Fluidity between ethno-religious and national identifications: A study of identity and ethics in Mauritius (1950-2022)

By

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I, Ramesh Ragoo, declare that the thesis: **"Fluidity between ethno-religious and national identifications: A study of identity and ethics in Mauritius (1950-2022)"**, submitted for the qualification of a master's degree by dissertation (Study of Religions), is my personal independent research work for the University of Cape Town. Further, since the nature of this academic research deals with religious matters, anything revealed in this paper does not represent in any way the statement of religious institutions in Mauritius. Errors, omissions and weaknesses, if any, are my own responsibility.

I also declare that permission/consent has been sought where necessary for all references, journals and books with their names mentioned in this thesis where deemed appropriate and with acknowledgement.

Finally, a word of thanks to Professor Elisabetta Porcu, from the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Cape Town, for her valuable support, advice and comments.

Made in good faith,

Signed by candidate

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Abstract

Mauritius, an island with a population of nearly 1.3 million, is composed essentially of different local diasporas with numerous religious backgrounds. After more than three centuries of active cohabitation, a cosmopolitan and democratic nation is emerging. One of the traits of the island is the relatively peaceful co-existence of a diversity of religions and cultures, often considered a unique case of reference for the world. On the other hand, although the Mauritian constitution (1968) and public discourses by leaders of successive governments advocate for a democratic secular state, the nexus between communities (including religions as per the constitution) and political power predominates. At times, small tensions or communal conflicts do arise, which incite for research on sustainable peace. Other faiths have also emerged, cutting across traditional communities and breaking the tie with political power. Moreover, the legal requirement for legislative candidates at national elections to identify themselves with one of the four constitutional communities has become controversial. Against this background, this qualitative research, based on a social identity theory and employing an autoethnographic approach, aims to analyze the contributions of academics and religious organizations to the creation of a sustainable plural Mauritian society. A particular attention is paid to interfaith dialogue, with an emphasis on common religious values and ethics, which is gaining importance to address the 21st century social and national issues. Religion, and particularly the Council of Religions, constituted at the turn of this century, play a leading role in the transition from a multi-cultural, communally centered society to an intercultural and cosmopolitan one. To narrow down the study, two areas shall be examined: self-identification and ethics, from legacy to advocacy.

Chapter 1

Reading the Mauritian reality

1.1 Introduction

It is undeniable in the history of mankind that the migration of people from one land to another, for different reasons, has created diverse settlements. Such is the case of the small island of Mauritius which has a remarkable mix of cultures and religions. This diversity has been a prime factor in the construction of a cosmopolitan worldview. Examining identities in the Mauritian nation is comparable to the analogy of flowers in a garden. For instance, a tulip and a lily have different characteristics giving them each an identity. But when grown in one garden, their identities shine together to create a unique identity for the garden. While each flower's respective identity is preserved, creating different appreciations from a visitor's viewpoint (socialization), together they promote a common higher level of identity as reflected in the beauty of the garden. Similarly, the similarities and differences, bonds and boundaries across cultures and religions create a kind of connection or relationship for a nation (Veverka 2004, 40). A relationship that can be described as organic and time-bound, towards the creation of a shared future, new expectations and a new order of citizenship.

Studies state that there were no indigenous people in Mauritius prior to the successive colonizing periods under Dutch rule (1638-1710), French rule (1767-1810) and British rule (1810-1968) (Hollup, 1994; Leuprecht, 2012). The Dutch brought the first slaves from Madagascar. When they departed due to natural calamities, the French and British colonizers brought more slaves to settled in. After the abolition of slavery in 1834, indentured workers from India and other Asian merchants were brought to Mauritius (Maudarbux, 2016; Sambajee, 2016). The first generation of migrants, with their respective religions, traditions and distinct identities came to co-exist on the same land. In the first instance, communities were formed by a natural human instinct to preserve and protect the interests of the respective traditions and religions, while in common spaces, like land cultivation, industrial development zones, or retail shopping centers, communities started to socialize. Externalization is considered here as another formative factor acting on every individual to interact with the 'other', from a different community. In this process of formation of an externalized relationship, a new mindset is instilled (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Worldviews intersect and a new society develops, justifying Capps' argument that the *Verstehen* approach can help to explore the dynamics of interaction across cultures and religious orientations (Capps, 1995). To illustrate, the duality in the Christian worldview, of God as creator of the world, is faced with the concept of unity in the Hindu worldview, that the deity and the world are one and eternal. Therefore, the first generations of migrants in Mauritius must have lived these opposed concepts in what the Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) paradigm cultivated as numerous cognitive forms of human experience such as reasoned

