
Conclusion

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Although the two islands, Zanzibar and Mauritius, are of similar size and population, and both are located within the western Indian Ocean, they went through their experience of slavery and transition which were influenced by both the global hegemony of the capitalist mode of production under which both of them had developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they were also affected by the inherent and varying cultural milieux of the two islands which imprinted their differences. Zanzibar, which is only a few miles from the East African coast, was settled by humans almost thirty centuries ago, had been inducted into the Indian Ocean commercial system at least two millennia ago, and had been part of the Muslim world for at least a millennium. Mauritius, on the other hand, is in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and was not settled by humans until its discovery by the Europeans in the seventeenth century, bringing with them their European and Christian traditions. Despite these initial differences, both these islands developed their dependent slave modes of production from the eighteenth century when they came under the sway of capitalism and European colonialism which set the tone for their histories without erasing their cultural differences in some aspects of their slavery and emancipation.

Slavery was not a new phenomenon for Zanzibar, but that concept is a very broad one covering a whole range of servile relations that cannot be equated to the better known slavery in the Americas that had developed at a particular juncture with the rise of capitalism as a world system. The two islands of Lanjuya (Unguja) and Qanbalu (Pemba?) are mentioned by the Arab literati Al-Jahiz in the tenth century as having been enmeshed in the slave trade that supplied slaves to southern Iraq where a plantation economy based on slave labour had developed under a predominant tributary mode of production. However, the consequent Zanj Rebellion shook the foundation of the Abbasid Empire and brought to an end the massive slave trade, although trade on a smaller scale may have continued

over the next many centuries. Side by side with the slave trade, there may also have been slavery on the East African coast itself, as indicated by the history of Kilwa, although the mainstay of the economy of the Swahili city states was oceanic trade in many other mundane commodities, including mangrove poles, foodstuffs, cloth and ivory, most of which were probably produced by free peasants.

When a plantation system based on slave labour did develop on these islands in the nineteenth century to produce cloves for export, the world was already under the dominance of capitalism that exercised a powerful influence on the slave system there. However, the underlying cultural matrix had varying impacts on the different sectors of slavery. In a culture long influenced by Islam, its conception of slavery was bound to put its imprint on the treatment of slaves and relations between owners and slaves. In Islam, slaves are not merely chattel but human beings with certain (though diminished) human rights and responsibilities. In classical slavery, slaves were supposed to be fed by their owners who had total control over their production; but in Zanzibar in the nineteenth century slaves were given plots to produce their own foodstuffs and sell the surplus in the market for their own benefit. Emancipation of a slave is a built-in feature of slavery in Islamic law, it being recommended in numerous circumstances that created a freed population in every Muslim society as a norm. One such example is the Persian Gulf at the beginning of the twentieth century before slaves were emancipated by the British as noted by Lorimer.

The influence of Islam is even more apparent in the domestic arena where some slaves were integrated even into the families of their owners. Cohabitation between slave owners and slaves is a universal phenomenon in slave societies, but according to Islamic law, offspring from such cohabitation is legitimate with equal rights to inheritance with children of free mothers, and the mother cannot thereafter be sold. This was not a rare occurrence but widespread to the extent that many of the Abbasid caliphs as well as sultans in Zanzibar and Oman had slave mothers. According to a recent genetic study, while 35 per cent of Zanzibaris traced the origin of their fathers from across the sea, 98 per cent of their mothers originated from sub-Saharan Africa, and their mother tongue is naturally Kiswahili.

On the other hand, Mauritius experienced slavery in circumstances similar to those in the West Indies at 'the rosy dawn of the capitalist mode of production'. For an island without a people, all labour had to be brought from abroad to establish a servile system from scratch to cut timber and grow food for passing ships, to experiment with cloves, before finally landing on its colonial monoculture of sugar. However, unlike the West Indies, slaves in Mauritius were multi-ethnic, including the Malagasy, those from India, as well as from Mozambique and the Swahili coast, while the slave owners were predominantly white, giving slavery there a distinct racial texture.

