“OUR STRUGGLE”

Mauritius: an Exploration of Colonial Legacies on an ‘Island Paradise’

KRISH SEETAH

McDonald Institute, University of Cambridge <ks354@cam.ac.uk>

Abstracts

It is unlikely that anyone reading this article can say that they have not been affected in some way by past colonial activity. Whether through diasporas, interaction with new cultural attitudes or the exposure of our taste buds to new foods, one thing is certain: no one remains unaffected. However, for some, the colonial experience is one that is very present in day-to-day life. This article examines Mauritius, an island ‘created’ in its modern guise by colonialism. It juxtaposes the colonial legacies of Europe with the ideals of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, former Prime Minister of Mauritius and unequivocal *père de la nation*, as laid out in his (co-authored) book *Our Struggle* (1992). The book outlines the ‘epic struggle’ of a colonial island, under British rule, to achieve a peaceful transition to independence. For an island foreshadowed by doom in the years following independence, how has ‘islandness’ and isolation helped it to become a rare economic success story? By finding an equilibrium between the turbulence of its past and the needs of its future, Mauritius has used the colonial experience to shape the modern island and in so doing develop a sense of nationhood. That sense of cultural heritage, currently defined through literature, could undergo a dramatic transformation as an archaeological perspective is added to the historic.

Keywords

Mauritius, ethnicity, cultural diversity, national identity

Introduction

Many travellers have been captivated by the ecological and environmental nature of Mauritius. The island’s beauty enchanted Charles Darwin, for instance, when he visited in 1842. However, as much as the ecology of the island captivated him, he was also drawn to the people:

> *The various races of men walking in the streets afford the most interesting spectacle in Port Louis. Convicts from India are banished here for life… Before seeing these people, I had no idea that the inhabitants of India were such noble-looking figures*. (1842: 299)

As a descendent of those original immigrants, my Mauritius is one of ethnic diversity, tolerance and religious freedom. It is also one of rapid development, pollution and immense ecological change. The island's beauty belies the underlying struggle that Mauritius has undergone throughout its history. The end of one period of turbulence and the start of another occurred in 1968 when, after centuries of colonial rule, Mauritius gained independence from the British. In his book, written some sixteen years later, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam outlines this final transition, the resistance to it from the colonial powers and the aspirations he had for all of the island's peoples. This article explores the inseparability of colonialism and Mauritius, and highlights examples that show independence from the colonial past, and attachments that appear harder to relinquish. It explores the modern sense of nationhood, one that is based on historical retellings that do not sit well with a population that must acknowledge much negativity in order to embrace their past. It also presents more recent work that aims to develop new approaches to exploration of 'cultural heritage' through archaeology. Few archaeologists have such an unprecedented opportunity and, whilst the subject is certainly not without precedent, in the past archaeology has been used to address specific questions, such as the ecology of the Dodo (Janoo, 2005; Nicholls, 2006), or the first steps of indenture (Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, 2003). There has been limited examination based on systematic methods-driven archaeology addressing the island's role as a colonial enclave. My approach has been to look at the 'archaeology of Mauritius' to demonstrate how archaeology can be a universal leveller, presenting a story that alleviates bias.

Colonial transformations: the sweet surrender of a deserted paradise

Mauritius lies 500 miles from the east coast of Madagascar and over 1000 miles from South Africa. The Island is volcanic, with a total landmass of approximately 720 square miles. Geologically, it has been aged by eruptions that occurred in the Indian Ocean some eight million years ago in a region known as the Réunion hotspot. The Island had no indigenous inhabitants and, despite its relative proximity to large land masses, when the first European colonists arrived it did not have a native mammalian population other than bats. A rich and varied avian fauna compensated for the lack of mammals and the island (and those surrounding it) are still renowned for their bird life. Most famous of Mauritius' birds was the flightless dodo, a giant, ground dwelling pigeon (Pinto-Correia, 2003). The colonisation of Mauritius is its defining characteristic. "In Mauritius, colonialism was not something which came from outside; it was built into the fabric of the whole society" (Houbert, 1981: 75). It has been suggested that Malays and even Phoenicians visited the island some 2000 years ago (Toth, 1995: 98), although no evidence exists for this. The Arabs located it on their maps, naming it *Dina Mozare* (Eastern Island) circa AD 1000 (le Comte, 2007: 14). The Portuguese arrived next, in the 15th Century, exploiting the local environment and using the Island as a stopping point on their journeys east. Curiously, they named the Island *Ilha do Cirna* (Island of the Swan). None of these groups left any lasting legacy. The first Europeans to do so where the Dutch in 1598; the Island was named by Admiral Van Warwyck after Prince Maurice Van Nassau, the *stadthouder* of Holland at the time (Addison and Hazareesingh, 1984: 2,3). It was not until 1622 that they made an attempt at settlement, up to this point the Island had been used only as an occasional stopping point. The Dutch were the first to bring slaves to the Island, in this case from Madagascar and Java, so beginning the process that has led to the diversity of Mauritius' present population.

