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## The relegation of the recidivists in French Guyana, nineteenth-twentieth century.

Jean-Lucien Sanchez.

Following the work of Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir*, published in 1975, many studies of the prison system have emerged in France and scholars have developed an important historiography of the penal system<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, if the prison itself has been closely examined, the penal colonies of the French empire have received much less attention. The initiator of the historiography of prisons in French Guyana remains unquestionably Michel Pierre whose 1982 book *La terre de la grande punition. Histoire des bagnes de Guyane*<sup>2</sup>, was the first devoted to this topic and to stimulate an area of research<sup>3</sup>. Following him, Danielle Donet-Vincent produced the most complete and most knowledgeable studies of the prisons of French Guyana, in a pair of books that represent the sum of the most comprehensive historiography<sup>4</sup>. The value of Donet-Vincent's work lies in his use of original and unique sources, especially the papers of Charles Péan and Gaston Monnerville, who were instrumental in the abolition of prisons in French Guyana. However, these studies have mostly focused on a single class of convicts, the *transportés* (those condemned to hard labour), and analyze the history of the prison in general over the long term, without closely examining the internal functioning of penitentiaries. This is not surprising, as the *transportés* were the largest category of convicts in French Guyana (nearly 52 000 individuals) and their history is the longest (from 1852 to 1953).

But aside from the *transportés*, another less known category of convicts, the *relégués*, were sentenced to forced labour in French Guyana from 1887 to 1953s. This essay will analyze this criminal category which represents a unique aspect of the French colonial and criminal historiography. Adopting an approach of "asylum" in reference to the works of

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques-Guy Petit, *Ces peines obscures. La prison pénale en France 1780-1875* (Paris, 1990) and Robert Badinter, *La prison républicaine : 1871-1914* (Paris, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Pierre, *La terre de la grande punition. Histoire des bagnes de Guyane* (Paris, 1982), reissued as *Bagnards. La terre de la grande punition. Cayenne 1852-1953* (Paris, 2000). For prison of New Calédonia, see Louis-José Barbançon, *L'Archipel des forçats : l'histoire du bague de Nouvelle-Calédonie (1863-1931)* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 2003) and Isabelle Merle *Expériences coloniales. La Nouvelle-Calédonie (1853-1920)* (Paris, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques-Guy Petit, Nicole Castan, Claude Faugeron, Michel Pierre, André Zysberg, eds, *Histoire des galères, bagnes et prisons. XIIIème-XXème siècles. Introduction à l'histoire pénale de la France* (Paris, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Danielle Donet-Vincent, *La fin du bague* (Rennes, 1992) and Danielle Donet-Vincent, *De soleil et de silences. Histoire des bagnes de Guyane* (Paris, 2003).

Erving Goffman<sup>5</sup>, the article presents the internal functioning of the institution confining the *relégués* in the prison of Saint-Jean-du-Maroni. In doing so, the article addresses the political question of control over the prison and, more generally, the impact of this institution in the colony. While formally under the supervision of the governor of the colony, the director of the prison ruled a vast territory – the entire prison territory of Maroni – far away from the capital of the colony, Cayenne, where the governor resided. This situation led to a situation of double colonization, with French Guyana virtually divided into two territories in which two different powers reigned supreme: on the one hand, the director of the prison, who sought to manage the establishment under his charge; on the other the governor, who hoped to develop and administer the colony under his authority as best as he could. This article analyzes this double colonization through the example of the *relégués* interned in the penitentiary of Saint-Jean. Moving from internal prison governance to the larger question of colonial sovereignty, it seeks to explore the main features of the colonial Franco-Guyanese state and the tension embedded in the local executive power of the penal colony<sup>6</sup>.

Not surprisingly, this double sovereignty is mirrored in the structure of the archival records that open a window onto penal life in the colony. The records produced by the department of the ministry of colonies, which was responsible for the prison, are available at the *Archives Nationales d’Outre-mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, in the serie *H Colonies*<sup>7</sup>. Conversely, the other major series of penal records of French Guyana, regarding the archives of the governor, can be found at the *Archives départementales de Guyane* (ADG), in the IX series, *Administration Pénitentiaire*. These are the archives of the governor of French Guyana, who actually maintained authority over the day-to-day management of the prison and its agents but, in fact, was ultimately powerless against the might of the director of the prison.

### **What were are the different categories of convicts in French Guyana?**

There were several categories of prisoners condemned to hard labour in French Guyana. The most common were the *transportés*, that is to say those condemned to hard

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<sup>5</sup> Erving Goffman, *asiles : études sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux et autres reclus* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, Frederick Cooper, « Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda », in Ann Laura Stoler, Frederick Cooper, eds, *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1997), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvie Clair, Odile Krakovitch, Jean Prêteux, eds, *Établissements pénitentiaires coloniaux, 1792-1952, Série Colonies H, Répertoire numérique* (Paris, 1990).

labour by criminal courts under the law on transportation of May 30, 1854. Until 1852, hard labour was carried out in France, in port prisons located primarily in Brest, Toulon and Rochefort. Strongly influenced by the model of penal colonization developed by Great Britain in Australia, Napoleon III decided in 1854 to send all prisoners condemned to hard labour to the colonies, specifically to French Guyana<sup>8</sup>. In doing so, the law allowed metropolitan France to get rid of the convicts on its soil by sending them far enough away to prevent any return. Simultaneously, transportation allowed the colony to benefit from an abundant and cheap workforce, seen as a necessity since the abolition of slavery in 1848. Finally, this penal project also contained within it the seeds of territorial colonization; the aim was to allow the best among the convicts to settle permanently in the colony upon their release from prison and to support them with a grant of land. The challenge, then, was to enable convicts to redeem a life beyond the borders of the metropolis and promote the development of the French colonial empire.

The law on transportation of May 30, 1854 required convicts to be deployed to "the hardest work of colonization" and Article 6 required that those condemned to less than eight years hard labour had to remain, at the expiration of their sentence, in the colony a time equal to the length of their sentence. Conversely, if their sentence was more than eight years, they were required to remain for life in the colony at the end of their sentence. This was known as *doublage* (doubling) and the *transportés* in this case were called *4ème Ière* (4th Section, 1st class), while those sentenced to less than eight years after their *doublage* was made, were called *4ème 2ème* (4th Section, 2<sup>nd</sup> class) and were then free to return home if they had enough money for their repatriation.

Work patterns for the *transportés* were organized in a rigid hierarchy. Upon arrival in French Guyana, they were appointed to the third class which included three levels (3rd, 2nd and 1st class): to move from one class to another, a *transporté* had to behave well, work diligently, and then hope to reach the first class. When reaching the level of the first class, he could receive a grant of land or work for private individuals or in public service of the colony.

Nevertheless, in case of misconduct, lack of development of a land concession, or attempted escape from the colony, the *transporté* could be reinstated within the penitentiary and be demoted. Anyone condemned to a term of imprisonment imposed by a special court,

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Pierre, *Bagnards. La terre de la grande punition. Cayenne 1852-1953, op. cit.*, 24.

the *Tribunal Maritime Spécial*, was automatically appointed to the second category, and the third category was reserved for habitual criminals.

