Common Denominators: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of compromise in Mauritius

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Preface

Can multiethnic nations be stable and meaningful imagined communities? Are multiethnic societies necessarily multicultural ones, or is the very term 'multicultural society' a contradiction in terms? To what extent do processes of modernisation lead to an obliteration of ethnic boundaries, and in what ways are the very same boundaries strengthened through social change? Is it possible to avoid discrimination against minorities in multiethnic society? How can ethnic conflict be avoided? And what does the word 'we' mean?

These are some of the questions raised in this book -- questions that have occupied much of my intellectual attention for the last decade, not least with respect to Mauritian society. As this book will make clear, the recent historical experiences of Mauritians can provide a profound and nuanced understanding of multiethnic societies. This can serve as a counter-example to the depressingly numerous cases of violent ethnic conflict of recent years, and can provide fresh and sometimes unexpected premises for ongoing debates on 'multiculturalism' and minority rights worldwide.

The book is written in a comparative spirit. I have sought to use the example of Mauritius to make sense not only of fundamental processes of identification, ethnic and non-ethnic alike, but also to shed light, albeit indirectly, on tensions and conflicts in other societies. Mauritius, which has often been described as a 'laboratory of diversity', has a story that deserves to be told, about the possibilities and predicaments characteristic of complex multiethnic societies. In Western Europe, in particular, it is only recently that identity politics has become an issue of national concern; but Mauritius has been self-consciously multiethnic since its inception as a society nearly three hundred years ago, and may for that reason have a lesson to teach the rest of us.

Parts of this book are identical or similar to work published earlier, to the extent of as little as a sentence or as much as a few pages. Much has been adapted from *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity* (Eriksen 1988), an early

study of ethnicity and nation-building in Mauritius. Much less has been grafted from my doctoral thesis, 'Ethnicity and Two Nationalisms' (Eriksen 1991c), which was a comparative study of nation-building and interethnic relations in Trinidad and Mauritius, very different in scope from the present study. Snippets and excerpts have also been taken from 'Mauritian Society between the Ethnic and the Non-ethnic' (Eriksen 1997a), 'The Cultural Contexts of Ethnic Differences' (Eriksen 1991a), 'Multiculturalism, Individualism and Human Rights' (Eriksen 1997b), 'Nationalism, Mauritian Style' (Eriksen 1994a), 'Multiple Traditions and the Problem of Cultural Integration' (Eriksen 1992b) and 'We and Us: Two Modes of Group Identification' (Eriksen 1995). These articles may often be the fullest sources for the particular issues they raise concerning Mauritian society -- for although important research undertaken by other scholars is under way, Mauritius is still seriously understudied anthropologically -- but conversely, most of this book consists of original material.

During my long-standing engagement with Mauritian affairs, which has sometimes brought me precariously close to meddling, I have made many friends and no enemies. Very many Mauritians deserve a note of thanks, and I can only mention a few of them. I have a great debt of gratitude towards the Cotte/Jugdhur family, Suren Pamoo and Suresh Pamoo, Alix Koenig and Georges Koenig for their extraordinary hospitality; Malenn and Adi Oodiah, Elisabeth and Gaëtan Boullé, Amrita Suntah, and Patrick Bazile and his family thanks for their friendship and intellectual input; and I am also grateful to Raj Virahsawmy, U. Bissondoyal, Dev Virahsawmy and, in particular, Vinesh Hookoomsing, for their enduring interest in my work. Many others could have been mentioned, Mauritians and non-Mauritians alike -- you know who you are.

Oslo, autumn 1997

8 The Mauritian dilemma

You run on *ahead*? -- Do you do so as a herdsman? or as an exception? A third possibility would be as a deserter....*First* question of conscience.

-- Friedrich Nietzsche

The Swami Sivananda Yoga Ashram, set in a luxuriant garden in a lush suburb of Rose-Hill, provides a striking image of multiculturalism. Facing the street, statues and symbols representing a multitude of religious traditions are displayed: Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christianity are represented. In the meditation room, open to the public, a great variety of sacred scriptures and holy books are available: the Gita, the Qu'ran, the Bible and many others. In a certain sense, the ashram may be seen as a symbol of Mauritian tolerance; it nonetheless represents an image of syncretism impossible to accept for most Mauritians.