More crucial in maintaining the racial character of slavery in Mauritius was the legal and cultural superstructure that hindered the reintegration of society. Cohabitation between slave owners and their female slaves, of course, could not be prevented considering the gross gender imbalance in the planter society. However, Christian morality and monogamy and the prevailing legal system prevented the recognition of the reality of the social process that was going on. Thus, while the planter class struggled to maintain its lily white purity, the pigmentation of their offspring lightened with every generation, but they and their mothers remained slaves, and the racialised class division of the society was frozen to a much greater extent than in Zanzibar.

Both Mauritius and Zanzibar came under British colonial rule, the former in 1810 as a British colony, and the latter in 1890 as a British protectorate. Committed to the abolition of slavery so that capitalist imperialism could mature, Britain pushed for the dissolution of slavery in both islands in comparable steps, but again the underlying cultural differences introduced some contrasting results.

In Mauritius the abolition of slavery was part of an empire-wide movement that involved the payment of compensation to the slave owners of £20 million voted by the British Parliament in 1833, of which £2 million went to the slave-owners of Mauritius to help them make the transition to free labour. Moreover, to help them further make a soft landing, the colonial government introduced a so-called apprenticeship system whereby all slaves were 'apprenticed' to their former owners for the next five years. During this period, they remained in all senses bound to their former owners. Under the apprenticeship system, the apprentices were required to work 45 hours for their employers and, if they performed any type of additional work, they had to be remunerated in cash for their labour. At the same time, they could 'buy' their freedom for a certain amount of money – and as Peerthum shows – many scraped all their resources to buy their own freedom and that of their loved ones. Between February 1835 and March 1839, a total of 4,200 apprentices purchased their freedom with the majority being female apprentices. At the end of the 'apprenticeship', the remaining 53,000 apprentices were finally freed, and a vast majority moved away from the plantations of their former owners, preferring to work on the small plots of their own or those of the free Coloured rather than remain at the site of their former humiliation.

The Mauritian free population of colour partly consisted of non-whites who were local-born and shared a mixed European, African and Indian ancestry. Furthermore, the free Coloured were also composed of African, Indian and Malagasy slaves who had been manumitted or the *vieux affranchis* and of some free Indian and Malagasy immigrants who came to the island between the 1730s and early 1800s. Between 1767 and 1830, apart from a high birth rate and a low death rate among the free Coloured, it was the manumission of the slaves which was one of the major reasons for the rapid growth of the Mauritian free population

of colour. During the early 1800s, free Coloured communities gradually emerged in Port Louis, Grand Port, Moka and Plaines Wilhems districts and other parts of Mauritius which were made up mostly free Coloured who were free-born and manumitted slaves. Between 1806 and 1830, they were active in commerce and trade in Port Louis and Grand Port. They saved their money, were able to achieve capital accumulation and purchased and established hundreds of small estates in the island's rural districts. By 1830, the free Coloured controlled one fifth of the island's wealth, owned almost a quarter of the slaves, and more than one-tenth of the island's inventoried arable land.

Between 1829 and 1839, there were more than 7,100 slaves and apprentices, the majority being female slaves and apprentices, who secured their freedom. They took full advantage of the liberal and flexible manumission laws during the amelioration period (1829-1834) and apprenticeship era (1835-1839), and purchased their freedom and that of their loved ones. They did not wait for 1 February 1835, when the slavery was abolished in Mauritius, and 31 March 1839, when the local British colonial government terminated the apprenticeship system. During the 1830s, there were thousands of female slaves and apprentices who wanted to secure their own freedom and that of their loved ones through their own efforts, and did not want freedom from above or for it to be bestowed on them by the British government.

Between the 1810s and 1830s, it was common for free Coloured males to have intimate relationships with slave women who were their companions or concubines and bore them several children. They even purchased the freedom of their enslaved companions, got married to them and legitimised their children. This was considered acceptable in Mauritian colonial society as well as under colonial law. Furthermore, it was a common practice and can clearly be seen in the archival records. However, during the early nineteenth century, this was not the same case when it came to intimate relationships between white colonists and female slaves. After all, it was not allowed under colonial law and frowned upon by the island's conservative slave-owning elite. Most of the time, these relationships were kept hidden from the public view, and the slave-owner did not recognise his slave children or give any rights to his slave concubine. Thus, it was difficult for the freed children to claim any inheritance from their slave-owner father who either did not recognise them or the law did not permit them to inherit anything from him. This practice continued even after December 1829 Royal-Order-in-Council, which otherwise removed the colour bar and outlawed social and legal discriminations against the free Coloured and ex-slaves by the island's white ruling elite.

