

Slavery in ile de france



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Slavery in Ile de France

If we go back into history, we can note that slavery had existed on the island since the sixteenth century by the Dutch settlement. Slavery had become firmly embedded in the economy and society of Mauritius. Mauritius, previously known as 'Ile de France' was colonised by the Dutch (1638-1710), the French (1715-1810) and later by the British (1810-1835) which paved the way towards the abolition of slavery in 1835.

It was only when Guillaume Dufresne d'Arsel landed in 1715 that the island came to be known as a French colony. He named it 'Ile de France'. It was only in 1721 that the French began to occupy the island. From 1598 to 1710, the Dutch were the first one to take possession of the island. However, we cannot deny that before the Dutch stay in Mauritius, in 1510, a Portuguese sailor, Don Pedro Mascarenhas was the main founder of the island but he was not interested. Whether during the Dutch, French or British stay in Mauritius, they faced a lot of problems. So, slaves had to be brought from other countries. As we already know, since centuries, under the colonial era, the one having more territories was considered to be more powerful. But who will work on those territories? Since there were not enough workers to work on the land, it was necessary to bring slaves on the island through slave trade.

Slavery had played an important role in the historiography of the island. Whether in early eighteenth or nineteenth century, while European settlers were on the island, we can examine the condition of the slaves with their masters. Slavery in Mauritius is still considered to be less harsh than others

like West Indian slavery. Slaves were mainly brought from countries like Goa-India, Madagascar, Mozambique and other regions of Africa but Reunion was the first island from which slaves were first introduced in Ile de France. But what was the aim behind this? They were brought to work for the development and betterment of Ile de France. This was seen to be advantageous for slave owners since slaves' labour was being exploited at cheaper price.

The slaves were divided into different ethnic categories such as Creole, Indian, Malagasy and Mozambican. Each ethnic group were portrayed as having specific attributes; for example. Mozambican slaves were characterised as being hardworking on plantation fields which indicates that they were physically strong but less intelligent. Contrary to this, Indian slaves were weak to work on plantations fields.

According to Milbert, the African slaves were less in numbers. Furthermore, Prentout adds that these slaves were seen as the best hardworking labourers but more intelligent than the Mozambican slaves ; « *Parmi eux, les yolofs, plus grands et plus forts sont regardés comme les meilleurs représentants de la race nègre, ils sont plus intelligents que ceux qui viennent de la cote de Mozambique ou de la cote adjacente* ».

Different names were picturised to slaves who came from Africa or Mozambique; ' Macoas', ' Mondjavocas', ' Sennas', ' Moursenas', ' Yabanes', ' Mouquidos', ' Mavairs', ' Macondes' and ' Miamoeses'. These slaves were physically portrayed as having thick lips, flat nose, oily skin and woolly hair. Another category of slaves coming from Madagascar were known to be '

Hovas', ' Betsilées', ' Antatoimes', and ' Sakalavas'. Those who came from India were classified as ' Talingas', ' Malabars' and ' Bengalis'.

In addition, people had their own perception about the relationship between slaves and their owners. Likewise, Charles Telfair noticed that there was a relationship of kindness which prevailed between slaves and their masters ;
“ dans la plus haute classe, les rapports des maitres avec les esclaves étaient empreints de bienveillance”. Thus, the master was far from being a cruel and oppressive ruler. Prentout further adds that ; *« il n’y avait pas à l’île de France, la même haine des esclaves qu’aux Antilles »*.

Slaves were nevertheless known to be a source of property for their masters. Reynolds Michel, a priest of Catholic Diocese argues *that “ Slavery, an institution as old as the history of human society is based on the exploitation of man’s labour. Certainly the history of slavery is a history of blood and tears lived by millions of men and women, a memory of people torn from their land of origin, of bodies thrown at the bottom of the holds of ships, corpses thrown overboard, removal and prohibition to bear one’s surname, forced labour and humiliation n the plantations. But it is also the story of a permanent resistance from beginning to end. And it is this strength in resistance in its many forms which abolished slavery”*.

Therefore, slaves did not lead a comfortable and simple life. They were none other than a source of income for their masters. They were just treated like an object which could be bought or sold anytime without restriction. They had no right to neither misbehave nor demand anything. Even the children of slaves were denied the right to education and were perceived as slaves just

like their parents. Power was solely concentrated in the hands of the masters, that is, whenever they wanted they could use and throw away the slaves. For example, women slaves were brought at their master's place, just for the sake of sexual pleasures. They did not have the right to voice out. In short they did not enjoy any form of human rights and they were completely deprived of their freedom. Thus, "*the history of slavery must be remembered because memory undertakes not to repeat it*". However, we cannot deny the fact that slavery had a great significance in the economic development of the colony.

