

The Archives of Réunion: A Workshop Opened For Historical Research¹

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Archives of Réunion

THE ISLAND of Réunion is located in the Indian Ocean at latitude 20° 50' S. and longitude 52° 10' E., between Madagascar and the island of Mauritius. It is a volcanic land of approximately 2,880 square kilometers, with sharp topographical relief, the highest elevation being over 3,000 meters. Its population, which approaches 300,000 persons, is composed essentially of descendants of old French colonists, Negroes who came as slaves from Madagascar, Mozambique, and other parts of Africa, some Chinese, and many Hindus. It is engaged principally in the cultivation and processing of sugar cane.

Although in all likelihood its existence had been known since the Middle Ages to Arab voyagers in the Indian Ocean, the island was not discovered by Westerners until the sixteenth century. French colonization, the only colonization really carried out there, dates from the second half of the seventeenth century. It was undertaken originally by the French India Company, which, under various forms, held the island of the King like a feudal land for an entire century. This epoch saw the first influx of settlers, the importation of slaves, and the introduction of coffee and sugar cane. It was also during this period that Mahé de La Bourdonnais organized the Île de France (Mauritius²) and Bourbon (Réunion³) as economic and strategic fueling stations on the water route to the Indies. In 1767 the island of Réunion passed under direct royal control; then, from 1789 to the beginning of the nineteenth century, it experienced a revolutionary regime of local origin, under which at a certain stage it was practically autonomous. After a brief reorganization under the Empire, during which it received the ephemeral name of Bonaparte, it fell under British rule (1810-15). Its return

¹Translated from the French by Albert Dannenhirsch, National Archives. The footnotes following this are notes by the translator.

² Present name.

³ Present name.

to France under the Treaty of Vienna restored it to the status of a French colony, which it retained during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. This period was marked economically by the increase of sugar production, which brought great prosperity before 1860. Then a grave crisis followed, and finally a certain stagnation. From the social point of view, the salient event of this period was the liberation of slaves in 1848.

Since 1946, Réunion has been a French department like Gironde or Seine-Inférieure. It was incorporated into the mother country at the same time as the old French colonies of America. Among other administrative innovations, this "departmentalization" led to the creation in 1952 of the Departmental Archives that succeeded the Colonial Archives. The statute regulating the Archives of Réunion has had changes through the years.

The Archives Service is at present directed by a Chief Archivist, the author of these lines, assisted by a technical staff employed by the national government and a local staff. Besides the departmental depository, this organization controls the archives maintained by the different administrations, the courts of justice, and the communes. It also has the authority to examine the legal acts of notaries, and it furnishes information with respect to private archives.

The depository itself is located at Saint-Denis, the capital city of the department, in a relatively new building which also houses the public library. The part of this structure reserved to the Archives is at present in no condition to assure the rational arrangement of records. However, while awaiting the erection of a new structure, the Archives part is shortly to be rebuilt, at an estimated cost of 8 million francs C.F.A.⁴ This project will provide for the installation of metal shelves of a linear capacity of 1,600 meters and for furnished offices, all organized in a modern manner.

Not to speak of the documents for research in the offices of the court clerks, city halls, and notaries — some of which are very old, bulky, and important — the collections of the Archives of Réunion deposited at Saint-Denis represent a sequence of documentary pieces extending from the very earliest years of colonization until the present time (1674-1946), covering therefore nearly three centuries.

These collections, unfortunately, have suffered greatly during the course of the years. Carelessness or vandalism, cyclones, transfers, and insects (especially termites) have destroyed certain docu-

⁴ C.F.A.: Colonie française d'Afrique. The value of a franc C.F.A. is twice that of a standard French franc.

ments and damaged others. There remain, however, approximately 500 linear meters of bundles and registers sufficient in quality and quantity to document practically all the facts and periods of the history of the island.

The oldest group (the local archives of the India Company) has been classified by M. Albert Lounon, eminent historian of Réunion. Those of the royal, revolutionary, imperial, and English periods (1767-1815) have likewise been classified, but more summarily. As to the archives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I found them lacking any arrangement and in great disorder.

Rebuilding of the depot and disinfection. The rebuilding project to which I have referred ought to provide sanitary quarters for the Archives. With the object of protecting fully the documents and assuring their physical preservation, a frontal attack has been launched against insects, simultaneously with the restoration of deteriorated documents.