Over the course of a century (1852-1953) 52 000 men and 394 women were banished to French Guyana. During much of this period, the main reception point for the *transportés* was the prison of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni. Located in the *territoire pénitentiaire du Maroni* (prison territory of Maroni), created by decree in 1860 and assigned to the exclusive needs of the prison, this penitentiary was concentrated in the centre of the *commune pénitentiaire* (town prison) of Saint-Laurent, founded in 1880 and headed by the director of prison administration and its agents.

The *relégués* composed the other category of convicts. An Act of May 27, 1885 on the relegation of recidivists mandated perpetual confinement of repeat criminals or repeat offenders in a colony. This law mainly affected repeat offenders guilty of petty theft and vagrancy and its mechanism is unique in the history of French criminal law. Article 4 of the Act created an "irrefutable presumption of incorrigibility" supposed to prove positively the danger of a repeat offender. It read as follows:

"Art. 4. Repeat offenders who will be relegated, in any order whatsoever, and in an interval of ten years, excluding the length of any sentence served, have incurred the convictions listed in one of the following paragraphs:

- The first. Two sentences to hard labour or confinement without a derogation from the provisions of paragraphs 1 and 2 of art. 6 of the Act of May 30, 1854;
- Second. One of the convictions in the preceding paragraph and two sentences, or to imprisonment for acts defined as crimes, or more than three months in prison for: larceny; breach of trust; outrage public decency; incitement of minors' debauchery; begging or vagrancy, through application of art. 277 and 279 of the Penal Code;
- Third. Four convictions, or to imprisonment for acts defined as crimes, or more than three months' imprisonment for offences specified in paragraph above;
- Fourth. Seven convictions, including two at least under the preceding paragraphs, and the other, or for vagrancy, or for violation of the prohibition of residence served by the application of s. 19 of this Act, provided that two of the other convictions are more than three months' imprisonment."

Any man or woman who appeared before a magistrate and presented a criminal record combination listed above was, if reconvicted, automatically condemned to relegation. Relegation was a mandatory sentence for the judge to impose, and it was considered an accessory penalty or secondary penalty, that is to say, a security measure taken against a convict once he served his main sentence. It was not the convict's most recent criminal act that relegation punished, but rather all of the convictions entered on the criminal record of a condemned, that is to say a total punishment in response to a "criminal career".

The relegation system itself in French Guyana was based on a pecuniary distinction. *Relégués* who demonstrated sufficient financial resources to support themselves in the colony benefited from the *relégation individuelle* (individual relegation). The *relégués individuels* were free in their daily actions (but did not have the right to leave the colony), could make a commitment to work for individuals or in public services of the colony, and were only required to answer two annual roll calls organized by the prison administration. All those who did not have sufficient financial means to support themselves in the colony, however, were supported by the State and thus expected to work for the State. This was the system of the *relégation collective* (collective relegation) and the *relégués collectifs* were interned in a penitentiary, supervised by officers of the prison administration, and subjected to hard penal labour.

In the spirit of the legislation, collective relegation corresponded to a regime in which the *relégués* received a preparation for work in a colonial environment in order to eventually be placed in the regime of individual relegation. However, in reality, the system of relegation proved similar to the system of transportation and the *relégués* resembled their counterparts among *transportés* condemned to hard labour. Between 1887 and 1953, French Guyana received nearly 17,893 *relégués*: 17 375 men and 519 women..

Prisons that received the *transportés* were located in different corners of French Guyana. Cayenne, on the colony's northeast coast, had a penitentiary with a relatively small number of convicts; the *îles du Salut* (three offshore islands of French Guyana) included a penitentiary on the Isle Royale for the most dangerous *transportés*, a building devoted to solitary confinement on St. Joseph Island and dwellings for the political prisoners condemned by the Act of June 8 1850 on the deportation on Devil's Island (made infamous by H. Charriere in *Papillon*). Located on the coast opposite the *îles du Salut*, the penitentiary of

Kourou was a camp with a small number of convicts. Most of the transportation facilities, however, were located in Maroni, more precisely in the prison territory of Maroni, on the colony's Northwestern border, across the Maroni river from the Dutch colony of Suriname.

This latter territory was exclusively reserved for convicts who were interned in a penitentiary located in the town prison of Saint-Laurent, headed by a director of the prison administration who wielded significant local power. The *transportés* were confined in the penitentiary of Saint-Laurent or scattered in sub-camps for those guilty of disciplinary infractions (*Charvein, Godebert*) or for the sick or the infirm (*Malgaches, Nouveau Camp*).

The *relégués*, by contrast, settled only in the most remote part of the prison territory of Maroni, totally isolated from Saint-Laurent. They were mainly interned in the prison of Saint-Jean and in several disciplinary sub-camps (*Saint Louis, Tigre, La Forestière*) or those camps set aside for the sick or the infirm (*Nouveau Camp, Tollinche*).

Indeed, the prison territory of Maroni was reserved for the exclusive needs of the prison, and convicts were first and foremost a workforce extensively absorbed by the needs of the penitentiaries. Similarly, the requirements of the prison administration for food and equipment represented the main economic activity in the Maroni territory, but at the expense of its development. If the legislature had granted an autonomous territory to the prison, it was in order to prevent forced cohabitation with the free population that lived in the eastern part of French Guyana (Cayenne and its suburbs) and to allow installation of convicts in an area destined to become an epicentre of a colonial society. Nevertheless, the workforce requirements of the penitentiaries prevented the provision of convicts' labor in suitable proportions to free settlers or to public services of the colony; instead the convict workforce almost exclusively served the needs of the prison.

### **The various penitentiaries and sub camps of relegation.**

Upon arrival of the first wave of *relégués* in Saint-Jean in June 1887, the initial project provided by the minister of the colonies was to develop a village of settlers. The *relégués* expected to receive land grants and the centre of the village should have been composed of a market place where convicts could come and sell their agricultural produce. They were initially installed in four temporary camps made of huts and isolated from each other. However, confronted with the growing number of newcomers, the commander of the

relegation corps decided in 1891 to create a set of twenty barracks of brick and iron concentrated in the same space. These dwellings were designed to accommodate the *relégués* and the camp, called *camp central* (central camp) or the *camp du Grand Plateau*, was flanked by a prison and a punishment block and several barracks for guards all around.

From a village of settlers, at the behest of the local penal authorities Saint-Jean turned into a penitentiary where the *relégués* were treated in the same fashion as the *transportés* in the prison of Saint-Laurent. Moreover, given that the *relégués* had to build with their own hands the infrastructure to accommodate them, very few of them benefited from placement in individual relegation and nearly all remained under collective relegation. Therefore, instead of settling as colonists and developing the prison territory of Maroni as envisioned by colonial administrators back in Paris, the *relégués* were employed exclusively for the needs of the penal authorities and proved unable to free themselves from prison.

Only the strongest and most docile *relégués* remained in the prison at Saint-Jean. All the rest, that is to say the disobedient or those who were too old or disabled and could no longer work, were remanded to sub-camps. For example in 1890 the camp of Saint Louis housed the jail and the punishment block of relegation. The disciplinary system at this camp was organized by decree and punishments were varied. The *relégué* could be punished if he had money, if he showed inappropriate or offensive behaviour towards any member of the prison authority, if he rebelled, if he engaged in larceny, destruction of his uniform, acts of immorality, if he demonstrated laziness or an unwillingness to work, if he gambled, engaged in fights, drunkenness or assault and violence against other *relégués*. Punishments for all of these offences were limited in time and in intensity, and could include:

- No additional food at the canteen (one month maximum).
- A loss of a portion of salary that cannot exceed one third of the total product of labour (maximum one month).
- Prison at night (maximum one month).
- Isolation cell (maximum one month).
- Dungeon (maximum two weeks).