thoughts, ethics, feelings or expressions (Capps, 1995, 166-168). From the resistance of absolute interpretations, motivations for relative understandings, commonalities and tolerance started to develop. This is a qualitative research aiming to identify the components or stages in the process that lead to complex forms of relational identity across generations. In this context, creation and maintenance of a Mauritian secular state into a prosperous and plural nation has always been a challenge as many realities, taboos, learnings and experiences developed alongside. This study shall examine the development and intersection of religion with different stakeholders in society such as the government, non-governmental organisations (hereafter NGOs), commercials and media outlets. In my view, each country with a diversified population has its own specificities and evolves progressively through decades of cohabitation. Mauritius and other countries like the Fiji Islands or Trinidad and Tobago have much in common, such as local Indian diasporas in cohabitation with other ethnicities. Various learnings and comparisons can be derived from scholarly studies on these countries (Caroll and Caroll, 2000; Voigt-Graf, 2008; Leuprecht, 2012). For example, interfaith dialogue can take different forms, expressions and meanings such as the 'Vivre Ensemble' (French translation to 'Live Together') concept in the construction of a Mauritian identity.

1.2 Argument and Research Questions

Mauritius is often mentioned as a plural nation in local conversations or public discourses because of the cohabitation of different faiths, ethnicities and cultures. Beyond intellectual intuition, religious and sacred texts as expressions of immanence, are often used in these public discourses and conversations. Muslims would refer to the Quranic verses, Christians would refer to the Gospels or more generally they would refer to God, like in cases of injustice, a popular creole saying is "ena enn bondieu lao" (loosely translated as "God in the heavens will judge").[1] Even political leaders occasionally do refer to the sacred texts in their speeches. Although Mauritius constitutionally preserves its status as a secular state, I will show how religion plays an active role in the development of relational identities, ethics and morality and even aesthetics, in the realm of business, strengthening the family nucleus, and celebrations. For example, religious leaders are often solicited in conflict resolution for the maintenance of peace and harmony. A posture of learning about and from the religion of the other is becoming crucial in the process of nation building. The assumption or maintenance of rigid ethnic or community identities, which has been the focus of most academic research to now, cannot ignore the fluidity happening across the boundaries over the recent decades. This is a research problem which shall be addressed here, as much as public discourses are nowadays highlighting the need for a paradigm shift from multicultural to intercultural stands. The examination aims to provide sufficient evidence of this transition.

[1] Creole also written as Kreol, or lingua franca local dialect generated during the encounter of the slaves' language with the colonizing French.

Religion has been and continues to be an active protagonist for social justice and good governance of the island. How does religion address contemporary social issues in the 21st century? What meaningful orientations can be anticipated in future generations? To summarize, this research is based on the following rationale:

- The arrival of immigrants since colonization, with their diverse cultures, has been the foundation of formative societal patterns. These constantly change shape across generations, particularly with the advent of the digital era, in the construct of a plural and ethical nation. Multiculturalism is thus the starting point from immigration and with time becomes almost a precursor for emerging forms of inter-culturalism. In this context, I draw on Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Polish psychologist Henri Tajfel's (1919-1982) in his research work on in-group and out-group relationships (Zakiryanova and Redkina, 2020). Its focus on the dynamics and categorizations of groups within society can be useful in the context of Mauritius. Moreover, the work of John Turner (1947-2011) (himself a PhD student of Tajfel and together they come up with the Social Identity Theory), particularly on social structures or systems as reflections of the very irreducible social nature of individuals, their psychologies and ideals (Haslam, Reicher and Reynolds, 2012). According to SIT, social identities can be many, ethnicity and religious affiliations are but examples, and there is a nexus between individuals and the social groups they belong. While the individual's attitude and behaviour contribute to the collective image of the group (intra-group relationships), the latter in turn shapes the self-identity of the former. Today, one can observe how social media groups, for example, bring together people from different ethnic/religious affiliations (inter-group relationships), impacting further the nature of self-identifications. SIT is therefore of interest in this examination.

- These patterns may vary from a kind of hierarchical and organic identity, in both space and time, to a dual-identity. Each immigrant came to the island with a particular worldview and mission, undoubtingly highly attached to their homeland. For example, the Indian indentured workers would hold identities and cultural traits from their respective state. With time, generations born on the island became Indo-Mauritians, eligible for a Mauritian national identity. Therefore, across generations every Mauritian may display varying degrees of national and cultural belongingness.