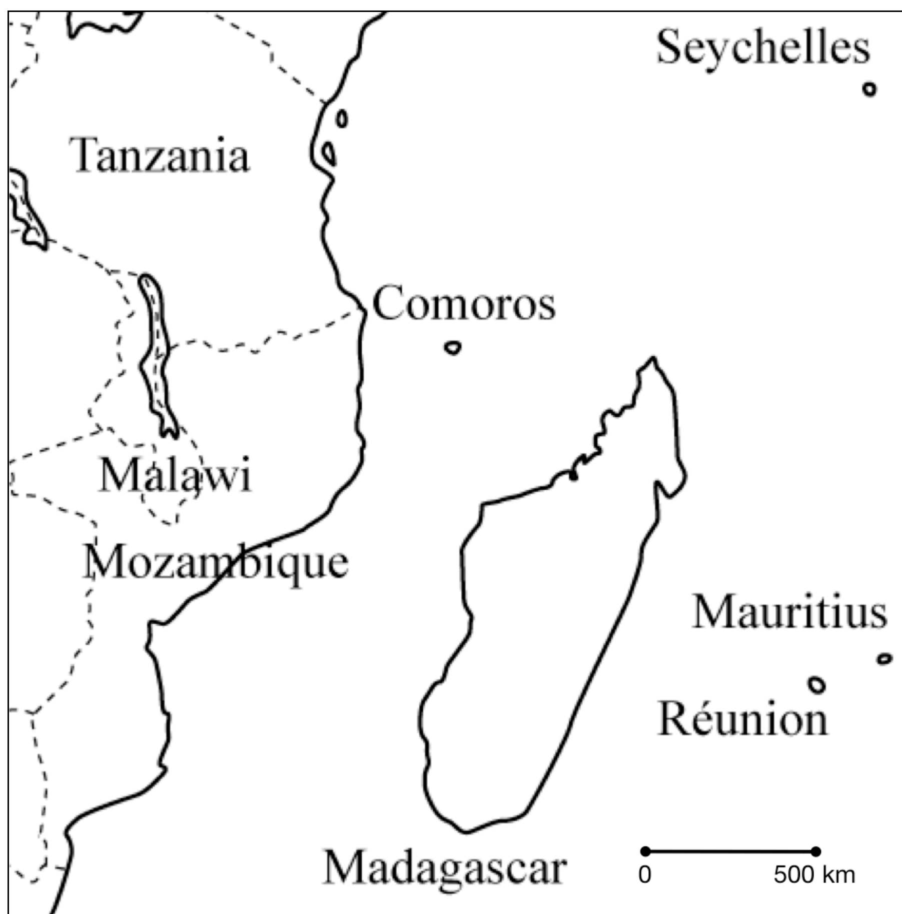

Figure 1 – Mauritius' position in the Indian Ocean

Modern Mauritius has its birth in 1721 when a group of French colonists named it *Ilé de France*. By 1710 the last Dutch settlers had deserted the Island and it had been taken in the name of Louis XV in September 1715 by Guillaume Dufresne d'Arsel. He stayed on the Island for three days, just enough time to plant the French flag and rename it. Under a French sea captain, the fortunes of the Island were transformed. Mahe de Labourdonnais is credited with bringing dramatic changes to Mauritius, creating a flourishing harbour in Port Louis (which remains the capital to this day) and implementing widespread social and economic changes. Not surprisingly, the French also brought slaves to Mauritius, predominantly from Madagascar and East Africa. Under French governance the colony became a producer of cotton, pepper and coffee (Bowman, 1991: 12). The French also encouraged the crop that most dramatically transformed the landscape, economy and ultimately the persona of the Island. It satisfied the sweet tooth of Europeans, first the elite and then the common man: sugar (Storey, 1997: 7).

