The Roots of Mauritian Multi-Culturalism[1]
and the Birth of a New Social Contract:
Being *"Autochtone"*, Being Creole*

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Resumé

La société insulaire de l'île Maurice a connu différentes phases de peuplements successifs, qui n'ont pas débouché sur la production de mythes fondateurs de l'origine de la société et du pouvoir. C'est pourquoi, *"l'autochtonie"* sera considérée comme relevant plus des rapports externes, de la culture politique mauricienne, correspondant au modèle libéral de colonisation anglaise que d'une structuration interne fondatrice d'un modèle sociétal univoque. En interrogeant le modèle ethnique de culture politique et la manière dont il s'est imposé à l'ensemble des rapports sociaux à travers le serment d'allégeance à la colonie britannique et l'engagisme, on remarquera qu'il fut bâti sur un processus général de négation de la figure de l'étranger dans les rapports internes. C'est ainsi que le modèle inachevé d'intégration de la société créole qui présidait à l'ancien mode d'exploitation esclavagiste a été englobé dans le processus d'ethnicisation. Celui-ci a transformé tout débat d'identité en une manière particulière d'instruire la séparation des groupes sociaux, d'intérioriser les différences économiques et sociales pour se légitimer dans l'espace des différences religieuses sous-jacentes aux grandes civilisations, hindoues, chinoises, musulmanes et chrétiennes. L'univers de l'ethnicité, celui de la créolité, seront vus comme deux manières particulières de dénier aux différences économiques et au métissage leur importance dans la transformation de la société mauricienne.

Introduction

The concept of *"autochtonie"* is seldom mentioned to characterise the birth of an island society right from its earliest stages in terms of the salient features of

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the development of merchant capitalism with the creation of the East India Companies, which was transformed into financial and industrial capitalism under the Empires of the British and French colonialism. In common parlance the terms "Creolity", "Creole islands", or "Creole world" are more commonly used to designate these *settlement colonies* perched in the southern hemisphere. After serving as bridgeheads and outposts for the triangular trade, these colonies built up an autonomous existence in the gaps and on the edges of colonial influence. This article will attempt to present the foundations of Mauritian multiculturalism, based on an analytical reflection of the nature of the Creole identity, with respect to *"autochtonie"* as a historical category which emerged during the transition period between the abolition of slavery and the development of a contractual system of exploitation of the labour force under the sugar cane plantation with the introduction of a huge number of Indian indentured labourers from India.

By studying the long colonial history of Mauritius, I shall demonstrate how the *"malaise créole"*, which is regularly mentioned in the media, especially in the Press, stems from issues relating to both class and ethnicity. This article will attempt a historic and anthropological explanation for the most significant social change which has taken place within the society of modern Mauritius. This change is present in the shifting meanings of the term "Creole" and in the recent trend, (1983 census), towards an ethnic differentiation based on the principal religious categories: Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim. What is then the significance of this two-fold movement which simultaneously distances and shifts the meaning of creolity and ethnicity?

The Creole and ethnic issue in present day Mauritius

The Creole and ethnic issues are more pronounced these days in Mauritius than ever. The last decade has witnessed a considerable social and economic change with the island's entry into the world economy restructuring (Chazan-Gillig & Widmer, 2001)[2]. In this international context, the constant increase of social inequalities is inevitable. I will aim at two major events in order to highlight the political and economic implications of the racial and ethnic differences in modern Mauritian society. The first event hit the headlines in 1999. The second is a major political event which occurred during the last General Elections in 2000, bringing to power a new government alliance based on the principle of alternating the position of Prime Ministership between the

two nationally elected leaders of MSM and MMM[3]. Both these events indicate that there is a growing but genuine realisation that constitutional legitimacy needs to be adapted to social legitimacy to a greater extent. The "Kaya affair" has indeed revealed the contradictions of a political system founded on the institutional duality of the white, or so-called "General Population". The latter cannot refer to its diverse origins, contrary to the Asiatic population which is characterised by differences of origin and culture that may be proclaimed. This legal inequality has resulted in a feeling of unrest or discontent among a large proportion of the population: the so-called *"malaise créole"*. This problem is a legacy of the British colonial institutions which forged the social legality of the "General Population" census category. It is defined as such because it differentiated the whites, and populations assimilated to the white population category on the basis of the Catholic religion, from other migrants distinguishable by origin, language and religion. Since 1983, following the outbreak of the ethnic conflict, just after Independence, it is the great religions (Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist) which have been used to determine ethnic and cultural differences. Languages and origins have been maintained as categories which are available in certain circumstances in order to justify the ethnic legitimacy, whilst the unchanged category of "General Population" offers no possibility for social action other than a common Catholic religion which has been judged too general to be considered as important at the level of social distinctions. The so-called *"malaise créole"* arises from the specific condition of the assimilated white population who feels that there is no available institution to represent their genuine differences. Faced with this institutional void, Creoles today find themselves in a situation of social exclusion in the Mauritian society. They feel indeed sometimes referred to as *"nation"*[4] (lowly people) which is indicative of the fundamental discrimination against the poor black Creoles, stigmatised by the past of their ex-slaves ancestors who were subsequently emancipated or considered as such in the colony. It is far from the creolity concept of the 19th century, which designated all those born in the colony, without exception, including the second generation Indians. In these circumstances the *"malaise créole"* stems from the constant contradiction between the constitutional legality and the social legitimacy which prevents *"métissage"* being accepted as a social value equal to those which are used to forge the different communities present on the island.

