

ABSTRACT

"By the Sweat of Their Brow": A Study of Free and Unfree Labourers in the Chagos Archipelago, c.1783-1880

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The main objective of this conference paper is to carry out an in-depth micro-study of free and unfree labourers in the Chagos archipelago between the 1780s and 1880s. It will focus on the slaves/apprentices, former slaves/apprentices and their descendants on Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos, Six Islands, Trois Frères, and Salomon Islands which were also known as the Oil Islands. One of its primary objectives is to compare and contrast some of the main islands of the Chagos Archipelago in order to show that some of them were unique. This study will be divided into three parts: (1) French Period (1783 and 1810), (2) the Early British Period (1811-1839), (3) and the Post-Emancipation Era (1840-1880).

The first part shows that, during the 1780s and the first decade of the 1800s, the first land concessions were given to four Franco-Mauritian slaveowners and it discusses the arrival of the first slaves from Mauritius to work on the coconut plantations or establishments in the Chagos Archipelago. It also mentions the coming of the first lepers to Diego Garcia. The second part takes an in-depth look at the genesis of 'island communities' in the Chagos Archipelago and the emergence of a heterogeneous slave/apprentice population between the 1810s and 1830s. It focuses on the demography of the slave population, the birth of slaves in the archipelago, the rise of matrifocal slave/apprentice families as well as the living and working conditions of the unfree labourers. This section of the study will show how new slaves and lepers were brought to the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius during the 1820s and the brief sojourn of three slave ships in Diego Garcia, in 1826 and 1827, while en route to Reunion Island. It will also discuss the work of Mr. Le Camus, the British Government Agent between 1824 and 1829, who was able to establish firm control over the slaves, lepers, and establishment managers in Diego Garcia and the other islands of the Archipelago. This section will conclude with a detailed account of the visit of Special Magistrate Charles Anderson to the Dependencies, including the Chagos Archipelago, in 1838 in order to assess the working and living conditions of the apprentices.

The third and last part looks at the development of these island communities and its demography during the post-emancipation era and the impact of free labour on the Chagos. It takes an in-depth look at the lives, experience as well as the working and living conditions of the islanders as free labourers. It also covers the issue of punishments and cruel treatment which the free workers had to endure at the hands of the plantation/establishment managers. The last section of this study focuses on the escape attempts by some of these labourers from the Chagos Archipelago between the 1850s and 1870s. It will examine the escape by three Indian labourers in 1856 as well as the murder of a Franco-Mauritian plantation manager in Six Islands by four Indian labourers who were put on trial in Mauritius in 1859. It will describe how this specific incident led to the setting up of a government commission of inquiry which investigated the living and working conditions of the free labourers in the Dependencies, while focusing mostly on the Chagos. This section also discusses the visits by the different Stipendiary Magistrates for the Dependencies during the 1860s and 1870s.