

'Archaeology of Indenture'; Mauritius is Setting up a New Avenue of Archaeological Research



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Submission: September 12, 2018; **Published:** July 15, 2019

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Abstract

For nearly 20 years now, though with a toddler pace, Mauritius has seen the introduction of systematic archaeological studies as one of the important means of studying the history of the island. Different types of sites have been surveyed and excavated around the island including fortifications, temporary settlements, industrial vestiges and others. Furthermore, archaeological research in Mauritius is a contribution to the global perspective of archaeological investigation as well as to the understanding of World's history and dynamics marked by phenomena like Colonialism, Slavery and Indenture and even environmental change due to anthropogenic impact. Mauritius has reached a point when defining the different disciplines within the field of archaeology has become very important. This paper is one of the attempts to look at this question and to give a direction to an area of study. It discusses the concept of 'Archaeology of Indenture', a disputed term among archaeologists working on the island, for it is a new term being coined and up to now confined to this country. This paper was presented in the international seminar on Indenture held on 28-29 September 2017 in Mauritius.

Keywords: Mauritius; Colonialism; Slavery; Indenture; Archaeology

Introduction

The end of 20th century and advent of 21st century has seen the introduction and acceptance of new methodologies to study the history of Mauritius and Archaeology is one of them.

Brief History of Archaeological Research in Mauritius

Figure 1 the first site where archaeological investigation was undertaken in the country was at Fort Frederik Hendrik, a site located in the South Eastern Coast of the island. It was surveyed in 1895 by L.H. de Forbille who presented a report on the ruins to the

Comité des Souvenirs Historiques. Nearly 100 years later, in 1972 the Foundation for Cultural History of the Dutch Overseas (CNO) led by Paul Van Vliet undertook a survey of the same site and a test trench was excavated [1]. However, these were standalone, remote investigations which remained unpublished. After that instance, there was no mention of Archaeology at all. As in many parts of the world, Archaeology was not easily accepted by the classical historians in Mauritius as well; it was for long not considered an appropriate method to study the history of the country by many historians as it consists of the recent history of about 300 years, a period rich in archival documents.

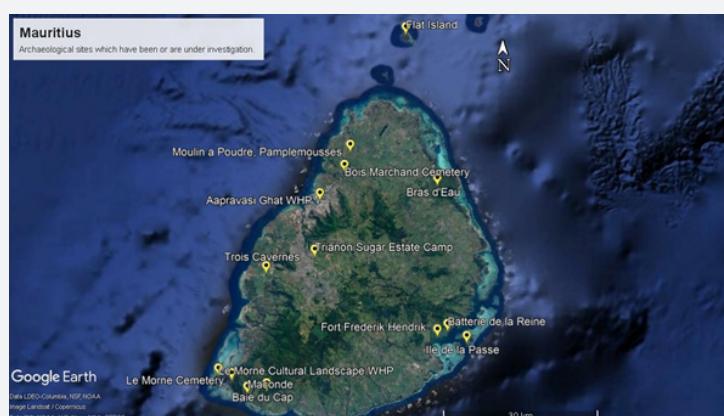


Figure 1: Map of Mauritius with location of Archaeological Sites which have been investigated or are under investigation.

Archaeology reappeared in the country through the archaeological investigation project of the same site in 1997 by a Dutch team led by the archaeologist Peter Flore. The six seasons of archaeological field work were spread over six years and were undertaken in collaboration with the Mauritius Museum Council [1]. This was indeed the first systematic and well documented archaeological project with reports and publications which sow

the seed of Historical Archaeology in Mauritius. Fort Frederik Hendrik is a fortification and settlement site related to the first occupation of the island that is by the Dutch. The same site was later occupied by the French who built upon the remains from the Dutch occupation. Archaeological studies revealed the remains of the fortification along with other vestiges like the church, the prison, the bakery and associated features [1] (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Fort Frederik Hendrik.

Another fortification site investigated around the same period is that of Ile de La Passe, an islet on the southeastern coast of Mauritius. Located on the sea pass to enter the island, Ile de la Passe, indeed accommodated an important fortification built by the French and later reinforced and used by the British as well. The islet was used to control access to the mainland from the

eastern part and played an important role in the Napoleonic War, 'Combat de Grand Port' of 1810. The archaeological project was led by the British archaeologist Geoffrey Summers and the architect Françoise Summers. Detailed documentation of all the features and structures were undertaken followed by excavations [2] (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Ile de La Passe.

