

GOVERNING RIGHTS IN LA RÉUNION: SOCIAL LEGISLATION, LANDHOLDING, HOUSING
AND THE MAKING OF FRANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, 1946-2009

by
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Indian Ocean Area



Réunion
Island

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List of Abbreviations

ADR	Archives Départementales de La Réunion
AESD	Archives de l'Evêché de St Denis
AHC	Archives de l'Histoire Contemporaine, Institut de Sciences Politiques, Paris
AMSD	Archives Municipales de St Denis
AMSP	Archives Municipales de St Paul
CAC	Archives Nationales, Fontainebleau
CARAN	Archives Nationales, Paris
DDE	Bibliothèque de la Direction Départementale de l'Equipement, St Denis
SIDR	Archives de la Société Immobilière de La Réunion

Abstract

The study of governance is often divided between formal state institutions and informal types of authority. Some scholars focus on state institutions: engineers, bureaucrats and politicians. Others concentrate on so-called “traditional” authority: landed relations and family networks, usually seen as motors for corrupting state resources. Instead of such divisions, this dissertation examines how different modes of governance interacted, to rethink conventional understandings of how state authority works. The peculiar modern history of Réunion Island – a sugar-growing French colony in the Indian Ocean whose multiracial inhabitants were French citizens from 1870, which became a French Department in 1946, and is now the only European Union region in the Southern Hemisphere – creates an opportune site for considering how different ruling practices interact.

From 1946 all French laws were to apply in Réunion Island, where Creole agricultural workers were dominated by white landowning minority who also ran the local government. Through historical archive research and ethnographic fieldwork the dissertation examines how Metropolitan French and Réunionnais politicians, civil servants, property owners, landlords, tenants and families claimed and reconfigured French social rights in rural areas, shantytown and social housing neighborhoods in Réunion’s capital St Denis. The dissertation demonstrates how the underlying logics of Réunionnais governance, based on landlord-tenant obligation, reshaped the French

administration in Réunion, which became a participant in landlord-tenant relations rather than assimilating Réunion to French forms of governance.

The governance of social legislation in Réunion is an important case study combining histories of socialism, the demise of colonial empires and the rise of state interventions overseas. The dissertation extends conventional interpretations of French colonialism by examining how the project of French social rights for colonial political loyalty endured in Overseas France - beyond the 1962 Algerian defeat when France is considered to have “decolonized.” French welfare eventually transformed class and racial divides in Réunion, enabling Creole descendants of Africans, Malagasy, Indians and Europeans to create meanings about being French in Overseas France and eventually to appropriate the governance of French welfare systems themselves. The dissertation thus provides a new, comparative overseas perspective for understanding racial difference and social equality in contemporary France.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In June 2009 I attended the closing ceremony of the Institut des Hautes Etudes en Defense Nationale senior seminar, run by the French Ministry of Defense. It took place in the long, gilt-decorated and mirrored ballroom of St Denis city hall in Réunion.¹ The company was illustrious; the two most important people presiding over the ceremony were the Prefect of Réunion and the General of France's Southern Indian Ocean forces, both wearing their tropical white dress uniforms. The first rows of the audience were filled with the forty seminar participants, dressed in their best suits. They all had senior management positions in civil service, religious organizations, business, military or medical professions in France, Mauritius, the Comoros Islands and Madagascar. I was present as a member of the "junior" defense seminar; we had come to listen to the final presentation of the day and to enjoy the lavish cocktail reception afterwards.

The final group presentation of the senior seminar was entitled "What place for the French overseas territories in French strategy, especially defense and security policy?" The group's presenter was Mr. Jean-Pierre Philip, a professor of economics at the University of Réunion and a local media pundit. Mr. Philip began his talk proclaiming that France is the second biggest maritime power after the US in terms of area, thanks to Overseas France. France's national territory extends from St Pierre-et-Miquelon off the

¹ IHEDN (Institut de Hautes Etudes en Defense Nationale) is the French Defense Ministry's educational wing. It runs political science seminars in Paris and the French provinces for young people aged 20-30 alongside a prestigious seminar for managers and high-ranking military officers (above colonel) for people aged 35-55. In 2009 Réunion Island was one of the French provinces designated to host the IHEDN junior and senior seminars.

coast of Newfoundland in Canada to the Kerguelen Islands and New Amsterdam in the Southern Ocean; from French Polynesia and the Society Islands in the Pacific to the French Antilles and French Guyana in the Caribbean, not to mention its territories in the southwest Indian Ocean: the Glorious Islands in the Mozambique Channel, the island of Mayotte in the Comoros archipelago and, of course, Réunion Island.

Mr. Philip enumerated how these overseas territories are strategically important for France's future, and even for the present: French naval vessels stationed in Réunion Island had recently participated in anti-piracy operations off the Seychelles Islands, a thousand miles further north. He then ranged over the "added value" that Overseas France could give to other areas of French policy: from its marine resources and biodiversity to its developing capacities in specialized research. Overseas France was important for political stability in the regions neighboring these tiny French territories. It would also help maintain international francophone culture. In conclusion, said Mr. Philip, "Overseas France is the transmission antenna for the French exception."²

Mr. Philip's rhetorical exuberance about France's glorious and natural relationship with Overseas France, which proved something exceptional about France's ability to maintain a worldwide political presence, was too much to resist. In the Q & A section I stood up, and disingenuously asked whether economists are able to measure if the cost of subsidizing French welfare in Overseas France correlates with its strategic importance to France? My query was insincere because I did not want an answer; rather I wanted to provoke Mr. Philip into admitting the mechanisms of the link between France

² The notion of "French exceptionalism" is deeply embedded in the nation's self-image and in a range of political and academic discourses which are explored in Tony Chafer and Emmanuel Godin, *The French exception* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

and its overseas territories, especially in the very Republican French context of the IHEDN seminar. M Phillip replied cogently, but defensively, as I expected: “Yes La Réunion costs [France] 5 billion Euros per year, yes the [entire] Overseas France budget is 16 billion Euros, but these costs cannot be separated out (*ils ne sont pas modularisables*).” After having numerically separated the budget of Réunion from the budget of Overseas France for me, M Philip then underlined that in the Republican French logic, these costs cannot be separated ideologically.

I was most surprised at the audience’s defensive reaction to my question about France’s role overseas. A man took the floor and reminded the audience that French Guyana “had done nothing for France for 300 years and then it turned out to be an ideal place for launching space rockets. So watch out before you say anything about the economic cost of Overseas France!” A woman added “we shouldn't say France *in* the Overseas territories, but the France *of* the Overseas territories” (*on ne devrait pas dire la France à l'outre-mer but de l'outre-mer, des outre-mers*)." The entire assembly gave her a round of applause for underlining that France’s Overseas territories were so fundamentally French that one shouldn’t talk of a French presence *in* them, but more of the Frenchness that emanated *from* them.

The following week, I went to the St Denis ravine, not more than a mile away from St Denis city hall, to make a third interview with a Réunion Islander named Nelson Dijoux. Since it was the month of June, when I passed the church of Notre Dame de la Deliverance, there were Catholic first communions being celebrated. The girls outside the church were all dressed in white dresses, and the boys wore smart black trousers and white shirts. Turning on to the quiet Bas de la Rivière road which leads to Nelson

Dijoux's house, men standing in the shade of the Chinese grocery store looked on as a woman walked by dressed in a kanga and holding a baby to her chest. A child walked in the opposite direction towards the city council sports centre with his fencing kit in a long bag on his shoulder. As I drove along the St Denis river road, women washed their clothes in the river, and dried them along the rocks – an increasingly rare site in Réunion, but Bas de la Rivière has a lot of comparatively poorer French migrants from Mayotte Island. The road crossed the river on a narrow bridge made of clanking sheets of metal, just wide enough for the car. On the other side of the river I passed a Hindu temple before arriving at Nelson Dijoux's house, the last house before the road ended. He was waiting for me with his wife, dressed in an old green blazer half-eaten by damp, ragged shorts, and new flip flops.

Nelson Dijoux and his family live in a different way to most Réunion Islanders. They live in a house built from river rocks and cement, on land belonging to the city council. Their house has a rough floor as well as cable TV, and their front and back yard contains all manner of useful objects in case of need. Their garden has fruit trees and a fish pond; far removed from most of the other Réunion Islanders I knew who either lived in professionally built villas or who lived in social housing.

Mr. Dijoux had come from a family of sharecroppers in rural Réunion. When they were thrown off their land in the 1950s, he had moved to St Denis and become a committed member of the Réunion Island Communist party, which had sought Réunion's independence from France. He had been a passionate CGTR trade union militant and presided over its marches in St Denis – to the extent that no-one wanted to employ him anymore, he said. Thirty years later, Mr. Dijoux was now a deeply religious Catholic

committed to brotherly love and peace. However, our conversations about his radical past invariably brought a passionate glint into his eyes. As Mr. Dijoux walked me back to my car after my last interview, he stopped in the middle of the road and looked at me with this same fire in his eyes. “We could have had a real revolution here! We could have overthrown the capitalists! All it would have taken was a loss of 10% of the Réunionnais population! We could have made a land reform.”

When I talked to Mr. Dijoux about land, it transpired that he did not own his land. He had built his house on land belonging to the St Denis city council. In the past, many poor Réunion Islanders had done the same. They had worked as sugar cane sharecroppers or agricultural workers on land belonging to richer landowners who had the monopoly of landholding on the island. The poor had built houses on other people’s land. If they were loyal workers who voted for the landowners’ choice, the local landowner could grant workers plots of land for themselves.

Nowadays most poor Réunion Islanders who do not own their houses are able to live in social housing. Yet the St Denis city council had not built social housing in the St Denis ravine, which was supposed to be a protected natural area. The city council tolerated the presence of Nelson Dijoux and his neighbors. The city council had even built a neighborhood meeting hall and a basketball court in the ravine, to curry favor with voters at election time. What did it mean to live for free on city council land? Would tenants have political obligations in return? While sharecropping no longer exists in Réunion, and sugar cane farming has vastly diminished, in Nelson Dijoux’s neighborhood, it appeared that relations of political obligation and gifts of land between landlords and tenants still existed in urban areas.

As I left Mr. Dijoux and his wife who waved me off from the edge of the road, I thought: how could it have been that Nelson Dijoux was now a radical exception to most Réunion Islanders? Why did the vast majority stop supporting independence movements? How could it now be unthinkable to question the political and moral link between Réunion Island and France? France's presence in Réunion was not only normal for the pro-Republican upper crust in Réunion, but also for much poorer Réunion Islanders who told me that when they were growing up in the 1960s "like all Creoles I thought that France was super, immense, you know, the dream." I wondered to what extent the arrival of the French administration in Réunion from 1946 had been able to change the social and economic relations which were structured around the sugar cane agriculture and land monopolies? By becoming a French Overseas Department, had property relations in Réunion really become as French as Metropolitan France?

Frequently from 2006-2008 when I talked of my research about the idea of France in Réunion, Réunion Islanders would give me a quixotic look: what was there to question? There is little notion of imperial debris here. The "ruins of empire" and an "implacable ... disregard, and abandonment" by France in Réunion seem absent.³ All Réunion Islanders admit that the island has its own political and regional identity. But they consider that it is part of France and they intend that it stays that way.

This dissertation investigates how the French policy of granting social legislation in return for political loyalty was used in Réunion. It asks how the links between Metropolitan and Overseas France became naturalized, and what the role of French social legislation was in this. It also examines how social legislation was appropriated by

³ Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008).

different Réunion Islanders and Metropolitan French to further their own political and social interests. Was French social legislation able to resolve the fundamental inequalities of the island's plantation-based economic and social systems by legally assimilating Réunion into France?

I. Literature review

i. Governance, governments, governmentality

The study of governance is often divided between formal state institutions on one hand, and informal types of authority on the other. While some scholars focus on state technologies and institutions, studying engineers, bureaucrats and politicians, others have concentrated on so-called “traditional” authority and examined landed relations or family networks. These forms of governance are sometimes even opposed to each other, with the latter types of authority seen as vehicles for the corruption of state resources. This dissertation does not rely on artificial divisions between formal and informal or rational and corrupt governance. Rather, it studies the interaction of many different forms of governance to broaden conventional understandings of the workings of state authority. The peculiar modern history of Réunion Island – a sugar-growing French colony in the Indian Ocean whose multiracial inhabitants were French citizens from 1870, which legally became a French Department in 1946, and is now the only European Union region in the Southern Hemisphere – creates an opportune site for reconsidering multiple domains of ruling practices in the same framework.

By using historical archive research and ethnographic fieldwork the dissertation tracks how Metropolitan French and Réunionnais politicians, civil servants, property

owners, landlords, tenants and families conceived, claimed and reconfigured French social rights. The dissertation reveals the underlying logics of Réunionnais governance, social rights, racial distinction and the political projects of Overseas France which motivated these different groups to reshape governance through French social legislation in shantytown and social housing neighborhoods in Réunion's capital St Denis.

From 1946 all French laws were to apply in Réunion Island, where the majority of Réunionnais were agricultural workers, dominated by a minority white factory and landholding elite who also ran the local government. This dissertation examines how the meanings, practices and material forms of French social legislation were shaped and transformed through the interactions of these formal and informal governing authorities in Réunion.

On March 14 1946 the French National Assembly voted to transform the French colonies of Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyana to French Overseas Departments. Their colonial legal regimes would be changed into French law.⁴ However, applying French social legislation to Réunion would not prove to be straightforward or uncontested. The application of French social laws and worker equality in a fundamentally unequal plantation society would call into question the privileges of the landowning Creole elites, a powerful minority. "The sugar barons and landowners have always had everything [for themselves]... administration, justice, armed forces, in short the efficient apparatus of the state" declared Réunion deputy Dr Raymond Vergès in 1946 discussions of Réunion's political future with France. He contrasted the elites'

⁴ Article 2 of the March 14 law postponed the application of the Overseas departments' legal assimilation to January 1 1947. This was later postponed to March 31 1948. In fact it would take decades for the assimilation of social legislation to occur in Réunion

governing power with the mass of the laboring population, who had no rights except “killing themselves with work, and keeping quiet.”⁵

In 1946 the French colonial authorities did not dominate social and labor relations in Réunion even though there was a French colonial governor and small colonial administration. Rather, the numerically small landed Creole elite – socially white Réunionnais landowners and factory owners whose families had lived on the island for generations – dominated political life, positions in the colonial administration, transport management and the import and export business.⁶ The vast majority of Réunionnais cultivated sugar cane and geranium or worked in the sugar factories. They were Creoles with mixed African, Chinese, European and Indian origins. These Réunionnais usually did not own the land they worked or lived on; they rented or sharecropped it from large landowners. Landlords usually gave employment, so labor and tenancy arrangements were closely linked. In short local systems of patronage and obligation structured social and political relations between Creole elites and workers.

From 1870 there was no official distinction between citizenship and subjecthood for anyone in the “Old Colonies” of Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, or the inhabitants of the four oldest communes in Senegal. All the inhabitants of these places, regardless of race or religion, were able to vote and send their deputies to the French National Assembly in Paris. They were colonial citizens who had political representation in France, but French laws only applied to them through special decree. Their deputies

⁵ Debates in the Assemblée Nationale Constituante 1st session 24/3/1946

⁶ Unlike Martinique (whose Creole elite class is known as *béké*, and is racially white), in Réunion there were more possibilities for colored Réunion Islanders to join the ranks of the upper class Creole elite from the 19th century. See David Gagneur, "Prosopographie des élites politiques d'une colonie républicaine : La Réunion 1870-1914" (PhD dissertation, Université de La Réunion 2005).

were able to vote for social laws which applied in Metropolitan France, but did not apply in the colonies. These deputies were always from the socially white Creole elite, however. Réunion's 1946 legal assimilation with France also required French administrative services, adding further layers of political and social power to the already existing landed, commercial and colonial political relations in Réunion.

There is a rich body of work on colonial processes of control which can be helpful in understanding legitimacy and governance in colonial conditions.⁷ Yet from 1946 Réunion was legally assimilated with France, its inhabitants having the same social and political rights as Metropolitan French. Not all Réunion Islanders considered that the island was still under a colonial power after 1946.⁸ On the contrary, historians of Réunion consider that the process of "decolonization" immediately began when Réunion gained the legal status as part of France.⁹

Which analytical framework can take into account these different political and social relations in Réunion when government was both colonial and not, and was concerned with the French nation-state although not completely defined by it?¹⁰ The

⁷ Dagmar Engels, Shula Marks, and German Historical Institute in London., "Contesting colonial hegemony : state and society in Africa and India," British Academic Press ; German Historical Institute London.

⁸ Edmond Maestri, Université de la Réunion., and Réunion. Conseil général., eds., *1946 : La Réunion, département : regards sur la Réunion contemporaine : actes du colloque de Saint-Denis de la Réunion, organisée par l'Université de la Réunion, en collaboration avec le Conseil général de la Réunion, 6-10 décembre 1996* (Paris: L'Harmattan,1999). Yvan Combeau, ed. *La Réunion et l'océan Indien : de la décolonisation au XXIe siècle : actes du colloque de Saint-Denis de la Réunion, 23-24-25 octobre 2006* (Paris: Indes savantes,2007).

⁹ Combeau, ed. *La Réunion et l'océan Indien : de la décolonisation au XXIe siècle : actes du colloque de Saint-Denis de la Réunion, 23-24-25 octobre 2006.*

¹⁰ Whether one should study government or the state has been a debate in anthropology. See Phillip Abrams, "Notes on the difficulty of studying the state (1977)," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988); Fernando Coronil, *The magical state : nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); John L. Comaroff, "Reflections on the colonial state, in South Africa and elsewhere: Fractions, Fragments, Facts and Fictions," *Social Identities* 4, no. 3 (1998); Philip Richard D. Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The great arch : English state formation as cultural revolution* (Oxford

concept of governance permits a focus on the forms, content and detail of practices of rule without trying to define Réunion only as a plantation, colony or a nation-state.¹¹ The concept of governance can also help us to understand changing practices and interactions of rule over time. Some scholars interested in governance have studied “governmentality”; how administrations or institutions govern conduct, and control populations, through statistics, expertise, administrative assumptions and institutional control.¹² Others have questioned whether we can study formal institutional control in areas where state institutions may be absent, or do not have wide-ranging control (such as parts of colonial Africa or Réunion in 1946).¹³ Thus we need to also study “informal” institutions in Réunion alongside the arrival of the French administration.

Scholars with an interest in the anthropology of “corruption” study people’s moral view of the world and their rights in it, and how formal and informal types of governance are intertwined. These studies most frequently occur outside Europe, yet this corruption could just as easily be found in France. Identifying these local definitions of corruption is sometimes considered a goal in itself, which implies that a domain of untainted bureaucracy exists somewhere where “real”, rational governance is conducted.¹⁴ More interesting work does not search for “corruption” per se; rather, it examines how

[Oxfordshire] ; New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1985); A. Gupta and A. Sharma, "Globalization and postcolonial states," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006); A. Gupta, "Blurred boundaries - the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state," *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995). Rather than taking sides in this debate, I use governance as a way of moving analysis in and out of formal and informal governing institutions.

¹¹ Ilana Feldman, *Governing Gaza : Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008)

¹² Michel Foucault et al., *The Foucault effect : studies in governmentality : with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

¹³ Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940 : the past of the present*, New approaches to African history (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Max Weber, Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich, *Economy and society : an outline of interpretive sociology*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

administrations work on a daily level and how governance is embedded in informal local interactions.¹⁵ In Réunion, the governance of social legislation is strongly linked to neighborhood micro-politics, and to non-public landed relations between property owners, landlords and tenants. Far from merely identifying corruption in Réunion, this dissertation explores “uncivil politics” - the governance of social legislation within both bureaucracies and patron-client relations.¹⁶

ii. The problem of landholding

Although it was only 400 miles east of Madagascar, Réunion was an uninhabited volcanic island when Europeans discovered it in the 16th century along with its nearest island neighbor Mauritius. Reunion was colonized by French and Malagasy in the late 17th century, beginning trade and population movements between the Indian Ocean and France. The profitable cultivation of coffee, spices and indigo was the reason for introducing slavery in Réunion and Mauritius. Unlike in the French colonies of the Caribbean, slavery was not officially abolished in the French Indian Ocean colonies during the French Revolution.¹⁷ There were no massive slave revolts as in Haiti or

¹⁵ Italo Pardo, *Between morality and the law : corruption, anthropology and comparative society* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Dieter Haller and Cris Shore, *Corruption : anthropological perspectives, Anthropology, culture, and society* (London ; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2005); Giorgio Blundo and Pierre-Yves Le Meur, *The governance of daily life in Africa : ethnographic explorations of public and collective services*, African social studies series, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009); Giorgio Blundo and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Everyday corruption and the state : citizens and public officials in Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁶ Matthew Hull uses the idea of “uncivil politics” to understand informal ways of negotiating certain types of bureaucratic relationships Matthew Hull, "Uncivil politics and the appropriation of planning in Islamabad," in *Beyond Crisis: A Critical look at Contemporary Pakistan*, ed. Naveeda Khan (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁷ Claude Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage, 1794-1802 : le cas des colonies orientales, Ile de France (Maurice) et la Rêunion* (Paris: Karthala, 1998). Laurent Dubois and Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture., *A colony of citizens : revolution & slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Williamsburg Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Guadeloupe. After French defeats in the Napoleonic wars, in 1815 Mauritius became a British colony, and Réunion remained French.

After the 1848 abolition of slavery in France and its Empire, all freedmen and freedwomen were to be treated equally in front of the law. Yet the regime of freedom in a post-slavery society did not benefit all populations.¹⁸ Poor whites with small amounts of land in Réunion could no longer afford to cultivate land without slave labor. Some retreated into the mountainous interior of the island and subsistence agriculture, others remained small, unprofitable landowners.¹⁹ Slaves quickly purchased land in the years after emancipation but many quickly re-sold their land to Indian-origin workers at the end of the latter's indenture contracts.²⁰ The 1860s sugar cane depression affected all of these groups, as the French government agreed to favor sugar beet producers in Metropolitan France. Many smaller landowners in Réunion became deeply indebted to the island's only colonial bank. They were obliged to give their land to the bank which ended up with a property monopoly of cultivable land. The vast majority of Réunion's population became sharecroppers or laborers, and the majority of Réunion's cultivable land was concentrated among a minority of people.²¹ The continued importance of landed relations would resurge in debates and practices over social legislation a century later in 1946.

Despite the early arrival of French voting rights for Réunion Islanders, and the promise of legal assimilation into France in 1946, it is essential to understand the power

¹⁸ Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond slavery : explorations of race, labor, and citizenship in postemancipation societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Alexandre Bourquin and Hubert Gerbeau, *Histoire des Petits-Blancs de La Réunion : XIX^e-début XX^e siècle : aux confins de l'oubli*, Hommes et sociétés (Paris: Ed. Karthala, 2005).

²⁰ Richard Blair Allen, *Slaves, freedmen, and indentured laborers in colonial Mauritius*, African studies series ; 99 (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²¹ Sudel Fuma, *Un exemple d'impérialisme économique dans une colonie française au XIX^e siècle : l'Île de La Réunion et la société du Crédit foncier colonial*, Publications du CDRHR (Paris ; Saint-Denis: Harmattan ; Université de La Réunion, 2001).

of rural and urban landholders in Réunion. The arrival of French social legislation - social housing, shantytown clearance and rent controls - threatened to change this power, especially in urban areas. The introduction of social housing policies, and the threats they posed to landlords and property owners underlined the fact that the problems of post emancipation societies stretched far beyond the moment of the emancipation of slaves.²²

Landholding is a general term which can denote a holder, proprietor, or occupier of land. Understanding the importance of social legislation for landholding in Réunion requires appreciating types of landholding systems which emerged in Europe, in African colonial regimes, and in plantation societies, and combining analysis of each type.

Landholding and property in Europe have often been based on the forming of responsible citizens. Locke viewed private property as the central idea of society with the property-owning citizen becoming a responsible subject of a democratic polity.²³ This logic led European governments to encourage the social assimilation of the working classes through home ownership from the 19th century. Scholars of French history have studied how these early philanthropic schemes became large-scale housing projects in urban areas of Metropolitan France from the 1950s.²⁴ They have focused on how the urban environment of modernist social housing contributed to social problems which

²² Cooper, Holt, and Scott, *Beyond slavery : explorations of race, labor, and citizenship in postemancipation societies*.

²³ John Locke, "On Property," in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1690] 1964); J.G.A. Pocock, "Authority and property: The question of liberal origins," in *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on political thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁴ Rémy Butler and Patrice Noisette, *Le logement social en France 1815-1981 de la cité ouvrière au grand ensemble*, Fondations (Paris: La Découverte Maspéro, 1983); Rosemary Wakeman, *Modernizing the provincial city : Toulouse, 1945-1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

emerged in these neighborhoods, and have usually focused their attention on Paris.²⁵

From the 1950s, the French state intervened in Réunion with a similar logic, even though it had fewer financial resources than in Metropolitan France. It also used the same format of mass produced social housing and the *grands ensembles* construction method, albeit on a smaller scale.

Despite the arrival of French social legislation, prior Réunionnais concepts of tenancy agreements, squatting rights, and moral claims to land ownership endured in the post 1946 French regime.²⁶ Thus, the dissertation asks how the effects of French-style urban development in Réunion interacted with Réunionnais concepts of property ownership and appropriation.²⁷ Studies of colonial housing have explored urban development overseas although they sometimes focus more on Metropolitan architects, or on formal housing than on informal construction or worker housing.²⁸ Property owning,

²⁵ Bruno Levasseur, "National identity and everyday cultures in contemporary France: re-constructing Frenchness through 'Third Kind' representations of the *Cités* (1960-2000)," *Modern and Contemporary France* 17, no. 3 (2009); Amelia H. Lyons, "Des bidonvilles aux HLM: Le logement des familles algériennes en France avant l'indépendance de l'Algérie," *Hommes et Migrations*, no. 1264 (2006); Thibault Tellier, *Le temps des HLM 1945-1975. La saga urbaine des Trente Glorieuses*, Mémoires. Culture (Paris: Autrement, 2007); Annie Fourcaut, "Les premiers grandes ensembles. Ne pas refaire la banlieue?," *French Historical Studies* 27, no. 1 (2004); Annie Fourcaut, Emmanuel Bellanger, and Mathieu Flonneau, *Paris-banlieues. Conflits et solidarités historiographie, anthologie, chronologie, 1788-2006* ([Gréne]: Créaphis, 2007).

²⁶ Daniel de Coppet, "Land Owns People," in *Contexts and levels. Anthropological essays on hierarchy.*, ed. Daniel de Coppet R.H. Barnes, R.J. Parkins, *JASO Occasional Paper* (Oxford: JASO, 1985); C. M. Hann, *Property relations : renewing the anthropological tradition* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Tim Ingold, *The perception of the environment : essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The way of the masks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

²⁷ H. Morphy, "Colonialism, History and the Construction of Place: The Politics of Landscape in Northern Australia," in *Landscape, Politics and Perspectives*, ed. B. Bender (New York, Oxford: Berg, 1993); Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey, *Property in question : value transformation in the global economy*, English ed. (Oxford, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Berg, 2004).

²⁸ Zeynep Çelik, *Urban forms and colonial confrontations : Algiers under French rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Zeynep Çelik et al., *Walls of Algiers : narratives of the city through text and image* (Los Angeles; Seattle: Getty Research Institute In association with University of Washington Press, 2009); Paul Rabinow, *French modern : norms and forms of the social environment* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Gwendolyn Wright, *The politics of design in French colonial urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Thomas R. Metcalf, *An imperial vision : Indian*

social housing and the urban environment in Reunion must also be understood in the context of local landholding ideas.

Studies of landholding in rural Africa have often focused on the relationship between state-making, governance and the politics of land, which is relevant for understanding the interlinking of Réunionnais and French ideas of landholding. They have examined how different systems of property and land tenure existed inside and outside colonial regimes, and how such regimes attempted to shape “traditional” landholding, or make land reform. These studies have closely examined reciprocal types of landholding obligations between families, or patrons and clients.²⁹ These notions of reciprocal attachment over land are also important for understanding landholding in post-emancipation plantation societies, whether in post-abolition colonial Africa, the Caribbean, or the Indian Ocean. Here, scholars have examined the construction of post-emancipation societies and their definitions of public and political rights. Should governments enact land tenure reform for the freedmen, or make them landless laborers?³⁰

architecture and Britain's Raj, Oxford India paperbacks (New Delhi Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁹ T. O. Ranger, "The Invention of tradition in colonial Africa," in *The Invention of tradition*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Henrietta L. Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting down trees : gender, nutrition, and agricultural change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990*, Social history of Africa (Portsmouth, NH; London: Heinemann ; James Currey, 1994); Parker MacDonald Shipton, *Mortgaging the ancestors : ideologies of attachment in Africa*, Yale agrarian studies series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Donald S. Moore, *Suffering for territory : race, place, and power in Zimbabwe* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2005); Jocelyn Alexander, *The unsettled land : state-making & the politics of land in Zimbabwe, 1893-2003* (Oxford: James Currey ;, 2006). Holly Elisabeth Hanson, *Landed obligation : the practice of power in Buganda*, Social history of Africa, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

³⁰ Frederick Cooper, *From slaves to squatters : plantation labor and agriculture in Zanzibar and coastal Kenya, 1890-1925* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of freedom : Louisiana and Cuba after slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

Even though all Réunion Islanders could vote after 1870, whatever their race or religion, social perceptions of skin color, landholding power and the power of the “plantocracy” continued to fundamentally structure social and economic relations in Réunion, as they would in other plantation economies.³¹ Réunion’s regime of indentured labor did not end until 1936. The broadest social problem continued to be landowning, as the vast majority of Réunionnais descended from poor whites, slaves and indentured laborers continued to work as day laborers and sharecroppers on land they did not own.

In 1946 the possibility of applying French social legislation to Réunion promised to reshape land obligations. Social legislation was partly about new social rights and labor laws, and partly about urban property reform through the construction of worker housing.³² The control of landed relations and its importance for social and political life would affect how social legislation would be applied and understood in Réunion.

iii. Social rights in the French colonies

Studying social legislation in Réunion provides an important case study combining histories of socialism, the demise of a colonial empire and the rise of French state welfare interventionism overseas. Studying social legislation in Réunion from 1946 and after 1962 extends conventional interpretations of French colonialism. These have tended to consider demands for social rights in the colonies as a precursor to colonial nationalism

³¹ Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Caribbean transformations* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1974); *Sweetness and power : the place of sugar in modern history* (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 1985); Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The birth of African-American culture : an anthropological perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Jean Benoist, *Un développement ambigu. Structure et changement de la société réunionnaise* (St Denis: Fondation pour la recherche et le développement dans l’Océan Indien, 1983).

³² Turits has demonstrated the importance of landholding for the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, which was able to endure because of the peasants’ interest in becoming landowners. Richard Lee Turits, *Foundations of despotism : peasants, the Trujillo regime, and modernity in Dominican history* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

and independence. In contrast, demands for social rights in Réunion and the other Old colonies were predicated on closer assimilation with France. After 1962, when French colonialism is traditionally considered to have ended, France bound Réunion and the other Overseas Departments ever legally and politically closer. Despite France's policy of applying increased social rights in return for political loyalty, the governance of social legislation in Réunion was not merely a successful example of postcolonial French rule. Rather social legislation was reshaped by local Réunionnais distribution networks of state welfare altering its meanings and uses on the island.

Unlike Reunion, most of the inhabitants of France's colonies were not French citizens in the 19th century. Political and legal differences between French citizens and French colonial subjects were legislated around the perceived racial or religious distinctions of subject populations.³³ In 1936 the Metropolitan French 'Popular Front' governing coalition instituted a wave of significant social reform and worker rights. This had an important impact on worker demands in the French colonies, where colonial subjects demanded similar worker rights as Metropolitan French citizens. Some scholars have identified the colonial Popular Front movements as deeply influencing later colonial movements towards nationalism and decolonization.³⁴

Others have considered that we not must interpret the Popular Front or post-1946 demands for social rights as inevitably leading towards decolonization. Rather they were

³³ Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie : les métis de l'empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté*, Espace de l'histoire (Paris: Découverte, 2007).

³⁴ Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, *French colonial empire and the Popular Front : hope and disillusion* (New York, N. Y.: St. Mary's Press, 1999). Prosper Eve, *Tableau du syndicalisme à la Réunion de 1912 à 1968*, Cahiers de notre histoire no 23-24 (Saint-Denis: Editions CNH, 1991); *Le jeu politique à la Réunion de 1900 à 1939* (Paris; Saint-Denis: L'Harmattan ; Université de la Réunion, 1994). Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial citizens : republican rights, paternal privilege, and gender in French Syria and Lebanon*, History and society of the modern Middle East (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

moments of possibility for the meaning of France and its colonies.³⁵ French colonialism had become unstable thanks to subject populations mobilized by World War II. Leaders in France sought to rewrite the French constitution. Representatives from the French colonies were included in the discussions at the French Constituent Assembly in 1946.³⁶ France and its colonies would no longer be politically separate entities. Distinctions between French citizens, colonial citizens and colonial subjects would also be abolished. Instead, all inhabitants of the French Empire, now renamed the “French Union”, would benefit from a new, multinational, French citizenship. One could be a French citizen in Metropolitan France, or a French citizen in an ex-French colony in Africa. This was agreed in the new French Constitution of October 1946.³⁷

The inhabitants of the Old Colonies possessed both civil and political French citizenship. All but one of their deputies wanted immediate social citizenship. “After fraternity and liberty, we come to demand equality in front of the law, the equality of rights ... through the application of social laws” stated Gaston Monnerville, deputy for Guyana and future president of the French Senate.³⁸ They demanded the immediate legal assimilation of the Old Colonies to France. Their populations should have the same social equality as Metropolitan French workers.

³⁵ Frederick Cooper, "From imperial inclusion to republican exclusion? France's ambiguous postwar trajectory," in *Frenchness and the African diaspora : identity and uprising in contemporary France*, ed. Charles Tshimanga, Ch Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Burbank, Jane, and Frederick Cooper. 2008. Empire, droits et citoyenneté de 212 à 1946. *Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales* 63 (3):495-532; "Provincializing France," in *Imperial Formations and Their Discontents*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue (Santa Fe, N.M.: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007). Elizabeth Schmidt, "Anticolonial Nationalism in French West Africa: What Made Guinea Unique?," *African Studies Review* 52, no. 2 (2009).; Gary Wilder, "Untimely Vision: Aime Césaire, Decolonization, Utopia," *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009).

³⁶ Although there were two electoral colleges for citizens, and colonial populations were not numerically represented

³⁷ The specific constitution for Algeria was not agreed until 1947

³⁸ Debates in the Assemblée Nationale Constituante 1st session 14/3/1946 p.755

Shepard has suggested that after 1962, France made a breakpoint with colonization.³⁹ The continued existence of Overseas France, and especially Réunion, stands as important proof that this was not the case everywhere. One of the main authors of the Algerian decolonization in 1962, ex-Prime Minister Michel Debré, zealously continued to carry out a vision of French influence in Réunion until the late 1980s, in order to reinstate the power and influence of the French state in the Indian Ocean (see chapters 3 and 4). Debré used very similar colonial idioms that Shepard claims had ended in 1962. If the 1946-1962 period was a moment of possibility for France rather than an inevitable road to decolonization, I claim the post-1962 period and the politics of Overseas France should also be reconsidered. France did not simply become a post-colonial country in 1963, and the official borders of France did not suddenly shrink to Europe.

Wilder has described France and its colonies before 1962 as an “imperial nation state.” The Metropole and the colonies must be analyzed in the same framework, rather than separately.⁴⁰ His call is increasingly being acknowledged in French colonial history. However scholars of France after 1962 tend to frame the country as ‘post-colonial’ and they prefer to study the French colonial populations who immigrated to France. Apart from work on Antillean migration *to the Metropole*, scholars routinely pass over Overseas populations, and the existence of Overseas France, despite these populations

³⁹ Todd Shepard, *The invention of decolonization : the Algerian War and the remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁴⁰ Gary Wilder, *The French imperial nation-state : negritude & colonial humanism between the two world wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of empire : colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

being French.⁴¹ Conversely, Overseas France is also often studied in isolation. Scholars often pay scant attention to considering Overseas France and Metropolitan France in the same framework, nor with Overseas France and their surrounding countries. Rather, they imply that Overseas France is not exotic enough to be foreign and not “quite” France either.⁴²

Specifically, I propose that the study of contemporary France, especially French welfare policies, should be considered alongside the study of welfare in Overseas France, rather than separately.⁴³ It is not enough to study the colonial origins of modern French welfare institutions before 1962, without also considering their continuation in Overseas France after this period.⁴⁴ It is not enough to study culturally different uses of welfare only in Overseas or Metropolitan France.⁴⁵ France’s welfare budget in Overseas France is reason alone to include it in histories of the contemporary French welfare state. The history of the French project of welfare for political loyalty overseas, enacted by Michel Debré in Réunion after 1962, is the basis for understanding this continued, accepted, and financially significant French presence in Overseas France.

⁴¹ Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the nation : immigration, racism, and citizenship in modern France*, Critical studies in racism and migration (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁴² Peter Redfield, *Space in the tropics : from convicts to rockets in French Guiana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Pascal Duret and Muriel Augustini, "Sans l'imaginaire balnéaire, que reste-t-il de l'exotisme à La Réunion?," *Ethnologie Française* 22, no. 3 (2002).

⁴³ Timothy B. Smith, *France in crisis : welfare, inequality, and globalization since 1980* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Amelia H. Lyons, "Social welfare, French Muslims and decolonization in France: the case of the Fonds d'action sociale," *Patterns of Prejudice* 43, no. 1 (2009); Lyons, "Des bidonvilles aux HLM: Le logement des familles algériennes en France avant l'indépendance de l'Algérie."; Amelia H. Lyons, "The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Immigrants in France and the Politics of Adaptation during Decolonization," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 23(2006).

⁴⁵ M. Ticktin, "Where ethics and politics meet: The violence of humanitarianism in France," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006); Nicolas Roinsard, *La Réunion face au chômage de masse : sociologie d'une société intégrée* (Rennes [France]: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007); Eliane Wolff, *Quartiers de vie au jour le jour approche ethnologique des populations défavorisées de l'île de la Réunion*, Analyse institutionnelle (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991).

iv. Race in Metropolitan and Overseas France

Studies of race and difference in France have usually been constructed around the history of immigration and assimilation in Metropolitan France. The contemporary functioning of markers of race, ethnicity and religion in Overseas France has been much less studied. Yet the different, but complementary, history of Overseas France, especially Réunion Island, provides an important counter-perspective on the way that difference and diversity are commonly understood and practiced in the French Republic. In addition, studying the 20th century history of landless Creole populations in Réunion adds to the literature of population movements in the Indian Ocean after the end of the slave trade. However, studying Creoles in Réunion Island also poses some methodological problems which are different from conventional studies of race and French colonialism.

Overseas France provides an important counter-example to ideas about race in France. There has been an increasing focus on the politics of racial exclusion and religious intolerance in the French Republic. These narratives usually only focus on Metropolitan France and are often closely linked to the history of immigration in France. Sometimes it is implied that the ideologies of the French Republic are inherently racist, or are incapable of incorporating difference.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hafid Gafaïti, Patricia M. E. Lorcin, and David G. Troyansky, *Transnational spaces and identities in the francophone world*, France overseas : studies in empire and decolonization (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Charles Tshimanga, Ch Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom, *Frenchness and the African diaspora : identity and uprising in contemporary France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Cooper, "From imperial inclusion to republican exclusion? France's ambiguous postwar trajectory."; Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *The boundaries of the republic : migrant rights and the limits of universalism in France, 1918-1940* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Herrick Chapman and Laura Levine Frader, *Race in France : interdisciplinary perspectives on the politics of difference* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration, 'race' and ethnicity in contemporary France* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995); Sue Peabody and Tyler Edward Stovall, *The color of liberty : histories of race in France* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003).

Racism and exclusion are certainly not absent from Réunion, or other places in Overseas France.⁴⁷ All areas of Overseas France have been historic sites of immigration, if not forced labor and immigration continues in the contemporary period.⁴⁸ Social and ethnic diversity also varies widely across Overseas France. Despite this, the populations of Overseas France are French, and are educated in the same Republican tradition as their contemporaries in Metropolitan France. However ways of interpreting racial and religious diversity are different to Metropolitan France. Réunion's socially and racially cohesive atmosphere is locally recognized and celebrated, but it is not well-known in Metropolitan France. Perhaps this is because the racial diversity of Réunionnais renders them less easily recognizable than Caribbean French in the Metropole.⁴⁹

This dissertation suggests that the governance of social legislation in Réunion flattened racial and class divisions, enabling Republican welfare to be an important factor of social cohesion. I argue that in the absence of an identifiable racial majority in Réunion, the French state effectively acted as a mediator of race and class differences. This slowly enabled landless descendants of slaves and indentured laborers to obtain minimum social and health care, flattening social divisions. The Creole descendants of Africans, Malagasy, Indians and Europeans came to practice being French in Overseas

⁴⁷ Literature on the racial representation of Réunion Islanders includes Philippe Bessière, *Vingt décembre, le jour où la Réunion se souvient* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001); Rose-May Nicole, *Noirs, cafres et créoles : études de la représentation du non blanc réunionnais : documents et littératures réunionnaises 1710-1980* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); Lucette Labache, "La question de l'ethnicité à l'île de La Réunion : vers un melting-pot ?" (PhD dissertation, EHESS, 1996); Lucette Labache, Françoise Vergès, and Laurent Médéa, eds., *Identité et société réunionnaise : nouvelles perspectives et nouvelles approches* (Paris: Karthala, 2005); F. J. Laurent Medea, ed. *Kaf: Etude pluridisciplinaire* (St Denis: Zarlou Editions, 2009).

⁴⁸ Recent examples are of the Mahorais community in Réunion, and Comorian boat refugees in Mayotte. See also the special issue of *Ethnologie Française* on Overseas France. "Outre-mers : statuts, cultures, devenirs," *Ethnologie Française* 32, no. 4 (2002).

⁴⁹ Wilfrid Bertile and Alain Lorraine, *Une communauté invisible : 175,000 Réunionnais en France* (Paris: Karthala, 1996).

France through their appropriation and local governance of French welfare systems. The dissertation thus provides a new, comparative perspective for understanding racial difference and equality in contemporary France.

i. Histories and anthropologies of Réunion

Réunion Island is usually studied in splendid isolation. There have been relatively few historical studies of Réunion after 1946 in the broader political context of French decolonization, France's policies in Metropolitan France or elsewhere in Overseas France.⁵⁰ Studies of Réunion since 1946 have more often focused on the local developments that French departmentalization brought to the island, and the radical changes that this brought to the dominant form of rural life on the island, and to identity politics in general.⁵¹

Most historians of Réunion Island also use this model of rapid change to explain social life in Réunion. They also assume that after 1946 Réunion Islanders slowly became like the Metropolitan French in their political habits. As overt electoral fraud diminished, and ballot boxes were no longer stuffed in Réunion these historians imply that Réunion Islanders slowly assimilated into rational French-style political action.⁵² In contrast, this dissertation examines how political action in Réunion continued to be influenced by

⁵⁰ Combeau, ed. *La Réunion et l'océan Indien : de la décolonisation au XXI^e siècle : actes du colloque de Saint-Denis de la Réunion, 23-24-25 octobre 2006*; Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵¹ Benoist, *Un développement ambigu. Structure et changement de la société réunionnaise*; Labache, Vergès, and Médéa, eds., *Identité et société réunionnaise : nouvelles perspectives et nouvelles approches*; F. J. Laurent Medea, *Creolization and Social Identity in a neo-colonial setting: the case of Réunion*, (Bordeaux: Pretoria, Unisa Press and Bordeaux, 2007).

⁵² Yvan Combeau, *La vie politique à La Réunion, 1942-1963* (Paris: SEDES, 2001); Gilles Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du septentrion, 2006).

informal practices, including social relations which were strongly linked to rural landlord-tenant relations.

Recent studies on urban social relations in social housing in Réunion have been framed as a break with the past, than a continuation of previous forms of landlord-tenant relations.⁵³ While anthropologists and historians of Réunion have studied landholding practices these have usually been focused on property holding and inheritance in rural Réunion.⁵⁴ The relations that tenants and sharecroppers held with property owners have been largely passed over. Excellent studies of urban architecture in Réunion, and the history and anthropology of housing have also passed over the history of urban landholding holding in Réunion and the rise of social housing – even though 25 % of Réunion Islanders now live in social housing.⁵⁵

This dissertation attempts to combine historical and anthropological concerns with rural and urban forms of political and social life in Réunion. It aims to understand how these affected Réunion Islanders' acceptance of the French administration in Réunion, and how the French administration was transformed Réunion Islanders without

⁵³ Georges Baronce, " Identité et délinquance à la Réunion : approche géographique du phénomène de la délinquance en corrélation avec une nouvelle variable explicative : l'identité spatiale" (PhD dissertation, Université de La Réunion, 2010); F. J. Laurent Medea, "La délinquance juvénile à la Réunion," (St Denis: Region Reunion, 2007).

⁵⁴ Jean Mas, "Droit de propriété et paysage rural de l'Ile de Bourbon-La Réunion" (Université Paris 1, 1971); Bernard Chérubini, ed. *Le monde rural à la Réunion : mutations foncières, mutations paysagères* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); Hélène Paillat-Jarousseau, *Une terre pour cultiver et habiter: anthropologie d'une localité de l'île de la Réunion*, Collection Alternatives rurales (Paris Budapest Torino: l'Harmattan, 2001).

⁵⁵ Conseil d'architecture d'urbanisme et d'environnement de La Réunion and Jean-Denis Compain, *350 ans d'architecture à l'île de la Réunion : un panorama réalisé par le CAUE* (Saint Denis CAUE de la Réunion, 2005); Wolff, *Quartiers de vie au jour le jour approche ethnologique des populations défavorisées de l'île de la Réunion*; Jean Mas, "Des habitations à l'habitat: propos errants sur un foncier en tous ses états," in *Le monde rural à la Réunion : mutations foncières, mutations paysagères*, ed. Bernard Chérubini (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); Laurence Goudron, "Le logement à La Réunion de 1949 à 1973 " (Masters dissertation, Université de La Réunion, 2003); Michel Watin, "Habiter : approche anthropologique de l'espace domestique à La Réunion" (University of La Reunion, 1981).

positing either a fundamental break with Réunion's past, or a straightforward assimilation in to Metropolitan French political forms.

II. Racial distinctions in Réunion

Historians of colonialism have often studied anthropological and administrative representations of colonial populations, to understand the ideologies of colonial rule and racial distinctions.⁵⁶ This dissertation focuses on the Creole descendants of slaves, indentured laborers and poor whites from these places. However, unlike other French colonies, it is very difficult to make simple racial classifications about these Réunion Islanders. Slavery transported large numbers of people with different African and Malagasy origins to Réunion. Post 1848 indentured labor brought tens of thousands of people from the Indian subcontinent, Eastern Africa, the Comoros Islands, Madagascar, Rodrigues, Indochina, New Caledonia, and China through 1936. This enabled intermarriage between working people from many different backgrounds.

Racial classification was also difficult in the 19th century. In 1863, Desiré Charnay, a French anthropologist, came to Réunion to do an anthropometric study of local racial "types" who were not part of the "white" population. Charnay took photos of clearly uncomfortable naked and semi-naked men and women, some with clear marks of chains on their ankles fifteen years after the official end of slavery. He used the categories of Malagasy, Mozambique, Creole, Indian, Annamite and Chinese to classify

⁵⁶ Spencer D. Segalla, *The Moroccan soul : French education, colonial ethnology, and Muslim resistance, 1912-1956*, France overseas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). William B. Cohen, *The French encounter with Africans : white response to blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Imperial identities : stereotyping, prejudice and race in colonial Algeria*, Society and culture in the modern Middle East (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995). Pascal Blanchard and Association connaissance de l'histoire de l'Afrique contemporaine., *L'autre et nous : scènes et types* (Paris: Syros : ACHAC, 1995).

these working people, already simplifying their diverse origins.⁵⁷ By 1946 some of these racial categories – Mozambique, Annamite - were no longer in use. Others – Kaf, Zoreil, and Zarab – were more frequently used in local racial vocabularies, partly because of the arrival of free migrant populations had arrived in Réunion from Western India (especially Bombay) and Metropolitan France. Free populations from India – Zarabs - typically started work as coolies, peddlers or cloth traders; Metropolitan French often worked in the administration on the Island.⁵⁸

After Réunion became a French Overseas Department in 1946, the French administration tried to analyze the Creole population in a 1952 INSEE survey. French officials found it very difficult to make clear distinctions of the island's highly mixed-race working class population.⁵⁹

In 1952 Réunion Island had 274,370 inhabitants, of whom 4,775 people were foreign-born, probably from China, British India and Madagascar. The administration estimated that there were 15,000 poor French-origin and socially white Petit Blancs. These people typically lived in the rural, mountainous interior of Reunion, in areas where sugar cane could not be cultivated. In addition to these poor whites, the administration guessed there were around 1,000 or so Metropolitan French (Zoreys). There was also the Creole economic elite (Grand Blancs) although the administration did not count them.

The administration then attempted to account for all the “Asian” population together - in the French parlance this meant free Indian and Chinese migrants although

⁵⁷ Sudel Fuma and Jean-Claude Carpanin Marimoutou, *Chambre noire, chants obscurs Texte imprimée photographies anthropométriques de Désirée Charnay types de la Réunion, 1863* (Saint-Denis-de-la-Réunion: Musée Léon-Dierx, 1995).

⁵⁸ Ho Hai Quang, *38 chefs d'entreprise de la Réunion témoignent* (St André: Azalées Editions, 2001).

⁵⁹ CAC 19940180/9 Préfecture de La Réunion, Situation démographique de La Réunion, 01/06/1957

some of their children were naturalized as French. The administration estimated 6,000 individuals ‘of the pure yellow race’ who worked in the food trade and 4,000 Indians or Pakistanis who worked in the cloth trade. This idea of Chinese racial “purity” was shorthand for counting the shopkeepers who worked in commerce and came from Cantonese backgrounds, rather than the Hakka-speaking indentured laborers who had arrived earlier in Réunion.

The 1952 administration thus classified approximately 40,000 people as racially “identifiable” in Réunion. It was obliged to account for the rest – 230,000 people - as *métisse* or “mixed race”. The Prefect reported “these individuals comprise the majority of the population. They are French citizens and have civil rights. The mixing between whites, blacks [i.e. African and Indian] and yellows has been general and in this population has given a great variety of ethnic and color characteristics.” In an attempt to make the population more “legible” the administration listed people’s occupations.⁶⁰

Agricultural laborers	26.7%
Undeclared	17.0%
Non-agricultural workers	16.9%*
Sharecroppers	10.4%
Independent [workers]	7.8%
[Landowners]	7.7%
Other	4.8%
Administrators	4.6%
Private sector workers	3.3%
Fishermen	0.8%

* Construction workers, woodworkers, seamstress, domestic servants

Despite these neat statistics, 17% of this Réunionnais working population was classified as “undeclared”, and 26% agricultural laborers were often seasonal workers. The Prefect

⁶⁰ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state : how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale agrarian studies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

commented that in Réunion there were “almost 100,000 people with few resources and with few reserves, working a few months a year. This group of poor, landless laborers of mixed racial origins is the subject of my dissertation.

In 2009 racial and labor distinctions are no longer so sharp in Réunion, even if they still exist as prejudice, media representation, or as consumption for tourists. However it is undeniable that the diversity of obvious racial characteristics is a frequent and mostly anodyne subject of conversation in Réunion. That is not to say there is no racial prejudice.⁶¹ Nowadays, the visual attraction of Réunion’s diverse, racially mixed and socially French racial groups is a selling point for Réunion’s tourist board.

⁶¹ See Laurent Medea *Kaf* 2008, Lucette Labache *Vers un Melting Pot Reunionnais*, 1996 and Labache, Medea, Vergès *Identité et société réunionnaise - Nouvelles perspectives et nouvelles approches*



Figure 1.1 Le Zarab, le Chinois, le Yab, le Malbar
 Figure 1.2 Réunionnais house, le Zorey, le Kaf, Réunionnais woman
 (photographs Heloise Finch)

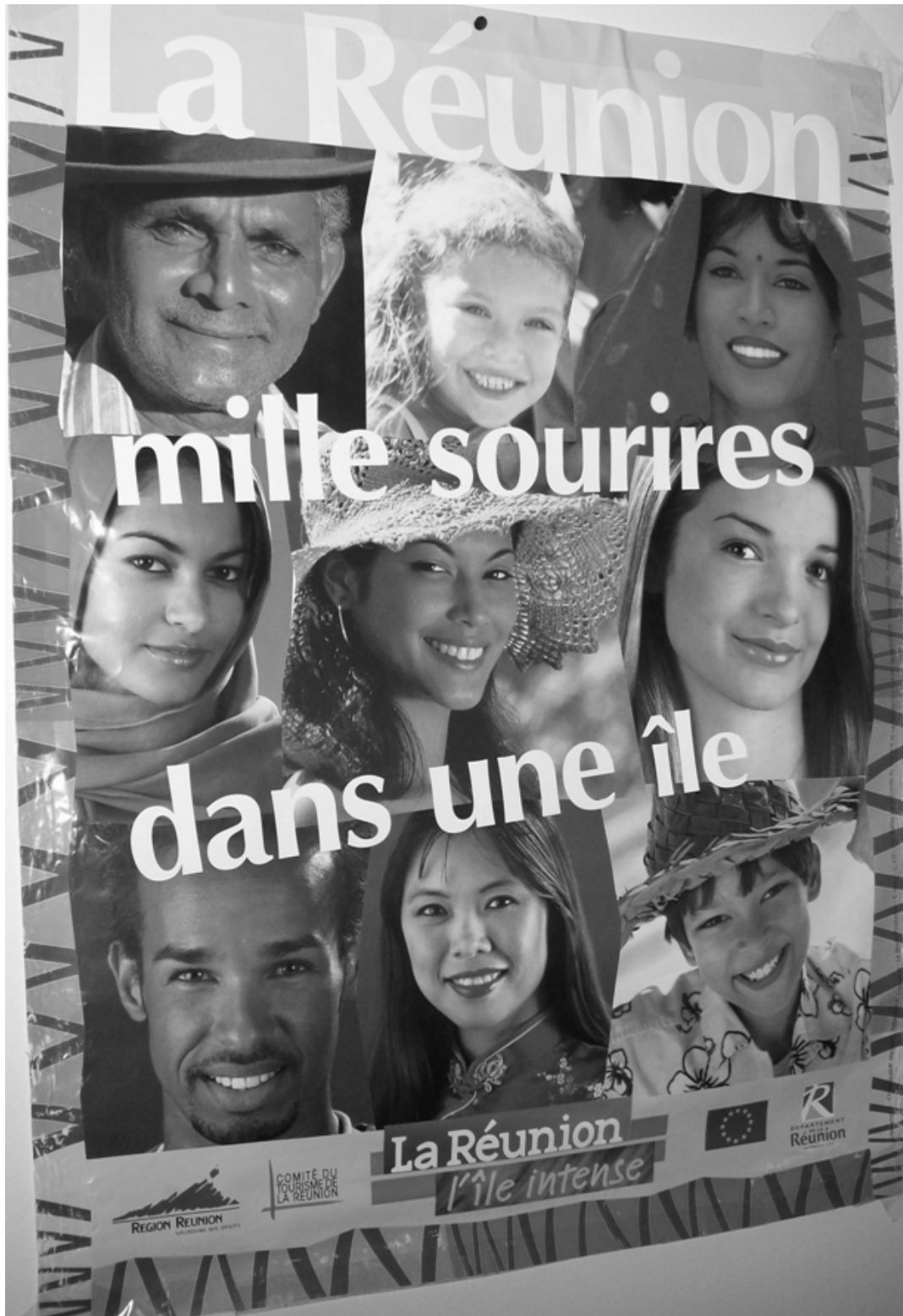


Figure 1.3 La Réunion, a thousand smiles in one island.
Réunion Island tourism poster 2004 (photograph Heloise Finch)

The shot glasses, photographed in August 2009 designate, in a typified yet highly untypical ‘national costume’, Réunion’s main ethnic groups as understood today. They designate the Creole words for male Réunion Islanders: le Zarab, le Chinois, le Yab, le Malbar, le Zorey, le Kaf. The first glass portrays a male Muslim Réunion Islander (Zarab), pictured wearing a tunic and prayer hat, with a bolt of cloth in his hand, conforming to the stereotype of Zarabes as people who work in textiles. The Chinese man is dressed in a representation of Chinese clothes, with a backdrop of a rum shop and old-style grocery store behind him, designating the tradition of Cantonese Chinese as owners of food retail stores. The poor white Réunion Islander, usually known as a Petit Blanc is here designated as Yab (from the Creole *pauv’ diab*, meaning poor devil). He is drawn with red hair, next to geranium plants and a geranium essence still – one of the main income sources of Petits Blancs in western and southwestern Réunion until the geranium decline of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Réunion Islander with southern Indian-origins is designated as Malbar (most British Indian indentured laborers came from the Malabar Coast in the 19th century). He wears a yellow tunic and behind him is a goat ready to be sacrificed. He is holding coconuts in his hand, presumably also ready for sacrifice. This portrayal denotes his Hindu religion, but ignores local practices where many Hindus are also Catholic.⁶² The second row has the Metropolitan French-born Zorey pictured as a white, very muscular blond man holding a surfboard with a self-satisfied grin. Finally, the Kaf (from the French *Cafre*) is the word most Réunion Islanders use for people who appear to have marked African origins. Here he is pictured as a poor fisherman, holding a *vouve*, a

⁶² Jean Benoist and Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, *Hindouismes créoles Mascareignes, Antilles* (Paris: Ed. du CTHS, 1998).

Malagasy-origin conical fishing trap for baby fish which enter the river. The nameless Creole woman dances with her back turned from the viewer, and is not designated as anything. These images are clearly ambiguous, if not to say problematic. The shot glasses of racial types are redolent of colonial collections of racial imagery, denoting the “typical” ethnic groups which were sold on postcards for Metropolitan consumption or which advertized colonial commodities.⁶³ These Réunionnais groups are still portrayed for Metropolitan consumption, not only on shot glasses but on postcards, books and clothing.

The broader point of this dissertation is to demonstrate how French social legislation became a mediator of racial and class divides, to enable the sale of such shot glasses and other types of racial consumption without protest in Réunion. Creole descendants of Africans, Malagasy, Indians and Europeans came to practice being French in Overseas France through their appropriation and local governance of French welfare systems. However, even as France bound Réunion ever legally and politically closer, French social legislation was reshaped by Réunionnais networks of welfare distribution. Rather than becoming a simple tool of French hegemony in Réunion, the local governance of social legislation eventually enabled even Réunion’s poorest inhabitants to force French welfare agencies to entirely change their policies.

Additionally, there is a gap in the English-language historiography on East African or Indian Ocean slavery. It is generally assumed, that the Mascarene Islands and especially Réunion Island stopped any relationships with Eastern Africa after 1848 and

⁶³ See Blanchard and Association connaissance de l'histoire de l'Afrique contemporaine., *L'autre et nous : scènes et types*.

the end of the slave trade.⁶⁴ The implication is that Réunion was self-evidently part of France after this time. My dissertation underlines the cultural and political work which was needed from 1946 to ideologically separate Réunion from the rest of the Indian Ocean, to further France's political goal of maintaining loyalty with France. In addition my dissertation shows that Réunion was in many ways much more linked to Madagascar than to France until the late 1950s when France was created as a natural destination and focus for Réunion.

Réunion Island has always been set in the context of other people's knowledge about France, the French Empire, and Indian Ocean Africa. For much of the Anglophone world, the French Antilles has come to speak for what it means to be French and Creole, first through the Afro-centric negritude writings of Aimé Césaire, and then through writings of Glissant, Bernabé and Chamoiseau who championed a view of that being Creole was to be hybrid.⁶⁵ These intellectual programs were specific to the Caribbean. More recently, from Réunion Island, the scholars Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou have called for an acknowledgment of specificities of Indian Ocean creolisation, with Réunion a crossroads of Indian Ocean cultures.⁶⁶

Yet how can we understand a crossroads of Indian Ocean cultures? Researchers studying African history have underlined the difficulty of trying to find true and authentic Africans, or knowledge of pure pasts untainted by colonialism.⁶⁷ While some historians

⁶⁴ This has been recognized by Pier Martin Larson, *Ocean of letters : language and creolization in an Indian Ocean diaspora*, Critical perspectives on empire (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶⁵ Jean Bernabé et al., *Eloge de la Créolité*, Éd. bilingue français/anglais ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

⁶⁶ Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou, *Amarres : créolisations india-océanes* (Paris: LHarmattan, 2005).

⁶⁷ Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen, *African words, African voices : critical practices in oral history*, African systems of thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

sought to use oral history as a channel to a knowable past, other scholars have understood that oral history is also a way of recalibrating contemporary ways of relating stories and information. This historical problem of the location and deployment of African words and voices has become a central issue in Africanist historiography with many different ways of approaching historical statements, not all of which necessarily search for their historical veracity.⁶⁸

Inspired by, and respectful of, this approach, I am wary of designating what it *means* to be Creole, or to *look* Creole. I wish to further subject my own sources to the questions of their knowledge productions. Yet my dissertation concentrates specifically on this poor ‘mixed-race’ population: how the administration and political elites attempted to decide their political futures, and the types of lives and choices they were able to make. In this dissertation I attempt to resolve this dilemma by talking about Réunion Islanders’ ancestry, or personal history, rather than classify them by racial categories.

III. Methodology

My first stay in Réunion during 2000-2001 was as an undergraduate student. I had previously spent a year living in Metropolitan France before starting university, and when the obligatory junior year abroad loomed as part of my language degree, I petitioned the University of Birmingham not to study as an Erasmus student in Metropolitan France but to work for the British Council as a language assistant. Thus, I went to teach English at a

⁶⁸ Luise White, *Speaking with vampires : rumor and history in colonial Africa*, Studies on the history of society and culture (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000); David William Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, *The risks of knowledge : investigations into the death of the Hon. Minister John Robert Ouko in Kenya, 1990*, New African histories series (Athens: Ohio University Press 2004).

Réunion Island high school with the British Council. Already familiar with France, and determined to become bilingual in French, I shared a house with Réunion Islanders and French people in St Gilles les Bains and worked on my language skills. For seven months I avoided all English-speaking people, and spent time immersed in Metropolitan French culture with the easiest French people to find – Metropolitan French “Zoreys” working in Réunion usually on 2-year contracts as speech therapists, nurses, teachers, sales managers and journalists.

Although I lived with two Réunion Islanders, and I taught in a Réunion Island high school, Creole culture completely eluded me, so intent was I on naïvely finding the authentic “French” language and culture I had studied in university and encountered in Metropolitan France. In the middle of the seventh month some chance encounters took me a mile down the road from where I was living, where I was astonished to find Réunion Islanders living in houses made from corrugated iron with no hot water and no electrical appliances. My sudden realization of a different, parallel world to the Zoreys and the Metropolitan French I knew made me want to become an anthropologist.

Despite my familiarity with Réunion, and my numerous research trips, during my MA and the beginning of my PhD, ethnographic fieldwork in Réunion always proved mysterious and elusive. I could not understand how my other colleagues in anthropology were able to find NGOs to watch at work, or were able to watch grassroots neighborhood groups making collective claims. Whenever I attempted to affiliate myself with informal social organizations, there always seemed to be *quid pro quos* which I did not understand and I was never able to get a “hold” on the “social movements” which I felt should be my object of study when looking at the claims Réunion Islanders made about their place in

France. So this time, I started with archival work and eventually moved to studying bureaucracies, the French administration and Réunion Islanders' individual claims on French state agencies like the SIDR housing agency, rather than looking for group claims which did not actually exist.

Historians of Réunion Island after 1946 have not made the fullest use of archival resources either in Metropolitan France or in Réunion. Most of my source material in Paris and in St Denis –apart from SIDR photographs, newspapers and the Debré archives – had not been consulted before. However, a post 1945 French archive project has some challenges. Political or social documents considered sensitive - such as Prefect reports or social services reports - are subject to a 60 year delay before being communicated. In Réunion it was almost impossible to get permission to consult any Prefect correspondence or social services data, although I was lucky to find a certain amount of duplicate material in Paris.

In the final phase of my research in Réunion I got in touch with the SIDR to see if they had any photograph archives. Bernard Hoarau, the PR manager of the SIDR was extremely welcoming and changed the direction of my project, as he put me in touch with SIDR social workers in the current renovation project in Petite Ile. I had been looking for informal social movements, but I should have been studying the French bureaucracy that was all around me as a site for political claims! I was invited to sit in with social work sessions. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval at the University of Michigan I was able to attend social work meetings, and accompany the social workers around Petite Ile and elsewhere in St Denis, allowing me to recruit people who came to the SIDR office for interviews.

IV. Chapter summaries

The order of the remaining chapters is as follows:

Chapter Two: Challenging the landlord-tenant regime and clearing the debris of the cyclone in Réunion 1947-1952 examines landlord-tenant relations in the rural areas of Réunion and how these relations of political and social pressure affected local governance of the rural areas. By focusing on the early years of the SIDR, the French government housing agency in Réunion, the chapter demonstrates how the French administration successfully challenged the dominance of the Creole elites and the Communist Party as these groups attempted to direct early French legislation on the island in the wake of the 1948 cyclone.

Chapter Three: Framing race and poverty in Réunion 1950-1955 demonstrates how the French administration unsuccessfully attempted to tackle worker poverty and thus discourage workers from becoming Communist. Introducing social legislation had unintended political consequences, restructuring male employment in Réunion from agricultural work to the construction sector, where workers were recruited for the Communist Party. The French administration unsuccessfully attempted to diminish support for the Communist Party by political repression, and attempting to racially profile Réunion Islanders as potential Communist supporters. However, support for the Communist party, and the intersection of race and poverty defied these neat categorizations. The blurred race and class boundaries in Réunion made it difficult for the administration to categorize political enemies by racial origin.

Chapter Four: Urban landholding and political loyalty in a St Denis shantytown 1954-1963 demonstrates how, by attempting to improve urban worker

housing and thus diminish support for the Communist Party, the SIDR effectively became an urban landlord, a role normally played by Creole landowners. By intervening in urban shantytown destruction, the SIDR also began to change and control the political allegiances between landlords and tenants. The French administration had not managed to fundamentally transform landlord-tenant relations in Réunion. Rather, it had started to take part in them.

Chapter Five: The morality of low rents: a new French tenancy program in St Denis 1960-1966 describes the French state's attempt to govern urban landholding relations in Réunion through changing shantytown rents. The state unintentionally became the mediator between landowners, tenants, and sub letters in St Denis. The shantytown decree enabled Réunionnais to individually claim material improvement from the state as a fundamental moral and legal right. Landowners and landlords were now the object of control, rather than the tenants. The entire relationship between Réunion Island tenants, landlords, landowners and the state was being transformed, and a new idiom of making citizenship claims linked to French state welfare had been created.

