Mauritius: Culture Crossings and its Consequences

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ABSTRACT
Mauritius has been crossed by a wide variety of cultures from the inception of its population through the present. As a result of the waves of different peoples, and therefore, cultures, crossing the island, Mauritius now houses a multicultural “rainbow” population. However, the cultures in place are not given equal social statuses. The status of each culture depends on the way in which each group’s ancestors arrived on the island. Some groups came to Mauritius on their own accord, while others were brought to the island by force as slaves. Currently, peoples sharing different ancestral cultures cohabit Mauritius. Nevertheless, the slaves' descendants, mostly the Creoles, inherited the culture of their “masters” and at the same time embodied the Mauritian culture. Indeed, having been ripped from their African or Malagasy culture, they have adopted parts of the other groups’ cultures and have created a culture of their own. This paper proposes to study briefly the place of each culture in Mauritius and to explore the consequences of culture crossings.

Introduction
A Member of the Commonwealth since its independence in 1968, Mauritius is currently known as the “Rainbow Island.” From the point of view adopted, it either underwent or benefited from several settlements, which have led to the building of a multicultural society. The cultures present on this island is an example of what Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote in “Race and History” (1952): “no culture is unique: it is always given in coalition with other cultures, and this is what allows it to build cumulative series.” Each settlement left an imprint on Mauritius, both cultural and human. These imprints were often permanent, as evidenced by today’s cosmopolitan society.

Problems
Because the island has been alternately, a Dutch colony, then a French colony, and a British colony until its independence, modern “Mauritian culture,” its history and language have been influenced by both colonisers and non-colonisers; the latter being Africans, Europeans, Malagasies, Indians and Chinese. Today, we find that the brief presence of the Dutch shaped Mauritius geographically and ecologically; leaving heritage such as the name, “Mauritius” as well as some places’ names around the island. Dutch colonists also shaped Mauritius through the introduction or destruction of certain animal species like the Dodo. France and England left significant parts of their respective cultures and peoples. India and China offered the island a part of their population. Africa is no exception, as it was the origin of the island’s slave population, some of whom crossed a continent and an ocean,
bringing what remained of their culture of origin. This reminds us of what Edgar Morin wrote in “Le paradigme perdu” (1979) – “the destructive whirlwind of history sweeps all cultures, shatters them and disperses spores.”

From the nickname ‘Rainbow Island’, we may infer that the different cultures, which once crossed the island, are still present in modern Mauritius. How do the various cultures relate to one another in modern Mauritius? Are the relations harmonious or conflictual? Which group can embody the “Mauritian culture”?

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**An Outline of What Will be Discussed in this Article**

To understand the culture crossings in today’s Mauritius, I will first try to understand the concept of culture through the maze of definitions. The parts of culture in Mauritius I will focus on are religions, which are of the utmost importance in this post-colonial, post-independent society, and toponymy, through some place names, and languages to a lesser degree. Based on interviews conducted in 2008, 2011 and 2012, primarily with the Rasta’s President, representing the “culture” of the slaves, the voiceless group, as well as on the works of some Mauritian and foreign historians, this paper will first focus on the colonists’ cultural legacies in Mauritius and the culture crossings today. All this will give us the opportunity to analyse their evolution through a brief study of inclusion and exclusion among groups that live on the island. In the third and last part, I will study the Mauritian Creoles, a group that is a compendium of these multiple cultures, based entirely on field observation and interview’s analyses.

**General Definition of Culture(s) and in Mauritius**

According to the Online Oxford Dictionary, ‘culture’, which came directly from Latin cultura, was first linked to “growing” and “cultivation of the soil”. Then, in the early 16th century, the sense shifted to that of “cultivation of the mind, faculties or manners”. In the 20th century popular culture, it relates to “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively”. However, it has been shown that the concept of ‘culture’ is hard to define, it is almost undefinable. This is the reason that there have been, and still are, countless attempt to establish a fixed definition. Hence, in 1952, two American Social Anthropologists, L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, wrote in “Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and definitions”, that there were 164 definitions of the concept so far; and it has increased constantly since then. This paper will not go through all these definitions but will instead only condense them as for example:

> Culture consists of patterns of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional [= historically derived and selected] ideas and especially their attached values” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:35)

1 [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture#culture__3](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture#culture__3)
In the Mauritian context, all the groups can transmit the symbols of their ancestral cultures to their descendants. However, this is not true for some sub-groups of Creoles whose ancestors lost their culture during the period of slavery. At the same time, there is a situation of culture crossings in Mauritius but with very few cultural mixings such as through intercultural marriages.

