

**“Discontented scoundrels
who crowd the mercantile marine today”¹
Labour relations regimes of the Cape and Ichaboe
guano trade, c. 1843–1898**

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In defiance of the romantic tranquillity of their mythology, historically islands have been places of violence. Because of their rigid boundaries, shifting strategic significance and small areas, islands have been subject to intensive socio-cultural encounters and political annexation, rendering them particularly useful lenses into the impact of colonialism and globalisation, as several new analyses have revealed. In historiographical terms, various disciplinary trajectories, especially world history, are now flooded with oceanic histories which seek to map connections across the water and to trace transnational and transcontinental relations.² As Wigen argues, previously intractably land-driven conceptions are eroding as the sea appears on the horizon.³ The history of the world is being retold from the point of view of the sea. However, not just the oceanic currents and routes, but the islands too are critical in understanding global trends. Edmond and Smith have urged “island-centred theorising”.⁴ Islands certainly prove useful in understanding the long history of labour oppression. The narratives of labour, indenture and servitude are critical as new systems of labour emerged after the abolition of Atlantic slavery.⁵ The making and management of “coolie labour” in the Cape and Ichaboe trade is an under-researched topic in labour studies, and even under-represented in research

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1. The title is derived from statements made by J.H. Jackson, the Cape guano agent, to the Commission of Inquiry into the management of the government’s Guano Islands, July–August 1897. See Cape Archives Repository (hereafter KAB): AMPT PUBS CCP 2/2/1/76: Report and Papers of the Commission of Inquiry, July–August 1897 (C.10–98), Testimony of J.H. Jackson.
2. See, for example, M. Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Ashgate, Burlington, 2005); D. Egerton, A. Games, D.R. Wright, K.E. Lane, J.G. Landers, *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400–1888* (Davidson, Wheeling, 2007); and S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2006).
3. From “Introduction: Oceans of History”, *American Historical Review*, 111, 3, June 2006, pp 717–721.
4. R. Edmond and V. Smith (eds), *Islands in History and Representation* (Routledge, London, 2003).
5. C. Anderson, “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century”, *Slavery and Abolition*, 30, 1, pp 93–109. Anderson urges the debate away from whether it was a “new form of slavery”, drawing connections between penal and labour developments.

within international guano labour studies. “Coolies” and related labour identities such as “kanakas”, are both designative and pejorative terms, describing firstly a “low class of worker” and secondly, representing a racialised understanding of certain groups of workers, either non-white or from Asian origins and their linkages to particular jobs. Due to its widespread geographical appearance and the harsh exploitation associated with its presence, the term “coolies” has over time acquired a transnational character.⁶ Balachandran (among others) has described the term as indicative of a exploitative social relationship between guanopreneurs and their workforce.⁷ Indeed, Phillips has argued that the guano labour regime of the mid-nineteenth century, with its repressive labour practices, came to represent a new form of slavery.⁸ They make the argument that the resultant struggle of the labour force to reappropriate the fruits of their labour can be viewed as essentially a struggle against “coolification” and the prevention of the erosion of their right to choose their conditions of employment. As such, it was also actions taken to counter attempts at their “unmaking” as free workers.⁹ Glasco has contended that their’s was a fundamental fight for the restoration of their own understanding of their worth as men.¹⁰

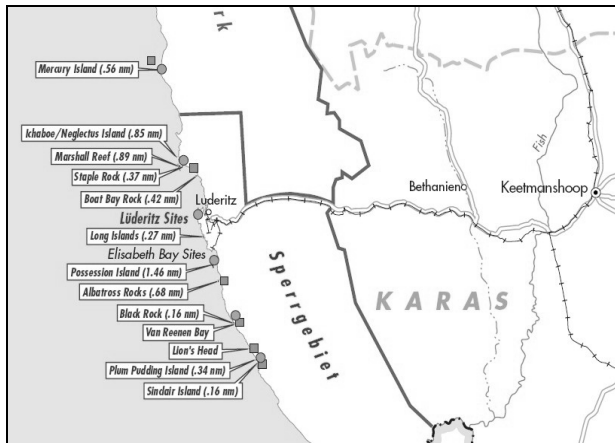
Although, as we will demonstrate, the Cape trade shared commonalities with the international trade, it also exhibited a strongly idiographic locatedness. The nature and organisation of the African trade was fundamentally influenced by its location; the natural features of the offshore islands; its distance from its supply headquarters (see map, Figure 1, below); the economics of the trade; and the very nature of guano labour itself. The usefulness of the explanation offered by Balachandran and Phillips of labour conflict within the international trade will be assessed against the development of local labour regimes and resistance during the period 1843–1910.

Guano collection and the nature of the guano work environment

Guano-mining and trading in the mid to late 19th century was a speculative activity because it dealt with the collection and trade of a finite product founded on various offshore islands.¹¹ The quality of the product was

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6. M. Jung, “Outlawing “Coolies”: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation”, *American Quarterly*, 57, 3, September 2005.
 7. G. Balachandran, “Producing Coolies, (Un)making Workers: A (Post) Colonial Parable for the Contemporary Present.” <[http://hei.unige.ch/sections/hp/Documents/ Balachandran_producing%20Coolies.pdf](http://hei.unige.ch/sections/hp/Documents/Balachandran_producing%20Coolies.pdf)> (Accessed 2 November2009).
 8. L. Phillips, “British Slavery after Abolition: The Pacific Trade”, *Race and Class*, 41, 3, January/March 2000, p 13.
 9. Balachandran, “Producing Coolies”.
 10. J.D. Glasco, “The Seaman Feels Himself a Man”, *International Labor and Working-class History*, 66, Fall, 2004.
 11. Ever since the discovery of guano on the islands on the Namib coast in the mid-nineteenth century, the pioneers referred to the self-demarcated exploitation areas as “pits” and “claims”, terms associated with mining. This created an image of the

entirely dependent on the right combination of chemical elements (phosphate, ammonia, nitrogen) essential for plant growth. The profitability of the entire industry therefore depended on the adoption of a low cost and labour-intensive system of operation.¹² Guanopreneurs followed other extractive enterprises based on natural plunder, like their gold mining counterparts in Southern Rhodesia who were involved in gathering another scattered natural product during the late nineteenth century. Low-grade mining entrepreneurs positioned themselves as individual small producers using essentially their own financial resources and worked the islands as individual “business” units.¹³ This method not only necessitated merely a small capital outlay but also proved a more practical way of cutting costs.



Map 1: Ichaboe Islands¹⁴

The African guano trade which began on the Namib coast in 1843, was located in a harsh area which generally consisted of angry surf, barren rocks, arid sand hills and little vegetation.¹⁵ The territorial islands such as Malgas and Bird Island, although closer to Cape Town were still located in

collection of guano as a mining activity although the capital invested in these operations was essentially merchant rather than mining capital. Furthermore, those involved in the physical removal of the product were referred to as “labourers” and “sailors”, not diggers or miners. See Ex-member of the Committee, “The African Guano Trade: Being an Account of the Trade in Guano from Ichaboe, and Other Places on the African Coast, more Particularly the Proceedings of the Committee of Management”, in *Nautical Magazine*, 16, 1845, pp 617–666.

