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# PENAL LABOR AND PRODUCTIVE INCARCERATION

*MOBILE PRISON CAMPS IN SENEGAL  
DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD*

French research on colonial imprisonment in Africa is significantly lagging behind (1). For instance, it has particularly overlooked the economic dimension of imprisonment in the colonies – i.e., penal labor, considering it marginal or not characteristic of the situation in the colonies (2). Yet, the institution, functioning, and evolution of penal labor in the colonies provide a relevant analysis framework as regards the realities of a colonial system primarily based on coercion and compulsory labor. In Senegal, for instance, the creation of mobile prison camps has actively contributed to the construction and renovation of the Senegalese road network.

The colonial prison system was installed in societies for the most part unfamiliar with incarceration. In French West Africa and more particularly in Senegal, the first incarceration venues (prison, solitary confinement and security cells) appeared

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when trading posts were established, in the late eighteenth century, and developed in direct connection with the slave trade. However, colonial prison was not just a mere importation of the mainland model to the colonies. Even though imprisonment in the colonies was a product of reflections, ideologies and practices held worldwide, it was constantly (re)formulated, reinvented and recomposed according to local situations, generating a great number of hybrid models with diverse functions.

Generally speaking, incarceration in the colonies was rather an instrument of conquest than an application of the Foucauldian view of the penitentiary as a setting of punishment and moral reform. Contrary to the prison in mainland France, which defines individuals as citizens and subjects of rights and duties, colonial prison took part in the construction of « indigenous » populations as objects of power. In a way, it mirrored within walls what colonial society did outside. It was used as a plural instrument of social control and involved more than just the penal dimension.

In this regard, the creation of mobile prison camps in Senegal is both original and emblematic. These camps, established during the interwar period, housed inmates condemned to long sentences in mobile prisons that moved camp depending on the needs of private and public roadwork sites, providing these sites with labor they could exploit at will. Inmates were not expected to participate in their own moral reform but rather to contribute to the public interest by taking part, among other things, in road works. The camps acted as a real labor pool, and in this, were characteristic of this economy of coercion. Our analysis purports to highlight the role played by the use of penal labor in French colonies and more particularly in Senegal through the study of the organization of penal camps and life conditions of inmates. Effectively, the use of inmates on Senegal's roadwork sites partook of the colonial obsession with putting the native populations to work in the name of the sacrosanct « development » of colonies – the purpose being to secure a labor pool.

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(1) See Frédéric Le Marcis and Marie Morelle, « Pour une pensée pluridisciplinaire de la prison en Afrique, » *Afrique contemporaine*, 253 (2015): 117-129; Florence Bernault, (ed.), *Enfermement, prison et châtements en Afrique du 19e siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Karthala, 1999); Franck Dikötter, Ian Brown, (eds.), *Cultures of confinement: A history of the prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

(2) As concerns Senegal, Ibra Sene's is the only article dealing with penal camps, although it tends to be rather descriptive and falls short of stressing their economic dimension. Ibra Sene, « Colonisation française et main-d'œuvre carcérale au Sénégal: De l'emploi des détenus des camps pénaux sur les chantiers des travaux routiers (1927-1940), » *French Colonial History*, 5/1 (2004): 153-171.

## ROADWORK SITES AND COLONIAL OBSESSION WITH WORK: CREATION OF MOBILE PRISON CAMPS

In 1936, Inspector Monguillot conducted a general inspection of prisons and proposed to reform the prison service in Senegal by making a more rational use of the penal workforce. His report suggested a reorganization of penal labor aiming to decongest civilian prisons by concentrating long-term offenders in three penal camps and having them work on roadwork sites. Monguillot noted that given the state of roads, « there will be work for a long time.»<sup>(3)</sup>.

Penal camps were mobile and moved according to the needs for maintenance and repair jobs on the road network. Inmates sentenced to more than a year's imprisonment were directed to one of the three camps depending on the duration of their sentence. Penal camp A, in Thiès region, housed inmates sentenced to less than five years' imprisonment. Penal camp B, Kaolack region – prisoners serving sentences of more than five years. Last, penal camp C, Louga region, comprised a “maximum-security section” and housed recidivists and « dangerous offenders.» The three camps stood at strategic spots between the two political capitals Dakar and Saint-Louis and Sine-Saloum in the heart of the Senegalese peanut economy. The governor of Senegal himself stated that the use of this free labor provided « major benefits for the repair of the road network.» <sup>(4)</sup>.

One must keep in mind that the international economic context was decisive in the setting up of penal camps. Initially, road maintenance was the responsibility of workers subjected to prestation, a tax in kind to be paid in a number of free days of work on roadwork sites. During the 1929 Geneva debates on forced labor, this form of compelled employment was greatly criticized and condemned by Convention no. 29 of the International Labour Organization (ILO). One may then argue that the creation of penal camps in Senegal was a strategy adopted by colonial authorities both to appease international opinion and secure the workforce necessary for the maintenance of the road network. The gain was triple: first, colonial authorities protected themselves from international criticism of forced labor as the use of penal labor was tolerated. Second, the creation of penal camps allowed for the provision of extra workforce for roadwork sites in a colony where the number of prestation days was particularly low (four days per year). Last, the colony secured an inexhaustible labor pool in the event that the prestation system disappeared.