Chapter Six: Making France in the Indian Ocean 1963-2006 explores how Michel Debré and Paul Vergès' attempted to polarize political and cultural discourse on the island as a choice either for Réunion or for France. Yet by the 1970s in Réunion it was impossible to define the island as either French or Creole. This chapter demonstrates how young urban Réunion Islanders in St Denis appropriated and made their own ideas about being French in the Indian Ocean, interpreting in their own fashion the pro- and anti- French ideologies which saturated political life on the island. Unlike the prevailing

political discourse, Islanders did not need to choose either Réunion or France to understand what it meant to be French in the Indian Ocean.

The 1960-1966 administrative success in the St Denis shantytowns was short-lived. From 1966 locally elected elites regained control of the SIDR, and began a new form of governing welfare distribution in urban neighborhoods, explored in **Chapter Seven: Transforming class relations and landholding through French social legislation 1967-1981**. Elected officials in the city councils were able to use the resources of the French administration, giving them much more financial and political power than ever before. This fundamentally transformed traditional class divisions between the extremely poor majority and the landowning minority by creating a new middle class. However, just as landowners had previously been the source of material wealth, many people now considered that material welfare and employment came directly from the Mayors.

Chapter Eight: “They claim stronger rights than property owners’ rights”: **inverting landlord – tenant relations in SIDR Petite Ile 1998-2009** brings the governance of social legislation to the last ten years in Réunion. Social tensions over opposing moral judgments of the “right” way to live in social housing have set the principally Réunionnais employees in French welfare agencies against SIDR residents and their families who maintain the view that they have moral rights to purchase housing. These conflicts have delayed the completion of the Petite Ile program by several years. From the 1960s, locally elected elites appropriated the means of distributing welfare in order to further their political projects. Social housing residents have now also appropriated and instrumentalized French welfare allocations and houses. Rather than

being submissive to landholders, some urban residents in social housing have been able to invert landlord-tenant relations. Tenants are now able to use different tactics – helplessness, stubborn resistance, hustling, family pressure – to put pressure on the French administration, and French landholders such as the SIDR, to claim rights to better conditions of social housing and even to property ownership.

CHAPTER 2 CHALLENGING THE LANDLORD-TENANT REGIME AND CLEARING THE DEBRIS OF THE CYCLONE IN RÉUNION 1947-1952

I. Introduction

The political future of Réunion and France's other Old colonies was decided on the 14th of March 1946. Deputies in the French National Assembly voted unanimously for a project to politically and socially integrate Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guyana with Metropolitan France.¹ The political moment was favorable. The new post-war 4th French Republic was on the point of redefining the political relationship between France and its empire, which would be renamed the French Union in October 1946. Réunion and the other old colonies would become French Overseas Departments (DOMs) legally and politically assimilated with France. The DOMs were the vanguard for a new idea of colonial citizenship: a multinational French citizenship where citizens of France's colonies and citizens of the French Metropole would be politically, even socially, equal.² For Réunion, becoming a French department signaled the defeat of the landholding lobbies. It also demonstrated to the French that Réunion's political loyalty had earned the island the right to become fully French.³ Raymond Vergès and Réunion's other left wing

¹ The 46-451 law was published on 19/3/1946 in the *Journal Officiel*. The French government was given two years to accomplish full assimilation.

² Cooper, "From imperial inclusion to republican exclusion? France's ambiguous postwar trajectory."

³ Vergès *Monsters and Revolutionaries* 1999, Françoise Vergès, *La loi du 19 mars 1946, Les débats à l'Assemblée constituante* (St Denis: Graphica, 1996).

deputy Leon de Lepervanche sent a telegram from Paris asking for the event to be marked by a “grandiose” celebration in Réunion.⁴

Given the privations of everyday life in the aftermath of World War II, Réunion Islanders had other preoccupations. Despite the rhetoric of Réunion’s deputies, many Réunion Islanders had very limited ideas about what becoming part of France would mean for them. There was no large-scale celebration on the island. Nor, indeed, was there any immediate change. The island still had a French colonial governor and elite Creole landholders continued to structure life for the majority of Réunion Island’s poverty-stricken workers. Life continued as before.⁵

Whatever the promises of the 1946 assimilation law, French social welfare was not immediately applied in Réunion or the other DOMs. By 1947 newspaper critiques abounded. Why had assimilation not occurred? *Le Progrès*, a centrist Réunion newspaper lamented that Réunion was only a French department by name. Being called a French department may have satisfied “the national susceptibilities of ... this amalgam of races which makes up the entity of Réunion. If that’s what we were looking for, the goal has been achieved. No more. As far as all the other dreamed-of improvements, they have been confirmed as puerile and farcical.”⁶

1947 saw the handover from the French colonial governor of Réunion to the new French Prefect. This was merely ceremony. The real social power in Réunion was in the hands of Creole landholders who had significant influence over agricultural workers and sharecroppers on their land. Landowners also had a hold on local government, although

⁴ Edmond Maestri and Danielle Nomdedeu-Maestri, *Chronologie de la Réunion : de la départementalisation à la loi d'orientation, 1946-2001* (Paris: SEDES, 2001), 17.

⁵ The 1946 law gave France two years to assimilate Réunion and the other Overseas Departments

⁶ *Le Progrès* 20/01/1947

there was a political counter-movement from the Réunion Island Communist party which sought the immediate application of French social legislation in Reunion. Bureaucrats in Metropolitan France were far too busy thinking about France's reconstruction after the Second World War, to worry about Réunion Island. It would take a devastating cyclone in 1948 to reshape Réunion's material and social order and put this new, theoretically Metropolitan French, regime to the test.⁷

The combination of the 1948 cyclone and the 1946 assimilation law forced two systems of governance – the Creole elites and the French administration – to confront each other. While the landholding Creole elites were content to maintain the status quo, the newly arrived French civil servants threatened their hold on government. Although by 1952 the French administration would have control over government, they had to compromise with the landholding elites who managed to retain their social control over the lives of the majority of agricultural workers in rural Réunion and their monopoly on landholding. And by 1952 the Communist party had become radicalized, now a political force of opposition to the French administration.

⁷ Cyclone, hurricane and typhoon are similar sub-tropical phenomena. Different names are used in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans respectively. Before 1962, cyclones were not named.

II. La Réunion's social and material worlds ... as seen as through a journey



Figure 2.1 Map of La Réunion

In 1947 Raphaella left her family home near Ste Rose on the rainy eastern slopes of Réunion's volcano to marry a landowner almost twice her age named Yvan Bottard who lived on the other side of Réunion in St Gilles les Bains.⁸ This was the longest journey Raphaella would take for the next fifty years. Like many children of poor French-origin sharecroppers in Réunion, Raphaella had only briefly attended school between the ages of six and seven. Afterwards, she accompanied her father to the fields to work sugar cane and vanilla, and cultivate other food crops, on land belonging to the rich Baronce family. Raphaella had caught the eye of Yvan a number of years before, when she had

⁸ http://pedagogie2.ac-reunion.fr/anglaislp/images/Cartes/carte_reunion.jpg Accessed October 20 2009

accompanied her father delivering volcanic stone to a road project in St Gilles les Bains. When Raphaella was 22, Yvan Bottard had called for her to marry him.

From her tiny village of Bois Blanc, Raphaella travelled on an open-topped bus to the town of St Benoît, one of the terminuses for Réunion's only train line. The train took fourteen hours to run 150km counterclockwise around most of the island's coast between St Benoît in the east and St Pierre in the south. Raphaella boarded one of the carriages of the ancient steam train, built many decades before, and it slowly and laboriously stopped at two dozen stations between her old and her new life. As Raphaella passed along the windward side of the island she saw nothing but sugar cane fields planted from the middle slopes of Réunion's high mountains down to the ocean, interspersed with a few sugar factory chimneys near the coast. Working in those fields and factories were thousands of other sharecroppers and sugar factory workers who lived in very similar material conditions to her Petit Blanc background, even if they had come to Réunion from other parts of the Indian Ocean.

If Raphaella had looked out of the dusty window at the stop near the sugar cane factory of La Mare near Ste Marie, she might have seen Mr. M who lived and worked near the factory. His father was a Muslim from the Comoros Islands who had come over to work the sugar fields around La Mare in the early 1900s as an indentured laborer, later marrying his Réunionnais Creole wife. His mother had Indian ancestors and was both Catholic and Hindu. Mr. M himself was a cane sharecropper, and also delivered imported cattle around the island on foot. In 1947 Mr. M's wife was pregnant again and she would soon have to stop her work. She earned a little money by buying produce from the big St Denis market in La Mare and selling it in the neighborhood. As Raphaella's train stopped

at La Mare, Mr. M's wife would have walked alongside the carriages with her basket on her head as the locomotive hissed, to sell fruit to the tired passengers from window to window.

After La Mare, Raphaella Boyer's train would have eventually stopped at Réunion's capital. St Denis, on the north of Réunion, which was built in the 18th century on a French colonial layout and faced the Indian Ocean. Much larger wooden or stone houses in a French Creole style - with long gardens, iron balconies and verandahs - flanked the roads in the centre of the town. African and Indian-origin chauffeurs, butlers, domestic servants and nannies bustled around St Denis in the day time before going back to their own quarters behind the main houses, or to the "camps" on the outskirts of St Denis. Other women spent the day at the St Denis river, scrubbing the sheets and tablecloths of the 'grand families' and laying them out to dry on the rocks.

Just after crossing the St Denis river, the train halted at the barracks of Petite Ile, also known as *Camp des Noirs* (the black's camp). Next to the barracks was a highly odorous "manure" factory. Prisoners of the St Denis jail spent their days delivering the takings of grand family pisspots to men from Camp des Noirs. Many of the men working at the factory were descendants of Malagasy indentured laborers who had come to labor at the Colonial public works building in Camp des Noirs, before it had been disbanded years before.

Emerging from the 11km tunnel which separated St Denis from the west of the island, and covered in a light dusting of soot, the train and its passengers crossed the deserted rocky stones at the foothills of the north west's dramatic mountainscape. They stopped off at Le Port, the island's only port where hundreds of men came from all over

the west to work on the docks when boats came in once a week. After crossing the 300m long railway bridge above the stony Rivière des Galets, the train skirted the foothills of the western cane-growing area of St Paul. The leeward west was much drier than the east of the island, and the savannah grass shone yellow in the sun. Perhaps as the train slowed its rhythm, skirting the precipitous black volcanic cliffs of the western coast which dropped straight down to the ocean, Raphaella might have remembered the song that she and her sister had invented as adolescent girls, and often sung together, about the resourcefulness of Réunion Islanders during the island's poverty stricken experience of World War II which had ended only two years previously.

*La guerre, c'est la misère
Du riz n'a plus, i mangent maïs*

War, it makes us poor
There's no more rice, we have to eat
corn

...
*La guerre c'est la misère
Quand la toile l'avait point
Nous la met goni
Manioc avec patate
Nous la debate
Les dames allaient a la messe,
Les robes en fil aloes
Les gros bracelets en bois
Et les sacs en vacoa*

...
War, it makes us poor
When there was no more cloth
We had to put on sacks
Cassava and potatoes
We argued over them
The women went to mass
With their woven aloe dress
With big wood bracelets
And bags made from pandanus

...
*La guerre c'est la misère
Quand du sel n'avait point
Nous la fait bouille l'eau de mer*

...
War, it makes you poor
When there was no more salt
We boiled water from the sea

...
*Dans les usines i coulent
Plus que pistaches et bancoules
Zarabe i vend tomates
Chinois i fait galoches*

...
And the factories
Only burn peanuts and candlenuts
Zarabes sell tomatoes
And the Chinese make clogs

The train rounded finally into the station at St Gilles les Bains as Mr. Govindin the station master flagged it down.⁹

i. Background to the train journey:

As Raphaella Boyer was only too well aware, in 1947 the vast majority of Réunion Island's population was extremely poor. Material conditions had not changed much since the Second World War, when Islanders had been forced to make their own clothes from aloes leaves, and to live off a meager diet of fruit, corn and root crops, with little or no meat. Réunion Islanders who generally made a living from importing goods to sell had been forced to change their trade as no more boats arrived on the island. Raphaella's song described *Zarabes*, people of Muslim Indian origin who usually worked in the textile and hardware trades, incongruously having to sell vegetables. Similarly, Chinese-origin Islanders who had come to dominate the dry goods retail sector were reduced to making and selling wooden clogs. Rice and salt, which were imported from other French colonies were unavailable and had to be substituted locally by other ingenious means.

In 1948 Réunion was the most populated of the new Overseas Departments at about 223,000 inhabitants.¹⁰ Workers' houses were usually thatched huts or *paillottes* and only had one or two rooms for living in. An exterior kitchen or *boucan* was also made of thatch and was separate from the main house. However these living conditions were precarious. The proportion of Réunionnais babies who died before their first birthday was approximately twice as high as the other French Overseas Departments as well as

⁹ Interview Raphaella Bottard 2008

¹⁰ This is back-estimated from the INSEE census of 1954 which is more reliable than that of 1948. The 1954 census gives DOM populations as: Réunion 274,370, Martinique 239,130, Guadeloupe 229,120 and Guyane 27,863. CAC 19940180/253 INSEE à M. Perillier Ingénieur Général de l'ADIN en mission extraordinaire pour les DOM 02/03/1955

Réunion Island's neighbor, the British colony of Mauritius.¹¹ There were only thirty doctors working on the island, and Islanders only had an average life expectancy of 53 years.¹² In comparison, life expectancy in Metropolitan France was 66½.¹³

There had been a significant decrease in profitable agricultural production since the 2nd world war and Réunion's Vichy Regime had been blockaded by the British until 1943. Thousands of acres of sugar cane had been ripped out to produce food crops for subsistence.¹⁴ By 1947 Réunion's sugar cane production still had not recovered to pre-war levels: production had declined from 73,600 tons in 1939 to 68,000 tons in 1946.¹⁵ In 1948 there were still fourteen sugar factories on the island, underlining the importance of competing economic fiefdoms in La Réunion.

Réunion Island's train line had been built in 1871, sixty years previously, in a last-gasp effort to stimulate the island's sugar economy. Even though it was very old, it was an important mode of transport. The train had been built too late, however, to rescue Réunion's industrial decline, caused by the price of sugar on the world market and the favorable treatment given to sugar beet producers in France. The later monopoly trade agreement between Réunion and France in 1892 had only worsened the overall export situation from Réunion even if it had protected the price of Réunion's sugar.¹⁶ As the

¹¹ Figures for beginning of 1950s in Magali Barbieri and Christine Catteau, "Changes in Infant Mortality in Réunion in the Last Fifty Years," *Population (English Edition)* 58, no. 2 (2003).

¹² CAC 19940180/240 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philip à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : situation de mon département 26/2/1954

¹³ André Scherer, "La population de la Réunion," *Population (French Edition)*, 10e Année, no. 3 (1955).

¹⁴ ADR 57 W 33 Note de Directeur de la Caisse Centrale de la France d'Outre-mer à la Réunion. Confidentielle. Activité dans le domaine de l'habitat. Expériences de constructions de logements d'urgence (type F2 Bossu) 09/03/1955

¹⁵ CAC 19940180/9 Documentation sur le Département de La Réunion et la ville de Saint-Denis à l'occasion du voyage du Général de Gaulle juillet 1959. Les opérations du FIDOM et de la Caisse Centrale à La Réunion

¹⁶ CAC 19840179/70 Henri Cornu à Bourillon, Direction des Affaires Economiques, 28/12/1951 ; SP 9 DE 1 Henri Cornu à Michel Debré Confidentiel: introduction à la vie réunionnaise 11/04/1963

profitability of sugar declined, smaller landowners had found themselves increasingly in debt. Raphaella's Petit Blanc family had probably, like many others, ended up as sharecroppers on their old land.

In 2008 I visited Mme Raphaella Bottard, now in her late eighties but very alert and still taking time to sing, in her house in St Gilles les Bains. I asked her to explain what she thought of France at the time of the 1946 law

Heloise Finch: Did you ever think of France when you were young?

...

Raphaella Bottard: Yes, I had heard of France but we didn't give it any importance [*nous la pas fait trop un compte avec ça*]. They talked about France, I sang the Marseillaise, there was the French flag, but whether I *knew* anything ... in Bois Blanc, there was nobody to give us an education, nothing at all! There we were, over there in Bois Blanc, over there in our little hole [*notre petit trou*].¹⁷

Even if Raphaella Bottard knew she was French, and had voted for the first time in the 1945 elections like most other French women, she had grown up in a very rural part of Réunion, and French education was not freely available to all. Her knowledge of France did not extend much further than recognition of the flag, and ability to sing the national anthem.

The way Mme Bottard thought about France and French state actors during her childhood is highly reminiscent of stories that historians have gathered elsewhere in colonial Africa. Mme Bottard told me how she used to fear the *gendarmes*, the French colonial policemen who would occasionally patrol in her rural village during the 1930s.

We were afraid of the gendarmes, we were kids! Ah, ah! If the police came, if we just heard the motorbike ... I ran to hide! Sometimes I would be gathering wood for cooking the food, and I carried my wood pile on my head, and if I heard a motorbike "po po po po" ... I'd throw the wood on the ground and run off and

¹⁷ I used a French-style orthography for Creole transcriptions

hide, I wouldn't move a muscle! I was scared ... scared, I tell you! I'd come out when I heard the gendarme going back off to Sainte Rose!

And of course we'd all heard of the red car that came to take the kids, and when we heard a red car... hidden! Didn't move, because there was the car that came to take the kids, and it would take us!¹⁸

As a child in Bois Blanc, Mme Bottard had heard that a red car came to take the children away.¹⁹ She was afraid of the soldiers, and of the police. She couldn't explain her fear of the police, but said it was partly because she didn't know what police questioning (*un procès verbal*) was and she was scared of it.²⁰ Other Réunion Islanders who had already spent time in school, or who lived nearer the seat of colonial government in St Denis were more used to the idea of France, and had met colonial officials. We should not devalue Mme Bottard's account of a very real childhood fear, as some kind of make-believe, something that never happened.²¹ Her youthful certainty that a child-eating red car existed, and her fear of French colonial officials who could wield untold power with unknown words underlines the many different systems of knowledge circulating in La Réunion about France and its intentions on the island. On the eve of the French assimilation of Réunion Island in 1946, some Réunion Islanders understood French colonial power as terrifying and unknown.

In this way, Réunion Islanders had a very different social and economic experience of France than that of French peasants in Metropolitan France between 1870 and 1914 who became assimilated into a national French community through education,

¹⁸ Interview Mme Raphaella Bottard 18/9/2008

¹⁹ Many other Réunion Islanders I interviewed also knew about or had heard of the nefarious "l'auto rouge"

²⁰ The Procès-Verbal is a detailed authenticated account which can be drawn up by a police officer, magistrate or other authority, and can involve questioning

²¹ White, *Speaking with vampires : rumor and history in colonial Africa*.

and the arrival of modern infrastructure.²² It was legally possible for all Réunionnais whatever their racial origins, to purchase land, work in the civil service, or vote. Nevertheless, the plantation system of production had created historical social inequalities and racial barriers which were deeply enshrined in practice, if not in law. Only 1 % of the population of Réunion Island had a secondary-level education or higher. Just over half of Réunion's population was totally illiterate, 35% knew how to read and write and a mere 9% had completed primary school level studies.²³

Yet it would be incorrect to assume that Réunion in 1946 was directly comparable to rural Metropolitan France before the Revolution or in 1870.²⁴ Although Republican education had not been universally and freely available to Réunion Islanders, by 1946 Réunion had similar, if more outdated, industrial and technical infrastructure as Metropolitan France. Many Réunion Islanders had also fought in the First and Second World Wars. Most of Réunion's populations had radically different cultural origins and social experiences than Metropolitan French peasants, which were further shaped by the areas they lived in Réunion and the type of work they undertook. These factors would ensure that Réunion's assimilation into Metropolitan France would not prove to be a copy of the Metropolitan French peasants.

²² Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen : the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

²³ CAC 19940180/9 Préfecture de La Réunion, Situation démographique de La Réunion, 01/06/1957

²⁴ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the other : how anthropology makes its object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

III. Governance by the Creole landholding elite in Réunion

Most Réunion Islanders were extremely poor agricultural workers in 1947. Either they did seasonal agricultural work, or they lived on the landowners' land and farmed as sharecroppers. Sharecroppers gave 1/3 of the harvest to their landowner and they were paid annually for the rest. Either way most Réunion Islanders did not own the land they worked on. This put them in relations of debt and obligation to property owners and landlords.

Creole elites were mostly large landowners, many of whom were involved in governing Réunion. Large landowners and business elites wished for politicians who would maintain the status quo favoring economic development over social legislation. They did not welcome the idea of French social legislation in Réunion. Because of their economic power, property owners and landlords were able to pressure desperately poor Réunion Islanders to vote for their political choices. They had significant social influence and economic power over these extremely poor Réunion Islanders because they owned the land, and the possibility of employment in rural areas. The power of the landowning elites meant that workers were beholden to them for their material needs. Landowners could also favor certain families over others. This ensured that agricultural workers did not group together to improve their conditions collectively. These rural social relations can be seen in the types of housing that people lived in. Scattered, self-sufficient homesteads were the most common rural form of housing.

i. Rural housing design

The labor conditions of the majority of rural Réunionnais agricultural workers and sharecroppers were very similar. Their living conditions differed considerably depending on the solidity of their houses. House construction varied according to the building materials which were available in the region. They also depended on the resources of the householder, and the availability of wood or other solid building materials. The spatial arrangements of Réunionnais worker houses points to their desire for domestic privacy. The design of the houses often included garden walls to mark the private domestic sphere, and each house had its own animal shelter and kitchen. Unless the members of the same family lived in a courtyard, groups of houses almost never faced each other. Rather, houses were scattered across rural areas with each house in its own space.

The spatial arrangement of the houses and homesteads underlines the self-sufficiency of rural Réunion Islanders. Islanders were more reliant on landowners and politicians than on neighbors for the resolution of differences. Neighborhoods were organized around the local landowners and the Mayor rather than through communal enterprises.

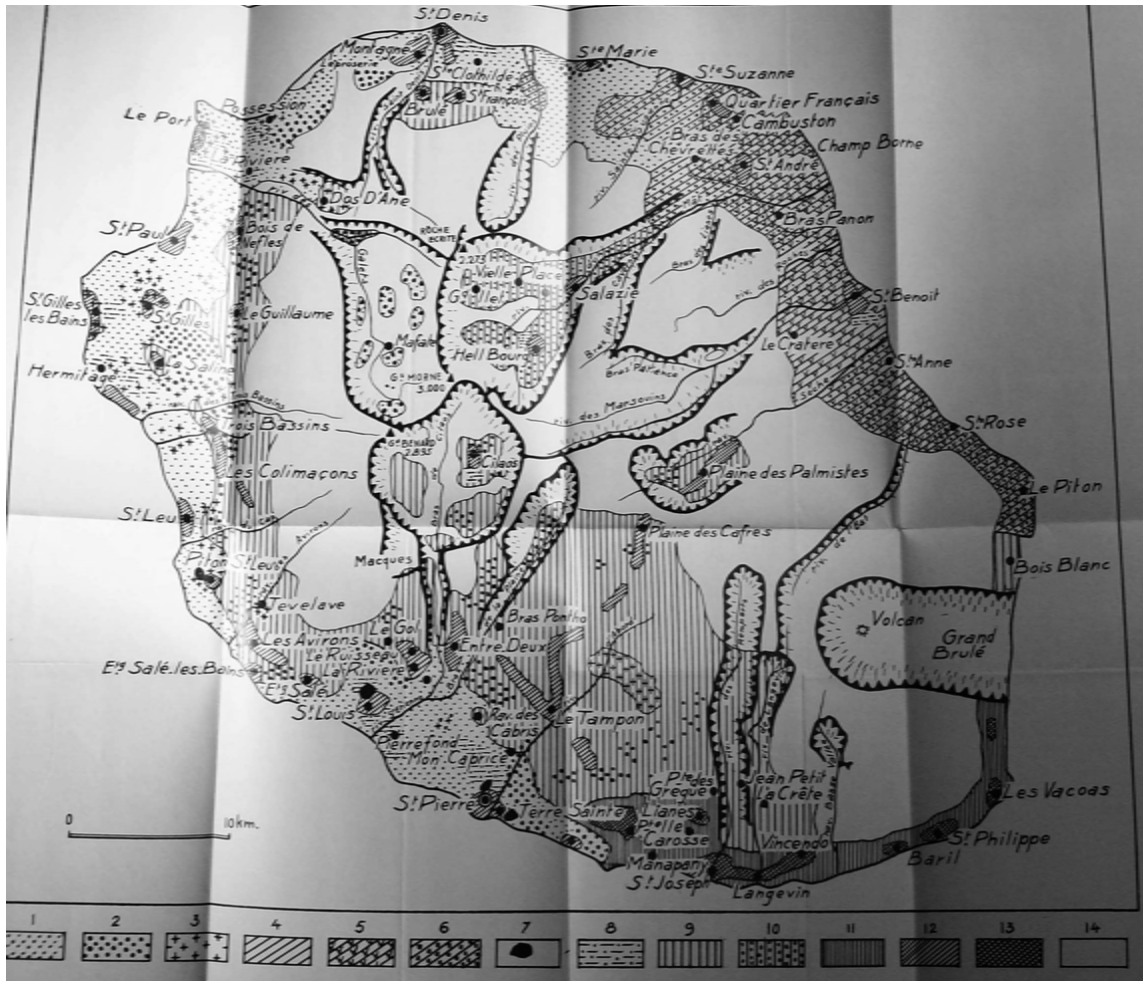


Figure 2.2 Housing materials in Réunion according to region

- 1) Paillottes with thatched roofs
- 2) Paillottes with wooden walls and thatched roofs
- 3) Paillottes with thatched roofs and calumet [woven bamboo] walls
- 4) Paillottes with earth walls
- 5) Houses with vacoa roofs
- 6) Houses with earth walls and cane leaf roofs
- 7) African-type villages
- 8) Shantytowns and miserable paillottes
- 9) Residential houses in wood and wood shingles
- 10) Houses with wood and wood shingles with vetiver [thatched] roofs
- 11) Residential houses with red [metal] roofs
- 12) Residential villas
- 13) Residential villas with red [metal] roofs
- 14) Uninhabited region

Table 2.1 Housing Materials in Réunion according to region

The numbers above correspond to the numbered patterns on Figure 2.1, indicating the building materials of houses in different areas of Réunion.²⁵ As Figure 2.1 shows, the building materials for houses varied depending on the region. The map was completed by a Metropolitan French geographer named Jean Defos du Rau who came to Réunion in the mid 1950s to write a PhD on the human geography of Réunion. He mapped and photographed many types of houses on the island. Many of the following photographs were taken by Defos du Rau for his study of human geography in Réunion or by Jean-Claude Allaire, the first Metropolitan French urban planner and architect to write a regional study of Réunion in 1964.²⁶

The poorest workers in Réunion lived in cramped collective housing or *calbanons* built by the landowner or factory owner. Such collective housing was a legacy from 19th century housing made for slaves or indentured laborers.²⁷ Families often only had one room each. In Figure 2.2 below, each window corresponds to a one-room house in a calbanon.²⁸ Each family has fenced off their section of the house with bamboo or grasses, to make some privacy. The householder on the left of the photo has created more privacy by making a solid garden gate, from a flattened tin barrel. The women and girls outside the calbanons are barefoot, indicating their poverty. The household behind the women and girls in the middle has constructed what appears to be a thatched *paillotte* in the front garden to create more space for the family, probably to house a young couple.

²⁵ Jean Defos du Rau, *L'île de la Réunion Etude de géographie humaine* (Bordeaux: Inst. de Géographie, 1960).

²⁶ See ADR 447 W 90 *La Réunion, Enquête Monographique Régionale* 1964 and Jean-Claude Allaire and Françoise Allaire, *La Réunion* (1967).

²⁷ Conseil d'architecture d'urbanisme et d'environnement de La Réunion and Compain, *350 ans d'architecture à l'île de la Réunion : un panorama réalisé par le CAUE*.

²⁸ Photograph by Defos du Rau, *L'île de la Réunion Etude de géographie humaine*.



Figure 2.3 Collective housing near Le Gol sugar factory c1956

Although calbanons existed all over Réunion in urban and rural areas, the majority of the poorest Réunion Islanders were not housed collectively, but lived in individual *paillottes*, houses made entirely out of local thatch, sometimes with wooden walls. In 1948 landowners considered that these types of houses were the most suited for the Réunionnais working population, even if they were fragile and susceptible to high winds.

Grass houses (*paillottes*) create astonishment, indignation even, from visiting Metropolitans [yet they are] far and away the best adapted constructions for the country's climatic conditions. Given the small temperature differences ... the grass houses with the overhanging sloping roofs on earth walls keep coolest in the day ... the management have however given up with these types of construction which have to be rebuilt almost every year and end up being costly.²⁹

The landowners admitted that Metropolitan French visitors regarded the presence of grass houses or *paillottes* as scandalous in Réunion. Indeed, a decade later when Defos du Rau visited Réunion for his study, he classified the villages where the majority of houses were *paillottes* as “African-type villages” (see Map Key for Figure 2.1). Implicitly he did not

²⁹ AESD 24BVI/1 Notes sur les problèmes sociaux dans les usines de la Mare, de Savannah et de Grand Bois. Anon. 28/10/1948

consider them as being French or even Creole, but very poor and thus “African”, or backward (Defos du Rau also created another category for “shantytowns and miserable paillottes” which occurred in urban areas of La Réunion. Representations of urban housing will be discussed in Chapter 3).

Defos du Rau’s map and the landowners’ discussions highlight the differences between Réunionnais and Metropolitan French housing norms in 1948, and also their contrasting attitudes towards worker comfort. Creole elites considered that the paillotte was sufficient shelter for workers, although they lived in considerably more luxurious houses. Metropolitans were shocked by the social and material differences between the landowning class and the working classes in Réunion a difference which Creole elites took for granted.



Figure 2.4 Lowland paillotte in southwest Réunion

Figure 2.4 shows a paillotte built from bushes of vetiver grass tied on to a wood frame typical of lowland, coastal Réunion.³⁰ The paillotte is situated on the stony, dry savannah of Pierrefonds, in the southwest of the island. It has a little white curtain in the doorway, a touch of domestic pride. Behind the paillotte are banana trees and probably other fruit trees. To the left of the house is a sugar cane cart made to be drawn by oxen or zebu, suggesting that the occupier is a cane sharecropper. Large rocks have been used to make a natural barrier around the occupier's house.

Rural Réunion homes were usually built on similar homestead models. Almost all houses had a separate kitchen or *boucan* to avoid cooking fires setting the house alight, and as a place to smoke meat. Figure 2.54 below shows a highland paillotte and its adjacent, smaller boucan in the foreground.³¹ The householder has demarcated part of the courtyard with rocks, underneath the trees in the middle of the picture. The house is constructed far from its nearest neighbor, and facing a different direction, underlining the Réunionnais preference for living privately, far from neighbors.

³⁰ Photograph by Defos du Rau in Defos du Rau, *L'île de la Réunion Etude de géographie humaine*.

³¹ Photograph by Jean-Claude Allaire in CAC 19790543/74



Figure 2.5 Highland paillette with adjoining boucan

The majority of poor Réunionnais lived in these types of paillettes in 1947.

Comparatively richer workers constructed some or all of their houses with wood. These people often fenced off their gardens with aloes, bamboo, or stone. Figures 2.5 through 2.9 below show the wooden paillettes of more affluent rural householders. All the paillettes have solid walls made of wood shingle, packed earth or a native Réunionnais bamboo known as calumet (*nastus borbonicus*).



Figure 2.6 Thatched house with wood shingle walls in northeastern lowlands

Although they are not clearly shown on these photographs, even the poorest householders individually kept poultry, if not pigs or a zebu in a *parc* or shelter, such as in Figure 2.6, below.³²

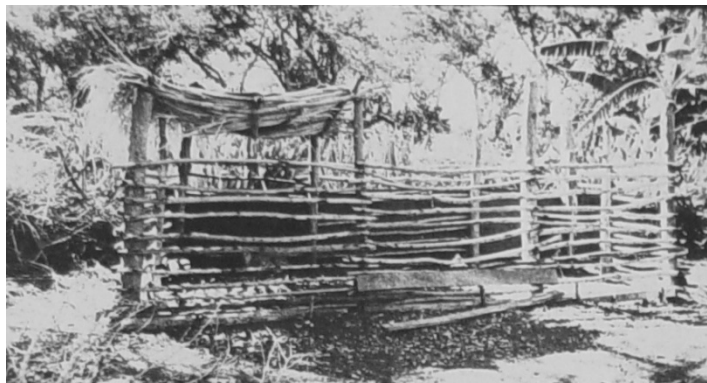


Figure 2.7 Wooden shelter or *parc* for animals

³² Photograph in CAC 19790543/72 GREHAS Etude monographique d'habitat sauvage en milieu rural 1975



Figure 2.8 Thatched house with woven calumet walls on the west coast

Figure 2.8 Thatched house with woven calumet walls on . The householder has also constructed a thatched kitchen or boucan in the far left of the photo, and probably an animal shelter in the right of the photo. The boundary of the house is partly made of bamboo. The additional barbed wire fence on the right of the photo suggests that the householder was rich enough to purchase this, rather than use local building materials. Figure 2.8 below shows a house made of sugar cane thatch and earth walls in Champ-Borne in northeastern Reunion. The trees behind the house are vacoas. Opposite the house is another structure which could be the boucan. The photographer noted that nine people lived in the house.



Figure 2.9 Sugar cane thatched house with earth walls in northeastern lowlands

Wood was more expensive, and shows that the householder had more money to spend on building materials.³³ Richer rural Réunionnais who owned their own plots of land were often able to afford an entire house made of wood shingles, or wood planks, set on a stone base. In Figure 2.10.9 below the thatched house has been constructed over wood plank walls. The barriers of the garden are made from *kader* a local aloes. Figure 2.11 Small landowner's house, Etang Salé les Hauts in southwest Réunion, surrounded by sugar cane.³⁴ The landowner has added a small lean-to extension to the back of the house, suggesting that the family has grown since the original house was built.

³³ Photograph by Jean-Claude Allaire in CAC 19790543/74

³⁴ Defos du Rau, *L'île de la Réunion Etude de géographie humaine*.



Figure 2.10 Thatched house with wood plank walls and *kader* garden barrier



Figure 2.11 Small landowner's house, Etang Salé les Hauts

In Figure 2.9 below the landowner in Cilaos, highland Réunion has combined two types of building styles – square and pointed roofs – in an entirely wooden house. It was easier to build in wood in the highlands of Réunion, and residents of the Cilaos cirque had

easier access to remaining forests. Building adjoining extensions to the house was common when householders needed to enlarge their house for a growing family. Here the landowner's house is surrounded by vines – Cilaos is the only region in Réunion where it is possible to make wine.



Figure 2.12 Small landowner's house, Cilaos

In contrast the richest landowners were able to build their houses entirely from tropical hardwoods. From the late 19th century, Creole elites had to import tropical hardwoods to Réunion from Madagascar to build their houses, as Réunion's stocks were depleted. In Figure 2.12 the rural house of the landowner is built around a central four-sloped roof in a similar style to in Figure 2.9. Extensions were subsequently added to the sides of the house and possibly to the back of the house.³⁵

³⁵ Conseil d'architecture d'urbanisme et d'environnement de La Réunion and Compain, *350 ans d'architecture à l'île de la Réunion : un panorama réalisé par le CAUE*.



Figure 2.13 Large landowner's rural house

Figure 2.13 below was taken around 1962, when most of the paillottes had started to be replaced by corrugated iron houses. However the photograph shows how settlements in rural Réunion were laid out.³⁶ The houses in Bellemène are constructed on uncultivable rocky savannah, above the coastal sugar cane and coconut plantations of St Paul. All the houses are arranged facing east and west, to gain the maximum ventilation from the western sea breeze during the day, and the eastern land breeze during the night.

Significantly, none of the houses face each other, even if they are in a family cluster. Rather, they are all facing the same way, and spread out from each other. Although types of house varied in Réunion these photographs demonstrate that Réunion Islanders all built their houses on the homestead model. Even if they were joined in collective housing, homesteads were independent units, fenced off from neighbors, or at least not facing them, even if family members lived in a cluster. This demonstrates that Réunion Islanders were protective of their privacy and their domestic lives.

³⁶ Photo Jean-Claude Allaire CAC 19790543/74



Figure 2.14 View of St Paul from the hamlet of Bellemène, c1962

Although rural Islanders preferred to live independently, the collective labor imposed by their living conditions required sociability during the day. Many Réunionnais women were obliged to collect drinking water from outdoor fountains, or met at the river to wash

clothes. As Figures 2.14 and 2.15 show, the women pictured were extremely poor, carrying water in tin barrels. None of them could afford to buy shoes, leaving them susceptible to foot-borne parasites.³⁷



Figure 2.15 Washing clothes at Le Gol, western Réunion



Figure 2.16 The water chore in La Saline

Figure 2.16 shows a long line of men and ox-drawn carts with wooden wheels waiting for their contents of sugar cane to be weighed at Le Gol sugar factory. Only 23km of about 1,800 km of roads were asphalted in 1948, so lorries were not generally used. Much was

³⁷ Photographs in Defos du Rau, *L'île de la Réunion Etude de géographie humaine*.

still transported by head. Not only were cane sharecroppers and farmers paid at the end of the year, forcing them to live on credit, but sugar prices were set by the factory owners without negotiation.



Figure 2.17 Ox-carts full of sugar cane waiting to be weighed in Le Gol



Figure 2.18 Bringing in the boats in St Gilles les Bains

Figure 2.17 shows a fishing boat brought up the beach in St Gilles les Bains.³⁸ The photograph was used for an early tourist brochure in the 1960s. However the picturesque scene does not explain that most fishermen in St Gilles did not own the boats they

³⁸ Photograph in CAC 19850387/8

worked on. The fishing boats were owned by a local Indian-origin shopkeeper who also sold the catch. The fishermen were paid poorly and spent their wages on daily necessities in their boss's shop, living on credit for the rest of the month. This system enabled the shopkeeper to gradually become the largest landowner in St Gilles les Bains as he accepted small plots of land in return for debts incurred in his shop. His workers thus gradually also became his tenants, underlining the fundamental importance of landlord and tenant obligation in rural Réunion.

Whether sharecroppers, agricultural workers, day laborers or fishermen the majority of poor rural Réunion Islanders were tenants. They relied on their landowner's goodwill to keep their livelihood, and to stay in their houses. They were often forced to live off credit, because they were paid poorly or infrequently. The most important landowners expected tenants and employees to vote for their choice at election time.

Rural relations of governance were thus structured around labor constraints, lack of financial resources, and political pressure. Although African, European, Chinese and Indian-origin Réunionnais lived and worked side by side, all Réunionnais preferred to live in individual, independent homesteads, often with other family members. This preference influenced the relations between landlords and tenants. In the rural areas, rural governance was based on landlord-tenant paternalism which was a much stronger political force than group organizations such as political parties or trade unions.

ii. Politics in the rural areas

In the 1950s, a Prefect described rural governance in Réunion to the Minister of the Interior in the following terms. "Properly speaking, there are no formed political parties (*parties politiques constitués*) apart from the Communist Party. We are in the presence of

clan warfare where the followers go from one [clan] to the other depending on the influence of the local personalities and the interests at stake.”³⁹ The use of “clan” is typical in colonial arguments where administrators sought to de-value and de-legitimize the use of politics in the colonies. However the large landowners enabled had significant power over their workers, effectively creating clan followings based on landholding.

In the lowlands of Reunion, where the climate supported the cultivation of sugar cane, agricultural life was structured around large plantations and smaller land where sharecroppers worked. As a Prefect noted in 1951, “the latifundia [i.e. the landowners] share out the land The poor worker cannot nourish the hope of owning his domicile because *the land does not belong to him* and the price of a tin barrel [for building his house] represents the equivalent of half a day’s work.”⁴⁰ Only the rich could buy land. The poorest workers could only hope to acquire land through the patronage of landowners.

Sharecropping or working in a factory constrained workers to live as tenants on land belonging to someone else. Workers and sharecroppers had the right to erect a house on their employer’s land and to cultivate their own food crops. In return, they were paid weekly if they were workers. If they were sharecroppers, they were not paid until the end of the year, after they had given one third of the harvest to their landowners. All tenants and sharecroppers were expected to vote for the political choice of the landowner. The grandson of Mr. M (the Comorian described in Raphaella Boyer’s train journey)

³⁹ CAC 19940180/244 Note pour M. l'Inspecteur Général de l'administration en mission extraordinaire pour les DOM. Objet: situation politique à La Réunion 1/3/1955

⁴⁰ ADR 57 W 69 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philippe à M. le ministre de la reconstruction et de l'urbanisme (sous-direction habitat) 07/11/1952

remembered how voting was strongly linked to land tenancy and employment for sugar cane workers around the La Mare sugar factory in Ste Marie during the 1950s.

You didn't pay any rent or anything, but the house belonged to La Mare. If your kids needed a house later, the owner would give you a house, but you had to [vote for his choice] whether you wanted to or not, you had to [politically support] him. If you didn't want to, he would sack you and then tell you to find another house away from the factory. *Ou paye pas ni le loyer ni rien, ça c'est la case La Mare, ça ... le z'enfants, té rode un ti case, i donne aou un ti case, té oblige mars pou li, si ou veu, ou ve pas, té oblige mars pou li ... ou té obligé ... si ou vé pas, i renvoye aou plus i di aou sort de l'etablisman.*⁴¹

Remuneration for workers at La Mare or other large properties consisted of the right to have a house, and sometimes included food allocations for the week – perhaps five kilos of rice per person in the house, two kilograms of peas, dried fish, oil and lard. In addition there was a small amount of cash.⁴² However sharecroppers were not paid until the harvest at the end of the year. Many people lived on credit throughout the year, buying their daily necessities in tiny amounts from the plantation shop, or local grocery store. This system of deferred payment ensured that workers were tied into debt towards shop owners and towards landowners for any needs they might have during the year.

In addition, landowners considered that they had the right to direct the voting choices of the workers who lived on their land to ensure social and political stability. In a 1948 memorandum, a group of large landowners discussed the best ways of controlling the political opinions of the laborers on their land. The landowners linked political control to the types of houses people lived in, and their proximity to the factory. They considered that the ideal, politically passive worker lived around the Grand Bois factory in southern Réunion. The landowners had given the workers of Grand Bois the right to

⁴¹ Interview Mr M 19/6/2009

⁴² Interview Alex Maillot 5/6/2008; CAC 19940180/9 Préfecture de La Réunion Situation démographique de La Réunion, 01/06/1957

set up their houses in a group near the factory – they had given their workers land. The workers had not had to purchase it.

As they lived nearby, the landowners judged that the political opinions of the workers were easier to control. “The large majority of the workers live in neat wooden houses, surrounded by a garden which they own ... for the last fifty years there have been no [political] difficulties from this” said the landowners.

The landowners contrasted the politically stable atmosphere of the workers in Grand Bois with Eperon near St Paul in the west of the island and at La Mare near Ste Marie. Workers in these areas supported the Communist party. The landowners correlated their political views with their residence. These workers’ houses were dispersed amongst the cane fields. The workers were not owners of the land their houses were built on. The landowners judged that if they could regroup the Eperon workers in a 3km circle around the factory, and then allow them to own their plots of land, worker support for the Communist party would diminish. “The construction of a workers’ town unfortunately seems to be [politically] necessary for the personnel and their families, about 800 to 1,000 people” concluded the landowners.⁴³

The land and factory owners thus had significant social and political influence over many poor, illiterate and economically exploited Islanders. This became even more important when landowners and factory owners entered into local politics. Their workers were under even more pressure to politically support them, and vote for them, as Mr. M remembered.

⁴³ AESD 24BVI/1 Anon. Notes sur les problèmes sociaux dans les usines de La Mare, de Savannah et de Grand Bois. 28/10/1948

My family didn't [take a public stand] in politics, not even my old man, not even my granddad ... you were obliged [to vote for the factory owner]! Everyone on the place had to vote for him ... or you acted like you voted for him ... in that way no-one knew ... *Pas de politique, même pas mon vieux, même pas mon grand père ... - té oblige [voter pour le propriétaire]! Tout de moun sur le tablisman, tout le monde té oblige vote pou li, ou vote pou li ... ou fait comme si ou vote pou li ... comme ça, personne i conné pas.*⁴⁴

The important thing to do was to pretend to have voted for the boss, and not to mention the Communists. Communist meetings were held outside the factory (*l'etablisman*) and people attended in secret.

When the Communist party had meetings, no one would have attended if they were held on the factory land. They had to hold the meetings elsewhere, you see, in more hidden places. On the factory land, the Communists weren't [even] allowed to hold meetings. *Quand ca té fait la réunion communiste, personne té vient pas, faut pas faire la réunion dans l'etablisman, i fé en dehors, ou wa, dans des endroits retirés, mais dans l'etablisman, les communistes ont pas le droit ça.*⁴⁵

The slowly growing Communist party was not welcomed in the factory of La Mare in the 1950s and had to hold meetings elsewhere. The Communist party directly threatened the landed interests by supporting the application of French social legislation to Réunion.

iii. Alternatives to governance by landholding in Réunion

Although systems of governance in Réunion were strongly based around landholding, the 1946 assimilation law offered a new alternative: the possibility of applying French social legislation to Réunion. The left wing political group in Réunion championed this option, but was opposed by the landholders and by the Catholic Church.

The left-wing political group in Réunion was not closely represented by landholding elites but it had won elections in 1945, and its two deputies represented Réunion in the 1946 debates in the French Constituent Assembly. The left wing

⁴⁴ Interview Mr. M 19/6/2009

⁴⁵ Interview Mr. M 19/6/2009

supported the assimilation of Réunion to France and the rights of working Réunionnais to immediately benefit from French social legislation. This was optimistic. The French administration in Réunion was only a tiny presence from the end of 1947 and had limited influence on policy and finances in Metropolitan France at that time.

The left wing in Réunion was led by Dr Raymond Vergès, the deputy who had voted for the island's assimilation in 1946. He was a white Creole born in Réunion Island from an educated urban family, without the landed power base of most politicians on the island. After being educated in Réunion, Vergès left the island to train as an engineer in Paris. He worked for the French colonial administration in Indochina. After his first wife died of malaria there, he cohabited with a woman from Annam. They had two children together, Jacques and Paul Vergès who were born around 1922. In keeping with colonial anxieties about local female companions of colonial employees and fears of *métissage* or mixed race children, Raymond Vergès was widely criticized for living with his companion. This led to his dismissal from his colonial post in Indochina in 1929.⁴⁶

Returning to Réunion in the early 1930s Raymond Vergès practiced as a doctor. His political thinking about the influence of France in the colonies was influenced not only by his dismissal from the French colonial service, but also by two prominent anti-colonial leaders who had been exiled from their homelands by the French and lived in Réunion. Raymond Vergès frequented both Abd El Krim and the Prince of Annam who

⁴⁶ Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie : les métis de l'empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté*; Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power : race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

both lived in exile in St Denis.⁴⁷ Abd El Krim was leader of a wide-scale armed resistance movement against French and Spanish colonial rule in North Africa. He was exiled in Réunion from 1926 to 1947, before escaping to Egypt on his way from Réunion to the Metropole. Raymond Vergès and his sons frequently visited the house of Abd El Krim in Réunion during the 1930s, and Jacques and Paul Vergès attended school with Abd El Krim's son. Contact with Abd El Krim was a major influence on the political education of Raymond Vergès' sons and also influenced Dr Vergès himself.⁴⁸

Living in Réunion at the same time was Prince Nguyễn Phúc Vĩnh San. He had been crowned Emperor Duy Tan of Indochina in 1907 but thanks to his anti-French sentiments, he was deposed, reduced in rank, and exiled to Reunion in 1916 by the French. He was a symbol of the Vietnamese anticolonialist movement against the French before and during World War I. Although under house arrest in St Denis, he was a member of St Denis bourgeois society, and knew Raymond Vergès. Although Prince Vĩnh San died in 1945 in an airplane accident, his descendants in St Denis also privately supported anti-French movements in Indochina.⁴⁹

Vergès was not solely influenced by Metropolitan French politics; he took part in the French Front Populaire movement in Réunion during the 1930s, but was also aware

⁴⁷ Bao Vang Nguyen Phuoc, *Duy Tan, Empereur d'Annam 1900-1945, exilé à l'île de La Réunion, ou, Le destin tragique du Prince Vinh San : biographie* (Saint-Marie de La Réunion; Paris: Azalées; Harmattan, 2001); Jacques Vergès and Philippe Karim Felissi, *Jacques Vergès l'anticolonialiste* (Paris: Félin, 2005); Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'agitators' : militant anti-colonialism in Africa and the west, 1918-1939* (London: Hurst, 2008).

⁴⁸ Gilles Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).

⁴⁹ Interview Gisèle Tarnus 20/72009

of worldwide anticolonial movements against the French, thanks to his experience in Indochina and the presence of anticolonial exiles in Réunion.⁵⁰

After World War II Vergès co-founded a new political party called the *Comité Républicain d'Action Démocratique et Sociale* (CRADS) which supported the legal assimilation of Réunion to France and the extension of French social legislation to Réunion. Despite the fact that the landowners feared that French social legislation would spell economic disaster for the island, in 1945 CRADS still won a landslide victory in city council and General Council elections. CRADS also won Réunion's only two seats for the National Assembly. As Mayor of St Denis in 1946, Vergès made the radical proposal that the sugar and rum industries be nationalized.⁵¹ A few weeks later Vergès and Leon de Lepervanche, the other Réunionnais deputy, voted for Réunion's assimilation to France in March 1946 (see Introduction). However Vergès was quickly disenchanted. Metropolitan France did not consider that Réunion was a priority. Events in 1946 would add to his disenchantment and motivated him to create a radical left-wing party.

These events created a political chasm between the landholding interests and the supporters of French social legislation in Réunion. In 1946 the landholder's candidate for a National Assembly seat, Alexis de Villeneuve, was assassinated. His murder became a political running sore in Réunion. Dr Vergès' son Paul was the prime suspect. The link

⁵⁰ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*; Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

⁵¹ AMSD 1 D 41 Motion du Conseil Municipal 5/3/1946

was never proved yet Paul Vergès still received a suspended sentence.⁵² The shooting of de Villeneuve divided the political scene in Réunion in to two bitterly opposing groups.

The opposition to Vergès' CRADS party was composed of the urban economic elites and the landowners. Their party was the RPF (*Rassemblement du Peuple Français*) headed by Jean Chatel, a landowner, and Jules Olivier, a Metropolitan Frenchman who had emigrated to Réunion. They opposed assimilation with France. Urban middle classes in Réunion were a small minority and did not have a specific political party that represented their interests.

In 1947 Vergès' CRADS party lost five of its twelve city councils in the elections. Vergès claimed that full assimilation with France was not going quickly enough and was being "sabotaged" by the Metropole. Indeed, by 1947 no French social legislation had been applied in Réunion and the Metropole seemed disinterested in promoting social equality there. By the end of 1947 Vergès disbanded CRADS. He decided to create a political group in Réunion which could align with the French Communist Party (PCF), at a moment when the PCF was at the height of its political power in the French National Assembly.

However, members of Réunion's center-left who had supported the CRADS were less keen to be connected to the explicitly Communist ideas of the PCF. Many bourgeois Catholic moderates who had supported CRADS and Vergès were now uncomfortable with the party's radical new label of Communist.⁵³ With the loss of his moderate educated backing, Vergès had to recruit support from sharecroppers, dockers, railway

⁵² Eugène Rousse, *Qui a tué Alexis de Villeneuve ? ou le verdict controversé de la cour d'assises du Rhône postf. de Rémi Boniface* (Le Port: les Deux mondes, 2000).

⁵³ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Réunion (1959-1967)*.

workers and public works employees. In contrast to the CRADS, the Communists' political base was increasingly formed of people who did not directly work for landowners who opposed the Communists.

The chasm between Communists and the anti-Communists (i.e. landowners and economic elites) grew deeper in Réunion. It also affected rural life, as demonstrated through the following account of Nelson Dijoux's family. Nelson Dijoux was 12 in 1947 and lived with his sharecropping family in a *paillette* in Ouaki near St Louis in the southwest of Réunion. His ancestors were mostly African-origin, although he had a Corsican grandfather. His father's family had been sharecropping for three generations in Ouaki, and his mother's family had always worked for the Catholic Church in the village of Tampon. However his mother's family stopped working in the Church after joining Réunion's Communist Party in 1947.

Like Raphaella Boyer, Nelson Dijoux had started his working life at seven years of age looking after cattle. His parents tried sending him to school when he was nine, but he missed tending his animals and only lasted two days. He was mocked by the other boys in the school for being older than them and for being poor: he only had a calabash to carry his food. The other boys had tin pots, given to their parents as electoral sweeteners by the right wing political party in St Louis. For Nelson Dijoux, racial inequality between white Creoles and people with his Kaf, or African, ancestry was blatant in 1948, and it motivated his parents' support of the Communist Party and their agenda of social change. Popular entertainment was segregated in Nelson Dijoux's village between the black people's dance *bal pour les noirs* and the white people's dances *bal pour les blancs*. A Kaf could only go to a white dance if he was working there as a waiter or a musician, and

was not to chat or look at women, only to serve “like the slave ... That hurts, because we are all equal”, he remembered. Dijoux’s experience of political and racial segregation in the countryside explains why his parents joined the Communist Party which offered a new hope for working people in Réunion.

In Réunion supporting the Communist Party meant making a break with the political choices of the landowners. A journalist for *Le Monde* described the fundamental social divisions between Communist and landowner political parties as votes were counted in the St Denis election office in November 1948.

They were more than rivals [they were] hostile. ... [there were no electoral candidates] other than communist or anticommunist ... the delegates ... place[d] themselves on either side of an invisible line, more [tightly controlled] than a border, because no-one crossed the line during the [2 hour] count. Two camps, two entrenched camps, in which there were, however, equal numbers of blacks and in which there were men who resembled each other, real peasants [like in Metropolitan France]... in flannel or cotton drill jackets, which nothing presupposed for one side or the other.⁵⁴

Although there were two entrenched political camps, the journalist noted that poor black Réunion Islanders were as likely to support the landowners as they were the Communist Party. This shows that even though the Communist Party had support and was attractive for poor agricultural workers, tenant-landowner relations were still very strong. They were as likely to influence poor voters’ choices as the promises of the Communist Party, and this hampered the growth of the Communist Party.

Although Vergès’ sons took part in successful Communist activism in Paris, back in Réunion Dr Vergès’ aims seemed impossible to attain, given the power of Réunion’s landowning and economic elites to defend their interests, and the Metropole’s

⁵⁴ *Le Monde* André Blanchet 25/1/1949

indifference to Réunion. Vergès sons were actively involved in the Communist Party in Metropolitan France. Dr Vergès' son Paul worked in the *Front Uni des Etudiants* in Paris, and at the Section Coloniale of the French Communist Party a special office which coordinated communist activities in the French colonies.⁵⁵ Jacques Vergès, the other son, was also in Paris, and launched the newspaper *Etudiants anticolonialistes* with a team of African, Vietnamese and North African students. Dr Vergès, however, seemed destined to fail. The head of Réunion's *gendarmerie* observed that "Dr Vergès is driving a paper cart against a 60 ton armor-plated tank."⁵⁶ Despite the policeman's doubts, the Communist party was destined to become much stronger.

There were only a handful of Creole elites who did not take an active side in this political division between Communists and landowners in 1948. One of these was Henri Cornu. Cornu was skeptical about the abilities of the French administration to improve the governance of Réunion, but he would be intimately involved in one of the administration's projects in Réunion, the creation of a housing agency in 1949. Cornu was a member of Réunion's urban high society and like Vergès he did not come from a landed family. He was not a member of a political party nor was he interested in political allegiances. Although he worked for a landowner he was a public figure interested in the good governance of Réunion. Unusually he was considered not to be corrupt. He was described in Ministry of Finance correspondence as "one of the most efficient and highly-considered personalities of this Department."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

⁵⁶ Cited in Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*, 141.

⁵⁷ CAC 19840179/70 M. Durand délégué des affaires économiques à MM Bourillon et Seite, Secrétaire d'état aux affaires économiques 08/04/1957

Cornu had received a French education and like Vergès he had graduated from the Ecole Coloniale in Paris, and worked in Congo-Brazzaville, Madagascar and Mayotte before returning to Réunion in the 1930s. He liked the French and was a fervent believer in the French civilizing mission. He also supported the goals of the landed interests in Réunion which were economic development.⁵⁸ Cornu was certainly aware of the poverty surrounding him and concerned about the working poor in a paternalistic way.⁵⁹ Yet Cornu doubted that assimilation with France would radically improve Réunion's economy. Assimilation did not only mean French social rights. Assimilation would also mean fiscal assimilation: the introduction of property tax, import taxes and employer contributions for Réunion's economic elite.

A final opponent of the Communist Party was the Catholic Church which took a virulently anti-Communist political stand after Jacques Foccart visited La Réunion in 1949. Foccart hastened the diocese's application of the 1949 Papal decree excommunicating Catholics who supported the Communists.⁶⁰ Foccart was a shadowy gangster during the Resistance, and a high Gaullist official with intelligence ties throughout Africa for his entire career. He visited Réunion with the intention of minimizing Communist influence on the island.⁶¹ To the fury of the Communists Foccart was instrumental in pushing the bishop of Réunion to publicize this Papal decree. Foccart described that "in this extremely religious country ... the effects of the [decree] were considerable ... people were asking [mayors] for certificates attesting that they were not

⁵⁸ Interview with Hélène Cornu 1/4/2008, Interview Mme Henri Cornu 28/9/2008; see also ADR 194 W 59 Henri Cornu à Pierre Bolotte, Chef du Cabinet de la Préfecture de La Réunion 18/9/1961

⁵⁹ Interview Mme Cornu, Hélène Cornu

⁶⁰ Claude Prudhomme, *Histoire religieuse de la Réunion* (Paris: Karthala, 1984); Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

⁶¹ Jacques Foccart was a French politician who became Charles De Gaulle's leading advisor on African policy, and created the neo-colonial "Françafrique" conception of French-African policy

Communists, in order to participate in baptisms. ... the bishop's condemnation of the [Communist] newspaper *Témoignages* reduced the sales considerably.”⁶² The Church influenced local political attitudes towards Communism, but did not, of itself, directly influence the election results in the following decade.

iv. The arrival of the French administration

After Réunion became a French Overseas Department in 1946 the entire Metropolitan French bureaucracy would be recreated in Réunion. This would not occur until 1947. The arrival of the French administration threatened the landholding and economic elites, as well as the increasingly disenchanted Communist Party. Thus, eighteen months after Réunion became a French Overseas Department in 1946 the French administration took over from the French colonial governor, in August 1947.⁶³ La Réunion's last colonial governor André Capagorry optimistically described the island as “the torchbearer for the great French Union in the Indian Ocean” in a ceremony handing power over to the new French Prefect. The new Prefect of La Réunion, Paul Demange took over on the same day, 17th August 1947. The French colonial presence on the island had not been significant. The influence of the new French bureaucracy in Réunion, headed by the Prefect, would be much greater from now on.

The major issue facing Prefect Demange was how Réunion could suddenly be assimilated with the Metropole.⁶⁴ Demange recognized the cultural chasm between French and Réunionnais ways of living, earning money and dealing in politics. In

⁶² Cited in Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

⁶³ Cited in Combeau, *La vie politique à La Réunion, 1942-1963*. Assemblée Nationale law 46-451, 19/3/1946

⁶⁴ CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur, transformation de la colonie en département, 12/19/1947

Réunion economic life revolved around landlord – tenant relations and political life was divided between landlord-tenant relations and the Communists. Demange saw that assimilation would be difficult, given the two opposing political camps.

Assimilation [for Réunion would mean] ... to create a real civic spirit here ... in a population steeped in such a partisan spirit that ... they cannot accept the presence of political enemies in a funeral cortège.⁶⁵

Demange also felt that the landowners only cared about what France could offer Réunion and did not want to make any economic sacrifices in the island's assimilation with the Metropole.⁶⁶ Demange was especially shocked at the level of poverty in Réunion in 1947 and considered that Réunion was very unlike Metropolitan France. "It was clear to me straightaway that the territory I was sent to administer was at least fifty years behind a Metropolitan department" wrote Demange in his first dispatches. "I was heartbroken to see puny, badly-clothed school-age children ... I found no hospitals, no dispensaries worth talking about in a country where numerous diseases – malaria, tuberculosis and syphilis - do such terrible devastation."⁶⁷ This indifference to the material conditions of the majority of Réunion Islanders struck the Prefect. He mused that Creole elites saw themselves as French, and were attached to events in the Metropole, because they completely ignored the poverty that surrounded them.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 5 juin 1948, 6/15/1948

⁶⁶ CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur, transformation de la colonie en département, 12/19/1947

⁶⁷ CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 5 juin 1948, 6/15/1948

⁶⁸ CARAN F/2/4407 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur Objet: Renseignements Généraux sur les postes de l'administration préfectoraux. Rapport concernant la physionomie générale du département de La Réunion 26/06/1948

It was impossible for Demange to even consider confronting this poverty through the immediate application of French social rights to Réunion. On his arrival in 1947, Réunion was facing famine. “The island lives at the rhythm of a feverish man, whose heart beats in time with the irregular boat arrivals” Demange noted.⁶⁹ The island did not and could not feed itself. Deliveries by boat had increased since 1945, but there was about one boat a week in 1946 and a total of 72 boats in 1947.⁷⁰ Staple foods such as beef, lard, oil, salt cod and rice were imported by boat.⁷¹ The landowners monopolized land use to grow cash crops like sugar cane. The business elites monopolized imports, and controlled food prices and speculated on the price of rice by not importing enough to go round.

In late 1947 rice was rationed at 300g per person per day and even the sale of cassava, grown locally, was regulated. Salt cod was rare.⁷² In December 1947 Prefect Demange reported to Paris that there were almost no stocks of rice or corn for the island, even though 97% of people ate them as a basic nutrient.⁷³ The new Franco-Indochinese war prevented Réunion’s importers from buying adequate stocks of rice from Saigon. 12,000 tons of Indochinese rice had been ordered since the beginning of the year, of

⁶⁹ CARAN F/2/4407 Discours prononcé par M. Paul Demange Préfet de La Réunion à l'occasion de l'ouverture de la deuxième session ordinaire du Conseil Général du département de La Réunion le 30 octobre 1947. Imprimerie Casal, Saint-Denis, Réunion 1947

⁷⁰ Maestri and Nomdedeu-Maestri, *Chronologie de la Réunion : de la départementalisation à la loi d'orientation, 1946-2001*.

⁷¹ CAC 19940180/9 Documentation sur le Département de La Réunion et la ville de Saint-Denis à l'occasion du voyage du Général de Gaulle juillet 1959. Economie et questions sociales.

⁷² ADR 1 PER 82/26 *Le Progrès*. Radio Saint-Denis. Allocution de Préfet Paul Démange 19/20 décembre 22/12/1948

⁷³ CAC 19940180/240 Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : Transformation de la colonie en département, 12/19/1947

which only 1,500 tons had been delivered. The Prefect was so worried about the lack of food stocks that he travelled personally to Madagascar to purchase supplies of rice.⁷⁴

Prefect Demange also aimed to further French links with Madagascar, and hoped to strengthen France's presence in the Indian Ocean through his influence in Réunion.⁷⁵ The importance of Réunion for France's reputation, and France's reforming role in Réunion was clear. The new Prefect wrote to Paris: "Opposite Madagascar, French India and Indochina, where French sovereignty is questioned, France must keep [a stronghold in Réunion] which regroups the most diverse races ... To achieve this, the grand reform must be a success."⁷⁶

Thus in December 1947 the Creole elite's monopoly on governance in Réunion was threatened, not only by the ambitions of the new Communist Party, but also by the French administration which wanted to prove that France could still have a political influence overseas.

IV. The 1948 cyclone

"[The 1948 cyclone] was ... a diabolic cyclone ... there were balls of fire ... it wasn't a cyclone like other cyclones ... it was ... devastating" remembered Nelson Dijoux.

65,000 Réunion Islanders were seriously affected by the 1948 cyclone. 21,248 people

⁷⁴ This policy of subsidizing rice continued until the mid 1950s. It had no effect on the underlying problems of food supply and import monopolies in Réunion ADR 1158 W 97 procès verbal Conseil Général de La Réunion séance d'après-midi 18/2/1948 ; ADR 41 W 117 *Le Cri du Peuple*: le scandale du riz 10/6/1952 ; CARAN F/1cIII/1352 Préfet à M. le ministre de l'intérieur Rapport mensuel 16/01/1953 ; CARAN F/1cIII/1352 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel 12/10/1953

⁷⁵ The Préfet also represented Réunion at a Franco-Malagasy exhibition in Tananarive during his October 1947 visit CARAN F/2/4407 Discours prononcé par M. Paul Démange Préfet de La Réunion à l'inauguration de l'exposition franco-malgache à Tananarive le 5 octobre 1947 Imprimerie Cazal, Saint-Denis, Réunion 1947; CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Transformation de la colonie en département 12/19/1947

⁷⁶ CAC 19940180/240 Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 15/6/1948

were without any possessions at all, losing “even their clothes”. 15,296 people were without shelter.⁷⁷ 165 people died during the cyclone.⁷⁸ At the height of the cyclone, many poor people were sheltered by their landowners, in a moment of solidarity between rich and poor in Réunion. However, after the cyclone, poor Réunionnais were left to their own resources to survive. The administration did not encourage the poor to claim relief. The Church told them to consider the disaster as God’s will, rather than as a result of their meager resources and poverty. The Communist Party mobilized Réunionnais to make claims on the authorities for disaster relief, but Réunionnais elites felt threatened by the poor demanding aid.

In the wake of the cyclone all local politicians demanded aid from France to pay for new infrastructure, but the cyclone exposed further divisions between the Communists on one side, and the landholders and the administration on the other. The divisions between Communists and landowners became clearer as the landowners attempted to weaken the Communists by disbanding the train line, whose workers were a core support base for the Communists. The French administration also sought to weaken the Communist party by taking the side of the landowners and supporting the destruction of the trains. To achieve this, the French administration and the landowners presented the cyclone as a purely natural disaster which had made the train line obsolete.

i. The night of the cyclone

⁷⁷ Although this depended on the area : 80% of people lost their homes in the western towns of St Paul and St Leu Jean Emon, *Le cyclone tropical destructeur des 26 et 27 janvier 1948 à La Réunion* ed. Haut Commissariat de la République Française à Madagascar et Dépendances (Tananarive: Service Météorologique de Madagascar, 1948).