**The History of Culture Crossings in Mauritius: Colonial Legacies**

Geographically, Mauritius is situated in the Indian Ocean, the smallest ocean in the world, yet this region is said to contain the largest variety of populations and cultures (Teelock 2009:1). Hence, the region is like a mirror to the island. Jean-Louis Delbende, prospector for tour operators, wrote in the special edition of Geo Magazine dated 14th October 2009 devoted to Mauritius that the island was the “world in miniature”. To define Mauritius today and to understand how such a small area contains such a large cultural legacy, we have to focus on some important historical events.

**Some Historical Facts**

From a historical point of view, it has not been clearly established who visited Mauritius before the first human settlement. The island had never had any indigenous population. Based on clay tablets allegedly discovered by the Dutch, some Historians like Patrick Joseph Barnwell and August Toussaint stated that the first people to have set foot in Mauritius were the Phoenicians 2500 years ago (Teelock 2009:21-23). However, another Historian, Hazareesingh, claimed that the Dravidian sailors were the first to visit Mauritius for the obvious reason that India is not far from the island (Teelock 2009:21-23). Other Historians would say that the Malayans discovered the island because it was on their way from Malaysia to Madagascar. While for other Historians, it was either Malayan or Chinese sailors, who visited Mauritius first. Considering what French Historian and Anthropologist, Nathan Wachtel, wrote in “La vision des vaincus” about history written from the point of view of those who have the power, we may infer that the Mauritian historians put forward that their ancestors’ fellow compatriots first visited the island. We may also deduce that it is a disguised way of affirming the legacy of Mauritius. Hence, there is no reference to Africans visiting Mauritius first, which would have been logical, if we consider the distance from South-Eastern-Africa, or even South Africa, to Mauritius.

**The Dutch Legacies**

However, the first known settlers were the Dutch. They brought their culture through the name of the island, in honour of the Stathouder, Maurits van Nassau. They also named several places in the island, like the mountain Pieter Both, Plaine Wilhems, Flacq, Wolmar or Flic-en-Flac as shown on the map (see Figure 1). The other colonisers did not change the names of these places, except for “Mauritius”, which became Isle de France during the French period. They also left sugar-cane and other crops cultivations. There are no other traces of the Dutch culture in Mauritius, but when they left in 1710, they did not take back the Maroon slaves (fugitives) originated from Africa and Asia, who built a culture of their own before the following colonisation.

**The French Legacies**

When the French took over Mauritius/Isle de France in 1715, they became the craftsmen of culture crossings. Indeed, they brought in their own culture, which they imposed on the slaves they
brought with them, destroying the latter’s ancestral cultures. The biggest legacy from the French is the economic development of the island, but they developed and imposed their culture through literature – poems and novels, the best known being “Paul et Virginie”. The slaves were taken from different parts of Africa and Madagascar, but also from the French colony next door, La Reunion, known at that time as Ile Bourbon, so that they could not communicate. This was a strategy of the masters to preclude any revolts. The slaves did find a way to communicate among themselves by mixing their ancestral language to that of their masters’ language. Perhaps they also used body language. Nevertheless, the mixing of languages gave birth to a pidgin, which has continued to evolve and enrich itself with the crossings of other cultures. Today, it is called “Kreol Morisien” and it is spoken by 99% of the Mauritians. According to a Mauritian linguist I interviewed, this language contains around 90% of French words.

The slaves were also forcibly christened upon their arrival in Mauritius. Hence, it was what Mauritian historian, Jocelyn Chan Low, called a “cultural genocide.” However, we later discovered that the African cultures did not disappear completely. According to Rasta’s president I interviewed, fragments of their cultures did survive, through music, for example, where the slaves would sing in order to lament their poor lives. Today, this music is part of the Mauritian culture. This new type of music, which derived from the African cultures, became known as the “sega”. The Maroon slaves also transmitted fragments of their African cultures to their descendants through the religious cult, which is still practised today, although it was, and still is, condemned by the Catholic Church. According to people I interviewed, this cult is called “longanis” in the Mauritian Kreol language. During that same period, sailors from several parts of the world passed through Mauritius on their way to or from the British Indian Empire. Under the French rules, Chinese people migrated to Mauritius and brought their cultures along with them. To this day, their descendants have maintained their cultural heritage, through their language and some specific cults.