In view of these circumstances, the new principle of governmental change is most welcome as it should, in keeping with the expressed wishes of the electorate, allow Paul Bérenger, a member of the "General Population"

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category, to become Prime Minister after Sir Anerood Jugnauth who represents the Hindu community. Bérenger will become the first non-Hindu Prime Minister after Independence, which will lead to a weakening of the ethnic and racial barriers, and for a better social justice. One can anticipate a better adjustment of the constitutional system with the socio-political scenario, thereby to assist to eschew the same situation or, in other forms, similar to that in the "Kaya affair". The way in which the "Kaya affair" gave rise to a judicial inquiry into the consequences leading to the death of the singer Kaya whilst in police custody and how the affair became a rallying cause for Mauritian youth. The whole issue, and its repercussions, may be considered to represent the central national issue: a call for greater reconciliation.

Beyond the acts of vandalism, the expression of racial, class and ethnic inequalities, the rioting linked to the "Kaya affair", provided a form of liberation, especially for the youth, from the social constraints maintaining the racial and ethnic barriers in place. The events in question, which spread from the deprived suburbs of Port-Louis, Rose-Hill and Quatre-Bornes, were more in the nature of a general liberation, almost a warlike sport with defined rules rather than race riots. The following day, the stolen objects were returned to the streets which began to resemble a rubbish dump. Carl de Souza's[5] novel *"Les jours Kaya"* recreated scenes from these events in the form of a parable. He has not used any ethnic, racial or other terms to describe the events. De Souza has removed the historical events by describing the wanderings of an elder Hindu sister, sent out by her mother to look for her little brother Ram. The responsibility of a sister for her little brother refers to the author's position during those events: he observed the events from his position as a Director of an educational institution in Rose-Hill where these acts of violence took place. He had to shoulder the responsibility of the safety of all the students whom he had to send back home as there were still buses running. The ethnic, class, gender and sibling differences, as well as the sexual taboos, evoked through the wanderings of the young girl through the town, are in fact built on a role inversion of the real events. The main character of the novel is a young Hindu girl and not a young mixed blood Creole-Hindu like Kaya. Similarly, the author hails from the "General Population", neither from the same generation, nor from the same gender. The hero of the novel, the author, and the involuntary participant, Kaya, do not share the same social background. From their different positions and through the secondary characters involved, a certain reality of the actual events of the social upheaval becomes clear, thus describing the social changes. The choice of a mythological presentation of the events corresponds to the profoundly symbolic characteristics of the

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problem of creolity today. Unwillingly, the singer Kaya has become the emblematic figure for a movement towards a creolity without frontiers – free of class, caste, ethnic or gender distinctions. It is evident that the singer Kaya represents the inversion of the colonial founding myth of the island, since the events surrounding his death gave his short life new meaning. He opposed communalism in any kind, and lived a marginal lifestyle, away from any rigidly established social norms. His personal choice was the life of a fundamental pacifist on the margins of society. This is the naked reality that is recognised by the youngsters of today who listen to his music, his songs and their themes. The singer had a particular fate (which would have surprised even Kaya himself had he been conscious about it) which transcended the racial and cultural borders, through the events involved, thus revealing the profound change in the attitudes of the younger generation as regards ethnic and racial boundaries. His posthumous fame is due to the intersection of the tragic scenario produced in the context of a profound social change in the society and the initial signs of which had already been witnessed on previous occasions at the level of social and political affairs. There is no denial to the fact that the racial and ethnic barriers are highly ambiguous and that it is of paramount importance to distinguish the form from the content. The use of the terms "race" and "ethnic" have almost become a social taboo, and their usage to describe such events prevent any further in-depth study of the profound social transformations at work.

The issue that has been legally and politically dealt with, that is the "national reconciliation" formula mentioned earlier, has become the central theme for the building up of a new social and political order. The "Matadin report", resulting from an enquiry of a judicial commission into the "Kaya affair", has made further debate possible.[6] The social critical approach made by Carl de Souza in his mythological novel, taking the "Kaya affair" as its backdrop, could also be considered as a glimpse in the future towards the making of a Mauritian nation. This future is intrinsically linked to the debate on the necessity for national reconciliation[7] by widening that debate to all the communities living on the island, since they are all concerned and indirectly committed to recognising the collective wrong and injustice of slavery in Mauritius. This reconciliation has been partially expressed by the Catholic Church on the occasion of the commemoration of the bi-centenary of the abolition of the slavery system. Yet is this sufficient to remove inequalities based on racial, colour or ethnic differences? Certainly not, historically speaking the wrongs in question were not only due to the white population[8]. Indeed, the intermediaries involved in the slavery system were numerous:

Indians, Africans, even Creoles, played a role in the slave trade or benefited from it[9]. This feeling of shared blame is therefore a socially ambiguous interpretation, similar in nature to the conclusion that the "Kaya affair" was a conflict revealing the "Creole crisis" in terms of the predominantly racial and ethnic explanation generally reported in the press.

