Patrick Eisenlohr

An Indian Ocean “creole island”? Language and the politics of hybridity in Mauritius

1. Introduction

For decades researchers have been intrigued about the historical connections and parallels between the Caribbean and Indian Ocean worlds, in particular between the French Antilles and the Mascarenes. Linking the Caribbean with the Indian Ocean, a shared history of French colonial rule and settlement, slavery, plantation capitalism, together with the prevalent use of French-lexifier Creole languages, has caused some to view certain Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands as the remnants of a formerly shared world, or in the words of Jean Benoist, as “the remains of a shattered universe” (Benoist 1979, 6). Accordingly, Benoist and others have proclaimed the legacy of a “Creole world” connecting the Caribbean with the Indian Ocean. Indeed, creolization has emerged as the gate-keeping concept in the study of the Caribbean at large, recent interrogation of some problematic dimensions of the concept of creolization notwithstanding (Khan 2001, Munasinghe 2006, Price & Price 1997). But while the centrality of creolization as a scholarly concept and a historical process is largely uncontested in the study of the Caribbean, its position in the Mascarenes is more ambiguous, and perhaps nowhere as much as in Mauritius.

In this article I am concerned with the following question: Why has the significance of creolization turned out to be far less secure in the study of Mauritius, given some obvious parallels between the Mascarenes and the French Antilles in their colonial histories as plantation societies under French colonial rule? I seek to address this question by discussing different uses and conceptions of creoledom in Mauritius, as Mauritian, along with foreign scholars and intellectuals, have drawn on this notion in characterizing Mauritian society and nationhood. Official and everyday discourses, as well as several scholarly accounts, imagine creolization as a key theme of collective identities and cultural practices in Mauritius. Creolization is hereby regarded as the
outcome of a mixing of cultural elements, often represented to have been relatively homogeneous before they entered creolization. The significance of language for creolization in a wider sense, such as in the creation of "hybrid" cultural practices and identifications, is perhaps the most important issue in these debates. In particular the central role of language ideologies, i.e., politically charged ideas about language and its use, in the negotiation of local cultural traditions and identities labeled "Creole" represents another intriguing parallel between Mauritius and the French Antilles. Indeed, comparing the French Antilles with the Mascarenes it is obvious that in recent decades questions of language, in particular those surrounding the politics and use of the different French-lexifier Creole languages used in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion and Mauritius, have emerged as the focal point for theorizing about the Creole identities of these societies.

In what follows, I show how contrasting ways of interpreting creoleness in Mauritius imply different perspectives on Mauritian society and history, as well as on the place of Mauritius in a wider international sphere. But most significantly, spokesmen of different ethnic groups in Mauritius have struggled over the meanings of creolization while seeking to position themselves as ideal representatives of a Mauritian nation. In describing the different understandings of creoleness in Mauritius, I focus on three political projects involving this notion, advocating conflicting ideas about Mauritian culture, the relations between different ethno-religious groups and the location of Mauritius in a global historical and geopolitical sense. The shifting ideas of what has come to be known as creoleness, créolité, or Creole culture in Mauritius are therefore tied to the politically charged process of the formation of group identities as well as to conflicting claims on the nation.

1 See, for example, Jean Benoist's account of creolization in what he terms the "Creole world": "Méthodes des corps, édition de parlers, genèses de musiques, émergence des cultures: tous les lieux significatifs de la vie sociale ont été le théâtre de la mise progressive en système d'éléments initialement disparates, explicitement contradictoires. Ces éléments apparaissaient initialement à des ensembles cohérents et clos: « races » aux contours sans faille, langues originelles des immigrants, religions anciennes aux dogmes et aux rites clairement définis" (Benoist 1997, 336). A notable exception in this regard is Megan Vaughan's study of slavery in 18th century Mauritius (2005). Vaughan emphasizes that Madagascar, the east coast of Africa, Senegal, and southern India as well as Bengal, from which the slave population of the Île de France was drawn, constituted highly hybrid and dynamic societies marked by long-standing relations with other parts of the world and ongoing transformation due to interaction with Europeans. Accordingly, the slave population was twice creolized when settling in Mauritius.


My first example is one in which creoleness functions as the leitmotiv of a perspective emphasizing links between Mauritius as a "Creole island" and the world of francophonie. An important conceptual move in the context of this position is the designation of Mauritius as île créole. This is done on the ground that practically all Mauritians are speakers of French-lexifier Mauritian Creole and because of a perception of its population as diverse and mixed. By highlighting the legacy of French colonization from 1715 until 1810, the central role of French colonists in the settling of Mauritius and the links between the Mauritian Creole and French languages, Mauritius is conceived as falling within a French zone of influence. An important way of stressing this connection is through invoking the language ideology and post-colonial political project of francophonie.

Second, the concept of Mauritius as a Creole island played a major role in the postcolonial campaign for Mauritian Creole as national language of Mauritius, which eventually failed. Proponents of this political project saw the practice of Mauritian Creole as a quasi-indigenous, shared cultural tradition and as perhaps the only available base for postcolonial nation-building. The campaign therefore stressed the identification of the multivalent notion of "Creole" with the Mauritian nation, a move which was rejected by most Mauritians, since the notion "Creole" in Mauritian designates not only a language, but also an ethnic group. The failure of the campaign for Mauritian Creole as national language of Mauritius finally takes my analysis to the third ideological project involving the notion of creoleness, which is also the dominant one in contemporary Mauritius. Its proponents cast creolization as an attribute of cultural practices and collective identifications as belonging to just one ethnic group in Mauritius, to which most Mauritians do not belong, and contrast such cultural practices and identities with officially recognized diasporic "ancestral cultures", whose cultivation is strongly encouraged by Mauritian state institutions.