The British Legacies

More cultures crossed Mauritius when the British took over the island. This was the last colonisation of Mauritius, but not the last culture crossings, for the new owners of the island abolished slavery in 1835 and brought in Indentured labourers from India. By that time, the cultural landscape of the island was already fairly diversified. The French colonisers were allowed to stay on the island and to keep their culture – their religion, Roman Catholicism, and their language. History has it that the British did not favour the French. According to a Historian I interviewed, it was just because the British did not want Mauritius as a place to settle. The island was only a place where they could fill their boats with water and food on their way to and from India. La Reunion was less important to the British than was Mauritius because it was easier to have boats anchor around Mauritius than around La Reunion. This colonial religion, Roman Catholic, is still one of the main religions on the island. French language is also extensively used in Mauritius today, although the people are bilingual or sometimes multilingual. However, the language, which is widely used nowadays, at school, in public and private administrations along in most of the road signs, is English, although not all Mauritians master this language. One of the other British legacies is that Mauritians drive on the left.

2 Famous novel written during the French colonisation, giving quite an idealistic and conqueror views of the slaves’ situation in the colony.
3 Creole is often spelt “kreol”, in the local Mauritian language. Hence, when I refer to the kreol language, I use “Mauritian Kreol” only. There is sometimes a difference in meaning between the two spellings of “Creole”. “Creole” refers to a specific community in Mauritius, whereas “kreol” can refer either to the community or to the language spoken by almost all Mauritians.
The Indians’ Arrivals

The result of several waves of Indians’ immigration caused the cultures to be even more diversified and the population to increase. In fact, these new comers caused a disruption among the existing groups. At the time of abolition, there were 66,613 slaves, who were freed. About 15,000 to 20,000 were already free or Maroons (Nagapen 1996:69). The newly freed slaves included 26,830 agricultural slaves – who worked specifically for the sugar cane production; 7,594 other agricultural slaves; 22,275 domestic slaves – who worked as servants inside the Whites’ houses; 7,612 children under the age of 16; 2,302 old and disabled slaves (Nagapen 1996:69). Most of the Indian labourers that arrived in Mauritius in very large numbers would never return to India. Only 169,693 out of 453,036 Indians, who came as Indentured labourers to Mauritius, from 1835 to 1910, went back to India after completing their contracts (Nagapen 1996:72). According to historians, around one and a half million of Indians fled from poverty on “Overcrowded Barracoon” (Naipaul 1994, cover) towards other British colonies and almost a third of these immigrants were brought to Mauritius by the British. This might be explained by the fact that geographically Mauritius is close to India. However, this large number of immigrants dramatically changed the life of the existing population on the island.

Indentured Labourers and Slaves: Some Differences in Mauritius

The slaves were taken by force from the African continent with different cultures. It was almost the same thing for the Indentured labourers, but unlike the slaves, they were allowed to keep their cultures and their family names. They were paid, though not enough for the work done, according to some of their descendants interviewed. Some people argue that Indentured Labour was a disguised and new form of slavery. They were, however, freed at the end of their contract. This is not meant to quantify or to compare the suffering between slavery and indentured labour, which is, of course, non-quantifiable, but it is meant to show the results of this historical situation on their descendants. The indentured labourers came from several parts of India. Henceforth, these different cultures would come across each other without being widely mixed with the former cultures on the island. The Hindus were the first to create the system of community in Mauritius. They also developed schools known as “baitka”, to teach their ancestral languages and other aspects of their culture to their descendants. Some historians said that it was the beginning of protectionism, thus the beginning of communitarianism.

Culture Crossings Evolution: Inclusion and Exclusion

Mauritius has a multicultural, “rainbow” population, viewed from the outside as a model of peace and harmony among different cultures, who live so close to one another and share such a small area. However, from polls carried out on the island and from some events, one may infer that this idealistic image serves only to attract tourism, which is the foundation of the island’s economy.

Debunking the Idealistic Image

Polls indicate that Mauritian does not know each other’s cultures thoroughly. There is a lack of cultural education at school and among the population. However, there is the “School of Human Values” which is led by the Roman Catholic Church, the former colonisers’ religion, and members

4 École des valeurs.
of each of the other groups. This “school” is meant to teaching tolerance through the knowledge of the other groups’ cultures. The board members of the school designed textbooks containing several exercises, stories and role-plays for each level of secondary school students for them to get to know the other cultures. According to three of the members I interviewed, this “school” is a new project designed to encourage secondary school teachers to use their textbook to study all the cultures, present in Mauritius, in class. It has not given the expected results so far. However, they are all optimistic because most of the members worked with children and strongly believed that school is the ideal place to teach tolerance, to have each group to know one another and to reduce communitarianism and derogatory ideas on each other’s group.

