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SEEDS OF RESISTANCE: AFRO-ASIAN SPATIALITIES IN NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: The landscape of KwaZulu-Natal endures the scars of its colonial history, with acres of land along the coast bristling with sugarcane. Over the years, the terrain has been manipulated to control and dispossess indigenous vegetation, along with certain populations. Between 1860 and 1911, laborers were recruited from farms and villages in India by the British Government to serve indentured contracts in Natal, South Africa. Indentured laborers had many skills; most notably, they were fluent in understanding the land. They used inherited knowledge to seize any opportunity for relief and success under the conditions of the colonial power. Through remarkable ingenuity, indentured laborers smuggled their own plants, methi bajee, chorahi, dhanias, and more, onto the plantations, disrupting the homogeneity of the capitalist landscape. Indentured Indians in South Africa relied on seeds and plants to gain their agency and value through the land on which they toiled. They resisted the demands of the plantation regime through covert acts, which sought to recompense injustices through various acts of defiance. These small actions catalysed a culture of festivals, market gardening, and trade in Indian fruit and vegetables. This aimed to restore a measure of autonomy, dignity, and respite within the labor institution. Plants were not only part of the logic of extractivism but were also valuable for how networks of diasporic communities transformed them. Even with minimal possessions, laborers imported immaterial epistemologies of spatial tactics that they used to establish themselves in a new place. This work explores the articulation of social narratives, cultural practices, and everyday rituals within diasporic communities ordered around plants. The research uses visual ethnography and mapping to re-script dominant architectural narratives, embracing less visible itineraries and cartographies. It observes de-colonial practices and “soft” spatial imaginaries relating to collective spatial agencies.

KEYWORDS: diasporic plants, soft architecture, spatial agency.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of KwaZulu-Natal, with its vast fields of sugarcane along the coast, bears traces of its colonial history. The land was manipulated as a way of controlling and dispossessing the indigenous bush, along with certain populations. The coastal belt, originally covered with dense, lush bushes, evergreen trees, and flowering shrubs, was stripped to provide space for the first sugarcane (Russel 1891, 30–31). European colonialism in South Africa included expeditions that aimed at charting territory and classifying its natural resources, in turn paving the way for occupation and exploitation (Orlow 2016, 21). During the British colonial regime, indigenous people were allocated a small portion of land out of the total 15,864,660 acres of land in Natal. For 265,812 people, a mere 255,904 acres was assigned in what was designated the “native locations” (Sayce 1925, 105–14). This meant that 87% of the land was white-owned, leaving the remaining 13% for African people. This land was rapidly saturated as the population increased, leaving hardly any land for additional homes and agriculture. The Natives Land Act (1913) intensified this issue, prohibiting black people from acquiring property.¹

Colonial settlers manufactured a system that legitimized the use of nature to generate massive quantities of produce, namely sugarcane. To augment indigenous labor, indentured laborers were recruited from India between 1860 and 1911 (Vahed 1999, 131). Most indentured laborers (92%) were recruited from the most important agricultural provinces in India, Uttar Pradesh and Behar (Ganges basin) (Le Roux 1971, 39). The settlers were brutal in subjugating indentures to work on plantations and were violent toward the ground, species, and ecosystems, destroying everything to make space for large-scale monocropping of sugarcane (Du Bois 2010, 12–19; Ostendorf-Rodriguez 2023, 41).

1. “DUAL MOVEMENT”: BOTANY AS RESISTANCE

Plant mobilities intertwine within historical, trans-oceanic, and global narratives of the colonial project. Raw materials, specifically cotton, indigo, sugar, and spices, have defined global capitalism through the subjugation and transplantation of people, plants, and their uses. The movement and transfer of certain plants around the world went hand in hand with the transportation of people. Indentured laborers had many skills; most notably, they were fluent in understanding the land. They used inherited knowledge to seize any opportunity for relief and success under the conditions of colonial power. Plants embodied the knowledge, values, and capital that followed the movement of indentured Indians as they made South Africa their home. This paper seeks to demonstrate the processes of botanical cultivation as a “dual movement” (Urrow 2016, 28)—not only as a means of “oppression, discrimination, and dispossession” but as a tool for “resistance, sustainability, and self-determination.” This work challenges dominant narratives of colonial botany and plant-based knowledge systems, where migration trajectories are less documented. This is done by illustrating the hidden histories and various ways in which Indian indentured laborers and their descendants used plants, ritual practices, and farming knowledge as tools of resistance and agency within the agricultural landscape of Natal. The imperial script is contested through retelling and re-imagining the journeys of indentured people. This work builds an archive for the neglected cartographies, cultural contexts, and spatial relationships by foregrounding “plants as systems of counter-knowledge, resistance and empowerment” (Ostendorf-Rodriguez 2023, 43–44). Yasmine Ostendorf-Rodriguez describes this process by quoting Annalee Davis:

[Her growth required] an unlearning and re-learning in response to the colonial curriculum which left out so much of information “alienating us from many alternative narratives” ... “It’s about trying to probe underneath the surface of the colonial project and recognize the chaos, trauma, and potential of what sits just below the surface.” (43–44)

The present research is framed within a larger project on “soft” architecture and migrant spatialities. “Soft” architecture refers to the knowledge that communities possess and the

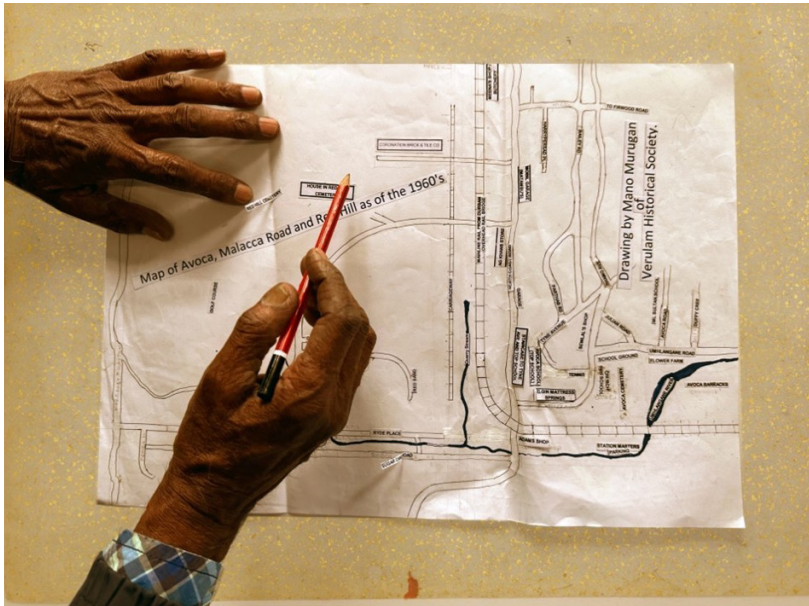


Figure 1: Map created by Mr. Mano Muragan from his childhood memories of Malacca Road (1940–1960). Source: Verulam Heritage Centre 2023.

daily habits and performances of certain social and labour relations, micro-transactions, and community organizations. On entering a “hard” place of arrival, migrants often create “soft” architectures, which facilitate connection and belonging when ritually incorporated into a new social terrain. These cultural forms sometimes exist in fixed architecture but often exist within temporal and variable experiences. The work further develops a repertoire of rituals and events ordered around plants. Indentured laborers would apply value to plants in creative ways to resist the demands of the plantation regime. Through covert acts, they sought to recompense injustices through various acts of defiance (Hassankhan 2014, 10). Laborers used “soft” architecture through everyday acts of resistance and collective organization in response to the “hard” infrastructures of discriminatory laws, residential segregation, and political exclusion. According to James. C. Scott (1992, 7), these “everyday acts of resistance” were efforts to restore a measure of autonomy, dignity, and respite within a labor institution that sought to objectify and treat them as property (Vahed 2014, 98).

In an informative interview, Mr. Mano Muragan, whose grandfather was an indentured laborer, reminisced about his childhood on sugarcane plantations. The conversation focused on a hand-drawn map he had recreated from memory. It was exhilarating for me to spot this map concealed amongst a pile of discarded documents, especially since maps of this kind are so hard to come by. Questioned about the map, Mr. Muragan described the stories and meaning behind each hand-drawn line and glued-on label, revealing the different spatial dynamics embodied in everyday life (Fig. 1).

Pointing to the map, he explained how, together with the other local boys, he would excitedly sneak onto the sugarcane plantation and forage within the thick, tall sugarcane for amakhowe, a wild African mushroom that would erupt from the ground after heavy rains. They would set out before sunrise, beating the hadedas (African ibis) to the worms, which they would attach to paperclips as bait for fishing in the small stream near their homes. There is a certain joy and fondness in the way that Mr. Muragan recalled how they outsmarted the plantation guards, with their menacing knobkerries (wooden staffs). Much to my surprise, he quickly lifted his pants to reveal the scars of being struck with a

knobkerrie at twelve years old. He remembered the pride of being able to provide for his family and cherishing their appreciation for the mushroom that would serve the whole family for dinner (Verulam Heritage Centre, interview on October 3, 2023).