Simultaneously was the Maroon Archaeological project undertaken by University of Mauritius in the year 2002-2004; a project commissioned by the National Heritage Fund and led by the historian Vijaya Teelock and the Indian archaeologist Amitava Chowdhury, then assistant professor at the university. This project was an initiation to archaeological investigation into

sites related to slavery. Reconnaissance survey was undertaken on several sites while in depth archaeological investigation including excavations were undertaken on 3 sites namely (i) Trois Cavernes, an underground lava tunnel forming 3 consecutive caves; (ii) Le Morne Brabant a mountain with several rock shelters and (iii) Baie du Cap consisting a karst cave in the basaltic formation [3].

Evidence of temporary habitation by fugitive/ maroon slaves has been documented on those sites. This project did not only reinforce archaeology as a discipline in the country but also brought new understanding of slavery and maroon age on the island and in the

world. Based on the findings of the project, was even presented the nomination dossier in 2005 for Le Morne Cultural Landscape to be listed World Heritage property in 2008 [3] (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Le Morne Brabant Cultural Landscape World Heritage Property.



Figure 5: Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Property.

Another important archaeological endeavor within the same time period was at the Aapravasi Ghat, a site related to indenture immigration and located in the capital city of Port Louis. The project was undertaken under the patronage of the Ministry of Arts and Culture of the republic. Archaeological investigation on the site started in the year 2000 with a non-intrusive survey and culminated with excavations in 2003-2005 and 2010-11 [4]. Aapravasi Ghat was an immigration depot of nearly half a million of immigrants who arrived on the island as indenture laborer's, after the abolition of slavery. The site was used to shelter the immigrants on their arrival for about 48 hours and all administrative procedures were undertaken on the site before being sent to work in sugar estates or other working places. The investigation at the Aapravasi Ghat included intensive archival works along with site documentation and excavations exposing major part of the structures and features of what are visible to

visitors today. The findings on the site supported the nomination dossier submitted in 2004 and the site got nominated as UNESCO World Heritage in 2006 [4] (Figure 5).

Since then several archaeological projects were initiated including Archaeological Investigation at Makak, a village related to slavery [5,6]; A Preliminary Archaeological Study at Batterie de la Reine, a French fortification site; Architectural and Archaeological Survey of Flat Island, an islet used as a quarantine station for indenture arrivals by the British [7,8]; Excavation at Trianon Sugar Estate Camp, a settlement of indenture laborer's attached to a plantation [8]; Excavation at Le Morne Slave Cemetery and Cemetery of Bois Marchand whereby the data from the human skeletons are being studied along with DNA analysis [8]; Excavation of Maconde rock shelters to know more about the temporary settlement of the maroons [9]; Archaeological Investigation of Bras d'Eau, a plantation site [10] and recently the

Study of Moulin à Poudre, a slave and industrial site related to the production of gun powder in the French colony [11,12] (Figure 6).

Being in the center of the Indian Ocean, one of the key islands where trade ships would refuge for provision of fresh supplies and also used as a strategic point to control movements in the Indian Ocean during the colonial period, the waters around Mauritius have preserved a large number of wrecks: wrecks like Le Magicienne, Le Syrius and Le Coureur which have been

investigated by archaeologists in collaboration with the Mauritius Museum Council [13]. As highlighted above through the various archaeological projects, archaeological sites in Mauritius are diverse including fortifications, settlements, plantations, factories and even wrecks. The sites moreover range from the Dutch, French and British period of colonization widely influenced by slavery and indenture, thus giving rise to specialized fields of Archaeology.



Figure 6: Moulin à Poudre, Pamplemousses.

The term 'Archaeology of Indenture'

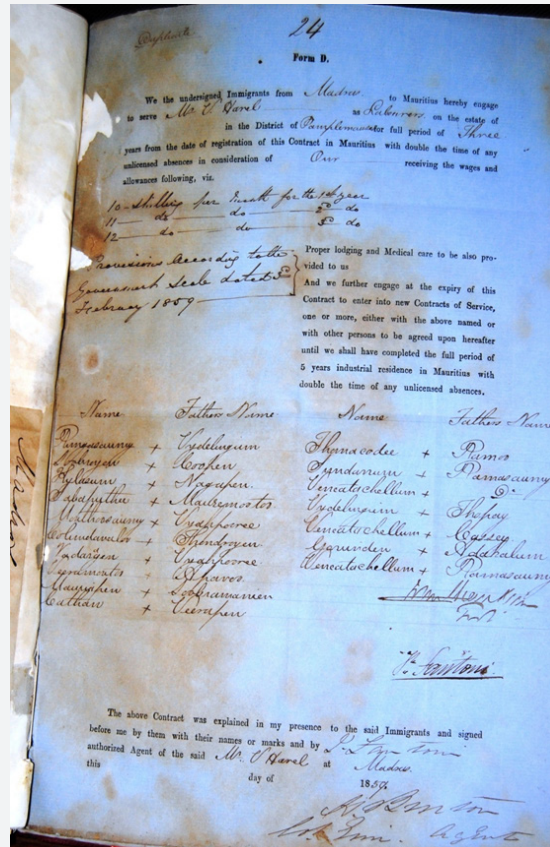


Figure 7: An example of Indenture Labour Contract in 1859. Source: Mauritius National Archives.