Compromise and hegemony

Nowhere is the orthodox conceptualisation of the nation as an imagined community more evidently valid than in the colonially created states. Commonly invoked as examples of this are the postcolonial African states, whose boundaries were randomly drawn a century or less ago. Even more striking are the culturally constructed nationalisms of societies that were never precolonial. Mauritius is such a nation. Its very society was created through the mass imports of slaves and indentured labourers during the modern era, and it has been independent for only three decades. Until the 1960s, the wider identities of the inhabitants of Mauritius were by and large colonial; they knew that they were British subjects and that they owed their dominant written language to France.

Mauritians are generally, this book has shown, self-conscious of ethnic differences. Their society is made up of groups originating from three continents and four major religions; there is no clear ethnic majority, and yet the Mauritian state has hitherto avoided public interethnic violence since the riots around Independence. Yet most Mauritians are, regardless of ethnic membership, subjectively concerned to retain their ethnic distinctiveness, although tendencies in Mauritian society indicate that this may be difficult in the near future. Religious ritual is widely attended, and there is currently -- in the 1990s -- an upsurge in popular interest in cultural origins.

Simultaneously, there are strong forces at work, described in the last two chapters, encouraging a polyethnic or postethnic Mauritian nationalism that is identified with cultural uniformity in quotidian practices and a shared destiny: the emergent industrial system requires uniformly qualified, mobile labour, which in turn requires a standardisation of education; national radio, TV and the newspapers increasingly influence the form and topics of discourse about society, and there seems to have been a growth in the occurrence of interethnic marriages.

* *Particularism and universalism.* The Mauritian state, recognising the immanent dangers of the potential dominance of one ethnic category, has taken great pains to develop a set of national symbols that can be endorsed by anybody, and that are thus not associated with one particular ethnic category. Caught between different, sometimes conflicting ideological orientations, Mauritians choose situationally between universalist ethics of state nationalism, and particularist ethics of ethnicity or comparable ideological orientations. In formal politics, in matters relating to employment and marriage, and in some informal contexts of social interaction, ethnicity remains a major variable; but it is constantly being counteracted by discourse arguing the superiority of abstract justice and non-particularism. The openness of Mauritian discourse, public and private -- in particular, the fact that ethnic tension and cultural differences are universally acknowledged as facts of social life, and the absence of a clearly hegemonic ethnic category -- are some of the conditions for the kind of interethnic

compromise realised in Mauritius. Although there may be important contradictions between ideologies of ethnicity and ideologies of nationalism at the level of individual agency, such contradictions can to a great extent be reconciled at the national, formal political level, where compromise, legalistic justice, equal rights and tolerance are emphasised. Ethnically based systems of segmentary oppositions are nevertheless encouraged officially, but only if they are enacted outside the educational, political and economic systems, where the virtues of meritocracy and individualism are stressed, although these principles are, as has been indicated, often violated. The Mauritian nation aims at striking a balance between the binary logic of the state (dividing the world's population into citizens and foreigners) and the segmentary logic of the ethnic mosaic, where *degrees* of membership and loyalty are made relevant (see Evans-Pritchard 1940; Gluckman 1982 [1956]; Eriksen 1993b on segmentary oppositions).

* *A non-ethnic nation?* The nation-building project in Mauritius is contradiction-ridden, even if the state does not represent a form of lineage organisation but rather a compromise between 'lineages', and requires continuous negotiation over the relationship between uniformity and diversity. The project is politically interesting as it has successfully prevented interethnic violence for nearly thirty years; and also analytically interesting, because it seems to contradict central tenets in the academic analysis of nationalism, where cultural and ethnic diversity is generally seen as a threat to national integrity. However, virtually every country in the world is torn, in some way, between homogenisation and emphasis on shared values and culture on the one hand; and differentiation and ethnic or regional movements on the other. Mauritius is not unique in this. In which sense can Mauritian nationalism truly be said to be non-ethnic? The answer is not as obvious as it might seem at a first glance. For although the official ideology of multiculturalism seems to 'freeze' ethnic distinctions, the Mauritian project of nation-building can also be seen, in its universalistic mode, as an attempt, more or less conscious, to create a new *ethnie* or ethnic community of people, whose ancestral language will eventually be Kreol. Since the entire population has already become integrated into a uniform system of

communication, politics and economic exchange, it can be argued that the only ingredient missing is the self-definition: in other words, that Mauritians can be *a people* tomorrow if they decide to.

There can be no doubt that the majority of Mauritians do not wish ethnic boundaries to vanish altogether, although there are many views on what the relationship between similarity and difference ought to be. Since Mauritian nationhood must be defined as adherence to a unifying, non-ethnic ideology, it is difficult to invest any nationalism with substantive content, since most of the potential national symbols can be interpreted as expression of ethnic interests.