Nevertheless, the duration of the punishment could be doubled if the *relégué* committed another offence within three months following his release from prison. These punishments were imposed by a disciplinary commission that met weekly and was chaired by



the commander of the relegation assisted by two employees of the prison designated by the director of the prison. The appearance before the commission was driven by a demand for punishment from a prison guard. After finding a fault, the prison guard could make a request and then the punishment would be imposed by a unanimous vote by the commission<sup>9</sup>.

Some *relégués*, called *incorrigibles*, could be confined for up to four months in the punishment block. Most were detained for serious misconduct and they were usually repeat offenders. Just like in prison, the *relégués* were subjected to forced labour but the regime in this area was far more draconian than that in force in the main penitentiary at Saint-Jean. The *relégués* were forced to observe total silence day and night and during work as well as during rest. Inside the punishment block, those condemned to an isolation cell were put on bread and water every third day and those thrown in the dungeon subsisted on bread and water two days out of three.

As of 1899, the prison and the punishment block of the Saint Louis sub-camp were moved back to Saint-Jean. The camp was then transformed into a village consisting of agricultural concessions. But the quality of the land of Saint Louis was poor and the prison agents were not accustomed to agriculture. As a result, the concessionaires failed to produce agricultural commodities and many fell ill because of the swampy areas surrounding the site. This experiment failed and in 1908, the camp of Saint Louis was reduced to a sub-camp of Saint-Laurent, providing wood for the town prison, chopped of course by the prisoners.

Another sub-camp, Tollinche, created in 1895, was located in Upper Maroni (*Haut Maroni*), about forty kilometres from Saint-Jean. This was initially a camp to house the *relégués* deemed too old or disabled and thus unable to work<sup>10</sup>. Rather than keeping them in Saint-Jean, prison authorities decided to send them to Tollinche, which would serve as the relegation hospice. However, following complaints by colonial doctors, the camp was transformed into a disciplinary camp in 1909 and hosted *incorrigibles*. Nevertheless, because of the very high mortality rate and brutality suffered by the *relégués* in this camp, authorities closed the camp in 1918. Following their evacuation from Tollinche in 1909, all the *relégués* who were too old or too disabled to work were sent instead to the *Nouveau Camp*, which

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<sup>9</sup> Décret du 22 août 1887 portant organisation du régime disciplinaire des relégués collectifs aux colonies, Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) H 1954.

<sup>10</sup> Rapport fait par M. Gaie, inspecteur de 1<sup>ère</sup> classe des colonies, concernant la vérification du service de M. Leyraud, Joseph, commandant par intérim à Saint-Jean-du-Maroni, à l'époque du 14 janvier 1899 et explications fournies par cet agent sur les résultats de sa vérification, ANOM H 1870.

became the hospice of relegation and included a ward for convicts with tuberculosis<sup>11</sup>. A similar isolation ward was established on the island of Saint Louis, in the middle of the Maroni River, housing both *relégués* and the *transportés* suffering from leprosy and forbidden to leave the island.

Four kilometres from Tollinche, the camp of *La Forestière* was opened in 1888 and housed the *section mobile des relégués* (movable section of *relégués*). Created by decree, in theory this section allowed convicts who volunteered to work in isolated sections of the prison territory of Maroni and aimed to enable them to advance quickly to the status of individual relegation. However, in fact, this camp was strictly disciplinary and made it possible for the superior commander of relegation to expel from the prison of Saint-Jean all the *relégués* he considered disobedient. Given the low production of this forest camp, it was transformed into an agricultural camp in 1899 and, like Tollinche, abandoned in 1918<sup>12</sup>.

### **The organization of hard labour in Saint-Jean.**

Despite the existence of such sub-camps, the prison at Saint-Jean remained at the center of the *relégués*' universe. There, the collective *relégués* worked in four main services: the interior, the works department, the agricultural department and the ambulance. The interior service included the *porte-clefs* (the *relégués* who were auxiliary prison guards), the *gardiens de case* (the *relégués* responsible for the cleanliness and food of one of the *relégués* cells), scavengers (the *relégués* responsible for emptying the toilets of administrative staff), those assigned to the cleanliness and maintenance of roads, and finally, the *relégués* assigned to different services such as accounting, harbour, kitchens and the clothing shop. The *relégués* assigned to the works department of the penitentiary were of two kinds: the best qualified in certain trades (masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc.) were designated artisan workers (divided into three classes) while those without special training were assigned as apprentices or labourers. Those employed in the agricultural department were responsible for the gardens and dairy. Those employed in the ambulance service were nurses and thus responsible for providing care and drugs to patients.

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<sup>11</sup> L'inspecteur de 1ère classe Fillon au ministre des Colonies, le 20 février 1911, ANOM H 1864.

<sup>12</sup> Rapport fait par M. Berruë, inspecteur de 1ère classe des colonies concernant la vérification du service de M. Chaix, commandant supérieur de la Relégation, à Saint-Jean-du-Maroni, à l'époque du 28 novembre 1917 et explications fournies par ce fonctionnaire sur les résultats de sa vérification, ANOM H 1873.

The jobs of cooks, accountants, boaters or nurses were the most popular with convicts because they shielded prisoners from arduous work and brought them into contact with foodstuffs and narcotics that they could easily resell on the black market. This was known as *la débrouille* (resourcefulness), which was fed by ceaseless traffic inside the penitentiary: The *relégués* stole food or drugs and sold it to their counterparts or exchanged it for other items (chocolate, cards game, alcohol) with prison guards. Some prisoners manufactured alcohol, *la bibine*, made from corn and rice and sold it for relatively minor sums.

Conversely, agricultural work or labour in the works department were regarded as very difficult because they required the *relégués* to work in contact with an extremely dangerous and unhealthy climate, sometimes in the middle of the rainforest. The hardest work was logging in the forest which required loggers to venture several kilometres into the surrounding wilderness and come into contact with an environment with many mosquitoes, making them susceptible to malaria.

The *relégués* received a salary as a peculium<sup>13</sup>. Half of the peculium was money available for a *relégué*, that is to say the prison administration paid half his salary to an account he could only spend at the penitentiary canteen. The other half of his salary, the reserve peculium, was held in reserve and given to the *relégué* only if he was eventually placed in individual relegation. The low volume of available money required the *relégués* to seek other means to earn enough money to improve their diet by buying illegal food on the prison's internal black market. To this end, they worked for the prison mainly in the morning, 6:00 to 11:00 and during the rest of the day (with the exception of those at the works department) they were free. They could work on a land grant and sell their production, could hunt or fish and sell their catch, or engage in the production of *camelote* (junk). *Camelote* consisted of making various handicrafts for sale to military or civilian personnel of the prison. Convicts carved precious wood, horn, moulded balata, painted pictures, or chased butterflies. This production was then marketed by the *relégués* who owned land grants and were thus authorized to travel to Saint-Laurent every Monday to sell their agricultural production.