The debate on the establishing of a new social order, distinct from that which developed after the abolition of slavery and the development of the "coolie trade", is far from over. It is taking on new significance in the context of a globalisation which is spreading the model of multicultural societies world-wide. Informed both by the earlier struggles against slavery, such as Victor Schoelcher's personal struggle, and the more recent analyses such as Hugh Tinker's, which equate the coolie-trade with slavery, this debate addresses the issue in the context of the multiplicity of conflicts having ethnic dimensions. To analyse such conflicts it is more appropriate to integrate the historical fact of these settlement colonies, and take into consideration the simultaneously political and economic nature of racial and ethnic differences which permeate the society. The struggles of the past are not the same as those of today, but they are instructive in helping to understand the present. Thus, the abolition of slavery at the very moment when Mauritius became a British colony, gives clues as to the dominant ethnic functioning of Modern Mauritius. In this perspective the so-called *"malaise créole"* must be viewed and analysed as stemming from an institutionalised deficit of certain social minorities in the public sector of constitutional law. *"Les jours Kaya"* has laid emphasis on this contradiction.

In order to interpret this contradiction of history, one should look in the *"rétroviseur"* of the past as far back as the 1830s when the abolition of slavery took place. For over a century, until 1930, with the birth of the Mauritius Labour Party, the political stakes of racial and ethnic differentiations were less marked than what they became later after the process of increasing awareness which led to Independence. I shall consider the historical, legal and political problems of the *"malaise créole"* which became obvious at a time when the island was moving towards a greater national harmonisation, at a moment in its history when it is faced with globalisation and post-modernism.

If liberal thinking was at the origin of the setting up of the British colony and also inspired the creation of the private sector of the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in 1970, it is currently being called into question since the Government

is no longer exclusively focussed on social affairs. It is the very concept of state intervention in the economy which is changing. In this context it is suggested that a revision may be required of the constitutive categories of ethnicity and creolity in present day Mauritian society. This global change in strategy becomes particularly evident in the signing of a contract between the state and the private groups of the "consortium" who are buying out the shares of the Illovo South Africa company. The state may be seen to intervene in several ways. Indirectly through "the regulating institutions which mediate financial deals between private operators and some state companies" (L'Express 21/02/2001). Direct state intervention is also clear in the purchase of agricultural land which will be used for the "cybercity" and "intelligence corridor" project that will be located at Réduit: The investment in the new Information Technology sector and related areas of activity will be developed in a mixed economy capitalist system. The state is showing the way by moving ahead of more cautious private operators. We have now entered in the second phase of the development of the EPZ, where there will be an increased competition with more developed countries. In order to succeed, this new political and economic strategy must be accompanied by a new social contract less influenced by racial and ethnic community differences. This is the reason why the newly emerging social relationships, as revealed in the "Kaya affair", may lead us to a rethinking of the historical roots of Mauritian multiculturalism. This return to a somewhat remote past may help to place the emergence of a new society into its modern day context.

The Making of Multi-ethnic Society

The emergence of a liberal colonisation model

The history of the birth of an island society and settlement colony, cannot be easily re-visited, because it is written "in a form of time where the question of power cannot be dissociated from the question of bondage, emancipation, and manumission." (Michel Foucault,1997)[10] The assimilation process on which is based the first forms of differentiation by colour (whites, mulattos, and blacks) is still ingrained in the contemporary Mauritian society. This process was founded upon a racial duality[11] corresponding to a vision of the world which developed in France and throughout Europe towards the end of the 17th and 18th centuries. It became an ethnic reality in the context of British colonial rule. Thus the multi-racial society[12] (Tony Arno & Claude Orian,1986)

which was originally a French colony known as "île de France", became a multi-ethnic society[13] (Thomas Eriksen) when "Mauritius" was colonised by the British. To explain this transition to a model of ethnic integration under British administration we must refer to the legal and administrative legacy the British rulers inherited from France. The new British administrators built on and perfected this administrative system after the Treaty of Paris[14]. As a result, pre-existing laws, institutions, languages, and religions were maintained in Mauritius. These measures may be said to define the British style of governing the colony from the very beginning. The sovereignty of the Crown was founded upon a system of checks and balances required to equalise social tensions, rather than on any pre-established consensus. Power was continuously being redefined and its purpose was to implement the appropriate measures and to revise existing legislation to maintain social tension at a manageable level. This desire for stability can be observed in the statistical record where the names of the categories which identified the groups of people living in Mauritius were continually being changed[15]. (A.J. Christopher, 1992; I. Widmer, 1999; S. Chazan-Gillig & I. Widmer, 2001). Behind the statistical changes which took place since 1830 to-date, one can observe the existence of a binary representation of society: the "General Population" is not defined in terms of its ethnic identity, as opposed to the other groups whose geographic origins are clearly defined and who can indeed be identified as pertaining to different religious and linguistic subgroups. This means of structuring the main social differentiation is simply the formulation of a general symbolic representation system which can be traced to the "oath of allegiance" which was the founding gesture of the British colony. The purpose of this vow was to signify that the form of Government chosen was supposed to establish a system of checks and balances in the relationship between new immigrants, hired as "coolies" on the sugar cane plantations, and former slaves (free men of colour who were already established in the colony). Therefore the society which emerged may be said to have been based on the general contractualisation of the social bond, including that with the white planters who were formerly the colonists. Out of this initial negotiation which linked individually the French colonists with the British arose a state sovereignty, as a repository for, and guarantor of, balanced social relationship on which is based its legitimacy. This symbolic act characterises a particular mode of colonisation which was simply an extension of the development of a form of merchant capitalism which had partly originated from the implementation of the "global" vision of La Bourdonnais[16] (S. Chazan-Gillig,1998). This was markedly different from