⁷⁸ This could also have been a result of increased mosquito-borne illnesses ADR 41 W 148 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 19/3/1948 Objet: cyclone du 27 janvier 1948

The cyclone's devastating wind blew away innumerable houses made of materials such as thatch, and even stronger houses of wood, if they were exposed. It destroyed parts of the railway line. Many of the different environments on the west of the island were utterly transformed by the incomprehensible and amazing force of the cyclone.

As day turned to evening on January 26 1948, the ocean swell grew and the barometer dropped to 967Mb, indicating the extreme low pressure and stormy conditions.⁷⁹ During the night the wind speeds gusted to 300 km/h, over Beaufort force twelve, the highest possible wind measure. The cyclone winds also brought enormous amounts of rain. Réunion's hundreds of ravines and river beds coursed with wide, torrential rivers of filthy run-off water drawn from the mountain tops, carrying everything in their flow: rocks, trees and dead animals. Eddy Juillerot who lived alongside the St Denis river in Bas de la Rivière remembered the flood waters rising into his family house and swilling around the floor.

All night ... we sat on our bed ... we prayed ... the wind blew "bobobobo grrr" until six o'clock in the morning [when]...the wind suddenly stopped ... we knew it was six because [the church of] La Délivrance sounded the Angelus and suddenly the wind veered to the south and lifted the roof completely off! Gone!⁸⁰

The ocean swept away the Robert family's thatched house in nearby Ste Clotilde. "The ocean foam blew everywhere ... and the ocean flowed over our house, the wind picked up the roof and the pig died. There it lay with its four legs in the air! Ah, the '48 cyclone was a dangerous one, that! *La mer l'a grainé ... la mer rent dans la case, le vent té i tir le toit,*

⁷⁹ Mireille Mayoka, *Les cyclones à La Réunion* (La Réunion: Centre des cyclones tropicaux à La Réunion; Météo France, 1998). I am grateful to Isabelle Mayer for conversations about cyclones in Réunion and for indicating this and other useful secondary sources. See Isabelle Mayer, "Sociétés et Cyclones dans le Sud-Ouest de l'Océan Indien : La Réunion, Maurice et Madagascar (XXème Siècle) » History PhD thesis in preparation, Université de La Réunion

⁸⁰ Interview Mr. Juillerot 15/10/2008

et le cochon té mort, té la ek les quat' pattes dans l'air! ... ah cyclone 48 té un cyclone dangereux ça."⁸¹ A family of sharecroppers and their ten children in the remote mountain village of Entre-Deux woke up to find that in the area where they had planted their maize, a ravine had appeared, fifty meters wide.⁸² They had not only lost their house, their furniture and their clothes, but also their land.

It was like magic ... you'll never believe me, (the young never believe me when I tell them this) but just when the ocean calmed down [after it had been crashing into the mouth of the St Denis river] the water was sucked out suddenly and it left shrimp, eels, all the things you find in the river, they were flapping around in our back yard!⁸³

With holes appearing in the fields, and fish flapping in the yard, the cyclone had inverted the normal material order of Réunion.

The force of the waters even destroyed railway bridges and road sections which had stood up to previous cyclones. The 300 meter long bridge along the Rivière des Galets near Le Port was washed away.⁸⁴ Parts of St Paul were flooded with four meters of water. St Leu was covered with thick black mud; and rocks up to three meters high were strewn all over the town like marbles having been brought down the ravines with the flood waters. The wind blew off the roofs of even strong buildings such as churches, schools and warehouses, as well as a radio antenna in St Denis which had been built to stand up to winds of 250km/hour. The island was cut off from international communications for two days.⁸⁵ However, the cyclone did not end on the morning of the 26th of January, after the storm had passed by the island. It rained for eight days straight

⁸¹ Interview Mr. Robert 10/7/2009

⁸² ADR 1158 W 97 procès-verbal Conseil Général de La Réunion séance d'après-midi 18/2/1948

⁸³ Interview Mr. Juillerot 15/10/2008

⁸⁴ Emon, *Le cyclone tropical destructeur des 26 et 27 janvier 1948 à La Réunion*

⁸⁵ ADR 41 W 148 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 19/3/1948 Objet: cyclone du 27 janvier 1948.

in the remote interior village of Cilaos, destroying the road linking it to the coast and destroying the thermal spas which had been enjoyed by the international French colonial set before the Second World War. Three new sources were created however.⁸⁶

The corpses of fifteen people killed by a landslide in Cilaos had to be pulled across a flooding river in order to bury them in the cemetery on the other side. "The poor corpses fell in the drink from time to time" a villager recounted.⁸⁷ For days, fresh water was impossible to obtain in the lowlands because the rivers were dirty from all the dead animals which had been brought down in the flood waters. People who lived in Ouaki buried their animals near the mouth of the Rivière St Louis. Even weeks after, Nelson Dijoux's zebus refused to go near the area because of the smell of rotting animals. The lack of drinking water created an outbreak of dysentery in the village of Champ-Borne in northeastern Réunion, with two fatalities a fortnight after the cyclone had passed.⁸⁸ During the year of the cyclone, infant mortality rose to 2.3% of all births: 70% higher than previous and subsequent year averages.⁸⁹

ii. Moments of solidarity

The cyclone briefly forced populations that were socially separated by class differences to help each other. For some Réunion Islanders, the landowning elites became their protectors during the night of the cyclone. In Ouaki, Nelson Dijoux's family knew that their house, thatched with sugar cane stalks, would not stand up to the wind, and they had

⁸⁶ For a brief history of the spas in La Réunion, see Chapter 4 of Eric Thomas Jennings, *Curing the colonizers : hydrotherapy, climatology, and French colonial spas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁸⁷ Collège Paul Hermann, ed. *Gramounes Cilaos : cent ans de souvenirs* (Saint Pierre, La Réunion: CKC, 1986). ADR 1 PER 82/26 Le Progrès. Trois nouvelles sources jaillissent à Cilaos 18/2/1948

⁸⁸ ADR 41 W 148 Dr Vergès à Préfet de La Réunion, 10/2/1948

⁸⁹ Scherer, "La population de la Réunion."

nothing to protect their animals. The family let all their animals loose in the yard and went to seek protection from their landowner. During the cyclone the eleven members of the Dijoux family, along with other sharecroppers, sheltered in their landowners' strong wooden house. "People had solidarity, and [the landowners] welcomed us with love, I must be frank ... but they were also happy because if a window worked loose, or a door flew open we were all on hand." In St Gilles les Bains, Raphaella and Yvan Bottard spent the afternoon tying down their roof with handmade ropes, and it did not fly off. As they were moderately well-off landowners, they also sheltered their sharecroppers after the roof of their sharecroppers' house flew into the St Gilles ravine.

Many people needed to fall on the charity of their landowner. Mr. M, the Comorian laborer asked his employer at the La Mare sugar factory in Ste Marie for help, after his house near the beach at Maperine was swept away by the ocean, during the cyclone.⁹⁰ This was the benefit of working in a factory and acting like he voted for the boss's choice. All this was part of the local system of material aid that landowners gave to their workers in return for their loyalty.

The urban Creole elites also sheltered their neighbors. Henri Cornu's wife had been safe in their country house in Le Brûlé, located in the hills above St Denis. Their house was sheltered by a hill and remained unscathed but Mme Cornu saw her neighbor's roof land in her back yard. Henri Cornu had stayed down in St Denis during the cyclone. As he walked back up to Le Brûlé the following morning he came across a Réunionnais sharecropper. The man appeared to be cuddling a pig in his arms. "What are you doing there?" asked Mr. Cornu. "Monsieur" the man replied "the water has carried away all my

⁹⁰ Interview Mr. M 19/6/2009

papers, the little money I had, all my animals and I have nothing left. All I have is this pig. And my pig is in shock! *li la gagne saisissement!*” Mme Cornu laughed as she imagined the man cuddling the overwhelmed pig. “There are always funny things in cyclones. We laugh about them, but they’re terrible” she added. In their safe, well-situated houses, the Creole elites had different experiences of the cyclone, and different explanations of its importance.

What pity the state of these [damaged] houses inspires, especially the poor peoples’ houses ... what future do these disaster victims have? [The cyclone of] 26 January will mark the darkest day in the history of our disasters. We more or less have no idea about these poor people living in the rural interior of our island.⁹¹ Despite the plaintive tone of this editorial, after the cyclone there was no organized system of welfare for all neighborhoods in Réunion. People living near urban centers such as St Denis or St Paul benefitted from a limited amount of Church aid, or help from the administration. The Prefect made food handouts in some neighborhoods and set up a disaster committee with the Mayors of each commune, to give financial assistance to those who had lost everything. French government intervention was also needed in the following month to parachute supplies to the mountain villages.⁹² However, the Prefect’s disaster committee had a limited effect in rural neighborhoods, and some Réunionnais never realized that the disaster commission even existed.

“We ask you, M. le Prefect, to intercede in our favor because in Réunion we think of you as a good father figure who looks after his children.” A newspaper subscriber wrote to the Prefect in a Réunion newspaper requesting help for people in the rural Plaine des Cafres region who had received no help.⁹³ Calling the Prefect a benevolent father

⁹¹ ADR 1 PER 81/50 *La Démocratie* Après le désastre 02/02/1948

⁹² BNF 4 LK11 1558 Deuxième anniversaire de l’érection de La Réunion en département 16/03/1948

⁹³ ADR 1 PER 82/26 *Le Progrès* Plaine des Cafres. Lettre ouverte à M. le Préfet 10/02/1948

echoed the rural practice of considering landowners as powerful people to turn to for material help in a crisis. This letter was written by a literate person who had enough money to subscribe to a newspaper, rather than an agricultural worker who was likely to be illiterate. Réunion Islanders living areas such as Plaine des Cafres would have had a very vague idea of the Prefect in 1948.⁹⁴ Tens of thousands of Réunion's disaster victims were merely left to their own resources to rebuild their house, and their lives, relying solely on neighborly solidarity.

There was an enormous threat of famine when basic foodstuffs such as rice, beans and cooking oil were already rationed.⁹⁵ The day after the cyclone, the Dijoux family came back to their farm to find all their chickens, ducks and most of their goats had gone. They only had one zebu left and their house had been knocked flat. Réunion Islanders were obliged to resort to neighborly solidarity. "We bartered, we ate cassava, sweet potato, taro; we ate whatever we could find!"⁹⁶ Reciprocity helped people survive after the cyclone ripped out almost all food crops in the west of Réunion.⁹⁷ "There was nothing left in the vegetable garden, we had no more plants, nothing at all, we had planted taro, it was ripped out, bananas, everything ripped out and blown off together."

The biggest problem [after the cyclone] was for food. For the food that we had grown, the fruit trees, it was "zero", nothing, ... skeletons, not one leaf, not one fruit, nothing, in the vegetable garden there was nothing, completely destroyed. ... It was atrocious, it was pitiful ... it was complete destitution (*la misère noire*).⁹⁸

⁹⁴ However the 1951-1952 cyclone produced more supplicating letters to the Prefect, suggesting that Réunion Islanders had come to a greater understanding of his role and financial power See ADR 41 W 149

⁹⁵ ADR 1 PER 82/26 *Le Progrès*. Radio Saint-Denis. Allocution de Préfet Paul Démange 19/20 décembre 22/12/1948

⁹⁶ Interview Mme Hoarau 26/9/2008

⁹⁷ ADR 41 W 148 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 19/3/1948 Objet: cyclone du 27 janvier 1948

⁹⁸ I am grateful to Professor Henry Wright for pointing out that the taro cuttings would have been put in the ground in November or December, and would not yet have begun to form a large corm. He also observes

In the highland village of Dos d’Ane a resident wrote to a local newspaper that the village had lost most of their animals and even the local grocery store, had been destroyed. There were no more cabbages, sweet potato or chocho and most of the thatched houses had been blown away.⁹⁹

The cyclone provided an excuse for supporters of the right wing in Réunion to make political critiques about the Communist Party, through the idiom of food shortage. In the weeks after the cyclone, right-wing newspapers used ideas about smell and rotting to criticize the Communist Mayor of St Paul, Raoul Lucas.¹⁰⁰ Some newspapers claimed that St Paul was overwhelmed with the putrid smell of rotting animals, or even more shockingly, rotting food such as rice and corn. The anti-Communist newspapers criticized the Communist Mayor of St Paul for abandoning the town. These newspapers praised the solidarity of Reunion Islanders, and attacked the Communist city government for not helping the people in the villages.¹⁰¹

Despite these political jibes between elites, poor Réunionnais had no other choice but to rebuild their lives with the materials at hand, showing independence and resilience. They were not dependent on landowners or the Communists to rebuild their lives. If they were lucky, neighborly solidarity would extend to lending a few wood shingles or a bit of

that in this season manioc/cassava and sweet potatoes would have been well advanced and even if the leaves were stripped off, one could eat the corms or tubers. Perhaps Dos d’Ane was also subject to landslides from the rain, or more probably it was an elite view of the food situation without substantive knowledge.

⁹⁹ ADR 1 PER 81/50 *La Démocratie*. Le passage de l’ouragan du 26 sur la localité du Dos d’Ane (Possession) 06/02/1948 ; ADR 41W148 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur 19/3/1948
Objet: cyclone du 27 janvier 1948

¹⁰⁰ It seems likely that this was a politically directed critique, because newspapers only describe St Paul and other villages such as St Gilles in this way, pointing to a few unhappy residents of the commune who sent reports to different newspapers

¹⁰¹ ADR 1 PER 86/3 *Le Cri du Peuple* Nouvelles de St Paul 10/2/1948 ; ADR 1 PER 84/6 *La Démocratie* Au lendemain du désastre 10/02/1948 ; ADR 1 PER 84/6 *La Démocratie* Les Méconnus 18/02/1948

sheet metal to tide them over.¹⁰² Material possessions were very scarce but housing was basic and recyclable. Réunionnais re-used the wood from their fallen thatched houses, and collected wood from fallen trees or brought down by water in the ravines. Some Réunionnais fetched wood from the high forest.¹⁰³ They were able to rebuild thatch houses quickly. Even if they only constructed shelters, these were good for few months as they waited for thatch materials to regrow.¹⁰⁴

The Robert family, whose beachside house was swept away by the ocean, had pulled their mother and new baby sister in a handcart through the rain to reach the nuns in the village of Ste Clotilde during the night of the cyclone.¹⁰⁵ They were taken in by the nuns with 200 or 300 other people. The St. Denis municipal government provided them with food after the cyclone.¹⁰⁶ Despite losing their house, the Roberts were expected to find somewhere else to live ten days afterwards. There had been a brief moment of paternalistic solidarity when elites sheltered agricultural workers during the cyclone. The administration and the Church also provided aid for some people in urban areas. Shortly after the cyclone, however, poor Réunion Islanders were merely expected to fall back on their own resources and to rebuild their lives as best they could. Yet for Réunion

¹⁰² Interview Mme Hoarau 26/9/2008

¹⁰³ Some of this was in control of the government and was officially authorized to people, especially in regions such as Cilaos where woodcutting was officially permitted in the 1944 cyclone see ADR 41W 6 Sinistrés et calamités publiques (I thank Isabelle Mayer for drawing my attention to this source). Some land was in control of landowners such as Albert Lounon in St Paul, who allowed residents of Bellemène to use his wood (interview Mme Blanc 1/5/2007)

¹⁰⁴ I am grateful to Professor Henry Wright for his observation that people throughout the tropics have adapted to cyclones by building easily reconstructed houses

¹⁰⁵ Judging by reports of the 1945 cyclone in St Denis the Church was extremely important in giving public aid during 1948. St Denis Municipal records for the 1945 cyclone record the help of the frères des écoles chrétiennes, sœurs de Sainte Clotilde, orphelinat de Saint-Jacques, sœurs de la providence, dispensaire de la montagne and the orphelinat de la charité AMSD 1 D 41 rapport au conseil municipal 11 mars 1946

¹⁰⁶ ADR 1 PER 81/50 *La Démocratie*. Un désastre 29/01/1948

Islanders who supported the Communist Party, the cyclone threw into sharp relief that French social rights had not been applied to Réunion.

iii. Cyclone relief and a “natural” disaster

Réunion had suffered hundreds of cyclones in the past, including in 1944 and 1945. However the 1948 cyclone was an especially devastating one, the strongest in living memory. The cyclone occurred just as Réunion was supposedly being assimilated into France. All Réunionnais politicians now claimed the French state should fund rebuilding of Réunion’s infrastructure. The Prefect and the landowners considered that Port, electricity production, better water supply and better roads were the priority.¹⁰⁷ The communists favored the application of French social legislation, and encouraged poor Réunion Islanders to seek cyclone relief from the authorities.

After the cyclone, the Communist party created a new strategy. They mobilized poor populations in St Denis to request cyclone relief from the government.

In September 1948, people who had lost everything in St Denis still had not been compensated. The city government announced that payments would once again be rescheduled. The next day the Communists organized a hundred women to march down Avenue de la Victoire, one of the main streets in St Denis, and demonstrated outside the Prefecture to demand payment. Mindful of the potential disturbance only weeks before the local government elections, the Prefect met with a delegation of four women, and

¹⁰⁷ CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur, 15/6/1948

cyclone charity payments were scheduled for the following Saturday.¹⁰⁸ This was a victory for the Communist party.

The centrist *La Démocratie* newspaper criticized this Communist activism. Rather than admitting the severe problems of poverty and malnutrition in St Denis, the newspaper accused the Communists of “taking advantage” of the disaster for political gain. The right wing elites feared that if the poor claimed state aid, mass discontent might ensue. The newspaper accused the Communists of having “stormed” the Town Hall and demanded food. They claimed that the following day the Communists even tried to “incite” poor people in St Denis to rebel against the city government, and alleged that the Communist prison guards were fomenting rebellion among the prisoners. The exaggerated reports threw in to sharp focus the unease of middle and upper class Réunion Islanders regarding the claims of the poor, even after such a disaster.¹⁰⁹

The Catholics presented the cyclone’s destruction as a natural disaster. Calling the cyclone natural glossed over the fact that the disaster was also caused by social inequalities in Réunion that left poor populations vulnerable. “It seems that God is showing Réunion that we must live here like sick people who wait from one moment to the next to leave the earth and all their worldly goods” wrote a journalist in Réunion’s conservative Catholic newspaper *Dieu et Patrie*.¹¹⁰ Thus, the journalist expected poor people to be passive in the face of hardship, rather than claim disaster relief.

¹⁰⁸ AMSD 3 I 17 Commissaire de Police à M. le Directeur Départemental des Services de Police 15/09/1948

¹⁰⁹ ADR 1 PER 84/6 *La Démocratie*. Un désastre/Ceux qu'on devait fusiller ou pendre/Les rapaces qui vivent sur les cadavres 29/01/1948

¹¹⁰ ADR 1 PER 83/1 *Dieu et Patrie*. Prière pour éloigner les cyclones 15/2/1948

Although the poor were not expected to ask for aid, since colonial times Réunionnais politicians had often demanded cyclone relief for the island from the French National Assembly.¹¹¹ Now that Réunion was assimilated with France, cyclone relief could be framed as relief for *French* people rather than for a colonial population. Réunion should thus benefit from more money than in previous decades. The Prefect estimated the cyclone damage at 4 ½ billion Metropolitan Francs and wrote to Paris asking France to make an effort for Réunion and reminding him that French contributions to the colony after the 1944 and 1945 cyclones had been “ridiculously small.”¹¹²

Even if the Prefect and local elites considered that France should send relief, the first country to offer help to Réunion was another Overseas Department, Guadeloupe.¹¹³ The French High Commissioner of Madagascar also sent money, with a message that European, Réunionnais and Malagasy would feel the “reality of the French Union” through this donation.¹¹⁴ Donations also came in from Senegal as well as neighboring French and British Indian Ocean colonies: the Comoros Islands, the Seychelles and Mauritius.¹¹⁵ This funding underlines that Réunion was also part of a broader colonial world, now called the French Union. However, Réunionnais politicians attempted to frame Réunion as exclusively French, with problems that could only be resolved by a comprehensive plan for reconstruction in Réunion paid for by France.

¹¹¹ For example in 1914 aid was specifically demanded for disaster victims and was then spent by the colony on infrastructure renewal to the complaints of French deputies ADR 41 W 6 / 1M4083 Lettre n°200C du 22/06/1915 du ministre des colonies au gouverneur de La Réunion. I thank Isabelle Mayer for bringing this source to my attention

¹¹² ADR 41 W 148 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 19/3/1948 Objet: cyclone du 27 janvier 1948

¹¹³ ADR 41 W 148 Préfet de Guadeloupe à Préfet de La Réunion 27/01/1948

¹¹⁴ ADR 41 W 148 Président du Comité Central de l'Association des Réunionnais à Madagascar à Monsieur le Député à l'Assemblée National Haut Commissaire de la République française à Madagascar et Dépendances 24/03/1948

¹¹⁵ For specific details of donations see the file of “souscriptions” for the 1948 cyclone in ADR 41 W 148

Central French government was unenthusiastic. It took almost a month for a funding proposal to be put in front of deputies of the French Assembly.¹¹⁶ It was not passed until the 17th of March 1948, two months after the cyclone. The sum allocated by the Metropole was only a quarter of the total needed - 100 million Francs - much to the disgust of the deputies for Réunion, Dr Vergès and Leon de Lepervanche.

Repairing 30% sugar cane and 80% essential oil plants: 760 million CFA
Forest damage: 120 million CFA
Roads: 125 million CFA
Railway: 95 million CFA
Schools: 113 million CFA
Churches 85 millions: CFA¹¹⁷

Table 2.2 Claims for refunding infrastructure in Réunion 1948

Environmental upheaval in Réunion, and new funding from Metropolitan France, had created the financial conditions for making changes to infrastructure in Réunion.

However the French administration, the Communists and the landowners would argue about the shape and direction of these changes.

iv. The radicalization of the Communists

The cyclone had caused many roads and bridges to be swept away, including the railway bridge at Rivière des Galets. The material ruin of the railway line allowed both rightwing politicians and the French administration to use the natural disaster as an excuse to remedy a political problem. They deployed ideas about nature, obsolescence, and

¹¹⁶ The proposal was tabled in the National Assembly on the 18/2/1948. On 1/8/1949 the French government finally promised 315 million F to repair cyclone damage in La Réunion

¹¹⁷ ADR 41 W 148 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur 19/3/1948 Objet: cyclone du 27 janvier 1948

inefficiency in order to cast the railway as a technically backward part of the island's infrastructure, whose destruction should be welcomed.

Just after the cyclone, *Le Progrès* wrote that the disbanding of Réunion's railway was inevitable. "We had decided to disband the railway on paper, and then nature brought it the final blow. Poor railway. Everything has turned against it – inefficiency, indiscipline, government relentlessness to destroy it, management reshuffle, and finally, coup de grace, an atomic cyclone"¹¹⁸ Talk of indiscipline, inefficiency and inevitability were euphemisms for the well-known fact that the railway had a very large number of publicly employed railway workers, or *cheminots*, most of whom were unionized and supported the Communist Party. The Communist deputy Leon de Lepervanche was the head of the railway and dismantling the train would reduce his political support.

There was no inevitability about the railway's demise. In Henri Cornu's more moderate opinion, the future of Réunion Island's economy depended on French commitment to infrastructure renewal, including the railway."¹¹⁹ However the French administration and the landowners both labeled the railway infrastructure as "superseded" technology in order to cast a political blow on the Communist party. This deepened the political divide between Communists and anti-Communists.

In 1951 the Communists created a new tactic to bolster support for their party. Rather than calling for Réunion's immediate assimilation with France, the Communists argued that France was acting like a colonial power in Réunion, in spite of departmentalization. In the 1951 legislative elections in Réunion, the Communist Party declared itself as "anticolonial and antifascist." Their list carried the slogan "vote against

¹¹⁸ ADR 1 PER 82/26 *Le Progrès* 04/02/1948

¹¹⁹ CAC 19840179/70 Cornu à Bourillon, Direction des Affaires Economiques 28/12/1951

colonialism for your mouthful of rice, your right to live.”¹²⁰ The Communist Party attempted to create discontent by blaming the food problems on the French administration although the import cartels run by Réunion’s economic elites were really responsible for food shortages and the high price of rice.

In 1952 Prefect Béchoff sacked many railway workers. In public, he claimed to be efficiently reorganizing colonial-era government services which did not exist in French Departments. However in private correspondence the Prefect saw the disbanding of the public works and railway workers as a political “clean up”, to get rid of Communist support. He intended that the ex-railway workers would be split up and employed in the growing French-funded construction industry, specifically in urban renovation and housing construction.¹²¹

Thanks to the alliance between the landowners and the French administration over the disbanding of Réunion’s train line, the cyclone had the ultimate effect of radicalizing the Communist Party. From being a political party which supported immediate assimilation with France in 1947, by 1952 the Communist party had cast itself as an anti-colonial party, and positioned itself against the French administration in Réunion. The ex-railway workers would be re-employed in the construction industry, which would become the new site for Communist influence.

The creation of the new French-funded construction industry in Réunion was also an effect of the cyclone which had destroyed so many houses. Part of this would be the founding of the state first housing agency in Réunion. Although this would only concern

¹²⁰ Combeau, *La vie politique à La Réunion, 1942-1963*.

¹²¹ CAC 19840179/74 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur. Objet: mes rapports des 6 et 15 juillet 1950 22/7/1950

the landowners and the French administration in 1949, by 1956 the administration and landowners would attempt to finally quash political support for Communists by using the housing agency to build urban housing for workers (see chapter 3).

V. Clashing views of governance: the creation of the SIDR

In the first General Council meeting after the cyclone in March 1948, Léon de Lepervanche, the other Communist deputy for Réunion, laid out his vision for tackling the seriousness of the housing problem in Réunion. “We have to apply urban planning in Réunion. The cyclone has complicated the problem of housing. Instead of paillottes we should construct modern housing which the owner could [pay off] over a number of years.”¹²² Other members of the ruling class in Réunion were more concerned to kick-start agricultural production and improve the quantity of the sugar cane harvest, rather than create politically independent workers living in their own houses.¹²³ Yet the Prefect agreed that something needed to be done about housing in Réunion. Writing to central government in Paris later that year, he observed,

The lack of housing in the island is of unprecedented seriousness ... the population of the island is growing by 5,000 people a year; and the existing constructions, already insufficient, are periodically destroyed by the cyclones which devastate Réunion. The crisis of housing presents the hallmarks of a social problem which can only be resolved in the framework of an equipment plan for the department.¹²⁴

¹²² ADR 1158 W 97 procès-verbal Conseil Général de La Réunion séance d'après-midi 18/2/1948

¹²³ CAC 19940180/240, Paul Demange, Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Transformation de la colonie en département, 12/19/1947, ADR 1158 W 97 procès-verbal Conseil Général de La Réunion séance d'après-midi 18/2/1948

¹²⁴ CAC 19840179/70 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le Secrétaire d'État aux Affaires Economiques, Direction des Affaires d'Outre-mer. Objet: Société Immobilière de La Réunion; Arrêté 1946. 12/11/1948

In Réunion's General Council session of September 29 1948, the motion was carried to make a mixed economy housing company funded by France.¹²⁵ This housing company would build better houses than the paillottes that had been destroyed by the cyclone and it would be part of France's reconstruction plan in Réunion.

A housing company was linked to landholding, and this was of special interest to landed elites. The creation of the housing company in the wake of the cyclone was one of the earliest moments that French administrators and Creole elites worked together attempting to shape policy and impose their views about the right way to govern Réunion. However, the French administration was not interested in Creole views of how houses should be built in Réunion. French decisions would be made in Paris and landowners would be excluded from decision-making. However, the French administration was not able to control the landholders' speculation on rents and land prices, in the same way as it had not managed to control the import cartel's price fixing for rice. Although the French administration would gain control of the housing agency, it was forced to work around the Creole elites' continuing monopoly over land.

i. Who to build for?

In December 1949 the Société Immobilière du Department de la Réunion (SIDR) was created by agreement with the Minister of Overseas France, the Minister of Economy, the General Council of Réunion and the FIDES.¹²⁶ Réunion's General Council had originally hoped that the SIDR would just be funded by the state, but the state wanted a contribution from private capital in Réunion. This combination of private and public capital made the

¹²⁵ ADR 1 PER 82/26 Le Progrès. Radio Saint-Denis. Allocution de Préfet Paul Démange 19/20 décembre 22/12/1948

¹²⁶ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR Procès Verbal. Délibération du Conseil d'Administration 29/12/1949

SIDR a mixed-economy entity.¹²⁷ The SIDR was naturally the focus of high expectations. The Réunion ruling elite hoped to take advantage of government money and join in the decision-making processes for reconstruction in Réunion: they hoped the housing agency would create another source of social power for them.

The members of the SIDR board were local representatives from the Prefecture, Réunion's local government (General Council); the Overseas Bank, the Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, and the Ministry of Equipment. It also had three prominent members of Réunion's economic and social elite representing the private shareholders. There were no Communists on the board. The private interests were Henri Cornu, land administrator for the powerful landholding and newly constituted sugar company *Sucreries de Bourbon*,¹²⁸ Kichenin, an administrator for another housing project called *Le Foyer Bourbonnais*, and Jean Pinguet, an important landowner in St Benoit. These men were experienced, high-profile figures in Réunion; they were either landowners or their agents. They were pro-French, but shared prejudices about the effectiveness of French government in Réunion.

The recruitment of Metropolitan civil servants to undertake reconstruction in Réunion had not gone unnoticed by Creole elites who regarded this influx of Metropolitan French experts with irony and suspicion. Metropolitan civil servants also

¹²⁷ Before 1946 infrastructure renewal had to be funded by the colonies themselves. The 1946 law for the Overseas Departments provided, for the first time, a metropolitan contribution to the budget of the ex-colonies. To pay for this, French government set up a special fund called the FIDES managed by the French Overseas Bank (called the CCFOM or Caisse Centrale de la France d'Outre-mer). FIDES : Fonds d'investissement pour le développement économique et social des territoires d'outre-mer. See Julien Meimon, "L'invention de l'aide française au développement. Discours, instruments et pratiques d'une dynamique hégémonique.," *Questions de Recherche / Research in Question*, no. 21 (2007).ADR 57 W 69 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philippe à M. le ministre de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (sous-direction habitat) 07/11/1952

¹²⁸ Formed in 1948 from a number of individually owned concerns

came to Réunion with preconceived ideas about colonial populations and their lack of expertise, or worse, viewed Réunion Islanders either as scheming, provincial despots, or only interested in personal gain and small-town feuding.¹²⁹

Although the 1949 General Council resolution proposed that the SIDR build housing for workers, the SIDR's mission was quickly reframed to be a solution for the housing problems of Metropolitan French civil servants. *Le Monde* visiting Réunion in 1949 considered the housing situation was terrible, although only from the angle of what would be adequate for Metropolitan French people, rather than as a problem for all Réunion Islanders. "[civil servants] sent to Réunion would find miserable conditions of existence there and would look in vain for housing that the administration is incapable of providing."¹³⁰ In the eyes of the Metropolitans, even Réunion's middle class houses for rent were only barely adequate, and were outrageously overpriced, as property-owning Réunion Islanders had increased the cost of renting to profit from the arrival of the civil servants.¹³¹ Prefect Béchoff highlighted the problems faced by Metropolitan civil servants who attempted to find lodgings in Réunion, and who were obliged to pay ten times more for rent than they would in a provincial town in Metropolitan France.¹³² The Prefecture hoped that building government-funded housing for civil servants would alleviate this extortionate rent speculation, and attract more technicians to Réunion.¹³³

¹²⁹ ADR 57 W 69 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philippe à M. le ministre de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (sous-direction habitat) 07/11/1952 ; CAC 19940180/240 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philip à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : situation de mon département 26/2/1954

¹³⁰ *Le Monde* André Blanchet 29/1/1949

¹³¹ ADR 57 W 33 Note de Directeur de la Caisse Centrale de la France d'Outre-mer à La Réunion. Activité dans le domaine de l'habitat. Expériences de constructions de logements d'urgence (type F2 Bossu) 09/03/1955

¹³² ADR 249 W 36 Entretien avec Roland-Luc Béchoff Radiodiffusion française 19/4/1951

¹³³ ADR 57 W 69 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philippe à M. le ministre de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (sous-direction habitat) 07/11/1952

So, the first question for the SIDR agenda in 1950 was whether to build houses for French civil servants or for the working Réunion Island majority, referred to as “the masses” by both civil servants and local elites.¹³⁴ A third option was to run the SIDR as a company offering low-interest loans for private entrepreneurs interested in getting good terms from the state. This had been proposed as an encouragement for further investment from business in Réunion. The first SIDR President Mr. Gaultier, a civil servant from the Metropole, rejected this proposal to offer loans as too blatantly self-serving on the part of elites.¹³⁵

The SIDR President did not think that granting individual loans was appropriate for a business that should concentrate on building for the public good. This public good would be defined by central government representatives, rather than Réunion Island businessmen who Metropolitans considered as lacking in concerns for the social welfare of Réunion’s population.¹³⁶ However, the French administration also ignored the problem of the ‘poor workers’ and proposed that the SIDR construct houses for Metropolitan civil servants. The SIDR board members claimed it would be far too costly to clean up the “notoriously insalubrious” urban neighborhoods of St Denis,¹³⁷ thus using the poverty of Réunion Islanders as a reason to construct houses for Metropolitan civil servants rather than for the Réunionnais poor.¹³⁸ Therefore the SIDR would build houses for civil servants, rather than for poor Réunionnais. It would not serve as a low-interest loan company to allow rich Creoles to build houses paid for by the government.

¹³⁴ ADR 57 W 33 Président du SIDR au Préfet 4/1/1950

¹³⁵ CAC 19840179/70 Préfet de La Réunion à Monsieur le Secrétaire d'État aux Affaires Economiques, Direction des Affaires d'Outre-mer. Objet : Société immobilière de La Réunion; Arrêté 1946. 12/11/1948

¹³⁶ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR Assemblée Générale des actionnaires 11/5/1951

¹³⁷ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 22/11/1950

¹³⁸ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 30/9/1950

The rich Creoles hoped to maintain their influence in the housing agency, even if they were only going to build houses for civil servants. They hoped to use their technical expertise and knowledge about Réunion Island housing, to build houses with French money. The French administration saw them as a bunch of corrupt crooks because “Whenever anything happens, a coalition of [Creole] private interests [impedes] all work of common good” the Metropolitan French SIDR President complained.¹³⁹ The following exchange which occurred during a 1950 SIDR board meeting reveals the prejudices each group held of the other.

Henri Cornu [talking to the Metropolitan French]: ... you have formidable perseverance, but you must understand that in [Réunion] we have a certain mistrust of the Administration, and anything pertaining to government directives. It’s understandable, because the [French] public powers have never done anything [here].

Marx [a Metropolitan French administrator]: And the private [Creole] interests; what have they done?

Rabot [a Réunion Islander]: They created the sugar industry, the only thing that works in this country. But back to the matter in hand.”¹⁴⁰

As this exchange shows, although Henri Cornu was an effective mediator between local business interests and Metropolitan civil servants, the French administration mistrusted Creoles and their ideas.

Cornu’s boss, Emile Hugot was the powerful director of Sucreries de Bourbon and one of the most important local business figures on the island. Hugot was a shareholder in the SIDR and complained that the administration ignored the local elites’ expertise about “climate, the preferences of residents in Réunion, hygiene [needs] or the

¹³⁹ ADR 57 W 33 Vergelin, Président du Conseil d'Administration du SIDR au Préfet de La Réunion 20/1/1950

¹⁴⁰ Marx was the representative of the CCFOM; Rabot, a Réunion Islander and director of the Bank of Réunion. ADR 57 W 33 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 11/5/1950

action of elements on the climate.¹⁴¹ Réunion Islanders on the board wanted to encourage housing construction in the hills of Brûlé above the capital St Denis. The higher altitude and cooler climate meant that there was no risk of malaria. Yet Creole building techniques and knowledge of the environment was systematically ignored by the Metropolitan representatives, because they assumed the Creoles knew little about modern housing.¹⁴²

The Creole shareholders became disgruntled: “The [French] administration seems to think we are used to building houses upside down, but in 1951 there are competent people in Reunion” complained Jean Chatel, a powerful owner of a large rum distillery. The SIDR’s first President affirmed the Metropolitan view that Creole knowledge was outmoded and outdated. He declared that building houses in Réunion was as easy as building houses in France *il s'agit ici de construire pour Dupont et Durand*.¹⁴³ He was to be proved sorely wrong, both in the ability of the SIDR to construct houses, and to buy appropriate land for them.

Despite Henri Cornu’s diplomacy between administration and Creole private interests, the first years of the SIDR was a series of prolonged U-turns. No-one could agree on the best course to take.¹⁴⁴ A year-long struggle between two Metropolitan civil servants on the board used up a lot of the SIDR’s construction budget to pay architects, who were contracted and then revoked causing heavy financial penalties.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR Assemblée Générale des actionnaires 11/5/1951

¹⁴² CAC 19840179/74 Note de Rabot, Président du conseil d'administration de la SIDR sur le choix des terrains à bâtir 6/9/1950 ; ADR 57 W 33 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 30/9/1950

¹⁴³ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 11/5/1950

¹⁴⁴ See ADR 57 W 37 for struggles between Verglin and Hanning over Vergelin’s choice of architects

¹⁴⁵ CAC 19840179/74 Rabot SIDR à Caisse Centrale de la France d'Outre-mer à La Réunion 28/07/1950 ; ADR 41 W 117 *Témoignages*. ‘Assez de mensonges, assez de "démagogie"’ 31/8/1951 ; SIDR Proposition de programme à venir 15/1/1959

ii. Creole land ownership and the SIDR

Land acquisition was also an expensive problem for the SIDR. Because of the political role of land in Réunion, there was no formal land registry or *cadastre* in Réunion during the early 1950s and no official island-wide repository of land ownership.¹⁴⁶ This was a problem for French government because it was impossible to measure the landholdings of the important landowners in Réunion, and thus their tax declarations.¹⁴⁷ It was a problem for the SIDR, because there were no large areas of government land already reserved for the housing agency's use. Although the land owned by the French colonial government was transferred to Réunion's local government in 1948, it was not allocated to the SIDR. The SIDR had to buy its own land with the meager government funds allocated, and it was often unsure of what it was buying because there was no official land registry.

It was a seller's market in 1951. Precisely because of the influx of French money, every landowner in Réunion wanted to start selling to the SIDR and set the price.¹⁴⁸ Creole landowners of all racial origins with medium-sized land holdings in urban areas were most keen to sell their land. Land prices quickly increased. For example, in 1952 the SIDR had an option on the Chane Po plot in St Denis with a base price of 40 F per square meter. The SIDR did not follow through. Seven years later in 1959 the Chane Po descendants were asking for 2000 F per square meter for the same plot.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ CAC 19850387/1 Compte-rendu d'une mission d'information sur les conditions d'établissement d'un cadastre parcellaire dans le département de La Réunion par l'inspecteur en chef du cadastre 18/09/1950

¹⁴⁷ CAC 19940180/254 ministre intérieur Perillier à M. François Rey 17/02/1956 in Série sur l'attribution d'anciennes domaine coloniale et cadastres dans le département de La Réunion

¹⁴⁸ ADR 57 W 37 SIDR Conseil d'Administration du 10 mars 1961 Terrains. Politique foncière de la société à Saint-Denis

¹⁴⁹ ADR 57 W 37 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration. Terrains. Politique foncière de la société à Saint-Denis 10/3/1961

In 1950 Bertrand Rivière wanted to sell what he claimed was a 10 hectare plot. It was actually just over 5 hectares when the SIDR measured it. Rivière then merely increased the price per hectare once the fault was discovered. The result was profit for landowners who were starting a new business of property speculation with the government. Seeing the appearance on French money on the horizon, some Réunionnais attempted to act as middlemen, reselling land to the SIDR at inflated prices.¹⁵⁰ A SIDR annual report later admitted that in the early 1950s “just mentioning the SIDR was to invite ironic sneers” because the housing agency was ineffective, had not built any houses and was forced to buy land at inflated prices.¹⁵¹

Differences of opinion between Creole elites and Metropolitan officials over reconstructing houses after the cyclone slowed down progress in the SIDR. The French administration finally gained control of SIDR policy, and ignored elite Creole expertise. Yet Creoles continued to monopolize landholding and set the prices for land bought by the SIDR. By 1954 Réunionnais land speculators had gained the upper hand on the SIDR’s building program by dictating the price of land.

VI. Conclusion

As people buried their dead, their broken possessions and rebuilt their houses after the 1948 cyclone, the landowners, the Prefecture and the Communist party fought over how to deal with the general poverty of the Réunionnais population. All groups claimed that France should help with the reconstruction effort, yet they sought to put the money to different use: the administration and landholders sought to improve infrastructure, and the

¹⁵⁰ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 22/11/1950

¹⁵¹ ADR 57 W 37 SIDR proposition de programme à venir 15/1/1959

Communist Party sought to build worker houses and encourage the application of French social legislation.

The French administration attempted to out-manuever Creole elites by talking control of the SIDR management in Réunion. However, ongoing conflicts between the civil servants themselves until 1952 stalled any progress in housing construction. The first houses were not built in Le Port by the SIDR until 1954. Despite the self-conceived expertise of French civil servants and the Prefects, they made errors over reconstruction. The administration could not control speculative landowners. By 1952 the Creole elites still maintained political control over rural areas and monopolized landholding and the import-export trades. This was despite early electoral successes of the Communist Party, the arrival of the French administration and a devastating cyclone in 1948.

In 1952 Réunion was a beacon for France's influence in the Indian Ocean - according to the French administration. Yet the reality was that the French authorities were unable to make their influence felt in Réunion. They did not resolve the inequalities in Réunion or the problems of the environment, and they were not helped by central government in Paris.¹⁵² The Prefect of Réunion complained to that letters from Paris addressed to Réunion were often addressed to 'the colony' because no-one in Paris had noticed that Réunion was now an Overseas Department.¹⁵³

In 1952 the island still bore traces of the 1948 cyclone, and was still controlled by Creole elites. Two hundred thousand people still lived in abject poverty, with no participation in the governance of the island. Even though the Communist Party now had

¹⁵² This is a hypothesis which would be more nuanced if I had been able to access to Ministry of Interior correspondence to Réunion. I was only able to see the Réunion Prefect's correspondence to Paris

¹⁵³ CARAN F/1cIII/1352 Préfet à M. de l'intérieur Rapport manuel janvier 1953 04/02/1953

fewer supporters than in 1947, it no longer called for immediate assimilation with France. By 1952 it frequently criticized France's regime in Réunion. The Communist Party's growing anticolonial movement and support of workers' rights posed a new danger for the French position, and the power of the Creole elites in the island.

CHAPTER 3 FRAMING RACE AND POVERTY IN RÉUNION 1950-1955

I. Introduction

The French administration was not only faced with the problem of infrastructure after the 1948 cyclone. The most pressing concern was that the majority of Réunion Islanders were extremely poor. The aim was to tackle worker poverty and discourage workers from becoming Communist. The administration attempted to solve rural poverty in two ways: sending people to farm in Madagascar, and introducing French social legislation to agricultural workers in Réunion. While the Madagascar idea briefly appeared to work, introducing social legislation had unintended political consequences, restructuring male employment in Réunion from agricultural work to the construction sector, who were recruited for the Communist Party in the cities. The French administration unsuccessfully attempted and diminish support for the Communist Party by attempting to racially profile Réunion Islanders. However Réunion and Réunion Islanders continually demonstrated that a French model would never fit Réunion exactly. There was no easy way of defining which groups were and were not loyal to France. While the administration assumed that support for the Communist party ran along racial lines, the blurred race and class boundaries in Réunion made it difficult for the administration to categorize political enemies by racial origin.

Anti-communist policies in the era of French decolonization in both West Africa and French Overseas Departments have been understudied. In Sub-Saharan Africa and

French Polynesia, the French administration attempted to assimilate Communist leaders into the French administration. Anti-Communist policies in Réunion differed strongly in this regard. The French administration was as equally suspicious of the Communist party in Réunion as elsewhere in the French Union, and feared a takeover by Moscow. Yet in Réunion the French administration did everything to exclude the Communist party from having any administrative or political power on the Island.¹

Gary Wilder has suggested that France was “never not an imperial nation-state”, meaning that scholars must always consider the back and forth relationship between France and its colonies, rather than considering either in isolation.² This chapter demonstrates that during the 1950s the close relationship between Metropolitan France and Réunion was not natural but had to be manufactured through political repression. Rather than thinking only in terms of Réunion Island’s reciprocal relationship with the Metropole, this chapter shows that Réunion was located in wider imperial and Indian Ocean networks. Réunion defied the Metropolitan administration’s desire for neat political boundaries and racial classifications.

II. Solutions to poverty: France or Madagascar?

There were two directions for early social welfare projects in Réunion. One looked towards France and the other looked towards Madagascar. From 1948, the French ministry of Agriculture studied the possible creation of a new Réunionnais colony in the Sakay river valley in Madagascar. Poor Réunion Islanders – especially the Petit Blancs without agricultural land – could be sent to Madagascar and work cultivating the land.

¹ Alexander Keese, "A culture of panic. 'Communist' scapegoats and decolonization in French West Africa and French Polynesia (1945-1957)," *French colonial history* 9(2008).

² Wilder, *The French imperial nation-state : negritude & colonial humanism between the two world wars*.

This would solve the problem of ‘overpopulation’ which Metropolitan French studies feared would make life unsustainable in Réunion. Additionally in 1949 France instituted a very limited range of social laws which were not applied until 1952. This legislation was unpopular and forced the workers to the cities because the elites were not prepared to pay the employer contributions.

- i. Is Madagascar a solution to Réunion’s poverty?

Letter from Réunion

A French village, far away, out of sight, a mountain village like any other with clog makers, lace makers, and kids, blond like yours or like mine. Not all blond it is true ... others black, more or less, and most often, one or the other, dirty and ragged.

Because: this part of old France is in the middle of the Indian Ocean. [In] Bourbon Island, today the department of Réunion ... one encounters images of poverty that Mr. Cartier Bresson goes to China to find. Poverty that is growing, despite appearances, at 3% a year. The population [of Réunion] is 300,000, closed off on an island 60km square, $\frac{3}{4}$ of which is mountainous. Five people per cultivable hectare. Ten in thirty years’ time.

One must not underestimate the efforts accomplished by a small elite, Metropolitan and Creole, for increasing, improving, balancing the resources of the island, until now only reliant on sugar cane ... But the only solution is migration, a massive emigration, absorbing the annual surplus ... to the only logical and possible Promised Land: Madagascar.³

The above letter, with its discussion of looming overpopulation in Réunion, and its description of population per cultivable hectare, was typical of concerns about Réunion’s future in the 1950s. It had become accepted wisdom for the French administration and Metropolitan French commentators that if Réunion’s population grew any more, the island would no longer be able to feed itself, and that the only solution to this problem was migration. This ignored the fact that much of Réunion’s food was already imported.

³ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 *Le Progrès* RD 'Lettre de La Réunion' 15/3/1956

The letter demonstrates that during the 1950s Réunion's political link to France was not the only natural one. Rather, some Réunion Islanders envisaged that the enormous neighboring island of Madagascar could become, once again, a destination for poor Réunion Islanders.

Réunion Islanders had lived in Madagascar since the 18th century and the time of the slave trade. From the end of the 19th century Creole elites saw Madagascar as an ideal destination for the growing numbers of poor Petit Blancs: socially white Réunion Islanders who, after the end of slavery in 1848, had no racial advantage over the freed slaves but also did not want to sell their labor on the plantations.⁴ These populations had retreated into the rural interior of the island, where cultivation was difficult. At the end of the 19th century, the Réunion Island General Council encouraged Petit Blanc migration to Madagascar. It was a way of ridding the island of poor whites whose poverty underlined the social inequalities in Réunion and provided a constant reminder that white Creoles were not naturally racially superior to the other populations of Réunion.⁵

After 1946 the French administration in Réunion again worried about the future of the Petit Blanc population. They were offended that the Petit Blancs, a *white* French population, was poor. They were more worried about Petit Blancs than they were about other social groups which they considered were more “naturally” poor, because they were not white. Metropolitan French were shocked that poor Petit Blancs lived in similar conditions to African-origin Islanders.

⁴ Bourquin and Gerbeau, *Histoire des Petits-Blancs de La Réunion : XIX^e-début XX^e siècle : aux confins de l'oubli*.

⁵ Claude Bavoux, "Les Réunionnais de Madagascar de 1880 à 1925 " (PhD dissertation, Université de La Réunion, 1998).

Across the countryside there are straw huts ... in front of which one feels ashamed to think that they shelter French citizens, white and black, electors for the last 100 years; it reminds you more about the housing of black people in Brazil, the “shanty town” dwellers in South Africa. The Bantus stifled in the large cities in the Transvaal would hardly envy [the Réunion Islanders].⁶

A civil servant visiting Réunion in 1953 considered the economic and social “decline” of the white population in Réunion was painful to see.⁷ Another noted that “nothing could be more afflicting than these Petit Blancs in rags, often skeletal, with their eyes sunk in their sockets, numerous in the coastal towns, and even more numerous in the interior, in the hills.”⁸ The well-known French author Roger Vailland gave the following description of the Petit Blancs in Réunion after visiting in 1959. The title of his article was “In Reunion Island, more wretched than the poorest of Blacks, the descendants of former colonists live from the memory of a better past.” Vailland’s description emphasized how white poverty reversed the island’s “natural” racial hierarchies

In contrast to the colored minorities in the towns of the United States, the Petit Blancs of La Réunion do not live in groups. They are dispersed throughout the island. Many go begging. ... Scenes of the following kind on busy roads are frequent: the Petit Blancs send their children to sell things to the drivers (Blacks) who might stop and buy the varied objects, especially their basketwork.⁹

The illustration to the newspaper article (Figure 3.1 below) shows Petit Blanc children selling basketwork to people in a car, a Petit Blanc man sitting on the street selling fruit wrapped in newspaper, and Mr. and Mme Paul, an old Petit Blanc couple outside their

⁶ *Le Monde* André Blanchet 25/1/1949

⁷ CARAN F/1cI/238 rapport de M. Pierre Montel, secrétaire de l’état à l’AIR sur son voyage d’étude et inspection en Afrique du 16 au 31 Mars 1953 n.d.

⁸ *Le Monde* Terres oubliés de l’Océan Indien. 1. La Réunion - département français abandonné à lui-même 18/8/1959

⁹ ADR 380 W 240 *L’illustré* 48 Roger Vailland ‘La Grande Misère des Petits-Blancs’ 26/11/1964 although the article is dated 1964, it is drawn from Roger Vailland, *La Réunion* ed. Charles-Henri Favrod, *L’Atlas des Voyages* (Lausanne: Editions Rencontre, 1964). which was based on a 1959 visit to La Réunion

thatched house in the remote highland village of Marla, in the Mafate cirque. In the article Vailland described his stay in Marla, in the remote interior of the island. His host's son was his mountain guide for reaching Marla on foot, because there were no roads to the village. Their son described how he had never "believed" in France as a child. He assumed it was just an invention of his teachers. It was not until he went to Madagascar on military service that he realized there actually was a world outside Réunion. Although Vailland deployed this story to emphasize the backwardness and poverty of the Petits Blancs in Réunion, it also underlines the importance of Madagascar for Réunion Islanders, and the fact that, despite the 1946 department law, France still seemed incredibly remote, and almost unreal to some Creoles.

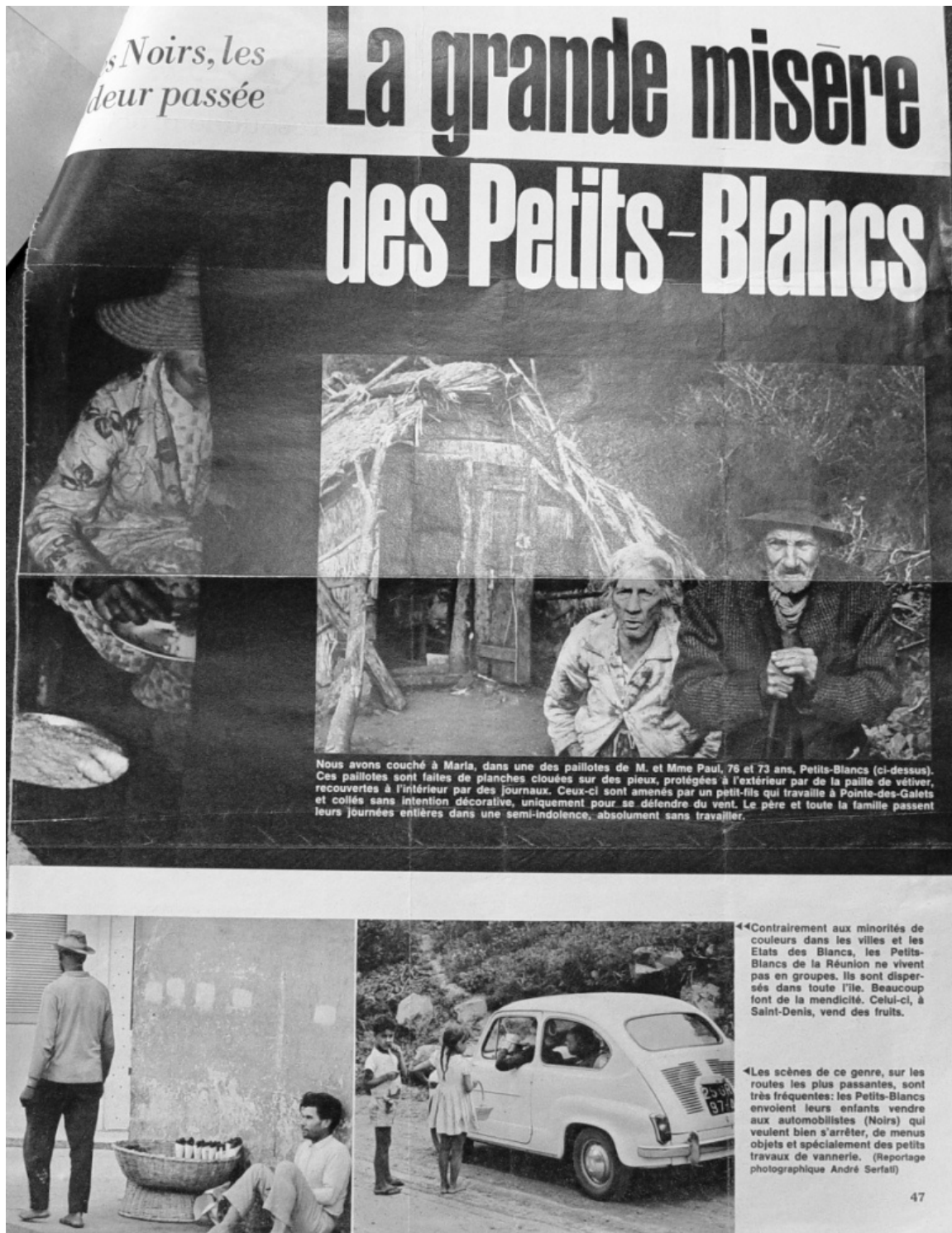


Figure 3.1 The terrible poverty of the Petit Blancs¹⁰

¹⁰ *L'illustré* 48 26/11/1964 pp47-48 'La Grande Misère des Petits-Blancs'

The solution to the poverty of the Petit Blancs appeared to be emigration to Madagascar, because the historic links between Réunion and Madagascar had not yet been suppressed by the increasing Metropolitan control over Réunion. Raphael Babet, a Réunion Island deputy born in Madagascar was favorable to the project of sending Petit Blancs to Madagascar. In 1950 a mixed-economy agricultural company was created for the new project of sending Réunionnais to Madagascar: le Bureau d'études pour la production agricole (BDPA) whose president was the powerful French colonial administrator Robert Delavignette. The BDPA chose the Sakay region in Madagascar, 140 kilometers west of the capital Tananarive as the solution for the poverty of the Petit Blancs.

The region was deserted and was reputed to have uncultivable land. However, the BPDA set up a project to fertilize the soil, and bring Réunion Islanders to Madagascar. Metropolitan French, Reunion Islanders and Malagasy would work together to set up an economically viable farm project which, if successful, could be reproduced elsewhere in Madagascar. The Sakay project had the hallmarks of the traditional French civilizing mission, but also a new idea of French assimilation. Réunion Islanders would work alongside Malagasy, teaching them about new agricultural techniques, which they would then use themselves.

Most importantly the project would 'save' the Petit Blancs in Reunion who were presented as degenerate and inbred because of their frightening white poverty.¹¹ It also

¹¹ Joël de Palmas, "L'émigration réunionnaise à la Sakay ou L'ultime aventure coloniale française 1952-1977" (PhD, University of La Réunion 2004). See also Joel de Palmas 'L'émigration réunionnaise à la SAKAY, ou l'ultime aventure coloniale française' <http://amis.univ-reunion.fr/Conference/presentation/97/> accessed 29/11/2009

gave France another possibility for affirming its presence in both Madagascar and Réunion.

The colonization began in 1952. The BDPA rebuilt a hamlet named Babetville (in honor of Raphael Babet, the Reunion Island deputy born in Madagascar) near a ruined Malagasy village named Ankadinondry. The hamlet had houses, schools, a post office, a city hall, a youth club and a church as well as a production center. The Réunion Island families who migrated followed a training course for a year, and then went to one of the outlying farms where basic buildings were provided, and they were associated with the BDPA cooperative.¹²

In the 1950s, both rural Réunion Islanders and those in the French administration invested hope and admiration for the Sakay project. In a context where Metropolitan France had not equally applied social laws in Reunion, some considered that Madagascar offered more possibilities for Réunion Islanders' social and material improvement than Réunion. A study of relative calorie intake revealed that Réunion Islanders in Sakay ate more than rural Réunion Islanders in Réunion.¹³ In 1956, the Prefect of Réunion qualified the Sakay experiment as an operation which guaranteed “a rosy future not only for the French presence in Madagascar, and the development of the Big Island [i.e. Madagascar] but also for the future of Reunion and its social peace.”

Emigration could be a panacea for the social ills in Réunion and also for its “social peace”. One journalist felt that poor people, even if they were white, were likely to subscribe to the Communist party if they stayed in Réunion. He had a radical vision of Réunion's future: either the island made the effort to increase emigration *and* local

¹³ AESD *Dieu et Patrie*. ‘La sous alimentation, fléau no 1 de notre pays’ 03/02/1956

standards of living, or “in 15 years, the methodical work of the Communist Party in Réunion will bear its fruit of blood and anger, harvested by thousands of sugar cane knives.¹⁴ *Le Monde*, visiting Réunion in 1959, reiterated these fears. The Petit Blanc population was poor and “poverty makes a bad advisor”: the result would surely be that the Communist Party would follow the Antillean example, and declare Réunion should become autonomous from France.

At its height, there were 2,000 Réunion Island migrants on the Madagascar farm. Despite its location in Madagascar, it was reliant on heavy subsidies from France to function. In 1959, the Prefecture of Réunion had already concluded that it was not viable as a larger model. There were 260 families in Sakay, and it cost 680 million French Francs to run, amounting to 5 million French Francs for each family.¹⁵ Réunion Islanders left the island in the 1950s with the idea of starting a new life. Whilst the pro-French President Tsiranana was in place, the Sakay project remained. However, when the regime changed in 1975 and the 2nd Malagasy Republic was declared, Réunion Islanders were forced to leave and lost everything they had built.

The Sakay project was never more than experimental, and did not solve the social problems of Réunion Island. Emigration would, however, continue to be seen as a solution for Réunion Island; however, in the following decade, emigration would be to Metropolitan France, rather than elsewhere. By the 1960s Réunion Island would be much more tightly linked to Metropolitan France through Michel Debré’s migration bureau to Metropolitan France, the BUMIDOM (see chapter 4). The history of the Réunionnais

¹⁴ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Le Progrès RD 'Lettre de La Réunion' 15/3/1956

¹⁵ CAC 19940180/9 Le problème démographique réunionnais et l'émigration réunionnaise à Madagascar 1/6/1959

colonization of Sakay is a fascinating addition to the story of the French colonization of Madagascar. It challenges conventional histories of French decolonization in Madagascar and in the Indian Ocean more generally. While French decolonization is usually assumed to have been completed by 1962, Réunionnais colonization of Madagascar continued until 1977.

ii. Unemployment: the unintended consequence of introducing French social legislation

In the 1950s, Madagascar was one potential solution to the poverty of Réunion Island. Another choice was to import French social legislation to improve conditions in Réunion. Social legislation pertaining to worker rights was introduced in Reunion in 1949, but this was not enforced until 1952.

In 1952 Réunion's social legislation was vastly inferior to Metropolitan France. Although contributions and income brackets for eligibility were the same as in Metropolitan France, in Réunion payouts were inferior. Family allocations in Réunion were also inferior to Metropolitan levels, even though contributions were the same. In contrast to the rest of the workforce, Réunionnais or Metropolitan French civil servants in Réunion received the same social benefits and payouts as in Metropolitan France. This created a highly unequal two-tier employment system.

From 1952, eligible salaried workers were allowed to receive an old age pension on retirement. They were in the minority, as the majority of workers were seasonal laborers or sharecroppers. In 1954 the Prefect reported that this small group of retired salaried workers was very pleased with their benefits and their new buying power. Although the old age pension benefits appeared to be successful, the Prefect was not

pleased. The institution of employer contributions had led to mass unemployment and “previously unknown levels of poverty.”

The problem was that employers also had to contribute to social welfare programs when they paid their employees. Inspectors came round to employers and backdated dues to the law’s inception in 1949. These employer contributions added to the economic elite’s unsympathetic view about applying Metropolitan laws in Réunion. The Prefect noted that the elites were “hostile to the application of social security ... the fear of including sickness coverage [to contributions] has pushed employers to sack their [domestic workers and sharecroppers].”¹⁶ The Prefect cited an employer who had been inspected and who had then immediately sacked 150 workers. Numerous landowners sacked their sharecroppers in order to invest in tractors and other mechanization. Sharecroppers who were out of work could not, in turn, hire seasonal or day labor. Agricultural unemployment grew at an alarming rate.¹⁷

Thus, the introduction of social laws in 1952 created a perverse situation where the administration then had to pay for public works (*chantiers de chômage*) to employ people who could not feed their families because they had been sacked from their agricultural jobs, on account of the new employer charges. In 1954 Mayors in Réunion were allowed employ destitute workers in their communes on public works programs. The Mayors were exonerated from paying employer contributions for the workers. Thus

¹⁶ AHC 9 DE 12 Anon. Bilan des réalisations 1946-1962 c. oct. 1962; CAC 19940180/9 Documentation sur le Département de La Réunion et la ville de Saint-Denis à l’occasion du voyage du Général de Gaulle juillet 1959

¹⁷ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l’intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel de mai 1954 05/06/1954

they avoided paying the same charges which were supposed to protect the workers but had led to their unemployment.¹⁸

In 1954, the Prefect of Reunion claimed that France's social allocations in Réunion had created a new caste system. At the top of the scale were the rich landowners and factory owners who lived "in luxury which has become rare in the Metropole." Then there were the civil servants paid by France, and paid over double French rates (2.2 times more than civil servants Metropolitan France). They benefitted from the Metropolitan regime of social security, and family benefits. On the next level down were the workers and employees of all racial origins who worked on a monthly salary and got some social security benefits. Workers in commerce had similar social protection.

Then, much lower, were the workers who could not benefit from social protection; in fact the majority of Réunion Islanders. Sharecroppers cultivating sugar cane were not eligible for social security coverage. Seasonal laborers and day laborers were also not eligible for social security coverage either. According to the Prefect, this last category "lives in inexpressible poverty. The children are hardly dressed, or fed, and rickets and tuberculosis ravages these families."¹⁹

At the same time as the crisis of agricultural employment, the French administration increased funding for new building projects in Réunion, as part of the reconstruction plans to rebuild Réunion after the 1948 cyclone. Central government and the French Overseas Bank (CCFOM) funded the construction of schools, hospitals and public administrative buildings. The French Overseas Bank also gave financial incentives

¹⁸ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel de mai 1954 05/06/1954

¹⁹ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel de mai 1954 05/06/1954

such as low interest loans and subsidies for private companies to renew their built environments.²⁰ This funded a construction boom all over Réunion, especially in St Denis.

New jobs in construction seemed to be the obvious solution to agricultural unemployment.²¹ Many agricultural workers migrated to St Denis to work in construction. As the number of urban migrants to St Denis increased throughout the 1950s the Communists sought to recruit new political supporters who had freed themselves of the rural political obligations to property owners. Communist Party gained strong political support in St Denis, and shantytowns grew further thanks to urban migration. The administration was wary of the Communist Party's increasingly anti-French stance, and set out to repress its popularity with two strategies. The administration sought to silence any anti-French dissent and started to monitor all suspected enemies of the administration. The administration then attempted to tackle the problem of urban worker housing by building social housing with the SIDR, in an attempt to push people away from Communism by improving their material conditions.²²

III. Interpreting race in Réunion

²⁰ ADR 41 W 34 Préfet de La Réunion à Bour, Inspecteur Général CCFOM 26/02/1958 ; CARAN F/1cIII/1367 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet de l'activité durant le mois de mai 1958 7/6/1958

²¹ CAC 19840179/74 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur objet: mes rapports des 6 et 15 juillet 1950 22/7/1950

²² The Communist Party was also important in the south of the island. Construction workers employed by the Isautier family also created trade unions and joined the Communist party after the Isautier family diversified from alcohol production to the construction business in the early 1950s See Julie Matthieu, "Stratégies d'une industrie réunionnaise : les Etablissements Isautier à l'échelle d'une vie: Charles Isautier (1917-1990) " (PhD dissertation, Université de La Réunion, 2010).

By 1953 the PCF structure in Réunion was weak. There was no obvious political successor to the ageing Raymond Vergès and grassroots organization was losing momentum. Despite appearances, the party was extremely weak and the coffers were empty. Although the French administration had blacklisted the party newspaper *Témoignages* as “receiving orders direct from the Komintern” and no longer published official notices in it, the newspaper was now published only very infrequently.²³ Dr Vergès’ son, Paul Vergès, returned to Réunion in 1953. Prefect Philippe considered Paul Vergès’ return was a glimmer of hope for the Communist Party in Réunion, which had been riven with internal battles. The Prefect saw that Paul Vergès would provide the “necessary Creole element” for federating Réunionnais electors around him.²⁴ However, the Prefect worried about the type of political struggles Vergès would be organizing in the name of the Réunion Communist Party. He predicted “a long period of agitation which could go as far as serious unrest.”²⁵

In 1954 the specter of decolonization was raised violently and irreversibly for France. Despite the loss of Syria and Lebanon in 1946, and the violent uprising in Madagascar in 1947, France’s resounding loss of the French fort at Dien Bien Phu was highly significant after a war lasting seven years. For millions of people worldwide, Dien Bien Phu was the proof that there was another viable option to suffering European colonization, and the Vietnamese had just proved it. Just months afterwards, in November 1954, the Algerian revolt was launched.