I relate these shifts and the contextual flexibility of notions of creoleness in Mauritius to different modes of inclusion in a Mauritian nation. Conflicting perspectives on creolization are indicative of a struggle between two opposing modes of cultural citizenship. The dominant one privileges the performance of diasporic "ancestral cultures" whose origins elsewhere are highlighted rather than downplayed for membership in a Mauritian nation, the other emphasizing locally created cultural forms, above all the practice of Mauritian Creole, as defining Mauritian citizens. In marked contrast to the Antillean situation, as
well as several other locations in the Caribbean, where the highlighting of locally created cultural traditions under the banner of creolization has emerged as central to postcolonial forms of identification, such traditions have become relatively marginal to the postcolonial Mauritian nation. Not coincidentally, those most embodying the ideals of creolization also tend to be among the most marginal citizens in contemporary Mauritius.

2. Mauritius as île créole

What are the reasons that have led a number of scholars as well as proponents of cultural and literary movements to designate Mauritius as an île créole, even if in Mauritius the term “Creole” is mainly reserved for a particular ethnic group, comprising just a little more than a quarter of the population? Three issues feature prominently in justifying this designation. Perhaps the most central theme is Mauritius as a society where usage of a French-lexifier Creole language predominates. Other languages are used in Mauritius, and Mauritian Creole is not the official language, but Mauritian Creole is the predominant vernacular language in Mauritius, used by nearly all Mauritians. From this perspective, since Mauritians predominantly use a Creole whose lexicon is mainly derived from French, Mauritius appears as a part of a Creole world linking the Caribbean with the Indian Ocean, a “creolophone space”.

A further way of conceiving Mauritius as part of a shared Creole world is by highlighting common aspects in the history of Mauritius, Réunion, the Seychelles, and the French Antilles. In this view, a shared history of colonization, the central role of the plantation with the importation of slave and indentured labor justifies the assumption of a common historical trajectory of these islands, which were then constituted as Creole societies. Finally, the highly mixed character of Mauritian society, composed of populations having migrated, voluntarily or not, to the island from Europe, India, the African mainland and Madagascar as well as China has earned the island the label “Creole” by outside observers. Here, “Creole” is mainly understood as standing for cultural hybridity, which has resulted in a uniquely plural and varied “Creole culture”.

In fact, these three justifications for the designation of Mauritius as île créole are sometimes combined, while the account of the linguistic situation serves as a master-model. Researchers classifying Mauritius as a “Creole island” sometimes argue that Mauritius is included into this category because of historical

and socio-economic parallels to a whole range of societies created by plantation colonialism, resulting in a high degree of cultural and ethnic diversity. But Jean Benoist and Jean-Luc Bonniol, for example, do not include all of those islands whose history includes colonial plantations, slavery and indenture and the spread of Creole languages into a “Creole area” (“aire créole”). Instead, their view is mainly focused on those “Creole” territories, which used to be French colonies at some point of time and in which French-lexifier Creoles predominate. Placing Mauritius into a French orbit along with the other “Creole islands” Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean and Réunion in the Indian Ocean by privileging ideas about language, they conceive the French zone of influence extending over the “Creole islands” not only in terms of French colonial heritage, but above all as defined by the continuing use of French and French-lexifier Creole languages (Benoist 1985, 54, Bonniol 1985, 77).

Jean Benoist highlights the significance of Mauritian Creole for Mauritian membership among the îles créoles particularly when Indo-Mauritians with their cultivation of diasporic and officially recognized “ancestral cultures” seem to problematize the image of Mauritius as a “Creole island.” Addressing the majority status of Mauritians of Indian origin and their importance in the political and cultural life of the country, Benoist concludes:

Mauritius… gives another image of Indianess (indianité) in a Creole country. To such a degree, if it were not for the general use of the Creole language, the use of the expression “Creole country” (pays créole) would present a real problem. Because Mauritius merits, maybe more and more (but this is an issue of debate) the slogan of its tourist services ‘India abroad’. (Benoist 1989, 187)

But since Creole is spoken, Jean Benoist implies, the designation pays créole is not really a problem in the case of Mauritius. A particular language ideology is fundamental for locating Mauritius in a wider political and geographical framework, which links the Indian Ocean area with the French Caribbean islands. The prevalent use of Mauritian Creole is considered evidence enough that Mauritius, similar to Réunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe, has become a “creolized” island in other respects as well, with French-lexifier Creoles and French colonial history as the central determinants of this process.

