Chapter 7

Bondage across the Ocean
Indentured Labor in the Indian Ocean

The Main Argument

We have already discussed the link between labor in Europe, slavery in the colonies, and serfdom in Russia, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thought (in chapter 1). Yet this was not simply a representation of the facts, but a reflection on real entanglements in social and economic relationships between Russia, Europe, and Europe's main colonies. As I mentioned in the introduction, Russian serfdom can hardly been compared to American slavery. Nevertheless, the evolution of labor in Russia and in some European colonies did reflect similar tensions. This chapter argues that not only was the definition and practice of bonded labor in the colonies linked to the definition and practice of wage labor in Europe, but that the development of labor in the two realms was interconnected. Indentured servants in the British Empire and *engagés* (equivalent to indentured servants) in the French colonies would have been inconceivable without hiring for services and domestic service in Britain and France. A connection was possible because there were important differences in status between masters, landowners, and employers, on the one hand, and domestic servants, wage earners, bonded laborers, and apprentices, on the other.[1]

Yet the British and the French did not export just any notion and practice of wage earner, but a specific form of it, that is, indentured labor. This peculiar contract derived from two types of extant contracts: that of the sailor and that of the agrarian laborer. The interaction among the forms of bondage and the notions of indenture and *engagement* exported by the Europeans make this an interesting case.[2]

In this context, Réunion and Mauritius Islands, along with certain parts of the Swahili coast, constitute an exception in the Indian Ocean region, insofar as they were the only areas that developed plantation economies; however, the passage from slavery to indentured labor acquired certain peculiar features that distinguished it from labor in the Antilles and the rest of the West Indies. I will use the extreme case of Réunion and Mauritius Islands to raise doubts regarding the validity of the "colonial paradigm" in general and labor questions in particular. Before looking at indentured labor, I will first briefly sketch the history of slavery in the Indian Ocean. A full development of this topic would require a book of its own and goes beyond the scope of the present study.

Forms of Bondage in the Indian Ocean

Histories of slavery in the Indian Ocean are strongly influenced by the Atlantic perspective: this means that most studies focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on plantations on the east coast of Africa and Mauritius and Réunion Islands, and on the African labor force.[3] This approach is misleading; indeed, the meaning of slavery in the Indian Ocean only becomes intelligible when viewed outside the categories of ancient or North American slavery. It often entailed mutual forms of dependence in which one individual (or a group or caste) of inferior status was obligated to another with superior status, who (or which) in turn was under obligation to his (or its) superior. Consequently, the forms of status obligation, bondage, and temporary slavery (for debt, etc.) coexisted with forms of hereditary slavery.[4]

Two basic systems of Indian Ocean slavery can be distinguished. The *open system* of slavery was found in the commercialized, cosmopolitan cities of Southeast Asia and elsewhere, where the boundary between slavery and other forms of bondage was porous and indistinct, and upward mobility was possible. In the *closed systems* of South (and East) Asia, the stigma of slavery made it inconceivable for a slave to be accepted into the kinship systems of their owners as long as they remained slaves; instead they were maintained as separate ethnic groups.[5] Slave occupations in the Indian Ocean were diverse and varied according to location: most slaves were employed in homes as domestic servants or in construction work; in food cultivation and animal herding; as sailors and fishermen; or in artisanal occupations, ranging from distilling to saltpeter manufacturing. In port towns like Batavia and Malacca, thousands worked in docks and shipyards, loading, unloading, repairing, and servicing company vessels.[6] The majority of people entered (involuntary) slavery through debt, which

differed from debt bondage (which was mostly voluntary and exerted on collateral).

Furthermore, the chronology of slavery in the Indian Ocean differs greatly from that in the Atlantic: it was not restricted to African or non-white slavery and was not exclusively linked to the colonial plantation system. Quite the contrary, forms of bondage and slavery in the Indian Ocean developed over millennia, before the arrival of the European powers; it mostly concerned women and children, and with the exception of Omani plantations in East Africa and on Mauritius and Réunion Islands, it was not linked to the plantation system. Thus recent analyses identify three main peaks in the long trend of slavery in the Indian Ocean: the first, ca. 200 BC–200 AD; the second, ca. 800–1300 AD; and the third, ca. 1780–1910.[7] The demand for slaves was linked to rising economic cycles, mostly in labor-intensive economies, while slave supplies increased with hostile climatic conditions and degradation, as well as with the incidence of warfare and kidnapping. Thus the first cycle was linked to the expansion of ancient economies, the second to the rise of Islam, and the third to European expansion. The predominance of women and children was particularly evident in the first two cycles, but it was still important in the eighteenth century.[8] Since the eighth century, Islam played a major role in connecting Eastern Africa to India and to the Arabian or Persian Gulf.[9] Between the seventh and the fifteenth centuries, 3.8 million slaves were traded across the Sahara and another 2 million across the Indian Ocean.[10] While demand from the world of Islam was not always responsible for the Indian Ocean trade (some slaves went to the Mascarenes, Hindu India, China, and Southeast Asia), most slaves from about 1000 AD to the end of the trade were conveyed across the Sahara Desert and the Indian Ocean by Muslim merchants, marketed to Muslims, and employed in societies where Islam was a key force. Large units of government slaves (*kul*) defied the slaveholding norm, particularly in the servile armies that supported central governments from Morocco to Mogul India. Yet agricultural slaves were not rare: during the eleventh century, up to 30,000 African slaves were employed in agricultural pursuits along the coast of what is now Bahrain. Women were an important component of the slave trade. The laws and customs relating to slavery as interpreted from the Koran produced analogous results in lands as dispersed as the Hejaz, the Maghreb, Oman, the Persian Gulf, and north India. In all these regions, slave women were prized by freemen as wives and concubines, while free women sought female slaves as attendants and household laborers.[11]

This system did not end after the seventeenth century with the arrival of the European powers, which competed with these already existing

networks and eventually integrated them.[12] Thus the Omanis enhanced their power in the western Indian Ocean by founding colonies in Zanzibar and Kilwa. Traditional imports of domestic slaves to Arabia added to the increasing slave trade between inland Africa and the Omanis plantations along its east coast.[13] In the Mozambique Channel since the seventeenth century, the expanding slave trade was linked to the immigration of Swahili and Hadrami Arabs to the region and the exportation of labor from northwest Madagascar to the ports of the Swahili coast and Arabia that reached its heyday in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, developments in both the interior of Madagascar (the rise of the Imerina Empire) and along the Swahili coast caused a shift in the trade, so that Madagascar became a significant importer of bonded African labor from Mozambique.[14]

In Madagascar, the Antalaotras—Islamic merchants of Swahili-Arab origin—controlled the slave as well as the general trade with the Arabian Peninsula. They constituted a powerful network with the Indians Karany (Muslims) in Merina and with the Omani power in Zanzibar.[15] The Swahilis themselves took an active part in the commerce in ivory and slaves.[16] Instead of making an attempt to seize control of the trade, the European powers—the Portuguese,[17] Dutch,[18] British,[19] and French[20]—thus sought to integrate the already existing networks.