12. C. van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933* (Pluto Press, London, 1976), p 100.
13. Van Onselen, *Chibaro*, p 21.
14. The map of the Ichaboe and surrounding islands was drawn by Marius Meiring, chief information officer at Saldanha Bay Municipality and is based on L. Berat, *Walvis Bay: The Last Frontier* (Radix, Sandton, 1990), p 197.
15. Ex-Member of the Committee, “The African Guano Trade”, p 641.

relatively underdeveloped territories with no harbour facilities. Both exploitation zones lacked an adequate fresh water supply.¹⁶ Where water could be found, it was generally salt and brackish.¹⁷ This meant water had to be imported in bulk from Cape Town. Provisioning ships were frequently in a poor condition with leaky hulls, which caused the water transported in wooden casks to become spoiled. Its further conveyance by raft to the mainland also compromised its long-term preservation since seawater contamination caused it to become malodorous and virtually undrinkable.¹⁸ To survive, workers frequently had to boil salt water to secure a sufficient potable supply.¹⁹ Life under these circumstances was extremely precarious.

The primary task of guano workers was the physical collection, bagging and loading of guano with the aid of basic tools such as crowbars, spades and wheelbarrows. To assist with loading and conveyance, they constructed numerous improvisations such as a swinging platform and a primitive railway system.²⁰ Unpredictable and poor weather conditions turned guano collection into a slow, frustrating and dangerous task and heightened the possibility of collapsing guano heaps.²¹ The islands, without exception, lacked access to medical care. Where medicine was available on board ship, its efficacy was compromised by seawater contamination as well as rat and vermin infestation during transportation.²² There were no bandages, dispensing manuals or any surgical instruments available for use in case of emergencies.²³ Aside from accidental injury, guano-mining caused colds, sore throats, rheumatism and agues (a fever or shivering fit) whilst the ammonia-laden excrement and guano dust also caused constant bleeding of the eyes and nostrils.²⁴ Since nose-bleeding was also one of the tell-tale signs of scurvy,²⁵ its occurrence was easily mistaken for the onset of the dreaded disease.

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16. W.S. Fletcher, "The African Guano Islands", *The Cape Illustrated Magazine*, September 1897, p 21.
 17. Ex-Member of the Committee, "The African Guano Trade", p 648.
 18. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt Burr, 22 July 1897.
 19. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of C. Miller, 22 July 1897.
 20. E.F. Frank, "History of the Guano Mining Industry, Isla De Mona, Puerto Rico", *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies*, 60, 2, August 1998, p 1989.
 21. Ex-Member of the Committee, "The African Guano Trade", p 623.
 22. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence of Captain Burr, 21 July 1897.
 23. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 2/2/1/76, Report and Papers of the Commission of Inquiry into the Management of the Government Guano Islands, July–August 1897 (C.10–'98), Testimony of A. John Gregory, Medical Report, p 22.
 24. J. Kinahan, "The Historical Archaeology of Nineteenth-century Fisheries at Sandwich Harbour on the Namib Coast", *Cimbebasia*, 13, 1991, p 35.
 25. C. Gordon, "Scurvy and Anson's Voyage round the World: 1740–1744. An Analysis of the Royal Navy's Worst Outbreak", *The American Neptune*, 44, 3, Summer 1984, p 157.

The availability of fresh vegetables and lime juice in particular was critical for the prevention of scurvy.²⁶ The spoilage of both fresh water and meat after its removal from the casks, was a serious health problem and also became a significant cost factor.²⁷ The maintenance of a regular provisioning system was key to successfully exploiting the guano islands. Robert Granger, one of the local guanopreneurs estimated the cost of maintaining a workforce as ranging between £60 and £70 per year (salaries and provisions included).²⁸

Providing accommodation for the workforce on the islands was a major challenge since the hard and rocky island surface made the erection of proper brick structures impossible. Workers were therefore housed in a variety of structures ranging from small one-roomed wooden structures with a galvanised or tarpaulin roof, without proper flooring and glassless windows, to an old sail, supported by oars or empty cement casks.²⁹ The absence of stoves; constantly leaking roofs; and a shortage of coal and firewood also made life extremely unpleasant and denied workers a measure of heat and comfort.³⁰ The absence of any form of recreation and leisure activities added to this misery, especially for those (admittedly few) literate individuals who specifically expressed a need for such literature.³¹ Thus the islands were, as guano digger J.H. Mitchell lamented, a “wretched placed for men to live”.³²

The *ad hoc* labour regime, 1843–1845

The early guano labour system in Africa was designed by the shipmasters who participated in the guano rush during the period 1843 to 1845. Owing to its ruthless efficiency, serving the economic objectives of both businessmen and the Cape colonial state, it endured for more than two generations. From the outset, sailors were the primary source of labour for guano-loading. Their ranks were often supplemented by groups of contracted non-seamen working under the supervision of super cargoes to speed up the loading process. This practice closely mirrored the Peruvian system prior to the

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26. Provisions generally consisted of basic foodstuffs such as salted meat, biscuits, flour, Indian meal, beans, peas, barley, Chinese tea, coffee, sugar, lime juice, vinegar as well as fresh and preserved vegetables and meat.
 27. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Nivallo, 21 July 1897.
 28. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11–61: Testimony of R. Granger, p 65.
 29. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. Burr, 22 July 1897.
 30. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Kay, 21 July 1897.
 31. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J.H. Mitchell, 30 July 1897.
 32. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J.H. Mitchell, 30 July 1897.

importation of Chinese workers and the introduction of the “coolie” labour regime from the late 1820s.³³

The crewmen on European ships were recruited in a variety of ways and their conditions of employment were regulated by law and enforced by the Cape courts. Typically, the bulk was recruited from the ranks of deserters or the unemployed and those wanting to escape from society.³⁴ All that shipmasters had to do was to give notice of their need for new recruits. A significant number of men therefore simply ended up on the guano islands after having responded to the shouts of recruiters while “standing about the jetty with some mate”.³⁵ The unemployed were in no position to negotiate a reasonable wage.³⁶ Crucially, they were also kept ignorant about the nature of guano collection and the expected living conditions on the islands. In terms of their contracts, they were supposed to load and discharge all cargo if required – an “odious task” at best.³⁷ They were also expected to demonstrate an unquestioned obedience to their shipmaster. This effectively turned them into cheap labour, and shipmasters into “masters next to God”.³⁸

The maritime laws coupled with the unwritten practices and accepted traditions of the nineteenth-century shipping trade empowered shipmasters to act autonomously. Crewmen were placed at the receiving end of scarcely disguised attempts to turn them into cheap and irregularly paid labour. Dangerous working conditions, paltry salaries and deferred wages were also common features of their working-life and the exchange of promissory notes between shipmasters, as surety for work to be done, offered no guarantee for the honouring of these agreements.³⁹ When the situation demanded, shipmasters deliberately contracted day workers (at a cheaper rate of 3s/5d) to accelerate the collection and loading of freight.⁴⁰

