would have happened as early as 1848 were it not for yet another revolution, which that February replaced the regime of Louis Philippe with the Second Republic. The new republic granted universal male suffrage, including in the colonies, enfranchised *gens de couleur* and granted freedom and enfranchisement to former enslaved populations in one swoop.

Emancipation: continuity and conflict

The speed with which emancipation was brought about following the 1848 revolution owes a great deal to Schœlcher. As a member of the so-called *Réforme* (named for its connection to the *La Réforme* newspaper) which had taken a leading role in the republican government, Schœlcher became the chair of a new emancipation committee. He drew up an emancipation decree and was able to acquire the government's approval by April 1848. The speed of this process was partly due to the declining importance of the plantation colonies to France's economy (particularly as the continental sugar beet industry expanded) and, as Seymour Drescher argues, evidence more of an absence of public interest in the colonies rather than of popular anti-slavery sentiment.³³⁶ It was this indifference, both on the part of public and the government, that Schœlcher was able to exploit.

The extent to which rebellions of enslaved populations in the colonies contributed to abolition in 1848 is contested.³³⁷ Drescher dismisses their role, pointing out that the uprising in Martinique in May 1848 was in anticipation of the emancipation decree's implementation.³³⁸ Yet this disregards the cumulative impact of rebellions and growing consciousness and mobilisation among both enslaved people and *gens de couleur* in the preceding decades. Events in Martinique did at least shape the course and timing of abolition in the Antilles. When in May

³³⁶ Drescher, 'British Way, French Way', 731.

³³⁷ Catherine A. Reinhard stresses the role of insurrections by enslaved people in *Claims to Memory: Beyond Slavery and Emancipation in the French Caribbean* (New York, 2006).

³³⁸ *Ibid*, 731.

1848 news of the abolition decree reached the island, large numbers of enslaved workers gathered to protest for their immediate freedom. On 22 May, local authorities fired on the demonstrators, killing around 70. In response, the enslaved workers burned the homes of white families in Saint-Pierre, leading to 34 deaths.³³⁹ In the face of growing unrest and violence, the Governor abolished slavery with immediate effect rather than waiting the prescribed two months. His counterpart in Guadeloupe followed suit, fearing violent repercussions if he did not.³⁴⁰ Guyane's enslaved population were then liberated in August and Réunion's in December.

The delay in implementation in Réunion allowed for a transition period, during which there was a concerted effort to keep freed individuals on plantations. In October, Réunion's Governor, Joseph Napoleon Sebastien Sarda Garriga, issued a decree mandating that the island's soon-to-be emancipated workforce to enter work contracts (*engagements de travail*) with their former owners or other plantation employers before the actual date of emancipation. Despite clearly having similar intentions—namely maintaining a stable and controllable workforce during the transition from a slave-labour to free-labour based economy—the transition period in Réunion did not amount to a formal apprenticeship period as was instituted in British colonies. The work contracts in Réunion were usually for one year, as opposed to the four years of apprenticeship in neighbouring Mauritius. The British apprenticeship system was also explicitly coercive, mandated by law, and implemented as a legal extension of enslavement with specific obligations for both apprentices and their former enslavers. In Réunion, Sarda Garriga's contracts were framed as voluntary agreements as workers were theoretically able to

³³⁹ See: Oruno D. Lara, *La liberté assassinée: Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique et La Réunion, 1848-1856* (Paris, 2005).

³⁴⁰ Nelly Schmidt, 'Suppression de l'esclavage, système scolaire et réorganisation sociale aux Antilles: les Frères de l'Instruction Chrétienne, témoins et acteurs, instituteurs des nouveaux libres,' *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1954-) T. 31e, No. 2, La France et ses colonies, April-June 1984, 203-44.

choose their employer and renegotiate the terms of their employments.³⁴¹ ‘You have taken work contracts’ and ‘you have freely chosen your employers to whom you have rented your labour’, read the decree abolishing slavery of 20 December, signed by Sarda Garriga. Yet in reality these contracts were signed under economic and social coercion.

Despite the immediate turbulence following emancipation in the Antilles, the years that followed saw significant continuity in these colonies. This was the design of Schœlcher’s abolition decree, which drew on the British abolition decree of 1834 by ensuring indemnity for planters but no such compensation for enslaved workers. A complimentary decree in May 1848, although not including the institution of a *livret de travail* as proposed by some, nonetheless created *ateliers nationaux*. Any individual found guilty of vagabondage could be sent to an *atelier de discipline* for three to six months.³⁴² Such measures highlight the extent to which Schœlcher was focused on guaranteeing continued labour and production. Addressing commissions in Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1848 and 1849, he insisted on: ‘Work, you whom the nation admits into the rank of its sons; it is through work that you will gain the esteem of your fellow citizens from Europe’.³⁴³

Accompanying decrees further served to establish the post-slavery order. As well as universal male suffrage (to elect representatives to the National Assembly), these included rights and freedoms of association, expression and press publication, freedom of employment and universal access to primary education. Yet these decrees were ‘also potentially self-nullifying’, Nelly Schmidt argues; ‘[t]he sections proclaiming freedom all contained the legal safeguards required to monitor, regulate and finally limit this freedom’.³⁴⁴ By September 1848, gatherings and political clubs had been banned in Guadeloupe and Martinique. While the

³⁴¹ Oruno D. Lara *Abolition de L’esclavage, 1848-1852*, (Paris, 2016), 84.

³⁴² Décret complémentaire du 27 avril 1848, *Moniteur Universel*, 3 May 1848, 929. BNF.

³⁴³ Victor Schœlcher aux électeurs de Guadeloupe et de Martinique, 29 September 1848.

³⁴⁴ Nelly Schmidt, ‘Slavery and its Abolition, French colonies, Research and Transmission of Knowledge’, in *The Slave Port Project*, UNESCO, 17.

institution of slavery had ended, colonial authorities had acquired new coercive measures of control.

The widely propagated image of emancipated enslaved people deserting plantations in their droves after 1848 is overly simplistic and, in many cases, inaccurate. Guadeloupe's mountainous geography and its relative lack of development gave its newly freed citizens greater opportunity to abandon plantations and set up elsewhere as small-scale peasant farmers. Réunion's geography also facilitated escaping to the island's interior. According to Christian Schnakenbourg there were 32,000 enslaved workers on Guadeloupe's sugar plantations in 1847. After abolition 18,700 workers remained. Many returned thereafter, however; the number grew to 25,700 in 1849 and 26,500 in 1850.³⁴⁵ In contrast, the initial desertion by Réunion's workers was not followed by a gradual return: the 50,000 registered in 1848 had dropped to 18,000 by 1852.³⁴⁶ In Martinique, where most of the land was already occupied by sugar plantations, even such an initial desertion was less possible. Here, around two-thirds or 27,006 out of 40,429 enslaved workers stayed on plantations, continuing to work in sugar production.³⁴⁷ Those who remained or returned to estates sought to detach themselves from their previous state of servitude and to redefine their lives as far as possible on their own terms.

In the French Antilles, planters improvised new forms of labour contracts with freed workers. These were rarely based on wage labour, instead mimicking a *de facto* contract that had come about under slavery. In exchange for their labour, enslaved individuals received a

³⁴⁵ Christian Schnakenbourg, 'La disparition des "habitation-sucreries" en Guadeloupe (1848-1906). Recherche sur la désagrégation des structures préindustrielles de la production sucrière antillaise après l'abolition de l'esclavage', *Revue d'histoire Outre-Mers*, 276 (1987), 259.

³⁴⁶ Lara, *La liberté assassinée*, 757.

³⁴⁷ ANOM, Martinique, État des Cultures, Bruat au Ministre de la Marine et les Colonies, Fort-de-France, 9 November 1848; ANOM, Mar C.11 d.109, cited in Dale Tomich, 'Visions of Liberty: Martinique in 1848', *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 19 (1994).

portion of the proceeds from the sugar crop and were able to keep their *cabanes* and *jardins* or provision grounds. This arrangement was formalised in a *contrat d'association*.³⁴⁸

In Guadeloupe and Martinique, independent labour courts, *jurys cantonaux*, were established between 1848 and 1852 to handle disputes between planters and freed workers, though not in Réunion.³⁴⁹ The verdicts often favoured planters, stirring further unrest among freed workers and increasing their demands for wage labour.³⁵⁰ Planters claimed this was financially impossible as production rates dropped after 1848. *Colonage partiaire* eventually became the preferred arrangement: a system of tenant farmers who required to employ their own wage labourers and produce sugar cane.³⁵¹

The post-slavery period in Martinique in particular was characterised by increasingly coercive measures, including disciplinary labour gangs, *livrets de travail* and vagrancy laws. As in Guadeloupe and Réunion, these made it harder for newly freed individuals to shape the terms under which they ‘sold’ their labour to planters and sought to make it impossible for them to refuse to do so completely by abandoning plantations. Individuals who deserted plantations—more numerous in Guadeloupe and Réunion—were deemed guilty of vagabondage and many wound up in *ateliers de discipline* which functioned essentially as prisons.³⁵² There was a perception that Africans should pay a price for their freedom—that they needed to compensate the French nation with their labour for their emancipation.

³⁴⁸ ANOM, Mar C.56 d.464. Also see: Tomich, ‘Visions of Liberty’, 166 and 170.

³⁴⁹ See Ulrike Schmieder, ‘Histories under Construction: Slavery, Emancipation, and Post-Emancipation in the French Caribbean’, *Fernand Braudel Center Review* 31 (2008), 232.

³⁵⁰ ANOM, FG, SG Papiers Perrinon; Commission du régime de, travail, Police de travail. ANOM, FM, SG: Amérique C.8, Répression d'émeutes de 1848 à la Martinique. See also Myriam Cottias, ‘Droit, justice et dépendance dans les Antilles françaises (1848-1852)’, *Annales* 59e année, no. 3 (2004).

³⁵¹ Emile Thomas, the organiser of the *ateliers nationaux* in Paris who was sent to Martinique to observe labour conditions, reported that planters were in financial ruin. ANOM, Mar C.11 d.109, Emile Thomas au Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, Fort-de-France, 9 November 1848.

³⁵² Nelly Schmidt, ‘Victor Schœlcher et le processus de destruction du système esclavagiste aux Caraïbes au XIXe siècle’, PhD, (Paris IV 1991), 925.

Organisation du travail

Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's *coup d'état* in December 1851 brought yet another regime changes in Paris and new colonial policy in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion. Measures to coerce labour were ramped up considerably: a decree of 13 February 1852 abolished *jurys cantonaux* and strengthened the *livret de travail* regime, ordering that any individual without a labour contract of a year or more needed to obtain a *livret* from the mayor, to be carried at all times, in which their personal information along with previous and current labour contracts were to be recorded.³⁵³ Anyone not carrying a correct *livret* would be charged with vagabondage and faced a fine or prison sentence of to two years. Freed individuals with tax debts were required to work off their debts in *ateliers de discipline* or on plantations.³⁵⁴ A new head tax was introduced which specifically targeting freed individuals who had left rural plantations and taken up professions in towns.

While the *regime de livret* was also instituted in mainland France, Martinique's Governor Gueydon in Martinique took it further by establishing the '*passeport à l'interieur*' (much to the chagrin of Schœlcher). Any individual over the age of 16 caught without one was subject to a fine. The *passeport* itself had to be paid for and the penalty for non-payment was labour.³⁵⁵ These laws were supplemented in Guadeloupe in 1857 with further attempts to constrain the movement of the once-enslaved population and bind them to plantation labour. News laws were supplemented with old methods of control and coercion. *Marronage* lists published in the islands' newspapers and official gazettes were replaced by remarkably similar

³⁵³ Arrêtés des 17 mai et 23 octobre 1852; Arrêtés des 20 mai et 25 octobre 1862. Also see: ADM, Bulletin Officiel de la Martinique, 1852, 353-59; ADG, Bulletin Officiel de la Guadeloupe, 1852; ADR, Bulletin Officiel de la Reunion, 1852.

³⁵⁴ Rosamunde Renard, 'Labour Relations in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1848-1870', and 'Immigration and Indentureship in the French West Indies, 1848-1870', in Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds, *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present* (Kingston, 1993).

³⁵⁵ See Anne Girollet. *Victor Schœlcher, abolitionniste et républicain: approche juridique et politique de l'oeuvre d'un fondateur de la République* (Paris, 2000), 266.

vagabondage lists. Such measures cumulatively forced many freed individuals in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion back onto plantations.³⁵⁶

Conclusion

If the eighteenth century saw the progressive implementation of legislation aimed at reinforcing and ordering the racial hierarchy in the French Caribbean, the first half of the nineteenth century saw the progressive erosion of at least the legal distinction between free whites and free people of colour. The question of French citizenship, and identity, and the role of race within this, was one thrown into flux by two revolutions. These issues were contested not only by powerful white men in France and the colonies but by free and enslaved men and women of African origin on both sides of the Atlantic. Both free and unfree demonstrated a growing consciousness of their claim for citizenship, and later their rights as citizens, in French imperial society in general and their island's creole society more particularly. On the eve of emancipation in 1848, what it meant to be French had changed: old regime markers of Frenchness, including education and religion, were deliberately extended to non-white men and woman, as were new identifiers of French citizenship.

None of this took place because racist ideas withered away from colonial or metropolitan thinking. Rather, these ideas mutated. Alongside the stories of metropolitan officials versus *colons* and shifting political ideologies and policies is another of a steadily advancing scientific racism. Having at one time contributed to French understanding of who was eligible for enslavement and freedom, racial ideology after the abolition of slavery now endowed with scientific legitimacy, took on, if anything, a greater role. In the absence of slavery as an institution, race—and racism—were increasingly used to structure colonial

³⁵⁶ For deeper discussion of the impact in the Antilles see J. Adélaïde-Meriande, *Historial antillais*, vol. IV (Paris, 1980), 125-140. For Réunion, see Sudel Fuma, *Esclaves et citoyens, le destin de 62,000 Réunionnais: histoire de l'insertion des affranchis de 1848 dans la société réunionnaise* (Saint-Denis, 1980).

societies and their labour. The coercive laws and religious sermons that sought to keep newly freed individuals toiling in plantations were accompanied by a flourishing of racialised rhetoric that defined the perceived inherent laziness of people of African origin.

By the mid-nineteenth century, environmentalism as an explanation for perceived racial inferiority had given way to the idea that biology was the determinant factor. This put paid to the idea that in the right environment so-called ‘inferior races’ would advance up Buffon’s ‘chain of being’; as a newfound biological reality, this inferiority was unchangeable. While undermining one of the strongest arguments in favour of slavery—the need to civilise Africans over time, under European influence—this shift shaped colonial thinking and policies by creating a more immovable hierarchy of citizens based on race. This ideological shift was advanced by technological and material advance in Europe, which widened the perceived gap between the condition of white Europeans and black Africans (and other non-white ‘races’). In line with such a shift in thinking, the earlier battle between monogenism and polygenism was clearly won by the latter and served to underscore a claimed scientific justification for racial segregation.³⁵⁷

When indentured labourers from South Asia began to arrive in the French Caribbean in the mid-nineteenth century, they entered this world of seeming contradiction: one in which men and women of African descent had just been made French citizens but were subjected to increasingly coercive measures and racist rhetoric which sought to structure societies based on race. In this context, the newly codified lines around what it meant to be French, to be a citizen, to belong, which had been long fought for by the non-white creole population, took on great significance. From this population emerged a black political elite, who, like white elites, had a strong consciousness of their rights as French citizens and understanding of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ based on racial and social identifiers including language and religion. A new racial

³⁵⁷ Cohen, *The French Encounter*, 234.

group, with different mores and religious practices, could not easily be countenanced as insiders: they were often perceived as outsiders *and* the allies of the white elites that had spent much of the last century oppressing the majority. Yet the newcomers were also subject to the racist ideas of the planter class and colonial administrators, who were determined to maintain their control over society and labour in the Antillean colonies.

CHAPTER THREE

Mapping indenture: roots, regulations and recruitment

The role that Indians came to play in the societies of the French plantation colonies was shaped by the factors that determined their arrival on each island. This chapter explores the debates that led to Indian immigration, which offer insights into the economic imperatives of the islands' planters and administrations as well as their understanding of race and the islands' racial dynamics. It also explores the legislation and regulations that steered indentured migration from India, which came about largely because of balancing priorities between metropolitan and colonial needs and between these and British demands and expectations. That the recruitment of Indian workers was carried out almost entirely in British-ruled territory, with only small pockets under French control, also served to determine the regions and communities from which recruits were drawn. So too, did other economic, cultural and social factors. Finally, despite the recourse to tricks and deceit on the part of labour recruiters that has been widely documented (although more so in relation to recruits for British-ruled islands), the perceptions of Indians themselves about indentured labour further contributed to shaping the societies of the various islands to which they migrated.³⁵⁸ While the dislike felt by Réunion's planters for Bengalis certainly limited recruitment from that region, for example, information and rumours about French colonies in the Americas in several districts of India similarly reduced recruits' willingness to migrate there, even when they were wanted. The purpose of this chapter is not to go over well-trodden debates about whether push or pull factors were

³⁵⁸ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*.

more significant in motivating indentured labour migration from India.³⁵⁹ Rather, it is to lay the foundations for understanding both how Indian indentured labourers were received in the French islands and the nature of their cultural impact in these colonies.

The existing literature on the recruitment of Indians and their transportation to European colonies has overwhelmingly focused on recruitment for British colonies, especially English-language literature. This has recently been challenged by Reshaad Durgahee's notion of the 'indentured archipelago', which highlights the interconnectedness of various colonial experiences.³⁶⁰ This perspective is essential for understanding how the recruitment of Indian labourers in French colonies like Réunion and Guadeloupe was not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a larger global network shaped by inter-imperial dynamics and the spatial realities of colonialism. This chapter draws on Durgahee's work and seeks to expand the existing scholarship by situating the indenture system within a French colonial context, demonstrating how the debates around labour recruitment, regulations, racial ideologies, and perceptions of Indians of different origins differed from the more frequently studied British context. Building on Durgahee's reframing of indenture in terms of colonial space, it seeks to shed light on temporal and geographic continuities and evolutions, drawing links between French colonial understandings of Indians between India and French colonies and between the period of slavery and indenture. It also analyses debates around labour recruitment as a starting point for understanding the French notion of assimilation and how this functioned in the colonies.

Céline Flory has examined the racialised distinctions between different groups in terms of the fluidity of colonial understandings of freedom. Indian indentured labourers and African recaptives were both referred to as 'migrants' despite the latter having been forcibly brought to the colonies through the '*rachat*' system, which involved purchasing captives to impose ten-

³⁵⁹ For a summary of these debates see Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (New Delhi, 2017).

³⁶⁰ Durgahee, *The Indentured Archipelago*.

year indenture contracts upon them, she writes, arguing that ‘the concept of freedom produced by French imperial and colonial power was plastic in its content, depending on the population to which it is applied.’³⁶¹ This chapter develops this by considering the interplay between these racialised distinctions and colonial assimilationist and civilising ideology.

While scholarship on Indian indentured labourers in British colonies has unearthed the voices of migrants themselves, this has been notably absent from studies on French colonies. This chapter, however, analyses the letters of one Mandalamodély, offering rare insights into the experience of Indians recruited for French colonies.

Debates on where to source labour

Following abolition in 1848, planters and colonial administrations in the Antilles debated how to replace the enslaved labour force, many of whom resisted attempts to keep them on plantations. Planters felt that the solution to fleeing *affranchis* and the demands for higher wages created by a free labour market was to introduce competition.³⁶² Guadeloupe’s Director of the Interior subsequently summarised planters’ motivations in 1854:

1) The planter having constantly at his disposal a sufficient number of labourers will be able to do all his work in good time; 2) The native cultivator, feeling that he is no longer the master of the market, will no longer be able to reduce the intensity of his work with impunity while continuing to receive his daily wage; 3) Finally, the owner no longer being exposed to a lack of labourers, capital will come to his aid and increase the productive power of each worker.³⁶³

³⁶¹ Céline Flory, *De l’esclavage à la liberté force: histoire des travailleurs africains engagés dans la Caraïbe française au XIXe siècle*, (Paris, 2015), 7.

³⁶² ADM, O. Duquesnay, Procès-verbaux imprimés du conseil général de la Martinique, session ordinaire de 1884, 178.

³⁶³ ADG, 5K, 56, fol.116, Rapport du directeur de l’Intérieur au conseil privé, 4 August 1854.

The focus quickly shifted from whether to recruit foreign migrants to where they could best be sourced.

As early as 1840, Martinique and Guadeloupe's administrations along with central authorities in Paris, in anticipation of abolition, made tentative plans to bring European labourers to the Antilles. They hoped that European workers would bring with them 'improved methods of farming that they will easily propagate among blacks'.³⁶⁴ French authorities also hoped that European workers would impart to formerly enslaved people 'habits of order, morality and assiduity at work'.³⁶⁵ Some historians argue they further sought to increase the ratio of Europeans to Africans, fearing the latter's numerical preponderance after abolition.³⁶⁶

Some 1,200 European immigrants (mostly French and German) were therefore brought to Martinique and Guadeloupe between 1848 and 1852, when stricter legislation governing was introduced. For a few years after 1852, Europeans workers continued to arrive under this new legislation, but in much smaller numbers.³⁶⁷ Following abolition, a small number of the thousands of Madeirans who had been brought to British colonies during the 1840s were recruited for nearby French islands. After 1852, an additional 488 workers were recruited directly from Madeira for Martinique and Guadeloupe. In 1848, when around 150 workers, of which 80 were Madeirans, were brought from neighbouring English islands to Guadeloupe, it was noted that Madeirans 'distinguish themselves by their zeal, their diligence and the gentleness of their character'. In contrast, workers of British or Portuguese origin coming from

³⁶⁴ Rapport d'Auguste Boutan daté du 12 octobre 1847 et adressé au ministre de la Marine et des colonies, cited in A.P. Blérald, *Histoire économique de la Guadeloupe et de la Martinique* (Paris, 1986), 106.

³⁶⁵ ANOM, Gua., C.260, d.1567, Gouverneur Fiéron à la ministère de la Marine et les colonies, 26 August 1849.

³⁶⁶ B. David, *Les origines de la population martiniquaise au fil des ans (1635-1902)* (Paris, 1973); Blérald, *Histoire économique*, 193.

³⁶⁷ ANOM, Géné., C.129, d.1119, Rapport de la direction des colonies, 3 September 1853.

the neighbouring islands ‘were generally weak as a result of deprivation or illness’.³⁶⁸ But European and Madeiran labourers adapted badly to the tropical climate—mortality and morbidity rates were high—and planters found them expensive, especially the Europeans.³⁶⁹ As early as 1848, the effort to replace enslaved labour with European immigration was observed to be a failure.³⁷⁰ Expeditions to Madeira to find fresh recruits, the last of which was in 1856, also ended in failure as the island, which had previously been in economic turmoil, had made a recovery by then.³⁷¹

Chinese migrant workers, like Madeirans, were first recruited for British Caribbean islands, along with Cuba and Peru, before moving on to the French Caribbean.³⁷² They were, however, recruited directly to Réunion. The suspension of Indian migration to Réunion in 1839, together with the lack of agreement between administrations in French India and Réunion on how to restart it, served to push Réunion towards Chinese immigration, which was not subjected to the same restrictions and guarantees for migrants. In 1844, Chinese recruits from the Straits Settlements, later Malaya, were brought to the island after the *Conseil Colonial* signed an accord with Governor Bazoche for 1,000 workers.³⁷³ A number of the 458 Chinese recruits brought to Réunion between 1844 and 1846 laboured on public works projects. Of the 69 Chinese men who arrived from Singapore on *La Sarcelle* on 5 July 1844,³⁷⁴ 59 were sent to the *Atelier Colonial* from where some were ‘assigned to the work on the rivière des Marsouins’,

³⁶⁸ ANOM, Fonds ministériels, Serie Géographie, Gua. 151, d.156, Rapport du directeur de l’intérieur au gouverneur de la Guadeloupe (transmis au ministre de la Marine par letter du 13 mars 1849).

³⁶⁹ ANOM, Mar C.131 d.155. Immigration Indienne et autres.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ ANOM, Géné., C.124 d.1087, Deux lettres de l’ambassadeur de France à Lisbonne au MAE, transmises par celui-ci à la ministère de la Marine et les colonies, 8 and 23 December 1856.

³⁷² For a more complete analysis see J. L. Cardin, *Martinique “Chine-Chine”, L’immigration chinoise a à la Martinique* (Paris, 1990).

³⁷³ ANOM, Reu, C.43, C 45, 17, Arrêté de 10 Novembre 1843.

³⁷⁴ ANOM, Reu, C.432 d.4601, Correspondance, 1844.

and the rest ‘to the works for the protection of la rivière Saint-Denis’.³⁷⁵ Only ten went to labour on the plantation of Monsieur Perrichon in Salazie.

In July 1846, recruitment of indentured Chinese labourers was stopped.³⁷⁶ During the previous two years, the Chinese lodged endless complaints about their treatment at the hands of Réunion’s planters.³⁷⁷ In turn, the planters, who initially lauded the intelligence of Chinese workers, soon came to see this intelligence as rendering them ‘cunning’ and prone to criminality.³⁷⁸ Some sources also noted opium addiction as prevalent among Chinese workers with an 1844 newspaper praising ‘the higher authority’ ‘for the care it takes in preventing the excesses the Chinese might be inclined to, by prohibiting pharmacists from supplying them with opium, for which they have such an appetite.’³⁷⁹ After the suspension of official migration, smaller numbers of Chinese workers continued to arrive in Réunion in the 1850s, mostly via Mauritius.³⁸⁰ Formal migration would begin again half a century later, in 1901, when 808 Chinese men (and this time some women), set sail from Fuzhou. Again, however, this attempt ended in failure.

Despite the apparent lack of success in Réunion in the 1840s, during the 1850s, the Minister of the Interior in Paris advocated for Chinese immigration to the Antilles. After initial

³⁷⁵ ANOM, Reu, C.432 d.4603, Immigration chinoise, Atelier Colonial, 1844.

³⁷⁶ ANOM, Reu, C.432 d.4604, Recrutement de main-d’œuvre, 1846.

³⁷⁷ ADR, 168, M, 2, 12, M, Immigration, 2 July 1846.

³⁷⁸ ADR, 166 M 1, Lettre de Gabriel de Kveguen au directeur de l’intérieur, 16 February 1848.

³⁷⁹ ANOM, Reu, C.515, d.6007, *Le Hebdomadaire de l’Île Bourbon*, 16 October 1844. For more on opium and indenture see: J. Banks, ‘“Sterile Citizens” & “Excellent Disbursers”: Opium and the Representations of Indentured Migrant Consumption in British Guiana and Trinidad’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 45 (2) (2023), 325–341.

³⁸⁰ After 1862, when Réunion issued a decree allowing foreigners to immigrate freely to Réunion, a number of Chinese people came, particularly from Guangzhou. The French also imported Vietnamese prisoners. See Lorraine M Paterson, ‘Prisoners from Indochina in the Nineteenth-Century French Colonial World’, in *Exile in Colonial Asia: Kings, Convicts, Commemoration*, ed. Ronit Ricci, Anand A. Yang and Kieko Matteson, (Honolulu, 2016) 220–247 and Daniel Varga, ‘Un engagisme vietnamien à La Réunion. *Revue historique de l’océan Indien*, (3) (2007), 48–62.

hesitation, planters seemed to express their support.³⁸¹ In 1859 and 1860 three ships brought 1,200 Chinese migrants to Guadeloupe and Martinique. The exercise failed, however, particularly in Guadeloupe, where the administration struggled to convince planters to take on the newly arrived Chinese workers. Eventually, the administration was forced to send 223 of the 428 Chinese migrants who arrived on *l'Indien* in 1859 to Martinique, where they were slightly better received. The reluctance of Guadeloupean planters was, it seems, in part based on a belief that the Chinese workers were 'of an origin known for its violence and the difficulties that can arise in their conduct at work'.³⁸² Rumours from Trinidad about rebellions seem to have driven these perceptions. M. Hayot, who led a commission on immigration for Martinique in 1853, wrote that the Chinese workers in Trinidad 'are temperamental, unruly, savage (quick to revolt). They caused a lot of embarrassment in Trinidad'.³⁸³

This belief seems to quickly have been altered once Chinese labourers were set to work. Guadeloupe's Immigration Commissioner wrote to the Director of the Interior in 1860: 'These men are easy to lead and have so far committed no act that could justify the reputation of insubordination and wickedness which had been given to them before their arrival in the colony'.³⁸⁴ The costs of hiring Chinese labourers, however, were too high for most planters in both colonies. They also adapted badly to the heat and to field work; mortality rates were high. Planters, more in Guadeloupe than in Martinique, found that they were less productive than Africans and Indians. 'They are very mediocre workers who are worth less than Indians and

³⁸¹ ADG, Procès-verbaux imprimés du Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, session ordinaire de 1857, 155.

³⁸² ANOM, Gua C.66 d.492, "Convoi de l'Indien", Bontemps à la ministère de la Marine et les colonies, 12 August 1859.

³⁸³ Journal Officiel de la Martinique (J.O.M), 16 June 1853.

³⁸⁴ ADG, Tribunal correctionnel de Pointe-à-Pitre, C.6979 to 6993.

Africans’, the immigration commissioner wrote to the Director of the Interior in 1862.³⁸⁵ Both the administrations in the Antilles and the ministry in Paris gave up on Chinese immigration.

The possibility of African indentured migration prompted a much hotter debate, with members of the planter class and colonial administration both fervently for and against. The idea originated with the British, who, after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, began transporting African labourers to their Caribbean colonies.³⁸⁶ Many of these individuals were ‘recaptives,’ or liberated Africans who had been freed by the Royal Navy from intercepted illegal slave ships. While termed ‘free’, the extent to which these African recruits had agency over their emigration to European colonies remains contested, both by historians and contemporary observers.³⁸⁷ Inspired, nonetheless, after slavery had drawn to a close in French colonies, the French Ministry of the Navy, whose arsenal itself played little or no role in suppressing illegal slave-trading, came up with the idea of ‘*rachat préalable*’,³⁸⁸ by which French recruiters purchased not the captives but ‘re-purchased’ their freedom. The difference, in practice, was marginal. Some officials in the colonial and metropolitan administrations were opposed to African immigration on the grounds that any recruitment in Africa resembled too much the slave trade.³⁸⁹ However, the arguments both for and against rested more on ideas about race.

³⁸⁵ ANOM, Gua C.180 d.1116, Commissaire à l’immigration à directeur de l’intérieur, 24 February 1862.

³⁸⁶ Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy, (eds.), *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1896* (Rochester, 2000).

³⁸⁷ Shantel George, ‘Religion, Identity Formation, and Memory among Liberated Africans and their Descendants in Grenada, 1836–2015’, PhD thesis, (SOAS, University of London, 2017).

³⁸⁸ Jacques Weber, *Les établissements français en Inde au XIXe siècle, 1816-1914*, vol.2 (Paris, 1995), 1067.

³⁸⁹ *Abolition de l’esclavage. Procès-verbaux, rapports et projets de décrets de la Commission instituée pour préparer l’acte d’abolition immédiate de l’esclavage*, (Paris, 1848), 233-56 (débat) and 345-47 (rapport au ministre).

These arguments represented a continuation of those that had developed in Europe over the early modern era to justify the enslavement of Africans and which from the mid-eighteenth century, as discussed, had drawn from (and in turn supported) emerging theories of racial science. This meant that the same stereotypes of the ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilised’ African abounded and could readily be called upon to argue why putting Africans to work could be justified in moral terms. Dr Formel, aboard the *Marie-Laure*, wrote that ‘the *nègre* from the coast of Africa, generally tall and strongly muscular, accustomed since childhood to easily endure the highest temperatures’ made him ‘fundamentally fit for the cultivation of land’. He also described the African, however, as lazy, unintelligent and ‘without initiative’, which required him to be ‘stimulated [into work] by the constant presence of the master’.³⁹⁰ Conversely, journalist and anti-slavery commentator Augustin Cochin wrote from Paris that the African was ‘more submissive than the Indian, more moral than the Chinese’.³⁹¹ In 1848, Guadeloupe’s Governor, Jacques-Amédée-Philippe Fiéron, described African labourers, who had been introduced from neighbouring English island as ‘bad subjects’ with ‘inveterate habits of laziness’.³⁹²

The strongest arguments in favour of African immigration centred on the idea that workers would be readily assimilated into the existing ex-slave population. Cochin added that the African was ‘more open to religious influences than either the Indian or Chinese, more easily established and mixed within the population’.³⁹³ Ideas purporting assimilation were clearly based on the shared geographic and ethnic origins of African migrants and the existing

³⁹⁰ ANOM, FM, Mar C.131 d.1198, Immigration indienne, Marie-Laure, navire francais, partie de l’Inde le 25 août 1879.

³⁹¹ Augustin Cochin, *L’Abolition d’esclavage* (Paris, 1979 [1861]), 249.

³⁹² ANOM, Gua C.131 d.155, letter du le Gouverneur de la Guadeloupe au ministre de la marine et des colonies, 10 November 1848.

³⁹³ Cochin, *L’abolition*, 249.

formerly enslaved population, but also on the notion that Africans could easily be Christianised:

The African is truly the man of the future. He is a savage, it is true, who has not the slightest notion of work and of civilisation, but this savage, once trained, once admitted into the bosom of the church, settles definitively in the country, he assimilates and immediately integrates into our population, accepting without reservation a homeland where he appreciates the benefits of a new existence. With the African, we consolidate the legacy of our planters... Africans assimilate fully and easily into the population, and they will probably no longer think of ... the African coast.³⁹⁴

Africans were not viewed as a temporary, foreign work force but as men and women brought to settle in the islands who could live alongside the existing African population.

It was, however, this same presumed ability of Africans to assimilate into creole society that worried others. These voices feared the possibility of a 'black coalition' if African migrants and newly emancipated enslaved people joined forces. This was especially worrying as blacks already far outnumbered whites, who could no longer use terror and violence to enforce control. In 1851, in his report presented in front of Guadeloupe's *Conseil Privé*, the Director of the Interior raised the issue of 'the extent to which it would be appropriate to increase the numerical strength of the black population, already proportionately so considerable, in countries in which the political constitution already exposes them to agitations which can so easily lead to disorder'.³⁹⁵ When it was finally decided to recruit Africans *en masse*, Martinique's administration instructed that, as in the era of slavery, '*les bons sujets*' should keep a watchful

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ ADG, 5K 46, fol.105, Rapport du directeur de l'Intérieur Eggimann, 10 October 1851.

eye on the new immigrants ‘to prevent them from being absorbed’ by their fellow Africans and suggested they should receive particular attention from the clergy.³⁹⁶

Réunion was the first French island to be involved in the *rachat préalable* of Africans. In 1842, the island’s Governor charged Le Mauff de Kerdudal, a ship captain, with investigating the possibility of bringing labourers from the coast and islands off East Africa, especially ‘Quiloa’ (Kilwa, on the southern coast of present-day Tanzania). The region, falling within the domain of the Sultan of Oman, was the original source of many enslaved men and women in Réunion—an apparent draw for Réunion’s Governor and planters. In April 1843, an agreement was signed between Le Mauff de Kerdudal and Omani officials permitting the purchase of enslaved people from Arab landowners on the East African coast on condition that they become indentured labourers on arrival on the French island.³⁹⁷ The following year, however, the Minister of the Navy and the Colonies issued a decree condemning the *rachat préalable* of enslaved people from Africa.³⁹⁸ Any ambiguities were quashed in 1845, when France signed a ten-year convention with Britain regarding the suppression of the slave trade from the coast of Africa. This explicitly removed France’s right to recruit captured Africans for its colonies, permitting only the recruitment of those born free or having been free for a certain number of years. It effectively brought the first attempt at African indentured labour to an end.

The abolition of slavery that accompanied the advent of the Second Republic in Paris in 1848, however, meant adherence to the convention became more a question of diplomatic

³⁹⁶ J.O.M, 7 January 1855.

³⁹⁷ ANOM, FM, SG, REU, C.51 5d.320 and d.600, Le Mauff de Kerdudal to Bazoche, Governor of Bourbon, St. Denis, 10 January 1843; Bazoche à la ministre de la Marine et les colonies, St Denis, 25 January 1843 and 19 October 1843; see also ANOM, FM Gen, c.126 d.1096, Notes sur l’immigration africaine dans les colonies anglaises et françaises par le directeur des colonies, Paris, 9 January 1850.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. See also Weber, *Les établissements français*. 960.

rhetoric than reality. Réunion was essentially given carte blanche to carry on recruiting captive Africans, spurred on by the demands of planters who were anxious to avoid the island's economic ruin. The ship captains who served their purposes headed for Africa's east coast, tapping existing routes for clandestine slave trading. People from Mozambique, Zanzibar and the states under the influence of the Sultan of Oman were captured in their villages often by Arab chiefs and brought to French traders on the coast.³⁹⁹ They were brought not just directly to Réunion but often via Madagascar and Mayotte in the Comoros Islands, which had been occupied by the French in 1841.⁴⁰⁰ Malagasies and Comorians also made up the contingents of African indentured labourers that disembarked in Réunion. In total, these east Africans numbered almost 34,000 between 1848 and 1859, after which the migration subsided.⁴⁰¹

In 1856, Napoleon III formally sanctioned the *rachat préalable* of enslaved individuals from all the coasts of Africa. The convention with Britain had ended the previous year and Napoleon was facing increasing pressure from planters in both Réunion and the Antilles. A treaty was then signed in March 1857 with a shipowner named Victor Régis, authorising him to bring 5,000 African labourers to Guadeloupe and 7,500 to Martinique, through the *rachat préalable*.⁴⁰² Targeting captives, Régis was to conclude their emancipation and indenture contracts simultaneously. He tried first at Ouidah, in the West African kingdom of Dahomey, where he was well-established, and which was a large centre of slave-trading in the region. His efforts were thwarted when the kingdom came under pressure from the British to put a stop to

³⁹⁹ Archives de l'Evêché, île de La Réunion, Saint-Denis, 21 October 1858; Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères, Archives rapatriées de Lisbonne, série A, C37, Lettre de Sa Da Bandeira adressée au gouverneur de La Réunion, 5 May 1857.

⁴⁰⁰ F. Renault, *Libération d'esclaves et nouvelles servitudes. Les rachats de captifs africains pour le compte des colonies françaises après l'abolition de l'esclavage*, (Abidjan, 1976), 42.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰² ADG, *Rapport de la commission de l'immigration*, procès-verbaux imprimés du Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, session ordinaire de 1858, 261; Renault, *Libération d'esclaves*, 48. Also see: Flory, *De l'esclavage à la liberté force*.

the clandestine trade; perhaps more importantly, he had been authorised to pay only 200F for the freedom of an African captive, so could not compete with illegal Spanish, Portuguese and Brazilian slave traders who could pay 500F.⁴⁰³ Régis redirected his efforts to the mouth of the Congo River and the adjacent kingdom of Loango. Establishing a factory at the port of Banana, Régis's recruits came from a broad hinterland in modern-day Gabon and the Republic of Congo.⁴⁰⁴

The exact number of 'free' African migrants brought to the French Antilles between 1857 and 1862 is uncertain. Estimates suggest around 10,000 arrived in Martinique and 6,000 in Guadeloupe.⁴⁰⁵ Unlike attempts at European, Madeiran and Chinese labour migration, that from Africa cannot be deemed a failure: the numbers exceeded those set out in 1856. As will be discussed, the end of African immigration to Réunion and the Antilles was largely because the Franco-British conventions from 1860 allowed the large-scale emigration of labourers from India to the French colonies. Less easily compared to the slave trade, Indian recruitment drew less criticism.⁴⁰⁶ Britain had banned African indentured labour migration in Mauritius in 1857 and kept a watchful eye on French activities. France accused Britain of officially opposing African recruitment simply as a way to deny France labourers, believing that the British were secretly hoarding supplies of manpower and benefitting from 'the pure and simple transfer to

⁴⁰³ Bernard Schnapper, *La politique et commerce français dans le golfe de Guinée de 1838 à 1871* (Paris, 1961), 167-171; C. W. Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers* (Oxford, 1961), 49-53.

⁴⁰⁴ J. Cl. Blanche, '6.000 "engagés libres" en Afrique et en Guadeloupe, 1858-1861', PhD thesis (Université de Paris, 1994), vol.I, 160-62, and vol.II, 407-574.

⁴⁰⁵ For Guadeloupe see *ibid.*; for Martinique, see David, *Population martiniquaise*, 163-4; and Renard, Raymond. 'La Martinique de 1848 à 1870", *Cahiers du GURIC*, Groupe universitaire de recherches inter-Caraïbes, Université des Antilles et de la Guyane, n° 12, 1973, 110; and Juliette Smeralda-Amon, *La question de l'immigration indienne dans son environnement socio-économique Martiniquais, 1848-1990* (Paris, 1996), 333.

⁴⁰⁶ The maximum length of contract set for Africans was ten years, see ADR, 8, K, 44, Arrêté du 10 mai 1858.

her colonies of slaves captured on the slave ships'.⁴⁰⁷ But there were also sceptical voices within France and its colonies. An observer writing in *Moniteur de la Martinique* in 1859 neatly summarised the reasons behind the shift to the recruitment of Indians, 'who are free and to whom the suspicion of slave trading cannot apply'; Africans, in contrast, due to 'the coarseness of their social condition...make it easier for English philanthropists to consider dupes of manoeuvres equivalent to a genuine trade in slaves'.⁴⁰⁸ In Réunion, however, this was not quite the end of African indentured immigration. When Indian recruitment became more difficult after the end of the convention with Britain in 1881, the island's planters looked once more to the coast of Africa. In 1887, France signed an accord with Portugal, which had abolished slavery in its colonies in 1869, allowing recruitment from certain ports in Mozambique, from where some 3,000 migrants arrived between 1887 and 1914.⁴⁰⁹

India was the obvious choice as a source for migrant labourers for the struggling plantations. For Réunion, where Indian indentured labourers were first brought, India had long been a source of both free and enslaved labourers. The connections between French families in India and Réunion were also well-established. Legislation in 1815 and 1817 banning the slave trade gave Réunion's planters and administration the impetus to recruit indentured labourers as substitutes for enslaved workers, especially as clandestine slaving waned in the 1820s and Réunion saw a boom in sugar cultivation that demanded an increased labour force. The strong links between Réunion and India facilitated the next step. In 1828, Eugène Panon Desbassyns de Richemont had been promoted from *Commissaire de la Marine et Administrateur des Etablissements français de l'Inde* to Governor of Pondicherry.⁴¹⁰ The Desbassayns family owned Réunion's largest and most profitable plantations, and he was sympathetic to the

⁴⁰⁷ *Revue Coloniale*, vol. XIX, 2nd series (1858), 5.

⁴⁰⁸ ANOM, FM, Généralités, c.118 d.1030, Extrait du *Moniteur de la Martinique*, Journal officiel de la colonie, 9 January 1859.

⁴⁰⁹ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 947.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 948.

demands of the island's planters for labourers from India. As will be further discussed, this first attempt at large-scale indentured labour from India was not a roaring success: a little over ten years later the government in Pondicherry banned the emigration of labourers to Réunion. In 1848, however, it recommenced in earnest.

When it came to the Antilles, India was not such an obvious choice, and the debate properly began in the years immediately before and after the emancipation decree of 1848. Administrations in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Paris looked to Mauritius, Réunion and, closer to home, to British-ruled Trinidad, where Indian migrant labourers seemed to be successfully replacing enslaved people on the island's plantations. M. Hayot described how in Mauritius, Réunion and Trinidad, 'the coolies were filling the void left by the withdrawal of the blacks, ensuring labour and reviving the formerly deserted properties'.⁴¹¹ In comparison with his reports about Chinese labourers in Trinidad, Hayot found Indians 'naturally gentle' and 'intelligent', albeit weak. The future of Martinique, he declared, 'is Indian immigration'.⁴¹²

In Réunion, Indians were already part of a diverse ethnic population. In contrast, in the Antilles, especially Martinique, racial boundaries were more sharply drawn, and society racially stratified into a hierarchy of black, *métis* and white. For some, the idea of adding other races into the mix was worrying. According to Cochin:

Above all, immigration creates a permanent danger for the social and moral state of the colonies. Thinking of those little corners of the globe where masses of blacks, Indians, Chinese, Malaysians mingle and pile up with a small number of whites, one shudders thinking about thee the race threatened by these deplorable, and about the morality and law and order [of these colonies], afflicted as they are by this invasion of a paganism

⁴¹¹ Journal Officiel de la Martinique (J.O.M.), 12 June 1853.