The role of non-European merchants is even more important if we do not limit ourselves to the maritime, but consider also the overland slave trade. Thus between 1400 and 1900, 2.5 million slaves were traded by sea along the coast of the Indian Ocean, while about 9 million passed along the trans-Saharan route (3.6 million being exported).[21] Exports of slaves from East Africa rose from 100,000 in the seventeenth century to 400,000 in the eighteenth century and 1,618,000 in the nineteenth century, half of whom were sent overseas and the other half of which was retained on the eastern African coasts.[22] In all the areas concerned, in Africa as in India, in Arabia as in Europe, the increasing demand for labor was linked to the general upward economic trend. Not only the European empires, but also the Omani, Merina, Ethiopian, and Egyptian Empires, developed and required a larger labor force. As in earlier times, concubines, soldiers, domestics, and plantation slaves formed the bulk of this trade. Pearl fishers in the Gulf, slave-seamen, and new urban slaves were also important.[23] The European demand for sugar and cotton strongly contributed to the growth of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean: the Mascarene Islands absorbed most of the slave trade, while, paradoxically, the abolition of slavery in the United States led to increasing production of cotton in Egypt, which greatly relied on slaves.[24]

As a consequence of this, when the British decided to abolish the slave trade, they had to compete not only with recalcitrant French and Portuguese, but also with local powers and existing forms of bondage. The issue of this confrontation was even more complicated by the fact that the European powers, including the British, did not always have a clear-cut distinction between free and unfree labor.

Forced Migration Across the Oceans: Convicts

Even if *engagisme* (in the French Empire) and indentured (its equivalent in the British Empire) labor mostly developed after the abolition of slavery, as a temporary solution to the lack of labor on the plantation, the end of slavery cannot fully explain their development entirely. Indeed, these forms of labor were used before slavery; they were not only linked to the plantation economy—like slavery itself in the Indian Ocean—and they persisted long after the abolition of slavery and the decline of the plantation system. To understand indentured labor, we thus need to keep in mind both the multiple versions of bonded labor in the Indian Ocean and the peculiar notions and practices of labor that the Europeans sought to export into this area—to start with, convict labor.

Convict labor as a form of penal servitude is usually associated with public law and social order.[25] Yet its boundary with private law and private forms of servitudes was continuously blurred. Convicts transported by the British to North America, the Caribbean, Australia, or the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were given in service to private merchants and estate owners. The terms of service were often between seven and fourteen years, with no guarantee that the convict would be redeemed at the end of the term. Since the 1830s, the abolitionist movement began to include convict labor among the forms of labor it regarded as slavery. The lack of convicts' consent to the duration of work and the price were arguments in favor of this orientation; defenders of the convict system argued that unlike slavery, penal servitude was not perpetual; it rested upon conviction; and it lacked any racial basis. Indeed, the living conditions of convicts depended on the time, the colony, and the estate. In public camps, the inmates were subjected to severe deprivation, while when assigned to private merchants or planters, they were quickly assimilated to slaves and thus often protected as a form of capital (for example, in Australia). At the same time, private masters did not hesitate to punish convicts for disobedience. Convict labor was often made up of prisoners who had previously been condemned to death but whose sentences had been commuted to lifetime penal servitude; however, in

periods of rigorous enforcement of the law in Britain coupled with the inadequacy of the country's prisons to cope with the number of prisoners, many people were transferred to labor for minor offences. Something like 60,000 British convicts were transported to North America and the Caribbean between the 1660s and the 1770s, and 162,000 were sent to Australia between 1788 and 1867.[26] The French transported at about 36,000 convicts to French Guiana and New Caledonia. To this, one has to add at least 100,000 Indian convicts transported to Aden, Mauritius, and Southeast Asia, between the 1790s and the early 1860s.[27]

Convict labor was unpaid but costly; the costs of transportation, feeding, and surveillance had to be taken into consideration, and they often exceeded the estimated or real monetary rewards.[28] Convicts also frequently escaped—some 9 percent did so in Maryland between 1746 and 1775—and were often drunk and incapable of work.[29] At the same time, convict labor cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis that compares it with wage labor. In the places where convict labor was primarily used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was extremely little or no free labor. When the conditions in new settlement colonies were too harsh to attract free labor, convicts were pressed into the breach. Clearance of the land, the construction of harbors and roads, and the development of cattle and sheep ranches were among the convicts' tasks. They also exploited timber and minerals where the climate and the terrain were so hostile that compulsion remained the only viable solution. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, petitions by convicts show that they still preferred to serve in the army, be flogged, or used for medical research rather than be transported to America.[30] From this standpoint, convict labor aimed at a goal similar to that of the workhouse; beyond any calculation of utility and economic considerations, these forms of bondage served multiple aims, such as meting out punishment and providing a labor force for situations in which other forms of more or less coerced labor (indentured immigrants) were still insufficient and where slave imports were still too expensive. With this background one can understand the indirect benefit Britain sought to gain by sending convicts to Australia: by doing so they reduced incarceration costs and the rate of recidivism (which was 80 percent for the incarcerated population in question), while engaging in a positive production of wealth.[31] This calculation was probably accurate for Australia and some areas of North America, but much less for Guiana and the Indian Ocean settlements. The latter case involved Indians and other Southeast Asian populations, unlike the first generation of convicts sent to Australia, who were white convicts unacceptable in the motherland. Britain began to send Indian convicts to Mauritius from the turn of the

eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. Yet within a few years, the authorities expressed increasing skepticism about the efficiency of convict labor, focusing in particular on the high cost of convict transportation. Other considerations pushed in the opposite direction, namely the lack of labor force in Mauritius and other British settlements in Southeast Asia after the abolition of slavery, as well as the perception that convict transport was an appropriate punishment in India's caste-based society.[32] But the issue on the ground was quite different: members of high castes were extremely rare among convicts, most of whom were peasants, of low castes, or even Muslim. Most of them were placed under colonial authorities for public works. However, convicts enjoyed a limited right to move, and some of them had children. They entered into economic relations, which raised the question whether they could actually own property.[33] Colonial authorities mostly answered this question in the affirmative.[34] Between 1815 and 1837, almost 1,500 Indian convicts were transported to Mauritius, first from Bengal, then from Bombay. Even if their legal status was not that of formal slaves, their very existence raised the question of the boundary between forms of servitude within empires and, thus, that of the boundary between bondage and formally free labor. In the next section we will study the evolution of indentured immigration in the Indian Ocean before, during, and after slavery.[35]

