

Call for papers Indentured labour in European colonies Resistance and memory(ies) (19th– 21st centuries)

This international conference is incorporated within the framework of research theme 4 of the LabEx EHNE (Ecrire une Histoire Nouvelle de l'Europe) and of the STARACO project (Statuts « Race » et Couleurs dans l'Atlantique de l'Antiquité à nos jours), and is organised by the CRHIA (Research Centre for International and Atlantic History at the Universities of Nantes and La Rochelle), with the support of Aapravasi Ghat (UNESCO World Heritage).

The progressive abolition of slave trade and slavery in European colonies is the origin of new international migrations of workers, particularly during the second part of the 19th century. To meet the needs of an economy of plantation or to build the main infrastructures of their colonies, Europeans, mainly English, French, Portuguese and Dutch people have recourse to free immigrant workers. This is what we name the system of the “engagisme” or indenture (which means “contract”) or even coolie trade for the indentured labourers from Asia (“coolie” comes from the Tamil and means “salary”).

These new movements of indentured labourers are required by the colonial expansion of Europe but also by the difficult socioeconomic conditions in countries of origin of indentured workers, which are powerful factors of departure. So, Javanese, Japanese, Tonkinese, African, Malagasy but above all Chinese and Indian people leave their country of origin to come to work, in exchange for a salary, in the colonies of America and of the Indian Ocean but also in the territories recently conquered by the imperial powers in Africa, in Asia and in the Pacific Ocean.

Many of these workers will not finally be repatriated in their country of origin as planned in their contract and will settle in the colony or in a nearby colony at the end of their contract. It is particularly true for the indentured servants captured in Africa who do have no more connections in their country of origin and who do not benefit from the protection of any European powers.

If in certain cases, the indentured labourers succeed in escaping from a difficult life and to build a better future in other place, many immigrants will not find in indenture what they were looking for. Some will fight against European authorities, from the recruitment and the travel to the colonies. The rebellions which burst on ships transporting immigrants, in particular between Africa and the Indian Ocean are violent and reflect the coercive character of the indenture system. Likewise the situation of indentured labourers in the host colony is not generally enviable. Uprooted, badly considered, sometimes badly treated, some of them will refuse the obligations of their status and will try - by the violence, the runaway or even the suicide - to free itself from a system comparable to slavery. Others will fight against the colonial system and a predefined European model and will try to maintain their religion, their language, their culture as well as a type of communitarianism.

In comparison to the important historiography dedicated to slave trade or to slavery, the history of indenture, a large-scale migratory phenomenon, remains largely understudied. Nevertheless, indenture is a major fact with regards to European colonial history and to the identity construction of the old colonial territories, overseas Europe and Europe “by itself”. Recent works and an international conference held in Bordeaux in May, 2015 (organisation: Céline Flory (CNRS/CIRESC)) within the framework of 5th “Meeting of the Atlantic Ocean” allowed to make a historiographical

evaluation of the situation and to work on a global perspective of the phenomenon by crossing the comparative reflections and by passing beyond studies focused on a group of migrants or on a host colony.

In keeping with these new approaches, this conference studies the phenomenon through the issue of the resistances and their impacts on the relations between European settlers and indentured, on the indenture system itself, and more widely on the identity construction of the colonial and postcolonial society.

To work on the resistances implies to revisit the question of freedom and indenture system, its coercive character and the identity labourers issue. It is also to consider the history of the indenture as regards the forms of resistances and to work on their typology. Furthermore, this conference aims at opening a second field of research, very developed for slave trade and slavery, but almost missing in the historiography of indenture: the question of the memory(ies). During decades, the indenture system was only considered as a prolongation of slave trade and slavery torments, at least in popular memory. Moreover, there is a sort of confusion and even of assimilation between the two phenomena. Furthermore, the social separations inherited from this migratory phenomenon still persist in postcolonial societies, particularly in overseas Europe. Questionings and identical demands are many among the descendants of indentured labourers. Revisited, deconstructed, “over-promoted”, reinvented, the memory of the indenture is a political and societal instrument very important today and deserves that historians take interest in it. The conference is also an opportunity to list the historical sites of the indenture system, in postcolonial territories, in country of origin of the indentured labourers in Africa and in Asia but also in overseas Europe and to be interested in the promotion of this heritage. This process of *patrimonialisation* represents a major memory issue.

Thematic axes

The committee will particularly encourage the papers which deal with a long-term and comparative analysis. The papers could focus on one of the following main themes:

- Recruitment terms in the country of origin
- Revolts and rebellions on board
- Strategies and forms of resistances in the colony
- Typology of the resistances
- Abuses and resistances
- Actors of the resistance
- Resistances and foreign protection
- Indentured labourers and colonial power / Indentured workers and colonial society
- Identity, culture, religion and communitarian attitude
- Transmission processes among the families of indentured workers
- Processes of reconstruction, forgetting, “over promotion”, negation
- Commemorations
- Identical and community demands
- Communitarianism and social separation linked to these migratory phenomena
- Memory as balance of power between social groups with an indentured background
- Role of the policies and the European states in the history and the construction of the memory of this migratory phenomenon
- Commemorative sites / rehabilitation and heritage promotion.

Submission criteria

Abstracts (limited to 500 words in French or in English), with a brief CV (one page), have to be sent to Virginie Chaillou-Atrous: labexehne4@univ-nantes.fr before April 15th, 2016.

The conference will be held in Nantes on October 20th and 21st, 2016.

Scientific committee

- Virginie Chaillou-Atrous (CRHIA / LabEx EHNE / Université de Nantes)
- Céline Flory (CNRS / Mondes Américains / CERMA / CIRESC)
- Hubert Gerbeau (Aix-Marseille Université)
- Antonio de Almeida Mendes (CRHIA / CIRESC / Université de Nantes)
- Bernard Michon (CRHIA / Université de Nantes)
- Jacques Weber (CRHIA / Université de Nantes)
- Michèle Marimoutou (CRHIA / Université de Nantes)
- Myriam Cottias (CNRS)
- Pieter Emmer (Université de Leyde)
- Singaravélou (Université Bordeaux Montaigne)
- Satyendra Peerthum (Aapravasi Ghat / Université de Maurice)

Organisation

- Virginie Chaillou-Atrous (CRHIA / Labex EHNE / Université de Nantes)
- Aurélie Cloarec (Gestionnaire / CRHIA)
- Thomas Burel (Ingénieur valorisation / CRHIA)
- Aanor Le Mouél (Ingénieure projet STARACO / CRHIA / Université de Nantes)