

Representation in Mauritian politics: who speaks for African pasts?¹

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Abstract

The island nation of Mauritius is recognized across most disciplines - from anthropology to tourism - as a 'plural' or 'multi-ethnic' country. This essay will show that any attempt to represent the pluralism of Mauritius must contend with the complex history of 'representation' itself within this postcolonial nation. This complexity, in its turn, is bound up with the intersecting histories of the varied immigrant and diasporic populations that make up this myriad society. The legacy of these tensions in the contemporary era can be symbolized in the public persona of the Mauritian Prime Minister, Paul Béranger, as he sought to represent various groups of the Mauritian electorate in his bid to be re-elected in September 2005. The various and, at times, contradictory ways in which Africanness and Indianness have made their way into the public sphere will be read through an analysis of debates in the Legislative Assembly, articles in the contemporary press, and historical sources that draw on these key issues. If, at bottom, diaspora draws both on making ethnic connections that go beyond the political boundaries of the nation state, and on the more immediate engendering of ethnocultural solidarity within the nation state itself, then these issues are fraught with complex and particular complications for Mauritians of African and/or Malagasy descent.

Keywords

Mauritian politics
Africanness
Indianness
slavery

Résumé

On reconnaît l'île Maurice dans bon nombre de disciplines pour son 'pluralisme', sa 'multi-ethnicité'. Cet article montrera que toute tentative de représenter le pluralisme de l'île Maurice doit tenir compte d'une histoire complexe d'auto-représentation au sein de ce pays post-colonial. Cette complexité est à son tour liée aux histoires mêlées des diverses populations immigrantes et diasporiques au sein de cette société plurielle. L'héritage de tensions historiques peut être symbolisé par la personnalité publique du Premier Ministre mauricien, Paul Béranger, qui tente de représenter les divers groupes de l'électorat mauricien en vue des élections de septembre 2005. Les manières diverses, et parfois contradictoires, dont l'identité africaine et indienne ont marqué la scène publique seront analysées à l'appui des débats à l'Assemblée Législative, d'articles de la presse contemporaine et de sources historiques qui abordent ces questions clefs. Si la diaspora tire son identité tant de la création de relations ethniques qui vont au delà des frontières

- 1 The second part of the title is inspired by Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?', *Representations*, 37 (1992), pp. 1–26.

- 2 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2000, p. 123.
- 3 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 19.
- 4 The term 'African' in this essay refers to connections with the African continent and Madagascar. Clear markings of different affiliations within the Creole (black) population are not inscribed in the way ethnic affiliation is claimed amongst Indians.
- 5 Radhika Ramaseshan, 'PM walks into Mauritius poll - Singh pays tribute to island "Gandhi", party sees politics', *Telegraph*, p. 1. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1050401/as/nation/story_4560336.asp. Accessed 6 June 2005.
- 6 The term 'public discourse' encompasses speeches and other pronouncements made by government officials such as Ministers, Members of Parliament, or lawyers representing indentured Indian labourers, as well as individuals who have some connection with the administration of the island such as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, a high profile French visitor introduced to the colonial administrators upon his arrival. This excludes less formal but no less important milieus such as jokes, proverbs, music, or

politiques de l'état-nation que de la notion plus immédiate de solidarité ethnoculturelle engendrée par l'état-nation lui-même, ces questions deviennent alors particulièrement complexes et polémiques pour les Mauriciens de descendance africaine et/ou malgache.

The Indian Prime Minister's visit to Mauritius in April 2005 and the question of monetary retribution to descendants of slaves that were raised in a 2002 United Nations' statement are two events that position Mauritius as part of the Indian and African diaspora respectively. For Gilroy, diaspora

[...] is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness. It destroys the naïve invocation of common memory as the basis of particularity in a similar fashion by drawing attention to the contingent political dynamics of commemoration.²

By examining some of the ways in which these two events explicitly call forth a diasporic definition of the Mauritian people, I show that the conception of this 'plural' nation is refashioned by activating both the question of common memory and the politics of identification. Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic seeks 'to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity'.³ This essay will indeed seek to explore how such a Black Atlantic consciousness plays out in Mauritius. Though located far from Atlantic shores, this island shares with the Atlantic basin a common history of slavery, indentureship and creolization. Linking essential aspects of Gilroy's notion of diaspora to Mauritian history and contemporary society will help us understand how differently the transoceanic dialogue might be approached from various diasporic sites. While the various groups that comprise the plurality of Mauritius are implicated in the analyses that follow, the latter are most specifically concerned with this nation's 'African',⁴ and 'Indian' past and present.

