

---

# **“Coolies”, Containment, and Resistance**

---

The Indentured System  
in British Guiana

---

MELEISA ONO-GEORGE

---

By MELEISA ONO-GEORGE

## “Coolies”, Containment, and Resistance: The Indentured System in British Guiana

Plantations played a pivotal role in the development and maintenance of the British Empire throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though crops varied, coffee, sugar, tea, and rubber, all served the same purpose: to fuel the British capitalist system. By extension then, those who labored: slaves; free laborers; and indentured laborers were instruments of the system. The success of plantations depended on a cheap labor source that planters could control and bind to the land. The Indentured System worked to control labor throughout the British Empire. This paper will examine the mechanisms within the indentured system that ensured the planters control and domination of Asian laborers or “coolie”<sup>1</sup> labor in the British colony of British Guiana.

Prior to 1838, the institution of slavery provided a labor source on plantations throughout the British West Indies. When slavery was abolished in 1834, the Guiana colonial government introduced an “apprenticeship” program that forced ‘ex-slaves’ to continue working on the plantations for a period of six years. After protest from the Creole population, this term was reduced to four years. With a new sense of power, workers organized and demanded a wage higher than Planters were willing to pay. In 1842 and again in 1848 sugar strikes occurred, the first of which lasted between twelve

---

<sup>1</sup> The word “coolie” is a term, now considered derogative, used to refer to all manual laborers from Asia. It is problematic for a number of reasons. This paper does not discuss those problems but uses the word in quotation marks, except when the word is used as a part of a quote. For discussion on the word “coolie”, see Jung, Moon-Ho, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 4-6.

and thirteen weeks.<sup>2</sup> After the introduction of the British Sugar Duties Act in 1846, sugar from the West Indies was no longer protected on British markets, and had to compete with foreign imports. Competition on a free market and the shortage of labor further “strengthened the determination of planters to secure immigrant laborers whose conditions of indentured service excluded the right to seek out new employers and whose wage rates were also statutorily restricted.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1838, 396 Indians known as the “Gladstone Coolies” were the first brought to British Guiana as workers by plantation owner John Gladstone.<sup>4</sup> Among allegations of abuse and “neoslavery” were testimonies from former slaves who asserted that Indian workers were treated in the same way they had been treated under slavery.<sup>5</sup> After reports of ill treatment, the Indian government put a stop to the unregulated system in 1839. As the economic situation deteriorated, planters demanded the ban on indentured labor be lifted. The Indian Government, under pressure to ensure the will being of its citizens, but economic pressure to maintain the prosperity of the plantation system, lifted the ban and emigration was once again resumed to the British West Indies between 1845 and 1848. Between 1851-1870, referred by Look Lai as the “period of multiracial immigration”, a steady shipment of Asian laborers arrived in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica annually.<sup>6</sup> It was during this period that heavy regulations were established

---

<sup>2</sup>Rodney, Walter, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881 – 1905* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Rodney, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, Moon-Ho. "Outlawing "Coolies": Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation." *American Quarterly* (2005): 681.

<sup>5</sup> Rodney, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Lai, Walton Look, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 107.

with the purpose of protecting the laborers from harsh conditions and abuses and to silence anti-slavery protest both in Britain, India,<sup>7</sup> and China.

From 1838 until the indentured system ended in 1920, a total of 470,594 people immigrated from Asia.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 91 percent of those that emigrated from Asia to the British Caribbean during this period came from India, while those from China made up only 9 percent; British Guiana received 238,909 people from India, and 13,533 people from China.<sup>9</sup> People from India made up the largest population of migrants to the West Indies from 1838 to 1917, people from Portugal, freed Africans, Chinese, Europeans, and then African-Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Poverty and social unrest were the main ‘push’ factors for migrants leaving Asia. In India, British imperial policies and industrialization had forced people to leave their land and thousands flocked to the cities in search of work. Similarly in China, both local and imperial policies created extreme poverty and displacement. Anti-imperial conflict, particularly the Taping Rebellion in southeast China, further exacerbated the problems. Thousands of people flocked towards the ports of Guangdong and Fujian in search of employment.<sup>11</sup>

Although the vast majority of Chinese migrants went to Cuba (125,000 people) and Peru (100,000 people), the Chinese migration to British West Indies had more in

---

7 Jung (2005): 681

8 The import of laborers to British Guiana under the system of indentured from China officially ended in 1874 and from India in 1917.