the state-centered concepts of Dupleix who was the French Governor of the East India Company in India during the same period. La Bourdonnais's plans differed from prevailing French colonial ideology in that they sought to enhance the associative values of commerce, trade, mobility, and exchange rather than searching for the enhancement and development of local resources. Mauritius Island became a rising star in the merchant capitalism galaxy forming as a result of the industrial capitalism on the rise in Europe[17]. In the early years of the 19th century Britain's industrialisation was more advanced than that of France. Thus the trade of labour and goods was the chief aim of the British colonial rationale. The development of the sugar industry served two purposes: firstly, to structure the labour market in the British colonies, and secondly to expand the British sugar market. Indeed, this dual political and economic context was the background to the abolition of slavery. As the legitimate heir to French rule, Britain perfected and moralised the legal system, while rationalising employment and recruitment of labour forces. This process culminated in the structuralisation of the British Commonwealth market. Slavery, which was seen as a morally reprehensible form of colonial exploitation, was abolished when it became obsolete and ineffective because it collided with recurring labour problems on the plantations: these problems were exacerbated by the low productivity of the labourers. Plantation society and its differentiations based on colour and racial divisions, as well as a land ownership based system of social belonging, (which was the product of the French system of colonial rule), were engulfed in a general process of social and economic restructuration based on ethnic differences. The contractual policy of the British rule led the existing groups to mutually exclude each other, thus avoiding the constitution of any hierarchically incorporated groups. The closing of familial ethnic groups coalesced and clustered in the absence of the figure of the foreigner in domestic relations. In this context the "coolie trade", and indentured labour, which were instruments of the colonial Government, should be analysed simultaneously in terms of political and economic culture. The Mauritian "autochtonie", which differed from national belonging and lacked a strict territorial reference, transformed any debate about identity dealing with the political and ethnic issues. Racial differences, however, in which economic differences were a factor, were minimised, as class barriers are generally found in a liberal society. How did migrants turn their initial position of weakness into a position of strength, and how did geographical dispersion function as a framework for the creation of bonds of ethnic and family solidarity? What is the characteristic of "créolité"?

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The ethnic model of political culture

When the slaves under plantations were replaced by Indian indentured labourers, a new social, political, and economic landscape emerged on the island. Its most distinctive trait was not differences in working conditions[18] between those who were associated with slavery and those who came more or less as voluntary immigrants for a period of employment defined by contract[19] (Hugh Tinker,1974). The originality of this new system of exploitation resided in the importance of the labour contract, signed by the indentured labourer: an act which attested to a commitment made of his own free will. Despite the existence of many coercive tactics, the system of recruitment and assignment of coolies were improved in response to problems which arose regarding the candidate's real or assumed wish to emigrate, as well as problems arising in the departure zones, during the voyage, or on arrival. A set of regulations, functions, and administrative procedures were created by the need to anticipate, overcome, or resolve any conflict, as a means of ensuring a general balance of power and social and economic stability which were the source of the State's legitimacy. This golden rule, whereby the balance of power in the colony was a primordial value, spread throughout Mauritian society[20] (Saloni Deerpalsing & Marina Carter, 1996) even to the immigrants themselves, some of whom became *Sirdars*, or 'job contractors' involved in recruiting labourers on the plantations. The act of signing a job contract and the act by which one became a British subject may therefore be compared. It is not because they belong to the same order, but because they reveal a general symbolic mode of power which operates as non-power, ruling through agreement, consensus, and acceptance: all usually derived from the services and rewards which were set out in negotiation. This formally established bargaining system, regulating those who became British subjects and indentured labourers, may not have alleviated the chafing of the yoke of domination and exploitation borne by the indentured employees, but it did create a public space for one and all. The administrative system and its operation attest to the very early use of procedures and state organisations which served to develop the social legitimacy of indentured labourers within the context of the requirements of the sugar cane plantation production or its fringes. Thus, beyond the privileges to which officially recognised British subjects were entitled, and the implementation of legislation to promote sugar industry development, a political culture arose. Although, it mainly involved planters, it also affected anyone who was directly or indirectly involved in the colonial interests which the administration systematically favoured. This political culture, which was assimilated by all the participants involved, was