The dilemma of multiculturalism
Ethnic plurality poses a problem for the nation-state to the extent that the constituent groups communicate their distinctiveness in contexts where this distinctiveness is seen as incompatible with the requirements of the nation-state, notably those related to formal equality and uniform practices. In reminding the authorities of the possibility of segmentary systems of opposition within the nation-state, cultural minorities may seem to threaten its unity. The minorities are in turn usually faced with threats of more or less enforced assimilation. The intensity of such pressures to assimilate is usually contingent on the degree of modernisation and the level of state integration in national society. What about Mauritius?

* *Limits to plurality.* The 'cultural pluralist model', which is posited as an explicit ideal through Mauritian state nationalist ideology, sets clear limitations to the extent of the cultural plurality allowed: common denominators depend on cultural sharing. To the extent that the different population segments participate in the formal institutions of the state, their assimilation is likely at least in those respects to which these institutions are relevant. Thus the then Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth commented on the Diard case (see Chap. 5): 'No religious body should think that it is a state within a state.' Responding to accusations of ethnic particularism, Jugnauth in this way redefined the conflict by maintaining that the expulsion was not caused by religious animosities, for religious

pluralism had to be deemed as legitimate; rather, it was the 'meddling' with the affairs of the *state* by the priest (who, like many Catholic clergymen in Mauritius, was a French citizen) that was considered illegitimate. The general issue pertains to the limits of shared imperatives and common denominators, and conversely, the scope of the cultural differences that are acceptable, seen from the state's perspective within the compass of the nation-state.

Between the ethnic and the post-ethnic

Let us look more closely at some of the problems, controversies, paradoxes and contradictions that inevitably arise in the course of the balancing acts between demands for similarity and homogenisation, and claims of difference and special rights justified ethnically.

Père Henri Souchon became famous overnight when, at the height of the legendary 'race riots' of 1968, he admonished his congregation in central Port-Louis to visit the nearby mosque in order to familiarise themselves with a Muslim way of thought and thereby mitigate the mutual suspicion between Christians and Muslims. He called for contact and a possible 'merging of horizons', to use Gadamer's term, between the antagonists.

More than two decades after the riots, Souchon, now fondly described as *l'homme-pont* (the human bridge, cf. Ahnee 1991), sees two possible scenarios confronting Mauritius in terms of the relationship between ethnic boundaries and the formation of identity categories oblivious of ethnicity. He calls them the *fruit salad* and the *fruit compote*, respectively. In the fruit salad, the components are clearly distinct; ethnic boundaries are intact, and reflexively 'rooted' identities are secure and stable. In the fruit *compote*, on the other hand, the different fruits are squashed and mixed together with substantial use of force. (This metaphor, it may be noted, is reminiscent of the American 'melting pot' metaphor.) The result of the *compote de fruit*, in *père* Souchon's view, would be uprootedness, nihilism and confusion. He himself therefore supports the fruit salad variety, although he goes further than most in expanding the compass of the common denominators or, to stretch the fruit salad metaphor somewhat,

thickening the syrup. In order to have a dialogue, Souchon argues, one needs a firm position to conduct it from. This kind of argument should be familiar from multiethnic societies elsewhere as well. The fruit *compote* corresponds to processes of creolisation and the merging of horizons; while the fruit salad corresponds to alternating policies of compromise and avoidance.

The world view envisioned in the fruit salad metaphor, often phrased as a rainbow metaphor, is hegemonic in Mauritius. Yet conflicts between equality and difference are inevitable given the complementary hegemony of ethnic identification of self and others. A few examples will make this clear.

* *The Catholic school.* Most Mauritian schools are public, but private schools also exist, many of them run by religious organisations. There are anti-discrimination laws. The Catholic Church runs some of the most prestigious secondary schools in the country, but as a condition for receiving state funding, a minimum of 49 per cent of the students have to be non-Catholics. (Only 30 per cent of the Mauritian population are Catholics.) It is nevertheless well known that Catholic schools have tended to prefer Catholic applicants for teaching positions, although they have also occasionally hired Muslims and Hindus. This policy was tested in court when an unsuccessful applicant filed a suit against a Catholic school in 1989 because she suspected that her application had been passed over on religious grounds. In court the following year, the defence argued that it was necessary to have devout Catholics in certain teaching jobs, because a part of their job consisted in turning the pupils into good Catholics. The prosecutor asked whether this policy was also relevant to subjects such as French, English and mathematics, which the school's lawyer admitted was not the case. In his testimony, the Archbishop, Mgr Jean Margéot, argued that the colours of the Mauritian rainbow had to be kept separate 'for the *arc-en-ciel* to remain beautiful'. The Catholic school won the case, and succeeded in this way in creating a precedent for differential treatment on religious grounds in a limited part of the labour market. The principle of difference was here victorious over the principle of equality. Instead of a common denominator defending a principle

of meritocracy, a common denominator defending ethnic segregation was sanctioned.

