



Bittersweet Connections: The Mauritian Model in Hawai'i

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Mauritius is often described as the staging grounds of modern indenture, serving as a model of sorts for its implementation in other world sites following the abolition of slavery. This extended beyond the world of formal European colonies. On 1 May 1865, the Hawaiian-language newspaper *Ke Au Okoa* presented to its readers the lessons of “o ka mokupuni o Mauritiusa”—the island of Mauritius. Emphasising similarities in terms of terrain, climate, latitude (respective to their hemispheres), and size (offering the counterpart of O'ahu, though Maui is actually closer in size), the article proclaimed that Hawai'i could achieve Mauritian levels of prosperity, if only Hawai'i were to apply Mauritian methods of labour and cultivation.

As similar as the islands might be geographically and climatically, fundamental differences distinguished them politically and economically at this time. In 1865, the Kingdom of Hawai'i was a recognized minor member of the community of nations, whose sovereignty putatively lay in the will of its native population as embodied by its native king. Mauritius by contrast never had an indigenous population and was then under the rule of its third European imperial master. Despite these significant political differences, sugar and indenture would connect these distant archipelagos economically and socially, transforming Hawai'i in the decades prior to US annexation in 1898 as profoundly as they had Mauritius several decades previously.

From the 1860s up to the 1890s, Hawaiian newspapers kept local settler and elite actors abreast of developments in the contract labour system of Mauritius. While some found Mauritius a model to be followed, others instead perceived

a warning. During this period, the conjuncture between the expansion of sugar production and indentured immigration from India was framed, by advocates and detractors alike, as the lessons of Mauritius. Unlike most other major global contexts of sugar production during this time, Hawai'i never drew upon India as a source of indentured labour. Instead, indentured migrants to pre-annexation Hawai'i came principally from China, Japan and Portugal, with a minority from Germany, Kiribati, Vanuatu and Norway. The absence of India from this list was not for want of discussion, but rather, the complex intersection of migrant choice and political factions in the island Kingdom.

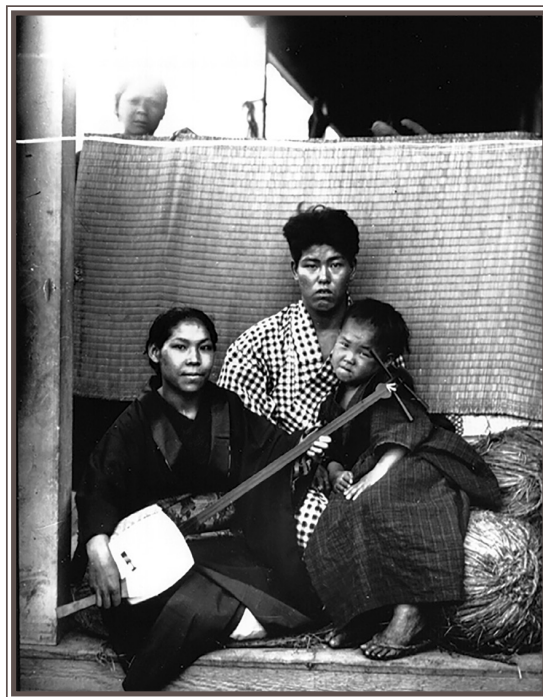
Until the late 1870s, labour migrants to Hawai'i came almost exclusively from China, via a system of co-ethnic transport and indebtedness managed by Chinese merchant labour brokers known conventionally as credit-ticket. Yet from 1864 onwards, government and private actors made recurrent attempts to establish formal state institutions of indenture. Mauritius loomed large in these debates. A government board of immigration was established in 1864, with future King Kalākaua as its secretary. At the end of that year, it funded a year long mission to China, Java and India by the German botanist, medic and immigration commissioner Wilhelm Hillebrand [1821-86], who was himself a member of the board. Information about Mauritius' labour system had been acquired immediately prior through the global networks of the Kingdom's Scottish-born foreign minister Robert Crichton Wyllie [1798-1865], with Mahébourg schoolmaster and dodo-enthusiast George Clark [1807-73] responding to a ten-part questionnaire on sugar cultivation and labour practices in Mauritius. The configuration of Mauritius as a sort of model first occurred during Hillebrand's tour, with local newspapers judging

his second-hand reports about the island's labour system, and those acquired by actors based in Hawai'i through other information networks.