Non-payment and the deferment of wages represented serious attacks on the ability of seamen to negotiate as free workers. Speculating entrepreneurs often used these measures as a mechanism to reduce the incidence of desertion or in the hope of securing a financial windfall or early

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33. J.P. Olinger, “The Guano Age in Peru”, *History Today*, 30, June 1980, pp 13–18.
 34. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A. 11 – ‘61: Testimony of Sheperd, p 5.
 35. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Charles Miller, 22 July 1897.
 36. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T.H. Dyke, 22 July 1897.
 37. J. Fingard, “The Decline of the Sailor as a Ship Labourer in the 19th Century Timber Ports”, *Labour / Le Travail*, 2, 1977, p 42.
 38. Jann M. Witt, “Master next to God? The Merchant Captain from the 17th to the 19th Century”, in Luc François and A. isaacs (eds), *The Sea in European History* (Edizioni Plus, Pisa, 2001), p 237; A. Parnaby, “The Many Motivations of Jack Tar”, Review Essay, 2008 www.historycooperative.org/journals/lt/62/parnaby.html Accessed 21 April 2010.
 39. R. Craig, “The African Guano Trade”, *The Mariner’s Mirror*, 50, 1, 1964, p 48.
 40. Craig, “The African Guano Trade”, p 45.

return from their enterprise.⁴¹ There were some cases of sailors refusing to work or deserting to work as day workers at the improved wage rate. These actions were consistent with trends elsewhere, like Canadian timber ports, where (as Fingard has shown) seamen, contracted to do work that they normally loathed as article seamen, found it “quite palatable” in small doses as hired labour.⁴² At first these were small acts of defiance which stopped just short of more serious challenges such as mutiny. The continued exploitation and poor working conditions, however, took a turn for the worse in March and April 1844 when the sailors on *Ichaboe* revolted and established a guano republic, defying the shipmasters. A similar mutiny erupted on *Malgas Island* the following year.

The troubles at both *Ichaboe* and *Malgas Island* had their origin in the introduction of a system of supercargoes and contract manual labour as opposed to sea labour. Following their earlier experiences, those returning to *Ichaboe* were accompanied by groups of manual labourers to fast-track the loading of vessels chartered in England. The supercargoes responsible for supervising the loading, together with the Committee of Shipmasters and Others (COSMO) and which represented a minority of the shipmasters present, monopolised certain loading stages in order to prioritise the loading of pre-arranged chartered vessels. In addition to long delays, independent shipmasters had to pay for a guano load as well as having to assist others with loading before they could secure a load of their own. In the midst of internecine conflict over these arrangements, a large number of sailors deserted to “Supercargo Town” to work as day labourers at a higher wage. This forced the affected shipmasters to act in their own interest. In mid-1845 and with the assistance of 1 400 loyal crewmen from an estimated 300 crews present at the island, they attacked “Supercargo Town” and

its entire population put to the rout at the point of the bayonet, and driven directly into the sea up to their chins, and the discomfited landlords there and then made to swear, that from henceforth they had relinquished all right and title to the soil of *Ichaboe*, after which declaration they were permitted to return to their respective place of abode. This summary proceeding produced an entire change in the civil affairs of the island.⁴³

This victory was however of short duration. With the arrival of the warship *HMS Thunderbolt* in May 1844, the COSMO was restructured and a new set of rules implemented. Not only was the original labour regime of strict contract enforcement, alcohol rations, fixed working hours and evacuation of all crews from the island at the end of the work day re-established, but all deserters had to re-join their original crew. These instructions caused significant dissatisfaction amongst the workforce. The labourers in particular regarded the combined actions of both the groups of shipmasters and loyal crewmen as a serious threat to their interests.

41. Van Onselen, *Chibaro*, p 100.

42. Fingard, “The Decline of the Sailor as a Ship Labourer”, pp 38–39.

43. “Revolution at *Ichaboe*”, *Sydney Morning Chronicle*, 6 August 1845.

Although these arrangements were kept in place by subsequent naval crews of the *HMS Clio* and *Isis*, their presence was of a short duration. As a result, with their departure by July, the recalcitrant element among the crews and ordinary labourers regrouped and mutinied.⁴⁴ In addition to constituting themselves as a “sort of sovereign authority”, they elected one of their number, the best boxer on the island as “King of Ichaboe” and physically denied shipmasters access to the island.⁴⁵ They also forced the shipmasters to pay between 7 and 8 shillings per ton of guano. This situation, which lasted for nearly six months was only reversed with the return of *HMS Thunderbolt* in December 1844 to restore the general order, arrest the ringleaders and to supervise the final scraping of the island. The act of establishing a republic or “kingdom” represented an extreme act of symbolic or ideological resistance against attempts to relegate workers to an inferior economic and social or ritual position.⁴⁶ In confronting the Committee of Shipmasters and Others (COSMO), the rebelling seaman displayed, as Scott has argued in another context, not only their immediate discontent but also an incipient sense of class-consciousness.⁴⁷ Their actions represented more than an attempt to re-appropriate the product of their labour but also expressed their particular world view;⁴⁸ offered a radical critique of the existing arrangements;⁴⁹ and was an attempt to reclaim their status as men of worth. This is evident in the utterings of a number of the ordinary guano diggers. Joseph Fletcher, a guano digger on Possession Island, who not only confronted his supervisor about the quality of food by demanding to know “whether the food was fit to give a man after working hard all day?”, but also expressed his disgust with the available drinking water which in his view was “not fit for a human being to drink”.⁵⁰ Similarly, Anthony Rodericks declared his material interest when he stated simply: “I struck for wages this time.”⁵¹ In the same vein, Alfred Kaiser made it clear that the system of credit extended to guano workers was exploitive since “we pay dear for them, and our wages are but small”.⁵²

Viewed from this perspective, their actions thus represented both a struggle for economic redress and an embryonic class consciousness in insisting on a measure of political equality above (and off) deck. Arguably, it

44. “The Guano Trade”, *Courier*, 29 October 1844.

45. “On Guano: Its Origins and History”, *The Inquirer & Commercial News*, 3 October 1855.

46. J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985), p 235.

47. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p 297.

48. L. van Sittert, “Labour, Capital and the State in the St Helena Bay Fisheries c. 1856–c.1956”, PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1992, p 57.

49. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p 339.

50. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence of J. Fletcher, 22 July 1897.

51. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897.

52. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence of A. Kaiser, 30 July 1897.

also represented a new and different vision of the existing social order, namely one of men receiving more equitable treatment between the classes.⁵³ British crewmen in particular, had long struggled to elevate their social status and to counter the attitude that relegated them to “inhabitants of the imperial periphery” not “worthy of the guarantees associated with metropolitan freedom (‘British liberty’)”.⁵⁴ Their unambiguous declaration through radical collective actions was therefore not only a clear expression of their entitlement, but also an attempt at reclaiming their rights as British citizens.