²³ CARAN F/1cI/238 Préfet à M. le ministre de l'information Objet: Annonces judiciaires et légales 30/12/1952

²⁴ CARAN F/1cIII/1352 Préfet a M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Rapport mensuel décembre 1952 16/01/1953

²⁵ CARAN F/1cI/238 Préfet au ministre de l'intérieur, traduction d'un télégramme chiffrée 19/2/1953 11h55 Secrète

The French administration saw Réunion as part of the colonial world which it wanted to retain. “I attach special importance to ...the defense of our territories in the Indian Ocean” emphasized Prefect Philip.²⁶ In the context of Indochina and Algeria, criticism of the French regime in Réunion was potentially an attack on French power in the Indian Ocean. The Prefecture was particularly sensitive to any political allegiances which appeared to be based on ethnic affiliation with Chinese or Vietnamese Communism, Indian nationalism or Pan-Arabism. However, this racialized view of anticolonial threats missed the reasons for the growing popularity of the PCF in Réunion, which claimed autonomy for Réunion in order to end an inequality in Réunion which was not based on racial distinctions.

i. Reinventing loyal Réunionnais as white

The new Prefect of Réunion Pierre Philip attempted to cast the “true” inhabitants of Réunion as white French (including the ex-slave populations) all others being “foreign”. However Réunion was not racially readable along these lines and the attempt proved futile. Paul Vergès more successfully recalibrated PCF strategy along race lines. He claimed that Metropolitan French bureaucrats in Réunion were foreigners, rather than fellow French citizens.

In the new racial vision of Réunion Island’s inhabitants, the French loyalty of the landowning Creole elites was not questioned. Even if they did not agree with the application of French social laws in Réunion, and they distrusted the French administration, the Creole elites were opposed to the Communist party. They were

²⁶ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel avril 1955 06/05/1955

broadly supportive of France's presence in Réunion even if they argued about how that should occur. They were also socially white, which made it easier to cast them as French. The loyalty of poor African and French-origin Réunion Islanders was not doubted either by the French administration: they appeared to be dominated by the economic elites, and the African-origin Réunion Islanders did not appear maintain any political ties with their homelands.

However, the French administration was suspicious of Paul Vergès' activities in Madagascar and from this time the administration portrayed Paul Vergès as a disloyal, *non-French* Communist. In addition to his Communist campaign in Réunion, Paul Vergès was also suspected of helping with the Malagasy independence movements in the name of the Communist Party. The Prefect of Réunion asked the French High Commissioner of Madagascar to survey Paul Vergès' activities there and send the secret police to follow him.²⁷

Paul Vergès was cast as a racially suspicious Frenchman because his mother was from Indochina.²⁸ The fear of the "half-blood" had not been a part of Réunion Island political culture for decades because the elite colored population had achieved a modicum of social acceptance.²⁹ The French administration deployed images of Vergès' origins as "Asian" and his political culture as untrustworthy and non-French.

The dangerous influence of other Indian Ocean polities on Réunion also worried the Prefect. He attempted to recast Réunion as part of France, and block any political or

²⁷ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel avril 1955 06/05/1955

²⁸ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*; Michel Debré et *l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*; Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

²⁹ Gagneur, "Prosopographie des élites politiques d'une colonie républicaine : La Réunion 1870-1914".

cultural influences from the exterior. Not all recent Chinese and Muslim Indian immigrants to Réunion from the 1920s and 1930s had become French citizens. Their children could be naturalized as French. This worried the Prefect because in his view, these children could never be *real* French citizens. “The application of the [Metropolitan French] ordinance on nationality ... is heretical in this overpopulated department... because it permits the *francisation* of definitively inassimilable elements in contrast to Spanish and Italians ... that come to France and integrate our customs in the second generation.”³⁰

The French administration wanted to be assured of unshakeable French loyalty in Réunion and began surveillance of potentially disloyal ethnic groups. The Prefect ordered the police to be vigilant about the Indian-origin populations. The police followed Muslim Réunion Islanders to meetings to check for signs of dissent to French authority.³¹ Prefect Philip was also worried about the growing economic power of these non-white groups.

“The problem of foreigners, which has been resolved in a liberal fashion in Metropolitan France, should be envisaged cautiously [in Réunion]. The Asians, Pakistanis and Chinese have a practical monopoly over retail and bulk sales, and have large amounts of capital at their disposal in this territory where the availability of credit is rare.”³² The Prefect worried that “[Muslim groups]...own entire streets to the detriment of Creoles”³³ He accused Muslims of having too much financial capital. “The [Réunion]

³⁰ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel avril 1955 06/05/1955

³¹ CAC 19940180/240 Préfecture de La Réunion, Direction des renseignements généraux. A/S de la communauté musulmane à La Réunion 11/8/1956

³² ADR 57 W 69 Préfet de La Réunion Pierre Philippe à M. le Ministre de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (sous- direction habitat) 07/11/1952

³³ CAC 19940180/240 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre des affaires étrangères. Objet : activité politique de la minorité indienne implantée sur le territoire de La Réunion 04/05/1955

import trade is going to second-generation foreigners who an overgenerous law makes French. The Prefect also worried whether Chinese-origin Réunion Islanders would support French interests, or Chinese ones.³⁴

The Prefect's worried about the potential political influence of nearby Mauritius which had a majority Hindu population with Indian origins. He feared that if Mauritius became independent from Britain, Mauritius might fall into the hands of Indian nationalists, and become a satellite state of India. "To avoid a similar fate befalling Réunion ... I have immediately stopped all Indian immigration."³⁵ He considered that the 'Indians' "were singularly turbulent on a political level ... and make a hostile campaign against our country."³⁶ Administrative fear of these groups grew when it transpired that some Indian-origin groups were holding meetings and publishing newspapers which were openly critical of the French regime. The real danger was that this dissent, led by educated groups, would spread to the workers.

It has been noted that ... at the end of the day, in front of the mosque of St Denis, groups of Muslims are deep in discussion for hours at a stretch. In addition, in the area of [Camp] Lataniers, some of them go from house to house and talk late into the night with their *coreligionnaires* who are less lucky than they are... This propaganda has been disseminated since seven Indians coming from Mombasa transited in La Reunion on the 28th May. These fanatics trouble minds by associating Islam with the Arab League.³⁷

When some Muslims in St Denis dared to go and talk to people in the Camps of St Denis, the Prefect feared popular uprising. This was the same fear of urban workers which had

³⁴ CAC 19940180/240 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre des affaires étrangères. Objet : activité politique de la minorité indienne implantée sur le territoire de La Réunion 04/05/1955

³⁵ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel avril 1955 6/5/1955

³⁶ CAC 19940180/240 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre des affaires étrangères. Objet : activité politique de la minorité indienne implantée sur le territoire de La Réunion 04/05/1955

³⁷ CAC 19940180/240 Préfecture de La Réunion, Direction des renseignements généraux. A/S de la communauté musulmane à La Réunion 11/8/1956

had led the Police to survey Dr Raymond Vergès' 1948 march through the St Denis Camps.

The Prefect accused the Réunion Island Muslim groups of having been historically disloyal to France. However, Abd El Krim had probably been more influential for the Vergès family who had frequently visited the house of Abd El Krim in Réunion during the 1930s.

These political contacts – from travelers on boats from East Africa, to the influence of various Indian Ocean nationalisms underlines that Réunion could not be held into a singular model with the Metropole. Réunion was located in the Indian Ocean. Both its geography and Réunion Islanders themselves resisted attempts to designate Réunion Island's ideological location.

ii. Attempts to define Communist supporters

One of the reasons that Paul Vergès had returned to Réunion was to attempt to take back Communist control of the city government of St Denis in the April 1953 elections.

In the event, the Communist Party won a significant number of seats, but not enough for them to secure the majority. Paul Vergès won 13 seats, Raphael Babet won 7 seats, and Jules Olivier won 11 seats, and was voted as Mayor.³⁸ Raphael Babet portrayed himself as the champion of the large landowners and factory owners of the island; Jules Olivier, voted as Mayor, presented himself as the champion of the small planters.³⁹

³⁸ Maestri and Nomdedeu-Maestri, *Chronologie de la Réunion : de la départementalisation à la loi d'orientation, 1946-2001*.

³⁹ CAC 19940180/244 Note pour M.l'Inspecteur Général de l'administration en mission extraordinaire pour les DOM. Objet: situation politique à La Réunion 1/3/1955

The Communist Party attempted to attract the small planters through two new strategies: agrarian reform, and anti-French feeling. Agrarian reform was an obvious claim, since a small number of landowners held the majority of cultivable land in Réunion.⁴⁰ French critique was a new idea, but tapped into popular feelings of jealousy and mistrust of the increasing number of Metropolitan French (or *Zorey*) civil servants working in Réunion's administration. From 1953 the Communists focused on criticizing the Zorey population and the disproportionately large salaries they earned in the civil service. Zoreys were considered to be whites from France although they were not all Metropolitan French. A growing number were middle-class *Pieds Noirs*, white people who had left Algeria and come to settle in Réunion.⁴¹ Although Zoreys were a tiny part of Réunion's population, they were overrepresented in the French administration, especially at managerial level.⁴²

The Communist Party had earlier sought for Réunion Islanders to have the same rights as people in Metropolitan France. Here they upturned the definition of French rights in Réunion. Now, they proposed that Metropolitan French should not have the right to come to Réunion as civil servants and earn money. The PCF hid the fact that Réunion Islanders working with the same qualifications in the civil service received the same salary as these Zoreys, including prominent members of the Communist party. The PCF party disingenuously and successfully mobilized popular discontent at the Zoreys, as if it

⁴⁰ In 1953, there were 18,000 Réunionnais planters who produced less than 50 tons of sugar cane; 3000 planters who produced between 50 and 500 tons, and 200 planters who produced more than 500 tons CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel de mai 1954 05/06/1954

⁴¹ Interview Alain Troja and Philippe Jam 10/10/2007

⁴² Between 1946 and 1954, the number of civil servants born in Réunion rose by 22%, from 3128 to 3822 employees. In the same time period, Metropolitan or foreign-born civil servants in Réunion rose by 108%: 608 in 1954 compared to 292 in 1946. By 1967 Metropolitan French-born civil servants would make up almost 60% of the managerial-level civil servants in Réunion.

were the Metropolitan French civil servants who were responsible for the poverty of Réunion Islanders, instead of the elite Creoles.

Paul Vergès spent much of 1955 decrying the poverty of Réunion Islanders, the rising unemployment, the insufficient development of Réunion, increased layoffs, and the continued lack of parity between Réunion and Metropolitan French social welfare. Against a fragmented right wing, the Communist Party's activities in Réunion produced clear results. The Communist Party won two out of Réunion's three available seats for the French National Assembly in 1956. In that year they also held 11 General Council seats out of 36 and controlled 7 of Réunion's 23 municipal governments. This year was the height of their electoral success and the French administration saw these results as worrying.⁴³ It now believed that in Réunion "[French] authority should have absolutely no opposition" in Réunion.⁴⁴

In the same year as the Communist Party won election victories, Prefect Perreau-Pradier arrived. He viewed the Communist Party as dangerously anti-French and recognized that they were the most powerful political group, much more effective than the politicians supported by the landowners. "Opposite the extremist action developed by Paul Vergès, there is only a very limited, undynamic and badly coordinated opposition."⁴⁵

Perreau-Pradier now sought to discredit the Communists and decided that the French administration should help the landowners regain their political control of Réunion. The Prefect encouraged the mass resignations of city councils: when Dr

⁴³ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*, 49.

⁴⁴ CAC 19940180/240 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre des affaires étrangères. Objet : activité politique de la minorité indienne implantée sur le territoire de La Réunion 04/05/1955

⁴⁵ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*, 147-49.

Raymond Vergès died in 1957, the Prefect encouraged eight of the other councilors to resign. New elections were then needed in the city council of St André. During these elections, the Prefect officially sanctioned electoral fraud against the communist Party. Voters were denied electoral cards and the boundaries of voting districts were changed, to ensure that Paul Vergès only got just over 2% of the vote in his father's district.⁴⁶

Thanks to these tactics, by 1959 the Communists had been squeezed out of their two seats in the National Assembly, and they lost had their majority in all but one of Réunion's city councils, thanks to the French administration's sanctioning of electoral fraud.⁴⁷

In the same year the Communist Party in Réunion decided split from the French Communist Party. Although Vergès was still the head of the party, it was now the Réunion Communist Party (PCR), independent from Metropolitan France. This followed the Antilles' break with the French Communist Party in 1956. The Réunion Communist Party developed a new program, which broke with any remaining support for the idea of Réunion's total assimilation with France. The Communist Party now claimed the right for Réunion's self-determination, the right to manage its own affairs independently from the foreign French colonial power.

The Réunion Communist Party now cast Réunionnais as the oppressed colonial people, who sought autonomy and a locally elected legislative assembly. They declared that Réunionnais Creole was a separate language (a radical proposition in the political

⁴⁶ For examples of electoral fraud in St André see Eugène Rousse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté*, 3 vols., vol. 1, Cahiers de notre histoire (Saint-Denis: Ed. CNH, 1994).

⁴⁷ CAC 19940180/244 Préfecture de La Réunion la situation politique de ce département 05/06/1959 Rousse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté*; Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'Ile de La Reunion (1959-1967)*.

context). They proved their commitment to the “Réunionnais people” by inaugurating their first meeting by a public performance of maloya by a musician named Firmin Viry. Maloya is a Reunion Island musical form associated with African-origin peoples which was not part of public French culture. Thus the new Communist Party underlined its commitment to cultural forms associated with slavery.⁴⁸

When the Communist Party declared its new program in 1959 the Prefecture attempted to identify *who* supported the Communists in Réunion, in order to discredit political mobilization by the Communist Party. The Prefecture created a list of potential attributes of Communist Party supporters: religion, skin color, literacy, “insular mentality”, attachment to France and poverty. However none of these characteristics were self-explanatory in Réunion. They did not allow the French administration to understand support for the Communist Party any more easily. Rather they revealed more about the French administration’s assumptions about Réunion Island society.

The first attribute of Communist Party supporters was that they were suspected of being “profoundly Catholic”, in other words that they were credulous. Regarding skin color, the Prefect’s report suggested that although the Réunion Island population was very mixed, Communist party meetings “attracted more dark skinned people than a moderate meeting.” Yet as the following photographs of the creation of the left-wing Union of French Women in 1958 and the PCR in 1959 show that members with diverse ancestries represented in the photographs.

⁴⁸ CAC 19940180/244 Préfecture de La Réunion la situation politique de ce département 05/06/1959 ; Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.



Figure 3.2 Creation of Union des Femmes Réunionnaises 1958



Figure 3.3 Creation of PCR 1959

Figure 3.2 shows the creation of the Union des Femmes Réunionnaises in September 1958 by Isnelle Amelin, a General Councilor, and longstanding friend of

Raymond Vergès.⁴⁹ The photograph underlines the broad racial and class support for women's rights in Réunion, with some of the women wearing the white uniforms of domestic servants and others in more bourgeois clothing. There is a similar diversity of racial origins and also a significant female presence at the 1959 meeting to create the new Réunion Communist Party in Le Port.⁵⁰ In the background of this photo are paintings of two members who had been killed in electoral violence in 1958 and 1959 in Réunion.

As the *Le Monde* journalist had underlined in 1949, support for the Communists or the right wing could not be divided along racial lines. Part of the attraction of the PCR was hope for social and material improvement in a time when the majority of Réunion's population was still living in significant poverty. The Prefect's analytical grille was racial fantasy, mapping Metropolitan prejudices on to Réunion.

Illiteracy and support of the Communist were also linked for the Prefect who considered that "the masses are interested more in the man than in the doctrine. It is doubtful whether the PCR, the only to have made efforts in this direction, has formed more than 50 conscious and enlightened Marxists." In addition to the elitist assumption that people could not understand their own situations of poverty, or the message produced by any political group, the vast majority of Réunion Islanders were illiterate, whatever their political leanings. This is proved by the Réunion Island national service selection only two years later in 1961. Only half of the total cohort of young men was physically able to serve. Out of this half a mere 3 % had a high school diploma, 13 % had followed

⁴⁹ Cited in Rouse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté*, 182. The woman in black in the center of the photo is Marie Gamelle, a General Councilor also from St André (which had been Raymond Vergès' city council). Isnelle Amelin is standing to Marie Gamelle's left and is slightly hidden in a dark grey suit.

⁵⁰ Paul Vergès is 3rd from left

some high school studies, 26 % had a primary school education, 32 % claimed they could read and write, and 26 % were illiterate.⁵¹

More revealing of the Metropolitan French stereotyping of Réunion Islanders' desires and actions, the Prefect also thought Communist supporters were more likely to have an "insular mentality". They supported the Communist Party because they were attached to "their little country which they consider the center of the world... thus the anti-Metropolitan contestations have met with so much success." In conclusion, the Prefect noted "the extreme poverty of a part of the mass [of Réunion Islanders] where unemployment is chronic ... [this] makes the electorate sensitive to the pressures and promises in relation to its material existence (distributions of rice before the elections for example)."⁵² Although the Prefect claimed to understand why people might support the Communist Party, he was actually describing Réunion Island's working class society in general, and the landlord-tenant relations which structured economic and political life, especially at election time.

The Prefecture's description of Communist supporters as incapable of understanding their material situation, as driven only by material gain, as illiterate and "dark skinned" revealed more about the racial and class assumptions of a Metropolitan administrator in a French colony than it did about the real hopes and fears of Réunion Islanders, as the following example of Nelson Dijoux, a Communist supporter, demonstrates.

⁵¹ CAC 19940180/254 Mission de Max Moulins 27/11/1961

⁵² CAC 19941080/41 Note de renseignements. Objet: l'évolution des dirigeants du PC à La Réunion vers l'idée de l'autonomie de l'île et la succession - transformation du PCF en partie communiste réunionnaise PCR 9/10/1959

iii. A militant Communist supporter: the example of Nelson Dijoux

Nelson Dijoux and his family lived in Ouaki near St Louis in the southwest of Réunion. In 1958 they were thrown off the land they had worked as sharecroppers. The Payets, their landowners, had decided that it was no longer economically viable to have sharecroppers work their land. Nelson Dijoux had recently married. He and his wife left the plot his family had worked in Ouaki. They took the bus to St Denis where there were jobs on the growing number of construction sites, funded by French money.

Nelson found a job as a stonemason on a construction site of the new Ecole Normale. He went to live in Camp Ozoux, a growing neighborhood of poor workers just outside the center of St Denis. Camp Ozoux housed many workers in thatched houses patched up with wood and corrugated iron, such as Figure 3.4. below.⁵³

After the original creation of the Communist Party in 1947, Nelson Dijoux's family had been profoundly and personally affected by the violent opposition between Communists and anticommunists in the rural areas of St Louis. The combination of rural poverty, strong political difference and the institution of employer contributions all seriously affected Nelson Dijoux and his family.

Nelson Dijoux's father had joined the PCF in 1947 and had publicly supported Claudine Saramito, the Metropolitan French Communist Party Secretary in Réunion. During the 1948 General Council elections Nelson Dijoux's father had acted as Saramito's bodyguard. Neither by the police nor by the anticommunist opposition approved of Nelson Dijoux's father.

⁵³ Photograph by Jean-Claude Allaire CAC 19790543/4 as part of a 1964 series on shantytowns in St Denis and St Benoît

[Rivière St Louis was notorious for electoral violence] ... the rich spent money on buying off the poor. They would give them money. Sometimes alcohol. They also paid thugs to support them, and they were helped by ... the police, the *gendarmes*. You couldn't open your mouth. It was impossible to talk about the Left ... there was too much revenge in Rivière St Louis.

After the 1948 elections, Nelson's father had fled the family home in fear of reprisals. His father hid in a ravine and with friends in the town of Le Tampon. Nelson vividly remembered how the Mayor of St Louis paid thugs to camp outside the Dijoux family house for a month. He claimed that the police had even come to search the family house looking for his father and Saramito. This incident made a huge impression on the 13 year old boy. From that moment Nelson Dijoux started to become angry and yearn for a "total liberation" of Réunion from corrupt political power.

As a youth, Nelson played the trumpet in the St Louis brass band which was funded by the right wing city council. Nelson was the only member of the band who was from an overtly Communist family. One evening, after returning from playing in La Montagne, Nelson got off the bus in St Louis and his fellow band members attacked him from behind, knocking him out. Political opposition and violence, even inside a brass band which played together, was unfortunately normal in the divided political atmosphere of St Louis in the 1950s.

On his arrival in St Denis in 1958 Nelson Dijoux quickly became a CGTR trade union leader for the construction workers and an active member of the Communist Party. "I was ... ready to physically smash things up ... on the construction sites if I saw someone mistreating a bloke I'd run after him, I was ready to give him some ... I was

furious, furious, furious! I was always furious with people who exploited the poor underdog (*le petit malheureux*), I was always against that.”⁵⁴

Conditions on the construction sites could be as socially oppressive as in the rural areas, and the work was physically demanding. Figure 3.4 shows the unequal working conditions on a construction site in St Denis. Workers were rechanneling a stream named Ruisseau des Noirs in preparation for building a SIDR social housing project called La Source. Many of the workers who appear to be of African ancestry are barefoot, and carry individual rocks on their head, to fill the concrete canal. The overseers standing on the rocks in the canal are wearing stout boots and socks.⁵⁵



Figure 3.4 Construction workers in St Denis c1961

⁵⁴ CGTR: Confédération Générale des Travailleurs de La Réunion

⁵⁵ Photograph by Jean-Claude Allaire in CAC 19790543/74

The importance of Nelson Dijoux's political attitude and his Communist activism in the St Denis camps and on the construction sites can be measured by the lengths that the French administration took to silence him. A few months after his arrival in St Denis, Nelson Dijoux claims that the extremely right-wing Mayor of St Denis, Gabriel Macé, offered him a job as a guardian of the St Denis cemetery. As the job was in the city government, it was paid at the Metropolitan rate, with overseas weighting - more than the double of a civil servant in Metropolitan France.⁵⁶ The job was worth 40,000CFA per month, an enormous increase from Nelson Dijoux's 3,500CFA monthly wage as a stonemason. In addition Macé offered Nelson Dijoux a house, a driving license and a car as long as he became a member of the right wing, and stopped his Communist Party activities. "But I wasn't interested in riches *mais la richesse, mi cherchait pas ça*", Nelson Dijoux commented to me, fifty years later. Although Nelson Dijoux claimed to remain true to his Communist convictions, many other Communist activists would have been, and probably were, tempted by the material comforts offered by working in Macé's city council.

Gabriel Macé's flagrantly illegal electoral practices in 1962 created the re-election which enabled ex-Prime Minister Michel Debré to gain a National Assembly seat in Réunion (see chapter 4). Macé's attempt to buy off Nelson Dijoux demonstrates the threat that an angry Communist agitator posed to the political and social order of St Denis. It also emphasizes the increasing financial power of elected leaders people at

⁵⁶ In 1953 the French administration increased the pay of civil servants working in Réunion to 30% more than Metropolitan France, after a seven week strike. This was to take into account the rising cost of living - and the differences in living conditions - between Réunion and France. In 1957 this increased to 35% more than Metropolitan French salaries.

vastly higher salaries than private-sector workers. These elected leaders would become politically and economically important from the 1960s as they took over positions in the French administration (see Chapter 5).

Despite the growing rural unemployment which led agricultural workers to seek construction jobs in St Denis, and which enabled angry men like Nelson Dijoux to seek social justice through Communism, the majority of the landowners, other right-wing supporters and the French administration completely ignored the claims of the poor in Réunion to French social legislation until the Communist Party appeared to pose a threat to the established social order. In 1956 Prefect Philip left Réunion. In his final dispatches to Paris he emphasized his fear that the poverty of the Réunionnais population would prove fertile ground for Paul Vergès and the Communist Party. Worse, Paul Vergès and the Communist Party might even have valid criticisms against the French administration's handling of the poverty in Réunion. The Prefect claimed that it would be impossible to make changes in Réunion while the French administration in Réunion was forced to have every policy approved by different ministries in Paris.

I hope that my successor obtains the devolution of powers which I have vainly asked for.

Without those, Paul Vergès will be right when he said last May, making parallels between Algeria and Réunion [that] 'there is no reason for the Creole people not to demand its independence, in order to [also] escape slavery and capitalist exploitation',⁵⁷

From 1956 the French administration would attempt to apply a new version of French welfare: social housing to improve worker's material conditions and thus their political views.

⁵⁷ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'Intérieur. Objet : rapport sur l'activité du mois de mai 30/05/1956 my emphasis

IV. Conclusion

The Communists claimed that France's administration of Réunion was inadequate, and increasingly motioned that Réunion Islanders should have the power to govern themselves autonomously. In the face of these Communist claims for French social justice in Réunion, and in the context of the growing anticolonial movements in the Indian Ocean and in the French Empire, the French administration in Réunion attempted to recalibrate French citizenship as white. It put populations that it considered to be "non-French" under surveillance.

Similarly the administration's attempts to place Réunion in a singular relationship between the Metropole and the Colony were defied- by Réunion Islanders and their diverse racial origins, by their political contacts and affiliations, and by the administration's own brief colonial project in Madagascar.

CHAPTER 4 URBAN LANDHOLDING AND POLITICAL LOYALTY IN A ST DENIS SHANTYTOWN 1954-1963

In 1952 the Prefect noted that “there is poverty [in La Réunion] which completely surpasses what one is used to noticing in the suburbs of the big Metropolitan [French] towns.”¹ In the same year the SIDR housing agency decided to pay speculating Creole landowners high prices for land to build houses for Metropolitan civil servants. The SIDR judged that paying extortionate land prices would be more cost-effective than building worker housing which would need “a costly cleanup operation [either] in an unventilated piece of government land behind the colonial gardens in the place known as “Shit Ravine” or in “the stinking plots of land in Camp Ozoux which are covered with filth.”² Réunion elites and French administrators in the SIDR had a public mission to improve housing but they considered themselves financially incapable of cleaning up Réunion’s *Camps* or shantytowns and providing urban infrastructure for poor workers in St Denis.

The SIDR’s willful disdain for the living conditions of poor Réunion Islanders – symptomatic of the indifference of the Creole landowners and the French administration – enabled the PCF to gain strong and effective political support in the Camps of St Denis. When the SIDR and the French administration finally decided that the Communist Party

¹ CARAN F/1cIII/1352 Préfet à M. le Ministre de l'intérieur Rapport mensuel décembre 1952

² CAC 19840179/74 Note de Rabot, Président du conseil d'administration de la SIDR sur le choix des terrains à bâtir 6/9/1950 ; ADR 57 W 33 SIDR Procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration 30/9/1950

was a political threat to the social order of Réunion in 1956, SIDR housing policy changed. The SIDR decided to build social housing to create political allegiance to the French administration in the neighborhood of Petite Ile-Camp des Noirs, a shantytown in St Denis.

The SIDR did not merely provide worker housing in Petite Ile. By rehousing poor workers in SIDR accommodation, the SIDR took on the role of a landlord, a role normally played by Creole landowners. Housing poor workers was more than providing them with running water, a cyclone-resistant house and getting them to pay regular rent. If the SIDR was to house poor workers it meant that a government-funded agency was going to intervene in the Réunionnais system of tenant-landlord relations. The stakes of shantytown destruction were also the stakes of changing and controlling the political allegiances between landlords and tenants. From 1947 the Communist Party had consolidated political support in urban areas through control of shantytown land. The growing migration to St Denis had brought a new base of political support. The SIDR's new social housing policy would upset the conflict between the Communists and the landowners by becoming another landholder. In the midst of this conflict, the poor residents of Petite Ile sought a way of buying their own houses from the SIDR to be free of landlord-tenant political obligations.

Interest in *bidonvilles* or shantytowns has resurged in French history in the context of the Franco-Algerian conflict of the 1954-1962.³ Historians have also focused on the way this conflict simultaneously played out in the shantytowns of Paris. From merely being seen as spaces of chaos, historians have examined the urban forms of the

³ Çelik, *Urban forms and colonial confrontations : Algiers under French rule*.

shantytowns.⁴ In the context of the Algerian conflict, French shantytowns have become almost synonymous with broader police repression and violence – and resistance and confrontation.⁵

This chapter examines the social arrangements of a Camp, or shantytown in St Denis which became a site of contestation between the SIDR, the Communist party and local residents. This shantytown was not part of violent police conflicts or subject to dawn raids, as Paris shantytowns were. In the context of France's attempt to maintain political control over Réunion this first shantytown operation reveals how the French administration attempted to gain political control over poor Réunionnais in urban areas. By doing so the French administration actually became a player in the landholding conflicts which had governed social life in Réunion. The French administration had not managed to fundamentally change landlord-tenant relations in Réunion. Rather, it had started to take part in them.

I. Urban landlord-tenant relations in Petite Ile/Camp des Noirs

The city of St Denis was founded in 1669 by the first governor of Réunion Island. In 1738 St Denis became the capital of Réunion, replacing St Paul. Only a few decades after

⁴ Mireille Rosello, "French bidonvilles around 1960s Paris: urbanism and individual initiatives," in *The hieroglyphics of space: reading and experiencing the modern metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ Neil MacMaster, "Shantytown Republics. Algerian migrants and the culture of space in the bidonvilles," in *Transnational spaces and identities in the francophone world*, ed. Hafid Gafaïti, Patricia M. E. Lorcin, and David G. Troyansky, *France overseas : studies in empire and decolonization* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961 : Algerians, state terror, and memory* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Azouz Begag, Alec G. Hargreaves, and Naïma Wolf, *Shantytown kid = Le gone du Chaâba* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Monique Hervo, *Chroniques du bidonville : Nanterre en Guerre d'Algérie, 1959-1962*, Epreuve des faits ([Paris]: Seuil, 2001).

becoming the capital, and just at the beginning of the major influx of African slaves to Réunion, St Denis became home to Camp des Noirs became the location of the Royal slave camp in St Denis.⁶ From the middle of the 18th century, then, one of the areas of St Denis was specifically reserved for African-origin people. This area on the outskirts of St Denis was known as ‘Camp des Noirs’. Later, Camp des Noirs would also be called Petite Ile.



Figure 4.1 Banks’ 1777 map of St Denis

The slave camp of Camp des Noirs-Petite Ile is circled in Figure 4.1, with north at the bottom of the page.⁷ As it housed government slaves, Camp des Noirs was separated from the rest of the city by the St Denis River and was situated next to the military defenses at the west of St Denis. From this time, Camp des Noirs was always included on maps of St Denis underlining the continual presence of African-origin slaves in St Denis, and that the slave camp was an area worth noting and controlling for the colonial

⁶ Sketches in 1822 for a more rational organization of the slave camp which were never realized can be found in the ADR CP 136 Plan de la negrerie du Roy and ADR CP 133 plan du camp des noirs 1822

⁷ AMSD

administration.⁸ After the abolition of slavery in 1848, the Catholic Church sought to evangelize and educate the freedmen. Perhaps the existence of a worrisome ex-slave population living on the outskirts of St Denis was one of the reasons why the church of Notre Dame de la Délivrance was built on the edge of Petite Ile in 1855.⁹

After the end of slavery the Camp des Noirs became part of the colonial public works center and *Atelier de Discipline* (Figure 4.2).¹⁰ The land belonged to the local colonial government of Réunion. Prisoners also went to Camp des Noirs do public labor.¹¹

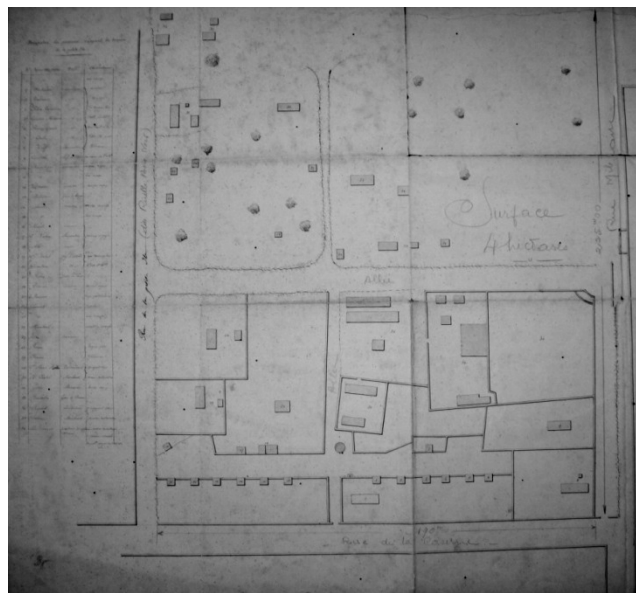


Figure 4.2 Public works and housing at Camp des Noirs c1865

Listed on the left of Figure 4.2 are the names a dozen ex-indentured laborers or *anciens engagés*. Drawn above the public works center at the bottom of Figure 4.2 are their scattered houses. These laborers were permitted to continue living in Camp des Noirs as

⁸ See also ADR CP 120a Plan de St Denis ville Balzac-Penrose 1854 ‘sur lequel on a ajouté les changements survenus jusqu’en 1865’

⁹ This reason is not cited by the latest history of the church. See Association des Quartiers de la Délivrance, *Une paroisse, une église, un quartier. La Délivrance* (St Denis: RCS, 2008).

¹⁰ ADR CP 139 Plan de Terrain de la Petite Ile This map has been marked up in pencil with the modern street names of Petite Ile and the size of the government-owned land “4 hectares” presumably by the French administration in the 1950s

¹¹ ADR CP 219 Plan de la ville de St Denis 1876 par Jacob de Cordemoy

tenants of the colonial administration in Réunion. These government workers did not pay rent, and the map marks that their “residence is tolerated in Petite Ile.”¹² Although the land was owned by the government, this rent arrangement is similar to the rural landlord-tenant relations described in Chapter Two. The poorest workers were allocated land to live on according to their employer’s goodwill – in this case the colonial government of Réunion. The poorest workers could only hope to acquire land through the patronage of landowners.

Between 1850 and 1936 Réunion became the destination of many indentured laborers, first from India and other parts of the Indian Ocean world, and from Madagascar through 1936. Some of these Malagasy indentured laborers worked on the colonial government land in Petite Ile, and Malagasy troops were also stationed in Camp des Noirs during the Second World War.¹³ By the 1950s Camp des Noirs was also frequently known as Petite Ile (I will refer to the area as Petite Ile for the rest of the chapter). By the 1950s, many residents in Petite Ile had Malagasy surnames or Malagasy-speaking grandparents and some were the descendents of indentured laborers, such as the Perny family.¹⁴

Grandmother Perny had come over to Réunion as a child from Madagascar to join a relative already living on the island.¹⁵ Grandfather Perny had possibly been an indentured laborer or was the son of a Malagasy-speaking indentured laborer. Both spoke Malagasy. Grandfather Perny worked from a handcart delivering barrels from the

¹² *Anciens engagés des Ponts et Chaussées résidant à la Petite Ile sous tolérance*

¹³ Interview Mr Brema, 25/10/2008

¹⁴ Affranchized slaves in 1848 typically took or were given French-style surnames see Sudel Fuma, *Esclaves et citoyens; le destin de 62.000 réunionnais Histoire de l'insertion des affranchis de 1848 dans la société réunionnaise* (Saint-Denis: Fondation pour la recherche et le développement dans l'Océan Indien, 1979).

¹⁵ Interview Philippe Perny 27/5/2009

distillery in Bas de la Rivière to the Chinese shopkeepers all over St Denis. By 1958 three householders named Perny lived in Petite Ile.¹⁶ Grandfather Perny also had seven daughters, who had all married into other families in Petite Ile. As a child in the 1960s, Philippe Perny would run behind Grandfather Perny's handcart with all the other Perny grandchildren, while his grandfather did his rounds and occasionally threw the grandchildren bananas to catch.

i. Communist control in St Denis

In the 1950s both the Creole and French administrations viewed Petite Ile as one of the poorest areas of St Denis. The St Denis city council's list of people who received poor relief included a number of Petite Ile widows on it in 1955.¹⁷ People living in Petite Ile would have been attracted to the Communist party because of their poverty and the proximity of the Communist Party headquarters: only ten minutes' walk on the other side of the St Denis River (see Figure 4.3, below).¹⁸ In addition, the Communist Party was a landholder in Petite Ile.

In 1948 the old colonial government land of Petite Ile was transferred to the Réunion Island General Council. The Communist Party had a majority in the General Council at that time and used the General Council land to help supporters of the Communist Party. The Communist Party replicated rural tenant-landlord relations by allowing political supporters to pay low rent. This enabled the Communist Party to gain a core of political followers in Petite Ile who organized neighborhood support for the party,

¹⁶ CAC 19841079/78 Direction générale des impôts (Petite Ile) 25/03/1958

¹⁷ AMSD 6 Q 1 List of indigents St Denis 1955

¹⁸ CAC 19840179/78

and could make money themselves by charging rent on the land they leased for free from the Communist Party.

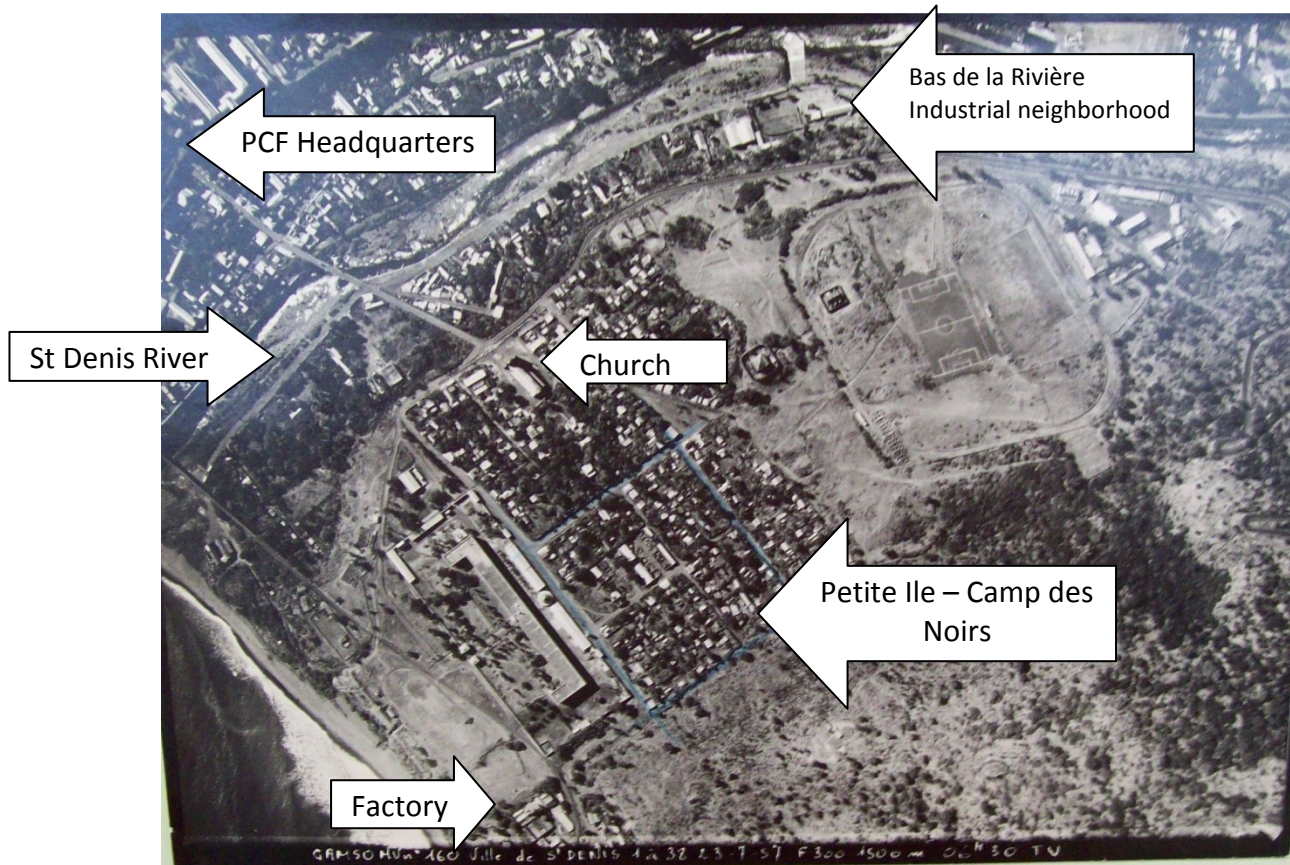


Figure 4.3 Aerial view of Petite Ile and Bas de la Rivière, western St Denis, 1951

Petite Ile was not the only place in St Denis where the Communist Party had a strong base of support. Other worker neighborhoods in St Denis were also bases of political support for the Communist Party, such as Camp Ozoux where the Communist Party also used land held by the General Council. As urban workers became tenants of the Communist Party they were encouraged to be politically active for the Communist party.¹⁹

¹⁹ The Communist Party (at least Raymond Vergès and Raoul Dupuis) ran the Société des Habitations à Bon Marché on land owned by the colonial government CAC 19840179/1 Procès-verbal Conseil

From its creation, the Communist Party used the Camps to organize political meetings and demonstrations. In October 1948 the St Denis Police Commissioner went to investigate noise outside the Communist headquarters in St Denis, just ten minutes' walk away from Camp Ozoux and Petite Ile. About thirty men were outside on the street, waiting to enter a party meeting. Political tensions between Communists and anti-Communists were strong in St Denis. The day before, the PCF had lost a number of seats in the General Council election and the Prefect had banned any political gatherings. Dr Vergès, leader of the PCF, and Mme Isnelle Amelin, an important Communist elected leader came outside. They explained to the police that the Communist Party gathering was not a political meeting as such, it was merely being held to thank their electors. The Police Commissioner reported this to the Prefect, who allowed the meeting to take place.

During the meeting, Mr. Thevenin vehemently accused the French administration in Réunion of colluding with the Creole right wing to stop the Communists from winning the elections in the violent electoral district of St Louis. After the meeting, and closely supervised by the Police, four hundred Communists walked through the St Denis Camps: Camp Ozoux, Camp Lataniers and then on to Butor, another poor neighborhood where Dr Vergès lived nearby. The supporters marched through the camps and grew in number until they stopped outside Dr Vergès' house where he thanked them, saying that they should forget about "past slights" but only think actively of the Communists who were increasing in number all over the world. After inviting them to sing the Communist

International, Dr Vergès asked the crowd to go back home calmly. Five minutes later, about one thousand people dispersed peacefully into the adjoining streets of St Denis.²⁰

In this demonstration, the PCF deliberately marched through many of the St Denis Camps with the explicit aim of giving a visible party presence to areas which the bourgeoisie usually preferred not to visit. The PCF underlined the opposition between Communists and anticommunists, and critiqued the French administration in Réunion and its sanctioning of corruption. Their march was closely supervised by the police who were not afraid to control the Camps.

The Communist Party also ran a small business to rent low cost social housing (HBM or *habitations à bon marché*) to workers in Camp Ozoux and Petite Ile. This gave the Communist party a political base for neighborhood canvassing in Petite Ile. It also conferred undeniable financial advantages for these tenants who sublet the plots and charged rents for people living on them. These houses were even more politically important when the General Council majority changed in 1948.

On the same day as Raymond Vergès marched through the Camps of St Denis in October 1948, the St Denis Police Commissioner also went to calm a political quarrel between two women in Petite Ile. Madame Itare supported the landowner's party, the RPF. Her neighbor Madame Tabère was a Communist who had close links to Dr Vergès' Communist Party. Mme Tabère also sublet a number of the General Council HBM houses in Petite Ile thanks to these political connections.

Mme Tabère went to the police and complained that Madame Itare had slapped her and threatened that the new RPF General Councilor for the district Mr. Vallon-

²⁰ AMSD 3 I 17 Rapport du Commissaire de Police à M. le Maire de Saint-Denis 4/10/1948

Hoareau would force Mme Tabère and the other Communists to leave their HBM homes in Petite Ile.²¹ Mme Itare effectively threatened her neighbor that she had a new political patron in Mr. Vallon-Hoareau and that landlord-tenant relations in Petite Ile should change. She hoped to show that her political contact could evict Mme Tabère, who sublet land belonging to the General Council in Petite Ile to make a profit. The General Council had changed political majority. As the ‘landlord’ had changed from the Communist Party majority to the RPF, Mme Itare considered that the tenant in Petite Ile should change too, and the new tenant should be a supporter of Mr. Vallon-Hoareau, who now had the General Council seat in Petite Ile neighborhood. Although Mme Itare does not appear to have been successful, it is essential to underline that the fight between these two women was not about political ideology. It was about the importance of political patronage and its link to land.

Urban workers in St Denis were not under the same types of surveillance and labor constraints as rural laborers. Yet HBM houses and General Council land tenure were part of an urban system of political favors based on a similar system of landholding and political patronage. Thus Communist political control of Petite Ile mirrored rural landlord-tenant relations. Vergès’ HBM housing business had created a strong base of Communist support. Mme Tabère rented houses cheaply because of her political connections. In turn she was a neighborhood organizer for the PCF in Petite Ile, giving her significant social and political power, which she did not intend to cede to Mme Itare.

II. Discovering the poverty of Petite Ile

²¹ AMSD 3 I 17 Rapport du Commissaire de Police à M. le Maire de Saint-Denis 4/10/1948

The increasing rural migration to urban areas had been ignored by the SIDR and the French administration through the early years of the SIDR. As early as 1951 the SIDR board recognized that “urbanism is a capital question which is linked to the social question.” In reality most of its managers did not consider poor, urban, Réunion Islanders as French people with social rights.²² Rather, in their board meetings, most SIDR managers described them as a homogeneous “mass”, undesirable and unknowable. They lived in “foul” Camps, which a SIDR board member loudly claimed “not to be in the habit of frequenting” in a 1950 meeting.²³

Yet by 1955 even the right wing press started to comment on the living conditions of the Camps of St Denis. The Catholic weekly *Dieu et Patrie* suggested that housing was the basic condition of the “social and religious promotion of the popular masses.” The journalist noted that while the SIDR and other organizations had started building houses for salaried workers, “the impoverished do not yet benefit from the ingenious [technicians] ... who improve the living conditions of the middle and upper classes.”²⁴

This renewed interest in Petite Ile and the other Camps in St Denis was surely not coincidental. After all, Petite Ile had been a poor neighborhood near the center of St Denis since the 18th century. Creole elites had been used to seeing poverty around them for centuries and had remained indifferent to it. What had suddenly made the elites concerned about their fellow Réunion Islanders?

After the Second World War, France undertook a program of urban reconstruction, to rebuild its cities. These had suffered both from the ravages of war, and

²² ADR 249 W 36 *Le Progrès Enigme* 6/7/1951

²³ ADR 57 W 33 SIDR Procès-verbal du conseil d’administration 30/9/1950

²⁴ AESD *Dieu et Patrie* Propos sur le logement 11/12/1955

from the longer-term effects of rent freezes which had discouraged investment in housing renovation, and scant investment in new construction. France sought to build cheap social housing in urban areas to alleviate the growing problems of shantytowns in the capital. Between four and five million homes were needed. Economic reforms and financial incentives were made during this period to encourage investment in social housing. However, although the state considered housing and urban planning primary social problems, the Algerian war meant that the major construction period in Metropolitan France occurred after the war's end.²⁵

The Algerian conflict also led France to commit significant resources to alleviate dangerous 'overcrowding' in urban shantytowns and to 'uplift' rural peasants from their adobe homes or *gourbis* in the name of modernization. By 1953 the French government had built 10,000 new urban homes in the three Algerian communes.²⁶ After 1958, French investment in Algeria continued on a massive scale in an attempt to find an economic solution to the troubles, and would include massive urban housing initiatives.²⁷ This was known as the 'Constantine' plan - a mass modernization and infrastructure program to win hearts and minds.

²⁵ Tellier, *Le temps des HLM 1945-1975. La saga urbaine des Trente Glorieuses*; W. Brian Newsome, "The Rise of the Grands Ensembles: government, business and housing in postwar France" *The Historian* 66, no. 4 (2004); Sabine Effosse, *L'invention du logement aidé en France : l'immobilier au temps des Trente Glorieuses*, Histoire économique et financière de la France. Etudes générales, (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2003); Fourcaut, " Les premiers grandes ensembles. Ne pas refaire la banlieue?."

²⁶ CAC 19771136/1 Documents Algériens. Série Sociale. No 42. Habitat. Bilan Général de l'aide à la construction de 1946 à 1953 26/08/1953 ; CAC 19771136/1 Ministère de la reconstruction et du logement. Service juridique et financier. Bureau de législation. L'aide à la construction en Algérie 10/10/1953

²⁷ CAC 19770830/1 Logements urbains quintuplés depuis 1952 c1959 ; Alistair Horne, *A savage war of peace : Algeria, 1954-1962*, New York Review Books classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2006).

Although Réunion had none of the legally entrenched social divisions of Algeria, the French administration and the Réunionnais Creole elites were certainly determined that the Communist Party would not gain power. The Communist Party's continual calls for French social legislation, worker equality and land reform in Réunion had made the poverty of Réunion Islanders politically dangerous for the Creole elites, and for the French administration.

In 1956 the same Catholic newspaper *Dieu et Patrie* warned that if everyone continued to ignore the poor (and by extension the claims of the Communist party) the poor would have cause to rise up. If they did not get “help” to get out of their impoverished state, there might be dangerous consequences. “One only has to open their eyes to note the imposing number of paillottes without comfort, which exist, with poor, pale, suffering people who live without color and naturally are not always [resigned to their fate] ... we let them live and die in dirt and bitterness.”²⁸ Thus, the French administration and the SIDR developed a new interest in the urban housing and Camps of St Denis, starting with Petite Ile.

i. Investigating Petite Ile

The SIDR had to go and investigate Petite Ile, to understand who lived there, and what their housing needs would be. Unlike housing policy in Algeria or the policies of housing immigrants in Metropolitan France, there was never any concern with the Réunionnais' capacity for adaption to modern French-style living. French Algerian housing policy in the 1950s had rated Algerians on their capacity to assimilate – peasants, urban workers

²⁸ AESD *Dieu et Patrie* La politique du logement 1/7/1956

and middle class had different housing built for them. The same was true for Algerian migrants to Metropolitan France. They were classified by social workers as to their degree of integration to Metropolitan French life. According to this rating in Metropolitan France, migrants would be allowed to move into French-style low cost housing or in a *cité de transit* to be re-educated.²⁹

While housing policy and fears of a political enemy which opposed France led to some similarities with the French housing policy of Algeria, the French administration in Réunion appears to have assumed that Réunion Islanders would immediately adapt to French-style low cost housing, without any period of education.³⁰ Despite Réunion Islanders' housing styles of the homestead, and their preference for animal husbandry, and groups of family houses, the SIDR and the survey takers ignored these living preferences. Contemporary photographs of Petite Ile and other urban neighborhoods by the SIDR and the metropolitan French administration reveal much more concern over the building materials and the urban forms used by Réunionnais, which were considered unsightly by richer people. While *paillottes* were certainly scandalously poor housing for French citizens, at least they were picturesque. Urban neighborhoods where *paillottes* were often replaced by a mixture of corrugated iron and wood (such as Figure 4.4 below) were merely an eyesore.³¹

²⁹ MacMaster, "Shantytown Republics. Algerian migrants and the culture of space in the bidonvilles."

³⁰ The later housing development of Commune Prima in St Denis was an experiment of the *Cité Transit* kind, but was not repeated in Réunion.

³¹ Photo by Jean-Claude Allaire in CAC 19790543/4 Les bidonvilles et les cases vetustes à effacer c1964 ; CAC 19910712/39 Bidonville du Cœur Saignant, St Benoît Duhal. Réunion Le Port Comm 26/9/1974

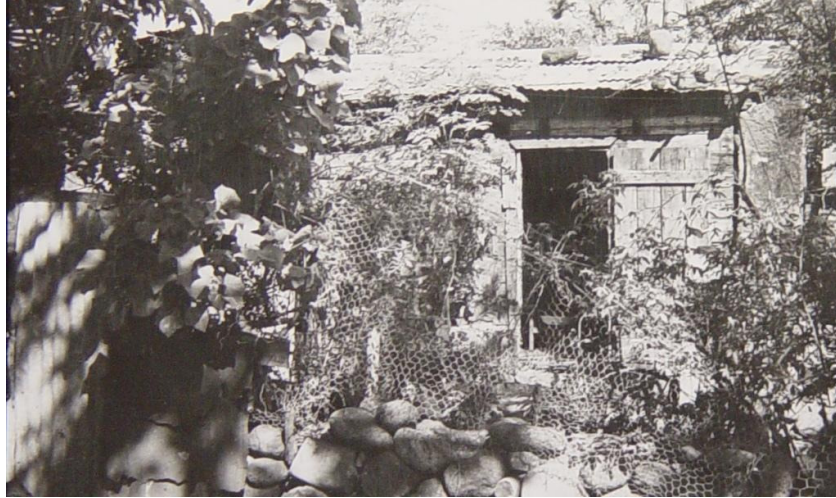


Figure 4.4 House in Camp Butor, St Denis c1964

Le Progrès, a Reunion Island rightwing newspaper, criticized Petite Ile for being an ensemble of rubbish, “barrels and boxes all covered in dirty dust, which pretends to be a residential neighborhood in St Denis.”³² The tone of this editorial assumes that the living conditions of people in Petite Ile were the fault of the residents. Yet the City government of St Denis had completely ignored the surrounding Camps. There was no evacuation system for waste. In the town center each house or shack had privy pots or tinettes which were collected once or twice a week by the prisoners of St Denis jail. There were no tinettes in the Camps. Rather, householders dug pits in their back yards, or in the ditches by their houses.³³

³² ADR 57 W 58 *Le Progrès*. Quand le bâtiment va. Petite Ile Saint-Denis : quartier pauvre mais tout neuf 07/12/1957

³³ ADR 57 W 38 Département de La Réunion Service des Ponts et Chaussées. Assainissement de Saint-Denis. Évacuation des eaux usées et pluviales c1962



Figure 4.5 Le Chaudron c1964

In Petite Ile as in other outlying areas of St Denis such as Le Chaudron (Figure 4.6) rubbish and human waste sometimes collected in ditches along the side of the narrow, unpaved roads.³⁴ Because there was no drainage, during the rainy season, filthy puddles and rivulets sprang up, sometimes running through the houses themselves. The damp was exacerbated by the continually trickling public fountains. People got their water free, but it could take up to ten minutes to fill up one metal bucket. Figure 4.5 shows women doing the water chore barefoot with buckets in their hand, although this was often done by children.

The photographers of these poor urban houses were not concerned with capturing the sense of community in these urban neighborhoods, family links or the way that social interaction was organized. Rather, they focused more on the unevenly assembled corrugated iron and flattened barrels, the mix of flimsy building materials: bamboo,

³⁴ Interview M. Boyer 29/10/2008

cardboard, corrugated iron, a flattened barrel and wood all for the boucan or kitchen in Figure 4.6.³⁵



Figure 4.6 Kitchen in Beaufonds c1974

While the photographers' visual representations of the Camps focused on architecture, the SIDR also interviewed people in the neighborhood of Petite Ile, in view of an eventual removal. These interviews were not always successful. When some residents were interviewed, they gave false names, one even claimed to be called 'Indingue' meaning mad.

Nevertheless, the SIDR employees listed who was living in the houses, how many their children and what their income was. They then mapped out the location and housing material of all 190 families in the neighborhood of Petite Ile (see Figure 4.7).

³⁵ CAC 19910712/39 Bidonville du Cœur Saignant, St Benoît Duhal. Réunion Le Port Comm 26/9/1974

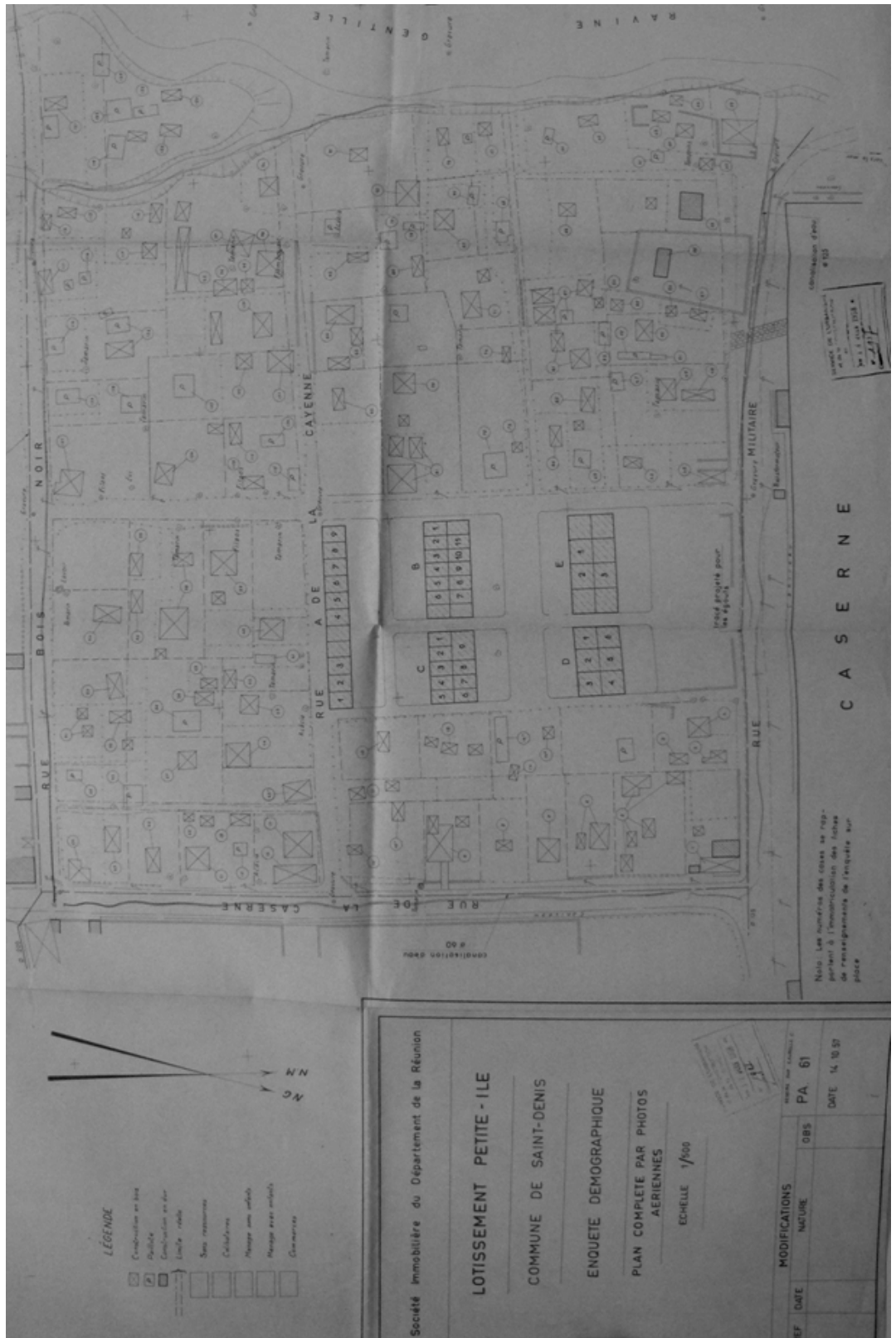


Figure 4.7 SIDR map of Petite Ile, October 1957



Figure 4.8 Close-up of Gentile Ravine Petite Ile December 1955

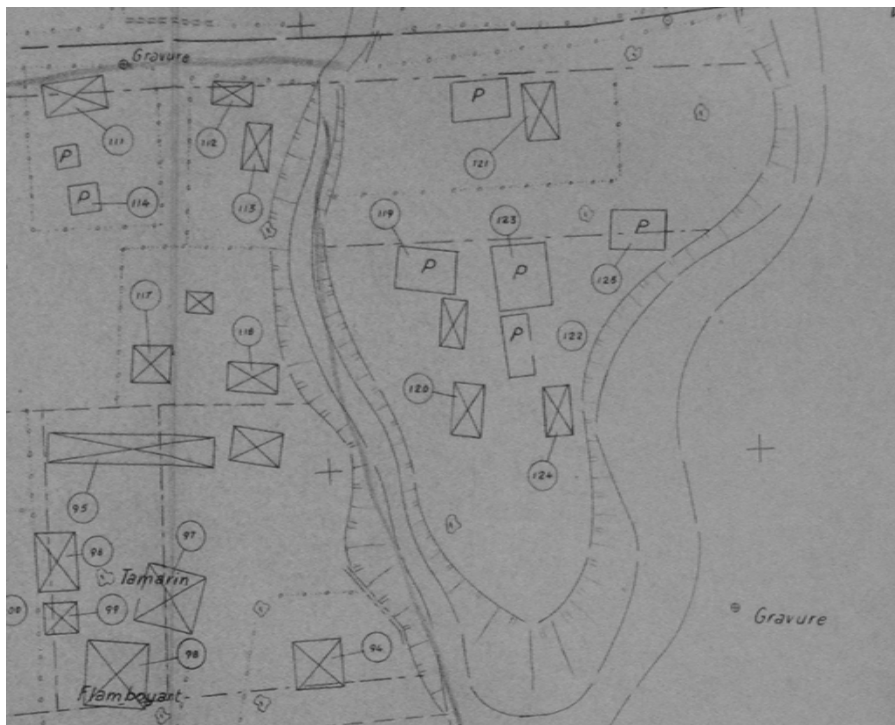


Figure 4.9 Close-up of Gentile Ravine Petite Ile October 1957

The SIDR aerial map of Petite Ile (Figure 4.7, above) in October 1957 marks houses made of wood with an X, and paillottes have P on them (north is at the bottom of the map). The square houses drawn in bold at the very center of the map are the remains of the Communist party HBM houses. Although many of them were destroyed in the 1948 cyclone, soon after their construction, the map details that many families had built wooden houses among the ruins.³⁶

The SIDR appears to have undertaken two different neighborhood studies, because two maps exist for Petite Ile, drawn in December 1955 and October 1957. Comparing the area of the Gentile Ravine in the top right hand corner of the 1957 map demonstrates that even in two years, the number of houses had increased, pointing to the growing urban migration to the neighborhood, and to St Denis in general (Figure 4.8 and 4.9, above). The above maps show the V-shaped Gentile Ravine area of Petite Ile in 1955 and 1957.³⁷ The houses marked on the 1957 map (figure 4.9) are numbered 119-125 corresponding to the SIDR household study.³⁸

119. Paillotte	Widow Albert Itare, 4 children
120. Wooden house	Mr. and Mme Roger Isana, 3 children
121. Wooden house	Mr. and Mme Cecilien Boyer, 5 children
122. Paillotte	Mr. and Mme Roger Montfort, 4 children, 1 other adult
123. Paillotte	Mr. Emile Montfort and female companion, 3 children
	Mr. and Mme Alfred Monfort, 2 children
124. Wooden house	Mr. and Mme Tram Van Hai, 2 children
125. Paillotte	Mr. and Mme René Grondin, 3 children

Table 4.1 Inhabitants of Gentille Ravine, Petite Ile 1957

The maps show that even between 1955 and 1957 the people letting the land from the Communist Party had divided the land and further sublet it to make way for more houses.

³⁶ CAC 19841079/78 Lotissement Petite Ile, St Denis. Enquête démographique

³⁷ 1955 map from SIDR archives, 1957 map from CAC 19840179/78

³⁸ CAC 19840179/78 Saint Denis de La Réunion opération petite île annexe SIDR 18/04/1956

This suggests an increasing population. In 1957 in the middle of Gentille Ravine, numbers 124 and 120 were new wooden houses which were not present in 1955. The new residents - Mme Isana and Tram Van Hai - were not named members of the Montfort family who were the majority family in Gentille Ravine. This confirms that there was a growing need for housing in St Denis, and tenants were amenable to subletting small parcels to new arrivals.

The plot of the Boyer Family, number 121, also grew to two houses between 1955 and 1957 suggesting a similar subletting arrangement, or that the family had grown large enough to need two houses. All the new houses were partly made of wood. This underlines the broader move in the 1950s away from constructing paillottes in urban areas to using pieces of wood and other materials, a trend which was noted by the French administration in St Denis. "Entirely wooden houses are a luxury; the house made of flattened barrels or even a paillotte covered with corrugated iron are signs of social advancement."³⁹

In addition to building materials, this map also shows the diverse origins of Réunion Islanders living in Petite Ile. Three of the groups living near each other are members of the Montfort family, a French-origin name, but which also could have origins in post-1848 emancipation names of freedmen. The names Itare and Isana are Malagasy-origin names, suggesting that these people's ancestors were indentured laborers. Tram Van Hai is probably Indochinese. It is also important to note that all the families in this part of Petite Ile used the natural boundary of the Ravine Gentille to site

³⁹ CAC 19940180/9 Documentation sur le Département de La Réunion et la ville de Saint-Denis à l'occasion du voyage du Général de Gaulle juillet 1959

their houses, showing a respect for the annual flooding of the usually small ravine (hence its name Gentille, or kind).

In 1956 SIDR report, a health official claimed that Petite Ile was “the last kingdom of the Anopheles mosquito” – and thus malaria - in St Denis. The SIDR considered Petite Ile as the bottom of the social scale compared to other Camps, a hideaway for the unfortunates who were ashamed of their abject poverty. “[Petite Ile] ...in St Denis [is] the worst ... habitat ... The only people that live here ... are ... poor, and in the deepest moral misery; this neighborhood is [separated from the town] and is considered by the poor people as a sort of refuge, sheltered from the view of the rest of the population.”⁴⁰

Petite Ile was a prime candidate for a new social housing scheme, based on Metropolitan French models.

Residents of Petite Ile and other camps did not see their neighborhoods in the same way as the Creole urban elites and the Metropolitan administration in Réunion. One said to me “My house wasn’t dirty at all, it was clean. It was small, it wasn’t painted, but I spent all my time making little improvements, sweeping out the yard. I think that people just made the best of what they had.”⁴¹

For Mr. Jean-Paul Carpaye’s mother, Petite Ile was a social improvement. She had left the town of Le Tampon in the 1950s because there was no work and moved to St Denis, where she was a domestic servant for the rich Mauritian Tomi family in St Denis. She then moved to Petite Ile in 1957 to marry someone who already lived there. Living

⁴⁰ CAC 19840179/78 SIDR Mission Petite Ile: Le dossier de présentation. Exposé de la situation présente March 1960

⁴¹ Interview Nelson Dijoux 30/10/2008; ADR 49 W 38 SIDR IVe plan pour les DOM. Construction des logements 1961

independently in a house in Petite Ile was far better than living in the *calbanons*, sheds behind the Tomi family house which were reserved for the servants. Jean-Paul Carpaye's paternal grandparents earned a living in the small rum factory run by the Hoareau family near Petite Ile. Next to the rum factory was the "manure" factory where St Denis prisoners brought the domestic waste of St Denis' bourgeois houses to be treated.