**Derogatory Ideas**

There are derogatory ideas that each culture holds about the other cultures. The main pejorative ideas among the groups concern religion, where each group believes that their religion is better than the other’s religion. For example, Catholics would say that Chinese religion and Hindu religion are both devilish. The latter would accuse the Creoles of lacking culture and practicing their former masters’ religion. This idea was underpinned by a controversial article published in August 2012 in a Mauritian newspaper, *Le Défi*, entitled “Why are Creoles a problem” 5, written by Darlmah Naeck6. In the same year 2012, there was a young Hindu woman, who uploaded racist statements on her Facebook page against the Muslim community. She later argued that she did not mean to attack this religion/ community. She married a Muslim, and she decided to convert into her husband religion. Some people believed her statements racists and other people from her own community commented her statements positively and there were many “likes” on her Facebook page7. The Mauritian Justice condemned her, and this specific Facebook page was shut down. However, the fact that she attacked a community reinforces the feelings of uneasiness some tourists perceived among the population and which they testified during interviews.

**Discrimination through Words**

Hence, culture, especially religion, is a way through which each group tries to hurt the other. At the same time, culture is a way of inclusion, for example, through music. The Mauritian music is the sega and the instruments are from all the ethnic groups. However, sega is mainly sung by the Creoles. One of them tried to make this cultural element a way to unite Mauritians from all groups, transforming it into an element of inclusion. His stage name was Kaya and he created a new type of music, which he named “seggae”. It is a mix of Mauritian sega and the reggae. It is a way of reuniting Mauritius, or even more so, to reunite Mauritian Creoles of African descent to Africa, their ancestral land. Unfortunately, this peacemaker was allegedly beaten to death by police officers while he was imprisoned in 1999. Interviewees said that police officers are mostly from the Hindu ethnic group. It has now been proven through the “Truth and Justice Commission”8 report, released in 2012, and by

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5 The original title was: “Pourquoi les Créoles posent problème”
6 http://lescreoles.blogspot.fr/ (15 June 2014)
8 The Truth and Justice Commission is tasked to undertake an inquiry into the legacy of slavery and indentured labour in Mauritius. The commission also has the responsibility to determine appropriate measures to be extended to descendants of slaves and indentured labourers, and to investigate complaints of the dispossession of land. The Mauritius Truth and Justice Commission is unique in that it deals with socio-economic class abuses and attempts to cover more than 370 years (1638–present), the longest period that a truth commission has ever attempted to cover. […] The mandate foresees a commission of five members. Four members are nationals, while the current chair, Alex Boraine, is a citizen of South Africa and the former deputy chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (http://www.usip.org/publications/truth-commission-mauritius, 25 June 2014). As a comparison, since the chair for the Truth Commission in
field investigations that there is tension between Hindus and Creoles. This report also put forward that there is discrimination, mainly from the former against the latter. This situation between the two groups is underpinned by Mr. Naeck’s article stigmatising the Creoles. The latter are probably a problem for the Hindus, since a Hindu journalist wrote the article. Many Creoles reacted against this article in order to defend their group, but it has increased the tension between these two groups. Some Hindus said in interviews that the article put into words what many Hindus think about Creoles. Fortunately, not all Hindus think that way as Rada Gungaloo, who denounced the corruption among the Hindus politicians, which leads to stigmatisations of the Creoles, shows it in another article.

“Noubann” versus “zot bann”

During my field investigation, I met a Political Scientist, who told me that she had been studying a phenomenon known as “noubannism” in Mauritius for quite a long period. This word is a Mauritian Kreol neologism for communalism. It can be understood as follows:

