

## Ethnicity and free exchange in Mauritian society\*

Economic miracle or rainbow nation are two terms commonly used to illustrate how Mauritian society has managed to orchestrate the various components of a multi-cultural society and the political and economic order in which they interact. It is one thing to join the ranks of newly industrialised countries, and another to maintain the pace. However, one could cite from Mauritian history many examples of this experience specific to insular societies, which consists in reversing the terms of external dependency to implement relevant strategies for local social and economic integration, and have a say in international competition. There is a cross-ethnic consensus in Mauritian society today around a model of development where trading activity, in its cultural and political dimension, is still – as it was when the island was settled – the reference matrix that nurtures production systems designed to contribute to local and regional development. This is the basis of the economic strategies set up since independence in 1968.

Nobody in Mauritius would question independence and they are all satisfied with the status of Independent Republic granted in 1992.<sup>1</sup> As for welcoming foreign trade and investment, Mauritius has nothing to prove; its attitude in this area has been well established by history and political choice (Hein 1997: 16–17). A study of Mauritian economic and social history reveals how, in both crisis situations and times of relative prosperity, the scenario of origin is always applied. This scenario initiates a form of self-centred local development which models production systems on the trading networks surrounding them, thereby reinforcing complementarity rather than competition. This type of economic and social structure, defined by the external interaction of trade, turns a fairly isolated geographical entity into the centre of the geographical and economic changes wrought by the process of globalisation. As a result, Mauritius, at its founding a mere warehouse, has woven a tight economic fabric between the public and private sectors appropriate to serve as the basis for a more diversified industrial sector able to conquer new markets. Combined with national independence, this

\* Translated from the French by Professor Aline Royet, Strasbourg. A first version of this text was presented at the second seminar of the Institut Austral de Démographie organized in November 1997 by Reunion Island's ODR (Observatoire de Développement Régional). I take this opportunity to thank M. Thierry de la Grange for inviting me to take part in this seminar. The term 'free exchange' in the title should be interpreted in the broad sense of a free exchange; that is, the opening of an exchange, rather than according to the narrow definition used by economic theorists.

1 Although 44 per cent of the population voted against independence in 1967 and in 1992 many non-Hindus wished to maintain ties to the Commonwealth, no one today questions the island's status as an independent republic.



process of modernisation of the Mauritian economy brought about a considerable change in the position of the sugar industry in relation to other economic sectors.

Although until the 1960s the sugar industry accounted for more than a third of the Gross National Product and even composed 99 per cent of the exports, and Mauritius was thus considered an extreme case of specialisation (Hein, 1997: 19), that decade witnessed a shift in the government's economic strategy which consisted of implementing a policy of import substitution, furthered in the 1970s by an export-oriented industrial development strategy, known as EPZ (Barbier and Véron 1991: 111–38).<sup>2</sup> Industrial diversification became a fact of the Mauritian economy. By 1995, having graduated with honours as a good pupil of the International Monetary Fund, it was moving towards development, firmly set on conquering new markets thanks to more industrial and agricultural diversification.<sup>3</sup> Social mobility is once again tested as a main factor of development. One doesn't emigrate any more, one immigrates (Chazan-Gillig and Widmer 1998), relatively speaking.<sup>4</sup> Ongoing diversification includes such activities as jewellery, electronics and offshore banking, and aims at economic success based on the introduction of the more highly skilled labour force required by these new, capital-intensive production operations. The sugar industry, independent planters and traders take part in this self-centred local development by investing in tourism and the EPZ sector, as well as abroad, on the African, Asian and European markets.<sup>5</sup>

The new forms of enterprise appearing on the Mauritian landscape are most often shaped by a racial ethnic specificity (Arno and Orian 1986)<sup>6</sup> that intertwines plantation and trading activities, and cannot be understood without prior knowledge of Mauritian history, which generated the colonial system in which today's liberal society was able to take root. It is interesting to note that Mauritius, originally a colony peopled by the French, later transformed itself to a mixed French and British system of colonisation. Because of its history and its geographic location far from international markets, it inherited a broad palette of economic structures based on the opening of exchanges and their old and new preferential limits. South-south relationships could also thrive in a more highly competitive context.