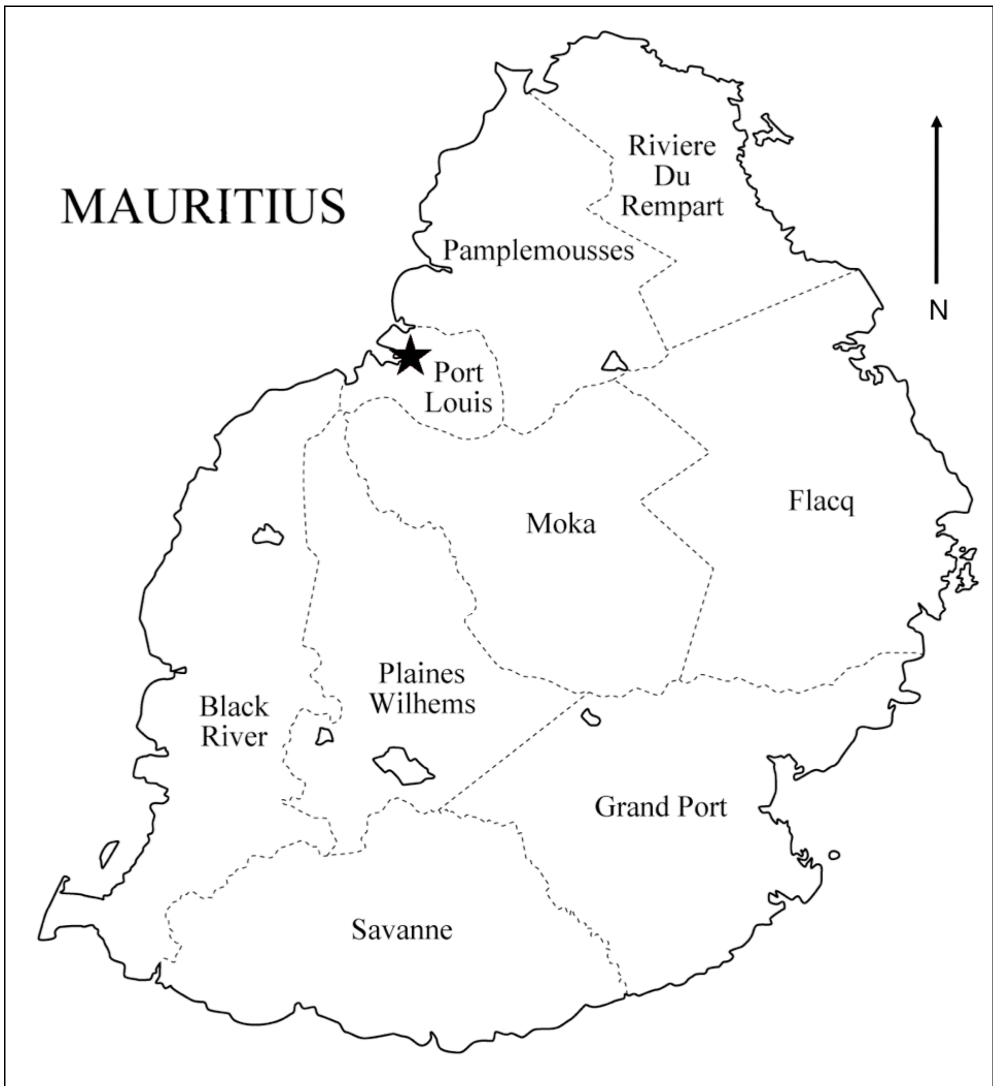

Figure 2 - Mauritius with the capital highlighted.

The years that followed were turbulent as both France and Britain vied for control of the Indian Ocean, the Mascarene Islands and the spice route from Asia to Europe. By 1810, the British under General Abercrombie, had gained the upper hand, overthrowing the French and reinstating the original name of Mauritius. The British saw the huge potential for wealth and exploited the Island for sugar production. It was under British rule that Mauritius witnessed its most significant influx of people, its most dramatic transitions including the move to independence, and its pivotal role in the restructuring of labour to meet the insatiable needs of the European colonial powers. When, in 1825, the British removed preferential tariffs for West Indian sugar imported into Britain, Mauritius' fate

was sealed and the production of cane was in excess of 100,000 tons by the mid-1850s (Allen, 1999: 12). This heralded the monoculture that would dominate the landscape and give rise to the huge influx of Indians into Mauritius. Indirectly, owing to increased opportunity, it also formed the impetus for the final immigration into Mauritius, that of Chinese merchants, who formed the basis of the contemporary Sino-Mauritians, part of an overall population of 1.2 million inhabitants.

