Religion and Diaspora: Islam as Ancestral Heritage in Mauritius

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Abstract

Orientation towards a point of political and historical allegiance outside the boundaries of the nation-state is often taken to be a defining quality of diasporas, and this aligns with the ubiquitous tendency of Islamic practice to engage with sources of long-distance, or indeed global, religious authority. In this article, I shall investigate the dimensions of religious and political long-distance allegiances by analysing Mauritian Muslims as a diasporic formation. Looking at debates between proponents of Barelwi, Deobandi and Salafi traditions of Islam and disagreements between Urdu and Arabic as ‘ancestral languages’, I show the malleability of diasporic orientations manifest in such ‘ancestral culture’. This is not just a matter of theological contestation, but represents forms of belonging driven by local politics in a context where the state privileges the engagement with major, standardised forms of religious tradition as ancestral heritage.

Keywords

Islam – Mauritius – South Asia – heritage – citizenship

Anthropology of Islam and the Notion of Diaspora

Moving beyond older dichotomies of ‘folk’ or ‘tribal’ against ‘scriptural’ or ‘urban’ Islam (Gellner, 1981; Geertz, 1968), in recent decades anthropologists have problematised the opposition of local versus universal Islam (Bowen, 1992, 1993; Varisco, 2005). Recognising Islam as a profoundly trans-local, indeed global, religious tradition that at the same time is deeply embedded in a diversity of cultural contexts, they have turned their attention to the forms and
practices that mediate between the trans-local and the local in lived Islam. Islam, understood as a religious tradition in the sense of an ongoing complex of narrations and discourses that relate themselves to a common origin (Asad, 1986: 14; 1993), contains globally circulating forms such as rituals and textual traditions, and anthropologists have sought to trace the social life of such circulating forms as they are used and interpreted in a range of contexts (Lambek, 1993).1 Against the background of such research, Islamic traditions appear simultaneously as universally connected and manifold, as they feature claims to the unity of tradition while also being embedded in scenarios of cultural and historical diversity. As much as it is the product of local histories and cultural traditions, Islam has always had a strong trans-local dimension that Muslims tend to be very aware of. This has only become more obvious in the latter half of the 20th century due to the growth of a much better educated Muslim public worldwide, and the rapidly increasing use of new media technologies has also contributed to the spread of more standardised, orthodox forms of Islam throughout the Muslim world (Eickelman and Anderson, 1999; Eickelman, 2005). Thus, Islamic tradition contains an inherently long-distance, indeed global, dimension in which local practice is constantly set in relation to religious authorities located elsewhere, and where religious practice goes hand in hand with the creation and perpetuation of long-distance forms of belonging.

This quasi-inbuilt long-distance dimension of Islam as social practice poses the question of its relationship with another concept that has long-distance forms of belonging at its definitional core, the notion of diaspora. The question of diaspora is not only relevant for the study of Islam because there are numerous populations of Muslims around the world that are commonly classified as diasporas, but also because of certain homologies between Islam as a tradition and diasporas as connected across regional or national boundaries while being locally rooted.

Diaspora is not a simple consequence of a migration from A to B, but can be conceptualised as the outcome of a post-migration process of ‘diasporisation’

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1 Asad ultimately leaves open the question of whether there is one or several Islamic traditions. A great range of viewpoints and practices is possible under either option, as long as they can be related to the founding texts of the Qur’an and hadith: ‘A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. . . . An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present’ (Asad, 1986: 14). See also Eaton (2006) on the unity and diversity of India’s Islamic traditions.
driven by the politics of the location where a diaspora is produced and is perceived to be residing, especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts and the politics of the nation-state (Eisenlohr, 2006a: 227-265). On one level, it is a form of identification based on an ongoing relationship with a ‘homeland’, however conceived. Indeed, a triangular relationship between an ethnic group whose members—by a process of ongoing boundary-maintenance—reproduce a sense of being distinct from others in the society they live in, co-ethnics dispersed in other states, and a homeland conceived of as the source or origin of the group, is at the core of current definitions of diaspora (Vertovec, 2000: 141; Brubaker, 2005: 5-6). The imagined homeland is, in many instances, a shifting category that bears little or sometimes no resemblance to the actual origin of migrants, or of migrating ancestors. Therefore, diasporas are not created by the mere fact of displacement, but are a malleable category, as displacement alone does not necessarily imply a continued relationship with a ‘homeland’. Nevertheless, the socially constructed character of diaspora should not distract from the fact that diaspora as a lived condition also contains elements that do not appear from the actors’ perspectives to have been constructed, as they owe much of their force to dimensions of experience that go beyond the realms of ideology and narrative, however great their importance. Diasporic conditions can, for example, draw on emotional and affective dimensions of experience, such as emotional mappings of space and sensory impressions across the entire range of the senses, including olfactory impressions and sounds, which provide experiential triggers for trans-local forms of belonging (Deffner and Eisenlohr, 2013). In this way ‘emotional geographies’ (Davidson, Bondi and Smith, 2005) can provide key foundations for what Appadurai some time ago referred to as diasporic ‘counter-geographies’, by which he meant spatio-political imaginaries that undercut the prevailing global order that is based on a system of nation-states (Appadurai, 1996).

