

***Tu dimunn pu vini kreol: The  
Mauritian creole and the  
concept of creolization***

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The concept of cultural creolisation, introduced in anthropology by Ulf Hannerz (see Hannerz 1992), refers to the intermingling and mixing of two or several formerly discrete traditions or cultures. In an era of global mass communication and capitalism, creolisation can be identified nearly everywhere in the world, but there are important differences as to the degree of mixing. The concept has been criticized for essentialising cultures (as if the merging traditions were “pure” at the outset, cf. Friedman 1994). Although this critique may sometimes be relevant, the concept nevertheless helps to make sense of a great number of contemporary cultural processes, characterised by movement, change and fuzzy boundaries.

Creolisation, as it is used by some anthropologists, is an analogy taken from linguistics. This discipline in turn took the term from a particular aspect of colonialism, namely the uprooting and displacement of large numbers of people to the plantation economies of certain colonies, such as Louisiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Réunion and Mauritius. Both in the Caribbean basin and in the Indian Ocean, certain (or all) groups who contributed to this economy during slavery were described as creoles. Originally, a *criollo* meant a European (normally a Spaniard) born in the New World (as opposed to *peninsulares*); today, a similar usage is current in La Réunion, where everybody born in the island, regardless of skin colour, is seen as *créole*, as opposed to the *zoreils* who were born in metropolitan France. In Trinidad, the term creole is sometimes used to designate all Trinidadians except those of Asian origin. In Suriname, a creole is a person

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of African origin, while in neighbouring French Guyana a creole is a person who has adopted a European way of life. In spite of the differences, there are some important resemblances between the various conceptualisations of “the creole”, which resonate with the theoretical concept of creolisation: Creoles are uprooted, they belong to the New World, are the products of some form of mixing, and are contrasted with that which is old, deep and rooted. This paper sets out to discuss the concept of the creole — related both to language and to people — as it is used in Mauritius, and then relate the Mauritian situation to the general use of the concept of creolisation.

A question often posed by people unfamiliar with the varying uses of the term is: “What is *really* a creole?” They may have encountered the term in connection with food or architecture from Louisiana, languages in the Caribbean or people in the Indian Ocean. The standard response is that whereas vernacular uses of the term creole vary, there exist accurate definitions of creole languages in linguistics and of cultural creolisation in anthropology. There are nevertheless similarities, although there is no one-to-one relationship, between the ethnic groups described locally (emically) as creoles in particular societies, and the phenomena classified as creole or creolised in the academic literature. A motto for this short investigation could therefore be Gregory Bateson’s admonition that if one uses creative analogies, one ought to go back to the field where the analogy was taken from to investigate its internal logic, or as he puts it: “the moment I begin to work out the analogy, I am brought up against the rigid formulations which have been devised in the field from which I borrow the analogy” (Bateson 1972: 75). In other words, it is worthwhile to take a close at Mauritian creoledom to see if it could shed light on the theory of cultural creolisation.

### **Mauritius and its Creoles**

Mauritius, located near the Tropic of Capricorn eight hundred kilometres east of Madagascar, is a crowded, bustling, complex, democratic and recently prosperous island. Its total population is slightly over a million, giving it a population density of about 550 inhabitants per square kilometre. There was no indigenous population, and

so all the inhabitants are descendants of immigrants who have arrived during the last three centuries – from France, China, Africa, Madagascar, and different parts of India. About half of the population are Hindus, but they are subdivided into North Indians (“Hindi speaking”), Tamils, Telugus and Marathis, and do not consider themselves as belonging to the same ethnic group. The largest ethnic group are North Indian Hindus, comprising about 35 per cent of the population. 17 per cent are Muslims of Indian descent, around 28 per cent are Creoles or non-white Catholics of African, Malagasy or mixed descent, while 3 per cent are Chinese and about 2 per cent Franco-Mauritians.

Analytically speaking, all the cultures of all the ethnic groups in Mauritius are creolised to a greater or lesser extent. For example, the Bhojpuri vernacular spoken by many of the Indo-Mauritians has been so strongly influenced by other languages that it is unintelligible to Bhojpuri-speakers in Bihar, and the Franco-Mauritians – like all other Mauritians – eat spicy curries and lots of rice. Nearly every Mauritian speaks a French-based creole language (Kreol) fluently, and it is the mother-tongue of a substantial majority. Regarding lifestyle, consumption and way of life in general, it is easy to demonstrate the effects of mutual influence between the ethnic groups that make up the Mauritian population, as well as cultural influence from the outside world – not merely from the West, incidentally, but also from India and East Asia.