Filling a void: a slave by any other name…

Mauritius played a particular role in the paradigm of slavery and the transition to alternative strategies of labour supply. It was a colony that reached maturity at a time when colonialism *itself* was undergoing a period of flux. The economic and social tenets upon which slavery had been sustained underwent dramatic change in the face of the abolitionist movement and recognition that 'we are all brothers' under the skin. Other texts deal far more eloquently with this subject than time and space allow here (Allen, 1999; Barker, 1996; Carter et al, 2003); however, there can be little doubt that by the end of the 17th Century the appalling treatment of slaves could not be justified, no matter how much economic wealth it generated.

Up to this point slaves had been brought from as far afield as Mozambique, Madagascar, Java and India (Figure 3 illustrates labour into Mauritius from the 17th Century). News of abolition arrived in Mauritius in 1832, although it was not until 1835 that the practice officially ceased (Addison and Hazareesingh, 1984: 48). The huge void in labour that this created prompted the remarkable 'Great Experiment' on the part of the British: replace slaves arriving (mainly) from Africa with free workers from Asia, specifically Britain's colonial 'Jewel', India. Thus, first a trickle and then a flood of labourers keen for work arrived into Port Louis with the promise of regular wages, housing, and a return passage home (a process known as 'indenture'). The better life that was promised did not materialise; instead they experienced appalling conditions, which for all intents and purposes comprised slavery (at times complete with the shackle). The difference was that the 'coolies' had arrived of their own free will, albeit under false pretences, whilst the slaves had not. Unsurprisingly, this experiment proved hugely successful as it satisfied the moral climate as well as economic need. It came to be adopted throughout the British Empire. This final influx into Mauritius, the most significant in terms of numbers of people, continued up to the early 19th Century when immigration came to a halt. Some 450, 000 Indians had arrived from Madras, Bombay and Calcutta forming the basis for 70% of the current population (Chandrasekhar, 1990: 21). The site where they arrived is now named Aapravasi Ghat. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006 and has been the location for historical and archaeological research detailing the commencement of the Indentured Labour Diaspora, an event that instigated the movement of over 2 million people from Africa, Asia and Melanesia to European colonial enclaves (cf Carter et al, 2003; Teelock, 1998, 2004, 2009; Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, 2006).

What does this tell us about the worldview of people prior to and during this period? How does it inform us on what was considered acceptable, and who (or what?) was considered human? Clearly the whole paradigm of slavery was in transition, but just as clearly, this was only within a portion of (Western) society. More significant for the present article, how are these questions answered within the context of Mauritius itself? The Island is unique for more than just the Dodo. Slavery, indenture, East, West, island

identity and changing worldviews coalesced on this thirty square mile landmass in the Indian Ocean. The isolationism of the 'island' has been instrumental in the formation of cultural cohesion and for allowing/forcing solutions to perennial issues of ethnic and racial division.