A key issue in earlier debates about diaspora has been the assumed link between diaspora and hybrid, cosmopolitan, or transgressive forms of belonging (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Clifford, 1997; García Canclini, 1995; Gilroy, 1993; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 18; Hall, 1990, 1991; Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996). This assessment was primarily motivated by the idea that intensifying processes of globalisation had dissolved the link between culture and place (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999: 141; Hannerz, 1996). A range of scholars have thus taken diaspora to be the emblematic case of a ‘de-territorialisation’ of cultural practices (Appadurai, 1996). Yet there are at least two problems with these approaches. First, it is clear that diasporic life, however manifested, has not only generated pluralist practices that transgress purist identifications, but has also been a catalyst for highly exclusionary forms and politics of belonging.
The second point, and one which is closely related to the first, is that it is impossible to understand the formation of diasporas without taking their interplay with modern nation-states into account. Contrary to widely held assumptions among theorists of globalisation in the 1990s, the nation-state is alive and well, and shows no signs of disappearance. While in the 1990s diasporas were often portrayed as a force of difference and otherness undercutting nation-states, particularly many nation-states’ homogenising tendencies, it is evident that diasporic formations have for quite some time also been important generators of national ideologies and nation-state formation, a dynamic encapsulated in Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘long-distance nationalism’. From such a perspective, the experience of being exiled and dislocated provides a catalyst, or in several instances even the precondition, for nationalism (Anderson, 1994; Thiranagama, 2014; see also Hobsbawm, 1990).

The literature on religion in Indian diasporas, of which Mauritius is a prime example, has also shifted from earlier concerns with cultural retention and attenuation towards an understanding of diasporic religious forms as products of colonial contexts and the politics of new nation-states. Here, the emphasis has been on the constant reproduction and transformation of religious practices and identities in changing circumstances in the destination countries (Khan, 1994; Vertovec, 2000; van der Burg and van der Veer, 1986; van der Veer and Vertovec, 1991; Hollup, 1994, 1995; Brown, 2006). Significantly for the current discussion, far from being a permanent historical ‘fact’ established once and for all by the act of migration, ongoing links to India as the land of the ancestors need to be constantly reproduced and actualised in the destination context for a diaspora to come into being. As I have argued previously, in Mauritius such processes of the ‘diasporisation’ of a heterogeneous migrant population and their descendants have been mediated by ideas about language and religion, brought together in the institution of an officially recognised ‘ancestral culture’ (Eisenlohr, 2006a). ‘Ancestral culture’ is the local official term for what in recent decades scholars have identified as diasporic formations across a wide range of settings.

In this article, I trace the crucial role of Islam in diasporisation processes amongst Muslims of Indian origin in Mauritius. My analysis is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mauritius in 1996, 1997-1998, 2003, 2009, 2010 and 2011. I suggest that the diasporisation processes I investigate are driven not only by inbuilt, long-distance dimensions of Muslim religious practices, but also by a particular form of state regulation of religious diversity in which religious traditions are cast as diasporic heritage. In the context of a post-colonial nation-building strategy that portrays Mauritius as a mosaic of people with origins in other parts of the world and ongoing commitments to places and cultural traditions outside Mauritius, the cultivation of Islam
as an officially recognised ‘ancestral culture’ not only supports long-distance forms of belonging but also legitimises the place of Muslims in the Mauritian nation. ‘Ancestral culture’ is the term the state bureaucracy uses as English is the official language. The French expression *culture ancestrale* is current in the predominantly francophone mediascape while its rendering in the dominant vernacular Mauritian Creole *kiltir ban anset* is also used. The discourse of ‘ancestral cultures’ is not only relevant for state recognition of groups perceived through the lens of ethnic and religious difference, but it has also become a dominant mode of drawing distinctions between Mauritians in everyday situations, in which they often foreground ethnic and/or religious difference while also acknowledging each other’s membership in the nation by virtue of possessing an ‘ancestral culture’.

