Introduction

Linguistic diversity is closely connected to the building of modern forms of political belonging. However, there is no single, universal way of linking language-related differences to other differences of social and political character. Instead, these links are historically contingent and take various forms. For example, difference in vernacular languages does not necessarily lead to the emergence of ethnic or national boundaries on their basis, and conversely, the sharing of the same or very similar vernacular languages does not preclude the emergence of such boundaries. As linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have for some time been pointing out, such boundaries based on perceptions of linguistic difference often come about as at least the partial result of language ideologies (Irvine and Gal, 2000). Such politically charged assumptions about language and language difference are historical, and therefore variable and embedded in particular socio-cultural contexts.

Mauritius is no exception to this. In its colonial and postcolonial history, different kinds of linking language-related difference to political forms of belonging have emerged and have become a key dimension of its nation-building process. There is an enduring antagonism between two fundamentally different ways of imagining Mauritius through language difference that persists until today. These are, on one hand, a nation-building paradigm that privileges a foregrounding of the different ‘ancestral cultures’ and ‘ancestral languages’ linked to particular different religious traditions among Mauritians, and on the other hand, a more homogenizing vision of ethnolinguistic nationalism based on Mauritian Creole as the near-universally shared vernacular language of Mauritius. Ever since independence, the former has been the dominant of these two approaches to Mauritian nation-building. As I will explain, the recent introduction of Mauritian Creole as an optional school subject in Mauritian schools ironically testifies to the final defeat of ethnolinguistic nationalism drawing on the notion of Creole as national language. Moreover, Mauritius can also tell us an interesting story with regard to the copying and ‘pirating’ of European and North American forms of political belonging and its language ideologies in the colonial and
postcolonial world (cf. Anderson, 1991: 4, 87). This is because ethnolinguistic nationalism based on Mauritian Creole as a way of imagining a Mauritian nation through language difference is derivative of European models of ethnolinguistic nationalism, while the multiculturalist privileging of ‘ancestral languages’ with religious biases is a rather novel formation at odds with them.

As I will try to show, a discussion of these two modes of Mauritian nation building inevitably leads to the issue of religion, and its often veiled centrality in Mauritian nation building. This is because the dominant paradigm of postcolonial Mauritian nation building ultimately privileges a multicultural understanding of the Mauritian nation. As I will explain, in its highlighting of ‘ancestral cultures’ and associated ‘ancestral languages’, it establishes religion as the single most important element of communal differentiation among Mauritians. In fact, there is a strong connection between the now dominant multicultural mode of nation building and the strategy of gaining recognition through ‘religionization’ that Mauritians of Indian origin successfully pursued under colonial rule. This link has had great consequences for Mauritian nation building and has not yet gained the attention it deserves among scholars working on Mauritius. Even though this process of religionization that turned ‘Indians’ into Hindus and Muslims was closely linked to parallel developments in India, it was also a response to the situation Mauritians of Indian backgrounds were facing in colonial Mauritius. Religious differences are also related to the failure of the competing paradigm to break the dominance of a multicultural vision of the Mauritian nation. By this I mean the relative lack of success ethnolinguistic nationalism based on the almost universally shared vernacular language Mauritian Creole has had in Mauritius.

Linguistic diversity in Mauritius

Mauritius is widely known as a multilingual island nation. Mauritian multilingualism is complex and operates on multiple levels. To begin with, linguistic diversity in Mauritius is not, with some qualifications, a matter of distinct groups marked off from each other through different vernacular languages. Instead, there is one almost universally shared vernacular, Mauritian Creole, a language that is also usually considered the flagship of locally created cultural traditions in Mauritius. Other vernacular languages are in use as well, such as French, which is a home language for a small percentage of the population, as well as Bhojpuri, still used by less than a fifth of Mauritians, especially among people of north Indian descent in rural areas. There are still smaller numbers of Mauritians who use Hakka, Gujarati, and Kutchi as home languages. But all those using French, Bhojpuri, Hakka, Gujarati and Kutchi in everyday life also use Mauritian Creole, whose role as the predominant vernacular of Mauritius is uncontested. As in several other postcolonial states, notably in Africa, the language of the former colonizer, English, has been retained as official language in state administration and education. Mauritius experienced multiple layers of colonization, and French, the language of the colonizers from 1715-1810 continues to overshadow the significance of English in several respects, as it is the dominant language of media and the private sector economy. The importance of French is largely due to the dominant role Franco-Mauritian settlers and their descendants have always played in the island’s economy, and their very important role in the politics of the colony even after the end of French rule until independence in 1968. A particularity of Mauritian linguistic diversity is the importance of so-called ancestral languages for local understandings of language and belonging. These languages, modern standard forms of Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Arabic and Mandarin were rarely ever used or even known by any ancestors migrating from India or China to Mauritius, but emerged as important rallying points for emerging ethnic and ethno-religious identifications in Mauritius. They are officially recognized and supported by the state as school subjects, and the mostly religious organizations promoting these languages also receive state subsidies. Among Mauritians of Indian descent who comprise almost 70 per cent of the population and who claim these languages (with the exception of Mandarin) as their ancestral patrimony, these languages are closely tied to religious traditions and are predominantly used in religious contexts. They are hardly ever used in other areas of everyday life. Basic knowledge of Hindi and Urdu is relatively widespread among Mauritians of Indian origin, while knowledge of Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Arabic tends to be minimal or absent even among those Mauritians claiming them as ‘ancestral languages.’ The main uses of these ancestral languages lie in ritual practice, and in the possibilities identification with these languages affords for the making of religious, and ethno-religious, and even sectarian boundaries. Despite their limited use and the often minimal knowledge Mauritians have of these languages, even if they are associated with them by virtue of their background, these languages are very significant because of their ties to religion. Their important role points to the prominent place of religion and religious diversity for Mauritius nation building. The latter has largely followed a markedly multiculturalist strategy in which the ongoing cultivation as well as official recognition of diasporic ‘ancestral culture’ centered on major, standardized forms of religion play a supreme role.

