



features

Mauritius: Communities of Paradise

by Aileen Familara

Walk down the main streets of Mauritius and one would perceive a striking mixture of peoples. This is a society that has come out of the grindstone of history and emerged with a plethora of ethnicities, cultures, traditions, and religions. This mélange of identities is a source of pride on one hand and a tripping point of tensions on another.

And yet Mauritians would be the first to say that they live in a tolerant society, that people live harmoniously and without fear of hatred because of their colour or religion. Nevertheless, such diversity does have its pockets of discontent that is increasingly being expressed as intolerance, hate and even violence. When the mixture is stirred too much, not all things blend, they boil over.

Where does this much vaunted notion of tolerance and harmony in Mauritian society come from?

Like the spiciness that is the keenest features of its cuisine, Mauritius was cooked from various elements, the major ingredients being colonisation, slavery and immigration.

The islands that comprised Mauritius were dormant volcanic chains occupied only by tropical vegetation and a diversity of fauna including docile land tortoises and flightless birds. Its isolation from major landmasses and its vulnerability to tropical weather made it not viable enough for colonisation, such that half-hearted colonisers saw little reason to stay after beating down the dodos, clearing up the ebony trees and surviving a few cyclones.

Eventually the Dutch were able to set up a colony in the 17th century, bringing in sugarcane and slaves. They seem to have considered this effort a failure, and so abandoned the island in 1710. A few years later, the French took over the island and systematised the slave labour system that powered the sugarcane economy and linked it up to the trading system that connected India, the Arab peninsula and Africa. France also held naval power in the area through its colonies in Reunion and Madagascar.

Slavery was pervasive that it constituted the backbone of Mauritian society under the French. The slaves were taken either from eastern parts of the African continent or Madagascar. This outpost of the French empire was resistant to reform. Whereas in Paris there was already an abolitionist struggle, culminating in a law that abolished slavery in all its forms in 1794, in the colonies, the landowners did not even bother to follow this law. More slaves were brought into the country continuously even until the British took the country by war in 1810. The slaves developed a form of simplified French, stripped of

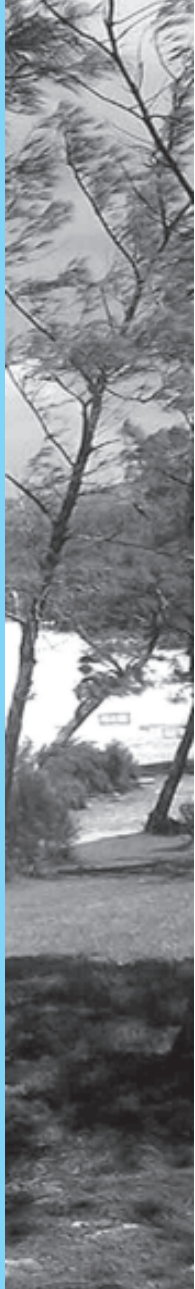
much structure and grammar and borrowing from the languages of the enslaved peoples: Kreol became the common language for the islands in the region.

By the early 1800s, the British had set up a mode of compensation for landowners to give up their slaves. To maintain its economic production, “indentured” labourers were imported initially from China, Malaysia, Africa and Madagascar and then eventually, most labourers were brought in from various parts of the Indian subcontinent. These various peoples brought with them their own practices, belief systems, castes, biases and interests.

Muritians in communal identities, unities and divisions

By the time of independence from the British in 1967, Mauritian society was already stratified and pluralistic. There are Creoles (who are descendants of African slaves), Franco-Muritians (the descendants of white Europeans), people of mixed European and African descent (who are also called Creoles but some who consider themselves white to a greater degree, and who would call themselves Coloured), the people of Indian origin (Indo-Muritian) and the people of Chinese origin (Sino-Muritian).

Slavery was so pervasive that it constituted the backbone of Mauritian society under the French. More slaves were brought into the country continuously even until the British took the country by war in 1810.



Telling Tranquility.
Just like the muffling winds and waves beyond its pristine beaches, Mauritius is simultaneously enriched and challenged by the diversity and differences among its communities.

In photo is the Rodriguez beach by B. Navez from Wikimedia Commons.

The Indo-Mauritians would distinguish themselves by religion, thus there are the Tamils, the Hindus and the Muslims. Some notion of caste is also recognised among the Hindus. In fact, caste becomes visible during election season when political observers note that the leaders of parties seem to come mostly from the dominant caste. Bhojpuri, a mixture of Hindi, French, Pharsi, Chinese among others, was historically the common language among the Indo-Mauritians, but a desire for ethnic pride is rekindling an interest in speaking Hindi among Hindus in Mauritius.