- Self-identification to a religious group can be based on (new) faith, parental heritage or even political interest.

- A dual-identity with affinity to both religion and the nation, towards a unified population around legitimate patriotism, is also increasingly perceivable.

And the inquiry shall attempt to explore the following questions/topics:

1- The existing country's constitution continues to describe the Mauritian nation as composed of four communities based on ethno-religious origins. Although ethno-religious identifications are visible at spaces like religious celebrations, after decades of cohabitation and based on previous academic research on identities in Mauritius, national identification tends to predominate in public spaces.

2- There has been a sustainable quest for interfaith dialogue over the last two decades. What are the policies and possibilities of this growing interfaith dialogue?

3- Religious leaders and their discourses play an important role in the construct of the Mauritian society. To what extent do nation building and sustainable peace rely on the application of ethics and morals inspired from the respective sacred texts?

1.3 An autoethnographic approach: lived experiences

The interpretations and knowledge derived from the phenomena of religion, with its multiplicity of characteristics can vary from believer to believer, from community to community and even from researcher to researcher. A theoretical representation cannot therefore be fully reflective and comprehensive of the human reality. In Mauritius religion tends to be associated with communities, based on their respective ancestral traditions or beliefs and, it thus makes more sense to talk of 'religions' (plural form). This study shall elaborate on the teleological terms of the phenomena, exploring the functions and purposes (Capps 1995, 158) of religion for Mauritians, as well as the interdependence between religions. The experience of different cultures in Mauritius, with religion as a principal motive shall be explored. This research is informed by *the Verstehen* approach used by Max Weber (1864-1920) in his investigations on the content of the noumenal world and the formation of cultures. In the words of Capps, Weber sought to go beyond an empirical analysis, to derive an 'understanding in the richest, deepest, most thorough sense' (Capps 1995, 163). By being in the field and as a citizen of Mauritius, I shall investigate the interactions of individuals of different religious backgrounds in everyday life, the participation together with religious leaders in inter-faith forums and sharing experiences, the social and cultural contexts in Mauritius to generate a reliable understanding of the religious landscape, its evolution, and the question of identities in Mauritius.

My personal involvement with religious matters, firstly, as member of a religion, and secondly, being recently appointed as member of the Council of Religions in Mauritius will generate knowledge and interpretations of the "real world" from a scientific approach. Beyond the *noumena* and phenomena relationship, these religious orientations, cutting across cultures, can be meaningful to understand social changes occurring in Mauritius. A taxonomy of actions and local events can be generated as a result of the dynamic motives of

these orientations. An exploration of the dynamics of interaction such as with interfaith marriages, movement of believers across faiths and a growing interfaith dialogue may, in my opinion, generate deeper understanding of both identity and ethical issues and provide reliable interpretations. To some extent, autobiography (self-narrative) and autoethnography, a qualitative research method, will be used to create first-hand religion-related data based on my personal experiences over the last fifty years. Moreover, this period of time is largely sufficient to investigate the behavioral changes happening at the levels of self-identification and social groups. Thus an analytical account is formulated in the research write-up based partly on my personal background, self-reflexivity and feelings (Lapadat 2017; Zempi and Awan 2021, 154).

Being an island where many religions co-exist, Mauritius is an ideal location for this study. This allows gathering of national data mainly from fieldwork, participation in religious meetings/activities, conversations with locals, observing popular rituals/cultural performances and the examination of the authorities and non-governmental publications/reports, national archives and the local media. While addressing the research topic, both 'insider' and 'outsider' knowledge shall be generated, in contrast with the limitation of traditional methods (Zempi and Awan 2021, 160). On the other hand, access to online library resources, consultation of scholarly books, journals relevant to the topic under investigation and literature review shall constitute the primal sources of academic data. Together, these sources of religion-related data shall assist me to construct a research thesis founded on an ethnographic qualitative analysis and to add to the sociological understanding of religious identities in Mauritius.

