

RECONSTRUCTION OF TROU CHENILLE VILLAGE

PROJECT WRITE-UP

1. Historical background

The former village of Le Morne, also known as Trou Chenille was located on the South side of Le Morne Brabant Mountain. The origin of the names Trou Chenille is believed to be from the worms collected by the fishermen (*Sini san pie*) as bait or from the numerous sea cucumbers also locally known as found in Trou Chenille. Trou Chenille is considered as the cradle of settlement of the South West region of Mauritius. Although there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that during slavery, it may have been a slave camp, then after 1835, an ex-slave village, latest historical research dates it to end of the 19th Century, but further archaeological and archival research may in future date it further back.

From oral history conducted in the past decade by Le Morne Trust Fund, the University of Mauritius and individual researchers with former residents of Trou Chenille, research reveals that this village was the site where the descendants of slaves continued to live even after the abolition of slavery in 1835. Several elderly people interviewed in Le Morne village have mentioned that they were born and raised in the village known as Trou Chenille and its vicinity which was composed of about 20-30 families and about 50 huts until they were forced to leave in the 1950s. At the same time, other sites of settlement in the area in the 1950s and earlier, included L'Embrazure, Makak and the estate of Mr. Cambier. However Trou Chenille remained the core in the lives of neighboring settlements as it was there where Sega nights (*Sware Sega*) were held every Saturday till Sunday. Sega nights were organized in different villages, but those held at Trou Chenille were the most popular. They went there either individually or in groups to sing and dance the Sega or to watch and to enjoy the entertainment under the rhythm of the *ravann*, *maravann* and *triyang* that the villagers feasted under a banyan tree which is still present as a place of memory. It was also under this banyan tree that people gathered to hold meetings, tell stories and sing and dance the Sega, on Saturday nights.

Maize, manioc and rice were the main foods consumed by the inhabitants of Trou Chenille. One of the most common dishes mentioned is the "*diri-maye*", which consisted of a mixture of boiled maize and rice. People in Trou Chenille were living an autonomous life. Although traditional fishing was the main activity, inhabitants

did not starve when fishing was not possible. Several of our informants mentioned that the practice of having a small plot of land and rearing animals was very common among the inhabitants of Trou Chenille. In their gardens, they cultivated vegetables and grew medicinal plants, which they used for their own consumption. However, some of the inhabitants interviewed also mentioned having at one moment or another been employed as labourer, guard and maid by the main landowner, Mr. Cambier who was closely associated with the historical and economic activities of the area. The economic activities in which they were involved were fishing, deer and cattle farming, the production of charcoal, wood bundles, salt and lime some of which were shipped by boat from Trou Chenille to Port Louis such as charcoal and wood bundles.

The several descriptions obtained during field work tend to depict housing patterns that evolved from the days of slavery. The houses of Trou Chenille were at that time either a *Langar Kreol* (Creole Sheds) or Straw huts. The walls of the straw huts were made with aloe sticks and the roof thatched with the leaves of the same tree. The floor was glazed with cow dung and white soil. The *Langar Kreol* was composed of a single room in triangular tent shaped, made of wood and thatched with Aloe leaves. There was no toilet or bathroom. People went into the woods. On the other hand, straw huts were bigger than Creole sheds and consisted of two rooms with an outdoor bathroom and toilet in the yard. The interior contained a bedroom where the whole family slept on a *katiya* (wooden bed with a straw mattress). A second room served as a common space and had a table, chairs and storage space for utensils. The kitchen was located outside.

When the old inhabitants of Trou Chenille described their village, they usually talk about a shop and there was also at that time, an old chapel. Water was procured from natural sources and from Ilot Fourneau. The shop was considered as one of the most important vital features of the village where the inhabitants were able to procure all their basic necessities. For that matter, some informants believed that one of the reasons why they left Trou Chenille was due to the relocation of the shop to L'Embrasure (the area opposite the present football ground). On the other hand, still according to oral history, when the straw houses of Trou Chenille were destroyed by the cyclone of 1945, Mr. Hugh Cambier, owner of the lands of Le Morne, displaced the population of the village to L'Embazure so as to recover his lands back.

When the inhabitants left Trou Chenille left the area, they went to settle in various parts of the Southwest and the rest of the island. Many of them settled in the area what has today been renamed Le Morne Village where the tradition and cultural practices are still vibrant as a rich intangible cultural heritage.