In spite of obvious cultural creolisation evident throughout Mauritian society, it is traditionally the Mauritians of African and/or Malagasy descent who are classified locally as Creoles. Indeed, already in the 1850s, the Rev. Patrick Beaton entitled his book on Mauritius *Creoles and Coolies* (Beaton 1977), contrasting the two major groups of African and Indian descent, respectively. This is no accident, and as I shall argue, the Mauritian classification connects well with the theoretical concept of cultural creolisation. The ancestors of Mauritian creoles were slaves from different parts of Africa and Madagascar, brought there between 1715 (the beginning of French colonisation) and 1810 (when the slave trade was banned). As in other plantation colonies based on slavery, slave owners in Ile-de-France (as Mauritius was called during French rule) mixed individuals from different ethnic groups together, dissolving family structures and forms of political organisation. As a result, in a given compound, there were few shared collective cultural resources; no shared language, no shared

kinship structure, cosmology or traditional system of social organisation that might have been transplanted and eventually reproduced. Thus the degree of cultural continuity in the slave groups was by default limited. As in similar situations elsewhere in the world, particular in the Caribbean, a creole language developed quickly, using French vocabulary, a modified pronunciation and a simplified grammar. In Bernardin de St Pierre's travel book from 1773, *Voyage à l'Île de France*, fragments of the so-called patois spoken by the slaves are cited in a few places, and it was clearly structurally similar to the creole spoken in Mauritius today.

Regarding other aspects of culture, some religious beliefs and practices have survived, in modified forms, although the slaves were converted to Christianity and their descendants are Catholics. However, the most significant "African survival" is in music and dance, where the *séga*, which has obvious African forebears, has attained a status as the unofficial national music of Mauritius.

In other words, like other groups known as Creoles, Mauritian Creoles have a history of uprootedness, and their connections with their places of origin were severed almost immediately upon arrival in the colony. This entailed the urgent necessity of crafting new cultural and social forms under conditions of extreme hardship.

### **The non-Creoles**

Let me now briefly contrast the situation of the Creoles with that of other Mauritian groups. The Sino-Mauritians, the most recent arrivals to the island (most arrived during the first half of the 20th century), have changed their religion (to Catholicism) and to a great extent their language (to Kreol), but have retained both their strong kinship organisation, many aspects of their material culture and important rituals, as well as — importantly — active links with relatives in East Asia. Regarding the Franco-Mauritians, most of whom are descendants of Frenchmen who arrived in Mauritius in the 18th century, their kinship links with Europe have in most cases waned, yet they have always been the economically and culturally dominant group in the island (which, to some extent, they still are). Even when the British conquered Mauritius during the

Napoleonic wars, the Franco-Mauritians were promised, in the terms of surrender, the right to retain their customs, language and religion.

Regarding the many ethnic groups originating from the Indian subcontinent, the conditions of their arrival could be said to resemble those of slavery (cf. Tinker's book on the indentureship system, *A New Form of Slavery*, Tinker 1974). They were brought from Madras, Calcutta and Bombay from the 1840s onwards in order to replace the liberated slaves as plantation labour. When they arrived in the colony it turned out, to their dismay, that they were interned in camps with very restricted freedom of movement, and although nominally free, the material hardships they suffered might well justify the term "a new form of slavery". However, there were important differences between slaves and indentured labourers, which are relevant for this discussion of creolism and creolisation. They came from clusters of villages in particular parts of India; Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. They transplanted their beliefs and ritual practices, language, kinship structure, food habits, a simplified caste structure and rudiments of their political organisation (including *panchayats*, village councils) to their new home, and even — in the case of the Hindus — invented a myth to the effect that the small lake Grand Bassin in southern Mauritius somehow contained the holy waters of the Ganges. (Today, the largest Hindu festival outside India is said to be the annual Maha Shivaratri pilgrimage to Grand Bassin.) Soon after the arrival of the first batches of indentured labourers, temples were built, and as restrictions on their freedom were lifted, they moved into villages, replicating in no small degree the Indian countryside in remote Mauritius.