Those *relégués* not directly employed by the prison or employed by the public services of the colony, received a land grant or benefit from an assignment in private homes. The

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<sup>13</sup> Note relative aux modifications à apporter à la réglementation du pécule des relégués, Archives départementales de Guyane (ADG) IX 70.

simplest way to take advantage of these commitments remained individual relegation. Nevertheless, to be selected for this privilege, the *relégué* needed a good disciplinary record and was required to pay a deposit of one hundred francs. The payment of this deposit represented an insurmountable obstacle for many prisoners, and the number of the individual *relégués* remained at just under 400 men from 1918 to 1938. Moreover, if the individual *relégué* was dismissed from his job by his employer for any fault, if he tried to escape, or if he failed to develop his land grant, he was automatically deprived of the privilege of individual relegation and returned to the penitentiary to resume his status as a collective *relégué*.

Despite their apparent opportunities outside the walls of the prison, the individual *relégués* were forbidden to stay in Cayenne, the capital of the colony<sup>14</sup>. This prohibition was instituted by the governor of the colony at the request of the General Council of the colony who feared the presence of convicts released from prison in Cayenne, the only place where the activity of the French Guyanese economy could absorb most of them. Denied the right to reside in the eastern part of French Guyana, the convicts had to remain in the western section, in the prison territory of Maroni. Unfortunately, the few economic activities generated in the territory were already occupied by convicts under sentence leased by the prison administration to companies and individuals at prices that competed directly with the labour opportunities of freed convicts.

Prisoners under individual relegation also had to compete with the *transportés* released from prison subject to *doublage* who were also restricted to the prison territory of Maroni. Thus, the individual *relégués* and the *transportés* released from prison both fell into poverty due to the lack of remunerative jobs. While some accepted work for very low wages on banana plantations, others decided to search for gold in Upper Maroni, with all the attendant risks. A few established small shops in the town of Saint-Laurent and sold *camelote* to tourists passing through; others produced coal or improvised small restaurants. Many lived like tramps, getting drunk on rum or tried to live by becoming carriers at the market of Saint-Laurent or dockworkers at the port<sup>15</sup>.

The cost of the upkeep of convicts was the subject of regular complaints from the governor and from members of the General Council of the colony to the Minister of Colonies.

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<sup>14</sup> Appel adressé aux libérés et aux relégués prononcé par le libéré 4ème 1ère Mesclon (10867) lors de la réunion des libérés et des relégués du 20 novembre 1910, ANOM H 1873.

<sup>15</sup> Observations du Président du Comité de patronage des libérés, ADG IX 71.

Composed of farmers and industrialists, members of the General Council leased the *transportés* from the prison administration under the individual assignment system established by the decree of September 15, 1891. The *transportés* could be assigned to individuals, municipalities and local service in the colony but this assignment carried a cost. For individuals, each *transporté* cost 1.50 francs daily with an additional deposit of 25 francs per man.

The regime's commitment to private work for the collective *relégués* was created on February 3, 1900 and only those who observed good behaviour and attendance at work for six months were eligible. The employer was required to pay 2.50 francs per day and had to pay a deposit of 50 francs per collective *relégué*. The General Council often demanded lowering the cost of the workforce of convicts but each time the Minister of Colonies refused, because the difference would have to be supported by his budget<sup>16</sup>. The Minister considered, for example in the month of May 1914, that lowering the cost of the workforce of convicts to 0.50 francs per man and per day would result in an expense to his budget of 90 000 to 100 000 francs.

For his part, the governor of the colony required in December 1931 the provision without charge of the workforce of convicts for the upkeep of all colonial major utility works. However, here too, the Minister of Colonies proved reluctant to increase the expense of the state budget<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the cost of the workforce of convicts prevented the governor of the colony from receiving convicts in sufficient numbers to carry out public works that could develop the colony. Ultimately, the convicts worked almost exclusively for the penitentiaries, rather than for the colony as a whole.

The opportunities for individual *relégués* were limited by the fact that they were much less popular with employers and local businesses than the *transportés* released from prison. The *relégué* was a victim of a stigma in the colony, where he was marked as a petty criminal and recidivist, always ready to steal or defraud his employer. The *transporté*, condemned to hard labour for single crimes and thus seen as subject to redemption, conversely maintained a better reputation and was more popular as a labourer than the *relégué*:

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<sup>16</sup> Le ministre des Colonies au gouverneur, le 7 mai 1914, ADG 1 M 392. DM. 1914.

<sup>17</sup> Le ministre des Colonies au gouverneur, le 13 février 1932, ADG 1 M 457. DM. 1932.

"It's very rare that a *relégué* is requested, merchants [of Saint-Laurent] tell you: I will take one condemned to hard labour in any case [that is to say a *transporté*], but I do not want to see a *relégué* in my home.<sup>18</sup>"

Many of the *relégués* became homeless when they left the prison because they could not find jobs. They were effectively banned from Cayenne, the only place in Guyana where economic activity was sufficient to hire them. This followed the request of the General Council of the colony who refused to allow former *transportés* or individual *relégués* to live with the free population of Cayenne. So, they had to remain in Saint-Laurent with former *transportés* submitted to *doublage* who were also banned from Cayenne and required to remain in Saint-Laurent. There, they had to compete with *transportés* that the prison administration rented at low prices to local businesses or private individuals. The majority of jobs were therefore held by current *transportés* and very few *relégués* or former *transportés* succeeded in living decently. On the other hand, few marriages established between free women and former convicts are considered by the governor as a real danger. Even free, the convicts stay dangerous individuals. They should not reproduce because they could "contaminate" their children and the entire colony. Even the colonial society is not made for them, and the governor considers it is necessary to stop sending convicts in French Guiana:

"The former convicts, [...] live in the cities of contracting law unions. They procreate a large number of children. It thus forms a mixed race which originates from a physically and mentally freak element. There is here a eugenics backwards experience. It is unworthy of the colonizer and the convict.<sup>19</sup>"

"Les libérés, [...] demeurent dans les villes contractent des unions libres. Ils procréent un grand nombre d'enfants. Il se forme ainsi une race métisse issue d'un élément taré physiquement et

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Normand, « Les mystères du bagne », in *Police Magazine* 45 (1931), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Réponse du gouverneur de la Guyane au rapport de Monsieur l'inspecteur des colonies, chef de mission, concernant le projet de loi portant réforme de la peine des travaux forcés et du régime de la relégation. Conséquences éventuelles pour l'organisation et la répartition du personnel pénal, le 12 juin 1938, ANOM H 1877.

moralement. Il se fait ici une expérience d'eugénisme à rebours. Elle est indigne du colonisateur et du condamné.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, the experiment of integrating former convicts (whether *relégués* or *transportés*) into the colony as a labour force after their release from prison was regarded as such a failure, that the governor decided in 1935, with the help of the Salvation Army, to organize their repatriation to metropolitan France or to their original colonies.

The other hope of penal colonization, but no more successful, was based on land grants, which required released convicts to work independently rather than as employees. The individual *relégués* were permitted from 1890 to settle on land grants in Saint-Laurent but they had to pay a rental rate of twelve francs per year. Their only obligation was to build within the first six months a dwelling "with the best guarantee of hygiene and safety possible"<sup>21</sup>. The majority of the individual *relégués* settled on land grants within a radius of five to six kilometres from Saint-Laurent. However, because so many were remanded to prison, or escaped, the number of individual *relégués* who actually developed their land grants scarcely rose to four by 1896. Admission to individual relegation was rarely permitted by the prison administration until the early twentieth century. But orders were then issued by the Colonial Office to increase the numbers of potentially redeemed prisoners: from 677 in 1912 they reached 826 in 1914. Then the number dropped sharply after the First World War to reach 400 annually.