9 Shepherd, Verene A, *Maharani's Misery* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002), 4.

10 Lai, Walton Look, "The Chinese Indenture System in the British West Indies and Its Aftermath," In *Chinese in the Caribbean*, edited by Andrew R. Wilson, 3-24 (Princeton: Markus Wiener Press, 2004), 7.

11 *Ibid.*, 4

common with the Indian migration than to migrations to Latin American colonies.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike the indentured system in Cuba and Peru, the British system involved the state and its agencies at all levels of the of the migration process, from recruitment to arrival in the West Indies. The British colonial office attempted to make the British indenture system distinct from the Latin American system, which had a “myriad of abuses” that “had become something of a scandal... and colored much of the labor export business.”<sup>13</sup> As one poster advertised by the British in Canton:

- There is no slavery wherever the British Flag flies.
- The Law is the same to rich and poor. All Religions are tolerated and protected, and the Queen of England has appointed Special Magistrates in her West Indian Colonies, to look after and protect the strangers, who go there to seek their fortunes
- Any laborer entering into a contract for five years, and desiring to cancel it at the end of the first year, and work where he pleases, can do so on repayment of four fifths of the passage money from China to the West Indies, estimated at \$75. At the end of the second year, he can cancel it on repayment of three fifths, and so on, one fifth being deducted for every year’s service
- A special Law has been passed by the Parliament of England, for the feeding and protection of the emigrants during voyage.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the heavy regulations to “protect” workers from abuses, the Indentured System in British Guiana was used to keep indentured laborers “in their place” on the plantations, where they were exploited in order to maintain the primacy of sugar production. Essential to that process were the contracts used to legally bind immigrants to

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Lai, 9. There are numerous accounts of people from port cities in both China and India, before and after the regulated system, being kidnapped, coerced, or in other ways manipulated into signing contracts. For further discussion on this important aspect of the indentured system in China, please refer to Campbell, Persia Crawford, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries Within the British Empire* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1923).

<sup>14</sup> Lai, 11.

plantations, vagrancy and pass clauses of the Immigration Ordinance of 1864, and finally the use of quotas to increase the number of women in the colony. By focusing on these aspects of the British indentured system, this paper will explore the ways in which planters attempted to systematically contain Asian immigrants, and subjugate them to the absolute authority of the white planter class.

The basis for Planter control was a civil contract between the British colonial government and Asian laborer. The contract varied over the years and varied for Indian and Chinese workers. Elements of the contract for workers from China were different from those signed by Indian workers, such as the guarantee of return passage outlined in the Indian contract. In both cases workers were required to sign a contract for a term of five years. After the five year term, immigrants were given a certificate of “industrial residence” which allowed them to remain within the colony, or reindenture for another five year contract.<sup>15</sup> Under the 1843 regulations, the first regulations after the re-establishment of the indentured system from both India and China, contracts between worker and employer could be terminated at the end of six months or one year as a security against abuses.<sup>16</sup> This changed so that laborers could terminate that contract only after repayment of the costs of introduction less an amount equivalent to their wages for their time of service. In a 1852 ordinance “any laborer entering into a contract for five years, and desiring to cancel it at the end of the first year, and work where he pleases,

---

15 Adamson, Alan H, "The Impact of Indentured Immigration on the Political Economy of British Guiana," In *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, edited by Kay Saunders, 42-56 (Beckenham: Croom Helm Ltd, 1984), 45.

16 Cohen, Lucy M., *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without A History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 43. Also refer to Lai, 11.

can do so on repayment of four fifths of the passage money....”<sup>17</sup>; or they could terminate it at the end of a year if they paid a periodic tax. Commutation payments increased dramatically between 1859 and 1862<sup>18</sup> indicating that many immigrants chose to buy out of their contracts. In response to the growing loss of labor, the Immigration Ordinance was amended in 1862 so that “[n]o such immigrant shall be entitled to change his employer, or to pay in commutation of service, during and portion of the said term of five years for which he shall have been so indentured. ...”<sup>19</sup> Hence, whatever power immigrants had had was taken away and the planter class had complete control and power over the laborers for a period of five years.