In spite of this continuity, it is easy to point out aspects of Indo-Mauritian culture and social life which are the result of cultural creolisation — from aesthetic details such as clothing to more fundamental issues such as the omnipresence of the monetary economy and wage work; the *jajmani* system, important in rural India, vanished the moment the indentured labourers arrived in the island, and the caste system thus lost one of its most important functions. (There are only four castes among Hindus in Mauritius, and although both politics, marriage and interpersonal networks have a caste aspect, it is much less important than in India.)

Within the Indo-Mauritian communities, including notably North Indian Hindus, North Indian Muslims and Tamils, there are ongoing, interesting controversies regarding “cultural purity”, the relationship to Western languages (English and French) and Western culture in general, questions of “roots” and so on, but this is not the place to go more deeply into them. More relevant in this context are the different implications, at the level of political and cultural identity, of the histories of Creoles on the one hand, and the non-Creole Mauritians on the other.

Non-Creole Mauritians have the opportunity at any time to draw on an enormous non-Mauritian cultural tradition in order to make political or existential statements about themselves. Although they, like the Creoles, can be seen as diasporic populations — uprooted, exiled and homeless — their genealogical and cultural links with their ancestral country enable them to construe their past as an unbroken and continuous narrative that harks back to the mists of prehistory, and even more importantly in an age of identity politics, their identity as metonymically linked with a great civilization of immense historical depth — whether it is the Chinese, the Indian, the Islamic or the European tradition. These links, sometimes difficult to see, are being reactivated in several ways, increasingly so in the 1990s, which has not only been a decade of revitalised identity politics, but also one of considerable prosperity in Mauritius. For example, the last decade has seen the rise of a moderately successful political Hindu movement along the lines of the BJP (in India itself); the Muslims, generally opting for an Islamic identity rather than an Indian (or Pakistani) one, have for years groomed their relationship with the Arab world, and Mauritian Tamils, whose organisations are currently very active in identity politics at the national level, recently employed a number of architects and craftsmen from Tamil Nadu, in order to build a spectacular Tamil temple in northern Mauritius. While Franco-Mauritians have always travelled regularly to France, Indo-Mauritians also now increasingly travel to ancestral countries or spiritual homelands (in the case of Muslims), sometimes in search of their ancestral village.

### ***Le malaise créole***

Such practices, which emphasise the organic connection between diaspora and metropole, simultaneously serve to strengthen group cohesion within Mauritius and to counteract a feeling of uprootedness or creolisation. As we now turn to the Creoles, it seems that they have few opportunities to match the efforts of the other groups. To begin with, few Creoles recognise and cherish their African origins. Some intellectuals have tried to re-define the Creoles as “Afro-Mauritians” (see e.g. Benoît 1985) along the same lines as “Sino-Mauritians”, “Indo-Mauritians” etc., but with limited success. A handful of parents have given their children Ashanti or Yoruba names, but the Jacques’es and Maries predominate massively. Direct contact between Creoles and Africans is minimal, and although the booming Mauritian textile industry is now investing in Madagascar, the investors generally belong to other ethnic groups.

Even if the effort to provide the Creoles with an African identity had been successful, it would have been difficult to give it a substantial content. Since the slaves came from different parts of West and East Africa, and the groups were immediately mixed, no Creole is able to point out where his or her ancestors came from. Unlike other ethnic groups in Mauritius, the Creoles in this sense lack a pre-colonial past and are unable to draw upon close links with a major civilization in their contemporary identity politics.

Throughout the 1990s, one of the most pressing public issues in Mauritius has been the cluster of social problems called *le malaise créole*, the Creole ailment. Social change has been rapid in Mauritius during the 1980s and 1990s, leading to a very significant improvement of standards of living and educational achievement. In this process, it has become clear that the Creoles have been lagging behind. It has also been argued that the reasons for this can be found in Creole culture, which place a great emphasis on individualism, freedom and consumption, and in Creole social organisation, which lacks the strong kinship obligations characteristic of the other groups. These accounts are one-sided in that they fail to consider, among other things, the connections between Hindu political hegemony, kinship obligations, nepotism and Hindu dominance in the state sector. Yet it must be conceded that their description of Creole values and way of life are not entirely inaccurate. As I have shown earlier

(Eriksen 1988), moreover, the powerful individualism among the Creoles has nothing to do with “African roots”, but can be traced back to the social conditions under slavery, when family and kinship systems were destroyed, individual freedom emerged as the paramount value and social relations were individualised and became contractual in nature. In the contemporary context of a democratic, competitive capitalist society, the Creoles are at a distinct disadvantage because of their weak social organisation, and — as has already been elaborated — because of their relative lack of symbolic capital in Mauritian identity politics, which is largely a politics of invented traditions.