Paul Béranger, the first Prime Minister of non-Indian origin to be elected since Mauritian independence in 1968, was chastised for intending to manipulate the imminent arrival of the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, in order to garner support for himself amongst the Indo-Mauritians, who represent over 60 per cent of the Mauritian electorate. As an Indian journalist in Calcutta (India) reported: 'Singh [...] finds himself unwittingly caught in the vortex of the island's politics.'⁵ While it is obvious that the relatively large size of the Indian population makes the latter visible and allows 'Indianness' to play a dominant role in public discourse,⁶ other historical factors explain Béranger's complex position vis-à-vis his electorate and underscore a more general aspect of public discourse in Mauritius, namely, the uneasy position of 'Africanness'.

Mauritius: historical and electoral profile

Mauritius is an island located 550 miles east of Madagascar, and about 2,300 miles from the Cape of Good Hope. Following Portuguese, Dutch and English colonial and commercial ventures in the island, Mauritius became Dutch in 1598, soon fell into French hands, only to be taken over by the British in 1810. At this time, Mauritius was a French plantation colony relying on the labour of slaves imported from both the African continent and Madagascar. The official emancipation of slavery (1835 for Mauritius) spurred massive Indian immigration to replace slave labour in the fields while Chinese immigrants hailed primarily from the merchant class. Indo-Mauritians are primarily Hindus and Muslims, but also include groups that cohere around language and ethnicity, such as Tamils, Telugus or Gujaratis. Such linkages between categories of immigrants based upon their region of origin and their role in the new colony are not completely stable. Still, at the time of Mauritian independence in 1968 and in the discussions regarding representation that preceded it, whites were historically linked to the colonizers, and accounted for most plantation owners. Those of mixed blood (usually black and white) were seen as descendants of the offspring of slaves and their white masters and referred to as *métis* or *mulâtres*, while those of African ancestry, identified by dark skin and 'African appearance', were called Creoles and linked to the mixed-blood or *métis* group and the white population through a cultural alliance, often characterized by the use of and attachment to the French language.⁷ Since independence, this 'plural' nation has experienced a major recession following a slump in sugar prices and rebirth as an Asian tiger with a diversified economy relying on an educated workforce, tax-free havens and a boom in textile and technology-related industries.

For electoral purposes, whites, *métis*, and Creoles make up what is called the 'general population', while other categories including Indians and Chinese are registered separately. These categories become significant, and almost unavoidable, as the representation of the electorate is understood in these terms.⁸

The road leading up to the September 2005 Mauritian elections was not smooth for the incumbent. Through a complex mechanism, ethnic groups are identified as requiring protection in the electoral process, and therefore accorded seats. This 'best-loser' system was put in place to ensure equal representation to all visible 'ethnic' groups of the island as the electoral process was being worked out, prior to independence. The coalition previously in power in Mauritius proposed to have this 'best-loser' system additionally extended to women, allotting them seven of its 'best-loser' seats. In an article published in the *Express* of 22 March 2005, women of different convictions expressed their dissatisfaction with this hasty effort to include them in Mauritian politics. As Pauline Étienne reports in this article, not only do women aspire to increase their visibility from the current 4 per cent (or the proposed 8 per cent in this proposal), but they refuse to be considered 'second-class citizens', as the system of

dance. The examples used here are emblematic of the tendencies in official language that is intrinsically related to the administration, be it colonial or postcolonial.

- 7 An anthropological analysis of these groups is provided in Thomas Ericksen, *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Mauritius*, Oslo Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology, 16, Blindern: University of Oslo.
- 8 For more details on the electoral process, see Centre d'études et de recherches sur les sociétés de l'océan indien, *Île Maurice: sociale économique et politique (1974–1980)*, Aix-en-Provence: University d'Aix-Marseille, 1984.

- 9 Pauline Étienne, 'Adding Insult to Injury', *Express*, p. 2. http://www.lexpress.mu/display_article_su p.php?news_id=38291. Accessed 6 June 2005.
- 10 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*, p. 123.
- 11 Vinesh Y. Hookoomsing, 'L'Île Maurice et ses langues', *Notre Librairie*, 114 (1993), p. 26.
- 12 Nita Rughoonundun, 'Les langues à l'école mauricienne', *Notre Librairie*, 114 (1993), p. 34.

'best losers' might imply.⁹ This issue further complicates the process of public representation in Mauritius, with a gender group now becoming increasingly vocal alongside the existing ethnic groups.