In addition to the contracts, local immigration legislation in British Guiana had the purpose of restricting “coolie” labor to the plantations and of actually preventing integration into the larger society. Planters may have lost ownership of slaves in 1838, but they were still “firmly in control of the post-Emancipation legislature”<sup>20</sup>, and had complete power in the making of laws. In the 1864 Immigration Ordinance a vagrancy clause was implemented in British Guiana that restricted “immigrants” to a two mile radius of plantations.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, any “immigrant” found beyond two miles of his or her plantation without written permission from the plantation owner or overseer would be

---

17 Lai, 11.

18 Adamson, 45.

19 An Ordinance to Extend the Term of Indentures of Immigrants Introduced from India and China, 1862 (No. 30); Papers re British Guiana, pp, 1863 (6830), XV. 139.

20 Rodney, 31.

21 An Ordinance to consolidate and Amend the Law Relating to Immigrants. p. 155, 1864 (No. 4); Papers re British Guiana, pp, 1865, XVI, 131.

liable for fines and criminal charges<sup>22</sup>. What is problematic about these laws, besides that fact that they removed the freedom of technically ‘free’ people and made breaking a civil contract criminally punishable, is that the vagrancy and pass laws also prevented Asian laborers from filing complaints against planters and overseers, and from socializing beyond those on their own plantations. In order to file a complaint, a person had to go to the Immigration Office which was located in Georgetown, the capital of British Guiana. For many laborers, the plantations were located several miles from Georgetown so that in order to actually file a complaint they would have to receive a “pass” from the overseer or planter, the very people they were often filing the complaint against. Under the immigration ordinance, immigrants could leave the plantation without a pass if they were going to the immigration authorities to file a "reasonable" complaint. If the complaint was deemed to be “frivolous” by the colonial authorities or if five or more immigrants went together, they could be prosecuted for breaking the pass law.<sup>23</sup> While some were successful in filing a complaint, in many cases, immigrants would be charged with breaking the vagrancy laws. In one case, an immigrant was subpoenaed to come to Georgetown to testify against his employer. He was then charged by his employer for missing work and thrown in to jail.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the vagrancy laws, immigrants could

---

22 Ibid.

23 Lai (1993), 64.

24 Kloosterboer, W., *Involuntary Labour Since the Abolition of Slavery: A Survey of Compulsory Labour Throughout the World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 13.

And Adamson, 46.



be charged for missing work.<sup>25</sup> Immigrants were subjected to criminal charges, fines, or jail time, in addition to losing wages. In 1887, there were 17,770 indentured laborers in British Guiana. Employers filed 2,848 complaints against indentured immigrants for various reasons; indentured immigrants filed only five complaints against employers.<sup>26</sup> While these dramatic differences can be interpreted in different ways, the figures suggests that planters held more power to use the law against immigrants, and the law was not a tool by which immigrants could protect themselves from their employers. Despite the pretext of protection from abuses, the laws actually worked against immigrants and were used by planters to discipline rebellious immigrants by charging them with minor or major offenses against labor laws of which there was “court partiality toward planters in the dispensation of justice.”<sup>27</sup>

Though vagrancy and pass laws were intended for indentured workers, the laws were often applied to anyone of Indian or Chinese descent whether or not they were under indentured contracts. If they could not prove “to the satisfaction of the Stipendiary Justice” they were not under indentureship they were often arrested.<sup>28</sup> For example, in 1855 a free immigrant was arrested and jailed by the police in Georgetown, and then sent to Plantation La Jalousie.<sup>29</sup> According to the arresting police officer, “[n]o coolie could

---

25 An Ordinance to consolidate and Amend the Law Relating to Immigrants. p. 159, 1864 (No. 4); Papers re British Guiana, pp. 1865, XVI, 131.

26 Daily Chronicle (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 1, 1888.

27 Lai, 15.

28 Lai (1993), 63.

29 Adamson, 46.

remain in the city...all must go to the estates.”<sup>30</sup> A common belief was that “every immigrant ought to be either in the fields at work, in [the] hospital, or in jail.”<sup>31</sup> The vagrancy and pass laws worked to maintain the isolation and immobility of Asian immigrants by tying them to the plantations and preventing integration into larger society. By doing this the state could control and contain Asians and keep them subjugated to white dominance in addition to maintaining a cheap, servile labor force.

