

Mauritius: Interethnic relations through rice and rum

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*Eating is not only a vital need,
it is also one of our most intimate relationships to the world.*
(Book cover of *Géopolitique de l'alimentation*)

Abstract

According to Aristotle, Man is by nature a social being. Undeniably, humans have evolved towards a social and cultural behaviour, thus codifying their eating habits; even though human beings have a vital need to eat and drink, as it is the case for animals. Humanity has therefore, developed a form of identity based on food models. In Mauritius, a multicultural and multiethnic society, there are several food models and eating behaviours. Consequently, people can expect either rejection or acceptance from other ethnic groups that share different food behaviours. Nevertheless, rice and curry are no more subject to ethnic categorisation in Mauritius. That situation is true as well for French territories like La Réunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique. Rum is different, for it is more ethnically associated to a particular ethnic group, the Creole. In this paper, I will first study rice as a marker of identity through various recipes and rum as a marker of personal and ethnic identities. I will show their limits of inclusion and exclusion in Mauritian society by focusing on the Mauritians' eating and drinking habits. I will explain how, through food patterns, there is not only a search for unity and acceptance but rejection of Otherness as well. Furthermore, food being closely related to nutrition, I will focus on post colonial and food behaviours in modern period in relation to globalisation. This part will shed lights on global food effects in a multiethnic society.

Key words: rice; rum; Mauritius; unity; inclusion/exclusion

Introduction

Man is by nature a social being. Like for animals, food is vital for human beings as well. Unlike animals though, humans have evolved towards a social and cultural behaviour that codifies their eating habits. Regardless of their evolution and need for food, humans' eating behaviours differ from animals' by their cultural connection. Additionally, humans have developed different eating habits based on their environment, codified by the society they live in. Through the ages, human beings have developed affiliations to particular groups sharing the same dietary behaviour resulting in inclusion to or exclusion from groups sharing or not sharing their eating code. To support group membership, humans have therefore developed a form of identity based on their eating habits. In

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multi-ethnic societies like Mauritius, we expect either rejection or acceptance of Otherness and sometimes it can be mixed behaviour. Audrey Richards (1932) in *Hunger and work in a savage tribe: a functional study of nutrition among the Southern Bantu*. and Guthe and Mead (1945) in their article entitled *Manual for the Study of Food Habits*. were the first to analyse food through the anthropological discipline (de Garine 2001). They studied it through *food habits, the ways in which individuals or groups of individuals, in response to the social and cultural pressures, choose, consume and bring some parts of present food supply*. (Guthe and Mead 1945, 3) (ibid.).

Before dealing with the issues of rice and rum in Mauritius, here are some facts about this country. It is a small island of 2,040 sq. km with a population of about 1.313.095, according to the July 2011 census, thus ranking 18th on the global scale in population density. This represents around 630 inhabitants per square kilometre (CIA World Fact Book 2012). As a result, even if Mauritius has succeeded recently to cultivate rice, and is even thinking of exporting it to Europe and the US, this country is far from being self-sufficient in producing all the rice needed by its population to survive (Prosper 2012). It depends a lot, if not entirely, on imports to feed its population. However, since all Mauritians depend on rice to survive, this staple food can become a marker of unity among the various ethnic groups. While rice can be an element of unity; rum has boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in that multi-ethnic society. And with nowadays globalisation of food modes, have Mauritians kept the same eating habits as their ancestors? Probably not, they must be following the trend. Do all Mauritians share the same kind of food or drink? Is there a dish that all will share regardless of their ethnic group? Is there an inclusion or an exclusion of Otherness through the consumption of particular food and drink? Relating food to nutrition, we may infer that the dietary patterns have changed throughout the centuries, which include the colonial and post-colonial periods, but also today. Consequently, what is the impact of the new mode of eating, if there is one, on a multi-ethnic country like Mauritius? How is the relationship of Mauritians with food and culture now; and is there a possibility to create unity in the Mauritian society today or will the consumption of rum generate a split among the ethnic groups?

This work is based on qualitative and quantitative methods. I focused my research on interviews, as well as anonymous polls, which include specific questions on the consumption of rum and rice, through observations from conducted fieldworks on several visits to Mauritius. In my observations, I targeted people of all ethnic groups, residing in each part of the island either on the coastal parts or inside, from north to south, in rural and urban areas.