“Nou” meaning “us” and “bann” meaning “group”. “Zot” is the Mauritian kreol’s way to say “them”. Hence, there is the opposition between “us” and “them”. This is the Mauritian way for each group to include people belonging to the same culture and to exclude those, who do not belong to their culture. In a manifesto for the 21st century, British sociologist, John Urry writes about ‘belonging’ as “a new sociology of flows to replace the sociology of ‘territory’”. He argues that ‘belonging’ “almost always involve(s) diverse forms of mobility. He adds that people dwell in and through being at home and away, through the dialectic of roots and routes” (Urry 2002:1). In the Mauritian’s situation, home is now the island but the cultures come from different roots and routes, as we showed briefly at the beginning of this text. There are no aboriginal people; therefore, there is no aboriginal culture, but the ancestral cultures are from elsewhere. This ‘elsewhere’ that each group of Mauritians tends to idealise, rejecting any Mauritian culture that would be shared by all Mauritians regardless of the ancestral cultures. Furthermore, the theorists, Baumeister and Leary, wrote that it is almost universal for human beings to entertain interpersonal relationships with other humans. Thus, “belongingness is an innate quality with an evolutionary basis, and would have clear survival and reproductive benefits” (Baumeister & Leary 1995:497-529). Because of this application of “noubannism” leading some politician to say that “each monkey protects its mountain”, there are shared pejorative perceptions of the other groups.

How Mauritians See Each Other

For quite a lot of Hindus, the Creoles are the black sheep. They consider the latter as being lazy and alcoholic. The Creoles, along with the other ethnic groups, would qualify the Hindus as “Malbar coolies”, which is a direct reference of how their ancestors arrived on the island, as indentured

Mauritius was South African, Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 established the Truth and Reconciliation for South Africa. It was meant to investigate gross human rights violations (abductions, killings, torture and severe ill treatment) committed by state actors and liberation movements between 21 March 1960 and 10 May 1994, to provide amnesty to individuals who applied and who fulfilled the criteria, and to recommend reparations to victims. The commission also held special hearings focused on specific sectors, institutions and individuals. The commission had the power to search premises and seize evidence, subpoena witnesses and run a witness protection program. (http://webfactory.co.za/csvr/csvr/afrika/mauritius/truth-and-justice-commission/80-country/mechanism/397.html, 25 June 2014). There were other such commissions in Australia, Moving Forward - Achieving Reparations for the Stolen Generations. In Canada the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hopes to guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of reconciliation and renewed relationships that are based on mutual understanding and respect.

10 “sak zako protez so montagne”
labourers, being “coolies” from India. “Malbar” is a pejorative term. However, all the groups consider the Hindus as hard workers, although they are seen by the Creoles as working as hard as oxen, which is quite pejorative in the Mauritian context. The other groups would perceive the Chinese as cunning and hard workers at the same time. They are often referred to as “sinwa makao”, in reference to the region from which most of them originated. The Muslims, who originated from India, are referred to as “Lascar”, a judgemental term in the Mauritian context. The only group that is spared from any negative qualifications is the Whites, the colonisers’ descendants. The part of culture that is responsible for inclusion or exclusion is the language used for or against a group. This shows the important role of cultures when they cross in a multicultural society.

Mauritian Culture Outside Mauritius

Nevertheless, from interviews during my fieldwork in Mauritius, it appears that when Mauritians from any groups travel to their ancestor’s lands, they discovered that the culture they inherited has almost nothing more to do with its original one. When the cultures crossed on the island, they shaped each other. Each culture seems to have taken a piece of the other cultures and has formed a new one. In the long run, the new culture may become a Mauritian culture, thus uniting all the groups in the country. However, families and members of each group would prevent young Mauritians from mixing cultures, especially through interethnic marriages, for example, although they increased over the past years and may keep on increasing in the future especially with Creoles.

The Mauritian Creoles: From Culture Crossings to Culture Mixings

To understand the definition of Mauritian Creoles, the people not the language, I will define the term “Creole” in a general way, from its inception until today.

General Definition of “Creole”

I start with the genesis of the term “Creole”. It emerged during the colonial period, when it was used to describe the many uprooted and displaced people brought to serve as slaves on the plantations and thus contribute to the economic growth of certain colonies, both in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. These colonies were Louisiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, La Réunion and Mauritius (Eriksen 1999: 2). The term Creole is rooted in that of ‘criollo’, which qualified any Spanish born in the New World, in contrast to ‘peninsulares’. Today, there is a similar term in La Réunion, where people who are born on the island, regardless of their skin colour, are called Creoles. The same is true for the French Antilles, contrary to ‘Zoreils’, which designates people born in metropolitan France for La Réunion (Eriksen 1999: 2). In Trinidad, the term ‘Creole’ refers to all Trinidadians, except for those of Asian origin (Eriksen 1999: 2). In Suriname, a Creole is a person of African descent, while in neighbouring countries, such as French Guiana, a Creole is a person, who has adopted a European lifestyle (Eriksen 1999: 2).