Arrangement projects. The mass of the archives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been attacked with vigor. At this time (October 1953) two-thirds of these records have been sorted and identified, put in bundles, and labeled. A concurrent undertaking to revise the classification of series L (1789-1815) has been successfully carried out.

Publication of inventories. We inaugurated in the year 1953 a series of publications, one volume to be issued each year. The first is a catalog of documents preserved at Paris and concerning the islands of Île de France and Bourbon during the administration of the India Company. Beginning with 1954, we shall start to issue some inventories describing the local archives, publishing that of series L at the same time that an analogous work will appear at Mauritius prepared by my colleague and friend Dr. Toussaint, chief archivist of that British colony. In 1955 we shall bring out an inventory of series C (Company of the Indies). For 1956 is anticipated a catalog of the royal period (A to H) and for the following years catalogs of the modern series (M to Y).

Foreign exhibits. In spite of the importance of the work in progress, I have welcomed the chance to arrange for the appearance of certain documents from the Archives of Réunion in the French exhibit at the Exposition of Bulawayo (Rhodesia). Of special note, I have organized at Saint-Denis, in collaboration with Dr. Toussaint (who presents a similar display), an exhibition of documents originating from our two depositories and from Paris in honor of La Bourdonnais, who died in 1753.

Such are, very briefly, the Archives of Réunion and the work that is going on there: a workshop, a little prehistory, an exploration, and an infancy full of promise. We must still wait for a regular depository, installed in an adequate building, furnished with detailed card indexes and a library of *reference books*, and equipped with microfilm and photostat apparatus as well as a document-restoration laboratory. All this will require time, personnel, and funds, but we shall arrive at it eventually.

Then we shall be able to exploit profitably these incontestable riches, of which the following are becoming discernible:

First, an immense documentation on an "old colony" of France (probably unique, except for what is preserved in Paris). Exploited at the same time as the documents of Paris and those of the departmental depositories of western France, the archives of Réunion will one day permit the writing of a definitive history of the island, which has been impossible until now.

Second, some source material concerning Madagascar and the island of Mauritius that is more important than would be expected in the case of neighboring territories with a common history that were in certain periods under the same administration. Concerning Madagascar, the Archives of Réunion holds some administrative documents on the first French colonizations and also some memoirs, drawings, photographs, and so forth, originating from travelers or business men of Réunion that relate to the rule of the Hovas⁵ as well as to family life in the period of independence. Concerning Mauritius, we have, for the period of the India Company, some documents that have no equal at Port Louis.⁶

Finally, and without doubt the most interesting, a considerable documentation on the important questions affecting the history of the Indian Ocean for all periods. For the eighteenth century: political relations with India within the framework of Anglo-French rivalry; relations with the Arab States of the Near East, the East Coast of Africa and neighboring islands; privateering; the importation of slaves; the introduction of coffee and sugar in the islands; and the introduction of spices originating from the Far East. For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: colonial expansion of Europeans in Africa; the activities of slave smugglers; the transporting of coolie immigrants from Australia to Aden and from China to Madagascar; the great sugar growing industry; maritime commerce; rice; and the Suez Canal. When completely inventoried,

⁵ Principal native tribe.

⁶ Capital city of Mauritius.

this documentation will form a remarkable chapter in the general inventory of sources on the history of the Indian Ocean that will have to be established some day. This could be the work of a congress of archivists of the Indian Ocean, for which a meeting call is contemplated in the near future.

Conversely, there is little documentation in our Archives on foreign relations beyond the Indian Ocean. It is for this reason that we have little documentation on America, especially the United States. There are, however, a few sporadic pieces of this kind. Among them I might mention those that relate to the passage of American vessels during the American Revolutionary War, a question already studied by Dr. Toussaint with respect to Mauritius.

In ending this rapid survey, it remains for me to say that in spite of the fact that the Archives of Réunion is at present being completely reorganized, I should be happy to receive any searcher seeking information or carrying out some study. Unfortunately, this island is far off; its antipode is found near California. Airmail, however, is reasonably rapid, and it is possible to answer an American correspondent in several days. I shall do this with the greatest pleasure.