

Le Malaise Créole

Research >
South West Asia

Before its independence in 1968, the island of Mauritius in the South West Indian Ocean region experienced three centuries of subsequent colonization by the Dutch, French, and English. During this period, it developed into a plural society where people of diverse origins and faiths coexisted. Nowadays it is inhabited by a mixture of Christians, Hindus, and Muslims of Indian, African, Chinese, and European descent.

By Rosabelle Boswell

This article examines the situation of the people known as Creoles, primarily the descendents of African and Malagasy slaves who currently live in Mauritius. It focuses specifically on a local sociocultural phenomenon branded *le malaise Créole* (the Creole predicament) and discusses its impact on the Creole population. Mauritians associate the phenomenon with the lowest social and economic expressions of a particular segment of the Creole population, known as the *ti-Kreol*. The poverty and marginalization of the *ti-Kreol* partly results from racial stereotyping by the wealthier classes, Creoles and

experience creolization: the acquisition of locally forged, social and political characteristics that ease interethnic communication and provide a measure of social flexibility and meaning. However, there are no indigenes in Mauritius and the dominant ethos hails a plural rather than Creole society. Thus, as a means to demonstrate their intrinsic cultures, ethnic groups are encouraged to proclaim and maintain their roots. In such a context, creolization and Creole-ness is perceived and often treated as an aberration. At the same time, it is possible to argue that the maintenance of plurality and difference is also a product of local need, a means of achieving a sense of place and belong-

Organisation Fraternel, called on the government on behalf of the descendants of slaves, to obtain political and financial compensation for the imposition of slavery on their ancestors and for their experiences of racial discrimination over the past 160 years. Those who are intent to foster Mauritian nationhood argue that Creoles are the 'true' Mauritians, harking back to the eighteenth-century understanding of Creoles as 'locally' born. The political nature of the term Creole suggests several things. First, that the category is still in the process of ethnogenesis and that existing interpretations of Creole-ness and Creole identity are being reviewed; second, that Mauritians are moving away from strictly cultural definitions of group identity; and third, that the Creole category is culturally open.

Findings and interpretations

Ethnography revealed that in each of the five geographically distinct sites of my research (Centre-de-Flacq, Karina, Roche Bois, Chamarel, and Le Morne village) those ethnic groups able to lay claim to distinct cultural origins and a 'singular' homeland and, thus, groups with a potent fiction of homogeneity, are socially valued the most. Groups that possess 'mobile' cultural resources such as caste, race, or religion use these to refer to particular geographical and spiritual homelands in life rituals, to strengthen and maintain the community, its cultural integrity, and the political constitution of the group. The dominant cultural paradigm does not allow for the accommodation of 'creole' identity. Until very recently Creole identity has not been publicly articulated (in the form of pilgrimages, and ethnic and religious symbols). As a result, Mauritians in general argue that Creoles 'suffer' a lack of identity, which finds expression in the phenomenon of *le malaise Créole*.

However, *le malaise Créole* is a complex phenomenon that is differently expressed in each location. This view challenges the dominant, primordial view that the phenomenon is the result of the lazy, spendthrift nature of Creoles, who have not been resourceful enough to make use of the opportunities that they have been granted since independence in 1968. My findings also challenge the pro-Creole and minority view that *le malaise Créole* would be the experience of victimization through racial and cultural domination. By and large, *le malaise Créole* can be seen as a condition of hybridity in a society that has devalued such hybridity. Its manifestation is symptomatic of the experience of cultural and social oppression. To appear more homogeneous and to deal with the painful memories of the past, the Creoles have adopted diverse strategies. Many Creoles have accepted orthodox Christianity, adopted European standards of fashion, and accumulated material goods to symbolize their aspirations to middle-class status. Under the conviction that light skin is socially advantageous, many Creoles chose

partners with a light skin as they aspire to have children with a fair complexion. In other words, some have attempted to 'escape' the past. However, it is presently apparent that some Creoles are beginning to re-engage with the past and are rekindling positive memories of endurance and survival.

The Creole population is far from homogenous and consists of groups such as the Rodriguais (from Rodrigues Island), the Ilois (from the Chagos archipelago) and the Kreol Morisyen (from Mauritius). There are various ways in which the Creoles deal with their past and its impact on their identity. Both the Ilois and Rodriguais maintain and appeal to traditions and culture that they perceive to be uniquely theirs. By positively valuing their 'roots', they give a meaning to their background, while affirming their homogeneity. The Ilois for example established their place in the discourse on origins and memory making in Mauritius by the strong reference to their forced displacement from the Chagos archipelago and the loss of their ancestral graves.