* *The Muslim Personal Law.* Another nationally famous case from the same period concerned the controversial Muslim Personal Law, introduced during British rule, which allowed Muslims to follow customary Muslim law in family matters. A characteristic consequence of this law was that it became nearly impossible for women, but relatively easy for men, to obtain a divorce. In the course of the investigations of a Commission of Enquiry set up in the mid-1980s, it became clear that the opposition to the MPL was significant even among Mauritius' Muslims. Not unexpectedly, many women and young Muslims were against it, arguing that they were entitled to the same rights as other Mauritian citizens. In the end, the law was abolished, and universalistic principles won over particularistic ones.

This second example is the most interesting one in this context. Here, the fundamental paradox of multiculturalist ideology -- Mauritian identity as identical with the 'cultural mosaic' -- becomes highly visible: it presupposes that the 'cultures' are homogeneous and 'have values and interests'. The mere fact that the formal leaders of an ethnic category invoke particular values and traditions does not, however, imply that all members of the group support them. This is why many governments and social philosophers hesitate to accord special rights to *groups*, for groups inevitably consist of persons with often highly discrepant values and interests.

* *The syncretist intellectual.* A third example highlights the relationship between particularist identities and universalist principles in a somewhat different way. Some intellectual Mauritians, tending towards a 'fruit *compote*' as an ideal, have experimented with mixing religions and cultural conventions in novel way. One such is the radical music group Grup Latanier, which performs an essentially Creole *séga* music with strong Indian elements and politically radical lyrics. One leading Mauritian intellectual decided, at some time during the 1980s, to challenge the rigid boundaries between different religions, reasoning that the island needed a 'shared culture' for a proper national identity to come about. On

Christmas day, therefore, he solemnly went to church, bringing bananas and incense as a sacrifice to the Hindu gods. This act was, naturally, frowned upon by Hindus as well as Christians, who both felt insulted by the blasphemous syncretism implied. If anything, they felt further apart after the experiment than before it. The ideal of the 'fruit *compote*' thus cannot be enforced against people's wishes. It should nevertheless be noted that universalist principles have been adopted by the Mauritian population with respect to political culture. In so far as discrepant religious or other cultural practices do not interfere with the universalism guaranteeing individuals equal rights, there is no good reason to chastise them.

Similarity and difference

The Mauritian attempt at creating a synthesis between liberal principles of individual equality and a cultural relativist principle is remarkable and unusual, and it arguably deserves international attention at a time when identity politics is becoming a main political preoccupation in a great number of societies worldwide.

* Community and individual. The examples sketched above suggest that *both* equal rights and the right to be different may in particular situations lead to discrimination and the violation of individual human rights. If one insists on shared civil rights as the basis of citizenship and nationality, as the French revolutionaries did, one will tend to oppress minorities by forcing them to assimilate to a public culture (language, rules, hierarchies and conventions) that they perceive as alien and intrusive. If, on the other hand, one opts for differential treatment on the basis of religion or ethnicity, the risk is the opposite: those afflicted may lose their equal rights. South African apartheid policies are a good example of this: South Africans were encouraged to use their vernacular languages at all levels, and the majority of blacks were thereby in practice excluded from national and international political discourse. This, in a nutshell, is the conflict between Enlightenment and Romantic social philosophers as well as that between communitarians and liberals, and it is *the* dilemma of multiculturalism (see Macintyre 1981; Lukes 1991; Taylor

1992; Rawls 1993, for the philosophical debate; see Lijphart 1977 for a classic statement from political theory). The hidden variable in this puzzle is power discrepancies (cf. Gledhill 1997): the unequal right to evaluate reified 'cultures', to define collective identities and social relations between them.