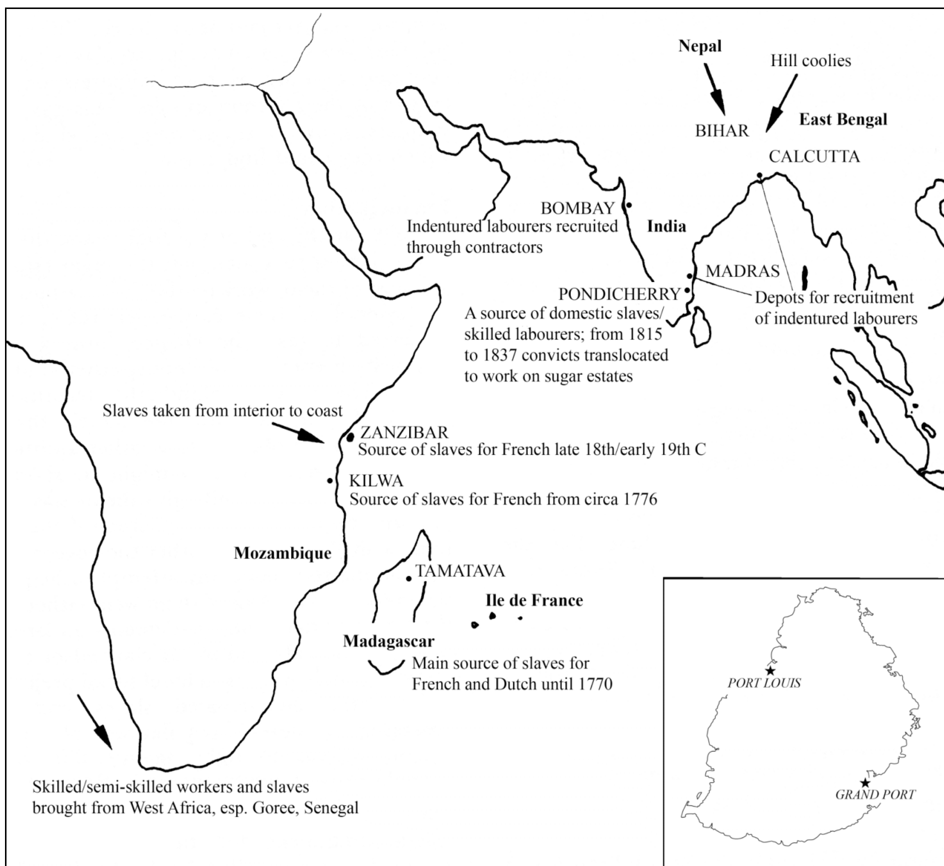

Figure 3 - Labour into Mauritius from the 17th Century (adapted from Addison and Hazareesingh, 1984: 47). Inset shows two main historic ports.

Islandness and identity

Slavery is an exemplar of the most extreme racism; how does a nation free itself of those shackles and how do individuals who experience prejudice on this level react: do they resist and refrain from becoming that which they abhor, or do they capitulate and emulate the deeds and ideals they experienced, projecting and enacting them on others? How does this evolve from one generation to the next, taking into account the fact that even when the vehicle of colonialism has been removed, the drivers of the system are still present in one form or another? In the isolated circumstances that epitomise this island, these questions are even more poignant. How does the specific 'coloniser/colonised' dichotomy that exists in every circumstance where colonial*ism* has

occurred express itself in Mauritius? Does islandness compound or alleviate the issues at hand? In a strange parody of the 'Stockholm Syndrome' (see Namnyak et al, 2008) can an island's sense of self be articulated with any/all of the colonising groups, or do the colonised retain closer affinities with their respective motherlands? For Mauritius, the answer is: both. This question actually posits a deeper query: what of the colonisers? Dutch, French and British legacies have all been left (including descendents) but who has left the most enduring legacy and why has this been the case?

Perhaps surprisingly, given the 160 years of British Rule – and the transitions that this period witnessed – it is not with the last coloniser that most Mauritians find commonality, but with the French (who were in power for less than a hundred years). Commonality is the key word here: Mauritians are *Mauritian* first and foremost (Lionnet, 1993: 104). However, identity is plastic and malleable with the ability to take on many influences. The most lucid expression of this 'colonial identity' is with language. The *lingua franca* may be Creole, but in polite circles French is often expected. It is more common to hear French spoken then English; and there still exists a greater sense of affinity with the French tongue, and a greater pride in being able to speak French, than English. This is despite both languages being taught within the educated system (interestingly, Mauritians tend to speak French without a discernable accent, while the same cannot be said for English. On occasion, Mauritians are even noted to speak English with a French accent, although this should be no great surprise considering that Creole is a bastardised French). This idiosyncrasy is deeply personal and permeates everyday facets of the individual; there is a greater inherent confidence with French than English, even though both are learnt from a young age. The truly anglophone Mauritian is in a minority compared to his/her francophone counterpart. This is all the more surprising given that, in a country where up to 15 languages are recognised, the official tongue *is* English (Eriksen, 1994: 552; 1998: 17), with many obvious economic and practical advantages to speaking this language (Miles 2000). Mauritians are, to use a local expression: 'like tomatoes… good in all sauces'. Coming from a small island with limited resources the average Mauritian is adaptable and recognises the need not only for education (as statistics have shown, cf. Toth, 1995: 115-117 and Eriksen, 1998: 70) but also for communication skills at all levels. Indeed, the key resource of Mauritius is "its talented people" (Carroll and Carroll, 1997). Given the growing trend in spoken English around the world one might anticipate a shift away from French. While this is no doubt taking place with the younger generation, the underlying value of French has not diminished. In yet another quirk of this linguistic game: the 'Empire' strikes back! Unlike many parts of the world where spoken English is in fact American English, there is a distinct attempt, particularly noticeable during news broadcasts, to speak British English in the media.