Paul Béranger, a white Franco-Mauritian, belongs to the small elite 3 per cent minority of the total population. His political success has depended, among other things, upon massive support from a majority of the electorate that is identified as Indo-Mauritian, a support that was highlighted in the questions raised by the Mauritian press regarding the Indian Prime Minister's visit. According to K. Venugopal of the *Hindu* (an Indian newspaper), Manmohan Singh's visit had a strictly economic objective, namely to increase commercial exchange through a treaty between the two nations. Mr Singh inaugurated various sites during the course of his visit, including a cyber tower, financed in large part by Indian companies. This inauguration was to be suggestive of the closer ties with regard to information technology that the two nations are seeking. Béranger's position as the incumbent seeking re-election forced him into a web of relations with his potential voters and was reminiscent of the fact that 'India' for Mauritians cannot simply function as the 'basis for particularity' through common memory for a single group, but, as Gilroy suggests, is also part of the 'contingent political dynamics of commemoration'.¹⁰ The Indian premier's visit, then, implicated both the Indianness of Mauritius and the Frenchness of its Prime Minister, and called up other ethnic, racial and cultural 'aspects' of Mauritian society as well. But the visit also simultaneously established a more dialectical position between this nation's past and its present, situating it as diasporic rather than simply pluralistic.

The increased recognition of 'oriental' languages and the use of language as an ethnic marker further point to the ease with which Indianness has entered public discourse in Mauritius. The institutionalization of surveys regarding language affiliation and use from the 1930s onwards¹¹ as well as the subsequent inclusion of 'Oriental Languages' in the curriculum¹² have given the language/ethnic marker greater 'reality'. The presence of various languages (French, English, Hindi, Mandarin, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Telugu, Tamil, among others) in Mauritius provides a forum for representation within Mauritian culture of a history and a link to something greater than, and outside of, the colonial structure. No African language is inscribed in the Mauritian educational system in the way these other languages have been promoted, to different degrees, of course. Yet, the Indian languages listed above were not always widely spoken in the island before their introduction into the system. This move was one that acknowledged a particular history and provided a vehicle for the development of an 'ethnic' identity, which, by virtue of appearing in the idiom of the 'cultural', escaped being a racial nomination derived so directly through colonial purpose. Likewise, though virtually all Mauritians speak and understand Mauritian Creole and Béranger's party, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), supported its official recognition in the 1970s and 1980s, most of the population has been opposed to

giving it any official credence.¹³ Mauritian Creole is seen as not sufficiently international or prestigious to be a national language but it is also subliminally attached to the 'Creoles' as a demographic group. As whites are perceived in Mauritian culture as the legitimate speakers of French, most Mauritians tend to aspire to speak this language with ease and authority. English functions as a language of international use, more recently intertwined with independent India's adoption of English as its official language. Although we cannot discuss here all the ramifications of the language situation in Mauritius and its connections to ethnicity, it is to be noted that while language became an official way of 'ethnification' for Mauritians of Asian descent, there has been no comparable mechanism for ethnification in the case of 'Africans', an appellation that is almost never heard in Mauritian public discourse. In carrying out his duties as Prime Minister, Paul Béranger, like any other public figure, engages this issue in his interactions with his electorate.

Paul Béranger is no newcomer to Mauritian politics. One of the founding members of the radical MMM, Béranger is also remembered for leading the General Workers' Federation to a general strike that practically crippled the economy in 1979. During this period of economic crisis for Mauritius, the country had to approach the IMF, and the rupee was heavily devalued. During the 1982 elections, the Labour Party, represented by the first Prime Minister of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam - also known as the Father of the Nation - accused the MMM of Libyan connections through the Muslim faction of the party. The MMM swept the polls, winning 64 per cent of the vote with its alliance with the self-proclaimed Hindu Parti Socialiste Mauricien.¹⁴ Paul Béranger served as Finance Minister following this election. In 1995 he became Deputy Prime Minister to Navin Ramgoolam's Prime Ministership while Anerood Jugnauth led the opposition.

Despite these rapidly changing alliances, which might legitimately make a voter cynical, Béranger's support by a fairly large section of the Indian majority is now indisputable. Following the historic defeat of the Indian-dominated Labour Party in 1982, the new coalition government was soon beset by its own problems, coming to a head in a rift between Anerood Jugnauth, the Prime Minister and co-member of the MMM, and Béranger. New elections were held in 1983, with Jugnauth garnering the support of a huge coalition of various parties under the banner of the Alliance. Béranger disregarded traditional Mauritian concerns with ethnicity, which would have entailed a more proactive approach to ensure overt connections to all ethnic groups, and continued to lead the self-proclaimed non-sectarian MMM against this coalition. Though defeated, he entered Parliament as Leader of the Opposition through the 'best-loser' system mentioned before. In a reversal of fortunes, the timely arrest (from his perspective) of four members of Jugnauth's Alliance for drug trafficking in Amsterdam provided sufficient scandal to help fuel the 1991 win of the coalition formed by the MMM with Jugnauth's MSM!

