

5. In 1968, one of the sugar estates was purchased by the Mauritian state.
6. This is not always the case; consider, for example, caste climbing in India or any other type of successful 'grass roots' movement.
7. It is sometimes suggested that the real problem of communalism in Mauritius might actually be one of *nepotism*. Nepotism is largely activated in the labour market, in politics and in the national educational system – that is, on a high level of scale; and it may therefore be argued that nepotist practices, misinterpreted as communalism on lower levels of scale, determine ethnic relations generally. My material suggests that this hypothesis is only partly correct: non-kinship-based communalism is also widely practised on a high level of scale, although nepotism is preferred if available (and this is directly implied in the practical application of taxonomic levels).
8. The Mauritian term 'Vaish' lumps together what was originally a large number of clean castes in India, and only corresponds vaguely to the Indian Vaishya *varna*.
9. Baker lists this as 'Hindustani' *tout court*, but I believe most of the transmissions must have been in Bhojpuri. On TV, on the other hand, many programmes *are* in Hindustani: they are Indian feature films.
10. Since Mauritius now has two TV channels, the figures are not readily comparable.

CHAPTER FIVE

Contested Symbols: Language and Religion

Sakenn pe prie dan so fason. (Each prays in his/her own way.)

– Mauritian proverb

One of the most enduring debates in the literature on ethnicity concerns the relationship between its instrumental and its symbolic aspects – whether the main cause of the maintenance of ethnic distinctions is their political and strategic potential or their role as a repository of meaning. Since the Mauritian material has already suggested that ethnicity is dual in that it encompasses aspects of both strategy and meaning, the debate seems to rest on a false assumption, namely that we are talking about an 'either-or' kind of phenomenon. The distinction is nevertheless relevant, as it calls attention to the functional poles of ethnicity: if it is impossible to identify subjectively with an ethnic category, persons will by default not do it; and if ethnic distinctions have no social consequences, they are by definition non-existent.

- *Differences in ethnic incorporation.* The largest ethnic categories of Mauritius are organised along very different lines, and show the significance of the interrelationship between social organisation and meaning. As I have shown elsewhere (Eriksen 1986, 1988, 1991c; cf. also Mannick 1978), the social organisation and cultural values reproduced among Creoles effectively militate against the formation of a Creole corporate group. The emphasis placed on individual freedom, the shallowness and classificatory breadth of genealogies and kin reckoning, the 'crab antics' of friendship, obliging a male Creole to spend liberally on his friends,¹ and the suspicion of formal hierarchies – phenomena that form an important part of the dominant Creole self-identification – have prevented the Creoles from representing their interests strategically and collectively, as virtually all the

other ethnic categories of Mauritius have done. Indeed, by climbing the social ladder and beginning to endorse middle-class values, Creoles may change ethnic membership and become Coloureds, no matter what their actual physical appearance.

This chapter will concentrate on two focal dimensions for ethnic and national identification in Mauritius, religion and language; and the interplay between aspects of strategy and aspects of meaning is apparent here. Language and religion are simultaneously instrumental and meaningful. They serve as political symbols and as structures of relevance; they can be held up as banners, and they provide personal experiences with a substantial, meaningful content.

Language Strategies in Ethnicity

The ways in which ethnic identity and organisation are linked to language are many and complex. As was noted earlier, the number of languages in Mauritius is high, but their respective uses differ greatly and crucially. Language can be invoked self-consciously as a marker of ethnicity, which is evident from the discrepancy between what many people *claim* they do, and what they actually *do* when it comes to speech acts in the widest sense (see also Eriksen 1990; Hookoomsing 1986). Language seen as linguistic practice can also bridge differences. All other things being equal, cultural differences in a complex society are naturally less marked when the constituent groups speak a common language than when they do not.

- *A typology of languages.* Mauritius has everything in this respect: community languages strengthening intra-ethnic cohesion, supra-ethnic languages bridging differences and serving as common denominators of both communication and identity symbolism, and languages that are not spoken but are invoked as ethnic symbols.

Henri Souchon, entitling his contribution to a conference on language and society² 'The Myth of Fifteen Languages for a Population of One Million' (Souchon 1982) aptly characterises the ambiguity of the situation. In his brief paper Souchon elaborates on former typologies of languages, and finally divides Mauritian languages into four categories (see Table 5.1).

Since Kreol is by far the most spoken language in Mauritius regardless of ethnic category, language is rarely used as an ethnic boundary marker in everyday situations. Interestingly, dialectal variations within Kreol are linked with age and region (see also Chap. 6), rather than with ethnic distinctions. Instead, connections with ancestral languages are stressed, sometimes to the extent of manipulating recorded facts. This discourse

Table 3. Languages in Mauritius

Language	Maternal	Ancestral	International	Ritual
Arabic	N 0.2%	N 7.0%	Y	Y
Bhojpuri	Y 20.4%	Y 19.0%	N	N
Cantonese	N	Y	N	N
English	N 0.2%	N 0.2%	Y	Y
French	Y 3.7%	Y 3.5%	Y	Y
Gujerati	N	Y 0.2%	N	N
Hakka	Y 0.6%	Y 2.0%	N	(Y)
Hindi	N 11.5%	N 23.0%	Y	Y
Hindustani	N	N	Y	N
Kreol	Y 54.0%	Y 29.0%	N	(Y)
Latin	N	N	N	Y
Mandarin	N	N	Y	Y
Marathi	Y 1.3%	Y 2.2%	N	(Y)
Sanskrit	N	N	N	Y
Tamil	Y 3.6%	Y 7.0%	N	Y
Telugu	Y 1.6%	Y 2.6%	N	(Y)
Urdu	N 2.5%	Y 5.8%	N	N*

Sources: Mauritius 1984, vol. II, tables 19 and 20 (percentages), Souchon (1982), Baker (1972), Stein (1983), Ramdoyal (1977), own field material.

*Urdu was used in Muslim ritual until the early 1970s, when its place was taken by Kreol. Today, Arabic gradually seems to be becoming the only language of the mosque, although Kreol is still widely used.

takes place in the national fields of politics, media and education, and ramifies into the local fields.

The percentages in Table 3 refer to figures from the population census of 1983. As the census was carried out as a questionnaire survey, the figures accumulate individual statements regarding which language they and their ancestors spoke, and these social facts are not necessarily coterminous with the historical facts.

The concept 'ancestral language' is an elusive one, and in practice it is held to replace the former census category 'ethnic membership'. Ethnic categories are now officially not included in Mauritian censuses, and to a great extent, statements about ancestral languages are to be understood as statements about ethnic membership.

Revelations from a Census

Read properly, which is to say between the lines, census figures reveal a great deal about both ethnic identification and ethnic organisation in Mauritius.

- *The place of Kreol.* In all likelihood, Kreol is casually spoken by much more than 54 per cent of the population. (At a later census (Mauritius 1991–2), 35.8 per cent stated that Kreol was their ancestral language, an increase of 6 per cent, whereas 61.7 per cent stated that it was the language they usually spoke at home.)

Perhaps the term ‘mother tongue’ is ill chosen, for indeed, many Indo-Mauritians speak Bhojpuri with their mother and Kreol with virtually everybody else. Be this as it may; the ideological linking of Kreol (‘Creole’) with the Creole ethnic category, and the historically correct assumption that Kreol began as a contact language used by African and Malagasy slaves, discourage non-Creoles from advertising the fact that Kreol is actually their maternal tongue. Before the census, further, religious and ethnic organisations ordered their followers to fill in the census forms in a way enhancing ethnic interests. Instructions were given from religious or otherwise ethnicist bodies through vertical religious and para-religious channels in order that information should be available in the local fields, outside mosques and temples, through *baitkas* and *madrassahs*, and in the mass media.