During the French and especially during the British colonial period in Mauritius, there were different types of people, who would later be all qualified as Creoles. There were “Creole” slaves – those who were born in the colony – the slaves “newly arrived”11, who were referred to as “bossales”. Furthermore, slaves devoted to farm work were nicknamed Pickaxe Negroes. Those working in the

11 “Fek debarke”.
court yard were nicknamed Court Negroes; slaves who took care of the master’s house were referred to as House Negroes. Finally, there were the Talented Negroes, the name given to slaves who were manual workers. The freed slaves and the people of colour would later be classified under the single denomination of Creoles, that is to say, in the post-slavery era.

**Definition of “Mauritian Creoles”**

From the discussion above, we easily assess how modern Mauritian Creole has become quite complex to be defined. Hence, they can be classified as in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creoles</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creole Mazambik</td>
<td>Also called “big leaf” (“Gro fei”), referring to their thick features. Other derogatory names are: “ti-seve, seve maymaye, fandja, nasyon, nass”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured Creole</td>
<td>Also called “half-white skin” (“Demikle”) – Europeans-Africans mestizo, Europeans-Asians (mostly Indians) mestizo or Asians-Africans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole-Malbar</td>
<td>Children from marriages between Creoles and Hindus. Creoles with straight hair, like Hindus; sometimes baptised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole-Madras</td>
<td>Same definition as for the Creole-Malbar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras-Batize (Baptised Tamil)</td>
<td>Tamil converted into Catholicism, in India or in Mauritius. Differentiated by their surnames and phenotype; religions: Catholic and Tamil. Rejected by “True” Tamils (Information from interviewees).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole-Sinois (Chinese-Creole)</td>
<td>Born from Creole and Chinese parents, have Chinese traits, sometimes dark or brown skin, hence qualified Sinois-Noir (Black Chinese).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasta</td>
<td>Sometimes dark-skinned. Claim their state of belonging to African soil. 1980-1990: sought to revive the Africainism in all Creoles (Information from interviewees). Physical characteristics: dreadlocks, often wear Jamaican flag colours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole rouz (Red Creole)</td>
<td>Definition given in 2011 by Father Alain Romaine, a Mauritian Creole Roman Catholic priest. Born out of miscegenation (Africans and Whites); clear-skinned, blue or clear-coloured eyes sometimes, dark, red or brown hair, often frizzy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulatto</td>
<td>Originally called coloured people, “Milat”: interbreeding between white settlers and Indian women (De L’Estrac 2007:191-192).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole fer blanc</td>
<td>“Do like the Whites”: Dress, act, eat, mimic speaking French like the Whites. During one of the many walkings I did with a group in Mauritius, in 2011, I met two girls named C.F. and V.O. They had a fairly clear complexion. They spoke only French with a strong accent, while everyone in the group was speaking kreol. I asked them if they were Mauritian. They chuckled and replied, “In fact, we have always lived in Mauritius, but our family never spoke anything else but French, so we have difficulties speaking Kreol.” “I insisted,” So you are not Mauritians, you are French.” They responded, giggling, “No, but we do not speak Kreol that’s all.” They did not say clearly whether they were French or Mauritian. This is an example of “Creole Fer-Blanc”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Names given to Creoles and their definition. (Sources: books and interviews).

**Mauritian Creoles: Cultures and Religions**

The table above shows that the Mauritian Creole community shares several cultures. The group is a form of a melting pot, not completely in the American way of the term because, as we can
see in this table, some groups would melt some elements of their culture; but that does not mean they would turn into a harmonious whole with a common culture. For example, many Creoles may practice two religions at a time, mixing religions and cultures from the other groups. This practice gives way to a form of syncretism and its principle, as far as religion is concerned, “holds that when any two cultures meet and interact, they will exchange religious ideas with the dominant culture prevailing in the exchange”\(^{12}\). In the case of the Creoles, the dominant religion had been Catholicism, the masters’ religion, over the slaves’ African cultures and religions during the colonial periods. Today, there is still the former masters’ religion that prevails over any other religions that the Creoles would practice. Pictured below is a Creole’s house, which testifies to the fact that two or more religions are being practiced:

**The Mauritian Creoles: Outsiders’ Views**

Some Creoles I met during the Cavadee\(^{13}\) celebration testified that they did not want the Catholic priests to know that they also adopted Tamil’s religion for fear of excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church. However, they also testified that for the Tamil priest, it was not a problem for Catholics to practice both religions.