These simple actions, though not large heroic gestures, are embodied in everyday life. This is important in contexts where the continuity of everyday life, or a dignified life, is under constant attack. Jumana Manna (2022) states that the act of foraging might not always appear political. Still, in the context of the law, it becomes another facet of resistance against racist laws and policing. The process of retrieving these memories and creating speculative drawings contributes to the understanding and recognition of “unregistered spaces” (Fig. 2)—that is, those spaces described by Ostendorf-Rodriguez (2023, 44) as existing “between the plot and the plantation, between wild mushrooms and the agricultural field,” where true value and important knowledge are situated.

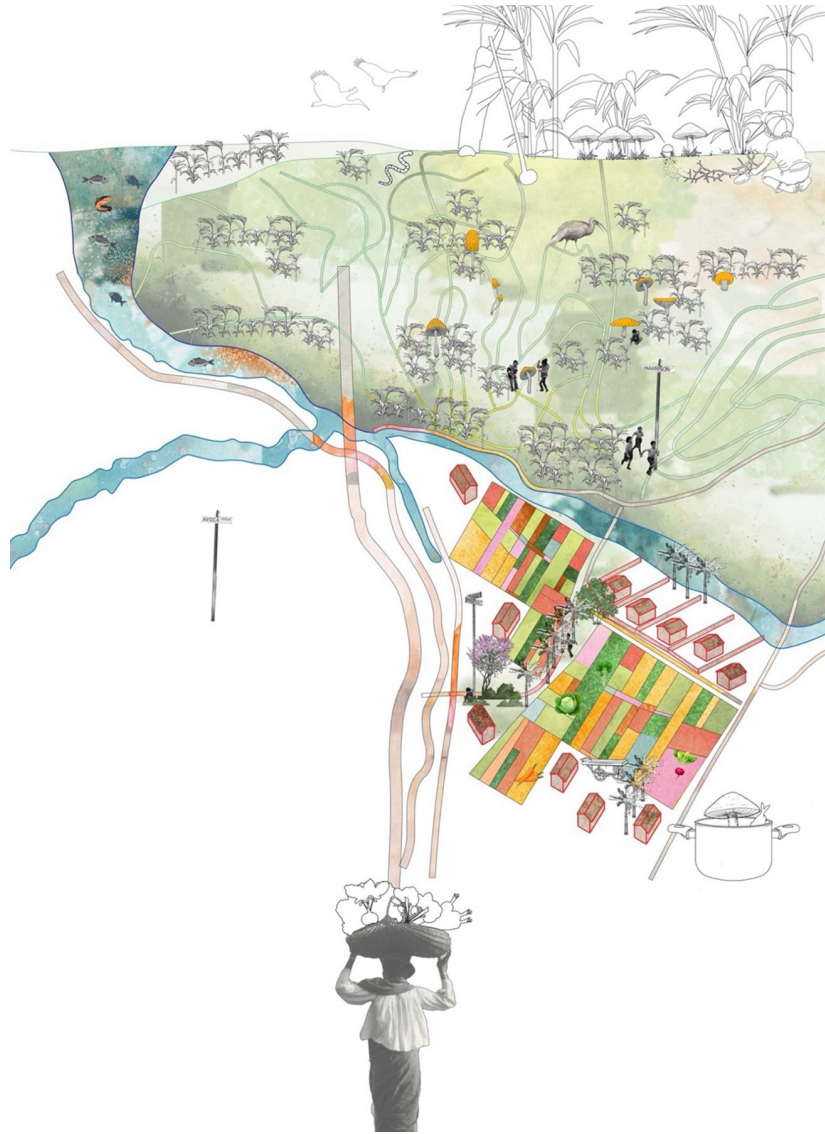


Figure 2: Speculative drawing of the historical landscape of Malacca Road in Durban North (1940–1960) and the micro-narratives of mushroom foraging, fishing, and small-scale market gardening by Indian farmers. Source: Author 2022.

2. DISRUPTING COLONIAL LANDSCAPES WITH SUBVERSIVE SEED PRACTICES

Upon departing India, each laborer was stripped of most of their material possessions, carrying with them only a pass and an identity docket called a “tin ticket.” The men were given a bundle with two dhotis (cloths), two jackets, and two caps, and the women, two saris (a draped garment) and one flannel jacket. Indentured laborers took a few possessions of their own, bits of jewelry, cloth, medicines, handkerchiefs, turbans, and pots (Desai and Vahed 2010, 54). Remarkably, they would also smuggle precious herbs and seeds in handkerchiefs to carry with them on the ship (Mayat 1961, 128) (Fig. 3). It was common for women in India to collect seeds and Indian vegetables in the folds of their saris (Mayat 2019, 108). These types of local micro-practices extend to macro-global migrations, as seeds were carried in fabrics and saris across the Indian Ocean.