Such assumed links between linguistic traditions, colonial history and “Creole islands” have also made it possible for theorists of créolité or créole to include a Creole identity within a larger framework of francophonie. Probably the best known example of this nowadays is the créolité movement in the French Antilles, créolité understood as the combined cultural legacy of all the different populations having migrated to the Caribbean. The créolistes greatly
stress that créolité is “multilingual,” and that they as writers “possess several languages” (Bernabé & Chamoiseau & Confiant 1993, 43). “Créolité is not monolingual. It is also not a multilingualism of isolated compartments. Its domain is langage. Its appetite: all the languages of the world” (ibid., 48). But a look at the literary work of writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau reveals the “multilingualism” so celebrated by the Antillean créolistes as a literary language that is regional French with the selective use of Creole linguistic elements and themes as well as occasional quoted passages in Creole (Lang 1992). On a visit to Mauritius in March 1998, primarily organized by the French-sponsored Centre Culturel Charles Baudelaire, the prominent Martiniquean writer and co-author of the Éloge de la créolité Patrick Chamoiseau situated himself squarely within a francophone agenda. At a public conference at the University of Mauritius, speaking in French, he declared himself fully “at home” in this “Creole country”. Chamoiseau’s explanation of how his conception of créolité would overcome both the “uniformization” imposed by (read Anglo-American) globalization as well as oppose “atavistic forces” and “fundamentalisms” striving for ancestral purity almost perfectly matched the contemporary official ideology of francophonie, which sees itself engaged in a struggle for “diversity” in the world (Ager 1996). Further, when a faculty member of the University of Mauritius asked about the relationships of créolité to religion and the solution proposed by the créolistes for a setting affected by ethno-religious communalism such as can be found in Mauritius, Chamoiseau answered that laïcité was the solution. He suggested that the historical model for regulating the relationships between the Catholic Church and the French state (Baubérot 2000) could be applied to Mauritius, despite the fact that the relationships between the colonial and postcolonial state and the diverse religious traditions of Mauritius were never characterized by strict separation and, compared to the development of laïcité in France, have followed a radically different trajectory (Eisenlohr 2006b).

Also in the Indian Ocean, there has been a literary and cultural movement known as Créolité indianoceaniste since the 1970s, postulating a Creole identity that is resolutely anchored in francophone traditions as characteristic of the island societies of the southwest Indian Ocean. Proponents of such a francophone créolité are above all present in the French overseas department Réunion, where Gilbert Aubry (“Hymne à la créolité”) and Jean-François Sam-Long have been among their foremost spokesmen. According to Sam-Long, créolité should be understood as situated within the parameters of francophonie, since it aims to “enrich” the French language with Creole linguistic elements and themes, wishing that “the French culture accepts our multiple relations and does not reject our words and images” (quoted in Armand and Chopinet 1983, 419)*. Jean-Claude Marimoutou directly evokes the example of the Antillean créolistes in his description of “créolophonie” as a particular version of a wider francophonie:

The dream of a language and literature métisse who would enrich francophonie. With this, one finds itself in an astonishing proximity to the conception that Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant have of the Antillean créolité, which on the basis of créolité finally presents itself as another way of being francophone (quoted in Prosper 1996, 18).

More recently, the most vocal Mauritian champion of Créolité-indianoceaniste has been the literary critic and former director of the African Cultural Center Jean-Georges Prosper, who also casts the Indian Ocean version of créolité as embedded in francophonie, “la communauté du français” and “la créolophonie à base lexicale française” (Prosper 1996, 46):

The Indio-oceanie comprises Madagascar, the Comoros, Mascarene and Seychelles archipelagos: an ensemble which is not Africa, Asia or Europe...and which cannot be but the Indian-oceane under francophone predominance.

Mauritius is specially celebrated as the “daughter of francophonie” (Prosper 1993, 42, 129). Alluding to the important Indian presence in Mauritius, Prosper in the manner of the Antillean créolistes highlights what he sees as the great plurality of languages and traditions in Mauritius which need to be respected and celebrated according to the motto “unity in diversity”, but makes clear that all this “diversity” should be encompassed under the francophone banner (Prosper 1996, 46).

Leaving aside the change from French to British colonial rule in 1810, the large presence of people of Indian background in Mauritius is often felt to be the other main feature distinguishing Mauritius from the French “Creole islands” considered by some the universe of créolité or créole. Despite large-scale social and cultural transformations among Mauritians of Indian background since their arrival on the island, and despite the fact that nearly all of them are users of Mauritian Creole, Mauritians of Indian background, both Hindus and Muslims, often reject being described as creolized. The great majority of Indo-Mauritians maintain that a Creole identity is only relevant to the non-white Christian population of Mauritius, while Mauritians of Indian

---

* Aubry’s perspective on créolité needs to be distinguished from alternative approaches to valorizing local Réunionnais linguistic traditions, such as Axel Gauvin’s plea for bilingualism and critique of French linguistic hegemony in Réunion (Lionnet 1993, 111-112).
being limited to one language. It is like a challenge to writing, to linguistics and semiotics, preferring the langage which unites to the langues which divide. (Prosper 1996, 46)

Although other languages are not directly excluded, “créole under francophone predominance” becomes the unifying element in the diversity of Mauritius, as opposed to Indian ancestral languages which in their particularity can only have divisive effects. The “Indian presence” in Mauritius can be accommodated in the concept of the “Creole island”, but only within an order set by créolophonie-francophonie.

3. Complementarity within francophonie

Visions of Mauritius as a “Creole island” as part of a wider postcolonial sphere of French heritage often rest on the highly controversial assumption that French and Mauritian Creole are closely connected linguistic varieties. This widespread perspective of hierarchically linking French and Mauritian Creole and conceiving them as a functionally complementary pair is amply documented in the literature on the language situation in Mauritius. The perceived proximity of the two languages results in a vision in which “Creole participates partially in the prestige of French”, while “French supports itself also, taking into account its proximity with that language, on the large demographic base of Creole” (de Robillard 1990, 34) and “Creole is lived as an intermediary step towards French” (Baggio and de Robillard 1990, 61). The policy of institutionalized francophonic towards Creole languages reflects a similar perspective. At the 1989 Francophone Summit held in Dakar, former French President François Mitterrand announced that the world of francophonic should finally be understood as encompassing a multilingual space. Originally founded as a French government organization solely dedicated to defend and expand the use of standard French, the promotion of bilingualism in French and the various national languages of the member states has now become one of the main stated goals of the francophonic network (Ager 1996, 73-75). Accordingly, the organizations of francophonic should make efforts in language planning (aménagement linguistique) which would “mutually enrich” both French and the other national languages of member states while at the same time furthering the acceptance of French. The fifth session of the Haut Conseil de la Francophonie in 1989, preparing the Dakar Summit taking place three months
later, convened under the heading of *francopolyphonie* based on a “fraternity” of languages (Haut Conseil 1997, 374)\(^5\).