We shall consider Mauritian society from a historical point of view, which casts light on the apparent contradiction between the fact that abroad Mauritians have a strong sense of their own identity whereas at home they usually clearly mark their ethnic background. Hence, the following questions arise: What kind of development has its origins in the French settlement? What part of the French heritage, already based on a free-exchange ideology underlying the social and economic organisation, was transformed into a founding myth of the British colony? How did the material-

2 In ch. 4, pp. 111–38, the authors cite the Mauritian Export Processing Zone (EPZ) legislation as exemplary. Government measures define such particulars as the status of business, customs tariffs, trade agreements and special financial conditions.

3 The sugar sector will soon undergo further concentration, which will reduce the number of sugar producers from 18 companies to nine, of which only three will produce electricity. The EPZ sector is expanding into new high-technology activities.

4 The informal migration is difficult to quantify: new migratory flows appear in a transitional demographic context revealing some development strategies.

5 As attested by recent sugar investments in African countries: Ivory Coast, Madagascar and elsewhere in East Africa, as well as by textile-sector investments (the firm Floreal Knitwear) in the textile and tourist industries in such neighbouring countries as Madagascar and Comoros.

6 The authors develop a general theory of social integration and differentiation.

ization of the colonial myth influence the emergence of a liberal society? Last of all, will a descent into the roots of ethnicity shed light on the new relationships between civilian society and the State since independence?

### **At the origins of French settlement: An implicit ideology of free exchange**

A 'free-exchange ideology' was born long ago, at the time the French colony was established. It is not surprising to observe that it appeared in the context of the commercial monopoly of the Compagnie des Indes – yet another example of how fundamental historical changes often result from a dialectic reversal of elements. Let us briefly outline the history of the birth of the Mauritian settlement, which bore the imprint of the trading traditions and cultures flourishing in the towns and harbours of eighteenth-century Europe.

Mauritius island, which was uninhabited (de Rauville 1889),<sup>7</sup> is a land of settlement and colonisation whose history began long before the arrival of the first French settlers. It has its roots in the Dutch period, too often reduced in histories of Mauritius, which are ill-documented on this period,<sup>8</sup> to the exploitation of timber, the destruction of the forest and the extinction of the dodo. The Portuguese and Dutch period in the Indian Ocean had already set the stage for sugar planting (Ly Tio Fane 1993: 10).<sup>9</sup> Huguette Ly Tio Fane (1993: 5) presents an accurate account of Mauritius history prior to latter-day historiography that conveys the colonial ambitions of old Europe to control trade in tropical and oriental products from India and Asia. As Richelieu gave way to Colbert, France gradually shifted from a more or less exclusively mercantilist system of outlying trading posts and ports (*'ces confettis d'Empire'*, these specks of empire), to modelling the settlements into locally administered systems of production controlled by the Compagnies des Indes, successors to the first companies granted commercial privileges by the king. On Mauritius, the first royal privileges were granted to companies from Saint Malo.

Simultaneously, sea trade was expanding against the background of a struggle between France, England (which had gained control of the Atlantic) and Holland (which had established its supremacy over the Indian Ocean). A completed French colonial system was achieved with the chartering of 'a trust regrouping the

7 The author presents a legend according to which a man named William once jumped ship and lived as a hermit on the island. When the first French settlers arrived and found him, they named the place where he lived Les Plaines Wilhems. However, no Mauritian informant refers to a first inhabitant of this type. The only report which mentioned the legend did so only to discredit it, and referred to a cross located at Port-Louis which bears the following inscription: 'Le Roi de France qui le veut'. The cross was erected by Governor Denyons when Grand Port was moved to Port Louis. At this time, Ile Bourbon (today's Reunion) was under the same governor as Ile de France (today's Mauritius).

8 Among the reasons which can explain the lack of knowledge of this period is the language barrier, as Dutch Archives are written in Old Dutch. We will see that translations have been made at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute by Sitradeven Panyandee and at Mauritius University by Jocelin Chen Law.