Once workers completed their five year contracts, various measures were taken by the planters and Colonial Office in an effort to keep Asian laborers in the colonies and on the plantations. One such measure used was the establishment of quotas in India to increase the number of women on the plantations. The sex disparities were high in both Indian and Chinese communities. To increase the number of women to the colonies quota laws were established which mandated that a 40:100 ratio of females to males be established before a vessel could leave the port.<sup>32</sup> As the number of Asian laborers increased in the colony, women, were seen as a way of keeping experienced male workers in the colonies and on the plantations, even after their indenture period had expired.<sup>33</sup> Planters believed that men would more likely to settle in the colony and on the plantation if they could find a partner to settle down with and create a family. In addition, as Reddock stated, women were used “as part of a desire by both capital and state, to generate a self-reproducing

---

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Shepherd, 6.

33 Tinker, Hugh, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 89.

source of labor in the colonies".<sup>34</sup> Having families willing to remain within the colony, and on the plantation not only eliminated the cost for return passage that planters had to pay Indian workers, but also was thought to reduce the number of 'disturbances' on the plantations that disrupted the production of sugar. Such disturbances, namely fighting between men and the abuse of Indian women by Indian males, were blamed on the "insufficiency" of females, opposed to the violence of males.

Fear of abuse was a major factor that made many women reluctant to board vessels to go overseas. Stories of rape were common among women in the colony, as well as on the vessels that carried them there, described as spaces of “sexploitation”.<sup>35</sup> One example is the case of Maharani. Maharani was an Indian woman who was raped aboard the *Allanshaw* in 1885 on route to British Guiana from Calcutta. She later died from injuries she sustained during rape. On arriving in British Guiana, a full investigation was launched in which several of the crew and passengers were interrogated. The man accused of the crime was a young black crew member name Ipson. Maharani's rape and death highlights the abuse so common to women on the ships. Incidences of rape were not uncommon aboard the passage, but, unlike Maharani's case, most were ignored. Shepherd speculates that in the case of Maharani, the fact that the accused rapist was a black man, may have made the authorities more inclined to investigate to show critics of

---

34 Reddock, Rhoda, "Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1985): 79-87. Found in Moses Seenarine, "Indian Women in Colonial Guyana: Recruitment, Migration, Labor, and Caste." 23 March 2007. <<http://saxakali.com/indocarib/sojourner3.htm>>

35 Shepherd, xix.

the indentured system their commitment to the protection of Asian women, although no charges were actually laid.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike in India, no quota was mandated in China, although men were encouraged to bring their wives and children.<sup>37</sup> Chinese women were not allowed to sign their own contracts of indenture, but instead signed contracts of residence. Though contracts of residence forced women to remain on a specific plantation, it did not require the women to work.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, to entice men to bring their wives and family, a monetary gift of twenty dollars was given to the wife, twenty dollars for every adult daughter, and five dollars for every child.<sup>39</sup>

Whether they had a contract of indentured or one of residence, all immigrant women were punished under the vagrancy laws just like the men.<sup>40</sup> Many men remained within the colonies as “marginal members of society,”<sup>41</sup> even after their five year term of contract ended, which may indicate the effectiveness of efforts to use women to maintain a labor force, although there may be other contributing factors. Women were used as tools to maintain a stable work for on the plantations for as long as possible. They were often subject to physical and sexual exploitation, much like black women enslaved on the plantations prior to 1838, and had to survive “multiple oppression”.<sup>42</sup>

---

36 Ibid.

37 Campbell, Persia Crawford, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries Within the British Empire* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1923), 123.

38 Lai, 13.

39 *ibid*, 12.

40 *Ibid*.

41 Tinker, 233.

42 Poynting, Jeremy, “East Indian Women in the Caribbean: Experience and Voice”, in *India in the Caribbean*, ed. David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (London: Hansib, 1987), 231-63. Cited in Shepherd, xviii.

Similar to the period of slavery, resistance was a common occurrence on plantations. In contradiction to the racialization of Asians as “docile”<sup>43</sup>, many laborers, both men and women, resisted harsh conditions and ill treatment individually and collectively.<sup>44</sup> Desertion was a common way that workers denied their labor, asserted agency, and opposed harsh conditions. In 1887, 588 immigrants, 490 men and 98 women, deserted from their estates.<sup>45</sup> In British Guiana where independent settlements of free Chinese were established, runaways could be assured protection and refuge. In reference to such settlements one observer recorded that “it would be a bold policeman who would attempt to execute a warrant in their midst.”<sup>46</sup> Another example of resistance was the destruction of planters’ property. In one case recorded in the *Daily Chronicle*, an immigrant named Abodoolah, set fire to the cane field of his employer, destroying hundreds of dollars in profit for the planter.<sup>47</sup> Direct challenges to the indentured system also occurred. Bechu, a Bengali man who arrived to Plantation Enmore, is often cited for his effort to bring about change in the colony. In 1894, he wrote a series of letters to the press criticizing the actions of the planters including allegations of the exploitation of Indian women by overseers, active discouragement of those seeking repatriation, and many examples of

---

43 Rodney, 158.

44 Resistance is defined here as any act indentured or free worker could do to hinder the production of sugar on the plantation, challenge oppression, and assert agency.