1.4 Religious Identity

Religious identity is defined as a religious affiliation or fellowship in a group activity and generally promotes social interactions and comfort (Scroggs, Miller and Stanfield, 2018). Though Scroggs, Miller and Stanfield (2018) examine identity development with respect to gender and sexual minority, they point out in their findings that in general individuals may develop and affirm a religious identity in their emerging adulthood. This could be a reasonable input to capture for the purpose of this study, even if religious identity can also be acquired at childhood by birth or parental influence. This position is explained by the capacity of the mind during adulthood to better appreciate the immanence or the abstract. Previous studies have shown that adolescence, as a transition phase between childhood and adulthood, is marked by psychological development to understand complex subjects, such as spiritual exploration (Good and Willoughby, 2008). However, religious affiliation or adherence to a particular faith in early adulthood can be less remarkable (Scroggs, Miller and Stanfield, 2018). This suggests for inclination of young minds rather on developing personal beliefs and worldview which is greatly influenced by the interaction with other cultures and beliefs, outside the family circle and religious heritage. But, affirmation of a religious identity and

affiliation at an early age can be very much dependent on the religion itself, the space where it evolves and the parents upbringing as we shall see below. To date, sixteen religious organizations are registered with the Council of Religions and there are a few others still seeking for recognition and affiliation. This demonstrates that the Mauritian religious landscape is rich and dynamic, and that religion is very much present in the daily life of Mauritians. There is evolution and fluidity in religious identity and self-identification which this study aims to explore.

1.5 Dual Identity and National Identity

In addition to religious identity, Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten (2013) examined the dynamics of dual and national identities and focused on these identifications in adolescence with three particular religious groups in Mauritius. They found that there was greater self-esteem for the religious identity and this to a varying degree is very much dependent on the specific religion in question. According to their findings, Muslim adolescents are more inclined to manifest their religious identity as a sense of religious affiliation stronger than their national identity. They argued that as there are less Muslims than Hindus on the island, the former tends to display their religious fellowship mainly for protection as a group and that Muslim parents also teach their children to be good Muslims. On the other hand, it is stated that Hindus are a majority group both socially and politically, dominating Mauritian politics and state institutions (Eisenlohr, 2006). This implies an intrinsic status of security and due to their division in various sub-groups, like Tamil or Marathi, religious group identification of adolescents seems to be less visible. This would suggest here for a closer investigation on the claimed majority of Hindus, with respect to the increasing popularity of Pentecostal churches over the island and other emerging religions. Lastly, Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten (2013) found that religious traditions in Mauritius provide for moral values, such as tolerance and civism, which together contribute to a national identity as a common ideal. In this context, my personal experience is shared below.

I took birth in a Hindu family in Mauritius and studied at the Adventist College (around 1975) during my adolescent years. It was one of the rare educational institutions allowing for a mix of boys and girls of different faiths. Even if the students were of different religious backgrounds by birth, the study of the Bible was mandatory and prayers were said every day before classes begin. It was in those years that my personal reflections on the supernatural or God, the world of creations and humanity, started, but without adherence to any specific church. In my late teenage, a kind of religious identity was thus developed based rather on my emotions, feelings and experience with the other. This subscribes to the externalized relationship of my religious paradigm with other Mauritians, irrespective of their own beliefs.

1.6 Ethics

Ethics generally implies the morals, correct attitudes, behaviours and best practices in the conduct of one's personal life or the activities of a group of people whether for business affairs or agencies like the institutions of a country. There is a tendency to believe that as a country becomes highly rational and materially advanced, religion is marginalized and it operates in the individual's private life only. Mauritius is a particular secular space where religion plays an important role, a situation which I will explore in this study. Abdelgawad and Zahra (2019) examined the influence of religious identity in the affairs of private founder family firms and provides ground for discussion on the contribution of religion to ethics. Generally, business administrations tend to be more rational in making use of available resources effectively and efficiently. The authors argue that conducting a family business based on values drawn out of a religious identity can create a kind of 'spiritual capital', like devoted responsibility. This might suggest for the term 'spiritual intelligence' (Candra and Dwija, 2020) as a non-economic factor contributing to the success of doing business. However, recognizing the influence of religion in conducting administration, either public or private, is widely researched (see, for example, cf. Ragoo 2019).[2]

According to the Organizational Identity theory, Abdelgawad and Zahra (2019) explained that religious values of the founder members of a business, derived from religious identity, serve as drivers for organizing and managing their activity. Core values like work is worship, devotion or compassion, become distinct characteristics of the business and create a positive image for both the business owners and the public. Religious core values are thus translated into the ethics of the business, as an act of faith and articulated through expressions like patience, compliance or truth in all matters. It suggests that religion is not necessarily a manifestation meant for the private sphere only because it takes a greater expression when externalized and applied in society. In Mauritius, it is also very common to see family businesses/shops displaying physical or symbolic representations of their religious identities either on themselves or in the public space of their premises, like a miniature statue of the Virgin Mary. However, here this can have many interpretations; it could be a reminder of the 'spiritual capital' for the owner, advertising one's religious identity or a divine protection for the business.