For many people, the smell of the manure factory at the edge of Petite Ile was fearful."⁴² Jean-Paul Carpaye was used to the smell, however, and the prisoners. His biggest pleasure as a boy in Petite Ile was to go on Saturdays to help at the abattoir at the mouth of the St Denis River. He would be able to take home some bones for his mother to boil up, a sign of the family's poverty. Along with other Petite Ile families, Jean-Paul Carpaye's family attended the Communist meetings in Petite Ile which were run by Mme Tabère, but Communist party organizers were not demanding the renovation of their neighborhood. It was against their interests. It appears that Mme Tabère was subletting part of her low cost Communist Party land to other people in Petite Ile, for a profit. Renovating the neighborhood would lose her income.

One of the people Mme Tabère may have been subletting to was the Juillerot family, who moved to Petite Ile just after the 1948 cyclone. The Juillerots considered that Petite Ile was a social step up from Bas de la Rivière, where the family's house had been flooded by the rising waters caused by the 1948 cyclone (see Chapter 2). Eddy's Juillerots parents had also moved to St Denis in the 1930s to escape the constraining rural plantation relations. Mme Juillerot was Hindu, and her ancestors had been indentured laborers who arrived in Réunion at the end of the 19th century from Southern India. She

⁴² Interview Alex Maillot, 5/6/2008

moved to St Denis to work as a washerwoman in the St Denis river, only too happy to have left the constraining power relations in the plantations of St André. Eddy's father came to St Denis after leaving a plantation in Etang-Salé-les-Hauts in the southwest of the island. Eddy emphasized that his father disliked the obedience to authority which working on the land required. In St Denis, Eddy's father could work independently as a stonemason and a fisherman. Although his parents thought that they were now renting a house from a landowner, they actually rented their house from a woman who had been allocated land from the General Council to sublet. This renting arrangement would be upset when the SIDR decided to bulldoze the neighborhood.

In 1955, the SIDR proposed building houses in Camp des Noirs-Petite Ile. It seemed like an efficient solution to the problem of land acquisition and the threat of growing Communist Party support in the shantytowns.⁴³ Half of the land in Petite Ile was owned by the General Council which was willing to give the land to the SIDR for free.⁴⁴ In 1956 there was also new French funding for rental-only social housing.⁴⁵ The Prefect hoped that the political and psychological impact of social housing would be important in Petite Ile.

The SIDR underestimated the difficulty of applying social housing welfare in Réunion. Although the tin houses and thatched huts could be bulldozed and replaced with SIDR housing, the residents of the neighborhood were already entangled in political claims which were articulated through property leases and connections with local

⁴³ ADR 1158 W 109 Conseil Général. Premier Session ordinaire de 1956. Matin 18/4/1956. Dossier No 12 Domaine Départementale. Cession d'un terrain sis à la Petite Ile (St Denis) pour construction de logements par la SIDR

⁴⁴ CAC 19840179/1 Procès-verbal conseil d'administration SIDR 04/10/1955

⁴⁵ This social housing policy, paid for by the FIDOM, had already been massively used in Algeria since 1952

political notables. A seemingly simple housing operation to rehouse 150 families, 600 people, would prove complex.⁴⁶ Networks of personal interest in Petite Ile intersected with different layers of landlord-tenant relations and their associated communist party support.⁴⁷

ii. Changing landlord-tenant relations in Petite Ile

In 1956 the General Council gave ownership of the Petite Ile plot of land to the SIDR with the idea that the SIDR would use the land to build new housing.⁴⁸ Since there were already people living in Petite Ile the SIDR decided to build workers' houses, and re-house the old residents on site. Following the Réunionnais landlord-tenant political tradition, the SIDR also agreed to find space to house people who worked for the General Council and the Prefecture.⁴⁹

People in Petite Ile considered that since they had enjoyed the right to live on the land for low rent for a long time, they now had the right to own the land. Longstanding landlord-tenant relations had given them a property right. This understanding of the process of land acquisition mirrored the rural areas when the people around the sugar cane factory in grand bois had been given their right to own the land for social peace. The very poor could sometimes acquire land through the patronage of landowners. Only the rich had to buy land. No-one in the SIDR considered that Petite Ile residents' rent agreements with the Communist Party in Réunion now had any importance for the future of the neighborhood.

⁴⁶ CAC 19840179/78 Saint Denis de La Réunion opération Petite Ile annexe SIDR 18/04/1956

⁴⁷ AMSD 1 D 41 conseil municipal de Saint-Denis. Affaire no 7 lotissement de la SIDR au quartier de la Petite Ile Saint-Denis : participation de la commune au logement de la population 31/1/1958

⁴⁸ SIDR Procès-verbal conseil d'administration 24/1/1956

⁴⁹ CAC 19841079/76 Rapport au Conseil Général 17/4/1956

The question of Petite Ile residents' moral right to land was raised in the General Council.⁵⁰ However, the SIDR was not going to give the residents of Petite Ile the right to own the land their families lived on. The Petite Ile project would rid St Denis of one of the most insalubrious neighborhoods at a very low cost, because the land had been given to the SIDR. Yet the question of rent was problematic for the SIDR. The population of Petite Ile was poor. They were much poorer than the usual middle class tenants of SIDR housing who had regular salaries and could afford to pay rent. How was the SIDR to build houses which the poorest residents of St Denis would be able to rent? There were 190 families in Petite Ile, many of whom only worked seasonally or occasionally. 40 of these families were without any financial resources and according to the SIDR they were "indigent".⁵¹

The SIDR was not going to give the land to people in Petite Ile, so they were faced with two options. Rather the new houses in Petite Ile could be rented indefinitely to residents, or they could be rented in view of an eventual purchase.⁵² Metropolitan French social housing directives favored indefinite renting in 1957.⁵³ Not allowing residents to eventually purchase their houses would enable the SIDR to demolish Petite Ile later without the problem of having small parts of the project belonging to residents. Indefinite renting would also permit the SIDR to control maintenance on the houses. The population of Petite Ile should be grateful for the opportunity to pay rent indefinitely to the SIDR for their cyclone-resistant houses with running water and toilets.

⁵⁰ ADR 1158 W 109 Conseil Général. Premier Session ordinaire de 1956. Matin 18/4/1956. Dossier no 12 Domaine Départementale. Cession d'un terrain sis à la Petite Ile (St Denis) pour construction de logements par la SIDR

⁵¹ CAC 19840179/78 Saint Denis de La Réunion opération Petite Ile annexe SIDR 18/04/1956

⁵² SIDR Procès-verbal 3/3/1956

⁵³ SIDR Procès-verbal 30/12/1957

However in 1957 the SIDR was undergoing reckless management by Mr. Courtier the President of the SIDR.⁵⁴ Even though Courtier knew that French housing policy did not recommend rent-to-buy housing, he promised the residents of Petite Ile that they would be able to buy their houses. This was an impossible promise. The SIDR did not have enough funding. Rather than renting houses at 1,000CFA per month which tenants would own after 20 years, the Petite Ile houses would be rented indefinitely to tenants at 2,500CFA per month.⁵⁵

By 1957 the Prefect in Réunion was under pressure from Paris to start developing social housing in Réunion.⁵⁶ The Réunion Island press also considered that eradicating the “filthy” shantytown of Petite Ile and rebuilding it would be an excellent plan.⁵⁷ Yet once more the SIDR was in disarray, and President Courtier had to be replaced.⁵⁸ The Prefect decided that the management of the SIDR was too important to be left in the hands of incompetent civil servants. It should now be taken over by the Prefecture. In 1958 the new manager of the SIDR would be the Prefect’s closest colleague, the new General Secretary of the Prefecture Pierre Bolotte.⁵⁹

The SIDR was now to be used as a powerful government tool for improving the material conditions of working Réunion Islanders, and thus their political allegiance, in a minute replica of the Constantine plan in Algeria.⁶⁰ The comparison between Algeria and

⁵⁴ ADR 194 W 59 Bolotte à Bour, Inspecteur Général de la CCFOM 04/03/1959

⁵⁵ ADR 194 W 59 Bolotte à Bordessoules Cabinet du Secrétaire Général des DOM 23/12/1959

⁵⁶ CAC 19840179/70 Secrétaire d’Etat aux affaires économiques Duhamel à M. le Préfet de La Réunion 28/01/1957

⁵⁷ ADR 57 W 58 *Le Progrès*. Quand le bâtiment va. Petite Ile Saint-Denis : quartier pauvre mais tout neuf 07/12/1957

⁵⁸ ADR 194 W 59 Bolotte à Bordessoules Cabinet du Secrétaire Général des DOM 23/12/1959

⁵⁹ ADR 41 W 34 Roux Directeur Ministre Reconstruction Logement à Perreau Pradier Préfet Réunion 16/2/1957

⁶⁰ Horne, *A savage war of peace : Algeria, 1954-1962*.

Réunion was not lost on Pierre Bolotte, who arrived in Réunion after working in two disastrous French colonial situations.⁶¹ Bolotte had spent twenty months in Indochina at the end of the French-Indochinese war, and then a few years in Constantine in Algeria, until the outbreak of war with the French in 1958, when he was transferred to La Réunion. These experiences marked Bolotte strongly and he was particularly keen to reduce the attraction of the Communist Party in Réunion.⁶² Réunion should be an important site for maintaining French power and influence. “I swore to myself that I would do everything in my power, even against the majority, to make sure that [Réunion did not turn out like Algeria]” Bolotte wrote to a colleague.⁶³

However the Prefect and Pierre Bolotte underestimated the difficulty of applying social housing welfare in Réunion. Although the tin houses and thatched huts could be bulldozed and replaced with SIDR housing, many of the residents of Petite Ile were entangled in landholder-tenant relations strongly linked to the Communist Party. A seemingly simple housing operation would prove complex.⁶⁴ The much-maligned Mr. Courtier, ex-President of the SIDR had, however, seen the potential problems more clearly. “The notion of rehousing is ... not the same in Paris as it is in St Denis ... [there are] two unknown elements: the reaction of the inhabitants and the political influences.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ ADR 49 W 38 Pierre Bolotte au ministère des départements et territoires d'outre-mer 4/6/1960

⁶² ADR 49 W 38 Note pour M. le sous-préfet directeur du cabinet 09/08/1959

⁶³ ADR 194 W 59 Pierre Bolotte à Henri Cornu 19/9/1961

⁶⁴ CAC 19840179/78 Saint Denis de La Réunion opération Petite Ile annexe SIDR 18/04/1956

⁶⁵ ADR 1259 W 12 M.Courtier au Préfet Objet: Opération-tiroir de Petite Ile 07/07/1959

Political allegiances and tenancy intersected in Petite Ile. The SIDR was effectively challenging the dominance of the Communist party land and political patronage system in the neighborhood.⁶⁶

III. Moving Réunionnais into French-style homes

Before they moved in to their new concrete homes, half of the occupants of Petite Ile were rehoused in wooden sheds or *calbanons* nearby, on the old racecourse of La Redoute which was a football pitch in 1958. But the SIDR still had financial problems. A prior building project in St Benoît had not been completed. The Prefect stalled the construction of Petite Ile even though half of the residents of Petite Ile were now living in wooden sheds.⁶⁷ This period of waiting would later be remembered bitterly by residents of Petite Ile, who had been forced out of their homes without being consulted and obliged to live on the old racecourse. One resident claimed to me, sadly, that he had been born in 1958 “in the stables” of La Redoute.

Once the first group of residents had been moved out to temporary accommodation in La Redoute, some refused to move *back* to the newly-built houses in Petite Ile in 1959. They were encouraged to protest by neighborhood Communist party representatives.⁶⁸ If this first group refused to move in to their new houses, then it would be impossible to build the second phase of Petite Ile. “We have clearly underestimated

⁶⁶ AMSD 1 D 41 conseil municipal de Saint-Denis. Affaire no 7 lotissement de la SIDR au quartier de la petite Ile Saint-Denis : participation de la commune au logement de la population 31/1/1958

⁶⁷ CAC 19840179/70 Procès-verbal conseil d’administration SIDR 24/4/1958

⁶⁸ ADR 1259 W 12 Pierre Bolotte à Neveu (secrétaire générale IIE division) Objet: opération tiroir de la Petite Ile St Denis 07/09/1959

the duration, the cost and the social significance of this project” wrote Pierre Bolotte to Henri Cornu.⁶⁹

Once all the residents had moved in to their new homes in 1960, the problems did not end. Many residents were bitter about the broken 1957 promise that they would be able to buy their homes. A member of the Communist party set up a protest group in Petite Ile and declared that the tenants would no longer pay their rent until they could buy their homes.⁷⁰ The protest group claimed that residents had been coerced into signing the SIDR contracts on the threat of being thrown out of Petite Ile.⁷¹

The French administration applied for a subsidy to lower the rents in Petite Ile. This very first social housing operation needed to be a “social and psychological” success. The SIDR also wanted to stop being publicly humiliated by the Communist Party.⁷² The French administration had successfully repressed the Communist Party in local government. Yet it was still capable of mobilizing people in the St Denis urban neighborhoods. The rightwing press claimed that the PCR had deliberately sabotaged the Petite Ile operation because they were threatened by the material improvements that the SIDR promised.⁷³ The Communist Party claimed that they were merely defending the

⁶⁹ ADR 1259 W 12 Pierre Bolotte à Henri Cornu (président du CA de la SIDR) 06/07/1959

⁷⁰ ADR 1 PER 82/38 *Le Progrès*. L'affaire de la SIDR à la Petite Ile 10/01/1960 ; *Le Progrès*. Comment le Parti Communiste grignote le lotissement de la Petite Ile 24/01/1960 ; *Le Progrès* Pourquoi la SIDR renonce à la formule location - vente? Les documents de l'affaire Petite Ile 07/02/1960; ADR 1 PER 82/38 *Le Progrès* L'association des locataires de la SIDR fait son histoire de la question 21/02/1960

⁷¹ ADR 1 PER 84/14 *La Démocratie*. L'Association des locataires de la Petite Ile St Denis communique 15/01/1960

⁷² CAC 19840179/78 Ministère de la construction Roux à Ministre de Sahara DOM-TOM Objet : Petite Ile Saint-Denis de La Réunion demande de subventions présentées par la SIDR 23/03/1960

⁷³ ADR 1 PER 84/14 *La Démocratie*. Le vrai scandale à la Petite Ile 02/02/1960

interests of the Petite Ile residents.⁷⁴ Either way, the Communist Party had lost one method of maintaining party support through reduced rents.

Mme Tabère, the Communist party organizer in Petite Ile, flatly refused to leave the home that she leased from the General Council.⁷⁵ She was angry that she could no longer make money subletting to other people. The SIDR nearly had to build the entire neighborhood around her wooden home. The SIDR eventually allocated her extra land in Bas de La Rivière where she could continue to sublet houses, as well as giving her a SIDR house in Petite Ile. Thus, the SIDR, a Metropolitan French housing agency, started to act like a benevolent rural landowner, allocating land to a favored tenant to keep the social peace.

i. New houses

From being housed in thatched cottages and wooden houses, by 1960 all the SIDR Petite Ile tenants lived in concrete bungalows with concrete flooring, running water, toilets and electricity. The new housing in Petite Ile was an economic model called *type pêcheur* or “fisherman” developed by the Réunion Island architects Hébrard and Monfreid, following Metropolitan French models.⁷⁶ The houses were known as TE - *très économique* or highly economical - and were built around a 22m² model, in order to reduce costs. They were also built to ensure they withstood cyclones of up to

⁷⁴ 1 PER 85/9 *Témoignages*. Hier à la Mairie de St Denis 04/02/1960

⁷⁵ ADR 1259 W 12 Préfecture Note explicative, Groupe d'habitations de la Petite Ile à St Denis 05/02/1959 ; ADR 194 W 59 SIDR Procès-verbal. Conseil d'Administration 7/12/1960

⁷⁶ CAC 19840179/78 Saint Denis de La Réunion opération Petite Ile annexe SIDR 18/04/1956

250km/hour. Each house had two bedrooms and one living room which doubled as a bedroom.

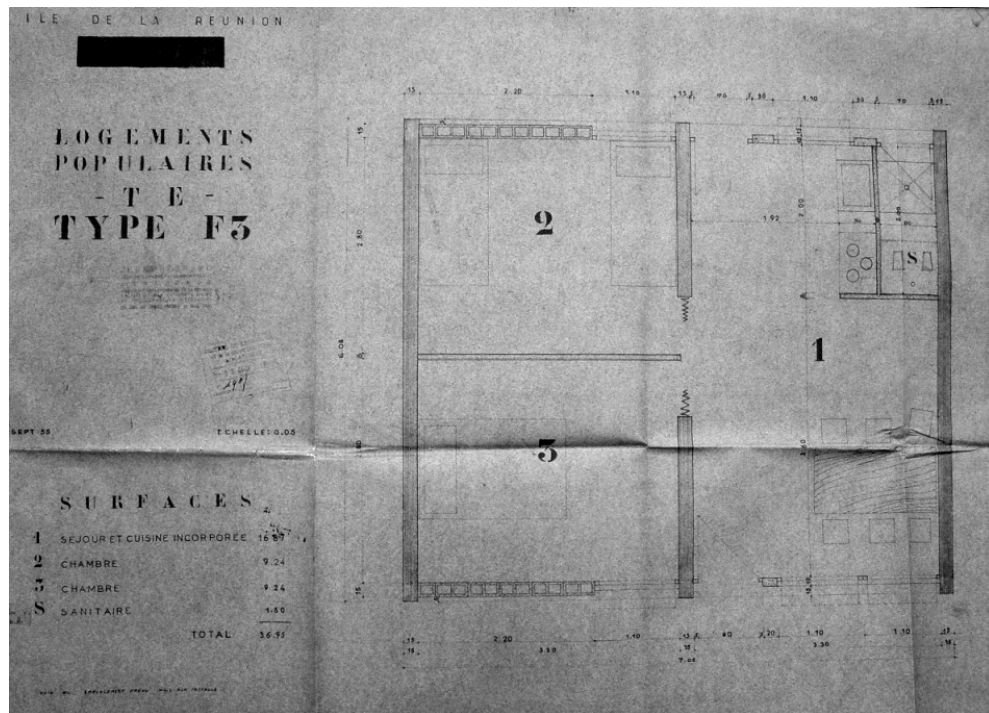


Figure 4.10 SIDR Petite Ile housing floor plan

Residents needed to go outside of the house to enter the bathroom and wash area (top left of Figure 4.10) which was separated from the rest of the house by a wall. The SIDR also installed a running water and drainage system for the entire neighborhood, part of which was paid for by the St Denis city council.

The Metropolitan French architect clearly followed the prevailing architectural preferences for straight lines in low-cost housing. Petite Ile was a grid-like neighborhood using the modern built form of TE low-cost houses. Although the SIDR had not specifically investigated or commented on the cultural differences of the Réunionnais, this form of low-cost French-style housing and the cultural presumptions built into its architecture was an obvious attempt to ensure that poor Réunionnais inhabit their new

homes in an appropriate urban way. The President of the SIDR, Pierre Bolotte, saw rehousing of Petite Ile residents as an issue of establishing tidiness and domestic conformity. In 1959 he requested that something be done to change the way that the residents of Petite Ile organized their front and back yards. “Yesterday at the end of the afternoon, I went round Petite Ile. I am shocked by the rubbish, old containers, all sorts of junk wood ... behind these new houses ... pigs, chickens and dogs roam free.”⁷⁷

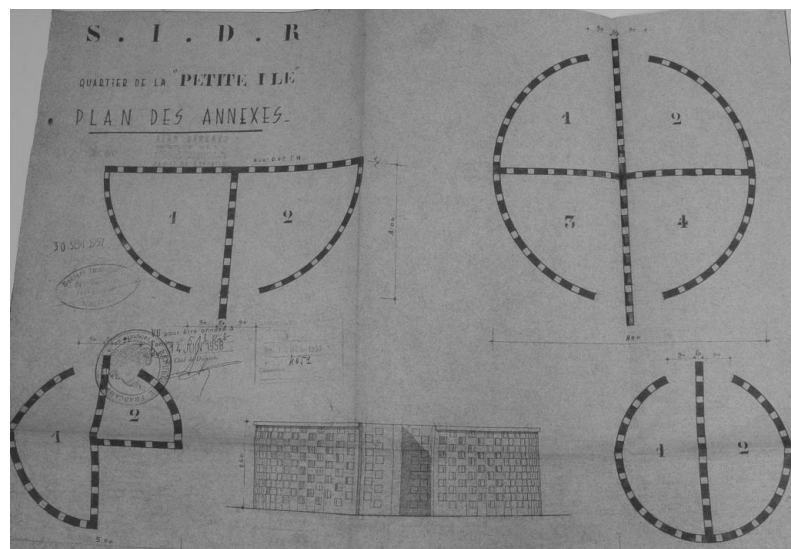


Figure 4.11 No more animal husbandry: roofless concrete outbuildings

The SIDR attempted to socialize residents into Metropolitan French ways of living. The SIDR discouraged the rural homestead model of animal husbandry. It disapproved of home-made outbuildings, and objects retained in the back yard in case of need. SIDR Petite Ile residents were not allowed to keep animals and the outbuildings were constructed in a completely different logic to the habits of poor Réunion Islanders who were used to keeping animals. Each house had only one semicircular concrete

⁷⁷ ADR 194 W 59 Bolotte à M. Bizien 04/12/1959

outbuilding which was either 2.5 or 4 metres diameter. These outbuildings did not have solid walls, rather they were built in a concrete lattice form, letting in the air. They had no roof or door and were unsuitable even for keeping birds (Figure 4.11).⁷⁸ Given Bolotte's comment that Petite Ile should have tidier front and back yards, it seems the only purpose of the concrete outbuilding was to hide people's stocks of wood and other objects.

In addition tenants were forbidden from building on extra rooms or houses in the backyard, a fundamental expression of growing Réunionnais families, and their desire to live grouped around a courtyard. The SIDR was also unwise in its building choices, because it ignored the course of the Gentille Ravine. Figure 4.12 shows the neighborhood in 1960.⁷⁹ While the houses are now neatly arranged, the SIDR had also built over half of the Gentille Ravine on the right of the photo. The Metropolitan French architects constructed houses and a road over the V-shaped ravine. The road followed one side of the ravine, the other side of the ravine flowed through people's back yards as soon as there was rain. The house windows did not have glass, either. This was also to prove problematic during the rainy season.

⁷⁸ Archives SIDR 2 W 1122

⁷⁹ Archives SIDR



Figure 4.12 Petite Ile 1960



Figure 4.13 Monfort family outside their house in Petite Ile c1961

The SIDR wished for the former shantytown residents to appreciate their new houses.⁸⁰ Another SIDR initiative was to organize gardening competitions for SIDR residents in Petite Ile, to encourage them to look after their front yards in appropriate displays of domestic care. Figure 4.13 shows a SIDR photograph of some members of the

⁸⁰ SIDR 2 W 1122

Monfort family in front of a garden which has already been planted, suggesting that they had had won an early gardening competition. Although many Réunion Islanders already took pleasure in gardening, the competition also followed the SIDR's idea about the uplifting of the shantytown population. As the SIDR board agreed in a 1961 meeting, the organization must beware of residents erecting another "sordid" shantytown in their front gardens.⁸¹

Another SIDR initiative was to construct a circular washing station to encourage Réunion Islanders to have a new sense of neighborly community and wash their clothes in the neighborhood, instead of going to the St Denis river. The circular wash basin was also aimed at creating spaces of communal interaction, unlike the individual homestead model of Réunion Islanders. The communal washing station appears to have been little-used and short-lived.

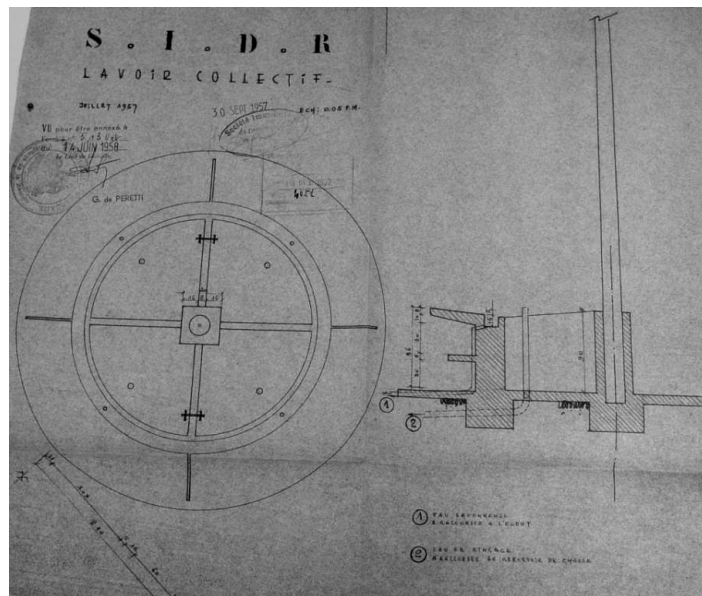


Figure 4.14 Plan for circular clothes washing station, Petite Ile

⁸¹ SIDR Procès-verbal SIDR 28/8/1961

In short, these SIDR developments promoted open air healthiness which the French urban planners in Paris and in Reunion considered essential to the moral development of the population in its new social houses.⁸²

ii. Whose political victory?

Given the Creole elites' and the French administration's fears of the Communists' influence in the urban Camps, did the Petite Ile project actually discourage poor Réunion Islanders from supporting the Communist Party? In 1960 a right-wing newspaper stated darkly that "those who know [Petite Ile] say that it is becoming more Communist."⁸³

By 1963 poorer areas of St Denis – including SIDR Petite Ile – continued to pay membership to the Communist party.⁸⁴

Centre Ville	10,994
Boulevard Doret	9,735
Belle Pierre [Camp Ozoux]	5,814
Petite Ile [including non-SIDR]	3,623
Bas de la Rivière	1,760
Montagne	1,875
Butor	330
Rampes du Brûlé	270

Table 4.2 Communist Party subscriptions for St Denis 1963

Even though one third of the Petite Ile neighborhood, 5 hectares, was now a SIDR neighborhood, Petite Ile was still clearly an area with significant Communist support especially given its small size. Without access to a membership list from 1960 it is impossible to tell whether the improved material comfort of the residents in SIDR Petite

⁸² ADR 40 W 19 Avant projet d'un plan de paysage du département de La Réunion 6/1/1961 ; SIDR Procès-verbal SIDR 28/8/1961 ; SIDR Procès-verbal 21/5/1963

⁸³ ADR 1 PER 82/38 *Le Progrès*. Comment le Parti Communiste grignote le lotissement de la Petite Ile 24/01/1960

⁸⁴ CAC 19941080/41 Ministre de l'Intérieur. Renseignements Généraux. Objet. Réunion du Comité de section du PCR a St Denis 12/07/1963

Ile had positively or negatively affected residents' political choices. To be sure, Communist control of the neighborhood had clearly not been extinguished by 1963. Yet after 1963, the French administration would create a much more sustained strategy of winning Réunion Islanders' political allegiance to the French administration through material gain. By the time the right-wing Auguste Legros became Mayor of St Denis in 1968, residents in Petite Ile had become much more vocal supporters of the right wing (see Chapter 5).

IV. Conclusion

In 1960, after the four-year long project to move unwilling Petite Ile residents into new accommodation the SIDR board unanimously voted not to rehouse any more poor Réunion Islanders.⁸⁵ Yet by 1960 the direction of French administrative policy in Réunion had shifted. The SIDR was immediately put under more pressure to resolve the urban poverty elsewhere in St Denis by building more social housing, this time without making the same mistakes as in Petite Ile.⁸⁶ The national political context had also changed. In 1958 De Gaulle had become President of France, with Michel Debré as his Prime Minister. From 1960, France's policy for maintaining influence in Overseas France would skillfully combine political welfare operations such as social housing provision with political repression (see chapter 5).

However, the solution for Réunion's political future was not a simple matter of putting poor, grateful, Réunion Islanders in materially better conditions. The Communist Party's landlord-tenant in Petite Ile had enabled the Party to maintain its support through

⁸⁵ SIDR PV 16/5/1960

⁸⁶ 194 W 59 Pierre Bolotte. Note pour M. Jourden Directeur Général de la SIDR 16/03/1961

1960. However, by rehousing the tenants of Petite Ile, the SIDR had effectively become their new landlord. The French administration and the SIDR housing agency had taken a new role in controlling social peace and administering favors, a role usually played by landowners and their associated political parties. It would only take one astute politician, Mayor Auguste Legros in 1968, to realize that gaining administrative control over the SIDR housing agency would allow a new set of landlord-tenant relations to develop, paid for and maintained by the French administration in Réunion. This new strategy of local elites using the French administration's resources would fundamentally change the meaning of the Metropolitan French presence in Réunion, by using it to follow local Réunionnais political formats (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER 5 THE MORALITY OF LOW RENTS: A NEW FRENCH TENANCY PROGRAM IN ST DENIS 1960-1966

I. Introduction

French solidarity and fraternity must have the same meaning in Réunion as in Marseille, Paris, Tours or Strasbourg. How can you not feel the heart of Paris beat profoundly on this land? How can we not evoke the magnificent conduct of Réunion Islanders in the successive wars for the liberation of France? ... Our union is eternal.¹

Michel Debré's 1963 election campaign in Réunion was filled with the rhetoric of a passionate and patriotic French citizenship in La Réunion. French citizenship in La Réunion would be the same as citizenship in anywhere in Metropolitan France. French citizenship meant feeling the heart of Paris beat in the Indian Ocean. French citizenship meant military service. Real French citizenship in La Réunion would be eternal, and Réunion Island's French citizens would never consider breaking away from Metropolitan France.

Ex-Prime Minister Michel Debré was elected as deputy of Réunion's first electoral district in 1963, and set about reforming Réunion Islanders as French citizens, so that Réunion could truly be a "little France in the Indian Ocean". Debré attempted to replicate the Gaullist formats of Republican citizenship and the centralizing French state in Réunion.² Ensuring Réunion Islanders loved the mother country, participation in a

¹ AHC 9 DE 1 Élections législatives du 5 mai 1963. 1er circonscription. Candidat Michel Debré

² Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*; *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

higher national ideal through military service, education and patriotic pride would be the surefire way to keep the heart of Paris beating in Réunion.

Debré had been invited to participate in Réunion Island political life to beat the Paul Vergès, the Communist Party candidate in Réunion Island's 1st district elections. Debré's main aim once elected was to ensure that French influence was maintained in Réunion by repressing and defusing the claims which had made the Communist Party popular among poor workers in Réunion. Réunion Islanders had long awaited the full application of Metropolitan French social legislation. However Réunion Islanders would neither gain it through claims on the government, nor through negotiations between social groups as in the Metropole. These would not be permitted in Réunion. Rather Michel Debré intended that the French central government would control and distribute the appropriate welfare to Réunion Islanders who should merely be passively grateful.

One of Michel Debré's first policies as a deputy of Réunion was to reduce the number of Réunion's shantytowns. He persuaded the Prefect to set a legal maximum rent, hoping that this would push urban landowners to finally sell their land to the SIDR. As this decree entered Réunion Island social life, different groups of Islanders –landowners, tenants, subletters, the Communist Party and the French administration – claimed the moral authority to interpret its meaning and intention. The state unintentionally became the mediator between these groups. Réunion Islanders also created new types of political action to support their claims which were not based on a coordinated political movement. Large landowners took the French state to Réunion's civil court in order to reverse the shantytown decree. Small landowners individually applied to the French administration for financial compensation. Poor shantytown tenants individually petitioned the Prefect

of Réunion for welfare. The Prefect's 1964 shantytown decree thus opened a space for a new kind of Réunion Island political action based on individual claims to members of the French administration rather than collectively-based claims on the state. By 1966 the relationship between these social groups in the cities had been recalibrated. As the poor left the shantytowns to live in social housing run by the SIDR, small landowners received financial compensation to live in social housing. Both groups accepted Debré's imposed compromise. In return for not participating in the Communist Party's political claims to French social legislation, these Réunion Islanders were rewarded with increased material comfort.

Between 1954 and 1964 an estimated 47,000 people lived in terrible conditions in Paris and the suburbs, making up 62 % of Metropolitan France's shantytowns. The PACA region had another 20% of France's shantytowns.³ At the same time in Overseas France, a conservative estimate was 130,000 people living in shantytowns. In three of La Réunion's towns at least 24,000 people lived in shantytowns.⁴ In 1966 the shanty towns of Réunion Island alone received 4,25 million Metropolitan Francs from the French administration. This sum was just under half of the housing funds allocated for all of Paris and its suburbs. Why did the French state devote such a large amount of money to eradicating Overseas French shantytowns which were not the same type of political threat to France as the shantytowns in the Parisian suburbs?

The introduction of the shantytown decree and the Debré law, indeed Michel Debré's participation in Réunion's 1963 elections underlines how seriously the French

³ Cited in Yvan Gastaut, "Les bidonvilles, lieux d'exclusion et de marginalité en France durant les trente glorieuses," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 69(2004): 69.

⁴ ADR 447 W 90 Ministère de la construction. Atelier d'urbanisme de La Réunion. La Réunion (enquête monographique régionale) Tome 1. 15/2/1964

state took the Communist threat in Réunion after the end of the Algerian war, when France is usually considered to have finally decolonized and become a “post-colonial” state. Unlike political petitions to the Prefect (Chapter 2) or solutions to poverty through emigration to Madagascar (Chapter 3) the shantytown decree enabled Réunionnais to individually claim material improvement from the state as a fundamental moral and legal right. The shantytowns were being policed, but the landowners and landlords were the object of control, rather than the tenants. Tenants welcomed the police warmly into their houses. The Prefect’s decree and Debré’s proposed law would change their fortunes, by changing the value of their land, a clear shift away from protecting, or tolerating, the traditional power of the landowners in Réunion.

Shantytowns in La Réunion were the reason for the 1964 Debré law which was also applied in Metropolitan shantytowns. In Metropolitan France the existence of shantytowns were strongly linked to earlier rent freezes and the slow start to housing reconstruction in France.⁵ Although urban shantytowns in Metropolitan France had French residents, they had also been settled by foreign migrants from Portugal and Italy as well as from immigrants from France’s ex-colonies. Even after the end of the Algerian war, shantytowns were feared as spaces of disorder and political opposition in the Metropole. In contrast the 1960s shantytowns of the French Overseas Departments were populated with French citizens who voted in local elections - why Communist party activism in the shantytowns was considered dangerous. Instead of understanding Overseas French concern with poor urban neighborhoods in the context of immigration in Metropolitan France, it may be more accurate to compare Réunion with African colonial

⁵ Effosse, *L'invention du logement aidé en France : l'immobilier au temps des Trente Glorieuses*.

administrators' anxiety over the migration of rural, "traditional" populations to urban centers who then did not engage in the right type of regular wage labor to enable them to assimilate to colonial satisfaction.⁶

This chapter also responds to a recent call by Chari and Verdery to re-order the "post colonial" and "postsocial" intellectual division. They ask how both the colonies, *and also* the existence of Soviet socialism, affected the constitution of "The West". They pose a so-far unexplored question: Did competition with the "actually existing" socialist alternative make elites in the United States and especially Europe more amenable to the expansion of welfare principles in response to workers' demands?⁷ This chapter demonstrates that in 1960s Réunion, an imagined political threat from Russia – through the activism of the members of the Réunion Communist Party – did indeed make France more amenable to the expansion of welfare provisions in Réunion. The chapter thus contributes to an ongoing call to bring together intellectual work from post-socialist scholars with those scholars of imperialism who have so far dominated both French and African historiography.

II. Political contestation in St Denis 1958 – 1963

Between 1954 and 1961 Reunion Island's population significantly increased from 274,370 to 340,325 people. By 1963, there were 136 young people under 20 for every 100 Réunionnais adults. The figure for Metropolitan France was 66 young people to 100 adults. Almost 90 % of Reunion's inhabitants lived near the coast, many of them in

⁶ Luise White, *The comforts of home : prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁷ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War," *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009).

Reunion's largest city, St Denis.⁸ From 1954 to 1961 the St Denis area grew from 41,863 to 65,200 people, partly owing to migration to work in the city. This 55% population growth in seven years threatened the French administration who feared urban neighborhoods becoming a hotbed of Communist activism.

i. The growth of the Camps

The construction industry was becoming an important economic motor for La Réunion. By 1962 it was the second biggest employer after agriculture and the main employer in St Denis; one of the chief reasons for migration to the city was the abundance of jobs on construction sites. French financial transfers helped the construction industry through subsidies, low interest loans, and public contracts. There was also private investment. Between 1948 and 1962, French governmental investment in the construction sector was 7,500 million CFA, with private investment 1,800 million CFA.⁹ By 1963 Réunion had 56 building companies which employed almost 10,000 workers. This number grew with the year-on-year increase in housing, school, hospital and infrastructure construction on the island.

The SIDR was becoming an increasingly powerful landowner and stakeholder in St Denis, especially since it was now effectively managed by the Prefecture in Réunion. After building Petite Ile in 1960 the SIDR quickly completed social housing projects in the St Denis neighborhoods of La Source and Bois de Nèfles for 1,700 families.¹⁰ Yet these SIDR projects were still hopelessly oversubscribed. In 1963 there were 3,000

⁸ ADR 53 W 1 DOM - les départements français d'outre-mer Le Développement des DFOM, edite Information et entreprise SA, 38 Avenue des Ternes, Paris XVII pour le compte du Ministère DTOM 1964

⁹ AHC 9 DE 12 Anon. Bilan des réalisations 1946-1962

¹⁰ ADR 302 W 51-52 SIDR dossier d'enquête d'utilité publique concernant la réalisation de groupes d'habitations aux lieux-dits Camélias, Chemin Montgaillard et Boulevard Doret à Saint-Denis 1963

demands for only 550 houses in La Source.¹¹ Many workers who were employed by the SIDR constructing social housing could not themselves live in SIDR houses, but in the Camps of St Denis. Urban workers had more stable living conditions than the rest of Réunion Islanders, 2/3 of whom still lived sharecropping in rural areas.¹² Nevertheless they were managed by Metropolitan overseers, a source of resentment and one of the PCR's critiques of the Metropolitan regime in Réunion.¹³

The SIDR had been able to acquire the land for La Source and Bois de Nèfles because they were largely unpopulated areas of St Denis. The SIDR now wanted to construct more social housing in the urban periphery of St Denis. However many of the largest plots of land around St Denis were occupied by workers living in Camps. This land was suitable for social housing, but it would be expensive. Although the SIDR could now force landowners to sell their land (expropriating in the public interest) the housing agency would have to pay the landowner the market price. Given the speculation of the property owners in St Denis, the costs would be high.

Building the Petite Ile housing project in 1960 revealed the complexity of rehousing residents in temporary accommodation whilst new housing was built for them.¹⁴ The Communist Party had profited from the situation and publicly humiliated the SIDR – and thus the French administration. Petite Ile had been a relatively small neighborhood. Other Camps in St Denis were much larger. Even if the SIDR purchased

¹¹ ADR 64 W 39 enquête sur l'utilité publique du projet d'acquisition par la SIDR les terrains nécessaires à la réalisation d'un nouveau quartier d'habitation au lieu-dit le Chaudron à Saint-Denis. Rapport du Commissaire-Enqueteur Max de Cotte 08/01/1964

¹² CAC 19790543/76 La construction à La Réunion 1963

¹³ CAC 19840179/75 Commission de vérification des comptes des entreprises publiques. Rapport sur les comptes de la gestion de la Société Immobilière du département de La Réunion pour les exercices 1961 à 1962 30/09/1963

¹⁴ADR 194 W 59 Pierre Bolotte Note pour M. Jourden Directeur Général de la SIDR 16/03/1961

expensive land, it would then have to deal with the political and financial consequences of removing the people already living on it which would make the costs prohibitive.¹⁵

The SIDR was at an impasse.

The standard of urban housing in Réunion's shantytowns in Réunion was not materially different to rural areas – the main problem was the poverty of most of Réunion's population. In 1961 the SIDR was concerned that the populations of the St Denis Camps did not have proper salaried work activities or appropriate class aspirations, in addition to the political threat they posed: "The constant state of [political] upheaval [in Réunion]...will not allow the brutal application of the [expropriation] law [to the Camps] without a surefire reaction ... the most urgent is the case of [Camp] Ozoux, where a miserable population swarms without normal means of existence. The estimated number of inhabitants is 2000."¹⁶

The SIDR described Réunion Islanders in Camp Ozoux as if they were insects, "poor" and "swarming" in 1961 - revealing that the organization's attitude towards the urban poor had not changed since 1950. The SIDR did not consider that inhabitants of Camp Ozoux had "normal means of existence". The French administration wanted Réunion Islanders to improve their material conditions by regular wage labor rather than occasional work as day laborers or washerwomen.¹⁷ Rehousing the "swarming" population of Camp Ozoux had become a political imperative for the French administration and the SIDR.

¹⁵ The 1958 Expropriation procedure was JO ordonnance 58-997 23/10/1958

¹⁶ ADR 49 W 38 SIDR IV è plan pour les DOM. Construction des logements 1961

¹⁷ See 1965 census of activities ADR 64 W 1-13

Opposite the SIDR, the Communist party aimed to be allies of the people in the Camps. The Communist Party blamed the French administration for the poverty of and difficult material conditions of the Réunion Islanders. The Communist Party continued to maintain its grassroots network in the Camps. In early 1963 Gabriel Macé, the rightwing Mayor of St Denis, offered the inhabitants of a small Camp on the outskirts of St Denis the chance to settle on a new piece of land, so the city council could build houses on the original plot. The Communists accused the Mayor, their political enemy, of trying to “expel” poor Réunion Islanders from the Camp. The Communist Party held a meeting in widow Rangaman’s courtyard in the Camp to protest. They also invited the inhabitants of another neighboring Camp called Rivière-Viadère to their meeting. Residents of Rivière-Viadère feared that the SIDR had its eye on developing the Camp and would displace expel them without warning.

Isnelle Amelin encouraged the residents of the Camps to become members of the Communist Party who would defend their interests. Amelin was a prominent female activist in the Communist Party, a General Councilor and the President of the Union of Women in Réunion. She exhorted the inhabitants of the Camps to join evening classes to learn to read. Finally, she declared “it’s not the fault of the poor creoles if they are reduced to living in thatched houses and shantytowns.... It’s the fault of the colonial regime which keeps them in poverty.” In the political context where divisions were strong between pro and anti-Communist viewpoints, Amelins’s speech was considered by Secret Police as incendiary, worth recording.¹⁸

¹⁸ CAC 19941080/41 Ministre de l'intérieur. Renseignements Généraux. Objet. Réunion organisée par le Parti Communiste à St Denis "Montgaillard" pour protester contre d'éventuelles expulsions de locataires 12/6/1963

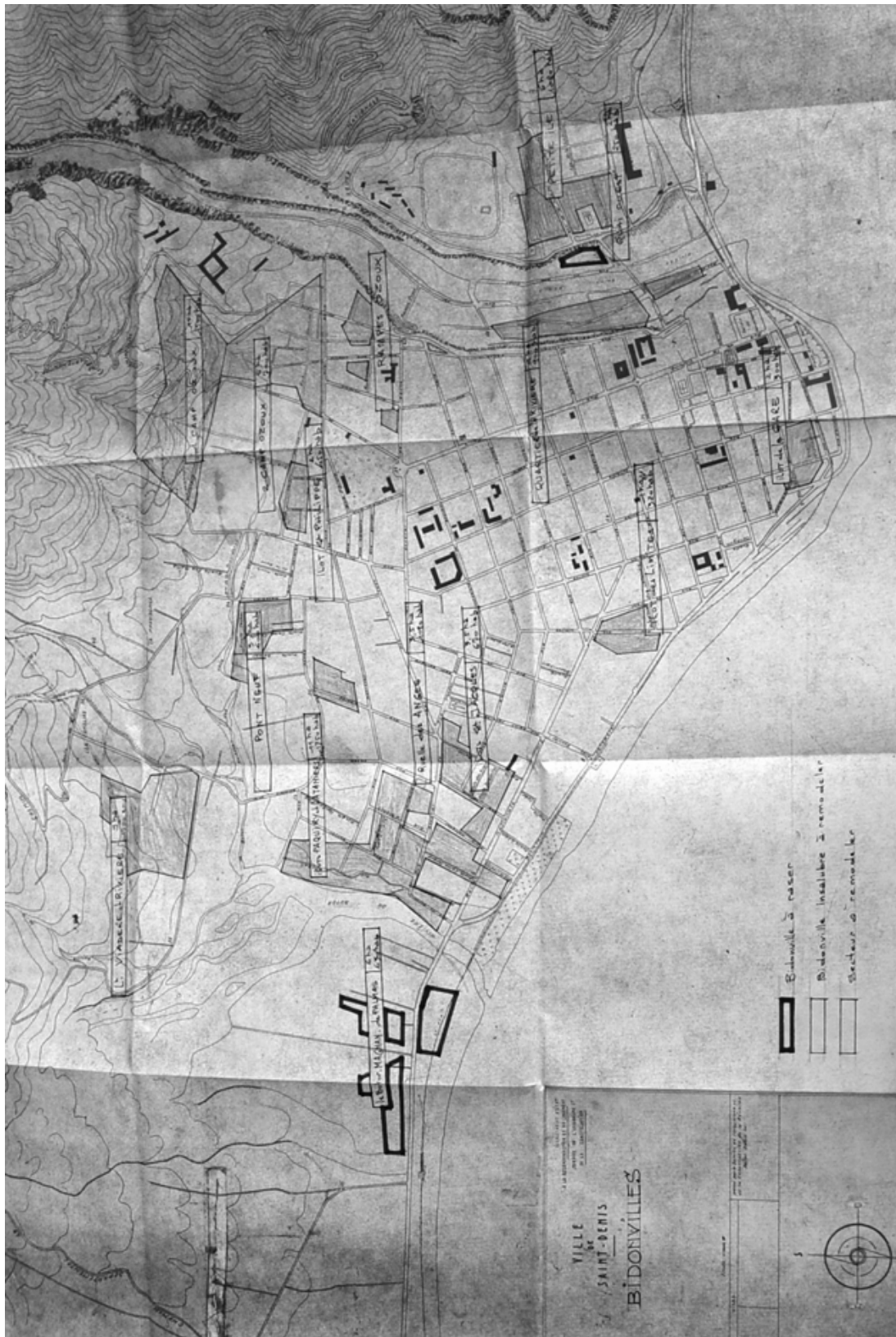


Figure 5.1 St Denis *bidonvilles* or shantytowns 1965

Rivière-Viadère, two plots of land in southern St Denis epitomized the problems faced by the administration. The SIDR had been able to buy part of the Rivière-Viadère plot in 1962. They had begun constructing a new type of social housing based on a modernist high-rise design, known in France as *grandes ensemble* because of the similarity of the units and the labor-saving method of construction. The housing project would be called SIDR Camélias.

The SIDR wished to enlarge the project, but could not finish building it. Adjoining landowners would not sell their plots. A large, poor urban population lived on them. The landowners were making so much money from their hundreds of tenants that they had no financial motive to sell. About 900 people, not including children, lived on the Rivière-Viadère land behind SIDR Camélias in 1963.¹⁹ The landowners had illegally made rent contracts with each of their tenants. These contracts were for six to nine years each. It was impossible for the SIDR to expropriate the land until these rent contracts had been annulled.²⁰

In 1961 a white Creole named Edouard Rivière rented out 22 plots of bare land on one of the Rivière plots. The average size of each plot was 300m². Edouard Rivière earned 100,000 CFA per month from his rents.²¹ Another white Creole, Léonce Viadère, owned the adjoining land and rented similar sized plots. In 1961 Léonce Viadère earned

¹⁹ AHC 9 DE 31 Enquête sommaire sur les bidonvilles réalisée par les services de la construction entre juillet et septembre 1965

²⁰ ADR 302 W 51-52 ministre d'État chargé des départements français et territoires d'outre-mer à M. le Préfet de La Réunion. Objet : convoi numéro 69 -- 456 formées par sieurs Morel et Riviere contre le jugement rendu par le tribunal administratif de Saint-Denis le 20 novembre 1965

²¹ ADR 302 W 51-52 Liste des baux consentis par M. Rivière sur son terrain sis chemin de Mongaillard à Saint-Denis le ... 1963 par la direction du service de l'enregistrement; liste des baux consentis par Mme Viadere Léonce sur son terrain à Saint-Denis boulevard Doret (Camélias) Liste fourni le 21 janvier 1961

40,000 CFA per month from 42 tenancy contracts. Increased migration to St Denis doubled Léonce Viadère's rent takings by 1963.²²

A large urban landowner like Rivière could earn up to 120,000CFA a year per hectare, without having to worry about the weather. In contrast, the same hectare planted with sugar cane and invested with labor would only earn a planter around 40,000CFA per year.²³ Although Edouard Rivière lived off a large family plot which he had inherited, many of the smaller urban landowners in St Denis were people from the countryside. They had money in agriculture in the rural areas of Réunion, and come to St Denis in the early 1950s to buy relatively cheap land, investing their savings in renting out property to the growing urban population.²⁴

The money-making by urban landholders did not stop at landowners renting empty plots of land to tenants. Tenants then built many small houses on their rented plots. They sublet these houses at high prices to workers in St Denis. The average rent for an empty plot of land 300m² in St Denis was 14,250 CFA *per year*. The average rent on one of these plots for a small house of 20m² was 3,500 CFA *per month*. Renting land and subletting houses was an easy way of making money in the growing city of St Denis.

Figure 5.2 (below) shows the densely populated housing settlements around the Rivière-Viadère plots.²⁵ At the bottom of the photo near the center, under the new housing project, the white sheets of the washerwomen can be seen drying on the banks of the stream. Landowners were under no obligation to invest in water or sewerage

²² ADR 57 W 37 SIDR Procès-verbal du Conseil d'Administration. Terrains. Politique foncière de la société à Saint-Denis 10/3/1961

²³ ADR 1158 W 118 Conseil Général de La Réunion 2e séance extraordinaire 1965 Rapports de M. Alfred Diefenbacher Préfet de La Réunion. Rapport No 32 DAG/2 Réglementation du prix de location des terrains nus et des cases dans des bidonvilles 4/1/1965

²⁴ Interview Mme Dany 27/5/2009 , M.Alba 5/6/2009

²⁵ CAC 19840179/78 SIDR photo album 1961

infrastructure on their land, or to repair houses. The municipal government had installed water pumps in most neighborhoods of St Denis, and tenants dug their own pits for sewage. But there was no drainage system in St Denis. Water, household and human waste collected in the streets, especially in the Camps, and ran off into the streams.²⁶



Figure 5.2 SIDR Camélias phases I through III with Rivière-Viadère behind c1962

The SIDR wanted to expropriate Rivière and Viadère. Many of the landowners' tenants had put their names on the waiting list for SIDR social housing, already heavily

²⁶ ADR 57 W 38 Département de La Réunion Service des Ponts et Chaussées. Assainissement de Saint-Denis. Évacuation des eaux usées et pluviales c1962

oversubscribed. The tenants' presence on the plots of land in Rivière-Viadère - and the existence of their rent contracts - was the major barrier to the SIDR continuing its construction program. The SIDR could not build another housing development until the tenants had been removed.²⁷

“Poverty is spreading at a menacing speed, and with it, Communism. Everyone is worried” noted Henri Cornu in early 1963.²⁸ Creole elites and the French administration feared that the continued growth of the shantytowns in St Denis and the anticolonial political organizing of the PCR had created “an explosive situation likely to degenerate to extremely serious troubles.”²⁹ But they had no way of resolving the financial and legal barriers to destroying the shantytowns.

ii. General de Gaulle and Prime Minister Michel Debré in Réunion

In June 1958 General de Gaulle had assumed full powers in France. The Algerian crisis had finally succeeded in destabilizing the French 4th Republic. The 4th Republic had been a weak political regime, overly reliant on fleeting and unstable coalitions in the French National Assembly. Michel Debré, trained as a lawyer, was one of General de Gaulle's most committed political supporters. His first post in President de Gaulle's government was as Minister of Justice, and Debré spent 1958 and 1959 rewriting the French constitution of the new 5th Republic.

At the end of 1958 de Gaulle had unsuccessfully proposed a truce in Algeria, the fateful “*paix des braves*.”³⁰ It had backfired. The Muslim Algerians were not disposed for

²⁷ ADR 1 PER 82/42 *Le Progrès*. Les Bidonvilles 20/12/1964

²⁸ AHC 9 DE 1 Henri Cornu à Michel Debré Confidentiel: introduction à la vie réunionnaise 11/04/1963

²⁹ ADR 64 W 39 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le Ministre d'État DOM-TOM 17/2/1965

³⁰ Horne, *A savage war of peace : Algeria, 1954-1962*.

a truce. The white French Algerian minority – the Pieds Noirs - became mistrustful of de Gaulle's intentions in Algeria. At the beginning of 1959 de Gaulle appointed Michel Debré as Prime Minister of France. The appointment of Michel Debré was a judicious move for de Gaulle to retain credibility with the Pieds Noirs in Algeria: Debré was well-known partisan of the French civilizing and pacifying mission, and he wished Algeria to remain French.

In 1958 de Gaulle was also facing independence movements elsewhere in the French Union, now renamed the "French Community." In May 1959 Philippe Tsirana was elected President of Madagascar, and he clearly supported African independence outside the confines of the French Community. Also in 1959, the Réunion Communist Party had declared its existence separate from France's Communist Party. Thus, when de Gaulle travelled to Madagascar to attend the 4th executive meeting of the French Community he also visited Réunion Island in July 1959.

Between 40,000 and 50,000 Réunion Islanders flocked to hear de Gaulle speak at La Redoute, near Petite Ile, in July 1959.³¹ Michel Debré stood next to the President and was highly impressed at what he interpreted as the "love of Réunion Islanders for France."³² In his memoirs, Debré commented that although he had been used to "the popular enthusiasm which a visit of General de Gaulle would bring out all over France ... the welcome in Réunion Island was exceptional."³³

³¹ CAC 19940180/9 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre délégué auprès du premier ministre. Objet : visite de M. le Général De Gaulle président de la République française à La Reunion le 9 et 10 juillet 1959 18/07/1959

³² Michel Debré, *Gouverner 1958-1962*, Trois républiques pour une France . (Paris: A. Michel, 1988).

³³ *Une politique pour la Réunion* (Paris: Plon, 1974).

Before de Gaulle spoke to the crowd, Roger Payet, the President of Réunion's General Council gave an introductory speech. At the moment Payet stood up, a dozen Communist Party activists held up boards on which were written "down with [electoral] fraud." *Témoignages* claimed that the demonstration was for the "Reunion Island people" to show de Gaulle that they did not want electoral fraud in Réunion and that they wanted to uphold universal suffrage in "their country."³⁴ A dozen people were immediately arrested in the stadium.³⁵ A visiting *Le Monde* journalist who was in the stadium expressed surprise to his neighbor, a priest, as he saw the Communists being handcuffed and led out of the stadium. The journalist reported that the priest then followed him as he left the stadium, and later gave the riot police the journalist's license plate number. This story shows that even commenting aloud on the arrest of Communists in Réunion was itself a subversive act.³⁶ Yet many Communist Réunion Islanders supported de Gaulle's liberating role in the Second World War and considered him a war hero, not, as Debré had thought, because of the Réunion Islanders loved France.³⁷

Following Roger Payet, Michel Debré's speech to the Réunion Islanders hid the preceding decade of political contestations in Réunion. "You never doubted your attachment [to France]. Never, you know, did France doubt it. ... Here is France. This first visit of a head of state is both the memory of an admirable past and the guarantee of the future" said Debré. General de Gaulle underlined this message "Ah! Yes you are

³⁴ ADR 447 W 1 *Témoignages* Visite de Général de Gaulle 11/7/1959

³⁵ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*. Rousse claims that the Communists had not been demonstrating for Réunion's autonomy when Général de Gaulle arrived in Réunion Rousse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté*.

³⁶ *Le Monde* Decraene, Philip. 'Terres oubliées de l'Océan Indien.1. La Reunion - département français abandonne à lui-même' 18/8/1959

³⁷ Interview Alex Maillot 5/6/2008

French, you are passionately French.... You play your role in the destiny of France ... and you have an important French position in this Ocean.”³⁸

De Gaulle and his advisors had been minutely prepared for the visit by Prefect Perreau-Pradier. He had briefed de Gaulle’s speechwriters on the important international context of de Gaulle’s speech in La Réunion.³⁹ The French presence in Overseas France must be maintained, along with France’s strategic place in the Indian Ocean.

[De Gaulle] could allude to the fact that the island was absolutely deserted when the French arrived, and also to the French presence in the Indian Ocean; because we mustn’t forget that he will be a sounding board here, whose echoes will be diffused not only in Mauritius but in India and in [China and Taiwan], large countries with which, in an indirect but certain fashion, Réunion maintains relatively close links.⁴⁰

Michel Debré was struck by the Réunion Islanders’ welcome of De Gaulle, especially given their diverse racial origins. “It was moving to see the impression of national unity across the astonishing variety of faces. A cry [of] ‘long live the motherland *vive la patrie*’ [which I heard in Réunion, something I did not frequently hear] will always stay engraved in my spirit, in my heart.”⁴¹ Eugène Rousse, a lifelong Communist Party activist who was also in St Denis that day remembered no such patriotism from Réunion Islanders during de Gaulle’s visit. He claimed that the only cries to be heard in St Denis that day were “long live de Gaulle” and “down with fraud!”⁴²

With echoes of the Algerian repression that appalled politicians in the National Assembly, in 1960 Michel Debré issued a national decree aimed at repressing any hint of

³⁸ ADR 447 W 1 *Le Progrès* Allocutions président Charles de Gaulle et Debré 15/7/1959

³⁹ See CAC 19940180/9

⁴⁰ ADR 447 W 1 Perreau-Pradier à Tremeaud secrétaire général pour l’administration de l’Outre-mer visite Charles de Gaulle 30/5/1959

⁴¹ Debré, *Une politique pour la Réunion*.

⁴² Eugène Rousse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté I-II* [Les Cahiers de notre histoire] (Saint-Denis: ÂEd. CNH, 1993).

dissension with the French administration in the Overseas Departments.⁴³ This decree particularly targeted the Communist parties of Overseas France.⁴⁴ Prefects of Overseas France would have the power to “exile” French civil servants in Overseas France back to Metropolitan France if any civil servant showed signs of “troubling the public order” – i.e. by criticizing the French regime. In 1961 thirteen Réunion Islanders were arbitrarily transferred from Réunion to a post in Metropolitan France on the orders of Prefect Perreau-Pradier, although they had differing levels of engagement with the Communist Party.⁴⁵

The Prefect also secretly proposed to the Minister of Overseas France that the Communist Party should be abolished and made illegal in Réunion. The Prefect considered the Party a “subversive and separatist movement.” Couched in the language of urban renewal, the Prefect envisioned destroying the Communist Party “as a measure of public salubrity and the confirmation of the government’s desire to maintain [La Réunion], this old French land at the heart of the mother country.”⁴⁶ The Communist Party was allowed to legally remain, however. It loudly denounced the exile of the Réunion Islanders, as further evidence of the “colonial oppression” in Réunion. To maintain Réunion’s political attachment to Metropolitan France, the French administration would have to combine political control and winning the hearts and minds of the Réunion Islanders back from the Communist alternative.

⁴³ CAC 19940180/254 Premier ministre aux préfets DOM. Objet fonctionnaires... nature à troubler l'ordre public

⁴⁴ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Réunion (1959-1967)*.

⁴⁵ *Michel Debre et l'île de La Réunion (1959-1967)*; Eugène Rousse, *Combat des Réunionnais pour la liberté* Cahiers de notre histoire (Saint-Denis: Ed. CNH, 1994).

⁴⁶ CAC 19940180/254 conseil restreint le 6 juillet 196 ; préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre des DOM-TOM 4/12/1961

Algeria's war of liberation exacted a great toll on Michel Debré. After the Evian Agreements in March 1962 Michel Debré resigned, disillusioned, from his post as Prime Minister. Unlike President De Gaulle, Michel Debré had been personally and ideologically invested in maintaining Algeria as part of France and could not accept defeat.⁴⁷ In 1962, President de Gaulle proposed a constitutional amendment by referendum. The French must decide whether de Gaulle could be elected as President by universal suffrage rather than by the National Assembly. This move challenged the authority of the politicians and was strongly opposed by most of the non-Gaullist deputies in the National Assembly. A testament to the lack of free political speech in La Réunion, in the week leading to the referendum the Mayors of western Réunion decided to officially campaign for the “yes” vote, without informing their electors of any possibility for voting no.⁴⁸ After the referendum, the National Assembly deputies proposed a motion to censure Prime Minister Pompidou for his toleration of the referendum. De Gaulle dissolved the Parliament, and legislative elections were held in France in November 1962. Nationally, the Gaullists won in the large majority, sealing De Gaulle’s political defeat of traditional party politics. However during these elections Michel Debré lost his seat in Indre-et-Loire.

iii. Vote for Debré or tomorrow you will all be Russian!

With Algeria independent from July 1962, the November 1962 elections in La Réunion effectively became a local referendum about whether Réunion should become

⁴⁷ Michel Debré and Odile Rudelle, *Trois républiques pour une France : mémoires* (Paris: A. Michel, 1984).

⁴⁸ AMSP Vol. 23/6/58-25/01/1963 Referendum 28/10/1962, 10/22/1962

autonomous from France.⁴⁹ The position of the French administration and the Creole elites in Reunion was that the island was “historically, culturally, socially and sentimentally a French province.”⁵⁰ A journalist from the left-wing French newspaper *L’Humanité* visiting Réunion in 1963 was amazed at this idea.

Stating the La Réunion is a French department makes the *départementalistes*⁵¹ say and write absurd things that they do not really seem to be conscious about. La Réunion is France. From there all sorts of fallacies are allowed ... ‘Three centuries of union, of life with France and Europe means that there is no difference between the Dordogne and us’ writes Mr. Henri Cornu.

Decraene thought it was surreal to imagine that Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean could be compared with the Dordogne, a rural department in the southwest interior of Metropolitan France. Decraene judged that the elite Creoles merely wanted to be part of France.⁵² Yet Henri Cornu did not embrace unconditional assimilation with Metropolitan France. Cornu considered that the fortunes of Réunion’s poor would improve with better conditions for economic growth. He was worried that increasing the minimum wage or social contributions in Réunion would have a negative effect on Réunion Island businesses. Cornu felt that the Metropolitan Government was blind to the real, economic, problems of Réunion.⁵³

Growing tensions between pro-and anti-Communists erupted into political violence in St Louis in early 1962 after the Communist Party demonstrated against

⁴⁹ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l’Ile de La Reunion (1959-1967)*.

⁵⁰ CAC 19790543/74 Document Provisoire: Rapport d’enquête monographique préalable au plan directeur régional de La Réunion, première frappe, Mars - Avril 1963

⁵¹ The *départementalistes* in Réunion Island broadly supported Michel Debré and wished Réunion to remain an integral part of France as a French overseas *département*, rather than becoming independent from France as Réunion’s Communist Party wanted.

⁵² *L’Humanité* Decraene, Philippe. ‘Réunion III - Au Royaume du Père UBU’ 6/3/1963

⁵³ AHC 9 DE 1 Henri Cornu à Michel Debré Confidentiel: introduction à la vie réunionnaise 11/04/1963

Metropolitan France applying a new, lower, sugar price for Réunion sugar.⁵⁴ The Prefect sent the CRS to break up the demonstration where, for the first time, people had burnt the French flag and denounced the presence of Zoreys in Réunion. One demonstrator had died.

To add to the social tension, at the end of February 1962, Cyclone Jenny had hit the island hard. There had been 35 deaths, 4,000 houses destroyed and most of the sugar planters lost between 30 and 70% of their harvest. France had not given very much cyclone aid to the island. A lot of small agricultural landowners and sharecroppers faced severe financial hardship, leaving many to come and work in the towns.⁵⁵ The Prefect created more tension between pro-and anti- Communists in March 1962. The last city government with a Communist majority, which had held off the Prefect's repression for six years, was forced to resign.

The 1962 elections for the French National Assembly in Réunion were held in an atmosphere of political repression and counter-repression. Much of the electoral fraud was committed by the French administration in Réunion to ensure that the Communist Party did not gain votes. The Prefect of Réunion tried to hand-pick candidates who were likely to beat the Communist Party. Even the Bishop of Réunion, a staunch opponent of Communism denounced the general climate of "immorality, of compromise, of abusive pressure and complicit silences"⁵⁶ The right-wing *Journal de l'Île* described election day in Réunion as "organized crime and anarchy." Paul Vergès condemned the French administration's fraud as the "organized electoral crime of the colonialists." In the 1st

⁵⁴ *L'Humanité* Réunion I. Brève histoire de l'île sœur des Antilles n.d. but probably 4/3/1963

⁵⁵ *L'Humanité* Réunion II: plusieurs tableaux d'une même misère 5/3/1963

⁵⁶ Cited in Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'Île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*.

electoral district, which included St Denis, many of the polling stations were closed because of political trouble. Yet Gabriel Macé, Mayor of St Denis, was still elected as a deputy even though he only received 62% of the necessary 21,788 votes needed to secure a majority.⁵⁷

The election results were later annulled by the French constitutional court because the fraud and the irregularities had been so obvious. In the face of a re-election, the right-wing was now divided. Some people still supported Gabriel Macé, and others now opposed his candidacy. Senator Georges Repiquet then contacted Michel Debré on behalf of the right wing of La Réunion.⁵⁸ He was worried that in a re-election Paul Verges would succeed in being elected to the National Assembly on the Communist ticket. Senator Repiquet already knew Michel Debré personally. Repiquet proposed that Debré, the ex-Prime Minister, become candidate for Réunion's first electoral district in the re-election of May 1963. Michel Debré was in two minds about it, but after consulting President De Gaulle he accepted the offer in early 1963.⁵⁹

Local notables in Réunion wrote to Debré to congratulate him for accepting the offer, pleased that Réunion Island would be represented by such an influential and well known political figure.⁶⁰ "With [Michel Debré], we will be able to honestly beat, without fraud, the Communist candidate," wrote the Mayor of St Benoit in a letter to the Secretary of Overseas France. Paul Vergès' condemnation of the French administration's "organized electoral crime" may have been strongly worded, but it was to a large degree

⁵⁷ *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*.

⁵⁸ The right in Réunion had moved away from supporting Gabriel Macé's candidature as deputy

⁵⁹ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

⁶⁰ See March 1963 congratulation letters by Roger Payet, Jacques Caillé and Avril amongst others in AHC 9 DE 1

accurate. The Mayor's letter and his admission of electoral corruption demonstrate the complicity of the French administration in keeping the Communist Party away from power.⁶¹

The atmosphere of state-sponsored coercion and corrupt local election practices in Réunion are captured in a short 1963 film about Debré's election to the Réunion Island seat. The film shows the different tactics of Michel Debré and the Communist Party at a fundamental turning point in Réunion's history, and in the career of Michel Debré. French film director Yann Le Masson shot a documentary of Debré's 1963 political campaign in Réunion called *Sucre Amer* which won a Gold Prize from the Conseil Mondial de la Paix at the International film festival in Leipzig in 1963.⁶² Le Masson's film seeks to portray France as a violent colonial power in Réunion, and paints a picture of Debré's campaign as the state's cynical manipulation of Réunion Islanders who were by no means "French" in 1963.