The Invention of *Engagisme*

Engagisme has received less attention than either Anglo-Saxon indentured service or slavery in the strict sense. One of the rare works devoted to French *engagisme* was undertaken by Gabriel Debien, who combed the notary archives in Normandy and Brittany as well as archives in the French West Indies.[36] Louise Dechêne[37] also discussed certain aspects of white *engagisme* in Canada, in a work later summarized by Fréderic Mauro.[38]

In the French colonies, the contract of *engagement* or indentured service was developed in the seventeenth century. It was initially intended for white settlers whose transport expenses were advanced by employers or their middlemen in exchange for a commitment to work for several years. The *engagés* were subject to criminal penalties and could be transferred along with their contract to other masters. Owing to the close resemblance between wage earners and domestic servants (especially under the ancien régime) and the survival of forms of domestic service into the nineteenth century, the contract of *engagement* should not be understood in opposition to these other labor relationships, but rather as an extension and of them in the colonial situation. In other

words, whereas our own accustomed categories contrast free wage work in France with slavery and indentured service in its colonies, the actors at the time regarded the contract of *engagement* as a free contract, and the penalties for breach of contract were quite similar to those applied to laborers. Indeed, the notaries of Normandy in charge of drafting the first contracts of *engagement* in the seventeenth century explicitly relied on two types of contracts that already existed: the agricultural journeyman's contract and the sailor's contract. These contracts provided for a particular status of the hired person who offered his services and all his time to his master. The agricultural journeyman transferred exclusive ownership of his time and services to his employer; the sailor's contract extended the duration of this sale with special clauses related to voyage expenses. As Debien noted, these contracts "are reminiscent of contracts to farm uncultivated land in France, and the ties between the first *engagés* and their masters were rather like those between tenant farmers and our rural domains. The oldest contracts of *engagement* were thus the ones that still had some connection to rent paid by tenants to feudal lords and leases for tenant farming."[39] It is no accident that contracts of *engagement* explicitly mention hiring for service: the *engagé* rented his services, i.e., the totality of his time, to his master, and terminating a contract was difficult, especially for the *engagé*.[40] Similarly, contracts of *engagement* explicitly invoked apprenticeship contracts: the master had the same requirement to provide for the care of the *engagé* as he did for the apprentice, the same expenses in case of illness, and the same word in the margins: bondage.[41]

However, two clauses differentiated the apprenticeship contract from the contract of *engagement*: the act of apprenticeship emphasized training in a trade, whereas in the contract of *engagement,* the *engagé* first owed his labor to his master who, in exchange, was to teach him about colonial farming. It was also the master who gave a lump sum to his *engagé* and not the other way around, as in the case of the apprentice.[42]

Sometimes the close relationship between *engagement* and apprenticeship was explicit, and the expression *engagement-apprentissage* appeared. In this case, the *engagé* departed and returned with his master to work on all "his affairs, trade, and commerce." These *engagés* were not apprentice-settlers but apprentice-merchants, without wages. Indeed, the father or mother of the *engagé* paid a lump sum to the merchant or the settler.[43] The overwhelming majority of the contracts studied by Debien concern fatherless *engagés.* And finally, the contract of *engagement* also borrowed from the sailor's contract in that it clearly stipulated the length and type of service required and, above all, the penalty for desertion.[44]

Sometimes the *engagement* involved a contract of association between two *engagés* or between an *engagé* and the captain of a ship. In the second

case, the *engagé* offered his service to the captain, who covered the cost of passage. Once they arrived, the captain could sell the *engagé* and his debt to a master or share the labor services (or the income generated from them) with this master. In the case of association, on the other hand, the two *engagés* shared the capital and the labor; they called each other "my mate," with the association usually, but not necessarily, ending when one of the associates married.[45] In general the *engagés* were not allowed to marry without authorization from the master, but an *engagé* had the right to redeem his indenture and could oblige his master to agree to do so. Differences nevertheless appear in this overall context between the *engagés* "with no trade" and those who left as doctors, carpenters, etc. The latter committed themselves for three years instead of five; they received wages but were not subject to the servitude clauses imposed on the others.

Finally, in addition to the trade involved, our understanding of contracts of *engagement* should be qualified in accordance with the destination (French West Indies, Canada, or the Indian Ocean) and the historical period. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the contract of *engagement* concerned mainly whites who went to the French West Indies and Canada, but also to the Indian Ocean.[46] Between 1660 and 1715, 5,200 *engagés* left for the French West Indies from La Rochelle alone. This figure is much smaller than the 210,000 indentured Britons who left for North America between 1630 and 1700.[47]

Engagés from Asia and Africa in the Indian Ocean in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Many scholars assert that white *engagisme* can be situated in the initial colonial context, i.e., prior to the rapid development of plantations, when the practice was to use non-white slaves. This interpretation, while not incorrect, must be qualified; in fact, *engagisme* did not disappear with slavery but continued during and, most of all, after it. It is important to account for how legal institutions were passed on, how they were applied to whites and people of color, and the economic significance of *engagisme*. Indeed, the Mascarene Islands were an exception insofar as they were the only ones to develop a plantation economy and forms of slavery similar to North American slavery, this dominating other forms of dependence.[48] On Réunion Island, alongside the use of slaves in the strictest sense,[49] *engagés* of color were employed in the eighteenth century and even more so in the nineteenth. This immigration was partly linked to the need for artisans (Indian carpenters and masons), but above all to the demand for additional laborers at a time when, under pressure from the English, the

price of slaves was constantly rising and rumors of the abolition of slavery in France and its colonies were growing.[50] In all, about 160,000 slaves are estimated to have been imported to the Mascarene Islands prior to 1810.[51] They came primarily from Madagascar (70 percent), followed by Mozambique and East Africa (19 percent).[52] In the early eighteenth century, France played a central role in organizing the slave trade in East Africa that was intended for the Mascarene Islands.[53]