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characterised by a contractual, negotiable relationship which could also become a means of rising above the status of indentured labourer despite the fact that it institutionalised relations. A particular sense of unification was born, based on belonging to one of a network of social categories. These categories were created by the very act of recruiting labourers and integrating them into the life of the camp, and also by the administrative opportunities accessible to each individual. Such opportunities are attested to by the widespread practice of petitioning, and the emergence of a whole network of intermediaries, agents, writers, translators, and recruiters. The study of recruitment strategies, and the fact that immigrants, usually the earlier ones who went back to India after their period of indentureship, came back later to Mauritius after having recruited their kith and kin and their fellow villagers[21] (Marina Carter,1992; Marina Carter & James Ng,1997) enables us to understand how such stratified social categories as caste membership and regions of origin in India became factors in the migration pattern. For these recruiters, *"Sirdars"* were the generating forces behind the re-creation of the Indian village. Many labourers who resided in the camps came to settle in the villages which expanded due to the acquisition of lands at the times of the parcelling of lands[22] (Richard Allen, 1982). The ethnicisation process, which was fostered by the *Sirdars* who were usually plantation overseers, had an impact which was both private and public. Inasmuch as the planters' initiatives developed on the fringes of the official system, they also contributed to transforming that system. The liberal *modus operandi* tended to institutionalise forms of stability which had already been proven informally. Thus, it promoted partial social integration which spread in the village. Such a village was constituted of random groupings which occurred because families who had acquired portion of lands during the *"grand morcellement"* settled close to one another thereby, creating an agnatic link or a kind of corporation. A constellation of social networks[23] (Toni Arno & Claude Orian: 1986) was formerly established without referring to territorial unity. In response to the absence of identity issues in the early and informal social groupings which occurred when villages were formed, we can only invert the problematic of Mauritian ethnicity, and treat it as a phenomenon which was politically ordained. It would correspond to the invisible nature of the power instituted by the spacelessness of the networks, where their respective forces come into play. Hence, the relevance of Thomas Eriksen's question (is Mauritius an island, or not ?), becomes especially apparent[24] (1993) or is there a resurgence of Creole population? The answer to such questions necessitates further study of the long history of the passage from slavery to indenture, and of the social

and economic emergence of the groups present during the development of the sugar industry. Where are the class divisions found in the world of ethnicity considering as a form of categorising networks based on region of origin, religion, caste, or mother tongue within the framework of biological race distinctions? Can race and ethnicity be perceived as ways of negating the importance of economic differences and racial mixing in the transformation of societies and cultures?

Multiracial and Pluri-ethnic Mauritian Society

The nature of creolity

Two sets of research, that of Richard Allen and that of Toni Arno and Claude Orian will be used as references for the analysis of the concept of creolity in Mauritian society. This concept highlights the discrepancy between the way Mauritian society appears to the outside world, (as a multi-ethnic organisation model masking economic differences based to varying degrees on colour modulations), and the reality of its actual social functioning. Similarly to the concept of *"autochtonie"* discussed earlier, the concept of creolity will be used as a framework in order to replace the mixed blood "mulatto" culture at the centre of a past historical reality which, although lost and perhaps forgotten, but nevertheless continues to function as a model for local territorial integration. The creolisation process of Mauritian society goes far back in the past, since it coincides with the emergence of the slave plantation society prevalent at the time of the initial French colonisation of "île de France."

The theses of Arno and Orian framed a theory of a lost *Creole identity*, which brought the mixed-blood category known as "mulattos" to the centre of an unachieved social and economic development which was only half consolidated at the time the colony passed from French to British hands. The rational thinking of the authors leads them to apply the term Creole in order to designate a considerable variety of situations which may explicitly describe such diverse social groups at times as "plantation foremen" (p.36), and sometimes former slaves (p.76). The use of the term Creole in their research work is confined to the plantation world and to its relational exploitation. Arno and Orian thus agree with Auguste Toussaint (1936),[25] who found that the social stability achieved during the French Revolution "was not based on any opposition between blacks and whites, which is much less prevalent than in the West Indies" ... but... it "relied on a certain way so as to maintain a

sense of social cohesion among the settlers and to prevent class conflicts." Eventually the term Creole used by Arno and Orian in their studies denotes a means of pointing out the ways in which the plantation society of Île de France cannot be considered purely and simply as a slave society. This signifies that the term Creole has a double meaning designating the dialectical nature of the relationships between masters and slaves against the background of French colonial rule. Arno and Orian assert that people born on the island created a differentiated society in which the slave was more an asset of wealth than a workforce to be ruthlessly exploited on the plantation. This was quite precisely attuned to the degree to which trade was the very activity which defined economic differentiation. The authors quote Bernardin de St Pierre (1768): "Île de France... imports its porcelain dishes from China, its linens and clothing from India, its slaves and cattle from Madagascar, some of its victuals from the Cape of Good Hope, its money from Cadiz, and its administration from France."[26] This historical retrospective of the function of slavery and trade in Mauritian plantation society would later develop a theory elucidating future differentiation based on colour. Arno and Orian analyse the political and economic consequences of the massive arrival of Indian indentured labourers and the abolition of slavery in a context where plantation activity had not yet reached a sufficiently advanced stage in its development. They postulate that under the new British colonial order, property ownership became the principal means of accumulating wealth and, simultaneously, transforming rapidly the slaves into free labourers. As a result, the pre-existing social equilibrium, which was gradually dissolving due to the widespread practice of manumission, was prematurely unbalanced. The British colonial Government, by accelerating a process of emancipation of freed men of colour and free blacks, which was already underway during the period of French rule, kindled demands for economic equality which *de jure* equality could not strengthen, as there was a cut-throat competition for lands and markets. As a result, social relations rigidified according to skin-colour differences. While "free coloured" society began to organise itself and white traders became planters and sugar barons, part of them became poorer and crossed the colour bar. This led "each group to seek the slightest element around which to develop their identity". From then on, "the mulatto group, being subject of social contradictions on the island", asserted itself, and "ethnic distribution of the social activities developed with the massive arrival of Indian immigrants."