To this it is nevertheless necessary to add that Creole identity politicians have been active and successful during several periods in recent Mauritian history. Their most important political leader for three decades, the late Gaëtan Duval, emphasised the Creole *joie-de-vivre* and Europeanised lifestyle in contrast to the allegedly collectivist, traditionalist and unglamorous culture of the largely rural Indo-Mauritians. Duval was nonetheless associated politically with the right, and could scarcely be said to be a spokesman for the poor and powerless. A different form of identity politics is represented through the recent merger of the traditional *séga* music with reggae. The result, known as *seggae*, has not only been the most popular local music during the 1990s, but has also belatedly created a link between Mauritian and Seychellois creoles on the one hand, and the Rastafarian movement in the Caribbean. It seems that the historical parallels and cultural similarities between the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean are at last about to be exploited, and only in October 1999, for the first time, Mauritius had a visit from a Trinidadian steel band. Although few Mauritians are engaged in the mythology tracing the origin of the African diaspora to Ethiopia, the new connections with the Afro-Caribbean world have provided many Creoles with a wider identity, which can challenge that of Indo- and Franco-Mauritians in competition over symbolic capital. This widening of the Creole identity has the potential of providing the Creoles with roots and belongingness in one of the great global traditions.

However, Mauritius is in some important respects a more isolated and more conservative society than the Caribbean islands. Instead of revolting against the descendants of the old slavemasters, Mauritian Creoles still tend to be Francophiles with no powerful identity alternatives to the one offered by the plantation-owning elite,

although this may be about to change (Eriksen 1999 is an analysis of the riots of February 1999). Upwards mobility among Creoles tends to be an individual or nuclear family-based affair, while mobility in the other groups tends to involve a larger network of people. Moreover, importantly, there is a tendency for successful Creoles to be no longer considered Creoles. Regarding ethnicity, Mauritian Catholics may be arranged on a continuum with clear stereotypes at both ends: on top, there is a pale (European), well educated, urban, wealthy, French-speaking person; at the bottom, there is a dark-skinned (African), illiterate, rural, poor, Creole-speaking person. Between these extremes, there are numerous socially important distinctions, and colour, language, place of residence, education and wealth are the main markers. When a Creole moves upwards, he or she has traditionally been re-defined as a “coloured” (*gen de couleur*), in other words as someone aspiring to European or Franco-Mauritian values. In fact, this classification has little to do with actual skin colour, although successful Creole men nearly always marry light-skinned women. In other words, “Creole” the way it is used in Mauritius refers not only to slave ancestry and cultural impurity, but to low class; it belongs to the proletariat of the *milieu populaire*. There are historical reasons for this — the urban middle class of professionals in colonial Mauritius were often light-skinned descendants of black slave women and white *patrons*, who were educated and free but did not own property; and although social mobility has become widespread, the colonial classification endures.

### **Two ways of being Creole**

In other words, some of the individuals who would seem the very embodiments of cultural creolisation from an analytical perspective — genetically mixed, culturally familiar with several traditions and frequently rejoicing in the cultural “mosaic” of Mauritius — are not defined as Creoles locally. This, I have argued, is due to the endurance of colonial social classification, which related to an economic system — the colonial plantation economy — which was different, and which offered less flexibility and fewer opportunities for social mobility — than the present.

On the other hand, there are also tendencies to the effect that local classifications more closely approach the analytical concept of creolisation. A good example is offered by a schoolboy of my acquaintance, who lives in a middle-class neighbourhood in a Mauritian town. His father is a Tamil and his mother is a north Indian Hindu; he is, in other words, the offspring of a mixed marriage, although it would be considered “less mixed” than, say, a Hindu–Creole marriage. Since his father is a Tamil, the boy is expected to take lessons in Tamil at school. This is not a language that has ever been spoken in his home. The way of life in his family could be described as very creolised; with regards to food, clothes, interior decorating, ritual and music, both Indian and European influences are clearly present and are routinely and unquestioningly mixed. Not surprisingly, the boy did not want to take Tamil lessons, and argued that he considered himself a Creole since his first language was Kreol. The parents, telling me about the son’s predicament, had no objections to his line of reasoning; to them, ethnic labels were unimportant; what mattered was the quality of the boy’s education. The boy, like many other Mauritians of non-African origin — and not just children of mixed marriages — saw himself as a Creole by virtue of speaking Kreol and not belonging to one of the distinct Asian or European communities in the island. This kind of process, which has been spoken of as “creolisation” a few times in Mauritius, corresponds well to the anthropological concept of creolisation.