⁴¹² J.O.M., 16 June 1853.

that the Christian religion does not have time to tame. By everyone's admission, these new populations are scandalous.⁴¹³

Others believed this could be an advantage. One planter is recorded as having said: 'not being of the same race, nor the same religion or speaking the same language, [the Indian] would avoid any rapprochement with the blacks and would make common cause with the owners'.⁴¹⁴ While planters worried about a 'black coalition' between African immigrants and *affranchis*, Indians, as foreigners with little in common with *affranchis*, appealed as a means to 'divide and rule' the workforce. This eased fears of an unfavourable black to white ratio on the islands and promised to break the *affranchis*' bargaining power.⁴¹⁵ One report noted:

The immigrants will serve as a counterweight against this tendency for desertion or absenteeism among *cultivateurs*; at the same time immigration will serve, for the benefit of all interests, as a sliding scale for fixing the remunerative price of labour...recognising the need to bring a correction to the recklessness, laziness and apathy of the black who has not yet been able to put himself at the level of his new condition....⁴¹⁶

Crucially, the role of Indians in the eyes of planters and officials relied from the outset on the preservation of their 'otherness' and on their confinement to plantation labour. It was not intended that they should assimilate to creole society. In terms of the majority population of recently emancipated enslaved people, division—both physical and cultural—was not only

⁴¹³ Cochin, *L'Abolition*, 214-15.

⁴¹⁴ ANOM, Mar C.129 d.1163.

⁴¹⁵ ANOM, Gua, C.15 d.155, Nomination d'une commission chargée d'un travail préparatoire sur la question d'immigration (1851).

⁴¹⁶ ANOM, Gua, C.15 d.160. Conseil privé de la Guadeloupe et dépendances, 1853, session du mois d'octobre, séance du six.

encouraged but tension and antagonism between the two groups were actively sought as a way to preserve this.

Regulations

When the first cohort of Indian indentured labourers arrived in Réunion on 16 March 1828, the enterprise was under the control of the Administrator General of the French establishments in India, Eugene Desbassayns de Richemont. A year later, Auguste Jacques Nicolas Peureux de Mélay, who succeeded Desbassayns, drew up a contract for future indentured labourers from India which stated that their religious beliefs and customs must be respected and authorised them to establish syndicates with other free labourers in order to protect themselves from the excesses of the planter.⁴¹⁷ This was followed by a decree issued by Réunion's Governor which confirmed some of the conditions for 'Indian and Chinese workers or other individuals from the free Asian population', set out in de Mélay's contract, but contradicted others.⁴¹⁸ Having drawn up the contract, however, de Mélay then promptly withdrew his administration's involvement. The result was that Réunion's decree was only patchily enforced, leaving the 3,196 Indians who left from the French outpost of Yanaon in south India for Réunion between 1829 and 1830 vulnerable to abuses. The scale of these abuses ultimately led to another decree in 1839 forbidding Indian indentured immigration to Réunion, issued on the urging of the British.⁴¹⁹

Abolition, however, shifted the landscape for both powers. The British abolished slavery in the Caribbean, Mauritius and other crown colonies in 1834, although they introduced a transitory apprenticeship period that tied formerly enslaved people to plantation labour until 1838. Fearing they their workforce would soon deplete, British colonial authorities in Mauritius

⁴¹⁷ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 948.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 948-9.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 956.

looked once again to India. With the help of the British East India Company, which at this time controlled most of the subcontinent, they brought in 24,000 privately recruited indentured labourers between 1834 and 1838, before the British government stepped in and prohibited the system in 1839. Indentured migration to British colonies resumed in 1842, but this time under governmental control.⁴²⁰ Inspired by this, in June 1843 the French Minister of the Navy, Admiral Roussin, authorised the Governor General of French India, Paul de Nourquer du Camper, to start recruiting Indians for Réunion again. Falling short of abrogating the 1839 decree, however, he specified that first measures would need to be put in place to prevent abuses during recruitment and on the island's plantations.⁴²¹ Following orders from Paris, du Camper sought to establish the system of guarantees described with the administration in Réunion. He was rebuffed.⁴²² The intransigence of Réunion's administration did not pay off. Du Camper refused to allow recruitment in India, even as boats docked in Pondicherry's port with captains set on bringing back Indian labourers.⁴²³

While the official refusal to allow recruitment must have complicated matters, many of these captains, along with others who moored along the coast at Karaikal, did not return with empty boats. They managed illicitly to recruit and transport Indians to Réunion—although most were domestics and artisans rather than plantation labourers. Notary registers from Karaikal show a number of indenture contracts, usually for five years, that took place in the 1840s, before immigration was officially re-established in 1848.⁴²⁴ Women and children are often

⁴²⁰ Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge, 1999), 55-6.

⁴²¹ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 959.

⁴²² ANOM, Inde, C.353 d.249, Mémoire pour mon successeur sur la situation de la colonie en 1844, 15 November 1844.

⁴²³ Weber, *Les établissements français* 960.

⁴²⁴ See a contract drawn up between Charles Vergez of Saint-Denis and 10 Indians for a five-year period of work: ANOM, Notariat. Inde. Karikal, 1844-1849, 11 April 1846.

listed as accompanying the men. Nonetheless, according to Jacques Weber, Réunion counted only 2,200 Indian labourers in 1845.⁴²⁵

In 1847, the French administrations of Réunion and India continued to spar over immigration to the island and regulations to protect Indian workers. While the former was adamant that existing measures were sufficient, the latter argued that a system similar to that imposed by the British in Mauritius was necessary. When the emancipation decree was hastily rushed through in Paris the following year, however, these disputes lost significance and indentured immigration from India to Réunion officially recommenced.

Unlike under de Mélay, when the administration washed its hands of the organisation of indentured migration, French administrations were now involved, down to small details. Louis Pujol, Governor General of French India (1844-49), and Joseph Napoleon Sebastien Sarda Garriga, Governor of Réunion (1848-50), were aware that they were being watched by the British who were poised to intervene at the first sign of abuses. They issued a flurry of regulations governing Indian migration, from recruitment in India through to life on the plantations, including limiting the period of indenture to five years.⁴²⁶ Three years later, in 1852, a new decree authorised Indian indentured emigration to the French Caribbean. All the legislation put in place between 1848 and 1852 to safeguard Indian migrants to Réunion was extended to the Antilles.⁴²⁷ On 31 December 1848, there were 3,440 Indians on Réunion; 8,078 more arrived in 1849; 6,598 in 1850; 4,407 in 1851; 3,383 in 1852; 3,181 in 1853; and peaking with 9,135 in 1854. In 1855, numbers were limited to 3,097 and then averaged 1,750 a year from 1856 to 1860. The peaks and troughs can be explained by the intervention of the British,

⁴²⁵ Weber, *Les établissements*, 959.

⁴²⁶ L'arrêté de Sarda Garriga du 11 juin 1849.

⁴²⁷ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 967.

by conditions in India and by French legislation that after 1853 sought to balance numbers between the Antilles and Réunion.⁴²⁸

The 1860s marked another sharp transition in terms of the regulation of indentured migration. In July 1861, the Franco-British convention was signed. It had been a long time coming: negotiations had taken place throughout the 1850s, often breaking down. Original proposals from the British suggested that immigration should be organised by agencies also responsible for Mauritius—which was rejected by Paris, Pondicherry and Réunion, where it was feared it would lead to preferential treatment for Mauritius at Réunion's expense.⁴²⁹ Even as the British conceded on other demands, they steadfastly maintained that only emigration to Réunion, not France's Caribbean colonies, could be permitted, which remained a sticking point for French colonial administrations. In 1860, however, a convention was signed in Paris allowing the recruitment of 6,000 Indians for Réunion. Under this, British Indian ports were opened to emigration to the island, and recruitment of Indians for Réunion from British India was legalised, with an agent appointed by the French and approved by the British.⁴³⁰ All recruitment had to comply with British regulations, which specified working hours on the plantations, the number of women, repatriations, and conditions aboard the ship. The following year the convention was extended, ending African indentured migration and permitting Indian immigration to all French colonies under the same conditions.⁴³¹ In 1862, the Governor of the French establishments in India issued a decree, which along with other measures, stipulated how recruitment could function in India through agencies and sub-agencies.⁴³²

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 980.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 939.

⁴³⁰ Prior to 1861, despite being banned from doing so by the British, French recruiters sought recruits in Calcutta and Madras and their hinterland throughout the 1850s clandestinely. Jean-François Dupon, 'Les immigrants indiens de la Réunion. Evolution et assimilation d'une population', *Cahiers d'outre-mer*, N° 77 - 20e année (1967).

⁴³¹ For discussion of how one impacted the other see Flory, *De l'esclavage à la liberté forcée*.

⁴³² *Bulletin officiel des états Français de l'Inde*, 1862.

Ratios for women

Only a tiny number of women joined men crossing from India in the early years of indenture but as time progressed regulations required more and more female recruits. In 1849, Réunion's Governor, Sarda Garriga, sought to establish a minimum: at least a tenth of a ship's cohort of migrants, and if possible, a third, was to be made up of women.⁴³³ For the first six years of migration to the Caribbean the proportion of women in the convoy was set at a maximum of one-sixth and minimum of one-eighth. In 1858, this was increased to one quarter for Martinique and a third for Guadeloupe.⁴³⁴ For Réunion it remained a third.⁴³⁵ From July 1860, ships headed to the French Caribbean needed one woman for every four men. The agreed ratio was a compromise between the British, who wanted a higher proportion of women, and the French, who favoured a lower ratio, but it included a stipulation that three years after the convention came into effect, in 1865, the quota would be increased to one woman for three men and two years after that to one woman to two men.⁴³⁶

British officials were particularly focused on increasing the portion of women among indentured recruits. The ratio of women to men among those who travelled to British islands began as one to ten, but the Indian Emigration Act of 1864 imposed a mandatory 40 per cent quota of women.⁴³⁷ By the 1860s, Mauritius had almost achieved a 50:50 male-female immigration ratio. (State subsidies drove increases, but without these numbers tended to drop.) While French officials and planters were arguably more pragmatic in this, often prioritising male recruitment, especially during times of economic struggle, they also became increasingly interested in fostering family settlements as a means to keep male workers in the colonies,

⁴³³ L'arrêté de Sarda Garriga du 11 juin 1849.

⁴³⁴ Christian Schnakenbourg, 'L'immigration indienne en Guadeloupe (1848-1923)', PhD thesis, (l'Université de Provence, 2005), 249.

⁴³⁵ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 967.

⁴³⁶ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne', 478.

⁴³⁷ Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago, 2013), 166-9.

create a self-producing workforce and remedy instability and disorder, which were seen as resulting from the overwhelming male workforce. Réunion's officials and planters were particularly influenced by Mauritius, which became somewhat of a model.⁴³⁸

Recruiters in India often railed against quotas for women, claiming Hindu women would not cross the *Kala Pani* (black water), as this prohibited act was deemed to strip one of one's caste or social respectability.⁴³⁹ While as will be discussed, the importance of fear surrounding crossing the *Kala Pani* can be contested, recruiting women was, in many ways, more difficult—hence why recruiters were paid more for female recruits. Women tended to have more restricted geographic mobility, unlike itinerant male workers in Bengal, for example, and faced strict social control, particularly higher caste women.⁴⁴⁰ Yet women did make the journey to European colonies in considerable numbers.

Recruitment in India

Throughout most of the 1850s, recruitment in India for French colonies was organised almost singularly by the *Société d'Émigration de Pondichéry*. A private enterprise created as an association of commercial houses in Pondicherry in 1850, the *Société* often put business before welfare—much to the chagrin of the British.⁴⁴¹ In 1857, during the negotiations that led to the conventions in 1860-61, the British demanded an end to recruitment being run through the *Société* or any other commercial enterprise, insisting that it should operate through official immigration agencies.⁴⁴² It was one of the few demands that the French administration in Pondicherry readily agreed to; by the 1860s the *Société's* monopoly was over. In its stead the

⁴³⁸ Marina Carter, *Women and Indenture: Experiences of Indian Labour Migrants* (London, 2012).

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴⁰ Léna Loza, 'L'engagisme indien au féminin : entre tradition et modernité ?', *ILCEA*, 34 (2019), 2.

⁴⁴¹ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne', 404.

⁴⁴² Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1081.

French administration established agencies in the French Indian *comptoirs* of Yanaon, Mahé, Karikal and Pondicherry, together with one in Calcutta. These were created as official institutions connected to the French colonial administration, which was charged with financing and regulating them. As stipulated by the convention, although the administration had the authority to appoint and dismiss the agents, British approval was required. The role of the agencies, of the colonies and of the metropolitan state were all kept legally distinct from one another.⁴⁴³

Under the 1864 act which formalised the emigration system set up in India, all colonies seeking to recruit labourers had to operate through the agencies and adhere to the strict set of rules established by the British government in India.⁴⁴⁴ Yet, destinations within Asia such as Ceylon, Burma, the Dutch East Indies and the British Straits Settlements were exempt, highlighting the conceptual distinction made between former slave sugar colonies and other labour destinations. The former, due to their association with slavery, came under much greater scrutiny, while Indians sent to toil in the latter (which made up the vast majority of emigration flows) were by no means immune to abuses.

With the exception of Calcutta, the agencies were set up in France's *comptoirs* in order to avoid competition with the British. Under the convention the agencies were also under the administrative supervision of the Government of India and that of the presidency in which they were located. Selecting French *comptoirs* was therefore one way to limit the scrutiny of the British, which both agents and French officials found burdensome. Nonetheless, the British were entitled to appoint a 'protector of immigrants' in every port, normally a doctor who was a member of the Indian civil service and endowed with the authority to ensure all the regulations were strictly adhered to. Pondicherry's *commissaire d'émigration* and his

⁴⁴³ Schnakenbourg, 'L'immigration indienne', 391.

⁴⁴⁴ Rapport Geoghegan, 39-43. An extract printed in ANOM, Inde C.467 d.607, Réglementation anglaise.

representatives in the other *comptoirs* also exercised oversight, their powers being extended by the 1862 decree.⁴⁴⁵

Each agency had its own catchment area, with recruiters who operated out of sub-agencies rather than the port head office and were required to stick within these boundaries. Karikal agency handled recruits from the Tamil districts of Salem, Coimbatore, Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Madura and Tinivelly, while Mahé agency managed South Canara and Malabar districts along with the principality of Cochin and kingdom of Travancore. The Yanaon agency's catchment areas included the northern districts of the Madras presidency, from Ganjam to Kistna and that of the Pondicherry agency included the city of Madras, districts of Chingleput, North and South Arcot, Cuddapah, Nellore, Kurnool, Bellary Guntor and the principality of Mysore.

Originally there was no agency in Madras, given the city's proximity to Pondicherry and that it was a British territory — albeit one with a significant contingent of French residents. Yet Réunion's planters, who held the most sway with the French administration in India along with its commercial allies there, successfully lobbied for a Madras agency. They were partly driven by their dislike of Bengali labourers: as the agencies in Yanaon, Karaikal and Mahé were largely unsuccessful in securing recruits and Pondicherry was also recruiting for the Antilles, some 10,000 recruits from the Bengal Presidency went to work on Réunion's plantations via Calcutta in 1861 and 1862. Madras, as such, offered an alternative to Calcutta. Another agency was later set up in Bombay, slightly shifting constituency boundaries including in south India.⁴⁴⁶ Despite the demands of Réunion's planters to preserve their own agency, the

⁴⁴⁵ ANOM, Gén., C.137 d.1175, Rapport du directeur des colonies au ministre sur l'organisation des futures agences françaises d'émigration, 15 March 1862.

⁴⁴⁶ Yanon and Mahé's constituency boundaries remained unchanged. The districts of Chingleput, North Arcot, Cuddapah, Nellore, Kurnool, Bellary and Guntor were transferred from the jurisdiction of the Pondicherry agency to that of Madras. Pondicherry incorporated

different agencies did not correspond directly to specific colonies, which competed with each other for recruits. Their administrators often railed against the division established in Paris: one third for Réunion and two thirds for the Antilles and Guyane.⁴⁴⁷ Réunion's planters, and in later years those of Guadeloupe, demanded, in vain, to work directly with their chosen agents and to avoid the interference of the administration.⁴⁴⁸

Throughout their constituencies, agencies had sub-agencies and sub-depots which housed recruits before they were brought to the main depots in the ports. These networks were dispersed throughout vast areas, especially that of the Calcutta agency, which reached not only to Delhi but beyond as far as the Punjab.⁴⁴⁹ Unfortunately, there are no French reports offering descriptions of the sub-agencies in the recruiting areas of the *comptoirs*, but Major Pitcher and Sir George Grierson, British civil servants, visited sub-agencies in the Western Provinces and in Oudh and Bihar respectively in the 1880s—including those for the French colonies. Their reports offer some insight into recruitment in the interiors of these districts.⁴⁵⁰

Known as *Mestrys* in the Dravidian south and *Kanganis* in the north, recruiters formed the core of the operation. In 1860, the Pondicherry agency employed between 500 and 600 *Mestrys*.⁴⁵¹ The French agency in Calcutta, however, had only 66 recruiters employed in 1873-

Salem and Coimbatore, leaving the constituency of the Karikal agency reduced to just Trichinopoly, Tanhore, Madura and Tinivelly.

⁴⁴⁷ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 977.

⁴⁴⁸ ANOM, Gén., C.125 d.1092, ministre de la Marine et les colonies au gouverneur de la Réunion, 4 June 1861; Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire, 1870, 89-91, Rapport sur le budget de l'immigration; ANOM, Gua., C.188 d.1144, Gouverneur de la Guadeloupe à M. ministre de la Marine et les colonies et réponse de ce dernier, 6 February and 5 March 1872.

⁴⁴⁹ A report from 1877 by a British consular agent in Karikal offers one of the few mentions of the sub-agencies feeding the Karikal depot: TNA, FO, 881/3627, 148.

⁴⁵⁰ Leela Gujadhur Sarup, ed., *Facts about Indian Indentured Labour: Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson (Commissioned by the Government of India)*, (Kolkata, 2011).

⁴⁵¹ ANOM, Inde, C.467 d.608, 'Réglementation', gouverneur Bontemps à ministre de la Marine et les colonies, 18 November 1864.

4, which dropped to between 40 and 50 by the 1880s.⁴⁵² Relatively little is known about these men, or about the small number of women who often unofficially worked with them. Act XIII of 1864 gave administrations oversight of the appointment of recruiters, many of whom prior to this having been accused of coercive practices.⁴⁵³ Having been selected, they paid a tax for their licence, which lasted up to a year but could be withdrawn at any moment. They were also required to wear a badge identifying them as an official recruiter.

Grierson outlined that there were two types of recruiters: licensed and unlicensed, noting that ‘licensed are always men; unlicensed are either men or women’.⁴⁵⁴ ‘Licensed recruiters may again be subdivided into Head recruiters, commonly called sub agents, and ordinary recruiters’, he continued. ‘Ordinary recruiters may be either subordinate to the head recruiter or independent’. While there were two types of payment systems for recruiters (labelled the Trinidad and Demerara systems) the Demerara system (also known as the contract system) was most popular, especially as the indenture period progressed. Under this system, Grierson explained, head recruiters were paid per recruit who successfully boarded the emigrant ship, with rates varying based on the recruit’s origin and travel costs. The recruiter received no payment for recruits rejected medically or who were unwilling to emigrate or absconded en route. Half rates were paid for recruits who absconded from the depot or died. ‘The Trinidad and Demerara agencies give Rs.18 for every man and Rs.26 for every woman recruited,’ added Grierson..⁴⁵⁵

He further observed, however, that ‘the smaller agencies, such as those for Surinam and the French colonies give somewhat higher rates than these, as the business being smaller, a

⁴⁵² *Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson*, 66.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

higher profit has to be given to tempt head recruiters and recruiters to do the work'.⁴⁵⁶ French reports suggest that it was common in the contracts between French agencies and recruiters for the recruiter to be paid a commission for each Indian recruit who embarked on the crossing, but for an additional compensation of 10 rupees to be paid for each recruit who made it to the depot but not onto the boat.⁴⁵⁷ The higher price for women reflects the difficulty in recruiting them and achieving quotas.

Grierson argued that having payment dependent on healthy recruits making it to the ship ensured they were treated well at all stages of recruitments.⁴⁵⁸ Conditions in the sub-depots varied, however. These usually consisted, according to Grierson, 'of a pretty large house in the native style, with more or less accommodation for the separation of sex and provided with a well and latrine arrangements.'⁴⁵⁹ Yet, some were better than others. Comparing two sub-depots in Danpur Grierson described the Trinidad sub-depot as 'a vile place' and the French sub-depot as 'the best' he'd seen. The latter, wrote Grierson, was 'kept scrupulously clean' and had a 'latrine arrangement' which was 'everything that could be desired' along with 'separate accommodation for married women'.⁴⁶⁰

The recruits: origins

It is difficult to determine the precise districts from which Indian recruits were drawn for French colonies, as most of the registers that detailed this have disappeared, painting an incomplete picture. Although many were recruited in areas from which they did not originate

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵⁷ ANOM, Gén . C.136, d.1174, Dossier Jumna, rapport du Dr Aurillac, 1875; ANOM, Gua., C.188, d.1144, Charriol   ministre de la Marine et les colonies, 3 November 1876; ANOM, Gua. C.188. d.1144, Charriol   directeur des colonies, 3 November 1876.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33 and 37.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

and embarked on boats yet further afield, there are still some indications of the regional origins of the recruits. These varied between each colony and over time, dependent on conditions both in the islands and in India, including the capabilities of the different recruitment agencies and socio-economic factors such as the impact of famine.

In contrast to British colonies, which drew most of their indentured recruits from India's northern provinces, most labourers taken to French colonies came from '*les pays tamouls*' ('Tamil countries') via the ports of Madras, Yanaon, Pondicherry and Karikal. (Tamil migration to Malaya would be a later exception to this rule.) Not all migrants were Tamil speakers from the modern-day state of Tamil Nadu, however: many came from present-day Kerala, Karnataka and Telengana, and were therefore speakers of Malayalam, Kanada, and Telegu, respectively. This tells us that beneath the homogenising descriptions of French colonial officials, which referred simply to 'Malabars' or '*Tamouls*', was considerable regional and linguistic diversity. This is significant in terms of the evolution of Indian communities after their arrival in French colonies.

In Réunion, the first recruits came via the port of Yanaon in present-day Andhra Pradesh, including from Orissa (now Odisha) to the north. The regions around Yanaon were suffering a crisis in the cottage textile industry, as shall be discussed, which facilitated this recruitment. Between May 1829 and September 1830, 3,196 Indians left Yanaon for Réunion aboard 18 ships.⁴⁶¹ A further lone ship left from Calcutta. During the 1830s, the majority of the 25,468 Indians taken to Mauritius in the unregulated overseas indenture hailed from Bengal. Some 8,263 of them left for Mauritius through French ports, with a proportion of this number ending up in Réunion.⁴⁶² The exact number is unknown, but it is likely to have been less than 1,000.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 949.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 955.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, note 1770.

After abolition in 1848, the French ports of Pondicherry and Karaikal replaced Yanaon as the main points of departure for Réunion. These migrants therefore tended to come from the region along the Coromandel coast and its interior, including within British territories. These Coromandel Indians, recruited between 1848 and 1859 and numbering some 47,000, accounted for 40 per cent of the total taken to Réunion throughout the whole nineteenth century. Some 10,000 additional migrants were drawn from the Bengal Presidency via Calcutta between 1860 and 1862.

In 1854, the first ship to carry indentured migrants to the Antilles, *L'Aurélie*, arrived from Karaikal, followed by two further ships that year. Within a few years, ships from Pondicherry began to sail to the Antilles as well as Réunion. As will be discussed, the numbers fluctuated in the 1850s depending on various factors, including famines, but between 1857 and 1860, 13,190 Indians were brought to the French Antilles and Guyane and 4,939 to Réunion. The vast majority of these embarked from Pondicherry and Karaikal. Although recruits sailed via these French ports, Schnakenbourg's analysis of records in Pondicherry shows that only a small percentage originated from within French *comptoirs*: around 4.5 per cent of those who emigrated out of Pondicherry between 1849 and 1852 were from within French-ruled territory; 1.9 per cent of those who emigrated from both Pondicherry and Karaikal between the end of 1852 and April 1854; and 0.9 per cent between 1856 and 1860. The rest came from neighbouring regions of British India. Publicly, French officials denounced this illegal recruitment but, in reality, it was not only permitted but encouraged.⁴⁶⁴

In the 1860s, most recruits continued to come from the hinterland of India's south-eastern coast. Between 1862 and 1864, 1,611 Indians left from Yanaon and 2,550 from Madras. Only 330 of these ended up in the Antilles; the rest headed for Réunion.⁴⁶⁵ Although French

⁴⁶⁴ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne,' 225-6.

⁴⁶⁵ ANOM, Génée., C.122 d.1078, État des mouvements de l'emigration indienne depuis 1854.

agencies on the southwestern coast—the so-called Malabar coast of present-day Kerala—were technically up and running, these produced dismal results. Just 72 Indians emigrated from Mahé in 1862 and 1863.⁴⁶⁶ Even after another agency was opened in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1863, recruitment did not increase in this part of India. In fact, it faltered altogether: the Bombay agency is recorded as having supplied not one indentured labourer.⁴⁶⁷

The predominance of Karaikal and Pondicherry is largely explained by the latter's status as the headquarters of France's administrative and commercial power in India. As a result, all the administrative structures were already in place and the *comptoir* had strong links with Paris, functioning as a gateway as well as gatekeeper of communication with the metropole. As the commercial hub, it also had large flows of capital which the other *comptoirs* lacked. The *Société d'Émigration* from the 1850s had left the infrastructure and staff in place that passed directly to the agencies in Pondicherry and Karaikal, which were therefore in the best position to capitalise on the greater autonomy granted in the 1863 accord with the British.⁴⁶⁸ From 1862, ships sailing from Pondicherry also collected recruits from nearby Karaikal.

The only other agency that contributed significant numbers of recruits was Calcutta. In 1861, the Calcutta agency recruited its first cohort of 7,007 labourers for Réunion. This figure subsequently declined, however: over the following three years a total of 3,228 further emigrants left from Calcutta, all of whom went to Réunion.⁴⁶⁹ As noted above, Réunion's planters complained about the 'Bengalis', who they deemed more expensive and less hard working than labourers from the south of India. Within a few years the Calcutta agency had

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne,' 412-14.

⁴⁶⁹ ANOM, Gén. C.117 d.1008, Lettre à la ministre de la Marine et des colonies, 8 November 1867.

ceased to operate and Réunion relied instead on Indians from the south. Evidently, in addition to the institutional and infrastructural factors, colonial perceptions of Indians of different regional origins also shaped recruitment patterns and thus the composition of migrant communities in French islands.

The long-standing familiarity that the French had with southern India led to an understanding of Tamils as being more accustomed to French colonial administration, thus being seen as reliable, loyal, and ‘robust’ for labour in plantations. Additionally, the climate of southern India, with its hot and tropical conditions, was often thought to make Tamils naturally more resilient to the harsh labour conditions found in colonies like Réunion and the Caribbean. In contrast, Bengalis were often perceived by the French (and also by the British) as more intellectual, refined, and less suited for manual labour. Mrinalini Sinha also explores how notions of masculinity played into the ways in which different groups were measured against each other and against white colonial men, focusing on the cliché of the ‘effeminate Bengali’, which was frequently invoked in colonial India by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷⁰

The association of Bengal with the British administrative centre in Calcutta may have also contributed to a sense of difference and detachment. As Marsh describes, by the mid-nineteenth century, with France’s position in India in terminal decline, a discourse had established itself which held France as a potential liberator in the subcontinent, with moral superiority over the British.⁴⁷¹ Works by thinkers such as Abbé Raynal questioned the principles on which colonies should be founded, stimulated by abuses like the British mismanagement in Bengal.⁴⁷² The impact that this may have had on perceptions of Indians from British-ruled parts of India, compared to those from parts of the continent historically

⁴⁷⁰ Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*.

⁴⁷¹ Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*.

⁴⁷² Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique*.

under a French sphere of influence—if not direct rule—and consequently on understandings of their fitness for indentured recruitment merits further research.

In the 1870s, in order to respond to the increasing demand for Indian labourers, driven by a renewed sugar boom in the Antilles, French authorities sought to restart the failed agencies of the previous decade. Recruitment efforts in Yanaon, Mahé and Bombay, however, all fell flat. But in Calcutta, after a brief flirtation with a direct arrangement with the British, the former French agent reappeared and made an agreement to provide more than 1,000 recruits to Guadeloupe in 1873 and 1874. Similar agreements may also have been made for Martinique and Guyane, but these details are absent from the historical record.⁴⁷³ Some 1,350 Indian migrants left Calcutta for Guadeloupe in three ships along with another 1,427 for Guyane and 441 for Martinique on one ship in 1873-4.⁴⁷⁴ This led to the signing of a convention whereby the agency in Calcutta agreed to provide 1,350 labourers to Guadeloupe (with a provision to reduce this to 900 if required) each year from 1875.

Due to its geographical isolation from south India and Pondicherry, the Calcutta agency came directly under the Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies in Paris. It operated through a network of sub-depots that stretched throughout Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa. One notable element of recruitment in this region was the large amount of internal migration between districts but also from further afield within the Indian subcontinent to Bengal. The seasonality of internal migration also had an impact on this.⁴⁷⁵

While larger numbers of Indians from other regions were recruited in east Bengal or *en route* there, recruits originating from east Bengal seemed to have been few. From 1879 to 1882, just 12 left from Jasar (Jessore), only 4 from Maimansingh (Mymensingh), 3 from Rangpur, one from Dinajpur and 3 from Chattagoan (Chattogram) and 26 from the region's urban centre,

⁴⁷³ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne,' 422.

⁴⁷⁴ *Calcutta Emigration Report, 1873-4*, 4.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

Dhaka.⁴⁷⁶ In the period 1873-85, out of the 17,303 recruits from Bengal, 15,366 went to Guadeloupe. In the final phase of overseas indentured migration, recruits from the Bengal agency made up the majority of new arrivals in Guadeloupe and in total a third of all the recruits to the island came via Calcutta.⁴⁷⁷

These variations in recruitment over time and space shaped the composition of the Indian communities in the three islands as well as shaping their cultures more broadly. While Guadeloupe had a large Bengali population, Réunion and Martinique's Indian indentured populations were predominantly made up of southern Indians. In Réunion, however, these indentured labourers were joined by a significant number of traders and artisans who emigrated independently from other parts of the sub-continent, particularly Bengal and Gujarat. Their presence, along with that of Réunion's existing Indian population of formerly enslaved and free individuals, also played a significant role in shaping Réunion's culture.

Motives for migration

Much has been written about the push and pull factors that drove indentured migration from India. Tinker, the most notable voice within this debate, stresses the coercive measures deployed by recruiters and European colonialists to support his argument that indentured labour effectively amounted to a new form of slavery.⁴⁷⁸ Opposing this, scholars such as Lal and Emmer argue not only that indentured migration was distinctive from slavery, but it offered a means to escape hardship and India's hierarchical social system.⁴⁷⁹ This, Emmer contends, was particularly the case for women: overseas indenture offered an opportunity to escape from an

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 91-2.

⁴⁷⁷ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne,' 429.

⁴⁷⁸ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*.

⁴⁷⁹ Lal, *Girmitiyas*; Emmer, ed., *Colonialism and Migration*; R. Reddock, 'Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (1985).

oppressive patriarchal system, from unhappy marriage marriages and the constraints of widowhood.⁴⁸⁰ Carter, carving out a middle ground, emphasises diversity both in time and space.⁴⁸¹ She also stresses the diversity in nuance in women's motives. Some sought to escape oppressive conditions, including poverty, Carter argues, and others were drawn by the promise of better economic opportunity. Some women, however, were coerced or misled, particularly those from marginalised communities who were deliberately targeted.⁴⁸² Moving beyond the question of the similarity or dissimilarity with the slave trade allows for a deeper examination of the complex economic, social, cultural and personal reasons for which migrants boarded ships for European colonies. Certainly, reports of duplicitous recruiting techniques abound. So too, however, does evidence that over time Indians found ways to inform themselves about the various islands and what awaited them there, and to distinguish reliable information from rumour. Emigrating as a migrant labourer was rarely a flight of fancy: it was economic necessity that drove much migration within India as well as beyond its borders.

The ongoing debate over the extent to which the advent of British rule forced Indians into poverty is more complex.⁴⁸³ British rule without doubt generated significant economic change, with a wide degree of variation over space and time. High rates of revenue collection, especially prior to 1850, created new groups of impoverished men and women across the Indian countryside, while subsequent changes in wealth distribution as well as governance and land ownership caused dramatic shifts in social structures. In Bengal and Bihar, the British

⁴⁸⁰ Pieter Emmer, 'Immigration into the Caribbean: The Introduction of Chinese and East Indian Indentured Labourers between 1839 and 1917', *Itinerario*, 14, 1 (1990), 73.

⁴⁸¹ Carter, *Servants, Sidars and Settlers*, 2.

⁴⁸² Marina Carter, 'Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indenture Workers for Mauritius', in E. V. Daniel, H. Bernstein & T. Brass (dir.), *Plantations, Proletarian and Peasants in Colonial India*, (London, 1992), 229; and 'Indian Indentured Migration and the Forced Labour Debate', *Itinerario*, 21, 1 (1997), 53-4.

⁴⁸³ For a useful summary, see N. Charlesworth, *British Rule and the Indian Economy* (London, 1982).

administration turned *zamindars* into tax-collecting landlords, while in other parts of the subcontinent where *zamindars* did not exist, wealthy farmers in each village took on this role. This transformed huge numbers of smaller-scale cultivators into tenants, subject to the whims, as well as the taxes, of these landlords and an increasingly commoditised land market. This in turn formed a new class of landlords who grew fat off the vast swathes of land they acquired, replacing traditional elites. These changes exacerbated rural indebtedness and poverty. There is a level of consensus among historians that, as land ownership fell into the hands of a few, landlessness and inequality grew.⁴⁸⁴ For women such upheavals unleashed by the British, over time, may have eased restrictions on their mobility, prompting greater interregional movement than previously was possible, which some historians argue, was a precursor to overseas indentured migration. Gaiutra Bahadur writes of her own great-grandmother who first migrated 160 miles from her village within India before signing up for indentured labour in British Guiana.⁴⁸⁵

An assessment of various crises in key economic sectors during the nineteenth century suggests these played a crucial role in driving emigration. For example, an ongoing crisis in the textile region in the Yanaon region attributed to growing competition from imports from Lancashire coincided with successful recruitment for Réunion. Weber has detailed how the numbers employed in cotton spinning and/ or weaving in Chandernagore plummeted from 7,000 before 1789 to just 400 in 1839.⁴⁸⁶ A similar but more dramatic depletion occurred in Dhaka. Those employed in the once thriving industry found their livelihoods destroyed and represented significant numbers of those recruited for indentured labour. In 1834, the collector for the district of Godavari in the Madras Presidency wrote to the Governor that since the East

⁴⁸⁴ See: Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*, (Cambridge, 1993).

⁴⁸⁵ Bahadur, *Coolie Women*, 26.

⁴⁸⁶ Weber, *Les établissements français*, vol.1, 436-40.

India Company stopped its purchases of cloth, the launderers and the weavers were emigrating to the Mascarenes in large numbers.⁴⁸⁷ The decline in textile industries also had a wider impact on economies within these regions, pushing others outside the industry itself into poverty.

Famines also drove migration. Rising rice prices often correlate with increases in recruitment for overseas indenture in particular regions. Famines in the Madras and Bombay presidencies in the early 1850s saw an increase in overseas migration, as did famine in Bengal, Bihar and central India in 1873-4.⁴⁸⁸ Conversely, Pitcher reports that good harvest years, such as 1882, saw a drop in migration.⁴⁸⁹ Grierson made the same observation, noting that for one recruiter 'the good crops have made it a bad year for his business'.⁴⁹⁰

Unsurprisingly, many of the worst affected by famine and poverty came from lower castes. Of the Indians recruited from Yanaon for Réunion in the 1820s and 1830s, a majority were recorded as so-called *parias*, like Banla Vincadou who arrived in 1830.⁴⁹¹ *Paria* in South India referred to both low caste *shudras* and Dalits ('Untouchables'), who are seen to exist outside the caste system altogether. Of the 268 Indians who went to Réunion in 1828-29, 197 were *parias*. They were joined by 27 Muslims, 13 weavers, 13 agricultural workers and five fishermen.⁴⁹² Echoing Emmer, Weber finds that the high number of *parias* among those who emigrated from Tamil Nadu (where according to British officials one fifth of the population at

⁴⁸⁷ Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1965), 130 and 139.

⁴⁸⁸ L. and P. Visaria, 'Population (1757-1947)', in D. Kumar and M. Desai, eds, *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol. 2, c.1757-c.1970* (Cambridge, 1982), 528-31.

⁴⁸⁹ *Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson*, 118.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁹¹ Annexe 1-B in S.S Govindin, *Les engagés indiens: Ile de La Réunion-XIXe siècle* (Saint-Denis, 1994), 151.

⁴⁹² P. Pitoëff, 'Yanaon et les engagés de La Réunion: trois expériences d'émigration au XIXe siècle', in AHIOI, *Les Relations Historiques et Culturelles Entre La France Et L'Inde XVIIe - XXe Siècles/Historical and Cultural Relations Between France and India XVIIth-XXth Centuries* (Sainte-Clotilde, 1987), vol.2, 228.

the time were among this low caste group) was due not only to their poverty but to their desire to escape their almost slave-like status. 'Their condition was virtually one of slavery under the grip of the upper castes, and any release from their bondage was to be welcomed', wrote a British official, Captain Christopher Bidon, in 1857.⁴⁹³ In general, though, some higher caste Indians did sign up for periods of indenture. Recruiters, according to Grierson, had to deal with interference from local police, who sought to stop higher caste Hindus from being recruited.⁴⁹⁴ This shows that there was stigma attached to high caste Indians signing up for indenture overseas, but that some nonetheless were recruited; while police may have succeeded in preventing some of them from leaving, it is unlikely they did in every instance.

Aside from poverty, famine and caste, the significance of the 1857 rebellion in driving Indians to migrate as indentured labourers has also attracted historical debate. Its impact would have been negligible in southern India, which lay beyond the the regions most affected by mutiny and rebellion. Yet it is clear that rising recruitment levels in and around Calcutta in 1859 (and even over the following decade) were linked to many sepoys being disbanded from the army following the uprising and wider social disruption. Recruits embarking from Calcutta in 1856-57 numbered 7,439, but this rose to 27,779 in 1858-59.⁴⁹⁵ Clare Anderson's analysis suggests that the rebellion's aftermath created conditions that made indentured labour migration more appealing to many Indians, stimulating global emigration.⁴⁹⁶

Other repercussions of British rule, conversely, may have deterred migration. The surge in public works and infrastructure projects, notably but not limited to the railway, in the second half of the nineteenth century provided employment to those who may otherwise have left to

⁴⁹³ Cited in Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1022.

⁴⁹⁴ *Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson*, 174.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10; see also Northrup, *Indentured Labour*, 66.

⁴⁹⁶ Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion*, (London, 2007). Also, for an in-depth account see: Jill Bender, *The 1857 Indian Uprising and the British Empire*, (Cambridge, 2016).

work overseas. In 1879, Dr Granger, observing recruitment in the North-Western Provinces, noted that the difficulties faced by recruiters was in large part because of an irrigation project undertaken by the government which ‘occupied a great number of people’.⁴⁹⁷ Faced with such challenges, recruiters did their best to persuade people to sign contracts. There are numerous reported cases where ‘persuasion’ shaded into coercion.

A series of letters written around 1859 (in Tamil) by one Indian, named Mandalamodély, to Queen Victoria, shed light on these themes around the impact of the British in India and paths into indenture. Indians in French colonies did not have the same means to send letters home as some of those in British colonies, making these a rare example of an Indian indentured labourer describing his experience in his own words. Mandalamodély wrote that he was not a peasant farmer, but instead a ‘village official drawing salary from the government’. In the summer of 1853 the villages in the Manjakuppam district of Madras Province, had been hit by drought after monsoon failed, he explained, adding that wild animals had also contributed to the crop failure. Despite this, he wrote, ‘these villages have been levied by higher taxes.’ In the autumn of 1853 word reached Mandalamodély that Queen Victoria, having learnt about the failure of the monsoon in the province, had sent an official to assess the impact of the drought. According to Mandalamodély, he set off to meet this official but was intercepted en route by an agent, who tricked him into going to Pondicherry, telling him this was where the official was. Once there, wrote Mandalamodély, the agent ‘locked me up in a godwon [warehouse] which house the slaves shipped to Martinique. Along with many innocents who were procured against their freewill, I was transported to Martinique in France.’ In Martinique, ‘they had schemed to engage us in forced labour without any legal agreement.’ Similarly, elsewhere he wrote: ‘They forcefully made us board the ship without allowing us to inform our respective families through letters about our departure. These acts remain unchallenged’. In the

⁴⁹⁷ ANOM, Géné., C.136 d.1174, Rapport médical du Dr Granger, dossier Artist.

third letter, however, he acknowledges the innocents like him who were forcibly transported were alongside ‘outsiders and wilful labourers’. He explained his situation to his employer in Case Pilote, Martinique but, in general, the Indians’ employers in Martinique ignored their plight, he wrote, imploring Queen Victoria to take action. As well as organising his repatriation Mandalamodély asked that his government job be bestowed on one of his family members, writing: ‘else my entire family would perish’.⁴⁹⁸

Mandalamodély described writing seven letters, although how many in total he sent is unclear. One at least reached his family, as he wrote in one letter that they had responded to tell him they had assumed him dead. It seems unlikely the letters in the archives reached Queen Victoria, however, as they were intercepted in Paris. While there is a risk in extrapolating from one man’s account, the letters paint a picture of the economic hardship facing the drought-struck villages of Madras, which may have led some labourers to sign up for overseas indenture wilfully, as well as the duplicitous tactics recruiters may have used to force others onto ships headed for French colonies against their will. Mandalamodély’s desperate letters also suggest that the regulations put in place to prevent such abuses often had little material impact. His persistence, however, testifies to the agency Indian migrants displayed in remonstrating for their rights through different means.

While Tinker details incidents of kidnapping (following in the vein of late nineteenth-century humanitarians like John Scoble), others question just how common these practices were.⁴⁹⁹ Notably, Lal dispels the notion that recruiters were both exclusively lower caste and routinely willing to stoop to kidnap and deception.⁵⁰⁰ Nonetheless, it seems clear that recruiters

⁴⁹⁸ ANOM, Mar C.129 d.11169, Réclamation de l’Indien Mandalam, adressée à la reine d’Angleterre. [Translation of the Tamil].

⁴⁹⁹ See John Scoble, *Hill Coolies; A Brief Exposition of the Deplorable Condition of the Hill Coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius* (London, 1840).