As *Sucre Amer* opens, the camera pans Réunion's tropical rural landscape. The narrator describes the monopoly of the sugar industry in Réunion: Réunion Island's 90,000 workers labor for only five different sugar companies. The camera then focuses on a queue of mostly African and Indian-origin workers lining up to go into a sugar factory. They wear tatty laborers' trousers with short, wide legs and battered canvas hats. Some of them are barefoot. They smoke cigarettes and shuffle forward as they cast wary looks at the camera. Their exotic origins and poor clothing are deliberately contrasted by the director's choice of voice over. A pro-Debré politician proclaims "the inestimable

⁶¹ CAC 19941080/41 Dr Moreau Maire de la Commune de St Benoît à M. Max Moulins Secrétaire Général de l'Outre-mer 08/03/1963

⁶² Yann Le Masson, "Sucre amer " (France1963). Can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale NUMAV-31733)

values of the old and noble French civilization! ... You wish to stay French because France is the light of the world!”

The film emphasizes the different class registers of female political activism between Debré and the PCR. In a pro-Debré political meeting, an elite Creole woman, her cardigan demurely draped over her shoulders, hesitatingly says “You must let your domestic servants out to vote!” In contrast, a female Communist activist stands in the street and gives a sardonic and animated speech to a group of women who are crowded around her. In Réunionnais Creole, rather than French, she mocks the administration’s attempt to influence the elections in Réunion Island. “The [administration] didn’t give people the disaster money [from cyclone Jenny in 1962] for ages! ... And then when Debré arrives for the electoral campaign, they hand it all out! Ah! Ah!”

Later in the documentary the camera pans Debré attending Catholic mass in Réunion, placing his hands lightly on a Réunion Islanders’ head as if he was blessing him. At the same time an interview with a Creole worker plays on voiceover, accusing the landowners of coercing workers to vote for their political choice. “If the workers don’t come out [to march in support of Debré] they will have problems in the workplace. Some people are obliged to come, because of the factory owners and the work floor managers [*commandeurs*].” The film accuses the French state of using riot police to also influence and intimidate voters in La Réunion.

In contrast the film ends by training the camera on Paul Vergès as he speaks to a large and very vocal Réunion Island crowd in the evening. The people who support him cheer and throw their fists in the air, although the camera focuses on some of the men who have dazed expressions and glassy eyes, as if they have been drinking. Paul Vergès,

lit up by a spotlight, is portrayed as a frenzied and passionate orator with sweat dripping from his shirt as he concludes his speech: “an economic crisis without precedent! A social crisis, a political crisis, has all come to show the urgent need to finish, as quickly as possible, with the colonial oppression!” The camera pans over the cheering crowd, with their fists in the air, as the credits roll.

The Communist Party’s accusation that the French administration had bolstered Debré’s candidacy by sending cyclone relief was correct. A month before the election, Prefect Diefenbacher told the Minister for Overseas France that “we must promote the interest of the [electors] for the candidacy of Michel Debré ... [including] the attribution of an extra subsidy for the planters who were victims of cyclone Jenny”.⁶³ Paul Vergès led a campaign which highlighted the fraud of the French administration and the Creole elites. He accused Debré of being the candidate of the factory owners and large landowners. In his manifesto Vergès carefully proposed the “decolonization” of Reunion through political autonomy within France, rather than Réunion’s independence.⁶⁴

In contrast, Debré’s campaign had no such nuance. Its rhetoric was stark. “Vote for Debré or tomorrow you will all be Russian.”⁶⁵ Debré told Réunion Islanders – and it was on his official campaign poster – that a vote for Debré was a vote for de Gaulle. Debré promised to increase French social legislation in Reunion as a political ploy to attract Communist voters. Debré promised that France would bring material improvement. Conversely, he denounced Communist claims for worker equality as

⁶³ CAC 19941080/41 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le Ministre d'Etat chargé des DTOM. Elections législatives partielles du 5 mai 1963. 20/04/1963

⁶⁴ CAC 19941080/41 Elections législatives du 5 mai 1963 1er circonscription de La Réunion. Liste d'union contre la fraude

⁶⁵ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

merely the repetition of orders from Moscow intended to separate Réunion from France. As Debré repeatedly said, either one was pro-French or pro-Communist. One could not be both.

In stark contrast to the French administration's policy of racially profiling loyal supporters in the 1950s, Debré claimed that all of Réunion Island's multicultural population could be considered French citizens. That is, as long as they were loyal to the French administration. "Everyone, from wherever they come, whatever their origins, [affirms] the French character of their island" Debré said, now recasting the French administration as color blind. Debré told the Prefect, who was still putting Chinese and Indian populations under surveillance, that he wanted to concentrate on the welfare of all the population in Réunion without distinction of race.⁶⁶ "We are ... French from Continental France, or French from far away islands, from the same past and ... animated by the same faith in our national destiny" Debré asserted.⁶⁷

If everyone in La Réunion could be French then it followed that a Metropolitan French person could be a Réunion Island Creole. Thus Debré referred to his own relationship with Réunion through the aphorism "Creole once, Creole forever! *Creole un jour, Creole toujours!*" This was a direct attack on Communist Party campaigns against the Zoreys, the Metropolitan French who came to work in La Réunion and who were portrayed as colonialists. Debré casting himself as Creole was also a nod to the long-used rhetorical strategy of the Communists in Réunion who had often given speeches with

⁶⁶ An 1963 election speech of Debré in Réunion as filmed in Masson, "Sucre amer "; CAC 19940180/240 synthèses mensuelles 1964 29/5/1964

⁶⁷ CAC 19941080/41 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le Ministre d'état chargé des DTOM. Élections législatives partielles des DTOM. Réponse de M. Michel Debré à Me Gabriel Macé 17/04/1963

asides and jokes in Réunionnais Creole to foster complicity with the majority of Réunion Islanders who spoke Creole as their first language.

Michel Debré was an extremely powerful figure, very close to President de Gaulle and his campaign was financially underpinned by the French administration in Réunion and in Paris. Ultimately Paul Vergès could not compete with the personal association that many people made between Debré and the much revered President de Gaulle. Debré's rhetoric, his political reputation and the significant state support which shored up his campaign decided the election in favor of him. The Communist party was definitively beaten in the May 5 1963 election.⁶⁸

Number of the people on the electoral roll: 54,170
Number of votes: 38,273
Michel Debré: 30,908 votes (80.75%)
Paul Vergès: 7,365 votes (15.95%)

Table 5.1 Election results, 1st electoral district 1963

Through his election campaign in 1963 Debré successfully and permanently transform the nature and idioms of France's relationship with Réunion Island. People voted for Debré because he appeared politically connected, and able to materially transform Réunion. Debré claimed that Réunion was firmly part of France, the motherland, and was part of an Indian Ocean world that France had continued interest in defending. Réunion's loyalty to France would be maintained by state-imposed welfare, improving the material conditions of Réunion Islanders in return for their political allegiance. Just after his

⁶⁸ Gauvin, *Michel Debre et l'île de La Reunion (1959-1967)*.

election, Debré predicted to the Prefect that “once poverty has disappeared from the country the Communists will lose the fundamental reason for their success.”⁶⁹

III. “We are all poor and above all equal”. Tenants, landowners and the new administration’s shanty town laws

As soon as Debré was elected a deputy of La Réunion, he recast the Camps as *bidonvilles* or “shantytowns” which had to be eradicated at all costs. For Debré, the shanty towns were the number one social and political problem in La Réunion. Poverty in the poor urban areas of Réunion was linked to their residents’ support of the Communist party. “The total destruction of the shanty towns is extremely urgent... Without this ... we can fear disorder in the north and north east regions of the island ... a French department cannot display such types of human misery” Debré reported to the Prefect.⁷⁰

In late 1963 Michel Debré proposed a law in the National Assembly to deal with the shantytowns in Metropolitan and Overseas France.⁷¹ The law intended to financially penalize landowners who rented poor-quality houses. If renting land and houses in shantytowns was no longer financially viable, Debré reasoned, landowners would be willing to sell their land.⁷² The law further proposed that organizations such as the SIDR in La Réunion would no longer have to pay the market price for any land with a

⁶⁹ CAC 19940180/240 Synthèses mensuelles 29/5/1964 ; AHC 9 DE 84 Note au sujet de La Réunion 02/02/1964

⁷⁰ Gilles. Gauvin, "Michel Debré et l’île de La Réunion. Archéologie d’une Identité Nationale (1946-1988)" (PhD dissertation, Institut des Sciences Politiques, 2002), 244. ; AHC 9 DE 81 26/10/1964

⁷¹ JO numéro 667 Assemblée Nationale. 1er session. 1963 à 1964. Proposition de loi tendant à faciliter aux fins de reconstruction d’aménagement expropriation des terrains sur lesquels sont édifiées les locaux d’habitations insalubres et irrécupérables communément appelées "bidonvilles" présenté par Michel Debré 5/11/1963

⁷² This law had been previously drafted, probably by the ministry of construction ADR 64 W 13 note à l’attention de M. le secrétaire général. Objet : fixation des loyers dans les bidonvilles 10/2/1964

shantytown on it. The sum of a landowner's shantytown rent receipts from the previous five years would be deducted from the price that the SIDR would pay for the land. Debré clearly had the land of Rivière-Viadère in St Denis in mind. This law would specifically resolve the problem faced by the SIDR.⁷³

Debré's law was drafted in order to discourage landowners from making profits. While waiting for it to pass in the National Assembly, Debré persuaded the Prefect of Réunion to issue a local decree to limit the profits that Rivière, Viadère and other landowners and landlords in St Denis could make renting their land, also to incite them to sell their land to the SIDR.

The decree was aimed at the landowners. It had a huge financial impact for tenants. People defined as living in a "shanty town" could expect to pay up to a quarter of their former rent: from an average of 3000 francs to 900 francs per month.⁷⁴ While the decree was a threat to the livelihoods of small and medium landowners, the decree promised an unheard-of improvement in their material conditions. Social rights for the urban poor were no longer the exclusive mandate of the Communist Party. Rather, material improvement would be controlled by the Prefecture, in a special shantytown commission run out of an office in the center of St Denis. It would be enforced by the police. After Debré's decree, poor urban Réunion Islanders now had a new way of demanding rights directly to the state.

i. The moral imperative of the shantytowns

⁷³ ADR 302 W 51-52 Directeur des impôts ... À M. le préfet de La réunion de Saint-Denis. Objet : évaluation de plusieurs terrains aux Camélias pour la SIDR 9/3/1965

⁷⁴ ADR 64 W 1-13

“The shantytowns are the shame of our towns” proclaimed Debré. Debré’s decree made shantytown rents a moral problem which would be resolved by the French administration. In the National Assembly, Debré cast himself as the necessary agent of moral change for Réunion able to understand the island and create “a coherent doctrine for it.”⁷⁵ From 1963 to 1964 Michel Debré used his political influence in central government to lobby Ministers and ensure the shantytown law would eventually pass.⁷⁶ The legislation did not go through quickly and stalled in the National Assembly in July 1964. The opposition feared that Prefects would have too much arbitrary power to define a shantytown. The law was eventually modified to make elected local authorities the judges, rather than the Prefect.⁷⁷

While waiting for the law to pass, Debré persuaded the Prefect of Réunion to issue a local decree in October 1964 defining what a shanty town was in La Réunion and how much a landlord could demand for renting one.⁷⁸ Setting a minimum rent would incite the landowners to sell their land to the SIDR because they would no longer make a significant income from renting out their plots of land.⁷⁹ Thus, the decree did not intend to control the dangerous urban populations of Réunion. Rather, it principally aimed to change land values to enable the SIDR, run by the Prefecture, to buy plots in the center of

⁷⁵ Assemblée Nationale, Séance 1963-1964 proposition de loi tendant à faciliter aux fins de reconstruction ou d'aménagement l'expropriation des terrains sur lesquels sont édifiés des locaux d'habitation insalubres et irrécupérables communément appelés "bidonvilles" 21/11/1963

⁷⁶ See Debré’s correspondence in AHC 4 DE 46 with Minister of Construction and Minister of the interior.

⁷⁷ Gauvin, "Michel Debré et l’Ile de La Réunion. Archéologie d’une Identité Nationale (1946-1988)". AHC 4 DE 46 Senat loi Debré proposition 15/10/64

⁷⁸ “Michel Debré n’hésite pas à faire intervenir le préfet en devançant la législation”, see "Michel Debré et l’Ile de La Réunion. Archéologie d’une Identité Nationale (1946-1988)", 245. Two Prefectoral decrees were actually published, one on 14/10/1964 (2829/DAG/2) and one on 14/11/1964 (2616/DAG/2). The first defined what a bidonville was, and the second gave geographical limits for the decree’s application.

⁷⁹ ADR 64 W 39 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre d’État DOM-TOM. Objet : recours introduit par M. Camille Morel et consorts en vue de l'annulation d'un arrêté préfectoral le 14 octobre 1964 en montant des loyers des terrains nus et des abris provisoires situés dans les bidonvilles de Saint Denis 17/2/1965

St Denis. It also aimed to diminish the perceived exploitation of Réunion Islanders in the shantytowns by the landlords who charged abusive rents.

The Prefect defined that shanty towns could only exist in three towns in Réunion: St Denis, St Pierre and Le Port, even though housing conditions there were not fundamentally different from housing all over Réunion. Houses were shanty towns if they did not conform to “the minimal conditions imposed by the regulations on hygiene, salubrity and security.” Shantytowns were houses which did not conform to these regulations, usually constructed with old pieces of wood, sheets of corrugated iron, or flattened tin barrels. Shantytowns were now also houses with an earth floor, which did not have running water inside or in the courtyard. Houses that did not have an inside WC, regulation privy or collecting pot were also shantytowns. From now on, landlords could not charge more than 1 CFA per square meter for a bare plot of land, or 50 CFA for a house. Houses in St Denis which previously had been rented out at the average price of 3,000 CFA per month would now to be reduced to 800 CFA per month.⁸⁰

The Prefect briefed the rightwing Réunion Island press to publicly support the shantytown proposal.⁸¹ The right wing press now had to change its framing of poor populations in Réunion, part of Michel Debré’s larger anticommunist strategy to appropriate the social claims of the Communist Party. Rather than denouncing the poor as the “swarming,” unnamed masses as they had for decades, journalists in St Denis now described the living conditions of shantytown populations in Réunion. Whereas in the 1950s elites had been proud to know nothing about the conditions in the Camps,

⁸⁰ ADR 64 W 65 Arrêté No 2829/DAG/2 portant la nomenclature des villes et délimitation des secteurs où sont applicables les dispositions de l'arrêté 2616/DAG/2 du 14/10/64 concernant le montant des loyers, des terrains nus et des abris provisoires situées dans les lieux dits 'Bidonvilles' 14/11/1964

⁸¹ ADR 64 W 19 Préfet Alfred Diefenbacher à Michel Debré 29/6/1965

journalists now sought to display their knowledge, and incite the public to feel compassion for the people in the shantytowns of La Réunion.

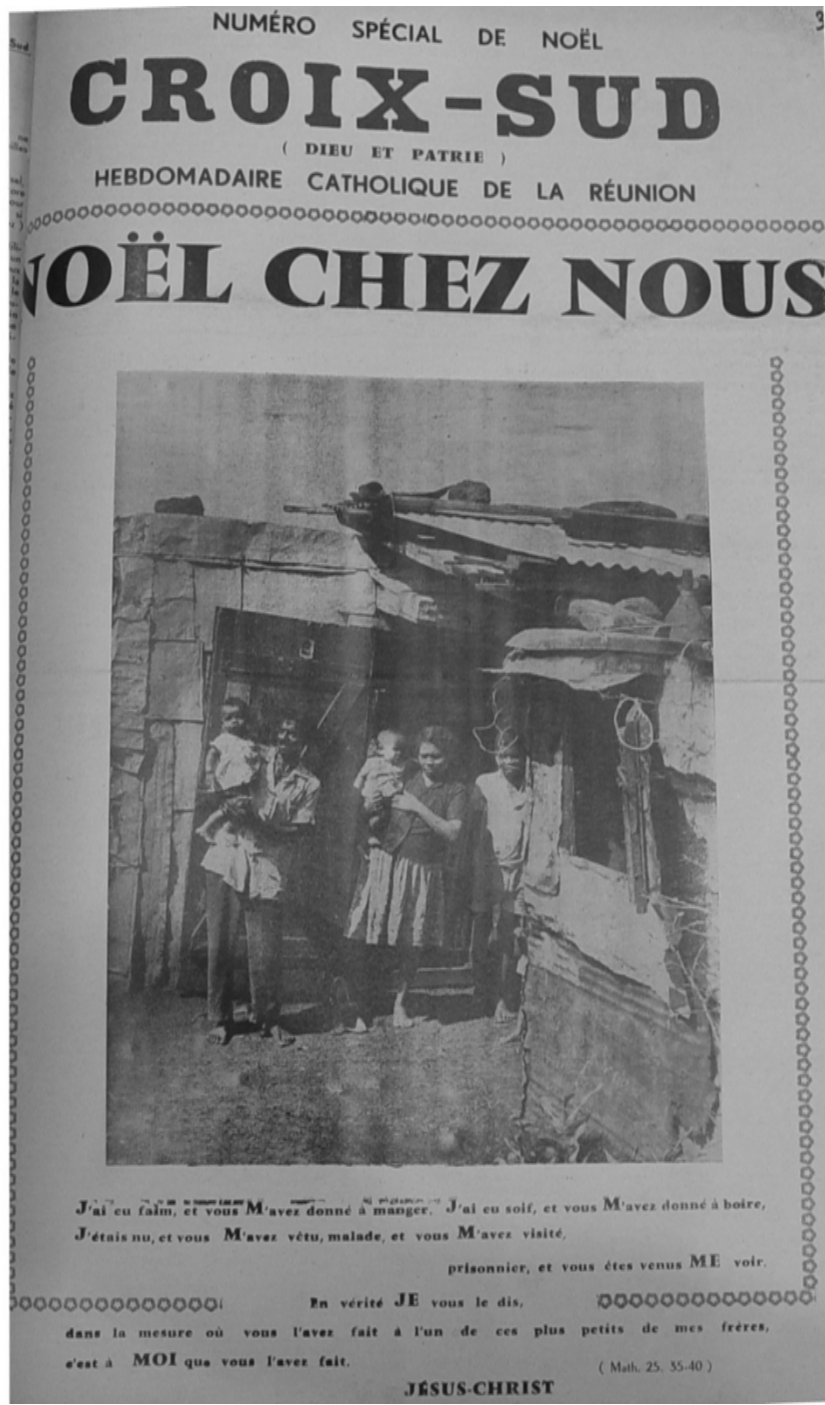


Figure 5.3 “Christmas in our house”

From 1964 the Catholic weekly newspaper *Croix Sud*, which rarely mentioned any social inequality in Réunion, wrote about the importance of improving conditions in Réunion's shantytowns as a goal of Christian social justice.⁸² *Croix Sud* devoted its Christmas 1964 issue to pricking the conscience of its readers to the problem of the poverty in shantytowns.⁸³ Its front cover shows a barefoot couple with African and Indian ancestry posing with their children in front of their house's open door. The December sun shines in their eyes, making them squint. Underneath the photograph is a biblical citation from Matthew: 25 (35-40) "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink."

This photograph and the accompanying article now framed poor Réunion Islanders in the shantytowns as objects of charity and sympathy. They were no longer to be perceived as threatening, able to claim their rights to French social legislation. Here, the poor are helpless, needing assistance, rather than political activists. In a May 1964 article, *Croix Sud* had denounced landlords who charged high rents and took advantage of the lack of housing in Réunion. "They suck the blood of the poor who cannot find anything else and don't know how to defend themselves."⁸⁴

Similarly in 1964, the rightwing newspaper *Le Progrès* described shantytown populations as "compatriots" forced to live in bad conditions because they had no choice. The high rents they paid were now morally inadmissible. Landlords were at fault for the poor living conditions. It was time to declare war on the "slums", and the rapacious landlords who exploited the poor.⁸⁵ Shantytowns were as shameful as electoral fraud.⁸⁶

⁸² ADR 1 PER 83/8 *Croix Sud* Bonne nouvelle 25/10/1964

⁸³ ADR 1 PER 83/8 *Croix Sud* 25/12/1964

⁸⁴ ADR 1 PER 83/8 *Croix Sud* Chronique sociale 10/5/1964

⁸⁵ ADR 1 PER 86/12 *Cri du Peuple* Guerre contre les "taudis" 2/4/1964

⁸⁶ ADR 1 PER 82/42 *Le Progrès* Le scandale des bidonvilles 24/1/1964

The right-wing press now saw itself as the group which really understood the problems of the poor.⁸⁷

In contrast to the right-wing press, the Communist newspaper *Témoignages* implicitly opposed to the shantytown decree. Before Michel Debré arrived in Réunion, the Communist party had held the monopoly on discourses and claims of social justice. The Prefecture's decree threatened to marginalize the Party which accused the administration of starting to care about a problem – shantytowns - which had long existed in Réunion.⁸⁸ When the shantytown decree was published in October 1964 *Témoignages* claimed not to have space to print it. A week later, when it finally printed the decree, *Témoignages* quibbled its terms, portraying the French administration as if they wished to expel shantytown inhabitants.⁸⁹

The PCR framed themselves as the real champions of the poor by pedantically challenging the wording of the shantytown decree. “Why does the decree only designate shanty towns but not huts or sheds or courtyards? *Pourquoi les bidonvilles et pas les cases ou des calbanons ou des cours?*”⁹⁰ *Témoignages* was even ready to defend the landlords and landowners, whom they normally called to capitalist exploiters. “We are the champions of the decent landlords!” the newspaper headline proclaimed.⁹¹

Although the right-wing now fought the Communist Party to defend the poor, the real impact of the Prefect's decree was that it enabled tenants to seek redress for their

⁸⁷ ADR 1 PER 82/42 *Le Progrès*. Les bidonvilles: Le bon sens mettra un cran d'arrêt à la campagne de terreur que voudrait entretenir *Témoignages* dans les bidonvilles 28/06/1964

⁸⁸ ADR 1 PER 85/13 *Témoignages*. Quand l'administration et les départementalistes "découvrent" un problème qu'ils ont eux-mêmes créé! 2/11/1964

⁸⁹ ADR 1 PER 85/13 *Témoignages* 23/10/1964

⁹⁰ ADR 302 W 51-52 *Témoignages* encore une fois à propos des bidonvilles des cases et des cours où logent les travailleurs 05/11/1964

⁹¹ ADR 1 PER 85/13 *Témoignages* 22/10/1964

own poverty. Tenants wrote to the Prefect of Réunion to make complaints about their landlords and to ask for their houses to be classified as shantytowns. In total, about 120 people in St Denis corresponded with the Prefect between 1964 and 1966 about their rent. Although several letters were written in the same handwriting by professional letter writers, there is no direct correlation between location and letter writing. There was only one courtyard of neighbors who all wrote similar letters to the Prefect complaining about the same landlord. Otherwise the letter writers appear to be tenants individually motivated to claim their rights in the new French state decree.

The Prefect had instituted a decree and used the police to enforce it. Réunion Islanders in shantytowns now had a legal right to be helped in their situations of inequality and poverty. The shantytown decree enabled Réunionnais to individually claim material improvement from the state as a fundamental moral and legal right.

ii. A “worthless” law

The Prefect’s decree was effective because it was backed up by the police. The riot squad (CRS),⁹² the Gendarmes and Police Nationale divided up St Denis into sections and patrolled the shantytowns to survey the rents being paid in every single house in the city. They checked houses street-to-street to discover how much rent every tenant paid. They classified the house to determine whether it was a shantytown.

The shantytowns were being policed, but the landowners and landlords were the object of control, rather than the tenants. Tenants welcomed the police warmly into their

⁹² Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité de la Police Nationale

houses. Landowners and landlords did so with less enthusiasm.⁹³ The riot squad did not enjoy the reality of urban poverty in Réunion.⁹⁴ After conducting surveys in Ste Clotilde the riot squad commander wrote to the Prefect complaining that his men had been bitten by dogs, ticks and fleas, they had contracted “disagreeable” skin diseases and had been infected by other parasites all of which had spread around the barracks.

The police surveyed approximately 800 houses in central St Denis between 1964 and 1966. There were 119 rent infractions: 62 for abusive rents, 52 for irregular receipts, and 2 for non-delivery of a receipt. A dozen other cases were ambiguous, but if the house was dilapidated but not completely run-down, the Prefect had no moral authority on unscrupulous landlords. “I have no intention of following your advice” a landlord curtly replied to the Prefecture when his house was not classified as a shantytown but the Prefecture attempted to persuade him to repair it anyway.⁹⁵

Despite Debré’s promises, Réunion Islanders did not have the equivalent pensions and state assistance as in Metropolitan France unless they were civil servants. Many landowners and landlords lived off their landholding incomes. Faced with the classification of their rental houses as shantytowns, landowners and landlords protested vociferously about the decree to the Prefecture, because renting houses was their living and their business.

In 1965 Mr. J wrote to the Prefect to complain that the new rents made his situation “critical.” He lived from landholding since having suffered an illness, neither he

⁹³ ADR 64 W 13 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le procureur général près la cour d'appel. Objet : réglementation des loyers dans des bidonvilles 18/01/1965

⁹⁴ ADR 64 W 19 Commandant CRS au Préfet. Objet: contrôle des bidonvilles de Ste Clotilde

⁹⁵ All letters are from the ADR 64 W 1-13 series. I have not included the names of the letter-writers to protect anonymity of people who are still living

nor his wife worked and he still had four of his seven children living at home. However, Mr. J included the details of his monthly rents, casting doubt on his claims of being in a “critical” situation.

Since 1959 Mr. and Mme J had lived off the rents from two plots of land in St Denis where they had built small houses. Mr. J rented one plot on Monthyon Street at 120,000 CFA per year where he had built bedrooms. He sublet each bedroom at 1,500 or 2,000 CFA per month. He rented his second plot on Boulevard de la Providence at 30,000 CFA per year and sublet six bedrooms each at 3,000 CFA per month, making a substantial profit. Mr. J. complained that his houses had not been properly classified as they had water in the courtyards, and electricity, yet the Prefecture had reduced their rent to 1,000F each. This threatened his way of life: “I cannot possibly lower my rents, or I will no longer be able to meet my family’s needs” Mr. J complained, but even with the reduced rent his income was substantially higher than the majority of workers in St Denis, and his request was ignored.

While this landowner clearly appeared to be able to continue to make a living despite the lower rents, a female landowner wrote to the Prefect in badly spelled Réunionnais Creole. Her living situation was more directly threatened by the Prefect’s rent decree.

We live off the rent of our two rooms; with five children ... I have a husband who doesn’t work, because he is blind. We needed [the rent] to live. How do you think that seven people can live with 600 Francs a month? ... I would prefer to put two or three animals in those rooms; at least I know what money I could make from them... Do you think all the landlords got gifts from the hardware store [when they built their houses to rent]? ... When you leave Réunion, I hope that you will be satisfied with your law which is worthless.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ ADR 64 W 5 Cluchard à Préfet 16/11/1964

Although the spelling and use of Creole is evidence of the author's limited schooling, the letter narrator is clearly aware of the Prefect's decree and its impact. She presumably exaggerates that she would rather keep animals inside the house than people, but she signs off her letter underlining that she was "disgusted" with the current Prefect and that everyone in Réunion had preferred Prefect Perreau-Pradier anyway. An employee in the Prefecture highlighted this letter in red crayon and noted next to it "this letter shows that there will be some small land owners who will be seriously affected by the shantytown laws." How could the small landowners make ends meet if they did not rent out houses and rooms? One landlady's son wrote that "mum doesn't get the old age pension or anything. That's why she rents two bedrooms at 5000 Francs."

The administration now appeared to favor the social rights of the Réunion Island working class. "What [the landowners] find most deplorable is that they are almost the only ones who will pay. If it could console them, we add that they are perhaps the first, and other [people] will follow" wrote *Le Progrès*.⁹⁷ A landlady called Mme L wrote to the Prefect to complain. She only rented one house in St Denis. With a new law protecting the landless tenants who was going to protect the landowners? "If [Debré's law] is a way of creating policy, it is marvelous because it plays into the Communists' hands ... making real conflicts between landowner and tenants. Where will the small landowners end up, who only have these rents to live off?"⁹⁸

The complaints of the small landowners were not followed up by the Prefect. Yet landowners and landlords wrote to the Prefect anyway to vent their feelings about the

⁹⁷ ADR 1 PER 82/42 *Le Progrès*. Les Bidonvilles 20/12/1964

⁹⁸ ADR 64 W 9

changes being made in the name of social equality and hoping that the Prefect might be able to act on their behalf. However, the Prefect supported the cause of the poor renters and subletters in the shantytowns to discourage the landowners from making profits, and incite them to sell their plots to the SIDR. Small landowners were well aware that the shantytown decree would affect their social position. The Prefect's decree and Debré's proposed law would change their fortunes, by changing the value of their land, a clear shift away from protecting, or tolerating, the traditional power of the landowners in Réunion.

iii. "A violation of the constitution": landowning as French citizenship

Léonce Viadère, Edouard Rivière, and Camille Morel were not just renting a few rooms. They were making significant incomes from renting their large plots of land. These large landowners did not just want to vent their feelings in writing. They were directly and financially threatened by the Prefecture's decree, and they had the economic wherewithal and the education to contest the decree in the courts. They considered that the state had no right to pass a law attempting to govern their commercial activities. They claimed their right to conduct commercial activities on their land as they saw fit, and remarkably, they succeeded in taking the French administration to the civil court to prove their point.

Edouard Rivière and Camille Morel were taken to court in early 1965 and charged with setting extortionate rents and not delivering receipts to their tenants. Yet Rivière and Morel successfully fought back and contested the legality of the Prefect's 1964 decree. They asserted the cultural, economic and moral right of Réunion Island landowners to dispose of their property as they wished, hoping to redefine the terms of the rent decree. In the civil court of St Denis they argued that the Prefecture had acted illegally, because it

had no right to govern rents. It was an issue of commercial freedom as governed by French civil law. The Prefecture had no rights to use its powers of police in such a way. The St Denis civil court released Camille Morel from all charges in June 1965.⁹⁹

The judgment in favor of Camille Morel threatened the entire standing of the shantytown rent decree and undermined the French administration's program of reducing shantytown rents. The civil servants in the Prefecture were astounded. How could they have been judged in the wrong? "We have appealed. But the affair is very worrying" is scribbled on the copy of the judgment in the Reunion Departmental archives. Underneath, another hand has written "a civil court has no right to judge the legality of administrative decrees."¹⁰⁰ The Prefect justified the rent decree because exploitation of the poor for profit could create "political" disturbances which could then be used by political opponents such as the Communist Party.¹⁰¹ The Prefect immediately asked Michel Debré if a legal solution could be found to the problem.¹⁰²

Other landowners in St Denis responded to this judgment in favor of Morel by attempting to raise their rents. Because of the pro-Morel judgment, Mme R's landlady demanded back payment. The landlady claimed that because Morel had won the case, the Prefecture's decree was now invalid. Mme R's rent had been recently reduced from 7,000 CFA to 2,195 CFA. The shanty town commissioner saw the danger of Mme R attempting to re-hike the rent. "Very urgent, an example must be made of this immediately. Tell

⁹⁹ ADR 57 W 38 audience publiques le 22 juin 1965 numéro 21. Extrait des minutes du greffe du tribunal d'instance de Saint-Denis. Tribunal de police de Saint-Denis.

¹⁰⁰ ADR 57 W 38 Note de renseignement ministère de l'État chargé des départements et territoires d'outre-mer sûreté nationale département de La Réunion. Objet : audience du tribunal d'instance de Saint-Denis du mardi 22 juin 1965

¹⁰¹ ADR 64 W 39 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre d'État DOM-TOM. Objet : recours introduit par M. Camille Morel et consorts en vue de l'annulation d'un arrêté préfectoral le 14 octobre 1964 en montant des loyers des terrains nus et des abris provisoires situés dans les bidonvilles de Saint Denis 17/2/1965

¹⁰² ADR 64 W 19 Préfet Alfred Diefenbacher à Michel Debré 29/6/1965

[her] that it is out of the question to go back on the rent. Tell the owner the same, totally and firmly. Publish this information in the press.”

The appeal against the Camille Morel judgment came back into the St Denis courts in October 1965. His lawyer claimed the landowners were moral people, exercising their commercial rights. In contrast, low rents would be an *immoral* influence on poor tenants in St Denis who were notoriously unclean and lacked hygiene. Low rents would “only produce the opposite of the desired outcome. The interested parties will have the [financial] means for constructing a few more shanty towns and drinking a bit more [rum].” Morel’s lawyer argued that the urban poor’s uncontrollable desire to build shantytowns and act anti-socially explained why there were so many shanty towns in St Denis. The lawyers also described the Creole landowners as French citizens freely undertaking commercial contracts which should not be regulated. The Prefecture had undermined the principles of commercial liberty for citizens enshrined in the constitutions of the 4th and 5th French Republics.¹⁰³

Framing the urban poor in St Denis as immoral, poor, dirty, alcoholic and somehow viral may have worked in the 1950s but not after Debré’s new policy for seeking the political loyalty of Réunion’s poor. Lawyers for the Prefecture successfully argued that controlling rents in the shantytowns was a way of avoiding public disorder, because Réunion Islanders’ poverty could be used for political ends (implicitly by the Communist Party, not by the French administration).¹⁰⁴ In the middle of 1965 the

¹⁰³ ADR 302 W 51-52 Hugues Constant, Avocat près de la cour d'appel. Mémoire en réplique à Messieurs les présidents et membres du tribunal administratif de Saint-Denis La Réunion 14/10/1965

¹⁰⁴ ADR 64 W 39 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre d'État DOM-TOM Objet : recours introduit par M. Camille Morel et consorts en vue de l'annulation d'un arrêté préfectoral le 14 octobre 1964 en montant des loyers des terrains nus et des abris provisoires situés dans les bidonvilles de Saint Denis 17/02/1965

Prefecture had announced in public that the shantytown decree would be maintained indefinitely, in order to maintain social peace and for the public good.¹⁰⁵ The final judgment in November 1965 acquitted the Prefecture, and charged the landowners guilty of taking the Prefect to court in order to continue their immoral exploitation of the poorest sections of the Réunion Island population with impunity. Rivière and Morel were forced to pay the costs of the trial.¹⁰⁶

A few years later, Michel Debré commented on the trial against Rivière and Morel. He said that the Prefect's decree had imposed morality, and the landowners had slyly attacked this morality by contesting the decree's wording "*ils ont préféré alors faire triompher le texte d'une règle plutôt que la règle d'une morale.*" Debré praised his moral political program in Réunion. The French administration could protect the poor by controlling the landowners' control over land, "holding back the excesses of a badly-employed freedom."¹⁰⁷

The Prefect's decree changed the relationship between the state and medium and small landowners. Instead of upholding the values of commercial freedom as a right of French citizenship, or allowing local landowners to continue their control over landless populations as the French administration and SIDR had done in the early 1950s, the Prefecture chose to support the poor, in order to obtain cheap land for the SIDR. By so doing, it threatened the livelihood of the small landowners and political loyalty of a small

¹⁰⁵ ADR 1 PER 83/9 *Croix Sud*. L'arrêté sur les loyers des bidonvilles 11/07/1965

¹⁰⁶ ADR 64 W 39 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre d'État DOM-TOM 17/2/1965 objets : recours introduit par M. Camille Morel et consorts en vue de l'annulation d'un arrêté préfectoral le 14 octobre 1964 en montant des loyers des terrains nus et des abris provisoires situés dans les bidonvilles de Saint Denis

¹⁰⁷ AHC 9 DE 92 *Croix Sud* Inaugurations de Michel Debré. Mille Roches et Cité Vauban 17/3/1974

middle class, in order to ensure that the more numerous poor Réunion Islanders in the shanty towns did not develop any more dangerous political opposition to the state.

Debré and the Prefecture had not intended any more than this. However the decree also enabled poor Réunion Islanders in the shantytowns to individually apply directly to the Prefect for help, opening up a new way of making social claims and undertaking political action individually.

iv. The state as social mediator of the poor Réunion Islanders

By changing the rents, the Prefecture mediated changing relations between the landowners, landlords and tenants in Réunion. Individuals in the shantytowns successfully petitioned the Prefecture to reduce their rents. Low rents were now framed as being moral and the proof of poor Réunion Islanders' social equality as French citizens. Through their letters, Réunion Island tenants articulated a new version of Réunion Island French citizenship. If the state now imposed and controlled welfare, individuals could also apply to the state for their rights, rather than taking to the streets as part of a political movement such as the PCR which was being repressed.

Out of approximately 800 rent investigations in houses in St Denis, I found 48 pleading letters, and about 50 letters between the Prefecture and tenants discussing rent. The major difference between writing supplicating letters to the Prefect before and after the Prefect's decree was that these letters could now lead to significant social action. The introduction of the law into Réunion Island social life meant that the Prefecture became an effective way of claiming welfare rights because the Prefecture controlled of the police.

Mme R lived with her husband and six children in a three room house in St Denis. Two of the rooms had old planks on the floor and one had an earth floor. The roof was made of corrugated iron. The entire house was only seven meters by six. Yet in this quite standard situation of poverty, she wrote to ask the Prefect to intervene in her life.

For the last eight years I have been in this house, I pay 7000F every month, and there have never been repairs, and since the rent has been reduced my landlord has told me to leave.

I'm a mother of six children, and my eldest is fighting for France [*sous le drapeau*] in Metropole. ... I can no longer cope with life in the poverty which surrounds me, and I am expecting another baby. Judge my situation for yourself. I'm about to lose my mind. Mr. Prefect, I hope that you will take pity on my situation and stop my landlord.

Since the application of the rent decree, Mme R's landlord had tried to throw her out, presumably to find more pliable tenants who would not argue with paying the pre-decree rent. In her plea to the Prefect, Mme R marshaled the morality of her position as a mother of young children, her helplessness in poverty and her fulfilling of her citizenship duties (one of her sons is in the French army). Although she had paid her rent for seven years, once Mme R had the possibility of a lower rent she could no longer "cope" with her poverty.

Her letter underlines that the introduction of the Prefect's decree gave the poor tenants in the shantytowns a new perspective on their financial and social possibilities. Thus Mme R seized the opportunity of writing an individual letter to the Prefect to claim her rights to pay a lower rent, rather than being forced into paying a higher rent which was no longer legal.

For the last year I have lived in a five bedroom shed (*calbanon*) ... made of brick with a corrugated iron roof, it is 3,85m long and 2,60m wide, with no kitchen, no doorstep, no water, no electricity and I pay 2500 Francs. The other tenants who live here used to pay the same amount as me, but since the shantytown inspections which reduced the price they pay only 500 Francs.

I wasn't there on the day of the inspection, I still pay 2500 francs. I ask whether you can do anything. We are all poor and above all equal. I don't see why they should pay less rent than me when we have the same things.

Through a narrative of poverty and unfair treatment the letter writer, a 27 year old married woman asks to benefit from the same low rent and same social justice as her neighbors, because everybody who benefits from the shantytown decree is poor and therefore should be equally treated. Given that she is writing to the Prefect, the letter writer deliberately deploys the notion of equality because it is an ideology of the French Republic. Mme R made a political claim to be recognized as an equal citizen, through the idiom of a right to pay a lower rent, the same as other poor people in St Denis.

A few Reunion Islanders manipulated their claims and some letters show that Réunion Islanders may have been trying to resolve personal scores, and neighborly disputes through the medium of the state. A 28 year old woman claimed that her landlady was harassing her— she had put a lock on the gate and not given her tenant a key. The woman could not open her own gate, and wrote to the Prefect in order to stop the woman's "spitefulness". This letter detailed strange acts of sabotage which appeared to have no motivation. The Prefecture's commission eventually revealed a personal dispute which had got out of hand, and which the woman had hoped that she could win if the Prefect mediated on her side. Another letter writer deployed the fear of being evicted from his of his house to be replaced by Comorian tenants. The Commission later found out he was merely envious of a Comorian neighbor who had a larger room.

Writing to the Prefect was only effective if writers had the time to wait for the administration to visit, and had the tenacity to make multiple demands. Mlle A walked to the Prefecture office to ask the CRS to come and inspect her bedroom which was 6m².

She took a day off work to wait for them. They never turned up and so she wrote to the Prefect again complaining that her landlady was making her life terribly difficult, taking advantage of her because she was all alone. Since the shantytown decree her landlady had refused to accept her rent. Instead her landlady had started hassling her, packing up her dishes, and stopping the water, so she had to get water in the street. After Mlle A wrote a second letter, the Prefecture sent the Police around to investigate. The Police pressured and legally obliged Mlle A's landlady police to reduce the rent from 1200 to 300 Francs, and in front of the Police she even said she would give the next month free until Mlle A found a cheaper place to stay. Similarly Mr. R wrote to the Prefecture several times. Eventually the Police tracked down his landlord who had been obliging the man to pay more rent, but who had used a false name to avoid being caught by.

The Prefecture gradually became engaged as a mediator in disputes between landowners, landlords and tenants who made opposing claims about rent levels. Mr. A had been harassed by his landlady who lived on the property. After the rent commission controlled the area, his landlady was upset about the decrease in her rent. She immediately ripped out the fence of the house occupied by Mr. A and she cut off the family's water supply. Mr. A had six children, some of whom were babies. She also threatened him with turning off his electricity. The shanty town commissioner asked the Police in St Denis "to advise the landlady that she must show herself to be more humane, reconstruct the fence and reconnect the water which this numerous family needs."

In stark contrast with 1961 fears about the "swarming" inhabitants of Camp Ozoux and their potential to make political claims, the Prefecture had become the protector of social rights in Réunion. Réunion Islanders in the shanty towns were no

longer seen as morally degenerate, or with a suspect allegiance to France. The effect of the 1964 shantytown decree was that the Prefecture now worried about the circumstances of an individual living in a shanty town and whether his fence needed to be mended.

Some writers had much vaguer notions of the legal power of the Prefect, but still saw the importance of the Prefecture's role in controlling rents. A woman claimed that her landlord was hassling her because she did not have a husband, the wind whipped at her house, and her child was sick. She asked for the Prefect to send a policeman to examine her situation and ended her letter "for the 1966 year, may God bless you in all your work and may he give you a long and happy life among your people." The rhetoric in this letter, reminiscent of the end of a Catholic mass, suggests that for some Réunion Islanders, the Prefect still embodied a mysterious and magical power from a far away land, far removed from more any notions of "citizenship" at all. Other poor Réunion Islanders in St Denis understood their rights to change their poverty by paying lower rents, and specifically cited knowledge of their citizenship rights - "I am waiting for your services to send someone ... if I am asking the shantytown commission it's because I am conscious of the law."

The culmination of the Prefect's rent decree with the repression of the PCR in Réunion enabled poor Réunion Islanders to individually write to the Prefect claiming their moral right to lower rents. This direct appeal to the state, rather than through political parties or other group claims was a new way of expressing Réunion Island citizenship, and was the result of Debré's use of the French state to impose and control welfare in Réunion. The letters to the Prefect were not an isolated phenomenon. From this time, Réunion Islanders started to abandon the PCR, and its public claims, in order to

align themselves with the state and its distribution and control of welfare. Réunion Island French citizenship would become based on a moral claim to welfare and to state aid as a citizen's right.

IV. Cleaning the shantytowns and creating loyal citizens

The Debré law had passed in the National Assembly in December 1964.¹⁰⁸ Rather than merely regulating rent relationships, the Debré law provided local governments with the legal means to expropriate land being used for shantytowns. The Prefect's decree of 1964 just an interim measure for the French administration's solution to the shantytown problem in Réunion. After all, even though they now paid lower rent, the tenants still had to be moved off the land. In 1965 the SIDR was able to expropriate Rivière and Viadère. They had already bought a new plot of land called Le Chaudron in Ste Clotilde, 3km from the center of St Denis to rehouse the tenants who were on the land.¹⁰⁹

At the beginning of 1966 Michel Debré gave a speech. He praised the new developments in shantytown removals, and the new construction of housing in St Denis. After all, the SIDR had tried to achieve this since 1949 without success. The construction of Le Chaudron was going well, with 450 houses destined for the inhabitants of Rivière-

¹⁰⁸ Loi n° 64-1229 du 1er décembre 1964 tendant à faciliter aux fins de reconstruction et d'aménagement, l'expropriation des terrains sur lesquels sont édifiés des locaux d'habitation insalubres et irrécupérables, communément appelés « bidonvilles ». The law underwent modifications between 1963 and 12/7/66.

¹⁰⁹ ADR 64 W 39 Enquête parcellaire. Projet de construction d'un nouveau quartier d'habitation au lieu dit Chaudron, Ste Clotilde, commune de Saint-Denis pour la Société Immobilière du Département de La Réunion 30/12/1963

Viadère, of which 111 would be delivered that July.¹¹⁰ Including operations in Le Port and St Pierre, 3,700 Réunionnais families would be rehoused in 1966.¹¹¹

Debré proudly declared that French financing of the shantytown operation for 1966 had increased 267 % in relation to 1955. The financing for La Réunion represented 25% of the total amount of money allocated for Metropolitan France, including the massive sums dedicated to removing the shantytowns in the outskirts of Paris. “Thus, my dear compatriots” finished Michel Debré, “the government wishes to progressively allow all the inhabitants of Reunion to have a decent house at their disposition.” It must be noted that Debré emphasized “disposition”, not ownership.

As Debré had emphasized, a new model of social housing in Réunion appeared to have been implemented between 1963 and 1966. The French state had spent a large sum of money on Réunion’s shantytowns. Réunion’s finally appeared to be treated equally with the French administration, and the material conditions of urban Réunion Islanders were improving. The SIDR had even reimbursed the residents of Rivière-Viadère for the cost of their housing materials - corrugated iron sheets, and wood – in order that they could buy new furniture for their new houses in Chaudron.¹¹²

Debré’s speech was also planned for publication. In the book draft, the editor noted in the margin next to Debré’s last words “photograph of a new house with smiling

¹¹⁰ ADR 302 W 51-52 président SIDR à M. le préfet de La Réunion enquête conjointe d'utilité publique et par cela pour la réalisation d'une groupe d'habitations aux Camélias commune Saint-Denis 3/5/1965

¹¹¹ The next places to be cleared would be the shantytowns of Butor-Vauban, Patates à Durand and the Terrain Clain in St Denis, the Terrain Langlois in Le Port, and the Terrain Four à Chaux in St Pierre ADR 302 W 27 Dossier d'enquête parcellaire. Projet de construction de groupes d'habitation dans le quartier Vauban 24/10/1968

¹¹² Interview Mr. Thon-Hon 1/7/2009

families and pretty children, all well-dressed”.¹¹³ The Prefect of Reunion seemed similarly content. He hoped that changing the houses of the urban poor would change their social behavior and their need to pay a regular rent would make them proper workers. As their incomes increased, the SIDR tenants would want to pay for better houses, the Prefect’s logic ran. They would move out of social housing, and uplift themselves from the poor urban proletariat, through their class aspirations.¹¹⁴

A running tally for the numbers of shantytowns destroyed and to be destroyed were regularly sent to Michel Debré in Paris. In 1966 the total number of houses in the shantytowns was calculated as 10,967 for the whole of Réunion. With all the planned constructions, 9,543 houses should be built in the next three years, and then the housing problem of Réunion would be resolved.¹¹⁵

This shantytown removal even seemed to be diminishing the importance of the Communist Party in the urban neighborhoods. Urban Réunion Islanders appeared to have accepted the role of the state in governing their social rights and their housing. When the SIDR planned the construction of social housing in Butor-Vauban in 1967 there were about 1,000 small landowners who had to be paid off. Most residents were owners, in contrast to Rivière-Viadère where they had been tenants. The SIDR bought up all the land plots and there were only 50 contestations.

The Communist Party activist Mme Isnelle Amelin attempted to represent the residents of Butor-Vauban and publicize their “tragic situation” of being rehoused. She

¹¹³ CAC 19840179/78 discours Debré sur le programme bidonville 1966 Saint-Denis Saint-Pierre Le Port. 01/02/1966

¹¹⁴ ADR 57 W 38 Ministre de la Construction au Préfet obj: bidonville de St Denis, Le Port et St Pierre 12/07/1965

¹¹⁵ AHC 9 DE 31 Enquête sommaire sur les bidonvilles réalisée par les services de la construction entre juillet et septembre 1965 ; ADR 1259 W 3 Préfet à M. Secrétaire d’état logement Objet: Législation sur les loyers dans les DOM 10/6/1966

only got 26 signatures of concern on the public enquiry.¹¹⁶ Even when they made complaints to the public enquiry, Butor-Vauban residents merely asked for financial reimbursements from the SIDR for the cost of their land, and two people asked for a refund for the cost of their housing materials. They all wished to be rehoused by the SIDR house, and one person wished to be rehoused nearer the town center rather than Le Chaudron.¹¹⁷ The secret police claimed that there was now no support for the Communist Party in Butor-Vauban and that most people there wanted to be quickly rehoused by the SIDR. The police only noted that there had been concern from poorer residents, such as domestic workers earning 5,000F per month, who worried that they would pay more rent in a SIDR house. Apart from this quibble, in 1966 the residents of the shantytowns appeared to find the idea of moving into SIDR accommodation appealing, and did not protest their removals, asking only for financial compensation.

The curious 1965 picture of members of St Denis city council speaking in a bulldozed Vauban neighborhood with local residents listening (Figure 5.5) emphasizes the continuing class and race differences between residents in the shantytowns and those in government. Members of the municipal government of St Denis are grouped around the microphone, wearing suits and they are socially white, in contrast to the more informally dressed populations of Vauban on the right hand of the photograph, some of whom are in bare feet.

¹¹⁶ ADR 303 W 27 Renseignements Généraux c1968

¹¹⁷ See letters in ADR 303 W 27



Figure 5.4 Destruction of Vauban shantytown 1965

This photograph also underlines the different approach to shantytowns, and to state-run welfare in Reunion Island and Metropolitan France, where in the same year, the bulldozers destroyed the shantytowns of Champigny, using Debré's law.¹¹⁸ Yet small landowners in Vauban received material compensation from the SIDR. The Vauban shantytown destruction was not fundamentally opposed.¹¹⁹

V. Conclusion

In the local context where politics, landowning and tenancy were closely linked, the introduction of new rent laws enabled poor Réunion Islanders to use rent claims to make new political claims. Réunion Islanders could individually appeal to the French

¹¹⁸ *L'Express* Bidonvilles. Les Bulldozers attaquent à l'aube 28/02/1965

¹¹⁹ SIDR Archives

administration to improve their material circumstances, rather than directly following Debré's citizenship format of patriotism and love for the mother country. The majority of Réunion Islanders accepted the improved material conditions which came with public political acquiescence to Michel Debré's new idea of state-imposed social care.

Through a new rent decree, the state became the mediator of the class divide in Réunion and chose the poor over the petit bourgeois. Because the French administration set the terms of welfare, individuals were also able to make social claims directly to the state. Social claims were no longer the exclusive purview of party politics and social movements, but could be demanded if individuals petitioned the state for welfare.

On one hand Debré was successful in creating a multi-racial idea of Frenchness in Réunion in the spirit of the Republican tradition. On the other hand, Debré did not successfully recreate an identical idea of French citizenship in Réunion. Letters written by individuals to the Prefect in 1964-66 do not constitute a collective social movement, but demonstrate that Réunion Islanders had found new ways to make claims on the state.

The introduction of the shantytown decree enabled Réunion Islanders to mobilize previous ideas about the relationship between politics and landholding to request help from the authority figure of the Prefect. The Prefect's legal means and deployment of the police offered shantytown tenants an unheard-of social and political power in Réunion. They could assert their new rights to cheap rent by calling in the Prefect's commission to investigate the landowners who were exploiting them. The new decree was not merely about the morality of rents from land ownership. The entire relationship between Réunion Island tenants, landlords, landowners and the state was being transformed, and a new idiom of making citizenship claims linked to French state welfare had been created.

CHAPTER 6 MAKING FRANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN 1963-2006

I. Introduction

Reporting on Debré's 1963 election victory, the Prefect of Réunion noted that Debré had "confirmed himself as ... the very incarnation of France, and of her perpetuity in this faraway department."¹ Debré emphasized that Réunion Islanders were now as French as people in Metropolitan France. He also portrayed himself as the incarnation of France in Réunion. Debré portrayed himself as the personification of the French state and the distributor of its values and its welfare, the guarantor of French state legitimacy in Réunion.

In May 1968 many Metropolitan French people rejected President De Gaulle's project of creating a national French culture, coordinated by the central state.² Yet during this time in Réunion, Debré frequently proclaimed that the island was part of a national French culture. In a 1966 speech to Réunion's General Council, Debré asserted that "Réunionnais men and women feel, and profoundly express, their desire to be French. Here they make up a little France ... and La Réunion will be the living reflection in the Indian Ocean of Our Nation and her civilization."³

¹ CAC 19941080/41 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le Ministre de l'Etat des DTOM. Objet: déroulement des élections législatives partielles du 5 mai 1963 8/5/1963

² Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

³ ADR 57 W 12 Conseil Général de La Réunion. Réception de Michel Debré, Ancien Premier Ministre, Ancien Député de La Réunion, Ministre de l'économie et des finances. Allocution de M. Marcel Cerneau, Discours de M. Michel Debré 26/3/1966

Despite Debré's assertions, not everyone agreed that Réunion was now a replica of France, or that this was a necessarily a good thing. In 1972 a left-wing Metropolitan journalist writing about Réunion claimed the island had "just come out of the colonial era" and then questioned "has it really left it entirely?"⁴ The opposition Communist Party also loudly denounced Debré's colonial oppression of the Réunionnais, and accused the French administration of having an undemocratic influence in Réunion Island.

Were Réunion Islanders even more French than France itself? Did the French Empire really live on in Réunion by 1973? If so, what was needed to maintain an apparently French colonial culture in Réunion in the face of two decades of Communist opposition to the French regime?

After the 1962 French defeat in Algeria, recent scholarship has suggested that France made a breakpoint with colonization. Indeed, in 1962 politicians like Michel Debré appeared to frame French decolonization as something completely inevitable. Despite this, from 1963 Michel Debré sought to maintain French influence in Réunion using very similar idioms and to those of French colonialism. Shepard has also suggested that after the 1962 defeat in Algeria, and in the wake of enormous immigration from the colonies, race and ethnicity became meaningful markers in France to explain who could be considered French.⁵ This chapter shows how, unlike in Metropolitan France, Debré framed French citizenship in Réunion as multi-racial.

Studying East Africans' appropriation of British culture and consumer goods, Prestholdt suggests that East Africans used strategic representations of British imported goods both to flatter the British and to strategically manipulate the outsiders' perceptions

⁴ *Le Monde* Laurens, André 'La Réunion : l'île adolescente' 6/6/1972

⁵ Shepard, *The invention of decolonization : the Algerian War and the remaking of France*.

of them. This was to further East African political, social and economic strategies, not to mimic British ideas of class, status or order.⁶ Prestholdt suggests that it was easy to distinguish between the two cultures, and that any East African appropriation of Britishness was purely calculated.

In Réunion, both Michel Debré and Paul Vergès' attempted to polarize political and cultural discourse on the island as a choice either for Réunion or for France. Yet by the 1970s in Réunion it was impossible to define the island as either French or Creole. This chapter shows how young urban Réunion Islanders in St Denis appropriated and made their own ideas about being French in the Indian Ocean, interpreting in their own fashion the pro- and anti- French ideologies which saturated political life on the island. Unlike the prevailing political discourse, Islanders did not need to choose either Réunion or France to understand what it meant to be French in the Indian Ocean.

II. Shaping Réunion's future on a politically divided island

Being elected a deputy in Réunion Island enabled Michel Debré to enact his vision of the French Republican mission and gave him a springboard to re-launch his career, while remaining deputy for the island.⁷ Debré's retained his National Assembly seat in Reunion from 1963 to 1988.⁸ Reunion was also a platform for Michel Debré to perform his own vision of what France could achieve overseas. The Communist Party had a radically different vision of Réunion's future, based on a policy of autonomy from France, self-

⁶ Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the world : African consumerism and the genealogies of globalization*, The California world history library (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁷ Michel Debré had other offers to be a deputy for Metropolitan seats, but chose to stay in La Réunion Michel Debré, *Gouverner autrement 1962-1970*, Trois républiques pour une France. (Paris: A. Michel, 1993).

⁸ Debré, *Gouverner autrement 1962-1970*.

determination for the “Réunionnais people” and recognizing the contributions of Réunion Island culture. Debré and Vergès’ ideas about Réunion’s future operated in the same discursive field. They shaped each other and defined a framework for political expression action in Réunion which, in the 1960s at least, could only be oriented around one or other political sides: support of Debré or support of Vergès.

Both Michel Debré and Paul Vergès were highly charismatic leaders fighting an ideological battle between Communism and Gaullism. They oriented their claims to legitimate leadership and visions of an ideal future for Réunion around an idea about “France” Were Réunion Islanders patriotic French citizens or should they have the right to self-determination? Had they been French for 300 years, as supporters of Debré claimed, or were they more like Vergès’ description of the “banyan people” like the tree whose branches become roots, creating multiple trunks.⁹ Both Vergès and Debré fought over the same teleological idea: Réunion’s place in the nation. The only difference was whether Réunion was part of the French nation or Réunion was a nation in itself.

Working within already existing paternalistic idioms in Réunion, Michel Debré promoted a popular idea of himself as “papa Debré”, a paternal figure, an incarnation of the French state, and the guarantor of Republican citizenship in Réunion.¹⁰ In turn the Communist Party built its own political ideology of opposition: the Réunion Island Communist Party became the party of resistance. However the PCR leader Paul Vergès was also known as “Papa Vergès” at the same time he portrayed himself as the maroon rebel and resistor of France’s colonial oppression. Paternalistic political leadership was strongly associated with President De Gaulle and was increasingly criticized in

⁹ Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

¹⁰ *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

Metropolitan France through the 1960s. In Réunion, where paternalism had long shaped landlord-tenant relations, the figures of Papa Vergès and Papa Debré were immediately understandable. They were also pervasive, shaping political discourse in Réunion for decades.

i. Proving the viability of Overseas France in Réunion

As Prime Minister to President De Gaulle between 1958 and 1962, Michel Debré had frequently been mocked in France's satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* as a servile and self-effacing Prime Minister to an authoritative and regal President de Gaulle. Figure 6.1 is a 1961 cartoon which portrays Debré as the Prince De Bré, kneeling down with a concentrated expression. He is offering slippers on a velvet cushion to an unseen king who the reader knows is President De Gaulle.¹¹ When Michel Debré became elected as a deputy in far away Reunion Island in 1963, it was inevitable that Metropolitan commentators would see this as Debré's own attempt to become king.



Figure 6.1 The Prince De Bré *Le Canard Enchaîné* 1961

¹¹ Christian Delporte, "Le monstre bicéphale. L'exécutif dans le dessin du Canard Enchaîné (1959 - 1981)," *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 28, no. 28 (1992).



Figure 6.2 “I’m the General!” *Combat* 20/7/1963

The Metropolitan French press mocked Debré for having been parachuted into a parliamentary seat “in the sun”, where he could play at being General de Gaulle in front of the natives. Figure 6.2 portrays Reunion Islanders in the standard racist depiction of tiny black African natives with huge lips. The natives look up at Michel Debré who is dressed in President de Gaulle’s uniform –Michel Debré was quite short, and de Gaulle was very tall. However in the cartoon, Michel Debré claims that *he* is now “the General.”¹² It shows the newspapers’ lack of knowledge about Réunion and implies that Réunion Islanders are not really French. The most important aspect of this cartoon is not its satire of Michel Debré. Rather the cartoons emphasize that there was nothing strange or untoward about Michel Debré attempting to play at being General de Gaulle in a sunny faraway land with tiny black natives looking on. This suggests that for Metropolitan French cartoonists, Algerian decolonization in 1962 was not an entirely

¹² Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

definitive breakpoint with ideas about the French Empire. Rather, it was an amusing but logical continuation of Debré's previous role as a leader in French colonial policy.

President De Gaulle had already affirmed his wish to stay in France's Overseas Territories and to maintain political influence in France's ex-colonies. There could be no question of abandoning France's Overseas Departments.¹³ De Gaulle informed Senator Repiquet of Réunion, in Paris just before the 1963 elections there, that "Réunion is France ... France is a big country and can solve [Réunion's problems]." The new Prefect of Réunion, in transit in Paris, was informed by De Gaulle that "Réunion is a moral value for France, and an oceanic extension of the national territory" proving that De Gaulle had not formally and fully abandoned ideas and policies of France's extension overseas after 1962.¹⁴

Shepard claims that Debré framed an inevitable "tide of history" as the cause of Algerian decolonization in 1962, casting those who sought to retain France's legal link to Algeria as those who history had spurned. Yet outside the Algerian case, Michel Debré did not feel that the tide of history had turned away from Republican imperialism. Rather, by being elected in Réunion the year after the Algerian defeat, Debré intended to "defend faraway France ... not only to assure the security of [people proud to be French], not only to prove that the idea of the nation was superior than that of race ... also to oblige the leaders of our country to consider the worldwide interests of France."¹⁵ Debré clearly conceived his role in Réunion as a continuation of his earlier ambitions for Overseas France which had been dashed in 1962.

¹³ Cited in *Michel Debre et l'Ile de La Reunion (1959-1967)*, 99.

¹⁴ Cited in *Michel Debre et l'Ile de La Reunion (1959-1967)*, 102.

¹⁵ Debré, *Gouverner autrement 1962-1970*.

Yet Debré's vision of Overseas France after 1962 was a radical departure from previous models of French colonialism. From now on, France's mission overseas would be racially inclusive. Réunion Island French citizenship was a multi-racial, transnational French citizenship which went beyond the borders of European France, as Michel Debré proclaimed to the Réunion Island General Council in 1966.

This extraordinary wish, agreement, hope of the [Réunion] populations ... at 13,000 km from the Metropole women and men of diverse origins experience the constant feeling to strongly belong to the French nation ... Réunionnais and Réunionnaises agree, that whatever the diversity of their origins or their beliefs, whatever their geographical distance, that they will remain French citizens.¹⁶

Debré's vision of Réunion Island citizenship now mirrored the "multinational French citizenship" that France's ex-colonies had unsuccessfully petitioned the Metropole for between 1946 and 1960.¹⁷ For Debré, the continued presence of the French nation overseas in Réunion was more important than any outmoded ideas about inferior or dangerous races or a "civilizing mission." This multi-racial citizenship was a radical departure from the new regulation of immigration policy in Metropolitan France, and differed markedly from the French administration's views of dangerous "foreign" minorities in Réunion during the 1950s. In the National Assembly Debré frequently reiterated that the citizens of Overseas France were the equals of Metropolitan French citizens.

¹⁶ ADR 57 W 12 Conseil Général de La Réunion. Réception de Michel Debré, Ancien Premier Ministre, Ancien Député de La Réunion, Ministre de l'économie et des finances. Allocution de M. Marcel Cerneau, Discours de M. Michel Debré 26/3/1966

¹⁷ Cooper, "Provincializing France."; "From imperial inclusion to republican exclusion? France's ambiguous postwar trajectory."

Debré's new vision of a multiracial France in Réunion has been ignored in the scholarship in race on France. It calls into question theories that the French Republic was inherently racist, or has been incapable of incorporating difference. To be sure, Réunion and the other French Overseas Departments differed from French colonies of the 3rd Republic. Réunion had not had a legal regime based on exclusionary citizenship. Yet Debré's vision of a new French order in Réunion was also based on a selective erasure of past inequalities in Réunion. A multiracial French citizenship in Réunion would only be achieved by a heady reaffirmation of Ernest Renan's theories of nationhood, and by silencing the realities of social inequality in Réunion.

Renan had emphasized that a nation had to be built of a select forgetting of past violence. Debré was fond of quoting Renan and frequently referred to the "sacrifices" which Réunion Islanders soldiers had made for the French nation. Each of his visits to Réunion included laying wreaths at Réunion Island war memorials. Nonetheless Debré systematically refused to even acknowledge that Réunion Islanders might support Réunion's autonomy, or might have sympathy for the PCR's claims. Debré also silenced Paul Vergès by ensuring that he was banned from appearing on French radio or television.

The Communist Party directly challenged Debré's vision of French citizenship in Réunion. Between 1964 and 1966 Paul Vergès successfully hid from the French administration in Réunion. During Vergès' 28 month period of hiding in Réunion, the Communist Party revitalized and reappropriated the heritage of Réunion's maroon

slaves.¹⁸ They portrayed themselves as members of a resistance against the 1960 Debré Ordinance which transferred “subversive” civil servants to Metropolitan France, against the pervasive electoral fraud in Réunion, and the Communist Party’s victimization by the French state. Paul Vergès was the democratic champion of the Réunionnais people’s rights and the resistor of colonial oppression. The Party promoted local popular culture, music and political figures against Metropolitan French Republican ideology.¹⁹ While Debré never referred to social inequalities in Réunion - such as the system of slavery – the Communist Party used slavery and resistance as metaphors for their current political position in Réunion. The PCR claimed to be the direct descendants of the liberating 1848 abolitionists of slavery.²⁰ They also participated in meetings in the Antilles to present their project for Réunion’s autonomy during the 1960s and 1970s. Vergès also frequently visited socialist countries during this period.²¹

While rightwing city councils traditionally named their streets after Republican heroes, as soon as the PCR regained control of city councils in 1971, it named streets after Réunion Islanders linked to slavery. In 1971, the PCR city council of La Possession inaugurated new streets with the names of Edmund Albius,²² Sarda Garriga,²³ Anchain,

¹⁸ Paul Vergès and Brigitte Croisier, *D'une Ile au monde entretiens avec Brigitte Croisier* (Paris: Ed. Harmattan, 1993).

¹⁹ Admission of PCR leader Elie Hoarau, Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

²⁰ *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*; Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

²¹ This included the 1963 and 1968 Overseas France manifestos and the 1971 Morne Rouge declaration in Guadeloupe

²² Edmund Albius was a Reunion Island slave who discovered how to artificially pollinate vanilla flowers in the 19th century

²³ Sarda Garriga was the Republican commissary charged with announcing the 1848 abolition of slavery in Réunion in December 1848 as Victor Schoelcher had done in the Antilles in March 1848

Cimendef, who were linked to Réunion’s heritage of slavery and Raymond Vergès, the founder of the Communist Party in Réunion.²⁴



Figure 6.3 Fable: the Chinese cock (2nd district) and the Gallic cock (1st district)
Journal de l’Ile 17/2/1967

The discursive battle between Vergès and Debré was caricatured by the right-wing media in Réunion. The 1967 cartoon about the national elections in Réunion (Figure 6.3) contrasts the “Gallic cock”, a symbol of the French Republic with the “Chinese cock.” The Chinese cock’s head is a photograph of Paul Vergès and is portrayed falling down the side of a Réunion Island mountain, feathers flying. The “Chinese cock” emphasizes Vergès’ untrustworthy Vietnamese origins for racist effect. It portrays Vergès as a lackey of the USSR or China, and the Communists’ as a dangerous but a failure. In contrast, the Gallic cock stands in the foreground proudly asserting the rightful place of France in Réunion.