Given Mauritian multilingualism, Mauritians often have large linguistic repertoires. They creatively draw on them in order to take stances, define situations, and to enact social, ethnic, and religious identifications in everyday life. To make matters more complex, this is not just a matter of code-switching from one defined language to another, but also involves considerable register variation within the vernacular languages Mauritian Creole, Mauritian Bhojpuri, and French. Perhaps most
significantly, there is considerable sociolinguistic variation in the way Mauritians use Mauritian Creole. This often follows the dynamics of a 'creole continuum' (Rickford, 1987) that is also attested for many other settings where creole languages are used, in the Mauritian case ranging between 'basilectal' varieties of Mauritian Creole and its lexifier language French. The use of the creole continuum's intermediate varieties of "Frenchified Creole," corresponding to what creole linguists refer to as "mesolect," evokes middle class status and higher levels of education (Eisenlohr, 2006: 131-141, see also Chaudenson, 1993: 427 and de Robillard, 1989:153). While the role of the former colonial languages - English and French - remains uncontested in the education system, the role of the main vernacular language Mauritian Creole in education as well as the teaching of the officially claimed ancestral languages has been surrounded by controversies. Despite its role as the dominant vernacular of almost the entire population, Mauritian Creole was denied official recognition in the past. In 2012, the language was finally introduced as a school subject on an optional basis. In contrast to Mauritian Creole's striking lack of recognition as compared to its dominant role in everyday life, ancestral languages claimed by Mauritians of Indian origin as well as Mandarin, claimed by Sino-Mauritians whose ancestors were Hakka and Cantonese speakers, have long enjoyed strong official support as subjects to be taught in the school system, a policy that was already in place in the final years of colonial rule.

Language and the nation

Certainly, giving greater recognition to Mauritian Creole has been tried before. In fact, on the 50th anniversary of Mauritian independence it is highly instructive to remember the abortive attempt to give Mauritian Creole official recognition during the festivities of the 15th anniversary of independence in 1983. Leaders of the government, at the time dominated by the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), had the national anthem sung in Mauritian Creole instead of English, an event that was also announced as 'the national anthem sung in the national language' in its broadcast by the state-controlled Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). As Mauritians remember well, this caused a crisis, triggering a political upheaval along ethnic and religious lines. The vice-Prime Minister Harish Boodhoo dismissed the director of the MBC and the governing coalition fell apart soon after. In the following general elections the MMM, which had come to power in a landslide victory the previous year and whose leader Paul Bérenger was largely responsible for the controversial decision to performatively elevate Mauritian Creole as national language in the context of the Independence Day festivities, was defeated. The political resistance that doomed this 1983 attempt to give Mauritian Creole official recognition principally came from the Hindu state bourgeoisie (Houbert, 1982-1983: 254-255; Eisenlohr, 2007). The latter do not monopolize, but clearly hold a dominant position in the Mauritian state apparatuses. This raises the question of why representatives of this group were so opposed to giving official recognition to Mauritian Creole, the vernacular language of the overwhelming majority of Mauritians, including themselves. The question why the predominant vernacular language could not become the national language goes to the heart of the issue of language and religion in Mauritian nation building. Contrasting images of Mauritian Creole became linked to two opposed ways of imagining the nation through language differences.

For those promoting Mauritian Creole as national language, this move seemed a quintessential and overdue nation building strategy. Faced with a recently created postcolonial country that exhibited stark divisions along ethnic, racial, and religious lines as a result of its past as a plantation society, the leaders of the MMM at the time saw these 'communal' divisions as an obstacle to creating a 'real' nation, and therefore a deficit to be overcome under the slogan enn sel lepep, enn sel nasyon (one people, one nation). For them, a nation that merited such a designation would have to adopt a strategy of internal homogenisation. Conversely, heterogeneity in terms of multiple ethnic, religious, and linguistic boundaries constituted a danger to this new nation. At the same time, standardizing a widely used vernacular language and turning it into an emblem of the nation had long been a strategy easily available for 'piracy,' in Benedict Anderson's terms (Anderson, 1991: 67). Ethnolinguistic nationalism would be the vehicle for creating a new and more homogenous nation and the solution for 'communalism' that pro-Mauritian Creole activists - for good reasons - attributed to colonial history and politics. At least since the early 19th century, European nationalists had promoted vernacular standardization, resulting in the growth of ethnolinguistic nationalism in often previously linguistically heterogeneous areas. According to this ideology, the possession of a shared and standardized vernacular turns people into a nation, entitled to self-determination. The standardized vernacular language is portrayed as the already existing 'natural' language of the people, not only downplaying linguistic innovation and erasure in the process of standardisation, but also typically sideling substantial dialectal and sociolinguistic variation among those becoming a nation, let alone histories of long-established multilingualism. Attempts to standardize Mauritian Creole have for example all been based on 'basilectal' varieties of the language. In Mauritius, Mauritian Creole is not only shared by the vast majority of the population, but probably also the most significant locally created cultural element, thus an apparently ideal instrument for nation building when seen through the lens of European-style ethnolinguistic nationalism.

