

POLITICS, JOBS AND MARRIAGE: ETHNIC RELATIONS IN MAURITIUS

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This article is not what the title may suggest. Written for a Trinidadian readership, it tries to depict similarities between two ethnically complex places that I knew pretty well at the time. Published in *Equality* (Port-of-Spain), no. 1, 1989.

"Here in Mauritius, you must realize that we walk on eggs continuously," said Marie Benoit sternly to the foreigner. A Maltese expatriate married to a Mauritian, she had learnt through trial and error for over a decade. In a society where tolerance is a national virtue and ethnic conflicts are invisible to the casual visitor, it takes time to learn the do's and don'ts of socialising. For peaceful and tolerant as Mauritius undoubtedly is, the diverse groups populating the island do not collectively make up a nation. Mauritius, like Trinidad, is a nation of nations, and compromise is the order of the day, be it in politics, in the economy, in the media or at a dinner party.

Located almost exactly on the other side of the globe, eight hundred kilometres off Madagascar in the southern Indian Ocean, Mauritius is an island where a Trinidadian visitor would experience pangs of vague recognition (which V.S. Naipaul indeed did, visiting Mauritius in the early 70's). Mauritian towns, sprawling and disorganised, present the same motley blend of Victorian, modern, ramshackle and Indian architecture as do Trinidadian towns. The scenery of the countryside is varied, the vegetation luxuriant, the beaches exquisite. Although twice as densely populated as Trinidad (the island is half the size; the populations are roughly equal), Mauritius does not feel crowded. About half of the population lives in rural villages, where sugar remains king. Riding a hefty wave of industrialisation

since the early eighties, Mauritian society is in a state of flux, although underlying cultural patterns have proven difficult to refashion.

Like Trinidad, Mauritius is a multi-ethnic society, its population composed of groups of Indian (Hindu and Muslim), African, mixed, French and Chinese descent. A sugar colony for many years, sugar is still important despite the recent diversification of the economy. The currency is the Mauritian rupee, and English is the official language, but French and a French-lexicon Creole remain the dominant languages, despite 150 years of British rule. Since 1968, Mauritius is an independent democracy within the Commonwealth. In Mauritius as in Trinidad (and, perhaps, in any plural society), ethnicity is a pervasive, though elusive, aspect of social life. Although Mauritians often deny it, the ethnic membership of an individual provides him with crucial constraints and incentives as he goes on with his life; in situations relating to work, political activity, marriage etc. Like in Trinidad, no single ethnic group has a majority in Mauritius, but unlike in Trinidad, over 65% of the population are of Indian ancestry. However, Muslims (17%) and Tamils (6%) have rarely aligned themselves politically with the North Indians (mostly Biharis; 42%), and the Indo-Mauritian community has also from time to time been divided along caste lines. The other major ethnic group, the Creoles (about 29%), is culturally heterogeneous; it consists of a small segment of middle-class gens de couleur ("High Browns") and a large black working-class. The small group of Franco-Mauritians (local Whites), strongly fearing Indian cultural dominance, have historically aligned themselves with any non-Indian group, while the Sino-Mauritians (of Chinese origin, 3%) have collectively remained aloof from national politics. Hindus hailing from northern India have almost uninterruptedly been in control of the political system since the 1950s.

The 1970s and early 80s, however, saw the emergence of an alternative political force, the radical nationalist MMM party, which claimed to transcend ethnic politics altogether. In 1982, the MMM actually defeated Seewosagur Ramgoolam's Labour government in the General Elections, but alas, after nine months, the party split and the Hindu Cabinet Ministers walked out (so much

for non-ethnic politics...). Since then, the Mauritian government has been Hindu-dominated, with Anerood Jugnauth serving as Prime Minister since 1982. Administrative problems relating to the plural character of Mauritian society have long been recognised by the authorities, and although political alignments still generally follow ethnic lines, measures have been taken to mitigate the effects of this and to prevent gross discrimination. One such measure was the introduction of "best-loser seats" in the Mauritian parliament in the 1950's, intended to ensure that every major ethnic group was fairly represented. Ethnicity and ethnic uneasiness do not only play a part in politics. The right to be culturally different from the majority -- arguably an essential right in a multi-cultural society -- is stressed by political and religious leaders alike. Some flirt with syncretism, like the remarkable Catholic Pere Souchon, who encouraged his flock to attend Muslim Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations; but most hold that essential differences in religious beliefs and ways of life should not be tampered with for the sake of national integration.