⁵⁰⁰ Lal, *Girmitiyas*.

sought to paint a very rosy picture of life in the colonies and entice poor recruits with other means.⁵⁰¹

Recruiters were not alone in spinning yarns about the colonies. Returned migrants also undoubtedly told elaborate tales. Still, the reputations that different islands acquired and the rumours about them—although not always strictly true—served to inform potential recruits and steer the extent and the shape of migration. Grierson wrote:

Generally, Mauritius, Demerara, Trinidad, and Suriname are those best spoken of, and Natal is rising rapidly in popular estimation... About the French colonies, as Major Pitcher says, heads are shaken. Of them I heard the same story everywhere, that few returned from them. My own experience is that, in the whole course of my travels, I only met one coolie who had done so, though I heard of many who had gone.⁵⁰²

Later, he made clear what was meant by ‘heads are shaken’. He wrote, seemingly quoting an unnamed informant in Shahabad, ‘First of all, colonial emigration is by no means unpopular, except to the French Colonies. Everyone has the same story that when a man goes to French colonies, he is entirely lost sight of. This, they say, may occur in the case of Demerara or Mauritius, but is always case with the regard to the French.’⁵⁰³ The two explanations Grierson offered for the lack of knowledge about French colonies are the fewer numbers of returnees compared to other colonies and the inability of those who have ventured to these colonies to send letters to their families. He wrote:

While the average return from the English colonies is 309.1 per thousand emigrants, that from the French Colonies is only 70.2 and from Guadeloupe, the one which is still

⁵⁰¹ *Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson*, 10; see also Northrup, *Indentured Labour*, 172.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 10; see also Northrup, *Indentured Labour*, 222-3.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 179.

allowed to recruit in British India, only 25.6 per thousand. The question is, what becomes of this large (in the French Colonies enormous) unaccounted for residuum? No wonder that natives of India shake their heads over Colonies, whence nearly 930 out of every thousand who go are never heard of again. The statements given at the beginning of this chapter show that the Agent cannot point to a single letter or to a single remittance coming from any one of the French colonies, and, in addition to this, we find that 97 percent of the coolies entrusted to their care have disappeared from our ken.⁵⁰⁴

This indicates the important role that word of mouth played in providing information and in establishing the popularity or unpopularity of a certain colony. It also suggests that absence of knowledge may have been a deterrent. Rather than rely on recruiters, prospective migrants sought information from what they deemed a more trusted source in order to make their decision about whether to migrate at all and certainly to where. It further seems that continued contact with family in their home country and the likelihood of return were important factors in making this choice. There are several possible explanations behind the relatively low return rates from French colonies. Mortality rates varied between colonies and over time but in general they were slightly higher in French colonies than in British ones.⁵⁰⁵ In the British colonies, labour contracts often stipulated the option of a "free return passage" to India after a set period, commonly five years, although this was sometimes loosely enforced. In contrast, French colonial laws were often less stringent or more inconsistently applied regarding return provisions. The option to return may have been less accessible or enforceable in French colonies, as Mandalamodély's letters suggest. The British government, despite criticisms, was

⁵⁰⁴ *Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson*, 10; see also Northrup, *Indentured Labour*, 226.

⁵⁰⁵ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*.

somewhat more proactive in regulating the welfare of indentured labourers and monitoring repatriation. The French, with fewer resources and less oversight from India, were more hands-off in enforcing these regulations. British colonies had more frequent shipping routes with India, facilitating repatriation. The French, with fewer colonies using indentured labour, organised fewer return voyages, making it logistically more difficult and costly for labourers to go back to India.

Grierson detailed one example of a family returned from an unspecified French colony, writing:

Bihari, *Chamar*, came back many years ago from Mauritius, before there was a railroad to Ara. Usual praises of the place. Does not know English but knows French. Offers to explain the French language to me – ‘jam’ is the French for a ‘leg’, and ‘chaul’ for a ‘horse’. Here he was interrupted by a small boy in the crowd crying out, ‘No; it isn’t; cheval is the word’. Small boy promptly absconds. Pursued and brought back much frightened. Says he has just come back with his mother from the French Colonies. With a little pressure I found that he could speak French fluently and fairly grammatically. Searched for the mother and found her. Small boy’s name is Parmeshar, age nine years. Mother named Jalabi Koirin. Went out to the French Colonies with her husband ten years ago, leaving two sons behind. Small boy born in the colony. Husband died after they had been there three years. After being there ten years, returned to her other sons, and found that she had become a grandmother in the interval. While there, had never written home to her sons. Could not do it, French Colonies are not like Demerara or Trinidad, as coolies have no facilities for sending letters or money, [as] they have in the latter places. It was a novel experience to me to hear a nearly naked native boy of nine

speaking good French in a Bihar village. His French was far better than the Creole English of Demerara.⁵⁰⁶

The mother's observation about becoming a grandmother indicates that migrants such as herself did not simply disconnect from their homes on departing, instead retaining links, whether these involved communications—as in the case of those in British colonies who sent letters—or were simply sentimental. Equally, the little boy's fluency in French, which so surprised Grierson, suggests that within one generation Indian indentured labourers in French colonies had multiple, fluid and overlapping identities (expressed in this case through different languages) which they flitted between depending on the situation. As will be shown in following chapters, this process shaped the development of culture in the colonies not only among Indian communities themselves but also the wider communities of the islands.

Conclusion

In exploring the intricacies of Indian indentured labour migration to French colonies, this chapter has demonstrated how economic imperatives, racial ideologies, and inter-imperial negotiations converged to shape the nature and regulation of this labour system. The French colonial approach to sourcing and managing labour was not merely about filling the void left by the abolition of slavery but involved complex debates over race, assimilation, and social control. The selective enforcement of regulations, the attempts to balance recruitment across French territories, and the contrasting perceptions of different labouring communities reflect how colonial policies were shaped by both pragmatic needs and evolving ideas of racial hierarchy. This analysis not only underscores the role of Indian labourers in transforming the demographic and cultural landscapes of French colonies but also highlights how these

⁵⁰⁶ *Reports and Diaries of Major G.D. Pitcher and George A. Grierson*, 10; see also Northrup, *Indentured Labour*, 274.

dynamics contributed to broader patterns of racialised labour and social stratification within the French Empire.

CHAPTER FOUR

The crossing

Between recruitment in India and work on the plantation was not just a great geographic distance, the gulf of one if not two oceans, but also a gulf in time and in culture. The experience of indenture did not begin when the ships docked, but when they set sail—or even before, in the depots of India’s ports. From this point immigrants were subjected to French attempts to assimilate them and, conversely, to ‘other’ them; from this point they had to react not only to French colonial practices and understandings of them but also, often, to a new language and culture. Equally, what took place was not just an interaction between ‘Indian’ and ‘European’, but also between different modes of Indianness. Languages, religions and cultures met on the ship, laying foundations for new identities, whether these supplanted or stood alongside former senses of self. The purpose of this chapter is to explore French colonial understandings, the practices that resulted from them, and the Indian responses to them as the encounter played out in the confined space of a ship. This chapter argues that there was a concomitant homogenising effect created by the ship and colonial attempts to regulate Indians’ bodies and lives—as sources of labour—and the scientific racial categorising that imposed divisions. The chapter first looks at the regulations and realities of disease and mortality rates faced by Indians on the journeys to French colonies. This provides the necessary context to explore colonial attempts to regulate Indian bodies and the racialisation of caste and religious and regional divides. It proposes a rereading of some incidents described in the archive that shed light on these divides to highlight the agency and resistance of Indian migrants. There are hints that, with the confined

space of the ship acting as a pressure cooker, an active re-imagining of a collective Indian identity began.

The first Indians to undertake the journey in this new wave of indentured migration between 1828 and 1830, some three thousand of them, went to Réunion. French ports in India continued to process large numbers of migrant workers throughout the 1830s and it was French ships that transported them across the Indian Ocean, principally to the British colony of Mauritius. Of the 8,263 migrants from India that left for the Mascarenes between 1835 and 1840, Réunion received only a few hundred, and in 1839 French indentured immigration from India was suspended.⁵⁰⁷ That said, the recruitment and transport of indentured labourers continued clandestinely until its official re-establishment by French decree in 1848. The notarial registers in Karaikal, for example, show a contract arranged between a trader in Saint-Denis, Charles Vergez, and ten Indians who he recruited to work in Réunion for five years as *ouvriers* and *manoeuvres*.⁵⁰⁸ Throughout the 1850s, while the British banned the French from transporting any British subjects from India, disparities between the numbers leaving from French ports in India and those arriving in the French colonies suggests, again, the scale of the business was larger than officials in India admitted, and involved significant numbers of British subjects. All in all, the numbers that left India from French ports and aboard French ships, though fluctuating, were considerable.

In these early years, the journeys were long: to Réunion around a month and to the Caribbean at least three months, but often longer. This time was extended by enforced quarantines at either end and two stop-offs along the way. Ships transporting Indians normally followed the same routes: across the southern Indian Ocean to Réunion where, if the island was not the final destination, they stopped and restocked for several days or weeks before

⁵⁰⁷ Of these 8,263 only 10 per cent of these were from French India, the rest were British subjects. Weber, *Les établissements français*, 955.

⁵⁰⁸ ANOM, Notariat. Inde. Karikal, 1844-1849, 11 April 1846.

journeying around the Cape of Good Hope and up across the Atlantic. St Helena provided another stop-off before the indentured labourers were put in quarantine, either near the ports in Martinique and Guadeloupe, or more commonly, on one of the Îles des Saintes just off Guadeloupe. The distance covered to the Caribbean was immense and meant that the Indian migrants, and the ships' crews, encountered diverse environments and climates—from the tropical heat of the Indian Ocean to the bitter cold of the Cape of Good Hope. It also gave them ample time to encounter each other. Early crossings to Réunion were made by merchant ships with no state intervention but by the 1850s, the two operations, to Réunion and the Caribbean, were run by just two companies with state charters with strong state oversight. The captain, crew and doctors, representatives of the French colonial state aboard the ship, were in the unusual position of being in close and confined contact with Indians and of catering for their social, religious, cultural, dietary and medical needs. In doing so, they were sometimes required to consider the migrants' various geographic, caste and religious backgrounds—although they were not always aware or understanding of these needs. It was also the case that people from different caste and regional groups were put together in close quarters for an extended period.

Regulations

The regulations negotiated and put in place by the British and French to control the exportation of Indian workers to French colonies during the nineteenth century have been well documented by historians.⁵⁰⁹ But an overview of the regulations provides insights into French conceptions of indentured labourers and is useful in beginning to understand contemporary thinking regarding illness, medicine and diet—all of which had an impact on the conditions the Indians lived in, their treatment and health. Equally, the changing parameters of what should have been

⁵⁰⁹ See Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*; Emmer, ed., *Colonialism and Migration*; Northrup, *Indentured Labour*, and, with particular regard to the French, Weber, *Les établissements français*.

done serves as a framework for highlighting just how often such measures were disregarded in favour of cost efficiency or convenience.

When the first indentured labourers, 15 Indians of lower caste (referred to as *telinga parias*⁵¹⁰) set sail from Yanaon, a coastal enclave within the present-day Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, to Réunion on 16 March 1828, the voyage—like the terms of their contract once they docked in the island—was entirely unregulated by any government official. The cost of the journey—including the return—fell on the planter and thus the government took little interest in regulating it, even if in 1829 Réunion's Governor de Mélay saw to regulate conditions within the island. In this opening phase of migration the labourers were transported on merchant ships alongside cargo, such as the *Striana Pourana*, which left Yanaon on 26 March 1830 carrying 98 Indians and a cargo of rice, dates and linen.⁵¹¹ In total, some 3,196 Indians left Yanaon (where, as we have seen, the crisis in the textile industry had plunged the population into poverty) for Réunion between May 1829 and September 1830, yet the first regulation to concern itself with the protection of Indians aboard the ship came in December 1837. It was then that Hubert Jean Victor, Marquis de Saint Simon, the Governor of Pondicherry, issued a decree obliging all ships carrying 20 or more indentured labourers to ensure they had adequate food, water and medicine supplies—to be checked by a government official before departure.⁵¹² The decree also stipulated that an Indian doctor accompany the migrants on their voyage. Despite these moves, in March 1839 the British government banned the exportation of

⁵¹⁰ 'Telinga' suggests they spoke either Tamil or Telegu while '*parias*' refers to their low caste, most likely suggesting they were from the lowest caste.

⁵¹¹ ADR, 49 M 7, lettre n° 296, 16 August 1830, Gouverneur de Bourbon to Gouverneur des Établissements français dans l'Inde, Pondichéry. See also: Gerbeau, 'Minorités mal connues', 7.

⁵¹² ANOM, Inde C.464. d.590: Procès-verbaux de la séance du 29 juillet 1848 du conseil d'administration and arrêté 18 July 1848. Also see Weber, *Les établissements français*, 962.

indentured labourers from British India to the Mascarenes, following a series of abuses, more details of which will be further discussed.⁵¹³

Indentured migration from India to Mauritius recommenced in 1842—this time under the auspices of the British. Various attempts were made to restart migration to Réunion but without the guarantees against abuses that had been established in Mauritius, the Governor in Pondicherry was reluctant; the result was that far fewer numbers reached the French island. The French abolition of slavery in 1848, however, forced the government of Pondicherry's hand. The transportation of Indians to Réunion—an operation carried out as a free trade often by small-time Réunionnais or Pondicherrian shipowners—was governed once more by the regulations first introduced in 1837.⁵¹⁴ Governments in Paris, Pondicherry and in Réunion added to these substantially over the next few years. Among other measures, Réunion's Governor, Sarda Garriga, sought in 1849 to place an upper limit of no more than four people (including the crew) for every five tons of a ship's weight in a bid to limit the overcrowding that was deemed responsible for high on-board mortality rates.

Further regulations also specified the quantity of food and water and the inspection of medical supplies. The emigration agent was charged with ensuring that the right quantities were on board and none of the labourers on the ship were there unwillingly. Migrants waiting to board in Pondicherry would be lodged in depots in the town's so-called *ville noire*.⁵¹⁵ Further articles also regulated the age of migrants (at least 21) and their marital status—unaccompanied married women were not officially allowed to sign up. Hyacinthe Lalande de Calan, Governor of the French establishments in India (1849-50), soon adopted the measures put in place by Sarda Garriga. Lalande de Calan also added to the food requirements and medical supplies. He

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 957.

⁵¹⁴ ANOM, Inde C.464. d.590. Procès-verbaux de la séance du 29 juillet 1848 du conseil d'administration and arrêté 18 July 1848.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

was forced to ban all exportation of labourers from Yanaon, however, after the British caught a French captain loading a ship on their territory and imprisoned him.⁵¹⁶ This ban lasted for the next decade, although the exportation of labourers continued for the rest of French India. Measures imposed on conditions of travel came under increasing scrutiny: in October 1849, the French administration decreed that during bad weather, especially during the monsoon season, Indians could only be embarked 24 hours before departure.⁵¹⁷ The following year this measure was extended to apply all year round. Migrants also had to be checked in the Cabrol court of Pondicherry by the emigration agent just before departure to ensure that everyone present was the same as those seen by the doctor. Evidently, last minute swaps for older, younger or otherwise unsuitable labourers were a relatively common trick used by *mestrys* to increase their earnings. Further protective measures saw captains banned from lodging Indians in the in-between decks if loaded with goods and from carrying more than 12 in the poop deck if the ship was loaded with foods (this was later increased to 30 after pressure from captains and ship owners). In 1858, again to improve the ventilation aboard ships, it was made necessary to have special ventilators or wind sleeves installed.

In 1852, the first migrant ship, *L'Aurélie*, set sail for the French Antilles. Unlike the initial indenture operation to Réunion, only large-scale shippers sailed to the Caribbean. That year the French state made an agreement with a Captain Blanc, who in association with a shipping company from Nantes, Chauvet, Gouin & Corpel, held a monopoly on the operation until 1854 when, after a brief period of flux, it passed to La Compagnie Générale Maritime. By 1853, the crossings to Réunion had been monopolised by the *Société d'Immigration de la Réunion*, which was formed that year by the principal immigration companies on the island and quickly formed an alliance with the *Société d'Émigration de Pondichéry*.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1058-9.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 965.

⁵¹⁸ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne', 249.

Finally, in July 1860, after years of failed negotiations, the British government reauthorised French shippers to export labourers originating from British India and this time to the Antilles as well as Réunion.⁵¹⁹ Under the terms of the agreement, though, the French had to comply with British regulations. The departures were permitted to take place in French ports but a British consular agent was required to safeguard the interests of the Indians, particularly to ensure that no one was embarked unwilling and without full knowledge of their contract and where they were going.⁵²⁰ Other terms effecting the voyage included a stipulation that emigrants be allowed to roam freely in the port of departure, rather than being confined to depots (this far too closely resembling the depots that held slaves for the comfort of the British authorities). The ‘Coolie Ships’ were also required to have aboard a European surgeon and a translator; a change from the early regulation that insisted upon an Indian doctor. The cabins for the Indians had to be fitted out specially in either the between decks or on the upper deck and to have a minimum height of 1.65 m. Each passenger was afforded 2.3m from Bengal and those from a French port or from the presidencies of Madras or Bombay, 1.7m. Emigration operations could be carried out by French or British ships without distinction.⁵²¹ Finally, on arrival the French administration was charged with relaying to the British consular agent the tally of births and deaths that occurred during the journey, along with the state of the labourers to be disembarked.⁵²²

It is clear, then, that the journeys undertaken by Indians to French colonies changed quite significantly in the early years of overseas indenture. The weight of regulation thrown at the system, particularly in terms of the crossing, reflects the attempts to distinguish this migration from the forced migration of enslaved people and thus avoid the condemnation of

⁵¹⁹ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1070.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1071.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 1071.

⁵²² Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1071.

abolitionists, the press and, of course, the British. The latter were not solely motivated by humanitarian concerns, but also by their competition with the French—the thawing of these relations is reflected in the joint agreement over indenture in 1860. Despite the increasingly strict regulations, however, the reality of the sea crossing first to Réunion and then to the Antilles was often divorced from their intention. Moreover, the primary role of such regulations was the survival and wellbeing of the Indian passengers so they could fulfil their task as labourers. It is for this reason that doctors were required aboard ships, and why these doctors noted in such detail the health of the immigrants in their charge.

Disease, mortality and medicine

The rates of shipboard morbidity and mortality, particularly in the early years of overseas indenture, were quite significant. So much so that it was often with some sense of pride and triumph that doctors aboard ships reported that *only* a few new-born infants or children died during the voyage.⁵²³ The survival of Indians was integral to the whole migration exercise. Anil Persaud argues that all aspects of shipboard management, including medical practices and food supplies, were aimed essentially at supplying healthy ‘plantation bodies’ for labour to serve the colony.⁵²⁴ There is ample evidence to support this. The French authorities, together with the British officials who regulated French migrant labour activities from 1861, were exceptionally concerned with morbidity and mortality. So too have been historians writing about the violent and exploitative nature of indentured labour, for whom evidence of high mortality rates represent continuity with the Middle Passage of the slave trade. Conversely,

⁵²³ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3306. Introduction de 147 immigrants par le navire l'Anna, capitaine Macé. Rapport en anglais du docteur A. Daly, 16 October 1869.

⁵²⁴ Anil Persaud, ‘Transformed Over Seas: Medical Comforts Aboard Nineteenth-Century Emigrant Ships’, in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra, eds, *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories* (Delhi, 2009).

those who stress the difference between the two labour systems look to evidence for the greater care given to indentured migrants and the consequent lower mortality.

Tinker's assessment of seaboard mortality rates led to his conclusion that the conditions in which indentured labourers were transported were no better than those of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage.⁵²⁵ Other scholars have countered this thesis, arguing that the British regulations, designed to improve survival rates and the health of Indians, created far better conditions than those experienced on the Middle Passage.⁵²⁶ Ralph Shlomowitz demonstrates that regulations had an impact on mortality rates, which he argues were much lower than during the slave trade.⁵²⁷ However, the real decline that he pinpoints only took place in the last twenty to 25 years of the nineteenth century, almost fifty years after indentured labourers were first transported from India to Réunion. Carter, taking a more critical view of British regulations, argues mortality rates declined because of better selection in India, rather than because of the standard of treatment aboard the ships.⁵²⁸ It is worth noting that mortality rates in the transatlantic slave trade themselves varied greatly, depending on a range of variables which combined in complex ways: time period (from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, including both the legal and illegal trades), nationality of the ship, degree of crowding, regulatory frameworks and length of the voyage.⁵²⁹

Tinker, Shlomowitz and Carter have largely been concerned with the transportation of Indians to British colonies. In this area, as in many others regarding the history of indentured labour migration, there is limited crossover between Francophone and Anglophone literature

⁵²⁵ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, 117–18.

⁵²⁶ See Northrup, *Indentured Labour*.

⁵²⁷ Ralph Shlomowitz and John McDonald, 'Mortality of Indian Labour on Ocean Voyages, 1843–1917', *Studies in History* 6, no. 1 (1990): 35–6. Also see P.C. Emmer, 'Caribbean Plantations and Indentured Labour, 1640–1922: A Constructive or Destructive Deviation from Free Labour Market', *Itinerario*, 21, 1, (1997), 73–89.

⁵²⁸ Carter, *Servants, Sidars and Settlers*, 124.

⁵²⁹ For example: Thornton, *Africa and Africans*.

on indenture—even though French ships transported Indians to British colonies and vice-versa. After 1861—and before that date, clandestinely—British Indians were also carried to French colonies. Neither was it unheard of for Indian migrants to pass between the different colonies, from Réunion to Mauritius, for example, or from Guadeloupe to Trinidad.⁵³⁰ Moreover, British consuls operated in French India and in the destination colonies: a reflection of the British impulse to monitor the French handling of indentured labour. And the French, feeling under the constant watch of the British, were keenly observant themselves, on the lookout to point out British hypocrisy—particularly when it came to mortality rates. These issues are very much present in the French literature on indentured labour and the ocean crossing. Weber identifies cases where mortality rates among Indians carried on early voyages from French *comptoirs* were just as high as those on the Middle Passage. Yet such voyages, he argues, served as a hard lesson for the French, who went to efforts, thereafter, to improve conditions. ‘The accusations of “disguised trafficking” that the British sometimes directed at the French, besides being unfounded, reflected a certain cynicism; he writes; ‘no French ship experienced a comparable massacre to that of some British coolie ships departing from Calcutta’.⁵³¹ Marimoutou-Oberlé similarly compares French and British mortality rates and concludes that while indentured labourers had less space on French ships, ‘the lower mortality rates on French vessels would be attributed to better adherence to sanitary regulations and stricter controls at departure.’⁵³² For Schnakenbourg, the difference in mortality rates was related to the better skill of the doctors onboard French ships.⁵³³

⁵³⁰ Durgahee, *The Indentured Archipelago*.

⁵³¹ Jacques Weber, ‘La vie quotidienne à bord des coolies ship a destination des Antilles’, in R. Toumson, ed., *Les Indes Antillaise* (Paris, 1995), 53.

⁵³² Michèle Marimoutou-Oberlé, ‘Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire: quarantaine et lazarets de quarantaine dans les mascareignes aux XIXe siècle et début du XXe siècle’, PhD thesis, (Université de Nantes, 2015), 141-2.

⁵³³ Schnakenbourg, ‘L’Immigration Indienne’, 647-8.

The difference in emphasis in the French literature is perhaps partly a reflection of the sources. As Schnakenbourg and Marimoutou-Oberlé note, the French and British scorned each other's care of indentured labourers in equal measure.⁵³⁴ The mortality rates were, in fact, significantly different aboard French ships than British, particularly before 1861. Between 1852 and 1861 the mortality rate for ships passing between French India and Réunion was 3 per cent, and between 1853 and 1861 for ships arriving in the French Caribbean, 2.7 per cent.⁵³⁵ For British ships to the Caribbean the rate reached as high as 17 per cent in 1858-9, dropping to around 9 per cent during the 1860s and to 3 percent by 1872-3.⁵³⁶ Ashutosh Kumar's detailed explanation of the changes in mortality on ships operating between India and British colonies shows that in the early decades of indenture, high mortality was 'primarily due to the absence of any close monitoring or extensive regulation', particularly with regard to overcrowding (which legislation in 1842 tried to remedy).⁵³⁷ Citing the Mouat report,⁵³⁸ Kumar explains the high mortality rate in the 1850s and 1860s in terms of the lack of a sick bay, the mistaken focus on miasma theory,⁵³⁹ and the inexperience of European doctors, along with their inability to communicate with their Indian patients. Despite the lower mortality rates, many of these nuances are applicable in the French sphere too.

Evidence from a report on the voyage of the *Jeune Albert* reveals much about the perceived causes of mortality, and perhaps about the causes themselves. Some 502 Indians were embarked aboard the ship, a 518-tonne three-masted sailing ship, 228 from Pondicherry

⁵³⁴ Marimoutou-Oberlé, 'Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire', 142.

⁵³⁵ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1044.

⁵³⁶ Marimoutou-Oberlé, 'Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire', 141.

⁵³⁷ Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*, 85.

⁵³⁸ Record high rates of mortality on ships from Calcutta to the Caribbean between 1856 and 1858 prompted the Government of India in 1858 to set up an enquiry, which was led by Dr F.J. Mouat, the M.D. of Inspector of Goals and Government Dispensaries, formerly a professor of medicine and principal of the Calcutta Medical College. India Office Records, P.188.57, Reports by Dr Mouat on the mortality of emigrants from Calcutta to W. Indies 1856-7, Mouat to A.R. Young, Secretary to Government Bengal, 31 July 1858; *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵³⁹ See John M. Last, ed., *A Dictionary of Public Health* (Oxford, 2006).

and 274 from Karaikal, although all boarded in Pondicherry. On 28 June 1859, it set sail for Guadeloupe. In his report the doctor onboard, Mr Hippolyte Bernavon, claims he was already worried about the health of the Indians before they set sail. ‘Initially, I was struck by the frail appearance and emaciated features of the Indians’, he wrote. Those from Pondicherry seemed ‘fairly robust and somewhat clean’, but the others from Karaikal, ‘the women in particular,’ had ‘sunken cheeks, hollow eyes, and limbs so frail as to arouse compassion’.⁵⁴⁰ After a few days at sea, Bernavon found his infirmary filling up and by the twelfth day it was full. The *Jeune Albert*’s voyage had almost the full array of likely shipboard diseases that indentured labourers experienced in the nineteenth century. Dysentery struck down 36 passengers, as well as several members of the crew and the captain, on the initial crossing to Mauritius. Another 50 Indians suffered from either venereal diseases or scabies.⁵⁴¹ On 21 July, after nearly a month at sea, the ship finally reached Mauritius—by which point the death toll was already five.

British authorities in Mauritius, however, turned the ship away on account of a case of chickenpox. Bernavon reported that ‘this case of chickenpox, cured for ten days, had been unique and isolated’, but the ship was forced to head for Réunion, where it arrived on 27 July.⁵⁴² For just over two weeks it was docked in the harbour in Saint-Denis, during which time two more Indian passengers died, both from tuberculosis. Having moved down the coast to unload a cargo of rice there was an outbreak of chickenpox on the ship, which was instructed by the authorities to moor in front of the Lazaret in the Ravine à Jacques. Just as the chickenpox outbreak was clearing up the number of those afflicted with scabies started to increase, so all the passengers disembarked at Grande Chaloupe while the crew replenished supplies of

⁵⁴⁰ Dr. Hippolyte Bernavon, *Rapport adressé à M. le Dr Petit, chef du service de santé à l’île de la Réunion, sur l’état sanitaire des passagers indiens du navire Jeune Albert, depuis leur embarquement à Pondichéry jusqu’à ce jour*, (Paris, 1859), 2.

⁵⁴¹ ‘Galeux’ could refer to scabies or to leprosy.

⁵⁴² Bernavon, *Rapport*, 10.

water.⁵⁴³ At this point, 21 people were still suffering from chickenpox, twenty from a second bout of dysentery and there were ‘238 individuals with a pronounced and clearly visible case of scabies’. Finding the Lazeret inadequate, Bernavon had twelve huts built, reporting that ‘the stay on land quickly improved the health condition of our passengers’. But dysentery and chickenpox then ‘appeared again, even more terrible and intense’. In just a few days, 14 more people died.⁵⁴⁴

Some seventy Indians are recorded as having died on the voyage. Bernavon identified three reasons for the high rate of disease and mortality. First, the condition of the Indians before boarding in India. Second, the conditions aboard the ship and the environmental changes during the voyage. The third related to the supposed character of Indians themselves: their actions, and what he perceived as their inherent physical sickliness.⁵⁴⁵

Bernavon observed that the Indians ‘all asked for food through prostrations and affectionate gestures, which suggested that they had not satisfied their appetite for a long time’. Weber has shown that between the years 1817 and 1886, Pondicherry, Karaikal and Yanaon were hit by successive cyclones, floods and droughts: of these 69 years, only 21 did not involve some form of natural disaster. Firmin Lacpatia has also demonstrated that from 1853 up until 1900, these regions were free of famine for only nine years.⁵⁴⁶ While there is no record of a particular famine in 1859, it is likely that many of those aboard would have been suffering from the effects of these events, as indicated by Mandalamodély’s letters. Bernavon emphasises the particularly poor state of those who boarded the *Jeune Albert* at Karaikal, yet neither were all those from Pondicherry in good health. This led him to question, albeit cautiously, whether the

⁵⁴³ Marimoutou-Oberlé, ‘Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire’.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴⁶ Firmin Lacpatia, *Les Indiens de la Réunion: origine et recrutement* (Sainte-Clotilde, Réunion, 2008), 30-1.

regulations governing who was and who was not recruited were properly enforced:

When one thinks of the sad results previously obtained by certain ships and the frightening mortality that sometimes occurred among their Malabar passengers, one immediately wonders if the ships that endured such losses had received only healthy and well-conditioned people, especially those free from any chronic illness.⁵⁴⁷

The medical examination prior to boarding, he continues, was ‘superficial and incomplete’:

It is rather a scrupulous synoptic glance. And then, how can one judge what one does not see? Because, on that day alone, perhaps by a pure stroke of chance, the Indians are adorned with trousers and shirts or other garments that modesty does not allow them to remove, neither secretly nor in public.⁵⁴⁸

The full-clothed examination before boarding proved particularly inhibiting in terms of detecting sexually transmitted diseases, which manifested as scabies. Bernavon implies here that the Indians were not usually dressed in this way, suggesting that there was foul play at hand: that is, that recruiters had enlisted undesirable, sickly candidates and on the day of their medical inspection dressed them in clothes designed to conceal their illnesses. Either that, or that the Indians had taken it upon themselves to do this. While there is no doubt the doctor had a vested interest in shifting blame for the high rate of disease aboard the ship, this is far from implausible.

Other reports confirm that inspections in the depots before boarding were either superficial or involved some level of duplicity. In 1859 Dr Savatier aboard the *Junon* noted that many of the migrant Indian passengers were ‘in a such a state that there was little hope of

⁵⁴⁷ Bernavon, *Rapport*, 3.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

revitalising their health during the crossing'.⁵⁴⁹ That same year, the *Ville d'Agen* delivered a convoy of men who were 'too old' and included 'some convalescents who were rejected for the formation of previous convoys were able to take their place' on the ship. This agent described these migrants as '*non-valeurs*' who arrived in Martinique and constituted 'a real burden for the colony'.⁵⁵⁰

Healthy recruits were also sometimes swapped for older or younger ones after the doctor's inspection. On other occasions recruiters did not even try to deceive administrators, simply putting forward a number of elderly or young recruits. The *Aurelie* and the *Bordeaux*, which sailed to Guadeloupe in 1854 and 1856, respectively, had too many children and old people (i.e., over 50).⁵⁵¹ If detected these were often rejected, as was the case with the *Canova*, which left Karaikal on 28 October 1862: 'never before in any era had such a number of rejects been found in the convoys of immigrants from the Coromandel coast.'⁵⁵² So problematic was the recruitment of elderly labourers in Pondicherry and Karaikal that it was with some shock and triumph that of the cohort of 428 leaving Yanaon on the *Canova* in 1863, only 15 were rejected (not one of which was 'for advanced age') and the rest were deemed to be in 'excellent condition'.⁵⁵³

The most common explanation offered for high mortality rates on French ships, particularly in the early years of overseas indentured migration, was overcrowding—the same explanation offered during the later stages of the slave trade. A report detailing the abuses on the *Auguste* in 1854 cited the crowding together of men as the reason for the spread of an

⁵⁴⁹ ANOM, Inde 466, d.600. Dépêche ministérielle, 27 July 1859, no.44. Also see ANOM, Inde 465, d.596. Dépêche ministérielle, 18 October 1856.

⁵⁵⁰ ANOM, Inde 466, d.600. Dépêche ministérielle, 24 October 1859, no. 60.

⁵⁵¹ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1028.

⁵⁵² ANOM, Reu C.381 d.281: arrivè du Canova venat de Karikal le 28 oct 1862, convoi de 487 individus, morts 2, rebutes 53. Also see: ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3280: convoi parti de Karikal le 18 août 1862, arrivé a St Denis le 19 septembre.

⁵⁵³ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3289: convoi part de Yanaon le 28 aout 1863, arrivé le 23 sept sur le Canova.

epidemic of cholera.⁵⁵⁴ This explains why so much of the legislation put in place in the 1840s and 1850s was aimed at limiting the number of immigrants on ships.

Ship captains not only protested each new measure as it was introduced but sought any loophole possible or actively ignored regulations about space. In the first few years of overseas indenture from India to Réunion it was common for captains to transport indentured labourers along with other goods, which was thought, at the time, to cause of disease—particularly food cargos such as grain. Historians, too, have seen this as a reason for high mortality rates: Saha Panachanan attributes the mortality on British ships sailing from Calcutta to Mauritius in 1859-1860 to the fact that ‘the Calcutta ships almost all carried grain cargo along with emigrants’.⁵⁵⁵ The *Striana Pourana*, a ship of 78 tonnes, left Yanaon on 26 March 1830 with 98 Indians on board and a whole load of ‘rice, dates and toileries’. The journey to Réunion lasted 105 days, during which time most the Indians developed scabies.⁵⁵⁶ In 1850, a Captain Colbert placed sixty immigrants in the between decks, alongside live cattle, which brought the intervention of the administration in Karaikal. The following year, the Governor of Karaikal was forced to intervene again when a captain placed his passengers in the between deck stuffed alongside sacks of rice. Although Bernavon did not make much of it, the *Jeune Albert*’s captain had also found space to transport 1,000 sacks of rice to Réunion.⁵⁵⁷ All of this was in large part perceived to be because of the miasma theory, which held that the origin of disease was due to poisonous chemicals or miasma associated with certain atmospheric conditions.⁵⁵⁸

By the nineteenth century, however, the miasma theory was supplemented with the so-called contagion theory—a vague awareness that disease once established was spread through

⁵⁵⁴ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1037.

⁵⁵⁵ Saha Panachanan, *Indians in the British Overseas Colonies* (Calcutta, 2003).

⁵⁵⁶ ADR, 49M 7, letter no.296, from the Governor of Bourbon to the Governor of French Establishments in India, 16 August 1830.

⁵⁵⁷ Bernavon, *Rapport*, 4.

⁵⁵⁸ See: Last, *Dictionary of Public Health*; also, George Rosen, *A History of Public Health* (New York, 1958), 103–9 and 287–326.

human contact. In the *Jeune Albert*'s case, the decision of officials in Mauritius not to allow the ship to disembark was most likely guided by contagion theory. A few years earlier, the *Richelieu*, transporting 540 immigrants from Pondicherry and Karaikal to Réunion, was put in quarantine because of an onboard outbreak of smallpox.⁵⁵⁹ Sadasivam Jaganada Reddi emphasises that the local elite in Mauritius were contagionist, pushing the administration into adopting and enforcing a strong quarantine system.⁵⁶⁰ The arrival of Indian indentured labourers was held responsible for a large-scale cholera outbreak in the 1850s, something historians concur with. 'Coolie ships brought diseases in their holds,' writes Tinker.⁵⁶¹ By 1861, evidence for germ theory was beginning to gain ground thanks to the work of John Snow in London and Louis Pasteur in France, yet it was far from being widely embraced.⁵⁶²

Their own worst enemy

Although theories of disease causation guided regulations and practices, colonial doctors often blamed the spread of diseases on their Indian patients, as evident in Bernavon's note. As Laurence Brown and Radica Mahase point out, by presenting mortality as due to 'the fragility of Indian bodies...the responsibility of those managing the transportation for Indian ill health was minimised'.⁵⁶³ Juliette Smerelda-Amon has also observed that shipboard doctors very rarely tried to find explanations for the behaviour of the Indians on their ships, least of all their

⁵⁵⁹ ANOM, Reu C381 d.3276 convoi parti de Karaikal le 18 janvier 1862, arrive à St Denis le 15 fevrier.

⁵⁶⁰ Sadasivam Jaganada Reddi, 'Le role des Indiens dans l'economie de Maurice', *Conseil Indien pour les relations culturelles, rencontre avec L'Inde: La diaspora Indienne a Maurice*, vol. 28. No.1, 1999, 28; Raj Boodhoo, *Health, Disease and Indian Immigrants in Nineteenth Century Mauritius* (Port Louis, 2010), 61.

⁵⁶¹ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, 117-8. Also: David Arnold, 'The Indian Ocean as a Disease Zone, 1500-1950,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14 (2) (1991), 1-21.

⁵⁶² Boodhoo, *Health, Disease and Indian Immigrants*, 61.

⁵⁶³ Laurence Brown and Radica Mahase, 'Medical Encounters on the Kala Pani: Regulation and Resistance in the Passages of Indentured Indian Migrants, 1834-1900', in David Boyd Haycock and Sally Archer, eds, *Health and Medicine at Sea, 1700-1900* (Woodbridge, 2009), 199.

behaviour regarding hygiene, instead contenting themselves with invoking race ‘to the point of sometimes making it a genetic deficiency... as if the behaviour of the emigrants followed some obscure cultural determinism’.⁵⁶⁴ Aboard the *Jumma* heading from Pondicherry to Martinique the doctor wrote ‘the cleanliness, the chastity of the body, does not seem to be among the virtues of the Hindustani race’. He went on:

The temperament of the Indian is sympathetic, liberal, and nervous; it is characterised as follows: softness of the tissues, little development of muscle mass, absence of calf muscles, limited strength in the biceps and other muscles; mediocre appetite...often suffering from sluggish digestion... An organism so close to a morbid state, regardless of the precautions taken to keep it intact, has everything to fear from climatic variations, which always prevail in power over the means that are tasked with opposing them.⁵⁶⁵

Such descriptions pathologising Indian passengers appear dehumanising and suggest a racialised conception of disease.

Women were considered more of a health hazard because of matters of cleanliness: remarks in reports abounded about the dirtiness of Indian women. The doctor aboard the *Lebeave Lourmel*, which left Karaikal for Réunion in 1863, wrote:

The spacious and airy holds were cleaned, fumigated, and, when the weather allowed, thoroughly dried every day; the one for women, in particular, generally required more attention because they were less clean than the men. The same goes for washing; we faced great difficulties in convincing them to take care of this matter of hygiene.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Smeralda-Amon, *La question de l'immigration indienne*, 142 and 167-8.

⁵⁶⁵ ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1185, Convoi du navire *Jumma*, parti de karikal le 21 mars 1868, arrive a la martinique le 22 juin 1868. Medecin delegué Mr. Corre, 34.

⁵⁶⁶ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3287: convoi partir de Karikal le 28 juin 1863, arrive le 23 juillet dernier, sur *Lebeave Lourmel*.

The doctor does not speculate as to why the women might be reluctant to wash, concluding they are simply dirtier. But there are several plausible explanations. The lack of privacy and adequate facilities onboard the ship may well have deterred them. Most notably, their reluctance may have stemmed from the threat of sexual violence on board or as a result of actual occurrences of this that took place while the recruits were held in depots before ships left.⁵⁶⁷

As Carter notes, it was common, especially in the early years of indentured migration, for prostitutes to be gathered up around ports to fill the quotas for women.⁵⁶⁸ As a result, there was a colonial conception of female indentured labourers from India as ‘fallen women’. Bernavon reserves his strongest contempt for women who were potentially in this situation, speaking of them with a particularly moralising tone:

I must also mention the tragic fate of three little children who died of cold and starvation, victims of their mothers' negligence or misconduct. One of them, named Peyen, aged 8 months, should not be counted among the hospital patients: his mother had been suffering from chronic dysentery for over a month, concealing her condition and thus providing her infant with poisoned nourishment that soon dried up completely. The other two were only a few days old; they were both newly born in Grande-Chaloupe and breathed a little air of life and health that was delightful to behold. However, under the influence of the diet provided by their degenerate mothers, they did not take long to waste away and wither. One of them went without clothing and nourishment for two whole nights, while the despicable woman who conceived him went out to engage in prostitution.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁷ Carter, *Women and Indenture*, 25.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁶⁹ Bernavon, *Rapport*, 20.

Bernavon deployed well-established tropes about Indian women being ‘bad mothers’. This colonial construct was used to justify interventions in Indian society, as historians have discussed.⁵⁷⁰ The depiction of Indian women as lacking in maternal abilities served to frame colonial rulers as ‘saviours,’ claiming to reform social practices while imposing Western gender norms and undermining traditional family structures. This—often racialised—narrative further supported the colonial mission and the notion of moral superiority over Indigenous populations.

Whether or not the woman in question did indeed prostitute herself is hard to know. The view of indentured women as prostitutes meant women were also particularly linked to sexually transmitted diseases, one of the most common types of illness to afflict Indian migrants on their journeys. Syphilis was the disease most named. As such on some ships, mostly those leaving from Pondicherry, women had to undergo a thorough intimate examination to prove they were not syphilitic. Dorressamy, the Indian doctor aboard the *Sugar* which sailed from Pondicherry to Réunion in 1865, reported: ‘All the women had been examined with a speculum before their embarkation in Pondicherry and Karaikal and were found to be free of syphilitic conditions.’⁵⁷¹ In 1862, of the 346 immigrants aboard the *Nicolas Poussin*, 14 men and 11 women were rejected for ‘not being in accordance with market conditions’, and a further six sent to hospital because of syphilis.⁵⁷² This is noteworthy because there were only 69 women in the convoy to start with. We do not know what happened to the six admitted to hospital, the presumption being once treated they were sent on to their employers, but this is not certain. At the very least

⁵⁷⁰ See Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1999); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate” Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995).

⁵⁷¹ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3296: Rapport sur le voyage du "Sugar" de Pondichéry à la Réunion.

⁵⁷² ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3280: Convoi parti de Karikal le 18 aout 1862, arrivé à St Denis le 19 septembre.

11 of 69 women were rejected and sent back. Again, though, doctors' reports routinely failed to link sexual transmitted diseases to the sexual violence that women almost certainly faced.

Colonial medical encounters

Shipboard medicine—including the treatment of Indian indentured labourers—has received considerable attention from historians, especially of the British empire. Notably, David Boyd Haycock and Sally Archer have studied British naval surgeons and their medical practices aboard ships transporting slaves, convicts, army subalterns and indentured labourers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They argue that the treatment of these groups often amounted to 'clinical trials' for medical practices and treatments that were then used within Britain.⁵⁷³ Brown and Mahese have similarly argued that the policy of replacing indigenous Indian medicines and medical practices with western ones during indentured ship crossings reflected the racial construction of the Indian body.⁵⁷⁴ Kumar, however, has critiqued these arguments, emphasising the changing list of medical provisions over time; changes, which, he argues, reflected a growing concern for non-serious conditions such as eczema as well as for life threatening illnesses such as smallpox. This ultimately, he contends, showed an increasingly preoccupation with Indians' wellbeing.⁵⁷⁵

French studies looking at medical practices aboard ships transporting indentured labourers are more limited, but Marimoutou-Oberlé and Schnakenbourg dedicate parts of their theses to shipboard medicine.⁵⁷⁶ Although Schnakenbourg suggests the provisions on French and British ships were largely the same—this was more the case after 1861—in the early years there were differences, both in regulation and the practice but even more so in attitudes.

⁵⁷³ Haycock and Archer, eds., *Health and Medicine at Sea*.

⁵⁷⁴ Brown and Mahese, 'Medical Encounters'.

⁵⁷⁵ Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*, 92.

⁵⁷⁶ Marimoutou-Oberlé, 'Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire'; Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne'.

In fact, many of the medicines used on migrant voyages were sourced from within India—particularly those which had been used by Indians for a long time to treat diseases to which European doctors were unaccustomed. As in India, European doctors on board ships borrowed from Indian Ayurvedic medicine.⁵⁷⁷ This does not, however, necessarily indicate a straightforward acceptance of or respect for indigenous medicine. Bernavon showed contempt for Indian medical practices:

The night before our departure from Mauritius was marked by an unfortunate incident: a three-year-old child named Ramen died in convulsions from poisoning, killed by the ignorance of a Malabar who administered Indian medicines to him without my knowledge, not knowing their purpose. This child had nothing more than a simple indigestion contracted after a too hearty meal. I had already given him the appropriate remedies, namely a few sips of hot water and one or two cups of tea infusion.⁵⁷⁸

This incident shows that the unnamed migrant thought to bring medicine with him on the journey: If Bernavon shows contempt for Indians' medical practices and for his Indian patients, it seems that they also may have had their own reservations about Bernavon or his European medical practices and demonstrated resistance towards colonial endeavours to regulate their bodies. Other groups of Indians aboard the *Jeune Albert* went into the mountains while stopped in Réunion, 'to gorge on I don't know what herbs and eat prodigious quantities of green tamarind.' Green tamarind was traditionally used to alleviate stomach problems and dysentery, so the Indians were most likely self-medicating based on what was available and recognisable in a strange place. Such acts offer insights into the agency exercised by Indian migrants in the colonial encounter during sea crossings. Blaming several deaths on this, Bernavon wrote:

⁵⁷⁷ Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*, 95.