The rebelling seamen were contracted maritime labour and their actions – as far as their employers were concerned – were mutinous and constituted acts of theft and were therefore punishable by law.⁵⁵ These sentiments were explicitly expressed by captains Broderick of the *Star of the West* and Tasker of the brig *Leila* who respectively observed that “there are present ... many more common men than officers ... and the consequence is that a mutiny is a matter of daily occurrence” and “the outmost possible anarchy reigned amongst the crews of the numerous vessels lying there, notwithstanding the regulations which had been established”.⁵⁶ Similarly, James Seawright, reporting from Malgas Island in May 1845, stated it in no uncertain terms: “that the conduct of some of these crews and the whole of the European labours is so mutinous that your humblest are afraid to visit the island to superintend their crews and labourers”.⁵⁷ When the ship captains turned to the Cape Colony, Mauritius and St Helena Island as well as the naval authorities for assistance, they found them willing accomplices. The Cape courts not only sentenced the rebellious sailors to short periods of imprisonment, spare diets of rice and water, but also fined or dismissed them.⁵⁸ The recalcitrant received not only physical punishment but were often left in an open boat out in the unpredictable ocean.⁵⁹

Yet, significantly, most of the penalties were not harsh. This was a result of simple pragmatism rather than mercy: experienced and skilled seamen were hard to replace. The payment of one’s own passage, however, was particularly steep and unpleasant since mutinous crew were frequently returned in chains to their port of origin and also had to work for meagre rations. Most ordinary seamen had very little spare money and could therefore hardly afford to pay their own way. The use of this range of penalties as outlined was deployed to contain open protest and defiance. Alongside sporadic harsh retribution, a regime of routine repression aimed

53. Glasco, “The Seaman Feels Himself a Man”, p 47.

54. I. Land, “Customs of the Sea: Flogging, Empire, and the ‘True British Seaman’ 1770–1870”, *Interventions*, 3, 4, August 2001, pp 169–185.

55. Ex-Member of the Committee, “The African Guano Trade”, p 636.

56. Craig, “The African Guano Trade”, pp 40 and 44.

57. KAB: CO. 4027/578, J. Seawright 7 Co. – Government, 17 May 1845.

58. *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, 28 March 1845.

59. L. Green, *Panther Head* (Stanley Paul & Co, Cape Town, 1955), p 229.

at sowing fear rather than spreading terror.⁶⁰ This is demonstrated by the cases reported in the various issues of the *Cape of Good Hope & Port Natal Mercantile Gazette* as well as from others such as the *South Australian Register*.⁶¹ Whilst Charles Thompson and Peter Wilson of the schooner *Ann* were punished with 14 days of imprisonment and a spare diet of rice and water every second day for refusing to perform their duty on board ship, William Davis and William Nasin of the barque *Abel Gower*, were merely placed back on board after committing the same offence.⁶² Similarly, John Barry, Thomas Williams and James Toby who committed the more serious offence of deserting from the guano vessel, *Anlaby*, were imprisoned for one month supplemented by a spare diet every second day.⁶³ They, however, remained in the service of their respective employers. Yet when James Curtis, a chief mate on the brig *Acorn* used abusive and threatening language against the shipmaster, he was summarily discharged.⁶⁴ These cases clearly demonstrate how the application of the various measures therefore aided rather than undermined the collection, loading and shipping process.

The seasonal labour regime, 1847–1890

With the exhaustion of the resource in 1845 in both the bay of Angra Pequena and within the Cape territorial waters, the *ad hoc* labour regime came to its end. As the trade moved into its next phase and control passed into the hands of Cape businessmen, a system of seasonal labour was introduced. With the first signs of a replenished guano resource, the Liverpool firm of Gibson, Linton & Co. monopolised Ichaboe in 1847. To safeguard their interests, they appointed a supervisor or foreman for supervising the collection and loading as well as to maintain the peace.⁶⁵ Working from Liverpool their control, however, was of short duration. As a result of a combination of factors, including the death of one of the partners and financial difficulties, control of Ichaboe Island passed into the hands of a group of Cape businessmen including Robert Granger, Aaron and Elias de Pass, and Seawright & Co., some of whom were actively involved with the former regime of exploitation.

The new monopolists, increasingly aware of the need to protect the seabirds and specifically their guano, which was deposited on a cyclical basis, introduced a system of seasonal labour under the supervision of European headmen. They were tasked with recruitment, supervision,

60. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p 277.

61. "Nautical Facts", *South Australian Register*, 3 January 1846.

62. *Cape of Good Hope & Port Natal Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, Police Cases amongst the Shipping in Table Bay, 1 March; 29 March 1845.

63. *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, Police Cases in Table Bay, 31 ultimo; 18 April 1845.

64. *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, Police Cases in Table Bay, 14th to 18th instant; 25 April 1845.

65. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11-'61: Testimony of T. Boyce, p 9.

provisions management and reporting to their Cape Town headquarters.⁶⁶ Although they were generally chosen from the ranks of the most experienced seamen available, literacy levels were low and most had to be assisted to execute their administrative duties adequately.⁶⁷ However they received a remuneration package consisting of commission between six pence (6d) and one shilling per ton,⁶⁸ an additional gratuity based on the loading speed of the workforce under their supervision,⁶⁹ and a sealing concession for their own account.⁷⁰ These arrangements gave them a direct interest in maximising production.

As had become standard practice, labour was recruited from among a cross-section of Cape colonial society. Within these ranks were deserters, tradesmen, former public servants and even a former barrister.⁷¹ Prisoners with the option of a fine were recruited from the Roeland Street Prison in exchange for a twelve-month guano contract.⁷² Contemporary reports therefore painted a picture of a recruiting system geared towards securing as cheap a labour force as possible.⁷³

Working as day labourers, guano scrapers were paid an average wage of £2 per month.⁷⁴ This was supplemented by an extra three pence (3d) per ton depending on the loading speed as well as water and food rations.⁷⁵ A system of monthly “half pay notes”, allowing workers to

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66. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence of J.E. Sayer, 30 July 1897.
67. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 22 July 1897.
68. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11-'61: Testimony of J. Sheperd, p. 7.
69. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11 - '61: Testimony of J. Spence, p. 25.
70. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Ployer, 30 July 1897.
71. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence of W. Fieldman, 30 July 1897.
72. Green, *Panther Head*, p 23.
73. There is a rich variety of contemporary and unpublished primary testimony on the living and working conditions on the various islands in the various archives groups at the Cape Town Archives Depot. Most was not published consistently nor attached to the final reports of the Commissions of Inquiry into the management of the government guano Islands. The testimony underpinning, the 1897 investigation, filed under the archive group Agriculture (AGR), forms the basis of this study due to its richness and depth as well as constant reference and comparison between the labour and living regimes under the private leaseholders in comparison to that of the government guano agent. The testimony of the labour force presented to the Angra Pequena and West Coast Joint Claims Commission in 1885/86 and which preceded the era of government control over the islands, deals more with the issues of territorial control and jurisdiction prior to the advent of German influence in the area along the Namib coast than with the actual detail of the living and working conditions on the islands.
74. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11-'61, Testimony of B. Sinclair, p 19.
75. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11-'61: Testimony of B. Sinclair, p 25.

exchange half of their future pay to order goods, was also introduced.⁷⁶ A worker was therefore (theoretically) able to leave the islands having secured some savings from his labour. However, the “half-pay” system was also a valuable mechanism to control the labour force. By having a portion of their wages withheld, deserters faced losing a significant amount in accumulated earnings. This effectively compelled guano labourers to work out their full contract.