After the Napoleonic Wars, although France officially reintroduced slavery, English pressure resulted in certain slave importations assuming the form of contracts of *engagement*. In this manner, an estimated 45,000 illicit slaves were imported to Réunion Island between 1817 and 1835.[54] Taking into account official censuses and disguised importations, between 48,900 and 66,400 slaves are believed to have arrived in Réunion between 1811 and 1848. According to Allen, about 300,000 slaves were imported to the Mascarene archipelago between the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Unlike the trend during the eighteenth century, this time East Africa and Mozambique were the main source of supply (60 percent), with the rest coming from Madagascar (31 percent) and the countries of southern Asia (9 percent).[55] These networks, as we shall see, were to remain in place after the abolition of slavery.

Under these conditions, the distinction between slave and *engagé* was difficult to determine. The fragile dividing line was noticeable when they departed and when they arrived. A ship's captain transporting Indians to Réunion Island would often resort to fraud; contracts of *engagement* to Singapore were signed, but the *engagés* ended up being sent to Réunion.[56]

Once arriving on Réunion Island, there was no legal or factual dividing line between *engagement* and slavery. The reports drafted by the interior director and the governor, as well as correspondence with the ministries concerned at the time, manifestly show that the French colonial administration not only encouraged the Indian *engagés* and tried to establish rules of law that were sufficiently clear to avoid trouble, but that they were also concerned with actual enforcement of these laws.[57] These attitudes intersected with those of the abolitionist movement: some English administrators considered the "liberation" of labor a sign of real progress not only from an economic standpoint, but also in a political and moral sense.[58] All the same, translating these principles into action remained difficult. During the first half of 1830, Indian *engagés* numbered about 3,000.[59] The legal rules in force provided that the *engagés* should receive food, lodging, and wages.[60] In practice, however, the employer-landowners seldom complied with the rules, and in the event of a dispute or a problem with the administration, the settlers justified withholding the wages of the Indian *engagés* by claiming that they had failed to fulfill

their commitments. The arguments invoked were quite similar to those used with regard to the labor of domestic servants in France at end of the nineteenth century.

Does this mean that rules of law had no impact and consequently that there was no real distinction between the conditions of these *engagés* and those of real slaves?

The bonded servants and *engagés* did have rights, however much they may have been flouted. How those rights were secured depended not only on the wording of the laws but also on enforcement procedures (e.g., burden of proof, a method of written and oral evidence that radically shifted the weight of possible intimidations). Although domestic servants in France also lived in a state of inequality in relation to their masters, they nevertheless enjoyed the support of justices of the peace, an advantage that Indian *engagés* lacked on Réunion Island. However, the situation of the latter group was less dramatic than that of real slaves. Indeed, the *engagés* resisted not only by fleeing (runaways), reducing their labor, and rioting, but also by multiplying their lawsuits, which were undoubtedly more frequent than those of slaves during the same period.[61] Faced with the unfavorable attitude of the magistrates and the administration, Indian *engagés* formed a trade union in which the members with the best mastery of the French language played a highly active role in formulating appeals, intervening with the authorities, etc.[62] Some trials resulted in favorable decisions for the Indians, who were then able to recover their wages or leave without having to pay compensation to their masters. Debates arose among the settlers, and rumors spread of increasing appeals by the *engagés* that would inevitably lead to the breakdown of the whole social order. In 1837, the trade union was prohibited.[63]

At this point, the *engagés*, like agricultural wage earners in France, discovered another weapon: competition among employers. If they did not like their working conditions, they simply left their employers and went into the city, where they worked as domestic servants. They became "fugitives" and "deserters";[64] the use of these terms in ordinary as well as legal language of the time clearly conveys the link between white *engagés* and soldiers, on the one hand, and runaway slaves on the other. More concretely, many landowners did not demand the return of their runaway *engagés*; they knew perfectly well that it was in the interest of many of them to appropriate *engagés* or even slaves belonging to other settlers. This opportunistic behavior was prompted by various motives: some could not afford to buy slaves; others, including some of the large plantation owners, offered better conditions than small landowners, thereby helping to crush the small landowners in a process ranging from unfair competition (as described by the law) in the area of slavery and

engagement to the abolition of slavery, which was decidedly favorable to large landowners.[65] Yet the lack of cooperative agreements between estate owners opened up the possibility for workers to move from one estate to another while benefiting from their new master's protection.

Competition between planters and estate owners reinforced the immigrants' resistance, but so did the different attitudes among colonial rulers. Some rulers, such as Governor Pujol, requested legal protections for immigrants like those already in place in Mauritius;[66] other colonial administrators and plantation owners thought this state of affairs was due to Indian indolence rather than to contracts of *engagement* and lack of cooperation among landowners. Other solutions were then considered, starting with the importation of Chinese *engagés*. A new decree was adopted in 1843 to regulate these *engagés*: their contracts were supposed to last at least five years, and the minimum age of the *engagé* was set at sixteen; the landowners had to agree to pay wages and the return trip to China; ill treatment or a two-month delay in wage payments was sufficient grounds for the administration to nullify a contract.[67] By tightening the legal rules in favor of the *engagés*, the administration hoped to solve the problem of labor shortage and the social issues raised by the Indian *engagés*. However, once again, estate owners seemed unwilling to comply with the rules.[68] As a result, the few dozen Chinese who arrived soon adopted the same attitude as the Indians: they protested against their living conditions and overdue wages; they started legal proceedings or left their employers.[69] Thus, barely three years after the decree regulating the importation of Chinese *engagés*, a new decree was issued prohibiting Chinese *engagés*, who were now seen as troublemakers.[70] It was in this context that slavery was abolished in France and its colonies. Did this step mark a new departure, or did it simply consolidate existing practices under a new name?