Figure 3: Indentured labourers smuggled Indian seeds and herbs in cotton handkerchiefs brought from India to South Africa. Source: Mahdiyah Thokan 2022.

In South Africa, indentured laborers planted seeds brought with them from India in small apron gardens outside their sleeping quarters in the barracks on the plantations. By resettling “seeds from elsewhere” and cultivating their own gardens, laborers created relief from their scheduled vocation (Walker and Morrison 2017). The laborers had agency by cultivating their own seeds for their own uses that plantation managers did not control. The laborers exacted their authority over preserving cultural practices used for sustenance that was separate from plantation orders. The women would use the folds of their sari to hide herbs, such as chorahi, commonly known as the sugarcane herb, that they would grow secretly between the cane, later boiling it with chillies for the evening meal (Mayat 1998, 18). These practices were brought with them from India, where it was common for women on the farms to collect seeds and Indian vegetables in the folds of

their saris to take home to cook (Mayat 2019, 128). These actions were unruly, not neatly conforming to regulations, disrupting the monoculture on the plantations and creating disorder within a system that thrived on management, control, and subjugation.

In *Carribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant describes how “they sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence” (1981, 67). These invisible and small-scale interventions had large-scale ramifications that informed the dominant spatial culture in Kwa-Zulu Natal today. These disruptive actions have catalyzed an embedded culture of festivals and market gardening, as well as ethnic shops and markets overflowing with Indian fruit, vegetables, spices, and herbs; backyards and gardens lush with banana, mango, papaw, and litchi trees, and pot plants nurturing curry leaf trees, drumsticks (moringa plant), papdi (Indian bean), and chillis. All these events form a plethora of colors, textures, and aromas that are recognizable and comforting within the diasporic home. Furthermore, sensorial temporal activities, such as festivals, took over the landscape through collective actions. Other patterns, structures, and relationships are reimagined through the stories of plants. Structures arise that Anna L. Tsing (2024) describes in *Feral Atlas* as “playful, political and insistently attuned to more than human histories.”

Mackenzie Luke (2024), in her work on plantations in the context of the struggle for repatriations in Barbados, envisions the invisible presence of sowing seeds as the “architectural embodiment of the counter-plantation” (2024, 6). She describes:

A new world blossomed parallel to that of the colonial society. The counter-plantation emerged as a response to the oppressive legacy of the plantation system. The term “counter-plantation” permitted a rethinking of those who lived under the brutal regimes of slavery and emancipation. It is a site of resistance, resilience, and renewal, and its role in reclaiming land, culture, and identity comes naturally (2024, 6).

Prior to 1961, the Natal government did not see Indians as permanent inhabitants. Laws were enforced to diminish the growth of the freed Indian population by restricting further immigration of Indians to South Africa, subjecting Indians to discriminatory legislation, and encouraging repatriations of Indians to India (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 1985).² Laborers claimed patches of land by planting and cultivating rogue seeds, using the seeds subversively to undermine the oppressive regime. Planting seeds was a form of resistance, as Afro-Indians asserted their claims to territory without legal ownership and both literally and figurately planted roots on the land.

3. CONNECTING TO PRECOLONIAL INDIAN PRACTICES (LAND OWNERSHIP AND MARKET GARDENING)

Over time, these everyday individual micro-practices activated the large-scale reterritorialization of land, diversifying KwaZulu-Natal’s agricultural landscape. During the 1880s, indentured Indians whose contracts had ended used the skills they had learned over their indentured period and those they had carried with them from India for economic survival. Without capital or trade, many freed laborers turned to market gardening.³ They worked as farmers on small plots of decommissioned agricultural land that they bought or rented along the coastal belt of Natal. By 1910, Indians owned about 10,000 acres of land in Natal, while the acreage held by Indian tenant farmers and landowners increased from 11,722 acres in 1896 to 42,000 acres in 1909 (Vahed 1999, 131). The 1962 and 1963 Agricultural census shows 288 Indian farmers farming a total of 118,276 acres along the Tugela River in the north and the Umgheni River along the southern boundary of Natal (Fig. 4) (Le Roux 1971, 1). The role of Indians changed from unskilled field laborers to agricultural entrepreneurs and skilled or semi-skilled workers in the sugarcane industry. Through their tireless work, Indian farmers proved to be “useful citizens” in the eyes of white landowners by paying their taxes, obeying the law, contributing rental income, and working their land (Vahed 1999, 131).