The discourse privileging ‘ancestral culture’ in Mauritius has to be seen against the backdrop of a notion of nationhood that is rather different from those predominating in Europe (Eisenlohr, 2007), where diasporas often stand in a relationship of difference to the nation-state. There, nationhood is frequently though not always identified with a definite ethnic or ethno-linguistic group. This tends to push the cultivation of diasporic allegiances outside the national mainstream. Diasporas therefore prevalently appear as visible reminders of difference from a homogenizing nation, while diasporic and national allegiances may even be considered to be in opposition. In contrast, the dominant Mauritian understanding of the nation casts Mauritius as a mosaic of groups originating from elsewhere, whose members maintain continued relationships with such imagined or actual places of origin. As I shall explain, this model of the nation as a collection of diasporas is not uncontested in Mauritius, but it remains the one that is by far the most institutionalised. The lack of a pre-colonial population also facilitates this mode of nation building. Thus, not only do diaspora and nationhood appear as fully compatible, but diasporas actually are the building blocks of the nation. Muslims as one of these diasporic elements of a Mauritian nation do not appear as an extraneous addition; they are rather seen as part of the mainstream, while in homogenising imaginaries of historically Christian nations in Europe, Muslims often inhabit much more marginal positions. Muslims in many but not all parts of Europe can be usefully described as diasporas, but the political valence of diaspora is fundamentally different from the current one in Mauritius.

### Islam as Diasporic Heritage in Mauritius

Mauritius never had a pre-colonial population, and all Mauritians trace their origins to other parts of the world. Almost 70% of the Mauritian population
of approximately 1.2 million are of Indian origin, of which 52% are Hindu and 17% Muslim. About a quarter of the population are of predominantly African origin, largely descendants of African and Malagasy slaves that the French colonisers brought to Isle de France, as Mauritius was then known, in the 18th century, as it was gradually transformed from a trading entrepôt and staging post to India into a plantation economy. In addition, there are a small but economically very powerful number of Franco-Mauritians, descendants of settlers who arrived in the 18th century, while roughly 2% of the population are of Chinese origin.

Instead of adopting a homogenising approach to nation-building, post-colonial state elites, largely dominated by Hindus, have opted for a vision of Mauritius as a diasporic mosaic, where the origins of Mauritians elsewhere are not only highlighted, but where their cultivation has actually become a privileged avenue to the national mainstream and full citizenship (Eisenlohr, 2006a; Lowe Swift, 2007). Mauritians are divided into ‘communities’ not only by the constitution, but also by other practices of governance, and by other Mauritians in everyday life. Communities also claim official ownership of so-called ‘ancestral cultures’, with associated ‘ancestral languages’, pointing to diasporic origins outside Mauritius. For Indo-Mauritians, who constitute the great majority of the population, religious traditions—that is, Hinduism and Islam—actually play the role of ‘ancestral cultures’, while the ‘ancestral languages’ linked to those traditions are mainly studied and transmitted in their religious registers and significations. Consequently, in Mauritian discourses of ‘ancestral culture’, the terms ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ are often used interchangeably. For Mauritian Muslims, standardised, reformist versions of Islam that trace their origins to colonial India (Metcalf, 1982; Robinson, 2008) play the role of ancestral culture. Urdu and Arabic, studied in Mauritius largely for their role in supporting Muslim religious identities and learning, are their officially recognised ‘ancestral languages’. Islam as official ‘ancestral culture’ and Urdu and Arabic as ‘ancestral languages’ simultaneously cast Muslims as proper Mauritians. Urdu in its role as ‘ancestral language’ also points to the Indian origins of Muslims. The Mauritian identification of the cherished ‘ancestral culture’—predominantly religious traditions—with origins elsewhere suggests that ‘ancestral culture’ can be usefully treated as a key aspect of diasporisation.