In a global context, francophonie thus seeks to position French as a language of diversity and dialogue as opposed to the cultural and linguistic uniformization held to be characteristic of Anglo-American globalization (Attali et al. 2003). This kind of reasoning is extended to the Creole languages present in the “francophone space”. French-lexifier Creoles are seen as especially close to French no doubt because of the large French input into the lexicon of these Creole languages and because of its long history of interaction with varieties of French since the beginnings of French colonial rule and plantation capitalism in the *îles créoles*. Rather than considering them a threat to standard French, official francophonie has singled out these Creole languages as especially suitable for promoting access to French, entering in a relation of complementarity with French, a point especially relevant for Mauritius, where English is the official language (Baggioni 1992, 164). Creole languages find their places in “regional” or “national” frameworks, mainly in the oral domain with possibly some use in education, administration and “national” literature, while French is thought to be its superimposed “complement”, as the international medium of education, business and technical expertise, diplomacy and literature.

This vision of hierarchical complementarity, reinforced by the emphasis on the long diglossic coexistence of Creoles and French in the “Creole spheres” and the role that varieties of French are generally considered to have played in their genesis, also constitutes the backdrop of the renewed interest in the funding of Creole studies and the publication of works on Creole languages and literature by the French government and Francophone agencies\(^6\). It is also part of the context in which important francophone bodies such as ACCT (Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique, now known as Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie (AIF)) and AUPELF (Association des Universités

---

\(^5\) A vision of “conviviality” between French and other “national cultures and languages” is also expressed in the “Report of the sub-committee on the promotion of national cultures” presented at the Dakar summit: “The French language is a bridge [...] a privileged space of international cooperation [...] But the use of the French language must not constitute an obstacle to the blossoming of the national cultures and languages. On the contrary, francophonie is accepted as a multilingual and multicultural space where numerous national languages and cultures are in use communicating between each other through the French language [...] French presents itself as a means of promoting other national languages and cultures” (Haut Conseil 1997, 360). A division of labor between “national languages and cultures” confined to their respective “national” spheres, as opposed to a universal French is apparent even in this formulation projecting an image of pluralism.

\(^6\) Here I refer to diglossia as a historically dominant relationship between French-lexifier Creole languages and French. More recently, this form of their relationship has been severely challenged, as the increasing use of French-lexifier Creole languages in contexts where formerly French would have been expected illustrates (e.g. Managan 2004, Schnebel 2004).

---

4. Nationalizing Creole in Mauritius

In a way very different from the imaginations of créolité discussed above, the idea of creoledom played an important role in the campaign for Mauritian Creole as the national language of Mauritius in the 1970s and early 1980s. The ideology of Mauritian Creole as part of an emerging genuinely national culture also involved the recasting of other aspects of creolism. These transformations came into play as part of the language ideology invoked by the champions of Mauritian Creole as national language. Seeing Mauritian society as plagued by deep divisions between its main ethno-religious groups, notably Hindus (52%), Muslims (17%), Sino-Mauritians (2%), and the Christian “General population”, comprising Franco-Mauritians (1%), and above all those locally known as Creoles, who are largely descendants of slaves of African and

---

\(^7\) The original name of this organization *Bannzil krêyôl* means “Creole islands”, *bon* being the Creoles’ plural marker, *krêyôl* a spelling for “Creole” current in the francophone Caribbean while *isl* denotes “island” in both the French-lexifier Caribbean and Indian Ocean Creoles. Evoking the concept of a common “Creole archipelago” spread over two hemispheres and Oceans, *Bannzil*, which was officially constituted in the Seychelles in 1982, celebrated a supposedly shared identity based both on French-lexifier Creole languages and plural Creole identities.
Malagasy, but also of partly Indian and French origin (28%), proponents of this position argued that the only way to overcome "communalism" and to break with the colonial past would be the establishment of a truly unified "nation" in Mauritius. The campaign under the slogan of enn sel lepèp, enn sel nasèn ("one sole people, one sole nation"), supported by the leftist Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), sought to implement Mauritian Creole as the national language. Mauritian Creole was presented as the language of the "people" and the masses, irrespective of ethno-religious distinctions. It was therefore ideologically opposed to French, which came to be seen as associated with the small but wealthy Franco-Mauritian community, many of whose members constitute a privileged social class, still controlling most of the economy. The new Mauritian Creole linguistic nationalists portrayed French as both the property of a particular ethnic group and social class. In stark contrast to the position of seeing Mauritian Creole as part of the world of francophony in the way described before, the focus of the project of Mauritian Creole as national language was an ideological break with French. In the eyes of its partisans Mauritian Creole had to be asserted as an autonomous language and its connection to French minimized. The writer, politician and linguist Dev Virahsawmy was the key figure of this movement. Having returned with a degree in linguistics from the University of Edinburgh shortly before Mauritius' independence in March 1968, he began to denounce the widespread view according to which Mauritian Creole was not a language, but merely a patois. Virahsawmy, who became the most prominent author of Mauritian Creole literature in the 1970s, called for the official recognition of what he considered the "national language" and for its use in primary education. For this purpose he proposed a new standard orthography for Mauritian Creole, which would replace the French-oriented orthography used previously for the relatively rare occasions in which Mauritian Creole was written. Thus, from the beginning the project of Mauritian Creole as national language was tied to a debate about orthography.