To overcome this failure, the decree of May 8, 1899 authorized the gradual sale by the governor of land grants to the collective *relégués* of good conduct and to the individual *relégués* if they paid a bond not less than one hundred francs. For the first seven years, Concessionaires or their beneficiaries (if they were married or if they had children) had to pay an annual rent with the rate per hectare per year between 10 and 20 francs for agricultural or industrial concessions. Each concessionaire received an initial delivery of non-renewable agricultural tools, bedding and clothing and a food ration for six months for an agricultural

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<sup>20</sup> Réponse du gouverneur de la Guyane au rapport de Monsieur l'inspecteur des colonies, chef de mission, concernant le projet de loi portant réforme de la peine des travaux forcés et du régime de la relégation. Conséquences éventuelles pour l'organisation et la répartition du personnel pénal, le 12 juin 1938, ANOM H 1877.

<sup>21</sup> Modifications demandées par les colonies pénitentiaires de la Guyane et de la Nouvelle Calédonie, aux dispositions du décret du 18 janvier 1895 sur le régime des concessions à accorder aux condamnés aux travaux forcés, ANOM H 1240.

concession and for three months for an industrial concession. In exchange, he was expected to cultivate at least half of his allotted land during the first year of his installation and the rest during the second year; otherwise, he would be returned to the penitentiary. Concessions could also be revoked for any act that resulted in criminal sentences or correctional penalties, for misconduct, insubordination, to escape or attempt to escape and for non-payment of the rent. The concession only became final for the collective *relégué* after seven years provided he had been ranked in the same time to individual relegation. To cope with the needs of concessionaires, in 1899 the prison administration built around the prison of Saint-Jean eighteen dwellings but most of the effort was concentrated around Saint Louis, which became a centre of concessionaires. However, this experience never succeeded because the land of Saint Louis was too infertile and malaria and yellow fever resulted in a very high mortality rate among concessionaires.<sup>22</sup> The centre of Saint Louis concessionaires was abandoned in 1908 and attribute a concession to *relégués* became completely marginal in the colony after that date..

### **Sociology of the *relégués*.**

The matriculation registers kept at the ANOM identify 17,375 registered *relégués* in the penitentiary of Saint-Jean. Based on a survey of nearly 15,015 of them<sup>23</sup>, the sociological profile indicates a man with an average age of 32 years, condemned in an urban centre, and employed as a worker or a farm labourer.

One fifth of the *relégués* were natives from Paris and the surrounding areas and the industrialized Northern part of the country (12,75% from the department of Seine, 4,35% from Seine Inférieure and 3,80% from the Nord). Relegation was primarily designed to punish vagrants and individuals without homes: half of the metropolitan condemned to relegation were homeless at the time of their arrest (50.59%) and those who reported a residence at their arrest hailed from the department of Seine (33.43%), Seine Inférieure (5.29%), Bouches du Rhône (5.08%) and Nord (4.59 %). Relegation was decided mainly by correctional courts (83.56% of total sentences at relegation) and the most frequent offence covered by relegation

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<sup>22</sup> Rapport fait par M. Ferlande, Inspecteur de 3<sup>ème</sup> classe des colonies, concernant la vérification du service de M. Lhurre, commandant de pénitencier de 1<sup>ère</sup> classe à Saint-Jean-du-Maroni, à l'époque du 20 au 27 mai 1901 et explications fournies par cet agent sur les résultats de sa vérification, le 27 avril 1901, ANOM H 1871.

<sup>23</sup> Nearly 2,360 *relégués* (or 14% of total) are not recognized because of absence of information in the records or because of the state out of use of some of them.



was simple theft, representing more than half of the sentences to relegation (55.23%). Followed by offences prohibition of residence (interdiction de séjour) that represented 7.98% of total relegation sentences. Other offences included vagrancy (7.71% of total relegation sentences), breach of trust (3.02%) and frauds (4.77%). Together, the total of simple theft offences, infringement prohibition of residence , abuse of trust, fraud and vagrancy represented nearly 80.53% of total relegation sentences.

For the most part, the *relégués* had the profile of workers with low or no qualifications. The workforce of the *relégués* was, in fact, composed mainly of agricultural labourers, unskilled workers or vagabonds without a profession. Judging from figures kept in *Rapport[s] sur la marche générale de la relégation* from 1888 to 1893, just under half of the number of convicts (47.1%) consisted of farmers and unskilled laborers. By analyzing the occupations self-reported by the *relégués* at the depot for prisoners of Saint-Martin-de-Ré before their transport to French Guyana, the proportion appears much the same: at the time of the convoy of April 3, 1928, for example, 48.07% were cultivators, labourers or unemployed. The educational level of the convicts reveals that over half of them could be considered functionally illiterate, since 21% could not read or write, 10% could read only, and 28% claimed they could read and write but could not count.

The internal society of the *relégués* was very hierarchical and characterized by significant violence. During the day, the *relégués* were required to obey the orders of prison officers but once work ended, the true hierarchy of the prison appeared. This hierarchy was organized by cell block, that is to say each of the twenty blocks of the *camp central* was organized according to a homogeneous model of hierarchy. The *caïds* (bosses) or *forts-à-bras* (strong-arm), which referred to the stronger *relégués*, ruled over the weak *relégués* and organized all types of traffic which fed the underground life of the prison, including card games, such as the *Marseillaise*. This game was played at night and required the *relégués* to wager money. However, these gambling parties often ended in a fight, stemming from disputes lubricated by the clandestine consumption of home-made alcohol. Besides gambling, sexual liaisons between the *relégués* also drove many of them to commit crimes of passion<sup>24</sup>. Many of them lived in *ménages* (households) in their cells and these couples were known and accepted by other prisoners and prison guards. However, relationships were established

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<sup>24</sup> Le gouverneur au ministre des Colonies, le 31 décembre 1907, ANOM H 1862.

between a *môme* (kid), that is to say a young *relégué* who became a prostitute, and another *relégué*. Murders occurred because of jealous scenes between *mômes* and their lovers, or when a *môme* sought to dispose of his pimp or "protector" and killed him or passed under the protection of another pimp. This situation often created scenes of fighting with knives because many *relégués* carried weapons to defend themselves<sup>25</sup>.

The colonial *relégués* experienced special conditions within the prison of Saint-Jean. The majority of them were Algerians who spoke Arabic and they were isolated due to their poor knowledge of French. The prison administration used their isolation by granting them privileges. 12.71% of the *relégués* from 1887 to 1938 were born in French colonies and the colonial contingent of the *relégués* consisted of Algerians (48.83%) and people from Martinique and Guadeloupe (23.19%). Algerians had separate barracks in the central camp of Saint-Jean and the prison administration favoured the use of Algerians in the positions of supervisors or *porte-clefs*. They served as auxiliaries to prison guards and helped them in their daily monitoring tasks of the *relégués*. They monitored local discipline, oversaw work chores, inspected the barracks of the *relégués* to find alcohol or weapons, and spied to uncover and prevent escape plans. The *porte-clefs*, particularly brutal because of the privileges granted to them by the prison administration, reversed within the prison the colonial hierarchy; from dominated colonial subjects in their colony of origin, they became agents who could wield significant power over the *relégués* from metropolitan France. This status allowed the prison administration to obtain their loyalty, a necessity because of the lack of prison guards to monitor the *relégués*. This asymmetry was especially resented by the other *relégués* who referred to the *porte-clefs*, regardless of origin, in the slang of the prison as "Arabs." These men, intermediaries between prison authorities and those below them, were despised because their role made them the cause of all the accusations and most traffic in the penitentiary. The position of *porte-clefs* allowed these men to avoid hard labour and to rapidly advance to the status of individual relegation.