'Indenture', a form a forced labor, was adopted after the abolition of slavery in many colonies in the 19th Century. Mauritius has been the first country where the system was experimented by the British Empire in 1834 and it was called the 'Great Experiment'.

Its successful implementation on the island led to adoption of this system in many colonies around the World which continued for a century (Figures 7& 8).

Boordoo Lirdar.	X	Lungone	X
Lalaram Male.	X	Callachand.	X
Bhoodhoo.	X	Bhalak.	X
Champak.	X	Jisara Bhoodhoo.	X
Bhunchoo.	X	Sibichurn	X
Chooneram.	X	Chota Boodhoo.	X
Juttoo.	X	Scenram.	X
Chota Bhoodhoo.	X	Buddhram	X
Bachoo.	X	Muggroo	X
Onjoon	X	Harrah	X
Rammohun.	X	Chaylun	X
Lookram	X	Choolungo.	X
Dhicram.	X	Bhuggrooth.	X
Ghaupar.	X	Gungaram	X
Bhawan	X	Chota Muggroo	X
Chota Choonulall.	X	Chota Dhicram	X
Nigna	X	Lookkun	X
Auklahy.	X	Bhamarah	X

Figure 8: A list of immigrants to be engaged as indenture labourers in 1834

Among all the different fields of study to approach the history of Mauritius, was coined the term 'Archaeology of Indenture' which indeed form a field of specialization in itself. It is intrinsic to try to trace down the history and context of this term; when did it cropped up and how did it start to be used. This term has indeed not been pronounced despite initiation of the archaeological investigation of Aapravasi Ghat site in 2000, one of the most important indenture immigration sites in the world. Being part of the team for the archaeological investigation of this site and for the preparation of the nomination dossier of Aapravasi Ghat, I remember discussing the possibility of this term in 2003-2004 but only in friendly discussions, never taken seriously and of course the term is not used in any publication, despite publication on the history and archaeology of the site.

In the chapter, The Potential of Archaeology for the Study of Mauritian Indenture History and Heritage in the publication *Angaje - The impact of Indenture Volume II*, the historian Vijayalakshmi Teelock writes "The archaeology of Indenture or immigration" [14]. It is for the first time that this term gets published in an official, formal and widespread publication. However, with an ambiguity of what term suits best this topic of research and again she is not sure of whether this discipline should be called Archaeology of Indenture. Since, then this term is used in the research discourse in the country, often to discuss if the term makes sense or not. Personally, feeling the term makes sense as it is an area being dealt with every day in the world of research in Mauritius, as it is for the Archaeology of Slavery, I use the term in my presentations and reports on Aapravasi Ghat. But, with no determination as we cannot think of a term being coined in Mauritius for the field of

research in Archaeology. This privilege has by far been reserved to the respected and experienced scholars in Archaeology often of the Western World.

Further, not all archaeologists and researchers working in Mauritius agree with this term as well. Trying to put an end to this confusion other archaeologists were interviewed on the topic. The senior most archaeologists here, Geoffrey Summers states "There is no Archaeology of Indenture, what we have here is Colonial Archaeology, Plantation Archaeology ..." (Interview with G. Summers in 2016). I wondered 'Why Plantation Archaeology but not Archaeology of Indenture'. Plantation Archaeology is a well-established field in the Caribbean and even in the Americas. Mauritius does have a big potential for Plantation Archaeology with plantations especially sugar plantations and the entire social and economic dynamics around that form a major part of the Mauritian history. Sites like the sugar estates and the camps scattered around the island can be grouped within the category of Plantation Archaeology, however, where to place sites like Aapravasi Ghat, Vagrant Depot and others of that period but with no plantations.