9 According to the author, p. 10: 'The income from sugar imported from Brazil by Portugal competed with precious metal . . . and . . . the France-Africa-West Indies triangular trade emerged to control precious metals'.

Compagnies d'Occident, d'Orient and de Chine', which became 'La Compagnie des Indes' and set the stage for the exploitation of French territories in the new worlds lying to the west and the far east. The conditions for the opening of the Cape Town route were met by the creation of the state bank under the John Law system, making it possible to invest in outfitting ships for the Compagnie des Indes once the treaty allying England, France and Holland was signed (Ly Tio Fane 1993: 43).<sup>10</sup>

This European historical context, which presided over the founding of a plantation society on Mauritius and made it possible for a wealthy local entrepreneur class to emerge, took on a new dimension under the stewardship of the emblematic Mahé La Bourdonnais, the island's governor. His accomplishments and vision of development were innovative at a time when the Compagnie Des Indes still held the monopoly on trade. Mahé La Bourdonnais, a trader and a businessman, the administrator of the colony and an excellent seaman, was the first to perceive the Indian Ocean as a 'regional economic complex' (Haudrère 1992). He explicitly encouraged the island's inhabitants to invest in trade freed from the monopoly of the Compagnie Des Indes.

One cannot help interpreting the life and achievements of Mahé La Bourdonnais as those of a larger-than-life historical figure, linked with the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century merchant traditions which brought affluence to the big trading towns on France's Atlantic coast, in Provence, the Languedoc and Lyon. Mahé La Bourdonnais extrapolated – some say twisted – the colonial project to the benefit of a domestic strategy aimed at maintaining a certain prosperity for the residents of the colony, thus creating – before the term existed – the joint stock company which developed into today's shareholder firms. Perhaps he fully intended to make his mark on history, because his quality as a *bourgeois de marine* from Saint Malo was due to his commercial and investing skills rather than his political activity (Forest 1995: 131). His fate supports this idea: he was accused of betraying the colonial cause for his own benefit, while his opposition to Duplex, more than mere personal rivalry, became a struggle to defend a new form of colonial government based on a domestic model of development specific to the merchant traditions of his early social background (Castel 1995).

More liberal and less enthusiastic about state intervention than Duplex, Mahé La Bourdonnais conceived of the state as providing the legal framework for business open to all: traders, of course, but also planters, seamen, administrators and civil servants. His Port-Louis was a booming merchant town, engaged in shipbuilding as well as trade, carried on by joint stock companies financed by associations of investors – a structure that was well ahead of its time. We are looking at a form of self-centred local development created out of whole cloth in a regional economic area linking the Indian Ocean countries, a space both imagined and imaginary, and therefore ripe for conquest. It became the central node of a network of social relationships conducive to exchange between societies and cultures throughout the islands, promoting the elaboration of trade structures. These relationships played a direct role in the prosperity of merchants from the French regions mentioned above; some of them were shareholders in the Compagnie Des Indes and were more or less closely related to families settled on the island. Furthermore, their socio-familial bonds were cemented by membership in the masonic lodges and social clubs that were created at that time, and which were

10 'John Law financial system'.

the basis for international relations promoted by the merchant class in cities along the Atlantic and the Mediterranean seaboard.

The relationships between the colonists and their relatives in their original countries were well established and therefore gave rise to enduring activities – as attested by the development of merchant companies – while locally organised family systems characterised by strict endogamous preference exerted an internal structuring influence, reinforcing kinship bonds between relatives from the original countries and those who founded new lines in the colony. After reading Auguste Toussaint (n.d.: 39–58), Louis Dermigny (1957: 369–452) and Bourde de la Rougerie (1934), we can distinguish three different social groups stemming from three major eighteenth-century market towns represented in Mauritius: they hailed from Brittany, from Marseilles, and from Bordeaux, if one is referring to the development of seaport towns related to the triangular trade and the development of island settlements.