It should also be pointed out that political leaders are frequently prone to exploiting notions about cultural uniqueness strategically to strengthen their positions. In a critical study of ethnopolitics in the USA, Steinberg (1981) concludes that persons and organisations generally invoke principles of cultural relativism when they themselves have something to gain from differential treatment, and that they will otherwise support equality principles. 'Tradition', 'rooted culture' and similar catchwords are positively evaluated in many political discourses of our time, and they are often used rhetorically to justify privileges and political positions. On the other hand, this warning should not be taken to mean that there are never legitimate reasons for wishing to protect oneself against cultural domination (see Wilson 1997 for the anthropological debate over human rights and cultural rights). The difficult task, handled more skilfully by Mauritians than by many others, consists in drawing the boundary between the right to a cultural heritage and particularistic politics, through flexible policies aiming at establishing common denominators for the resolution of common problems.

* *Do I have to have an 'identity'?* Another, related point, which is also relevant for all polyethnic societies, concerns identification with collectivities in general. As a matter of fact, many Mauritians feel quite at ease as members of what they see as an emerging 'fruit *compote*', and do not long for roots and purity. They would prefer to be cultural hybrids to the extent they wish, to be recognised as individuals and not as the representatives of a particular group. The legitimacy of this kind of strategy was tried out in practice by members of *Lalit* before the general election of 1991. When they stood for the general election in 1987, Lalit decided to demonstrate against the ethnic character of Mauritian politics, which is actually embedded in the Constitution. Owing to the ingenious 'best loser system', intended to ensure a fair representation of all ethnic communities in Parliament, every candidate in the general election has to state his or her ethnic

membership. Lalit elected to decide their members' ethnic membership at random, by drawing lots. The result was not devoid of Theatre of the Absurd qualities. For example, one of their leaders, by all appearances a white Mauritian of foreign birth, re-emerged as a Hindu on the election rolls. In this way, they succeeded in calling public attention to a paradox in the prevailing multicultural ideology of Mauritius: it places a great stress on ethnic membership, and makes it difficult for anyone to be simply Mauritian. One virtually *has to* belong to a community, and one's community membership is necessarily something different from one's citizenship or nationality. Recall, in this context, Vishnu (Chap. 6), whose refusal to acknowledge Tamil as his ancestral language was contested by the census-taker.

The neo-Romantic ideological climate informing politics in many parts of the world today -- either viciously nationalist (in the cultural sense) or equally viciously multiculturalist -- is such that persons may be obliged to take on an ethnic identity whether they want to or not. Indeed, authoritarian culturalism may be just as oppressive in an ostensibly multiethnic and tolerant 'rainbow society' as in an ethnically hegemonic nation (as argued in a number of recent works, including Steven Lukes' wonderful philosophical novel about the adventures of Professor Caritat: Lukes 1995). The right to have an ethnic identity must also, according to the ideology of human rights, include the right not to have one. Here, perhaps, lies the greatest paradox of multiculturalism: in its apparently benevolent focus on 'the wealth of cultures and traditions' present in society, it neglects the Salman Rushdies of the world, so to speak; those persons who spend their entire lives midway between Bombay and London without wishing, or indeed being able, to land. It excludes the 'mongrels', anomalies and idiosyncratic individuals who are numerous and necessary as interethnic brokers and in the forging of cross-cutting or non-ethnic alignments, and who arguably represent the possible future of many societies.

Creolisation and revitalisation
Let us now move a step further, and reflect on the aforementioned tension in Mauritian society; the opposition between what Hannerz (1990) has labelled

'cosmopolitans and locals'. First, it should be emphasised that there is little to be gained from viewing this tension in evolutionary terms. Some individuals define themselves as, and act as, 'cosmopolitans' because their interpretations of their experiences and life-projects imply that they should do so; whereas others define themselves as 'locals' for the same kind of reasons. The point to be made in the context of current changes in Mauritian society is that an increasing number of young individuals experience the world and their own lives in ways encouraging a 'cosmopolitan' interpretation of their own identity and the surrounding social environment. To rephrase some points made earlier about social change in Mauritius: many Mauritians nowadays spend their Sundays in front of the TV set, in the shopping mall or at the beach instead of going to a place of worship; they read French *romans-photo* rather than the Bible, the Gita or the Qu'ran; they go to cafés and discos, where they meet others with a lifestyle similar to their own but a different ethnic identity; they compete on a par with everybody else for jobs and grades; and they end up working next to, and taking lunch breaks with, persons of different ethnic membership.

This 'cosmopolitan' tendency is underpinned at the institutional level by new forms of economic organisation, by the increasing application of principles of meritocracy in the educational system and the labour market (particularly in the private sector), by the growing secular public sphere (cafés, newspapers, magazines, professional organisations, etc.) and by increased contacts with the outside world through incoming tourism and economic diversification.