Within the complex hierarchy of the colonial prison system, the *relégués* were considered the lowest category of the prison, as outcasts. The *transportés*, condemned for crime to hard labour, were considered as *durs* (tough people), that is to say criminals who have often committed a single violent crime such as murder. Conversely, a *relégué* was seen

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<sup>25</sup> Le directeur de l'administration pénitentiaire, 1904, ANOM H 2072.

as a recidivist petty thief, a petty delinquent who could not be compared to a *transporté*. In most stories of convicts, the *relégués* are always mentioned as "repeat offenders" and not as convicts. As one of the best-known narrators of French colonial prison life, Henri Charrière, explains it:

"Saint-Martin de Ré is full of prisoners. Two very different categories, eight hundred or one thousand convicts and nine hundred *relégués*. To be a convict, you must have done something bad, or at least, have been accused of committing a big crime. [...] The *relégué* is different. Three to seven convictions and one man can be relegated. It is true that they are all incorrigible thieves and we understand that society ought to defend itself. However, it is shameful for a civilized people to have the penalty of relegation."<sup>26</sup>

However, many *relégués* refused the regime of the prison and hard labour imposed on them by the officers of prison. Those who imagined that collective relegation should prepare them for individual relegation discovered that their real sentence proved to be a sentence of hard labour for life. Many of them, especially among those newly arrived in the colony, were particularly disappointed with their fate because they thought they would be free in the colony. Therefore, they frequently rebelled or sought to escape. This was especially true in the early years of the construction of the prison of Saint-Jean, from 1887 to 1900, when the mortality rate was very high: in 1887 the mortality rate reached 14.3% of workforce, and 9.87% in 1888, 20.47% in 1889 and 12.78% in 1890<sup>27</sup>. From 1888 to 1890, punishment for laziness, improprieties, insults, fights, insolence and refusal to work represented more than half (51.52%) of all punishments inflicted (42% of the total of the *relégués* is punished during the same period). Rather than being punished, many *relégués* preferred to attempt an escape, and from 1888 to 1890, about, half of total workforce tried to abscond! This is an especially striking figure, given the risks; if captured during a failed escape, convicts faced a maximum of two years in prison for a first attempt and a maximum of six years in prison for repeat offences., At the beginning of their installation at Saint-Jean, many of them committed

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<sup>26</sup> Henri Charrière, *Papillon* (Paris, 1969), 57.

<sup>27</sup> Instructions pour l'inspecteur envoyé en mission à la Guyane française, le 9 novembre 1893, ANOM H 1855.

spontaneous revolts or strikes that were quickly repressed by prison guards. They would arrest the leaders and expect the other strikers return to work immediately. Only a single strike lasted for any length of time at Saint-Jean, starting in June 1931 and lasting a fortnight. A ban imposed on the concessionaires, preventing them from going to Saint-Laurent to sell the production of *camelote* made by other *relégués*, provoked this sustained resistance<sup>28</sup>. This ban caused a significant protest because the sale of *camelote* represented a major source of money for the *relégués*. The strike was very peaceful, as the *relégués* simply refused to leave their barracks and report to work. After several attempts to reason with them, the governor ordered the suppression of the strike, a task carried out by African colonial troops in the *tirailleurs Sénégalais*, who forced prisoners back to work.

### **The staff of the prison.**

Discipline within the prison was provided by the *porte-clefs*, by the *tirailleurs Sénégalais* and by military prison guards. The organization of the corps of military prison guards was fixed by a decree of November 20, 1867 and prison authorities recruited them from among non-commissioned officers of the army or among soldiers and sailors with at least three years of service<sup>29</sup>. Prison guards did not receive any special training: they needed only to sign their commitment and they were then sent directly to the penitentiaries of French Guyana. Over time, the quality of recruitment of military prison guards continued to deteriorate and, having difficulty in recruiting sufficient numbers, the ministry of colonies was not especially demanding regarding their recruitment. Before 1906, the guards were mostly recruited from the corps of the NCOs of the army but after this date, the prison mostly engaged common soldiers, as the following chart indicates:

Military guards	NCO	Corporals	Soldiers
Hired before December 31, 1906	85	46	9
Recruited after 1906 until 1909	27	39	200

<sup>28</sup> Le gouverneur au ministre des Colonies, le 25 juin 1931, ANOM H 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Corps des surveillants militaires, Inspection générale de 1887, Rapport d'ensemble, ANOM H 1215.

This sub-classification between NCO, corporals and soldiers is problematic however because in addition to their role as guards, these men also served as police officers and thus were required to write regular reports. However, because of low literacy levels, more than a few were incapable of writing anything. For instance, in 1933, the superior commander of relegation complained that of the fifty prison guards present in the penitentiary of Saint-Jean and its sub-camps, only a dozen demonstrated “the degree of primary culture and intellectual capacity needed to provide a service involving maintenance of records.”<sup>30</sup>

Superior commanders of relegation who succeeded, but also the directors of prison and the governors, regularly bemoaned the lack of preparation of the corps of prison guards and demanded changes in their recruitment. They made frequent requests for them to be recruited directly into the corps of the NCOs of the army. Nevertheless, the ministry of colonies opposed such reforms because this would impose an increase in their salaries, normally kept quite low: in 1931, a prison guard first class earned 1,000 francs a month and a prison guard from the third class earned just 847 francs<sup>31</sup>. These low salaries coupled with the harsh climate of French Guyana hardly encouraged the best elements of the corps of non-commissioned officers of the army to seek employment in the penal colony. All too often the prison administration recruited bad elements and found itself obliged to punish them or expel them quickly.

The lack of training and illiteracy among the prison guards had important implications in the penitentiaries because they supervised the *relégués* in their work and managed the various workshops of Saint-Jean (work, interior, culture and ambulance). The decree of November 20, 1867 also stipulated that the number of military prison guards present within penitentiaries should be equivalent to 4% of the total number of convicts. However, in reality, this figure oscillated constantly around 2% throughout the life of the prison because of absences due to illness or for long holidays in the metropolis<sup>32</sup>. This frequent shortage of staff increased the burdens for the prison guards who remained, and disrupted the normal functioning of the penitentiary, making it vulnerable to escapes.

### **A disputed sovereignty.**

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<sup>30</sup> Dépôt de la Relégation, Rapport annuel du 1er janvier au 31 décembre 1933, ANOM H 5143.

<sup>31</sup> Note pour le Contrôleur Général de l'Armée, Chef du Cabinet du Ministre, le 23 août 1919, ANOM H 2072.

<sup>32</sup> Rapport de l'inspecteur Ferlande sur le pénitencier de Saint-Jean, le 26 mars 1901, ANOM H 1854.

