Changing Definitions of Ethnic Boundaries on Mauritius

Research >
South West Asia

A mosque, a Tamil temple, China Town, and window shopping *en français*: it does not require a trip around the world to encounter such variety, but a five-minute walk through the centre of Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius. The bustling centre of the capital reflects the ethnic diversity of the small Indian Ocean Island, located 800 kilometres east of Madagascar. Almost four hundred years of European colonization has given the island its ethnically diverse population of 1.2 million, a population that its successive rulers have classified by birthplace, race, economic position, and most recently, ethnicity.

A Tamil temple in Port Louis.

By Tijo Salverda

This article examines the correlation, over time, of socio-economic and political status on the one hand and ethnicity on the other, and analyses the impact of historical trends in Mauritian society on the (fading) importance of language and religion in defining ethnicity. I do this by focusing on the changing definitions of ethnic boundaries, the social demarcations that mark the differences between ethnicities. These boundaries, flexible and changing over time, illustrate what is most important in distinguishing ethnic communities from one another.

Mauritius was uninhabited until 1598 when the Dutch settled on the island, which became a hub between their colonies in southern Africa and the Indonesian archipelago. The Dutch brought in the first slaves to labour on sugarcane plantations. The development of the island, however, took off with the French, who replaced the Dutch after the latter abandoned the island in 1710. The French built up the sugarcane industry, importing for their plantations large numbers of slaves, mainly from Madagascar and other parts of Africa. The heritage of the French period still has a strong presence in Mauritian society: the descendants of the French colonizers are the current Franco-Mauritians, a small but economically powerful group. The descendants of the slaves are found in today's Creole community; the French-lexicon *Kreol*, the language most used in everyday life, evolved during the period of French rule.

In 1810, the British captured Mauritius from the French, and stayed until 1968 when the island gained its independence. The British were content to administer the island; as the well-organized French planters elite was seen as an asset, no attempt was made to replace them, an important reason why the influence of French culture still prevails. Many of the Britons who settled on Mauritius eventually assimilated into the Franco-Mauritian community.

The British period was nevertheless an important chapter in Mauritian history. After 1835, when slavery was formally abolished, large numbers of indentured labourers were brought in from British India. The descendants of these Indian labourers are divided into a large Hindu community and a smaller Muslim community, and make up the majority of the current Mauritian population.

Although official ethnic classification was abandoned in 1982, large parts of the Mauritian population still define themselves and each other by their ethnic background. The classifications most used in every day life are based on categories from the last ethnic census of 1972, which divided the population into Hindus (52 per cent), Creoles (25 per cent), Muslims (16 per cent), Sino-Mauritians, whose ancestors came as free men from China during the British period (3 per cent), and Franco-Mauritians (2 per cent).[1]

Fault lines

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mauritius was a colonial society, strongly class based, and reliant on its sugarcane plantation industry.

A Hindu temple in Mauritius' north

All photo's by Tijo Salverda

A Tamil during the fire walking, which is part of the Tamil New Year's celebrations (1 January 2001) and is attended by many Mauritians from outside the Tamil community.

Although all sectors employed people of different ethnicities, the division of labour generally followed ethnicity. Occupation and class therefore strengthened ethnic boundaries. Franco-Mauritians, owning all the large plantations and sugarcane refining factories, were at the top of the socio-economic pyramid. The Creoles, having left their work in the sugarcane fields after the abolition of slavery, mainly worked as civil servants and artisans, either in sugarcane refining factories or elsewhere. Sino-Mauritians worked in the retail sector and owned most of the small shops on the island, whereas Hindus and Muslims were over-represented in the agricultural sector, working as labourers.

Over and above class and occupation, religion, place of origin, and language reinforced the confines of ethnicity. The Creoles, Franco-Mauritians and part of the Sino-Mauritian community were Christian, mainly Catholics. Franco-Mauritians spoke French, Creoles and significant parts of other communities spoke Kreol, and parts of the mainly rural Hindu community spoke Bhojpuri, a variant of Hindi.