⁵⁷⁸ Bernavon, *Rapport*, 16.

Even if I had the good fortune to be able to treat these diseases from the beginning, perhaps I would have had some success or at least some chances of success; but no, no patient came forward to declare themselves. I had to extract from among the apparently healthy individuals, emaciated skeletons, half-corpses, whose paralysed tongues and mouths full of tamarind tried to hide their illness and stubbornly claimed not to have dysentery.⁵⁷⁹

He did not speculate why people did not approach him for treatment, but either fear or a lack of faith prevented them from doing so, preferring instead to rely on the tamarind remedy they were familiar with. Attributing a reoccurrence of dysentery to ‘the humidity of the cold nights,’ he wrote later in the journey: ‘During our stay in the harbour of Saint Denis, our passengers had contracted the bad habit of sleeping in the open air and on the deck, which the freshness of the nights made cold and humid...it was never possible to get into the Malabar brain that one should not leave the hold, especially at night’.⁵⁸⁰ The mother in the above example is also described as having concealed her dysenteric state from Bernavon. What the doctor viewed as acts of foolishness that jeopardised the migrants’ health can in fact be viewed as acts of agency and, in some cases, rebellion or at least resistance against colonial attempts to regulate their bodies.

Such a dynamic is consistent with the historical trajectory of European medicine within India. Although colonial doctors saw themselves liberating Indians from superstition, as David Arnold argues, Indians, particularly in rural areas, were reluctant to accept European medical practices.⁵⁸¹ The nineteenth-century use of purgatives especially kept Indians away from European hospitals. Equally, Radhika Ramasubban shows that European medicine failed to

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁸¹ David Arnold, ed., *State and Imperial Medicine in Indigenous Societies* (New York, 1989), 175-8.

reach many of the Indians living in rural areas at all.⁵⁸² Given the areas from which indentured labourers were often drawn, many may have had little understanding of European medicine upon boarding the ship, and those that did may well have still been sceptical—preferring their own medical practices and treatments.

Yet although the ships were a space of contact between indigenous and European medicine, the division on a human level was not clear cut. Indians, particularly interpreters, medical assistants and doctors, were often also proponents and vehicles of European medicine. In Pondicherry particularly, Indians were trained in French medical schools and in some cases sent to train in France. One doctor named Gnanavirayen studied in Toulon, while another, Dorressamy, went to Paris. Dorressamy then served as a doctor aboard ships transporting indentured labourers, including the *Sugar* in 1865.⁵⁸³

The use of Indian doctors was sometimes contentious. As previously noted, in early French legislation regarding ships transporting indentured labourers an Indian doctor was compulsory, yet under the British a European doctor was obligatory. Despite the early French insistence on an Indian doctor, in 1865, the *Commission Supérieure d'Immigration* was forced to respond to concern from British officials about Dorressamy's appointment to the *Sugar*. The British had conceded by this point that there should be 'no objection to the appointment as surgeons to emigrants, on ship proceeding to the island of Reunion, of [Indian] Gentlemen of European habits who have graduated in Europe'.⁵⁸⁴ These Indian doctors were desired because of their familiarity with 'Indian diseases, languages and habits', yet there was little doubt that their acceptability was based on their European medical training and 'Europeanised

⁵⁸² Radhika Ramasubban, 'Imperial Health in British India, 1857-1900', in Roy MacLeod and Milton Lewis, eds., *Disease, Medicine and Empire and the Experience of European Expansion* (London, 1989).

⁵⁸³ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3300.

⁵⁸⁴ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3252. Letter from J.D. Gordon, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Protector of Emigrants, 4 April 1871.

manners'.⁵⁸⁵ To relieve his concern about the recruitment of Indian doctors, the French Minister of the Navy and the Colonies was told that 'recruitment is carried out among Christian students, from their childhood, by missionaries who are in frequent contact with Europeans, whose civilisation and position seem very desirable to these Indians, as they do to every native'.⁵⁸⁶ As such, Indian doctors were expected to act as arbiters of the colonial state. This included and sometimes went beyond the somewhat authoritarian imposition of European medical practices over Indian ones. When several irregularities in the reporting of deaths aboard the *Mansard*, which arrived in Martinique in 1869, prompted an inquiry and a court hearing, the Indian interpreter and nurse or medical assistant, named Maridasse, gave a statement that corroborated some facts from the statements given by the passengers. But he seems to have denied other parts of what they said happened, instead aligning with the version of events given by the captain, who stood accused of mistreating the passengers and causing at least one death.⁵⁸⁷ This shows a sense of shared identity or solidarity with the Indian passengers did not supersede Maridasse's loyalty to his employer. This also seems to hint at some degree of continuity in terms of racial boundaries and identity dynamics from the French *comptoirs* in India to the ships heading to far-flung islands. Carton has shown that in French India, Catholic Indians with 'Europeanised manners' sought to claim enhanced rights as a distinct, socially and racially superior community in comparison to non-Catholic Indigenous locals.⁵⁸⁸ On the one hand, shipboard colonial practices, which imposed European health practices and sought to dictate most other aspects of Indian passengers' daily lives, had a homogenising effect, treating Indians as bodies to be honed for labour. On the other hand, shipboard interactions reveal different

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., Letter to the Protector of Emigrants from H. Larmin, French Emigration Agent for Réunion, 10 April 1861.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., Lettre au ministre de la marine et des colonies.

⁵⁸⁷ ANOM, Mar C.131, d.1178, Procès-verbal constatant la contre visite du navire le *Mansard* porteur d'un convoi d'Emigrants de l'Inde pour la Martinique.

⁵⁸⁸ Carton, *Mixed-race and Modernity*, 80-94.

forms of Indianness, and, as shall be further discussed below, the influence of colonial constructions of ethnicity.

It is evident that the role of doctors aboard French migrant ships went above and beyond medical treatment. The extent of their interest in the Indian passengers was often far greater than that explained by Persaud's 'plantation body' theory, although perhaps no more wholesome. They were colonial enforcers of regulations, but also observers of Indians' fitness, reporters of mistreatment (though often abusers themselves), the eyes and ears of the administration. As an extension of the colonial state, endowed with considerable onboard authority, doctors were therefore involved in ethnographic and racial observation science. Boats full of migrants presented the opportunity for the study of 'the Indian race' for the 'scientific' enquiry, observation and data-gathering that informed and drove such racial constructions. Sometimes doctors like Dr Cauvin, aboard the *Hereford* that sailed from Calcutta to Guadeloupe in 1882, explicitly referred to the 'scientific' works on race discussed in chapter one. 'However high he may be on the scale of intelligent beings,' wrote Cauvin, 'the Hindu has a distractible mind, perhaps even more so than a being belonging to a civilised nation, who finds in himself and in the intellectual work he knows how to create a diversion from the boredom of physical inactivity'.⁵⁸⁹

Many of the doctors' observations seem to have been informed by prevalent colonial racialised perceptions in India of Indians, and distinctions between different ethnic, caste, religious and regional groups. It is interesting to note that these same perceptions continued in the altogether different space of the ship—and, as the following chapters, will show, to some extent also into the space of overseas colonies. Cauvin wrote: 'It is true that the flesh of a Pondicherian...is not the flesh of the Indian from Oudh and the northern provinces.'⁵⁹⁰ The

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ ANOM, Gua C.25 d.238, *Hereford*, parti de Calcutta le 2 Octobre 1882, arrivé le 23 decembre.

doctor aboard the *Camin-Lamouroux* in 1861 described in detail the differences between Indians from different regions:

Except for very few exceptions, they are young, vigorous, and well-built, just like all those who, coming from the same regions, that is, the provinces of the north, preceded them to Réunion. I have always found a significant difference between the latter and those recruited in the vicinity of Calcutta or generally in the Bengal region. Contrary to the latter, the men from the north have strong muscular limbs and generally well-developed internal organs, while the others have slender legs and arms, narrow chests, and more commonly a weakness of organs proportionate to the first category.⁵⁹¹

Even for a doctor, the language used is noticeably scientific and anatomical. His comparison of the internal organs of the Indians from different regions is particularly telling. In describing those from Bengal as weak, compared to the well-developed ‘visceras’ of those from the northern provinces, it seems he may be referring to their differing propensity to sea sickness and other forms of digestive illness. Such descriptions demonstrate how ethnic or regional origin was key to shaping perceptions of particular Indian workers and their capabilities. Alongside or beneath larger racial groupings, colonial constructions of ethnicity evidently impacted the treatment of Indian labourers.

Other doctors suggested Indians from Calcutta were more prone to illness, and death, such as the physicians aboard the *Eastern Empire* and the *Sigisbert Cezard* which departed from Calcutta carrying 450 and 446 Indian passengers, respectively, in 1864. The *Eastern Empire* lost nine of its passengers and the *Sigisbert Cezard* 14, eight of whom were children, leading the doctor to write: ‘This considerable mortality, if compared to that observed in the convoys coming from the Coromandel coast, unfortunately no longer surprises us when it

⁵⁹¹ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3266, convoi du Camin-Lamouroux, depart de Calcutta le 16 mai 1862.

concerns shipments from Calcutta'. The 900 immigrants who arrived in Réunion, according to the agent, were so hard to place that he was forced to tell the emigration agent in Calcutta to suspend the recruitment of all 'coolies of Bengal'.⁵⁹² These perceptions regarding workers from Bengal and those from south India seem to have extended to within the colonies, as demonstrated by the preference that planters expressed for workers from the south. As mentioned previously, while Bengal was known to be home to some agricultural castes, south India was particularly associated in European colonial discourse on the subcontinent with agricultural slavery and slave castes.⁵⁹³ This could have fuelled or fed into racialised colonial perceptions of south Indians as better fit for plantation work. Similarly, these descriptions seem to reflect colonial perceptions of Bengali men as effeminate and weak.⁵⁹⁴ Equally significantly, they demonstrate that there was no stable category of Indianness—in reality or in colonial constructions.

Doctors aboard ships headed for French colonies often described religious and caste distinctions as racial differences, imbued with stereotypes as well as physiological observations. Dr Franquid, aboard the *Jacques Coeur* headed for Martinique in 1865, wrote:

The Indians of different castes, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras, do they belong to the same race? I do not think so, based on the observations I have had the opportunity to make about these different castes, knowing the differences only by name. From the Brahmin to the Sudra, a marked difference in stature and the conformation of limbs can be observed. The Brahmins are generally taller and slenderer, with finer features, while the Sudras are often stockier and more robust. The colour of their skin also varies: Brahmins are often lighter-skinned, while Sudras have darker skin. This

⁵⁹² ANOM, Reu C.381, d.3272.

⁵⁹³ Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*, 189-232

⁵⁹⁴ Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*.

difference in colour is attributed not only to exposure to the sun but also, according to some, to ancient racial differences. Regarding facial structure, Brahmins have more regular and often more harmonious features, while Sudras have more angular and pronounced faces. One might therefore suppose that these physical distinctions reflect an ancient separation between castes, reinforced by strict religious practices that prevent the mixing of groups. These differences are also visible in their gait and manners, with Brahmins and Kshatriyas often carrying their heads high, while the Sudras are more inclined to adopt a more modest posture. One might think that Brahmins and Kshatriyas belong to a branch of the Caucasian race, even for the Sudras, they bear in their faces several characteristics of the Caucasian race.⁵⁹⁵

Evident in his descriptions is the colonial impulse to divide and categorise, aligning physical characteristics with regional, religious and cultural differences. Later in the same report, giving sweeping generalisations about the character and physical form, he divided ‘the Indians’ from ‘the Muslims’, the latter of whom, descending from ‘ancient conquerors’ were a ‘different race’, he wrote. ‘They have tanned skin and the character of the Arabs from whom they descend. They are less submissive and harder to manage than the Indians, have as many prejudices as them, and an obstinacy in character that prevents them from reflecting on the circumstances and necessities’.⁵⁹⁶ These ideas reflected well-established French colonial perceptions of Muslims within India. As discussed in chapter one, these held that Muslims were particularly resistant to being Westernised or, in colonial parlance ‘civilised’.⁵⁹⁷ Portrayals of Muslim women as sequestered, which were common in contemporary French

⁵⁹⁵ ANOM, Mar. C.88 d.729. Immigration indien: transport d’émigrants à la Guadeloupe. Rapport du chirurgien de Franquid. The exact spelling of the doctor’s is difficult to decipher due to handwriting.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ See Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, 114-138.

writings on and from India, are also evident in doctors' reports.⁵⁹⁸ One doctor headed for Martinique wrote regarding the pre-crossing examination: 'The Muslim women in the convoy completely veil themselves as soon as the doctor approaches... Out of fear of visiting them, only a very quick and superficial examination is performed'.⁵⁹⁹ This also potentially demonstrates, however, that women were often tasked with upholding cultural and religious practices and boundaries, as will be discussed.

Racialised categorisations, entrenched in thinking within India, endured as the indenture period wore on. H. B. Acquié, aboard the English ship the *Bayswater* which left India on 10 February 1870 headed to Martinique, wrote:

The skin colour varies from dark brown to café au lait. The latter shade is particularly seen among the Muslims, probably of Tartar origin; some higher-caste Indians also have it; the *pariahs* generally appeared to me to be the most strongly coloured. The specific characteristics of women are the same. However, in their case, the height seemed proportionally less, the tendency towards obesity less rare, and the hair colour slightly lighter.⁶⁰⁰

These ethnographic generalisations reveal an understanding of Indian society in terms of discrete, immutable categories, where each group had distinct physical traits and cultural characteristics. This shows the colonial tendency to essentialise and treat caste not just as a social category but as something linked to biological and racial distinctions. The association of Brahmins and Kshatriyas with Caucasian features thus placed them higher in both the social and racial hierarchy.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 48

⁵⁹⁹ ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1192, Convoi recruté pour le compte de M. Porry. Parti de Calcutta le 5 mars 1874.

⁶⁰⁰ ANOM, Mar C.131 d. 1186, Bayswater, Navire anglaise: Parti de l'Inde le 10 fevrier 1870, arrivé à la Martinique le 16 mai 1870.

The forensic interest the doctors took in the Indians their bodies, which included categorising and classifying them by origin and other distinguishing features, reflects the ideology of the Enlightenment and its thinking about race, which aligned culture, language with a physical manifestation. It also raises questions about the idea that the ship crossing under indenture marked the beginning of a cultural rupture. If doctors, who had significant control of ships and their Indian passengers, were keen to trace dividing lines between linguistic, regional and caste groups, it seems, under such management, these could have been maintained or even reinforced—albeit subject to reinvention according to these external, colonial interpretations and new conditions. Yet Indians also resisted these homogenising attempts and defied stereotypes that sought to categorise based on crude racialised colonial interpretations.

Caste and Religion

The South Asian subcontinent's caste system was—and remains—very complicated, but for the purposes of the study, it is necessary to note that the four principal castes (*varnas*) are: Brahmins, *ksattriyas* (warriors), *vaishyas* (traders) and *shudras* (labourers). As noted above, in South India, *paria* (originating from the Tamil word *paraiah*) tended to refer to both *shudras* and Dalits ('Untouchables'), who are seen as outside the caste system altogether. Together with the *varnas* are the more specific regional or occupational caste groups called *jatis*.

Caste was not always included in ship registers and when it was, it was occasionally confused with regional origin or profession. Nonetheless, for some periods in particular, a picture of the caste background of the Indians recruited for the French islands is available. Dr Granger, on the *Ile de Nimes* from Pondicherry to Martinique in 1874, observed that they were 'divided into castes which, as a result of the transformations that time and other influences have subjected them to, can currently be categorised into three: the Brahmins, the Sudrans, [shudras] and the *Pariahs*'. On the *Ile de Nimes* the shudras made up the majority of the convoy. Granger

recorded in this group 237 men, 87 women, and 25 children. *Parias* were recorded as the second largest group, but far smaller than the *shudras*: 50 men, 35 women and 5 children. Granger noted that some among this group were Christian.⁶⁰¹ The doctor aboard the *Winefred*, which sailed from Calcutta to Martinique arriving in March 1876, noted:

If we take a look at the religion and social status of the men in the convoy, we find that many of the subjects practiced the worship of Vishnu. We had only a few Christians, a small number of Muslims. I regret not following the example of some colleagues, that is, not having conducted a statistical analysis of the religions of all these men... On board, we had only a very small number of Brahmins, about twenty Muslims, active, energetic, intelligent people, who, as Rouband says, had a great superiority and influence over the others. The rest of the convoy consisted of *Pariahs*, or people of lower status, among whom some individuals from a less low class had mixed, whom I believe are called Soudras.⁶⁰²

While Granger's more detailed analysis distinguished between *shudras* and *parias*, here the latter are identified as a mixture of 'less low class' *shudras* and Dalits. Once again stereotypes about Muslims from India continued onto the ship.

The extent to which Brahmin and other high castes boarded ships as indentured labourers has been much debated. Recent works have dispelled the erstwhile commonly held notion that only low-castes signed up for indenture, although the focus on these works is largely on recruitment to British colonies.⁶⁰³ The contrast between the recordings of caste make-ups between 1829 and 1874, shown above, suggest, however, that in French colonies, as with

⁶⁰¹ ANOM, Mar C.131 d. 1191. Ile de Nimes, partie de l'Inde (Pondichery) le 22 7bre 1874, arrive à la Martinique le 27 novembre 1874.

⁶⁰² ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1194. Relation Medicale d'un voyage d'Emigrants Indiens effectué de Calcutta à la Martinique par le navire Anglais *Winefred*.

⁶⁰³ Laurence, *Question of Labour*; Allahar and Varadarajan, 'Differential Creolization'.

British, early indentured labourers were disproportionately lower-caste, while later on this shifted somewhat. Of the cohort that sailed on 7 August 1829, for example, there were 197 so-called *parias*, 27 Muslims, 13 weavers, 13 agriculturalists, five fishermen, some whose professions were not identified, and finally two immigrants from a high Telinga caste.⁶⁰⁴ But on the *Bayswater*, which sailed to Martinique in 1870, the doctor noted that there were many Brahmins.⁶⁰⁵ (Although On the *Île de Nimes* there was only one Brahmin recorded: ‘it is indeed very rare to encounter them in emigrant convoys. The influence they have on their fellow citizens does not usually put them in a state of destitution that compels them to leave and seek the necessary means of livelihood through work’.⁶⁰⁶)

As we have seen, the 1857 uprising caused a large surge of migration in the late 1850s and 1860s and perhaps even into the early 1870s both within India and overseas.⁶⁰⁷ Due to the demographic make-up of the Indian sepoys, many of those on the move were likely to have been from higher castes. For instance, in April 1864, three merchants from Saint-Denis recruited five Indians in Yanaon (Vassoumouty Somaya, Said Hyber, Somadou Gangaya, Caldindi Vincatramarazou, Caparada Atchigadou). Two of them belonged to the higher castes, Cometty (merchant), and a Rajah (Kshatriya), the others to the fishermen caste.⁶⁰⁸ Sepoys also had good reason for concealing their caste identity, along with their military background, so the true numbers may not be reflected in the records.

The extent to which Indians preserved their caste and religious identities during the ship crossing (as well as on the plantations) has remained more contentious. Historians have, in general, conceded that indentured labourers who migrated from India a to European plantation

⁶⁰⁴ Patrick Pitoeff, ‘Yanaon et les engagés de La Réunion: Trois expériences d’émigration au XIXe siècle’, in *Actes du Séminaire de l’AHIOI*, 1986, Saint-Denis, 227.

⁶⁰⁵ ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1186, *Bayswater*, navire anglaise, parti de l’Inde le 10 février 1870, arrive à la Martinique, le 16 mai 1870.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷ Anderson, *Indian Uprising of 1857-8*.

⁶⁰⁸ Pitoeff, ‘Yanaon et les engagés de La Réunion’, 234.

colonies were better able to maintain their cultural traditions than enslaved Africans.⁶⁰⁹ Nonetheless, many, including Tinker, have seen the crossing as similar to the Middle Passage in terms of its disruption of social norms and cultural patterns.⁶¹⁰ They have long held that caste boundaries in particular were eroded as Indians from different backgrounds and regions were forced to eat and live together. The traumatic experience of leaving India and crossing *Kala Pani*, the ‘black water’, moreover, was itself seen to dissolve caste identity. Tinker has made much of the apprehension and fear experienced in crossing the *Kala Pani*, and the loss of caste that was seen to have resulted from this. This reflects colonial officials’ attitudes at the time it seems. Franquid wrote: ‘If emigration and even the mere fact of having lived aboard our ships have the consequence of excluding the Indians from their caste, of making them outcasts, they will also have the effect of breaking down their prejudices and freeing them from the yoke of the caste.’⁶¹¹ Yet, both the extent to which this played on the minds of Indian recruits themselves and the extent of cultural rupture has recently been heavily contested in terms of migration to British colonies.⁶¹² As Anderson explains in her analysis of the nexus between indenture and criminal punishment, British policy was guided by the ‘perception that transportation was a particularly appropriate punishment for India’s “caste-based” society’. Officials thus believed that the ‘evils of caste defilement associated in the minds of Indians with the crossing of the *Kala Pani* were more efficacious as a deterrent to crime than even the death sentence’.⁶¹³ Once again, concerns about caste and the idea of *Kala Pani* reflect colonial

⁶⁰⁹ Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*, 76-124.

⁶¹⁰ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, 117-18. Also see Bahadur, *Coolie Women*.

⁶¹¹ ANOM, Mar. C.88 d.729. Immigration indien: transport d’emigrants à la Guadeloupe. Rapport du chirurgien de Franquid.

⁶¹² Laurence, *A Question of Labour*; Anton L. Allahar and T. Varadarajan, ‘Differential Creolisation: East Indians In Trinidad and Guyana’, *Indo-Caribbean Review* 1 (1994); Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (Leicester, 1996); Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, ‘Kala Pani revisited: Indian labour migrants and the sea crossing’, *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies*, 1(1) (2021), 36-62.

⁶¹³ Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean Transportation from South*

attitudes about Indians as much as, if not more than, the reality for Indians themselves. As demonstrated, high mortality and morbidity rates meant Indians had many other reasons to fear long ship journeys, as Anderson underlines.⁶¹⁴

As for ships headed for French colonies, doctors aboard noted divisions along caste and religious lines. Granger noted that the Muslims, for whom he gives no number, 'live completely apart from the Indians' and were 'in general, intelligent, suited for commerce, clean, energetic, but sometimes also very undisciplined'.⁶¹⁵ Dr Formel on the *Marie-Laure* noted that 'each caste has its rights which it guards jealously'. He continued:

So, presenting food to a person of caste in a dish that has been used by a Pariah, without purifying it in advance, would expose him to starvation. Two individuals of the same caste will not drink from the same glass; the second will not put to his mouth the vessel that the first has touched with his lips. Both will pour the liquid into their mouths without pressing their lips against the vessel. The reason for this is that saliva is considered by everyone as the most disgusting bodily secretion.⁶¹⁶

Religious and caste divisions are especially evident in doctors' observations about the eating and cooking habits of the Indian passengers. Dr Daly, a British doctor who travelled with 147 immigrants from Karaikal to Réunion in 1869, wrote that 'I would recommend that the practice obtained in Madras of having two separate kitchens on board, be adapted. One to be awarded to the hindoos, and the other to the mahomedans and *pariahs*, so as to facilitate the operation

Asia to Mauritius, 1815–53, (London: 2000), 16. Also see Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century', *Slavery & Abolition*, 30(1), (2009), 93-109.

⁶¹⁴ Clare Anderson, 'The Age of Revolution in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and South China Sea: A Maritime Perspective', *International Review of Social History*, (December, 2013): 229-51.

⁶¹⁵ ANOM, Mar C.131 d. 1191. Ile de Nimes.

⁶¹⁶ ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1198 (1872)

of cooking, and obviate the clashing of caste prejudices'.⁶¹⁷ Cauvin aboard the *Hereford* in 1882 wrote that 'The operation of the convoy required...a certain number of willing people chosen from among them to fill the roles of cooks, distributors, supervisors, or nursing 'sidars'. The first ones, chosen by the Emigration Agent himself from the higher castes to accommodate individual prejudices, satisfactorily carried out a job that was not without its fatigue.'⁶¹⁸

While the above examples could indicate the continuation of caste and religious distinctions, these are clearly based on French colonial perceptions of caste and distinctions between religious groups, which in the nineteenth century were heavily racialised. Various studies on this subject within the subcontinent have shown how these understandings often represented a simplification or biased interpretation of the complex reality, as transmitted by intermediaries with vested interests.⁶¹⁹ It is not surprising that this continued aboard ships. Yet, these perceptions, however flawed, did hold significance as they could shape the experience of Indian migrants—for example by leading to different treatment—as historians have demonstrated was the case, again, within India, where colonial attitudes helped to harden caste divisions.⁶²⁰ It could be argued that within the confined space of the ship, where colonial authorities had a more all-encompassing purview this effect was amplified. The provision of separate kitchens for higher caste Hindus on the one hand and lower caste Hindus and Muslims on the other is one example whereby colonial perceptions led to the reinforcing of divisions

⁶¹⁷ ANOM, Reu C.381 Introduction de 147 immigrants par le navire l'Anna, capitaine Macé. Rapport en anglais du docteur A. Daly (16 oct 1869). Parti de Karikal le 12 sept 1869, arrivé à St Denis 8 oct 1869.

⁶¹⁸ ANOM, Gua C.25 d.238, *Hereford*, parti de Calcutta le 2 Octobre 1882, arrive à le 23 decembre.

⁶¹⁹ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, (Princeton, 2001); Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India*, (Princeton, 1996); David Ludden, 'Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge' in C. A. Breckenridge and P. Van der Veer eds., *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: perspectives on South Asia*, (Philadelphia, 1993); Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India*, (Bloomington, 2000).

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*,

that otherwise may have broken down, or which may have followed different fault lines in reality. It could also, however, have been a response to acts of rebellion or resistance by Indian migrants against the contravention of caste norms in depots and on ships. Anderson notes one instance where convicts, confined together in Calcutta's Alipur jail as they awaited transportation to Mauritius, rioted in protest against being forced to share cooking and eating pots.⁶²¹

Acts of rebellion and resistance against the contravention of caste norms also took place during indentured ship crossings. Muslims aboard the *Winefred* did not accept pork, according to the doctor.⁶²² When the *Mansard* arrived in Martinique in 1869, the number of deaths and irregularities led to a court hearing. One Pavadé, the passengers reported, was beaten to death for stealing a biscuit. Another, Nanyapay, they reported, 'threw himself into the sea to escape the ill-treatment to which he was subjected'. The passengers' explanation of what happened was recorded as follows:

This man came from a caste which does not eat fish. Every day the lieutenant hit him in order to force him to take and consumer his ration. Nanyapay preferred to abstain from eating the food and contented himself with a sauce that he made himself to eat. One day, around five in the morning, when he had headed to the kitchen to take some water, the cook hit him and pushed him away, the Indian of his own volitation threw himself into the sea. No one sought to save him; the ship did not even stop.⁶²³

The Indians' reports of Nanyapay's death led to some confusion as his name was not on the list of Indians deceased during the crossing. But he had not disembarked in Martinique and

⁶²¹ Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies'.

⁶²² ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1194. Relation Medicale d'un voyage d'Emigrants Indiens effectué de Calcutta à la Martinique par le navire Anglais *Winefred*.

⁶²³ ANOM, Mar C.131, d.1178, Procès-verbal constatant la contre visite du navire le *Mansard* porteur d'un convoi d'Emigrants de l'Inde pour la Martinique.

‘The interpreter also affirms that the Indians of the caste known as Canada, to which this man belongs, do not eat fish or anything that has had life’.⁶²⁴ Evidently, some Indian migrants held onto their beliefs and practices *in spite of* colonial attitudes and the shipboard conditions created by them. Nanyapay was punished for not eating fish, yet he resisted.

Such moments of resistance against the homogenising effect of the ship and colonial attempts to regulate bodies and diets did not necessarily preclude the loosening of caste and ethnic boundaries. Some doctors, nonetheless, described an easing of caste restrictions and divisions. The doctor on the *Winefred* noted that ‘The caste division was felt in the early days, but after some time, it had almost completely disappeared.’⁶²⁵ The large degree of diversity may have facilitated an easing of divisions. Among the *shudras*, Granger recorded there were: ‘All professions: farmers, merchants...writers. Also, you can find traveling musicians there.’ Although Granger lists all the *shudras* together, the hierarchy and social structure among that group was likely to have been far more complex—as indicated by the diversity of professions. While people of similar caste married one another and had similar religious practices, there were still differences. The diversity of professions also shows that both village and city dwellers found their way onto the ships headed for French colonies and plantation labour. Echoed by the geographic diversity of the migrants’ origins on the *Winefred*, it seems the numbers belonging to each caste would have been very small and preserving rigid caste boundaries as existed in their villages and towns within the confines of the ship would have been difficult. It is hard to believe some of these divisions were not broken down or redrawn during the crossing by necessity.

The archives reveal hints of social disruption and potential changes to existing hierarchies and social structures aboard the ship. Granger remarked that among the *parias* there

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ ANOM Mar C.131 d.1194. Relation Medicale d’un voyage d’Emigrants Indiens effectué de Calcutta à la Martinique par le navire Anglais *Winefred*.

were some Christians, and the *parias* were ‘usually servants of other Indians and Europeans residing in India’. He added: ‘there are a few intelligent individuals, those who serve Europeans and can speak the French language quite easily’.⁶²⁶ The particular affinity of *parias*, as domestic workers, for the French language and that some of them were Christian meant that it was members of the lowest caste group, who had the skills (and in some cases religion) to most easily adapt to French colonial spaces. One migrant, Couroumoussamy, interviewed following the deaths on board the *Mansard* is recorded as expressing himself ‘very well in [Martiniquais] creole,’ because he had been to the island before. Especially in the later years of indenture, this was not so unusual. Such migrants would have had an understanding of caste divisions and a sense of caste identity from India, but also an understanding of the creole island and previous experience of the ship. Whatever his caste identity, Couroumoussamy’s ability to express himself in creole gave him a privileged position within the group on the ship and in the eyes of the colonial authorities: he became a sort of spokesperson, expressing the migrants’ wider grievances and also endowed with authority and trust by French colonial authorities. The court documents stated, for instance, ‘Here, according to Couroumoussamy, is how things happened,’ or, following a summary of what the passengers said, ‘Couroumoussamy confirms that...’⁶²⁷ While, as some of the descriptions above suggest, for some upper caste Indians having to interact in close proximity with lower caste people might have been traumatic, at least at first, for some lower caste people the crossing provided the opportunity to escape the restrictions of caste.

⁶²⁶ ANOM, Mar C.131 d. 1191. Ile de Nimes.

⁶²⁷ ANOM, Mar C.131, d.1178, Procès-verbal constatant la contre visite du navire le *Mansard* porteur d'un convoi d'Emigrants de l'Inde pour la Martinique.

Just as caste boundaries may have loosened as the ship's journey progressed, there is evidence to suggest over time Indian migrants sought adaptive strategies, as Anderson has argued.⁶²⁸ Sir George Grierson wrote in his report on migration from Bihar in 1883:

About caste, the people have invented a curious theory regarding ship-board life, which shows the adaptability of native customs. I was saying that the cooks on board were generally Brahmans and was met by the assertion that there are some castes, Sonars for instance, who will not eat food cooked by Brahmans. "How then do they do on board-ship?" "O, that is simple enough; a man can eat anything on board ship. A ship is like the temple of Jagannath, where there are no caste restrictions." I admit that this rather staggered me, but I have since enquired from respectable men, and without doubt this belief is spreading. It is said to have originated with the steamer journey from Calcutta to Orissa, which is one of the incidents of a pilgrimage to Jagannath. On board these ships the theory was first introduced, as one of the incidents of the pilgrimage, and is now being extended to emigrant ships, to the great benefit of the Colonies.

Cauvin, describing practices among migrants departing from Calcutta in 1882, seems to have referred to this when he noted: 'the coolies, to whom religious prescriptions also forbid milk, have promptly reached agreements with heaven, and this food has been distributed in such abundance as to border on prodigality.'⁶²⁹ This suggests a pragmatic approach to dietary restrictions, indicating that migrants were actively negotiating their cultural practices in response to new conditions. Rather than viewing this as a mere abandonment of caste, it can be interpreted as resilience: individuals sought to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to the realities of life on the ship.

⁶²⁸ Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies'.

⁶²⁹ ANOM, Gua C.25 d.238, Hereford, parti de Calcutta le 2 Octobre 1882, arrive à le 23 decembre.

Equally, the space of the ship created an arena for intermingling, for sharing experiences and for forging relationships that social, religious and geographic boundaries may not have permitted in India. With little to do on the ship, many of the doctors recorded that the Indian migrants, especially the men, came together for dances or singing in the evenings. Dorressamy, the Indian doctor aboard the *Sugar*, reported that ‘we encouraged their emulation through reasonable distributions of brandy to the engaged [workers] to play comedies in the evening, an excellent means of entertainment’.⁶³⁰ Courousmoussamy wrote that aboard the *Mansard* ‘tamtam dances took place on the deck to entertain the passengers’.⁶³¹ Cauvin described aboard the *Hereford* in 1882: ‘Apart from the actual games for which the Emigration Agent foots the bill, consisting of card games and... [illegible], or better still, an Indian version of tic tac, I encouraged the coolies to gather in groups to sing, make music with drums, and perform airs from their countries.’ Although he added that ‘this type of diversion proved to be scarcely appreciated among the women; it is the same, for even stronger reasons, with dances.’ ‘Nevertheless,’ he said, ‘one day, a few young men dressed in women's clothing imitated ‘bayadères,’ much to the great joy of their comrades.’⁶³² (‘Bayadère was a word used by European colonists in India to refer to a female Hindu dancer, especially one at a South Indian temple, known as *devadasi*.) This description suggests that aboard the ship there was opportunity for Indians of different religions, castes and regions to witness or share (if not partake in) each other’s cultural practices. Moreover, when he noted that ‘the caste division was felt in the early days, but after some time, it had almost completely disappeared,’ this indicates a dynamic process rather than a static one. The initial adherence to caste boundaries suggests a recognition of their importance, but the subsequent mingling indicates that migrants

⁶³⁰ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3296.

⁶³¹ ANOM, Mar C.131, d.1178, Procès-verbal constatant la contre visite du navire le Mansard porteur d'un convoi d'Emigrants de l'Inde pour la Martinique.

⁶³² ANOM, Gua C.25 d.238, Hereford, parti de Calcutta le 2 Octobre 1882, arrivée le 23 decembre.

were actively engaging with each other, creating new social relationships that transcended traditional divisions. This shift can be seen as an opportunity for the formation of hybrid identities, reflecting a blend of cultural continuity and adaptation in a confined, communal environment.

Cauvin was not alone in remarking that such mingling was slower to take place among women. In noting that caste divisions disappeared after some time, the doctor on the *Winefred* added a caveat: 'The women held onto their prejudices for a long time, longer than the men.'⁶³³ Traditional gender roles frequently placed women in more restrictive positions, where adherence to caste norms was emphasised and reinforced through socialisation. This was compounded by the limited mobility of women, which restricted their opportunities to interact with individuals from different castes and religious groups, making it challenging to adapt to new social dynamics. Indeed, Cauvin further stated:

I made efforts, through small rewards, to encourage flat hand wrestling which develops strength along with agility and flexibility of the body; these high jumps, the gymnastics of arms and legs, and even rhythmic walking and running steps. I tried to introduce similar exercises among the women, but after a few days, I had to give it up; apart from a few young women who found it amusing, the others preferred to maintain their sphinx-like immobility, squatting or smoking the hookah with the men. The Hindu woman is a first-class smoker!⁶³⁴

Bahadur highlights that indentured women were often tasked with upholding cultural and religious practices, particularly on the ships but also on plantations.⁶³⁵ From the above

⁶³³ ANOM, Mar C.131 d.1194. Relation Medicale d'un voyage d'Emigrants Indiens effectué de Calcutta à la Martinique par le navire Anglais *Winefred*.

⁶³⁴ Ibid. On this Cauvin also said that 'every Sunday, tobacco in leaves or extract was distributed to male and female coolies.' He added that he 'also received opium extract and Indian hemp for those addicted to this intoxication'.

⁶³⁵ Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*, 357-61.

example of Muslim women, it seems this argument could be extended to pre-departure depots too. Bahadur demonstrates that women played crucial roles in organising rituals, preparing traditional foods, and ensuring the observance of cultural customs, thereby entrenching caste identities within their communities. The societal pressure on women to conform to established norms, alongside the strong associations of purity linked to caste, may also have contributed to a more prolonged adherence to these divisions. Bahadur illustrates that while women navigated new environments, they faced unique challenges that reinforced traditional boundaries, showcasing both their vulnerability and resilience in maintaining cultural practices amid oppressive circumstances. Thus, the interplay of gender, caste, and colonial structures created a complex landscape where caste identities remained more pronounced among women during this period of migration.

Conclusion

Regulations governing the ship crossings from India to French (and British) colonies increased throughout the indenture period, reflecting the focus at the core of the exercise: keeping Indians alive and fit for working on colonial plantations. This chapter has demonstrated how, in this context, Indians' bodies became sites of colonial control, of ethnographic inquiry, racialised and racist colonial projections and of contest between western modernity and 'orientalist' traditions. Doctors' reports from these crossings also provide detailed information not just about the health of their Indian patients but also about their daily lives. From sources of entertainment to eating habits, these seemingly inane descriptions offer insights into religious and regional divisions, caste identities and gender relations. Observed and recorded for the most part by French (and occasionally British) men, these descriptions often portray as much about their perceptions as about the Indians themselves, including the pervasive influence that racial ideas, which had their roots in the previous century, continued to have on colonial

perceptions. Indians and Europeans, on the ship perhaps more so than anywhere else, did not exist in isolation from one another and nor, therefore, did their understandings of one another. Indians were subject to but perhaps also adapted to and resisted colonial attempts to regulate their bodies and European understandings about themselves: about what it meant to be Indian, to be Bengali or ‘*Pondicherien*’, to be a so-called *paria* or a Muslim or a woman. Another central interaction aboard the ship was that which took place between the Indians themselves. Confronted with men and women of different religions, regions and castes, as described above, in many instances Indians found ways to maintain their own practices and divisions. In other instances, the confines and hardships of the ship facilitated or required that accommodations and adaptations were made. The form that these adaptations took varied according to individual experiences as well as due to caste, regional origin and gender, yet Indians actively negotiated their cultural practices in response to new conditions in what can be seen as a form of resilience. Thrown together on boats, Indian migrants did not leave their previous identities on the shores of India, instead these formed the basis of a re-imagined collective Indian identity.

CHAPTER FIVE

Créolité and Indianity during the period of indenture in Réunion

In 1794, a case came before the court in Saint-Denis, Réunion, regarding a dispute over the sale of some property between Julien Cesard, described as an '*Indien libre*', and Azy, an Indian '*lascard*'. The dispute escalated into a physical fight in the Camp de Malabard, an area in Saint-Denis where many enslaved and free Indians lived. Azy was reported to have said: 'you are a *nègre* and a scoundrel; I would buy ten other blacks like you; you are not fit to associate with me'. Witness statements were taken from Jean-Baptiste, '*un creol libre*', Jean-Francois Ramalinga, also described as a '*creol libre*' but with a Tamil name, and Sadoc, '*aussi Lascard*'. Later that same year, Julien Cesard was involved in another dispute, this time with a Monsieur Poulet, '*l'hussier*' (bailiff or court officer), whereby, to pay his debts to the latter, he was obliged to sell one of his slaves, Sophie, described as a '*negresse Bengalie*'.⁶³⁶

Allen and other historians of the Indian Ocean have tended to dismiss any Indian identities or cultural presence in Réunion prior to the nineteenth-century indenture period as insignificant: the number of Indians, both enslaved and free, has been seen as too small and the rupture with their previous lives too great.⁶³⁷ Yet, this case alone paints a very different picture of 'Indianity' in late eighteenth-century Réunion. Many of the lascars—Indian sailors—were likely to have been Muslims, while the free Indians, based on their names, appear to have been, at least nominally, Christian. Even these names, however, reveal complex and ambiguous identities: Ramalinga was described as a 'creole' and therefore most likely born on the island

⁶³⁶ ADR, 3E162, Affaire de Ramalinga.

⁶³⁷ Allen, *European Slave Trading*.

but kept his Tamil surname, while Julien Cesard, described as an Indian rather than a creole, so therefore unlikely to have been born on the island, has a fully Christian name. So too does Sophie, his 'Bengali slave'. Based on Azy's insult to Cesard (and also supported by emancipation records), the latter was also once enslaved, yet had been emancipated and gone on to be an enslaver himself. Azy's insult is reported as having been spoken in 'French creole', yet Azy signs his statement in '*caractères malabards*', suggesting he was literate (in an Indian language at least) and, most likely, bilingual.

On the eve of indenture in Réunion, it seems that among those of Indian origin and those born in India living in Réunion there were multiple Indian identities, reflecting regional, religious and class differences, and displaying different levels of 'creolisation'. In contrast to the Antilles, Réunion was no stranger to Indians by the time the first indentured labourers arrived in the 1820s. This chapter continues the story of the island's Indian population from chapter one, considering first the Indians who arrived under the first wave of indenture from 1828: the conditions they worked in, how they responded to these and their interactions with the enslaved men and women they worked alongside and the white planter class. Then, looking at the second wave of indenture, the chapter assesses how seventeenth-century stereotypes of enslaved Indians held by the island's planter class and colonial authorities were transformed during indenture. Finally, it examines the cultural adaptation of nineteenth-century Indian indentured labourers in Réunion, the nature of their assimilation into an existing creole society and contribution to that culture, focusing particularly on religion as a vessel through which wider cultural practices, traditions and social structures were contested, fought for, reshaped and utilised. One reason for this is the remarkable religious syncretism seen in Réunion today: it is possible on the island for an individual to be both a practising Catholic and a Hindu or Muslim. The foundations of this, it could be argued, were built at the time of indenture. Read

in combination with the final chapter, it will consider how did these processes in Réunion differed from those in the in the French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Indenture during slavery

In contrast to the Antilles, the indenture period on Réunion began during the era of slavery.⁶³⁸ By the mid-1820s, abolitionist rumours started to cause concern among the island's planters. This led to an arrangement with the Governor of the French outposts in India and the arrival of the first indentured labourers: 15 so-called *parias* from present-day Telangana signed contracts for three years' labour in Réunion. They arrived in March 1828, twenty years before the abolition of slavery, and were directed to the plantations of Sainte-Marie in the island's north. They were soon joined by a couple of hundred more migrants, most of whom came from impoverished parts of the coast of Orissa and who were distributed across the island. Out of the 268 'coolies' who travelled in 1828, 197 were recorded as *parias*, 27 Muslims (23 of whom were lascars or sailors), 13 weavers, 13 farmers and 5 fishermen. By 1831, 3,102 Indian indentured labourers were recorded as being on the island.⁶³⁹

The existence of Indian indentured workers during slavery meant that their relationship with plantation owners and with the existing enslaved and free populations, as well as their position within colonial society as a whole, was significantly different from that of Indians in the Antilles. Their proximity to enslaved people before abolition meant that the conditions in which the indentured labourers lived, and their treatment, were, in some ways, little different from those of enslaved people. Compared to indenture contracts in later years, those for these pioneering migrants were flimsy in practice, if not in theory. The first contracts were for three years and obliged the plantation-owner to pay 'round-trip transportation for the indentured

⁶³⁸ Gerbeau, 'Engagés and Coolies'.

⁶³⁹ Gerbeau, 'Minorités Mal Connues'.

worker' and 'provide him with a monthly salary of seven rupees, with a portion sent to the family remaining in India'.⁶⁴⁰ The Minister of the Navy and the Colonies in Paris also decreed that 'a great degree of freedom should be afforded to these foreigners who must be able to practise their own customs when it comes to burials and inheritances' and that there be 'reserved in the [plantation] grounds certain areas where they will be able to establish Indian villages'. He also prohibited corporal punishment: 'If corporal punishment is inflicted on the Indians, it may be regarded as a blameworthy abuse which, in no respect, can be tolerated and should be stopped immediately'.⁶⁴¹ Pondicherry's Governor, De Melay, also advocated for the establishment of a workers' union to ensure that these measures were honoured and to prevent abuses. A syndicate for Indians was set up in 1831, charged with addressing indentured labourers' grievances and with stopping them deserting plantations and handing over those that did over to the authorities.⁶⁴²

Officially, the syndicate was abolished in 1837, two years before indenture migration from India was banned. Between that year and 1842, an indentured labourer named Ogou Sourapa and several of his compatriots wrote a series of letters to Réunion's Governor and Director of the Interior, asking for the syndicate to be re-established, proposing that in its new form, it would be paid for by the Indians themselves. Claiming to be the '*chef de bandes*' of their compatriots and the 'interpreters of all their compatriots residing' on the island, they laid out many of the complaints of Indians indentured in Réunion.⁶⁴³ The picture the letters paint is one of Indians willing and eager to work the fields but forced to abandon this task because of the weak measures of protection and the planters' failure to adhere to the contract. They wrote on

⁶⁴⁰ Cited in Weber, *Les établissements français*, 949.