A very relevant aspect of Creole identity, as opposed to other collective, ethnic identities in Mauritius, is its fluidity and openness. It is sometimes said that “many Creoles look like Indians nowadays”, and it is true that many Mauritians with Christian names and a “Creole” family structure, Creole networks and a creole way of life do look vaguely Indian. This is caused both by conversions and by intermarriage. In general, Creoles are more tolerant of intermarriage than other Mauritian groups, and it is to some extent possible to *become* a Creole within one’s own lifetime — while one cannot conceivably become a Hindu, a Sino-Mauritian or a Franco-Mauritian. The fuzzy category of Mauritian Creoles thus includes both the traditional Creoles, that is dark-skinned working-class people most of whose ancestors were slaves, and a residual category of modern or postmodern Creoles, who are Creoles because for various reasons they do not fit in elsewhere. Against this background, and given the increasing

numbers of mixed marriages, some Mauritians actually envision a future when *tu dimunn pu vini kreol* — when everybody becomes a Creole. The notion of cultural mixing or impurity is important here, as is the notion of individualism.

Before moving to the conceptual discussion, we must consider the language Kreol (or Morisyen) briefly, as its place in Mauritian society can shed light not only on the situation of the Creoles, but also — perhaps — on the concept of creolisation. Kreol, which evolved during slavery in the 18th century, was created by the ethnic category now called Creoles, but it is the lingua franca of all Mauritian communities as well as the mother-tongue of most Mauritians. Attempts at making Kreol an official language have nevertheless failed; in 1982, the radical MMM party, then in power for the first time, tried to implement it in the media and in schools, but were met with massive resistance — not only from Indo- and Franco-Mauritians, but also, perhaps surprisingly, from Creoles. In general, the groups working for a wider recognition of Kreol are small and considered left-wing. Although Kreol is the only language the majority of Mauritians fully master, they do not want it to be an official language. This means that French and English predominate in the media, in the educational system and in public administration, French being the main language of culture and English the main language of administration. The resistance to Kreol can be traced to three causes: First, it is still widely regarded as “the poor cousin of French”, as an impoverished, shallow and context-dependent idiom. Secondly, its wider use at the expense of French and English might strengthen Mauritius’ isolation, since it is only spoken in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Thirdly, Kreol is still vaguely associated with the Creole ethnic group and/or creolisation as it is understood locally, and Kreol thus has some connotations in identity politics. Interestingly, few of the activists who have struggled for recognition of Kreol are Creoles in ethnic terms; they must nevertheless be seen as creoles in analytical terms — like in the European left, some are in favour of strong versions of multiculturalism, while others reject cultural tradition altogether as a source of personal identity.

Mauritian society is changing, and so are local perceptions of Creoles. While the standard definition of a Creole is essentialist and racial, it is currently accepted that

different forms of mixing may create Creoles. Both conversion to Christianity, commitment to mixing through marriage and mixed parentage may, under certain circumstances, make a person a Creole. During the last three decades, there has been a clear tendency in population censuses for increasing numbers to state that both their commonly spoken language and their ancestral language is Kreol. This is significant in so far as a person whose ancestral language is Kreol (and not an Oriental language or French) identifies him- or herself as someone rooted in Mauritian society and not in an old world civilization; in other words, as someone belonging to a new society founded on the premise of mixing.

### **Creoles and creolisation**

To sum up the argument so far: Mauritian notions of creoledom are traditionally associated with language and ethnicity, which are only partly overlapping. Although most Indo-Mauritians speak Kreol, their language of reference, that provides them with their group identity, still tends to be an Indian language; which means that although they live in a society based on uprootedness, migration and mixing, they retain a rooted self-identity based on notions of purity, continuity and boundaries.

Regarding the Creoles as an ethnic group, it has no fixed criteria for membership: You can be a Creole even if you are Muslim, given that you are of African descent and speak Kreol. You can also be a Creole if you are of Indian descent, provided you are Christian and demonstrate, through your way of life, commitment to Creole values. In this sense, the Creole ethnic category, lacking an essentialist myth of origin, is open to new members and, partly for the same reason, is poorly organised politically. Creoledom means mixing or impurity, openness and individualism.