- 13 The creation of an independent organization, *Ledikasyon pu Travayer*, in 1975 and its ongoing activities are still important steps in acknowledging Mauritian Creole and its valorization in the daily life of monolingual Creole speakers. This organization works with adults and is committed to rendering all Mauritians literate.
- 14 K. Alladin, *President for the People*, Rose Hill, Mauritius: The Mauritius Printing, 1998; and Archives coloniales, *Les Constitutions de l'île Maurice*, Port Louis: Colonial Archives printing, n.d., p. 110.

- 15 Adolphe de Plevitz (presenter), *Petition of the Old Immigrants of Mauritius*, Port Louis: n.p., 1871, p. 22.
- 16 Inhabitants of Mauritius, *Memorial in Support of their Petition to his Majesty*, London: Effingham Wilsom, 1833, p. 15.
- 17 *Memorial in Support of their Petition to his Majesty*, p. 15.

Béranger's election, in some ways, reclaims authorship of the MMM's slogan 'Ene sel lepep, ène sel nasyon' ('One people, one nation'). A white Franco-Mauritian who can secure enough voters' support in a small 'plural' country with a large Indian majority, Paul Béranger can be seen as exemplifying the spirit of the 'nasyon' and its future. A more cynical view might see his shifting loyalties, attributable to the different alliances he has made, as mere opportunism. Nevertheless, any understanding of his victory has to contend with the over-determined, communally understood Mauritian electorate.

Indian representation: historical perspective

The question of Indian representation entered public discourse in Mauritius well before independence. The misery of the Indian indentured labourer in Mauritius, his lack of representation and the collusion between overseers and proprietors were documented as early as 1832 by the lawyer A. Plevitz in the *Petition of the Old Immigrants*, which he addressed to the King of England. The long list of petitions regarding beatings or dupey led to the appointment of a Protector:

For each day in hospital [the Indian labourer] forfeits the pay of that day, but for each day that he is absent from his work he forfeits two days' pay. The overseers are in the interest of the proprietor, and are unfortunately but too often valued in proportion to the sum which they can enable the proprietor to deduct from the wages of the Indian labourers. Accordingly the labourers are frequently marked as absent when not absent and stoppages are made from their wages for the non-completion of tasks almost impossible to accomplish or for other reasons invented by the ingenuity or caprice of the overseers, who must adopt this means to retain the favour of their employers and their situations.¹⁵

If not intentionally pernicious, the Protectors have also been described as being simply unsuitable, as recorded in the *Memorial* presented by the 'Inhabitants of Mauritius'. Here, it is noted that the Protectors are often 'strangers to the Colony and unknown to its inhabitants, enjoy no public confidence, [...] are regarded as enemies; and are consequently distrusted, shunned and hated'.¹⁶ A note informs that '[o]ne of the Protectors discovered only after his landing in the Mauritius, that he had forgot [*sic*] to learn French!'¹⁷

Historically, representation in island politics has been a charged issue for all sections of the population. From 1810, when the British took over Mauritius from the French, until 1831, the Governor, who received direct orders from the colonial administration in Britain, held complete power over all aspects of the governance of this colony. Until 1881, the only input received in decision-making was from the officials named by the Governor himself. Gradually, with much agitation from the powerful sections of the French population, concessions were made for greater representation of the French planters and sugar barons.

When universal suffrage was being debated in the Legislative Council on 25 July 1950, most Indo-Mauritians were in favour of it. Their desire to be represented became incarnated in Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, who was to become the first Prime Minister of Mauritius.¹⁸ The linking of representation to ethnic groups, however, caused some acrimonious exchanges on the issue of communalism during the 1950s debates on universal suffrage. Mr Koenig, a non-Indian representative, remarked sarcastically on the Indians' anticipated fully-fledged entry into Mauritian politics on the eve of independence: 'When we are asking for posts in the Judicial Department, we are Indo-Mauritians, but when we are asking for universal suffrage, we are all Mauritians.'¹⁹ Although he believes that 'all representatives of all the communities living in this country should have a share in the administration of the colony',²⁰ he put forth his views on universal suffrage in this manner:

My friends have found it extraordinary, and I agree with them, that in the past with the old constitution, in spite of the fact that the white community represented some 1.5% of the whole population, the general elections returned a great majority of white members in this house. Well, if we are not careful, what will happen? What will happen in the future? If we resort to universal suffrage, when we know the real results of the last elections, with this suffrage which is not totally universal, it goes without saying that the members of that community who were elected in the past will be replaced by members of another single community in the future. What about the past? Is it because in the past the overwhelming majority represented only one community? That is the point. The point is, being given the communalistic feelings of the mass of the population, we are bound to be careful and see not only that the white community should not be trampled down [*sic*] but that the other communities should not be trampled down.²¹

Mr. Bissoondoyal, representing the 'Indian' and more specifically 'Hindu' side of the equation, retorted that:

[w]e claim that it will not be reasonable to say that if universal suffrage is granted, all the Hindus of Mauritius, because they are the bulk of the population will vote for Hindu candidates, and that only Hindu candidates will sit in this house, that they will entirely forget that there are other communities living in this country [...].²²

Bissoondoyal further cites various examples of how Hindus can think outside of their community and defend other constituents. He concludes that:

Now, if we were to go and look into the texts of the newspapers of Mauritius, we would see that people are not communally driven. Thousands of people of the Hindu community are not the subscribers of the Hindu paper. They are

18 See, for example, the Mauritius Legislative Council Debates No. 46 of the year 1948–49: 24 June and 19 July 1949 for strong speeches by Ramgoolam in favour of the government adjudicating on the sale of farmland and the fixing of prices of such sales (needless to say, the bulk of such sales were occurring between the whites who owned the land and Indians who had toiled over it for generations).

19 Mauritius Legislative Council, *Debates*, Port Louis: Claude M. d'Unienville, The Mauritius Co. Ltd., (n.d.), p. 21.

20 Mauritius Legislative Council, *Debates*, pp. 20–21.

21 Mauritius Legislative Council, *Debates*, p. 21.

22 Mauritius Legislative Council, *Debates*, p. 22.

the subscribers of the 'Cernéen' and the 'Mauricien' and there are thousands of non-Hindus who are not subscribers of the 'Mauricien' or the 'Cernéen'. They are the subscribers of the 'Advance' and they buy the Hindu paper. These are the proofs and the evidence to show us that the people of Mauritius are reasoning in a far different way from that in which some members of this House are trying to show us. It is because people are still believing in communalism that they see the shadow of it everywhere around them.²³

Against this backdrop of over-determined communal vocabulary and thinking, Bérenger's election under the auspices of the MMM becomes not only interesting but, indeed, remarkable. Koenig, a white Franco-Mauritian representative, neglects an important aspect of Mauritian reality in his statement that the one community that previously dominated the Assembly in numbers (i.e. the whites) would now be replaced by 'members of another single community' (i.e. the Indians). This reality includes the fact that the latter group comprised, even at that time, a large majority of the Mauritian population. A white majority in the Assembly indicated the domination of politics by a minority group whereas the anticipated Indian majority would reflect the make-up of the Mauritian population itself. The long fight waged by indentured Indians, whose offspring would form the future majority of the Mauritian electorate, continues to fuel the Indians' emotional investment in the electoral process. This idea of representation remains central to the Indo-Mauritian psyche and Paul Bérenger does not avoid exploiting this fact in contemporary Mauritian politics.

The difficulty of articulating Africanness

Representation was also central to the colonial planters, who constantly opposed British control of the colony in various contexts, the most contentious being that of slavery. Ever since the 1810 take-over of the island by the British, French planters enjoyed great freedom in terms of language and many other administrative issues. Yet the question of slavery became a sore point in their dealings with the British administration, keen to do away with the practice, keep up with the times and maintain international credibility. Somehow, slavery is less than visible in all forms of public discourse in Mauritius. While it is true that this period predates indenture, and that those who actually feel an emotional connection to the period and the question of slavery through ancestry are relatively few, the issue still somehow remains startlingly invisible. The question of representation, even as a bone of contention, may have long remained unimaginable to this section of the population historically - precisely because of the lack of power that characterized the position of slaves. The infamous *Code noir* deprived the slave of any right to or enjoyment of his civil rights: he could not receive any donation or inheritance, appeal to the judicial system, be a witness, play any public role or participate in a private institution. Marriage between slaves had to be allowed by the master, and children belonged to the master of the mother. Marriage between blacks and whites

was not permitted and severely punished; priests were not allowed to preside over them.²⁴ This history, although cited in the Colonial Archives, is never officially recognized nor discussed in any significant manner nowadays.

The most notable discourse on slavery in Mauritius comes from the French writer, Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, who published his *Voyages à l'île de France* in 1773. In 1805, Thomi Pitot refuted de Saint-Pierre's published collection of observations before being refuted himself by Abbé Ducrocq who denounced slavery and its heritage in the early twentieth century.²⁵ While these texts are interesting in and of themselves, they are evoked here because their very presence brings back the reality of slavery in a way that no other available official discourse really does. In Pitot's attack against de Saint-Pierre, he writes:

M. de Saint-Pierre s'indigne de la rigueur des châtimens infligés aux esclaves: mais, a-t-il dit la vérité en donnant comme fréquents ces 50, 100, 200 coups de fouets? Non. La calomnie seule écrivit sous sa dictée ces mensonges odieux ... J'ai habité sept années la colonie; j'ai visité beaucoup d'habitations et j'ai trouvé souvent plusieurs centaines de noirs réunis, et jamais, je l'atteste, je n'ai vu infliger à un noir plus de 25 coups de fouets.²⁶