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However, despite its wide distribution across ethnic and religious lines, Mauritian Creole has recognisable creators that are clearly identified with one of the ethno-religious group of Mauritius. Born on the homesteads and plantations of 18th century Isle de France, academics and the wider Mauritian public agree that the creators of Mauritian Creole were slaves, predominantly from Africa but also Madagascar and India. Their descendants are nowadays closely connected with the Creoles, a group of highly mixed but predominantly African and Malagasy origins and Christian by religion. This position was already voiced by Charles Baissac, the author of the first scholarly study on Mauritian Creole and one of the first systematic studies of Creole languages in general (Baissac, 1880: xi). It has largely remained uncontested until today. As a result, many Mauritians consider Mauritian Creole as more pertaining to the Creoles than any other group, despite its near-universal use (Rajah-Carrim, 2007; 2008). The post-independence attempts to standardize Creole on the basis of its most basilectal varieties, maximally distant from French influences, have only contributed to this association, since for Mauritians these varieties indicate low socioeconomic standing. This in turn dovetails with common perceptions of Creoles as an underprivileged group in Mauritian society. That is, despite the fact of its use across nearly all communal boundaries in Mauritian society, most Mauritians accord Creoles greater ‘ownership’ over the language than to any other group. In addition, both the Creoles as an ethno-religious group and the language Mauritian Creole are locally referred to with the same term ‘Creole’ (Kreole). This perceived lack of ethno-religious ‘neutrality,’ predicated on a distinction between factual use and ideological ownership was one of the key reasons for the spectacular failure of the 1983 attempt to declare Mauritian Creole national language, and the political backlash against its proponents. In particular, the Hindu middle classes and the Hindu state bourgeoisie saw in the campaign for recognizing Mauritian Creole as national language a thinly disguised attempt at sideling their centrality to the new postcolonial nation, placing Creoles, and thereby Christians in a privileged position in the national imaginary instead.

Hindu elites had at the time already successfully institutionalized a rather different regime of linking language and nationhood in Mauritius. Their is a vision of state-sponsored multiculturalism that highlights separate ancestral traditions brought from elsewhere over locally created cultural forms widely shared among Mauritians. According to them, Mauritius is already an established nation, albeit one that does not follow a model of nation building as homogenization. For them, the enduring deep communal divisions are not a deficit to be overcome on the road to a “real” nation. Instead, they view Mauritius as a mosaic of groups defined by their diasporic links to places of origin, especially India, as almost 70% of the population is of Indian background. Seen from this perspective, the public cultivation and celebration of such ancestral cultures is what makes people truly Mauritian in a country without an indigenous pre-colonial population. Accordingly, full cultural citizenship is achieved through the cultivation of such diasporic ancestral traditions pointing to origins elsewhere. For Mauritians of Indian background, the links of such officially recognized ‘ancestral cultures’ to the actual cultural and religious practices of ancestors who migrated from India to Mauritius is rather tenuous, as such ‘ancestral cultures’ emerged only after immigration from India had almost ended. They were the result of the profound impact modern Hindu and Islamic reformist movements have had among Mauritians of Indian origin since the 1910s and 1920s. In the final decades of colonial rule, such religious mobilizations that introduced modern, more standardized forms of Hinduism and Islam to Mauritius became rallying points for Indo-Mauritians’ struggle for emancipation and enfranchisement in colonial Mauritius which at the time was dominated by a Christian elite that often looked down on people of Indian origin. Instead of mere cultural baggage brought from India, such ‘ancestral cultures’ were in fact new creations, a powerful response to the often difficult situation of most Indo-Mauritians under colonial rule. Like Creole culture, they should be understood as local creations. However, adherents of such ancestral traditions strongly highlight the Indian origins of the key elements out which they are composed.

The intertwining of language and religion in Mauritian nation building

An important official justification for the support of such ‘ancestral cultures’ is their supposedly stabilizing function for the ‘social fabric’ of Mauritius. According to official state discourse, these ancestral cultures with their religious foundations provide valuable moral grounding in a society such as Mauritius that has undergone very rapid economic transformation and modernisation, helping to ensure the shaping of economically productive Mauritian citizens and their social cohesion. The fact that the strong promotion of such ancestral cultures also leads to the hardening of religious boundaries among Mauritians is usually sidelines by resorting to a Gandhian discourse that distinguishes between supposedly ‘true’ religion as the condition of possibility for a moral society, giving the impression that all religions are ultimately based on the same values, and religion’s reprehensible political instrumentalisation that is known in Mauritius, as in India, as ‘communalism. This policy is inspired by the maxim ‘unity in diversity’ that characterised postcolonial nation building in India under Nehru (Pehlin, 2016: 31-32), but takes a more optimistic Gandhian perspective on religion as the stabilising moral core of society and politics. Consider for example former Prime Minister Anrood Jugnauth’s remarks at the opening of the Ramayana Centre in 2002:

"It is very important to perpetuate human values, particularly in the present context
when crimes have increased, family breakups and divorces are frequent and moral commitment has lost its meaning.' Jugnauth went on to argue that only 'socio-cultural organisations,' which in Mauritian public discourse refer to politically well-connected religious organisations 'can in a real sense be the answer to today's social problems.' According to him, the Ramayana Centre 'would play a pivotal role for the moral and social uplift of the society at large.'

Anerood Jugnauth also stated, in Hindi, that during his long term as Prime Minister of Mauritius, 'in politics and statecraft the Ramayana has been my greatest ideal (rājñīti men rāmāyāna l merā sabse bālā ādarsh rahi hai).'