Language is an immensely important issue is Mauritius and one that has had significant political ramifications (Miles, 2000). However, it is not the only medium through which this affinity with France is expressed. It has been noted that the Franco-Mauritians set the "cultural tone of the Island" (Tinker, 1977: 322). While this is a receding trend, it nonetheless holds much truth. The reasons for this phenomenon are both ironic and pragmatic. The British overthrew the French to consolidate their hegemony in the Indian Ocean (Houbert, 1981: 76); Mauritius' motto remains to this day: *Stella Clavisque Maris Indici* (Key and Star of the Indian Ocean, see Figure 4). However, despite the French admission of defeat a number of important and far-reaching concessions were made on the part of the British. Not only did the French retain control of the plantocracy (European owned plantation system with chattel slave labour), the French legal,

education, religious and cultural systems were all retained (Tinker, 1977: 323). By taking a view of 'least force, least resistance' the British took over Mauritius without truly removing the French.

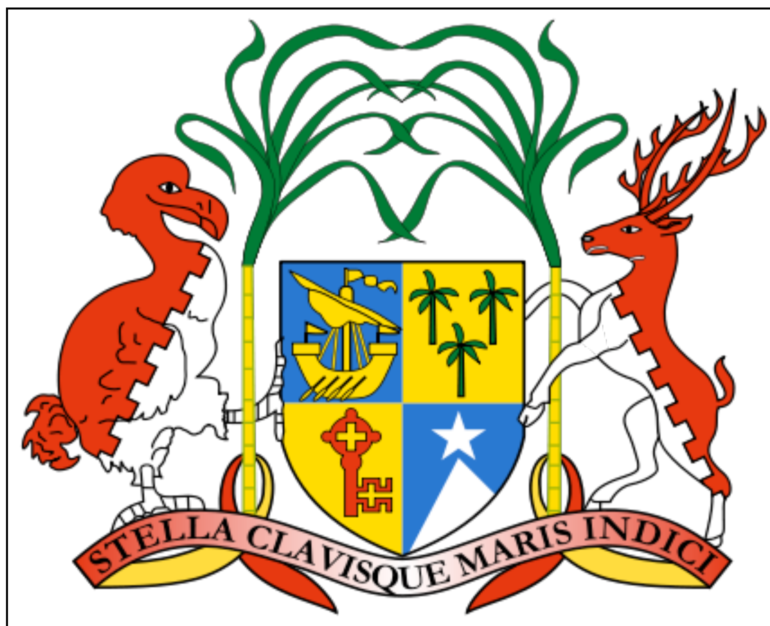

Figure 4: National coat of arms of Mauritius (including motto)

Much has been made of the fact that French (or indeed, Hindi, discussed shortly) is not the official language given the wide use and cultural identity (within certain portions of the island) with this tongue. The fact remains that Mauritius cannot risk further isolation with a language that simply does not carry the same international credit as English. But why not Hindi given the proportion of society that descended from speakers of this language? Here we see the 'colonial' paradigm at play. Slave owners must truly have detested their human chattel, but among the slaves, indentured labourers, *Sirdars* (working gang leaders), servants, 'free coloureds', artisans and merchants, another hierarchy was evident that stratified one from the other. Although many contemporary Mauritians, regardless of background, accept Creole (*Kreol*, as it is pronounced on the island, or *Morisien* as it is also referred to) as their own, this was the patois of the slaves (Eriksen, 1998: 17), not the language of the predominantly Bhojpuri speaking Indians, the Chinese (who spoke Hakka or Mandarin) or Europeans. As the people have accepted the *mélange* of their cultures, so too have they come to accept this tongue. Underlying this issue is the fact that the language was born on, and *is of*, Mauritius. It can be accepted by all, as it has no external origin – it is the islands tongue (although this is not without its problems, discussed shortly). However, while the population as a whole can and has accepted this transition, it would be impossible to have the separate groups take on the Hindi language in the same way. While all groups have some connection with the colonisers, not all of Mauritius' people have a link to India. For many this would be seen as a step backwards. Retaining French identity can be the

maintenance of separation; retaining 'Francophone-ia' identifies one with the plantocracy (Miles, 2000), not the slaves and indentured masses.