This refutation of the regular imposition of as many as 50, 100, or 200 whiplashes by asserting a maximum of 25 only serves paradoxically to verify rather than deny the terrible treatment inflicted upon slaves. Ducrocq also specifically cites the following article of the *Code noir*:

Voulons que les esclaves qui auront encouru les peines du fouet, de la fleur de lys et des oreilles coupées soient jugés en dernier ressort par les juges ordinaires et exécutés sans qu'il soit nécessaire que tel jugement soit confirmé par le Conseil supérieur, nonobstant le contenu de l'article 25 des présentes qui n'aura lieu que pour les jugemens portant condamnation à mort ou de jarret coupé.²⁷

Ducrocq points out that these ordinary judges were most often friends and acquaintances of the owners: 'Le misérable, condamné sans recours, n'avait donc aucune aide à attendre en ce monde. Il était absolument à la merci de son maître.'²⁸ Even such a return to these historical texts does not serve simply to provide one more account of slavery in Mauritius - a task eminently undertaken by Karl Noël in *Esclavage à l'île de France* - but rather to draw attention to the manner in which Africans, and slaves in particular, entered public discourse in mediated, indeed mitigated ways. While there is some continuity between the Protector's inadequacy as a defender of Indians' interests and the efforts of Indians to gain credible and satisfactory representation, there is no such continuity from the supposed intent of the *Code noir* to 'protect' slaves to any mechanism of representation for their descendants. Instead, the latter are grouped with (and ally

24 Archives coloniales, *Les Constitutions de l'île Maurice*, p. 14.

25 These three texts have been recently published together as *Île de France: voyage et controverses*.

26 Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Thomi Pitot and Abbé Ducrocq, *Île de France: voyage et controverses*, Alma: Mauritius, 1996, p. 154.

27 Quoted in *Île de France: voyage et controverses*, p. 194.

28 Quoted in *Île de France: voyage et controverses*, p. 194.

- 29 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*, p. 112.
- 30 Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, *Selected Speeches*, London: Macmillan, 1979, p. 129.

with) the white population. This could be seen as a very positive development in the post-colony era insofar as former masters and slaves would require no further mediation. In reality, the wide disparities in income, status and representation between white Mauritians and 'Creoles' (or their perceivably black counterparts) give the lie to such an interpretation. It is hard, then, to consider this lack of 'ethnification' in the case of 'Africans' in Mauritius as anything but a different, but necessary, recourse to the cultural in response to overt perceptions and practices of racism.²⁹

In the recent electoral history of Mauritius, those of African descent have tended to ally themselves with the small French minority. The use of the term 'Creole' to denote this population can also be seen positively since it previously referred to whites born in the colony. Such interchangeability of the term could suggest that the previous difference in situation and signification between whites and blacks no longer matters. At the same time, the lack of any 'African' referents as symbolic landmarks for this group, which for electoral purposes is considered no different from whites (within the category of 'general population' beginning from the period prior to independence), seems artificially construed. In other words, it is surprising that a common history of labour in the plantations, albeit under different situations, between Africans and Indians who came to Mauritius should not link their descendants more closely. The rubric of 'general population' suggests that former slaves and former white masters have more in common with each other than what could be expected between former slaves and former indentured labourers.

Since virtually all Mauritians speak Creole (or 'morisyen') with facility, there is no argument to be made that language becomes an actual barrier between those of African descent and those of Indian descent. The impossibility of really enunciating the term 'African' in contemporary public discourse in Mauritius simultaneously trips up any legitimate reference to slavery. 'French' culture or Mauritian French culture has long proved easier to reclaim by *métis* and Creoles. It follows that, in general, alliances between Africans and Indians would be forestalled due to the very different discursive and political strategies these groups deploy for group identification in modern Mauritius.

Seewoosagar Ramgoolam's elision of this very question, in his speech on Independence Day as the first Prime Minister of Mauritius, only continued a tendency that was already entrenched:

As we open a new chapter of our history we shall always remember that we are the inheritors of a great tradition, which is vested in the very history of our land. The daring and valour of our seamen, the creative imagination of the early colonisers, who included men and women from all continents, the hardy patience of those legions of workers whose efforts have enabled us to reach our present position, the respect which we have always shown for democratic principles, our love for justice and liberty, these will be the guiding lights of our national policy.³⁰