Engagisme after Slavery

In 1847 there were a total of 6,508 *engagés*—Indians, Chinese, Africans, and Creoles combined.[71] The lack of available labor encouraged several landowners to call for the arrival of additional *engagés*, but this time from Africa, especially since France was moving toward the abolition of slavery. Indeed, as in the British Empire in the 1830s and 1840s, the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1848 was followed by a revival of *engagés*. While only 153 African *engagés* entered into service in 1853, thereafter, on average, about 4,000 Africans were imported each year between 1851 and 1854; 10,008 were imported in 1858 and 5,027 the following year.[72] In reality, recruitment in India, Madagascar, Mozambique, and

the eastern coast of Africa relied on networks that had been in place since the eighteenth century, and it employed the same practices as the slave trade. It often took place violently, sometimes with the help of local tribal chiefs.[73] The annexation of Mayotte in 1841 opened up new sources of laborers in the Comoros Islands themselves, as well as in Madagascar and the East African coast. Using the slave-trade system already developed in the region with the rise of Islam, French traders, helped by local sultans, began importing *engagés* from Gabon, Congo, and West Africa.[74]

Between 1856 and 1866, some 8,000 *engagés*, almost all of them from Mozambique, passed through Mayotte on their way to Réunion Island.[75] In 1853, France built new centers in Gabon and Senegal to buy *engagés*. There were also "prior redemptions" (the term given to such purchases) in Madagascar, Zanzibar, and Mozambique, causing conflicts with the Portuguese and the English; officially, the disputes were over the protection of *engagé* rights, but in reality the issue was one of controlling and dividing up the workforce among the respective empires.

Similar trends were in play in relation to Indian *engagés*, who were in principle under the surveillance of the British administration; in practice, however, the kidnapping of adults was regularly denounced.[76] In all, 43,958 Indian *engagés* would arrive on Réunion Island between 1849 and 1859.[77]

France officially abolished these purchases in Madagascar at the end of the 1880s; however, not only did they continue, but the shortage of laborers was so great on Réunion Island that France decided to annex Madagascar specifically to meet the demand.[78] A secret agreement was signed between France and Portugal in 1887 and again in 1889, with Réunion Island becoming one of the accepted destinations for *engagés* from East Africa and Madagascar.

Thus the market for *engagés* was far from free, not only because of diplomatic and political interference, but also because of the way it worked. Whereas the rules adopted in France were increasingly favorable to workers in the early 1850s (e.g. the law prohibiting child labor, the abolition of a criminal charge for forming workers' coalitions), the Second Empire imposed tighter restrictions on emancipated slaves and *engagés*. A contract of *engagement* was imposed on all workers in the colonies; the legal rules governing the *livret ouvrier* were widely implemented and enforced.[79] Anyone without fixed employment (defined as a job lasting more than one year) was considered a vagrant and punished as such.[80] The penalties were considerable, but the law was also frequently circumvented through fictitious contracts of *engagements* that some—especially women—signed with landowners who were interested in having occasional laborers.[81]

In principle, *engagés* had the right to go to court and denounce cases of mistreatment and abuse. We have seen that under slavery, those rights had been largely ignored. Abolition did not much change those attitudes; in practice, it was extremely difficult to make use of the rules, above all, because colonial law courts were in the hands of local elites. Thus when immigrants addressed courts to denounce abuses, they were often sent back to their employer, who, at best, punished them and docked their wages for insubordination; in the worst case, the employer would sue them for breach of contract and slander. In the face of these difficulties, workers sometimes joined together to denounce illegal practices, but they risked being sentenced by the judge and the police to two months of forced labor in a workhouse for illicit association and breach of the peace.[82]

Following protests by Indian immigrants and British consuls, in the late 1850s a union for the protection of immigrants was permitted. It was granted the authority to inspect estates and was supposed to offer legal protection to immigrants. However, the union performed its mission poorly, at least until the late 1860s; inspections were seldom held, and legal assistance was offered only to those immigrants who had completed less than five years of a renewed contract. This approach provoked a counter reaction on the part of immigrants and the British consul, but the initial decisions of the courts validated the conservative interpretation and rejected claims denouncing unequal treatment under the law.[83]

The legal disputes mainly concerned health care, contractual performance, and physical violence. Until adoption of the 1898 law on labor accidents, French employers were not held responsible for the injuries of their workers, except in cases in which they were proven to be at fault. In hiring-for-service contracts, this attitude was justified by the fact that day laborers were under short-term informal contracts. As for *louage d'ouvrage,* workers were considered independent artisans and as such were personally responsible for any injuries and casualties they suffered. Finally, servants in husbandry had severe constraints placed on their mobility, but at least they benefited from health care. In the colonies, indentured immigrants under the concessionary regime were immediately assimilated as servants in husbandry and were therefore supposed to benefit from health care provided by their employer; statutes and contracts explicitly provided for this obligation.

This solution was adopted within the context of broader agreements with Britain on the circulation of labor in the Indian Ocean region. Britain demanded the provision of health care on plantations in exchange for liberalizing Indian immigration to Réunion Island; however, on Réunion Island, other official provisions added that workers would benefit from

health care only if they could demonstrate that they had complied with all the health and technical prescriptions detailed in the estate regulations and official statutes.[84] In practice, health care provision was poor; medical services simply did not exist on plantations, and injured and sick workers were not only mistreated, their wages were even reduced.[85]

And what about broader legal protections for immigrants?

Summaries of judicial statistics on Réunion Island are not available. We must rely on detailed archival cases and monthly reports made by justices of the peace and appeals courts. Contract renewals, wage payments, and corporal punishment were the most common issues in the lawsuits filed by *engagés*. Unlike slaves, *engagés* had the right to return home; terms were negotiated in the contract, which was supposed to comply with general provisions of the law. In practice, however, repatriation was difficult. During the 1850s and 1860s, one-third of the indentured immigrants returned home (mostly Indians). This percentage was close to that in Mauritius, the Caribbean, Surinam, and Jamaica, at the time, but it was far from the 70 percent repatriation recorded in Thailand, Malaya, and Melanesia. Distance and the cost of transport were only two of the variables affecting repatriation; politics and concrete forms of integration were also important factors.[86] On Réunion Island, in particular, urban traders and certain colonial officers encouraged *engagés* to return home. The former group argued that once the immigrants had completed their commitment, they then settled in towns and engaged in illegal trade and unfair competition. Colonial administrators were inclined to support this view: the defense of public order required the repatriation of immigrants.[87]

In contrast, several employers and estate owners, especially small ones, were hostile to the resettlement of immigrants in town or their repatriation, and they pushed for the renewal of contracts. Their attitude can be explained by the fact that unlike large estate owners, they faced increasing problems finding the financial resources, networks, and diplomatic support for new recruits. They therefore made use of every legal and illegal means to retain workers at the end of their contracts. In particular, they seized immigrants' wages and *livrets* and added severe penalties whenever possible ("laziness" and failure to accomplish assigned tasks in due time were the most common arguments for applying penalties). Hence, the worker's "debt" was never repaid, and the contract was protracted. Day-labor standards and objectives were gradually raised so that few workers could meet them; they were thus subject to stiff penalties while working eighteen to twenty hours a day instead of the ten mentioned in contracts and official rules.[88] And if all this were not enough, employers did not hesitate to use physical force to make workers renew their commitments.