Regarding the Kreol language, it is seen as an oral idiom lacking history and literature, and as rather superficial and limited, compared to the great civilizational languages of English, French, Hindi, Urdu and Mandarin. Its utility lies in its ability to unite otherwise very different groups in a shared field of communication.

Now, the anthropological use of the concept cultural creolization closely approximates Mauritian usage. Creolisation is seen as a process whereby new shared cultural forms, and new possibilities for communication, emerge due to contact. It highlights the open-ended, flexible and unbounded nature of cultural processes, as opposed to the notion of cultures as bounded, stable systems of communication.

In Mauritian public discourse, notions of change, flux, personal choice and hybridity are routinely contrasted with tradition, stability, commitment to fixed values and purity. These debates closely resemble debates in the academic community regarding stability and change, boundedness and openness. In the Mauritian context, the phenomena classified as creole — whether the ethnic group Creoles, the language Kreol or people who have been “creolised” — nearly always represent points of view that are consistent with the creolisation perspective of culture. As I have shown, the problems faced by Creoles (the ethnic category), in a society dominated by essentialist, “rooted” identities, are weak internal organisation and a chronic problem of leadership, lack of myths of origin that can match the others, as well as external stereotyping as being morally and culturally opportunistic. There are tendencies for Creole organisations to try to match the other ethnic groups by fashioning a Creole identity which is no less essentialist, no less rooted and bounded than the others. Simultaneously, a movement in the opposite direction amounts to the creolisation of non-Creoles — that is a growing commitment to the “mongrel” culture of Mauritius itself — borrowing and new juxtapositions — at the expense of “ancestral cultures” (for example, many Indo-Mauritians play the *séga*) and openness to change. Both tendencies co-exist and delineate a major field of political discourse. The relevant parameters are depicted in Figure 1: The debates concern on the one hand cultural similarity versus variation — in this regard, Mauritian politicians, unlike their European counterparts, favour difference rather than homogenisation — and, on the other hand, the relationship between notions of purity and notions of mixing. As Figure 1 suggests, this field of discourse extends far beyond Mauritius, and could shed light on Western political ideologies as well (plus, perhaps, academic debates over the nature of culture).