⁶⁴¹ ADR, M11 34. Lettre du Minsistre la Marine et des Colonies au Gouverneur de l'Ile Bourbon, 29 July 1829.

⁶⁴² Weber, *Les établissements français*, 948.

⁶⁴³ Cited in Firmin Lacpatia, *Les Indiens da la Réunion: La vie sociale: 1826-1848* (Saint-Denis, 1983), 61-76.

17 July 1837 that ‘due to a blind trust, these protective ordinances were not strictly observed concerning the payment of workers’ wages’⁶⁴⁴ and five years later that ‘with a few rare exceptions, from honourable landowners who paid regularly, the others, after the first few months, did not continue; a significant arrearage occurred because, under deceitful promises, the Indians were held back from work.’⁶⁴⁵ The solution Sourapa proposed was the syndicate, which ‘would offer workers to the *habitants*’ and would be ‘composed of *bandes* of which each would be led by an overseer from their own caste’ and which would guarantee the payment of salaries each month. For this to work, Sourapa continued, it would be necessary to have two interpreters, ‘the vast majority of Indians being unable to express themselves in French’. He mentioned in the same letter, however, that ‘some among us, endowed with a fertile intelligence speak quite well French.’ It is unclear whether Sourapa’s French was advanced enough that he did indeed write these letters or if they were scribed with assistance from someone else, yet they offer valuable insights into the conditions experienced by early indentured labourers and suggest a level of organisation among them to redress their complaints.

As written in Sourapa’s letters and as discussed in chapter three, the terms of the contracts were rarely enforced. The owners of plantations with indentured labourers often did not respect the contracts.⁶⁴⁶ Sometimes this was because of financial difficulties—a number of Réunion’s plantation-owners went bankrupt during the 1830s.⁶⁴⁷ In 1843, a local newspaper described the rapid change of the island’s economic fortunes: ‘In 1819, each landowner had a large number of domestic servants. Today, everyone is reducing their numbers to provide

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 64-5, Lettre à Monsieur Cuvillier, Contre-Amiral et Gouverneur de Bourbon, 17 July 1837.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 73-5, Lettre à Monsieur le Gouverneur, 25 July 1842.

⁶⁴⁶ Also see: Alessandro Stanziani, ‘Labor, Rights, and Immigration: A Comparison between Mauritius and Réunion, 1840-1880’, *Le Mouvement Social*, No 241(4) (2012), 47-64.

⁶⁴⁷ A period of growth in the island’s sugar industry was followed by one of crisis, mainly due to growing competition from sugar beet produced in Europe and heavy taxes. See Richard B. Allen, ‘Plantation Economy and Slavery in the Mascarene Islands (Indian Ocean)’, in Thomas Spear, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History* (Oxford, 2022).

agriculture with as many labourers as possible'.⁶⁴⁸ In this context, one of the Indians' biggest gripes was that they had not been paid, nor even, in some cases, fed. As Governor, Duval d'Ailly reported in 1832:

In some areas, the discontent among the Indians was so inflamed due to the lack of wages and even food that these men, who are usually so peaceful and timid in their own country, resorted to violence and almost rebellion, which could only be quelled through the use of force.⁶⁴⁹

Following a revolt in 1831, which saw 80 Indians from different plantations around Saint-André amass to protest against the non-payment of their wages, the town's mayor, while condemning their actions, nonetheless also placed blame on plantation owners for failing to fulfil their side of the contract.⁶⁵⁰

While some plantation-owners could not afford to pay their workers, others withheld payment or the return ticket they were contracted to provide on account of alleged insufficient work, absenteeism or other misdemeanours. Réunion's Director of the Interior, having heard reports of this, was quick to blame the 'fickle and mistrustful character of this class of men [the Indians]'. He noted, however, that certain plantation-owners complained about their indentured workers 'in spite of the fact that so many labourers had faithfully fulfilled the agreements'.⁶⁵¹

Aside from deprivation, other complaints were based on their treatment. Although plantation-owners were banned from using corporal punishment on indentured labourers, the mental leap from enslaver to employer was too great for many—especially when these roles

⁶⁴⁸ ADR, *Feuille Hebdomadaire de l'Île Bourbon*, 26 April 1843.

⁶⁴⁹ ANOM, Reu C.85, d.558, *Mémoire du gouverneur Duval d'Ailly*, 8 November 1832.

⁶⁵⁰ Lettre adressée à Mr. le directeur général de l'intérieur de Saint-Denis, 26 July 1831, cited in Lacpatia, *Les Indiens*, 32.

⁶⁵¹ ADR, 57 M I, 'Exposé de la situation intérieure de la colonie, 1832', by the Director of the Interior.

existed simultaneously. It is worth noting that their enslaved workforces could have included enslaved Indians. Police and court records contain many complaints from Indian indentured labourers of physical abuses carried out by, or on the orders of, plantation owners.⁶⁵² In April 1836, one Indian died from his injuries after having been beaten for not walking ‘at the will of the overseer’.⁶⁵³ The Indians subjected to such treatment did not take it lightly. As Governor d’Ailly described in that instance, the unfed and unpaid Indians rose up against their employer so fiercely that order was restored only ‘with the use of force’. Three full-scale revolts did take place in 1831, one in Saint-Gilles-les-Hauts and the others in Saint-André.⁶⁵⁴ Réunion’s authorities named Yancorsmi Talinga as the leader of the Saint-Gilles revolt, which began on the property of Madame Desbassyns, run by her son-in-law, M. de Villèle. The Indians were driven to revolt by a two-month delay in their wages and harsh treatment at the hands of their overseer: an enslaved creole. Saint-André saw two revolts, both triggered by the non-payment of wages. In describing the first, which took place among Indians from Mr. Laserve’s plantation in Champ-Borne, the Director of the Interior used the same language of ‘plots’ (*complots*) as was used to describe acts of resistance or organised rebellions by enslaved people. He wrote in a circular to the island’s mayors that more surveillance of Indian indentured labourers was needed as he feared that what happened that morning was ‘the result of a plot that could have ramifications.’ Both these revolts will be discussed further in the section below.

Many Indian migrants ran away. Tellingly, Réunion’s newspapers reported on such desertions in the 1830s and 1840s in their sections dedicated to announcements of runaway maroon slaves. No distinction was made between the two. Some of those who escaped plantations were found other employment, particularly in urban areas and occasionally in

⁶⁵² ADR, 79 M 3; lettre n° 144, Rapports généraux de police n° 4, 3 January 1830; 79 M 5 Indiens battus, 10 May 1851: Révolte de 31 Indiens contre les mauvais traitements dont ils sont victimes.

⁶⁵³ ADR, 79 M 4, Lettre n° 748, 17 April 1836.

⁶⁵⁴ ANOM, Reu, C.85, d.558, Mémoire du gouverneur Duval d’Ailly, 8 November 1832

businesses owned by their compatriots in Saint-Denis's Camp des Malabars. Many, however, were reported to have fallen into 'a vagrant life exposed to every need'.⁶⁵⁵ These 'vagabonds', and even those escapees in legitimate employment, were quickly arrested and imprisoned.⁶⁵⁶

Gerbeau argues that whatever distinction there was between enslaved and indentured labourers ended once they were imprisoned.⁶⁵⁷ In the 1830s, imprisoned slaves and indentured labourers alike were put to the same convict work, reported by the chief of police of Saint-Paul as 'breaking pebbles which are used for metalling the streets'.⁶⁵⁸ Yet, as will be seen, it is reasonable to believe in the 1840s some distinctions were made.

Across the board, however, the resemblance of indentured labour to slavery—and the resultant resistance and disorder—were great enough that, after scrutiny from the British and the Governor of Pondicherry, Indian indentured migration to Réunion was banned by decree on 6 March 1839. Some four years later, less than a thousand of those who had come to the island remained. On the eve of abolition in 1848, one of Réunion's liberal newspapers, *Le Cri Public*, published a letter supposedly written by 33 Indians addressing their grievances, which summarises the experience of those caught up in Réunion's first stab at indentured migration:

The Indians, of gentle and peaceful habits, who have been introduced into the Colony and who have come here only in the faith of the treaties and of the completely reassuring promises of a nation marching in the forefront of civilisation...have been inhumanly thrown into the hands of the police...placed under the deplorable patronage of a subordinate officer who, following habits acquired in dealing with maroons, sees all Indians living in the Colony as nothing but thieves or brigands.... They prefer to suffer

⁶⁵⁵ ADR, 57 M I, 'Exposé de la situation intérieure de la colonie, 1832', by the Director of the Interior.

⁶⁵⁶ ADR, Affaires sociales, 20144.

⁶⁵⁷ Gerbeau, 'Engagees and Coolies'.

⁶⁵⁸ ADR, 57 M I, 'Exposé de la situation ..., 1832', 3 tables and 4 folios concerning 'The Administration of Prisons', signed Superintendent Lambert (folio 3).

in silence rather than to undergo the ignoble treatment of a so-called syndic as well, a real slave-driver, who, before they have opened their mouths to complain and demand his intervention, showers—without shame—punches, kicks and blows from big rulers on them in order, says he, to get rid of their importunities, or else, he reduces, arbitrarily and according to his whim, wages which have been irrevocably fixed between the parties. No! Citizens, such a state of affairs can last no longer...! May the cause of our motive for bringing it to the notice of the National Assembly be removed.⁶⁵⁹

Dynamics between enslaved and early indentured workers

There are few archival sources that mention any relationship between Réunion's early indentured labourers and the enslaved population. As seen in chapter one, however, there is evidence for antagonism between enslaved men and women of different ethnic groups at various points during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which seems to have existed due to divisions stoked by plantation-owners and colonial policies.

As noted, Indians were also among Réunion's enslaved population. The number of enslaved Indians left on the island by 1828 was small, a few thousand at most, most of whom were born there and toiled as domestic servants. Some, however, were newly arrived: slave trading was abolished in French colonies in 1817 but it was only in the 1830s that the illegal trade was finally quashed and a number of enslaved captives arriving before then were Indian.⁶⁶⁰ Contemporary observers wrote that Indians in Réunion, whether enslaved, free or indentured, especially those from the Dravidian south, dressed almost identically.⁶⁶¹ The arrival of the new group of migrants, this suggests, did not mark a radical departure from the

⁶⁵⁹ ADR, *Le Cri public*, 17 July 1848.

⁶⁶⁰ Allen, 'The Constant Demand of the French', 49.

⁶⁶¹ Maillard, *Notes sur l'Île de Bourbon*, 183.

familiar. Indians in Réunion in the 1830s were not quite the strange objects of curiosity and fear as they were in the Antilles twenty years later.

One of the few archival sources to offer insights into the dynamic between early Indian indentured labourers and the enslaved population is also one of the rare sources written by an indentured labourer himself. 'I am an unfortunate Indian, in this moment unwell,' wrote Razana from a prison cell to the Director of the Interior in Saint-Denis on 24 August 1842. He continued:

I wish to go to hospital, but having recently been for the same illness, I could not stay there, given that they put me in the same block as the *Noirs* with shackles on my feet and I assure you that I was very badly cared for. I admit sir that we are not whites of the highest quality, but we are not slaves, and I think that our place should not be among the *Noirs* and especially not to have shackled feet. We do not ask Mr. the director to be put with the whites but at least that you give us a little room or an underground room so that we are alone. I am in this moment very ill, and I do not dare go to the hospital given that they would put me in that block, and I prefer to die of this illness and misery in prison than to be confused with the *Noirs* and very badly cared for.⁶⁶²

This is striking in that the distinction Razana makes between himself, as an Indian indentured labourer, and '*Noirs*' is not just that of free and unfree, but also based on a sense of racial hierarchy, as made clearest by the distinction he draws between Indian labourers and whites 'of the highest quality'. As such Razana held a sense not only of his superiority vis-à-vis the enslaved in legal terms, but also as an Indian. This suggests that indentured labourers, like enslaved Indians such as Furcy, were influenced in terms of their sense of identity by the prevailing ideas around race and the social structures that these ideas fed into.

⁶⁶² Lettre de Razana à Monsieur le Directeur de l'Interieur, 24 August 1842, cited in Lacpatia, *Les Indiens*, 77-8.

When the Director of the Interior forwarded the letter to the prison administrator, he added a note: 'It is not appropriate in fact that the Indians are mixed with the enslaved *Noirs*.' The prison administrator replied in agreement.⁶⁶³ Whether the colonial authorities' reactions reflect a desire to adhere to the legal distinction or their understanding of the different racial position of Indians and Africans is not clear. But neither referred to the status of those in question, that is to say indentured labourer, instead to their ethnic identity as Indians. Perhaps both were factors. This exchange occurred, after all, just a year before the enslaved Indian Furcy won his freedom.

On the plantations, however, the distinction between enslaved and indentured labourers was not clearcut. While enslaved Indians had formed an enslaved 'elite' which worked predominantly in domestic roles, Indian indentured labourers were initially very much restricted to field work. Early Indian indentured labourers also lived in the same camps next to enslaved men and women, either in mud *cases* (huts) with straw roofs or in long barracks. They shared 'in all ways the daily plight of the slaves'.⁶⁶⁴ They worked in *bandes* (gangs) of Indians, as they were known, just like *bandes* of enslaved people, and were fed a similar diet of rice, dry vegetables and salted fish. The 1829 decree regulating Indian indentured labour in the island stipulated that each family be given daily 800 grams of rice, 120 grams of dry vegetables, 15 grams of salt, and either 15 grams of salted fish or the equivalent in root vegetables.⁶⁶⁵ In comparison, the quantities given to enslaved people were not regulated, varying across plantations. A French colonial official observed in 1825: 'some masters add vegetables to the rice distribution; others, more affluent, particularly sugar manufacturers, distribute salted beef or fish or arrack. The cultivation of cassava expands along with the cultivation of sugar cane; cassava is an excellent food for the Black people; it is usually given at supper in a quantity

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁶⁴ Gerbeau, 'Engagés and Coolies', 181.

⁶⁶⁵ Arrêté du 3 juillet 1829, cited in Lacpatia, *Les Indiens*, 16.

double the weight of corn.’⁶⁶⁶ In reality, though, it seems Indian indentured labourers did not always receive the full ration, as the Governor’s report from 1832 suggests. (Despite the religious freedoms guaranteed in the 1829 decree, stipulations for food provisions also did not reflect religious or caste divisions.) As we have seen, in this early period mutual antipathy on the part of enslaved individuals of different ethnicities was partly because of the reserving of particular roles for different groups. Paradoxically, when Indians were indentured labourers rather than enslaved, the superiority that had set them apart from other enslaved groups, on the plantation at least, was in many ways obliterated.

Indian indentured labourers, like newly enslaved people, were cultural outsiders: for all their contracts and theoretical freedoms, they still faced many of the same disadvantages, while, enslaved people born on the island were cultural insiders and valued as such. They were not just fluent in French creole but culturally and socially fluent too and often baptised and Christianised. *Bandes* of Indians were put under enslaved ‘overseers’,⁶⁶⁷ who, despite their legal inferiority, were more powerful in this context. As mentioned above, Indians on the Debassyns estate in Saint-Gilles revolted against their perceived ill treatment at the hands of their enslaved overseer. Given Razana’s letter objecting to being in the same hospital block as ‘enslaved Blacks’, it is possible that the Indians’ revolt was due to their objection to being commanded by an enslaved person at all, but unfortunately the archival records do not offer any insights into this through the voices of the Indians themselves. Instead, we have the testimony that de Villèle gave to Saint-Paul’s police commissioner on 16 February 1831. He reported having sent his ‘*bande* of Indians’ to his mother-in-law’s plantation in Saint-Gilles to remove weeds from the fields:

⁶⁶⁶ Betting de Lancastel, Michel Euzèbe Mathias, *Statistique de l’île Bourbon* (Paris, 1827), 98.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 179-80.

They left with enough goodwill under the supervision of a man named Amédée Creole, my slave, who has been directing this workshop since these Indians have been in my service. From the first day of their arrival in St Gilles, they worked less well than usual and showed insubordination towards the aforementioned Amédée; they even went so far on that day and the next as to rush at their supervisor with their tools, striking him several times, forcing him to withdraw.⁶⁶⁸

After the Indians charged at another of de Villèle's men (this time a free man) but failed, the police tried to restore order. The police commissioner wrote to the Director of Interior that he came upon the *bande* of Indians on the road, headed for Saint-Denis, and sought to arrest them 'but these men of whom there were 30 were armed with big batons and refused to obey, and by their threatening gestures made it understood that they were set upon defending themselves if we tried to block their passage'. The Indians, who de Villèle said were led by Yancosormi, were eventually rounded up and taken to Saint-Paul's jail where the police commissioner questioned them, through an interpreter:

These men, questioned about the reasons for their refusal to return to their work, agreed to say that their intention was no longer to stay in the colony; that the tasks they were engaged in were too exhausting for them... When asked if they were paid correctly, they said that two months' worth of wages were owed to them. When asked if they were well fed and treated properly, they said that as for the food, they had no complaints, but that the overseer Amédée sometimes mistreated them for work.

Even when de Villèle proposed allowing the majority to return unpunished and promised to put them under a different overseer still they refused. In October that year, another revolt broke

⁶⁶⁸ Déclaration de Mr. de Villèle, communication du commissaire de police de Saint-Paul au Directeur de l'Intérieur, 3 February 1831, cited in Lacpatia, *Les Indiens*, 28-9.

out among the same Indians on de Villèle's own estate, forcing him to return them to India at his own cost.

The details of the revolt shed light on what set indentured Indians apart from the enslaved men and women they worked alongside. The latter, as mentioned, resisted too, including through revolts, refusal to work, running away and other means discussed. But, while their contracts were, to a great degree, ignored, their existence alone gave indentured labourers a further tool or rallying point for resistance. Unlike their enslaved counterparts Indian indentured labourers at this point also had some sort of recourse to repatriation. Of the 3,426 Indians brought to Réunion between 1828 and 1830, according to Lacpatia's calculations, seven returned to India after their contract ended, but a further 549 were returned due to incapacity to work—as would surely have been the case with the Indians who revolted in 1831.⁶⁶⁹ This revolt also shows that early Indian indentured labourers were keen to distinguish themselves from the enslaved and to make clear their superior status, despite similarities in their working conditions.

While the above is evidence of animosity between the two groups, owing it seems to their proximity, rather than their distance, from one another, there is evidence of other consequences of this proximity. In the Saint-André revolt, when indentured labourers fought the group of whites that tried to arrest them, the mayor described this group of whites as being 'supported by creoles'.⁶⁷⁰ (The term creole, as discussed, was used to describe enslaved men and women born on the island, as well as whites in other scenarios, but the distinction between white and creole and a later reference to 'noirs' suggests he may be referring to free men of colour.) He lamented, however that '300 blacks at least were present at the fight between the whites and Indians'. He went on: 'These slaves were able to notice what our predicament could

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁷⁰ Lettre adressée à Mr. le Directeur Général de l'Intérieur de Saint-Denis, 26 July 1831, Cited in *ibid.*, 31-2.

be in an inspired scenario and how easy it would be to cause us a lot of harm, us having no ammunition.’⁶⁷¹ Following the other revolt in Saint-André that year, the police commissioner in the town emphasised ‘the very difficult situation of the plantations, not in relation to [the Indians], but in relation to the slaves for whom the bad example could undermine their obedience’.⁶⁷²

Marriage records also suggest the physical proximity of enslaved women and indentured labourers resulted in unions. While earlier periods saw a noticeable endogamy among groups of Indians, as previously noted, by the 1830s the records show references to marriages between Indian indentured labourers and enslaved creoles.⁶⁷³ Sadly they do not reveal details of these but one reason was almost certainly due to the lack of Indian women who came over on the first ships.⁶⁷⁴ Nonetheless, marriages and the children born of them suggest at least in some cases these two groups became interwoven through their shared experience.

The perception that Réunion’s administrative and planter elite held of Indian indentured labourers is equally full of paradoxes. In several of the above examples, colonial authorities and even planters appear to have seen Indians as having both a separate, superior, racial and legal status. But so little distinction was apparent to some contemporary observers that they appeared unaware it even existed. In 1842, the creole missionary Père Levassieur returned to

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁷² Rapport du commissaire de police de Saint-André, 24 July 1831, cited in *ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁷³ Cited in ADR, GB1432, Roger S. Paquiry, ‘Mémoire sur L’immigration indienne à La Réunion,’ *Jeunesse Marxiste*, n° 14, 1970, 11.

⁶⁷⁴ M. Marimoutou-Oberlé, ‘Femmes indiennes et engagement au XIXe siècle à la Réunion’, in *AHIOI: Relations historiques et culturelles entre la France et l’Inde, XVIIe- XXe siècles*, (actes de la Conférence internationale France-Inde de l’AHIOI, Saint-Denis, 21-28 juillet 1986), 2 vol. Sainte-Clotilde, Archives Départementales de la Réunion, 1987, vol. 2, 91-106 and 285-97.

the island at a time of renewed missionary zeal in France, directed particularly at enslaved peoples in its colonies. He observed of one of Réunion's plantations:

There is immense work to be done, especially among those known as Creole *Noirs*... They are intelligent, and some of them are devout. The other *Noirs* who come from Madagascar, Africa, India, and the Malay Peninsula have less fervour for matters of God. This is because most of them have limited intelligence and are somewhat carnal... Of all these *Noirs*, the most difficult to convert are the Indians... They almost never manage to speak French intelligibly; there are many of them among my relatives, and I cannot understand them or make myself understood. They are very attached to their false religion.⁶⁷⁵

At first glance, the use of the word '*Noir*' suggests Levavasseur was referring solely to enslaved Indians, but it is implausible that so many freshly arrived enslaved Indians would have been found gathered on one plantation in 1842. If Levavasseur knew of the distinction between '*les noirs*' and '*engagés*', he did not view it as significant enough to acknowledge; to him the Indians he encountered were simply enslaved.

This account also demonstrates that the value attached to creole slaves was more than monetary and down to more than familiarity. Rather, it was a question of ideology. Having steadily taken hold throughout the last century, by the 1840s there was a pervasive belief among French colonialists, and some clergy, that centuries of enslavement, which brought Africans into proximity with Europeans, had served to help 'civilise' them. The sin committed by indentured labourers was to be insufficiently servile or 'slavish' —or at least, not to have been for long enough.

⁶⁷⁵ ASE, Bte. 232 A I. Lettre du P. Levavasseur au P. Libermann, Bourbon, 13 décembre 1842.

Following the opening of the era of indentured labour in the late 1820s, Indians quickly lost the positive stereotypes that those same eyes had previously attributed to enslaved Indians and acquired new and more negative ones. Many of Réunion's planters had a strong preference for indentured Africans rather than Indians, who they believed were ill-suited to field work. Indentured labourers were eventually recruited from Madagascar and Africa's coasts, starting from 1845, but prior to the 1848 abolition the close association of Africans with the slave trade hindered any legitimate attempts to arrange large-scale recruitment from these regions. India, therefore, having been recognised for its long-standing role in providing domestics, was suddenly called upon to fill Réunion's fields with labourers. Planters and colonial officials were quick to judge that, in this role, Indians fell short.⁶⁷⁶

The disorder that resulted from the failure of planters to honour indenture contracts and pay wages was also increasingly blamed on the labourers themselves. While the 'docile' Indian was seen to characterise Indian servility just a few years previously, this image had been replaced by one of the Indian vagabond and criminal—an image which strengthened and acquired more racialised colour as their numbers grew after 1848. Sourapa suggested even as early as 1842 Indian indentured labourers were aware of this characterisation: 'lazy or vagabond Indians only harm the general population because it often happens that the whole is easily judged by the actions of a small part.'⁶⁷⁷

In this context, as noted above, many early recruits returned to India. What happened to those who stayed? Sourapa gives some idea, writing in 1842: 'Three quarters of the Indians returned to their country, and the agriculture sector [of Réunion] lacks manpower that would have been very useful to it. Those who stayed took another direction: some serve as domestics,

⁶⁷⁶ Maillard wrote '*le Cafre est le travailleur par excellence*' in *Notes sur L'Ile de la Réunion*, 188-9; V. Focard similarly described how '*le noir africain est le véritable, le seul cultivateur colonial*': ADR, 619 V, 310, V. Focard, *Dix-huit mois de République à l'Ile Bourbon* (Paris, 1849).

⁶⁷⁷ Lettre à Monsieur le Gouverneur, 25 July 1842, cited in Lacaptia, *Les Indiens*, 74.

others as carriers of water and packages in the town, and finally, the last group found employment in various small industries known to them from their country.’⁶⁷⁸ It seems from this that the labourers who stayed from this early period of indenture were easily absorbed into Réunion’s diverse social milieu, perhaps aided by relationships forged with Indians long-established in the colony, especially in Saint-Denis’s Camp des Malabars. Among this group, there is reason to think they would have found familiar cultural and religious practices. ‘No race seems to have retained its primitive religion here, except for the Indians who have not lost anything here of the customs of their country,’ Joseph Moriozot, a doctor in the colony, wrote in 1838. ‘Towards the end of the year, they celebrate with as much grandeur as possible a festival called the Iamserey.’⁶⁷⁹ Referring to Yamsé, as discussed in chapter one, it seems that the celebration of this festival continued from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, or perhaps that the arrival of indentured labourers from India from 1828 revived it. Evidence from Mauritius from the early nineteenth century gives weight to the continuation argument.⁶⁸⁰ In either case, Yamsé, a publicly celebrated Indian religious festival, was rooted in the tradition of the island before the period of slavery drew to an end and that of indenture began in earnest.

Indenture after abolition

As discussed in chapter three, regulations governing indenture migration and conditions in the colonies steadily increased the second half of the nineteenth century progressed. In Réunion, the agreements between the British and French governing the indenture enterprise to French colonies was often supplemented by additional decrees unique to the island. The 1861 convention, for example, was followed by further decrees specifying that the maximum number

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Joseph Moriozot, *Considérations historiques et médicales sur l’état de l’esclavage à l’île Bourbon; suivies d’un coup-d’œil sur quelques-unes des maladies les plus communes chez les noirs de cette colonie*, 1838, 12. Published online.

⁶⁸⁰ Paroomal, ‘Le Muharram (Ghoun ou Yamseh) à Port-Louis depuis le xviii^e siècle’.

of immigrants that each *colon* was entitled to was established according to the amount of sugar-cane land under cultivation. Other decrees concerned the rights and treatment of labourers. Notably, in 1861, they were given the right to legal assistance.

Despite the added protection, historians such as Weber have concluded that little changed in terms of the conditions of Indians before and after 1848.⁶⁸¹ In terms of their living conditions, little changed initially: many indentured labourers were still, in the 1860s and 1870s, housed in the same quarters as enslaved people had been, in what were known as ‘*paillottes*’ (straw huts). Other planters built ‘*cabanons*’, described by the British consul, Miot, as ‘large buildings, usually made of stone and covered with tiles or shingles, divided in a way that can adequately accommodate the workers. The “paillotes” are separate huts or houses, made of wood, planks, or sometimes pebbles, and covered with straw or thatch’.⁶⁸²

The *cabanon* was more enduring and as such seen as more hospitable. Nonetheless, there were often no walls to separate the quarters of different families, who made make-shift partitions by hanging cloths. Moreover, while part of the 1861 convention held that the British agent would frequently visit the Indians’ lodgings to ensure the conditions were satisfactory—particularly in terms of sanitation—there were frequent complaints against Réunion’s planters for denying the agent entry. Poor sanitation was given in several British reports as the cause of high death rates on certain plantations.⁶⁸³

Conditions, however, did not remain the same throughout the indenture period. By 1893, the year of the last large report on the conditions of labourers in the colony, it was noted that many Indian families had their own *cases*, the structures of which had been reinforced. Many also had their own small vegetable gardens and livestock. Improvements were most

⁶⁸¹ Weber, *Les Etablissements français*, 949.

⁶⁸² ANOM, C.377, d.3195, Rapport du M. Miot, 1877.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

noted in terms of water supply and sewage, which, it was concluded, had led to a general improvement in the health of the Indians.⁶⁸⁴

From elite slaves to ‘*mauvais travailleurs*’

One change in the living conditions of indentured labourers after abolition was that they no longer lived to such an extent side by side with Réunion’s enslaved population. As discussed in chapter two, unlike in British colonies, where slavery was abolished by an act of parliament in 1833, there was no official ‘apprenticeship’ period in Réunion. After 1848 the formerly enslaved, now ‘*affranchis*’, left the plantations in their droves. While as noted in the previous chapter, some were forced back to plantations by coercive measures,⁶⁸⁵ Réunion’s geography, divided between ‘*les bas*’, the low land along the coast where the sugar plantations were located, and ‘*les hauts*’, the mountainous, forested land in the interior of the island (where maroon slaves had escaped to in the previous century), facilitated their physical separation from the plantation. In *les hauts* emancipated slaves joined poor whites (‘*petit blancs*’) who had moved up as independent smallholders increasingly over the previous decades. Left in *les bas* were the plantation-owners, rich whites who formed the local aristocracy, and with them their workers, the newly arriving indentured workers who, in the absence of the formerly enslaved, became the majority labour group.

The repercussions for relations between indentured labourers from India and Réunion’s erstwhile creole enslaved population were manifold. Firstly, the physical separation diminished the opportunity for interaction between the two groups within the plantation setting. This came at a time when the numbers of Indian indentured labourers on the island rapidly increased,

⁶⁸⁴ M. Mackenzie, *Report on the condition and treatment of Indian Coolie immigrants in the French island of Reunion* (Calcutta, 1894).

⁶⁸⁵ Fuma, *Esclaves et citoyens*.

making plantations a largely Indian space versus the creole space in the mountains. The divide, both mental and physical, hindered the natural familiarity that arose when Indians and enslaved communities were tied together to the plantations.

As elsewhere, including the Antilles, Indians were seen, through their impact on driving down wages, as collaborating with planters, but the idea of Indians as the agents of rich white planters took hold less strongly than in the Antilles. Tellingly, in one of his letters to the Director of the Interior Sourapa referred to ‘the numerous emancipations’ that were ‘reducing the number of slave field-hands’, presenting Indian indentured labourers as the solution for planters faced with a dwindling workforce. He added that ‘it must be certain that that the events to which the first [Indians] introduced fell victim do not reoccur’.⁶⁸⁶

The more vigorous legislation after 1848 was designed to distance indenture from slavery as an institution and safeguard Indians’ rights and minimum terms of treatment. It also served to underline the temporary or transitory nature of their presence on the island. This was based on—and in turn contributed to—the idea of Indians as cultural outsiders who threatened the island’s existing social cohesion, the structures on which, its elite believed, was built on Catholicism and racial hierarchy. Such notions ran in contradiction to the degree of religious and cultural diversity that had characterised Réunion’s society for the last few centuries—and continued to characterise it. Nonetheless, among this class and the colonial administration, an idea prevailed that although enslaved men and women may legally have been property, once bought they became part of the island, a cog in Réunionnais society. This was passed on to their creole children, who were equally deemed ‘of the island’. Enslaved people were encouraged to ‘belong’, linguistically, culturally and religiously: all steps towards this were taken as signs that they were being ‘civilised’ and taking up their place in the French republic.

⁶⁸⁶ Lettre à Mr. le Directeur de l’Intérieur de Saint-Denis, 29 July 1837, cited in Lacpatia, *Les Indiens*, 66.

Indentured labourers, in contrast, were not intended to belong. They were there simply to work for a fixed period. Colonial legislation gave them the right to practise their own religions and customs, but colonial officials and elites then reacted to these customs by deriding and penalising Indians, as will be discussed. They became objects of suspicion for creoles at various levels of society. In 1852 a dispute broke out between the local population and Indian indentured labourers from a nearby plantation, resulting in one '*habitant*' called Lacille shooting an Indian, leading to the latter having an arm amputated. The prosecutor described the paranoia among local inhabitants that fuelled such violence:

This case...holds great importance in this area where the residents think only of Malabar plots and conspiracies against them and their properties...creating imaginary fears that are passed from one to another. Even the most sensible residents are not immune to these unfounded fears.⁶⁸⁷

They also became a target for criticism from the Catholic Church—which, as shall be discussed, began operating with renewed vigour just as large number of migrants were arriving from the 1850s.

Beyond this alien 'newness' (akin to that of newly arrived slaves in the previous centuries), colonial elites also spun derogatory racialised stereotypes around the striking cultural and ethnic difference of Indians, and their condition as common labourers. These negative stereotypes reinforced one another, serving to justify the Indians' lowly position and to reinforce their status as cultural outsiders, on the island but not of the island. At first, perceptions of Indians were characterised by a fascinated ambivalence. Louis Maillard observed in 1862 that among the Indians coming from Mahé and Pondicherry 'were to be found men of remarkable beauty, with pure and distinguished features...with a highly intelligent

⁶⁸⁷ ADR 2111-63-1, n.386, Lettre du 12 juin 1852.

appearance'. Such views conformed to established stereotypes of Indians in Réunion. Despite being seen as 'more intelligent, shrewder, and more civilised' than Africans, however, once put to the work in the fields they become 'cowardly, lazy, thieves, demanding'.

While Indians of all regional origins came under fire, there was particular contempt for 'Bengalis', many of whom, as we have seen, actually came not from Bengal but from Bihar. A report by P. Dechateauvieux thus concluded about the latter:

The greatest care was lavished upon them; but neither the most delicate foods, nor the most skilful treatments by our doctors, nor the ever-open refuge of our hospitals: nothing could restore these men, who spoke a language unknown to our Indians from the Coromandel Coast, to work, and we saw workers without strength wandering around our untilled fields.⁶⁸⁸

This was two years after the *Saint-Bernard*, transported first convoy of emigrants from Calcutta to Réunion. It is therefore not so surprising these 'Bengalis' retained their own languages. Around the same time Maillard went further, writing:

Alongside the Indian from Malabar stands the Bengali or Indian from Calcutta, the saddest and worst of our workers. Immigration from Bengal is now fundamentally condemned, and no one wants these unfortunate beings, emaciated, gaunt, and skeletal, brought to us from Calcutta, half of whom perish within their first year of arrival. Nine-tenths suffer from almost incurable skin diseases, often rendering them unfit for work. Beriberi, myelitis, dysentery, and other illnesses quickly claim their lives, beyond the reach of medical intervention. Even the most robust and healthy among them are barely

⁶⁸⁸ P. De Chateauvieux, Rapport au nom de la Commission chargée d'examiner les modifications à apporter, dans l'intérêt de la colonie, à l'immigration des coolies de l'Inde, 30 June 1862, (Paris, 1862), 2.

capable of working the land and at best have just enough strength and energy to serve as domestics, a role for which a certain intelligence makes them somewhat suitable.⁶⁸⁹

Here again is evident the preoccupation with and racialisation of Indians' health, along with the colonial construction of ethnicity, which was almost certainly informed by earlier perceptions of enslaved Bengalis as particularly beautiful, intelligent and suited to domestic work. This construction of ethnicity seems likely to have shaped indentured labourers' treatment and experiences in Réunion.

Criminality

Negative stereotypes of Indians abounded most around their supposed criminality. In 1861, for example, a French traveller visiting Réunion wrote that 'at no time, not even in the worst days of slavery, did the country have to lament so many and varied atrocities as since the Indian immigration'.⁶⁹⁰ Yet the outcry against Indian criminality seems disproportionate to the number of crimes committed by Indians. Between 1848 and 1860, few Indians were arrested for any serious crimes, and even in subsequent decades the majority of convictions were for small offences.⁶⁹¹ Most serious crimes committed by Indians, such as murder, were committed against other Indians.

There is evidence, however, to indicate that, unsurprisingly, the sentences doled out to Indians were harsher compared to those given to other groups. In 1852 one Rayalou, a 19-year-old who had allegedly wounded a fellow Indian worker with a knife while drunk, was deemed to have had criminal intent and sentenced to 15 years' hard labour.⁶⁹² The same year,

⁶⁸⁹ Maillard, *Notes sur L'île de la Réunion*, annexe D, Ethnologie.

⁶⁹⁰ Lous Simonin, 'Voyage à l'île de la Réunion (île Bourbon)', *Le Tour du monde*, vol.6, 1862. Published online.

⁶⁹¹ Laval, 'Les problemes liés a la 'criminalité indienne'.

⁶⁹² ADR, 2111-63-1, n.635, 2e session des assises de Saint-Denis, 1852.

a wealthy white creole man, in contrast, who had shot his mistress at close range was let off with a caution.⁶⁹³ So too was another of Réunion's aristocratic figures, La Serve, who in 1852 beat one of his indentured labourers named Appassamy to death with the handle of a pickaxe. Appassamy's crime was having worked half-heartedly (*'trop mollement'*).⁶⁹⁴

Indians did, however, commit crimes in quite considerable numbers.⁶⁹⁵ In 1851 alone, nearly 22,000 criminal sentences were doled out to Indians, with some individuals receiving more than one.⁶⁹⁶ Vagabondage was by far the most frequently committed crime. This illustrates how indenture contracts in Réunion, as in other colonial contexts, were not merely labour agreements but also instruments of control, functioning as quasi-penal contracts. Indenture contracts effectively bound labourers to their employers, turning minor infractions such as absence, refusal to work, or attempts to leave plantations into punishable offenses. As Anderson explores in depth, colonial authorities in the Indian Ocean world blurred the lines between labour and punishment, employing punitive measures to ensure a compliant workforce.⁶⁹⁷

Other frequently committed crimes can be seen as relating to the condition of indenture. Thefts were often of small consequence, usually food items taken from other workers. Sentences, however, could be harsh: 18-year-old Moutouvirin was condemned to five years in prison in 1851 for stealing ducks.⁶⁹⁸ Again, this seems as much a reflection of their difficult working and living conditions as of any inherent tendency to criminality.

Many of the more serious crimes revolved around women, which again can be seen as a partly product of the indenture system. One of the most problematic aspects of

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ ADR, Serie U: Justice, 2111-63-1, n.655, 2e session des assises de Saint-Denis, 1852.

⁶⁹⁵ Laval, 'Les problemes liés a la 'criminalité indienne'.

⁶⁹⁶ ADR, Serie U: Justice, 2111-63-1, cours d'assises, 1851.

⁶⁹⁷ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*, (Cambridge, 2012), 56-60.

⁶⁹⁸ ADR, Serie U: Justice, 2111-63-1, n.655, 4e session du cours d'assises de Saint-Paul, 1851.

indentureship in Réunion was the lack of women. Even after quotas were introduced regarding the minimum number of women in cohorts of migrants, there were still very few. In 1850, the Indian indentured population included 3,070 women compared to 30,305 men and by 1860 this had reached just 3,655 women and 31,919 men. As a result of competition, so-called crimes of passion occurred frequently. On the morning of 26 February 1868, on a plantation in Sainte-Rose, one Samivadin is reported to have left the *case* he shared with his ‘concubine’ Mimatchy after a violent quarrel. When he returned later that evening and discovered her with another man, Kichenin, he knocked him to the ground using a pickaxe handle and then stabbed Mimatchy several times with a knife. He was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to seven years hard labour.⁶⁹⁹ Concern about the treatment of women within India was one factor that eventually led to the abolition of the whole indenture system, to all European colonies. Historians of indenture in British colonies have examined the experiences of indentured women, with some highlighting the liberation and empowerment women experienced and others the violence they were subjected to by both European and Indian men.⁷⁰⁰ Although it is beyond the parameters of this study, further research of this kind for French colonies is needed.

That many of the crimes committed by Indians related to the conditions of indentureship did not go unnoticed by the colonial authorities. In 1854, the Central Commissioner for Security wrote that ‘one can infer from this that the civilisation that Indians acquire through a prolonged stay in the country is the source from which thefts, murders, rapes,

⁶⁹⁹ ANOM, Reu C.385 d.3341-3374 Comptes rendues des assies, Reunion, 2e et 3e trimestre, 1868.

⁷⁰⁰ For the former see: Patricia Mohammed, ‘Writing Gender into History: the Negotiation of Gender Relations among Indian Men and Women in Post-indenture Trinidad Society, 1917-1947’, in V. Shepherd, B. Bremerton, B. Bailey eds. *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (London, 1995), 40. For the latter see: Basdeo Mangru, ‘The Sex-Ratio Disparity and its Consequences Under the Indenture in British Guyana,’ in Dabydeen, David and Brinsley Samaroo eds. *India in the Caribbean* (London, 1987), 211-230.

and rebellions, for which they are responsible on our rural establishments, originate'.⁷⁰¹ Yet, the prevalence of crimes was used, in conjunction with observations about Indian cultural and religious practices, to support the idea that Indians were inherently criminal and immoral. Indian crime was almost never depicted as thoughtless but instead as involving some sort of cunning or 'evil' plot. Here, contemporary observers drew a distinction from African slaves. As Maillard wrote:

Formerly, on Bourbon Island, crimes were very rare, armed robberies almost unknown, and in no other country were the roads so safe and travellers so peaceful. Unfortunately, times have changed significantly because the Indians, by bringing with them all the vices of their decrepit civilisation, have transformed, in this regard as well as in terms of health, this beautiful country that ancient travellers called Eden.⁷⁰²

In common with much Catholic missionary reportage, Maillard regarded Indians as being a corrupting force on creole society. He contrasted this with the simple morality of '*le Cafre*' who he describes as the 'the labourer *par excellence*'. Indians in his eyes, although an 'intelligent cast', were inherently 'vicious and perverse'.⁷⁰³

Anderson shows that colonial administrations elsewhere also racialised labour resistance, casting Indian labourers as inherently 'criminal' or 'vagrant' to justify punitive measures against them. This framing allowed authorities to deploy a range of penalties, from wage deductions to imprisonment, under the guise of maintaining order among 'unruly' labourers.⁷⁰⁴ In Réunion, there was a similar criminalisation of labour infractions, with planters

⁷⁰¹ ADR, 79 M 2, Rapport de tournée de Lambert au Directeur de l'Intérieur, Saint-Denis, 5 July 1854.

⁷⁰² Maillard, *Notes sur L'île de la Réunion*, 187.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 188-9.

⁷⁰⁴ Clare Anderson, *Legible bodies. Race, criminality and colonialism in South Asia*, (Oxford/New York, 2004), 90-95.

and colonial officials describing indentured workers' desertion or resistance in terms that racialised their behaviour, reinforcing stereotypes of Indians as troublesome or insubordinate. By embedding criminal penalties into the structure of labour contracts, the French colonial government could regulate and contain labourers, preserving the plantation economy through coercive legal means. Thus, the penal dimensions of these contracts were not incidental but central to the function of indenture as a disciplinary institution.

'Asiatiques industriels': resistance and success

Criminal reports about Indians are littered with words such as industrial and intelligent but always used derogatorily. As Sainte-Suzanne's mayor wrote to the Governor in 1865: 'the majority of Indians, who are already ten years in the colony... the most intelligent ones engage irregularly with shopkeepers of their own caste, thus becoming so many tribal chiefs, living off thefts and hoarding'.⁷⁰⁵ Indians' crimes were often those that involved stepping beyond the barriers that had been constructed to confine them, whether those barriers be physical, as in the parameters of the plantation, or figurative. Many of these existed only for Indian migrants. Indeed, the persistence with which colonial officials and the colon elite lamented Indian criminality suggests that their greatest discomfort was caused by indentured Indian labourers attempting to enter creole society and by that society's culture being Indianised.

This is apparent with regard to Indian economic integration. The extent of this is attested to by such reports as that written about one Muslim Indian named Abdoual Khéman. The chief police inspector described him as: 'One of these all too numerous Asian businessmen without capital, whose secretive and often mystical manoeuvres speculate on hoarding, deceiving the trust of traders, their overly credulous suppliers.'⁷⁰⁶ Colonial officials also went

⁷⁰⁵ ADR, 79 M6. Lettre du 14 octobre 1870.