On 1 September 1865, a few months after the discussion of Mauritius in *Ke Au Okoa*, the English-language *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* offered a critical survey of indenture in Mauritius on the basis of a copy of the Commercial Gazette of Port Louis. The newspaper decried the number of desertion notices encountered, along with the system of "stipendiary magistrates" and the dehumanising practice offered to migrants merely through individual registration numbers. Four years later, in 1869, an article entitled "Mauritius and the Lessons She Teaches" in the same paper presented "the working of the coolie system, in what has been termed the most successful sugar country in the world". The paper warned that large scale Asian labour migration would displace white artisans and the indigenous population, with the "inevitable result" of the coolie system being, even if not "the design of any who advocate" it, the termination of "the dynasty of the Kamehamehas, and cementing a colonial alliance with our powerful neighbour".

Indian indenture, and the Mauritian model, however had their advocates in the islands, particularly among committed royalists. The two main proponents were Hudson Bay Company trader-turned coffee planter-turned perennial politician Godfrey Rhodes [1815-97], and British-aligned Queen Emma [1836-85], widow of Kamehameha IV [1834-63, r. 1856-63] and rival to the throne ultimately assumed, after election, by Kalākaua [1836-1891, r. 1874-91]. Both Rhodes and Emma were in favour of a migration treaty with the Government of British India and persistently advocated for mass immigration from India, especially during the late 1870s and early 1880s. This was however not the path taken. Resident American actors were anxious about the prospect of expanded British influence in the islands through the appointment of a local Protector, perceived as a precondition for any Indian migration treaty with the British government. Hawai'i's unusual status as a native-ruled state featuring a powerful resident Westerner community and an international consular system presented significant political complications not present in formal European colonial possessions.

Discussion of the Mauritian model was perhaps most intense during 1879, when Scottish botanist



Arning, Japanese Immigrants in quarantine.

John Horne [1835-1905], long time director of the Pamplemousses Botanic Garden (today the SSR Botanical Gardens), visited Hawai'i. After having lived in Mauritius since 1860, Horne was recruited by colonial administrator Arthur Hamilton-Gordon in 1876 to undertake a botanical survey of Fiji, which had just been annexed by the British in late October 1874. As part of his circumnavigatory return to Mauritius, Horne stayed in Hawai'i for over a month, where he was feted by local planters and politicians, and invited to speak at local planter and scientific societies. At a meeting of planters presided over by Godfrey Rhodes, Horne responded to questions relating to Indian indentured migration to Mauritius for over two hours, describing migrants' origins in India, their general rate of pay, their qualities as colonists and their general disposition to servile labour.

Once contract labour was institutionalised in Hawai'i by the mid 1880s, the lessons of Mauritius shifted to land use and cane variety. Horne was the bridge between these two topics. Hawai'i-based British planter Theophilus Harris Davies [1834-98] maintained a correspondence with Horne after his departure, receiving in 1884 a shipment of 26 varieties of sugar cane, 17 surviving. Another significant visitor from Mauritius arrived in 1891, when Arthur T. Robinson undertook his own global sugar survey. Well furnished with



HARVESTING SUGAR.

letters of introduction, Robinson conducted a comprehensive tour of plantations on Kaua'i, O'ahu, Maui and the Island of Hawai'i, putatively working for a company based in Mauritius. At a meeting of sugar planters that year, he contended that the cultivation of sugar in Hawai'i was "quite equal to the practice" in Mauritius, though Hawai'i had better logistics of transport and far higher labour costs.

With a sugar complex worked by indentured labour firmly in place, the circulation of plantation knowledge between Hawai'i and Mauritius intensified through the institutionalisation of sugar planter journals and networking. By 1895, the Mauritian model as articulated in Hawai'i had become defined by extremely cheap labour and the disaggregation of production. During that year, an opponent to the dominance of what is now remembered as the "Big Five" sugar factors claimed that Mauritius offered an alternate approach, based on small landholdings. Today, the two archipelagos retain remarkable similarities, economically—as major tourist

destinations and prime luxury property markets—as much as socially—in terms of the structuring role of indenture in the identity construction of substantial proportions of the contemporary population. The political futures of both islands was divergent: while Mauritius became an independent country in 1968, Hawai'i witnessed the overthrow of its monarchy in 1893, annexation by the U.S. as an organized territory in 1898, and US statehood in 1959. Given the radically divergent political histories of both sites, our understanding of the significant historical similarities between both contexts is best recovered through renewed attention to past connections. Hawai'i and Mauritius do not merely evidence similar legacies of nineteenth-century sugar capitalism: their histories were intimately connected by the operation of planter knowledge and networks across typical framings of imperial space.