- *The ‘non-Kreolised’ Telugu.* An example of an ethnic minority organisation anxious that the cultural identity it embodies should continue to be recognised is the National Telugu Federation, which represents some 2.7 per cent of the total population, virtually all Kreolophones. Their newspaper advertisement reads as follows (in French!):

NATIONAL TELUGU FEDERATION

All Telugus of Mauritius are asked, as regards the new population census, to write in the columns 11–12–13:
Telugu – Telugu – Telugu.

Thank you.

(Quoted from Hookoomsing 1986:124.)

The columns in question are those dealing with religion, ancestral language and language currently spoken.

Obviously, if all Telugus had in fact been casual speakers of Telugu, this advertisement would not have been necessary. Noting that only some 60 per cent of the Mauritians of Telugu ancestry actually did fill in the last column as asked, it is necessary to conclude that some interviewers did not take answers at face value,³ and/or that many of the people in question followed values different from those of the organisation ostensibly representing their interests: they allowed some identity different from their ancestral ethnic one to overrule it.

The second assumption is not inherently valid. Ethnic identity can be maintained despite the recognised disappearance of linguistic difference. The fact is that virtually all the Telugus of Mauritius stated that their *ancestral* language was Telugu. This means that even those of Telugu origin who admitted being Kreolophones remained self-ascribed carriers of Telugu cultural identity. For when does an ancestral language cease to be an ancestral language? Three generations after it was last spoken within the family? Five generations? Ten? A hundred? – It does when members of an ethnic category cease to regard themselves as such, which is to say when the ethnic category ceases to exist. When Mauritians whose ancestors were Telugus start to claim Kreol as their ancestral language, they will, it may seem, have acquired a Mauritian identity overruling the ethnic one. Why don’t they?

The Telugu are a small minority (3 per cent of the Mauritian population) within the larger overarching Hindu category, and most of them are rural small planters and labourers, although Telegus, like other Mauritians, and most of all young women, are increasingly becoming industrial workers. Politically, the Telugus are, unlike the Tamils, generally believed to vote with the majority Hindus. Ritually, they share many practices with the Tamils and have a related ancestral language; but there has been no spectacular revival of Telugu traditions. The leadership of the Dravidian League of Mauritius is strongly dominated by Tamils, and there can be no comparison between the level of participation in the Dravidian festivals of Tamils and Telugus. The Tamils have a strong urban base and many wealthy members (notably merchants in Port-Louis), and several leading politicians. The Telugu have none of this. So why, then, was it so important to the Telugu leaders that their fellow Telegus stated that they spoke Telugu daily? The answer has both practical and symbolic aspects: one relating to utility, and one to meaning. First, the Telugu leaders would never have encouraged maintenance of their identity as discrepant unless they believed that this could endow them with greater power than they would have had, had they allowed their discreteness to disappear into greater Hinduness. This hypothesis is plausible enough in a wider context, where the rights of ethnic minority groups are unofficially recognised in the fields of politics (through strategic alliances and the best loser system), the mass media (through quotas of air time) and the educational system (through language instruction in ‘ancestral languages’). A Mauritian interest group has an unspoken right to more power the larger the number of members it can credibly claim.

Secondly, it is in the utilitarian interest of the Telugu leaders to maintain genealogies and recognition of kinship as intact as possible. Nepotism is a

major form of communalism. Should their mutual recognition of closeness disappear, it wouldn't follow that the individual Telugus approached any other ethnic category taxonomically, and they would as a result end up in a situation similar to that of the Creoles in the labour market: with no self-sustaining 'safety net', no networks facilitating social mobility and securing employment.

If this explains why the Telugu Federation encouraged people to over-communicate the cultural dimension of their ethnic identity, it cannot explain why over half the Telugus of Mauritius, most of them rural workers and their families, stated that their casual language was Telugu. Surely, from their own perspective, this could not improve their or their children's job opportunities? It thus seems much more likely that they did it in order to communicate their cultural identity (the symbolic aspect of ethnicity) to others and to themselves: to the interviewer they did not wish to admit to not being capable of speaking their ancestral language; for themselves, they felt ashamed about it. There is no reason to believe that they replied as they did for purely utilitarian reasons.

- *Arabic-speaking Indo-Muslims.* The Mauritian Muslims and their strategies in relation to the census also reveal the importance of unspoken languages for ethnic identity. In Emrith's *The Muslims of Mauritius* (1967), no mention whatsoever is made of Arabic as a language important to Mauritian Muslims. In the 1972 Census, *nobody* seems to have referred to Arabic as their ancestral language: the entire Islamic community still overtly recognised the Indian subcontinent as their ancestral country, and Urdu was still considered the ancestral language. By the 1980s, the Muslims, widely believed by Mauritian non-Muslims to act very corporatively in political matters, are split into several factions on the language issue. More than 40 per cent have redefined their own history, claiming that their ancestors spoke Arabic; a third stick to Urdu; and the remaining quarter are probably distributed over Kreol, Bhojpuri and Gujarati. (In fact, the majority of the ancestors of Mauritian Muslims spoke Bhojpuri, but Urdu would have been their literary language.) The turn towards Arabic during this period must be seen as an expression of (a) a wish to participate in the pan-Islamic movement, (b) part of a strategy to create employment for Mauritian Muslims in OPEC countries, and (c) a qualitative 'improvement' of one's own cultural identity. No social prestige is associated with links to Pakistan, while the Arab part of the world has been of increasing geopolitical importance since the early 1970s (see also Hollup 1995).⁴

- *Undercommunicating Sino-Mauritians.* Among the Sino-Mauritians, a surprisingly high number state Kreol as their ancestral and currently spoken language alike. Mandarin is nonetheless widely read, and most Sino-

Mauritians are able to speak a Chinese language. Obviously, the Sino-Mauritian strategy is fundamentally different from that of the various Indo-Mauritian categories. Numerically weak but economically strong, the 'Jews of Mauritius' undercommunicate their ethnic identity in public, by claiming Kreol as a first language. In fact, this practice makes it difficult to identify the Sino-Mauritian ethnic category in the census. Altogether, about 21,000 Mauritians state a Chinese language as their ancestral one, which amounts to only two-thirds of the Sino-Mauritians. The rest cannot be identified with reference to religion either, since they are nominally Catholics, like the General Population. Clearly, the strategic option chosen by a growing number of Sino-Mauritians is Mauritian nationalism. As an economic élite, they have everything to lose in democratic communal competition. It is in their immediate interest that their ethnic identity is publicly under-communicated; as the 'Jews of Mauritius', the Sino-Mauritians further fear the very possible advent of anti-Chinese sentiment.

In a social context where national identity is more important than ethnic identity, the fact that many of the nation's important businessmen are of Chinese descent would diminish in importance. Simultaneously, the Sino-Mauritians efficiently reproduce their organisation and cultural traits *internally*, with a material base in the Chinatown of Port-Louis. This is where the various organisations with Chinese connotations (many of them with 'neutral' names) are based; it is where clans meet, where Sino-Mauritian newspapers are printed *and* distributed (I have hardly ever seen any of them outside this quarter), and where the signs of shops are in Chinese – many of the shops specialising in imported goods from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. Roughly half the Sino-Mauritians live in Port-Louis; the atmosphere of the Chinese quarter has a strong Chinese flavour, whereas the Chinese cultural element is virtually absent elsewhere in public Mauritius. The strategy has been to remain as invisible as possible externally, and to reproduce ancestral culture and forms of organisation intensely internally (Kouwenhoven 1988). The parallels to diaspora Jews are striking (cf. Epstein 1978:64, quoting a New York rabbi: 'For our own part, we are Israelites in the Synagogue, and Americans elsewhere.').

