

Indentured Labour in European Colonies during the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

The gradual abolition of the slave trade and slavery in European colonies led authorities to call on foreign labourers in Asia and Africa to meet manpower needs in the colonies. Consequently, by way of a system of indenture, many millions of workers emigrated to European colonies in the Americas, the Pacific, or the Indian Ocean. In exchange for the promise of a better life, they signed an indenture contract the duration of which varied according to the worker's origin and the host colony. Often compared to the slave trade, this system, the abuses of which were visible, gradually disappeared on the eve of World War One.



Coolies newly arrived in Trinidad, 1897

A System that Took Over From Slavery

The gradual abolition of the slave trade and slavery in European colonies was the source of new migrations of labourers throughout the world, notably during the second half of the nineteenth century. In order to meet the needs of a labour-intensive plantation economy or to build the central infrastructure of their colonies, the Europeans—for the most part the English, French, Portuguese, and the Dutch—called on free foreign labourers. This was known as the indenture system (which means “contract”), or the coolie trade if the indentured labourers were from Asia (coolie being derived from the Tamil word for salary).

These new flows of indentured manpower were dictated by the colonial expansion of Europe, as well as by the difficult socio-economic conditions in the countries where the indentured labourers came from, which acted as a powerful factor for departure. The workers, the majority of whom were men, were directly recruited by the colonial

administration or by immigration agents. For example, Javanese, Japanese, Tonkinese, Africans, Madagascans and especially Chinese and Indians left their native land to go and work, in exchange for a salary, in the colonies of the Americas and the Indian Ocean, or in the territory recently conquered by the imperial powers in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Between 1834 and 1920, approximately 1,500,000 indentured labourers, of whom 85% were from India, were sent to British colonies, one third to Mauritius, one third to the British West Indies, and the rest to Natal. Tens of thousands of Indian workers emigrated to the French colonies of La Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana. 750,000 Chinese left for Malaysia, Sumatra, Cuba, the British West Indies, or La Réunion. This is not to mention the tens of thousands of African workers who went to the West Indies, French Guiana, La Réunion, Mauritius or Natal. Those who went to the Indian Ocean came from Mozambique or Zanzibar, and those who went to the Atlantic region were from the Congo and Senegal. Experiments were also made with European workers (Maltese, Irish, French), but without success.

A Slave Trade in Disguise?

In exchange for the promise of a better life, these workers signed an indenture contract that bound them to the other party. The duration varied according to the origin and the host colony, and could be as long as ten years, which was notably the case for Africans indentured in the French colonies of the Indian Ocean. The contract also specified the working conditions, salary, and method of repatriation. Indian immigration was regulated and supervised by British authorities, notably as part of the Anglo-French Treaty of Commerce of 1860. This agreement authorized the French to take on board indentured labourers who were subjects of Her Majesty the Queen, either in French ports or in English ports in India, while respecting strict regulations, notably with regard to transportation. These labourers were recruited from a population of free men who were trying to change their fortunes. Despite the abuses of recruiters, the Anglo-French Treaty provided Indians with protection and guarantees. On the contrary, African indentureship in the Indian Ocean amounted to a genuine slave trade in disguise. The so-called indentured labourers from the West Coast of Africa were captured in their villages, reduced to slavery, and sold to French and British traders. Those who were recruited on the coasts of Madagascar or the Comoro Islands were also slaves who were originally from Mozambique or areas subject to the control of the Sultan of Muscat, and were the victims of a horrendous trafficking through coastal navigation in the Mozambique Channel. The French possessions of Madagascar and the Comoros both received and dispatched labour, which was in constant transit. In 1856, under pressure from planters, Napoleon III authorized for France the system known as “*rachat préalable*” [prior redemption] of slaves, in order to increase opportunities for recruiting indentured labourers. The purchase process was thus made official, and was coupled with a subsequent liberation that was supposed to guarantee the morality and legality of the operations.

The status of indentured labourers was no more enviable once they arrived in the host colony. Uprooted, weakened, and poorly thought of, they were doomed to a servitude that in certain respects likened their status to that of slaves. The British historian Hugh Tinker incidentally compared indentured labour to a new form of slavery. The working conditions of Chinese indentured labourers in Cuba, or African indentured labourers in La Réunion, were particularly difficult. Often decried by the British press, the recruitment of indentured labourers was stained by deadly scandals, notably in the Indian Ocean. The considerable difference should nevertheless not be denied, as indentured labourers were legally free in the host colony, and the small salary they received set them apart from slaves.

A Diplomatic Issue Between the Major European Powers

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the question of indentured manpower was at the heart of European diplomatic relations, notably French-British and French-Portuguese relations. The British accused the French of taking coolies on board without their consent and enlisting them by force, and the Anti-Slavery Society accused France of continuing the slave trade in the Indian Ocean. Encouraged by England, Portugal denounced France's responsibility in Africa's internal wars, and opposed the departure of African workers from Mozambique until 1887. The question of the *rachat préalable* was the subject of new disputes, and agitated the British press and philanthropists, who heaped insults on France. Nevertheless, the philanthropic impulses of the British did not carry much credibility, as the British resorted more or less to the same methods to supply their colonies with *corvée* manpower. In reality, the powers were engaged in genuine competition for recruiting manpower.

A Major Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact on European Colonial Societies

A large number of these workers were ultimately not repatriated to their country of origin as provided for in their contract, and settled in the colony or nearby colonies at the end of their indenture. This was particularly true for captured African indentured labourers who no longer had ties in their country of origin, and who did not enjoy the protection of a major power. For more than a century, these transfers of indentured labourers had a major impact on the economic development of colonial societies. More broadly, these migrations contributed to the populating—as well as the identity and cultural construction—of these societies. These workers from elsewhere brought their beliefs, language, forms of music and dance, and culinary practices. For instance, Mauritius, Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and La Réunion abound with multi-coloured Tamil temples, testimony to the heritage of Indian indentured labourers. In the face of difficulties connected to recruitment, the immigration of indentured labourers gradually declined on the eve of the First World War, and completely disappeared in the middle of the twentieth century in favour of other more spontaneous migratory movements.

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