Equally importantly, the importance of kinship and family in the social organisation is decreasing in some milieux in Mauritius because of the individualistic and meritocratic tendencies in the labour market. Just like work, marriage is becoming a relationship between individuals rather than a relationship between groups.

One immediate outcome of this situation, which is no longer a mere scenario but visible (and quantifiable) in urban Mauritius, is the growth of the 'Creole' ethnic category. As remarked earlier, the Creoles make up an ethnic category that is not

based on shared descent, but on 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein 1983) pertaining to their general lifestyle. Ethnic anomalies therefore tend to be classified as Creoles. 'Creole' as an ethnic label in Mauritius is in practice a 'catch-all' label; a truly residual category absorbing everyone who does not fit well into the other categories, which are legitimised through references to notions of purity and descent. The children of Chinese--Muslim marriages tend to be categorised as 'a kind of Creoles', despite the fact that Creoles were initially defined as Mauritians of wholly or partial African or Malagasy descent.

Through this absorbent quality of the Creole social category, it may be remarked, the native term *Kreol*(when used about people, not about language) is superbly compatible with the analytic term 'creolisation' as used in the work of Hannerz (1992) and others, where it is conceptualised as a continuous process whereby distinctive 'packages' of cultural signification merge into new forms. A possible redefinition of 'a Creole' in Mauritius, fitting the current situation of flux, could be 'an individual who holds that his or her ancestral language is Kreol', thereby acknowledging that his or her origins are mixed -- if not genetically, then at least culturally. This option would, of course, be open to Hindus as well as Muslims, who thereby do not, however, become fully-fledged Creoles, but rather 'Creolised Indo-Mauritians', whose children may in turn be identified as Creoles. The Creole category is thus open in several respects; but it remains partly bounded, largely because most Mauritians define themselves as non-Creoles.

The next logical step, exemplified through Vishnu and Shalini (Chap. 6), transcends the ethnic logic altogether, would reject 'Creole identity' for being a residual category created by an obsolete ethnic logic, and claims Mauritian citizenship as the only rational basis for political identity. Within this world view or structure of relevance, shared culture is caused by the ability to communicate rather than by shared origins. It would be possible to argue, in this respect, that the cultural distance between a rural, proletarian Hindu and an urban middle-class Hindu is greater than that between an urban middle-class Hindu and an urban middle-class *gen de couleur*. This identity discourse, which takes place in Mauritian society because of the very real tensions between the ethnic and the

non-ethnic criteria for 'we-hood', is analogous to the debates over the concept of culture in anthropology and related disciplines (cf. Chap. 3).

Many thousands of Mauritians live within an experienced reality of this kind, which was unthinkable only thirty years ago, when the main social institutions of Mauritius were still tightly tied up with ethnic distinctions. In contemporary Mauritius, the boundaries have become fuzzy. Of course, most Mauritians still think and act largely within an ethnic mode of thought. Still, Creoles may bitterly complain that *tu pu malbar* when explaining why they can never expect to find employment in the civil service. And still, a Hindu may tell a visitor that 'it's funny, but nowadays, a lot of Creoles look almost like Hindus'. However, it can also be observed that a lot of Hindus look almost like Creoles, and this, perhaps, pertains especially to the young, who are constantly exposed to the same influences as Creoles in terms of music, dress, food and so on. On the other hand, it is also clear that not all parts of culture change in the same direction or at the same speed. Even if public culture becomes identical for all the ethnic categories in Mauritius, this (i) does not imply that ethnicity disappears as a socially organising principle, and (ii) does not mean that distinctive cultural values are not transmitted in the domestic and local fields. Be this as it may, it is clear that Mauritian ethnicity is in the middle of a phase of transformation in which its significance and relevance are changing. If the tendencies I have sketched here, some of which have been analysed more carefully in earlier chapters, were the only ones, the end of ethnicity might have been imminent. But there are other strong tendencies that strongly confront the processes of creolisation taking place in the economy, in the media and in the intimate sphere.

Until a few decades ago, ethnicity was firmly embedded in politics, the economy and informal social interaction in Mauritius. Ethnicity was *the* public discourse of Mauritius. Ethnicity was, also, strongly hierarchical. The changes in post-independence Mauritius have been no less than spectacular. The ethnic foundation of politics, although still strong, has repeatedly been challenged. Principles for recruitment to the labour market are no longer unambiguously ethnic. Educational opportunities have spread and have levelled out some

profound (including linguistic) cultural differences. New arenas for informal networking, such as discos, have appeared. Most households now have a TV set, and follow the same programmes. Far from everybody views this development with delight, and the pressure towards conformity and cultural homogenisation is met with powerful counterreactions from different quarters.