- *Non-African Creoles.* It should finally be noted that the Creoles do not collectively emphasise their African ancestry: virtually nobody in the census stated that their ancestral language was Malagasy, Kiswahili or Wolof, or even 'African' (the latter being, incredibly, an option in the census forms). Their history as an ethnic category begins with slavery. But the example of the Muslims shows that it need not be so, and changes in the Creole representation of their own history and thus their communal identity may be imminent (see Benoit 1985). A very low proportion of the Creoles state

that French is their ancestral language, although many are of mixed phenotype.

- *Language and religion.* Hookoomsing (1986:126) finds a high correlation between ancestral language and religious inclination in the census figures. The Hindu categories display very nearly a one-to-one relationship; Kreol is slightly overrepresented *vis-à-vis* Christianity; the case of Islam has been accounted for above; finally, there are apparently many more descendants of speakers of Chinese languages than there are Buddhists. In fact, most of the Sino-Mauritians are today officially Catholics.

In sum, differences in the ethnic categories' mode of internal organisation are reflected in the strategies adopted in the population census. The Hindus tend to overcommunicate the Indianness of their culture, and the Hindu minorities overcommunicate linguistic markers of distinctiveness;⁵ a substantial proportion of the Muslims are drifting from a Pakistano-Mauritian to an Arabo-Mauritian identity; and the Sino-Mauritians undercommunicate their distinctiveness; whereas the Creoles, Coloureds and Franco-Mauritians have no corporate identity strategies in this respect.

Linguistic Diversity in Primary Education

The Mauritian system of education, initially designed by Europeans, has always been relatively uniform. Since Independence, there have been policies aiming to 'nationalise' it gradually, yet retaining its compatibility with European educational systems.

In November, 1984, the government appointed a committee of parliamentarians to 'consider and report on the circumstances in which registered school candidates sitting for the Certificate of Primary Education examination may opt for ranking purposes for an oriental language from among Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, Mandarin and Arabic in addition to the four compulsory subjects, namely: English, Mathematics, Geography and French' (Mauritius 1986:1). Instruction in Oriental languages had formerly been available in private institutions and as additional subjects in some schools. The novelty of the proposition was its suggestion that Oriental languages should now become important in ranking and thus have a direct effect on the admission to secondary school.

The committee was composed of 5 Hindus, 1 Muslim, 2 Creoles and 1 Coloured; two of the members belonged to the political opposition. Some of the members eventually resigned and were replaced, and the committee

responsible for the report consisted of 5 Hindus, 2 Muslims, 1 Coloured and a Tamilo-Christian.

- *The hearings.* In two consecutive press releases during 1985, the public was invited to suggest solutions and discuss particular issues with the committee, and 109 actors responded to the communiques: 62 individuals and 47 organisations. Ethnically, they were distributed as is shown in Table 4:

The pressure groups were founded on different bases. Some were religious groups (most of these were Hindu sub-categories based on caste, ancestral language and/or denomination); and some represented formal language groups (such as the Mauritius Arabic Language Teachers and Students Association); while yet others were national or local parents' organisations, teachers' unions, humanitarian groups or youth organisations. The great majority of the individuals belonged to one or several élites.

The very time-consuming hearings took place within the national political system. While it is clearly true that the hitherto dominant position of French has been caused by power relations in the economic system and in public cultural life, the entire debate was this time undertaken with no reference to the local economy. The overt preoccupation was with fairness and compromise; and whereas it might have been legitimate and indeed desirable to display adherence to sectional interests in the political system, anyone wishing to participate in the national press, where the issue was discussed extensively, was obliged to emphasise his or her commitment to the common good.

- *A new common denominator.* The issue was extremely important in so far as Mauritians attach high - and increasing - value to education, and it

Table 4. Participation in public hearing on language instruction in public schools (Source: Mauritius 1986)

	Individuals	Organisations
Hindu	45	24
Tamil	5	2
Muslim	7	5
Sino-Mauritian	1	-
Creole/Coloured	2	5
Franco	2	-
Mixed Oriental		1*
Non-ethnic/unidentified	10	

* Basha Andolan is a loosely knit umbrella organisation comprising some 16 lesser collectivities: 14 of the member organisations represent segments of the Hindu population (divided by caste, denomination and language). 1 represents Tamils and 1 represents Muslims.

demanded a *redefinition of the lowest common denominator*. Formerly, the lowest common denominator had been colonially defined and sanctioned; this time, it had to be specified *nationally* according to democratic rules balancing the demands of compromise with the demands of national homogeneity.

In the event, a composite denominator resulted. I quote from the report:

- (a) English being the official language and the most widely used international language should continue to be promoted and given due importance;
- (b) it would be desirable and in the interests of all Mauritians to be encouraged to learn French, which is readily acquired in the Mauritian context;
- (c) language, being also a vehicle of culture, must be given its importance in order to understand and preserve worthwhile ancestral values; and
- (d) children who do not take an oriental language would be offered a course in *Cultures and Civilisations in Mauritius* (Mauritius 1986:11).

This means, in practice, that children belonging to the 'General Population' would be taught *Cultures and Civilisations in Mauritius*, a course aiming at 'making children aware of the rich cultural heritage of Mauritius' (ibid.), denoting a multiculturalist variety of nationhood (see Chap. 7). In this way, knowledge of Oriental languages did not give a disproportionate advantage to children of Oriental ancestry. Kreol was not considered to be a language worthy of systematic instruction, and, as far as I have been able to ascertain, none of the groups and individuals involved in the hearing of the Select Committee suggested that it should be (see further discussion below).

Questions concerning languages in the educational system continue to be among the paramount political issues in Mauritius (see also Kalla 1986; Bunwaree 1994; Nave n.d. 1). When Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth supported, in 1995, a renewed suggestion to make Oriental languages an obligatory part of the CPE (Certificate of Primary Education), he was met with very strong objections from Creole spokesmen who argued that this move would deepen the *malaise créole*, the tendency among Creoles not to obtain higher education. This question became the main issue in the following electoral campaign, culminating in a massive defeat for Jugnauth's MSM/RMM government.

As the analysis has shown, language is a many-faceted symbol in Mauritius. It serves to symbolise ethnic identity in an essentially non-utilitarian way; but linguistic proficiency also directly impinges on a person's career opportunities. The two dimensions do not always coincide. For example, knowledge of Kreol is necessary in order to function in many fields in Mauritian society, but the language is scarcely valued positively. Proficiency

in Hindi, conversely, has a strong positive significance among Mauritian Hindus, but has little practical importance.

Kreol and Mauritian Nationhood

Comme de nombreuses bourgeoisies africaines qui affirment leur indépendance nationale et leur authenticité pour le retour aux sources, les riches Indiennes portent le *sari*. Mais celui-ci n'a rien à voir avec celui des femmes du peuple. Pour la bourgeoisie il a tout d'abord une fonction politique, celle d'affirmer sa spécificité nationale face aux autres nations de l'île, pour plus tard refuser le créole comme langue officielle, c'est-à-dire aussi refuser la nation mauricienne⁶ (Durand and Durand 1978: 25).

Were it only this simple! According to this view, the Mauritian nation would by definition exclude culturally communicated Indianness from Mauritian nationhood. A main point in the forging of a Mauritian national identity has nevertheless been to accommodate the 'ethnic cultures', including locally adapted variants of Mauritian Indianness, within a wider national identity (see Chaps. 7 and 8).⁷ Further, the 'political function' alluded to by the Durands cannot account for the enthusiasm and devotion encountered among Indo-Mauritians who strive to preserve, reinvent and revitalise aspects of their ancestral culture – language, ritual and beliefs, genealogies, pasts and localities – often at a considerable cost, without tangible political or material gains.