The Mauritian government and state apparatus support and finance the cultivation of religious traditions as diasporic ‘ancestral culture.’ Drawing on Gandhian discourses that highlight the links between religious morality and citizenship, Mauritian state institutions mobilise religious values and traditions in order to support the creation of morally grounded citizens who are economically productive, non-violent, and capable of peaceful co-existence.
with each other. From this perspective, there is a profound difference between the destructive instrumentalising of religion for political goals known as ‘communalism’ and ‘true’ religion. While the former is the bane of a religiously plural society, encouraging violence and intolerance, the latter provides crucial resources for morally fortifying citizens so that they can peacefully co-exist. While there is little evidence in either India or Mauritius for the existence of an unsullied and idealised folk religiosity that, according to a Gandhian perspective, has an inbuilt tendency towards tolerance of the religious other and peaceful co-existence, some have nevertheless argued that its side-lining through modern policies of secularisation has actually enabled the rise of violent Hindu nationalism in India (Nandy, 1990, 1998). Such ‘pure’ religiosity is then portrayed as the only effective bulwark against the forces of communalism threatening plural societies such as India and Mauritius. Adopting such a view, the dominant Mauritian regime of citizenship and nation-building not only defines the cultivation of diasporic traditions as central to full Mauritian citizenship, but also assigns to religious traditions and the governance of religion a key role in the integration and stabilisation of a highly diverse society often perceived to rest on otherwise precarious foundations. As a consequence, state institutions subsidise the activities of religious organisations, including those claiming to represent Islam in Mauritius, as well as the teaching of ‘ancestral languages’ with overwhelmingly religious functions. Senior state representatives, such as ministers, regularly attend major events in the Islamic ritual calendar. At such ritual events, public displays of piety go hand in hand with the idea that the moral grounding in Islam as a major religious tradition makes Muslims good citizens capable of successful and peaceful co-existence with others.

Mauritian Muslims are diverse, in terms of both ethnicity and sectarian affiliation. The great majority are the descendants of predominantly Bhojpuri-speaking indentured labourers from the present-day northern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who migrated to Mauritius to work on sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. However, during the period of indenture, which lasted until the First World War, communities of Muslim traders from Gujarat also established themselves as free migrants in Mauritius. With their capital and strong links with India through kinship, marriage and business, they also played a key role in spreading modern reformist traditions of Islam among the overwhelmingly poor indentured labourers from rural backgrounds. One of these Gujarati communities, the Kutchi Memons, was strongly linked to the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama’at, also known as the Barelwi tradition. This tradition, characterised by a synthesis of Sufism and ‘ulema-based Islam (Sanyal, 1996), emerged as the dominant form
of Islam in Mauritius in the 1920s and 1930s, and still probably commands the following of most Mauritian Muslims. However, a rival trader community, the Sunni Surtees, patronised the Deobandi traditions in Mauritius. These two communities were not only competitors in business, but had also engaged in a bitter struggle and lawsuit over the control of the Jummah Mosque, the chief mosque in the capital Port Louis, which the Kutchi Memons eventually won in 1908. Members of the Sunni Surtee community also invited the Deobandi-affiliated Tablighi Jama‘at to Mauritius in the 1950s. The latter is probably the largest Islamic missionary movement worldwide and, as in India and Pakistan, has made deep inroads into the Ahl-e Sunnat constituency to the point that the latter’s future majority status appears to be seriously threatened. Bypassing the authority of the established Gujarati trader communities who initially dominated almost all Islamic institutions in Mauritius, since the 1970s Mauritian Muslims from indentured backgrounds, initially from the Deobandi-associated Islamic Circle (Eisenlohr, 2006b: 242-243, 2006c: 403-405), have been going to Saudi Arabia for theological training and have begun to propagate Wahhabi and Salafi-oriented Islam on their return. This process gained greater importance in the 1990s, when Wahhabis began to attract a growing number of followers at the expense of the Ahl-e Sunnat (Donath, 2013: 137-150), meaning the sectarian make-up of Muslim Mauritius has become more diverse (Eisenlohr, 2006b). An ever more educated Muslim public has increasingly become actively involved with issues such as religious authority and the legitimacy of certain ritual practices favoured by the Ahl-e Sunnat that aim at invoking the intercession of saints or even the Prophet himself. There are thus several claimants for the role of ‘true’ and authentic Islam in Mauritius, although in relations with the Mauritian state the Kutchi Memon-controlled leadership of the Jummah Mosque has maintained the dominant position. However, the competition and conflicts among Muslims over religious authority have not challenged the overall dynamics of cultural citizenship, where the place of Muslims in Mauritius is largely defined in terms of religious tradition, and where this tradition counts as an officially recognised and supported diasporic heritage.

