

The Roots of Mauritian Multi-Culturalism' 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'ethnisation. 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 MMM³. 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"

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's⁵ 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

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 Ile 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): "Ile 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 process²⁷ 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 1825²⁹ (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 notes³¹ (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

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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