The Durands correctly identify one of the reasons that Kreol is not a respected language in the national fields of Mauritius; it is rarely written, never used in parliament, and is completely absent from school curricula and textbooks. While Kreol is of paramount importance in most households, in local networks and among colleagues, job advertisements and applications are always written in French or English, French and English are the only languages used in the Legislative Assembly, and Kreol is rarely heard on radio and television.

'Kreol is bad French. When you already know Kreol, why not take the extra effort to learn French? Kreol works fine orally, but it won't do in writing.' This kind of statement is very common, not least among people who do not master any other language properly. Replying to radical nationalists who rejected French on the grounds that it was the language of the colonisers, the chief editor of *Le Mauricien* once asked, rhetorically: 'Should one refuse Fidel Castro the right to speak the language of the coloniser of his country?' (Selvon 1984). When a Creole climbs socially and becomes a

member of the Mauritian middle class, not only does he begin to exert influence in the national fields of Mauritian society, but he may also switch ethnic membership to Coloured and home language to French (Chaudenson 1979; Eriksen 1988:109–24). The case for Kreol as a national language, in other words, seems bleak. Or does it?

- *A national language is a dialect backed by an army.* At the time of the French revolution, about a dozen dialects, some of them distinctive enough to be considered separate languages, were spoken in France. The concept of the modern nation-state was developed during the same period; the peoples of France were to be integrated economically and politically at a state level. The demand for a common language as a practical instrument (in administration and the extraction of taxes) and as a vessel of national unity (in military and other matters) was strong. Two centuries later, most Frenchmen speak a variety of what was at the time the Île-de-France (Parisian) dialect.

Sometimes, but rarely, otherwise diverse peoples have been successfully integrated into national states owing to their common language (Germany is an obvious example). More commonly, linguistic homogeneity develops after the nation-state. Politico-economic units that cannot be homogenised linguistically are frequently either federations (Switzerland, Canada, Belgium, Yugoslavia until its break-up), or ruled politically and/or economically by a hegemonic ethnic/linguistic group (Ian Smith's Rhodesia, French DOM-TOMs (*Domaines d'Outre-Mer, Territoires d'Outre-Mer*), Ecuador) – or they are either not really integrated on a state level and/or unstable (which could be said of many African countries). A form of compromise between linguistic fragmentation and enforced homogenisation is the coexistence of several linguistic groups mediated by one or several *lingua francas*, as in countries such as India and Singapore. Processes of ethnic and linguistic change are continuous; structurally they may be perceived as systemic adjustments aiming for stability, individually as struggles for meaningful survival within a manageable opportunity structure.

In Mauritius, Kreol has over the last two centuries proved practically capable of uniting otherwise very diverse groups into a relatively homogeneous linguistic group. This does not imply that ethnic differences have been eradicated; moreover, the importance of language as a criterion of distinctiveness remains crucial in the continued reproduction, discussed above, of ancestral languages.

- *Languages and fields.* None of the languages spoken in Mauritius is strictly confined to a single social field. English is rarely spoken but frequently written; French is widely written and spoken in formal or semi-formal contexts; Kreol is normally used in informal situations, etc.

Generally, use of particular languages depends on social situation and status activated, not on field nor interactional partners. During the break, the university lecturer addresses his students in Kreol; the clerk addresses his subordinate in Kreol but his boss in French (and possibly his mother in Bhojpuri); the Franco-Mauritian housewife addresses the Sino-Mauritian shopkeeper in Kreol, but would speak French with the attendant in one of the posh shops of downtown Curepipe.

- *The stigma of Kreol.* Popular conceptions of Kreol are, despite its near-universal use in informal contexts, all but pejorative. This is partly because Kreol is associated with the Creoles. It is a language the Mauritians speak *malgré eux*. The language is still widely regarded as 'nothing but French badly pronounced and free from ordinary rules of grammar', as a colonial official would have it at the turn of the century. But Mauritians also fear further isolation from the international community if they were to replace French and English with the language spoken only locally: they feel their pride as *us*, the Mauritians seen under the gaze of the foreigners (see Chap. 7), threatened. Further, there are Mauritian intellectuals, sympathetically inclined towards Kreol, who doubt its ability to conceptualise the increasingly complex Mauritian socio-cultural reality. In their – and in many's – view, Kreol is a beautiful language in poetry and songs, an accurate one in the fields, a colourful one in the bar. But, they claim, its syntax and grammar cannot accommodate concepts of abstract and complex character, such as those necessary in, for example, sociological research, industrial design, or philosophical thought. This kind of argument was, incidentally, used against the European vernaculars after the introduction of Gutenberg's printing press, when they began to threaten the hegemony of Latin.

Some symbolic connotations of the 'linguistic division of labour' or diglossia between French and Kreol, can be represented symbolically as Table 5.

- *Power asymmetries.* Great efforts are made in order that the asymmetrical relationship between the two possibly most important languages in Mauritius should be maintained and justified *vis-à-vis* non-Francophones. Command of French is a prerequisite for and a tangible sign of high social status; the ruling class of *colons* have always been Francophone and have consciously used the French language as an important part of their ideological apparatus. In books and newspaper columns, Franco-Mauritians and Coloureds of respectable standing regularly link the decline of manners with the supposedly deteriorating position of French in Mauritius.⁸ Arguing that making Kreol a national language would isolate Mauritius in the global community, they have, with a great measure of success, managed to shift attention towards the relationship between French and English rather than

Table 5. Normative connotations of French-Kreol diglossia

FRENCH	KREOL
power	impotence
abstract thought	practical tasks
steak & salad	<i>Kari masala</i>
wine & whisky	rum & beer
whiteness	blackness
refinement	vulgarity
responsibility	carelessness
religion	superstition
education	ignorance
literacy	illiteracy
seriousness	jocularity
<i>bonne société</i>	<i>milieu populaire</i>
(etc.)	

that between French and Kreol. The power of defining the relevant fields of discourse, alluded to elsewhere, is visibly exerted in the mass media field.

Representatives of France, the most important external power in the western Indian Ocean, are anxious to maintain a hegemonic position in the domain of 'culture'. The French cultural centre, *L'Alliance Française*, has a much higher level of activity than say, the British Council, and local dramatic groups staging plays in French receive financial support from France. Further, a powerful television transmitter broadcasting French programmes, aimed exclusively at Mauritius, has been installed on the eastern coast of the French DOM La Réunion. Quite unlike what occurs in many other societies (not least Quebec), French is perceived by the Mauritian nationalist left as the main language of domination, while English is seen as the more neutral language.

• *Cultural radicalism.* Since independence, the taken-for-granted asymmetry between Kreol and French has been challenged in a more serious manner in Mauritius than in the French DOM-TOMs (see Chaudenson 1979 for La Réunion, Bébel-Gisler 1975 for Guadeloupe and Martinique). From its foundation in 1969, the MMM used Kreol in its internal meetings, in press conferences and at public meetings. The discovery that their leader, an obviously educated and refined Franco-Mauritian, would rather speak Kreol than French, was a source of pride and wonder among the followers of the MMM.

The low symbolic rank of Kreol is thus not unambiguous. The radical postcolonial cultural movements seeking to justify a Mauritian nation in the decade following independence, some of them associated with the MMM, regarded the Kreol language and *séga* music⁹ as important symbolic

markers, and some of the more innovative activists introduced Oriental instruments and harmonies into the *séga*. While the MMM party was in power in 1982-3, a Kreol translation briefly replaced the English version of the national anthem played every evening at the end of TV transmissions. This caused a great uproar and contributed to the dissolution of the MMM government along largely ethnic lines (Oodiah 1989). Rather than unite the diverse populations in a nation, the decision awoke latent conflicts and accentuated the popular awareness of 'cultural differences'.