The orthographic system used before Mauritian Creole became part of the nationalist imagination was borrowed from French, mainly used by the press, and still is the way of writing Mauritian Creole that most Mauritians are primarily exposed to. However, the proponents of Mauritian Creole sought a way of writing the language that would definitely distinguish it from French. Also, associations with one of the ancestral languages, such as Hindi, for example, would be out of the question. Instead, Virahsawmy and other pro-Mauritian Creole activists called upon the authority of linguistic science in devising a proper system of writing Mauritian Creole according to "phonemic" criteria. This was the main feature of the orthographies proposed by Virahsawmy in 1967 and Philip Baker (1972), who proposed the spelling Kreol for créole. Also, the leftist activist group Lèdikasyon Pu Travayer (LPT) proposed its orthographic system in 1981 and proclaimed a general opposition between "sistem franziśe" and "sistem fonetik," as if any non-French orthography was necessarily "phonetic" (see de Robillard 1989). All the new orthographic systems claim a phonemic basis; they do however differ in the transcription of nasalized vowels. But the underlying issue here, similar to other debates about French-lexifier Creole orthographies (Schieffelin and Doucet 1998), was the question "who are we?" in a struggle over the nationalized "we".

In Mauritius, however, this issue has turned out to be even more complicated than in places such as Haiti and the Seychelles, because the field of contestation cannot be reduced to a dichotomy of pro-French "etymologists" versus anti-French "phonemicians" with a few intermediate positions. An additional factor, already mentioned, makes the Mauritian situation different. It is the large population of various Indian backgrounds, of whom especially Hindus remain ideologically very attached to Indian languages such as Hindi and Tamil, which are taught and promoted in Mauritius as ancestral languages. Further, many Hindus, and to a somewhat lesser extent Muslims of North Indian origin, use Bhojpuri as a vernacular in rural areas (see Eisenlohr 2004). Given the high ideological commitment to Indian languages, regardless of the fact that nearly all Mauritians of Indian origin use Mauritian Creole, the campaign for Mauritian Creole as national language raised suspicions especially among Hindus, because it appeared to be linked to the question of what kind of Mauritians best represented the nation. Interestingly, Philip Baker and Vinesh Hooooksing (1987) sought to address this problem when they presented another orthographic system for Mauritian Creole, which they named lortograf-linite (orthography of unity) since their goal was not only to provide an alternative system of writing for Mauritian Creole, but one which could also be extended to Mauritian Bhojpuri. One of the novelties of lortograf-linite with its conscious appeal to "unity" among Mauritians was the transcription of nasalized morphemes with the aid of a diacritic sign directly inspired by the binda used in writing Devanagari.

Although it is clear that the proposal to make Creole the national language and to give it official recognition also encountered stiff resistance from other groups, it was the suspicion among the Hindu state bourgeoisie that the pro-Creole campaign was a way to downplay the importance of their historical heritage and the legitimacy of their claim on the nation which proved to be politically most significant. When the MMM came to power in 1982, it decided that Creole should replace French as the main language on national TV and also be used for the news broadcast every evening. Furthermore, it proposed a
Creole version of the national anthem at the Independence Day celebrations of March 1983. Both measures were followed by a storm of protest, and had to be withdrawn. Especially the latter decision played a major role in the break-up of the ruling coalition leading to new elections in August 1983, which the MMM lost.

Fearing that many Mauritians, especially those of Indian origin, would refuse to identify with a language called Creole, the name of which also designates a particular ethnic group, Virahsawmy had already proposed in 1967 to call the language morisyen or “Mauritian” instead. However, the wide gap between “Creole” as indexing Africanness, since many members of the local ethnic group known as Creoles are of predominantly African descent, or alternatively as being francophone in a particular way, as opposed to the identification of “Creole” with the nation, could not be bridged. Especially Hindus responded with the reinforcement of a long-standing trend towards ideologies of ancestral and religious purity. For many Hindus, the notion of creolization evoked memories of oppression and disrespect towards their religious traditions by the Franco-Mauritian plantocracy in the colonial period, when there were attempts to convert Hindus to Christianity. As Hindus have dominated Mauritian politics since independence in 1968, the project of Mauritian Creole as national language was bound to fail. The campaign came to nothing because it raised the question of “who is a Mauritian”, and became a victim of the conflicts around this question. The attempt to recast Mauritian Creole as national was unsuccessful, despite the fact that the great majority use the language in their everyday lives, because the category “Creole” constantly shifted towards a particular ethnic signification in crucial moments of the struggle.

