

# FROM SLAVE CAMP TO CITÉ: LA MIVOIE

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report falls under Project 4 of the Truth and Justice Commission (TJC) entitled: Culture, Ethnicity and Identity. It is a multi-disciplinary study of Cité La Mivoie and aims at assessing the social and economic conditions of the residents of the Cité La Mivoie also known as *Cité* EDC Grande Rivière Noire.

It is a low cost housing estate situated on the western coast of Mauritius in the Black River District. It is located at the southern end of the village of Grand Rivière Noire, before the village of Petite Rivière Noire.

To meet its objectives, this research intends to answer the following guiding questions: (1) Are the social and economic conditions of the residents of Cité La Mivoie better than in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? (2) How has the *Cité* evolved since the time of slavery to the present day? (3) Have the job patterns evolved since the time of slavery and indentured-ship or are the inhabitants still performing menial jobs and adopting a subservient attitude towards the wealthier residents and new owners of the luxury residences? (4) What can be done to improve this situation?

In line with the objectives of the research, this report is divided into two parts. The first part is a historical survey of Cité La Mivoie and the second part is a social and economic survey of the *Cité*. The report concludes with recommendations to improve the social and economic situation of the local inhabitants.

The social survey focuses on the social life in Cité La Mivoie in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of, firstly, the social organisation in the *Cité*, secondly, the ethnic relationships within the housing estate, thirdly, the gender relationships and family patterns in the *Cité*, fourthly, the settlement in Cité La Mivoie, fifthly, its housing conditions and sanitation and finally the social conditions of the residents.

This social survey reconstructs the social evolution of Cité La Mivoie from the perspective of the local population aiming at assessing the local social conditions and identifying the social problems the residents are presently facing in order to make recommendations to address the problems identified and ultimately improve their social conditions.

The economic survey focuses on the economic life in the *Cité* in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of, firstly, the infrastructural development of the village of Petite Rivière Noire and the *Cité*, secondly, the occupation patterns in the housing estate during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thirdly, the educational patterns within the *Cité* and finally other economic problems that the local residents are facing.

This economic survey reconstructs the economic evolution of Cité La Mivoie from the perspective of the local population and aims at assessing the local economic conditions and identifying the economic problems the residents are presently facing in order to make recommendations to address the problems identified and ultimately improve their economic conditions.

Field research concluded that Black River village is at a transitional stage facing a population expansion with the mass influx of human resources as well as economic resources. High population density will in the end cause more economic problems related to security, space and natural and environmental resources.

Albeit, some local inhabitants have seen an improvement in their standard of living and there is a situation of quasi-full employment in Cité La Mivoie, yet, this pseudo development does not benefit everyone. The residents of Cité La Mivoie are facing the negative effects of these developmental projects.

This report concludes with recommendations for improving the social and economic life of the *Cité* residents and for the preservation of the local tangible and intangible heritage to ensure that the history of the residents' ancestors do not go in oblivion and ensure that the memories of their ancestors remain alive.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Cité La Mivoie also known as *Cité* EDC Grande Rivière Noire is a low cost housing estate located at the southern end of the village of Grand Rivière Noire, in Black River District. (See Appendix 2)

Black River District is the third largest and longest district of the Republic of Mauritius, encompassing an area of 346 Km<sup>2</sup> over a distance of more than 60 km with a population of approximately 74,572<sup>1</sup> that represents approximately 6% of total population living in Mauritius.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to state the exact number of people residing in Cité La Mivoie as all figures available give aggregate statistics for Grande Rivière-Noire VCA whose population in 2000 amounted to 2,042<sup>2</sup> (1,010 males and 1,032 females) and the population density per km<sup>2</sup> was 47.4<sup>3</sup>. As at 1<sup>st</sup> July 2009, the local population was estimated at 2,571<sup>4</sup>.

However, based on the electoral list of 2010, the resident population in the *Cité* was estimated at 5,000. Statistics on Grande Rivière-Noire VCA are included in this report for referencing purposes only and it should be emphasised that they do not reflect the social and economic reality of the *Cité*. Established in October 1989, the Black River District Council Area is the youngest local authority composed of 13 Village Councils Area (VCA). Prior to its setting up, under the French period, Black River was a division of the Plaines Wilhems district and, later, the district was under the jurisdiction and administration of the Moka/Flacq and Grand Port/Savanne District Councils respectively. The *Cité* (Eng. Trans. Low Cost Housing Estate) falls under the administration of the Grande Rivière Noire VCA.

As per the Local Government Act of 1989, every five years the villagers in accordance with the Representation People Act elect the village councillors. The chairperson and vice chairperson of the council are elected, by secret ballot, by the members of the village council during a special meeting convened by the chief executive of the district council.

The southern part of the district is known to be among the poorest localities of the island in terms of social and health conditions such as sanitary, infrastructure, academic achievements and economic and employment opportunities as illustrated in Map 1 below.

According to inhabitants' testimonies, the region and the local population have, for years, been stigmatised by people living in other parts of the island, as the 'back country' populated essentially by Mauritians presumed to be the descendants of slaves and of the maroon slaves. There is a shared feeling that this stigmatisation has, for many years, negatively impacted on the local social and economic evolution as illustrated in Marie Michele's testimony below:

...parce que tout le monde sait qu'à Rivière Noire c'était majoritairement des Créoles tu vois et tout le monde savait à cette époque là et que c'était considéré comme un endroit défavorisé et que, comme si que c'était pas que ma personne, c'était, parce que ce que j'étais...<sup>5</sup>

(Eng. trans:...because everyone knows that in Black River it was in majority Creoles you understand and at that time everyone knew that it was considered an underprivileged area and that it was not just me, it was because of who I was...)