This theory of a stuck society due to a poor transition between the slave economy and the indentured-labour economy is fascinating as it sheds light on

the mechanism by which each social group secluded itself from the others, thereby establishing mutually exclusive relationships, resulting in an absence of hierarchical integration of roles and statuses. This lack of a mental representation of "otherness" which could provide a basis for social differences resulted in the transformation of the creolisation process[27] which was already underway. This process had brought the so-called "mulatto" or "free coloured" group, and the emancipated slaves, to the forefront, and it was incorporated on the way towards an ethnicisation which was implicitly validated by the British colonial rule in all its modes of functioning.

The political and economic reality of ethnicity

This analysis of Toni Arno and Claude Orian, is by no means exhaustive as regards the interpretation of the social trauma upon which the history of colonial Mauritius was founded. It is interesting only insofar as it demonstrates the fact that the notion of "General Population" is based on a specific mode of seclusion from others, the first one is the product of the slavery system and the second one is the outcome of the indentured system. However, the social trauma as regards the dual experience of "forced labour" for ex-slaves, and "bonded labour" (Yann Moulier Boutang, 1998) for indentured labourers, has been transposed to a relationship of formal equality which was legally established by the validation of the distinctive ethnic categories after 1847 (Christopher, 1999: 59). The different legal statuses of the two main components of the population had an economic effect due to the fact of the residual solidarity consolidated between sugar cane planters and indentured labourers. This is indeed confirmed by the rise of small independent plantations as from 1860s onwards. The process of economic emergence of the "old immigrants" was all the more marked because the myth of "gentle slavery" (Vijaya Teelock, 1998: 133) was validated and assimilated, having an indirect impact of maintaining the difference between the "Mulattos", formerly called "Free Coloured", as against the "Emancipated Slaves". Hugh Tinker's analysis (1974), on the objective condition similar to the ex-slaves and the indentured labourers, need to be relativised in order to take account of the wide gap between the overriding interests of the Empire and the private interests of the planters (Yann Moulier Boutang, 1998: 407). Similar account must be taken into consideration of the significant financial support at the beginning of the sugar cane plantations (Lamusse, 1964), thus explaining a degree of leeway for labourers of all different origins to establish a certain amount of economic independence within the plantation. The

creolisation process of the society continued around the established constitutional duality, distinguishing the whites and assimilated white society, from the sphere of community and family links, transforming ethnic inequalities into demarcation lines of social and economic difference, and into demarcation lines between the new statuses in the colonial order.

Richard Allen studied the creolisation process from the formation of local capital's point of view till 1830, the census year when the population category "Free Coloured"[28] disappeared from the statistics. He concludes that their economic emergence was marginal, but effective. Examining the census data of 1776 to 1826, he distinguishes the different sources of capital: the bequest of money or plantations, compensation at the time of emancipation, the sale or purchase of lands, investments in shipping or the loans or ownership of slaves. The author comes to the conclusion that domestic capital did exist on the eve of the official abolition of the slavery system. This leads him to wonder why people of colour who controlled significant financial resources in 1830, and, in particular a large chunk of the colonial lands in 1825[29] (Richard Allen,1993), was not oriented towards a diversified agricultural activity. To attempt to reply to this question requires a definition of the differential economic status built by the Creole population in relation to the Indians in the colonial context of the 1830s. Whatever had been their strategies in the context of the economic events and the welcoming opportunities marked by the bankruptcy of the British trading houses which were making loans against the 1848 cutting season, while the era of finance and the banks domination was beginning?[30] (Lamusse,1964). In relation to these financial recessions and the land speculation which accompanied the development of the sugar industry at its outset, what accumulation strategies were staked out by each group (the free coloured and the Indian immigrants)? The most significant event in these processes which led to accumulation is the *"Grand Morcellement"* and *"Petit Morcellement"* beginning in around 1866. During that time a class of small-holding planters, especially the Indians, was constituted. It continued to grow until it reached over 50% of the cane-growing lands. Inversely, the coloured population was striving for independence from the colonial economy. The emergence of a Creole elite, which occurred in the mid 1820s, does not seem to have taken its expected course. It may have been stuck by financial constraints, a saturated job market, and aspirations for an autonomy from former employers. A historical study of the formation of this national capital is a decisive element in the analysis of the Mauritian society. It alone can help shed light on the ethnicisation process. Richard Allen's study should be supplemented by a more specific typology to determine the means by which social and economic differentiation led to a distinction between the "General Population" and the "Indian Community". It is far from the fact that the two differentiation models, ethnic or Creole, are solely the product of social and cultural differentiation. They are also based on a certain approach to understanding the relationship between politics and economics. This is observable in the ethnic categories that the drafters of the census forms felt it was important to represent.