The Ramayana Centre also is a good example of the important transnational dimensions of making Mauritian 'ancestral cultures,' as it was founded by an alliance of Mauritian and Indian Hindu and Hindu nationalistic organizations. In June 2017 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist BJP and Indian Minister of External Affairs and BJP leader Sushma Swaraj sent congratulatory messages to the Centre on the occasion of the inauguration of its Ram temple (Ram mandir). The dense Hindu nationalist networks between Mauritius and India that have played a considerable role in shaping Hindu 'ancestral culture' go back to the 1970s and have from the beginning involved representatives of the Mauritian state apparatus, up the ministerial level (Eisenlohr, 2006: 36-44; 48-50).

Another implication of this regime of privileging ancestral cultures based on religious tradition is the marginalisation of those Mauritians who have no recognised claims on a diaspora-religion complex that would count as 'ancestral culture' in Mauritius. This of course primarily applies to Creoles. Official discourse on the virtues of ancestral cultures implicitly suggests that those, like the Creoles, who do not have recognised claims on an ancestral culture do not contribute to the stabilising of the 'social fabric' in the same way as other groups do. Seen from the vantage point of a discourse of 'ancestral culture,' they lack the moral resources to be socio-economically beneficial citizens. In addition, they also have no prestigious and useful connection to a major foreign power associated with a given 'ancestral culture,' such as the longstanding official connections between Mauritian Hindu organizations and India. This view of Creoles as both morally and economically lacking because of an absence of 'ancestral culture' is also rather widespread beyond official circles, at least among Hindus. During my field research among Hindu Mauritians in northern and northeastern Mauritius, I often heard a fair number of my interlocutors compare themselves positively to Creoles. According to them, 'Hindu values,' among which they considered to be family cohesion, thrift, and a willingness to sacrifice immediate pleasure for greater gains in the long run, had enabled them to experience considerable socio-economic mobility from very humble origins as indentured workers and small sugarcane planters. In contrast, they looked down on Creoles for 'having no culture,' which they also thought was responsible for lifestyles that led to Creole economic failure, unstable families, and shortsighted and imprudent spending patterns. In other words, in such popular renderings of the discourse of diasporic 'ancestral cultures' with religious biases, moral and economic superiority are talked about as closely intertwined.

The fact that 'ancestral cultures' claimed by Hindus of north Indian origin, Tamils, Telugu, Marathas, and Muslims very largely revolve around religious traditions and practices points to the often veiled centrality of religion for Mauritian nation-building and multiculturalism. In fact, the constitution divides Mauritians into four principal 'communities': Hindus (52%), Muslims (17%), Sino-Mauritians (2%) and the General Population (29%). The category General Population is composed of those who cannot be classified as Hindus, Muslims, or Mauritians of Chinese origin. These are largely Creoles and Franco-Mauritians, who are overwhelmingly Catholic. The small and multi-religious Sino-Mauritian community is the only one not clearly aligned with a major religious tradition (even though most Sino-Mauritians are also Catholics). Another ethnic category that transcends religious boundaries is Tamil. A considerable number of Mauritians of Tamil background are Catholics, there has been a lot of intermarriage between them and Creoles to the point that the boundaries between Christian Tamils and Creoles are often ambiguous. Nevertheless, in everyday and official discourse, the label Tamil is largely restricted to Hindu Tamils. Certainly, everyday discourse in Mauritius draws much more fine-grained ethnic distinctions. However, few of them cut across the boundaries of major religious traditions, with the exception of sub-distinctions among Sino-Mauritians.

The upshot of this is that religion is not the only, but clearly the most significant element in the boundaries between the 'communities' of Mauritius, whether seen through the lens of state discourse, or in the distinctions made among the larger public. The circumstance that Mauritians often use circumlocutions when referring to public and officially recognised religion is an indicator of the sensitivity of the issue, such as when talking about 'culture' when they mean religion, or mentioning 'socio-cultural organisations' when they mean religious organisations with considerable political influence and connections. Not only, but especially among Mauritian Hindus it is common practice for politicians to publicly attend religious gatherings and events, usually with speeches that fuse religious themes with questions of state policy in a way serving the current interests of the politician in question, like Anerood Jugnauth did in the example above, especially at election time. The practice is as much criticised as it is impervious to any critique. The 'ancestral languages' Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Urdu and Arabic associated with the respective 'ancestral cultures' also primarily
function as religious languages in Mauritius. When Mauritians switch to one of these languages, this can performatively mark the context of interaction in which this occurs as one of religious practice, or otherwise dedicated to the affirmation of religious belonging.