Krish Seetah, another archaeologist from Stanford, often working in Mauritius has been arguing the same as G. Summers until 2015 when he publishes *The Archaeology of Mauritius* and he writes "Mauritian archaeology could have an impact on the development of global archaeological practice more generally: the archaeology of indenture" [8]. George Abungu, archaeologist and heritage expert from Kenya and running some heritage projects in Mauritius explains "the broader context is colonial for it is the colonial history but yes there is an Archaeology of Indenture in the same way as there is an Archaeology of Slavery" and he continues by saying "Colonial Archaeology has existed much before Archaeology of Slavery and Archaeology of Indenture as a discipline but it does not mean they are not there" (Interview with G. Abungu in 2017)

Well, it is time to look at things from a different perspective, from the perspectives of the slaves and the indenture as highlighted by the historian Amit Mishra in his key note address for the International Indenture Seminar in September 2017; "To look at the other side of the story", from the perspective of the community of the descendants of those populations and their heritage. The increase focus on community in the last few years [15] in a way demands also the right term in relation to the study related to that community. As put forward by Renfrew ".... archaeology is an exciting quest – the quest for knowledge about ourselves and about our past.... The materials the archaeologists find does not tell us directly what to think.....It is we today who have to make sense of these things" [16]. Following this line of thoughts, it is high time to look at the archaeological studies from the perspectives of those populations; the enslaved and the indentured and later their descendants. It is true that colonialism gave rise to these systems and framed the lives of people within the system but the populations were the slaves and the indenture, so why not calling

it the Archaeology of Slavery and Archaeology of Indenture when certainly the settlements, the lives and the culture of those people are being studied. Is it not time to use of the right term to study the people and not again using a term which give the impression of being colonized again, now for academic purpose?

This approach can be qualified as praxis or post processual one where the actor or people under study who has shaped the social experience and who are owners of the material culture become the central focus by already using the term relating them; rather than looking at them from the elite system of the time; same applies for Archaeology of Slavery or Archaeology of Indenture or any other form of human society where the population is the focus. Though at the same time it can be argued that slavery and indenture was also imposed by that an elite group. Nevertheless, as stressed in the book *Archaeology*, during the past three decades there has been a major realization that archaeology has much to contribute in recent historical periods [16]. It led to the development of specialized field like Colonial Archaeology. Archaeology of the recent past that is historical periods is giving new insight in the field of archaeology and in the understanding of our recent past. It unveils the importance of disciplines that not only covers the geography and the chronology but also ideology, whereby the terms of Archaeology of Slavery and Archaeology of Indenture.

Scope for Archaeology of Indenture

Mauritius is up to now the only country where indentured sites are being investigated archaeologically. The role played by Mauritius in the Indenture Diaspora gained international recognition in 2006 with the inscription of Aapravasi Ghat, an immigration depot of the 19th century, on the UNESCO World Heritage Property list [4]. Along, other indenture sites have been surveyed and are being studied including Flat Island, a quarantine station [8]; Trianon, a sugar estate camp [8]; Mon Desert Mon Tresor, a sugar estate camp [17]; Bras d'Eau, another sugar estate [10] among others. An overall archaeological mapping of Mauritius has estimated more than 100 sites associated with Indenture (Figures 9 & 10).

As for now Archaeology of Indenture is confined to Mauritius. However, this discipline is not to be restricted to Mauritius. It includes all the countries which has witnessed indenture as a major part of their history. Indenture has shown a flow of more than 2.2 million people mostly from India to at least 26 countries around the world [18]. It formed the Diaspora of Indenture population and a systematic settlement pattern in the various countries where these people landed. Hence, Archaeology of Indenture can be developed as a global discipline which can add up in our understanding of the history of the indentured people as well as the system that dominated the world in the 19th century. It can be studied and compared. If the archaeology of one geographical space with its material culture, for instance Egypt, can give rise to specialized field of study like Egyptology or Egyptian Archaeology;

then why not an international phenomenon like indenture which shaped the lives of millions of people and impacted on the

landscape and culture of so many countries around the world [19-21].



Figure 9: A aerial view of Flat Island.



Figure 10: Remains of Labourers' quarters at Trianon Sugar Camp.