45 *Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 1, 1888.

46 Lai, 16.

47 *Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown, British Guiana). May 17, 1888.

planters breaking the labor code by their treatment of indentured laborers.<sup>48</sup> In his letter he stated:

My countrymen like myself have had the misfortune to come to Demerara, the political system of which colony has very appropriately have divined and defined by Mr. Trollope under a happy inspiration as “despotism tempered by sugar.” To these twin forces, the Immigration system is as sacred as the old system of slavery in former days, and for one in my humble position to have ventured to touch it with profane hands or to have dared to unveil it is considered on this side of the Atlantic to be a capital and inextinguishable offence.<sup>49</sup>

Such direct challenges were instrumental in raising sympathies from those unaware of the conditions on the plantations and within the colonies.

In British Guiana, collective resistances like riots were also common. Rodney suggests that riots were spontaneous events that had little threat to the planters and little chance of influencing riots on other plantations. Contrary to this opinion, in 1888, riots first broke out on Plantation Nonpareil on June 14 and within days other riots broke out on plantations across the East Coast, which suggest that one influenced the other. In one account, on the Plantation Enmore, five overseers were put in the hospital after receiving beatings from the workers, who were enraged their pay was being withheld. It took 30 police officers to eventually put down the riot.<sup>50</sup> Many of these riots actually started in the weeding gang, which was the women’s sphere. In one case following a riot at Plantation Friends in Berbice in 1903, a plantation driver testified that he heard an indentured Indian woman by the name of Salamea tell “her shipmates on the Thursday to

---

<sup>48</sup> Rodney, 156.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Daily Chronicle (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 20, 1888.

go fight... Salamea, I hear, urge the coolies who had assembled to fight.”<sup>51</sup> Workers resisted in various ways, which created a sense of uneasiness throughout the colony and had white colonist at least attempting to address the dissatisfaction among the workers.<sup>52</sup>

Collaborations in resistance among Chinese, Indian, and black workers do not seem to be common. On the contrary, it seems that blacks were more likely to side with whites than with Asians when a disturbance or conflict occurred. For example, when a riot broke out on Plantation Enmore in June 1888, some of the overseers were “concealed by the kindly disposed blacks in their houses on the estate.” One overseer was only able to escape the beatings from the Asian workers with the help of a black woman who was washing clothes in a nearby trench and threw her clothes over him until his pursuers had passed.<sup>53</sup> It should be little wonder that whites in the south U.S. expected there would be tension between the black workers and Chinese workers.<sup>54</sup> Joint efforts to resist the oppression of the white minority did not seem to occur with any frequency in British Guiana.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, much of the resistance to the immigration of Asians, in its early stages, within British Guiana was led by former slaves and members of the London Missionary Society. The former slaves saw the newly created immigration policies as an attempt to undermine the leverage they held following emancipation in 1838 by the Plantocracy and colonial government.<sup>56</sup> As the *Creole* would state, “immigration was

---

51 Rodney, 157.

52 Daily Chronicle (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 22, 1888.

53 Daily Chronicle (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 20, 1888.

54 Jung, Moon-Ho, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) 202.

55 Further research needs to be done in this area before any conclusive argument can be made. In his research on Chinese workers in the U.S. South, Moon-Ho Jung discovers several instances of collaborations between Asian and African workers. See, Jung (2006: 203-206).

56 Lai (1993), 164-165.

intended to punish the Black population for having left the estates after Emancipation.”<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, communities did resist. Individual and collective acts of resistance help put an end to the oppressive nature of the indentured system and racial oppression.