The slippage between Mauritian Creole and the Creoles as the largest non-Indian, and Christian ethnic group doomed the attempt to nationalise Mauritian Creole. Hindu elites responded to it by reinforcing longstanding trends towards ancestral and religious purity originally introduced to Mauritius by modern religious reform movements, such as the Sanatan Dharm and the Arya Samaj among Hindus of north Indian origin, and the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama’at (known in Mauritius as Sunnat Jamaat) and later the Deobandis among Muslims. At least among Hindus, this was also a driven by equally longstanding fears about ‘creolisation.’ This polysemic term merits closer attention. Hindu elites did not take this term to mean overall cultural changes in a plantation society, such as the adoption of cultural forms in for example food and language and new forms of social organisation that were locally created in a plantation setting by people with origins elsewhere. This understanding of creolisation is dominant among academics (Chaudenson, 2001; Trouillot, 1998; Vaughan, 2005; Eriksen, 2007: 156-157) and points to socio-cultural processes that virtually the entire Mauritian population has long been subject to. Instead, for many Hindu activists and also large numbers of Hindus without activist commitments, creolisation has meant ‘becoming like Creoles.’ For them, creolisation was a term evoking memories of oppression and disdain under colonialism when the Franco-Mauritian plantocracy often looked down on people of Indian origins and their religious traditions, and when there were also (largely unsuccessful) attempts to convert Hindus to Christianity (see Ramdoyal, 1977: 90). Creolisation in this view entails the loss of ancestral traditions, as usually happened as a consequence of slavery, with its brutal violence and disruption of family and socio-cultural ties. From such a perspective, the most significant of these disruptions is the loss of religion, and conversion to Christianity. In my research, Hindu activists often used the term ‘deculturalization’ to talk about these fears that the propagation of religiously based ‘ancestral cultures’ are supposed to counter (see Eisenlohr, 2006: 53-54).

In fact, in the literature on creolization there is much celebration of creolisation’s openness and its embracing of diversity in the creation of new cultural forms, to the point that some have elevated creolization to the status of an inclusive ideal for the entire world (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, 1993). However, creolisation, whether in practice or in academic theory, has difficulties in coming to terms with genuine religious diversity. In religious terms, Christianity appears to be its default position, despite some intermingling with other religious traditions. In the Creole cultural settings in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean, Christianity is the dominant tradition, while other traditions could in the past only survive through subordination and partial adaption to Christianity (e.g. Benoist, 1998). Cultural ‘mixing’ in the field of religion in these contexts of creolisation has historically meant the subordination and marginalisation of non-Christian religions, unless certain groups managed to break away from such dynamics of creolisation through often purist forms of religious mobilisation and revitalisation. This has been the case with Mauritians of Indian origin. In short, for the Mauritian context, this implied that creolisation could only be a phenomenon proper to a particular Christian ethnic group, but never be national. The discourses of religious mobilisation and the vindication of creolized cultural forms as emblem of the nation were opposed to each other. Given the demographic and political realities of Mauritius, the latter stood no chance. Instead of a characteristic of the entire nation, as in discourses about Mauritius as a ‘Creole island’ (Eisenlohr, 2009), creolisation is now widely seen as merely the defining property of a particular ethnic group in Mauritian society.

Despite the spectacular failure of the 1983 attempt to declare Mauritian Creole national language, there has been progress in the factual recognition of the language in a number of fields, such as education. An important milestone in the ongoing debates about standardisation and orthography of Mauritian Creole (Rahaj-Carrin, 2008) was the 2004 issuing of grafi-larmoni (Hookoomsing, 2004), a new orthography designed under state sponsorship in order to create a consensual official version out of the different spelling systems already used. This was an important prerequisite for the 2012 introduction of Mauritian Creole as a school subject on an optional basis. The same period has also seen a growing vindication of Mauritian Creole as the ancestral language of the Creoles, conforming with the overall dominant multiculturalist setup of official Mauritian cultural politics. This trend, originating in the 1990s (Carpoooran, 2003; 2005: 27-29) greatly accelerated after the riots of 1999, which were initially triggered by the death of Creole singer Kaya in police custody, first pitting Creole protesters against the Hindu-dominated police force and quickly leading to broader Creole-Hindu confrontations that in the end left four people dead and led to much destruction of property. Widely considered a manifestation of le malaise Créole (Boswell, 2006), the events led to calls and activism for greater political and economic inclusion of Creoles, but also to a stronger emphasis on Creole identity and its recognition, along the established lines of Mauritian multicultural nation-building (Harmon, 2014). Especially the introduction of Mauritian Creole as an optional school subject has followed this logic, as Creole is taught in the already existing time slots reserved for the teaching of the also optional ‘ancestral languages.’ As a consequence,
the subject is mainly studied by students of Creole ethnic background, that is those students that would not normally be assigned to the study of either Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Arabic or Mandarin (Auleear Owodally and Unjore, 2013: 215-216). Politically, the introduction is also linked to the protests of parents and organisations with Creole background against the fact that the results for the 'ancestral languages' of Mauritians of Indian and Chinese background in the Certificate of Primary Examination exams count for the final result, determining access to higher-quality secondary schools. The introduction of Creole, factually for students of Creole background, was widely understood as a compensatory move to address these grievances (Owodally, 2014: 324). And finally, the official ceremony for the introduction of the Creole language into the school curriculum in 2012 was held in the primary school of the village of Le Morne, a quintessential Creole locality in vicinity of Le Morne mountain, a UNESCO world heritage site commemorating the suffering of slaves and the resistance of maroons, and a focal site for identity of the descendants of slaves in Mauritius, the Creoles (Auleear Owodally and Unjore, 2013: 215). Thus a certain degree of official recognition of Mauritian Creole, a theme constantly argued about since independence, only came about once its proponents started framing the issue in terms of inter-ethnic justice and recognition, thereby overtly ethnicizing the Creole language. In contrast, earlier arguments about recognizing Mauritian Creole because it is already the informal national language, to use Thomas Eriksen's term (Eriksen, 1990), or the language of the working classes had hardly any effect. Mauritian Creole thus shifted from being a candidate for the role of national language, because of its near-universal use and its history of local creation, to being claimed as the ancestral patrimony of one ethnic group, in a bid to alleviate exclusion through recognition as a key part of the Mauritian multicultural mosaic. The way Mauritian Creole was officially introduced in Mauritian schools can therefore be understood as the ultimate victory of the dominant multicultural nation-building paradigm privileging 'ancestral cultures' over an ethnonationalist nationalism centered on Mauritian Creole.

