



2009 CONFERENCE

IDENTIFYING THE PERSON: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Abstract

Cat and Mouse Games:

The State, Indians in the Cape and the Permit System, 1906-1920s

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The Cape Colony with its early history of slavery and subjection of the Khoisan population has the distinguished record amongst the South African colonies of some of the earliest controls over the mobility over its subjects. It is less known in the literature that in the early years of the twentieth century it devised means of controlling the mobility of Indians in the Cape across its land borders and across the ocean. In 1906, Indians within the Cape, wishing to leave for a trip to India or elsewhere were required to secure a permit if they wished to regain entry to the Cape. The permit carried a photograph of the traveller, a description of physical identity and provided for fingerprints. The holder on return had to satisfy the Immigration Officer of the validity of his/her identity. This paper analyses the nature of this particular document of identity and what the state attempted to achieve with it. In particular, following on Jane Caplan's and John Torpey's suggestion that identity documents tend to draw the state and its populace into cat and mouse games, this paper provides an insight into how some Indians subverted the system and with what efficacy. It particularly points to fingerprinting as the state's ultimate trump card.

The Documentation of Individual Identity:

Historical and Comparative Perspectives since 1500

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