Still, this group seems undefinable as Linguist Robert Chaudenson put it. He wrote that Creole is:

> “Any individual, who is neither Franco-Mauritian (White), nor Indo-Mauritian, nor Sino-Mauritian. This term is reserved either for Mulattos or for individuals of the Malagasy or African type, which is relatively well marked. One can then specify, depending on the case, Malagasy Creole, Mozambican Creole, and even Rodriguez Creole. When necessary, a distinction is also made within the creole ensemble for ‘people of colour’ (dimounn koulere in Creole), who have a weak degree of hybridity. Thus, in the local regional French variety, one can hear people say une femme de couleur bien blanche ‘a coloured woman who is quite white’. Strictly speaking, creoles are those who by their own phenotype cannot claim the term white” (Chaudenson 2001:5-6).

For Historian, Megan Vaughan:

> “Creoles” is both a racial category (those who allegedly look most “African” in their features are members of it, though their descent is likely to be very mixed) and a residual category, and therefore one that signifies lack. The Creoles in contemporary Mauritian terms are those who are not: they are neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Tamils nor Chinese nor “whites” of either the Franco or Anglo variety. The Creole community is the residue of these racial/ethnic/cultural categories […]” (Vaughan 2005:3).

I would like to add that the Creoles are also the compendium of all these cultures, and sometimes in the future they can be the craftsmen of Mauritianism and pave the way to a Mauritian culture. Furthermore, because of the development of high-speed transport today, very few groups/cultures in the world can say that they are not mixed with other groups/cultures. That is what probably led

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\(^{12}\) Excerpt from Gier N. F. 1994.

\(^{13}\) A Hindu festival celebrated by the Tamil community on the full moon in January or February. This festival can be observed in India (mainly in the region of Madras, in the south), Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand. Those are countries where there is a significant presence of the Tamils. It is the celebration of the victory of Muruga, the god, who vanquished the evil demon Soorapadman, thanks to a spear given to the god.
Norwegian Professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen to entitle one of his work, “Tu Dimunn Pu Vini Krei” (Everybody is becoming Creole). Nevertheless, some sub-groups of the Mauritian Creoles that can be seen as the epitome of modern Mauritian suffer from exclusion today.

Possible Reasons for Some Creoles Sub-groups’ Exclusion

In this article, I tried to show that the Creoles, even more so, some sub-groups of Creoles suffer from cultural exclusion that leads to economic exclusion. What are the reasons for this exclusion? Based on historical facts and from interviews, the possible reasons are that some of them are of slave descents. Indeed, from interviews and observations, it appears that the sub-groups of Creoles who seem to face discrimination are those from slave descents, the Rastas and, generally, the Creoles with African phenotype, as is shown in the table above. However, it has been impossible to find any reasons why being of slave descent is a path towards discrimination. Maybe, this is because the Creoles’ ancestors were not completely free even after the abolition. This is the reason why their descents are said to lack the courage of fighting for their rights against the Hindus’ rights. However, from polls and interviews, it appears that more and more Creoles are now showing pride of who they are and of their past, thus, they are acquiring their empowerment.

From a Political Point of View

A Historian, I discussed with, said that from a political point of view, the British Colonists were somehow responsible for this present situation because they encouraged the party that won the majority votes to govern the island after independence. Since the Hindus are more than 50% of the whole population, they are logically at the head of government. Hence, the Mauritian government is far from representing proportionally all the groups. Furthermore, the Hindus’ ancestors were indentured labourers, but they did not suffer from their culture’s genocide, to put it in Jocelyn Chan Low’s words.

From a Historical Point of View

In fact, after their contract as indentured labourers, the Indians bought land and stayed in Mauritius, and they even continued to work in the sugar-cane fields. The Creoles did not do this. Historians argued that the Hindus were not chained and beaten to death if they did not work quickly, or if they ran away as were the slaves. The Indentured labourers came to the island without being captured. This does not minimise the suffering they underwent on their way on the boat or “barracoon”, like V. S. Naipaul put it. They ran away from poverty in India to Mauritius to work with the hope of going back with enough money for a better life. However, most of the Indians stayed in Mauritius at the end of their contract.