⁷⁰⁶ ADR, 168 M5, Lettre du 23 avril 1862.

to great lengths to prevent Indians from running businesses. Concurrent to flows of indentured labourers was a separate and smaller migration of merchants and businessmen from India—especially Gujaratis coming from Bombay (Mumbai), sometimes via Mauritius. These Indians, who became known as *Z'arabes* because many of them were Muslim, set up shops in the island's urban centres. They were accompanied by Hindus from other regions of India. When Ratinom Pajanianpin, a jeweller, sought to set up shop in Saint-Pierre in 1880, his request was rejected because, according to the police commissioner, there were already enough Indian jewellers in the town and 'a jeweller is always dangerous'.⁷⁰⁷ They joined the existing urban Indian community, first established in the previous century, and referred to ten years previously by Sourapa. Together, their presence played a large role in blurring the parameters around Indian indentured labourers in Réunion's economic and social landscape. Many indentured Indians seem to have quickly become *commerçants*, with and without an official *permis de séjour*. In 1854, the government ordered the immediate closure of all shops run by Indians who had come to the island as indentured labourers. Several creole businessmen in Saint-Denis sent a panicked letter to the Director of the Interior, worried that if these shops closed, they would never receive repayments on loans given out to the Indians. They asked in the letter how was it possible to tell which Indians had come as '*commerçants*' and which as '*engagés*'.⁷⁰⁸ The fact they could not distinguish one group from the other indicates a level of integration of Indians who came to the island through very different routes as well as the economic evolution of indentured labourers. The ultimate goal of such measures was to maintain the fundamental status of Indians as foreign workers. If the Indian worker could not be kept in the field, it was preferential for him to be kicked out of the island.

⁷⁰⁷ ADR 4M Lettre du commissaire de police de Saint-Pierre au directeur de l'intérieur, 1 February 1881.

⁷⁰⁸ ADR 115 M7.

Such measures also demonstrate the extent to which Indian labourers as early as 1854 were moving away from the confines of plantation work. The fact that the businessmen in Saint-Denis were unable to distinguish Indian *commerçants* from (former) *engagés* suggests that with this change in employment came a change in social role and status. While in the Antilles, as we will see, the image of the Indian remained tied to the fields, in Réunion this association soon became weaker. This was partly because of the presence of an older Indian community and of a concurrent non-indentured migratory flow from India, but also because of the willingness and ability of indentured workers once their contracts had expired to move into towns and establish commercial enterprises, presumably using their connections with other non-indentured Indians to do so.

There is evidence that these networks became almost formalised in nature. In 1879 Ramsamy Moutoussamy Naiken wrote to Réunion's Governor, requesting permission for himself and some of his compatriots to establish a mutual aid association. Its purpose, he wrote, would be to 'establish a relief fund to assist Indians who are unable to work or have been struck by illness'. The association would also help to send back to India the belongings of any Indians who died in the colony and help to financially support their relatives left in India. The letter also provides the requirements for being part of the association: 'without any infamous convictions...being of legal age, having a domicile in Saint-Denis... all political discussion is prohibited within the association.'⁷⁰⁹ The letter attests to the connection established between Indian merchants installed in urban areas and indentured labourers. It also suggests that Naiken and others maintained connections to India, given that they saw themselves as in a position to organise payment to the bereaved families of indentured workers. Their request was rejected. Saint-Denis's mayor wrote to the Director of the Interior: 'The Indians who are holders of right

⁷⁰⁹ ADR, Serie X 66, Société de secours mutels, Lettre par rapport la société d'Adimoulomsamy, 20 September 1879.

to stay permits [*permis de séjours*] do not cease as a result of that being immigrants subjected to the regulations and to a particular surveillance. They cannot pretend to exercise in a country that is not their own, the rights that are reserved only for French citizens'.⁷¹⁰ This was not the only association founded, another called the Aroumodyom association was set up by Rangassamy Ramasamy in 1869. Among other objectives, including sending money to India, it wanted Indians returning to India to be given a ring on which would be inscribed Aroumoydyom.⁷¹¹

As well as moving to urban areas and setting up shops, Indian indentured labourers also quickly came to own and cultivate land. As Dupon notes, a new type of contract based on sharecropping or '*métayage*' emerged from the early 1860s, in which the Indian indentured labourer retained two-thirds or half of the proceeds of the allocated land.⁷¹² By 1886 Réunion counted 715 sharecroppers (*colons partiaires*) of Indian origin, according to Lacpatia.⁷¹³ This in itself did not make the indentured Indians landowners, but it paved the way for them to amass capital, which at the end of their contracts they could then use to purchase their own farms and employ their compatriots. Records showing land and property sales from 1857 to 1866 for Saint-André, Salazie, Sainte-Marie and Sainte-Suzanne, reveal the rate at which Indians became landowners in this period.⁷¹⁴ Judging by their Christian first names some such as Pierre Canaby, described as a 'large landowner', who bought land in Sainte-Suzanne in 1866 may well have been from among the established Indian community. Others, however, such as

⁷¹⁰ ADR M4168, Lettre du Maire de St-Denis adressée au Directeur de l'Intérieur, 15 November 1879.

⁷¹¹ ADR Serie X 66, Société de secours mutuels, Lettre du Rangassamy au gouverneur, September 1869.

⁷¹² Jean-François Dupon, 'Les immigrants Indiens de la Réunion. Evolution et assimilation d'une population', Cahiers d'outre-mer, N° 77 (1967), 55.

⁷¹³ Firmin Lacpatia, 'Quelques aspects de l'insertion des Indiens à la Réunion au XIX siècle,' in *Relations Historiques*, 319.

⁷¹⁴ ADR 3Q 2206. Table alphabétique des acquéreurs et nouveaux possesseurs de plusieurs communes de la région au Vent (1857-1866).

Carpin Minatchy who bought two plots in 1864 partnership with Soupin Kichenin seem most likely to have been indentured at some point. Among the professions listed are cultivator, merchant, landowner, businessman, indicating the diversity among the Indian community. Unfortunately, the archival folder is not complete and therefore it is not possible to obtain an overview of the whole island. Dupon cites, however, an example from Sainte-Rose, where from 1864 several Indians were listed on the '*registre matricule*' as landowners, including Rangassamy Alvarnàiken, who was described as a 'man exempt from indenture and landowner'.⁷¹⁵ Dupon also notes that from his name, it seems Alvarnàiken was from the Vannia caste, a lower caste group in Tamil Nadu, made up of cultivators, sometimes landowners.⁷¹⁶ In 1876 the records for the five communes in the east of Réunion—Saint-André, Salazie, Plaine des Palmistes, Sainte-Rose and Saint-Benoît—show that Indians were not only landowners, but had their own indentured workforces.⁷¹⁷ Such success brought renewed dispersions against their character, revolving around their 'criminal intelligence' and mystical ways, but equally pathed the way for them to leave the plantations earlier than their counterparts in the Antilles.⁷¹⁸ Mourouvin Tandrayen, came to Réunion as an indentured labourer, but by 1876, he was one of those who owned land and employed seven indentured labourers.⁷¹⁹ By the time his son Joseph Mourouvin, born in 1871, died in 1948, he was a well-known businessman, the owner of 5,000 hectares of land and a large sugar mill. A member of the Sugar Manufacturers Syndicate, he also sat on Réunion's *Conseil Général* and was a municipal councillor for Sainte-Rose. Not all Indians succeeded in Réunion; the archives also show those who borrowed money for business endeavours and went bust. But Mourouvin, while a notable character, was not a one-off. He was one of many descendants of Indian indentured labourers who prospered. As

⁷¹⁵ Dupon, 'Les immigrants Indiens', 55.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ Lacpatia, 'Quelques aspects', 318.

⁷¹⁸ Dupon, 'Les immigrants Indiens', 56.

⁷¹⁹ ADR 3P43. Matrice cadastrale rédigée en 1873 pour la période quinquennale 1874-1878.

indentured labourers and their offspring amassed capital, they often channelled it into strengthening Indians' religious presence on the island.

Religion

Compared to British colonies where Indians were transported as indentured labourers, there is a scarcity of documents from French colonies providing details of their religious lives.⁷²⁰ Those that remain are mainly written by the planter class, colonial authorities or missionaries. These inevitably offer only partial interpretations of the indentured labourers' religious practices, but nonetheless are instructive for understanding the context in which Indians practiced their religion and the freedom that they had to do so. As noted in chapter one, the Catholic Church's proselytising endeavours in Réunion during the period of slavery were not very successful, due to inadequate missionary numbers and some planters' reluctance to evangelise their enslaved workers, given that this would take them away from their work, or worse still, risked implanting ideas of abolition in their minds. After the 1845 Mackau laws, which sought to prepare enslaved men and women for emancipation through Christianity, the Catholic Church in Réunion, as in the Antilles, renewed its efforts.⁷²¹ Planters who continued to voice opposition to such moves had a change of heart in the wake of abolition of slavery in 1848, when they started to encourage the evangelisation of *affranchis* as a means of social integration—an endeavour that was at the heart of the second republic.⁷²² While the Catholic Church in Réunion had some success with this, when it came to converting Indian indentured labourers the task was altogether more challenging it seems, not least because, unlike their formerly enslaved counterparts, indentured labourers had contracts that guaranteed their right to religious

⁷²⁰ See: Dabydeen and Samaroo, eds. *Across the Dark Waters*.

⁷²¹ For details on the Mackau Laws, see Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*, 214-28.

⁷²² Jean-Francois Géraud, 'La ville des sucriers. Bourbon/La Réunion, 1810-1880', in Faranirina V. Rajaonah, ed., *Cultures citadines dans l'océan Indien occidental (XVIIIe- XXIe siècles): Pluralisme, échanges, inventivité* (Paris, 2011).

freedom. Réunion's first Bishop, Desprez, who was appointed in 1850, was keen to take on the challenge, along with his counterparts in Guadeloupe and Martinique.⁷²³ Desprez seems to have viewed the arrival of indentured labourers in a French Catholic island as an opportunity to evangelise the subcontinent. These Indians would return to India, he reasoned, and thus could become 'many apostles'.⁷²⁴ In 1852, he founded the Saint-Thomas mission or 'Mission Malabar'. The zeal for conversion among newly arrived Indians is also shown in letters written by a chaplain in Trois-Bassin in 1851, describing how he had begun giving religious instruction to Indians from various plantations in the area and could report already 'a few neophytes'.⁷²⁵

Desprez sent for further assistance from missions in India and secured it from a Jesuit mission in Madurai. After the first missionary sent died within days, Father Charles Laroche arrived on the island in 1855, staying in the role until his death in 1868. He immediately sought to procure funds for his work. *La Propagation de la Foi* allocated 8,000 francs to the work of converting the Indian and Chinese population of the colony that same year. Whether or not this money ever materialised is unclear—archival records show letters complaining that it did not—it attests to a concerted interest in converting Indians.⁷²⁶ Father Laroche, who spoke Tamil, seems to have focused on the need to speak and provide reading material in the language. At one point he ordered a large number of books in Tamil and complained that his efforts were being thwarted when his book supply ran dry.⁷²⁷ Within a few years, Laroche seems to have focused his efforts on the '2000 Indians', who, according to him, were already Christian, instead of attempting to convert 'pagans'.⁷²⁸ Even then, he wrote that he could 'only administer

⁷²³ Philippe Delisle, 'Un échec relatif: La mission des engagés indiens aux Antilles et à la Réunion (seconde moitié du XIXe siècle)', *Outre-mers*, vol, 88, n°330-331 (2001),189-203.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷²⁵ Archives de L'Evêché de Saint-Denis, 1 A 8, rapport du desservant de la chapelle, Trois-Bassins, 27 October 1851.

⁷²⁶ Archives de L'Evêché de Saint-Denis, dossier 5A2, Mission Indienne, 1855.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, Lettre du le Père Laroche à l'évêque, 27 July 1861.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1858.

the 2,000 Catholic Indians of Bourbon once every two years. As they are scattered all over the island and tied to work, they can only gather at night and in very small numbers in each church, these meetings range from 10 to 30 people.’⁷²⁹ He also noted that when non-Christian Indians fell sick, priests are not called ‘or the sick person refuses baptism due to not understanding the exhortations given to them’. In other cases, Indians were ‘baptised without receiving the necessary instruction, without understanding the nature of baptism, or the obligations that result from it,’ Laroche said, adding that ‘if they recover, they live as before.’ Continuing with the challenges he found himself up against he requested that the number of priests for this mission be increased, asking for four additional priests, who he said, would need to learn Tamil. His calls appear to have gone unanswered.

Bishop Maupoint, who replaced Desprez in 1857, recognised Laroche’s solitary efforts in a report he sent to the mission *Propagation de la Foi* requesting funds for the building of a chapel in Saint-Denis, on which work started in 1860.⁷³⁰ The Saint-Thomas chapel was ostensibly for ‘all idolaters, both Indians and Africans’, according to what Maupoint stated at the start of the report, but he went on to describe it as explicitly for Indians:

Until now, only one missionary has devoted his attention solely to the Indians. Undoubtedly, he visits them as much as he can, educates them, baptises a few, and administers the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist to others. But what can these isolated efforts accomplish for such a vast multitude scattered across the entire diocese? Barely would his zeal be sufficient for the Indians of Saint-Denis alone! Therefore, we are having a chapel built exclusively for the Indians, and our intention would be to establish him there, either to attend to the Indians residing there or to assist those

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

⁷³⁰ ADR, Série V Cultes, ‘Rapport sur la mission indienne’.

arriving from outside, identifying those who are already Christians before they are distributed among the different habitations.⁷³¹

Those Indians residing in Saint-Denis were not newly-arrived indentured labourers. How many of those who arrived since 1828 had already left the plantation and made their way to town? Sourapa's letters mentioned above suggest some at least. But how many of these were already converted to Catholicism (either in India or on the island)? This is hard to establish but it seems likely that the Saint-Thomas Chapel was built also to cater to formerly enslaved and free Indians, long established in the colony and more likely to have been converted to Catholicism. Charles Nadarassin, living in Butor, Saint-Denis, had once been enslaved and from his Christian first name seems to have been baptised, yet he retained both his Tamil surname and use of the Tamil language, becoming an interpreter for indentured labourers.⁷³² Strikingly, the following year Augustin Couchin described it as a 'special chapel decorated in the style of their [the Indians'] country'.⁷³³ This is likely the result of Laroche's experience in India, where proselytising missionaries had learnt to pay heed to Indian culture, but the fact it was permitted in Réunion perhaps hints at a level of cultural acceptance, afforded due to the existing Indian presence on the island.

This mission's success in Réunion seems limited. When indentured migration from India was abolished only some 6,000 Indians were baptised.⁷³⁴ As shown above, Laroche's letters suggest that Indians on plantations superficially converted and then continued as before. On this he also wrote:

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² ADR, 12M58, *Interprètes*, Lettre du Charles Nadarassin au Directeur de l'Interieur, 25 February 1850.

⁷³³ Augustin Cochin, *L'Abolition*, 248.

⁷³⁴ Lacpatia, 'Quelques aspects', 322.

Some were baptised before and after my arrival because they knew some prayers in French and expressed a strong desire for baptism. However, I found that a certain number, if not almost all, stopped at baptism and did not come to confession or Mass, and continued to live as before. Furthermore, when I examined them, I found that out of 10, barely two could tell me what the words 'our father' meant. I could mention over 30 similar cases in my parish alone.⁷³⁵

Without further archival evidence it is impossible to say definitively, but it seems Indian indentured labourers may have recognised certain social benefits to being baptised, or having their children baptised, while not necessarily relinquishing their own religious practices. These often drew contempt and suspicion from the Catholic Church. Maupoint wrote to a friend in 1858:

You may not know, Reverend Father, and certainly, if it has not been told to you, you would not guess it, that on the island of Réunion, a French colony and a Catholic diocese, the paganism of India displays its satanic solemnities on certain days. The first three days of the year are days of various saturnalias for these multitudes of Indians who have come here for agricultural work, most of whom are idolaters. The streets of our cities, the main roads are filled with pagan groups, where one sees the demon represented, not by paintings or statues, but by living beings adorned with trinkets, their bodies almost naked and painted in horrible colours, sometimes with horns and a tail. The crowd pays homage to him, to the sound of music adapted to this infernal worship and to this wretched spectacle. Simulacra of temples and pagodas are also transported in procession, containing idols before which incense burns.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁵ Archives de l'Evêché de Saint-Denis, dossier 5A2 Mission indienne, Lettre du le Père Laroche à l'évêque, 1 July 1858.

⁷³⁶ Archives de Société Jesus, R.P. Etcheverry, *Lettres de Vals*, 1 January 1864.

The vocabulary used in this description conveys not only Catholic contempt for Hindu practices but also fear of the corrupting influence that such public practices might have on the morality of the creole population. Other observers also used derogatory language. An engineer visiting the island in 1868 wrote: 'The Indians of the lower castes have a kind of pagan religion; with a few bizarre ceremonies, such as the Pongal festival, this is enough for them, and the missionaries have not been able to convert them to Christianity, so rebellious are they to any change in their decrepit civilisation'.⁷³⁷ The island's Governor, Hubert de Lisle, wrote to his wife in 1857: 'The revelry of the Indians is dreadful. All the servants are drunk on the occasion of New Year.'⁷³⁸ But while the above examples show hostility towards Indians' religious practices, these sources also attest to the fact these practices continued on the island, and often in the public sphere.

Maupoint's description is of Pongal, a harvest festival celebrated in southern regions of India, especially Tamil Nadu but also Kerala (and outside India, Ceylon). It centres around thanking the Hindu God Suraya and is usually held over three or four days in January, based on the Tamil solar calendar. The term 'Pongal' refers to the practice of 'boiling' rice in milk to offer to the Sun god. Cows are also often part of the celebration. Archival sources suggest that this was also how it was celebrated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Notably, they reveal too that Indians who converted to Christianity continued to celebrate the festival, as did Muslims.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁷ Auguste Du Peyrat, *Mémoire sur la situation de l'agriculture à l'île de la Réunion, en 1868* (Paris, 1872).

⁷³⁸ Cited in Tanneguy de Feuillade de Chauvin, *Au temps où la Réunion était une grande colonie: témoignages d'un gouverneur créole sous le second empire, Henry Hubert de Lisle* (Paris, 1996), 43.

⁷³⁹ Guillaume J. Le Gentil de la Galaisière, *Voyages dans les mers de l'Inde à l'occasion du passage de Venus sur le Disque du Soleil le 6 Juin 1761 et le 3 du meme mois 1769* (Paris, 1779), BNF. Published online.

As mentioned, planters were contractually obliged to give their Indian labourers four days off at the start of the year to celebrate Pongal. It is not clear that they always did this willingly. Captain Miot and Major-General Goldsmid, sent by the British government to Réunion in 1877 and 1878 to write a report about the condition of Indian workers in the French colony noted that planters failed to pay Indians for the leave taken for Pongal.⁷⁴⁰ In response to the British officials' complaints, Réunion's authorities published a circular on 29 September 1877 instructing planters to pay their Indian workers for the four days of holiday, much to the chagrin of some. One, Adrien Beller, complained to the syndic in Saint-Suzanne after hiring an Indian worker, Virin-Mary, and discovering the clause in the contract: 'You have added on your own, to these usual clauses of the contracts that I enter into with foreign workers, 'Pongal paid' and 'two changes per year.' I regret to inform you that I do not accept these new conditions imposed on landowners, and I would rather give up the benefit of Indian labour than subscribe to it.'⁷⁴¹

Despite the planters' gripes, Indians were evidently able to engage in their religious practices. There is not, unfortunately, an abundance of sources to suggest what form these took, or how Pongal was celebrated. But interestingly, what is available suggests that the supposedly Hindu festival was imbued with elements of the Muslim festival, Yasmé, the same festival celebrated by the island's Indian community in the previous century, as described in chapter one, and according to at least one report, as mentioned above, still in 1838. For instance, one description of Pongal from 1862 said: 'the procession formed outside the camp; at its head and on its flanks, the chained devils and tigers began to leap from side to side, emitting roars...'⁷⁴² The same report described 'a large wooden statue with multiple hands and feet', which was

⁷⁴⁰ ANOM, C.277, d.3194, Report on Coolie emigration from India, by Major-General F.J. Goldmid and Commandant Emile Miot, 1877.

⁷⁴¹ Cited in Prosper Ève, *Un quartier du 'Bon pays': Sainte Suzanne de 1646 à nos jours* (Saint-André, Réunion, 1996), 95.

⁷⁴² ADR 1 PER, *Journal des Voyages*, 1862.

‘placed on a kind of shield that four strong men lifted onto their shoulders to the enthusiastic cheers of all the faithful’. ‘The priests led the procession; women and children, bearing offerings, surrounded the divine shield, and the procession set off to the sound of various chants and brass instruments, heading towards the shore.’ Another, written by Maillard, described men ‘dressed as tigers or clad in cardboard armour covered in mirrors of all colours.’⁷⁴³ These practices are not part of Pongol festivities and correspond instead with those carried out during Yamsé. Other potentially Muslim elements are detectable in these descriptions. Both describe a ‘mast’, decorated with colourful banners. Such masts were often used in parts of India in the worship of Nargoulan, a Muslim Sufi saint. Laroche, who with his time spent in India had some knowledge of different festivities, recognised this, writing in 1857: ‘The worship honoured by the Indians is Islamism: all these pavilions, all these banners suspended on high masts are altars to a Turk Nagouramîra.... There are ten times more altars to this Turk in your diocese than to the true God and ten times more sacrifices.’⁷⁴⁴ (Although Laroche is mistaken in calling Nargoulan a Turk, it is conceivable he did so because of the saint’s Islamic origins). Yet, these celebrations are not purely Islamic, according to the descriptions. The first also mentions firewalking as part of the proceedings:

...the devils and tigers were placed around the bed of glowing coals, and two masters of ceremonies, their heads adorned with large green turbans and long whips in hand, stood at each end of the rectangle. The silence was profound, the anticipation solemn. The two masters of ceremonies, arm raised, fixed their gaze on the sun. The two whips

⁷⁴³ Maillard, *Notes sur l’île de La Réunion*, vol.2, 266.

⁷⁴⁴ Archives de l’Evêché de Saint-Denis, dossier 5A2 Mission indienne, Lettre du le Pere Laroche à l’évêque, 30 January 1857.

cracked simultaneously, and immediately the devils and tigers leaped with roars over the embers. It seemed like a troop of damned souls from hell rushing into the flames.⁷⁴⁵

Firewalking has roots predominantly in Hindu religious practices. The mention of the ‘gaze to the sun’ perhaps also denotes worship of sun god, as in Pongal. As discussed in chapter one, the celebration of Yamsé in India at this time involved the intermingling of Muslim and Hindu practices. The ‘devils’ mentioned also seem to be a reference or a precursor to the ‘Jako Malabar’ which became a prominent feature of Pongal festivities in Réunion and is thought to represent the Hindu monkey god Hanuman. Interviews carried out with Indo-Réunionnais who participated in these festivities in the 1920s found that Nargoulan and Hamuman (called Amal in Réunion) became conflated. One woman called Marsli, who, as a teenager, was a dancer in the festival, recalled:

Once upon a time, the ‘jacquot’ would dress with short pants. He was costumed and painted. I would start dressing at three in the morning to go out at six. Then I would pray in front of the monkey god. The ‘malbars’ call him Nargoulan. I call him the ‘Monkey God’ because all the monkey dancers go in front of this god of the ‘lascars’ before dancing. If someone wants to perform the monkey dance, they must pray to this god before going out. The deity is represented by a pole with five fingers fixed at the top and a flag.⁷⁴⁶

The celebrations described above in the second half of the nineteenth century would perhaps have been familiar to Hindus (and Muslims) from Bengal. As previously mentioned, Yamsé in India is thought to have drawn some elements from Durja Puja, the Hindu festival celebrated

⁷⁴⁵ ADR 1 PER, *Journal des Voyages*, 1862. For more on firewalking see: Prosper Eve, *L’église en terre réunionnaise, 1830-1960*(Réunion, 2000), 85.

⁷⁴⁶ Christian Barat, *Nargoulan: culture et rites malabar à la Réunion approche anthropologique* (Saint-Denis, 1989), 187.

in Bengal. This syncretism in Réunion existed outside of the Pongal celebrations too. Representations of Nargoulan, or what became Nagou-mira, were included in Hindu temples built in Réunion in this period, as will be discussed.

Historians who have considered religious and cultural change have tended to conclude that Indian migrants lost much of their culture when they settled in Réunion or that the relative homogeneity of indentured labourers in Réunion resulted in the speedy preponderance of Tamil culture and articulation of Hinduism.⁷⁴⁷ The above examples offer strong evidence to suggest that rather than Muslims simply relinquishing their Islamic practices and adopting Hindu ones, Muslim and Hindu indentured labourers participated in each other's cultural and religious festivities, which were often imbued with the elements of both religions. This, on the one hand, certainly represents a re-imagining of a collective Indian identity brought about the experience of indenture. The four days allocated to Pongal in January were the only days of holiday contractually granted to Indian indentured labourers. There was no separate consideration for Indians of different faiths (or from different regions thus with different festivities), which may have encouraged this mix of practices. On the other hand, it also represents more continuity with life in rural India than has perhaps previously been acknowledged. Historians have tended to search for 'authenticity' to determine how much of their culture Indians lost when they settled in Réunion.⁷⁴⁸ But both Indian Hinduism and Islam in this period were characterised by a degree of syncretism. Nargoulan, often referred to as the lascar or seafarers' god was thought to offer protection during sea crossing and prayed to not only by Muslim but also by Hindus. If cultural and religious practices and social structures are taken as fluid, then the notion of authenticity becomes less important. From this perspective, a

⁷⁴⁷ Claude Prudhomme, 'Les Indiens de La Reunion entre Hindouisme et Catholicism', in *Relations Historiques*, 258.

⁷⁴⁸ See Sully Santa Govindin. 'Ruptures dans l'hindouisme réunionnais de 1828 à nos jours Ou la créolisation d'un sacré', *Revue historique de l'océan Indien*, 13 (2016), 118-131.

point of deviation from the original becomes less a loss and more the result of deliberate action and a sign of cultural agency.

This blending of Hindu and Muslim practices in cultural festivals also reflects a broader trend of religious syncretism observed in other societies where indentured labourers settled. Frank Korom has shown how in Trinidad, Hindu and Muslim indentured labourers came together to celebrate Hosay, exploring how this Shia Muslim commemoration of Muharram incorporated elements appealing to Hindus, such as processions, drumming, and effigies, resulting in a hybrid festival that became an emblem of shared identity among Indo-Trinidadians.⁷⁴⁹ Similarly, Carter highlights how Hindu and Muslim indentured labourers in Mauritius adapted their religious practices within a shared labouring community, blending aspects of their rituals to accommodate a new cultural environment.⁷⁵⁰ This religious syncretism not only allowed for the retention of cultural identities but also helped solidify a collective sense of ‘Indianness’ on the island, bridging differences across regional and religious backgrounds.

Amid this re-imagining what became of distinctions between castes? As noted above, historians of Réunion have tended to emphasise the quick disappearance of caste structures following Indian migrants’ arrival on the island.⁷⁵¹ Very few sources refer in any detail to caste practices, as most are written by colonial authorities or travellers visiting the island, which often reveal more about their own biases or (sometimes limited) understanding of caste than about the situation as experienced by Indians themselves. Muir-Mackenzie, a British official sent to write a report about the conditions of Indians on Réunion under the indenture system in 1893 described how many of them held Hindu religious wedding ceremonies, but with ‘the

⁷⁴⁹ Korom, *Hosay Trinidad*.

⁷⁵⁰ Carter, *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers*.

⁷⁵¹ Marimoutou-Oberlé ‘Cabanons et danse du feu’, 227; Dupon ‘Les immigrants indiens’, 63-6.

dissolution of castes', he wrote, these 'rites have lost their authenticity'.⁷⁵² Writing some years earlier during a visit to Réunion in July 1877, another British official, Goldsmid, warned that the issue of caste 'should not be brutally abolished in order to respect sensitivities'. He added that Muslims should 'no longer be obliged to consume pork or wine' and that 'certain Hindus' should have the opportunity to observe the respects due to their caste (such as vegetarianism). 'They should not all be considered as *parias*', he wrote.⁷⁵³ The wording of this suggests he may have received complaints from both Muslims and higher caste Hindus about their food allocations; in particular the use of 'no longer' indicates that Muslims had been obliged to consume pork and that some Hindus of middle or upper castes had perhaps felt this status had been disrespected. If this was the case it would suggest the indentured labourers in question retained an understanding of their religious and caste divisions, even as they engaged in syncretic festivities as described. This is not contradictory as, again, caste and religious distinctions existed in India at this time, alongside a strong syncretic tradition.

Some of the Indians who travelled to Réunion during this period as merchants and artisans seem to have maintained their caste identity. The use of 'Naiken' by Ramsamy Moutoussamy Naiken, who petitioned to start an association, is a reference to his caste.⁷⁵⁴ Whether or not this had any meaning to him beyond his name is hard to say for certain but given, as established, he maintained ties to India, it seems possible that it did. When Rangasammy Ramsammy requested permission to start his association, as mentioned above, he stressed in a follow-up letter to the Director of the Interior: 'I belong to a caste which has always been devoted to France, our forefathers eagerly rallied under the French flags when it

⁷⁵² J.W.P. Muir-Mackenzie, *Report on the Condition and Treatment of Indian Coolie Immigrants in the French Island Colony of Reunion and on the Questions connected with the Proposed Resumption of Emigration to the Colony*, 1894, 173.

⁷⁵³ ANOM, C.277, d.3194, Report on Coolie emigration from India, by Major-General F.J. Goldmid and Commandant Emile Miot, 1877, 146

⁷⁵⁴ Jean-Regis Ramsamy, *La galaxie des noms malabar: les débuts de l'intégration des engagés à la Réunion (1828-1901)* (Saint-Denis, 2006), 99.

was necessary to drive out the foreigners from Pondicherry.’⁷⁵⁵ His association, he said, wanted to ensure assistance to Indians in Réunion for ‘decent funerals after death’ and give money for the purchase of ‘a resting place that will serve to receive the Holy Sacrament at the exit of the Saint-Thomas Chapel.’⁷⁵⁶ Again, it is hard to identify what meaning caste had for Ramsammy, but certainly enough he felt it worth mentioning to the island’s authorities. The fact he planned for his association to donate money to the Catholic chapel in Saint-Denis is also curious. Perhaps, he was a Catholic convert, who retained some notion of caste identity as akin to class. Or perhaps, just like those who received baptism without any apparent change in behaviour or faith, Ramsammy saw a donation to the Catholic chapel as socially advantageous. Both seem possible. Joseph Mourouvin gives some clue; he attended a Catholic school in Saint-André and is described as having maintained ties with the Catholic Church ‘as a landowner’ but was a big benefactor of Hindu temples across the island.⁷⁵⁷

In some ways, however, the environment into which Indians entered in Réunion would have made maintaining caste distinctions difficult, especially for those who toiled on plantations. Marrying within castes was not always possible due to the smaller number of women recruited, especially during earlier periods of indenture. Marriage records show most Indian men, whose marriages are recorded, wed creole women. According to Fuma, 4,316 were recorded in 1848, 1849 and 1850; 55 involved Indian men and only one took place between an Indian man and an Indian woman, nearly all the rest involved Indian men and creole women.⁷⁵⁸ Lacpatia has also analysed marriage and birth records for Saint-Benoit, a rural area in the east

⁷⁵⁵ ADR Serie X 66 Société de secours mutels, Lettre par rapport la société d’Adimoulomsamy, 20 September 1879.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ Florence Callandre. ‘Sucre et Sacré. L’ascension sociale hors du commun de Joseph Mourouvin, un fils d’engagé indien à La Réunion, au début du vingtième siècle,’ *Semaine de l’histoire, Centre de Recherches sur les Sociétés de l’Océan Indien*, Saint Denis, 2009.

⁷⁵⁸ Sudel Fuma, *Etude des actes de mariage de l’Etat-civil de La Réunion de 1848-1850* (Saint-Denis, 1999), 2.

of Réunion with a large Indian population, between 1850 and 1878.⁷⁵⁹ From 1850 to 1860, 203 marriages took place involving Indians, all of which were interethnic. From 1860 to 1878, however, there were 162 marriages between Indians and 42 mixed marriages recorded. Of course, these figures do not give an idea of how many unions took place unofficially, nor what mixing between Indians (such as Muslims marrying Hindus or Bengalis marrying Tamils) occurred. The word ‘creole’ does not allow us to understand the origins of the women—it was mainly Indian men and creole women—who could have been of Indian origin. A further interesting insight offered by Lacpatia’s analysis, however, shows that of the 203 marriages involving Indians, 76 included Indians and creoles in the wedding party as witnesses (*témoins*) and 49 just creoles. This attests to the Indians’ social integration.⁷⁶⁰ Finally, Lacpatia identifies 20 Indian merchants who registered a child’s birth during this period. In half these cases, the children were given Christian first names. Of these 10, four were born to two Indian parents and six to an Indian father and creole mother. From this Lacpatia argues that merchants, free from the constraints of the plantation, could adopt the colony’s customs more quickly.⁷⁶¹ As above, though, whether or not this entailed a complete relinquishing of their cultural and religious practices, was simply seen as socially advantageous, or a middle ground between the two, is unclear.

Rather than being absorbed into Réunion’s creole melting point at the expense of their Indianity, there is strong evidence, however, to suggest integration meant the indianising of the island’s creole culture. In Réunion, Indians’ cultural agency did not just mean a re-imagining of religious expression but often an assertion of right to it, including in the public sphere, which left its stamp on the island’s physical and cultural geography. In 1872, Marimoutou, an Indian overseer from Saint-Paul’s Laprade estate, for example, wrote to both the Governor and the

⁷⁵⁹ Lacpatia, ‘Quelques aspects’, 320-1.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

Director of the Interior to protest against a ban by the local police on them playing the drums during their upcoming festivities:

Never until now has this freedom to fulfil this great religious obligation been contested or prevented for us since 1848, the time when I arrived in the country. It is the first time that the mayor of St Paul, Mr. Lacaille, has forbidden us from celebrating a religious festival, or any entertainment on this occasion, even at the Laprade establishment, our residence...Saint-Denis, the capital of the country, has been the scene of similar processions for several days.⁷⁶²

It is interesting that for Indians on the Laprade plantation at least, some 25 years had passed in Réunion without any interference in their religious activities, according to Marimoutou. He wrote subsequently in his letter to the Director of the Interior:

I had the honour of personally submitting yesterday to the Governor of the colony a request to obtain permission to publicly celebrate one of our major religious festivals (Corpus Christi). It occurs only once a year, similar to Catholics, in the first days of each new year...We solemnly leave the Laprade Sugar Factory establishment in Saint-Paul, where the headquarters of our altar is located, at two o'clock in the afternoon. We take a tour around the town and always return by five o'clock. It's just three hours of procession during which, of course, the drums and our songs can be heard. Among the Catholics, it is exactly the same.⁷⁶³

The historian Marimoutou-Oberlé uses this as an example of the disintegration of an authentic Hinduism and an attempt on the part of the petitioners to ingratiate themselves with a dominant

⁷⁶² ADR 21 V, Lettre de Marimouthou, chef commandeur de bande à l'établissement de sucrerie Dominique Laprade, à Saint-Paul, 19 January 1872.

⁷⁶³ ADR 21 V, Lettre de Marimouthou, chef commandeur de bande à l'établissement de sucrerie Dominique Laprade, à Saint-Paul, 20 January 1872.

Catholicism.⁷⁶⁴ This conclusion seems flawed. Instead, the indentured labourer seems to be using the comparison to strengthen his case before the authorities. The insinuation is clear: that there should be no difference in treatment between Indians and their religion(s) and French Catholics. Interestingly, Dominique Laprade, one of the Laprade brothers they worked for, passionately took up the cause, lamenting in a letter to the governor, the Indians' 'right to engage in ceremonies of their worship on the property with their music and drums, as there are no Indian ceremonies without drums.' The Indians from the Laprade plantation, along with the Laprade brothers, also engaged in a long back and forth with various elements of the colonial administration throughout 1871 and 1872 regarding an Indian temple. In 1871 an Indian indentured labourer by the name of Coupanchetty, along with several other Indians wrote to the mayor of Saint-Paul:

Address presented by the Indians Coupanchetty, Senier, Delin, Canabady, Taililingom, Kamin Chetty, Sandryal, Ramalingom, Lagapa Chetty to Mr. Mayor and to the Inhabitants of Saint-Paul, in order to obtain their consent to erect a chapel on a vacant piece of land, situated at the end of the pond, in the commune of Saint-Paul.⁷⁶⁵ They have acquired this land from Mr. Jules and Albert Perren, for the sum of 1,080 francs paid in cash. The above-mentioned Indians kindly request, Gentlemen, your authorisation to build, at their own expense, on the said piece of land, a chapel that will serve to bring together all the Indians who wish to join in this good work.⁷⁶⁶

By the following year, the administration has accused the Laprade brothers of already having one unauthorised temple on their land. Coupanchetty wrote again to offer an explanation:

⁷⁶⁴ Marimoutou-Oberlé, 'Cabanons et danse du feu', 225-50.

⁷⁶⁵ 'Chapelle' was often used to refer to Hindu temples. Michèle Marimoutou-Oberlé, *Les Engagés du sucre: documents et recherches* (Saint-Denis, 1989), 127.

⁷⁶⁶ ADR 21 V, Lettre du Coupanchetty au Maire de Saint-Paul, 1871.

The undersigned Indians have the honour to explain to you that, attached for a long time to the property known as *l'Etang* in St Paul, formerly owned by Messrs Neveu and currently by the Laprade brothers, they were authorised by the former leaders of the colony to establish and maintain on the said property a modest structure improperly called a pagoda intended for the practice of their worship and related ceremonies. They are unable today to reproduce the authorisation that was granted to them more than twenty years ago, when Mr. Étienne Neveu was in charge of the property. The loss of all documents proving the said authorisation prompts them to request from our kindness the continuation of the favour that was granted to them, a favour justified by their interest in practicing their worship without moving away from their employers' property. This double advantage, benefiting both the Indians and their proprietors, could only be challenged by a malevolent and purely harassing intent; such is not the spirit that guides the leaders of our high administration.⁷⁶⁷

The second letter, or petition, which has around 70 signatures in Tamil script, makes clear that the Indians have been freely holding religious ceremonies for decades.

The signatories on the first letter included not only indentured labourers but Indian businessmen such as A. Ramalingon Patair, who had come to Réunion as recently as 1870 as a '*commerçant*' and made and sold jewellery in Saint-Paul.⁷⁶⁸ The statues of deities in the temple are decorated with silver, bearing Patair's signature in Tamil.⁷⁶⁹ The letter is also signed by inhabitants with non-Indian names, one of whom, F. Lacaze, added a note to say: 'In French lands, freedom of religions exists'.⁷⁷⁰ The expense of buying the land and building the temple

⁷⁶⁷ ADR 21 V, Lettre du Coupanchetty au Directeur de l'Intérieur, 1872.

⁷⁶⁸ ADR 7V1 Culte Hindouiste, cited in Jean-Regis Ramsamy, *Histoire des bijoutiers Indiens à l'île de la Reunion* (Sainte-Marie, La Réunion, 1999), 43

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

also suggests that this was an effort achieved with the help of Indians, who like Patair, were businessmen with wealth or already well-established on the island. A similar unity across social echelons also facilitated the construction of other stone-built temples in Réunion at this time, in Saint-Pierre, Saint-Louis and Saint-Benoit. For example, in 1873 in Saint-Louis, two men called Rangayen and Moutoucarpin, described as ‘well off merchants’ were behind the construction of a temple, which along with the land on which it was build, cost ‘around 7,500 francs’.⁷⁷¹

Historians often describe Indians’ religious practices as having been confined to plantations. Prudhomme went as far as to describe their religion in the 1870s as having ‘only a precarious existence’.⁷⁷² But there is substantial evidence to suggest this was not always the case. For example, Mayor Patu de Rosement wrote to the Director of the Interior in 1859 to complain complain about ‘the noise of the tambour’ during Indian processions and request that they be forbidden from beating drums on certain roads and that the police be notified when Indians were organising processions outside of their plantations. But even in complaining he added: ‘numerous groups of Indians, usually authorised by their employers, frequently travel the main roads to carry out what they call their religious ceremonies. It is rare for them to cause disorder during these lengthy processions, which are sometimes composed of several hundred individuals’.⁷⁷³ In 1859, processions were taking place very much out in the open, in the public sphere. Reporting on the Pongal festival in 1903, one local newspaper wrote:

Finally, wherever you went during these four days of celebration, you encountered liveliness and cheer. Rum was flowing, I would even say gushing. Body paint was

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Prudhomme, *Histoire religieuse*, 320.

⁷⁷³ ADR 21 V3, Lettre du maire Patu de Rosement au directeur de l’interieur, 24 October 1859.

dripping down chests. Gradually, the Creoles also began to participate in the zako dance... Indian customs were being adopted throughout the country.⁷⁷⁴

As during the period of slavery in Réunion, when as chapter one showed, there was a tension between the reality of the slavery system and ideas about race and enslavement, which were influenced by notions and ideologies born in Paris and racial dynamics in the Antilles, during the period of indenture another paradox occurred. An official line, again arising from the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period in mainland France and the Caribbean, held that to 'belong' in a French colony, was to assimilate and adopt French culture, language, Catholic religion and to own property. The colonial elite, planters and administrators, sought to uphold this in Réunion, emphasising the 'otherness' of Indians who did not meet this criterion. Yet, this official line existed in parallel with another reality: an island, where cultural and religious diversity was, at least to some degree, established and if not accepted, then tolerated.

Conclusion

Newly arrived indentured Indian migrants were confronted in post-slavery Réunion by entrenched racism and a complex system of racial stratification. To a large degree, this determined how they were perceived by planters and colonial administrators. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the system of racial stratification was markedly different in Réunion from that in the French Caribbean as a result of the island's more diverse enslaved population and the greater extent to which Indian indentured labourers were able to assert themselves and their identity in the broader social, economic and cultural context of the island. Whereas in the Antilles, Indian indentured labourers and their descendants turned inwards, in Réunion Indian communities fought for—and won—a more powerful position. They were able to do so in part

⁷⁷⁴ ADR, 1PER 45/4, *La Patrie Créole*, 6 January 1903.

because of the presence of the Indians who came before them as enslaved people, as lascars and as free men and women, and because of those who came in separate but concurrent migrant flows. In other words, Réunion should be seen not as an outpost of the Caribbean transplanted to the Indian Ocean, but as distinctly integrated into the Indian Ocean world.

In Réunion, the existence of an established Indian community facilitated the social mobility of new migrants. They were able to move into towns to live and work alongside Indian merchants, who continued to arrive during the indenture period. It was with the assistance of this broader Indian community that indentured labourers were able to assert themselves economically and culturally. Indians in the Antilles, in contrast, stayed confined to plantations or socially ostracised in towns, and fewer prospered economically. Much of the process of creolisation involved them learning creole and adapting to ongoing plantation life. In Réunion, in contrast, the process of 'creolisation' was more one of Indianisation. Yet it did not represent a seamless 'continuity' of these forms. Rather, the process can better be seen as an active reinvention which incorporated different regional and religious practices, and which served to lay the foundations for a unique 'Indianness'.

CHAPTER SIX

Strangers in Strange Lands: the Indian ‘Other’ in the French Caribbean

This chapter examines ideas about race and how these ideas were deployed and shaped conceptions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in French Caribbean society in the era of indenture. The persistence of the racial ideologies which were examined in the early chapters of the thesis, it argues, were significant in determining the extent to which Indian migrants could integrate and prosper both culturally and economically. These were coupled with ideas around eligibility for citizenship that formed during the revolutionary period and were articulated in 1848 as slavery was abolished, as chapter two described.