However, this vision of nation-building has not gone unchallenged. Ever since independence from Britain in 1968, critics have attacked it as further deepening the ethnic and religious divides that were institutionalised when the island was run as a colonial plantation economy. They have long argued that a more homogenising strategy of nation-building, emphasising shared cultural forms, is necessary to overcome these colonial divisions in order to turn Mauritius into what they consider a ‘real’ and more unified nation. Almost without exception, the vernacular language shared by nearly all Mauritians,
French-lexifier Mauritian Creole, has been the focus of such alternative visions of nation-building. Having been created by African and Malagasy slaves on the plantations of 18th-century Isle de France, Mauritian Creole is one of the few cultural elements particular to the island and arguably the only one widely shared by almost all Mauritians. Furthermore, both local activists and foreign francophone academics have described Mauritius as a ‘Creole island’, meaning that it is a society created from scratch by colonialism, and characterised by the emergence of new, locally created cultural forms that arose through the blending of cultural elements brought from elsewhere (Eisenlohr, 2007). The ‘Creole island’ perspective on Mauritius and its unifying ethnolinguistic nationalism, based on a call to standardise the shared vernacular, which bears resemblance to similar ideological projects in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, is diametrically at odds with the dominant and official paradigm of Mauritius as a diasporic mosaic. More than anything, the homology of name of the putative national language ‘Creole’ (often spelled ‘Kreol’ by local activists and also an increasing number of foreign academics) and ‘Creole’ as the designation of the main non-Indian ethnic group, who are Christians and primarily descendants of African and Malagasy slaves, severely hampered the campaign for Mauritian Creole to be the national language. In particular, members of the Hindu state bourgeoisie, who tend to dominate the government and state institutions, saw in the campaign for the Creole language a thinly veiled attempt at their marginalisation in a new portrayal of the Mauritian nation, assigning the descendants of the recognised creators of the language—the Creoles—a much more central place in the national imagination. In 1983, events came to a head, when a new government that had come to power the previous year had the national anthem sung in Creole at the Independence Day (12 March) festivities. The leader of the Hindu ethnic faction of the government coalition defected in protest, and in the subsequent general elections a new, more profoundly Hindu government was voted into power, and this put to an end to the plan to make Creole the official language (Eisenlohr, 2007: 968-969). In this contest between the ‘Creole island’ and the dominant ‘diasporic mosaic’ perspectives on Mauritius, the government, as well as Hindu organisations, strongly favours the cultivation and celebration of ‘ancestral languages’ with religious biases. Their vision of the Mauritian nation has so far remained dominant.

Despite the fact that virtually none of the predominantly Bhojpuri-speaking ancestors of indentured-background Muslims had knowledge of Urdu or Arabic, they became the officially recognised ‘ancestral languages’ of Mauritian Muslims. Furthermore, only some members of the Gujarati trader communities had command of one of the two languages, and generally used Kutchi and Gujarati as their vernaculars. In present-day Mauritius, Muslims
overwhelmingly use Mauritian Creole in everyday life, while French is the main language of business and the media, and English is used in education and for purposes of state administration. Like their Hindu neighbours with northern Indian backgrounds, whose ancestors originated from the same districts of present-day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as the ancestors of most Muslims and where Bhojpuri is the predominant vernacular language, many rural Muslims still know and use the Mauritian variety of Bhojpuri in everyday contexts, alongside Creole. Among Muslims with Gujarati-trader backgrounds, Kutchi and Gujarati are still known, but their currency and significance has sharply diminished. The notion of ‘ancestral languages’ thus refers to non-vernacular languages that are never used in everyday life, and are studied in schools and religious institutions for religious purposes and for the maintenance of ethno-religious boundaries vis-à-vis other Mauritians. This learning of Urdu and Arabic began on a significant scale in the first half of the 20th century, at a time when migration from India to Mauritius had already ceased, and it emerged in the context of religious mobilisation driven by modern reformist movements that had only appeared in colonial India in the second half of the 19th century, at a time when migration to Mauritius was already in full swing. ‘Ancestral languages’ were thus not cultural forms simply brought along as ‘survivals’ from India, but a new response to a Mauritian context, where religious identification and mobilisation were privileged modes of social and political organisation in a colonial plantation environment. This also applied to other migrants from India and their descendants, where competing Hindu reformist organisations promoted a similar process of religious standardisation and successfully institutionalised the cultivation of modern standard Hindi, as well as Tamil, Telugu, and even Marathi, as ‘ancestral languages’ (Eisenlohr, 2006a).