The influence of traders from metropolitan France on the development of the colony increased further at the time of the French Revolution, and up to 1803 before the arrival of General Decaen. It was to decline only with the rise of the sugar estates in 1825 (Toussaint n.d.: 42). The classic definition of a feudal system hardly applies to Mauritius. Race segregation was at that time the basis of the production system as well as of market exchange. The slave considered as property had no ethnic identity, the latter being wiped out by the black/white opposition. It was not easy to maintain this distinction given a context in which the black slave was valuable not only as a source of labour, but also as a commodity to be traded, while marooning was considerable and very severely punished.<sup>11</sup>

A society of people of colour, some of them freedmen, emerged at that time, made all the more complex by an absence of identifying marks. It was a population which was neither free, nor enslaved, because the individuals involved were no one's property, according to Richard Allen (1997). The differentiation which occurred came from the top – with the abolition of slavery – and from the bottom.<sup>12</sup> On what basis would British colonial rule be established, and what type of society would emerge from the colonial period from 1810 to 1968?

### **The myth of the founding development of the British colony. Where is the state? What are its grounds for existence?**

A reality becomes a myth when it is no longer designated an historical event and bears only invisibly on the whole society's global functioning. Any myth has a structural

11 Maroon slaves was the name given to those who fled the plantations and revolted.

12 The distinctions 'top' and 'bottom' made here refer to the power, the state and the more or less structured general public. Toni Arno and Claude Orian (1986) have developed a social theory of integration and differentiation based on colour and caste distinctions which were established during the transition from the slave-labour system to an economy based on indentured labourers. The abolition of slavery came about too quickly to pay heed to traditional relations between freemen of colour, whites and slaves. As opposed to the more gradual enfranchisement process, abolition disrupted an equilibrium, causing social fragmentation and stasis around colour distinctions and, later, caste distinctions, with the arrival of Indian 'coolies'. The second part of their work, *'Une société du regard'*, describes a latent and complementary dual ideological construction in contemporary Mauritian society. One emphasises racial mixtures (with skin-colour variations compared to a white ideal) and another which emphasises separation (the Indian ideal based on caste stratification).

and perennial effect insomuch as it represents a belief that is usually shared; it is a common article of faith that the social body as a whole, with all its components, agrees never to question. The British colonial reference has this mythical quality, in that it bears upon a modern Mauritian society which has opted for free-market capitalism based on export-oriented enterprise strategies. This liberal reference, which consists in taking advantage of the weakness and the narrowness of the market to realise accrued benefits and manage a successful industrialisation, has deep roots. We have traced it back to La Bourdonnais, but it would not be considered a virtue if the British administration had not actually put it into practice.

Indeed, the British colonial government adopted wholesale the economic model that was already prevalent when it arrived; colonised for strategic reasons, Mauritius has reinforced its warehousing function in the preferential British trading community, the Commonwealth. Furthermore, plantation society was granted the status of a constituent body by the British administration while the merchant elements proper to the British colony formed corporations.<sup>13</sup> The Chamber of Commerce was anglicised in 1850 (Berthelot 1991);<sup>14</sup> the Chamber of Agriculture remained the forum in which the planters voiced their concerns. The Indian market naturally opened to the merchant-planters of the colony, while the compensation given to slave-owners had an unexpected 'take-off' (Rostow 1953) effect for the plantation economy which lacked investment capital for large-scale ventures.<sup>15</sup> The choice of sugar as a single export crop did the rest; the sugar boom was to begin.

The British crown valued Mauritius as a strategic, low-overhead trading and military outpost in the Indian Ocean and had no plans to put down roots or develop the settlement. Thus, the liberal form of colonial state was most appropriate. The administrative staff, trimmed to a minimum, had its own social and educational institutions and 'the English way of life' became a model to be imitated by Mauritians with local social ambitions. More importantly, the British archives attest to the preference for the English model of conducting business. The 'Blue-Book', for example, a veritable atlas of trading geography, contains a detailed catalogue of import and export traffic which is a key to 'trade secrets'.<sup>16</sup> The colonial administration on the other hand could be characterized by an almost compulsive practice of secrecy. Indeed, the invisible hand of the administration seems omnipresent, thinly veiled by the Select Committees on which negotiations took place. In a context where the limits between the state and the general public tended to be obscured by gentlemen's agreements and implicitly shared

13 The use of this term coined by the French administration emphasises the degree to which the British Crown preserved the French heritage, which it 'modernised', so to speak, replacing slavery by the coolie-trade.