In 1923, when Henri Sidambarom a Guadeloupean Indian and colonial immigration officer, finally won the right to French citizenship for Indians in the French Antilles some twenty years after he filed a lawsuit to the effect and 75 years after their first arrival, they were, to a very large extent, still considered outsiders. In his speech before the court of justice, Sidambarom summarised the racial ideology which he identified as the main reason why the colonial administration had refused for so long to respond to his demand to grant Indians republican citizenship:

You cannot hunt a whole race of men, who you consider, in your society, idolaters and foreigners, but who have contributed in equal measure to the economy of the colony, whose forefathers, in India, asked for nothing more than to give themselves to France, to give it all to this vast and beautiful country, of which in Guadeloupe, sons like fathers before them have given and continue to give their guts to the island’s industries, and instead of reaching out to them, instead of raising their morale, depressed by poverty,

to reward them for having, too, fertilised our generous land, you tell them that, although fixed in Guadeloupe—where no race has more rights than any other any other—you tell them that they do not have the quality to participate in public life, to be citizens because they are ‘Indian’. So that no one is ignorant of it, I must tell the public of all the races of Guadeloupe... [that] this lawsuit is a question of race.⁷⁷⁵

The origins of this speech and the struggle for belonging and for French citizenship go back to long before 1923 and even before 1904, when Sidambarom first filed his lawsuit. From the moment Indian migrants docked in Point-à-Pitre in Guadeloupe and Fort-de-France in Martinique, they took on a unique role in French Caribbean society: both the agents of and the scapegoats for colonial administrations. Contrary to current discourses that emphasise their speedy assimilation into French creolity, this chapter argues that Indians not only held a distinct sense of Indian identity in the French Caribbean but that perceptions of Indian ‘otherness’ were manipulated and deployed by colonial administrations and planter elites or *Békés* in ways that reinforced cultural difference. This resulted in the creation and maintenance of a form of racial hierarchy and segregation in the islands—the legacy of which is still playing out today.

This chapter argues that the heterogeneity of the Indians who arrived in the French Antilles was a crucial factor in allowing for the active reinvention of cultural practices and the redefining of social boundaries dictated by caste, faith and language. These cultural and religious identities, refracted through long-established ideologies of racial difference, it will contend, were used by the islands’ existing populations of formerly enslaved Africans and white planters to maintain a discourse of ‘otherness’ surrounding Indian indentured migrants and their descendants. Indian communities reacted to this often by turning inwards and by

⁷⁷⁵ ADG, BR77, and Henri Sidambarom, *Procès politique: Contestation des droits électoraux opposée par le gouverneur de la Guadeloupe, M. le Vicomte de La Loyère, aux fils d’Hindous nés à la Guadeloupe, 1904-1906* (Pointe-à-Pitre, 1924; republished Bordeaux, 1990), 78.

reaffirming a collective identity as ‘Indian’. In other words, they were forced to, and chose to, forge a new collective cultural identity as Indians. Even as the second and third generation of Indians were born in the islands, learnt creole, took Christian names and—eventually—acquired French citizenship, this identity did not disappear.

Indenture in the French Antilles

Indian indentured labourers were first brought to the French Antilles in 1854. In the early years, plantation owners seemed to distinguish little between the status of their new Indian labourers and that of their formerly enslaved workers—mirroring in many ways the attitudes of Réunion’s planters following the arrival of indentured labourers from India. Antillean planters used strikingly similar language for Indian indentured labourers as they had done for enslaved men and women, referring to Indians as their ‘property’ and hoping for ‘good quality deliveries’ of workers.⁷⁷⁶ ‘*Moi, possesseur de coolis*’, M. Leon Birot, plantation owner in Ducos, Martinique, described himself in 1856.⁷⁷⁷

While the *Code Noir* became redundant with the end of slavery, the 1848 act of abolition was accompanied by a series of side acts which, among other things, made vagrancy and begging offences punishable by imprisonment.⁷⁷⁸ As in Réunion, vagrant or ‘vagabond’ Indians were listed in newspapers in the same way that escaped maroon slaves had been just a few years beforehand.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁶ See, for example, ADG, Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire, Rapport de la commission de l’immigration, 1854, 80; ADG Session Ordinaire, Intervention Célestin Nicolas, 1883, 175, 9; Exempleire du journal pointois L’Avenir du 18 octobre 1856, ANOM, Gua. C.186, d.1138; ADG, Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire Rapports de la commission de l’immigration 1867, 547, and Session Ordinaire 1868, 409; ANOM, Gua. C.56 d.399.

⁷⁷⁷ ANOM, Gua C.129 d.160.

⁷⁷⁸ Article 1 du décret réprimant le vagabondage et la mendicité et prévoyant l’ouverture d’ateliers de discipline dans les colonies du 27 avril 1848. Published online.

⁷⁷⁹ See ADG, Gazette Officielle de la Guadeloupe, 10 September 1867.

If plantation owners during the era of slavery simultaneously justified the enslavement of Africans (and in Réunion, of Indians as well) while praising their qualities as slaves, so too were indentured Indians subject to similar ambivalent assessments. In the first years of indenture, planters generally held their Indian workforce in high esteem. The 111 Indian labourers in Case-Pilote, Martinique, for example, were lauded in 1858 as being ‘full of health’ and said to work ‘always diligently, to the great satisfaction of the owners who wish to deal only with these Indians whose docility and intelligence leave nothing to be desired’.⁷⁸⁰ Using sweeping, racialised stereotypes, planters and administrators often compared Indians favourably to Chinese and African indentured migrants. As discussed, a total of 1,200 Chinese migrants were brought to the two islands in 1859 and 1860, but the exercise was unsuccessful, especially in Guadeloupe, which sent more than 200 Chinese workers to Martinique.⁷⁸¹ There is less certainty around the number of ‘free’ African migrants brought to the French Antilles between 1857 and 1862, but estimates suggest around 10,000 arrived in Martinique and 6,000 in Guadeloupe (compared to around 25,000 Indians sent to Martinique and 43,000 to Guadeloupe).⁷⁸² In crediting this new indentured labour force with improved harvests in 1859, Martinique’s administration said that credit was due ‘particularly to Indians’ who ‘stand out for their submission, their activity, and their skill. These immigrants have recently been preferred to all others, and everyone feels the need to have a larger number of them’.⁷⁸³ Planters, it was reported, often described their ‘marked preference for this race’.⁷⁸⁴

⁷⁸⁰ J.O.M., 11 November 1858.

⁷⁸¹ ANOM, Gua C.66 d.492, "Convoi de l'Indien", Bontemps à la ministère de la Marine et les colonies, 12 August 1859.

⁷⁸² For Guadeloupe see Cl. Blanche, ‘6.000 “engagés libres” en Afrique et en Guadeloupe, 1858-1861’, PhD thesis, (Université de Paris, 1994), vol.I, 160-62, and vol.II, 407-574; for Martinique, see David, *Population martiniquaise*, 163-4; and Renard, *Martinique*, 110; and Smeralda-Amon, *La question de l’immigration indienne*, 333.

⁷⁸³ J.O.M., 29 December 1859.

⁷⁸⁴ J.O.M., 29 March 1860.

Feeding into these comparisons were conceptions of race forged during the era of slavery that created a paranoia around African workers, as noted in chapter three. Planters expressed fear that if recently emancipated creoles of African origin were thrown into contact with a population of newly arrived Africans possessing ‘elements of its primitive state of barbarism’, the former would be hindered in their progress towards European civilisation.⁷⁸⁵ An 1854 report on immigration observed that Africans always retained ‘a certain tendency to move towards the savage state’.⁷⁸⁶ There were also fears that, given their shared roots, indentured African labourers would themselves be led astray by formerly enslaved people. The commissioner for immigration wrote in 1863 that little by little the African was adopting ‘the first hints of civilisation, allowing himself to become dominated by creole workers and becoming difficult to control’.⁷⁸⁷ Over time, however, the perceived facility of African indentured labourers to assimilate into the creole population and embrace French language, culture and religion, strengthened arguments for them to be granted citizenship, as will be discussed.

Positive descriptions of Indians, meanwhile, quickly gave way to increasingly negative ones. As in Réunion, Indians were criticised for deserting or absconding from plantations, for not working hard enough, for being sick or for costing too much,⁷⁸⁸ particularly following the economic crises that hit Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1860.⁷⁸⁹ Many of the insubordinations Indians were charged with can be directly related to the worsening conditions they faced as their employers became increasingly cash-strapped. Martinique’s planters complained that Indians deserted plantations ‘to file complaints in Fort-de-France against their recruiters’.

⁷⁸⁵ ADG, 5K 46, fol. 105, Rapport Eggimann au Conseil Privé, 10 October 1851.

⁷⁸⁶ ADG, Conseil General de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire, 1854, p. 76, Rapport de la commission de l’immigration.

⁷⁸⁷ ANOM, Gua. C.180 d.1116, Commissaire à l’immigration à directeur de l’Intérieur, 8 December 1863.

⁷⁸⁸ J.O.M., 10 October 1858.

⁷⁸⁹ Amon-Smeralda, *La question de l’immigration indienne*, 248-50.

There were also complaints of planters withholding payments or reducing food rations, although one administrative report noted many were ‘unfounded’.⁷⁹⁰

Such negative descriptions of Indians were often strongly shaped by racial theories: abolition, as we have seen, coincided with the advance of the pseudo-scientific racism which would dominate the second half of the nineteenth century. References to ‘this degenerate Asiatic race’ and similar representations were thus routine in the writings of plantation owners and colonial officials.⁷⁹¹ One administrator wrote that Indians ‘have tendencies, instincts, and brains which have nothing in common with ours’.⁷⁹² Indian workers had initially been sought after because of their perceived difference from the emancipated African slaves. Now, imbued with racist rhetoric, this difference served another purpose: it made Indians scapegoats for the islands’ floundering economy.

The difference in characterisations of African and Indian migrants in the French Antilles shows how developing racial ideology played out in reality. Both groups were subjected to colonial elites’ racial theorising and prejudice, yet in significantly different ways. African indentured migrants were portrayed as having no civilisation and as ‘primitive’; as such, it was believed that they could be civilised and assimilated into European creole society. Dr Pellegrin, who accompanied a shipload of Indians destined for Martinique (although they disembarked permanently in Réunion following bad weather on the crossing), compared Indians to Africans, remarking of the latter: ‘These men, who sometimes come from the interior of Africa, have no homeland, no society, no traditions, or at least, only memories that can fade in the face of a new life’.⁷⁹³

⁷⁹⁰ J.O.M., 29 March 1860.

⁷⁹¹ For example, ADG, *Le Courrier de la Guadeloupe*, 11 août 1882, ‘séance de la Chambre d’agriculture de Pointe-à-Pitre du 1er juillet 1882’.

⁷⁹² ADG, Conseil General de la Guadeloupe, Session Extraordinaire, June 1885, 207, intervention Auguste Isaac.

⁷⁹³ ANOM, Reu C.381 d.3242. Report on the Emigrants embarked at Pondichery and at Karikal on board the French ship *Francois Cail* for the island of Réunion, 8 December 1869.

Indians, in contrast, were often described as ‘intelligent’ and as having a civilisation, of sorts, but one which was too different, too inferior or too degraded to ever allow for their assimilation. Interestingly, Guadeloupe’s administration during the 1860s and 1870s appears to have made large efforts educate themselves on ‘Indian civilisation’. In 1870, the list of books ordered to be sent from the Ministry of Colonies in Paris included *Les Castes dans l’Inde*, by M. Esquer, a colonial judge in Pondicherry.⁷⁹⁴

The extent to which planters and officials sought to emphasise the intrinsic ‘otherness’ of Indians varied over time and place. Yet the end of the French Second Empire and advent of the Third Republic in 1870 was a significant turning point in this discourse. The French state deviated from the prevailing political trend in the Caribbean world, where English, Dutch and Spanish authorities were increasingly restricting the rights of their colonial subjects.⁷⁹⁵ Instead, the new French republic removed distinctions of race entirely, rendering every man—although not women—equal before the law as a French citizen.⁷⁹⁶ In reality, however, new dividing lines were drawn that set out who did and did not qualify for French imperial citizenship. These were based on labour and property ownership and imbued heavily with racial ideology.⁷⁹⁷ An 1872 commission to discuss labour policies focused its attention on how to put formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants to work on colonial plantations, with many of its members arguing that this population was inherently lazy and needed to be compelled to work through coercive labour laws. The leading abolitionist Victor Schœlcher opposed this view, calling for

⁷⁹⁴ ANOM, Gua C.74 d.556. Lettre du juillet 1870.

⁷⁹⁵ See: ANOM, FM SG Gén. C.224 d.1612, Projet de loi électorale préparé en 1874: Note sur la représentation des colonies.

⁷⁹⁶ The fact this was more theoretical than real did not escape the notice of some ministers in Paris: see the comments of Vice-Admiral Jean Bernard Jauréguiberry, Minister of the Navy and the Colonies, in ANOM, FM SG Gén. C.262 d.2803.

⁷⁹⁷ Elizabeth Heath, ‘Citizens of the Empire? Indentured Labor, Global Capitalism, and the Limits of French Republicanism in Colonial Guadeloupe’ in John Donoghue and Evelyn Jennings eds. *Building the Atlantic Empires: Slavery, the State, and the Rise of Global Capitalism, 1500-1945*, (Leiden, 2015).

such laws to be removed and replaced by education that would inculcate ‘the duties of citizenship and the merits of labour’.⁷⁹⁸ Yet Schœlcher’s conception of citizenship still revolved around questions of labour, property ownership and assimilation.⁷⁹⁹ The latter, which conceptually and politically gained hold by the 1880s, was premised on the formerly enslaved Africans’ facility to adopt the key tenets of French culture: language, customs and religion. This was possible because, as noted above, Africans were seen as having neither a civilisation of their own to hold onto nor a collective religious or cultural identity. Yet this appeared to be patently not true of Indians, who were therefore barred from citizenship in what amounted to a reversal of racial stereotyping and hierarchisation established in the previous century.

Criminality

As in Réunion, one emerging stereotype was that of Indians as an inherently ‘criminal race’. Racial theories and assimilationist ideologies came together to portray Indians as predisposed to criminality precisely because of their inability to assimilate either economically or culturally—including through renouncing their existing religious and cultural practices. To repeat, much of the alleged criminality of Indians was in fact a product of flaws in the indenture system itself. Indians were particularly associated with vagabondage and begging, which, as an 1860 report from Guadeloupe shows, was often the result of neglect or mistreatment by their employers:

For a long time now, our eyes have been afflicted by the sight of some Indian coolies, pale, emaciated, sick, and sordidly dressed, who go from door to door soliciting the pity of housewives, begging for alms in the city. Here is the tale these wretched individual’s

⁷⁹⁸ ANOM, FM SG Gén.C.127 d.1105, Commission du régime du travail aux colonies.

⁷⁹⁹ See: Elizabeth Heath, *Wine, Sugar, and the Making of Modern France: Global Economic Crisis and the Racialization of French Citizenship, 1870–1910*, (New York, 2014), 87-8.

recount: according to them, they all belong to M. de R.'s workshop, and he, in disregard of the rights of humanity and in defiance of strict commitments placed under the sanction of public regulations, lets them starve.⁸⁰⁰

Schnakenbourg has tallied the number of Indians and creoles charged with vagabondage in Guadeloupe between 1859 and 1887 and found that the proportion of Indians steadily increased until reaching more than 80 per cent in 1887.⁸⁰¹ This trend, he explains, can be partially attributed to the island's growing Indian population, which increased from 5,403 in 1859 to 18,985 in 1880, but also to changes initiated by the advent of the Third Republic. Vagrancy laws were less and less enforced among the black creole population, Schnakenbourg states, and after 1880 there was a *de facto* lifting of the 1852 decree on vagabondage in terms of its application to that group: Indians and formerly enslaved African creoles were not equal before the law.

The racialisation of supposed Indian criminality allowed it to be entrenched in the understanding and treatment of the group as whole. Reporting on Guadeloupe in 1887, the British commissioner William Lawless observed that the police saw 'all Indians' as 'potential criminals'.⁸⁰² The law was 'severe in the extreme with an Indian,' Lawless wrote, quoting the top of the judiciary in Pointe-à-Pitre, who gave this as an explanation for the higher conviction rate among Indians than formerly enslaved creoles.⁸⁰³

In 1889, Dr Amand Corré, a navy doctor, published *Le Crime en pays creole* based on his analysis of the records of 106 crimes committed in 1860 and of 218 more committed between 1879 and 1884 on Guadeloupe. Having spent two years on the island from 1885, Corré

⁸⁰⁰ ANOM, Gua C.112 d.782. *Demande d'explication sur un fait de incendite de la part de travailleurs indiens, signale par le journal de la Guadeloupe*, 3 January 1860.

⁸⁰¹ Schnakenbourg, 'L'immigration Indienne', 995.

⁸⁰² ANOM, Mar. C.130 d.1176, document n° 2, Plainte du consul Lawless dans son mémoire du 7 mars 1874 sur la situation des Indiens de l'île. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁰³ TNA, FO 27/3486, Vice-consul De Vaux à FO, 2 août 1899, Immigration Reports for 1898.

had a close friendship with the *procureur* in Pointe-à-Pitre, which gave him access to these records and to understandings of race and criminality, particularly among its judiciary. This work indicates how the colonial justice system reinforced the outsider status of Indians. ‘The criminality in the colonies can be broken down into two almost equally strong currents, one provided by the Creoles (intrinsic crime) and the other by the Hindu coolies (extrinsic crime)’, Corré writes. He continued:

It should be acknowledged that emigration has introduced into our colonies thousands of individuals recruited from afar, not among the best of their race, but rather among the worst, the vagabonds, and the outcasts of a specific civilisation where even crime has its castes and deified protectors.⁸⁰⁴

Corré refers to Indian civilisation, once again contrasting with the ways African were described as having no civilisation. He also alludes to the idea that indentured Indians were from lower castes, and links their religious practices— ‘deified protectors’—with inherent criminality.

He further showed an interest in plotting the relationship between skin colour and criminality, drawing on racial theories as he deployed the assimilationist ideology of the day. It is ‘impossible to establish’ just how crime is distributed by race, he wrote, as ‘the population is no longer clearly and consistently broken down into its various ethnic elements (sensitivities must be respected, especially among people of colour!)’. But from available statistics, Corré finds a ‘low level of crime for white Creoles’ and that ‘the accused are primarily from the category of people of colour (black countryside dwellers, cultivators, domestics, or those in small trades’. ‘Undoubtedly, the least enlightened and least docile portion of the population, those who have not yet had time to become initiated into the duties of a community of free

⁸⁰⁴ Corré, *Le Crime*, 73-4.

men, must present the highest proportion of offences in the environment.’⁸⁰⁵ Yet Corré qualifies this, suggesting that abolition has permitted those once enslaved to become civilised by learning from their European ‘superiors’: ‘But already, [this population] is on the path to improvement, through education and emulation’, meaning that ‘its criminality will decrease’. This, however, is taking place while the criminality ‘of the immigrants, treated as serviles, will gain more ground’.⁸⁰⁶ Corré continued:

It has been claimed that the African American differs greatly from his ancestor, the African, that he has even lost the physical characteristics of the latter, and that he has assimilated the intellectual traits of the White. I do not hesitate to declare that these are pure lies or pure fantasies escaped from armchair observers. The Creole Black is freed from the numbing toil and degrading miseries of his African counterpart, he has acquired some veneer through contact with superior ethnic elements; he has improved, but he has not ceased to belong to his race, and that race is not adaptable to the same social conditions as the Aryan ...The Black is not of a wicked character, but only unstable in character, like a child, and, like a child, but with the difference that he has reached the maturity of his physiological development, his instability is the consequence of incomplete brain development. In an environment of advanced civilisation, where he has complete freedom of behaviour, he stands out... Within this Creole population, there are several thousand indentured labourers living separately: these are the Indians, degenerate Aryans, who have accepted an almost servile situation far from their homeland.⁸⁰⁷

In referencing the numbing toil and degrading miseries of Africans compared to ‘the Creole

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 121 and 126.

Black' Corré seems to have been comparing enslaved Africans in European colonies, perhaps newly enslaved, from the era of slavery with formerly enslaved creolised people of African origin. Once more this reflects racist discourses of the time, which associated Africans with their enslaved state in European colonies rather than with Africa. Indians were described as racially superior but degenerate Aryans, who turned to criminality in their indentured state out of cowardice and cunning:

This *pariah*, this coolie, as he is called, has, in relation to his masters, the baseness of the enslaved; he is driven to harm them by an ever-present sense of revenge, but he obeys this feeling with cowardly acts: setting fire to crops, stores, and houses, carried out at night and in secret.⁸⁰⁸

His reference to *paria* again indicates Corré had some understanding of the Indian caste system and believed the criminality of Indians in the French colony was connected to their caste status, which, like shipboard doctors, he saw through a racial lens. Between themselves, he wrote, the Indians 'retain all the fierceness of their ethnic instincts'. Their criminality was more calculated and 'wicked' than the 'simple' African, Corré suggests. He added: 'they kill each other with unprecedented ferocity, and the majority of their murders are related to procreative influences'.⁸⁰⁹ As in Réunion, many crimes committed by Indian men can be seen as partly the result of the lack of Indian women and thus competition.

Such perceptions of cast Indians as inherently criminal and degenerate underpinned an emerging idea that they were irredeemable racial and cultural outsiders who stood apart from creole Catholic society. These racialised ideas were manifested in deliberate attempts by the plantation owners to divide Indians from creole African workers in order to keep wages low and to maintain control over the workforce, as seen in Réunion.⁸¹⁰ Some have contended that

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

⁸¹⁰ ANOM, Gua. C.180 d.1116, Commissaire à l'immigration à directeur de l'Intérieur, 27 août

in deliberately pitting the formerly enslaved and Indian newcomers against each other, the colonial administrations formed a kind of alliance with Indians against the black majority. In Martinique, in particular, much has been made of Indians as the agents of the *Béké*, or white plantation-owning class.⁸¹¹ These perceptions were certainly apparent at the time and shaped relations between Indians and the islands' majority black creole populations, again, especially in Martinique. Yet it can be argued that Indian migrants were placed in a vulnerable position which left them open to manipulation by the white plantation-owning elite. Despite this perceived alliance, they were still subject to discrimination and abuse from plantation-owner bosses.

Competitors and Usurpers

When the first ships docked in the Antilles carrying Indian indentured labourers in 1853, the reaction from the existing population was not immediately hostile. Reports from Abymes in Guadeloupe describe the 'curiosity of the people'.⁸¹² Similar reports were made about the first arrivals in Saint-Pierre in Martinique.⁸¹³ In 1864, *Le Messager*, a Martiniquais newspaper, reported an inter-communal gathering at which 'the Tam Tam sounded out under the agile fingers of the musician, immediately a circle formed around him and the carefree children from Africa and India got ready for their favourite dance'.⁸¹⁴ In general, however, sources from the 1850s and 1860s are scattered with police reports of clashes between Indians and creoles of both European and African origin. In 1856 in Capesterre in Guadeloupe, which had large Indian migrant population a brawl broke out after a creole 'touched' an Indian woman; in Basse-Terre,

et 8 décembre 1863,

⁸¹¹ Amon-Smeralda, *L'Indo-Antillais entre Noirs et Békés, Approche socio-anthropologique d'une société plurielle*, (Paris, 2008), 70-6.

⁸¹² ANOM, GUA C.186 d.1138. Gouverneur Aubry-Bailleul à la ministère de la Marine et les Colonies, 27 May 1853.

⁸¹³ Gerry L'Etang, 'La grâce, le sacrifice et l'oracle: De l'Inde à la Martinique, les avatars de l'hindouisme', (PhD thesis, Université des Antilles-Guyane, 1997), 141.

⁸¹⁴ *Le Messager*, 17 August 1864.

meanwhile, the entire Indian labour force on one plantation refused to work because a young creole man had ‘insulted their god’.⁸¹⁵ British consular officials also described the antagonism between the two communities:

I have from a very high judicial functionary in this city [Pointe-à-Pitre], that whenever a charge is brought against an Indian for some slight offence, it is something remarkable the great number of *Nègres* who spontaneously offer themselves to testify against the poor Indian. Whereas in the case of a *Nègre* not a soul is to be found to appear before a court to depose against him.⁸¹⁶

As in other plantation colonies, newly arrived indentured labourers were often viewed by emancipated slave communities as competitors and as willing agents of the plantocracy. As discussed, the abolition of slavery in the French colonies saw a large-scale desertion of plantations. Creole populations resented the low wages offered to them and preferred instead to start up their own small holdings where possible or move to towns. The arrival of Indian indentured labourers, who offered a cheaper labour source, impacted their bargaining power. At times of economic dislocation in the aftermath of abolition, resentment was particularly strong.⁸¹⁷ Describing this, Dr Formel, who spent six weeks in Martinique from December 1872 before embarking on a repatriation journey at the start of 1873, wrote:

Indian immigration came to ruin their hopes at the moment when they felt these hopes were close to being realised. Thus, they express the most intense hostility towards Indian migrants in all circumstances. I have seen several times in the streets of Fort-de-

⁸¹⁵ ANOM, Gua C.180 d.1116. Rapport mensuel du commissaire à l'immigration du 9 janvier 1856 and Rapport du 5 septembre 1856,^[SEP]7, and Rapport du 25 janvier 1857.

⁸¹⁶ TNA, FO 27/3486, vice-consul De Vaux to the Foreign Office, August 2, 1899, Immigration report for 1898.

⁸¹⁷ For a comparative perspective, see Toni Arno and Claude Orian, *L'Île Maurice: Une Société Multiculturelle* (Paris, 1986).

France and Saint-Pierre small black children, encouraged by their parents, hurling insults and chasing the coolies who had come to spend their Sunday there.⁸¹⁸

By the 1900s, Indians in Martinique had come to represent less of an economic threat to creole workers than in Guadeloupe, due to their smaller numbers and greater confinement to rural plantations.⁸¹⁹ Yet economic competition was not the only driver of antagonism between the two communities, especially for the period considered by this study: the sudden arrival of a new group of people with a different appearance, languages and cultures prompted widespread suspicion and sometimes open hostility. Describing when Indians came into the town of Moule in Guadeloupe, Dr Rosan Girard wrote:

The Indians represented for the people of the town objects of curiosity and distrust... They almost never left the plantation to which they were confined. We saw them sometimes in town, more dishevelled, if it was possible, than the black people from the plantation, the ear and the nose pierced with a ring, dragging their bare feet on the dusty road.... For the majority of the creole children, Indians were still people from another country, foreign workers with a curious complexion, neither black, nor *mulâtre*, nor white, with strange customs.⁸²⁰

These tensions did not necessarily ease over time. A report by D.W.D. Comins commissioned by the British government in 1891 to investigate the conditions of Indians in the French Caribbean, described the ‘contempt and dislike felt for the Indians by the general population’

⁸¹⁸ ANOM, Mar C.88 d.732. Rapport medical sur le transport d’un convoi de coolies Indiens repatriés de la Martinique à Pondichéry, à bord du trois-mâts Français *Marie-Laure*.

⁸¹⁹ Dominique Taffin, ‘Une intégration silencieuse? Citoyenneté, nationalité et créolisation à travers le cas des Indiens de la Martinique (1885 –1945), *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, N°138-139, (2004), 111–137.

⁸²⁰ Cited in Jean-Pierre Sainton, *Rosan Girard: Chronique d’une vie politique en Guadeloupe* (Paris and Pointe-à-Pitre, 1993).

and ‘the hostility of the blacks’ towards Indians.⁸²¹ In 1899, the British vice-consul in Guadeloupe, De Vaux, commented: ‘It is a notorious fact that the Indians are much disliked by the Black people here’.⁸²²

This antipathy often spilled over into violence. In 1879, a French man named Emile Avril travelling to South America stopped off in Guadeloupe and reported, with shock, that he had seen a black bailiff in Pointe-à-Pitre repeatedly hitting an Indian, the only crime of whom was to have put the bridle on the bailiff’s horse badly.⁸²³ In correspondence in 1879 with Martinique’s governor, Schœlcher, Avril wrote: ‘The Indian counts for nothing. He is a despised being, he is not a man, he is a thing’.⁸²⁴ The tribunals of Guadeloupe and Martinique often saw several complaints made by Indians against creoles for similar attacks—and, in different circumstances, vice-versa.⁸²⁵ Larger, more violent inter-ethnic fights were largely prevented, however, because of the physical segregation of Indians and formerly enslaved creoles. (Although as noted, in a later period, once their contracts ended, some Indians, in Guadeloupe, sooner than in Martinique, did incrementally move to urban areas).

During the whole term of their contracts (7 years prior to 1861 and 5 years thereafter) Indians were strictly confined to the plantations, only venturing into town with the permission of their boss, and therefore rarely. If found to be absent without permission, they were quickly sent back to their plantation. While this may have limited the possibility of violence, it also contributed to the persistence of the perception of Indians as foreign labourers and outsiders.

⁸²¹ India Office Library, India Office Records, P.4128 (1891), D. W. D. Comins, *Note on Emigration from the East Indies to the French West India Colonies* (Calcutta: Bengal Emigration Department, 1892), 13-14.

⁸²² TNA, FO 27/3486., Vice-consul De Vaux to the Foreign Office, 2 August 1899,

⁸²³ ANOM, Gua. C.56 d.399, Emile Avril to Victor Schœlcher, 28 October 1879

⁸²⁴ ADG, 5k/12. Lettre d’Emile Avril, un français vivant au Vénézuëla et de passage en Guadeloupe, à Schoelcher, 28 octobre 1879.

⁸²⁵ See: ANOM, Gua C.180 d.111 Rapports mensuels of 9 January 1856, 25 January and 20 September 1857, ANOM, Gua C.180 d.1116; ANOM, Gua C.56 d.399 Rapport mensuel du of 6 November 1862.

Yet African indentured plantation workers, under similar if not the same restrictive measures, seem to have integrated with the creole whole during this period. As in Réunion, where so-called vagabond Indians melted into the existing community of Indians, as described by Sourapa in the previous chapter, and local businessmen in the island's capital could not distinguish between free and indentured Indians, African indentured labourers in the Antilles may have experienced something similar. A cholera outbreak in Guadeloupe between 1865-66 provides evidence of this: Creoles and African indentured labourers were affected in very similar numbers, suggesting that the two communities had intimate ties, while the Indian and Chinese populations were much less impacted, a reflection most likely of their physical and social isolation.⁸²⁶

As will be described, Indians responded to their new environment and the hostility they encountered both from the creole workforce and white planters with a mixture of adaptation, resistance and insularity. As Schakenbourg argues, part of their response to the hostility they encountered included a rejection—of almost everything, outside of their own newly-defined community.⁸²⁷ This also came with a degree of discrimination, to the point that it sometimes is difficult to determine who was responding to whom. On a plantation in Lamentin, Martinique, for example, when Indians refused to eat food prepared by a creole woman, demanding instead an Indian cook, the commissioner commented that ‘this disdain towards the creole workers is felt generally throughout the colony, the Indian has a distrust of foreigners’.⁸²⁸ Similarly, on a plantation in Port-Louis after a fight between Indians and creoles, it was reported that Indians

⁸²⁶ Schnakenbourg, ‘L’Immigration Indienne’, 293.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1147-50

⁸²⁸ ANOM, Gua. C.56 d.399. Rapport du 10 novembre 1860.

regarded enslaved foremen of African descent 'with repugnance'.⁸²⁹ One reporter commented: 'the Indian race holds itself completely apart from our population of African origin'.⁸³⁰

Some historians hypothesise that the racialised dislike Indians expressed towards creoles was the result of a transferal of caste prejudices, in which darker skin was associated with lower caste.⁸³¹ There is little concrete evidence to support this within the Caribbean context, yet it is not implausible. In responding to a highly racialised, hierarchical and discriminatory colonial worldview, Indians developed not just a collective cultural identity but a racial identity, too. This is reflected in their choices for marriage or other forms of sexual relationship. Especially in the early years, there were far fewer Indian women than men. Northrup estimates that between 1858 and 1860 women made up around 24 per cent of the convoys that headed for Guadeloupe and Martinique, which increased to 36 percent between 1861 and 1870, following the 1861 convention.⁸³² Using different calculations, Schnakenbourg finds that throughout the period of indentured migration on average women made up only 26 per cent of convoys to Guadeloupe and perhaps as little as 16 percent in the 1850s.⁸³³ Despite the imbalance in the gender ratio of indentured migrants, Indian men showed very little interest in black creole women. Planters and officials had hoped such unions would serve to increase the stagnating rural population and therefore expressed disappointment with the fact 'not a single Indian has gone near, even in passing, a creole woman'.⁸³⁴ A report in 1868 noted that 'Africans are preferable to Indians, mainly because they "form fruitful alliances with their

⁸²⁹ Ibid.

⁸³⁰ ANOM, Conseil General de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire, 1864, Rapport de la commission de l'immigration, 379.

⁸³¹ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne', 1149. For comparison see Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad 1870-1900* (Cambridge, 1979), 188-189.

⁸³² Northrup, 'Les immigrants Indiens', 250-2.

⁸³³ Schnakenbourg, 'L'immigration Indienne,' 477-90.

⁸³⁴ ADG, 5 K 79, fol. 24. Conseil Privé du 6 juin 1861, rapport du directeur de l'Intérieur.

fellow countrymen”, which rarely happens with Indians’.⁸³⁵ This contrasts with Réunion. There too, as described, at times Indians displayed a sense of racial superiority vis-à-vis enslaved Africans and people of African origin, yet when few Indian women were available, Indian men married creole women, and outside of marriages there was further evidence of integration between formerly enslaved and indentured communities, such as who Indians invited to their weddings.

Religion

Catholic missionary efforts among enslaved populations during the era of slavery were much greater in the French Antilles than those by their Protestant counterparts in most British and Dutch islands. As a result, by 1848, the baptism rate among the enslaved populations of Guadeloupe and Martinique was high—even if baptism was as far as an embrace of Catholicism went. But, as argued in previous chapters, it was in the wake of abolition that Catholic efforts to Christianise formerly enslaved people took off. Like Réunion, in 1850 Guadeloupe and Martinique became dioceses of the Catholic Church, no longer missionary lands. Again, similarly to Réunion, during the period of slavery planters were not universally keen to promote Christianity among their enslaved workers, but this changed after abolition. By 1850, the number of religious marriages had increased among formerly enslaved people and congregations swelled to such an extent that the clergy in Martinique complained several churches were too small.⁸³⁶ As noted in chapter two, the political climate after 1848 meant embracing Christianity, outwardly at least, was even more socially expedient. For the

⁸³⁵ ANOM, Conseil General de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire, 1868, *Rapport de la commission de l'immigration*, 411.

⁸³⁶ ANOM, SG C.225 d.1623, M. Faveau, Etat des églises et chapeelles de la colonie et la situation des paroisses au point de vue religieuses, Saint Esprit, 28 October 1850. Also see Philippe Delisle, ‘Christianisation et créolisation dans la Caraïbe à l’époque contemporaine,’ in *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses*, 2013/1(n° 25).

politically engaged black population it provided not only access to integration but also to education, particularly in the form of Catholic schools. Philippe Delisle, who argues this point, further stresses that Catholicism practiced by formerly enslaved people in Guadeloupe and Martinique also incorporated elements of ‘magic’, which the clergy actively encouraged, using this association to appeal to their new congregations.⁸³⁷

As in Réunion, in the midst of this, the Catholic Church in Guadeloupe and Martinique mounted an effort to convert Indians. Like his counterpart in Saint-Denis, the Bishop of Martinique, Monseigneur Leherpeur, recognised language as the main barrier and sought to bring Tamil-speaking priests from Pondicherry.⁸³⁸ This was met with enthusiasm from administrators in Paris, who quickly looked to recruit such priests for Guadeloupe too.⁸³⁹ But the request was rejected on both counts by the French administration in India.⁸⁴⁰ In the absence of assistance from India, the Bishop appealed to devout planters who understood ‘the benefit of pulling these poor souls away from their superstitions’.⁸⁴¹ As in Réunion, Martinique’s planters generally showed as much or less enthusiasm for evangelising their Indian workforce as they had their enslaved one, for similar reasons: Catholic worship distracted from plantation work.⁸⁴² In 1855 in Guadeloupe, calls were made for planters to try to ‘change the mind of the immigrants and turn them towards the dogmas of Christianity and to inculcate them to the maxims of moral health’.⁸⁴³ As Schnakenberg notes, however, their motivation for desiring

⁸³⁷ See Delisle, ‘Christianisation et créolisation’, 55-62. Delisle draws on the work of Eugène Revert, *La magie aux Antilles*, Bellenand (Paris, 1951).

⁸³⁸ Archives de la congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit (ACPSE), 206 A VI, lettre du directeur des Cultes, 14 janvier 1858.

⁸³⁹ Archives Nationales (AN), F19 621 1, copie d'une lettre du ministre de la Marine au gouverneur des possessions indiennes, 1858

⁸⁴⁰ ACPSE, 206 A6, copie d'une lettre du gouverneur des établissements français en Inde du 22 mars 1858.

⁸⁴¹ ACPSE, 205 1, Lettre pastorale de Mg l'évêque de Saint-Pierre et Fort-de-France, June 1857, 5.

⁸⁴² Delisle, ‘Christianisation et créolisation’, 55

⁸⁴³ ADG, 5K 60, fol. 91, 16 November 1855.

Indian migrants' conversion was so that these migrants would be more inclined to stay permanently on the island as a workforce. In response, the administration underlined that they had guaranteed the migrants' religious freedom but equally did not argue against the planters' assumption that this religious freedom effectively barred the migrants from remaining permanently in the island.⁸⁴⁴ In the 1880s many of the children born to Indian parents and registered officially were done so with Christian first names. To read this as a sign of assimilation or conversion to Catholicism, however, could be an oversimplification. As Sainton notes, up until the 1920s at least, it was common for Indians to have a Christian name, for official purposes, as well as an Indian one.⁸⁴⁵ It seems that for reasons of convenience, social expedience or perhaps even facing pressure, Indians gave their children Christian names in official registers without having converted to Catholicism. In fact, in both Guadeloupe and Martinique very few Indians were baptised, despite pressure from the Church and plantation owners. The majority of Indians rejected these attempts to convert them to Catholicism and held on to their religion as crucial a marker of their Indian identity.⁸⁴⁶

Indians' maintenance of their religious practices and these practices themselves drew contempt from the Catholic Church, which lamented what it called their paganism and devil-worship. Bishop Leherpeur wrote in 1857 that Indians 'render worship to the Devil that is only due to God.'⁸⁴⁷ Similarly, planters often attributed disorder on plantations to 'Indian witchcraft', reviving narratives of African witchcraft that featured in the era of slavery. A 1868 report by the immigration commission described how the Indian's religion 'seems to impose on him the obligation to destroy his Christian master and to take revenge on him by all means

⁸⁴⁴ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne', 1159.

⁸⁴⁵ Jean-Pierre Sainton, 'Notes pour l'étude de la question de l'intégration politique des descendants d'Indiens en Guadeloupe au cours de la 1^{re} moitié du XX^e siècle', *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, (138-139) (2004), 144.

⁸⁴⁶ B. David, *Les origines*, 27.

⁸⁴⁷ ACPSE, 205 1, Lettre pastorale de Mg l'évêque de Saint-Pierre et Fort-de-France, June 1857, 5.

possible: theft, arson, etc'.⁸⁴⁸ In a later report, the 'physical weakness' and indolence of the Indian was also blamed on his religion, which left him malnourished: 'his religion obliges him most often to not eat meat'.⁸⁴⁹ As well as these perceptions, the colonies did not recognise non-Christian wedding ceremonies or 'Indian marriages' and obliged Indians to have Catholic funerals, although often Hindu funeral rites were carried out as well.⁸⁵⁰

This context of contempt and oppression has led historians like Schnakenberg to put considerable emphasis on the difficulties Indians faced in maintaining 'authentic' Hinduism in Guadeloupe. He argues that the relatively slow traditional rural life of Tamil Hinduism was 'completely transformed' by the demands of the production-intensive sugar industry. 'The immigrants' sad existence as overexploited coolies left them with little time and opportunity for the demanding daily religious practice, apart from a few basic devotions', he contends, 'Even the calendar of worship is completely disrupted.'⁸⁵¹ While Schnakenbourg's analysis by no means lacked some validity in terms of the hardships Indian labourers endured, the conclusion fails to recognise the agency of Indians who actively re-invented their religious identities.

As in Réunion, the celebration of the Pongal festival is perhaps the most striking example of this. A detailed description of the festival in Martinique published in *Le Moniteur* in 1855 reveals a great deal about how it was celebrated in the island.⁸⁵² The author described how on the first of the four days, the Indians decorated a structure within a cave using 'green branches' they had retrieved, along with garlands and flowers. At the bottom of this structure,

⁸⁴⁸ ANOM, Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire 1868, Rapport de la commission de l'immigration, 1868, 412.

⁸⁴⁹ ADG, Le Courrier, 11 August 1882, *Séance de la Chambre d'agriculture de Pointe-à-Pitre du 1er juillet 1882*, ADG, Le Courrier, 11 August 1882.

⁸⁵⁰ ADG, 5K 60 fol.91, 16 November 1855.

⁸⁵¹ Schnakenbourg, *L'immigration Indienne en Guadeloupe*, 1160.

⁸⁵² ANOM, Mar C.129 d.34. *Le Moniteur*, 14 January 1855.

they built a mound for the pagoda, described as a 'type of altar' that was 'composed almost entirely of cow dung'. The author commented: 'We know the respect the Indians have for this animal.' He continued:

While these preparations are being completed, the Indians, armed with very sharp pieces of bottle glass, shave each other's chins and heads, respecting only the long tuft of hair which must be used by the angel presiding over their destiny to transport to heaven. After these first cares given to their toilet, they go to the seaside, and, at a signal, they rush towards the waves. They perform numerous ablutions and proceed to the purification of the objects which will be used in the ceremony and the sacrifice. Those who have to play the main roles put on costumes that they have taken care to prepare.

The festivities 'really begin' when the 'pagoda is placed on a carpet of banana leaves,' wrote the author, describing in detail 'the Indian who is to carry the idol to the cave':

His demeanour is serious, his gait is slow, his long hair intertwined with flowers is raised to the top of his head; it is the throne intended for the pagoda during the procession. The upper body is bare, but coated in a yellow colour representing quite skilfully, by means of tattoos, a weapons rating. The rest of the body is surrounded by scarves of various colours producing a pretty effect.

The Indians then worshiped 'the idol', presenting fruits at its feet and singing. With silence restored, the master of ceremonies placed the pagoda on the head of the Indian 'whom is reserved the honour of carrying it to the cave'. He was accompanied by four men, two ahead of him 'carrying spears decorated with yellow lemons' and two others at his side 'with cutlasses'. Two others 'a few steps away' were 'dressed in strange costumes' and 'holding long sticks in each of their hands', the author wrote, 'they fight while walking'. When the carrier

arrived at the entrance to the cave, he 'seems seized by convulsions' and cannot enter. But then another Indian appears, this time with the costume of a warrior: 'he is armed with a long cutlass; he rushes, he fights, he triumphs. The face of the bearer of the pagoda immediately brightens, he lets out a cry of joy and, radiant, goes to place the idol on the mound at the bottom of the cave. Songs and dances begin immediately, only to stop with the celebration.'

Much of this description, similarly to those of Pongal in Réunion, seems to replicate key elements of the Muslim festival of Yamsé (also called Muharram), such as the role played in the ceremony by those thought to represent guards of Husayn's tomb. (As discussed, Indian labourers across the Caribbean celebrated Muharram.) The description also includes clear elements of the Pongal festival itself, which are lacking from descriptions in Réunion. The author wrote:

The scene changes. A stove is set up in front of the cave, on which rice is cooked with milk in a new vase, to draw the omens so that the milk boils. As soon as we see the first boiling, the Indians shout Pongol! which means it boils. The rice is presented first to the idol; after which all those present eat a little.

After this ceremony the sacrifice begins. Sacred cow dung ashes are placed on the altar. Each Indian rubs it on his forehead, chest and both shoulders, in order to purify himself of all his sins. Two innocent lambs, a gift from the owner, are brought in front of the cave. They are adorned with flowers. The master of ceremonies, helped by four Indians, pours lustral water on them, makes them drink it and perfumes them with incense. However, the helpers seize them at the ends, and the warrior who put the evil spirit to flight reappears and with a single blow of his scimitar cuts off the victims' heads. Cries of joy ring out, and the lambs are carried away to serve at the next day's meal.