To understand the importance of rice and rum in the life of the Mauritians today I studied the historical backgrounds of rice and rum from their origins, in the island and worldwide. Regarding the origins of rice, it was quite easy to trace back its route in Mauritius, history books are replete with information on the subject. I noticed that it was very difficult however to find reliable information on the history of rum in Mauritius. The Mauritian rum industries trace the history of this beverage, but it may sometimes be biased because it is used to promote the product first. As a result, several history books were needed to find information. There is one academic book devoted to the history of rum though, I could trace back the general history of rum in other colonies, but with regards to the history of rum in Mauritius, there was not much significant material.

My working hypothesis is to show that, through food, especially rice, all Mauritians are united and accept Otherness; but that drink is more associated to individuals or to a particular ethnic group and that consuming certain variety of rum is class-bound.

Hence, I first studied rice as a people's marker of identity and rum as an individual marker of identity along with inclusion and exclusion. I analysed the relationship between food and culture, from nature to culture, and the degree of inclusion and exclusion through rice and rum in Mauritius. Finally, in relation to nutrition, I studied colonial and postcolonial food modes and the consequences of modern eating behaviour. I studied the positive and negative effects, the consequences, of modern eating habits in a multi-ethnic country.

Rice: a people's marker of unity

Rice has long been adopted by all the ethnic groups in Mauritius. We may say that this is obvious, since it might have been brought to Mauritius by Asians, for they represent 58% of the population today. And if you go to Mauritius, no matter which Mauritian food you would choose to consume, almost all will be accompanied with rice. Rice is with almost every dish, in Hindu's and Tamil marriages for example. To celebrate any happy moments in the life of Mauritians, there is the perennial rice along with meat, fish, dried beans or vegetables. This is because at first sight it seems that there is no proper Mauritian food since all recipes were brought from elsewhere by the colonisers, the free settlers or the slaves, because Mauritius has no indigenous people, hence no Mauritian cuisines inherited from ancient time. As a result, little by little Mauritians started to mix ingredients, which might have given hybrid food, in other words, a mixture of various ethnic groups' food set into one. Here are four most popular dishes according to a survey that I carried out in June 2011 during my visit to Mauritius. I chose 23 people from different ethnic groups, different social status and different class:

- "Briani" comes first in the poll and I could observe during lunch time at the grand bazaar in Port-Louis, the capital city, that no matter which ethnic group this is a dish that people would choose most. It is said to be of Pakistani origin and it is a mixture of ingredients like rice which is cooked in, along with potatoes which are dipped in various spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, coriander, the meat or fish is also dipped in the spices before being fried. Then, all the ingredients are gathered and cooked for an hour or so.
- Then there is the "brèdes" which are plants growing out of some kind of eatable roots like the chayotte, but also pumpkin plants. Mauritians would cook it in oil to make a broth or a stew. Then, they would eat "brède" with dholl, which is a variety of dried beans, or lentils or meat or fish and coconut or tomato chutney, but always accompanied with rice.
- The third is the "bol renversé", but unfortunately, it is not served in a lot of restaurants because it is too expensive to prepare, hence not enough profit-making, according to the restaurateurs. This dish may be seen as a hybrid dish. It is made of various ingredients like Chinese sausages, various vegetables such as carrots, "Chinese brède" or "brède sinwa", mushrooms, and also with shrimps, meat –chicken or beef – and to meet the vegetarian demand meat is replaced by soybeans. There is also an egg at the top of the dish. It is called

“bol renversé” because all the ingredients are cooked together in soya sauce, except for the rice and egg which are cooked separately; then they are put in a bowl with the egg at the bottom, the mixed ingredients come after then the rice is at the top of the bowl. The idea is to reverse the bowl on a plate and that is why it is called “bol renversé”.

- The fourth one is all kinds of meat cooked in curry or tomato sauce accompanied with rice. There are also vegetables cooked in curry sauce, for example for Hindu's or Tamil's marriage where they serve seven sorts of vegetables cooked in curry on the eve of the ceremony. But all the vegetables are eaten with rice. Even though Mauritians would eat pasta sometimes or “dholl puri” or “chapatti”, yet rice is definitely their staple diet.