Driving through the original family farms on Armstrong Hill with Mr. Deena Govender, I learnt that his late father, Mr. Perumal Govender, worked on a wattle farm in this area with many other Indian indentured laborers (Fig. 5). Once his contract had ended, he

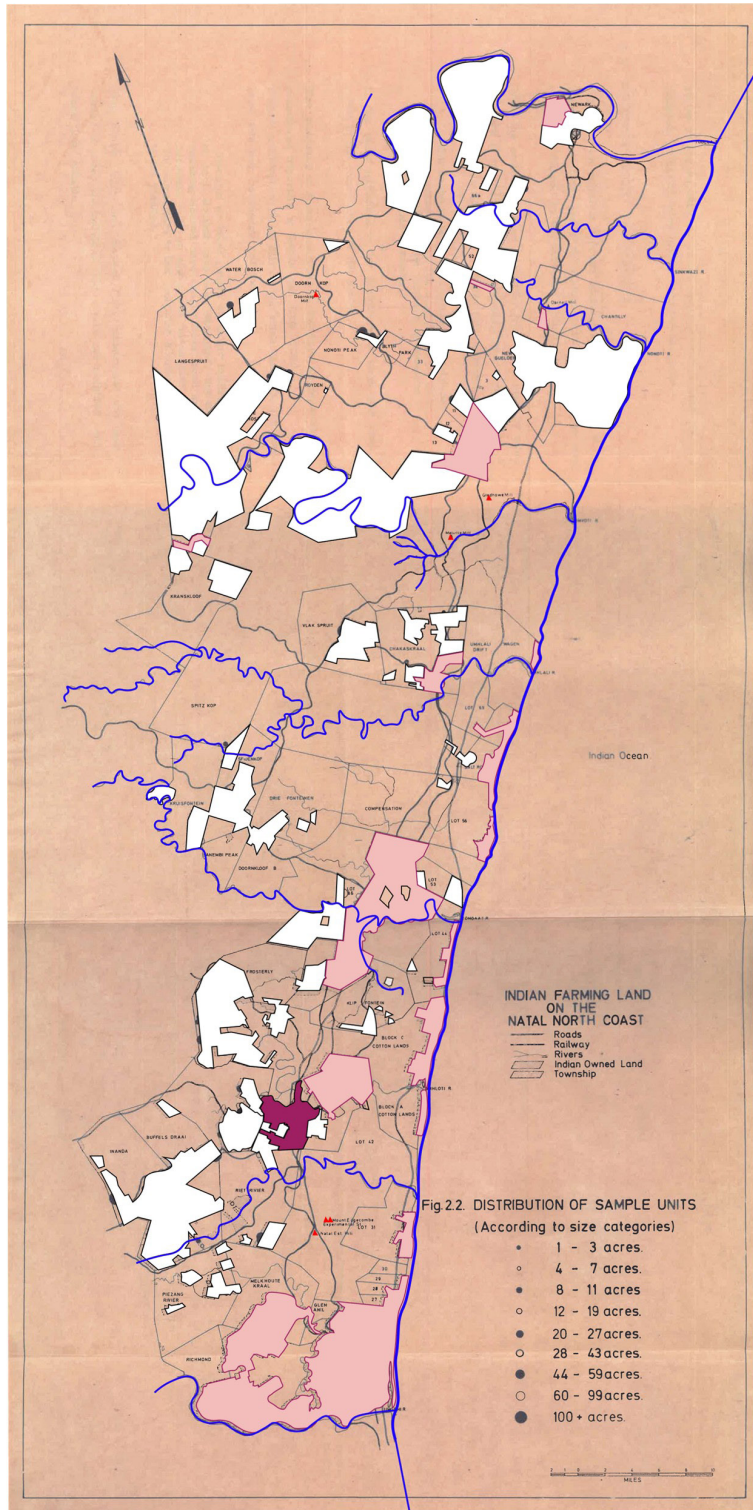


Figure 4: Map showing Indian farmland (white) and Indian townships (pink) on the North Coast of Natal in 1971. The Umgenhi River forms the southern boundary of the map. Source: Le Roux 1971.



Figure 5: Drawing of the Govender farm on Armstrong Hill based on a site visit and interview with Mr. Deena Govender. It shows the relationship of the family homesteads with different agricultural holdings. Source: Author 2023.



Figure 6: Dalita sells methi bhajee at the Bangladesh Market in Chatsworth, Durban. Source: Author 2023.

bought a small pocket of land on the decommissioned wattle plantation. Over time, each of his brothers bought about 10–15 acres of land. Indians would occupy the plantation houses of the previous white owners or build make-shift wattle and daub houses. The Govender family were farmers in India before they came to South Africa and used their knowledge of paddy field farming to grow rice. They cultivated Indian fruit and vegetables on a small plot of land behind their family home. Through market gardening, Indians introduced the diversification of crops, moving away from sugarcane toward more lucrative crops to increase income. Today, the Govenders grow sugarcane, as well as rice, bananas, marrow, gem squash, calabash, brinjal, cabbage, and other vegetables. Recently, they started growing flowers, including marigolds, which are popular in Hindu customs.