It is not clear from the archival records that in cases where the slave-owner was manumitting his female slave and her children, if she was the concubine of her owner and the children were his offspring. There were some cases where

manumitted slave women were given plots of land, money or even a small house to live in, but it is not clearly stated that she was the concubine or companion of her master. Therefore, most of the time, it can only be inferred and a matter of interpretation when it comes to the available Mauritian archival data.

In the case of Zanzibar, emancipation came in the wake of what has been dubbed 'the shortest war in history' in 1896 when Arab power was finally broken, and the British placed on the throne a pliant sultan who signed the emancipation decree the following year. In the ensuing decade a total of 11,837 slaves were emancipated through the courts, and compensation was paid to the owners amounting to nearly Rs.500,000 (£33,000) which, however, was paid not by the British Treasury as in the case of Mauritius, but out of the Zanzibar revenue – the price of British 'protection'. Cooper points out that 'the average compensation was about what slaves had cost when they were abundant, but was well under their cost in the 1890s and equivalent to less than five months' wages'.¹

As in Mauritius, the British tried to provide for a smooth transition from slave to semi-free labour by trying to tie the freed slaves to the land to prevent the collapse of the clove economy of their new protectorate. They introduced the 'contract system' under which freed slaves were provided with a plot of about four acres to grow their food crops in return for three or four days' work a week for the former owners for free, reinforced by vagrancy laws if they failed to prove fixed domicile and means of support. This system diverged little from the preceding system of slavery, and 'there was no rush for freedom'.² However, such was the shortage of labour that the freed slaves refused to work for free and had to be paid the going wage, but they were obliged to work on their landowner's land first before moving on to other plantations during the clove-picking season, the price for keeping their plots. The number of such annual contracts declined rapidly, and by 1900 the system had been abandoned, to be replaced by the squatter system. However, as the number of freed slaves declined, they were supplemented by fresh free squatters from the mainland.

But the emancipation of these slaves through the courts was only half the story. The other half owes its origin to the persisting influence of Islam which had attached so much importance to emancipating slaves as a pious act. The process appears to have accelerated after the promulgation of the emancipation decree by owners who preferred heavenly rewards in the hereafter rather than accept paltry earthly compensation from the British hand. According to Mrs. Saada Wahab, between April 1897 and December 1901, out of a total of 13,264 slaves emancipated, 3,700 slaves or 28 per cent were emancipated by their owners without going through the British courts and obtaining compensation. A larger number of these slaves were probably domestic slaves who had developed more intimate relationships with their owners, rather than among the plantation slaves.

Even more poignant was the question of the *suria* (secondary slave wives or 'concubines'). They were considered inmates of the Arab Muslim households with the slave mothers occupying a special status, *umm al-walad* (mother of the child), and their children who enjoyed equal rights with their siblings of free mothers. To abolish concubinage was therefore considered direct interference in the social structure of an Arab family. It would have meant throwing the *suria* onto the street and separating her from her children who were her sole source of support. Therefore the emancipation decrees provided that they were to be treated as wives and were not to be freed except on the ground of cruelty, until 1911 when that article of the decree was repealed.³

The comparative study of slavery and the transition from it during the nineteenth century in Mauritius and Zanzibar, representing respectively the Atlantic and Indian Ocean tendencies, has thus been very instructive, bringing out similarities as well as differences, tracing the similarities from the hegemony exercised by the capitalist mode of production over both these islands in the Indian Ocean, and the differences from the different cultural environments in which they were reared. Such a nuanced exploration of slavery in the Indian Ocean is likely to be more informative than imposing the Atlantic model across the whole world and all times.

Notes

1. F. Cooper, *From Slave to Squatters*, 1980, p.73.
2. L.W. Hollingsworth, *Zanzibar under the Foreign Office 1890-1913*, 1953, p.145.
3. Hollingsworth, *Zanzibar*, pp.137, 141, 157.