However, what distinguishes these more recent Creole activist bids for recognition and their claiming of Mauritian Creole as ancestral language is the lack of an appeal to religious alterity and difference. The latter is something that other groups that have been far more successful in gaining official recognition and valuation typically claim. These are above all the various ethno-religious groups of Indian origin who, taken together, constitute the great majority of the population. Despite the fact that Creoles are Christians and overwhelmingly Catholic, they do not claim recognition on a religious basis. This is because of enduring racial boundaries among Mauritian Christians that also powerfully contribute to Creole exclusion. In fact, Creoles are unable to replicate the very successful strategy of claiming ownership of a particular religious tradition, because the Catholic Church in Mauritius has from its very beginnings been under the control and domination of Franco-Mauritians. Also, many Sino-Mauritians are Catholics, as well as a number of Mauritians of Tamil background whose relationship with the Creoles is ambiguous. Claiming Mauritian Creole as ancestral heritage in a belated attempt to counter Creole exclusion under the current regime of Mauritian multiculturalism has therefore not had the same empowering results for Creoles compared to others claiming such languages. This is because the recognition and celebration of ancestral languages remains above all a recognition and celebration of religious traditions and religious difference. Under the dominant Mauritian regime of cultural policy, Mauritian Creole is thus doubly ineffective as ancestral language. As it is a locally created language native to nearly all Mauritians, it not only lacks fit with the long-established paradigm that ancestral languages are non-native, having origins elsewhere, and can be exclusively claimed by particular groups in Mauritian society. To make matters worse, despite the fact that Creoles are by definition Christians, the language many of them now claim as their ancestral heritage is also not clearly aligned with a particular religious tradition that Creoles could claim as their exclusive property.

Religionization as a strategy of recognition

The Mauritian nation-building policy of promoting religiously grounded 'ancestral cultures' has to be understood against the background of a long process of 'religionization' among Mauritians of Indian origin. This process is of key importance for a proper understanding of the role of language and religion in Mauritian nation-building and the imbalances it has resulted in. Earlier, Indo-Mauritians were in their majority humble indentured workers and small planters widely looked down on among the white and coloured Christian elites of colonial Mauritius for being perceived as racially different and for their 'pagan' popular religious practices. In the course of rallying behind major, standardised religious traditions, Mauritians of Indian background managed to change their standing, gaining greater recognition by turning into respected representatives of the major 'world religions' (Masuzawa, 2005) Hinduism and Islam. As scholarship on South Asia has amply documented, present-day Hinduism and Islam in India do not stand in an unbroken continuity with a deep past, but are the product of powerful reformist movements in 19th century India. In many ways, the latter were a direct response to the colonial situation (van der Veer, 1994; 2001; Metcalf, 1982; Pandey, 2006; Viswanathan, 2003; Frykenberg, 1989). Especially the notion of Hinduism as a clearly identifiable, more or less bounded 'religion' is a product of this process that only began in the 19th century. Responding to Christian critiques of idol worship and practices deemed to be barbarian, an emerging Hindu
middle class refashioned religious traditions along the lines of the Christian-influenced concept of religion. This entailed a greater focus on a limited number of sacred texts, a neo-Vedantist highlighting of philosophical foundations, and greater standardisation of religious doctrine and practice, often through Sanskritization. This newly standardised array of highly diverse traditions and practices then took the shape of an identifiable 'religion' also by making use of the emerging public sphere aided by modern transport and communications technology in colonial India. These dynamics of religious standardisation and reform through entering the modern public sphere were also particularly evident among Islamic reformers. For them, the turn to a newly emerging Indian Muslim public was particularly pressing because of the 'ulema's loss of patronage by Muslim dynastic states, especially after the failed anti-colonial rebellion of 1857. Both Hindu and Muslim reformers' stress on individual moral responsibility stemmed from this need to address a newly forming Indian public directly, bypassing state institutions, in an adjustment to the realities of colonial domination. This also resulted in greater intra-religious and sectarian competition. In short, colonial rule in 19th century India engendered a powerful response among Indian elites and middle classes that led to the highlighting of religious difference from the colonizer. This kind of self-assertion though religious mobilization also brought about a reconfigured religious landscape, resulting in standardized and competing 'religions' stressing the theme of personal moral reform. In relative terms, the dominance of modern Hindu and Islamic reformist movements in Mauritius became even more pronounced than in India. These modern religious movements were able to effect a far-ranging transformation of Indo-Mauritian society earlier than was the case in India. Among Mauritans of Indian origin, particularly Hindus of North Indian background and Muslims, it led to significant changes in religious practices and identifications so that the shared world of rural ritual practices that initially were more meaningful to indentured laborers and their descendants than the labels 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' gradually receded, turning 'Indians' into Hindus or Muslims of various sectarian affiliations.