Dutch period (1638-1710)

The Dutch occupation in Ile de France lasted from 1638 to 1710. The Dutch presence in Mauritius became noticeable through their introduction of domestic animals and plants like sugarcane. The Dutch East India Company also known as the 'Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' (VOC) was an institution where the rich and poor were treated equally in trade affairs. This had included the support of Governor Van der Stel who imported slaves as labour was required in abundance for the better functioning of the company. Mauritius was seen as a country which would derive economic benefits for the VOC.

During the Dutch period, slaves were brought mainly from Madagascar to work on the fields. However, many slaves, also known as maroon slaves ran away into the forests and often caused havoc for the settlers. They destroyed houses, burn farms or other properties so as to avoid being dominated and exploited. They knew if they were captured by their masters,

they had to face severe consequences but still they tried to escape. The Dutch settlement lasted for about 20 years and they finally left the island for the French in 1710.

French period (1715-1810)

In 1715, the French took control of the island on behalf of the King and renamed it ' Ile de France'. The island was managed under the direction of the French East India Company and it retained its existence until 1767. From 1767 until 1810, the French government chose officials and appointed them in Ile de France but this lasted only for a short period until the French revolution. Besides, amidst the Napoleonic wars, the French used Ile de France as a base where French corsairs were successful in launching surprise attacks on British ships. Until 1810, the French attacks and efforts in holding up the colony were effective until the British landed, but this time in great numbers and thus took possession of the island while the French capitulated. While surrendering, the British assured that the practice of the French traditions, customs, language and religion would be respected and maintained.

Among the French settlers, the Code Noir was established and subsequently seen as the rules that slaves had to follow. It was published between 1685 and 1783 and declared by Louis XIV in 1723. Bernardin de Saint- Pierre was somehow in favour about the regime of the ' Code-Noir' but he claimed that the laws established for the slaves were not really granted to them. He adds *that " il y a une loi faite en faveur des esclaves appelée le Code Noir. Cette loi favorable ordonne qu'à chaque punition ils ne recevront pas plus de*

trente coups, qu'ils ne travailleront point le dimanche, qu'on leur donnera de la viande toutes les semaines, des chemises tous les ans; quand ils sont vieux, on les envoie chercher leur vie comme ils peuvent. Un jour j'en vis un qui n'avait que la peau et les os, découper la chair d'un cheval mort pour la manger. C'était un squelette qui en dévorait un autre". Slaves were forced to respect the laws even if they had to undergo tyrannical treatments. Nagapen argues , *" les maitres s'arrogeaient le droit de vie et de mort sur leurs esclaves" .*

The slaves were granted the right to be baptised by the Articles I and II of the Code-Noir. Besides, they were not allowed to join into matrimony without the permission of their masters. Yet, the ' Code-Noir' was somehow useful for the slaves as it provided support for them both physically and morally. The owners were restrained from ill-treating and torturing the slaves. Slaves did not work on Sundays and public holidays. Additionally, they had the right to lodge complains against their owners and that to be done to the ' procureur-général' namely Virieux. When he settled on the island, *" he noticed that in no other colony had slaves been treated so well and the reasons for this were that the ' ruler' passed ' wise and enlightened measures', that whites were nicer towards their slaves than free black slave- owners"*.

In his study, Karl Noel mentions that slaves did not complain about any laws imposed upon them. In fact, they had no right but only to be obedient towards the law. The type of punishment the slave had to face was decided by the owners. Maroon slaves had to bear harsh consequences than them like their ears being cut or they even faced death. In short, governors like Souillac and Pierre Poivre blamed the unpleasant and dreadful foundation of

slavery. Slaves were also in constant struggle towards the laws imposed upon them. Those who could no more tolerate these brutal conditions landed up committing theft, suicide, abortion or even escaping from there.

In 1735, the French Governor Labourdonnais started developing Ile de France. Whether under the Dutch rule or French settlement, Ile de France became victim of several threats like starvation. Hence, Labourdonnais introduced staple food like manioc and maize for the slaves. Karl Noel assumed that under the French governance there were less agricultural works but they rather focussed on commerce, industry and warfare.