The strong hostility against making Kreol the national language was in part due to its being identified with the Creoles as an ethnic group, but there were also other factors (see Bowman 1991; Eriksen 1992a). In the early 1980s, the main slogan of the MMM was *Enn sel lepep; enn sel nasyon* (One single people; one single nation). A typical reaction among the sceptics was that this would imply that '*tu dimunn pu vini kreol*'; everybody would allegedly become a Creole in language and way of life. The *séga* music as a potential national symbol has faced similar obstacles, since it is still associated with the Creole ethnic group. The radical nationalists, most of whom were not ethnic Creoles, chose as their markers of nationhood symbols that were indeed uniquely Mauritian, but also happened to be symbols associated with the Creoles, who are the only Mauritians who cannot draw symbolic resources from an ancestral culture outside Mauritius. It is likely that if Mauritius had an ethnic composition similar to that in the Seychelles (with a modest Asian presence), Kreol could, in the early 1980s, have become a national language along with English and French.

Changes in attitudes to Kreol closely parallel political changes. From Independence to 1982, there was a period of increasing national sentiment and class consciousness, culminating in the general strike of 1979 and reaching an anticlimax of sorts following the 1982 election victory of the MMM-PSM alliance. Nationalist and class ideology were compatible with a higher evaluation of Kreol; indeed, it might be said that the latter follows logically from the former (or conversely). Thus the use of Kreol in unusual contexts came to be perceived as a sign that a unified, just nation was about to be built; at least, such was the hope of MMM strategists. These alternative dichotomies are represented in Table 6.

When attempting to replace folk classifications based on ethnicity with class-based ones, the cultural radicals alienated people seeing their own ethnically dependent strategies threatened and those fearing cultural uniformisation and further isolation of Mauritius, this syndrome being epitomised in the linguistic idiom of Kreol. Perhaps the dichotomies reproduced in Table 6 are acknowledged as 'true' by most Mauritians, but their personal experience and strategies in pursuit of their careers, and

Table 6. Alternative connotations of French-Kreol diglossia

FRENCH	KREOL
Oppression	Justice
Snobbery	Comradeship
Stratification	Equality
False consciousness	True consciousness

their perceptions of social rank (which are at least true as self-fulfilling prophecies), compel them, regardless of ethnic membership, to let the other model (Table 5), overrule them.

Kreol is correctly perceived as being in contradiction to social mobility. Within the Creole ethnic category, where no third language interferes with the French-Kreol diglossia, upward social mobility entails a switching of basic cultural codes. The switch to French language is crucial in this movement. As was noted above, literacy and seriousness are associated with French: 'One cannot live in a Western way and speak Creole.'¹⁰ Thus the widely accepted division of labour between Kreol and French (sanctioned publicly in the media, politics and education) contributes to preserving Kreol as an oral language lacking vocabulary and structures to conceptualise crucial aspects of social life in modern Mauritius. The entanglement of social status and language is self-fulfilling, and remains valid until a new model of social reality, incorporating a model of Kreol as a perfectly adequate language, presents itself as a more compelling definition of what is to be perceived as relevant reality. Such a model is not viable at present, and Kreol continues to play a crucial role as a vehicle of unofficial, or informal, nationalism (cf. Eriksen 1993a) and as a cultural homogeniser, while it cannot, for political reasons, be used in formal, state-centred nation-building.

The Roles of Religion

Statistically, religious diversity in Mauritius is at a first glance even more kaleidoscopic and presents an image of an even more fragmented society than the statistics on linguistic diversity do. In the 1990 Census, about 90 different religions were recorded in a population of a little over a million (Mauritius 1991-2). As in the case of language, differences that make a difference are much less than 90 in this respect. In the main organisational contexts, only three major religions are relevant: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Besides, religious symbols are invested in politics in pretty much

the same fashion by adherents of these three – although the *meaning-content* of the religions naturally varies.

- *Pragmatism in religion.* Before arriving in Mauritius for the first time, I had asked myself a naïve question: How could it be possible for a person to maintain sincere belief in a particular religious doctrine, granted that the surroundings offered a multitude of alternatives, visibly proven cognitively viable to their adherents. Of course, this way of posing the problem was quite beside the point and typical of a European intellectual. Agents do not conventionally subject their representations to systematic and critical scrutiny, nor do they endorse meta-views such as the one insinuated, unless they are 'cultural specialists'. Their representations are located in the 'body' as well as in the 'mind'; a 'culture' is as present in the mind of the fisherman as in the mind of the religious leader, and contradictions between representations and practices are significant aspects of social reality. Being 'Christian' does not imply that one regrets every act of adultery; it does not even necessarily mean that one relates to the Holy Trinity in any particular way. What makes a Hindu despicable to a Creole is not the fact that he attends ritual in the temple rather than the church, but the 'fact' that the former is a miser with no understanding of the 'real qualities of living', and the forms of competition in nationwide fields between the categories.

As a rule, Mauritians relate pragmatically to religious belief and practice – whether one's own or someone else's – in non-competitive contexts. Religious differences do not in themselves generate conflict and competition, but they can be situationally invoked. A few examples may indicate this.

- Historically and currently, an aspect of Franco-Mauritian cultural distinctiveness consists in their hierarchical relationship to the Creoles, who have historically worked for them as servants. However, Franco-Mauritians and Creoles belong to the same religion (Christianity) – even the same denomination (the Roman Catholic Church). In order to accentuate their superiority, many Franco-Mauritians have increasingly turned towards strongly traditionalist forms of Christian practice (performing Mass in Latin, for instance); forms of ritual perceived as élitist by the Mauritian population and, notably, perceived as snobbish by the average Creole. Among the Creoles themselves, on the other hand, the last decade has seen the development of a local form of 'liberation theology'. Young Creole priests have been important inspirational figures for the labour movement in the EPZ, and the organisation *Ligue Ouvrier d'Action Chrétienne*, led by Creole priests, has been perceived as belonging to the extreme left politically.

When political elections are approaching, however, the cultural unity of the different segments of the 'General Population' is stressed by campaign leaders, and the symbolic focus of the unity is, beside the French language and the common fear of Hindu dominance, Christianity.

- Tamils tend to stress the differences between their 'Dravidian' brand of Hinduism and 'Aryan' practices. The structural conditions for this overcommunication of cultural difference can be located in the labour market and politics, where Tamils and Hindus compete as different ethnic categories. Tamil temples are not generally perceived as Hindu temples in Mauritius.

- The split between traditional Sanatanism and reformist Arya Samajism has not led to the formation of separate political organisations, although the differences in *beliefs* are arguably more radical here than, for example, between Sanatanism and Tamil practices and beliefs.

- Large numbers of Tamils, and later Sino-Mauritians, have converted to Christianity because this seemed strategically useful during colonialism.¹¹

Granted that we now consider religion as a social dimension and not primarily as a belief system, we may turn to the points of conjuncture between the religions practised in Mauritius: that is, the flow of information (embedded in practices) across the ethnic boundaries. This communication and modification of practices does not necessarily lead to the breakdown of boundaries, but it does – as stated earlier – change their meaning content.

The common attitude to religious diversity can be summarised in the 'ecumenical' proverb quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, *Sakenn pe prie dan so fason*. 'Syncretism' is fairly common, particularly in the towns – and is tacitly accepted by 'purists'. The flow of information across religious boundaries may take many visible forms, among which are the following:

- In later years, increasing numbers of Creoles have participated actively in the annual, spectacular Tamil *Cavadee* festival.

- Sino-Mauritians, most of them nominally Catholics, celebrate both the Christian and the Chinese New Year. They perform most of their rituals in church, but on certain occasions they solemnly enter the pagoda in Port-Louis.

- Hindu women observed at Christian Mass in a south-western village replied, when asked, that they certainly remained religious Hindus. They did not seem to understand my insistent questions about contradicting religious practices.