Other countries which were heavily shaped by Indenture system and where the heritage can be experienced are Trinidad and Tobago, Surinam, Guyana, Jamaica, Fiji Islands, Guadeloupe and Reunion among others. Guyana, with the biggest number of indentured populations after Mauritius; according to historical sources Indentured laborers landed all along the Berbice River in Guyana, but no archaeological studies undertaken in those regions yet and neither within the settlements of indentured population. Trinidad is the third most important country in the world for the indenture period after Mauritius and Guyana, in terms of numbers. There, indenture started in 1845 and some 200 000 Indians were brought as well as a large number of Chinese to work mostly on sugar and coconut plantations. Remains of those settlements still exist in ruins [22-24]. Further, in Trinidad itself Nelson Island and other small islets nearby were used as the

landing place for the indentured population: these sites are yet to be studied. In Jamaica the landing place of the immigrants arriving on the island as from 1840s is located in the coast of Old Harbor. This area is now quite abandoned. No remains or ruins are visible on ground, a reason more for archaeological investigation. Along with landing places, depots, quarantine stations and settlement camps there are also the religious and ritualistic places like the shrines in Mauritius and in Guadeloupe and others to mention but a few (Figures 11 & 12).

The scope for Archaeology of Indenture is immense; spread across the globe with different geographical, environmental and political contexts, there are different types of sites. Indenture gave rise to new system, new pattern, new settlement and new material culture; though it is clear that there has been site

of continuity from slavery to indenture, as in Mauritius. The cultural backgrounds and beliefs from countries of origin like Madagascar, India, China and South East Asian countries forged the environment with creation of spaces having traces of different cultures influenced by each other. The material remains include

types barracks or huts built with knowledge of the country of origins, reflected in the style and architecture adapted to local raw materials; artefacts introduced with the movement of people or those produced locally with the knowhow from the roots.



Figure 11: Nelson Island in Trinidad.



Figure 12: Landing place in Jamaica.

It is true that this part of history has for long been avoided or forgotten in many of these countries. However, since the last two decades there is a revival for the awareness of the past and importance of the heritage, resulting in the foundation of commemorative monuments in the different countries to commemorate the arrival of the indenture population or abolition of the system. This growing awareness is without a doubt setting the base for a discipline like Archaeology of Indenture. Yes, it is affirmative, there is an Archaeology of Indenture for the scope is immense. However, what we have to be conscious and

cautious about is that Archaeology of Indenture or archaeology in general in these geographical spaces is often not linear. Sites are greatly mixed, with often no cultural gaps. There is a continuity of the different periods, continuity with the events of slavery and indenture giving rise to both, Archaeology of Slavery and Archaeology of Indenture often on the same sites. It is clear for Mauritius that sites give no straight story line and consist of a mixture: most often the sites are occupied by the different populations, in different historical period and with no cultural gap.

The mixing of people with populations from different parts of the world, with different cultures and their adaptations in the environmental and cultural context; further increase the complexities and challenges of understanding the history, the culture and the people themselves through their material remains. The beauty of undertaking archaeological research in such areas and within that time period; is this complexity of continuity along with discontinuity; and this represents a major challenge. Indeed, Archaeology of Indenture has a large potential in Mauritius and worldwide with all its complexities. Today there is Diaspora as a result of Indenture meaning there is also the heritage of the Indenture Diaspora including archaeological sites. Hence, the use of Indentured Diaspora Community and Heritage and Archaeology of Indenture are terms that will be more and more used to talk relate to this population.

It is also important to note that even the methodology for Archaeology of Indenture cannot be confined to the traditional archaeological approach. It has to be a combination of different methodologies from archival research, anthropology, oral history, ethnography, heritage and other possible fields to complement archaeological approach so as to understand and reconstruct to its best the history and lives of indentured people of this recent past. As an ending note an Interview of Mahendra Chaudhry, the general secretary of the National Farmers Union in Fiji, on Girit Divas Celebration in 2004 can be quoted. The latter was asked by a journalist: "Mauritius also had Indian indentured laborer's but the country today is in a totally opposite state than Fiji. Where do you think Fiji or the people here went wrong? He answers: "Yes, but the situation there is completely different. The leaders of Mauritius have been able to translate their visions into reality..... We have a lot to learn from them." Adding to this statement it can be said that even scholars in Mauritius have been able to do so: the Archaeological Investigation of Aapravasi Ghat was a vision of Vijaya Teelock and Amitava chowdhury which was achieved.

The interview continues further when he is asked "What are some of the major issues that will confront Indians in Fiji over the next 10 years? And are they mostly political? And he replies "These are manifold and include landlessness, unemployment, racial discrimination, and non-recognition of the role they have played and continue to play in Fiji's development....Yes, most of these are political in nature and originate from bad governance and racial prejudice.....However, these issues can be effectively addressed and overcome if we, as a people, can learn to live by universal human values."

I would here reinforce the statement by including "by valuing the Heritage as well". With the above I believe Mauritius has indeed set up the foundation stone for Archaeology of Indenture.

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DOI: [10.19080/GJAA.2019.10.555783](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJAA.2019.10.555783)

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