Among Hindus, differences between various claimed ancestral languages are related to regional background, making Hindi by far the most significant ancestral language in Mauritius, since around 41% of the population are Hindus of northern Indian background. However, for Mauritian Muslims, sectarian competition shapes allegiances to Urdu or Arabic. The followers of the Ahl-e Sunnat, known in Mauritius as Sunnat Jama’at, led by the Kutchi Memons who have control over the Jummah Mosque of Port Louis, have long championed Urdu as an ancestral language. They have done so not only because of the status of Urdu as the single most important language of Muslim cultural traditions in India, but also because certain devotional practices particular to the followers of the Ahl-e Sunnat are performed in Urdu. These are, above all, speech events known as mahfil-e mawlud (see also Qureshi 1996), which take place on occasions such as the Prophet’s birthday or the death anniversaries (‘urs) of prominent Sufi saints, weddings and other auspicious events in
people’s lives, where those participating recite popular Urdu poetry in honour of the Prophet (naʿt) (Eisenlohr, 2009). While the preference for Arabic among Salafis may be less surprising, those following the Tablighi Jamaʿat in Mauritius have also championed the promotion of Arabic as an ancestral language in Mauritius, despite the fact that the international headquarters of the movement are in Delhi, and that its international lingua franca tends to be Urdu. No group openly argues against Urdu or Arabic, but the choice is imposed by the fact that Muslim students can only study one ancestral language at school. Those who emphasise the significance of Urdu as the language of what they regard as the ‘Islamic culture’ of Muslims of Indian origin tend to choose Urdu. Those more sceptical about the authenticity of South Asian-derived Islamic practices, considering them to be in need of purification (such as the mahfil-e mawlad), tend to prefer the study of Arabic at school. The contest over the two languages is thus driven by linguistic ideologies (Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity, 1998; Kroskrity, 2000), which establish links between the languages and various locations of Islamic authority outside Mauritius. The more purist followers of the Salafis and the Tablighis, despite the latter’s cultural and historical roots in India, tend to view ‘Indian’ cultural forms as unwelcome innovations and dilutions of what they consider ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ Islam. They thus contribute to a very widespread discourse according to which non-shrine-based ‘scripturalist’ and purist traditions of Islam are essentially ‘foreign’ to India, despite their centuries-old presence within the boundaries of present-day India (cf. Das, 1984; Robinson, 1983; Metcalf, 2005; Hartung, 2008; Menon, 2014). The propagation of Arabic as the ancestral language of Mauritian Muslims of Indian origin is thus motivated by a search for a return to putatively original sources of Islam outside India. The advocates of Urdu in turn point out that standard Arabic is much more difficult than Urdu for Mauritian Muslims to learn, so the vast majority would never attain meaningful competence in the language. For them, the continuation of what they think of as authentic Muslim culture crucially depends on familiarity with and knowledge of Urdu. Otherwise, they argue, the diasporic reproduction of Islam in Mauritius, which they view as embedded in an Indian-influenced cultural context, would be at risk. The state-sponsored notion of ancestral languages thus turns out to be a chief means of linking Mauritians to different locations of religious authority outside Mauritius and is a key element in the constitution of the diasporic connections so central to membership in the Mauritian nation.