Class differences determine the extent to which appeals to traditions and roots are successful. For the poverty-stricken residents of the River Camp (a settlement on the edge of Roche Bois), their lack of material resources and social power limits their ability to travel home and to therefore acquire cultural goods necessary for the demonstration of culture. However, it is not only the display of tangible cultural goods that assists in authentication of culture and identity. The Kreol Morisyen in Karina, like the Kreol Morisyen in Chamarel and Le Morne utilize the stories from the past (in other words intangible culture) to achieve a sense of shared history and identity. These stories confer a measure of solidarity among the residents and encourage outsiders to perceive them as belonging to a homogeneous group. However, as Mauritian society becomes more heterogeneous, efforts to indicate homogeneity via shared history are being challenged in all three

sites. In these communities, many are now involved in achieving personal economic gain and therefore identify themselves more with class than with ethnicity or history.

Not until Mauritians take account of the reality of hybridization will phenomena such as *le malaise Créole* begin to dissipate. In Mauritian society, however, such attempts are few and far between. Both the state and cultural organizations explicitly emphasize the plurality of society and the need to preserve ethnic identity. These policies stress the individuality of ethnic groups, rather than pointing out the shared traditions and practices. By emphasizing ethnic group identity, interethnic communication and networks also tend to be ignored, thus neglecting how vital interethnicity is to survival and development. Moreover, with regard to Creoles, little attempt has been made by the state to consider and recognize their cultural and social contributions to the making of Mauritian society. Similar to African diaspora communities elsewhere, groups such as the Creoles can make a positive contribution to society's diversity and creativity. Not only do they create vibrant, new traditions and customs by drawing on their local circumstances, their contribution to diversity also lies in challenging fundamentalist and exclusivist tendencies, of the present-day civilizing mission type. The recognition and consideration of the effects of *le malaise Créole* on Creoles in Mauritius is necessary for the achievement of meaningful equality and social justice in the country. <

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Creoles in Mauritius

Today's approximately 200,000 Creoles in Mauritius are the descendants of African and Malagasy slaves that arrived on the island over a period of 300 years. As slaves they experienced Dutch, French, and British rule. Today the Creoles are considered a people of mixed heritage and they share physical and cultural traits with Mauritians of Indian, Chinese, and European descent. In addition, some Creoles in Mauritius have come from neighbouring islands. Those resident on the island fall into three major categories: Kreol Morisyen (Mauritian Creoles), Rodriguais (from the island of Rodrigues), and Ilois (exiles from the Chagos Archipelago).

Off-late, the Creole population has set up various political and cultural pressure groups to articulate their concerns. Some of these are: The Mauritian Movement for African Creoles (MMKA), The Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture (NMCAC), Rodrigues Peoples Organization (OPR), and Chagos Refugee Group (CRG). Since independence in 1968, Mauritius has developed from a low-income, agriculturally based economy to a middle-income diversified economy. Historically, Creoles have been employed in the sugar cane industry, which is still grown on about 90 per cent of the cultivated land area. All the same, this industry is facing competition from tourism development, offshore investment, and manufacture. The changing economy is affecting the Creoles in various ways and, in some instances, intensifies their marginalization.



Both photos by Rosabelle Boswell

Legions de Marie: Children's group at a religious service for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.



Retaining tradition, Ravanne players at a Creole cultural festival.

non-Creoles alike. In many postcolonial states today, dominant paradigms on culture and identity emphasize the boundaries of identity, thereby ignoring that social change and globalization make these boundaries between human groups rather fluid. Such views on culture and identity facilitate specific claims to cultural preservation and empowerment, while dismissing or delimiting the rights and cultural resources of all hybrids in society. By and large, *le malaise Créole* can be seen as a condition of hybridity in a society that has devalued such hybridity. The manifestation of *le malaise Créole* is symptomatic of the experience of cultural and social oppression.

The descendents of the Afro-Malagasy in particular acquired diverse social and cultural characteristics, resulting from their experiences of slavery, which had culturally fragmenting and in many instances annihilating impacts. In part, this allowed them to

ing in a complex and changing society.

The local population currently acknowledges the Creoles as descendants of African and Malagasy slaves. However, social and linguistic definitions indicate that the Creole category consists of a wider variety of people of mixed heritage. From a historical perspective, an eighteenth-century Creole was someone born on the island of Mauritius; in the early part of the twentieth century, a Creole was someone of mixed racial and/or cultural descent. Today, Creoles are largely defined as the Negroid population on the island and the term denotes a political category rather than a specifically ethnic one, which means that it is a category open to varying definitions. Some Mauritians (including Creoles) emphasize the hybridity of Creoles. Others associate Creoles with slavery and African roots, stressing the need for political and economic compensation. In 2002 for example, a pro-Creole organization,