Revitalisation. Religious leaders from Hinduism, Christianity and Islam preach tolerance and simultaneously stress the importance of having one faith. Some high-profiled political leaders have also campaigned more or less openly for ethnic solidarity in recent years, and are gaining support. Hindu leaders speak at public meetings about the decline of Bhojpuri, linking it to urban decadence, the replacement of the sari and incense with jeans and the pill, and calls for a revitalisation of ancient Hindu values. In line with this logic, a Franco-Mauritian argues that in Mauritius, one has avoided violent ethnic conflict because one has -- up to the present day and age -- avoided mixed marriages. (A Creole who was present later commented, angrily, that this was tantamount to defending apartheid.) 'Traditionalism' and the search for roots take a number of other forms as well, within all ethnic categories.

These kinds of counterreactions against the homogenisation of identities indicate that many Mauritians today reflexively fashion ethnic identities as self-conscious responses to the tendencies towards blurring identity boundaries and cultural creolisation. Why?

There seem to be two distinct kinds of motivation for subscribing to essentialist ethnic notions of identity in the current situation.

Most obviously, there are large groups of people who have vested political or economic interests in some kind of ethnic segregation. A rich ethnic group such as the Franco-Mauritians is a very clear example -- in their case, the very colour of their skin is a ticket to privilege; but among many Hindus, there is also fear that their privileged access to positions in the civil service is threatened by individualism and meritocracy. Through linking these tendencies to a moral

decline, they try to gather the support of people who are concerned with leading a decent life in accordance with established values. During a recent electoral campaign, thus, a false rumour to the effect that Jugnauth's son was engaged to a Muslim girl (the Jugnauths are Hindus) circulated in many Hindu-dominated villages. It is not adequate to view this kind of rumour purely as an attempt to discredit the Prime Minister as a moral person, a good Hindu and so on. Economic and political interests are also involved, since rural Hindus remain socially and economically organised on the basis of lineage and kinship. To marry a Muslim, therefore, in this kind of context, implies selling out the ethnic estate of Hindus (seen as a metaphoric kin group), which would have a strong economic aspect.

This is not to say that purely instrumental motives underlie ethnicist counterreactions against individualism and meritocracy; but the lack of revivalist enthusiasm in urban parts of Mauritius, where the employment structure is different from the countryside, indicates that the economic dimension is an important one. If no economic and political resources were channelled through ethnic organisation, it is unlikely that calls for ethnic purity would have mass appeal.

A different context for ethnic revitalisation is nonetheless found in the urban middle classes. Often accounted for as nostalgia and romanticism in the professional literature, this kind of ideology has a strong appeal in urban areas in Mauritius. Many Mauritians, among them many urban 'cosmopolitans', feel an increasing attraction for their ancestral culture as they approach middle age, many even making pilgrimages to their areas of origin in India. The erosion of the past is countered by a reconstruction of the past, whose architects do not necessarily turn this into a political programme aimed at defending their rights at the expense of the rights of others.

This way of reasoning, which is symmetrical or complementary to creolisation, globalisation and cultural homogenisation (see, for example, Friedman 1994), seems more difficult to undertake in Mauritius than in many other societies. For

one thing, few Mauritians are able to trace their origins accurately. About three quarters of the population are the descendants of either slaves or indentured labourers, and their genealogies usually vanish into the mists of oblivion after a few generations. Others, including many who are opinion leaders by virtue of being writers and journalists, have origins so mixed that any call for purity would seem patently meaningless to them. One of them actually sputtered indignantly, at the suggestion that he, too, might search for his roots: 'Should I search for my roots? I can count sixteen different origins in my ancestry. Perhaps I should begin in Brittany, or Canton, or on the Malabar coast? Should *I* search for my roots?' It nevertheless happens that representatives of the 'mixed' population, *les gens de couleur*, invoke notions of purity in their identity politics, arguing that they, *la population mixte*, are the only *vrais Mauriciens*, real Mauritians, as their category is the only one to have emerged on Mauritian soil. The two main criteria for political organisation, *Blut* (blood, kinship) and *Boden* (soil, land), thus meet in direct confrontation.