In this quotation, the institution of slavery and slaves themselves are conspicuously absent, although the word ‘worker’ immediately conjures up the quintessential Indian. The term ‘legions’ is a reminder of the shiploads of workers who arrived in the colony from British India. Still, several more recent cultural ventures have provided a forum for exploring African pasts. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy has shown the significance of music in the transatlantic dialogues of diaspora. The Mauritian-born ‘sega’ which derives from the music and dance of the slaves, and grew to encompass European dances such as the polka, could well be seen as capturing an African past as well as reaching out beyond the nation or the region in a dialogue with jazz, reggae, or hip hop as well as other kinds of music of fusion. Ti Frère’s renown as a sega musician was acknowledged on a night of music shortly before Mauritius’s independence. Since then, new sega artists and groups such as the Windblows have enjoyed great popularity that reaches beyond Mauritian shores and has replaced or added newer instruments and even electronic synthesizers to the traditional ‘maravane’ and ‘ravanne’.³¹ Even at the academic level, discussion of the origins of Mauritian Creole has led to a consideration of the impact of slavery on Mauritian culture. Linguists Baker and Corne have argued that there is a far greater connection to African languages from the period of slavery than has been formerly acknowledged. Notwithstanding these cultural and academic ventures, the fact remains that since the period preceding independence, official Mauritian discourse on the nation elides formulaically the question of slavery.

In the animated debate in the Legislative Council evoked earlier, Mr Bedaysee, an Indian representative, made a passionate plea for universal suffrage. During the course of his debate, he evoked the need for education in Mauritius in order to render such suffrage legitimate, rather than arguing that the masses were not sufficiently educated for universal suffrage. He makes a very interesting elision of slavery in the course of this discussion: ‘Intelligent men were caught in Africa and sold to the Americans as slaves. In India thousands of poor and intelligent people were led to the sugar cane planters and sold for sixty million rupees and they were denied education...’³² By locating slavery in distant America and using rupees as the currency paid by planters, the member simultaneously shifts indenture to being the sole issue at stake in Mauritius. This blatant neglect of the Africans brought as slaves to Mauritius appears to be the naturalized impulse in official Mauritian discourse concerning the nation.

After focusing his electoral preoccupations upon the Indo-Mauritian electorate, Bérenger must now pay attention to a newer discourse of difference, namely gender. To suggest, as this essay does, that an acknowledgement of ‘African’ identity is lacking in Mauritian public discourse does not necessarily entail establishing this cultural or geographical or racial identity is the only political choice to be exercised. Nevertheless, during Bérenger’s term, the issue of slavery has finally come back, boomeranging noticeably and forcefully into official Mauritian national discourse.

31 However, the performance of sega music and dance at five-star hotels, while attracting some ‘locals’ as well becomes primarily a showcasing of Mauritian culture for tourists and tends to be closer to what Édouard Glissant (1989) might disapprovingly call ‘folklore’ or an artificial reproduction of an aspect of culture that is not naturally created from within it as he cautions against the revival of the Creole language in Martinique that he observed (p. xxv).

32 Mauritius Legislative Council, *Debates*, p. 27.

33 Paul Bérenger, 'Statement by the Honorable Prime Minister', p. 1. <http://pm.gov.mu/pqpm/pq150205.htm>. Accessed 5 March 2005.

This question was raised in the Mauritian parliament as recently as 15 February 2005, following the African Union Commission's statement regarding the compensation of descendants of slaves. Since the UN's 2002 statement by the General Assembly that slavery and the slave trade were a crime against humanity, this question had to be addressed in this former French and then British colony. The Prime Minister was asked to state his position on this issue and whether it would be part of the Mauritian government's efforts. The following exchange shed light on his position:

1. Sir, With your permission, Sir, I will reply to PQ B/59 and PQ B/74 together.
2. Mr Speaker Sir, I wish to remind the House of the commitment of Government on this issue. At page 70 of the MSM-MMM Electoral manifesto for General Election 2000, it is mentioned that, I quote, 'Le gouvernement MSM-MMM s'engage à souscrire à toute action internationale visant au paiement d'une compensation aux descendants des esclaves. Vu la spécificité de Maurice, nous envisageons qu'une telle démarche puisse également inclure le paiement d'une compensation aux descendants des travailleurs engagés'.
3. I am informed that Mr Adam Thiam, spokesperson of the African Union Commission, made a statement on 4 February 2005 to the effect that, I quote, 'la Commission de l'Union Africaine va relancer le Comité panafricain sur les réparations des dommages causés par l'esclavage'. The 'Comité panafricain' was set up in 1991 but has been dormant since the late 1990s. The Government completely associates itself with this proposal of the African Union Commission.
4. I am also advised that the Chairperson of the African Union Commission has called on the Parliaments of African countries to adopt legislation along the lines of the French 10 May 2001 law which described the slave trade and slavery as 'crimes contre l'humanité'.
5. We are gathering information from the African Union to see how Mauritius can participate fully in this initiative of the African Union and are examining how this issue should be brought to Parliament.³³

The simultaneous consideration of indentured servants in the debate on compensation for the descendants of slaves is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may be seen as depriving slavery of its specificity and exercising a grouping in which once again descendants of slaves lose their specificity as has been the case in the grouping of 'Creoles' in the 'general population' with whites and *métis* in the election process. Still, perhaps such a move would finally enable a connection between 'Africans' and 'Indians' in Mauritius within a particular and well-defined collaborative project that could open the door to greater dialogue and sharing of the historical struggle and hardship.