To strengthen their hold over labour even further, employers extended credit to the workforce. Most workers generally had very few worldly possessions. Since employers provided only food and quarters, basic items such as basins, towels, soap, matches and blankets as well as non-food products (such as tobacco) had to be procured from the ship’s store.⁷⁷ The only other alternative for purchasing provisions was a store on the mainland operated by De Pass, Spence & Co., who guarded their monopoly jealously.⁷⁸ Workers and visiting crew therefore faced a choice of either paying or having their ablutions with a salt water guano bath and using the yolk of penguin eggs as soap.⁷⁹ This led George Fry, a guano digger on Possession Island, to observe: “we almost live in a salt atmosphere here; we have to wash ... [ourselves] and our clothes in salt water, and eat salt provisions.”⁸⁰ Nor was there “a glass of liquor now and then” that “would cheer the men up.”⁸¹

Given the value of alcohol and tobacco as potential mechanisms to aid control of the workforce, most employers strictly rationed these commodities, especially alcohol. A regular supply of tobacco could, however, be procured from either the ship’s store or from the De Pass establishment on the mainland.⁸² These two products provided a deeply desired – albeit temporary – respite from the isolated and miserable existence. Given the unreliability of the supply system and the regular shortages that resulted, some workers resorted to drinking friar’s balsam, paregoric and other medical remedies with an alcohol base.⁸³ The islands, from the workers’ perspective, were a “wretched place for men to live”.⁸⁴

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- 76. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Kaiser, 30 July 1897.
 - 77. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 22 July 1897.
 - 78. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/1/9: SC. A.11–’61, Testimony of R. Granger, p 64.
 - 79. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T.H. Dyke, 22 July 1897.
 - 80. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of G. Fry 30 July 1897.
 - 81. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Ployer, 30 July 1897.
 - 82. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 22 July 1897.
 - 83. Anonymous, *Chambers Journal*, 1897, p 358.
 - 84. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J.H. Mitchell, 30 July 1897.

As a result of their personal circumstances and employers' access to a combination of civil law (contracts) and criminal law ("prosecution for vagrancy and deviance from an orderly life on and off the job"),⁸⁵ guano labourers found themselves in Bittermann's words, with reference to the situation of agricultural settlers in Cape Breton, Canada, in an "inescapable conundrum".⁸⁶ Not in a position to negotiate a reasonable wage, most also had nowhere else to go.⁸⁷ As Newton-King has argued, those recruited with the assistance of crimps such as "Black Sophie" Nielson of Brée Street in Cape Town and other intermediaries as "stock-in-trade" labour, were also caught in a web of debt.⁸⁸ The Masters and Servants Act promulgated in 1873 by the Cape government outlawed "careless work", bad language or "neglect" and absence from work and threatened short periods of imprisonment and fines for any of these infringements.⁸⁹ It therefore assisted in constructing an effective though low-cost, coercive infrastructure and management system for the continuous exploitation of the islands. By the end of the 1880s and concomitant with the growing unhappiness of the seasonal labour force, its internal deficiencies, however, slowly began to show. Political factors and the establishment of a state-controlled guano agency system brought the period of private control to an end and inaugurated a new state-controlled labour dispensation.

The labour regime under the Cape guano agent, 1890–1898

After four decades of private exploitation and following persistent pressure from the farming community for cheap fertiliser, the Cape Legislative Council by way of Resolution 2 of 2 July 1889, took operational control of the trade. The Department of Crown Lands and Public Works (DCLPW) then appointed Captain C.H. Jackson on a commission basis as the government guano agent responsible for the overall management of the islands. In this role he was responsible for budgeting, labour recruitment and the management of the central guano depot in Cape Town where the different guano types were to be mixed, weighed and despatched. Having a free hand to organise the guano administration, he appointed Captain John Spence as the assistant guano agent responsible for supervising the actual collection on the various islands and overseeing the supply ship, the *Sea Bird*.

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85. F. Cooper, "The State and Agricultural Labour: Zanzibar after Slavery", in D.C. Hindson (ed.), *Working Papers in Southern African Studies*, 3 (Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1983), pp 2–3.
 86. R. Bitterman, "The Hierarchy of the Soil: Land and Labour in a 19th Century Cape Breton Community", *Acadiensis*, 18, 1, March 1988, p 43.
 87. KAB: AGR 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T.H. Dyke, 22 July 1897.
 88. S. Newton-King, "The Labour Market of the Cape Colony, 1807–28", in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds) *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (Longman, New York 1981), p 182.
 89. V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge University Press, London and New York, 1995), p 94.

The new guano administration followed a similar recruitment strategy as their predecessors by targeting the unemployed and those formerly employed by the former leaseholders.⁹⁰ Additional workers, particularly women, were also recruited from among the large number of indigenous people (Hottentots) on the Namibian mainland.⁹¹ Although this was not a new development, the targeting of the indigenous women was a new practice since they were regarded as ideal workers for removing stones from the guano whereas the men were used for the “rough work”.⁹² They were not only considered diligent and cheap workers, but also easy to exploit.⁹³ Payment promised ranged from rice and coffee⁹⁴ to a cash wage of 5 shillings per month in comparison to the £2 paid to the white guano digger.⁹⁵ The only exception in the treatment of indigenous men was in the case of those individuals who worked as cooks who were at least offered a pay-off prior to being landed on the mainland.⁹⁶

By comparison to the former system of short term contracts, the new dispensation provided for 12 month contracts to coincide with the breeding and collection season.⁹⁷ Longer term, open-ended contracts were the exception and were only entered into with the most seasoned individuals who preferred an island existence.⁹⁸ These men who boasted long years of working in the trade, were also regarded as essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the industry and the protection of the seabirds. Remuneration for headmen, however, was fixed on £4 and that of the ordinary worker decreased by 10 pence to £2 per month.⁹⁹ None were allowed any bargaining space.¹⁰⁰ This system almost immediately generated a cost saving since it was much cheaper than the former commission-based

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90. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/2/1/48: SC. A.12-'97, Testimony of Jackson, p 6.
 91. KAB: Government House (hereafter GH) 35/32, Imperial German Consul General – Sir Alfred Milner, 24 September 1897.
 92. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897.
 93. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Ployer, 30 July 1897.
 94. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T. Dyke, 22 July 1897.
 95. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897.
 96. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Fletcher, 22 July 1897.
 97. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of W.J.E. Sayer, 30 July 1897.
 98. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 22 July 1897.
 99. KAB: AGR: 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of G. Haggerstrom, 30 July 1897.
 100. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897. Rodericks or Roderiques the headman of Possession Island, who except for a promise of improvement, had his demand for a wage of £9 turned down.

system. Additionally, both categories of workers lost the right to collect sealskins for their own account and therefore also the opportunity to establish some form of economic independence.