However, Mauritius is not the only former colony where rice and curry are not ethnic or class bound, it is the case as well for former colonies like Guadeloupe, Martinique and La Réunion. And it might be interesting to point out that the former Creole food mode – cassava (dish called Katkat Maniok), sweet potato (dish called patat bwi), black pudding, fried ox blood etc. – seems to have disappeared in favour of a more “Indian” kitchen. This is especially true for cassava and sweet potato which are replaced by rice. The trend is similar in the Antilles. However, there is still typical creole dishes such as rugaj lamori, salmi kanar, sos blas susu , etc.

But how has rice become a factor of unity in all former colonies? A brief history of this staple food may help to understand.

A brief history of rice: from nature to culture

Rice culture seems to have been adopted more than 6500 years ago... (El Haloui-Deléglise 2004). The first crop appeared in China 5000 years before our era. It appeared in Thailand around 4500 BC, and later in Cambodia, Viet Nam and South India. [...] Rice spread in the Middle East and was brought to Greece by Alexander the Great (Ibid). It was later introduced in Spain by the Moors, that is, in the mid-15th century, then in Italy and in France by adventurers. By the end of the time of discoveries, it could be found on all continents. The African species spread from its original home, the Delta of Niger, to Senegal between 1500 and 800 BC, but had never undergone development away from its area of origin (El Haloui-Deléglise 2004). Its culture had even declined in favour of the Asian species, which was introduced on the African continent by the Arab caravans coming from the East coast between the 7th and the 10th century (Teelock, Vijayalakshmi 2009, 2). So, Rice became more and more important especially in a successful settlement either in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere as it is shown in the following example. During the Dutch period in Mauritius, Madagascar was a rice-producing country in the Indian Ocean, as a marine, van der Stel travelled to Madagascar to buy slaves to supply Mauritius. It is said that having learned his lesson during his previous trips, he also bought rice from the Malagasy king to avert any possible lack of food, because he knew by experience that a successful settlement depend on enough food, rice, to be able to survive (Ibid, 37). Furthermore, during the French period, rice along with coffee and maize were also several means of exchange for slaves (Ibid, 53).

Today, in Mauritius, when you are asked if you want to eat, it implies eating rice with something else.

However, rum, which had also been a means of exchange for slaves, is quite different from rice as far as culture is concerned as it is shown in a brief history of this beverage.

A brief history of rum

Rum is closely related to the European settlement in the Americas and to the Triangular Trade, as it is the case for rice (Huetz de Lempis 1997, 7). However, rice was, and is still, necessary for people's survival unlike rum, which was seen as a trivial good before becoming a luxury good. As a result, this shift in the status of rum brought considerable change in its production along with that of sugar. Hence, sugar cane production spread like dragged powder across all colonies not for the sole purpose of producing sugar as originally but for the main purpose of producing rum. This was a general phenomenon whether it was in French, Dutch or British colonies elsewhere and in the Indian Ocean including Mauritius (Ibid). At the beginning rum was not consumed by noble families. It was reserved to sailors and slaves (Ibid). That is probably what makes it keep this negative connotation in Mauritius today, even though it had gained its title of nobility back from the period of slavery, just like it had been the case for cognac and whiskey. Rum also used to represent a valuable gift among the colonisers, the slave owners (Huetz de Lempis 1997, 7). However, it is commonplace now to say "rum" but I found that it is difficult to determine the precise origin of this name. It is said that sugar cane originated from Asia and was introduced by Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean in the late 15th century and that rum appeared in the 16th century, after the so-called "discovery" of the Americas. But history did not say whether, what I call the blood of the cane, which is rum, was named in Asia, in the Americas or in the Caribbean (Huetz de Lempis 1997, 7). Distillation started in Europe in the 14th century and was learnt from the Arabs. The first distillation was known as "aqua vitae", eau de vie, by Arnaud de Villeneuve, a professor at the University of Montpellier at the beginning of the 14th century because it was used only in the preparation of medicine (Ibid, 14). Later, rum was also called eau de vie, probably because it was exchanged for people, slaves, hence for life; but it was also called grog by sailors, probably because it was used to cure scurvy (Ibid, 20). Towards the end of the 18th century, the trend seemed to turn to monoculture in some colonies including Mauritius, which was then in its French period and was thus known by the name of *Isle de France*. Subsequently sugar production became the number-one agriculture there. It was also because attempts to cultivate other crops like rice had failed. Still in that period, due to the war in America for independence, the importation of European alcohol such as wine and calvados fell. In the 1790s sugar production decreased, not the plantation of sugar cane, as most of the refineries were producing arack, which is an inferior category of rum. In 1789, arack production had taken over the production of sugar and refined rum, because it was cheaper to produce and also because the increase in the slave trade between 1786 and 1794 left little time to produce rum (Teelock 2009, 88).