14 A first Chamber of Commerce we know very little about was created in 1838 (Berthelot 1991).

15 Referring to the 'take off theory' developed by W. W. Rostow. Slave-compensation payments provided start-up capital the planters were able to invest in their plantations. It is interesting to refer to the Paris monthly *L'Express*, March and April 1994, which contains a debate about the role of slave-compensation funds – a total of £2,119,632 – in financing the Mauritius Commercial Bank (MCB), founded in 1938. It replaced the Bank of Mauritius, considered to be overly dominated by planters' interests. The MCB deal more with trade and business.

16 As registries of the colony's accounting and administration, the Blue-Book and the Mauritius Almanack are the two main archival sources. More than mere yearbooks, these annual documents contain valuable information on events significant in the general context of economic and political forces acting on the island.

goals and objectives, the attorney's profession was an especially valuable element in the social pattern, complementary to the French *notaire*.

Consequently, in a context in which the state could not be grasped in any way, least of all as the entity presumably ruling the colony, the society could structure itself within the framework of sugar estates which were established on an ethnic division of labour. Coolies replaced freedmen and free people of colour, as they left the plantations to become independent planters themselves, craftsmen, traders, civil servants or scholars, while Indian labourers from various ethnic groups were settled in camps and worked under very hard conditions.<sup>17</sup>

The best way to describe the colony's complex and unspoken social and economic structure is through imagery and symbolism. An overall dynamic can be seen to prevail.<sup>18</sup> The symbolism of 'the star and the key' (Masson 1945) emphasizes the importance of external relationships in local society.<sup>19</sup> The star expresses the centrifugal forces of social integration resulting from the ethnically disparate and stratified island population. The key symbolises domestic modes of stratification based on ethnic and social inequality. Former slaves who had become craftsmen, traders, and labourers had an identity quite separate from settlers who came for trade or business reasons. This multi-cultural capital was invested quite profitably in the world outside the island. What was it like in the colonial period? And what would become of it after independence?

### **A myth comes true. The birth of a liberal society**

The myth of durable development, based on using the colony's strategic position to take advantage of a weak market in trade with southern-hemisphere countries, found material expression in the progress of the sugar sector. By the early twentieth century, the number of mills was decreasing steadily as the sugar estates merged to form conglomerates. The concentration of the mills which led to the industrialisation of sugar production was a phenomenon that reverberated beyond the confines of the island's white society, the owners of the production mills; it sent a shock wave through the Chinese, Creole and Indian societies as well. The social cost of industrial transformation often had tragic financial consequences for the white minority, but it was also hard on the Indian labourers. Moreover, it perpetuated a state of exclusion for those who had been driven away from the plantations toward the coast; they were ultimately cast out in recent decades when the tourist business laid claim to the beaches. Mauritian history was no exception to the general rule of development, which is essentially unequal. However, there is no denying that the colony as a whole underwent considerable socio-economic development despite a slump in the sugar industry between the two world wars. The colonisation was notable for the formation of a

17 A distinction is usually made between Hindi-speaking Northern Indians, Southern Indian Tamils, Telegou and Marathi, and, lastly, Muslim Indians from Bihar.

18 Recent work by Allen points to the types of economic emergence strategies that were the outcome of the sugar-planting economy. The notion of 'domestic capital' has epistemological value in that it is useful for the analysis of the source of racial, caste or ethnic differentiation. Other authors have analysed differentiation in Mauritian society: Arno and Orian (1986); Brookfield (1958); and Benedict (1962). We commented on these authors' categories of analysis in the lecture presented to the IAD seminar, cited above.

19 The star and the key: subtitle of the book to be published by Richard Allen, already quoted.

sugar entrepreneur class, supported for the most part by domestic capital, together with the expansion of trade. The product of colonisation was a new economic and social order, and the significance of ethnic references in contemporary Mauritian society can best be understood by analysing the social processes that accompanied it.

