



Transition from Slavery: the tale of two islands in the Indian Ocean

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The research project is a study of transition from slavery into different forms of exploitation of labour during the colonial period in two island countries in the Indian Ocean with contrasting as well as comparable histories. Zanzibar has long been settled by Africans, but it has also been involved in *longue duree* trade and socio-cultural interaction in the Indian Ocean, including Islam with its unique features as regards slavery. However, during the nineteenth century there developed a slave plantation system to produce cloves for export when capitalism was already a world system. Mauritius, on the other hand, was uninhabited until the coming of the Europeans in the sixteenth century, and the slave plantation system there was an extension of the Atlantic model into the Indian Ocean developed at the ‘rosy dawn of capitalism.’ (Marx).

The two islands provide interesting comparative insights as they went through the painful process of transition from slavery under colonial rule along parallel lines. In Mauritius slavery was abolished in 1835, and the government had to resort to importation of indentured labourers from India and China to keep the sugar economy going, giving rise in the process to new ‘diasporic’ communities. However, landowners also had to sell less productive portions of their landholdings to Indian labourers after they had completed their indentures, and they became small landowners. Slavery was abolished in Zanzibar in 1897, and to keep the clove economy going, the British tried to retain the freed slaves on the plantations as squatters, but they were not enough. The squatters were soon joined by a large number of free migrant workers from the mainland, some of whom also settled down as squatters. Even here, the landowners were forced to sell parts of their land, but in this case, to neighbouring indigenous peasants who joined the impoverished Arabs as peasant clove producers.

Mauritius thus followed a silent transformation that ultimately resulted in the effective participation of descendants of the former slaves and indentured labourers in the governance of the island state, culminating in independence in 1968 with a descendant of an indentured labourer as the first Prime Minister. In Zanzibar, on the other hand, the British tried to prevent the complete disintegration of the former landowning class as well as creating the squatter class. It therefore attained independence in 1963 with a partially decomposed social system

that could not withstand the rigours of post-colonial politics. Within a month the government had been overthrown in a violent revolution, and in another 100 days it even lost its independence when it was absorbed into Tanzania.

The two islands, which started with almost equal area and population, and at a similar level of development and per capita income at the time of independence in the 1960s, find themselves miles apart four decades later. Mauritius has graduated from a low income single cash crop economy to a middle income diversified economy. Zanzibar, on the other hand, is still dependent on an unstable economy relying on a single sector, cloves and now tourism, with a per capita income of less than a twentieth compared with Mauritius at the present time. A comparative study of these two islands, therefore, offers a very good opportunity to examine some of the major themes in African and world history, especially slavery and the various paths of transition to new forms of colonial and postcolonial development.