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<sup>(3)</sup> National Archives of Senegal (NAS), Dakar, 3F100, p. 14. Colony Inspector Monguillot Inspection report on prison services in Senegal, February 1936.

<sup>(4)</sup> NAS, 3F101. Handwritten letter by the governor of Senegal. Note on penal camps, 5 January 1938.

And disappear it did, in 1937-1938, when the Popular Front created an additional tax.

The creation of penal camps thus sheds light on the colonial authorities' strategy: the various forms of forced labor were used as communicating vessels. In the context of a dwindling supply of prestation labor, roadwork was transferred to penal camps.

« Hope is dormant or destroyed »: Living conditions in penal camps The working day in penal camps was ten hours with a one-and-a-half-hour break. Inmates had to walk dozens of kilometers every day to reach roadwork sites in remote, deserted areas. For example, a report on penal camp C states that inmates left at 6:40 AM for a roadwork site seven kilometers away (5). They spent most of their time breaking and carrying laterite blocks extracted in nearby quarries for the extension of the road network. Equipped with rudimentary tools, they also had to clear the undergrowth, dig ditches, and pack down new road sections on irregular or level ground.

In addition to these trying working conditions, living and hygiene conditions in the camps rendered everyday life even more difficult to bear. Architecturally, penal camps had an oversimplified design facilitating dismantling and moving. For instance, penal camp C had three rows of barbed wire, and guards released a dozen hounds in the camp at night to prevent escape (6). The camp comprised two twenty-by-five-meter steel-sheet barracks used as dormitories and housing up to a hundred inmates. One can easily imagine how tight and cramped space was. These conditions were far removed from those of the panopticon of the Foucauldian prison. Promiscuity was the rule and living conditions reduced to minimum needs.

## ANNEX: REPORT ON KELLE PENAL CAMP, 1941 (NAS, 3F110)

As no lighting was allowed in the dormitories, inmates were immersed in total darkness upon their return from roadwork sites. No claims or collective complaints were permitted, the mail was subject to censorship by the camp management, and visits were allowed once a month – in theory at least – at the pleasure of guards and the manager (7).

In addition, penal camps had deleterious effects on inmates' physical and psychological health. Due to budget restrictions and mobility, sanitary conditions

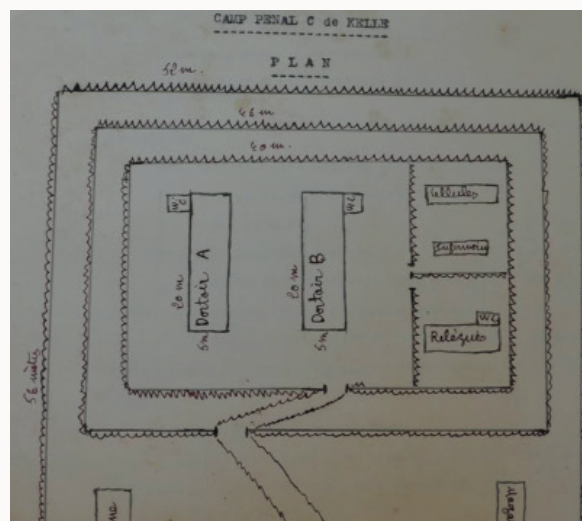
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(5) NAS, 3F107. Inspection report on penal camp C, 1938.

(6) *Ibid.*

were anything but a priority for colonial authorities. Several complaints by inmates, which got past censorship, mentioned insufficient food, clothing, sleeping accommodations and hygiene conditions.

A 1942 report following an unexpected inspection evokes the physical and mental state of the inmates of camp C. The police officer in charge of this inspection noted « that more than half of the inmates [have] festering sores or [...] seemingly recent scars on their shoulders, arms and backs, and sometimes on their inner thighs. » According to the report, these injuries were caused by three separate factors. First, the continuous friction due to carrying pails and rails on long distances irritated their shoulders and left deep wounds. Second, some injuries on the body or inner thighs came from intensive scratching caused by the presence of vermin in the dormitories. Last, inmates suffered much caning and physical abuse at the hands of camp guards. This daily suffering drove inmates to despair. Some of them developed incurable chronic diseases, leading the doctor of penal camp C to describe them as « human wrecks fated to certain death.» (8)



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(7) Articles 25, 28, and 29. NAS, K237 (26). Acts adopted at a private meeting. Order on the regulation of the service and system of penal camps, 7 January 1939.

(8) ANS, 3F136, Surprise Inspection of the Camp C by Lieutenant Boivin, 12 August 1942.

## CONCLUSION

The economic logic of production and « development » of territories prevailed over surveillance and moral reform. This makes penal camps appear as venues of « open incarceration.» This interesting oxymoron evokes both a closed space under surveillance and an open space in which inmates moved between the spatial confinement of the prison and the open space of the roadwork sites where they worked. It follows that, compounded by degrading living and working conditions, incarceration gave rise to various forms of refusal of prison and penal work such as desertion, mutiny, complaints, or even, in some extreme cases, self-mutilation (9). In the 1930s, nearly 50 percent of inmates escaped from Senegalese prisons – and some did so several times. Complicity with guards was widespread and refusals to work occurred daily. The diversity and scale of these reactions show the inability of colonial authorities to address this resistance and more generally highlight the inertia of the colonial machine, which was far from omnipotent and often ineffectual.

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(9) We have noted a dozen or so cases of self-mutilation in penal camps in archives covering the interwar years.