Two researchers, Marina Carter (1993) and Richard Allen (1983), have reconstructed the colonial system of production and exchange that came to define the history of Mauritius as a sugar-growing island. These works, based on a careful analysis of primary sources, cannot be disregarded by anyone seeking to evaluate the role of the colonial referent in producing the Mauritian concept of ethnic identity. Indeed, ethnic identity is the result of a dual process of formation and transformation. On the one hand, it is linked to the origin of migration and to the age-old content of culture, while on the other it is continually being forged by the new situations and relationships the migrant confronts when he or she is putting down roots in a new land.

The image of the star applies therefore to outside exchange relationships. It refers to the global rationality of the colonial system, which was to identify itself with the structure of the British market or Commonwealth around an integrated chain of trade similar to the earlier slave-trade economy by plugging into new integrated labour-for-goods trade systems and sugar exports to Britain. Intra-Indian trade did not disappear altogether, insofar as it is difficult to control any trading system on the high seas. The coolie trade itself, as described by Marina Carter, was no exception to this rule, gradually spawning a system of intermediaries at the sites of both emigration and immigration. Sirdars and contractors thus acquired a fairly significant role in selecting candidates best adapted to the needs of the sugar plantation. Thus, the sirdar was not a mere indentured laborer: he had a special status in the eyes of both planters and labourers. Similarly, the forces driving socio-economic integration and the rise of the sugar planters cannot be understood unless viewpoints other than that of the planter-mill-owner are taken into account. The latter was at the mercy of his workers, given the scale of the plantation and his need for a constant accumulation at his disposal to anticipate the crop, the expected yield of which depended on a variety of uncontrollable factors, such as weather or market-price. In these conditions the relationship between capital and labour was unavoidably intimately related to local development and it imposed itself on all the economic players, from the coolie to the sugar planter. As Allen has shown, strengths and weaknesses intrinsic to the system generated the industrial process: the economic rise and fall of a few – the sugar planters – brought about the economic rise and fall of the rest – labourers and craftsmen – through minor social and economic revolutions that established the specificity of Mauritian ethnicity.

Thus, the findings of this analysis suggest that the various subdivisions of the Creole community, like the various subdivisions of the Indian one, were gradually structured as relevant socio-economic entities: the sugar-plantation system was much less static than previously assumed. Although mill ownership was the determining factor in the rise of the great families and their circle of kin, most of whom claimed white ancestry, the sugar plantations they owned came under the category of property to be traded, so that a class of small, independent planters could emerge. The financial resources of the Indians, as attested by specific examples from the official records, were accumulated by engaging in trade and underwriting loans to, or borrowing from, planters. In most cases, early immigrants acquired a stable position by speculating on real estate, and they became intermediaries for the planters themselves. A cycle of



buying, selling, paying back debts and making loans enabled the future 'entrepreneur class' to participate in the process by which the large estates were subdivided, beginning in 1875.<sup>20</sup> (Allen notes an increase in the number of land-transfer deeds in the archives from this date.) The number of independent land-owners underlines the momentousness of this social and economic mobility. Land-owning strategies were coupled with the acquisition of rented land; the social stability of the Indian population is indicated by the small number of people who were registered as having returned home when their work contract expired in 1870. With the second generation of immigrants, the very nature of notarial acts changed. It concerned the inner social organisation of migrants; family relationships, travel fraternity, and permanent residence linked to temples or places of worship. The Indian community was structured at the beginning of century. All Allen's conclusions cast a new light on the inner workings of the sugar companies, which, for the agricultural part of their activity, were founded on an indirect farming arrangement. As a result, the sirdars, contractors and, as time went on, the major independent planters and tenants who had become work-force controllers, gained authority. Allen notes that the first villages appeared as early as 1870 and a third of the Indian population lived in them.

Thus, a certain colonial society was structured, modelling the outlines of each ethnic group in the aftermath of demographic and economic upheavals.<sup>21</sup> The wave of Indian immigration in the 1850s and early 1860s resulted in a wage decrease for the most highly skilled workers, bringing about the impoverishment of some Creoles who economically had just emerged. In the same way, ten years earlier, the successful advancement of the craftsmen from the sugar plantations was an obvious example of an emancipation process supported by a demographic balance in favour of the former enslaved population. The economic independence of the former apprentices was facilitated by the existence of a large population of free coloured people who could intercede in their favour. Allen concludes that the mere demographic factor had a major impact.