In the early to mid-1900s, Indians had the monopoly of market gardening, delivering their produce to the enclosed Indian market and selling on the streets of the Squatters' Market. Farmers squatted cross-legged next to their produce, hence the name "Squatters' Market" (Rosenburg 2019, 113). Farmers arrived between 6 p.m. and 2 a.m. to reserve a spot on the street. The street was lined with horse-drawn spring carts, which farmers would use to transport their produce. Mr. Muragan recalls travelling by horse-cart to the market, his father carrying two baskets, one for himself and one for his wife. His wife would rest the straw basket on her head, and his father would balance two baskets on a bamboo stick that he carried over his shoulders. Farmers and their families spent the night on the street, sleeping in or under their carts (Vahed 1999). The conditions of the market, even though extremely difficult, gave the farmers some measure of autonomy in governing the thoroughfare. This proved a threat to authorities, resulting in the market becoming more formalized and regulated to serve the interests of traders, white councilors, and town planners. Any attempts by Indians to control the system were denied. Although the state controlled the market under strict regulations, it provided farmers with a degree of permanence and stability (Vahed 1999, 153).

The legacy of Indian market gardening is still visible in Indian markets, such as the Durban Bulk Market, Clairwood Market, Bangladesh Market, Victoria Street Market, and chain stores. Sixty-two-year-old Dalita has been selling methi bhajee (fenugreek) at the Bangladesh Market in Chatsworth for over thirty years (Fig. 6). She cheerfully converses with her regular customers as she wraps bunches of bhajee in folded sheets

of newspaper. Next to her stall, there are rows of tables with Indian traders selling achar (pickle), mint, thyme, turnip, dhania (coriander), chillies, beetroot, and onion, which they grow on farms along the coastal belt of KwaZulu-Natal, from Verulam to Umzinto.

Today, Indians grow Indian fruit and vegetables in their gardens and backyards. Many city-dwellers grow limri (curry leaf tree), drumsticks (moringa plant), papdi (lentil or Indian bean), and many more in pots that are positioned on their kitchen windowsill and verandas or in their gardens.

4. KUTUM (COLLECTIVE), GANDHI, AND “EASTERN” FARMING CULTURE

Le Roux (1971, 74-80) writes that, when the Indians came to Natal, they brought with them an “eastern” culture of agriculture very different to Western and Bantu cultures. He distinguishes between modern and traditional, or “eastern,” agricultural practices. The latter is closely tied to social and community structures. Respect for ancestors instilled values of a close-knit community with regular social contact and strong group solidarity.

In the early 1900s, Mahatma Gandhi adopted this ethos by establishing an experimental farm that advocated communal living. Gandhi resisted modern materialistic and technological advancement. He enforced codes of “satyagraha,” or passive resistance, on the farm, which included interfaith harmony, environmental protection, conservation, and social and economic justice. The Phoenix Settlement comprised one hundred acres of land in Inanda, purchased by Gandhi in 1904. Gandhi provided two acres of land for each family to develop. He believed that communities like Phoenix, which advocated communal living, would form a sound basis for the struggle against social injustice. The farm was described as a lively and bustling community, a “true ‘kutum’” (collective). Everybody in the settlement had to participate in communal activities, such as the daily prayers and singing of hymns, that Gandhi had instituted (Mark 1993, 40–83).

5. UNITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION: THE MUHARRAM FESTIVAL

The unity created by religion was extremely valuable amongst indentured laborers, as it was very difficult for collective action due to armed violence by settlers and restrictions placed on their movement. There were also further challenges due to communication and language barriers among laborers caused by differences of caste, religion, and ethnicity (Hassankhan 2014, 100). One of the ways that indentured laborers created a ritual identity that extended beyond religion and language was through the Muharram festival (Fig. 6). The festival was one of the few ways that indentured Indians resisted their exploitation, close supervision, and systematic discipline. The festival provided laborers with an opportunity to express local community identity, drawing them together and fostering “Indianness” where there were few other opportunities to do so. Muharram thus allowed a heterogeneous group of people to constitute a collectivity (Vahed 2002, 131).

Laborers were not allowed or needed permission to leave their plantations. However, the Muharram festival permitted laborers from different plantations to come together to celebrate. It was the first indentured event to be celebrated in Durban (Hassankhan 2014, 100). Religion and culture played a role in the various strategies of resistance; laborers performed songs, danced, played the drums, beat sticks, and celebrated through the streets of Durban. They would carry with them a *tazzia*, a multi-level wooden and bamboo structure covered in muslin decorated with colored emblematic banners and paper. The procession marched through the neighborhoods towards the Umgeni River, where the *tazzias* were immersed in water (Vahed 2005).