The apparently Muslim and Hindu elements of the celebration are noteworthy, in light of

arguments that contend Islam in any form withered almost immediately in the context of French Antillean indenture. Such arguments reason that while Muslims were recorded as boarding ships headed for the French Antilles, no reference is made to them on the islands themselves, and that in Martinique, in particular, the smaller numbers of Muslims and a greater preponderance of south Indians meant the former were quickly incorporated into the Hindu majority. There are other explanations, however. The absence of Islam from the archival record could also reflect an active silencing of Muslim labourers' religious identities. Colonial authorities may have chosen not to document religious practices that they considered irrelevant, inconvenient, or difficult to control. As discussed, a colonial stereotype about Muslims being particularly resistant, which was prevalent in India, continued in the colonies. Granting just one holiday to Indians, Pongol, was most likely based on a desire to limit their time away from plantation work, but it could have also been a conscious decision to limit Muslim expression. Regardless of the motive, most interesting is how Indian migrants responded to this. This description of Pongal in Martinique seems to suggest, as in Réunion, rather than Hindu practices necessarily immediately eclipsing Muslim ones, the limited time for festivities meant practices from both religions were brought together. As noted in previous chapters, such syncretism was also a feature of rural India at the time.

Archival evidence of religious practices, as well as their legacies today, suggest a large degree of syncretism, which crossed both regional and doctrinal divides. This varied over time and place.⁸⁵³ In Guadeloupe, where about a third of immigrants arrived from northern India, Tamils took up worship of Kali, a goddess particularly associated with Bengal, while those from northern India took up worship of Maryamman, a distinctively Tamil goddess, who is

⁸⁵³ For the following section see: Étang, 'La grâce, le sacrifice et l'oracle,' 252-266; G. Ponaman, 'D'une déesse à l'autre. Du pays tamoul aux Antilles: les avatars de Mariamman' in R Toumson. (éd.), *Les Indes antillaises. Présence et situation des communautés indiennes en milieu caribéen*, (Paris, 1994), 65-72; M. Sulty and J. Nagapin, *La migration de l'hindouisme vers les Antilles aux XIXe siècle après l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Pointe-à-Pitre, 1989), 22.

believed to both curse people with and protect against contagious diseases, particularly smallpox. In Martinique, with far fewer migrants from the north, Kali disappeared as a figure of worship. In both the Antilles, like Réunion, there is clear evidence that Indian migrants worshipped Nagur Mira (or Nagur Miran), a divinity venerated by Muslims in South India and especially by lascars who prayed to him for safe passage on the sea. (Nagore Dargah, a sufi shrine, which was built in the sixteenth century in Nagore, Tamil Nadu, to house the tomb of Nagore Miran).⁸⁵⁴ Embraced by Hindus, the figure of Nagur evolved, becoming Nagoumila in the Caribbean. It is worth noting that in all the Antilles there is little record of popular worship of the great deities Vishnu and Shiva. The worship of these gods usually requires a Brahmin priest, but, as we have seen, the small numbers of Brahmins likely to have emigrated as indentured labourers suggests that there would have been too few to uphold Brahminic practices. Equally, over time, extending beyond the period of this study, this syncretism evolved to include Catholic practices. For example, the Virgin Mary was assimilated with the goddess Maryamman, whose name has become Maliémin.⁸⁵⁵ Historians of the twentieth century argue this blending with Catholic practices happened more quickly and to a greater extent in Martinique than Guadeloupe due to the former's smaller Indian population.⁸⁵⁶

The religious practices of Indian migrants in the French plantation colonies during the period of indenture can be seen to represent a combination of an existing degree of fluidity and ecumenicalism from rural India with the creation of a new collective forms of worship. Rather than a contradiction, it seems that the traditionally wide variety of practices that fell under what can loosely be termed popular Hinduism in nineteenth-century India allowed for and facilitated the syncretism and innovation that was necessary for forging a collective 'Indian' identity

⁸⁵⁴ Vasudha Narayanan, 'Nagore: Dargah of Hazrat Shahul Hamid,' in Mumtaz Currim and George Michell, eds., *Dargahs: Abodes of the Saints* (Mumbai, 2004) 135–147.

⁸⁵⁵ L. Farrugia, *Les Indiens de Guadeloupe et de Martinique* (Basse-Terre, 1975), 109-10.

⁸⁵⁶ Taffin, 'Une intégration silencieuse?'

under the indenture system. From the multitude of Indian cultures, which in India formed the basis of narrower identities, a more singular collective identity therefore emerged. Indian syncretism—extended in the Caribbean context—was part of the process of creolisation and cultural and linguistic hybridisation that took place simultaneously with processes of ethnic distinction.

This is not to suggest that divisions within the Indian community immediately evaporated. The commissioner for immigration in Guadeloupe reported in 1859 that a fight broke out ‘among the workers on this estate [Moulin-à-Eau, in Capesterre] due to rivalries...[that] would manifest during meals, especially on Sundays’ because of ‘caste prejudices’.⁸⁵⁷ While there are few other explicit references to caste distinctions, there is good reason to believe other fights that broke out between Indians may have had a caste element.⁸⁵⁸ And, where there was a mixture of Tamils and North Indians, regional differences certainly caused disagreements—particularly over food and cooking practices.⁸⁵⁹

Recently Aliyah Khan has explored the complex relationship between Muslim Indian indentured labourers and Muslims of African descent in Caribbean societies in Trinidad, Guyana, and to a lesser extent Jamaica.⁸⁶⁰ Khan notes that African Muslims, having arrived earlier and under more coercive conditions, often lost access to religious texts, language (like Arabic), and community structures, while by the time Indian indentured Muslims arrived, they had a more cohesive Islamic identity, as they came in large, organised groups and were able to form their own communities, mosques, and institutions. She argues that while historical experiences shaped by colonialism, slavery, and migration created distinct identities and sometimes tension between Muslims of African and Indian descent, Islam could provide a

⁸⁵⁷ ANOM, Gua C.56 d. 399, Rapport du commissaire à l'immigration du 8 juillet 1859.

⁸⁵⁸ ANOM, Gua C.180 d. 1116, Rapport mensuel, 6 October 1858.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Aliyah Khan, *Far from Mecca: Globalizing the Muslim Caribbean*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2020).

shared spiritual and cultural foundation. Both African-descended and Indian Muslims in these island societies, she demonstrates, adapted their Islamic practices to the local environment, often blending with other religious and cultural influences in the Caribbean. This adaptation, Khan argues, led to the development of unique forms of Caribbean Islam, influenced by both African and Indian traditions, but also shaped by broader Caribbean cultural contexts. As such, while Caribbean Muslims are part of a global Islamic *ummah* (community), their religious and cultural practices are deeply shaped by the specific histories of the Caribbean, including colonialism, slavery, and indenture.

Unfortunately, a similar exploration of the dynamic between formerly enslaved Muslims of African descent and Muslims of Indian descent during the indenture period in the French Caribbean is not possible. If such relationships and solidarities existed in this context during the years included in this study, the archival material does not give any hint of it. As discussed, however, omission from the archives does not mean it did not take place.

As in Réunion, enslaved Muslims were transported to the French Caribbean from regions in Africa such as Senegambia. While historians such as Michael Gomez and Sylviane Diouf have found evidence that Islamic practices continued among such groups in English Caribbean plantation islands, in the case of French islands there is a relative dearth of archival material offering insights into what form this took.⁸⁶¹ Missionary records in particular, however, testify to the presence of enslaved African Muslims, and to the difficulty the Catholic church had in its attempts to convert to Catholicism.⁸⁶² These also show that enslaved African Muslims often converted nominally but in a way that was unsatisfactory to missionaries. Diouf argues that the conditions of enslavement hindered the generational transfer of religious

⁸⁶¹ Michael A. Gomez, *Black crescent: the experience and legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2005); Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York, 1998).

⁸⁶² Gomez, *Black crescent*, 47-90.

practices, while Gomez suggests that French colonial policies, such as the *Code Noir*, restrictive regulations on religious practices, and the harsh enforcement of assimilation, may have made it harder for Islamic practices to continue, creating the possibility that these identities did indeed disappear or wane faster than in neighbouring English islands.⁸⁶³

Additionally, as mentioned, in comparison to the Caribbean societies on which Khan focuses, the imprint of indentured Muslim Indians was less apparent in Guadeloupe and Martinique during and following indenture. Yet, there is reason to believe that colonial onlookers may have been hasty in assuming that Muslim identities among Indian indentured labourers had disappeared or been subsumed into a Hindu majority, and historians, in turn, perhaps may have too readily reproduced these assumptions.

A description of religious and caste divisions among returning migrants in 1882 offers some insights into changes that may have taken place over in the colony over time, and perhaps more so about colonial assumptions regarding caste and religious practices as well as stereotypes surrounding Muslim identities.⁸⁶⁴ Dr Brucy, aboard the *Syria*, which left Fort-de-France in June 1882, headed for Pondicherry, made a number of contradictory and easily contestable observations. He wrote, for example: ‘caste prejudices have disappeared; we can attribute this change to the uniformity of the conditions in which they find themselves during the long years on the sugar properties of our colony’. Interestingly, this argument resembles that made by Schnakenbourg’s regarding caste and religious identities. Brucy suggested that religious and cultural restrictions around food had been broken down by time spent in the Antilles—the average duration of which was 13 years, he said—and that tastes had changed. ‘The Indians who have spent several years in our Atlantic possessions have gradually become

⁸⁶³ Ibid., 47-90; Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 251-4.

⁸⁶⁴ ANOM, Mar C.88 d.728, Repatriements d’Immigrants Indiens de la Martinique dans L’Inde: *Syria*, parti due Fort de France le 25 Juin 1882, arrivé à Pondichéry le 15 novembre 1882.

accustomed to using certain foods that inspired them with the greatest repulsion when they left India; among these are beef, pork, wine, rum, etc,' he wrote. Bruzy noted that for this reason as well as the difficulty in procuring certain foods in the Antilles, the usual requirements for what should be carried on the ship were adjusted. 'They have lost the caste prejudices that they had on leaving India,' he reiterated, 'They all eat the flesh of beef and nearly all of them eat pork, which permits us, as already said, to modify the food provisions for the return convoys.' He continued: 'As for their religious beliefs, none of them observe them; many have even forgotten the name of the most revered deity in their caste.' He later specified again that the Indians in general much prefer beef to pork, and that the latter 'should be removed from the list of foods'. Muslims, however, he added contradicting himself, 'even upon their return from the Antilles, never touch pork'.

It seems improbable that in a decade Indian migrants would have forgotten the main deities they worshipped. As previously noted, changes in dietary habits on the ships may have reflected a negotiation of cultural practices, which can be seen as resilience and adaptation in the face of new conditions rather than a complete loss of understanding of caste. Bruzy carried out what he described as a small anthropological study. Categorising 35 Indian men from South India aboard the *Syria*, he found a range of castes, which he loosely grouped as 18 men from intermediate, low or neutral caste and 17 from high castes. (He included within the former group four Muslims of 'Dravidian race'.) Notwithstanding the inherent bias entailed in his colonial understanding of castes and race, evidently the Indians were still aware of their caste identities.

It seems possible that Bruzy's somewhat contradictory description emphasising cultural loss or transformation reflected the assimilationist drive that characterised contemporary French colonial thinking. Perhaps this led colonial authorities to record and promote examples of cultural transformation, rather than persistence of religious practices, which may have been

seen as resistance to assimilation. The particular resistance—real or perceived—of Muslim Indians to change, as Bruce noted, may even have resulted in these identities being marginalised or suppressed in the archival record. Dr Formel's observations on the return journey of the *Marie-Laure* in 1873 are telling on this theme:

The category of children and adolescents up to 20 years old, born in the colony or brought to the country at a young age with their parents, is the best element of the convoy. All these children, raised in our customs and speaking only French, are all Catholics and bear Christian names. They only reluctantly obey their parents who take them to India and openly say that they will return to this country, Martinique, as soon as they are able. They are alert, vigorous, and do not possess the lymphatic constitution that nearly all children born and raised in India exhibit. Their health has always remained in perfect condition on board...⁸⁶⁵

The praise for children embracing French language and culture, and shedding their Indian identity, reflects the broader colonial narrative of the 'civilising mission'. In this logic, differences based on religion, ethnicity, or language were seen as obstacles to this progress, while assimilation was viewed as marker of success. The more these children appeared to embrace French culture, the more they were perceived as superior or more 'evolved' compared to those who maintained their original cultural or religious practices. Formel's comment that these assimilated children were physically more robust and healthier is also significant. The connection between assimilation and physical well-being underscores how colonial ideology linked cultural integration with improvements in racial 'stock,' framing the colonial environment and French culture as inherently beneficial. It also reveals the biopolitical

⁸⁶⁵ ANOM, Mar C.88 d.732. Rapport medical sur le transport d'un convoi de coulis Indiens repatriés de la Martinique à Pondichéry, à bord du trois-mâts Français *Marie-Laure*.

dimension of colonialism, where the colonial state sought not only to control resources and labour but also to regulate and shape bodies and minds. It confirms the colonial preference for groups or individuals who appeared more malleable or susceptible to cultural dominance, as discussed in chapter three.

The impulse to justify the French ‘civilising mission’ seems to have shaped colonial descriptions of Indians, perhaps leading to deliberate or subconscious omissions of cultural distinction. It seems implausible, for example, that these children and adolescents spoke only French, with no knowledge whatsoever of the language of their parents, as Formel wrote. Tamil was spoken within Indian families in Guadeloupe until the 1920s while in Martinique around the same time, some Indians are recorded as speaking only a ‘Hindu dialect’ and only a smattering of creole.⁸⁶⁶ Moreover, while soon after arriving, Indians seem to have started to dress like creole workers on the plantations, when not in the fields many donned traditional forms of dress—albeit modified according to the availability of fabric. Women, in particular, continued to wear saris.⁸⁶⁷ As mentioned, indentured women were often tasked with upholding cultural and religious practices. Writing about British Caribbean colonies, Patricia Mohammed and Rhoda Reddock have also shown, how Indian women collaborated with men to reinstate certain confining gender roles in order to create community stability.⁸⁶⁸

Indians’ ability to conserve their cultural and religious identities in Guadeloupe and Martinique should not be overstated. While, thanks to the wealth of migrant merchants and the established Indian community, in Réunion Indians started to build temples from stone, adorned with jewels, in the 1870s, it took another hundred years before their Antillean counterparts were able to construct solid temples. Prior to the 1970s, most temples in Guadeloupe and

⁸⁶⁶ Farrugia, *Les Indiens de Guadeloupe*, 109-111; Odette Arnaud, *Mer Caraïbe* (Paris, 1934).

⁸⁶⁷ Sulty and Nagapin, *Migration de l'hindouisme vers les Antilles*, 232; J. M. Renault, *Bons baisers de la colonie: La Guadeloupe en 1900* (Montpellier, 1991), 29.

⁸⁶⁸ Mohammed, *Gender Negotiations*; Reddock, ‘Freedom Denied’.

Martinique were rudimentary wooden huts.⁸⁶⁹ In Martinique, in particular, worship remained family-based and temples smaller and private, even as Guadeloupe's Indian festivities became more public and its larger temples attracted non-Indians.⁸⁷⁰ Yet, Indians in the French Antilles did not lack agency, in terms of the way in which they re-invented a collective Indian identity, expressed through religious practices. They also, to a lesser extent than in Réunion, exerted their religious rights. For example, during the outbreak of cholera in 1865, administrators considered cancelling the Pongal celebrations but expressed reluctance in case this was perceived by Indian migrants as a 'suppression of a right' which might provoke revolts and fires.⁸⁷¹

Paths out of indenture

Under the convention with the British, Indians were guaranteed a paid-for passage back to India after serving the five years of their contract. In Martinique, Indians could either re-indenture or choose which employer they wanted to work under while they waited to go home. But in Guadeloupe, a series of regulations compelled Indians to re-indenture. In practice, in both islands, the complexities of repatriation were open to manipulation and abuse by planters—who preferred to keep acclimatised workers over dealing with the expense of finding new ones. Colonial authorities were also motivated to promote re-indenture. Lawless observed, for example, there were insufficient ships for returning labourers in Martinique to India, which, he said, up to 1872 had resulted in just 2,393 being repatriated out of 16,992 introduced—a rate much lower than from British colonies. He interviewed passengers aboard two returning ships in 1872 and 1873, the *Intervallen* and *Marie Laure*, and found many had been forced to sign

⁸⁶⁹ Farrugia, *Les Indiens*, 32-34.

⁸⁷⁰ Taffin, 'Une intégration silencieuse?' Also see: Michel Leiris, *Note sur l'usage de chromolithographies catholiques par les vodouisants d'Haïti*, (Dakar, 1953).

⁸⁷¹ ANOM, Gua C.10 d.90. Des Délibérations du Conseil privé de la Guadeloupe et dependances, Année 1865, session du mois de Décembre, séance du vingt-trois.

up for a second indenture contract out of fear of being arrested as vagrants under the island's *organisation du travail*.⁸⁷²

Nearly 20 years later, Comins, the British official assessing the condition of Indian immigrants in the French Antilles, reserved the strongest contempt for the system in Guadeloupe. He wrote:

Having secured the coolie in the colony on the promise of perfect freedom of choice as to his movements after his five years indenture has expired, the full power of the Immigration Ordinances, the Colonial law, and the whole influence of his master, is exercised to retain him and his family with his consent or against his will a state of continued dependence until he is out of the colony as a broken-down and worn-out old man, incapable of any further work and an expense and trouble to his master. In most cases it is only then, as may be seen by watching the debarkation of return coolies from French Colonies, that restrictions around them are sufficiently relaxed to allow of a return to India.⁸⁷³

Describing how this worked in practice, Comins explained that at the end of the five-year period of indenture, an Indian worker needed to get his *livret*, often kept by the planter, and take this to the local syndic to ask for 'his *cong *'. 'The Syndic 'from politeness, as it was ingenuously put to me,' wrote Comins, 'tells him to get his *cong * from his master'. At this point, the Indians' employer could contest that the labourers had actually fulfilled their full five-year contracts, arguing that they owed more days due to absences. If they challenged this, it involved the local syndic, and occasionally the courts. Only once everything was settled would the planter issue a discharge stating that the period of indenture was fulfilled. This was

⁸⁷² ANOM, G n . C.125 d.1093, William Lawless to Governor of Martinique, St. Pierre, 7 March 1874.

⁸⁷³ Comins, *Note on Emigration*, 5-7.

needed for the syndic to add a note to the Indian's *livret* marking him or her as eligible for repatriation. Technically the work regime in the wake of abolition introduced this system for formerly enslaved people, but while for that purpose it fell into disuse, planters readily availed of it for Indians. With the *livret* marked, Indians could either stay for a year on a temporary basis, leave, or re-indenture—for which they had ten days to find a new employer, or else, after 30 days, risk being charged with vagrancy. Bounties for signing up a for a second contract made re-indenture more common in both islands. These were cheaper for the colonial authorities than the costs of repatriations. In 1860 Guadeloupe introduced an extra bonus to keep labourers not only under indenture contracts but under the same employer, and soon after, the practice of 'anticipatory engagements, or those made while the coolie is still under the control of the engagiste', became common.⁸⁷⁴ Indians convicted of crimes in the islands were deemed to have forfeited their right to repatriation.

This remained the case until the end of 1870s, when British pressure, followed by an economic crisis in the 1880s, forced changes. By 1882, the re-engagement bonus had been abolished and French authorities made use of repatriation ships to empty their jails and hospital through deportations. The British consular agent in French ports, observing the passengers disembarking from the *Hereford* that returned from Martinique to India in 1886, thus commented that the policy of French authorities in the island was to 'to get rid of every Indian within the colony, so as to allow greater liberty to the black population of the island'.⁸⁷⁵ French colonial authorities were, in any case, obliged by the British, to increase the number of return ships by this time. Until then they had been few and far between. Only one left Martinique

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁷⁵ TNA, FO 27/2893 Consular Agent, Pondichéry and Karikal, to Chief Secretary, Government of Madras, 1 October 1886.

between 1876 and 1881 and one from Guadeloupe between 1872 and 1881.⁸⁷⁶ Even in the 1880s and 1890s, however, not many ships brought Indians to their homeland; just six left Martinique between 1885 and 1894.⁸⁷⁷ From Martinique the final repatriation journey took place in 1900 and from Guadeloupe in 1906.⁸⁷⁸ Historians who have calculated the percentage of Indians who returned give slightly different estimates. Schnakenbourg calculates, however, that some 9,482 Indians returned from Guadeloupe, amounting to 22 per cent of those who came to the island from 1854. This compares to Martinique, which saw almost half (46.8 per cent) of the 25,509 Indian indentured labourers who travelled there return to India, according to B. David.⁸⁷⁹ Numbers to and from Réunion are even more imprecise, but A. Scherer and J.F. Dupon have both estimated approximately 118,000 travelled to Réunion under indenture contracts, and, between 1835 and 1930 some 88,000 returned.⁸⁸⁰ There were around 25,000 recorded in the island in 1891, among a population of 160,000, according to Dupon.⁸⁸¹ Others, without necessarily offering new numbers, have cast doubt on the likelihood of such a high rate of return, citing difficulties faced by Indians wanting to return that made remaining more common than going back.⁸⁸² From Guadeloupe, Indians from the northern regions were better represented in returning ships than South Indians. Accounting for a third of those who came to the island, they made up almost half of those who returned.⁸⁸³ Different return rates can perhaps mainly be explained simply by varying access to repatriation, dictated by individual policies

⁸⁷⁶ TNA, FO 27/2704, Lord Granville, FO, to Lord Lyons, British Ambassador to France, No. 43, 16 July 1884, and the reply of the French Prime Minister Jules Ferry to Lyons, 13 September 1884, cited in Northrup, 'Les immigrants Indiens', 261.

⁸⁷⁷ ANOM, Mar C. 32, d. 277 'Statistique de l'immigration indienne à la Martinique du 31 décembre 1885 au 30 septembre 1894'.

⁸⁷⁸ Taffin, 'Une intégration silencieuse?', 120-21.

⁸⁷⁹ David, *Population martiniquaise*, 120.

⁸⁸⁰ Scherer, *Histoire de la Réunion*, 74; Dupon, 'Les immigrants indiens', 51-3.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁸² Marimoutou-Oberlé, 'Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire'.

⁸⁸³ Schnakenbourg, *L'immigration Indienne*, 1093.

and different numbers of returning ships. Yet, perhaps the speed of social and economic integration and advancement also impacted return rates.

Among the Indians who stayed, as in Réunion, the archives show that some started to leave the indenture system and integrate economically, but it seems with greater difficulty. Comins wrote that ‘task work is preferred in Martinique, but in Guadeloupe it is rare,’ suggesting that Indians there were instead, as described above, confined to indentured work on plantations. Day work, according to Comins, which would be preferable, did not yet much exist in either colony. He further wrote: ‘in British colonies a man who, at the end of his indenture, has savings, usually proceeds to invest it in the purchase of a piece of land from the Crown on which he has probably long set his eye as suitable for his purpose...but in French Colonies this is not at all what the planters, and the labourers must remain and work on the estate.’ The first mention of an Indian ‘landowner’ in Guadeloupe appeared in the 1860s, but it was not followed by a proliferation of references in the following years, as in Réunion. The same decade, in both Guadeloupe and Martinique records show a handful of mentions of Indian merchants, such as Moutoussami, described in 1867 as a ‘*commerçant* in Point-à-Pitre’.⁸⁸⁴ Still, in 1886 just 265 Indians had a residence permit in Guadeloupe, representing around 2 per cent of the Indian population. British official J. W. P. Muir-Mackenzie noted 1,018 in Réunion in 1890.⁸⁸⁵ From the mid-1880s, with indentured migration to the French Antilles nearing an end, Indians in both Guadeloupe and Martinique started to refuse to renew their indenture contracts, and planters gave up reporting them to the authorities, making residence permits redundant. In 1891, Comins counted 269 Indian ‘peasants and rural landowners’ in Guadeloupe, accounting for around 2 percent of the Indian workforce. Comparative figures for Martinique are not available,

⁸⁸⁴ ADG, Tribunal de première instance de Pointe-à-Pitre, c. 6994, audience du 18 février 1867.

⁸⁸⁵ J.W.P. Muir-Mackenzie, *Report on the Condition and Treatment of Indian Coolie Immigrants in the French Island Colony of Reunion and on the Questions connected with the Proposed Resumption of Emigration to the Colony*, 1894, 179.

but Dominique Taffin notes that while Indians in Guadeloupe were more restricted to plantation work in the earlier period of indenture, by the 1890s and early 1900, they started to move to towns more quickly and in larger numbers than their counterparts in Martinique. As for Réunion, as mentioned in chapter five, by 1876, in the island's eastern region there were 30 Indian plantation owners with their own indentured workforces. In 1896, in the commune of Saint-André, on Réunion's east coast, 15 per cent of the Indians there owned 50 ares or more of land.⁸⁸⁶ As in terms of religious expression, in Réunion, Indians' economic integration was facilitated by an established Indian population and a contemporary migration of merchants and artisans. In Guadeloupe and in Martinique, it took longer for Indians to establish themselves away from indentured labour on the big plantations and success was harder to come by. This only began at the very end of the nineteenth century in Guadeloupe and even later in Martinique, where smaller numbers of Indians hindered social mobility.⁸⁸⁷

Towards citizenship

The idea that Indian indentured migrants might stay on in the French Antilles on the termination of their contracts took a long time to take hold among colonial authorities. It is noteworthy that such an idea was voiced a lot sooner for African migrants than for Indians. 'The majority of us have become landowners and *colons paritaires*, we have adopted the Catholic faith, having been baptised and married, our children go to school', reported a community of Africans in Guadeloupe in a petition to the *conseil général* for citizenship in 1884.⁸⁸⁸ This not only fulfilled all the criteria for eligibility for French citizenship, as established in the revolutionary and

⁸⁸⁶ ADR, 3Q 2206. Table alphabétique des acquéreurs et nouveaux possesseurs, Sainte-Suzanne, 1857-1866. (One are is equal to 100 square metres.)

⁸⁸⁷ Taffin, 'Une intégration silencieuse?'

⁸⁸⁸ ANOM, FM SG-G C.107 d.754, Petition, African Inhabitants of Sainte-Rose to conseil général, 10 December 1884. Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire 1884, 318-19, interventions Justin Marie et Isaac.

period and around abolition, but also stood in complete contrast to the Indian population, the majority of whom, as described above, were not landowners, nor *colons paritaires* (essentially sharecroppers) and for the most part had held onto their own religious and cultural practices, to differing degrees. According to Comins, in 1891, only 86 of 2,380 Indian children went to school.⁸⁸⁹ In response to the ex-indentured Africans' petition, this group were celebrated by Guadeloupe's *conseillers* as a community that 'made up an integral part of the population' and which 'we can really consider *compatriotes*'. These arguments helped them win their right to citizenship. A motion was put forward calling for them to be granted citizenship based on their level of social and racial integration. 'I ask...that these men of the same race and origin as the vast majority of the population of this colony be able to enter in the common rights, and, as citizens, enjoy their civil and political rights', wrote Alexandre Isaac, a Guadeloupean senator.⁸⁹⁰ Isaac went on:

They have resided in this country for long enough that it is certain they will never return home. Today, they are fully integrated with the population, are subject to our laws and follow our religion...They have integrated themselves into the local populations, of which they adopt all the customs and where today they constitute, by their hard-working habits, an element of our society worthy of acknowledgement.⁸⁹¹

Indians were not mentioned at this point. Despite many having been in the colony for as long as their African counterparts and fulfilling the same tasks, their racial identity, their distinctive cultural practices and their religion set them apart as outsiders. The images, both racialised, of the vagrant, criminal Indian migrant with his pagan religion at the fringes of society, and the land-owning or sharecropping African Catholic-convert, who had assimilated into the creole

⁸⁸⁹ Comins, *Note on Emigration*, annexe B.

⁸⁹⁰ ADG, Conseil General de Guadeloupe, Session Ordinaire, 1880, 562; Session Ordinaire 1884, 321.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 322.

majority stood in sharp contrast with one another. Isaac articulated this juxtaposition, arguing: ‘If the colony had only dealt with immigrants of this race [Africans], we would no longer see the need to inflict upon ourselves the greatest sacrifices in order to procure Indians. The more they came in the country, the more they have stayed.’

Isaac went on to describe how the Indian migrants benefited from the right to repatriation or a repatriation bounty, whereas those from Africa, having no ‘nation’ of their own, have adopted France as theirs and contribute to its general well-being.⁸⁹² Once again we see invoked the idea that Africans, perceived as having no civilisation or nation, could be assimilated, while Indians could not—they belonged elsewhere. Equally, as seen above, there is a contradiction which lies beneath perceptions of Indians in the Antilles: while they were constantly referred to as not belonging and denied the right to citizenship, it was enormously difficult for most of them to return. Such a seemingly hypocritical stance served a purpose: it maintained a disenfranchised, amenable workforce and a social equilibrium that suited the planter class.

Conclusion

To return to the opening of the chapter, Indians in the French Antilles were eventually awarded French citizenship in 1923. The path to legal citizenship has been a parallel focus of Francophone historians alongside the assimilation of Indians into French creole cultures.⁸⁹³ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the intricacies of this legal battle, but it is worth noting that although the legal path to citizenship was a long and difficult one for Indians, the path to becoming accepted as ‘insiders’ in local society was even more so. Over time, racial

⁸⁹² Ibid.

⁸⁹³ See Jean-Pierre Sainton, “‘De l’état d’esclave à l’état de citoyen’ Modalités du passage de l’esclavage à la citoyenneté aux Antilles françaises sous la Seconde République (1848-1850)”, *Outre-Mers, Revue d’Histoire*, n° 338-339, 2003; and Taffin, ‘Une intégration silencieuse?’

boundaries and discrimination withered, but they did not fully disintegrate. Indians in the Antilles were undoubtedly creolised, but their own contribution to creole culture was side-lined and their customs continued to be stigmatised—often with intent by the ruling white elite. As elsewhere in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French empire, the assimilationist impulse in the Caribbean struggled to allow space for multiple identities. This contrasts with Réunion, where in earlier periods French laws demarcating racial boundaries were less stringently applied or not at all, and where more diverse cultural, religious and ethnic identities existed both before and during the time of indenture. Here, as such, Indianity or ‘Indianness’ played a more recognised role in the making of creole identity.

In general, the greater and more established Indian presence in Réunion, not only facilitated their economic integration but shaped how Indian indentured labourers responded to attempts to ‘other’ them. Unlike in the Antilles, in Réunion there was more frequently and much earlier a bold assertion of an Indian culture in the public sphere and an Indianising of public spaces, seen in the construction of temples as well as of creole culture. That is not to say that indentured labourers in the Antilles ‘lost’ their ‘Indian identity’—which, in India, it should be stressed, they were unlikely to have had in the first place; rather, an Indian identity was created as the migrant community responded to a new environment and racialised hostility. The affirmation of some existing cultural markers and the invention of others was perhaps a response to the fear of losing cultural connections to their homeland and ancestors. Similarly, the greater prevalence of endogamous marriages in the Antilles was perhaps a response to cultural alienation and a cultural preservation strategy in a hostile environment. The Antilles’ more rigid racial hierarchy, with its emphasis on racial purity and its legacy of slavery, likely made intermarriage less acceptable to both Indians and creoles. In Réunion, however, the historical blending of populations may have weakened such social barriers, making such marriage more permissible, while the quicker economic integration and move away from

plantations may have removed physical barriers, creating more opportunity. All of these factors—economic integration, social integration through marriage and overt and recognised contribution to creole culture—were, of course, mutually reinforcing, creating different trajectories for Indian communities and their descendants in each colony.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that the racial boundaries that set the parameters for enslavement and social stratification in the French plantation island colonies of Réunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe during the era of slavery in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries continued into the era of Indian indentured labour after 1848. These racial ideologies served to shape decisions regarding from where the three colonies sourced indentured labourers, how the migrant workers were treated in the islands, and the nature of their interactions with formerly enslaved Africans, white planter elites and, uniquely in Réunion, the existing Indian community. It has shown that debates about eligibility for citizenship, which had their roots in the revolutionary period, came together with understandings of race to shape how Indian migrants were often perceived by both creolised whites and Africans as the ‘other’. In this respect, the thesis has established important similarities—and some key differences—between the experience of Indian indentured labourers transported to the two French Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, on the one hand, and the Indian Ocean Island of Réunion, on the other. Hitherto, these have tended either to occupy distinct regional historiographical traditions or Réunion has simply been presumed to be a Caribbean-type colony in the Indian Ocean. The thesis has argued against the prevailing narrative of assimilation which holds that Indian indentured labourers experienced cultural rupture or a weakening of their identity on their arrival in French colonies. Nor has it argued that there was unadulterated cultural survival among these migrants. Rather, it contends that there was an active re-imagining of a diasporic identity—as has been argued was the case in the best recent scholarship on African diasporic

identities in the Atlantic world. It has argued, to borrow the phrase of Piers Larson, that processes of *creolité* occurred simultaneously with processes of ethnic distinction.⁸⁹⁴

Significant differences in terms of the cultural adaptation of Indian indentured labourers and their contribution to creole culture have also been identified in these island communities. In the more racially stratified and geographically segregated Caribbean Antilles, Indian communities were more culturally and physically isolated. This meant that while they themselves held a strong sense of Indian identity, the Indianisation of the broader creole culture was more inhibited than in Reunion during the period of this study. In Réunion, in contrast, while negative racialised stereotypes of Indians took hold in a similar way, previous and contemporaneous migratory flows from India benefited the experience of indentured labourers, strengthening their ability to ‘Indianise’ the island’s creole culture. The wider participation in religious festivals held by lascars during the eighteenth century, for example, paved the way for indentured labourers to do the same in the nineteenth century and beyond. They were also able to ally with Réunion’s existing community of both free and formerly enslaved Indians to lobby for their religious rights. These connections, as well as those with newly arriving Indian migrants not attached to plantation labour—mainly *commerçants*—also facilitated their economic prosperity and quicker evolution away from plantation work. This analysis of the transition from slavery to indentured labour seeks to dispel the established scholarly conceptualisation of Réunion as a little more than a Caribbean outpost in the Indian Ocean.

The basic premise of this research is that it is only by examining the periods of slavery *and* of indenture together that we can fully understand how the conception and practical application of race during the former period impacted upon latter. It has also shown that the conception of and practical application of race during the period of slavery and after was impacted by the ethnic composition of the islands. In other words, to understand this transition

⁸⁹⁴ Larson, *Ocean of Letters*, 19.

within the wider context of the French empire it is essential to extend the analysis beyond just the Caribbean or just Réunion and to consider in comparative perspective. This thesis has further demonstrated that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and regional distinctions which existed within broader colonial racial categories influenced French conceptions of labour capacities, in turn shaping the treatment of different groups and their experiences.

As we have seen in chapter one, prior to the arrival of the first indentured labourers in Réunion in the mid-nineteenth century, Indian identities very much existed in the island. Both free and enslaved Indians, whether native-born or from the subcontinent, identified themselves and were identified as Indians, as evidenced not only by the distribution of labour among the enslaved based on their ethnicities but also by debates over eligibility for enslavement. Archival evidence that demonstrates the ways in which enslaved Indians challenged the terms of their servitude attests to a sense of cultural identity in some ways and, in certain contexts, of superiority next to their African and Malagasy counterparts. 'Colonial' understandings of race went beyond the white elite, impacting identities in complex ways. With the emergence of racial theories in the eighteenth century followed by their pseudo-scientific underpinning in the nineteenth century, island identities gradually assume racialised boundaries. This hardening of racial divisions was a countervailing process to that of (trans-racial) creolisation.

As chapter two shows, the revolutionary period established the boundaries of an imagined French national culture based on shared language, cultural practices and civilisation, but drawing also on evolving understandings of race. When non-white people were made French citizens and slavery was abolished under the Second Republic in 1848, it was not because the racist ideas that had justified enslavement had evaporated. Instead, these ideas and their legal underpinning continued to structure the plantation islands' societies and economies into the post-slavery era of indenture. While white groups in the Caribbean sought to maintain racially stratified societies, the non-white population had developed during the revolutionary

period a strong consciousness of its rights as citizens and understanding of what it meant to be French. These ideas would later impact Indian indentured labourers in their quest for citizenship.

Chapter three revealed how debates around where to recruit indentured labourers reflected understandings of race and acted as precursors to debates around eligibility for citizenship. Indians were chosen, in part, because they were considered as pliable and as ‘outsiders’. African indentured labourers, in contrast, were viewed as a risk not only because their transportation to the islands too closely resembled the slave trade but because it was thought they would too easily assimilate among formerly enslaved Africans, who significantly outnumbered the white planter class, thereby threatening the established racial hierarchy. A relative dearth of sources for the recruitment of Indian migrants for the French plantation colonies makes it difficult to reconstruct this process compared with the better-documented movement to British colonies such as Mauritius. Unlike many who went to British colonies, Indians who travelled to French islands appear to have lacked the means to communicate with their families back in India. A close reading of the sources, including a rare series of letters from an Indian indentured labourer in Martinique, enabled this chapter to demonstrate the complexity of motives for migration and the specificity of French colonies in this.

The records of ship crossings both within the Indian Ocean and beyond to the Caribbean discussed in chapter four provide some of the most detailed insights into the Indians recruited for indenture in the French colonies—and about French colonial understandings of Indians, which were shaped by contemporary racial theories and conceptions of Indians from within the subcontinent. By exploring health and disease in this context, this chapter shed light on colonial attempts to regulate Indian bodies and the ways in which they racialised caste, religious and regional divides. It also demonstrated the agency Indians displayed in their response to this,

through resistance, accommodation and adaptation. This prefigured the active re-imagining of a collective Indian identity in French colonies, as discussed below.

Once Indian indentured migrants arrived in the islands, they were confronted on the sugar plantations with tough working conditions that frequently contravened their contracts. This was especially the case in the first phase of indenture to Réunion, which was already underway before the abolition of slavery. As chapter five demonstrated, these early arrivals responded to the conditions in a variety of ways, including organised revolt and running away. Large numbers were repatriated back to India, while others found new professions away from the fields. On the one hand, archival documents reveal the sense of superiority some Indian arrivals felt vis-à-vis the enslaved men they toiled alongside—and often under. On the other hand, they also show how the positive stereotypes that Réunion's white planters and colonial authorities held regarding enslaved Indians started to change for the worse. When indentured labourers arrived in Réunion in larger numbers after the abolition of slavery, the idea of Indians as inherently criminal began to take hold.

Similar stereotypes gained currency in the Caribbean after Indians arrived in Guadeloupe and Martinique for the first time in the 1850s. Chapter six showed how comparisons with their African indentured counterparts reflected evolving racial theories, which held that the Africans' lack of civilisation facilitated their assimilation into creolised French culture. In contrast, Indians were regarded with hostility for more firmly holding on to their religious and cultural mores; they were what can be described as 'othered' and deemed ineligible for citizenship. In both the Caribbean islands and Réunion, there was an active reimagining of a collective Indian identity that involved a considerable degree of religious and cultural syncretism. Hindu and Islamic practices from different parts of the subcontinent notably among the numerically and culturally predominant Tamil-speaking people of south India, were woven together with established Christian practices from the islands. What sets

Réunion apart in this respect is the extent to which Indian indentured labourers were able to assert themselves and their identity in the broader social, economic and cultural context of the island. That is not to say that in the Caribbean Indians were swallowed up into the creole mass; if anything, they were kept and kept themselves apart. Indeed, it can be seen that Indian indentured labourers and their descendants in the Antilles turned inwards, and their contribution to creole culture was somewhat side-lined. In Réunion, in contrast, Indian communities fought for—and won—a more powerful position. They were able to do so in part because of the pioneering Indians who came before them as enslaved people, as lascars and as free men and women, and because of those who came in separate but concurrent migrant flows. Far from simply being an outpost of the Caribbean transplanted to the Indian Ocean, Réunion was firmly integrated into the Indian Ocean world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Port of origin of indentured labourers according to destination⁸⁹⁵:

Number of migrants departing from:	Guadeloupe 1854-88	Martinique 1853-82	Réunion 1849-82
Coromandel coast	29,023	23,788	54,927
Calcutta	15,530	962	10,235
Per cent from Calcutta	34.9	3.9	15.7

Appendix 2

Ships that transported indentured labourers from India to Réunion 1829-1830⁸⁹⁶

Ship	Departure Date	Number of Migrants
<i>Chérise</i>	10 May 1829	50
<i>Solide</i>	25 July 1829	50
<i>Pennsylvanie</i>	7 August 1829	153
<i>Pallas</i>	30 August 1829	268
<i>Alexandre</i>	18 October 1829	257
<i>France</i>	20 October 1829	235
<i>Striana Pourana</i>	26 March 1830	100
<i>Pallas</i>	30 March 1830	350

⁸⁹⁵ Schnakenbourg, 'L'Immigration Indienne', 493.

⁸⁹⁶ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 949.

<i>Epervier</i>	30 March 1830	200
<i>Delphine</i>	30 March 1830	125
<i>La Valeur</i>	10 June 1830	250
<i>Ernest</i>	30 June 1830	300
<i>Amédée</i>	15 August 1830	208
<i>Alexandre</i>	14 September 1830	250
<i>Les Trois Louves</i>	14 September 1830	40
<i>Epervier</i>	18 September 1830	270
<i>Landais</i>	18 September 1830	50
<i>Delphine</i>	18 September 1830	40
Total		3196

Appendix 3

Indians transported to Réunion 1836-1882⁸⁹⁷

Year	Number of Indian labourers transported	Number of declared ships	Estimation of non-declared ships
1836	490	0	3
1839	205	0	1
1844	521	2	1
1845	160	0	1
1846	458	0	3
1848	1,621	1	3
1849	8,078	10	12

⁸⁹⁷ From *ibid.*, 950.

1850	6,598	4	14
1851	4,407	1	11
1852	3,383	2	7
1853	3,181	3	6
1854	9,135	2	23
1855	3,097	1	7-8
1856	2,233	0	6
1857	1,449	1	3
1858	1,324	1	3
1859	2,394	7	0
1863	2,887	8	0
1864	4839	10	2
1865	1,113	2	1
1866	2,518	10	0
1869	1,081	1	2
1871	258	0	1
1873	1,036	1	2
1875	689	1	1
1877	715	1	1
1879	918	2	0
1880	1,690	2	2
1881	625	1	1
1882	1,274	1	2
Total		.	110

Appendix 4

Number of ship departures from India to the French Caribbean 1852-1888⁸⁹⁸

	Departures:	Arrivals in: Guadeloupe	Arrivals in: Martinique	Arrivals in: Guyane	Total
1853-60	17,583	6,924	8,834	1,341	17,099
1861-70	23,150	13,010	6,802	2,411	22,223
1871-80	26,810	14,403	7,356	4,447	22,206
1881-88	10,940	8,071	2,740	-	10,811
Total	78,483	42,408	25,732	8,199	76,339

Appendix 5

Mortality on board French ships, destined the French Antilles⁸⁹⁹

Ship	Year	Number of Passengers	Number of deaths	Per cent of deaths
<i>Ville d' Agen</i>	1859	633	22	3.4
<i>Réaumur</i>	1859	588	9	1.6
<i>Richelieu</i>	1859	538	9	1.6
<i>Siam</i>	1859	429	7	1.6
<i>Espérance</i>	1859	541	2	0.3

⁸⁹⁸ From Northrup, 'Indentured Indians in the French Antilles', 267.

⁸⁹⁹ Weber, *Les établissements français*, 1044. It seems Weber may have made a mistake regarding the date of the *Jeune Albert's* voyage. The ship did set sail from Pondicherry in 1861, but to Réunion, not the Antilles.⁸⁹⁹ An earlier journey to Guadeloupe is, however, recorded and with the same death toll that Weber calculates. Although this voyage took place in 1859, a report from the doctor onboard was published in 1861, perhaps explaining why Weber recorded it as this year. It is worth noting children were counted as fractions, which may explain Weber's total of 488.

<i>Réamur</i>	1860	540	12	2.2
<i>Suger</i>	1860	397	3	0.7
<i>Parmenier</i>	1860	531	17	3.2
<i>Jacques Coeur</i>	1860	674	10	1.4
<i>Hampden</i>	1860-61	528	10	1.8
<i>Rubens</i>	1860-61	687	25	3.6
<i>Suger</i>	1861	412	11	2.6
<i>Siam</i>	1861	444	5	1.1
<i>Confiance</i>	1861	410	9	2.1
<i>Dugay-Trouin</i>	1861	536	20	3.7
<i>Maurice et Réunion</i>	1861	388	30	7.7
<i>Jeune Albert</i>	1861 (1859)*	488	70	14.3
Total		22,157	597	2.7