

## Death in Diaspora: A Social History of Coolie Life in Mauritius

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Marcel Granet once proposed that ‘method is the road once you have travelled it’. Such a sense of method probably invokes the concept of life as lived experiences with all its sensorial qualities and experiences of the body that is biopolitical and biosocial. So, the different experiences of the individual talk about norms of the society, contemplating the economy and politics of the time. But what does method as a historical tool of analysis mean or culminate to when it comes to death as there are no trajectories afterwards. Can we consider death as a method to reflect on the trajectories lived through its silences of bodies preserved in its passage to the afterlife? To borrow from Mezzadra & Nielsen’s ‘Border as a Method’, this paper will try to look at ‘death’ as a method to reflect back on the conditions of colonial coolie labour regimes within the capitalist transformations of the overseas plantation economies of the Empire as mortality-morality-sickness were the common conditions accompanying not only during the transit of labour but a constant worry of the Empire in its attempts to sedentarise the population. The coolie question according to George Bowen was ‘step on fire placed under treacherous ashes’ and the mortality-morality index itinerantly remained and ultimately became the tool of the nationalist critique of the system and that of the Empire both at home and beyond. Death while being acknowledged as the end of the biological span of a physical being, here it is also looked at as an expository character that edifies the life exposition of absolutely everything lived for and lived in the bio-social being. Thereby, while, death is an individual [in]voluntary performative act, it also canvases the social setting in which the form of life was lived. It is the end strata that embeds multiple complex layered living that the individual body is exposed to. Death, therefore, becomes a qualitative tool for understanding the social, political and health trajectory of the community. Death here is analysed through the qualitative reading of the burial registers of the Bois Marchand cemetery in Mauritius not as a supplement to the official correspondence on the health of the coolies, reportages and pamphlets on indenture labour systems but as organic primary indicators of the health choices made and health systems and infrastructures available to them as migrants in Mauritius. Death registers are thus looked at as polyphonic texts and biographies of the health system in indentured labourhood that just not speaks of illness as Kierkegaard might have said ‘sickness unto death’ like injuries or traumas of childbirth, diarrhoea, fever, syphilis, etc. but these statistics and descriptions of mortality are autochthonic registers of the presence of another consciousness of the coolie self as both culturally defined by its prescriptive health systems engrained in its patriarchal structure with a rooted class-caste conscience as well as the self that is re-imagined and relocated in the new socio-cultural prescriptions of the Empire. Mortality-morality in these overseas plantation economies can be treated as asphyxiating labyrinths which rest supposedly in between the disenfranchisement of the dual consciousness of reflections of identity as dislocation and relocation and new social beginnings on the one hand and the ever-experimenting apparatus of the Empire to preserve the health of the labourers with the ideal of ‘healthy body and hard hands’ on the other. What emerges, thus, is the refabrication of the sense of autonomy and gaze of the male as an individual in the labour regime and that of the Empire as the paternalistic figure, and, thereby shows the rifts and disjunctures and insecurities in accepting the western medicine system as opposed to the traditional indigenous knowledge of health systems.