The range of ways in which representation will impact this issue, both in Parliament and society at large, and the influence that the creation of

an 'African' and post-slavery identity will exert on identifications based on gender remain open for future analysis. While the issues of slavery and Africanness have remained beyond the vocabulary of contemporary official discourse in Mauritius, the complex question of slavery, arising as it does from outside the nation, makes the creation of some mechanism for representation of this 'section' of the nation imperative. It is premature to speculate on how representation will develop here, but it is evident that the issue reintroduces a vocabulary and history that will require some practice in Mauritian public life before they are pronounced and remembered, respectively, with ease.

The ways in which the preceding analyses account for certain mechanisms within Mauritian public discourse and their calling up of particular ethnically defined groups is short-circuited by alternative, ongoing processes in less official spheres. Additionally, the question of gender provides a concrete instance of new types of potential affiliations that could function in defiance of the groupings that have continued to operate largely by adhering to the colonial conception (in the sense of birthing as well as thinking) of this island. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister and the renewed attention to slavery, both emerging quite literally from without the nation, require a notable response in the public sphere. The controversy surrounding Bérenger's handling of the first with regard to manipulating Indian sensibility shows how invested in Indianness his electorate still remains. In the second case, Bérenger is not able to state his 'position' on the issue. The very word 'slavery' remains somewhat foreign to the Mauritian psyche. His very measured and careful response indicates he has been 'informed' and 'advised' about the issue and that his government is still 'gathering information' and 'examining how this issue could be brought to Parliament'.³⁴

If diasporic trends, as Gilroy explains, record the 'desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity',³⁵ simply positioning Mauritian society as diasporic already puts pressure on the more secure idea of a 'plural' society. Plurality, in this sense, privileges the existence of difference *within*. However, this 'doubleness', when exercised, acts as a centripetal force that stretches to tautness the range of Mauritian identifications. To privilege it is to require this diasporic society to acknowledge, within the *same* act of identification, various connections with the 'original' lands of its immigrant population *and* between similar and dissimilar others within the nation. The Indian Prime Minister's visit and the debate around compensation both function to open such connections in Mauritian society. In the case of slavery, the question of identifying the descendants of slaves as well as defining how they (and by extension the society in which they live) view Africa are yet to be convincingly posed. In this context, Gilroy acknowledges that these desires to transcend narrow definitions 'have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national political cultures and national states [...]'.³⁶

34 Paul Bérenger, 'Statement by the Honorable Prime Minister', p. 1.

35 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 19.

36 *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 19.

37 Walter Benjamin
quoted in *The Black
Atlantic: Modernity and
Double Consciousness*,
p. 191.

However, viewing Mauritius's African past in light of the remarks above, one might suggest that '[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was". It means to seize hold of a meaning as it flashes up in a moment of danger.'³⁷ If the entry of Africanness into Mauritian public discourse can be seen as a moment of 'danger', in the sense of exigency, it is indeed time to creatively seize hold of a hitherto unarticulated 'meaning' of Africanness. It is conceivable, then, that Mauritians might invent a new way of thinking, or of conceiving culture, ethnicity and diaspora, in which Africanness need not be restrictively connected to slavery, and slavery need not lead back only to an identifiably African part of the population, but rather can potentially be resited and redefined as the history of the totality of the Mauritian nation. In this way, the notion of the 'diasporic' itself ultimately might be transformed as well.

For such a development to occur, the various ethnic lineages that contribute to Mauritian culture, be they African, Indian, Chinese or European, would need to forge an emotional connection to a collective past, recognized as such by one and all. The shared use of Mauritian Creole and the enjoyment of sega music by youth from all walks of life present opportunities to experience such an inclusive identity. However, further recognition of such a Mauritian identity would require an active reshaping of the concept of the nation and of its plurality. The Indian Prime Minister's visit to Mauritius and the current relationship with 'India' underline the difficulties of transcending plurality within a nation defined through its racial and ethnic history. In the context of Mauritius's African connections, all Mauritians would have to embrace the reality of slavery as a historical fact in which they all have an emotional stake and to which they are all tied. To do so means to abandon, at least momentarily, the idea of plurality and to engage the diasporic in a different way. The African connection would then be experienced by all Mauritians, not simply by Mauritians who can trace some kind of African lineage through racially grounded patterns of reasoning. Public discourse, such as parliamentary debates on the question of slavery, can provide an idiom to explore such new routes.

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