The Indentured system in British Guiana and other parts of the Caribbean were often used as a model for other white settler countries. In the U.S., the indentured system in the Caribbean was used by Southern plantation owners as a reason to maintain the institution of slavery. Many defenders of slavery denounced the use of “coolie” labor on American soil, which they viewed as a threat to domestic slavery. Furthermore, the U.S. pro-slavers criticized Britain for abolishing slavery throughout its empire, but then implementing a system that they viewed as worse than slavery.”<sup>58</sup> Jung notes that those “fighting the hardest to uphold slavery attempted to criminalize coolie importations [to the US] first.”<sup>59</sup> Anti-slavery advocates, who viewed the indentured system as a new form of slavery, ironically, were often on the same side of the debate as pro-slavers.

The Anti-“Coolie” Act, enacted in 1862, prohibited the carrying of “Chinese subjects also known as coolies”<sup>60</sup> aboard any American vessel to any foreign country. The purpose of this law was, supposedly, to protect Asians against the harsh conditions experienced under Caribbean indentured system. Therefore, Chinese people “also known as coolies” were not allowed into the country unless they came voluntarily.<sup>61</sup> The problem was that Asians were required to *prove* that they came voluntary and were not

---

<sup>57</sup> Lai (1993), 165.

<sup>58</sup> Jung, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Cohen, 177.

<sup>61</sup> Jung, 37.



“coolie” labor.<sup>62</sup> A more likely motivation for the Anti-“Coolie” Act was the fear of competition for jobs and growing anti-Asian sentiment. Another likely motivation may have had something to do with preventing US vessels from providing cheap labor to American foreign competitors’. As Cohan states, “those involved in this labor movement realized that the purpose of the act of 1862 was not to regulate importation of Chinese labor to the United States..., [but] to prohibit American ships from transporting Chinese coolies to foreign ports”.<sup>63</sup> The Anti-“Coolie” Act of 1862, may have been enacted under the pretense of concern for Asian workers, but was more accurately motivated by Anti-Asian sentiments and economic competition.

Following the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery throughout the US, like in the Caribbean 25 years before, finding cheap labor became a major concern for planters. Despite the Anti-“Coolie” Act, many people advocated for the importation of laborers from Asia to the southern plantations. One such advocate was a Chinese missionary by the name of Orr Tye Kim. Orr had lived and worked in British Guiana and had been one of the founders of an independent Chinese settlement in British Guiana called Hopetown. Educated by missionaries and fluent in English, Orr was one of the most prominent members of the Chinese community in British Guiana and was actually employed by the British government at one point as a kind of middle man.<sup>64</sup> Orr’s reputation among the Chinese community was destroyed after accusations by the Chinese community of embezzlement and criticism of his moral character after he had reportedly

---

62 Ibid.

63 Cohen, 62.

64 Jung, 1 and Lai (1993), 197-199.

impregnated a Creole woman in Georgetown.<sup>65</sup> Orr, disgraced, was said to have left British Guiana in 1867. He turns up again two years later in Louisiana advocating the indentured system. At a convention in 1869, attended by planters from across the U.S., Orr delivered a speech using his experience in the Caribbean to encourage planters to import Chinese labor:

You want to know about the Chinaman labor. I will tell you all my candid opinion; but I left home six years ago--in 1863, and since then I have traveled a great deal in West Indies and South America ... Now we have heard of the emancipation and land going to waste, unless we get labor. In the West Indies I studied the character of the people. You know they had emancipation—that was in 1830 something. The Negroes, after emancipation, degenerated and would not work. To remedy that they imported Chinese. I can't say how many ... I don't know the statistics; but they all are getting along well...I know the Chinese are heathens, but you want cotton and cane—and if he makes them you will not object very much to him.<sup>66</sup>

Several of the planters attending the conference sponsored a trip for Orr and the son of one of the planters to go to China to bring back workers to work on the sugar estates of the U.S. Gulf States.

British Guiana policies and legislations designed to control indentured workers influenced policies, legislations and attitudes in countries beyond the British Empire. The connections between the US and the Caribbean is not just one directional. According to Jung, planters in the British West Indies recruited free African-Americans between 1839 and 1847.<sup>67</sup> The total population of African-American immigrants made up about seven percent of the total migrant population to the British West Indies.<sup>68</sup> In addition, slave

---

65 Jung, 3 and Lai (1993), 197-199.

66 Jung, 102.

67 Jung, 47.

68 Lai, 7.

smuggling from Cuba to Louisiana occurred up until the 1860s.<sup>69</sup> With “ideas, peoples, and capital [moving] around the Greater Caribbean in myriad ways, across geopolitical boundaries”<sup>70</sup>, the extension to the U.S. is of no surprise. As Guterl and Skwiot state, “common interest bound the planter class of the United States South and the Caribbean islands.”<sup>71</sup> The indentured system, as it was used in the British Guiana, had effects on the ideas and actions of the Plantocracy in the United States. These transnational connections are important in recognizing that what occurred in British Guiana, and the Caribbean was a part of a much larger system of white dominance and labor control/exclusion worldwide.