²⁴ Malagasy-origin place names in Reunion’s cirques named after 18th century maroon slaves; Anchain is a mountain peak in the Salazie Cirque, and Cimendef is a mountain peak in the cirque of Mafate

The cartoon was not penned by Michel Debré. A comprehensive study of Debré's political role in Réunion emphasizes that Michel Debré was not himself racist.²⁵ However, Debré claimed to champion an inclusive multiracial citizenship in Réunion, but obviously tolerated racist Réunionnais portrayals of Vergès' untrustworthy racial heritage. An acceptance of multiracial citizenship in Réunion acceptance did not extend to political enemies like Paul Vergès who did not share Debré's notion of France's Republican mission in Réunion.

Even in the 1980s, Michel Debré continued to assert his paternalist vision of multiracial French politics in Réunion (Figure 6.5).²⁶



Figure 6.4 Michel Debré with Réunion Island women and children c1986

Dressed in a formal suit, Michel Debré is the only man in the photograph. He is an incongruous figure among the Réunion Islanders. This photograph was not taken

²⁵ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

²⁶ Michel Debré, *Combattre toujours 1969-1993*, Trois républiques pour une France. (Paris: A. Michel, 1994).

specifically for an election. It is even more significant, as it is the only photograph of Michel Debré in Réunion Island in his entire five volume autobiography. This image was important for Debré and it clearly shows his acceptance of racial diversity in Réunion. Yet this photograph of Debré surrounded by a picturesque multiracial French diversity hides the political repression which needed to make it function. It also leaves the reader of his biography with an image of Réunion Islanders as the childlike and feminine recipients of his patriarchal munificence. The photograph suggests, as Françoise Vergès has argued, that the political relationship between Réunion and Metropolitan France has consistently followed this patriarchal framework, managed by the Metropole.²⁷

Réunion Islanders were not merely the passive victims of Debré's patriarchal regime, however. Despite the pervasive discourse of the two main political leaders in Réunion, Réunion Islanders also created their own frameworks for interpreting the meanings of being French in the Indian Ocean. From singing political songs of support to understanding the environment around them, Réunion Islanders did not merely recreate to carbon copies of Metropolitan French political ideology about the role of France in the Indian Ocean.

²⁷ Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

III. The meanings of being French in the Indian Ocean

Tonton Debré (Uncle Debré) c1971

1.		
<i>Na longtemps nu gett'</i>		For ages we've been searching
<i>Dans not'ciel out' l'avion</i>		In our skies for your plane
<i>Mais not' zîés y rest'</i>		But our eyes stay white
<i>Blanc comme un bout' coton</i>		[We're waiting in vain]
<i>REFRAIN</i>		<i>CHORUS</i>
<i>O tonton Michel</i>		Oh uncle Michel
<i>Coça l'arriv' aou</i>		What's happened to you?
<i>Laiss' pas nous tout seul</i>		Don't leave us alone
<i>Nous na besoin aou</i>		We need you
...		...
4.		
<i>A caus' rest' en Franc'</i>		Why do you stay in France?
<i>Ca la pas in' manières</i>		It's just not right
<i>Ou not' l'espéranc'</i>		You are our only chance
<i>Jeanne d'Arc' de l'il' entièr'</i>		The island's Joan of Arc
5.		
...		
<i>Si nous l'est héréés</i>		If we're happy
<i>Tonton ou mêm' l'auteur.</i> ²⁸		Uncle, it's all thanks to you

This *séga* song was written by two Réunionnais popular musicians. It appears to idolize Michel Debré as the very incarnation of France. Debré is framed as the originator of all the infrastructure and social renewal in Réunion. The first verse describes Islanders who look desperately into the sky. The politician is longed-for, but he doesn't arrive. The chorus reproaches Debré for his absence. Debré is described as “Joan of Arc for the entire island”; Joan of Arc is a savior figure from Metropolitan French political mythology

²⁸ The words and music are in the Debré papers with a message “reconnaissance et gratitude” written and signed by Jules Arlanda, a well-known Réunion Island *ségatier* born in 1923. AHC 9 DE 88 Arlanda, Jules (music) and Louis Jessu (lyrics). “Tonton Michel”. c1971

whose cross was used as General de Gaulle's symbol of Free France.²⁹ Michel Debré as Joan of Arc is the redeemer of Réunion who appears to need professions of public gratitude.

The song seems to merely adulate Michel Debré. Yet the song also reveals the growing financial and political power of the city councils in Réunion (explored in the following chapter). The song describes Réunion Islanders who stare at the sky, waiting for a plane to land. Réunion Islanders would frequently congregate at the island's airport to greet political figures when they landed. However they were often there because they were city council employees, transported by their employers and given free food to incite them to attend when Debré or other politicians landed at the airport.

Réunion Islanders sang songs to welcome visiting French politicians which mirrored Debré's rhetoric about an adoring, patriotic, French citizenship in the Indian Ocean. Yet these songs did not fit neatly into the political binaries drawn up by Debré and Vergès, where Réunion Islanders had to choose between either being French or being resisters to France's colonial oppression on the island. Even if Réunion Islanders attempted to reproduce Debré's rhetoric for his own consumption when he arrived in Réunion on political visits, Réunion Islanders also created their own notions of what it could mean to be French in the Indian Ocean.

Sega Debré 1973

<i>Debré l'arrivé, li artourne voir à nous</i>	Debré has come, he's come back to us
<i>Nout papa lé là, nout papa lé là</i>	Our papa is here, our papa is here
...	...
<i>Tout bann communistes y pé pas fait père à nous</i>	Those Communists can't make us afraid

²⁹ Eric Jennings, "Reinventing 'Jeanne': The Iconology of Joan of Arc in Vichy Schoolbooks, 1940-44 " *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994).

<i>Quand Debré lé là, quand Debré lé là</i>	When Debré is here, when Debré is here
...	...
<i>L'école, çomin, qui ça la donne à nous</i>	Who gave us the roads and the schools
<i>Si la pas Debré, si la pas Debré</i>	If not Debré, if not Debré
<i>Vieux moun, marmaille,</i>	The old and the young,
<i>Qui ça que la aide à nous</i>	Who helped us
<i>Si la pas Debré, si la pas Debré</i>	If not Debré, if not Debré
...	...
<i>Roule à ou Joseph, roule à ou Titine</i>	Roll it Joseph, roll it Titine !
<i>Voui lève quatre hères, voui coule café</i>	You get up at four, you brew the coffee
<i>Voui prend le car, roule à ou Tantine</i>	You take the bus, roll it girl!
<i>Dépêce vienne crille :</i>	Hurry, come shout!
<i>Vive Michel Debré !³⁰</i>	Long live Michel Debré!

This song was written for Debré's visit to the town of St Joseph in southeast Réunion in 1973. Guy Hoarau, Mayor of St Joseph for 32 years, was a supporter of Debré. The song is written in Réunionnais Creole and uses the local musical rhythm of *séga*. Although the song may resemble colonial celebrations of the French Empire, the song lyrics do not refer to France at all. Rather, they celebrate the powerful persona of Michel Debré.

Michel Debré is portrayed as a "papa", the providing father of Réunion Islanders. He is the defeater of Réunion's Communist party. Although the songwriter is anonymous, the depiction of Réunion and celebration of Debré make it highly probable that members of Réunion's rightwing elites –the Mayor, or the National Assembly deputy for southern Réunion - commissioned it. They wanted to impress their loyalty on Debré, to show that he was welcome and that they preferred his politics to those of the opposition Communist party.

The song describes Debré as the creator of schools and roads, and the source of social welfare for young and old on the island. In this rightwing elite perception of the French welfare, Debré is the agent of an imagined Réunionnais modernization. He is also

³⁰ AHC 9 DE 91 Séga Debré c1973 (I have copied the songwriters' spelling of Réunionnais Creole)

portrayed as the source of social rights and welfare for all citizens, eliding the left's battle for these social rights during the 1950s, the role of the previous administrations, and the access that Réunion Islanders should have had to these rights as supposedly equal French citizens. French citizenship rights now emanate from one individual, Michel Debré.

Yet once again, the last verse points to the political pressures in Réunion. The song describes what the singers should have done that morning: arise at four, brew their coffee and get on the bus to come and shout "long live Michel Debré." The real buses that actually transported Réunion Islanders to sing Michel Debré's praises, and to listen to his speeches were provided by city councils. The song praises Michel Debré but once more reveals the rising power of city governments, and the pressure they exerted on communal employees to participate in political events, in return for maintaining their jobs.

Bienvenue Monsieur le Ministre 1973

Lost in the heart of the ocean
At 13,000 kilometers from Paris
We, too, are the children
Of France, our motherland
Our hearts are full of love
And will always remember
The immense kindness
That France has showered on us.

Children in the town of St Joseph sang this song to welcome the Minister for Overseas France who also visited La Réunion in 1973.³¹ They sang that they were the children of France who gratefully received the kindness of the 'mother country' in their faraway island lost in the Indian Ocean. The celebratory lyrics of this song appear redolent of high French colonial propaganda, even though they were sung over a decade after the official

³¹ CAC 19940180/264 Visite Stasi DOM TOM 1/6/1973

end of French imperialism.³² Yet once again, the song appears to be pro-French but it also emphasizes that Reunion is not a carbon copy of France, but is located in “the heart” of the Indian Ocean, 13,000 km from the French capital.

Rightwing Réunion Islanders sought to emulate and reproduce Debré’s patriotic rhetoric. Réunion Islanders physically participated in these public rituals legitimizing and celebrating Debré’s role in Réunion. Yet what they thought of France was also mixed in their own experiences of local pressure from city governments. The song lyrics demonstrate that Réunion Islanders were also finding their own ways of expressing the meanings of being French in the Indian Ocean.

ii. Locating France in the Indian Ocean

Réunion Islanders were taught to understand themselves as French citizens particularly through schools, the principal medium of indoctrination into national French culture. The boom in school construction occurred in Réunion at the end of the 1950s. Réunion Islanders who grew up in St Denis shantytowns in the 1960s were the first generation to have a comprehensive school experience, and were the first to fully learn about the prevailing and pervasive political discourses about France through French Republican education. In contrast to the rural Petit Blanc of the 1950s, who wondered whether his teacher had invented a place called France (Chapter 3) by the 1960s France was more present in daily life. Far more young people were educated, and stayed at school, having longer contact with the French republican education system.

³² Pascal Blanchard, Sandrine Lemaire, and Didier Daeninckx, *Culture impériale. Les colonies au coeur de la République, 1931-1961* Collection Mémoires (Paris: Ed. Autrement, 2004).

Indoctrination by the French education system in Réunion encouraged Mr. D, born in 1963, to believe that France was the celebrated “mother country” which Michel Debré championed. “Like all Creoles I thought France was super, immense, you know, the dream” Mr. D said. When he arrived in the Metropole to do his military service in 1980, Mr. D realized that his image of French racial equality did not hold up to the reality of Metropolitan France, like many, many Réunion Islanders before and since. Equal, multi-racial, French citizens did not seem to apply in Metropolitan France. Mr. D’s fellow soldiers on military service called him a *bougnole*, a highly derogatory French insult directed at people of North African origin. Mr. D. told me that his experience made him realize that, despite what he had been told growing up in Reunion, in the Metropole Réunion Islanders were “just French on paper.”³³

Left-wing families participated in the affirmation of Réunion Island Communist political culture, alongside the indoctrination of the French education system. Mr. Lionel Boyer remembered that “my grandmother only swore on the name of ‘Papa Verges’!”³⁴ Although support for the Communist Party was smaller, Party members and supporters often attended political meetings outside, or in the Rio cinema in St Denis during the 1970s. They participated in a parallel form of political culture to the meetings where Réunion Islanders sung about Michel Debré. In Communist Party meetings the emphasis was on Réunionnais identity.

³³ From my conversations with many people in Réunion, this realization of an unequal citizenship seems to be a universal phenomenon when Réunion Islanders travel to the Metropole. Réunion Islanders discover that, in contrast to what they have learnt in Réunion, they are not perceived as racially French; and their school qualifications are sometimes considered to be second class, even though they are identical to the Metropolitan education system

³⁴ Interview Lionel Boyer 2/6/2009

People from politically active left-wing families invariably despised Debré and his policies. Gisèle Tarnus was born in 1958. She is a middle-class Réunion Islander whose parents supported Réunion's Communist Party, and is also descended from the exiled Prince of Annam.

Michel Debré was ... an anti-hero, what you *shouldn't* be like. When he made his speeches I always heard my father saying 'it's easy for him ... he has all the power' ... we really weren't convinced [that his programs were reasonable]; we felt he was self-seeking, only interested in power, [Réunion Island] was only a springboard for him.³⁵

Just like Réunion Islanders who participated in right-wing political meetings, those who supported the Communist Party could also find a space to change their opinions from the prevailing discourse. Mr. C, born in 1955, told me that as a child, he had attended Communist meetings. He had chanted "we want to be independent" along with other participants, but he claims he did not understand any of it. When he was 21 he changed political sides. "I understood that thank goodness that France was behind us ... Michel Debré brought development to Réunion." Many Réunion Islanders attempted to navigate their own course between the different and competing political discourse on the island, to make their own understanding of what it meant to be French in the Indian Ocean.

Mr. M, born in 1951 felt that the French education system told him tales about a place which seemed almost unreal. "All those stories (*tout bann zistoires*) ... school says to you that you're French ... you know that you're French, you don't say that you're Creole, you say that you're French." In contrast to Debré's claim that Réunion Islanders spontaneously felt French, being French was clearly a process of cultural indoctrination – as in all national identity – but which was strongly perceived as indoctrination by poor

³⁵ Interview Gisèle Tarnus 17/7/2009

Réunion Islanders. Yet France was also a real place for Mr. M. He lived in Maperine, a shantytown next to the airport runway. When politicians arrived from Paris, France became a material presence in his life as the airplanes landed. “You had to think about France! The airport was just next door! When the planes landed, the house used to shake! *Té oblige penser, té juste à côté! Quand l'avion té pose la case té tremble !*”

Jean-Pierre Gourama was born in 1963 in a shantytown next to SIDR Petite Ile. He had Indian ancestors from his father’s side and Malagasy grandparents on his mother’s side. Mr. Gourama grew up in Petite Ile but he had to cross the St Denis river to attend the primary school in Bas de la Rivière. When I asked him to tell me what he thought of France, he was stuck for words, and sat thinking for a minute. He then mused “you know, nobody ever asked me that”. This proves how the idea of Réunion Island as French became a hegemonic idea for Islanders, which people are not used to questioning. France was not merely an abstract concept for him. Mr. Gourama materially located “France” and “Réunion” in his daily life and the world around him.

In school it’s France ... there’s the schoolmistress, the [French] teaching, you’re in another dimension. When we left school we took the path back home, we crossed the river ... at home it’s no longer France! When my dad arrived drunk at home it wasn’t France! You understand? I had to go and fetch water, the tin bucket (*fer-blanc*) on my head; there was no more talk of France. ... I had a brother who left for France with the BUMIDOM to train ... maybe the TV told us something about France, a few films, but afterwards it was over!

Mr. Gourama’s comments illustrate that the polarized political rhetoric of Debré and Vergès hid many ambiguities. “Integration” or “resistance” to France was complicated by Réunion Islanders’ daily participation in French state institutions, and especially schools. Yet as Mr. Gourama underlined, French schooling did not “make” him French. In his daily life around Petite Ile, schooling was a separate, French dimension, as was the

growing presence of French mass media. Mr. Gourama framed part of his childhood material world as French and part as not French. This suggests that he interiorized civic or masculine values such as not getting drunk as ideologically French. Equally he classified manual activities like fetching water as *not* being French. This underlines that “French” jobs in Réunion were usually perceived as being with the growing administration and civil service. Réunion Islanders – such as Jean-Pierre Gourama’s brother - were encouraged to go to work in Metropolitan France through the Overseas France Migration Bureau (BUMIDOM) created by Debré and were obliged to do national service.³⁶ France was a real place and a destination for Réunion Islanders.

Mr. C remembered Réunion Islanders crying as the train left the army barracks in Petite Ile for Le Port, as families said goodbye to young men going to do their French military service in Algeria or elsewhere. Mr. M knew that France existed because he lived near the airport and saw President De Gaulle arrive in 1959, as well as Michel Debré and other French politicians. Whilst French citizenship and France became natural, unquestioned categories for some Réunion Islanders, they were also contingent on experiences – whether at school, or traveling to France.

Debré often claimed that Réunion Islanders of all racial origins were equal to Metropolitan French citizens. The majority of subaltern Réunion Islanders who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s did not actively consider the meanings of their French citizenship,

³⁶ This is especially and viscerally true in relation to the BUMIDOM office which, worried about demographic increase, sent poor Réunion Island children to ‘populate’ rural parts of France. These ‘enfants de la Creuse’ suffered all manner of racial discrimination and could not contact their families in Reunion. Even if Debré was not quite at the origin of this forced migration (see Prefect correspondence c1958-60), Debré is closely associated with the creation of BUMIDOM and sending Réunion Islanders off to work in France, never to return. This part of Debré’s policy is too large to elaborate here, though undoubtedly crucial for how Réunion Islanders remember Debré’s policies today. Gauvin, “Michel Debré et l’Ile de La Réunion. Archéologie d’une Identité Nationale (1946-1988)”; Ivan Jablonka, *Enfants en exil : transfert de pupilles réunionnais en métropole, 1963-1982*, Univers historique (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

unless they experienced it by travelling to the Metropole. This continues to be the case for Réunion Islanders who leave to work or study in Metropolitan France. In spite of Debré's claims about an equal, multiracial French citizenship in Réunion, Islanders often found that the relative social and racial equality of Réunion Island was not the same as in Metropolitan France, when they arrived in the Metropole.

IV. Conclusion

Michel Debré and Paul Vergès were reliant on maintaining their political views as completely opposed in order to create two defined electoral constituencies in Réunion. These powerful, popular and contrasting poles of political discourse monopolized political discourse and action for decades in Réunion. Even though Michel Debré died in 1992, they still continue to shape political representations in Réunion. Since 1998 Paul Vergès has been President of Réunion's Regional Council. In March 2006, on the 60th anniversary of Réunion becoming an Overseas Department in 1946, Paul Vergès made an effective publicity stunt. Michel Debré was no longer alive but Paul Vergès invited Debré's son, Jean-Louis Debré, to Réunion for the celebrations. As a book cover using a photograph of the event shows (Figure 6.6) Paul Vergès made a public ritual of hugging Jean-Louis Debré.³⁷ By doing so, Vergès positioned himself as the magnanimous victor of a dual struggle, underlining the continued importance of these historical political divisions in Réunion Island political life which were shaped by Debré and Vergès from the early 1960s.

³⁷ Ary Yee Chong Tchi Kan, *Réconciliation et fraternité* (St Denis: Océan Editions, 2009).



Figure 6.5 “Reconciliation” of Paul Vergès and Jean-Louis Debré, 2006

Two main political groups attempted to dominate Réunion from 1963 to 1988.³⁸ Both groups claimed to hold the definitive answer to the question of Réunion’s political future: Réunion as an extension of the French nation or Réunion as the nation of the Réunionnais people. Ordinary Réunion Islanders were often pressured to take part in the political culture of these groups as city council employees for the right wing or for the Communist Party (after 1971). Yet in their own daily lives, Réunion Islanders did not consider France and Réunion to be two separate, irreconcilable entities. Rather, they found ways of understanding France as a material presence in their lives in Réunion. And despite Debré’s promises of Réunion Islanders’ multiracial citizenship, Islanders frequently experienced different racial categorizations when they travelled to Metropolitan France.

³⁸ The rise of other political groups in Réunion (such the Socialist party) from the 1970s complicates this narrative, but does not change the important public political duality which supporters of Vergès and Debré both worked to maintain.

The political opposition between the right and the left wing in Réunion attempted to define Réunion as entirely French or entirely local. Yet both political groups silenced the means of their party's political support and financial power. Both the Communist Party (after 1971) and the rightwing were financially reliant on the French administration's funding of local government, and of social insurance schemes in Réunion. Both groups were also reliant on local forms of Réunionnais politics, based around landlord-tenant relations and networks of Réunionnais sociability. These networks distributed material benefits paid for by the French administration to local voters to maintain political support, as the following chapter demonstrates.

CHAPTER 7 TRANSFORMING CLASS RELATIONS AND LANDHOLDING THROUGH FRENCH SOCIAL LEGISLATION 1967-1981

I. Introduction

The Prefect's 1964 shantytown decree had allowed Debré, the Prefecture and the SIDR to become the intermediaries of the class divide in Réunion, and had permitted Réunion Islanders to individually claim their rights to welfare from the French administration. By 1966 the French state's role as the intermediary had started to change. Elected Creole elites in city councils started to take control of key posts in the French administration.

As part of his strategy to forge worker allegiance to the French administration, in 1963 Michel Debré created a social insurance fund for Réunion. Local employer contributions funded the distribution of financial resources to Réunion's city councils for social projects. This gave Réunion's city councils vastly increased economic power. The city councils could now distribute material goods and employ increasing numbers of the electorate. The increased financial power of the city councils allowed Mayors and other city councilors to challenge the traditional political and economic dominance of the landholders.

In 1973 Auguste Legros, Mayor of St Denis also became President of the SIDR housing agency. He retained these two posts until 1989. Legros now combined his significant economic and political power as Mayor of St Denis with the traditional role of

a landholder. Legros was a new type of Réunionnais landholder, however. He did not personally own the land but managed it for the SIDR, and for his own political interests. Legros' control of the SIDR and the St Denis city government allowed him to create new political networks in the social housing neighborhoods by distributing jobs, housing and building materials to political allies. Elected officials in the city councils were able to use the resources of the French administration, giving them much more financial and political power than ever before.

The increased financial power of the city councils, through new applications of French social legislation enabled previously poor Réunion Islanders - especially women who had previously worked as domestic servants - to seize economic and political opportunities working for city council school canteens and as school sweepers. The new application of French social legislation in Réunion, with its significant financial resources, fundamentally transformed traditional class divisions between the extremely poor majority and the landowning minority by creating a new middle class. However, in the same way as landowners had previously been the source of material wealth, many people now considered that material welfare and employment came directly from the Mayors.

I. The increasing financial and social power of city governments

i. Health and social care before 1964

After the 1946 law of assimilation into France, Réunion's 24 city governments had financially benefited from being part of the French administration. Réunionnais Mayors were able to give more incentives to Réunion Islanders to vote for them, as they had

increased financial resources obtained from new local taxes and financial transfers from the French state.¹ Declining geranium agriculture, sugar cane layoffs and agricultural mechanization had forced Mayors to give out employment in public works. Jobs were usually given to political allies in the neighborhood. From 1948, healthcare in Réunion was also governed by the Mayors who distributed tickets for free health care to their constituents.² The healthcare tickets were paid for by the French state. They could be used as a political favor to constituents and to specific local doctors and pharmacists.³

This social system was extremely costly for the French state. In 1964 central government in Paris paid 66% of all social assistance costs in Réunion compared with 5.2% of social costs in the Metropole. Central government paid for 50% of all healthcare in Réunion, compared with 2.65% of healthcare in Metropolitan France.⁴ Another 1964 report claimed that out of Réunion's 380,000 habitants, 222,000 people were eligible for social care paid for by central French and local Réunionnais governments.⁵ The report claimed that this contributed to a "welfare mindset" or *mentalité d'assistés* in a large part of the Overseas French population who, it claimed, merely waited for handouts from the state. The first Réunion Island social workers' manual in 1964 also warned its readers of the Réunionnais welfare mindset. It claimed that Réunion Islanders "give the impression of abandoning, at least partially, their [personal] responsibility ... to the Welfare state

¹ City council incomes included a share in Réunion's lucrative *octroi de mer* import tax which was levied on a range of consumer goods to Réunion, including gasoline

² The Assistance Médicale Generalisée was instituted in Réunion in October 1948

³ Many of my informants claimed that the Mayor's control of medical aid meant that access to social care depended on political affiliation, but others declared that this was not the case.

⁴ ADR 53 W 1 Les départements français d'outre-mer. Le Développement des DFOM, Edité Information et entreprise SA, 38 Avenue des Ternes, Paris XVII pour le compte du Ministère DTOM 1/3/1964

⁵ CAC 19840179/1 Societe d'aide technique et de cooperation, 110 rue de l'Universite, Paris VIIe 1/9/1964

Etat-Providence ... the state holds a treasure of which they don't know the origin but only where it has to go – because it is [their] right.”⁶

These Metropolitan French commentators the complicated landlord tenant relations and which existed in Réunion and merely assumed that Réunion Islanders had chosen to be passive spectators of state munificence. The increased social aid after 1963 and the new employment opportunities it offered to poor Réunionnais women shows that the welfare mindset did not accurately reflect their experiences and ambitions. As more women became employed in city government jobs, the political importance of women in Réunion changed. Dinner ladies and city council employees were forced to participate in political demonstrations to retain their jobs. Yet women were not merely the dependent puppets of charismatic city council politicians, or the passive recipients of state-funded welfare jobs. They used this new system to improve their material conditions, and created new political and economic opportunities for themselves.

ii. The creation of the FASO

In 1963 Michel Debré reorganized social and health care in Réunion on a miniature version of a Metropolitan French model. Employer contributions would fund an island-wide social insurance organization called the FASO (Fonds d'Action Sanitaire et Solidaire Obligatoire).⁷ Health and social care would no longer be locally controlled by the city governments. The FASO would co-ordinate health and social care in Réunion, funded by Metropolitan French subsidies and by private sector salary contributions in

⁶ ADR PB 2350 Secrétariat social de La Réunion. Problèmes sociaux de La Réunion 1964

⁷ Arrêté du 14 aout 1963 modifié par arrêté du 14 octobre 1968

Réunion. Civil servants, teachers and other state employees contributed to Metropolitan social funds instead of the FASO.

Even though the 13.5% salary contributions were the same, the FASO differed from Metropolitan social insurance funds. Individual workers had family allowances in the Metropole. In Réunion Island individual family allowance diminished after the fourth child. The remaining money was held back and put into the FASO fund. This was a deliberate policy to privilege state-imposed “collective” benefits over individual benefits for Réunion Islanders. It was also a doomed attempt to discourage Réunion Islanders from having too many children by limiting their family allowances; Réunion Islanders valued large families as a sign of wealth and many followed Catholic contraception practices.

Despite these inequalities the FASO fund created enormous social change in Réunion. The FASO paid for school canteens as part of Michel Debré’s broader plan to improve child health on the island through better nutrition.⁸ They also FASO paid for dinner ladies to work in the canteens.⁹ Women did not need to be educated to work as a dinner lady preparing and serving meals, but they could earn significantly more money than working in agriculture, as a domestic servant or as a washerwoman. Dinner ladies also had access to pension rights and had a superior social status than domestic employment. Nevertheless, working on an annually renewable contract as a dinner lady for the city government was also a precarious job. To be re-employed the following year, women were pressured to demonstrate their political loyalty to the Mayor.

⁸ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

⁹ Central government later expanded the FASO to pay for social workers, contraception education, housing aid and other groups which promoted social and health goals CAC 19790543/72 Affaires d’outre-mer: allocation-logement Ministre Equipement 1971

II. The transformation of female labor in Réunion

The advent of employer contributions restructured male employment in Réunion from agricultural work to the construction sector (see Chapter 3). This did not affect women's labor. Most women in urban areas were undeclared domestic servants, or worked for themselves as washerwomen.¹⁰ Many of these women had African or Indian ancestry, and the figure of the matronly domestic servant or *nenène* was a standard part of elite Creole domestic culture.¹¹ In the 1950s domestic servants were not always paid, and some employers still merely gave servants a room to live in the sheds or *dependences* in the back yard.¹² Roger Vailland visiting La Réunion in 1959 noted that “for the same price as a cleaning lady in Paris, [Réunion Islanders] can employ a cook, a nanny and houseboys.”¹³ The Prefect noted in 1954 that almost everyone who could afford it employed domestic servants as it was a mark of class aspirations.¹⁴

A scene of the *Sucre Amer* film which covered Debré's 1963 election emphasizes the social control that some employers had over their domestic servants. In the film, an elite Creoles woman tells the political meeting to “let their domestic servants out” for the elections. A woman with her cardigan demurely draped over her shoulders, clearly a member of the Creole elite says: “I thus ask you to explain to your [pause] domestics that they must vote. Even if you have to do their work instead, do the work, Ladies, of your

¹⁰ CAC 19940180/9 Documentation sur le Département de La Réunion et la ville de Saint-Denis à l'occasion du voyage du Général de Gaulle juillet 1959

¹¹ Frédéric Mocadel, *Dames créoles* (Sainte Marie [Réunion]: Azalées Éditions, 2005). Interview Suzie Bachelier 11/2007

¹² CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel de mai 1954 05/06/1954

¹³ ADR 380 W 240 *France-Soir* Roger Vailland. ‘A la recherche du paradis perdu’ 22/5/1959

¹⁴ CARAN F/1cIII/1363 Préfet de La Réunion à M. le ministre de l'intérieur. Objet : rapport mensuel de mai 1954 05/06/1954

[pause] servants. They must go and vote.” The woman’s hesitant use of the French words *serviteurs* and *domestiques* in front of the cameras, rather than the more derogatory Creole *nenène*, or the French *bonne* (which were much more commonly used in speech) shows that she was trying to make a good impression for the cameras. The woman’s exhortation to let the servants out even if it meant doing their work underlines the power that employers had on their domestic servants’ liberty.

The social importance of domestic servants was changed by the alternative employment opportunities offered by new government and city council service jobs in Réunion. Domestic service no longer became the inevitable job of poor women. Women actively sought out these new opportunities. The right-wing Catholic weekly newspaper *Croix Sud* feared that these social changes threatened to discourage women from being domestic servants in a 1964 article.

The article is framed as an older man meeting a young woman named ‘Celine’ who is walking through the streets of St Denis wearing her best clothes and with a folder under her arm, as if she was going to work in an office. Celine is a domestic servant, and the narrator is confused why she is carrying a folder. Celine admits that it looks “better” to be an office worker, because “in her work people consider her as lower than others; boys don’t look at her when she is wearing her apron.” The narrator is aghast at Celine’s social aspirations, and her shame about being a domestic servant.

I want to cry out ... in front of all the employers that your job is the most beautiful that exists! I know you are badly paid! I know that sometimes people take advantage of you! ... I know you are often alone and because you come from the *quartiers* it is difficult to go out with girls that you don’t know! ... You are my sister Celine, and not my inferior! ... If I can ask you to do anything, it is to love your job!¹⁵

¹⁵ 1 PER 83/8 *Croix Sud* Regard sur la vie - employée de maison 26/04/1964

This 1964 article underlines that middle and upper classes in Réunion were anxious about the changing opportunities for poor Réunion Island women. Women from the St Denis *quartiers* – a euphemism for the poor shantytown neighborhoods - now had opportunities to work in offices. Domestic work was no longer a job to be proud of.

In the language of Christian charity, the article attempts to persuade the reader – presumably a domestic servant, but also employers - that domestic work is really enriching and valuable. Celine is the author’s “equal” rather than his “inferior”. She is a poor equal, however, who is explicitly told not to have any other aspirations, but to love her job. If the journalist was moved to “cry” that domestic servants were equal, it reveals that poor Réunion Island women were considered to be fit only for domestic work, and to stay with those aspirations. The article underlines that readers had become anxious about the new opportunities for these women in other occupations, and that there were fewer women wanting to do this job.

It is not explicitly stated in the article, but domestic service was usually only considered suitable work for African and Indian–origin women in Réunion. By dissuading domestic servants to have other aspirations, the *Croix Sud* article implicitly aimed to retain African and Indian origin women as their domestic labor force. A 1971 secret police report reveals these pervasive attitudes about race and domestic servants in Réunion. Increased French education opportunities also posed a threat to the old racially defined plantation order in Réunion.

Mr. X, teacher in the [St Denis] Leconte de Lisle high school, gave his ... class to understand that Mme Y had told him, in relation to students graduating from the

class, “that you mustn’t uplift the little blacks [*petits nègres*] too much, or there won’t be any more domestic servants in Réunion.”¹⁶

The above police report was concerned that Mr. X’s comment had made the class angry with Mme Y. The report specifies that Mr. X was “known for his Communist ideas.” The police report only emphasized Mr. X’s Communist views. It did not comment on the racist opinions of Mme Y, underlining that her racialized view of domestic labor was totally natural in Réunion in 1971, and not even worth commenting on.

i. Domestic servants to dinner ladies

The FASO funds significantly changed employment opportunities for women. FASO allocated money to city governments to pay for free meals in primary schools. These funds also paid for the employment of municipal dinner ladies. Being employed as a dinner lady was an easier job than being a domestic servant, in terms of the hours worked, and the length of the working day. City councils were also able to employ far more of their female electorate, and for longer periods than the two week public works programs which had been given to men. However, being a dinner lady meant publicly supporting city governments during election time, going to political meetings and waiting at the airport for politicians to arrive from Metropolitan France.

By 1964, only eighteen months after the creation of the FASO, 135 primary school canteens had been set up in Réunion.¹⁷ The St Paul commune was the second biggest in Réunion, and 43 out of its 44 primary schools had canteens in 1966. The budget records of the St Paul city government demonstrate the growing importance of

¹⁶ CAC 19940180/240 Préfecture de La Réunion, note de renseignements 27/07/1971

¹⁷ Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l’île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

city employment - including dinner ladies - from the 1960s (St Paul has more detailed records than St Denis for this period).

In 1963 the city government of St Paul spent 27% of its budget on personnel, and 15% on other social care such as medical aid.¹⁸ The following year the city council spent over double the amount on personnel, 56% of its total budget. This took money from other operations such as providing running water or paving roads in the rural areas. In 1964 the Prefect told city governments to distribute meals for children during the school holidays. The St Paul city government decided not to pay for school canteens during the holidays, even though the employees and food were paid by the FASO. It used the money to pay for personnel, aligning all its employees with the 35% salary bonus that other civil servants received when working in Réunion.¹⁹ St Paul city government also used the FASO money for other costs. In 1964 the council transferred money from the school food budget to the “parties and ceremonies” budget which included meals and drinks for the city council members.²⁰ In 1970, St Paul had not used up all of its funding for the canteens. It used 8% of the FASO funds to buy some land for city buildings.²¹

Michel Debré asked the Prefect to investigate whether city governments were embezzling FASO money²² *Témoignages* also denounced the embezzlement of canteen funds in 1968, perhaps because the Communist Party did not control any city councils between 1962 and 1971). *Témoignages* accused city governments of only providing

¹⁸ AMSP (25/1/1963 - 24/4/1965) Affaire 1 examen et vote du budget primitif pour 1963 30/01/1963

¹⁹ AMSP (PVs 25/1/1963 a 24/4/1965) Affaire no 22 - Repas chaud aux enfants des écoles pendant les vacances 21/12/1964 ; AMSP (22/10/1965-28/10/1968) Affaire No 1, Examen et vote du budget primitif 1966 29/12/1965 Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*.

²⁰ AMSP (25/1/1963 - 24/4/1965) Affaire No 16, Compte 6601 Fêtes et Cérémonies 28/10/1963

²¹ AMSP (30/12/1969 - 27/5/1971) Affaire no 21 - acquisition du terrain de M. Jacques Chabrier 08/10/1970

²² Letter from Debré to Vaudeville Gauvin, *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*, 65.

meals twice a week, instead of every day, despite the fact that the communal employees were employed all year round. The Communist Party newspaper even claimed that city governments used FASO money to employ strongmen *nervis*.²³ Although city governments certainly employed strongmen, female city employees paid for by the FASO were also important political campaigners who were also used by city government during election time.

Mme D became a city dinner lady after having worked as a domestic servant. Her son told me her story and emphasized the different kinds of constraints which Mme D may have felt changing from domestic employment to dinner lady. Mme D left her family's sharecropping occupation to search for an urban job in St Denis in the early 1950s. She became a domestic servant for a doctor in St Denis. She had 14 children and lived in a St Denis shantytown. She worked all day in the doctor's house, and sometimes worked late in the evening if the doctor was entertaining. Mme D's son vividly an occasion when the doctor came to eat with his wife and children in their shantytown house in St Denis. He remembers watching open-mouthed as his mother, with a towel over her arm, poured water from a jug for the doctor to wash his hands in their courtyard. He had never seen his mother do the same for someone in her own family, and this underlined for him the social position of domestic servants as the lowest in Réunionnais society.

When Mme D's partner died in 1973 she gained a job as a dinner lady in Mayor Legros' city council through a friend's influence. While the salary was much better, Mr. D felt that his mother had merely transferred her submission to the doctor to submissive

²³ *Michel Debré et l'île de la Réunion : une certaine idée de la plus grande France*, 66.

obedience to the Mayor. His mother feared losing her job if she did not attend political meetings or to go to the airport to welcome politicians such as Michel Debré when they arrived from France.

Whenever one of the [French] politicians came to St Denis, she had to go and welcome the ‘guardian angel’ (*l’homme providentiel*) because she worked for the city government. I call that submissive because if she didn’t turn up, she would have lost her job. ... You give someone a job, and all their life they have to be grateful? I’m revolted by that political mechanism...

Mr. D’s felt that nothing had changed when his mother became a dinner lady after having been a domestic servant. She merely continued to be submissive. Mr. D claimed that nowadays he still had to persuade his mother to stand up for her rights. When she received administrative letters in error, she would not protest, whereas Mr. D would tell her “don’t let it go, [that time] is over, you have your rights, you have to take them”.

Mr. D’s analysis of his mother’s submission was partly colored by his different political views, and his different education and life experience. Perhaps if Mme D had told me the story herself, it might have been different. After all, she also had access to social insurance benefits, worked fewer hours, and had a better salary than a domestic servant. Other women I spoke to in Petite Ile recognized that being a dinner lady gave them new opportunities for political and social power, as well as increasing their earning power.

III. Local elites take control of social housing

In 1966 Aimé Césaire railed against the power and the monopoly of state-funded housing companies during a debate at the National Assembly. As a deputy for Martinique and Mayor of its largest town, Fort-de-France, Césaire turned social housing into a political

priority and became well-known for this policy.²⁴ Césaire accused the unelected technocrats who ran the housing companies of using their power without any democratic checks.²⁵ Césaire proposed that locally elected leaders should have control over state-funded housing companies.²⁶

Like Césaire, Réunionnais elites had wanted to control the SIDR since its creation in 1949. In 1967, the same year as Césaire's speech, the powerful local politician Pierre Lagourgue became the first Réunionnais President of the SIDR. In 1968 the rightwing Auguste Legros became Mayor of St Denis, and in 1973 Legros replaced Lagourgue as President of the SIDR. In 1971 Paul Vergès became Mayor of the Port and in the same year he also became Vice-President of the SEDRE, another of Réunion's mixed-economy infrastructure and housing companies, underlining the local elites' growing control of state subsidized organizations.²⁷

From 1973 Auguste Legros was able to control rent and housing through the SIDR, and city council jobs and finances through his post as Mayor of St Denis. Legros also campaigned on behalf of Michel Debré who was the deputy of the electoral district that included St Denis. Funds such as the FASO enabled Auguste Legros to hire local workers such as dinner ladies. Legros also distributed gifts such as building materials and social housing to SIDR and shantytown neighborhoods. His networks of material distribution used the threat of higher rents or job losses to incite people to politically support him. With his control over the SIDR's significant property holdings in St Denis,

²⁴ The SIMAG was the Antillean counterpart of the SIDR. Césaire's rehousing policy is critiqued in Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

²⁵ *Journal Officiel* Assemblée Nationale, Loi finances 1967. Equipement, logement. 1er séance 9/11/1966.

²⁶ The SIMAG was created in 1955 for Martinique and Guadeloupe, becoming the Martinique-only housing company SIMAR in 1971

²⁷ SEDRE : Société d'Equipement du Département de La Réunion ; AHC 9 DE 4 Dedayan: note pour le ministre 23/12/1971

created by the 1964-1973 construction boom, French social legislation had effectively enabled Auguste Legros to become a powerful new urban landlord in Réunion.

IV. The SIDR: a new landlord

In the late 1950s, the French administration had feared that Petite Ile was a bastion of Communism. By the end of the 1960s the neighborhood began to support the right-wing because inhabitants of Petite Ile had been employed in city council jobs, had been allocated SIDR houses with rents paid by the city council, and controlled local distribution of food to electoral supporters. I interviewed a number of retired women in Petite Ile about their experiences as dinner ladies and school cleaners for the city council. Mme Robert, whose sister was employed as a city dinner lady, summarized the social obligations of the city council workforce. “They were always running around after the politicians! (*tout le temps té bat karé pou bann zhomme politique!*)” Mme Robert laughed.

Even if working for the city council involved “running round” for the politicians, women in Petite Ile were prepared to offer this electoral support. They all stopped being washerwomen and domestic servants as soon as there was a better opportunity working as cleaners and dinner ladies, although some also worked in the private sector - Mme B became a cleaner for the a Parisian bank when it opened in St Denis in 1963. As the St Paul city records demonstrate, city governments were prepared to spend significant sums of money on their personnel. City councils also employed more people than the private sector, as they were not expected to turn a profit.

Mme T currently lives in a SIDR house in Petite Ile and previously lived in Camp des Noirs. As a dinner lady, Mme T became involved in politics from the early 1960s in St Denis. In return for continued employment, she was expected to reciprocate with political support for the Mayor.²⁸ Her memories of her political practices were strongly linked to the personality of the Mayor of St Denis, and the material benefits he could deliver. “Ah, Michel Debré! I was his activist! I supported him (*moïn té marche ek li*)! I was an activist for Auguste Legros, Mr. Debré, and Mr. Chirac! ...” she told me proudly, mentioning President Chirac only after Mayor Legros and Michel Debré who were obviously more significant for her. In her living room, Mme T had photos of herself next to all of these political figures, because they had accompanied Auguste Legros on political visits to SIDR Petite Ile during election time. A number of people I spoke to remembered Michel Debré coming to political meetings in Mme T’s house.

Mrs. T remembered her days as an activist for Mayor Legros with evident relish. She enjoyed the political outings and the freedom to spend time with her female friends “marching” for the Mayor (the Creole expression for public political support is *marcher pour* - to “march’ for). “Day or night! We marched in Brûlé, everywhere! La Montagne [to stick posters up on the walls]! ... We’d go over and help Barau [the Mayor of Sainte Marie]!” She took pleasure in attending Mayor Legros’ political meetings at the Place Verdun in Petite Ile, because there would be free samosas and Coca Cola.

Mrs. T was not merely content with food, however. She managed to get a city council job for her daughter and an SIDR apartment in St Denis for her sister because she was an important neighborhood political organizer. She encouraged residents of Petite Ile

²⁸ In France, primary schools are organized at the communal level. Thus in St Denis Mrs. T along with other cleaners, janitors, bus drivers and dinner ladies were employed by the St Denis city government

to attend house meetings, political rallies in the neighborhood, and larger events like attending Michel Debré's speeches. She organized the city council buses which lined up at the Place Verdun in Petite Ile to transport communal employees to the airport to welcome Michel Debré. Another person in Petite Ile told me that "when the [politicians] arrived, there would be five or six buses full up with people [in Petite Ile] because [she] distributed [city] provisions." People who supported the Mayor received food provisions as long as they attended political meetings. At the end of the month Mme T doled out tins of beans, a bag of rice, or some cooking oil to active political supporters of Legros. These were a welcome help to poor Réunion Islanders.

A younger member of Mme T's family claimed that poverty and material improvement were the only motivations for people in Petite Ile with jobs in the city council. Rather than people passively waiting for state welfare, they made calculated choices about the political figures who would protect them.

I'd say that [in] Petite Ile ... almost everyone was right-wing. Why? At that time people were given provisions, tickets [for] sugar, rice, etc. If you supported the other side you didn't get sugar, on that basis people weren't choosy (*ils ne faisaient pas le difficile*). ... I can only talk about that today, but I don't have the same political opinions. My parents were right-wing by obligation.

Mme T did not seem to have been a supporter of a right wing mayor only by obligation. She clearly enjoyed the political and economic opportunities which working for the city council offered her.

Jean-Luc Alba's family was also political organizers in another neighborhood in St Denis, where they lived on their own plot of land in the 1960s. His mother got a job as a city dinner lady in a primary school in St Denis and in return she agreed to have political meetings in her house for Auguste Legros. As a boy, Jean-Luc enjoyed these

political meetings as there was always food, drink and music, paid for by the city government. The Mayor regularly rewarded the Alba family with cement and corrugated iron to help build and extend the houses on the family plot of land. Indeed, his family only had to order these building materials from Ravate (a major St Denis hardware store) and they would be delivered to them, paid for by the City government. His siblings ended up working for the city council and Jean-Luc eventually went to work for the SIDR, underlining the links between political jobs, housing materials and jobs for children. Every woman I spoke to who had been a dinner lady in the 1960s had managed to get jobs for some of her children in the city council.

Just as Mr. D's described his mother's "submission", other people in Petite Ile hated the link between material benefits and expected political support. Jean-Pierre Gourama's father worked as a construction worker for the St Denis city council, yet he secretly supported the Communist Party. Mr. Gourama's father did not 'march' for the Communists because he was afraid of losing his job. He did not attend political events run by the Mayor of St Denis either. Thus, his family did not receive provisions from the city council, even though the Gourama family was large: 18 people in a small house made of wood and corrugated iron in the bidonville of rue des Bois Noirs, opposite the SIDR Petite Ile.

However as young boys, when city council buses were lined up to transport city council employees to the airport, Jean-Pierre Gourama and his brother used to hop on them for entertainment and because they were attracted to the free food given to everyone who turned up. They did not stay to listen to the politicians, but ran out of the airport to visit the nearby stables at the Club Hippique Bourbon. "And then we'd go back and get

our sandwich and our drink. Sometimes we'd even get a T-shirt with Michel Debré's face printed on it. But I didn't dare bring *those* back home!" Jean-Pierre Gourama remembered.

Not everyone profited from this system in Petite Ile. Mr. and Mme Robert claimed that they had never received anything from the city government because neither of them worked for the Mayor, or marched for him. They observed that there were never any iron sheets or cement when *they* came to get it. "We were always told, 'too late, Monsieur'. We never got anything! *Nou la jamais gagne rien!*" There were also many people in Petite Ile who did not work for the city council. But Legros' system obviously worked, as Mr. C. another inhabitant of Petite Ile said to me "they continued voting him in for 20 years, didn't they!"

As President of the SIDR, Mayor Legros kept rents low in Petite Ile because of the political importance of the neighborhood. During the 1970s, SIDR Petite Ile and SIDR La Source had the lowest rents in St Denis.²⁹ A Ministry of Construction report put it directly: "for the last five years rents have not been raised for political reasons".³⁰ Keeping rents low and distributing building materials was a political priority. Poor Réunion Islanders appreciated these gifts of building materials. In 1977 the Ministry of Construction stated that 65,000 out of 105,000 Reunion Island families were "badly housed". In 1977 some SIDR houses even lay empty, because they could not find tenants who could afford pay the rent.³¹ Réunion Islanders thus continued to build their own

²⁹ CAC 19840179/72 SIDR conseil d'administration séance du 30 mars 1976. Objet : propositions concernant les majorations des loyers 30/3/1976

³⁰ CAC 19790543/72 Pour M. secrétaire général des DOM à M. Seite 01/04/1976

³¹ AHC 9 DE 95 *Journal de La Réunion*. Habitat social. Pour M. Bloch Lainé deux mesures s'imposent 24/09/1977

houses, often on land belonging to the city council, thus replicating rural models of landlord-tenant relations.

Like Mayors in other communes, Auguste Legros distributed political gifts such as corrugated iron sheets, wood, gravel and cement. In addition, Auguste Legros could distribute SIDR houses. He had frequently promised tenants of SIDR Petite Ile that their neighborhood would be renovated and they would be able to buy their houses, although neither of these electoral promises was fulfilled (see Chapter 8).

Mayors allowed shanty towns to spread on land owned by the city council. By allowing people in St Denis to enlarge their homes with free cement and corrugated iron, the city council effectively sponsored shantytown construction. This was not necessarily an incoherent policy. An electorate who lived precariously on shantytown land could be a captive political group, who would continue to vote for the promises of improved infrastructure. As the example of Maperine demonstrates, the landlord-tenant relations of the 1950s were still important political tools in the 1980s.

Maperine was a small shantytown in the neighboring commune to Saint Denis, Sainte Marie. Men in Maperine worked in the La Mare sugar factory, and most women worked as child minders, cleaners and washerwomen for bourgeois families in the outskirts of St Denis. Mme S was born in Maperine in 1936. As soon as she was old enough to vote, she had been approached by Sainte Marie politicians who offered her a tin of beans or a bag of rice for her vote. When her daughter F reached eighteen in 1979, F was also approached for her vote.

When F married, the Ste Marie city council helped her build a little house in Maperine and gave F and her husband corrugated iron, cement, and wood. The Mayor of

Ste Marie gave them verbal permission to build their house, instead of going through the written system of building permits. The city council also sent round employees to help them build the house. F did not seem bitter about this process, and described it to me in good humor.

Before, the politicians often used to come round to [Maperine], and they gave out money! I remember ... I went out to buy a pair of flip flops! [Laughs] ... They paid you for your vote, especially in the second round when they needed votes, they would come round to people's houses, check their lists [to see if you had been voting] and then! Voila! The envelope! That's how it was! 'Vote for me and we'll sort out a little kitchen for you!' They really gave stuff, it wasn't empty promises.

F did not feel that she was submissive to the politicians, because she did not work for the Ste Marie city council. She did not have the pressure of losing her job and she claimed she was at liberty to vote for who she pleased. "[In the end] I didn't vote for the party! People gave me money, I took the money! [Laughs] You take it, right?" F voted for her convictions, but she did not speak out about her political opinions. She felt that her children would be refused financial aid if the city council knew how she really voted.

F talked about the different political context for her family nowadays. In the 1990s Maperine had been demolished to make way for the airport's enlarged runway. The family had been rehoused and now owned their house. "They don't give out [political gifts like] corrugated iron anymore – it's forbidden" F observed. I pointed out that buying votes was forbidden in the past as well, but she didn't agree. "It wasn't forbidden!" she said "it was logical! ... politics depends on money ... if you haven't got a job, the politicians come and find you, that's what politics is!"

V. Conclusion

In 1970 the Prefect informed Michel Debré that Réunion's political system was based on "feudal loyalty" to the sugar barons and the big landowners, as well as the elected leaders who controlled Réunion's 24 city governments.³² Through the 1970s, this "feudal loyalty" was transformed by local elites' appropriation of para-state organizations such as the SIDR. Mayor Legros had taken control of the SIDR and used it and the FASO social insurance money to maintain a large number of political followers by using French state aid for local political ends.

The French administration regularly criticized called the poorest sections of the Réunion Island population as having "lack of initiative ... insouciance ... fatalism and this welfare mentality". The French administration considered it was this which created electoral corruption in Réunion.³³ Yet poor Réunion Islanders were far from passive. They clearly understood the prevailing political system and decided whether to participate in it by measuring the benefits to themselves.

For F, in her house in Maperine, as for many thousands of Réunion Islanders, the Mayors were the logical source of material benefits and employment. They did not see that the power of locally elected leaders in Réunion was underpinned by the central French government, as well as by the salary contributions to the FASO. In the same way as landowners had previously been the source of material wealth, many people considered that material welfare and employment came directly from the Mayors.

The French administration and Michel Debré were well aware of these networks of political obligation and the recreation of landlord-tenant relations by using the resources of the French administration. Debré received frequent reports from Réunion's

³² AHC 9 DE 87 Note diagnostic succinct de la conjoncture réunionnaise SECRET 1970

³³ AHC 9 DE 15 Réforme du Colonat partiaire à La Réunion c 1967

Prefecture detailing the political basis of his support in Réunion. Yet these reports also judged Réunion Islanders as simply passive puppets of the elected leaders.

However these practices were an integral part of Réunion Island sociability, inherited from the plantation system and the rural modes of landlord-tenant relations. Réunion Islanders made claims on the largesse that the local elites had at their disposal. Despite the weight of official discourses of Réunion Islanders being like Metropolitan French political practices at were still based on landlord tenant relations, even if they now included organizations like the SIDR.³⁴ The major transformation was that the new application of French social legislation in Réunion fundamentally transformed traditional class divisions between the extremely poor majority and the landowning minority by creating a new lower middle class, who were employed in manual jobs by the city governments.

Sharing out the French administration's networks of welfare and distribution in Réunion has been in the interests of all political groups. The increasing French bureaucratization of local government, and its increased funding of social provision in Réunion - especially after socialist President Mitterrand was elected in 1981 - ensured that all of Réunion's different political actors were able to gain control of elements of the system of material distribution. From 1981 Reunion Island had both a General Council and a Regional Council, each with different responsibilities. There is usually a right-wing majority in the General Council and left-wing majority in the Regional Council: both political groups have a monopoly on one type of local government. During the 1990s the Communist Party also unsuccessfully attempted three times to divide Réunion into two

³⁴ CAC 19940180/264 Ministère DOM TOM Situation politique économique et social 1973 15/6/1973

departments (like Corsica) in order to maximize its political control over the distribution of local government resources.

CHAPTER 8 “THEY CLAIM STRONGER RIGHTS THAN PROPERTY OWNERS’ RIGHTS”: INVERTING LANDLORD – TENANT RELATIONS IN SIDR PETITE ILE 1998-2009

I. Introduction

From the 1950s shanty town renovation became a political imperative for the French administration in Réunion. SIDR Petite Ile was constructed in 1960 and was the SIDR’s first social housing project built over Camp des Noirs in St Denis. The aim of replacing the shanty towns was to diminish their importance as a political recruiting ground for the Communist Party. However, the neighborhood of Petite Ile became a bastion of political support for Auguste Legros, the right wing Mayor of St Denis from 1969 to 1989, and President of the SIDR from 1973 to 1989.

Mayor Legros used French subsidies to distribute city council jobs to some political supporters in Petite Ile. Through his influence in the SIDR he maintained low rents in the neighborhood. He also allowed residents to construct extensions to their bungalows in wood or corrugated iron, giving building materials as a pre-election sweetener. These home-made extensions did not help SIDR Petite Ile age very well and by the 1980s it had become run-down and its infrastructure outdated.¹ The SIDR

¹ Problems in Petite Ile included an unreliable sewage system which often backed up, tiny water supply pipes and outdated electric installations. House bathrooms were accessed from outside and had stand-up “Turkish” toilets. Some project roads were still dirt tracks which had never been covered in tarmac.

renovated some of its other 1960s social housing projects in St Denis but SIDR Petite Ile was never renovated, probably because it was a prime plot of SIDR land near the center of St Denis and the city council and SIDR hoped to build a new development over the land.

In August 1998 the Managing Director of the SIDR suggested to the St Denis city government that the Petite Ile housing project should be entirely demolished and rebuilt. It had become “insalubrious”. Many SIDR residents strongly opposed the idea of losing their bungalows and being rehoused in apartments. The SIDR later relented. In 2004 it launched a renovation and rebuilding program for Petite Ile, rather than wholesale destruction of the neighborhood. The neighborhood renovation was projected to take five years. Astonishingly for such a small number of houses, the renovation of SIDR Petite Ile is scheduled to continue until at least 2012, if not longer. By 2009 only eighteen bungalows had been demolished and only twelve had been renovated out of a total of 175. Why has it taken the SIDR so long to renovate this neighborhood?

The delays over the renovation of Petite Ile have been linked to moral judgments about cleanliness and about the moral right to be a property owner. Who was to blame for the renovation? What was the appropriate way of living in social housing? Should tenants be able to buy their houses if they had lived in them for generations? These questions were linked to ideas about how to behave as a recipient of housing welfare and the expectations around being a property owner in Réunion.

The current renovation project in Petite Ile demonstrates that landholding monopolies and landlord-tenant relations in Réunion still structure social and political life in important ways. Residents of Petite Ile expected to be given their bungalows for free,

because they had been loyal tenants to the SIDR, regularly paying rent for 50 years. They wanted to become property owners and considered that their landlord, the SIDR, give them land – mirroring rural landlord-tenant relations of the sugar cane plantations. In the current renovation project in Petite Ile, the residents have been partly able to achieve their aims of becoming property owners. The power to govern land in Réunion, for so long held by landholders and the French administration, has now transferred, in a small way, to residents of social housing neighborhoods. The threat of unhappy poor urban residents also gives the Petite Ile residents political and social power against the SIDR and the French administration.

II. Dwelling in Petite Ile from the 1960s to today

Petite Ile was built with the specific aims of rehousing the residents of Camp des Noirs who were considered to be poor and dangerously Communist. The French administration and the SIDR assumed that rehousing the inhabitants of the Camps into small bungalows would change their political leanings, and their insalubrious ways of living. In the first few years of the SIDR, the housing agency held gardening competitions in Petite Ile and other bungalow developments, to encourage the residents to look after their environments, and conform to normative French ideas about the appropriate ways of living in social housing. The SIDR also installed a circular clothes washing station in contrast to the usual rectangular variety, in order to encourage appropriate communication between the women as they washed their clothes.

However these investments did not last a long time. Early in the 1970s the SIDR complained that Petite Ile and other residential spaces had become run down, and that

they were unable to raise the rents of the neighborhood for political reasons.² The SIDR had originally intended for the bungalow neighborhoods built in the 1960s to eventually be demolished when their shantytown inhabitants had finally become assimilated into urban living. Petite Ile tenants complained to me that the SIDR had deliberately allowed the neighborhood to become more run-down during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, the SIDR and the Mayor of St Denis had continually made vague promises that the tenants would be eventually allowed to buy their bungalows.

i. Petite Ile today

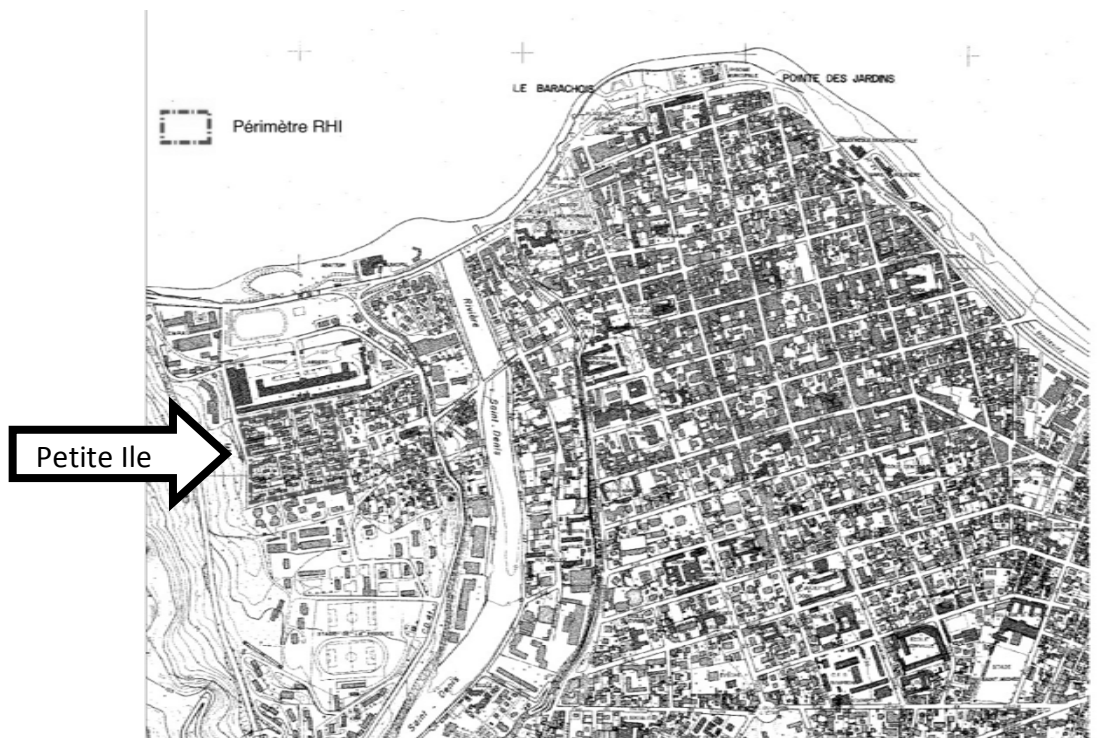


Figure 8.1 Downtown St Denis with the Indian Ocean to the north.

² CAC 19840179/72 SIDR Conseil d'administration séance du 30 mars 1976. Objet : propositions concernant les majorations de loyer 30/3/1976



Figure 8.2 Petite Ile Viewed from north.

Petite Ile is between two curved lines on Figure 8.2. Roads are marked in white. SIDR Petite Ile is in the four quadrants on the right of the photo.³ Since the 1960s, Petite Ile has changed very little in comparison with other areas in St Denis. The neighborhood is still only ten minutes' walk from the center of St Denis. It is divided from the rest of the city the St Denis River. About third of the neighborhood is the SIDR project. Another third (following the curved line) are later housing projects of the SEDRE and the SIDR. Another third of Petite Ile is middle-class private housing which surrounds the church of Notre Dame de La Délivrance. The church currently has a very lively priest and is well-attended. Many worshippers also stop by throughout the day to pray and to light candles

³ SIDR and ReA.R, "Etude pré-opérationnelle, R.H.I " Petite île.," (St Denis2004).

to the saints, but they do not usually drive through the SIDR neighborhood. This gives SIDR Petite Ile a village-like character which is unlike the other neighborhoods near the St Denis city center.

The St Denis city council administers Petite Ile with Bas de La Rivière, the neighborhood which runs along the banks of the St Denis River. Although Petite Ile has a city government annex, a church primary school and some small grocery shops with bars, the nearest large shops, the municipal sports center and the social services infrastructure are on the other side of the river in Bas de la Rivière. Petite Ile's spatial separation is mirrored by the residents' sense of social separation from Bas de La Rivière and the rest of St Denis. Residents expressed Petite Ile's specificity to me in different ways: memories of adolescent rivalries over neighborhood identity with Bas de la Rivière, sports rivalry with other areas of St Denis and the stability of family presence in Petite Ile.

A number of families in Petite Ile have lived there for at least three or four generations. Family links in the neighborhood are important, and many neighbors are related through family connections. Referring to the longstanding stability of families in Petite Ile, and the calm of the neighborhood was sometimes a subtle way of criticizing Petite Ile's class and race differences with Bas de la Rivière where there is a more visible presence of the Mahorais community, the most recent French migrants to Réunion, stigmatized because of ideas about their foreignness and poverty.⁴

⁴ The Mahorais are the French citizens of Mayotte Island in the Comoros archipelago northwest of Madagascar. The rest of the Comoros Islands became independent from France in 1976, but Mayotte chose to remain a French territory and in 2009 voted to become France's newest Overseas Department

Residents consider Petite Ile to be more pleasant to live in than other social housing projects. It has *cases-à-terre*, bungalows with an outside courtyard. Tenants pitied other Réunion Islanders who lived in the social housing high-rise apartments, known by Réunionnais as *cages-à-lapins* or rabbit cages. Despite their professed attachment to the neighborhood and its group identity, residents of Petite Ile live privately in their houses, mirroring the rural homestead preference for seclusion. Even though residents of Petite Ile are urban, and say hello to their neighbors, many people I interviewed are wary of maintaining too close neighborly relations. Like many Réunion Islanders, residents of Petite Ile fear the effects of *ladilafé*, malicious neighborhood gossip. In short, Petite Ile tenants strongly valued their quality of life in Petite Ile, and their bungalows.

ii. Protests against the SIDR renovation 1998-2004

In 1998 the Managing Director of the SIDR Jean-Paul Poinot wrote to the Mayor of St Denis. Poinot claimed that something needed to be done about Petite Ile, because renovating the project would be too expensive and selling the SIDR's houses to the current tenants would be "delicate".⁵ The SIDR intended to bulldoze the bungalows and replace them with new apartment blocks to house more families in the neighborhood. The only obstacle to this plan was the question of what to do with the current tenants of Petite Ile. The Mayor of St Denis, Michel Tamaya was unwilling to publicly support the SIDR President's program, because he was aware of the discontent of a large number of his electorate in Petite Ile. Yet he did not publically oppose it either.

⁵ *Journal de l'île de La Réunion*. J-B C. La SIDR envisage de raser 173 logements à la Petite Ile. 13/8/1998 ; *Le Quotidien* Les Petite Ilois se mobilisent pour leur quartier 13/8/1998

Tenants of the SIDR housing project called an emergency neighborhood meeting where a group of tenants resolved to “stop the demolition project, whatever it takes.” A spokesperson denounced the SIDR. “The problem is that there have been no repairs by the SIDR for some years. [The SIDR] has allowed the neighborhood to fall into disrepair. And now they are trying to make out that Petite Ile is a shanty town. That is just mocking people.” Although Petite Ile residents attended neighborhood meetings in August and September 1998, only a much smaller group of residents grouped together to protest against the SIDR’s plan. They set up a group defending the heritage of the neighborhood of Petite Ile: *l’association de defense du patrimoine des habitants de SIDR Petite Ile*.⁶

These residents accused the St Denis city council of opposing their right to purchase their social housing, in view of future urban developments in Petite Ile. “How can you say to people who have paid rent for 40 years that tomorrow they have to go and live in an apartment block? They aren’t fools. The SIDR want to reclaim the land to build concrete blocks. We don’t want that here.”⁷ Some members of the group even set up a roadblock in December 1998, although not all residents of Petite Ile participated. “We want to stay here” affirmed Germaine Brema, a resident of the neighborhood since 1959, “we are just fine here, and our neighborhood is far from being a slum (*taudis*).”⁸

The protest of the residents of Petite Ile, and the St Denis Mayor’s unwillingness to take a stand on the Petite Ile meant that a stalemate occurred for the next five years. In 2001 the Mayor of St Denis changed, and in 2004 the SIDR and the St Denis municipal council changed their plan to demolish the Petite Ile housing project. They made a study

⁶ *Le Quotidien* Le Maire ne veut pas se positionner 4/9/1998

⁷ *Le Quotidien* Les Petit Ilois se mobilisent pour leur quartier 13/8/1998

⁸ *Le Quotidien* La mairie n’a pas de projet sur ce quartier 31/12/1998.

of Petite Ile and interviewed all the residents. The study suggested that whilst some of the houses in Petite Ile were insalubrious, some of them could be repaired, rather than being demolished.⁹

The SIDR had changed its policy towards Petite Ile because unhappy neighborhoods gave very bad publicity both to the St Denis city council, the General Council (who had board members in the housing agency) and the SIDR. The SIDR was conscious of its image in St Denis, given that it houses 30% of the St Denis population. A SIDR manager later explained how the housing agency understands urban renewal and tenants' demands. "We ... must maintain peace in the neighborhoods, there mustn't be rioting (*il ne faut pas des émeutes*)."

iii. Looking like a shantytown

Petite Ile had partly been declared as "insalubrious" because of its outdated infrastructure – poor drainage, sewage, electricity and unpaved roads in the project. The other problem was that the SIDR considered that it resembled a shantytown. Most tenants had built extensions to their houses in corrugated iron, plastic and wood, the traditional materials of the Réunion Island shantytown. "The problem with Petite Ile was that the neighborhood *looked like* a shantytown" Bernard Hoarau, the PR manager for the SIDR told me. The SIDR objected to these handmade extensions, especially the way that tenants had covered over their gardens with corrugated iron shading. The universal preference of Réunion Islanders in Petite Ile houses was to have a shady place to sit and

⁹ SIDR and ReA.R, "Etude pré-opérationnelle, R.H.I " Petite île."."

eat outside, but because the original Petite Ile houses were not built with any shades or verandahs, most tenants had built shady extensions.