Many Mauritian Hindus and Muslims have common origins in Northern India, the area that are now the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They shared the same harsh working and living conditions on the sugar plantations of colonial Mauritius and later lived side-by-side in the emerging Indian-dominated villages that dot the Mauritian countryside. Ritual kinship based on the memory of having traveled on the same boat (jahaij bhal) was common across religious lines and religious divides were much less significant than they are today. In the 19th century, religious and ritual practices of most Indo-Mauritians were often more influenced by a shared rural and regional background, albeit divided by reconfigured caste lines, than by awareness of belonging to two major separate religious traditions. The migration of indentured labourers from mostly rural districts was already in full swing when modern Indian religious reform movements were just emerging. As a consequence, these movements were initially not able to exert much influence among the migrants. This changed in the early 20th century, when Indian religious reform movements finally reached Mauritius, at a time when migration from India had mostly ended. In 1910 the Arya Samaj arrived in Mauritius, followed in the 1920s by the competing Sanatan Dharm movement, that was locally spearheaded by high castes (Babujee-maraz), and the Ahie Sunnat wa Jana'at (Sunnat Jama'at). The supremacy of the latter movement among Muslims, linked to the Kutchi Memon trader community began to be challenged with the entry of the Deoband-linked Tabligh Jama'at that were initially connected to the Sunni Surtees, another Muslim Gujarati trader community from the 1950s onwards. These movements spread very rapidly among Mauritians of Indian origin, reforming religious practice and above all raising awareness of belonging to Hinduism and Islam as major world religions. Among Muslims, this led to ongoing debates and concerns about ritual orthopraxy that resulted in the abandonment of a number of features of ritual life that were common well into the 20th century (Benedict, 1961: 142; Hollup, 1996; see also Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2007: 128; Jahangeer-Choojo, 1997). One consequence was that Mauritian Muslims coalesced into rival sectarian groups that mirror the broader landscape of Islam in South Asia. Even though these sectarian traditions have always opposed each other, it made their followers more aware of their membership in a global community of Muslims, following one of the world's major religious traditions. A rising concern with orthopraxy was also present among those Mauritians of north Indian background who started to think of themselves as Hindus, particularly among the followers of the Arya Samaj (Hollup, 1995), whose influence was soon challenged by the Sanatan Dharm movement. Having conducted fieldwork in 1955-1957, Burton Benedict described low-caste ceremonies in honour of Kali and minor guardian deities that involved animal sacrifice and possession (Benedict, 1961: 131-134). But he also wrote of an already strong trend towards Sanskritization replacing local, tribal, or caste tradition: The special practices of the low caste Chamars and Dusads are being abandoned for standardised Arya Samaji or Sanataní practices. Many distinctive ceremonies performed in former days have vanished within the last decade' (Benedict, 1961: 141). Nevertheless, the main emphasis of Hindu reformist movements was less on orthopraxy than on 'Hindu unity,' that is the spreading of the notion that there is a Hindu religion that unites many diverse ritual and sectarian traditions as well as religious practitioners of different castes and regions. The 'high' Sanskrit deities worshipped in temples that until 1986 were controlled by high castes (Eisenlohr, 2006: 222, 292-293) have become increasingly dominant. However, the tenacity of the
popular cults at the multitude of smaller shrines known as kalimai, and the continued existence of low-caste rituals involving animal sacrifice such as baharia puja already described by Benedict are indicative of the limits of ritual standardization among Mauritian Hindus (Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota, 2009: 275-302). As happened among Muslims, religious reform and standardization also provoked the establishment of rival religious movements and associations among Mauritians of Indian background that had begun to identify as Hindus. These new divisions were less motivated by questions of ritual doctrine and practice, as was the case Muslims, but primarily emerged on regional (Eisenlohr, 2006: 234-238, Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota, 2009) and caste lines (Hollup, 1994: 302-303, 1995; Eisenlohr, 2006: 98-99, 222, 278; Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota, 2009), and nowadays are intimately connected to electoral politics (Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota, 2009). Nevertheless, and this is the crucial point, Hindu reformers were largely successful in grafting the label 'Hindu' on this diverse array of caste-based, regional and sectarian practices and affiliations. The stress on ideological unity, a common overall identity rather than unity of ritual doctrine and practice is also a hallmark of modern Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad ('World Hindu Council') which since its founding in 1964 has shown a particular interest in mobilising diasporic Hindus, including in Mauritius.

Among those beginning to identify as Hindus and Muslims, modern reformist movements also reinvigorated a connection with India, above all through regular visits of missionaries, the circulation of religious images and literature, and other links to the Indian public sphere. For Muslims, the presence of Gujarati trader communities who had settled in Mauritius as free immigrants with their own capital and who maintained dense business, kinship, and religious networks with India played a key role in facilitating the entry of the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at, and later the Tablighi Jama'at to Mauritius and the building of their institutions. Very importantly, all these Hindu and Islamic reformist movements enabled Mauritians of Indian origin to gain dignity as followers of a major world religion, with a global mission and presence (see Eisenlohr, 2012). These developments helped to spread more orthodox and purist ideas and practices about Hinduism and Islam in Mauritius and contributed to a shrinking of the old Indo-Mauritian worlds of shared sociability. The formally predominantly rural and regional ritual practices of Mauritians of Indian origin became more standardised while Indo-Mauritians began to align religious identities with the categories Hinduism and Islam.