The history of the emergence of various strands of reformist Islam and the local invention of associated ‘ancestral languages’ in Mauritius is very much at odds with their official portrayal as static cultural heritage brought by immigrating ancestors. The point is that, far from being durable ‘baggage’ imported
from elsewhere, their emergence was a response to political and social processes in colonial Mauritius that only began when significant migration from India had already ended. ‘Ancestral culture’ was thus the product of a process of diasporisation. At the same time, the interactions of the colonial and post-colonial state with religious organisations and institutions, including those representing Islam, had a decisive influence on the shaping of such diasporic ‘ancestral culture’. The dominant position of the Ahl-e Sunnat in Mauritius was partially the result of the long and bitter lawsuit over control of the Jummah Mosque that was finally decided by the Privy Council in London in 1908, and its ensuing state recognition as the highest Islamic authority in the country. In beginning a policy of extending subsidies to non-Christian religious organisations in the 1950s, the colonial government further encouraged competition between the various strands of Islam, and favoured those groups that could credibly claim to represent major standardised ‘world religions’ as official partners worthy of receiving such state funding. The same decade saw the full establishment of ‘ancestral languages’ teaching in state schools, initially in the slots when Christian students studied the Catechism. State institutions, in collaboration with religious organisations, then created a complete apparatus of teacher training, textbook development, and recruitment of teachers from exclusively defined ethno-religious backgrounds for instruction in ‘ancestral languages’, even before independence. The post-colonial Hindu-dominated state then further expanded and institutionalised this policy under its ‘diasporic mosaic’ nation-building programme intended to forestall the vision of Mauritius as ‘Creole island’ under implicit Christian hegemony.

Certain religious practices among Mauritian Muslims, such as the performance of naʿt (pl. naʿtein), as well as more generally the cultivation of Urdu or Arabic as ancestral languages, therefore address multiple audiences and serve a range of purposes. They are, of course, practices of religious mediation in a narrower sense insofar as they are part of processes of interaction between Muslims and the divine, a communicative exchange made possible by ritual and religious language. The element of ethical self-fashioning that is a key theme in discourses of piety among Mauritian Muslims is, however, not just the outcome of such ritual and linguistic practices, but also feeds into a Mauritian discourse of nation-building in which such religious engagement in a recognised ‘ancestral culture’ also contributes to the making of morally grounded and peace-loving citizens in a pluralistic society. At the same time, such ritual and linguistic practices also perform connections to places of religious authority located elsewhere. They thereby contribute to minimising the diasporic gap separating present-day Mauritian Muslims from the vastly different life-worlds of their ancestors in India. The theme of re-enacting the ways
of the ancestors through the performance of religious ritual is also important for Mauritian Hindus, who have institutionalised an annual pilgrimage to a mountain lake on the occasion of Shivratri around the theme of being one with their ancestors, at least within the frame of particular ritual events (Eisenlohr, 2006a). Likewise, the practice of Islam involves moments of addressing and suspending this diasporic gap, while also accomplishing an interaction with the divine as well as responding to the demands of Mauritian nation-building.

**State Regulation of Islam and the Privileging of Standardised Major Religions**

The links between processes of globalisation and religious mobilisation in the contemporary world have drawn increasing attention (Csordas, 2009; Robbins, 2009). Nevertheless, religious activism driven by aspects of globalisation, such as the availability of digital audio-visual technologies, the spread of major standardised religions, the growth of megacities, and the phenomenological resonance between certain religious cosmologies and the centre-periphery structures of the globalised world, is also subject to the regulatory powers of the modern nation state. In Mauritius, as in most other countries, religion, and especially religious diversity, is subject to state regulation. The public forms of religious practice and activism have to be understood as partially shaped by such state visions and controls of religion. As I have argued above, in Mauritius the state posits and promotes the politics of religiously inflected ‘ancestral cultures’ as a particular notion of desirable religious diversity that is seen as fundamental to the shaping of good citizens and the maintenance of social cohesion and public order. It is therefore commonplace to encounter a combination of religious activism with pledges to good citizenship that brings diasporic orientation together with Mauritian national belonging. However different their sectarian affiliations and political relationships to the current government, Mauritian Muslims cannot ignore these state visions of religious diversity, and the relationships between religious communities and state institutions they privilege.