What about rum consumers and other alcoholic beverage in Mauritius today?

Rum consumers today in Mauritius

According to polls, rum is no longer meant only for sailors, but it still bears a negative connotation sometimes.

The Muslims respondents from Port-Louis, the capital, and Quatre-Bornes, a city in the centre of Mauritius, would not drink it at all for obvious reason, their religion forbids the consumption of alcoholic drink, but two among the Muslim respondents said that at times they would drink rum. Four Hindus and three Tamils of different social media said that they drink rum sometimes but they prefer whiskey by far. In both Creole families who invited me to share their dinner, I could observe that rum streamed. However, not all members of the family would drink the beverage and they told me that poor Creoles would drink bad wine or arack while Creoles, who can afford it, would prefer refined rum, whiskey and *good wine from South Africa*. The Chinese like to drink a rice-based alcoholic drink, but they seem to have no preference; they consume wine, rum and whiskey. The Whites, from European descendants, prefer high range rum, which they produce themselves as it used to be during the French period; they also consume champagne and French wine, everything that would remind them of France, since they consider themselves more French than Mauritian. Consequently, we can say that Mauritians are not so fond of rum, that they consume this beverage reasonably.

Rum as an individual and ethnic marker of identity

However a subgroup of Creoles known as the Rastas, are said to be heavy rum drinkers. In his book Father Alain Romaine debunked that idea, saying that it is merely one of the generally accepted ideas linked to the status of some categories of Creoles in the Mauritian society. Rastas are despised because they are from the lower class, if not the lowest. What I observed was that they were happy people, not aggressive at all. But, they are despised because of poor behaviour they have when they are drunk and this is closely linked to rum. Furthermore, as they claim to perpetuate the lineage of the Maroons and the slaves² who did drink the arack to endure or to escape from the hardships of their situation, one may wonder whether they are not in fact reproducing the same pattern to be able to bear their current situation of excluded group from the Mauritian society. Thus, the consumption of rum is an element of exclusion for the Rastas by other Creoles and the other ethnic groups altogether. Nevertheless, Mr. Vadivelloo, a social worker I interviewed told me that alcoholism is not only linked to the Rastas but also to the social evil called poverty and that it touches people of any ethnic groups living in poor places, in some suburbs of Port Louis, the capital, for example. People would over drink arack, the cheapest alcoholic drink like an attempt to drown their despair. I asked him which ethnic group is most affected by this situation, and I later asked the same question to Ms Ismahan Ferhat, head of a NGO dealing with street children issues; their answer was identical: “the Creole”. I first hypothesised that rum was linked to a particular ethnic group, a minority group, or rather a particular subgroup, and this answer validate my hypothesis because over drinking arack is certainly linked to poverty but poverty is particularly, to a great extent, linked to the Creoles. Finally, we can say that from the period of colonisation until now the consumption of rum has evolved but it is also the case with the Mauritian eating habits.

2 They are the only Creoles to claim their status loudly.

Colonial and postcolonial food modes

It was a little bit of an adventure to find information concerning the eating habits of the first settlers, but that is what makes the search so fascinating. First I read in Jean Claude de l'Estrac's book that long before the arrival of the Dutch, the Portuguese had dropped pigs, goats and cattle they brought from Madagascar, as well as monkeys they are very fond of (de l'Estrac 2007, 21). Then, in Amédé Nagapen's book we can read that as early as 1639, under the administration of Adriaan van der Stel, the Dutch introduced, from Java, deer, livestock (cattle, goats, pigs), volatiles (chickens, geese, ducks, pigeons), and of course sugar cane to extract the arack (Nagapen 1996, 9). So we can hypothesise that the first settlers later ate the meat and obviously fish and sea turtles around the island. We also learnt that the Dutch brought rice from Madagascar to the island, though it was not produced in Mauritius. Subsequently, during their settlement the French introduced fruit trees and developed the culture of pineapple (de l'Estrac 2007, 59). Therefore, everything suggests that the eating mode during the colonial period was based on rice, fresh and dried meat along with the Dodos which became extinct during the Dutch colonisation. This food fashion continued throughout the period of colonisation, but from testimonies of elder people we learn that during World War II, rice became scarce and had to be rationed because the ships carrying this product were torpedoed. It was rationed until the 1970s. Hence, rice became a luxury food and the rationed-rice was sometimes of poor quality. Thus, during that period only people who could afford it would buy good quality rice which was very expensive.