These activities demonstrate how joyfulness can be a subversive attack on the order of the plantation regime. They create another utopian world that ridicules existing societal doctrines and challenges authority with “openness and joyous anarchy.” The soft architecture of joyous actions, such as drumming and dancing, was important in disrupting the order envisioned by authorities. It challenged the plantation’s sonic order, associated with commands of work and cries of suffering. The ritual’s emancipatory power can be

seen as it embraces what is perceived as a nuisance to European officials, awakening otherness. Drumming was political, and it challenged the natural order envisioned by the indentured system. The soundscape of the festival angered the plantation owners, who described it as “strange,” “weird,” and “fearsome,” and the festivalgoers as “naked fanatics” in the newspapers (Vahed 2002, 82). This is indicative of the prejudices created and harbored against Indians in Natal. They were further angered by the colorful waste that was cast across the river and land. Petitions by Europeans were brought forward to stop “this nuisance of tom-tomming.” However, Indians persistently demanded the right to observe Muharram, fighting for their ephemeral spatial rights. Police action failed to eradicate this practice (Vahed 2014, 98).

The Muharram festival can be seen as an expression of power by the powerless masses. Religious songs were reinterpreted as protest songs against oppression. Even though the Muharram festival was relevant for a handful of Shia laborers, the healing power and colorful splendor appealed to people from all backgrounds, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim (Vahed 2014, 98). Muharram rituals provided a break from the routine and grind of plantation life, what Falassi (1987) refers to as a “time out of time.” The festival helped release stresses associated with the regimented labor arrangement (Vahed 2002, 77–93). Despite the fragmented nature of the community’s right to public spaces, Muharram was the only opportunity for laborers to meet and build a collective spirit. The festival promoted cohesion and cooperation, strengthening the individual and community links. It was important to incorporate a diverse collection of people into a collectivity. The re-enactment of the festival into drawing allows the temporal form of appropriation and performance to be documented and mapped as part of the site’s history. The drawing becomes a performance, making the ephemerality of the event tangible through color and form.

6. METHI AND MARIGOLDS IN VERNACULAR PRACTICES

More recently, alternative cultural patterns of communal living can be seen on the P.K. Govender farm through the clustering of homesteads across the land. The land is a collective space for children to play and older people to go for walks and meet friends. Family and friends gather for prayer and rituals around large mounds made from earth and draped with fabric and flowers. These rituals are enacted to ask for permission to use the land and to request fertile soils and good rain for the growth of vegetables. During Diwali, the Hindu religious festival of lights, family and friends gather in the yard of the main family home, launching fireworks while people dance to Indian music. The staging of cultural symbols are expressions of togetherness, solidarity, and stewardship that exist within the landscape. Unlike previous colonial methods, communities incorporate small-scale farming and self-governance to foster sustainable farming. The counter-plantation model ensures food security and environmental sustainability while nurturing a sense of community and cultural heritage.

The impact of these rituals is visible within the agricultural landscape itself. Afro-Indians began to diversify the plantation’s monoculture with fruits and vegetables catering to African and Indian vernacular traditions. Recently, the Govenders started to grow flowers, including marigolds, which are popular in Hindu customs. These brightly colored orange and yellow flowers assert themselves in space, as they are used in homes across India and its diaspora. Most significantly, the calabash is used in South Africa for utensils or containers to store and transport water and food. It is also used for drums, lutes, and sitars in both African and Indian musical traditions. Fruits and flowers embody the oral tradition of multiple cultures. Like material objects inherited from generation to generation, these plants are the heirlooms of indigenous and indentured forefathers, the fruits of seeds carried from other places.

African and Afro-Indian cultures collaborate through shared values and customs associated with plants. This can be rationalized by the proximity of Indian and African land, which has led to the exchange of information between the groups. Many local Zulu



Figure 6: Indented laborers come together from different plantations for the Muharram festival, proceeding towards the Umgeni River. They beat drums and carry flags and tazzias, which they sink in the river water. Source: Author 2023.

communities were displaced from their land by the expansion of sugarcane plantations. They were forced to move inland to where Indian indentured laborers worked on plantations. Additionally, after the Group Areas Act, Indian and African townships were located next to each other.⁴ The proximity led to shared histories and the meeting of cultures, where languages, land, trade, and labor were exchanged and new rituals and foods were born out of common conjectures and necessities. The most well-known example is the use of maize, which Africans have been growing since pre-colonial times and which Afro-Indians use as a rice substitute when they can't afford other foods. This is also evident in the story of patha. "Patha" is a small snack made from large leaves stuffed with local vegetables and Indian spices. It shares its history with both Zulu food lineages and Indian indentured food habits. Patha was popular among indentured laborers who replaced the leaf of the Asian taro with the madumbi leaf. Madumbi grows abundantly in South Africa and is also common in Zulus meals.