Resentments have festered among the working class Creoles who see the wealth of the Franco-Mauritians as a product of slave labour and should be redistributed.

Oonk (2007) observed that the Indo-Mauritians did not begin to think of themselves as separate Hindi and Muslim communities until 1947, when Muslim-dominated Pakistan was formed out of India. This historical event influenced the thinking of Indian diaspora communities in Mauritius to assert differing identities. Meanwhile, some Hindus are seeking a kind of idealised identity and fostering a kind of extreme Hindu nationalism similar to that which is on the rise in India.

Membership by descent and by religious affiliation in a community is a source of identity for most Mauritians; thus they refer to their own groupings as the Tamil, Hindu and Chinese communities. In terms of identity, the Creoles exist in their own hierarchy of colouredness and mixed ethnicity; they do not necessarily think in terms of a Creole community, and politically they are referred to as the “general population.”

Economic stratification also exists which is linked to ethnicity: Franco-Mauritians are still major landowners and run big industries. Increasingly their ranks are joined by some Indo-Mauritians and Chinese. Resentments have festered among the working class Creoles who still see the wealth of the Franco-Mauritians as a product of slave labour and should be redistributed. Working class Creole sentiment is expressed best in the *sega*, a music that has hybrid characteristics similar to other African diaspora cultural expressions. The government is making an effort to promote a sense of identity among Creoles, through concerts and cultural festivals that look back towards African roots. Meanwhile, Creole leadership has come mostly from the Roman Catholic church. Creoles, Franco-Mauritians and some Sino-Mauritians are mostly Christian, predominantly Roman Catholic.



Segue to the Arts.
Sega, an indigenous music and dance performance in Mauritius is actually based on the struggles of resistance by the Creole people.

Photo by Lonely Planet-Germany from Wikimedia Commons

Communalism becomes a divide-and-conquer tactic when the political parties recruit and field their candidates while reserving a token number of electoral seats for those who were marginal through what is called a “best-loser” system.

“Communalism” is at once a negative word among Mauritians and also an acknowledgement that diversity does not always bring harmony. To be communal is about holding true to the values and traditions of your ethnic or religious grouping. At the same time, being communal also refers to a sense of intolerance, so that one will uphold the rights, values and traditions of one’s own community at the expense of other’s communities.

In the political arena, communalism becomes a divide-and-conquer tactic when the political parties recruit and field their candidates, seemingly employing a calculated sorting to ensure that there would be enough from certain communities to gain the votes while reserving a token number of electoral seats for those who were marginal through what is called a “best-loser” system.

Harmony and sharing, or name calling and hate-mongering?

Mauritians tend to be proud of their cultural diversity. They cite many instances when the various communities exhibit cooperation and harmony.

On religious holidays, people from a community share cakes, join festivities, greet each other: “*Bonne fetel!*” In these instances, a sense of unity falls on the whole island, aided by the rhetoric of the government leaders speaking about multiculturalism and harmony between communities on national television. In the towns, mosques broadcast their daily calls to payer, a few hundred meters away from a colourful Tamil temple, and down the road, the Catholic church rings its bells.

The schools, which are subsidised and regulated by the state, are run by either secular or religious organisations, and yet they enrol children from different communities; a law prevents them from discriminating in favour of children from a specific community.

And yet—there are many words that occur in the Kreol language, many of them used in a derogatory manner:

Nasyon = referring to a Creole

Lascar = referring to a Muslim

Malbar = referring to a Hindu

These words do not arise in polite conversation, except perhaps as banter between friends. However, a scan of online discussion groups show how Mauritians (under the relative anonymity of the Internet) feel free to call each other derogatory names when talking on Mauritian issues. On one discussion group, <<http://www.topix.com/forum/world/mauritus/TBGF18UDHR9H989NM>> some Mauritians (many of whom were apparently not living in Mauritius anymore) were talking about how usually a “malbar” girl would represent the country in the Miss

World contest. Some replies to this post pointed to how the current representative was actually *creole-milat* (mulatto), and then the conversation deteriorates from that point.