- Recently converted Tamil women, of whom there are quite a few in Stanley near Rose-Hill, always take their sandals off when entering church,

sometimes even sacrificing bananas to Christian shrines. Both practices originate in Hindu ritual.

- An unknown, but probably enormous, number of Mauritians (mostly Hindus and Christians) turn to witchdoctors (*ban longanis*) when confronted with certain personal problems, although the witchdoctors represent a cosmology unacceptable within any 'Great Tradition'. Significantly, Hindu and Creole *longanis* share most of their practices and representations, which are partly of African origin (or so at least it is claimed), yet which contain discernible European occult, Christian, and Hindu elements.¹² The medical anthropologist Sussman, investigating the relationship between diverse medical traditions in Mauritius, found seven distinctive medical systems; but she also claimed that there was 'surprisingly little divergence between the [ethnic] groups' (Sussman 1983:364). She concluded her study by asserting that Mauritian society reproduces a '*unitary conceptual framework* that promotes the maintenance of several ideologically diverse therapeutic traditions' (ibid.:372-3, my italics). Sussman's findings indicate that the 'multiple cultural heritages' of this kind of society do not stand in a simple one-to-one relationship to the actual *Relevanzstrukturen* of the agents, nor does each 'culture' refer specifically to any fixed set of agents. Symbolic universes interact and merge; they cross boundaries even when the social boundaries may remain discrete.

Politicised Religion

Despite considerable interchange of symbolism and substance between religions, there is virtually no public discourse about the content of religious differences. Sir Seewosagur Ramgoolam's warning, to the effect that religion ought not to be a topic of interethnic and public discourse, seems to remain valid. Breach of this informal rule may have dramatic consequences. In 1984, the entire staff of the Libyan Embassy in Port-Louis were given 48 hours to leave Mauritius. The causes for the expulsion remain unclear, but it is known that the Libyans initiated a certain missionary activity among Christians in eastern Port-Louis in addition to subsidising infrastructural expenses and improvements in the city, a Muslim stronghold in Mauritius (as a tangible result, the main square in eastern Port-Louis was renamed Khadaffi Square). Further, it was rumoured that Christians were paid as much as Rs. 40,000 (then roughly £ 2,000) to convert to Islam. The strong official reaction to this indicates that religion remains a strong symbolic carrier of sectional interests; that it is seen as a political resource.

The government's reasoning was that if a sufficiently large number of Christians converted to Islam, the precarious ethnic equilibrium of Port-Louis (and of Mauritius as such) might have been upset, and the outcome would be unpredictable and possibly disastrous.

To attack others for adhering to a different religion is in virtually every case an expression of disagreement over a non-religious issue – generally competition over scarce resources. Had this not been so, it would have been meaningless for Hindu gangs to desecrate mosques and churches, which happened during the unrest of the late 1960s. The fact that Hinduism is a 'tolerant' religion does not necessarily make 'tolerant' people of Hindus.

The riots before and after Independence had, on the face of it, religious difference as their main premiss. The groups fighting in the streets of Port-Louis were mutually exclusive religious groups; Hindus, Muslims and Christians. They attacked each other's places of worship, and a number of people were killed 'because of their religion'. As most Mauritians are aware today, this description of these events is misleading (see Chap. 8).

There was strong disagreement in the Mauritian population over the issue of independence. Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, in particular, feared that independent Mauritius would rapidly be transformed into a 'Little India'; that cultural bonds with France would be severed, that Hindi would be the national language, and that the Franco-Mauritians and Coloureds would lose their privileges. Notably, Franco-Mauritians feared the nationalisation of the sugar estates.

The 1960s saw a strong ethnic polarisation; among other things a short-lived Tamil party and a slightly more viable Muslim party emerged. There were social tension, heated political rhetoric, and, as mentioned, outbreaks of ethnic violence. The Coloured politician Gaëtan Duval made statements to the effect that every woman would be compelled to wear a sari in independent Mauritius. Muslim men grew beards to avoid being mistaken for Hindus. Throughout, *religion* seemed to be the criterion of allegiance.

However, religion, seen as a system of symbols and beliefs, has no direct relation to power, be it allocative or authorising. Around Independence, as during other dramatic periods in Mauritian political history, religion was exploited as a symbolic carrier of sectional interests. Religious symbols acquired new meanings directly connected with representations of power. This 'religious phenomenon' actually has nothing to do with the 'syncretist' women who took off their sandals before entering church, but with competition over power. Thus socially organised religion clearly is dual in the same way as ethnicity itself; it encompasses dimensions of meaning and of politics.

The Diard Affair

The following case story, famous in Mauritius, illustrates the instrumental and indexical character of religious identity, as well as indicating some of the interrelations between social fields.

Père Diard was a French Catholic priest who had worked in Mauritius for several years. In March 1986 his permit of work and residence expired, and it was not renewed by the authorities. This caused a great public scandal, lasting for more than two months, fading out in the press several weeks after Diard had left Mauritius.

The government's explanation was this: Diard had been preaching among the workers of the EPZ, encouraging them to organise in unions. He had associated with the radical Christian organisation LOAC (*Ligue Ouvrier d'Action Chrétienne*). This had been known for a while. Now, Diard had recently, it seemed, been instrumental in organising an illegal strike at several factories in Petite Rivière. This was a threat to the stability of the country and could not be accepted. 'If I had gone to France and done what Diard did here, I would have been evicted immediately,' said Prime Minister Jugnauth on television.

The diocese of Port-Louis quickly condemned the decision publicly, and thought it outrageous that Diard should be considered a communist (understating that had he indeed been a communist activist, it would have been correct to evict him).

It never became quite clear what Diard had actually done; contradictory versions from different factory owners, workers and politicians appeared in newspapers and periodicals. It is clear, however, that it had something to do with workers' rights, and that he claimed these rights on behalf of all workers, not merely the Christian ones.

- *From politics to religion.* From the beginning, there was a strong tendency to the effect that Diard was defended by Christians on an ethnic or religious basis. Reporters of the influential weekly *La Vie Catholique*, Catholic columnists in the best-selling weekly *Week-End* and other prominent journalists discussed the case without directly implying that the case was one of ethnic conflict. Some cried out about 'authoritarian measures' without specifying, but the implicit message was clear: a Hindu prime minister had expelled a Christian, pretending that he did so on 'national' and not on communal grounds. On government-controlled radio and TV, the case was regularly commented on, but from a perspective favouring national unity and stability, not defining the conflict as an ethnic one.

In the village where I was staying at the time, a fishing village heavily populated by Creoles, people nearly unanimously held that Diard was

evicted 'because he was a Christian'. Many Hindus thought so, too. Only in one household of my acquaintance, a Hindu teacher's family, it was argued that Diard's being a Christian could hardly be a satisfactory reason to evict him. 'Probably he engaged in illegal activities,' the teacher said, 'and the same thing would have happened to an Indian pundit doing the same thing.'

- *Transcending field boundaries.* Linking the case to our social fields, we see that: Diard set about working in workplaces; his activities were then perceived as harmful within the national economic system; then the government applied authorising power to neutralise the effects, and the case was referred to and discussed in the national mass media; from these lay people received all their information about it; and this formed the premisses for their discussions in the household and locality fields. The unity of interests between the economic and political systems is apparent. Notwithstanding the fact that many politicians have personal interests in the EPZ, they collectively support the interests of the capitalist economy sanctioning their power and justifying their policies.