The system of “half pay notes” was also terminated since all islands were to be provisioned from Cape Town. With the employer paying for all food and accommodation, salaries were only paid upon termination of service.¹⁰¹ The deferment of the payday forced workers to procure life’s necessities on credit at inflated prices from the stores of the *Sea Bird*. This not only increased their indebtedness but also effectively prevented early termination of the service contract. To aggravate matters, the price of tobacco was increased from 2 shillings and 6 pence (2/6) to 4 shillings,¹⁰² which – according to guano digger Alfred Kaiser – was “a disgrace in the nineteenth century”.¹⁰³

From their recruitment to the termination of their contract, recruits were still subjected to the harsh living and working conditions experienced under the earlier labour regimes. Upon their departure for the islands, the new workers had to sleep in makeshift beds, on water barrels, on top of each other on the deck and even in the lifeboats of a leaking ship.¹⁰⁴ This particular feature of their transportation mirrored the transport system of the slave trade and therefore buttresses Phillip’s description of the guano trade as a new form of slavery. The treatment meted out to the indigenous workers was equally bad. Having served the purpose for which they were hired but also with due consideration for the fact that the prior approval of the German colonial administration for the hire of indigenous labour was not obtained, their contracts were prematurely terminated and a group of 63 individuals unceremoniously repatriated to the mainland without any of the promised financial compensation in February 1896.¹⁰⁵ Only a threat of diplomatic action by the German colonial authorities and the payment of financial compensation to the amount of £350 for damages, resolved the matter.¹⁰⁶

To establish a disciplined work force, “curb idleness” and to achieve maximum productivity, the guano agency implemented a strict regulatory framework. A 12 hour workday stretching from daybreak to sundown with provision for a ninety minute breakfast and a dinner hour, was implemented.

101. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J.H. Mitchell, 30 July 1897.

102. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Roderick, 30 July 1897.

103. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Kaiser, 30 July 1897.

104. KAB: AMPT PUBS 2/2/1/76: C.10 '98, p 6.

105. KAB: GH. 35/32, Imperial German Consul General – Sir Alfred Milner, 24 September 1897.

106. KAB: GH. 35/32, Imperial German Consul General – Milner, 22 July 1898.

However, no break for a midday meal,¹⁰⁷ or a legally enforceable compulsory rest day was allowed. Workers could not accurately determine the length of their workday since they were denied access to a clock.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, strict contract enforcement and threats of imprisonment were used to discourage desertion.¹⁰⁹ Contracted labour had thus no option other than to work out their contracts and to wait for the *Sea Bird* to return them to Cape Town. As a result of this strict regime, the administration was able to collect nearly 26 000 tons of guano over the first six years (1890–1896) of its existence.¹¹⁰ On the remuneration side, comparatively speaking, the guano agent and his assistant jointly earned commissions of over £9 000 whilst the island labour force comprising 220 individuals, earned just over £19 000 as outlined in the table below.

YEAR	ANNUAL GUANO AGENT COMMISSION	ANNUAL ISLAND WORKFORCE WAGES
	AMOUNTS IN POUND STERLING	
1893 ¹¹¹	£1,012. 2s .3d	£2,528.10s. 5d
1894 ¹¹²	£1,545. 9s. 3d	£2,425. 3s.1d
1895 ¹¹³	£1,615. 8s.1d	£4,360. 6s. 7d
1896 ¹¹⁴	£2,035. 14s. 4d	£5,592.18s. 7d
1897 ¹¹⁵	£2,486. 15s. 0d	£4,233. 6s. 0d
TOTAL	£8,693. 48s. 11d	£19,138. 43s. 20d

Table 1: Comparative annual earnings: Guano agent commission vs. island workforce¹¹⁶

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- 107. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T. H. Dyke, 22 July 1897.
 - 108. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. Burr, 22 July 1897.
 - 109. KAB: AGR: 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T. H. Dyke, 22 July 1897.
 - 110. This figure is derived from a calculation of the totals reported in annual reports to the Colonial Legislature for the period 1890–1896.
 - 111. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 1/2/1/90, Ministerial Department of Public Works, Memorandum on Working of the Guano Islands: Annual Report for the Season 1893–1894 [G.66–1894].
 - 112. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 1/2/1/94, Department of Agriculture, Report on the Government Guano Islands for the Season 1894–1895 [G.71–95].
 - 113. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 1/2/1/98, Department of Agriculture: Report on the Government Guano Islands for the Season 1895–1896 by the Government Agent in Charge [G.80–96]
 - 114. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 1/2/1/102, Dept Agriculture: Report on the Government Guano Islands for the Year 1896, by the Government Agent in Charge [G.6 –97].
 - 115. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 1/2/1/106: Dept Agriculture: Report on the Government Guano Islands for the Year 1897, by the Government Agent in Charge [G.75–98].
 - 116. This table was composed from information contained in the various annual reports as submitted to the colonial Department of Agriculture; it was subsequently submitted to the colonial legislature.

Although the matter that finally tipped the scale was the cavalier disregard for the welfare of the workers and the careless handling of the island supply system by the guano agent, the growing demand of Cape farmers for a cheap and accessible supply of guano for agricultural purposes also played a role. As indicated, the uninterrupted supply from the islands was a critical element in the workings of the islands. Delays in the provision of fresh food and water therefore had to be prevented at all times since it also negatively impacted on worker productivity and the availability of the product. Jackson, due to the commission arrangements in his employment contract, were, however, set on further cost reductions without seriously considering its destabilising effect. To curb costs and eliminate waste, headmen were instructed to optimise available provisions of salted meat (both pork and beef) due to its high price.¹¹⁷ They were to refrain from buying meat from the mainland without prior approval. Any unauthorised expenditure in this regard was to be recovered from the salary of the responsible party.¹¹⁸ A ban was also placed on the collection of penguin eggs and the killing of penguins for food since they represented the future of the industry. This situation, according to guano digger Joseph Fletcher of Possession Island, “was not extra good” and “altogether disgraceful for an Englishman”.¹¹⁹ The further decision to discontinue employing a dedicated cook at an additional cost had serious health implications. As has been noted in other contexts, overcooking food considerably reduces its anti-scorbutic properties.¹²⁰ The men were unskilled at catering for themselves and their meals became inedible.¹²¹ Since the majority also had little money due to the system of deferred payment, they could not purchase the required health (indeed, life) sustaining foods from the nearby trading store.