These practices had been informally denounced since the 1850s, but it was not until the 1860s that they were brought before the courts, under pressure from British diplomats and French central government authorities.[89] Even then, lawsuits often dragged on for years and involved only a very small percentage of workers. At a time when there were several thousand workers on the island, local court records list only a few dozen cases of contractual abuses and illegal wage retention per year. Even in these few cases, employers were merely forced to pay their workers due wages, with no damages or interest, though many immigrants were also granted permission to terminate (illegal) contracts and abuses without paying penalties.[90]

Aside from contracts and wages, corporal punishment and violence were the most common crimes brought before magistrates. In the late 1860s and 1870s, special investigative commissions were set up, most often in response to British diplomatic pressure. Their archives testify to widespread corporal punishment—but also to the resistance by members of the commission to acknowledging its existence. In most cases, abuses were described as "exceptional," though in fact they were commonplace—even in the case of the death of brutalized workers, employers were only sentenced to one month of prison.[91] In first-level courts throughout the 1870s, only between one and seven employers were sentenced each year for inflicting injuries and other violence. At the appeals court level, the figure dipped to one per year, the sole exception being four individuals convicted in 1875, but this was a single lawsuit and the three people receiving sentences were themselves immigrants working as supervisors.[92]

On the other side of things, every year employers sued several hundred workers for breach of contract. Sentences were usually favorable to the plaintiffs, and the workers had to face severe monetary penalties, which often translated into forced labor. Every year, immigrants were also dragged into court for robbery, for which the sentences were very tough—e.g., five years of forced labor for a stolen chicken.[93]

Theft was mentioned in one case in which Chinese coolies were sued after refusing to allow their employer to "safeguard" their savings. The police confirmed that they had found an "unjustified" amount of money in their barracks; the coolies claimed it was their savings, with the employer claiming it belonged to him. The coolies were sentenced to five to seven years of forced labor.[94]

In sum, after the abolition of slavery on Réunion Island, access to justice was extremely limited for immigrants, and their living conditions were incredibly harsh. Legal redress for laborers and their employers

was unequal; the abuses, corruption, or simply partisan attitudes of local officers extremely widespread. Yet *engagés* were not slaves, and the differences became more pronounced over time. This was due to several factors, not least of which was the persistence of the immigrants themselves, who continued to denounce abuses despite the difficulties they faced in doing so and their engaging in passive resistance, as well as absconding and forming groups and pursuing lawsuits through the courts. These approaches met with increasing "benevolence" on the part of colonial elites, in some instances because the latter firmly believed in freedom and/or the virtues of the free market and in other cases, in response to political pressure from Paris and London. Britain was doubtless inclined to protect Indian immigrants on Réunion Island not only for humanitarian reasons, but also to guarantee a labor force for British employers in India and other parts of the empire. Whatever the rationale for Britain's action (likely a combination of both motives), the final outcome was increased legal protection for immigrants. Unfair competition between small and large estate owners and between rural and urban masters on Réunion Island were also contributing factors. Major employers were much more favorable than small ones to a fair labor market insofar as they benefited from economies of scale in the recruitment and exploitation of workers.

A third factor affecting immigrant conditions was the decline of sugar prices on the international market. In the early 1840s, the average producer price of sugar was some 39 English pounds a ton. By the 1870s, it was 22 pounds a ton and, as the glut grew in the 1890s, it fell by 12 pounds, reaching a low 9.60 pounds in 1896.[95] Small producers tried to cope with this trend by imposing increasingly harsh labor conditions, which provoked massive absconding (actually transfer to large estates) and worker resistance. Many *petits blancs* sold their properties and moved to the highlands,[96] where they were joined by immigrants and former slaves who began buying land or more often cultivating it under new forms of renting.[97]

We still have to determine whether the case of France and Réunion Island was an exception. Did the status of *engagés* of color reflect a long, arduous process of abolishing slavery in France compared with Great Britain?[98] And was the inferior status of immigrants in the colonies and of daily laborers and servants in France a broader consequence of the way the revolution of 1789 dealt with labor and rights?

To answer these questions, we need to compare labor conditions in France and Réunion Island with those of working people in Britain and Mauritius.

From Servants to Indentured Immigrants: The Case of Mauritius

The indenture contract, which historians have usually considered a form of forced labor, was not placed in this category until the middle of the nineteenth century. Until that point, ever since the seventeenth century, indenture had been viewed in the strictest sense as an expression of free contract; the individual bound by the contract was just a servant whose travel expenses were paid in advance and who committed himself for a longer period of time than a laborer but for a shorter one than a domestic servant. Like the others, however, he owed all this time to his master, who could sell the indentured servant along with any debts he still owed to someone else. Just as a master in Great Britain had the right to recover fugitives, so too in the colonies: indentured servants who fled were subject to criminal penalties. Without the Master and Servant Acts, indenture would not have been possible. The labor contract was no fiction, but a real tool in the master's hand. This situation was all the more important in that masters in the colonies gradually obtained broader rights than masters in Great Britain. They could exercise corporal punishment, authorize the marriage of indentured servants, etc.[99]

An innovation occurred around the middle of the eighteenth century in the American colonies: the magistrates decided that indentured servants but not Native Americans could be subject to criminal penalties. This was the first colonial innovation in relation to English case law. Indenture contracts nevertheless continued to provide criminal penalties for whites, until the 1830s. For the others—i.e., Indians, Africans, and Chinese—indenture contracts and the corresponding forms of servitude continued to be practiced until the early twentieth century; in other words, several decades after the abolition of slavery.[100] The same situation prevailed in the other English colonies in Central and South America and, above all, in Asia. We can therefore distinguish two periods: the first, from the seventeenth century to the 1830s, concerned some 300,000 European indentured servants. It took place while slavery was still legal and European traders engaged in the slave trade. The indentured servants were intended for tobacco plantations and, to some degree, for manufacturing.