The powers of the director of prison were established by a decree of February 16, 1878. Appointed by order of the President of the French Republic, the director oversaw "under the orders of the governor" the services of the prison administration in French Guyana<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, this dependence on metropolitan and local colonial authority was more apparent than real, as the director of the prisons retained considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the governor. This autonomy rested first and foremost on a fact of geography: no road connected the colonial capital of Cayenne to Saint-Laurent, nearly 300 kilometers distant across impassable terrain. It took twenty-four hours of sailing to travel from Cayenne to the prison territory on the Western border, and mail could take eight to ten days to reach its destination. The governor, who resided in Cayenne, had no way of knowing the daily situation of the prison, nor could he effectively supervise its administration. Only the director of prison maintained sufficiently precise knowledge of the penal system's services and knew the exact situation of his vast administration; only he could take all appropriate decisions. The directorship's powers within his penal empire were extensive: he prepared and submitted to the governor the regulations of his administration, he organized convict labour, distributed land grants to the *relégués*, and maintained discipline in penitentiaries. He was personally responsible for all acts of his administration, had control over all personnel under his command and led all offices and penitentiaries. He countersigned the orders and decisions of the governor for his administration.

Much like the internal life of the prison itself, the larger prison administration was extraordinarily hierarchical. An assistant director appointed by the Minister of Colonies (rather than the director himself), responsible for monitoring the general service of the prison administration, worked immediately under the prison director; he could assist or replace the director of prison if he was absent from his post or otherwise unable to carry out his duties. The prison administration in Maroni was divided into three offices: the office of the secretariat and finance, the office of prison guards and penal population, and the office of equipment, supplies and hospitals. The management of the offices and the stores of food and supplies and the hospitals in the penitentiaries were overseen by clerks with the status of civil functionaries. Under them came the prison guards and the police staff.

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<sup>33</sup> Ministère des Colonies, Administration pénitentiaire coloniale, *Guide pratique* (Melun, 1911), 45.

As of May 27, 1885 a new law imposed a strict separation between the realm of transportation and the realm of relegation. The officer put at the head of the prison of Saint-Jean retained control of the relegation service. He had under his authority all the staff on duty in penitentiaries or in sub-camps and he wielded the disciplinary power over prison guards. Nevertheless, his autonomy was only apparent, for he remained largely subservient to the power and the decisions of the director of prison. Even if his appointment depended in the final instance on the Minister of Colonies in Paris, the director of prison essentially appointed whomever he pleased as superior commander of relegation. Indeed, he was almost always promoted from the ranks of civil functionaries of the prison and had often already completed a part of his career in Saint-Laurent before his appointment.

Most significantly, the director of prison not only oversaw a penal administrative unit; he also controlled a *geographic* territory where he was sovereign. The prison territory of Maroni created May 30, 1860 and revised several times by decrees was reserved exclusively for the needs of convict transportation, that is to say for the execution of hard labour sentences imposed in France. This territorial autonomy was reinforced by the Decree of March 16, 1880, which established the prison town of Saint-Laurent<sup>34</sup>. The town itself was managed by a municipal committee composed of the superior commander of the Maroni, an Administrative Officer, the judge and four members appointed by the governor and recruited from among the officers and officials of various public services of Maroni. The Commission Chairman served simultaneously as the mayor of the municipality and was responsible under the authority of the director of prison for the municipality's management and its budget. Thus Saint-Laurent was no ordinary municipality in the French mold, but rather a "town prison" exclusively oriented to the achievement of penal goals set by the Act of May 30, 1854 establishing transportation. By extension, the prison territory of Maroni, which also included the territory of the relegation, submitted to the needs of the prison and its administration.

The law of relegation and the law of transportation each included a repressive component and a colonial component. The prison territory of Maroni was initially an area dedicated to the execution of the sentence of transportation and to the execution of the accessory penalty of relegation. It was only secondarily reserved for the development of land concessions allocated to the *transportés*, the *transportés* released from prison, the collective

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<sup>34</sup> Le ministre des Colonies au gouverneur, le 20 janvier 1914, ADG 1 M 391. DM. 1913.

*relégués*, the individual *relégués* and the *relégués* released from prison. This territory remained the exclusive property of the State and was itself a vast prison based on the larger objective of penal colonization determined by the metropolitan legislature. In this configuration, the establishment of independent merchants, industrialists or farmers in the territory was little more than a privilege granted at the sole discretion of the prison administration.

The structure of the local colonial state further strengthened the autonomy of the director of the prison. Governors who succeeded each other in the colony experienced high turnover; between 1852 and 1944 no less than sixty led French Guyana from their isolated perch in Cayenne, allowing them an average of two years of presence in the colony. The rapid turnover of governors within the colonial administration, as pointed out by Emmanuelle Sibeud<sup>35</sup>, set a limit on their power inside the colonies. Prison directors saw much less turnover and successors came from among current staff members of the prison administration in French Guyana or New Caledonia. Governors, often recent arrivals from Paris and from the colonial empire, unlike the directors of prison, were not necessarily familiar with the operating mode of the prison when they arrived in French Guyana and they rarely had time to complete the work required to develop the colony in consultation with the prison authorities of Saint-Laurent. Most governors preferred to leave the director of prisons in charge of developing the prison territory in the western corner of the colony, and rarely ventured there from Cayenne in any case.

Moreover, each time a governor tried to attack the authority of the prison director, he confronted the power of the Minister of Colonies. From 1924 to 1938, many governors sought to appropriate for themselves authority over the prison service<sup>36</sup>. However, the ministry of colonies repeatedly refused to approve the transfer because Paris saw in these attempts the efforts of merchants and farmers in French Guyana to imagine that the prison and its workforce belonged to them. As early as 1884, the councillors, traders and farmers of French Guyana had proposed to switch the service and the budget of the prison to the local colony. However, these claims were rejected by the colonial office that regarded them as the desire of local private interests to monopolize a public service of the colony. In the views of colonial

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<sup>35</sup> Emmanuelle Sibeud, « L'administration coloniale », in Vincent Duclerc, Christophe Prochasson, eds, *Dictionnaire critique de la République* (Paris, 2002), 625.

<sup>36</sup> Le gouverneur au ministre des Colonies, le 3 septembre 1927, ANOM H 2072.



inspectors who commented on these requests over the years, the mission of colonial development of the prison was based on works of public utility designed to benefit to the entire colony, not the sectoral interests of a few economic groups who hoped to bend the public service of colonization to the benefit of strictly private interests. Colonial inspectors and ministers of the colonies refused to countenance the idea that taxpayers' money from metropolitan France would serve the interests of citizens regarded as outsiders because of their colonial status. Every effort proposed by local governors to abolish the independence of the prison director was halted by this problem:

“We must therefore consider that requests from Local Government, inspired by the wishes of the General Council, have as their aim to assure that budget resources and prison labour are distributed to people whose morals and tendencies are distinct from those of of European civilization. In their hands, these policy instruments will naturally be employed, to avoid effort or to enhance profit, but not to colonize the territory in the sense understood by the European, that is to say to systematically subdue nature in the territory...<sup>37</sup>”

Despite the best efforts of local colonists to wrest away his power, the director of prison remained independent in his territory throughout the penal colony's existence. This situation ultimately created a double colonization of French Guyana. The local colonial state saw its executive power subdivided into two separate entities: the governor on one side and the director of prison on the other. Within the same colony a dual system coexisted, consisting of a civilian power and a military style administration. This dual sovereignty was reinforced in practice by the separation of the colony into two separate (and remote) geographic territories: the colony itself and the prison territory of Maroni, where the penal authority's word was law.