7. EVOLVING CHARACTER OF THE LAND

When driving with Mr. Deena Govender, Louis's cousin, through the P.K. Govender farm, he pointed toward the farm boundary, which is defined by natural forest, tribal land to the one side and the neighboring white-owned farmland to the other. A clear boundary can be seen through the change in vegetation because of the decreased fertility of the earth where the tribal land is located and the difference in settlement patterns. Over time, Indian farmers bought the property at the edge of the tribal land, creating a buffer between tribal land and white-owned farmland. He indicated the boundaries of different farms and who they belonged to, elaborating on the politics and personal histories between the Govender family and the neighboring farmers. As described earlier, the allocated tribal land was insufficient for the growing African population, which was exacerbated by Africans' inability to purchase additional property. The plantation served as the fundamental socioeconomic unit within the colonial countryside, sustaining inequalities and leaving behind a legacy of apartheid. Consequently, tribal leaders have started allocating and unofficially "selling" Afro-Indian-owned agricultural land, extending the tribal land. Mr. Govender explains the transformation of agricultural land, with new private homes built around the existing Indian-owned homes. Due to the contentious nature and racialized tensions of the agricultural landscape in Kwa-Zulu Natal, there has been a restructuring of labor systems by the new generation of Afro-Indians (fourth and fifth generations) who are moving away from their land as it is losing its agricultural and resale value. For large-scale Afro-Indian farmers such as the Govenders, this has meant taking over the management of white farms, where the owners have emigrated or are no longer interested in farming, and belonging to co-operatives with tribal leaders and black farmers to share farming knowledge and access agricultural land. This is reciprocated, as it gives Afro-Indians the opportunity to receive government funding and tenders, which usually prioritize projects led by black Africans.⁵

8. CONCLUSION

There are fundamental strategic positions that can be learnt from those adopted by indentured laborers in response to systems of exploitation, such as slavery, indenture, racism, and capitalism. James C. Scott (1992, 7) describes these relations as "public" and "hidden" transcripts. The ability of the "powerless" or subordinate classes to express implicit understandings and informal networks represents a form of individual self-help against oppressive power structures. These ordinary tactics are subtle weapons for the powerless and were camouflaged in everyday routines. Protest songs and festivals are another form of "hidden" transcript. While seemingly mundane and individualistic, these acts validated workers' integrity and reputation and frustrated employers (Scott 1992, 7). Tinker writes that, in resisting, the indentured mostly thought "in terms of immediate objectives" (Tinker 1974, 226). However, these practices have had long-term impacts, as seen by the legacy of Afro-Indian farming today.

This work experiments with understanding how forms of activism construct an environment using “soft” materials, creating solidarities and intentional social acts to form a decolonial, Afro-Asian type of place-making. By taking cues from seed smugglers, mushroom foragers, and processional or drumming landscapes, we can understand spatial identities differently, especially when access to land is not secure.

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ENDNOTES

1 The Native Land Act was implemented on June 19, 1913, with the purpose of limiting African land ownership to 7% and, subsequently, 13% through the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act of South Africa. The Act restricted black people from buying or occupying land except as employees of a white master. Once the law was passed, the apartheid government began the mass relocation of black people to poor homelands and poorly planned and serviced townships. No longer able to provide for themselves and their families, people were forced to look for work far away from their homes. This marked the beginning of the socio-economic challenges that the country is still facing today, such as landlessness, poverty, and inequality. The Land Act was finally repealed when The Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act, 1991 (Act No. 108 of 1991) came into force on June 30, 1991 (South African Government n.d.).

2 Act 17 of 1895 imposed a £3 tax on ex-indentured Indians who failed to re-indenture or return to India after the completion of their labor contracts. The Immigration Restriction Act (Natal) in 1897, and subsequent amendments in 1900, 1903, and 1906, imposed an educational, health, age, and means test on Indians, other than indentured workers, seeking admission to the country. This act stopped all further immigration of free Indians into the colony.

3 The original indenture period was five years, after which it could be renewed for another five years with the same employer or could be terminated, and a new employer found. At the end of ten years immigrants were to be provided with a free passage to India or they could remain in Natal as “free” Indians.

4 The Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950) and its numerous amendments divided the South African population into racial groups to segregate them into distinct residential areas.

5 Tenders from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development for agriculture, forestry, and fishery projects are awarded through the affirmative action policy, which prioritizes Africans, women, and people with disabilities per the Affirmative Action in the Public Service General Notice 564 of 1998.

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