The second phase, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concerned two million indentured servants, mostly Chinese and Indians, but also Africans, Japanese, and immigrants from the Pacific islands. They were employed in sugar plantations and in manufacturing. Unlike the indentured servants of the first phase, these new bonded laborers seldom returned to the world of free labor once their period of commitment ended. Their indenture contracts were therefore renewed.[101]

It is in this context that Mauritius is of particular interest—and for several reasons. After an initial period, during which the island belonged to the Dutch (1638–1710), Mauritius became a French colony like Canada, and then, in 1810, part of the British Empire. The first *engagés* arrived on Île-de-France (the French name for Mauritius) in the 1720s; they were artisans from India and other French colonies.[102] In the late eighteenth century, 40 percent of free men of color in Mauritius were of Indian extraction, whereas they formed only 15 percent of the servile population.[103] The English administration that succeeded the French in 1815 constantly encouraged the arrival of indentured servants from Madagascar and India and increasingly Swahilis from East Africa.[104] There were many intermediaries in India, Mozambique, Madagascar, and West Africa, ranging from local sultans to village chiefs as well as Indian, Arab, and Portuguese middlemen—in addition, of course, to the French and English landowners and traders.[105] The commitment terms were as varied as those we have identified on Réunion Island: in many cases, signatures to contracts were obtained by force or fraud; at the same time, many Indians signed up quite voluntarily.[106]

In Mauritius, between the official abolition of slavery in 1834 and 1910, 450,000 indentured servants arrived, mostly from India but also from Madagascar. Two-thirds remained, and as a result, the Indian population grew steadily—from 35 percent in 1846 to 66 percent in 1871.[107] Numerous observers drew attention to the inhuman living conditions of these immigrants.[108] These figures must also be expanded to include other indentured servants from South Asia and Africa: 30,000 in 1851 and twice that number ten years later. These two forms of immigration to Mauritius led to protests from English landowners and from sectors such as the railway in India and East Africa, complaining of unfair competition on the part of the Mauritians aided by the French, who contributed to this human trafficking both before and after 1848.[109] Female immigration to Mauritius remained secondary, at least initially, and had to be overseen by the state.[110] It did not develop rapidly until the mid-nineteenth century, after the abolition of slavery, due to the arrival of new indentured servants who came with their families and owing to the considerable demand for domestic and urban labor as well more traditional labor on the sugar plantations.

Similar uncertainty surrounds the relationships between former slaves and new indentured servants. Some authors think that the slaves were marginalized in Mauritian society,[111] while others emphasize that their status changed to that of small landowners or shopkeepers and they were therefore much better integrated than Indian coolies after the abolition of slavery.[112]

At the same time, even with equal legal status, differences emerged between former slaves and the new indentured servants. These two groups were sometimes of different ethnic origin: the former slaves were African and in part Indian; the *engagés* were usually Indians, but as time went by, African immigration also increased.[113] Along with ethnic origin, the period of immigration and whether the individual was a former slave were important factors.[114] Newcomers often agreed to work for lower wages than former slaves, causing the latter to protest and thus playing into the hands of the landowners.[115]

As on Réunion Island, the real conditions of workers depended not only on the period in which they came and their ethnic origin, but also on which specific estates they worked on. Small plantation owners were more concerned about fugitive, insubordinate and vagrant indentured servants,[116] whereas large plantation owners, who complained of the excessive cost of slave surveillance, often imposed a liberal ideology on the colonial systems; they found support for the indenture system in humanitarian and anti-slavery associations by underscoring the benefits of free immigration (indenture) as opposed to slavery as well as the purported "famine" in India and Africa. [117]

Despite the efforts of British abolitionists, who were on the lookout for any form of disguised slavery, the conditions of these immigrants remained quite harsh and the law difficult to enforce. Indenture contracts were governed by the provisions of the Master and Servant Acts in the colonies[118] and were greatly inspired by practices in Great Britain. It was undoubtedly extremely challenging for workers to make use of the law; the local magistrates were corrupt and had close ties to the plantation owners. The terms for reimbursing travel expenses were often complex and only vaguely explained at the time of commitment, thus leaving the immigrant indebted for life.[119] This drew protests from the anti-slavery movement in Great Britain as well as from the Indian colonial authorities.[120] The Free Labor Association replied that the landowners had the right to recover the travel expenses they had advanced and that the market price did not allow them to raise the wages of the *engagés* to the level of other wage earners.[121] All the same, the immigrants often complained of ill treatment, withheld wages, and poor food.[122] The estate inspectors, who were introduced specifically to oversee these relationships, confirmed the abuses;[123] however, in spite of the creation of a body of magistrates appointed by London in the early 1840s, the courts seldom ruled in favor of the immigrants.[124] The planters succeeded in convincing the magistrates that the indentured servants had invented "malicious" complaints against them and should be punished for it.[125] The number of cases in which indentured servants brought proceedings against their

masters—something that rarely happened in the 1850s—rose sharply thereafter. Between the 1860s and 1870s, about 10 percent of all indentured servants sued their masters, in virtually every case for nonpayment or insufficient payment of wages, and they won in more than 70 percent of these cases.[126] This result, partly due to pressure from England, would hardly indicate that the "march to equality" was underway. In subsequent years the percentage of contracts denounced by coolies declined first by 5 percent overall (at end of the 1870s) and later dropped to a mere 0.3 percent between 1895 and 1899, with the success rate falling to less than 40 percent.[127] This can be explained by the fact that, after the results of the 1860s and thanks to a new law on labor contracts adopted in 1867, more and more contracts were oral and it was therefore more difficult for the coolies to produce any proof that would hold up in court. Above all, the coolies' contracts were no longer drawn up with the plantation owners but instead with Indian middlemen, which no doubt helped to quash many conflicts. Retention of coolies increased, as both the result and source of this process, with the percentage of contract renewals rising from 40 percent in 1861 to more than 70 percent twenty years later.[128]