The demographic revolution changed not only the configuration of mid-nineteenth-century Mauritian society, but social and economic relationships as well. One of the conditions that paved the way to independence was the existence of domestic capital, attesting to the inner social structuring and differentiation of the Creole and Indian populations that were a side effect of sugar development.

## **A voyage to the heart of ethnic identity. The terms of the debate**

The independence process, initiated in the 1930s with the foundation of the Mauritius Labour Party (PTM), coincided with the economic emergence of the oldest Indian immigrants. It was at the source of the post-war labour struggles, and of raised worker awareness based upon the development of a cultural form of protest. Pro-independence leaders shifted the centralising character of the colonial state into a peripheral one

20 These terms are modern, but they are used to describe a different reality since financial practices and land speculation were not distinct from other types of activity, as they are nowadays. Economic success was based on combined practices which are today separate forms of activity.

21 Allen specifies that, up to 1930, 'coloured people' represented nearly one fifth of the total population and two-thirds of free inhabitants.

that managed the comparative clout and weight of the various ethnic groups. It seems then that the communal system born from independence must be considered in the light of a socio-cultural tradition which serves as the framework for majority/minority relationships at every level of society. This political culture corresponded so precisely to the widely accepted cultural mode which governed everyone's daily life that it resulted in a proliferation of ethnic and religious associations. A certain homogeneity was thus nevertheless manifest in the ethnic heterogeneity which these associations expressed, due to their organisation along the lines of the joint stock companies discussed above. The political and cultural issues raised by independence initiated new relationships between the general public and the state concerning the colonial heritage left by its economic institutions. The cultural and religious institutions created at that time became an expression of national identity all the more effective because they were rooted in a colonial practice that opted to stabilise its authority by adapting institutional procedure to the business at hand. Being liberal, the colonial state made a virtue of necessity, giving free rein to a symbolic expression that had nothing to do with state affairs. It is in this light that we can understand the dualism in the structural dynamic of contemporary Mauritian society. The result of this socio-political context was a society capable of conquering new markets by taking advantage of its symbolic multi-ethnic capital – one of its distinctive characteristics – in external relationships, despite being impervious to any manifestation of national identity and never allowing any representation of itself. Hence, ethnic group-religion or family-ethnic group bonds are not endowed with any special meaning, except as elements constituting the state and the market which they simultaneously acknowledge.

A voyage to the heart of ethnic identity is necessarily an initiatory one,<sup>22</sup> and if one immerses oneself, as I have tried to do, in this cultural universe of varying ranges and amplitudes, one has a direct experience of the close bonds between the economic, religious and political spheres. It makes one wonder about the limits of the ethnic group. The study of social and cultural expressions I carried out from 1992 to 1996 enabled me to identify the ethnic referent as the expression of a form of efficiency adapted to the structuring of broad social exchange networks, whether one speaks of trade, investments or more or less temporary migrations. Nevertheless, the general tendency to state one's identity as essentially different within the national space cannot be interpreted unilaterally in terms of its usefulness in outside exchanges. It also acknowledges the new relationship between private and public domains, which took shape with independence in the social and political functioning of the state.

I have attempted to describe the connection between the economic, political and cultural spheres in order to probe the relationships spawned by the homegrown Mauritian 'free exchange' system, and their influence on the formation of ethnic identities. It has enabled me to consider the question of ethnic relationships as a matter of determining ethnic boundaries. The case of Mauritius raises the question of how a manifold 'indigenusness' emerges from historical events, in the absence of any pre-

22 Ethnic classifications acquired a new set of significations after independence. The character and functioning of the state being as they are, this 'voyage to the heart of ethnic identity' should be understood as a conclusion which will serve as an introduction to the analysis of future social transformations. In this way, we feel we may avoid mistaking effect (ethnic differences) for cause.

viously constituted indigenous reference. That is the central issue in the debate on contemporary Mauritian multi-culturalism.