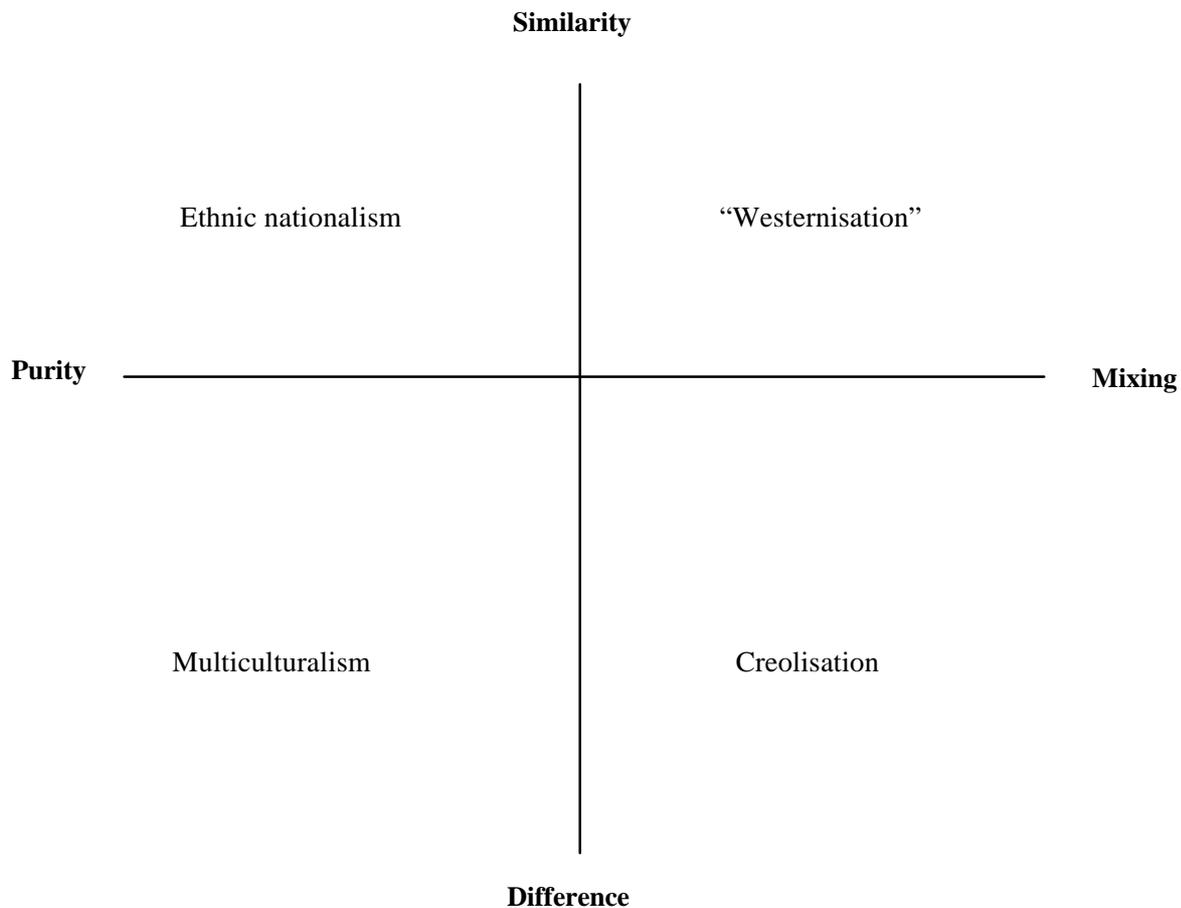


Figure 1. Dimensions in discourses of culture. In Mauritius, controversies concern the relationship between multiculturalism and creolisation. There are ethnic Creoles who favour multiculturalism (seeking to “purify” their own culture), as well as non-Creoles who favour creolisation (eclecticism, weak group identity)

Let us finally consider the term creolisation in linguistics. In this discipline, the term creole has a relatively fixed meaning. According to the recent *Penguin Dictionary of Language*, for example, a creole is “a pidgin language which has become the mother tongue of a speech community. The process of expanding the structural and stylistic range of the pidgin is called **creolization**” (boldface in the original). It is further remarked that decreolisation takes place when the standard language begins to influence the creole directly, and that the result is a “post-creole continuum”, i.e. a

seamless system of lects which are removed from the standard language to varying degrees. The language situation in Trinidad is probably one of the most obvious examples of a post-creole continuum, where spoken language ranges from standard English via forms which are perfectly intelligible to English-speakers to lects that are clearly distinct from it.

The analogy from linguistics actually seems to work slightly less well for the anthropological concept of cultural creolisation than the Mauritian usage of the term. For one thing, the way we understand cultural creolisation, it does not amount to the expansion of a pre-existing cultural pidginisation process. For another, the process of cultural creolisation hardly ends by the establishment of a stable form. Ironically, the current attempts by certain Mauritian creoles to reify and essentialise their culture counteract actual processes of creolisation. The notion of a post-creole continuum, further, might have a strong resonance among anthropologists, as it rejects absolute boundaries and instead highlights the existence of variations within a speech community. However, this “post-creole continuum” corresponds quite well simply to the creolisation of culture, which does not lead to stable uniformity, but is on the contrary an ongoing process.

The concept of “decreolisation”, finally, does not immediately seem useful in anthropological research, since there is no empirical sense in distinguishing between “standard culture” and “creole culture” along the same lines as linguists distinguish between standard language and creole in a situation of diglossia. However, in situations of migration, “decreolisation” may perhaps be used to describe attempts among migrants — whether they have remigrated back to the country of origin or not — to purify their culture and limit the influence from greater society.

On the whole, the analogy from linguistics nevertheless does not work particularly well. The analogy from “creole societies”, on the other hand, is important, and as I have argued, the situation of the Mauritian Creoles highlights important aspects of the theory of cultural creolisation: openness or vulnerability to change, cultural flexibility, impurity, individualism and fragility at the level of collective identity. As elsewhere in the world, creole tendencies inside and outside of the Creole

category are countered by essentialist tendencies — also from both inside and outside the Creole category.

Among other things, this conclusion confirms the often mentioned modernity of the creole societies. Some scholars writing on the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean have emphasised the loose kinship structure, individualism and contractual character of relationships; others have highlighted the “transient”, fleeting or unstable character of identity; while I would in this context point out that the concept of creolisation, recently introduced in anthropology as a tool for analysing contemporary, complex phenomena, has been embedded in the creole societies themselves for centuries.

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