The redefinition of the issue, from one of communism to one of communalism as it were, clearly took place in the local fields; but this could probably not have come about without the agency of journalists in the mass media field, without whose participation many people would never have learnt of the case at all. Virtually none of the articles dealing with the Diard case directly accuses the government of communalism, however. Some (particularly in *La Vie Catholique*) accuse it of being anti-Christian, but at the same time link Christianity with universal humanism, which is the form of socialism Diard was believed to support. In most of the written material circulating at the time, the conclusion that Diard was primarily a radical seems, to the outsider, just as likely as the conclusion that he was a Christian. The fact that most Mauritian Catholics perceived Diard primarily as a Catholic, rather than as a champion of social justice, exemplifies the pragmatic primacy of ethnic identity/membership, community overruling class in this case; and it is true that virtually any political issue is immediately interpreted (or re-interpreted) by ordinary people as dealing with ethnic conflict rather than with any other conflict in society. Yet there is no obvious link between such an interpretation of the situation in this particular instance and people's perceptions of their own utilitarian interests.

- *Religion and ethnicity.* The large-scale social significance of religion in Mauritius today, viewed as a single polyethnic system of action, consists in its capacity as an unofficial mechanism for the distribution of certain scarce commodities, and religious organisations as well as sentiments may be exploited politically, although national politics was not initially one of their

dimensions. It is by no means the only criterion; it forms part of a social 'package' that we may label 'ethnicity'. Since social relations in a society like Mauritius are pervaded by notions of 'us versus them', religion tends to be subsumed under the more encompassing heading of ethnicity. Incidentally, religions are not taught in public Mauritian schools; and hence *language* is a more relevant locus of competitive interethnic discourse.

Religious 'syncretism' has been dealt with above as a visible manifestation of the flow of information across ethnic boundaries. The socially most significant form of syncretism is not the 'mixing of religious beliefs and practices', but rather their replacement by a competing, more universalist symbolic system, namely supra-ethnic nationalism. Religion promotes cultural integration; but by contrast with the Medieval Church, operating in a religious universe that was largely homogeneous, the religions of Mauritius represent exclusive and mutually excluding forms of integration. When it is politicised, religion thus competes directly with nationhood in this kind of society. When it is not, religious diversity is compatible with Mauritian nationalism. Compromise in the form of common denominators implies, among other things, 'keeping silent about those things one cannot talk of' (Wittgenstein), such as cosmological differences, while playing a shared competitive game where religion is invoked like a flag or a banner.

Elements of Mauritian Ethnicity

Before moving to a consideration of non-ethnic alignments and identifications in the following chapters, it may be worthwhile to sum up the analysis so far.

- *The substantial content* of Mauritian ethnicity can in principle not be delineated, since ethnicity is relational and contextual, and therefore changes chameleon-like with the situation. The standard postwar official ethnic classification, which many Mauritians accept as a regulative idea, is inconsistent. Hindus and Muslims are defined according to religion. The Sino-Mauritians are defined according to their geographical origin. The General Population is a residual category; all or nearly all its members are nominally Catholics, but all the Catholics do not 'belong' to the General Population. If there is doubt about the actual origin of a person, he or she was classified there officially and known elsewhere as 'some kind of Creole'.

Ethnicity is locally associated with one or several among the factors of religion, language, geographical origin, phenotype, place of residence and class membership. Emphasis is placed situationally on one or several in a

purely *ad hoc* manner, and all these 'ascribed characteristics' of groups or individuals have metonymical potential in the social creation of meaning.

- *Ethnic pressure groups* are organised along various dimensions: ancestral language, religion, caste, economic interests or political ambition. Ethnicity is invoked in public, overtly or covertly, as a uniting principle whenever somebody needs the support of a large number of people in a competitive context. Ethnicity has proved the most powerful unifying principle both cognitively and socially; deeper than class membership, more relevant in everyday life than nationality – and sufficiently vague regarding substantial content to be manipulated in potentially infinite ways. Yet 'it' remains an aspect of the social person that enters into the definition of most situations.

- Another important modality is the *ethnic network*. All ethnic categories are strongly integrated at the network level in the sense that information and resources flow through ethnically delineated channels, although there are important differences regarding other forms of incorporation. While the Creoles are generally integrated at the network level, Hindus, Tamils, Franco-Mauritians and Muslims also have functioning associations representing their corporate interests, while the Sino-Mauritians, concentrated in certain parts of Port-Louis, could be seen as an ethnic community (following Handelman's (1977) typology).

- Through the consistent application of ethnic *taxonomies and stereotypes* in accounting for interethnic situations (though not necessarily in the interaction itself; recall the exigencies of the dictum of the lowest common denominator), mutual ethnic identities are conventionally reproduced and reified during socialisation, as 'inert' properties of the individual. The intra-ethnic reproduction of stereotypes facilitates the task of understanding a world of immense complexity (not least because of the presence of other ethnic categories), and gives meaning and direction to one's own efforts (as a member of a superior ethnic category).

The application of stereotypes also indicates that the ethnically complex Mauritian society is not staggeringly complex on the level of the lay actor, whose conceptual schemata of the social world are simplistic.

- The sometimes slightly organised *collective consciousness about a shared life-world* and way of life (or *habitus*) within an ethnic category draws its persuasive power from notions relating to characteristics listed above. Few non-ethnic identities available in the shared cultural universe are conceptually and practically viable unless in some way linked with ethnicity (for example, as its negation).

The main theoretical point here is that ethnicity is, in practice, *not* an inert, categorical property of persons (although folk models tend to depict it as such), but a property of the relationship between agents acting in

situations and contexts – and as such, its meaning changes with the context.

- Within the shared, but ambiguous, Mauritian system of symbolic ethnic representations, it is reasonable, for example, for a Creole to claim (to other Creoles) that they are poor because the Hindus have acquired a larger share than they deserve; Muslims may agree that non-Muslim decadence is a threat to the purity of their young; Franco-Mauritians may easily and programmatically blame the non-white populations for the 'state of the country' (which, according to many of them, is pitiful) – and they all know of each other's complaints. These ethnic skirmishes and quarrels are all important constituent parts of the *shared Mauritian culture*. Virtually everybody periodically feels discriminated against on an ethnic basis, which obviously encourages organisation along ethnic lines rather than any other option. *Notions of competition founded in (ascribed) ethnicity* constitute an important focal point in shared Mauritian culture.

- The ethnic category is organisationally united on principles of *us-hood* or dichotomisation. Any child knows that he or she is, say, a Tamil, and that this means, essentially, not being a Hindu, a Muslim or a Creole. The difficulties in propagating nationalism stem partly from this basic orientation, which is reified and confirmed in all the major social fields discussed.

- Identity is prior to organisation, although it may be reproduced (through socialisation) in a cultural realm largely defined by interethnic *relations* rather than by the substantial cultural *content* of the ethnic category in question. *Endogamy* is crucial in maintaining the sense of ethnic identity as primordial as well as reproducing it organisationally. This implies, among other things, that Barth (1969) is wrong in suggesting that if patterns of behaviour become identical, ethnicity vanishes. Differences that make a difference need not be ascribed to action alone: the physical appearance of middle-class North American blacks is sufficient to devalue the real estate market when they move into certain suburbs, and the lack of integration between Franco-Mauritians and Coloureds cannot be explained by referring to cultural differences or differences in *habitus* (cf. the debate between Bentley 1987 and Yelvington 1991).

The Significance of Identity

We have now viewed Mauritian ethnicity from a variety of angles, and it seems evident that ethnic identity is by and large perceived as primordial, although it is challenged from several directions – and there are important indications of change, which the following chapters will indicate. Ethnic

membership (individual level) functions as an asset of varying importance in the labour market. It is also activated as a resource when collective action is required, while this agency in turn is monitored from the formal or informal leadership segment of the ethnic *organisation*. Although ethnicity is usually played out in competitive contexts, following rules of competition on the one hand and norms of compromise on the other, there is a non-competitive ('symbolic') aspect in every case considered. Sometimes the individual agents might, as the next chapter shows, have a greater perceived benefit through organising along non-ethnic lines than through using ethnicity as a basis for corporate action. However, ethnic *identity* (meaning) has empirically proved itself too pervasive, too fundamental in the individual's definition of self and others, for such organisations to persist and overrule the ethnically-based alternatives permanently.