The British administration recorded the most obvious differentiations, gave some clues of how two distinct constitutional entities were created and social unification could take place within these entities. Reference categories in censuses taken after 1830 attest that the categories "Free Coloured" and "Slaves" disappeared as early as 1837, whereas the distinction "Ex-apprentices" who were freed slaves, remained. The category "Apprentices" recurred in the censuses of 1846 and 1851; it would later disappear, combined under the umbrella term "General Population" which included "Free Coloured", "Freed Slaves", and Whites in a single social category on the basis of language and religion. The Indo-Mauritian category appeared in the 1891 census as a means of distinguishing Mauritian natives descendants of Indian immigrants from more recent ones. This distinction was preserved until 1931, that is, the end of "coolie trade". It was in 1901 that Christopher notes[31] (1992: 58-59), there was an attempt to make a more precise racial distinction between Africans and "Europeans and Mixed", with a separate category for people of Indian origin. Only a small number were included in the census, and the category would subsequently disappear. From this survey of the census categories which were supposed to provide an accurate description of major social differences, one can draw many conclusions. It took 30 years, from 1830 to 1860, to erase the distinction between the "Free Coloured", and "Emancipated Slaves", in other words nearly two generations. In addition to that, there was a failure to distinguish black Creoles of African origin from those of non-African origin. And lastly, there was the appearance of the Indo-Mauritian category, reserved for second generation Indians born in Mauritius. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Government was still seeking, by trial and error, for demarcating lines to incorporate the various social groups within a system of balanced mutual relations. Finally, from 1911 to 1962, the four main categories "General Population", "Indo-Mauritian", "Indian" and "Chinese" became stable. It was only in 1962 that religion would become an objective criterion for the definition of official social categories. Throughout

the entire period, one can witness a widening gap between the institutional recognition of population categories and communities, and the reality of social and economic events.

A highly significant and contradictory tendency appears whereby the "Creole world" (which is racially differentiated) finds itself merged with a single language and religion, and whereby Indians are separated into different categories, depending on the order of immigration, language and religion. This tendency highlights the different economic positions which the "free coloured", "the emancipated", and the Indians were able to acquire to be considered as collective groups in the new political order. The years 1860 and 1891, when census categories altered, as mentioned earlier, for Free Coloured, Emancipated Slaves, and Indo-Mauritians, may be seen as milestones in the acquisition of economic and social autonomy for those communities – a prerequisite for their true identification with Mauritian soil. In general, the period from 1810 to 1930 was characterised by the need to create a sense of social cohesion of the very fabric of society in order to overcome the racial rifts inherited from the French period. As the sugar industry was developing during the British "coolie-trade" period, the new population arriving from India needed to be integrated and structured. The emergence of domestic capital[32] (Richard Allen,1997) over this long period of time, on the basis of financial and property strategies (and combinations thereof), reinforced by the endemic weakness of national local capital, attests to the singularity of the Mauritian experience as a society prey to rupture and separation with underlying class distinctions.

Conclusion

The specific mode of division, in the 19th century, which separated the population into two distinct groups - the - "General Population" and the "Indo-Mauritians" - belonged to a principle of unification which derived from the negation of the figure of the foreigner in domestic relationships. As a result, the symbolic violence of State and power could only be played out in the private sphere where the social bond is elaborated and legitimised: in this way, the issue of origin became irrelevant in the making of Mauritian society. Similarly, the question of ethnicity derives from the symbolic reversal of the pluralism of origins contained in the various religions. That is why it is important to understand that any ethnic or religious referent is the object of

social practices and multiple arrangements which establish a pluralistic relationship to the *other* which authentifies and verifies that otherness. These ethnic referents also act to perpetuate a social bond despite geographic discontinuity. This is a far cry from the political territorial integration model adopted by the slave-plantation society. As the Creole world disappeared it took on a new significance corresponding to the social, cultural, and economic rifts which had occurred in the history of the sugar cane plantation, and in the more recent context of the thirty years of Independence. While it may be validly considered that despite community differences, there is a way of being Mauritian, these differentiations cannot only be understood as the product of identity strategies. The singularity of Mauritian experience stems from the fact that from the very beginning ethnicity took the shape of a struggle to overcome the economic and social conditions of the status of slave or indentured labourer. This status was itself based on the appearance of different forms of accumulation, identifiable with class differences. For this reason, all the island's communities carry within them a Creole dimension which is involved in the structuring of the social bond. In these circumstances it may be seen that the *"malaise créole"*, which has been commented on in the press, is linked more closely to the emergence of the middle class than to social exclusion, to which it is all too often solely attributed. The term "exclusion" would suppose that a form of integration has already been achieved, but this is contradictory to the nature of the State and the political culture which have been built up and internalised during the history of the island of Mauritius.

Notes

1. Based on a paper presented at the International Interdisciplinary Conference *"Being a foreigner and migrant in 20th-century Africa: Social integration, modes and identity issues"*, December 8-11, 1999.

2. *Société contemporaine*, No.43 pp.81-121.

3. Mauritian Socialist Movement and Mauritian Militant Movement.

4. In the Creole language.

5. Carl de Souza is a Mauritian author whose latest books are becoming known internationally.

6. The President and members of this commission have been recognised for their considerable political courage in dealing with the affair in view of the persons who have been implicated by its findings.

7. The theme of national reconciliation has as its aim the official recognition, by the church, of the wrongs and injustices of the past. In Port-Louis, and in several places world-wide, there have been exhibitions, debates and other events to mark the commemoration of the abolition of slavery.