### 3. BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Black River was commonly perceived as being a land of predilection for the maroon slaves and as being inhabited by Mauritians of Afro-Malagasy origins that, subsequently, led to its exclusion and marginalisation by the colonial and postcolonial society. The socioeconomic conditions of northern and southern Black River differed and after emancipation the district experienced demographic changes:

The Northern part benefitting from better water supply, more roads, and large plantations developing into sugar plantations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Southern Black River which starts from the village of Black River going southwards, the story is very different. There were few roads; it was dry with little major economic activity except for the large estates which did not necessarily produce crops because of lack of rainfall and small scattered populations. The state of health was a preoccupation throughout its history as was the problem of communication... (Teelock (2010, p. 51),

According to Teelock (1998), in 1806, 1826 and 1832, the slave population in the Black River district amounted to 4,687; 5,397 and 4,429 respectively.<sup>6</sup> In 1831, the number of slaves in Black River amounted to 4,642 slaves of which 2,926 were men and 1,716 were women. There were 264 French settlers and 588 'Free Blacks'. At the abolition of slavery, in 1835, most inhabitants (French and Coloured) were still living in the region and between 1835 and 1935; about four percent of the ex-apprentice population of Mauritius lived in Black River.<sup>7</sup>

Emancipation led to the emigration of two-thirds of the slave population out of the district. 'As the Stipendiary Magistrate stated, only one third of ex-slaves were left and were replaced by other ex-slaves from other districts as well as by indentured immigrants. However, their exact location is not known. We know they left the large estates because returns from these large estates show only a handful of ex-apprentices listed as working there. Stipendiary Magistrates also reported that few wanted to stay on large plantations, but they probably stayed close to smaller estates or moved to where they could settle or purchase land'.<sup>8</sup>

With the arrival of the Indian indentured labourers, the local demography changed (Table 1).

Year/Population	Indian Population		General Population		TOTAL
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1846	2,014	261	2,532	2,024	6,831
1851	4,106	888	2,791	2,306	10,091
1861	7,822	2,945	3,592	2,812	17,171
1871	5,437	2,695	2,052	1,813	11,997
Total	19,379	6,789	10,967	8,955	46,090

Source: Appendix No. 10, Appendices to the Report of the Census of Mauritius

The population of Indian origins in the Black River region came essentially from Madras and Calcutta and the men outnumbered the women. Some of them were living on estate land while others were not living on Sugar Estates (Tables 2 and Table 3).

Sex/Immigrant	Calcutta	Madras	Bombay	Not Stated	Indo-Mauritians	Free Passengers
Males	1138	646	347	9	1351	146
Female <sup>3</sup>	467	312	128	3	1376	103

Source: Appendix No. 13, Appendices to the Report of the Census of Mauritius

Sex/Immigrant	Calcutta	Madras	Bombay	Not Stated	Indo-Mauritians	Free Passengers
Males	1084	386	356	13	1041	66
Females	408	181	150	20	977	28

Source: Appendix No. 13, Appendices to the Report of the Census of Mauritius

Oral history revealed that until 1960 the local people were still living in the camps on the surrounding estates and after the construction of the Cité La Mivoie under the Cyclone Housing Schemes of the Central Housing Act of 1960, people moved from the neighbouring localities to settle in the housing estate.

The settlement of the *Cité* dates to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present resident population is composed of majority Creoles presumed to be descendants of slaves and a minority of Hindi-speaking and Marathi-speaking Indo-Mauritians.

In accordance with Marie Michele's testimony quoted above and with Daniel's testimonies, the local inhabitants believe that they are being marginalised and ostracised because of, firstly, their political preferences and, secondly, their presumed ancestral origins. They feel that they are further discriminated against when the local councillors are not of the same political background as the government in power.

...Site la...ou kone ki arrive...ki fer site...demoli parseki bann dimunn aster zot tro met zot lespri dan sa MMM MMM la Zot ena lespoir ladan. Zot servi politik buku...Me selman lenvironmen ti pli bon....pena droger, pena piker...selmen pu li pa develop, c gras a politician. Kombien tan Ganoo ici la 25 an Ganoo dan sa soz la.....mo pa truv nenryen...<sup>9</sup>

(Eng. trans:...The housing estate...you know what is happening...why the housing estate is shattered because people now are too focused on MMM they have placed their hope in the MMM. They use politics lots...but the environment has improves...there are no drug abuser, there are no heroin addict...but it is because of politicians it is not developing...how long has Ganoo been here? 25 years in this (electoral ward)...I see nothing...)

Over the past ten years, following mass development, inward migration of people from urban areas to Black River and of foreigners especially French, South Africans and English<sup>10</sup>, the region has undergone much transformation in terms of infrastructural developments. For example, the opening of new restaurants, commercial centres and the construction of new residential areas that led to a reversal in the local employment structure. New Integrated Resort Schemes developments are planned in the region such as La Balise Marina and Matala Lifestyle and Spa.

The changes in the demographic profile and in the social, economic and cultural landscape of the area have other correlated impacts such as affecting the social fabric of the community. For example, the criteria under-pinning social stratification and social mobility are evolving and consequently social relationships as well with the historical econo-ethno pattern is resurfacing or even intensifying.

Although Black River has experienced burgeoning developments, field research uncovered that only part of the village and its population are benefiting from the opportunities of these developments with others being further victimised.