Therefore, we can see that language has been used to both '*lier et séparer*' and this has been true of other aspects of Mauritian culture. However, due to the specifics of the colonial experience, different groups have been able to maintain, or rather some have lost more of, their cultural heritage. For the descendents of African and Malagasy slaves, language and, to a large extent religion, appear irrevocably lost. Certain aspects of African folk belief systems have been intertwined into the fabric of Catholicism, and Vaughan reports on the experience of Malagasy maroons who stole ships in an attempt to get home, having the need to die on home soil and in so doing maintain the tangible spiritual links between the living and the dead (2005: 227). Even more intriguing are aspects of belief, for which origins are harder to establish, but that seem to permeate across the island's ethnic divides. For example, the concept of one individual being able to put negative thoughts, feelings (ibid: 221) or 'the evil eye' on another is well recognised and practices are in place to remove this 'negative energy' in all its forms. Social interactions demonstrate the "harmonious separatism" (Toth, 1995: 113) that epitomises the Island. On the surface, in both work and public spaces, there is a high degree of inter-group interaction. Some 20 public holidays, celebrating various festive occasions of the Island's religions, also demonstrate the 'unusual spirit of tolerance' (Sahlins, 1989: 137-67) that underpins much of day-to-day activity to balance cultures (Wright, 1974: 47). However, this is just a façade. In general, social mixing on a more intimate level does not occur to the same extent. The most lucid example of this social stratification is the perpetuation of endogamy within a significant proportion of the population; maintained despite mixing within the workplace, residential setting and in the country at large (Nave, 2000: 329-332).

The 'Island' as Nation

Mauritius is often studied under the etic colonial microscope, questioning how and why the Island should be seen as an 'economic miracle' or 'Little Tiger' (Bowman, 1991: 122). It is used as an exemplar for other nations that must negotiate racial and ethnic boundaries (Carroll and Carroll, 1997: 465). As in other similar settings, it serves as a guinea pig to study ethnicity, identity and 'the microcosm that is '*island*''. The colonial perspective is still used to scrutinise and contextualise. Authors highlight the island's seeming contradiction of simultaneously embracing separatism and integration (Eriksen, 1993: 3). They find it hard not to posit Mauritius as 'Little India', based on demographics or linguistics (Tinker, 1977: 321; Eisenlohr, 2006) convinced that they are representing Hindu Mauritians fairly, that they are doing justice to a group detached from India for at least two centuries, and certain that Hindu Mauritians "see themselves as Indian" (Tinker, 1977: 322). What they have failed to see is the Mauritian in the Indian, proud of both a cultural heritage and current feeling of nationhood that serendipity – not Europe – allowed them to hold on to. Delving a little deeper would reveal that Chinese, Muslim and other groups also adhere to their traditions and language whilst being Mauritian *first and foremost*. The French linguist, Daniel Baggioni, articulated the feeling of Mauritians best as he described the response at his astonishment with regards to the perplexing nature of verbal communication on the island: "If we spoke only French, we would be a little France, if we spoke English, we would be a little England, whereas this mixture, that's exactly what Mauritius is about" (Baggioni and de Robillard, 1990: 47).

However, this sentiment hides a deeper melancholy. Mauritius is a nation divided (Carroll and Carroll, 2000: 122), of that there can be little doubt. Perhaps naïvely, these are expressions of individualism, not separatism. Furthermore, these divisions are emic. Walling articulates this most lucidly in describing the islands' national identity: "People tend to define themselves in opposition to other Mauritians... rather than through identification with them" (2006: 199). One expression of this is found in the near total lack of recognition of the *lingua franca*, *Kreol*.

Despite the fact that language has played a remarkable role in political life (refer to Miles, 2000), the languages in question have invariably been French, English and the 'traditional' languages of incoming groups ie Hindi. Although the situation is changing, there is little appreciation for the island's own tongue. This issue penetrates further, to the very people who created *Kreol*, the group forced by the colonial powers to relinquish much of their culture and language, Afro-Mauritians or *Creoles*. While these Mauritians are no less proud of their island, they have less cultural attachment to Africa then an Indo-Mauritian to India to Sino-Mauritian to China. Afro-Mauritians reinforce an idiosyncrasy that typifies African diasporas geographically close to the continent itself, a lack of 'Afrocentricity' (Miles, 1999). Not only is there less affinity with their past, but *le malaise Créole* (Boswell, 2006) quite literally refers to the dissatisfied feeling of Afro-Mauritians about their own more recent role in Mauritian culture, politics, economics and life. Again, while such trends are undergoing flux, the general situation is still one far from being resolved.