8. The whites were of course the main organisers and beneficiaries of the slave trade. But for this they depended on locally existing slave trade structures which they attempted to use to maximum advantage.

9. It must be remembered that the first aim of an emancipated slave was to buy slaves for his own domestic needs, as soon as his means allowed, but also to rent them out and thereby obtain a fixed income. The slaves were, more often than not, rented out to others by the less well-off people living in the cities. Moreover, once emancipated, ex-slaves preferred to live in the towns where they could find non-agricultural employment and sources of income. This was how some of them became house owners.

10. Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 1997; Paris: Seuil/Gallimard. This is the transcription of lectures delivered at the Collège de France in 1976.

11. The author wishes to emphasise that the use of the term "racial" rather than "racist" is fully intentional and extremely important, as will be explained further on.

12. Toni Arno and Claude Orian, *Ile Maurice, une société multi-raciale*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986, 182 pages.

13. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Boulder: Pluto Press.

14. The Treaty of Paris of 1814 granted "Ile de France" to the British Crown. In 1810, a British expeditionary force had captured the island.

15. A.J. Christopher, *Ethnicity, Community, and the Census in Mauritius, 1830-1990*. 1992, The Geographical Journal, Vol. 158, n° 1, pp. 57-4. S. Chazan & I. Widmer, *Concentration sucrière, délocalisations industrielles et migrations dans le contexte de l'Indépendance nationale à l'Ile Maurice*, to be published. Isabelle Widmer, *Migrations, emploi, développement : Analyse comparée de l'Ile de la Réunion et de l'Ile Maurice*, 3 volumes, 1999, Ph.D. thesis in demography under the supervision of Daniel Courgeau, Université de Paris-I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, IDUTP, p.80, graph 11.

16. S. Chazan, *Libre échange et ethnicité dans la société de l'Ile Maurice*, in Illusion identitaire, 1998, L'Homme et la Société, N° 130, Vol. 4, pp.93-104. La Bourdonnais is presented as the emblematic figure of a form of liberal colonisation based on the expansion of trade relations; Port-Louis, the capital of Mauritius, became a major trading centre.

17. 18th-century "globalisation" consisted of the mobility of labour and goods and the immobility of capital.

18. The working conditions of coolies were not a great improvement on those of plantation slaves. For this reason, Tinker presents the coolie trade as a more recent form of slavery.

19. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery, the export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1820-1920*. 1974, Oxford University Press. We are in total disagreement with the author's premises. The nature of the relationship defined by the work contract introduced a degree of freedom and autonomy attested to in several ways by the history of Mauritius. The most obvious example is the contribution of labour unions to the events which led to Independence.

20. Marina Carter has collected such primary sources as official documents preserved by the Mauritius Archives and the Public Record Office in London, and presented them by theme in a series of three books: Volume 1, by Saloni Deerpalsing and Marina Carter, *Selected Documents on Indian Immigration, Mauritius 1834-1926. Organisation and Evaluation of the Indenture System*. Volume II, *The Despatch and Allocation of Indentured Labour*. Volume III: *Living and Working Conditions under Indenture*. Moka: MGI, 1994.

21. Marina Carter, *Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius*, 1992. Journal of Peasant Studies, 19:3/4, pp.229-245. The author focuses on the case of Ramanath and Raghoonauth in 1836, Mohun Mauderbacus and others in 1848. She specifies that in around 1852, local recruiters in Calcutta paid only for the recruitment of families or clan-like groups. Marina Carter & James Ng, *Forging the Rainbow, Labour Immigrants in British Mauritius*, 1997, Alfran Co. Ltd., Mauritius.

22. Richard Allen, *Creoles, Indian Immigrants and the Restructuring of Society and Economy in Mauritius 1767-1885*. Ph.D. dissertation in History, University of Illinois, 1982, 292 pages.

23. **Toni Arno & Claude Orian,** *op. cit.*

24. **Thomas Hylland Eriksen,** *In Which Sense Do Cultural Islands Exist?* In Marshall Sahlins. 1993, Social Anthropology, 1, 1B, 133-147.

25. **Auguste Toussaint,** *Port-Louis, deux siècles d'histoire,* 1936.

26. **Toni Arno and Claude Orian,** *op. cit.*

27. Understood as a form of economic and social prominence open to the group known as "mulatto"; also known as "free coloured": that is, the increasing number of emancipated former slaves.

28. Cf. **A.J. Christopher; I. Widmer; S. Chazan & I. Widmer:** articles and theses cited above.

29. The author writes that in 1806, the *"Gens de Couleur"* owned 6% of the property surveyed in the colony, and that in 1825, they controlled a much greater percentage. Moreover, they owned at least 20% to 25% of the colony's slaves. Land and slaves were the two main forms of accumulation.

30. **Roland Lamusse,** *Economic Development of the Sugar Industry,* Revue agricole et sucrière, 1964, vol. 48, No. 4, pp.354-372.

31. **A.J. Christopher,** article quoted above, pp.58-59.

32. **Richard Allen,** *Creating a Sugar Garden: Creoles, Indian Immigrants, and Domestic Capital in Mauritius, 1721-1936,* 1997, 501 pages, soon to be published by Cambridge University Press.

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The roots of Mauritian multi-culturalism and the birth of a new social contract : being "autochtone", being Creole

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