5. The ethnicization of creolization and Indian ancestral languages in Mauritius

The failure of institutionalizing Mauritian Creole in the context of the national ritual of independence day in 1983 illustrates the conflicting approaches to the question of creolization and Creole identity in contemporary Mauritius. Its proponents saw a need for a more pronounced Mauritian nationalism symbolized by the Creole language. According to them the mixing and openness of cultural traditions they held as characteristic of creolization could thus be turned into a unifying force. Nevertheless, the now dominant understanding of creolization as a phenomenon that does not affect Mauritius as a whole, but as a process that should only be relevant to the Creole ethnic group instead, is a view that enjoys not only widespread support among Mauritians of Indian background, in particular Hindus, but also state approval in Mauritius today. From the perspective of members of the Hindu state bourgeoisie the practice of Mauritian Creole is unproblematic, as long as Mauritian Creole is not declared a national language or otherwise officially presented as an emblem of the Mauritian nation. In contrast, national language ideologies of Mauritian Creole emphasize not only its ubiquitous use among Mauritians, but also its perceived mixed qualities. This image of Mauritian Creole as representative of creolization as an encompassing cultural process central to Mauritian history and identity systematically links perceived characteristics of Mauritian Creole to creolization as a way to define Mauritians. The ideological slippage between cultural processes of creolization and the “mixedness” of Mauritian Creole rests on iconic reasoning (Irving and Gal 2000), suggesting a relationship of qualitative likeness between mixed Mauritian Creole and mixed Mauritian culture. Postulating such a relationship of inherent likeness between national language and national culture makes the nationalization of Mauritian Creole suspect in the eyes of many Indo-Mauritians. Despite massive cultural transformation and interaction since the beginnings of the indenture system, Hindus and Muslims, many of whom endorse ideas of ancestral and religious purity conceived in explicit opposition to any notion of creolization, see Creoles as the only group of mixed, albeit predominantly African origins and culture in Mauritius. The government-sponsored Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture is now in charge of organizing the annual International Creole Day festivities, which are largely regarded as concerning the Creole ethnic group alone.

Debating creolization is part of a struggle over the nation, taking place in the context of important shifts of power between the main ethno-religious groups in Mauritius after independence. This is especially true for the struggle over control of state institutions in the years preceding and immediately following independence in 1968. Christians predominantly staffed the colonial state apparatus, many of them middle-class Creoles. However, independence in 1968 combined with largely communal voting ensured that post-colonial governments were Hindu-dominated and that many Creoles were gradually pushed out of the civil service. A bitter political struggle ensued and a considerable number of middle-class Creoles and petit blanc Franco-Mauritians emigrated (Simmons 1982). In the context of this conflict between ethno-religious groups over claims on the new nation-state of Mauritius, defining national identity with recourse to creolization became highly contested. While its promoters attempted to extend the concept “Creole” to the entire nation, in the name of forging an “indigenous” and common national culture integrating and transcending all communal identities, their opponents shifted the category towards the more restricted notion of the Creoles as a particular ethnic group in the context of political confrontation.
The official position of the Mauritian state is certainly in favor of the ethnicized notion of Creole identity and creolization. State policy in Mauritius since independence is geared towards reproducing ethnic boundaries established in the colonial period. The Mauritian constitution officially recognizes four communities: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians and the General Population, the Creoles forming the overwhelming part of the General Population, in which the Franco-Mauritians are also included. A "best loser" system of compensatory seats in parliament is in place to ensure that all communities are at least minimally represented, and many Mauritians see the political game of alliances, elections and struggle over posts and resources as heavily influenced by "communalism". In the name of "pluricultural Mauritianism" the state spends considerable amounts of resources on promoting diasporic ancestral languages and cultural traditions of especially the population of Indian origin, and every community is provided with its own cultural center. Hindu nationalist organizations based in India, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), who have been active in Mauritius since the 1970s, have gained considerable numbers of followers in the Hindu-dominated state apparatus and government up to the ministerial level, encouraging notions of ethno-religious purity and rivalry. Crucially, however, Creoles lack any claims on a recognized ancestral language and "ancestral culture".

Particularly among Hindus, the cultivation of ancestral languages, the most important among them being Hindi, is constitutive of such identities based on ancestral traditions with an origin outside Mauritius. Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi are taught to Hindu students in state schools and their teaching in Hindu temples is also subsidized by the Mauritian state. Even though these languages are known as ancestral, the ancestors of Mauritian Hindus and Muslims immigrating from India often had no knowledge of these languages which are now celebrated as ancestral patrimony. Also, ancestral languages are never used in everyday life, where the practice of Mauritian Creole predominates, in rural contexts often in a bilingual situation with Mauritian Bhojpuri. Nevertheless, in postcolonial Mauritius, this has not diminished their significance for the formation of ethno-religious communities and for constituting diasporic links to South Asia (Eisenlohr 2006a). Hindu nationalists such as the VHP and RSS active in Hindu diaspora communities support the propagation of Hindi in Mauritius, which since the late 19th century has been closely linked to the cause of Hindu nationalism in India (Lelyveld 1993). The use of Hindi, as ancestral language of Hindus of North Indian origin who comprise about 41 per cent of the population, is expected in contexts in which Hindu identity and the cultivation of 'ancestral' Indian traditions is publicly performed, such as in religious practices and events. At the state-sponsored central celebrations or major Hindu festivals in Mauritius such as Shivratri and Divali, broadcast by state-controlled Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation television, Hindu religious dignitaries and politicians address the audience in Hindi or English, but do not use Mauritian Creole at these events. Another context of publicly performing Hindu belonging are Hindu classes, to which students of known North Indian Hindu background are automatically assigned in state schools, usually on the basis of their names. Lessons, textbook content, and classroom discussions heavily emphasize Hindu religious traditions.