Individualism as a key factor

Outsiders often ask why Mauritius is such a stable democracy, incorporating, as it does, a vast number of religious groupings and people originating from different continents. The question is wrongly asked, and it reveals an inadequate understanding of culture. At the level of everyday representations and practices, Mauritian culture can actually be described as quite uniform, in the sense that there is a wide field of shared premisses for communication encompassing most of the population: there is a shared political culture and a standardised and standardising educational system, there is considerable linguistic uniformity, and the recruitment to the labour market is increasingly based on individual skills. It is generally not difficult to argue the virtues of individual human rights among Mauritians; they tend to share similar, Western-derived notions of justice. It is, in other words, only superficially (if often noisily) multicultural, compared to most other societies, even if it may be profoundly multiethnic.

It should be noted that the 'multiculturalist' model of coexistence, as practised in Mauritius and elsewhere, collapses unless the constituent groups share basic

values of individualism and, in all likelihood, a shared *lingua franca*. For instance, it is widely believed, not least in that country itself, that the USA has been capable of absorbing a great number of different nationalities without homogenising them culturally. This is wrong, and generally, migrants to the USA have changed their language within two generations. One could perhaps say that immigrants to the USA have been assimilated to a degree of 90 per cent, and have been allowed to use the remaining 10 per cent to advertise their cultural uniqueness, which exists largely as a set of symbolic identity markers. As a Norwegian, I have often met Americans who identify themselves as 'Norwegians', but who seem to betray, in their verbal and non-verbal language, lifestyle and values, a strong attachment to the moral discourses of US society.

If political multiculturalists favour equal individual rights, the 'culture' in their rhetoric is either a thin cosmetic film, or rests on a strong division between public and private fields. If, on the other hand, they seriously defend the right of ethnic minorities to run their own political affairs according to a cultural logic of their own, they run the risk of defending practices that conflict with the human rights of individual group members -- or that contribute to the reproduction of inequality between groups designated on an arbitrary (ethnic) basis. This, in a nutshell, is the classic predicament of Mauritian society, and it has been dealt with through a flexible application of policies of the lowest common denominator as well as policies of avoidance and policies creating merging horizons, trying to distinguish between the fields where the different policies are relevant. Particularism and universalism are confronted in many fields, from the household to the national mass media system, and the confrontations will doubtless continue, although their modes of expression will evolve. In this way, Mauritius, like many other contemporary societies, is facing a tension between modernism and traditionalism, or between communitarianism and liberalism. And there is no easy way out.

* Twenty-first century identity politics. There is something new to the current tension in Mauritian politics. While the classic model of reconciliation between ethnicist tendencies and universalist requirements accepted the omnipresence

of ethnic loyalties, an emergent category of Mauritians see themselves as being beyond ethnicity: to them, ethnicity is irrelevant and provides them with few material or symbolic resources. In this context, it is interesting to note that a growing minority of Mauritians report to Census authorities that Kreol is their ancestral language (Mauritius, 1991--2; see Chap. 5). This shift away from 'primordial' languages indicates that Mauritian identity is becoming the most important ancestral identity for many of the island's inhabitants.

The confrontation between a postethnic way of life, strengthened by consumerism, capitalism, secularism and individualism, and traditionalism will probably be the main challenge for Mauritian society in the twenty-first century. In this, Mauritius is, notwithstanding its degree of sophistication, similar to many, otherwise very different, complex modern societies facing an unpredictable but inevitable restructuring of the nation-state. The Aymara movement in Bolivia confronting the national élites of *criollos*, the anti immigrant Front National in France confronting creolised *beurs* and a liberal tradition of citizen rights, politicised Islam in Algeria fighting a secular government, and Sami organisations in northern Scandinavia negotiating rights to natural resources with reluctant governments: notwithstanding the differences, these examples share several of the problems discussed in this chapter, concerning the balance between a politics of identity granting rights of belongingness to groups, and a politics based on individual rights where culture is, by definition, deemed irrelevant.

Notes

1. South African legislators and reformists have discovered Mauritius, and social theorists might benefit from following suit. For example, a consideration of Mauritian politics and ideology might have made a wonderful section in Charles Taylor's now famous essay on multiculturalism (Taylor 1992).

2. A journalist once asked Rushdie about his roots during a TV interview. He pointed downwards and said: 'What do I have at the end of my legs? Roots? What I see are feet.'

3. Archetti (1995) makes a number of interesting points regarding the Latin American term *criollo* in relation to the analytic term 'creolisation', referring to early twentieth-century Argentina.

4. This recalls a memorable passage by V. S. Naipaul, where he writes, bitterly: 'Superficially, because of the multitude of races, Trinidad may seem complex, but to anyone who knows it, it is a simple colonial philistine society' (Naipaul 1979 [1958]).