In other words, since the first half of the 20th century Mauritians of Indian origins have successfully pursued a strategy of overcoming racial stigma as well as political and economic marginalisation through religionisation. It was this strategy that crucially informed the cultural policy of promoting ancestral cultures that was put in place in the final years of colonial rule. After independence, the newly dominant Hindu state bourgeoisie turned this into a model of nation-building casting Mauritius as a diasporic mosaic of 'communities," with religion being by far the most important element of differentiation between such communities. One of the obvious imbalances built into this Mauritian regime of nation building is that the route to recognition through religionisation has always been blocked for Creoles. As mentioned, Franco-Mauritian control of the Catholic Church made it impossible for Creoles to claim a religious tradition as their exclusive property in the same way as Mauritians of Indian origin were able to do with Hinduism and Islam. Also, despite its very important role in contemporary Africa, Christianity is not really considered 'African' in Mauritius, thus not suitable for the creation of 'ancestral' origins in the same manner as Hinduism and Islam are for Mauritians with Indian backgrounds. As a result, Creoles had no access to a comparable strategy of religionisation in order to overcome racial stigma and socioeconomic marginalisation. Not being able to claim property of a recognised 'ancestral culture' with a religious core put them in a marginal position in the dominant project of postcolonial Mauritian nation building.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the main two modes of Mauritian nation building, focusing on their language ideologies and the role religion plays in them. The dominance of the multiculturalist model privileging 'ancestral cultures' and the apparent defeat of ethnolinguistic nationalism based on Mauritian Creole point to the centrality of religion in Mauritian nation building. I have tried to show how religionization as a strategy of recognition has empowered Mauritians of Indian origin, who taken together constitute the great majority of the population. Even though a process originating in the first half of the 20th century, nowadays this strategy is also in line with an overall resurgence of public religion in many parts of the modern world, which some analysts have linked to the dynamics of globalisation (Csordas, 2009). In this sense, the centrality of religion to Mauritian nation building is also linked to the profoundly transnational quality of religious networks. Religious dynamics in other parts of the world, such as in South Asia, have had a deep impact on the Mauritian religious landscape and its social and political ramifications. The great imbalance in Mauritian multiculturalism as a nation-building strategy is that the Creoles do not have access to a comparable strategy of gaining recognition through foregrounding a link to a major religious tradition. The dominant imaginary of the nation as a diasporic mosaic mostly defined by religion sidelines them. The main tension in this Mauritian model of multicultural nation building is thus not only that it hardens religious boundaries
among Mauritians, such as between Hindus and Muslims. Above all, it marginalises those who are not defined in terms of religious alterity and those who cannot claim exclusive ‘ownership’ of a religious tradition.

References


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1 In Mauritian Creole nason is a polysemic concept that covers other meanings besides ‘nation.’ In everyday life, Hindus more often use it to denote ‘caste,’ such as in gran nason (high caste) and ë nason (low caste). It can also be understood as a reference to ‘African’ or ‘person of African phenotype,’ or ‘Creole,’ depending on context. Eriksen (1994: 553-554) has pointed to the confusion this caused during political campaigns.

2 A widespread notion in colonial Mauritius was that Creoles speak the ‘proper’ Mauritian Creole while the Creole used by Mauritians of Indian background was deficient in comparison. For example, the Mauritian writer Auguste Esnouf (1880-1939), writing under the pseudonym Savinien Mérédac distinguished the patois that the blacks speak among themselves’ from ‘different special sous-patois conditioned by the race of the interlocutor: Chinese, Indian, pseudo-Arab.’ We are even forced to note that the Indian has introduced into the patois accented forms that really never existed before him [before the beginning of Indian immigration to Mauritius]. The Creole from our home [the Creole domestic servant] says ‘Mo fi applé li’ [I have called him/her]; the Indian ‘Mo fini applé pour li’ (Mérédac, 1929: 123). Esnouf used the common label for Mauritian Creole at the time, patent, denying it the status of a ‘real’ language, but nevertheless suggests that there are correct and ungrammatical ways of speaking it. Thus, at the time, the notion that Creoles speak the proper form of the language they invented was already established. Even though today hardly anybody in Mauritius would suggest that the Mauritian Creole spoken by Mauritians of Indian extraction is incorrect or deficient as Mérédac suggested almost 90 years ago, the stronger association of Mauritian Creole with the Creoles when compared to other ethno-religious groups in Mauritius is still relevant today.

3 The policy documents of Armoogum Parsuramen, Minister of Arts and culture from 1984 to 1995 under Prime Minister Jugnauth are good illustrations of this official doctrine that identifies the promotion of ancestral religious traditions with the strengthening of social and political cohesion. This is a key justification for Mauritian multicultural politics (Parsuramen, 1988, n.d.).

4 Ramayana Centre in Mauritius, Organiser (New Delhi), 8 September 2002.

5 ‘SA’ and values of Ramayana: from then to now and beyond’, *Mauritius Times*, 23 August 2002.

6 Since the 1970s the Marxist groups LPT (Lektakson pu travayer) and Laliit have promoted Mauritian Creole as the language of the Mauritian working classes deliberately sidestoling ethnic and religious identifications, publishing a considerable amount of literature and dictionaries in the language, in addition to devising an orthography for Mauritian Creole that is maximally distant from French.

7 Certainlery, even among Hindus not all Mauritians of Indian background were of humble social standing, some ended up in business and became owners of sugar estates. In the period up to the abolition of slavery, some even were slave owners (Teelock, 2017: 90-91).

8 A partial exception are Tamils, who reject the term ‘Hindu’ for themselves, which in everyday discourse is limited to Mauritian Hindus of north Indian origin only. From the perspective of the constitution, and for the purposes of the census they however count as Hindu. Many Mauritian Tamils also reject the term ‘Hindu’ for their religious rituals and festivals which they call ‘Tamil’ instead. ‘The distancing of Tamils from a Hindu identity is particular to Mauritius. It does not exist elsewhere, neither in the Tamil diaspora, nor in Tamil Nadu, their land of origin, where 90% of the population is even officially of Hindu religion...’ (Trouillet, 2014: 170).
The Mauritian Paradox
Fifty years of Development, Diversity and Democracy

EDITED BY

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