Another aspect of modern governance of religion in evidence in the Mauritian politics of ancestral culture is the privileging of major, standardised forms of religion. In Mauritius, this dynamic is highly salient in the official policy of promoting ‘ancestral cultures’ largely derived from major religious traditions. ‘Ancestral culture’ is thus not thought to reside in ‘popular’ or ‘local’ religious traditions, but instead is closely aligned with the notion of ‘world religions’, which itself arose from a 19th-century colonial and Orientalist context.
(Masuzawa, 2005; van der Veer, 2001). In Mauritius, the forms of Islam representing Muslim ‘ancestral culture’ are the outcome of a long history of religious purification, boundary-making vis-à-vis religious others, and the activities of long-distance reformist missionaries and activists. This has led to the decline of previously rich, shared ritual worlds amongst the descendants of indentured Indian immigrants from northern India across what later became religious boundaries between Hindus and Muslims. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Indian immigrants' religious life-worlds were more influenced by shared regional and rural backgrounds than by the purifying tendencies of the emerging Hindu and Islamic reformist movements. However, movements such as the Ahl-e Sunnat and later also the Tablighi Jama'at and the Salafis, as well as the Arya Samaj, Sanatan Dharm, and more recently active Hindu nationalist organisations, have created a deep divide between Hindus and Muslims, as well as making their allegiance to major, standardised versions of religion a taken-for-granted social reality in Mauritius. Among Muslims, the issue of religious purification was intimately connected to sectarianism from the outset. The arrival of Ahl-e Sunnat missionaries in the 1920s at the invitation of the Kutchi Memons was a direct reaction to the local spread of the Ahmadiyya tradition at the time (Donath, 2013: 181-182). Contests over religious authority led to the denouncing of Ahmadis as non-Muslims, in a context in which increasing numbers of Muslims perceived a need to reflect and justify their religious practices in the light of major reformist versions of Islam, of which the Ahl-e Sunnat became the predominant representative. After the Second World War, with decolonisation imminent, the institutionalisation of the state policy of promoting ‘ancestral cultures’ with associated ‘ancestral languages’ reinforced this trend. From then on, the building of diasporic links around major reformist versions of Islam had become the predominant mode for Mauritian Muslims to simultaneously claim membership in the nation and locate themselves as part of larger transnational and trans-regional networks.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to illustrate the key role of the nation-state in the emergence of Muslim diasporas, focusing on the theme of governance of religion. I have attempted to illustrate Muslim responses to a broader state policy of framing religions as ‘ancestral cultures’ brought by ancestors who immigrated from elsewhere. In this context, I have treated contemporary Mauritian Muslim identities and Islamic practices not as survivals brought by immigrating ancestors but as the products of a colonial and post-colonial
setting in which religious mobilisation and purification came to play crucial roles in Mauritian politics and nation-building. The normative visions of religion and religious diversity promoted by the colonial and post-colonial state in Mauritius have proved to be very powerful in shaping Islamic practice and Muslim identities. The constitution of reformist Islam as ‘ancestral culture’ can partly be seen as a response to such official notions of religious diversity and as a bid for inclusion into the nation on such terms. Therefore, the formation of a Muslim diaspora in Mauritius is not the simple consequence of a 19th-century migration of Indians of Muslim background to Mauritius, but is in reality inseparable from 20th-century Mauritian politics, which saw the notion of a diasporic mosaic emerge as the dominant mode of nation-building. From the outset, for Mauritians of Indian origin, who comprise the great majority of the population and dominate the government and state institutions, religious traditions—Hinduism and Islam—were framed as the core elements constituting diasporic communities with demonstrable origins elsewhere. One of the consequences of this concern with aligning oneself with major, standardised religious traditions under the umbrella of ‘ancestral culture’ pointing to origins outside Mauritius is increased sectarian differentiation and antagonism among Mauritians identifying as Muslims.

Mauritius presents us with a particular scenario in which state regulation of religion and the inbuilt long-distance, indeed global, dimensions of a religious tradition such as Islam largely work in consonance, reinforcing each other. This is because Mauritian state policy has explicitly encouraged the formation of diasporas conceived of in terms of religious allegiance. Such a scenario greatly contrasts with the suspicion that many governments and other state institutions elsewhere harbour against transnational and other long-distance religious networks, which they often tend to view from a security angle. This has been the situation for many Muslim communities that find themselves in a minority position in nation-states in whose imagination they inhabit predominantly marginal or otherwise negative roles. Most notably for the purposes of the present discussion, this dynamic has become increasingly visible in post-colonial India, from whose territory the ancestors of Mauritian Muslims departed in the 19th century, and where Muslim transnational networks are subjected to scrutiny and restriction. Despite the fact that Mauritian Muslims also constitute a minority that in relative numerical terms is only slightly larger than the Muslim minority of India, Mauritian Muslims can engage with the global connectedness of their religious tradition on very different terms. In sharp contrast to the situation of Muslims in contemporary India, they can live the in-built global dimensions of Islam free from suspicion that such long-distance religious allegiances may undercut their loyalty to the nation.
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