Ideologies of ancestral language represent an alternative to a perspective on Mauritius as a "Creole island", and they enjoy the support of many Mauritians of Indian background, in particular Hindus. Since knowledge of such ancestral languages largely depends on schooling, the role of Hindu-dominated state institutions in supporting the cultivation of such languages is crucial. The promotion of ancestral languages is in turn part of a larger policy of encouraging the performance of "ancestral cultures" with diasporic origins in other parts of the world. The Mauritian state not only refuses recognition to Mauritian Creole, its institutions also place far more emphasis and spend far more resources on the promotion of diasporic "ancestral cultures" with associated ancestral languages than on the celebration of locally created cultural traditions, such as Mauritian Creole. The very visible official support for such ancestral languages instead of the championing of Mauritian Creole attempted by the short-lived MMM-led government in 1983 implies a vision of the nation in which the cultivation of intense diasporic ties and identities centered on notions of cultural and linguistic purity by Indo-Mauritians is central to being Mauritian. This image of the Mauritian nation, in which ideas about linguistic difference play a central role, is closely aligned with material and symbolic interests of the Hindu state bourgeoisie. Accordingly, full membership in a Mauritian nation is performed through cultivation of standardized, purist ancestral languages and cultures with origins elsewhere. Unlike members of other ethno-religious communities, Creoles have so far not claimed an official and standardized ancestral language with an origin outside of Mauritius, but can only draw on their status of creators of the "indigenous" Mauritian Creole. Some have read this as evidence of a potentially privileged role of Creoles in the construction of Mauritian nationalism: "In not looking to any other home or motherland as their anchor of identity, Creoles may indeed constitute the most authentic of Mauritians" (Miles 1999,

---

8 Urdu, Arabic and Mandarin are also taught as ancestral languages on an ethnic basis to Muslim and Sino-Mauritian students in state schools.

9 A large majority of Indian immigrants were speakers of various varieties of Bhojpuri, and few of them had knowledge of standard literary varieties of Indian languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Tamil.
228). However, nationhood is not always based on ideologies of indigenousness, and certainly, the diasporic politics of “ancestral cultures” put Creoles at a distinct disadvantage, especially since they represent the dominant vision of the Mauritian nation. The politics of “ancestral cultures” clearly marginalize ideas of cultural mixing and impurity, which are of key importance for New World Creole nationalisms (Munasinghe 2002), and assign these characteristics to one ethnic group only, to which most Mauritians do not belong. Resistance to the nationalization of Mauritian Creole is part of this imagination of the nation, since the recognition and cultivation of Mauritian Creole as national language would have deprived a Hindu state bourgeoisie of a crucial means of excluding Creoles.

6. Conclusion: Caribbean parallels and Mauritian inversions

Recent work on transnationalism and diasporas has appropriated the concept of creolization in order to describe the hybridity and fluidity of ethnic and national boundaries often seen as a hallmark of these processes (Hannerz 1987, 1996, Kaplan 1996, 129). However, as Mauritan debates about creolization demonstrate, creolization is not necessarily opposed to the reproduction of ethnic boundaries and purist identities. In this article, I have emphasized how conflicting perspectives on language and linguistic practice mediate how creolization is endowed with different social and historical meanings by different groups in Mauritian society. The ambiguity of Mauritian Creole as indexing Creoles, but also as an emblem of the nation for some because of its very widespread use, can be traced to contesting formulations of a link between linguistic practice and ethno-national community, one privileging putative ancestral languages, the other the vernacular. These in turn mediate different perspectives on creolization and the nation, traceable to conflicting material and symbolic interests. They also explain why Mauritians of Indian background, especially Hindus, hardly ever deny that Creole is “their own”, too, in a vernacular sense, while not necessarily concluding it should thus be the national language. Through privileging Indian ancestral languages instead of the dominant vernacular, Mauritian Creole, many Mauritians have thus ethnified creolization in a broader sense, and have rejected creolization and Creole identities as self-designations.

How do the Mauritian politics of ancestral language and “ancestral culture” reflect on the connections between the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean which have attracted increasing interest among scholars? One of the chief problems of the creolization concept which analysts of the Caribbean have identified is its difficulty, both in scholarship and in everyday discourse, to deal with Indo-Caribbeans, such as Indo-Trinidadians and Indo-Guyanese (Khan 2001, Munasinghe 2002, 2006, Puri 2004). Since Creole culture is often rendered as national culture in Caribbean locations such as Trinidad and Guyana, the exclusion of people of Indian origin from the creolization concept has had important political consequences in a context where, for example, Indo-Trinidadians have long been portrayed as “cultural foreigners” (Khan 2001, 291, emphasis in original). The problematic faced by Trinidadians of Indian origin has led some Caribbeanist anthropologists such as Viranjini Munasinghe to the conclusion that national discourses of creolization nevertheless can have a profoundly exclusionary potential, despite their inclusionary pathos and their portrayal of the nation as a mixture of peoples and traditions of diverse origins. Similarly, while discourses of créolité in the French Antilles have not entirely excluded Antileans of Indian descent from local Creole culture, they have nevertheless relegated them to only a marginal position (Burton 1994, Feindler 1997).