Why should this be the case for the group that gave Mauritius its two culturally unique attributes: the *Kreol* language and the expressive *Sega* dance and music form? (Miles, 1999, see also Edensor, 2001 for a discussion of Sega and its use in modern tourism.) Why, as a nation, does the de-colonised population favour colonial languages rather than their own? Practical reasons aside, these factors serve as exemplars for the inferiority complex at the heart of Mauritian culture (Walling, 2006: 199). The underlying root of this situation, both for the Creoles as an individual group and the island as a whole is the association of cultural heritage with slavery. The legacy of colonialism is a past skewed in favour of those who wrote about it, rather than a fair portrayal of the *history* of Mauritius. What is needed is a mechanism to delve deeper into that history, while simultaneously enhancing an appreciation of cultural heritage by detailing it in a manner that is balanced, dispassionate and unprejudiced by the legacies of slavery and indenture. One way of achieving this is through archaeological and anthropological research.

With the support of both external (McDonald Institute, British Academy, British Council, Australian National University, Slovenian Research Agency) and local (Truth and Justice Commission, Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund and Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund) bodies, a programme of study has been implemented that addresses a broad archaeological remit. The project initially centred on acquiring baseline environmental data for the island and was focused on a small site to the north in Mont Choisy. As a former plantation site it has returned valuable data detailing the influx of sugar management, the timeframe and process of agricultural implementation and ensuing ecological change. However, following discussions with local institutions it became apparent that there was pressing need for systematic implementation of high quality archaeological research. Thus, the project aims were significantly expanded with a large-scale survey carried out on a series of sites. Underpinning this were two broad objectives, the first to provide a clear chronology to the historical archaeology of Mauritius, along with a

narration of the past based on the available material evidence. The second focused on the wider 'potential' of the island, addressing such issues as to whether earlier historic colonisation events, ie by Arabs or Portuguese or indeed, prehistoric, by Malays, could be noted in the archaeological record. By using the environment as the marker of change, can subtle changes in vegetation, landscape or ecology offer evidence of agency in the absence of direct material cultures?

Non-destructive surveys were carried out using magnetometry and resistivity on the indentured sites of Aapravasi Ghat and Parc-a-Boule in Port Louis, labourer barracks at Trianon and the French Period site of Île Plate. Three facets of Mauritius' second UNESCO World Heritage Site, Le Morne, a remarkable natural site exemplifying maroon resistance to slavery and listed in 2008, were also studied. The main Plateaux, Malagasy Cemetery and Îlot Fourneau were surveyed; the Plateaux was also evaluated in terms of its strategic position and ecological potential for habitation, an important aspect of non-tangible archaeology made all the more significant given the users of the region. Environmental survey was undertaken at Trois Cavern, a series of volcanic channels, and the basin within Trou aux Cerf, an extinct volcanic crater. In effect, this carefully planned programme has laid the foundation for deriving an archaeological perspective on both the colonised *and* coloniser. Slavery, indenture and the colonising powers met in Mauritius, their material signatures are extant and demand investigation. This, combined with an appraisal of the changing environmental character of the island, offers *all* Mauritians an opportunity to appreciate their island's diverse and distinctive past.

Conclusion

The need to bring an impartial portrayal of the past based on archaeological research is paramount, it is only in this way that the subject will be embraced as a truly unbiased storyteller. Thus, Mauritius develops it own archaeological agenda with the aid of state-of-the-art methods and techniques, and can use this to add a third 'unique' cultural facet along with *Kreol* and *Sega*: its own communal national heritage.

It is the goal of archaeology to look back at all of Mauritius' ancestors; in concluding this article, one question remains: what of the island's offspring and the ideals of "Our Struggle"? How has an island, which for all intents and purposes was due to collapse following independence (Carroll and Carroll, 1997: 468), fared? In a global setting Mauritius demonstrated an inherent pragmatism that led to it becoming a part of the Commonwealth, the *Agence de La Francophonie* and a full member of the Organisation of African Unity, but it also remains Mauritius, it neither wants to be Little France, Britain or India. However, the "man with the hoe who has yet to find himself" (used to describe Indo-Mauritians (Tinker, 1977: 338) but arguably applicable to a number of groups that arrived on Mauritian soil) has managed to achieve near unrivalled rates of economic growth compared to nations that have undergone similar transitions; achieved whilst maintaining a democratic government (Carroll and Carroll, 1997: 464). This has been as a result of the realities, not the romanticism, of 'islandness', knowing deeply that little choice exists. The equilibrium between past and future is one that finds greatest necessity in isolated settings – where external influences are magnified – Mauritius exemplifies this perspective. Sugar cane and colonialism have shaped the ecology, landscape and past of Mauritius (Storey, 1997: 9-10). Its geography, location (physical, economic and figurative) and people will sculpt its future.

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