At the edge of tolerance – racial and ethnic discontent

The connectivity between intercultural conflict and economic disparity is alluded to by some analysts of Mauritian society: “If poverty hits particular groups within a small multiethnic society, the country runs the risk of having to face diverse forms of conflicts and interculturality becomes threatened. Interculturality can only be real and genuine if social justice prevails, if every citizen is given an equal chance and he or she perceives that this is the case.” (Bunwaree, 2002)

When Mauritians think of race conflict, they can look back to a fairly recent event: the riots that followed the death of the *sega* musician Joseph Reginald Topize, known more popularly as Kaya. A Rastafarian by belief and Creole by ethnicity, Kaya was arrested for participating in a protest calling for the legalisation of marijuana in 1999. He died in prison due to what was widely believed as police brutality. His death galvanised anti-Hindu sentiment and class discontent among working class Creoles, leading to riots in the major towns in February of 1999.

Ethno-religious conflict has not been seen in recent years. However, the media has reported the increasingly questionable and sometimes aggressive actions of a group calling themselves the Voice of Hindu (VOH). Their page on the social networking site Facebook describes their goals as “*All Hindu must be in the same way, to fight our enemy now we have the power in Mauritius we can do as we want we must take control of the world we must be more powerful to*



do this. for that we must join all our Hindu brother to make one force.... (sic).”

Mauritian novelist Lindsey Collen recounted how her own novel *The Rape of Sita* was subjected to censorship for drawing metaphors from Hindu mythology. She also mentioned how some VOH members tried to physically remove a painting on exhibition which had a non-traditional depiction of a Hindu goddess. VOH have been credited with intervening in “mixed marriages” (such as between Hindus and Muslims), and in vocal attacks against media that has been critical of Hindu leadership.

Gender at the intersection of Mauritian ethnicities, religions and classes

Where diversity exists, additional tensions can also occur when new factors enter into a system. For feminist activist and GenderLinks Mauritius director Loga Virahsawmy, the economic successes of Mauritius brings gender problems. She acknowledges that gender inequality differs along cultural lines:

From All Walks of Life.
Although the island nation has relatively managed to pacify conflicts along ethnic and racial lines, the goal of preserving of cultural identity remains strong among various groups.

Photo by Malyn Ando



“There are some women who can go to cinemas, who drive cars but there are some women, who depending on their culture, shouldn’t go out at night, should obey their husbands.

With the opening of the EPZ (export processing zones), women in Mauritius have had the chance to get economic independence, to go and work in industries. But then, men couldn’t accept that their wives had economic independence. They’ve become violent. So violence has become on the rise.”

Conclusion

Mauritius may still outpace any threats of disruption. Many aspects of Mauritian society point towards more unity rather than conflict. Erikse (1998) and Sisisky (2006) cite a few: the smallness of Mauritian society, the pervasive use of Kreol as a shared language, the shared history as immigrants, the

developing meritocracy in the private sector, and greater interaction and intermingling particularly in the younger generation.

However, there are aspects of society that need to be addressed: the feeling of disenfranchisement within the poorer Creoles, the perpetuation of communalist thinking in the political system and the economic and political dominance of certain groups. It is these areas that the Mauritian government has been seeking to address in some programs.

Whether matters come to a boil in Mauritian society depends on how such areas of tension and potential conflict are managed by its leaders and reacted to by its own citizens. ■

Aileen Familara is the former programme coordinator of the community and independent media programme of Isis International. She is married to a Mauritian and working freelance on ICT and media.

Sources and further reading

Oonk, G (Ed.) (2007). Global Indian Diasporas: Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory. University Press: Amsterdam.

Boswell, R. (2006). Le Malaise Créole: Ethnic Identity in Mauritius. URL: http://books.google.com/books?id=gN9K6685BQC&rlq=L+malaise+cr%C3%A9ole+ethnic+identity+in+Mauritius&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=K3pmS-aXG8uHkQW-e-P3nDw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBAQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=&f=false

Hand, F. (nd). “Ene sel le pep ene nasyon: Seggae as a Creole Challenge to Mauritianness.” URL: <http://www.ruc.dk/upload/application/pdf/53728e67/Felicity%20Hand%20paper.pdf>

Erikse, T.H. (1998). Common Denominators: Ethnicity, Nation-building and Compromise in Mauritius. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers.

Collen, L. (2006). “Art for Life and Death.” URL: <http://www.newint.org/columns/letters-from/2006/09/01/art/>.

Bunwaree, S.S. (2002). “Economics, conflicts and interculturality in a small island state: the case of Mauritius.” Polis 9 (Numéro Spécial), 1–19.

Sisisky, C. (2006). “Mauritian Hinduisms and Post-Colonial Religious Pluralism in Mauritius.” URL: <http://pluralism.org/affiliates/sisisky/report.pdf>