The law was largely enforced when immigrants were sued. Any unjustified absence was subject to criminal prosecution.[129] In particular, the law against vagrancy took on particular importance in Mauritius; several restrictive laws were adopted between the abolition of slavery and the 1870s.[130] Their adoption testifies to the same concerns that prompted laws limiting the mobility of workers and peasants in the rest of the British Empire; but as we have seen, in the French Empire as well, considerations of public order (monitoring movements, knowing the exact location of the immigrants and amount of their wages) converged with those involving competition among employers. Small landowners complained of runaway *engagés*, a problem that also stemmed from lack of cooperation on the part of large landowners.[131] Between 1860 and 1870, landowners and employers filed some 70,000 complaints against Indian immigrants; in 80 percent of the cases they pertained to desertion or illegal absence.[132] The other landowners refused to collaborate, so these complaints often came to nothing, which is why many of them preferred to resort to newcomers.[133]

In summary, the status of bonded laborers, indentured servants, and others was modeled on the status of apprentices and servants in Great Britain. The gap separating servant and master was not as great as the one between indentured servants and their masters, which continued to grow during the nineteenth century. In Mauritius, 14,000 indentured and domestic servants were prosecuted each year in the 1860s; during the same period in Great Britain, proceedings were brought against 9,700

servants per year for breach of contract and almost always resulted in convictions. By contrast, masters were seldom indicted and even more rarely convicted for breach of contract, ill treatment, or nonpayment of wages. At the same time, even though the real conditions of indentured servants were not necessarily better than those of the slaves who preceded them, the rights they enjoyed and the fact that their status was not hereditary were essential differences that were to play an increasingly important role in the twentieth century.

Toward a New World?

Instead of a history made up of slaves, bonded people, and free wage earners—or analogously, consisting of an old regime and capitalism, with a triumphant passage from one to the other—our findings suggest something altogether different. The French Revolution suppressed lifelong domestic bondage, while the nineteenth century progressively abolished slavery in the British colonies first, and then in the French colonies. Still, this process did not accompany the rise of a free labor market between legally equal actors. In Britain, France, and their colonies, workers and indentured immigrants were not disguised slaves (as much literature of the nineteenth century argued),[134] but they did have an inferior legal status and far fewer rights than their masters. From this perspective, colonies were territories not only of slavery but, above all, of forms of bondage inspired by status inequalities entrenched in Europe. Status inequalities in France and Britain served as the model for those in the colonies, but the *engagés*, bonded laborers, domestic servants, and wage earners were expressions of free contract. While relying on older institutions and practices, new institutions and forms of labor were introduced in the seventeenth century: indenture contracts, contractual forms of domestic service, apprenticeship, and *engagement* in the colonies. Indeed, territorial and colonial expansion, along with the growth of agriculture and trade, followed by proto-industrial and later industrial development, gave rise to a complex overall dynamic. Increasingly large population shifts took place within empires, between one empire and the other, and between city and country. It is therefore important to draw a distinction between living conditions and legal rights (as well as the possibility of their exercise). In the areas studied as a whole, there were status differences between domestic servants and property owners; between laborers and their employers; between *engagés* and indentured laborers; and between servants and apprentices and their masters. These differences in status were not only produced by the colonies; they existed in Europe as well and were hardly an expression of the Old Regime. On the contrary, such status differences

persisted through supposed political and economic revolutions. The existence of certain rights accorded the *engagés* (with a notable difference between white and non-European *engagés*) is important, because it allows us to distinguish the figures of ideal cases, such as former slaves or North American chattel slavery, from free wage earners. An *engagé* was not a slave—he was subject to forms of bondage that were not formally or necessarily hereditary, even though the debts from such bondage were quite frequently passed on to the descendants. Unlike traditional slave status, however, the legal condition of *engagé* was not automatically transferred to his or her descendants, and this made all the difference in the evolution of post-slavery forms of labor in the twentieth century.

This observation means that we should revise our view of the comparative evolution of economic and legal labor systems. From an economic standpoint, forced labor has traditionally been associated with preindustrial economies and the colonies. The history we have just recounted calls these clear-cut divisions into question. It would be a mistake to associate forced labor and slavery in the colonies with the plantation economy and to conclude that emigration prior to plantations consisted in colonization by white settlers and that later on, with the advent of mechanized labor on the plantations, recourse to slavery no longer made sense. We have seen instead that the conditions accompanying the bondage of whites in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century were quite harsh and did not improve until the arrival of *engagés* and slaves of color (and even then, with notable exceptions such as child vagrants). Prior to this shift, the formal abolition of slavery was above all the result of a political movement and only partially related to technological changes on the plantations, which remained labor intensive and resorted to *engagés* whose living conditions (but not their status) closely resembled those of slaves.

Local conditions played an important role. On Réunion Island, indentured immigrants met with constant difficulties in availing themselves of the law. When they were successful, it was usually due to British and French political intervention and depended on unfair competition between employers. At the same time, the crisis in the sugar market, followed by successful competition from Mauritius, lack of capital, and competition from sugar beets in northern France finally swept away most of the small planters and small units. Former indentured immigrants benefited in part from this trend and gained access to marginal land. "Small whites" and former indentured laborers shared their social inferiority and distrusted each other.

In Mauritius, former indentured immigrants enjoyed greater social mobility, more favorable economic trends, and political support among British and colonial elites. Paradoxically, labor protection arrived later

in Britain than in France, yet the defense of immigrant rights improved sooner on Mauritius than on Réunion Island. The anti-bondage movement in the British colonies was much more closely allied with the pro-worker movement in Britain than its counterpart in the French colonies was to greater worker protections in France.

The evolution that we have presented here did not necessarily correspond to a passage from constraint to freedom, which is a rather Eurocentric view and should therefore be reexamined. In particular, the official abolition of slavery in the French colonies was important, if only so as to eliminate any form of dominance through status or heredity. This change was accompanied by the introduction of extremely restrictive forms of contracts and status for immigrants. The forms of domestic service, criminal penalties, and rules for the colonies were reinforced at the very moment when labor law in Europe was becoming more favorable to wage earners. But how did this happen?

Notes

A version of this chapter has been published under the title: "Local Bondage in Global Economies: Servants, Wage-Earners and Indentured Migrants in Nineteenth-Century France, Britain, and the Mascarene Islands," *Modern Asian Studies*, 47,4 (2013): 1218–51. I acknowledge my gratitude to Cambridge Journals and Cambridge University Press.

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88. CAOM FM SG/Reu c 379 d 3211.
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