Suzanne Chazan-Gillig  
CNRS-Universités de Poitiers et de Bordeaux III  
Maison des Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société  
99 Avenue du Recteur Pineau  
86022 Poitiers  
France

Email: [suzanne.chazan@msbs.univ-poitiers.fr](mailto:suzanne.chazan@msbs.univ-poitiers.fr)

## References

- Allen R. 1999. *Slaves, freedmen and indentured labourers in colonial Mauritius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
1983. *Creoles, Indian immigrants and the restructuring of social and economy in Mauritius, 1765-1885*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois.
- Arasaratnam, S. 1986. *Merchants, companies and commerce on the Coromandel coast, 1650-1740*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Arno, T. and Orian, C. 1986. *Ile Maurice, une société multiraciale*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Barbier, J. P. and Véron, B. 1991. *Les zones franches industrielles d'exportation (Haïti, Maurice, Tunisie)*. Paris: Karthala.
- Benedict, B. 1962. 'Stratification in plural societies', *American Anthropologist*, 64: 328-41.
- Berthelot, Lilian. 1991. *Histoire de la Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Maurice*. Port-Louise: La Sentinelle.
- Bissoondoyal, U. and Servansing, S. B. C. 1986. *Indian Labour Immigration*. Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute.
- Bourde de la Rougerie, H. 1934. *Les Bretons aux Iles de France et de Bourbon*. Rennes.
- Bowman, L. W. 1991. *Mauritius. Democracy and development in the Indian Ocean*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Brookfield, H. C. 1958. 'Pluralism and geography in Mauritius', *Geographical Studies* 5, no 1.
- Carter, M. 1993. *Servants, sirdars and settlers. Indians in Mauritius, 1834-74*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Castel, R. 1995. *Métamorphose de la question sociale*. Paris: Fayard.
- Chaudhuri, K. N. 1985. *Trade and civilization in the Indian Ocean. An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chazan-Gillig, S. and Widmer, I. 1999. 'Libre échange et stratégies migratoires dans le contexte de l'indépendance nationale', in *Actes du séminaire de l'Observatoire de Développement Régional (ODR)*: 39-57.
- Dermigny, L. 1957. 'Languedociens et Provençaux aux îles de France et de Bourbon', *Revue historique des colonies*, 369-452.
- Durand, J. P. and J. 1975. *L'île Maurice, quelle indépendance? La reproduction des rapports de production capitalistes dans une formation sociale dominée*. Paris: Anthropos.
- Forest, A. 1995. 'Le Sud-Ouest Aquitain et al révolution française', in Franco Angiolini et Daniel Roche (eds.), *Cultures et formations commerçantes dans l'Europe modernes*, Paris: EHESS.
- Haudrère, P. 1992. *La Bourdonnais marin et aventurier*. Paris: Desjonquières.
1997. *Le grand commerce maritime au dix-huitième siècle*. Paris: SEDES.
- Hein, P. 1997. *L'économie de l'île Maurice*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Lau Thi Keng, J. C. 1991. *Inter-ethnicité et politique à l'île Maurice*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Luyten Joseph, M. 'Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century relationships among Portuguese and Dutch and their reflections in Japan', *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* 11: 979-96.

- Ly Tio Fane, H. 1993. *Ile de France, 1750-1746. L'émergence de Port-Louis*. Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute.
- Martinière G. and Vidal, L. 1997. *Les Européens et la mer au dix-huitième siècle*. Paris: OPHRYS.
- Masson, L. 1945, *L'étoile et la clef*. Paris: Gallimard.
- de Rauville, H. 1889. *L'Isle de France légendaire. Trois légendes de l'Isle de France*. Paris: Challamel.
- Rostow, W. W. 1953. *The process of economic growth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Toussaint, A. n.d. 'Les Lyonnais à l'Île de France, 1721-1810', *Cahiers d'histoire*, 39-58.
- Weber, J. 1996. *Pondichéry et les comptoirs de l'Inde après Duplex*. Paris: Denoël.