The marginalization of Mauritians of primarily African descent locally known as Creoles in a politics of ancestral culture favored by Mauritian state institutions appears to be to a large extent an inversion of the Caribbean politics of creolization described above. Indo-Caribbeans’ attachment and ongoing relationship to an ancestral land have justified their outsider position in Caribbean discourses of creolization. In contrast, Indo-Mauritians and in particular Hindu claims to an “ancestral culture” emerge not only as empowering, but even as a means of marginalizing those unable to make similar claims in a new Mauritian nation. Precisely those qualities justifying the leaving behind of Indo-Caribbeans in discourses of creolization appear to be central to a hegemonic sense of cultural citizenship in Mauritius. It therefore seems that we cannot talk about the parallels between the Antilles and the Mascarenes without also addressing their inversions.

7. Bibliography

Ager, Dennis 1996: ‘Francophonie’ in the 1990s: Problems and Opportunities, Cleddon, Multilingual Matters
Alber, Jean-Luc (ed.) 1990: Vivre au pluriel: production sociale des identités à l’île Maurice et à l’île de la Réunion, Saint-Denis, Université de la Réunion
Armand, Alain & Chopyinet, Gérard 1983: La littérature réunionnaise d’expression créole, Paris, L’Harmattan
Baker, Philip 1972: Kreyol: A Description of Mauritian Creole, London, C. Hurst
Baubérot, Jean 2000: Histoire de la laïcité française, Paris, Presses universitaires de France
Benoit, Jean 1979: “Carâibe – Océan Indien: pour un réseau du monde créole”, Études Créoles 2/2, 5-10
Benoit, Jean 1989: “De l’Inde à Maurice et de Maurice à l’Inde: la réincarnation d’une société”, Carbet 9, 163-184
Bernabé, Jean & Chamoiseau, Patrick & Confiant, Raphaël 1993: Éloge de la Créolité, Paris, Gallimard
Brekenridge, Carol A. & van der Veer, Peter (eds.) 1993: Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania
de Rauville, Camille 1970: Indianocéanisme, humanisme et négritude: mythes et structures indiano-céaniques, Port-Louis, Le livre mauricien
Durizot Jno-Baptiste, Paulette 2001: Cultures et stratégies identitaires dans la Caraïbe, Paris, L’Harmattan

Eisenlohr, Patrick 2004: “Register-levels of Ethnomononicity: The Ethnicization of Language and Community in Mauritius”, Language in Society 33/1, 59-80
Eisenlohr, Patrick 2006a: Little India: Diaspora, Time and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius, Berkeley, University of California Press
Gauvin, Axel 1977: Du créole opprimé au créole libre: défense de la langue réunionnaise, Paris, L’Harmattan
Haut Conseil de la Francophonie 1997: État de la francophonie dans le monde, Paris, La documentation française
Issop-Banian, Idrias 1990: Indianités, Saint-Denis de la Réunion, Éditions Page Libre
Kattenbusch, Dieter (ed.) 1997: Kulturkontakt und Sprachkonflikt in der Romandie, Wien, Braunmüller
Khan, Aisha 2001: “Journey to the Center of the Earth: The Caribbean as a Master Symbol”, Cultural Anthropology 16/3, 271-302
Kroksrt, Paul V. (ed.) 2000: Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics and Identities, Santa Fe, School of American Research Press
Ludwig, Ralph (ed.) 1989: Les créoles français entre l’oral et l’écrit, Tübingen, Narr
La créolité comme dépassagement de l’ethnicité en Martinique et en Guadeloupe

I. Introduction

Les Antilles françaises, tout comme les îles voisines anciennement colonisées par l’Espagne, l’Angleterre ou les Pays-Bas, furent, trois siècles durant, le lieu de confrontations ethniques sans précédent. Il y eut tout d’abord, le choc entre le conquérant européen et l’autochtone (qualifié par la suite d’ « Amérindien ») qui s’est achevé par l’extermination totale du second. Sans doute l’un des premiers génocides réussi de l’histoire. Cela a continué par la mise en esclavage de dizaines de milliers de Noirs arrachés à l’Afrique lesquels furent dès lors désignés par le terme de « Nègres ». Forme inouïe d’asservissement qui n’a que peu à voir avec l’esclavage antique ou celui pratiqué dans le monde arabo-musulman. Il s’est poursuivi par l’importation de travailleurs sous contrat, originaires du sud de l’Inde et de la Chine, affublés, eux, du qualificatif dépréciatif de « Cooles », pour se terminer au tournant des XIXe et XXe siècle par l’arrivée de commerçants Syro-Libanais dont l’image ne fut pas meilleure. C’est dire que l’ethnicité est une donnée fondamentale à la fois de la construction des sociétés antillaises et de l’identité qui en a émergé. Aux Antilles, avant d’être homme ou femme, médecin ou maçon, catholique ou athée, on est d’abord membre d’une catégorie phénotypique. Nous préférons cette expression à celle de « catégorie raciale » parce que d’une part, comme on le sait, la notion de « race » ne possède aucune pertinence scientifique et de l’autre parce qu’en dépit de la violence des confrontations que nous venons d’évoquer, il s’est produit un fort mouvement de métissage qui a conduit à une prédominance du « phénotypique » sur le « génotypique ». On est souvent ce que l’on paraît être, ce que montrent la texture de ses cheveux ou les traits de son visage, ou encore la couleur de son épeiderme, et non ce que l’on est de par son ascendance avérée.
Sprache – Identität – Kultur
Herausgegeben von Ralph Ludwig
und Sabine Schwarze

Band 5

Multiple Identities in Action
Mauritius and Some Antillean Parallelisms

Vinesh Y. Hookoomsing
Ralph Ludwig
Burkhard Schnepel
(eds.)