The restrictions on additional procurement were also extended to the purchase of drug foods such as tea, coffee and alcohol. In addition to banning alcohol, Chinese tea was replaced by bush tea (according to the available evidence, not rooibos tea) which was much disliked by the diggers. T.L. Graham, a member of a later parliamentary investigation committee, described the bush tea as a “nauseas beverage with nothing to recommend it but its cheapness”.¹²² The banning of alcohol was particularly hard and led Gustav Haggerstrom, the headman of Sinclair and Plum Pudding Island, to remark that “now the men have to live here like convicts”.¹²³ It was, therefore, not surprising that during 1897 after weeks of

117. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. F. Jameson, 30 July 1897.

118. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897.

119. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Fletcher, 22 July 1897.

120. Van Onselen, *Chibaro*, p 53.

121. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of T.H. Dyke, 22 July 1897.

122. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 2/2/1/76: C.10-'98, Testimony of T.L. Graham, p 8.

123. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Ployer, 30 July 1897.

non-delivery, the workforce decided to act. This is not to suggest that the actions that followed were the first display of unhappiness and show of resistance. Resistance to their working and living conditions, as will be shown, evolved slowly and grew progressively from subtle forms of protest to direct challenges of the system.

Worker resistance and reaction to the guano labour system

The changes that accompanied the establishment of the guano agency, especially its remuneration dispensation, had led to the exit of some of the most experienced men from the system. The majority of them found employment almost immediately with the nearby Cape Cross Guano Company, which offered both improved provisions and a better monthly salary of £5.¹²⁴ Others, including veterans of the trade, simply returned to Cape Town.¹²⁵ This trend continued throughout the period of state control so that by the outbreak of the South African War in 1899, an acute labour shortage was experienced.¹²⁶ Those who did not leave frequently resorted to “loafing” and excuses of an inability to work the usual way.¹²⁷ This forced the renewed recruitment of indigenous labour at 20 shillings per labourer.¹²⁸ Cost reductions therefore left the collection system vulnerable and dependent on an uncertain labour supply.

The system of regular reporting through the headman and the captain of the supply ship *Sea Bird* began to break down over time. Given the high incidence of illiteracy amongst headmen, their record-keeping was for the most part incomplete. Those headmen who wanted to visit Cape Town in order to directly communicate their concerns were dissuaded from doing so by Captain Burr of the *Sea Bird*, who instead undertook to relay it on their behalf.¹²⁹ Burr, however, failed to submit any written complaint and in his own words generally only “mentioned” his observations and the men’s complaints.¹³⁰ Given his own role in exploiting the men through credit sales from the ship’s store, this was not surprising. When a written report indeed reached Cape Town, no response was ever received.¹³¹ The guano agent failed to visit the islands under his jurisdiction; nor did he interact directly

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124. KAB: AGR: 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897.
 125. KAB: AGR: 667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of P. Nelson, 30 July 1897.
 126. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/2/1/48: SC. A.12–97: Testimony of Jackson, p 6.
 127. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of F.P. Jameson, 30 July 1897.
 128. KAB: AGR 1/511: D18, Inspection of Guano Islands: W.P. Truter – Colonial Secretary’s Office, 19 October 1905.
 129. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of M. Pietersen, 22 July 1897.
 130. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. Burr, 22 July 1897.
 131. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Kaiser, 30 July 1897.

with his headmen.¹³² Acting as a “general overlord”, and displaying a heightened sense of his own superiority, power, importance and entitlement to deference, the guano agent insulted and dismissed those who bothered to complain.¹³³ Nowhere were the features of the guano trade as a typical labour repressive system more evident than in the guano agent’s handling of his administrative responsibilities.

The disrespect shown to headmen gradually undermined their status in the eyes of their subordinates. As a result, most of them displayed their resistance by forcing their supervisors into a situation of false compliance with the stipulated regulations. This was particularly evident in the gap between the official records as represented by the island logbook and actual events on the islands that were never reported. When the guano island provisioning system broke down in late 1896, most headmen – out of concern for their charges– defied the bans regulating purchases from the mainland and allowed the killing of penguins and the collection of eggs. John Kay of Halifax Island also tried to obtain milk, meat and vegetables from the Germans on the mainland on his own account.¹³⁴ Others illegally maintained their own livestock such as pigs and fed them from official stores. Upon its discovery, this was conveniently and strategically blamed on the captain of the *Sea Bird*.¹³⁵ Very few of these incidents were ever reported.

Misunderstanding these dynamics, Captain F.P. Jameson, a member of a Commission of Investigation into the working of the guano islands in 1897, erroneously observed that there was not much supervision at the islands in the bay of Angra Pequena.¹³⁶ These actions, however, won individual headmen the respect of their subordinates and placed the blame for the failures of the system squarely on the guano agent. The assignment of such blame against the assigned authority who was “within moral reach” but failed to act in assisting the marginalised, represented, as Scott has shown in another milieu, the critical moment in the progression of protest to direct challenge.¹³⁷

Following the complete breakdown of the provisioning system which left the workforce with insufficient fresh supplies for nearly seven months, the “weapons of the weak” – the constant grumblings, strategic “loafing”, and threats of work stoppages by the guano labour force – finally

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132. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Ployer, 30 July 1897.
 133. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Rodericks, 30 July 1897.
 134. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of P. Fochs, 21 July 1897.
 135. KAB: AGR 1/511: D18, Inspection of Guano Islands by W.P. Truter; W.P. Truter – Colonial Secretary, 30 Octobe 1905.
 136. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. F.P. Jameson, 30 July 1897.
 137. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p 161.

crystallised into strike action in late 1896 and early 1897.¹³⁸ The shortage of fresh meat, vegetables, lime juice and vinegar in particular, hastened the onset of scurvy on most of the islands including Possession, Halifax, Sinclair, Hollamsbird, Mercury and Ichaboe. Efforts to mitigate the situation by employing various survival strategies, such as grinding rice to meal in order to bake bread; catching fish from the lagoon; and employing extreme measures such as frying a gemsbok skin; provided only a small measure of relief and added dysentery to an already bad situation.¹³⁹ This situation left the northern guano collection operations in total disarray. Confronted by official indifference from both Burr and Jackson, the workmen embarked on a series of 24-hour strikes. These actions, although essentially used as a defensive weapon aimed at restoring the supply system to its former standard, was also an offensive weapon and a response to the undermining of the value of their labour, especially the conditions of service which reduced the men to “penury and poverty before they even start”.¹⁴⁰

At the forefront of these strikes in March and April 1897 were white diggers who, over a long period of time, were foremost in articulating grievances on wages and provisioning. A close inspection of their remarks used during these times clearly indicates an acute awareness of their rights. Upon being confronted with the poor accommodation on the islands, for example, Burr commented that it was just “disgraceful and not fit for a human being”.¹⁴¹ Anthony Chimato, one of the headmen, regarded the accommodation as not even “fit for a nigger to live in”.¹⁴² Similarly the quality of the meat provided to the workers was described as an affront to any “British citizen” whilst the ship’s store system was described as a “nineteenth century disgrace” and the expectation that they sign a blank form to claim their accumulated earnings as something “the likes of it would not be allowed in a shipping office in England”.¹⁴³ This confirmed Isaac Land’s contention that British seamen from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century were eager to re-establish their worth in the eyes of British society based on the argument that “no one who possessed the sensibility of a British man should be governed like a Black slave”.¹⁴⁴