The 1930s witnessed significant changes in Mauritian society, causing ethnic boundaries to correlate more with political boundaries. Politics became an activity not only for the benefit of the elite, but also for the Mauritian majority, consisting mainly of poor Hindus, Creoles, and Muslims. Politicians' interest in the poor at first disregarded their ethnic background, but this changed quickly. The increased attention for the plight of the masses engendered a new kind of politics that emphasized and exaggerated ethnic sentiment. Hindu politicians, for one, hoped to gain power by mobilizing the Hindu community; they emphasized the economically inferior status of plantation labourers, but ignored similarities between Hindu and Creole workers. The emancipation of the majority and increased interaction between different communities in national politics induced that ethnic differences were stressed more.

In the years preceding 1968, tension between the communities grew over the issue of independence, ultimately leading to violent clashes. Mainly Hindus supported the political party favouring independence; large parts of the Franco-Mauritian, Creole, and Muslim communities, fearing Hindu domination in an independent Mauritius, did not. While the battle was won in favour of independence and violent confrontations between ethnic communities were temporarily, the new rulers inherited a society divided along ethnic lines.

Diversification

Thirty-five years of independence have removed the sharp edges from ethnic boundaries defined as political boundaries. Although Hindus dominate politics and the public sector, the government has been making efforts to better reflect the composition of the population in public sector employment. The 1960s' exaggeration of ethnic sentiment is a thing of the past, though certain political parties, usually the marginal ones, occasionally play the ethnic card to gain support. A clear and hopeful sign that contemporary politics play less on ethnic sentiments can be seen in the person of the current Franco-Mauritian Prime Minister, Paul Bérenger. The fact that he is the first non-Hindu prime minister since independence signifies a break with the past. The decreasing importance of ethnic differences within politics indicates a preference for fruitful interaction.

Mauritius' changing economy represents another break with the past. Interaction between ethnic communities has evolved as Mauritius' low-income, agriculturally based economy developed into a middle-income, diversified one. In contrast to the sugarcane industry and its historically rooted overlap of occupation and ethnicity, tourism, textiles, and offshore banking employ multi-ethnic work forces. Due to increased interaction between different communities at work, the awareness of each others' ethnic habits has gradually risen.

Even though there are still a considerable number of mono-ethnic work forces, occupation is less important in defining ethnic boundaries than it was in the 1930s. Undeniably, class still correlates with ethnicity: Franco-Mauritians and Sino-Mauritians are still over-represented in the private sector, while poverty is most striking in the Creole, Muslim, and Hindu communities. Nonetheless, educational levels have risen, and all ethnic communities today are themselves socio-economically stratified.

Less clearly linked to historical change, but of great importance to the interaction between ethnicities, is the Kreol language. Kreol was already in frequent use in the 1930s, but nowadays almost all Mauritians, apart from the Franco-Mauritians who stick to French, use Kreol in everyday life. Kreol is used to overcome ethnic differences and unite Mauritians; hence the prime minister will always address the nation in Kreol.[2]

The evolving definition of ethnic boundaries shows that the correlation between ethnicity and socio-economic and political status has decreased, due to the diversification of the economy and the independence of Mauritius. Nowadays, differences between ethnic communities are primarily emphasized by religion and origin, aspects that belong to the core of ethnic identity and have a more private character than occupation and political colour. By the same token that ethnic boundaries become more fluid, the importance of a shared language (Kreol) to enhance communication once more illustrates the increased interaction between communities. <

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1. The figures are approximates and thus do not add up to 100 per cent, while the classifications are simplifications of reality. Most ethnicities have sub-classifications, known to its members but not always to the members of other ethnicities. They are therefore not used in this article.
2. English is the hardly used official language of Mauritius. French is the language of the media and is often used in formal situations.

References

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