In economic and political matters, there is interethnic agreement as to the desirability of the defined goals (property, power, security); this condition of shared meaning must be fulfilled *a priori* – as a common denominator – in order that competition may come about at all. The interethnic disagreements as to the use of authorising and allocating power¹³ are due (a) to divergent interpretations of symbols, and (b) to systematic local variations of normative values within the shared system of representations – in other words, to the persistence and significance of distinctive ethnic identities. The issue of the place of Oriental languages in school curricula is an obvious case of a competitive issue (all agree that education is desirable) charged with ambiguous meaning. Thus, the competition goes on along two dimensions: (i) each actor attempts to win the supposed zero-sum game about the place of individual languages in school curricula, and (ii) each actor tries to present his interpretation of the actual situation as being more universally *true* than the others'.

Although it is certainly true that important aspects of Mauritian ethnicity can be revealed in studies of purely competitive contexts, such a procedure could never explain the *persistence* of organisation along ethnic lines where other, possibly more viable, alternatives are available (class and nation), nor the role played by non-strategic agency and representations in the production and reproduction of Mauritian multiethnic society. What makes Claude (pp. 33–34) dislike Hindus? Why do certain Muslims fear the legal sale of alcohol in their neighbourhood (pp. 57–59)? Why did Creoles emphasise *père* Diard's religion and not his political attitudes when he was evicted (pp. 95–96)? How do *baithkas* and *madrassahs* (Hindu and Muslim youth clubs, respectively), political parties and unions like the Hindu Teachers' Union recruit their members and ensure external support? Pure utility cannot account fully for these facts, even if it is tautologically true

that a collective identity has to *pay off* in some way or another in order to be relevant.

Ultimately, it must be conceded that a person's socio-cultural identity, ascribed by self and others, reproduced in daily life, is the *raw material* necessary for ethnicity to be organised socially in competitive contexts. The reproduction of ethnic identity is a necessary condition for the formation of ethnic groups in the political sense, and is a more fundamental aspect of ethnicity than the latter. This is why the impact of globalisation and ideological individualism, considered in the next chapter, can prove so significant in future Mauritian identities and politics: such processes reshape the personal experiences of Mauritians and contribute to reconfiguring the structures of relevance they act within.

The common denominators informing and shaping interethnic relations may be redefined in any interethnic situation, and this happens frequently in independent Mauritius, where cultural differences between individuals diminish, sometimes transforming one or several ethnic categories, sometimes creating intermediate categories of people half-way between ethnic categories and half-way beyond the very logic of ethnic identity. Friendship and intermarriage are obvious examples of such a redefinition of relevant social reality, while the effect is less spectacular but no less significant in cases where an employer hires manpower from ethnic categories other than his own; or in the choice of dress, education, occupation, place of residence, written language or leisure club. These are the processes of change that will be looked into more closely in the following chapters, which indicate that ethnic organisation and identification, although at the moment strong in Mauritius, need not always be so.

Notes

1. The crabs try to climb out of the bowl. The edges are slippery, and they climb over each other's bodies. When one has reached the edge, he/she/it is dragged down by the others, which are also attempting to slip out. Peter Wilson's metaphor from Providencia (Wilson 1978) not only fits other Caribbean societies, but is also helpful in understanding social processes in Mauritius and The Seychelles (cf. Benedict and Benedict 1982).
2. Of 64 papers that were presented at the conference, 9 were in French (6 presented by members of the 'General Population', 3 by Indo-Mauritians), and the remaining 55 in English. The leftist organisation LPT wished to present

their contribution in Kreol, but were denied the right. Fifty-two of the papers were written by Indo-Mauritians (here comprising Hindus, Tamils and Muslims), 11 by members of the 'General Population' and 1 by two Sino-Mauritians.

3. I have interviewed three census takers; all admitted manipulating with the answers given when they were 'obviously wrong'.
4. (a) and (b) are the essence of conversations with two imams and a leading Muslim politician, while (c) captures the feelings of many ordinary Mauritian Muslims.
5. This is considered legitimate in public; caste separatism is not.
6. 'Like many African bourgeoisies who advertise their national independence and their authenticity through a return to their "roots", rich Indian women wear the sari. But this has nothing to do with ordinary women. To the bourgeoisie, it first and foremost serves a political function, which consists in confirming one's national uniqueness *vis-à-vis* other nations in the island, only to reject Kreol as official language later; that is to say, to reject the Mauritian nation.'
7. The complex relationship between utility and meaning, cultural change and adaptation, in Indo-Mauritian identity has been explored at some length in Eriksen (1992a).
8. For examples, see Rauville (1967); Dinan (1983); Masson (1986).
9. Vaguely reminiscent of the West Indian calypso, the *séga* blends French *chansons* and African rhythms. Nowadays, most *ségas* incorporate electric instruments, and the original *sega tipik* is becoming rare. An interesting recent innovation is the *seggae*, which blends *séga* with reggae – emerging in Mauritius ten years after reggae went out of fashion in Jamaica.
10. The quotation is from one of Bébel-Gisler's (1975) Guadeloupean informants, and it fits the Mauritian context perfectly.
11. Formerly, conversion to some variety of Christianity was a great asset in the development of individual careers. According to Tinker (1977:327) there is 'reason to suppose that Dr Laurent [leader of the early twentieth-century Coloured political group *Action Libérale*] was partially Indian by origin'.
12. A *longanis* of my acquaintance insisted that he was a devoted Christian, and explained the Eucharist as a 'ritual designed to purify the atmosphere and to exorcise the *mauvais air* ("bad air") from the participants' – an interpretation couched in entirely non-Christian terms and shared by many of the people in the village.
13. In stressing that power has local and global uses, I mean to emphasise that power does not only exist in the political, economic and communicational systems on a nationwide scale. The cases of the two servants in Floréal and the Sino-Mauritian restaurant (Chap. 4) exemplify the ethnic use of power on a smaller scale.

Cross-Cutting Ties: The Non-Ethnic

What I am saying is that these conflicting loyalties and divisions of allegiance tend to inhibit the development of open quarrelling, and that the greater the division in one area of society, the greater is likely to be the cohesion in a wider range of relationships – provided that there is a general need for peace, and recognition of a moral order in which this peace can flourish.

– Max Gluckman (1982[1956]:25)

The preceding chapters have indicated the role of ethnicity in some of the most important fields and levels of scale where Mauritian society is being reproduced. Partly for this reason, alternatives to ethnic classification, organisation and identity, which are considered in this and in the following chapter, are to a great extent described *as opposed to* ethnic identity and organisation. However, the 'bias' that this implies is ultimately justified in the fact that most Mauritians themselves tend to think, act and classify in a similar way: ethnicity is in many situations and in many fields seen as being logically and ontologically prior to its alternatives, and thus it is an important dimension of Mauritian social reality. Ethnic differences tend to make a difference, even in social contexts based on other differences.

In most of Mauritian history from the eighteenth century onwards, different kinds of resources have been bundled together in social networks and organisations based on kinship and ethnicity. Of course, a great number of situations incorporating members of different ethnic categories have throughout this period been accounted for in ways with no exclusive or even important bearing on ethnic differences. Personal acquaintances are frequently excepted from stereotypically founded prejudice, and many networks in all the main social fields are based on a variety of non-ethnic criteria (although the ethnic element is usually also present there). This chapter shows ways in which group cleavages and relevant social boundaries