The tactic of short work stoppages combined with the use of the colonial press to highlight their plight and their contrasting of the guano

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- 138. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 30 July 1897.
 - 139. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 30 July 1897.
 - 140. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. Burr, 22 July 1897.
 - 141. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of Capt. Burr, 22 July 1897.
 - 142. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of A. Chimato, 30 July 1897.
 - 143. KAB: AGR:667:0000, Guano Island Commission of 1897, Evidence: Testimony of J. Fletcher, 22 July 1897.
 - 144. Land, “Customs of the Sea”, pp 169–185.

labour regime with accepted British practices, were chosen precisely to attract maximum public attention without threatening the dominant norms, laws, customs and political loyalty. It was also presented as a public act of compliance and conformity as well as, by implication, an effort to protect the “British way of doing things”. The action of the guano workers, however, also built on an existing tradition of labour organisation and collective resistance within the trade. Like the sailors during the period of *ad hoc* labour, during the second half of the nineteenth century, black guano workers on Navassa Island in the American Pacific, resisted and killed six white supervisors of the Navassa Phosphate Company in Baltimore following longstanding abuse and neglect.¹⁴⁵ However, it was also a pragmatic form of resistance given the isolation of the islands and their distance from Cape Town. These factors combined to secure formal government intervention through the appointment of a special investigative commission to scrutinise the complete working of the islands – the Guano Island Commission of Inquiry (1897).

The commission, in addition to revealing the harsh working and living conditions of workers, also exposed the systematic abuses of the administrative system by Jackson. Particularly disturbing was his habit of claiming repayment for worker salaries without submitting any detailed salary accounts.¹⁴⁶ The colonial government, ignorant as it was of the finer workings of the guano extraction system, save for the reports from its top official, also failed to question the ever-increasing wage bill.¹⁴⁷ It therefore became complicit in the maintenance of what had effectively become a coercive and exploitative labour system. These damning findings resulted in the abolition of the position of government guano agent as a commission-earning entity and the placement of the guano island administration under the formal control of the Department of Agriculture. Forthwith, the guano labour regime was to be managed as a formal state-run operation governed by formal public sector regulations and practices consistent with those governing labour in the metropole.

Conclusion

The Cape guano trade displayed features similar to those which prompted Phillips to describe the international guano trade as contributing to a new form of slavery. Private contractors designed a highly exploitative system characterised by extended credit; a system of half-pay notes; cash advances; rationing; and deferred payments. These were simply taken over

145. A.C. Hathaway, “Servant Church: Preaching and Teaching Servant Theology to African-American Leaders in Union Baptist Church of Baltimore”, *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable*, (Regent University, August 2006) <http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/conference_proceedings/servant_leadership_roundtable/2006/pdf/Hathaway.pdf> Accessed 15 June 2007.

146. KAB: AMPT PUBS CCP 1/2/2/1/53: SC. A30–99, Testimony of C.H. Jackson, p 1.

147. KAB: AMPT PUBS: CCP 1/2/2/1/48: SCA12–97, Testimony of C. Currey, p 34.

and refined by the guano agent in pursuit of higher profits and his own commission. The colonial government as the political authority failed in the duty of safeguarding colonial interests by providing virtually no oversight over the actions of the Cape businessmen involved in the trade and later, the actions of its own functionary. Owing to their hesitancy and failure to act in time, the colonial state became a slave to Jackson's "guano experience" – an experience that cared solely for fast profit, rather than its labourers or even the sustainability of the system.

Guided by growing awareness of their "rights" as whites, "British citizens" and "men", guano labourers evinced agency in rejecting their exploitation at certain flashpoints and acting in their own defence. Through both subtle and overt forms of resistance, they attempted to frustrate the system that aimed to exploit them. In this regard, they had the example of co-workers in both the guano and other industries to follow in their struggle. This willingness to engage their employers physically drove the evolution of guano labour from an *ad hoc* to a formally structured regime. The experience of labour exploitation on the guano islands was indeed shared, uniting guano workers from South America to the northwest coast of Africa. Historiographically, it is therefore possible to use both the events locally and those elsewhere to make a final judgement about guano's contribution to the institution of a new form of slavery, albeit for a very short time, until the new "slaves" themselves helped force its abolition.

Abstract

The scraping of guano on offshore islands in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans during the mid- to late nineteenth century was an essentially primitive industry. As guano is a natural product with no further need for processing, the primary task of guano workers was the physical collection of guano chunks using basic tools such as crowbars, spades and wheelbarrows. Working on nearly barren islands with non-existent harbour facilities in remote areas far removed from its supply source, meant that guano-collection was an extremely risky enterprise and guano-labour was both back breaking and hazardous labour. Motivated by profit considerations, guanopreneurs and the Cape colonial state established and maintained an exploitative and coercive labour regime characterised by the use of deferred wages, credit and rationing as well as rigid contract enforcement. Guano diggers, however, did not accept these practices passively and as this article demonstrates, actively resisted their exploitation and marginalisation. As a result, the Cape colonial authorities were compelled to intervene, changing the system in 1898.

Keywords: guano; fertiliser; labour regime; slavery; resistance; Cape Colony; Ichaboe islands.

Opsomming

Ghwanoversameling met behulp van basiese tegnologie (kruiswaens, pikke, grawe en koevoete) op dikwels afgelëe en onherbergsame kuseilande aan die Atlantiese kus, het tot gevolg gehad dat die 19de eeuse bedryf tereg as primitief, en werksomstandighede as onaangenaam en lewensbedreigend beskryf is. Teneinde kostes laag te hou en maksimale voordeel uit die bedryf te verkry, het beide die Kaapse koloniale owerhede en ghwano-entrepreneurs nie gehuiwer om werkers uit te buit en 'n verdrukkende arbeidsbedeling gekenmerk deur voedselrantsoenering, kredietverlening, beperkende kontrakte en uitgestelde betalings in te stel en instand te hou nie. Verdermeer het hulle toegang tot die koloniale strafregstelsel gebruik om kontrakbreuk en drostery tot die minimum te beperk. Die ghwano arbeidsmag het egter nie hierdie situasie stilswyend aanvaar nie en het, soos wat dit uit hierdie artikel blyk, hulle aktief teen uitbuiting en marginalisering verset. Gevolglik is die Kaapse owerhede gedwing om op te tree en met ingang vanaf 1898 die stelsel waarop die ghwanobedryf voortaan bestuur sou word, wesenlik verander.

Sleutelwoorde: ghwano; bemesting; arbeidbedeling; verset; Kaap Kolonie; Ichaboe; eilande