Trou Chenille is now considered as one of the attributes that sustain the Outstanding Universal Value of Le Morne Cultural Landscape UNESCO World Heritage Site. Having multiple values, it bears the memory of the descendants of slaves which is still living and conveys the Authenticity of the inscribed World Heritage Property.

In order ensure wider transmission, education, sensitization and promotion of the multiple values of Trou Chenille, Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund has carried out various programs and activities in the past few years which are still ongoing. One of the major activities was the temporary reconstruction and exhibition of Trou Chenille village that was organised by the Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund in joint collaboration with the University of Mauritius in 2013 on the Le Morne village public beach in the context of the 178th Anniversary for the Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery in Mauritius.

2. Concept and location

In pursuance of its ongoing efforts to sustain the Outstanding Universal Value of Le Morne Cultural Landscape, the Ministry of Tourism and External Communication and Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund are conceptualizing the reconstruction of a permanent village that depicts how life was in the former village of Trou Chenille after the abolition of slavery. The key project components will be as follow:

- ❖ reconstruction of traditional housing which will be composed of about 8-10 huts using as far as possible the original materials to retain its authenticity;
- ❖ the basic material components that were used in the houses like maize grinding mill, *katiya*, traditional iron, wooden cupboard, table and benches, tin oven, coconut broom, mortar and pestle, petrol lamp and tin kitchen utensils;
- ❖ fireplace;
- ❖ maize and fish drying;
- ❖ small outdoor toilet bathroom;
- ❖ the medicinal plants garden;

- ❖ animal and vegetable farming corners;
- ❖ fisherman huts, tools and equipment;
- ❖ the main economic activities like charcoal making and wood bundle;
- ❖ life sculpture/figurine demonstrating daily activities; and
- ❖ any other elements that are deemed useful in the effective interpretation of the former village.

The development concept will be mainly based on information gathered through former oral history research, archaeological findings, previous exhibition organised and ongoing ideas shared by former inhabitants of Trou Chenille considered as custodians and transmitters of both tangible and intangible heritage. In addition, priority will be given to local carpenters and other skilled workers for the reconstruction of the village.

The project will be implemented on an appropriate plot of land in the former village of Trou Chenille itself, found on Pas Geometrique and Core Zone of Le Morne Cultural Landscape. The Ministry of Housing and Lands has already pegged 2 acres of State Land which was recently vested to the Ministry of Arts and Culture opposite the main access leading to the mountain. The land has already been cleared by Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund for the project and to retain the natural character of the landscape, endemic and indigenous plants will be kept and further appropriate plants will be planted. Based on the topography of the area, rustic pathways will be created and demarcated to facilitate easy flow of visitors. The archaeological value of the site has also been taken into consideration and artifacts found on site have been systematically collected through salvage archaeology. Analysis of the materials will be carried out as and when required and the materials could be used in the future as important elements in museum's exhibitions for the presentation and interpretation of Trou Chenille. Furthermore, some stone demarcations have been found on the site which are suspected to be grave sites. Such sensitive sites will be protected from development until further archaeological excavation is done.

3. Aims and objectives

The benefits that will be derived from this kind of project are multifaceted and will gear towards the following:

- ❖ to raise sensitization and awareness as well as build education on the historical and cultural significance of the former village of Trou Chenille and Le Morne Cultural Landscape as a universal symbol of resistance to slavery;
- ❖ to recall the memory of the liberated slaves and help ensure that their history is preserved and interpreted from the viewpoint of their descendants through firsthand experience;
- ❖ to strengthen the identities of the Creole population and help educate all Mauritians about the role of slavery in the nation's past;
- ❖ to contribute in restorative justice and reparations in line with the Truth and Justice Report which recommends that *“the area known as Trou Chenille be officially recognized as a site of former settlement by inhabitants, many of whom are descendants of slaves having lived there for generations (and not as squatters) and that their removal be recognized as ‘forced removal’.*¹;
- ❖ to enhance the Authenticity and Integrity of Le Morne Cultural Landscape, more specifically in reinforcing the longevity of the oral traditions associated with the maroon slaves; and
- ❖ to promote cultural tourism on Le Morne Cultural Landscape.

It is also important to note that the reconstruction project is fully in line with the Management Plan of Le Morne Cultural Landscape and has also strong economic potentials that should be tapped in the future for the host community, for conservation purposes and wider interpretation of the site. The development of a Management Plan would provide an effective framework to become a model of sustainable and inclusive development and which will be a *grande premiere* in Mauritius.

¹ Report of the Truth and Justice Commission, Vol 1, Paragraph 81, pg 28