However, with the advent of the refrigerator and refrigerated ships, Mauritians were able to eat more diversified food thanks to the import of fresh product, but it was also possible for Mauritius to export its fresh products. This caused the radical turn in the Mauritian eating modes.

Consequences of modern eating behaviour in Mauritius

Indeed, today, Mauritians' food modes, as it is for the rest of the world, have diversified, modified. Today people eat for pleasure, no more for survival. They gather in the newly built mall to share a good time eating with friends or families, they eat without being hungry. But there is also the fact that there are vendors selling "dholl puri" or fruit macerated in vinegar and sugar at every corner of the streets in big cities, compelling people to buy and consume. As a result, people would eat all the time outside the eating hours that is breakfast, lunch and dinner. Mauritians have more or less left the physiological motivation if we consider Maslow's pyramid concerning the hierarchy of needs. Now eating is linked to love/belonging. And along with that change there are the various issues linked to that social phenomenon. Indeed, in 2004, 40% Mauritians of over 30 years old were obese and one in five suffered from diabetes. A study from the Ministry of Health in Mauritius shows that 43% of the population aged between 25-74 years is obese, 21% suffer from diabetes and 38% suffer from hypertension (Ackbarally 2004). Mauritians love eating foods which are salty and fatty, and above all there is a lack of parental authority, which leads children to eat anything at any time. But not only children, adults would eat at any time as well. As a result, children following their guides, their parents or teachers, cannot act differently. Several people in various medical professions including Dr. Pugo-Gunsam, who is lecturer at the University of

Mauritius, Dr. Aneef Yearroo, a cardiologist, Tony Evenor, a nutritionist, all of them deal either with or study diseases closely related to malnutrition, agree that this situation is due to the new purchasing power of Mauritians today which pushes them to buy more and richer food and to pay for comfortable cars, so they don't need to walk and therefore they lack physical exercises. This new way of life leads to obesity but also to diabetes. And they all agree to say that these new illnesses are linked to :

the low or average income, our predispositions, but also because of the shortcomings in education and appropriate preventive measures. Also the psychological, physiological, socio-economic and organic factors are involved in obesity: factors like stress, fear, anxiety, the level of education, the understanding of the messages passed, culture, taste, pleasure linked to the purchasing power. Mauritians would sometimes eat against all rationality as a form of compensation against stress. It is not only the fried cakes eaten at school canteens that are responsible for the high prevalence of overweight among young children... (Kalla 2011).

But this situation of rampant obesity does not concern only Mauritius. Still, according to a survey, for some Mauritians, even today, being fat means being wealthy.

Consequences of modern eating behavior worldwide

A WHO Fact sheet of 2008 shows that more than a billion of adults aged 20 years and over were overweight worldwide, including 200 million men and almost 300 million women. 65% of the world's population lives in countries where being overweight kills more than famine. More than 40 million children under five years old were overweight in 2010 (WHO 2012). Without any doubt, we can say that this is an alarming situation for the world and for Mauritius as well.

Conclusion

Rice has long been and is still the staple diet of Mauritians. At certain periods in the history of Mauritius rice turned into a luxury food, when there was the shortage during World War II. Even if rice was once linked to slavery, it was considered as noble because it helped for the survival of human kind. Whereas, rum is linked to a darker period of the history of the island with the Triangular Trade, thus it creates exclusion of some groups of the population. Now, the eating habits of the Mauritians as well as that of the world are changing. The economic achievements of this piece of land, leading it to be called the *Tiger of the African continent*, might be drifting Mauritius towards a pandemic situation of obesity and diabetes. Nevertheless, in modern Mauritius, all Mauritians today have to fight against obesity and diabetes as one people as one nation, no ethnic group is spared from this scourge since almost all Mauritians love sugar, and for a good reason, as this once led the island to the top of the African economic world and sugar was once given as compensation to workers in sugar cane industries. Sugar production means rum production, will Mauritians feel pride some day as a rum producer country – for they are successfully exporting it today – without relating it to some historical negative connotations? Will the common battle against these health issues – obesity and diabetes – unite all Mauritians in a same momentum to save their children, thus saving their future?

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