These factors, peculiar to French Guyana, increased the structural imbalances that characterized the organization of the State within colonies. The colonial state, as noted by

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<sup>37</sup> L'inspecteur de 1ère classe des colonies Berruë au ministre des Colonies, le 3 février 1918, ANOM H 1863.

Emmanuelle Saada<sup>38</sup>, is characterized by an essential feature due to the remoteness of the metropolis and thus limited control exercised by the Minister of Colonies. Moreover, the direction of the ministry of colonies was particularly unstable because of frequent changes of ministers at its head and a feeble central administration. Colonial inspectors, the only ones who could properly inform ministers of colonies, were sparse on the ground and unable to visit the prison facilities often enough to provide an informed opinion to the ministry. Coupled with the precariousness of the civil power in the colony because of frequent changes of governors and the concentration of the prison in the distant Maroni territory, all these factors gave considerable autonomy to the director of prison.

Ultimately, the management of penal colonization only allowed the creation of a prison, not a new country. The convicts were therefore not able to become settlers and penal colonization turned into building a prison and its management by prison officers. The prison, which would contribute to the development of French Guyana, became an independent institution with its own territory and its own people. It arrogated to itself for its own needs the convicts and prevented the colony from taking advantage of this labor for its development and population expansion. Away from the rest of the colony, the prison director pursued his own goal: to apply punishment to the convicts and nothing more.

### **Conclusion.**

Beginning in 1923, the journalist Albert Londres prepared a series of articles on the prison in French Guyana for the metropolitan newspaper, *Le Petit Parisien*. The reporter managed to go wherever he wanted inside the prison and described the plight of convicts in French Guyana. Following him, many popular “true crime” magazines, such as *Detective* or *Police Magazine*, published exposés of prison life in the colony and the metropolitan public became sensitized to an institution that writers portrayed as cruel and anachronistic.

At the same time, in 1933 the Salvation Army established a branch in French Guyana to help convicts released from prison and sought to relieve their plight of poverty<sup>39</sup>. The Captain of the Salvation Army in French Guyana, Charles Péan, organized many conferences

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<sup>38</sup> Emmanuelle Saada, *La « question des métis » dans les colonies françaises : socio-histoire d'une catégorie juridique (Indochine et autres territoires de l'Empire français ; années 1890-années 1950)*, thèse de doctorat de Sciences Sociales (Paris, 2001), 226-228.

<sup>39</sup> Danielle Donet-Vincent, *De soleil et de silences : histoire des bagnes de Guyane, op. cit.*, 343.

in metropolitan France where he called for the abolition of the prison. The same message was echoed by the deputy of French Guyana, Gaston Monnerville, who struggled in Parliament for the abolition of the prison and for the repatriation of all convicts. His fight succeeded with the arrival of the *Front Populaire* (Popular Front) in 1936, when Leon Blum decided to abolish the prison and issued a decree in June 1938 abolishing penal transportation to French Guyana. Subsequently, the *transportés* would serve their sentences to hard labour in prisons located in metropolitan France while those already present in French Guyana must remain so as to not suddenly disrupt the colony's economy. However, relegation, due to the lack of prison space in France, continued to be applied in French Guyana. It was not until 1946, after a particularly dark episode in the history of relegation, that the government finally stopped deporting *relégués* to French Guyana. During the war, Governor Robert Paul Chot-Plassot decided to stay loyal to the Vichy regime (Monnerville, for his part, joined the Resistance). But a former army captain, Claude Chandon, made an appeal to Free France from Surinam. *Relégués* decided to answer the call and escaped. The governor, alarmed by these escapes, then decided to toughen the regime of relegation: many *relégués* were punished and locked in disciplinary local penitentiary. Due to the limited resources in the colony, the *relégués* suffered a particularly murderous regime in their penitentiary: because of mistreatment and lack of food, nearly 48% of them died in 1942<sup>40</sup>! Like the *transportés* before them, after the liberation of 1945 the *relégués* had to serve their sentences in prisons located in metropolitan France.

Even the Vichy regime recognized this inevitability. In 1944, the doctor Lieutenant Colonel Sainz was sent by the French government to French Guyana to close the prison and organize repatriation of the last convicts and convicts released from prison too poor to pay for their own return ticket. The repatriation process, however, was long and drawn out. Aided by the Salvation Army which organized convoys, nearly 2,000 convicts were repatriated on a final trip in August 1953<sup>41</sup>. From that date, the prison of French Guyana was officially closed and there were no more convicts under sentence in the colony.

For nearly a century, the prison system in French Guyana essentially allowed a colonial power to get rid of a part of its criminals. Under the pretext of penal colonization, the

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<sup>40</sup> Rapport fait par M. Perreau, professeur des facultés de droit, attaché à la mission d'inspection des colonies, concernant le service de M. le médecin lieutenant-colonel Sainz, directeur des services pénitentiaires coloniaux, à la date du 30 mars 1946 et explications fournies par cet officier supérieur, ANOM H 1877.

<sup>41</sup> Rapport sur le rapatriement des gens ayant appartenu à la catégorie pénale (libérés, relevés de la relégation, réhabilités et déportés), le 9 mai 1946, Archives diplomatiques P 4355.

convicts were never able to emancipate themselves from prison and the penal system arrogated to itself the lives of thousands of individuals who had been entrusted by judges for the exclusive use of its own economic and administrative needs. French Guyana was forced to host relegation, and more broadly a prison territory, which occupied a space that might have been a beneficiary of free immigration. The objective of this experiment was not the goal of colonization, nor one of rehabilitation of a criminal class, but rather one of repression. Isolated on a territory reserved for the penal system, supervised by agents without special training, the *relégués* were sentenced to a double penalty which, far from facilitating their integration and reclassification in the colony, kept them in a prison and subjected them to a system of forced labour. Relegation produced what Charles Lucas, prison reformer and opponent of transportation overseas, called a "riddance policy"<sup>42</sup>, that is to say an exclusion mechanism designed to remove the convicts (*relégués* and *transportés*) from the metropolis and then confine them at the bottom of the colonial social order of French Guyana. Doubly excluded, the *relégués* were the victims of a law that also doubly stigmatized them. Regarded as incorrigible and irredeemable in metropolitan France, they remained so in the colony where they were permanently reminded of their stigma and treated as outcasts.

The prison, this huge "evacuation machine" in the words of Albert Londres, was thus a tool of repression which constituted a variation among other uses of a colony within the French colonial empire, a vast political unity which reproduced "differentiation and inequality among people it includes."<sup>43</sup> In the case of relegation in French Guyana, it only served the interests of a metropolis, acting as a kind of modern dungeon. Colonization by the *relégués* was a sham, designed not to give them a new start in the colony, but to legitimize the use of an excessive and severe penalty against "habitual" delinquents and vagrants.

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Lucas, *La transportation pénale ou la politique du débarras. Rapport verbal à l'occasion de la notice publiée par le ministère de la Marine sur la Guyane et la Nouvelle-Calédonie, séance du 16 février 1878, extrait du compte-rendu de l'Académie des Sciences morales et politiques rédigé par M. Charles Vergé, sous la direction de M. le Secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie* (Orléans, 1878).

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Le colonialisme en question. Théorie, connaissance et histoire* (Paris, 2010), 41.

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