After the abolition, the slaves chose to live as far away as possible from the places where they suffered so much abuse from their masters. Historians also argued that the slave descendant’s situation was unlike the Hindus, who were encouraged to go to school, to study and to participate in the political life of Mauritius, by such influent leaders as the Mahatma Gandhi upon his visit to Mauritius in 1901, from 30th October to 19th November. He then encouraged Manilall Doctor, a young Gujarati lawyer, to travel to Mauritius in order to help its Indo-Mauritian community (Nagapen 1996:100). Hugh Tinker, a British historian, said that, barely a decade later, the Mahatma met R.K. Boodhun, the first Indo-Mauritian lawyer, in London and encouraged him to return to his country to work on behalf of
the Indo-Mauritian community. The slaves and their descents did not have such reliable leaders. There have been Creoles leaders such as Augustic Moignac, Eliezer François or even Gaëtan Duval, known as “the King of the Creole” (‘Lerwa kreol’), the charismatic leader of the PMSD (Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate), a Mauritian political party. However, some Creoles interviewed said that they were far from representing all the Creoles; they represented only some specific sub-groups of Creoles.

From a Modern Mauritian Point of View

According to some Creoles I interviewed, the Whites discouraged Creoles’ parents from sending their children to school and to study. This went on from after the abolition until the 1960s. A Creole priest whom I interviewed said that his father’s manager offered his father a job for his son in the sugar-cane factory where the former was working. My interviewee said that, for the White Manager, it looked like the only thing to do for his employee’s son. The priest wanted to pursue study at a foreign university; however, the boss tried his best to discourage his father from acceding to his son’s request.

Furthermore, the difference between other groups and the Creoles is that the latter is a split group whereas the other groups can throw away their discord when the future of the whole community is at stake. For example, the Hindus are able to set aside their caste discord, and become closely knit whenever it is needed.

These are some possible reasons why Creoles face exclusion. However, this paper is not meant to compare one group of Mauritians to the others. All the people who were born in Mauritius are all Mauritians; it is high time that they accept their current situation. There are definitions for each group in Mauritius, but how can we define a Mauritian?

Definition of a Mauritian

Set aside ethnic definitions, being a Mauritian:

“means adhering to certain family and religious values despite their pressures and constraints. [...] It means respecting the rituals and traditions of others, even if we do not understand their culture. [...] Sharing the same pleasure for palavering, arguing. Sharing the same taste for brede broth, garlic and ginger crushed together. Being a Mauritian means sharing the same passion for politics, English footballs and horse’ racing. [...] It means “relaxing a little and sharing some little jokes”; transforming each birthday party into a state affair; not being able to say no but without saying yes. [...] Being a Mauritian means having your family send you Kraft cheese when you live abroad; drinking lots of over-sweetened cups of milked tea (without caring for your health). It is being lost in the details at the expense of the basics. [...] Being a Mauritian also means spying on others, but hating to be spied on; it means moving to the airport and to the beach with all the members of your family; being generous because, basically, you hate injustice. It is also being rebellious against an unwanted holiday, but take the opportunity of asking for another one two days later; [...] Seeing life as “really, really” hard, but doing everything to complicate it even more at any given opportunity; boasting to speak several languages, but understanding and insulting each other only in Kreol (La Rédaction 2015).

In fact, being a Mauritian can be seen as an alchemy of everything and its opposite because it is a mix of cultures from the three old continents.
Conclusion

Culture is quite an issue in Mauritius because of the number of culture crossings and sometimes mixings. Although each group living on the island clings to their ancestral culture, people travelling abroad conclude that there is a mixing, rather than a crossing, of cultures resulting in a brand new Mauritian culture. This is made of ‘bits and pieces’ of all the cultures that once crossed the island from the three old continents – Asia, Europe and Africa. The Creole, some of whom were ripped from their ancestral cultures, being a catchall group, seems to be the one to pave the way towards the Mauritian culture. Undeniably, it will take time for this new Republic\textsuperscript{14} to build up a Mauritian culture. They have started, and we may infer from the willpower of the young people from all ethnic groups living there, that there is a new culture rising. The questions that arise are: how long will it take to build that “Mauritianism”? How long will the old people, the ancestral culture keepers, continue to slow down this movement towards a new, harmonious Mauritian culture?

References


\textsuperscript{14} Mauritius became a Republic in 1992.
Appendix

Figure 1: The places and the country’s name given by the Dutch. http://www.welt-atlas.de/map_of_mauritius_2-114

Figure 2: Christian, Tamil and Hindu Divinities (Sylvie Maurer, June 2012).