The aim of this paper was to highlight the mechanisms used as a part of the government regulated indenture system to control and contain Asian people in British Guiana. This paper explored three of these mechanisms: prohibiting commutation of contracts, the enactment of local ordinances which restricted the mobility of Asians off the plantations and integration into the wider society, and the use of women as a way to encourage a stable labor force. Asian laborers were wanted not as active members in the colony but as labor only. The maintenance of a white dominant state and the economic production of sugar were of paramount importance in British Guiana during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in other white dominant nations across the world. As such, policies of exclusion/containment were created to maintain white dominance and increase economic prosperity.

---

69 Jung, 47.

70 Ibid, 46.

71 Guterl, Matthew and Christine Skwiot, "Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire, and "the Labor Problem" in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Radical History Review*, no. 91 (Winter 2005): 43.

The Indentured system within British Guiana or the Caribbean should not be seen as an isolated oppressive system of dominance but as apart of a wider system of racist imperialism and state formation. Exclusion/containment laws were not limited to the Caribbean or the U.S., nor was it limited to people from Asia. Laws to prevent the full inclusion of non-white persons into white dominant societies are an important part of state building and formation in the white settler societies.<sup>72</sup> Though in depth discussion of racial state formation is beyond the scope of this paper, such a discussion is of importance in understanding race, state, and nation today.

---

<sup>72</sup> Refer to Giroux, Susan Searls. "On the State of Race Theory: A Conversation with David Theo Goldberg." *jac* 26 (2006): 11-66. And David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002).

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

An Ordinance to Extend the Term of Indentures of Immigrants Introduced from India and China, 1862 (No. 30); Papers re British Guiana, pp, **1863** (6830), XV. 139

An Ordinance to consolidate and Amend the Law Relating to Immigrants. p. 155, 1864 (No. 4); Papers re British Guiana, pp, **1865**, XVI, 131.

An Ordinance to consolidate and Amend the Law Relating to Immigrants. p. 159, 1864 (No. 4); Papers re British Guiana, pp, **1865**, XVI, 131.

*Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown, British Guiana). May 17, 1888.

*Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 1, 1888.

*Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 20, 1888.

*Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 22, 1888.

## Secondary Sources

Adamson, Alan H. "The Impact of Indentured Immigration on the Political Economy of British Guiana." In *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, edited by Kay Saunders, 42-56. Beckenham: Croom Helm Ltd, 1984.

Campbell, Persia Crawford. *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries Within the British Empire*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1923.

Cohen, Lucy M. *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without A History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984.

Giroux, Susan Searls. "On the State of Race Theory: A Conversation with David Theo Goldberg." *jac* 26 (2006): 11-66.

Guterl, Matthew and Christine Skwiot. "Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire, and "the Labor Problem" in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Radical History Review*, no. 91 (Winter 2005): 40-61.

Jung, Moon-Ho. *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Jung, Moon-Ho. "Outlawing "Coolies": Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation." *American Quarterly*, 2005: 677-701.

Kloosterboer, W. *Involuntary Labour Since the Abolition of Slavery: A Survey of Compulsory Labour Throughout the World*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960.

Lai, Walton Look. *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Lai, Walton Look. "The Chinese Indenture System in the British West Indies and Its Aftermath." In *Chinese in the Caribbean*, edited by Andrew R. Wilson, 3-24. Princeton: Markus Wiener Press, 2004.

Lee-Loy, Anne-Marie. "Kissing the Cross: Nineteenth-Century Representations of Chinese and Indian Immigrants in British Guiana and Trinidad." In *The Chinese in Caribbean*, edited by Andrew R. Wilson, 25-39. Princeton: Markus Wiener Press, 2004.

Reddock, Rhoda. "Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1985. Found in Moses Seenarine, "Indian Women in Colonial Guyana: Recruitment, Migration, Labor, and Caste." <<http://saxakali.com/indocarib/sojourner3.htm>> March 23, 2007.

Rodney, Walter. *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881 - 1905*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.

Shepherd, Verene A. *Maharani's Misery*. Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002.

Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.