Figure 8.3 Petite Ile 1960



Figure 8.4 Petite Ile 2003

Figures 8.3 and 8.4 are aerial photographs of Petite Ile. They were compared side-by-side in the 2003 report which recommended the renovation of the SIDR. While Figure 8.3 shows the neighborhood in 1960, with orderly rows and with lots of open space, Figure 8.4. shows the neighborhood forty years later.¹⁰

Tenants in Petite Ile all constructed corrugated iron extensions covering their back yards. In some places the extensions were only held down by large rocks. The 2003 housing survey commented that these extensions were inappropriate, there was not enough air or light, and rainwater was badly drained from them. These hygienicist concerns about the circulation of air and light seem redolent of 1950s visions of urban slum dwellers in Réunion, and ignore Réunion Island practices of shaded sociability. The public spaces in Petite Ile also made it appear to be a shantytown, especially because some roads in the project had never been asphalted, and were made of sand.



Figure 8.5 Sand road in Petite Ile after rain

¹⁰"Etude pré-opérationnelle, R.H.I " Petite île."."



Figure 8.6 Home-made improvements to SIDR Petite Ile bathroom

Furthermore the project bathrooms needed updating. SIDR Manager Bernard Hoarau admitted that the neighborhood’s “insalubrity” was really caused by the decrepit infrastructure. Yet he also interpreted the hand-made extensions to houses as a lack of “appropriation” and investment in the bungalows on the part of tenants who “did not behave like owners.”

III. The “right” way to live in a social housing bungalow

A SIDR manager described SIDR Petite Ile to me as a “Gaulish village”. She was referring to the Asterix comic strip series, where an isolated village of Gauls successfully holds out against the Roman invaders in 52 BC. Her description mirrored her general sense that the neighborhood was resisting the SIDR’s inevitable and necessary renovation process.

The SIDR renovation plan for the neighborhood was to demolish some of the bungalows, and renovate others. This created tension between tenants and the SIDR. All Petite Ile residents wanted to buy their bungalows, but there were not enough bungalows for everyone. The SIDR planned to demolish bungalows in groups, retaining some rows of and selling off others. This meant that tenants who had “looked after” their bungalows might be moved out, if they were in a row set to be demolished. Equally, other tenants who had not invested money in their housing might be able to keep their bungalows if they were situated in a block to be sold off. To alleviate this problem, the SIDR planned to move tenants who had *not* looked after their houses into transition apartments. It would allow “good” tenants to move into renovated bungalows – bungalows which their neighbors may have lived in for thirty years. This created a certain amount of conflict and jealousy in the neighborhood, and anger at the SIDR which was exacerbated because no-one knew who was going to move where.

Since 2003, the SIDR demolition plans and reasons for delays had not been effectively communicated to residents. Not a single resident had received a copy of the report containing the projected outline of the new neighborhood. An unhappy tenant of Petite Ile gave me his version of the SIDR renovation plan in 2009. “One fine day, without consultation, they put leaflets in envelopes and there was a meeting ... ‘voilà [said the SIDR] we are reclassifying Petite Ile as RHI ... from now on you will all be owners.’” Indeed, the first SIDR liaison officer had promised all the tenants that they all would be able to buy their houses, even though this was clearly impossible according to the 2003 demolition project. The liaison officer had then resigned and moved away from

Réunion. Succeeding SIDR employees attempted to untangle the mess of claims about who would be able buy whose bungalows.

To re-organize the rights to buy the bungalows, the SIDR attempted to establish moral criteria of cleanliness. People who had appropriately looked after their houses, according to SIDR criteria, would have the right to buy them. However, Petite Ile tenants did not agree with the SIDR criteria. They complained that it was the fault of the SIDR that the neighborhood had become run-down. Tenants also created their own concepts of housing rights which reflected their own visions of the right way to live in social housing. Despite the SIDR's attempts to establish norms of appropriate cleanliness, its own employees revealed that defining and sanctioning insalubrity was ambiguous and a standard idea of living in social housing did not exist in the SIDR.

i. Investing in the space

I interviewed a dozen SIDR employees at different hierarchical levels in the organization. They all considered that being a tenant conferred different rights and obligations about caring for a house than being a property owner. Tenants should keep appropriately clean houses, but they should not try and inappropriately “invest” in the space - for example by building extensions on their houses, or changing the fixtures rented with the house.

Mr. Alba is the SIDR quality control manager. He and his assistant Mme Clain ensure SIDR tenant satisfaction. They manage SIDR repairs which are its responsibility such as major leaks, electrical faults and structural maintenance. Sometimes tenants do not understand what repairs are in the remit of the SIDR (such as outside walls and drainage) and what is their own responsibility (blocked sinks or changing light bulbs).

Mr. Alba talked with me about the appropriate way of living in a house, and the appropriate way of “investing” a space which a tenant rented.

Mr. Alba told me about a tenant outside Petite Ile who had recently cemented down tiles in his new apartment because he decided they were easier to clean than the SIDR regulation linoleum. This broke the terms of the SIDR rent contract which stipulated that tenants could not modify the apartment flooring. The tenant had been told by the SIDR to remove the tiles, and was furious, especially because of his financial investment in improving his home. The very morning of our interview, Mr. Alba had heard the tenant on Réunion’s shock talk radio station, Radio FreeDOM. The tenant claimed that he would go on hunger strike until the SIDR allowed him to keep the tiles. “[The tenants] are crazy!” Mr. Alba concluded. “They claim rights which are stronger than the rights of property owners! *Ils revendiquent un droit plus fort que le droit des propriétaires!*”

Whilst Mr. Alba fully understood the tenant’s desire for tiles instead of linoleum in his house, he considered that many tenants did not understand their rights and duties under the tenancy contract. Another SIDR manager told me incredulously about the tenants of Petite Ile: “people consider themselves like owners because they have paid rent for 30 years. [If they are to be moved out] they even want to be refunded for the work they have done on their house, for the tiles.” In contrast, tenants saw their investment in their social housing as giving them rights. Yet the SIDR did not think that tenants knew the “right” way of living in social housing.

SIDR Petite Ile tenants had a very different idea about the rights of a tenant than SIDR managers. Tenants felt that they had been morally justified in readapting the tiny

two-bedroom bungalows in Petite Ile for their family needs, in according to their vision and possible budget for creating a comfortable house. As all residents had pointed out to me, what else could they have done? The bungalows had only been built with two bedrooms, even though families in the 1960s and 1970s were large, and having seven children was not uncommon. To improve their living conditions tenants had made handmade extensions, building over the front and back yards for their large families, and erecting shaded dining areas with semi-permanent materials like corrugated iron, breeze blocks or wood.

Tenants considered that extending their houses and building extra rooms and shading was a logical necessity for their well-being. They had given themselves the right to construct extensions like an owner should behave. “We didn’t have the right, officially, but it was a right that everyone acquired for themselves (*que tout le monde s'est appris*).” Mme D told me. She justified her family’s practices by saying that they had not protested when the SIDR told them to remove the extensions. Mme D said that her family’s housing extensions were in good condition, because her father had been a foreman on construction sites. Some tenants were obviously not so skilled at constructing long-lasting extensions, or claimed that their budgets did not allow them to buy good quality building materials.

Although tenants admitted that their houses *were* now insalubrious, they imputed problems with cockroaches and rats to the poorly maintained sewage and water system; the peeling paint and the faulty electrics were due to SIDR negligence, because it had never renovated bungalows in Petite Ile. Some tenants accused the SIDR of deliberately allowing the housing project to fall into disrepair during the 1980s and 1990s, so that

people could not buy their houses. Others told me that they had been specifically permitted to make housing extensions in the 1970s and 1980s by Mayor Auguste Legros' government as long as the extension were semi-permanent - in wood, plastic or corrugated iron - rather than in concrete. SIDR and Réunion Islanders thus had highly different interpretations about what was an appropriate "investment" in the space of the house.

Although the SIDR claimed to promote normative French housing practices, the application of these standards Réunionnais SIDR employees was ambiguous and inconsistent. The SIDR liaison worker's office in Petite Ile was very dilapidated. During the rainy season children had broken one of the windows; water had infiltrated in the office. Inside, the floor was dirty, the furniture was rusty, and there was a smell of damp. The SIDR liaison officer, Mme Z, had never cleaned the office as there was no running water in the Portakabin.¹¹

I suggested Mme Z go next door to get a bucket of water from a SIDR tenant to clean it up. Mme Z told me it was not her job to clean the office. Yet Petite Ile tenants visiting her office invariably commented on its cleanliness to her, and to me, advising Mme Z that she should clean it up. Judging by their facial expressions when invited to sit down, tenants clearly considered her office was insalubrious, and that it was not an appropriate way of receiving the public. Even whilst she explained to me bungalows in Petite Ile would be would probably be reallocated to those who had kept a clean house, Mme Z did not see the contradiction of her own unclean work space, and the image it gave to SIDR tenants.

¹¹ All initials have been changed to protect anonymity of Petite Ile residents

Tenants and SIDR employees had different ideas and practices of what was appropriate cleanliness and investment in social housing. The SIDR discourse about cleanliness was also ambiguous. It seemed to be both condoning and condemning insalubrity. Tenants in Petite Ile claimed that their living practices were not insalubrious. At the same times as they blamed the SIDR for abandoning the neighborhood and letting its infrastructure decline. The definition of ‘insalubrity’ and responsibility for it were linked a broader idea: how people should behave when they accept French social welfare.

Although many residents had been happy with the idea of a renovation project in 2003 and the chance to buy their houses they gradually became disenchanted. SIDR calls for tender were delayed.¹² Operations to improve infrastructure such as sewers and roads did not even start until 2005. No houses could be improved until this was completed in 2007. During this time increasing numbers of houses lay derelict. The SIDR did not want to move new people in until repairs had been completed. Tenants suspected the SIDR and the new St Denis city would distribute some of the derelict houses as political gifts. Many tenants considered that the SIDR did not care about the families who had spent years living in Petite Ile.¹³

¹² Delays were caused by competition in the construction industry: there were more lucrative tenders to build private apartment blocks, (a booming construction sector because of French tax breaks) and to build sections of the EU-funded Route des Tamarins motorway built between 2002 and 2009.

¹³ *Le Quotidien* Les Petit Ilois se mobilisent pour leur quartier 13/8/1998, also interviews with current residents

IV. Ending the “welfare mindset”

Gisèle Tarnus worked on Réunion’s very first RHI operation after Cyclone Hyacinthe in 1980 damaged a shantytown neighborhood in St Denis.¹⁴ She remembers arriving on her weekly visits to the neighborhood, and hearing the women calling to each other to warn that “the welfare is here! *L’assistance i arrive!* It was a running joke. Mme Tarnus knew that the shantytown inhabitants saw her as the conduit of financial aid, but were wary of her in case she started investigating whether the women had partners and thus did not have the right to single-mother financial aid. The inhabitants recognized that the relationship between social services and employees was one of differential power – Mme Tarnus could help them, but she also might have the power to stop their allowances.

French welfare policy has moved away from admitting this type of power differential between social workers and clients.¹⁵ The SIDR now claims not to “give welfare” but they “accompany”. They work with tenants rather than for them. SIDR employees do not want to “give welfare” to people who look for it because this will only reinforce a perceived culture of dependency, the “welfare mindset”.

Every social worker and SIDR employee I spoke to were convinced that they were in a partnership with the people who sought housing aid and who lived in social housing. In this partnership, tenants must have a personal investment in their social housing. Yet as the previous section shows, the nature of a tenant’s personal investment

¹⁴ See her study of how rehousing shantytown residents to housing projects affected peoples’ lives in St Denis. Gisèle Tarnus, "De la ruelle au balcon : une expérience de résorption de l’habitat insalubre à Patate à Durand sur la commune de Saint-Denis" (Université de La Réunion, 1991).

¹⁵ This is part of broader French social welfare policy ideas about enabling welfare allocates rather than making them passive. See recent discussions about how the French welfare state has attempted to stop becoming an “état providentiel” by making social welfare recipients responsible for their condition Abraham Franssen, "Le sujet au coeur de la nouvelle question sociale," *La revue nouvelle* 17, no. 12 (2003).

is highly circumscribed. It is linked to French policy norms, not to Réunionnais construction traditions or their practices of sociability. Réunionnais in Petite Ile have a very different idea of what being a social housing tenant should mean and what being “actors” instead of “recipients” of housing welfare should achieve for them.

i. Visions of insalubrity

In 2005 the PR manager of the SIDR hired a Réunionnais photographer called Laurent Zitte to go with the SIDR neighborhood liaison officer and take pictures of the residents in their original Petite Ile bungalows. Zitte would later photograph the tenants in their transition lodgings, and then in their final houses, whether renovated bungalows, or new apartments. Once in their final houses, a member of the SIDR will present these framed photographs to the tenants. This process was undertaken to make Petite Ile tenants feel “accompanied”, or implicated, in the renovation, rather than being passively “assisted” participants in a rehousing process which was against their interests.¹⁶ The SIDR currently undertakes similar photo projects with their other RHI operations. They are a hopeful attempt at maintaining good public relations for the SIDR in a context where tenants are often unhappy with the conditions of their rehousing.

The two photographs below, whilst not of the same house, emphasize the ambiguous approach of the SIDR, and highlight different visions of the same Creole living practices. Whilst Laurent Zitte was paid to take very human portraits of all the residents in their sometimes dilapidated houses, at the same time the SIDR had paid a

¹⁶ This is in line with broader French welfare discourses of making allocataires of government social aid responsible actors of their own welfare rather than passive recipients of state largesse. The SIDR managers refer to this as ‘accompanying people in a social partnership’ rather than ‘assisting’ them – see next section

consulting company to photograph the houses (without their tenants) to judge their degrees of insalubrity.¹⁷



Figure 8.7 (left): Photograph by Laurent Zitte 2005 for SIDR tenant portrait series.
Figure 8.8 (right): Photograph for SIDR insalubrity investigation 2003.

Laurent Zitte's photograph (Figure 8.7) emphasizes the subjectivity of the female Petite Ile tenant as she smiles ironically in her doorway, probably mildly protesting at being photographed. By squatting in the woman's yard, Zitte makes her house appear bigger. Her doorframe is enlarged by the shadows. Although her doorway is framed by peeling walls our eyes are drawn to her well-tended pot plants at the center of the photograph.

The photograph for the SIDR insalubrity investigation of Petite Ile (Figure 8.8) shows another vision of the same type of bungalow.¹⁸ This time the objects around the house become the subject of the picture and are emphasized rather than hiding in

¹⁷ these photos were only circulated to government agencies and were not publicly displayed

¹⁸ SIDR and ReA.R, "Etude pré-opérationnelle, R.H.I " Petite île."."

shadows: potted plants lying in upturned brown earth and a wonky garden path indicate some effort to keep the house clean, but are offset by the rusty oil barrel and homemade wiring, elements of insalubrity. A female Metropolitan French investigator holding a clipboard is framed far away in the doorway.¹⁹ She is talking to an unseen Réunionnais tenant who does not appear. Indeed, there are no pictures of any tenants in the entire series of photos taken to plan the project's demolition.

The contrast between consultants' photographs of "insalubrity" and Laurent Zitte's emphasis on the tenants' histories underline the ambiguities of defining Petite Ile as insalubrious, and of promoting normative ideas of the "right" way to live in social housing. The SIDR has tried to make tenants conform to normative practices of cleanliness and appropriate welfare behavior. Yet it recognized that Réunion Islanders have different ideas about this. It employed a photographer to preserve the housing traditions of the Réunion Islanders. Even if it is demolishing the bungalows, it is obliged to acknowledge the residents' attachment to their ways of living in their social houses.

The ambiguity in these two sets of photographs suggests deeper social conflicts about the 'right' way to live in a Petite Ile bungalow. Indeed the conflict is publicly displayed by a large sign at the entry to Petite Ile just next to the church. The sign reproduces photographs by Laurent Zitte alongside photographs of the new SIDR houses. There is a legend "We renovate for you, with you!" (*Nous aménageons pour vous, avec vous!*). Smaller letters on the sign describe the SIDR's housing renovation project which

¹⁹ It is not the woman's whiteness which points to the fact she is Metropolitan French. It is strongly suggested by her body position, blonde hair tied in a chignon, sailor trousers ending above the ankle and her flat pumps

is currently being undertaken in Petite Ile. This underlines that the SIDR is “accompanying” the residents, renovating *with* them, rather than for them.



Figure 8.9 and Figure 8.10: SIDR sign on Rue de la Petite Ile 2009



Figure 8.11 and Figure 8.12 Portraits of SIDR residents by Laurent Zitte

Who is this woman? Is she welcoming us into our house, or is she saying goodbye? Is this nostalgia or resignation written on her face? Her ambiguous expression in Laurent

Zitte's photograph mirrors the ambiguity of the right way of living in social housing. Petite Ile has been earmarked for total renovation, yet the photo celebrates a nostalgic image of Creole housekeeping. The photograph portrays a Réunionnaise of African origin, perhaps with some Malagasy antecedents. She is in the garden of a Petite Ile SIDR bungalow. She has fitted the window behind her with slatted glass panes and flowery curtains.²⁰ Behind the crook of her elbow we can identify the thorny, crimson-red *épines de Christ* and some plants in pots - her garden is clearly well kept. A washing line traverses the photo from left to right, and a *serpillière* floor cloth has been left out to dry in the morning light, which tells the viewer that her house is clean.

The photograph evokes an older Creole generation's working-class respectability: a well-maintained house and garden, a strong-looking female matriarch who wears a *capeline* straw hat and who has welcomed her guests into her back yard, the domestic space and inner sanctum of many Réunionnais houses. The cleanliness of the house and its tended garden are also important because they index SIDR views of keeping a clean house. Good, personally responsible social housing tenants keep clean and well-maintained houses, but they do not make repairs to them; morally lax tenants who are poor but have a welfare attitude let their houses slide because they are not the owners of the houses. The photograph on the sign attempts to elide social tension by showcasing some of the new developments alongside nostalgic, black and white photographs of Creole homes, which are valued as part of Réunion's traditional past.

²⁰ In 1960 the Petite Ile bungalows were delivered to tenants with no glass in the windows, only shutters. Even when shuttered these windows let in the rain. Most tenants subsequently fitted glass panes at their own expense.

These Petite Ile tenants are well aware that their houses and well-kept gardens are destined for destruction.²¹ The younger man in the second photograph sits on a wooden wire roller in his front yard, next to a young banana plant. He appears to have been photographed in the middle of emphasizing something, and his hand is outstretched. This house is closed up, but the front yard has mature fruit trees, giving shade. The man's expression is much more somber than the woman's. His house was destined for demolition and he had already moved out.

The SIDR sign was erected in Petite Ile when the SIDR was already four years behind schedule and in conflict with numerous residents of Petite Ile who were covertly protesting against the renovation in different ways. Creating a personalized relationship with its tenants is especially important propaganda attempt in Petite Ile.²² As the SIDR sign at the entrance to Petite Ile claims, the SIDR is actively working together with residents: "for you, and with you". The photograph has been deployed to improve the SIDR's public relations in Petite Ile. It is aimed at convincing the residents of the housing project that the SIDR appreciates and respects the Creole housing practices of the tenants who will be affected by the renovation. However, significant ill-feeling and mistrust exists between SIDR employees working on the renovation, and the residents who are subject to it.

²¹ The tourist literature for the « villages creoles » promotes this image and anthropologists studying Réunion's houses have concentrated on it e.g. Watin, "Habiter : approche anthropologique de l'espace domestique à La Réunion".

²² *Journal de l'île de La Réunion*. J-B C. La SIDR envisage de raser 173 logements à la Petite Ile. 13/8/1998 (I use the figure of 175 bungalows rather than the cited 173 houses because there are also 2 shops in the neighborhood located in the bungalows)

ii. Mme Q's new house: accompanying or welfare?

Mme Z is in her early thirties and she is a Réunion Islander. Her job as a liaison officer is to mediate between SIDR managers and residents who are living through the renovation process. She tries to further SIDR renovation goals and she also deals with the residents' requests for help. Every Tuesday morning she leaves SIDR headquarters in St Denis to hold public office hours in a Portakabin on the edge of the Petite Ile housing project. Mme Z is the third SIDR liaison officer to work in Petite Ile since 2003, because the first two left out of frustration, and she had found it challenging to get Petite Ile tenants to accept the renovation process. I often sat in on Mme Z's office hours, and waited with her for tenants to come with problems to solve.

Some tenants came to Mme Z's office to ask for help about paperwork relating to the housing renovation project, or for her to make phone calls to higher managers in the SIDR about their cases. Mme Z held the treasured telephone numbers of the SIDR bureaucracy which were unavailable to tenants. A visit to her office in Petite Ile was clearly an efficient way of moving things forward. Other tenants came to her office clearly drunk, with insurance papers in their hands that they did not understand how to fill, or they came asking her to find their children a house. Mme Z interpreted the different demands of these cases to me as either "welfare" or "accompaniment". Some tenants were capable of going to the utilities office themselves to be connected, or could wait in their houses for the construction company to arrive. Others needed to be "held by the hand", and she considered that these people only wanted "welfare". In other words, they should have been capable of finding solutions to their problems *with* the social worker, but instead they wanted Mme Z to resolve their problems without their

input. Indeed, every SIDR employee I spoke to has a repertoire of “welfare” anecdotes about what they consider as the outrageous demands of tenants in their social housing. Tenants attempt to telephone the SIDR president because their sink is blocked; a tenant’s boyfriend who is not even on the rent contract threatens SIDR employees - he wants a larger apartment because he wants space for his dogs. While SIDR employees consider that most tenants “deserve” help, other people take advantage of the system.

One day Mme Z explained to me the complexities of the “deserving”: those who would be allowed to stay in their bungalows, and who would be moved on to their apartments.

[Some Petite Ile tenants] have houses in a really bad state. I don’t think that they should be allowed to buy a renovated bungalow, I think we should favor ... people who looked after their houses, and give those people a chance ... There are people who say to me “I should have worked [on my house] – would the SIDR have then kept it?” ... I am someone who speaks frankly ... I say ... “yes ... now it’s too late.”

Mme Z admitted that some bungalows in Petite Ile might not have been labeled for demolition if people had just looked after their houses in the appropriate way – “investing in the space” was the jargon. She inferred that there was partly a moral element to tenants being allowed to buy their renovated bungalows: the SIDR had chosen which houses to keep and renovate, and which houses would be entirely demolished, based on how residents had maintained them. However, in practice, the SIDR’s visions of morality and cleanliness, and only “accompanying” people were often confounded by the tenants’ strategies to ensure that they got the most of the SIDR and the welfare system

Mr. and Mme Q had lived Petite Ile since they had married in 1957. They had been moved into the SIDR project when the shantytown was knocked down. Although the SIDR bungalows only had two bedrooms, the Qs had managed to house themselves

and their ten children by building extra rooms out of corrugated iron in the back yard, and they had built an extra covered area in the front yard from corrugated iron so all the family could eat together outside in the shade – the preferred way of eating in Réunion and denigrated as contributing to the “shanty town” feel of the neighborhood.

In 2003, the Qs had the advantage of both a well-kept house that did not need to be completely demolished and enough money to buy it. After the SIDR had finally renovated the entire infrastructure in the neighborhood in 2005, the Bs bought the house from the SIDR at a subsidized price. They then obtained a government grant to pay a different company called PACT Réunion to renovate the inside of the house. PACT-Réunion’s renovations were supposed to follow French housing norms about the size of the house relative to the number of residents since they were paid by the government. Residents should also contribute their own labor to the renovation, rather than relying on state munificence; PACT-Réunion was not supposed to lay down flooring over the concrete base or to paint the walls – this was left to the occupants of the new house.

Since all of the Q’s children had moved out of the SIDR house and lived in other homes, Mme and Mr. Q were also supposed to reduce their living area. Therefore, all the outside rooms and eating areas were to be demolished, and one of the bedrooms would become a renovated kitchen. The only place left to eat would be in the small living room. This may have conformed to Metropolitan French norms. It was obviously unsuited to living in a tropical island, where almost every household eats under the *varangue* or under a covered area.²³ It is astonishing that Metropolitan housing norms are still used in

²³ The *varangue* had been recognized as a part of Creole housing practices since the earliest SIDR reports in the 1950s and has been studied a typical feature of Réunionnais houses. Watin, "Habiter : approche anthropologique de l'espace domestique à La Réunion".

Réunion, but PACT-Réunion had to follow them to get paid by the French government. Nonetheless Mme Q was able to insist that PACT-Réunion renovate the house to her desired specification. She kept the two bedrooms, and a larger kitchen was built as an extension on to the SIDR's land. She also retained the outside eating area made of corrugated iron. Mme Z the SIDR liaison officer affirmed the universal principle that all outside structures had to be demolished in the Petite Ile renovation. I mentioned Mme Q's success in overturning this. "Ah yes, in fact she was lucky" I was told. Luck, however, was obviously not part of Mme Q's strategy.

Instead, it appeared to me that every time Mme Q was faced with a challenge she underlined her helplessness and poor situation – in a similar idiom to supplicating letters to the Prefect when the shantytown rents were reduced in the 1960s. Mme Q was certainly old and she had loyally paid her rent for fifty years to the SIDR. She also performed "I am a poor, defenseless old woman" when workers from the SIDR or other government agencies arrived at her house, in order to force them to accede to her demands. This performance included a lot of crying to SIDR officials. The first time Mme Q met me, she also assumed I was a social worker and immediately started crying, although she stopped when one of her family members arrived.

Thus, the SIDR gave her exceptional financial aid to move her in to a nearby temporary house for eight months, and paid for her to move out again. Mme Q found someone to write a letter for her, and managed to get the SIDR to pay for painting the walls and laying her tiles. None of these expenses were supposed to be covered by the SIDR, yet Mme Q had negotiated them all.

I visited Mme Q in her new house a number of times. Each time I came across family members: one of her daughters passing by or her son-in-law who came to cook her lunch. Mme Q proudly told me how her children were good to her – a number of them lived in the neighborhood and passed by every day. Others of her adult children lived in the Metropole, but Mme Q told me that they regularly telephoned her on specific days in the week. “Of course, she doesn’t have family support” Mme Z told me. Mme Q had successfully performed being abandoned by her family and Mme Z had recently spent an afternoon driving Mme Q all over St Denis to help her sign her water and electricity connections, and to deal with her new housing insurance – other “exceptions”. “I don’t call that *accompanying*, I call that *welfare*” Mme Z told me “I don’t do *welfare*”. The liaison worker had consistently been forced to bend her policies, thanks to Mme Q’s performance of poverty and helplessness. The issue here is not merely to document one woman’s performance, but also to underline that the idea of “welfare” and “accompaniment” is practiced in very different ways between SIDR tenants and employees, who have different ideas about the rights of tenants and social welfare recipients.

iii. When tenants claim their rights to welfare

Many tenants did not share the SIDR’s definition of welfare and accompaniment. Reflecting the landlord-tenant relations of Réunion, some SIDR tenants considered that living in social housing for many years should confer ownership rights. Some tenants even accused the SIDR of deliberately profiting from *them* and hoarding the government money of RHI operations. Other tenants even accused the SIDR employees of

embezzlement - filling their pockets with government subsidies instead of helping deserving tenants.

Mr. X was one of the first tenants to force the SIDR to sell him his bungalow, rather than be moved out to an apartment. He had simply refused to move out of his bungalow until the SIDR had conceded, eventually renovating his bungalow rather than knocking it down, or evicting him. For Mr. X, tenants had to stand up for their rights to French social welfare. Everyone else in Petite Ile had the right to buy their house, and they just had to claim these rights. “[The tenants of Petite Ile] should have their own houses ... I had to hustle [*faire des manières*] to get mine. I have the right. It’s an RHI operation. ... [The other residents of Petite Ile can] also have help [from the state]. ... What are [social workers for]?”

This turns the SIDR discourse of assistance and accompanying on its head. Tenants do not wish to be active participants in a social process of “accompanying.” Rather, they seek their rights to an “assistance” meted out by the state. For Mr. X, the SIDR renovation in Petite Ile had been subsidized by the state and by the municipal government. “The SIDR put in zero Francs, if I understand correctly.... It’s a golden opportunity (*une aubaine*) for [the SIDR] and for us, the [poor] we can buy a house at an unbeatable price, but ... if [the SIDR] can ... persuade a few people not to buy the houses, that they don’t have the right ...”. Mr. X implied that the fewer houses the SIDR sold to the tenants, the more would be given to political followers.²⁴

²⁴ As chapter 5 demonstrates, the political advantages of the SIDR were durable gifts in kind which created durable political obligations. Four members of the SIDR executive board are always elected leaders of Réunion’s General Council (although the Mayor of St Denis is not currently among them). As of 2009 Gino Ponin-Ballom the President of Réunion’s General Council, and deputy mayor of St Denis, is currently executive president of the SIDR.

Mme Z the SIDR liaison officer acknowledged that many tenants had these views. “It’s hard to explain [to the tenants]. It’s not logical for them. It’s like the SIDR only sees its own interest ... the [SIDR] is often seen like the thief, [who steals land rather than] the savior who lifts people out of insalubrity.” Although Mme Z did not see herself as a “savior” by any means, she had been deeply offended by accusations of other SIDR tenants in St Denis that she was personally profiting from working on an RHI operation by not giving tenants their “rights”.

In another St Denis RHI renovation, the SIDR had allocated a global budget of 3000 Euros (\$4200) to help any families who needed special financial assistance to pay a security deposit or removal costs. One tenant had political connections in the municipal government (which pays 20% of the RHI costs). He had obtained the budget sheet with this sum. He declared his rights to this sum. A SIDR manager said that the SIDR “must be conciliatory” so the tenant was given a subsidy for his moving costs. The next week the tenant returned to see Mme Z saying that the sum did not correspond to 3000 Euros and that he wanted 1000 Euros “to pay for the electricity” which of course did not cost that much. He was allocated the sum. Mme Z was exasperated; she claimed that even when she attempted to be strict, SIDR managers overturned her decisions. A different tenant in another area of St Denis had even openly accused Mme Z of embezzling these special aid funds.

He said to me “your pockets are full, aren’t they?” (*out poches lé plein, là non?*) I replied “what do you mean, my pockets are full?” The tenant said “the 3000 Euros I should have gotten, you put them in your pockets”. Honestly it was one of the worst days of my life. There he was saying my pockets were full. If I had done that I would be rich by now!

Whilst the SIDR claims that they work with tenants, rather than giving them welfare, many SIDR tenants appeared to feel that they are owed a certain welfare service from the SIDR. Tenants individually exerted pressure on SIDR employees to achieve their ends, and make claims on the housing agency. Tenants attempted to use contacts higher up in the SIDR, or politicians in the General Council and St Denis city government who might be able to apply pressure on the SIDR employees. Some tenants claimed as much of their perceived rights as possible, whether from a position of relative weakness or as they were convinced that the SIDR is profiting from them.

V. Moral meanings of rent and new tenant-landlord relations

Why had the SIDR not sold the Petite Ile houses to tenants? Who would be able to buy their houses? The issue of ownership, described as “delicate” by the President of the SIDR in 1998 was a fundamental one for tenants in Petite Ile. The vast majority wanted to become property owners rather than forever tied into paying rent to the SIDR.²⁵ Residents claimed it was their right to buy SIDR property because paying rent gives a moral basis to property rights, and loyal tenants should become property owners – just as rural Réunion Islanders had been allocated land by landowners to ensure their political loyalty.

i. Understanding rental rights

Some tenants in Petite Ile had not understood the SIDR’s reversal from promising rent-to-buy houses in Petite Ile in 1957 to changing the policy to indefinite renting in 1958.

²⁵ I only met one woman who had actually given up her right to buy her bungalow and had happily moved into a rental apartment in Petite Ile. She had moved into Petite Ile in 1978 and did not have an extended family network in the neighborhood.

Some Petite Ile tenants claimed that they, or their parents, had actually signed a twenty year rent-to-buy contract with the SIDR. The 1960 SIDR rental contracts for Petite Ile did not contain rent-to-buy clauses. These families were convinced that the SIDR had lied to them since 1960.

The original cohort of Petite Ile residents had been rehoused in 1960 from the shanty town on the same site. Many people in Petite Ile would have been illiterate at that time.²⁶ Rent contracts were often verbally agreed in shantytowns, and in rural areas. When tenants had signed a paper contract they could not read with the SIDR, some people (not all) in Petite Ile were convinced that their families had been tricked. Residents appeared to remember being promised the opportunity to buy their new SIDR houses in 1957. SIDR records show that the SIDR publicly abandoned the plans to let Petite Ile residents buy their houses. This was not remembered by the Petite Ile tenants.²⁷

In addition residents claimed that elected leaders such as Mayor Legros had also made vague promises to the tenants of Petite Ile that they would be able to buy their houses. Mayor Legros had never written down this promise. It had also turned out to be empty.

Mr. Juillerot had been a resident of Petite Ile since the 1948 cyclone. He felt that the SIDR had maliciously taken advantage of the tenants' "ignorance", or illiteracy. Mr. Juillerot felt the SIDR should give the residents their houses - due to them since 1960 - and stop lying to them. Even Mme Dany, the daughter of a resident of Petite Ile who did

²⁶ Compulsory free schooling started in 1948, and most children over the age of 9 or 10 did not attend school anyway, meaning that in 1960 most adults were illiterate

²⁷ By 1959 the rent-to-buy option was no longer financially viable for the SIDR and was publicly abandoned before Petite Ile was finished (see chapter 4). No-one I spoke to in Petite Ile recalled the Communist activism in Petite Ile.

not overtly oppose the Petite Ile renovation thought that “there was deceit somewhere along the line, promises were been made about being able to buy the houses which were not fulfilled.”

Mr. X considered the SIDR had been taking advantage of residents of Petite Ile even longer - since the original shanty town removal in 1959. He had lived in Petite Ile since his birth in 1963; his family had lived in Petite Ile for generations and made up a significant clan in the neighborhood. He told me that his parents had been “thrown out of their thatched house (*case en paille*) to come into the SIDR [and were promised] that in twenty years the house would be theirs. Fifty years later we still don’t have this house. We’re still fighting.” The SIDR had not honored the rent-to-buy contract which his parents had purportedly signed in 1960. Fifty years of paying rent later, his parents had now effectively *paid* for the cost of the house. Mr. X evoked both a moral, and a financial claim to his Petite Ile bungalow.

Mr. X used the French verb *cotiser* to explain that his parents had “contributed” to paying off their house. *Cotiser* is usually associated with the notion of subscription. By using this verb Mr. X expressed a widespread belief amongst SIDR tenants in Petite Ile that French state housing welfare was a *contrepartie* – a reward for services rendered. Mr. X considered that the residents had been cheated in this *contrepartie* because “*zot na jamais rien eu en retour*” they had got nothing material back. For him, the point of paying rent was not merely to live in better social conditions than the shantytown. It was to pay off a house that they would eventually own. In this reading, Petite Ile tenants were not the passive recipients of munificent state housing welfare. Rather, by being forced into social housing and paying rent, Mr. X felt that it was the tenants who were funding

the salaries of SIDR employees through their rent payments.²⁸ Mr. X felt swindled. After fifty years of paying and “contributing” to the SIDR for so long, his family were not all sure to be able to buy their respective bungalows.²⁹

The issue here was not merely that the tenants were promised that they could own their houses. The act of paying money to stay in a house was understood differently by the tenants and the SIDR. SIDR managers considered that it was normal for a tenant to perpetually pay rent. Their social housing rents were often subsidized by the *Caisse des Allocations Familiales* (CAF). Tenants’ rents were very low compared to the private sector. However this group of tenants thought that paying this rent would and should eventually confer property rights on them.

“If they had been able to read the small print” Mr. C said knowingly, “they would have [read] that they were not owners. The SIDR property was never going to be theirs.” Mr. C was born in 1955 and had grown up in Petite Ile. Mr. C appeared not to reason in the same way as Mr. X or Mr. Juillerot, and did not seem to be bitter about the SIDR’s failed promises. Despite his understanding of the SIDR tenancy contract, Mr. C was also convinced that he was owed a house.

After the 2003 survey, the SIDR had “fixed” all the inhabitants of Petite Ile as having the right to benefit from the renovation project. Subsequently Mr. C had split up with his wife and by 2009 he lived elsewhere in St Denis. However Mr. C had attempted to hide his change of residence from the SIDR. By pretending to still live in Petite Ile with his wife he implicitly intended to use his “right” to buy a house there - as a certified

²⁸ Which was not wrong, because government subsidies are usually for construction or renovation costs, with salaries, light repairs and running costs paid out of the rent receipts

²⁹ He was not wrong – government subsidies usually paid for initial construction of SIDR buildings, and SIDR rents then paid for their upkeep and the salaries of the SIDR employees

resident of Petite Ile at the moment of the 2003 study. A belief his in moral rights based on being born and living in Petite Ile co-existed with his cynicism of others' feeble understanding of contract law. Perhaps the most surprising thing in Mr. C's case was that the SIDR employees dealing with Petite Ile *knew* that he was no longer living with his wife, and that he had no more rights to a renovated bungalow. Yet they had allocated him a plot of land in Petite Ile, anyway, separate from his ex-wife's new house.

What appeared at first an anomaly, I eventually understood to be fundamental to the way that Réunion Islanders in Petite Ile had managed to enact their moral claims to ownership of their environments and to being able to navigate in the choppy seas of housing welfare. The SIDR preferred to acquiesce to these demands, rather than face the threat of social disturbance in Petite Ile. This policy of acquiescing to residents' demands was mirrored in similar compromises in SIDR housing projects in St Denis or elsewhere in Reunion.³⁰ Unhappy residents used different tactics of interacting with the SIDR and other housing welfare agencies to make claims – to better housing renovation or to buying their property. Whilst the nature of these claims depended on their personal circumstances, they had the cumulative effect of changing SIDR housing policy.

VI. Inverting landlord-tenant relations in Petite Ile: the power of families

Unlike in the 1950s, Réunion Islanders now have much more financial power thanks to the post 1963 increase of French financial transfers to Réunion. Many residents of Petite Ile work in the French administration or the city councils. Others who do not work benefit from French welfare revenue and the *Revenue Minimum d'Insertion*, applied in

³⁰ This was claimed to be by numerous SIDR employees and managers, as well as Réunion's Prefecture reports since the 1970s

Réunion since 1991. Although residents of Petite Ile think in terms of landlord-tenant relations in relation to the SIDR – the SIDR should give them their houses because they had been loyal tenants – Petite Ile residents also had a growing social and political power over the SIDR.

The power of extended families living in social housing neighborhoods such as the SIDR allows them to make social problems for the housing agency and the French administration. The French administration and the SIDR are unwilling to enter in open conflict with social housing residents, enabling residents to make bolder and bolder claims on the housing agency, inverting the landlord-tenant relations of the past. Petite Ile families were able to dictate allocation of new houses and who would move in to apartments by using heterogeneous means of pressure of the SIDR. This pressure was widespread and successful because the French administration and the SIDR feared the threat of protest and public disorder from these families. They accommodate families' claims with help from the city government. This creates a system where Réunion Islanders are able to make effective claims about their place in social housing neighborhoods, and effectively dictate the housing allocation and renovation policy to the SIDR.

- i. Inheritance of social housing

Réunion Islanders prefer living in social housing neighborhoods with bungalows and yards like Petite Ile. When people move out of a new bungalow, SIDR employees choose the new tenants during private meetings based on criteria such as family size and links to the neighborhood. Employees know that SIDR tenants already in the neighborhood expect their own family members, or those of their neighbors to be given priority.

Tenants feel that they have a privileged right to direct who lives in the neighborhood because their families have invested the space and lived there for significant amounts of time, giving them a strong physical link to the neighborhoods. As some people claimed to me “my umbilical cord is buried there” – and this is still a common practice for some Creole families.

This creates a system where many house neighborhoods are excluded from having residents from outside (this is not the case with apartments). Existing tenants transfer leases between members of the same family, and even pass them on to descendants, a form of property transmission which is not based on strict ownership because the houses remain the property of the SIDR. Leases on social houses are frequently allocated to people who do not meet criteria such as family size (for example a couple will be allocated a three bedroom house) in order that there is no social disturbance. Tenants also deploy other means – such as the sacredness of their Hindu deities - to make claims about their rightful place in a neighborhood, and to reserve spaces for themselves.

All the people I spoke to in Petite Ile saw it as logic that houses remained in the same family circuit, even if it the housing was not adapted to the family’s size.

Mr. Perny was born in Petite Ile in 1958 but his family moved to Chaudron in 1972 when the number of children grew too big to fit in the tiny bungalows. His cousin, a member of the V family, took on the lease of the Petite Ile house. Years later, when his mother died and his brothers had left home, Mr. Perny stayed in the three bedroom family house, even though it was too big for him and should have been allocated to another family (“I just never went upstairs” he said). For Mr. Perny, keeping people in the same neighborhoods alleviated a fear of the unknown. “I think that if people who live there can

stay there, its better. Even if [they could move elsewhere] they don't know who they'll be moved next to, sometimes you can have neighbors who are really, you know ...” Mr. Perny left silent his fear of unknown neighbors, and of the possible conflicts which could result from living in a neighborhood full of strangers.

The transfer of leases is an accepted social practice. It alleviates the risk of the unknown and enables families to stay in the prized houses. Grandparents, parents and children often live in the same house, and will ask the SIDR to transfer the lease to the younger generation rather than have the house leave the family circuit. Mr. Alba and Mme Clain who worked in quality control at the SIDR described the importance of neighborhoods with bungalows for people in social housing. “[They] function in a closed circle. A house comes up for rent, if it's attributed to someone from the neighborhood it's accepted ... a person from outside will have a difficult time, believe me.” Problems for outsiders could include being ignored by neighbors, harassment or dogs being poisoned.

Mr. Alba also admitted that if the SIDR transferred such leases to other family members, houses would be attributed to people who did not meet the family size criteria. “One person recently didn't fit the [house] criteria at all, he was single, but he insisted and he was allocated the lease.” Placating people who claimed the right to stay in the “family house” was purely to keep the peace in the neighborhood, but this created a knock-on effect. Other tenants recognized that one person succeeded and tried to do the same by pressuring the SIDR. “... [Tenants] claim their rights, and when they have rights they will make sure they receive welfare (*ils vont se faire assister*) because “I have the right and I will wait”.

ii. Housing the Gods

Not all tenants can claim houses for their family members. Other tenants use strategies such as claiming a place for their religious deities in the house. For social housing tenants who have Hindu faith, once they have set up an altar in the house or in the garden, the place becomes sacred. Some of these tenants then use the sacredness of the ground to push the SIDR to allocate them the land, or to financially compensate them in the case of moving out. They consider that the SIDR is in the obligation to respect their religious rights, thus giving tenants their rightful financial compensation or even rights to the land.

In Petite Ile one of only a few Hindus has gradually appropriated an area of land outside his bungalow to make a small temple, and to store his brightly colored procession chariots.³¹

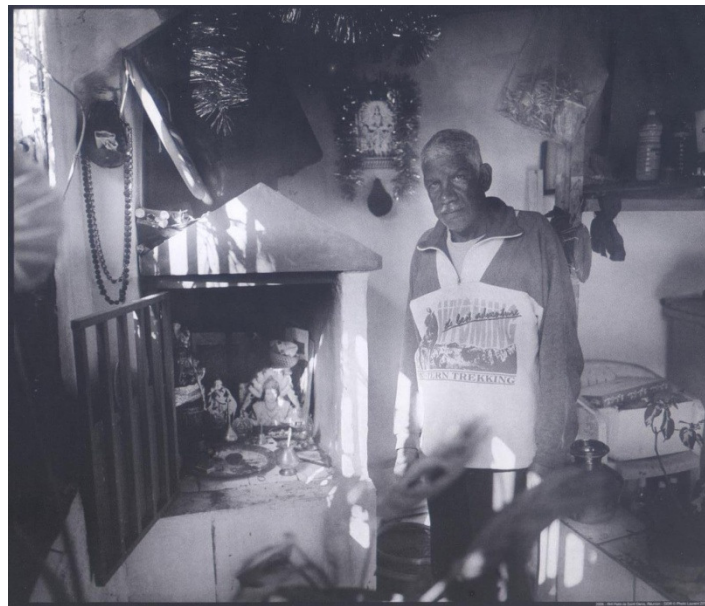


Figure 8.13 Petite Ile resident with Hindu altar

³¹ Hinduism in Reunion derives from the popular practices of Tamil-speaking Southern Indian indentured laborers who arrived in Réunion in the 19th century. Many Hindu Réunion Islanders are also Catholic at the same time, a practice derived from being forced to practice Catholicism on the plantations. Benoist and scientifiques, *Hindouismes créoles Mascareignes, Antilles*.

When the SIDR renovation process went ahead in Petite Ile, this Hindu tenant was able to purchase his house. It was subsequently renovated by PACT-Réunion. Because the tenant had already been able to buy his bungalow, he negotiated with the SIDR to buy the extra land next to his house which he had appropriated for his religious beliefs. According to the renovation goals, tenants were not supposed to buy extra land (although Mme Q also negotiated for extra land for her kitchen).

This tactic of having the SIDR allocate land in Petite Ile for his deities was not an isolated incident. Other people in social housing renovation projects were not as fortunate as the Hindu tenant of Petite Ile. They were not able to stay in their houses or buy them. This led them to negotiate more forcibly for the SIDR to recognize their religious rights, and to allocate them – and their deities – more housing space in the neighborhood.

In another case in St Denis a woman with a large family lived in SIDR social housing bungalow. When the neighbors moved away, the woman managed to procure the adjacent house for her family needs. In the garden of this second house she also installed an altar where she put her pantheon of Hindu deities. In 2007 there was a shanty town operation in the area. All the residents were supposed to leave their bungalows for two years and move into a specially built transition apartment in order that the SIDR rebuild their houses. The woman refused to move - risking the start of the entire building site - until she could have her conditions fulfilled: a piece of land with a house for her deities, the SIDR to pay the removal costs and an extra large flat in the new transition apartments because she had the “right” having been a member of the bungalow residence.

She obtained all of this, “although I asked for receipts for the costs of moving the deities” a SIDR liaison officer somewhat helplessly justified. The woman now lived in a

different bungalow which had been given her by her contacts in the municipal government (rather than the SIDR) indicating that her political loyalty was important. She had signed the tenancy contract, and extended her family presence in the apartment by allowing her son and daughter-in-law to live in the transition apartment while she stayed in the house given by the municipal government. The SIDR were well aware of this, but they had been forced to accept her conditions at the risk of the entire apartment block being delayed.

These incidents were not limited to the SIDR. An ex-manager of the SEMADER a Réunion Islander with some Hindu ancestry told me incredulously that the company had paid a tenant 7000 Euros (about \$10,000) for the cost of moving his deities.³² He thought that the SEMADER had paid such an outrageous sum because the project manager was from Metropolitan France, and was overly culturally sensitive to Réunion Islanders' religious needs, to the extent of not detecting the charlatans from the really faithful.

SIDR managers revealed that despite a discourse of firmness and “accompanying” tenants, these policies were continually overturned by the need to “negotiate” with tenants' demands. Mme Z, the SIDR liaison officer, claimed that she had started by attempting to be firm with tenants' demands. In her view some tenants had merely bypassed her and asked more senior managers who had conceded. Some tenants even used their political connections with the SIDR executive directors until they had got what they wanted. After all, for local politicians a satisfied household or a family's political loyalty could be key at election time. The link between SIDR tenants, family networks

³² SEMADER (Société d'Economie Mixte d'Aménagement, de Développement, d'Équipement de La Réunion) is another Reunion Island mixed-economy company that provides social housing

and political networks are obviously strong, as the woman who obtained a new house for her deities from the municipal government demonstrates. Yet people who wish to move their deities are at the lower end of political and extended family pressure on the SIDR. The following case of Mme V shows the extent to which defiance and rights claiming can generate property ownership.

iii. Family power to save an “insalubrious” house

Mme V, who is 73, belongs to a Petite Ile family who lived in Camps des Noirs before being moved into the SIDR project. Numerous members and branches of the M family still live in Petite Ile. Mme V’s house is different-looking to most of the others in the neighborhood. The SIDR liaison officer put it tactfully when she said to me “it’s old-style Creole living, wood stove and everything.” However this ‘old-style’ living was not the picturesque type, such as the picture of the woman with the straw bonnet celebrated at the entrance sign to Petite Ile. “Old-style” living in this case meant poverty and keeping junk in the back yard in case of need. Mme V’s corner bungalow was fenced around with corrugated iron of varying rustiness. Unlike most Réunion Islanders Mme V still did her clothes washing by hand in a basin in the back yard. The original concrete house was practically invisible: it was covered by corrugated iron sheets and cardboard boxes.

Mme V did not have enough money to take out a 12,000 Euro loan to buy her house from the SIDR. Given the SIDR liaison officer’s claims about houses being allocated based on cleanliness and “investment” in the space, Mme V did not have the possibility of buying her house. She risked being permanently moved into an apartment building and watching her house destroyed. Instead of conceding to the SIDR’s plan, in 2004 the M family decided to block the demolition of her house. Mme V refused to be

moved out, and that she refused any suggestions of rehousing put to her social workers. Other members of the V family who lived on the same street also refused to move out of their houses, until they could all buy their houses.

Previous experience had taught Mme V it was highly unlikely that she would be evicted by the police. How would it look for the SIDR, the St Denis municipal government and the Prefecture who gave final authorization for evictions to evict a 73 year old woman out of the house she had lived in all her life, in a neighborhood all her ancestors had lived in?

In 2005, one of Mme V's daughters had been evicted from an apartment elsewhere for not paying her rent for the better part of a year. Mme V's daughter had immediately gone to squat with her five children in a SIDR Petite Ile bungalow which was laying vacant, awaiting demolition to build a transition apartment building. The Prefect had been adamant that no police action should be taken to evict the daughter from the SIDR bungalow "in case it should trouble the already fragile peace of this neighborhood."³³ Mme V's daughter stayed in the house for over a year, also blocking the destruction of a different row of houses in the Petite Ile neighborhood renovation project. If the Prefecture had refused permission to evict Mme V's daughter and her young children, they were likely not to evict a 73 year old woman living on her own.

The V family's resistance to the SIDR stalled the demolition of the entire street, which impacted on the planned construction of transition apartments in Petite Ile. Two dozen other families in Petite Ile were waiting to move in to these transition apartments to while *their* houses were renovated, and were not happy with their wait. Events came to

³³ I have seen the prefecture's correspondence for this but I prefer not to cite the source.

a head in April 2009 when people, including members of the extended V family vandalized bulldozers which had been brought in to demolish the vacant houses in the lots adjacent to where the V families were still living.

The SIDR attempted to counter the family's dominance in the neighborhood by a counter-maneuver. It held a public meeting in Petite Ile where SIDR employees explained that the delays in continuing Petite Ile's renovation project were due to the resistance a few Petite Ile families, hoping that public pressure would induce the resisting families to negotiate. Public pressure did succeed, but Mme V posed two conditions to negotiating her move out of the apartment.

Her first condition was not to be moved out until she had been allocated a totally redecorated bungalow. She refused to be moved into an apartment, and refused to comply with the SIDR idea of accompanying social housing tenants which aimed to make tenants invest their own labor in their new surroundings. She wanted welfare and a new house. Her second condition was that the SIDR allocated bungalows in the Petite Ile neighborhood for two of her adult children— one of whom was the daughter who had squatted in the SIDR bungalows in 2005. Mme V's adult children were to be rehoused with their families in Petite Ile. However, they would be rehoused in bungalows which were *also* destined for destruction in the coming years, to be sold off as empty lots for people to build their own houses on. The people who were due to buy these new plots of land worried that in a couple of years Mme V's adult children would use the same tactic, and refuse to move out of their temporary houses.

Although I did not have the opportunity to speak with Mme V, her family members saw her property rights in a completely different light to the SIDR, or to the

new neighbors of Mrs. V's children. For them, Mme V had the rights to hold out for a new social housing bungalow because of her age, and her moral claims to residency in the SIDR: "She's been there for fifty years! She's 73 years old! The very least they could do is give her a house."

Extended families are able to use the threat of their disturbance to dissuade the SIDR and even the Prefect of Réunion from sending in the police to evict them. This is not unique to Petite Ile. A SIDR manager explained that when he worked in the bungalow neighborhood of SIDR Chaudron at the other side of St Denis he was confronted with very similar claims. "They aren't owners, it's not up to them, [but] for them it's absolutely normal ... 'I want to live here, my son will live here, my umbilical cord was cut here, we are attached here, even the SIDR can't throw us out' – many people said that to me." The tenants of Petite Ile had understood their negotiating power to ensure that they appropriated space and free houses for their families, and even their deities, to ensure that everyone could benefit from their moral rights to live in the social housing of their choice.

iv. A "Home Depot" house – once it's in the family you can't let it go

The final example of Mr. F underlines the importance of staying in social housing bungalows for tenants, to the extent of not wanting to give up the family's hold in the area. Mr. K lived three doors up the street from Mme V's house. This was also part of a block to be destroyed and replaced by an apartment block. Mr. K's house was the complete opposite of Mme V. Mr. K earned more money than most of the other residents of Petite Ile. As soon as he heard of the RHI operation in 2003, and that his house was destined for destruction, he decided to invest more money in his SIDR house, in the hope

that the housing agency would no longer knock it down, even though the whole block was destined to be replaced with apartment housing for 40 people.

Mr. K's house now looks like an example from a catalogue of a hardware superstore. The concrete house is totally covered in pine, the gates and fences are covered in pine, and he has a pine deck in the front yard. People who lived in Petite Ile admitted to me that his house had been done up in good quality materials- even if they all admitted in the same breath that he shouldn't have done it, and he shouldn't be blocking the building site for everyone else.

Mr. K was afraid of being moved out of his SIDR home. He earned too much money to still be in state-subsided housing. His income also stopped him being able to buy a SIDR house. Yet like other Petite Ile tenants, he valued living in the neighborhood and paying a low rent. For four years he refused to speak to the SIDR liaison officer, apparently claiming that the only person he would speak to was the President of the SIDR. Yet he was never threatened with eviction, even though he was benefitting from a service ostensibly reserved for people who were in financial and social need.

After the public meeting of April 2009 denouncing those who were delaying the renovation operation, Mr. K finally agreed to see a social worker, to arrange leaving his house, but again with very strong idea about his rights to housing welfare. "Don't even think about moving me into a transition apartment" he told her. Mr. K refused to move house unless one of two conditions were met: either he would be given a SIDR house elsewhere, and the difference between his Petite Ile rent and the new rent would be paid, indefinitely, by the SIDR or he was given a newly renovated house in Petite Ile "*clef en main*"- with all the interior painted, and the floor laid – and the SIDR would pay for the

renovation, not him. He also expected to be refunded for his housing improvements. Although this case had not been resolved by the time I left Réunion in August 2009, and the social worker claimed that the SIDR would not accede to Mr. K's outrageous demands, the other cases documented in this chapter suggest that Mr. K was probably going to receive some form of SIDR housing, despite the fact he was in no way eligible for it, just to allow the construction of the apartment block to go ahead.

VII. Conclusion

About twenty five percent of Réunion Islanders -200,000 people- live in social housing compared to fifteen percent of people in Metropolitan France. As Réunion's oldest and largest social housing agency, the SIDR houses ten percent of Réunion's entire population, although this rises to thirty percent of the population of St Denis. What can the extreme case of the delays in Petite Ile tell us about the meaning of French housing welfare goals and ideas about social rights in Réunion sixty years after "departmentalization" and Réunion's integration in to France was presumed to have occurred?

Réunion Islanders' strategies are cumulatively successful but are not publicly expressed as social movements. Unlike social movements in French *banlieues* Réunion Islanders rarely take to the streets for social protest. Rather, they favor individual and family-based strategies for political action which enable them to subtly work inside the local networks of power and patronage which actually manage social housing, and maintain France's presence in Réunion.

From the 1960s, locally elected elites appropriated the means of distributing welfare, in order to further their political projects. Social housing residents have now also appropriated and instrumentalized French welfare allocations and houses. Rather than being submissive to landholders, some urban residents in social housing have inverted landlord-tenant relations. Tenants are now able to use different tactics – helplessness, stubborn resistance, hustling and family pressure – to put pressure on landholders and claim rights to social housing, even to property ownership. Many of these strategies take years to come to fruition.

Petite Ile is representative of maneuvers undertaken by many other Réunion Islanders, using their family networks, to put pressure on local governments and the French administration. Réunion Islanders usually claim welfare rights in family groups rather than in group claims or marching in the streets. Réunion Island's multicultural society inhibits group claims federation. Also individual claims on SIDR resources are more easily realized through negotiations with political leaders and SIDR employees. Although the cold war and fear of Réunion Island's independence is over, fear of social housing neighborhood disturbances – and riots – clearly informs the pervasive concessions which the SIDR and the French administration make to Réunion Islanders' claims.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

In February and March of 2009, inhabitants of Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyana all launched protests, and strikes, about the prohibitive cost of living in Overseas France compared to Metropolitan France. In Réunion, the COSPAR, a broad-based coalition of political parties, trade union and grassroots groups petitioned for a reduction in the high cost of living in Réunion.¹ The organization claimed that 52% of Réunion Islanders live below the French poverty line, compared with 18% of Metropolitan French, and demanded an increase for the lowest-paid workers, who earn less than their compatriots in Metropolitan France. They called for reductions in the price of living including less expensive gasoline, cheaper flights to Metropolitan France, and a reduction in the cost of basic household supplies. The second major area of their protest was the cost of living in social housing. Out of 257,000 families in Réunion, 50,000 live in social accommodation, and 56,000 families live in privately rented accommodation. However there are currently 26,000 families on the waiting list for social accommodation. “What type of dignity for the human being without housing to live in insalubrious housing ... [nothing but] broken lives and children without direction.”²

¹ COSPAR : Collectif des organisations syndicales, politiques et associatives de La Réunion

² <http://www.npa2009.org/content/la-r%C3%A9union-plate-forme-revendicative-du-cospar> Accessed January 9 2010

There are two easy interpretations for these actions. It could appear that the French colonial project in Overseas France has been an unqualified success. Rather than demonstrating for independence and autonomy, French citizens in Réunion and in the Caribbean appeared to be rioting for social equality with Metropolitan French – they were simply demonstrating to stay part of France.

Linked to this interpretation is the postulate of the “welfare mindset.” More recently, Caribbean author Maryse Condé has decried the disappearance of autonomous production, and the slip into “assistance” of Guadeloupians. “The younger generation [in Guadeloupe have] become consumers rather than producers” says Condé. Similarly the Réunionnais critic Françoise Vergès reviles “the culture of dependence” in Réunion which creates passive accomplices of state violence.³ They critique the French state’s moral abandon of these populations on welfare. While this is the binary opposite of fears that populations in Overseas France abuse the generosity of the French welfare system, in both interpretations, poor populations are passive and dependent on state financial outlays. This welfare dependency has been described as “welfare colonialism” in places where peripheral populations are considered to be passively dependent on central government transfers.⁴

Neither concepts such as welfare dependency nor French colonial or state hegemony can account for the diverse practices of governance which have been needed to install and maintain systems of French social legislation in Réunion. This dissertation

³ Maryse Condé, “On the Apparent Carnivalization of Literature from the French Caribbean,” in *Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities*, ed. Jean Muteba Rahier (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1999); Vergès, *Monsters and revolutionaries : colonial family romance and métissage*.

⁴ ‘Welfare colonialism’ was a term coined to describe the economic integration of the native population in Northern Canada. Robert Paine, *The White Arctic : anthropological essays on tutelage and ethnicity*, Newfoundland social and economic papers ([St. John's]: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977).

has analyzed the formal and informal governance of social welfare. It has demonstrated how the application of French social legislation in Réunion was shaped by pre-existing networks of landed obligation and social control. It also showed the complex networks of interdependence between distributors and receivers of welfare, from the national to the neighborhood level.

It may appear that members of the COSPAR were merely demonstrating in 2009 to remain part of France. Yet the group also used the same logic as the deputies of 1946: Réunion's inhabitants should have the same social equality as France's workers. Over 60 years after the theoretical legal assimilation of Réunion to Metropolitan French social legislation, there are still numerous parts of social legislation for which Réunion Islanders are not eligible. If Réunion Islanders and other French citizens in Overseas France continue to demonstrate for the right to have the same social equality as people in Metropolitan France, it casts doubt on the success of the project of making France Overseas. Are the ideals of the French Republic exportable, even on a tiny island which has been French for 350 years?

On the other hand, part of the causes of the high cost of living in Réunion was silenced by the COSPAR protests, as they have been ignored by the French administration since 1946. Some of the reasons of the high cost of living in Réunion are the import-export and financial monopolies in Réunion.⁵ Finances for local social programs are gathered in an import tax on consumer goods, including gasoline - *l'octroi de mer* – funds which are then distributed to locally elected bodies, which in turn pass on

⁵ In October 2009 French bank charges in Réunion were revealed to be three times higher than in Metropolitan France <http://www.linfo.re/Des-frais-bancaires-exorbitants-a-la-Réunion> Accessed 9 January 2010

the material benefits to some of their constituents. Another reason for the high cost of living is the continued 50% higher payment of everyone who works for a state agency in Réunion. The high cost of living in Overseas France is therefore less to do with the successful project of French state welfare colonialism than the maintenance of local financial and political interests through local distribution networks, and the local elite's appropriation of the French administration's resources.

As the dissertation demonstrated, after 1946, the French administration appropriated the governance of Réunion. It did not allow either Creole elites or the Communist party to direct the use of French government resources in Réunion. Yet paradoxically, given the importance of landholding to local systems of governance, the French administration allowed the Creole elites to continue their monopoly on rural land.

The French administration successfully repressed the Communist Party, and its urban influence in Réunion through the 1960s through electoral fraud and political surveillance. The arrival of Michel Debré in 1963 was instrumental in ending any serious Communist Party challenge to the French administration. Debré ushered in new systems of state-sponsored welfare after 1963 to ensure that popular political support for the Communist party waned. These welfare systems became the tools for ensuring that locally elected elites – rather than the traditional rural landholding elites – became powerful political figures in their own right. These systems of welfare enabled Communist Party leaders to become re-elected Mayor at the city council level after 1971, and effectively funded the continuation of a polarized political discourse between Vergès and the French administration until 1988.

From the 1960s and local elites appropriated the new welfare systems to further their own political power. They also took control of French administrative organizations such as the SIDR. The Mayor of St Denis used the SIDR to become a new type of landholder. He appropriated the French administration's resources to attempt to govern social housing tenants in Réunion in the same way that rural landholders had politically controlled their tenants. At the same time he distributed jobs and material goods, funded by the French administration.

Although the French administration effectively funded the ambitions of a new class of Réunion Island politicians, most importantly the distribution of welfare (combined with the role of the French education system in Réunion) created a new lower-middle and middle class. The mass of Réunion Islanders no longer lived in the same crushing conditions of economic poverty as they had in 1946, and were able to take advantage of this welfare distribution to improve their living conditions.

From the 1990s, the French administration in Réunion and the SIDR housing agency has been concerned with the idea of the “welfare mentality” in Réunion, and has attempted to create housing policies which will create personal responsibility and autonomy for Réunion Islanders in the social housing system. However, many Réunion Islanders in social housing see the distribution of French welfare resources as their right. They also view their rights as tenants in a similar way to rural tenants in the 1950s – that in return for loyalty, the landlord should provide a plot of land for them to own. Hence, the Petite Ile housing renovation has already taken twelve years, and is still not complete.

The “welfare mentality”, if it exists, is far from passive. Many residents of Petite Ile have used all the resources they can muster to force the SIDR, city councils, and other

parts of the French administration, to agree to meet their demands for housing and property rights. Even the poor in Réunion are increasingly appropriating the resources of the French state.

Creole descendants of Africans, Malagasy, Indians and Europeans came to practice being French in Overseas France through their appropriation and local governance of French welfare systems. As historically landless populations were able to influence the governance and distribution of social legislation in Réunion, racial and class divisions in Réunion have been attenuated through the distribution of the material benefits of welfare policies.

The distribution of local employment through the state funding of school canteens enabled mass employment in city governments from the 1960s, allowing a generation of workers access to jobs which were paid a minimum wage, and had social coverage, unlike agricultural and domestic work, traditionally the labor of the landless masses. However, despite this flattening of inequality, conventional statistical measures comparing Réunion and Metropolitan France demonstrate that Réunion Islanders have less employment, training and jobs than the average in Metropolitan France.

Rather like the politicians in France who started to realize that full French employment was not France's destiny, but was a historical moment of the postwar *Trente Glorieuses* postwar period, my dissertation suggests that the current focus on 19th and early 20th century French colonialism could be enriched by an acknowledgement of the much longer time period of French colonialism – or the project of Overseas France - which extends to the present day. Understanding France after the so-called period of

decolonization reveals a continuation of certain state policies of high colonialism, or at least calls into question the conventional narratives of French colonialism.

Réunion Island has been part of France from 1663 until the present day. Its continued presence in the French Republic suggests we take histories and challenges of studying contemporary Overseas France more seriously, rather than seeing Overseas France as an inconvenient and inauthentic anomaly to an earlier colonial plan that is seemingly easy to understand.

In the French Antilles there have been calls for a referendum to reconsider its political relationship to France in the wake of the 2009 strikes. Few in Reunion, even Nelson Dijoux, seriously believe that independence would be a viable option for the island. As in 1946, the problem of an identifiable racial majority remains unresolved, and the state remains a convenient mediator between different interest groups. I cannot help but be reminded of the French-Algerian conflict and the speed with which France moved from a full support of French Algeria to a rejection of its claims to be part of the Republic. Perhaps at the right moment, France will simply jettison Réunion and the other areas of Overseas France in the same way. However, as the presentation of the IHEDN seminar relates at the beginning of this dissertation, many people have a stake in emphasizing and creating links to ensure that Réunion's separation from France remains unthinkable, and impossible.

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PB Petites brochures

CP Cartes et plans

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