Official Mauritian policy depicts Mauritian culture as a mosaic of Hindu, Muslim, European, African and Chinese influences, and it is highly unpopular to encourage the dissolution of cultural boundaries. Intermarriage is, incidentally, very rare. The division of labour in Mauritius remains ethnically correlated, although this tendency is strongest in the traditional occupations. Generally, Hindus and Muslims are associated with agriculture, and most are still employed (or self-employed) in the sugar industry, although Indo-Mauritians are to be found in any profession. The Coloureds follow the liberal professions (doctors, lawyers, teachers), and many work in the media and the civil service, while most of the black Creoles belong to the working class, as artisans, dockers, industrial workers and fishermen. The Sino-Mauritians dominate retail trade and play an increasingly important part in the new industries, while the Franco-Mauritians own and run the sugar industry. Mauritians of different cultural backgrounds remain very distinctive to this day. Unlike in Trinidad, virtually all Mauritians of Indian ancestry have Indian first names, and many of them are still able to communicate in Bhojpuri. Indian films, whether on TV or at the cinema, are never subtitled, and several Mauritian authors write their books in Hindi. The small Chinese

community, on its part, publishes two daily newspapers in Mandarin and frequently visit Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the Franco-Mauritians and middle-class coloureds remain impeccably old-world French in their cuisine, their language and their lifestyle. Only the African connection seems to have been broken. Mauritius never saw anything like a Black Power movement, and the Catholic working-class Creoles tend to regard Africa as a primitive and backward continent. The recent concept of the "Afro-Mauritian", introduced by a culturally self-conscious Mauritian black, remains a fiction for most practical purposes: there is nothing remotely African about the black Mauritian, save his countenance. Mauritian ethnicity, then, appears different from its Trinidadian counterpart. The Indo-Mauritians, traditionally lagging behind economically, educationally and politically, now hold their own in most fields of social life. In Mauritius, it is now the black Creoles who are lagging behind as the country speedily passes through its IMF-monitored industrial revolution.

That Mauritius should be so different from Trinidad in this respect is hardly surprising; for one thing, India is close and exerts a certain gravitational pull on the island; secondly, the Indians are more numerous in Mauritius; and thirdly, the Blacks in Mauritius are too remote, geographically and culturally (their literary language is French), to have been part of the Black movement of the 60's and 70's. Another important difference, of a more fundamental nature, pertains to governmental policies. In Mauritius, the plural nature of the society is taken more seriously than in Trinidad. The system of "best loser seats" has already been mentioned. In addition, every Mauritian child has the right to be taught an Oriental language up to the "O" level. Further, Independence Day celebrations nationwide invariably amount to large cultural shows highlighting the diversity of the Mauritian heritage; they will always include Indian music and dance along with Creole segas (the sega is similar to the calypso). And when it was decided to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the government designed a public holiday to mark the abolition of slavery and the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers simultaneously. The Mauritian governments have also been cautious not to upset the precarious ethnic equilibrium -- indeed to the

extent of closing down the Libyan embassy in 1984, following allegations that the Libyan embassy staff had been bribing Catholics to convert to Islam.

In some areas of Mauritian social life, the forces working towards national integration are the strongest. This is surely the case in sports (which should never be underestimated as a powerful symbolic vehicle of national sentiment) and in the growth sectors of the economy -- manufacturing and tourism. In other fields, cultural differences are acknowledged and respected. This would be the case in religious contexts: missionary activity is strongly disapproved of. The political situation is more ambiguous. The nationalist MMM, led by the Franco-Mauritian Paul Bérenger, have not been successful in recent elections, but they have nevertheless proven their point: that ethnicity need not always be the bottom line in politics, even in a society like Mauritius. Similarly, formal qualifications are increasingly important in the labour market, gradually replacing -- at least in some professions -- criteria relating to personal acquaintances and ethnic membership. This does not imply that social life in Mauritius is devoid of ethnic tension. In daily intercourse, one is continuously reminded of one's ethnicity and the social status it entails. More often than not, people depend on acquaintances to get a job, to find a spouse and a home; these acquaintances are normally relatives or at least members of one's own ethnic group. This is one main reason why a certain division of power is essential in a multi-cultural society, granted that total cultural assimilation is neither possible nor desirable. While the political system is largely controlled by Hindus, the people in charge of the economy are Franco-Mauritians, Sino-Mauritians, a few wealthy Hindu and Muslim families, and a handful of Asian expatriates. The media are to a great extent in the hands of Coloureds, but here it should be noted that Mauritian radio and television, although dominated by broadcasts in French and English, have regular transmissions in Mauritian Creole and in Indian and Chinese languages. The public service, including the police, has traditionally been the domain of the Creoles; light-skinned ones in white-collar jobs, black-skinned ones in blue-collar jobs. This has changed with the rise of the Indo-Mauritian to political power, and today, the police is possibly the last stronghold of the Creoles in the Public Service.

A certain ethnic balance of power thus prevails, although it is clear that the working-class Creoles are all but powerless in greater society. Lacking cultural resources for collective mobilisation and channels for social mobility, and valuing their independence and individual freedom greatly, they are presently unable to compete on the same level as the rest of the Mauritian population. As Mauritian society changes and a growing number of opportunities emerge, the Creoles are the least equipped to meet the challenges. Poorly educated and profoundly disorganised, they are definitely worse off than any other ethnic group, and the gulf is widening. It does, in other words, not require a lot of imagination to predict that if a Marcus Garvey or a Uriah Butler should now emerge from the ranks of the Creoles, the outcome might well be revolution.