Also relevant to this research, is the intersection of the business religious identity with others who may be of different faiths. Abdelgawad and Zahra (2019) mentioned that some organizations can use values from different faiths, especially in a plural society, in their interactions with others. In contrast, other recent studies have concluded that display of a particular religious identity does not necessarily enhance cross-religious cooperation or trust in countries like Mauritius where histories of religious tensions are known to exist. Instead, it has been found as more effective in attracting commitment with coreligionists than out-group relationships. There is a kind of trade-off between the limited perspectives of a coalitional

[2] https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/politics-divides-religion-reconstructs/301822/

recognition (with unidentifiable coreligionists) and the perception of benefits to all individuals due to a displayed supernatural presence (Shaver et al. 2018).

Insights from the above contributions show that there is a growing business tendency in Mauritius to recruit workers from different descents. Having spent many years as an engineer with an established Telecommunications company in Mauritius, I have experienced this gradual diversification in recruitment which is briefly elaborated below.

In the 1980's when I joined service, I could notice a majority of Hindus in the workforce and only few employees from the minority communities. With time I have seen more equal opportunity in recruitment based on competencies, irrespective of the country's community percentages representations. In my opinion, this creates trust in-house and acquaintance with colleagues of other religions. Some employees display their religious identities with markers, like Hindus wearing amulets on their wrists as a divine protection or Christians carrying a small cross on necklaces, bearing the sacrifice of Christ. These markers promote large-scale relations across communities within the firm and create inter-cultural activities among colleagues. For example, I have many times been invited to attend Muslim, Hindu or Christian celebrations and enjoyed yearly on the working space traditional cookies for Diwali or Chinese festivals.

Workplaces in both public and private sector, are thus spaces creating exchange of religious thoughts and cultures within the population. Also, as a collaborator with the Council of Religions in Mauritius, I have witnessed during recent years, this attitude to globalize while participating in interfaith prayers requested by established firms at the beginning of every year. There is somehow a consensual recognition and acceptance of a diversity of religious identities, contributing to the overall ethics and life-long stability of businesses. Indeed, these interactions allow 'spiritual capital' or spiritual intelligence to be developed, shared and expanded. The above literature therefore encourages for an exploration of the spiritual intelligence that is increasingly being solicited in a plural nation, like Mauritius, to promote ethics not only for businesses, but society at large.

1.7 Religions, Rituals and Media

In Mauritius, religions and religious performances cannot be studied in isolation as there are constant coverage and reporting of various religious activities, celebrations and commemorations in the papers, on the TV and radio and in the social media. This is often supported by the participation of political leaders. For example, community processions, such as the pilgrims' march to the shrine of 'Père Laval' (Father Laval, a French Christian missionary who landed on the island in the 1830's) on 9th September mobilizes both media and multi-faith believers. The Hindu pilgrimage on the occasion of the *Maha Shivaratri* festival is a long march to the Grand-Bassin lake, also known as *Ganga Talao* (it takes this name for it is believed its water is a resurgence of the holy Ganges lake in India) (Trouillet, 2012). Located in the crater of a dead volcano in the southern part of the island, this pilgrimage may last a

few days for remote pilgrims to walk to the lake and bring back some water to their home temples. Every year the pilgrims show much creativity and innovation in the design of *kanwars* which they usually carry on their shoulders.[3] Eisenlohr (2013) observed that Mauritian and Indian politicians and religious dignitaries deliver sermons and speeches during the pilgrimage that are simultaneously broadcast on the national television and radio. Thus for all these events, the authorities, sociocultural groups and the media invest a lot of resources for their smooth running and public retransmission.

The case studies examined in the book *Recasting Ritual: Performance, Media, Identity* by Crain and Hughes-Freeland (1998), based on a range of ethnographies from different plural societies, like the Balinese population, shall be used as a reference and applied in the context of Mauritius. The authors explore the role of media in engaging ritual empowerment of specific groups and the wide-reaching aspects of identity in a plural nation. They argue that performers of rituals can impose religious images on spectators, tourists or the audience at home. This would suggest for an analysis that interweaves ritual performance, consumption and power in Mauritius. Images of religious identities, performances and rituals, specially of traditional ones, are repetitively promoted by the MBC- Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (State-controlled Radio and Television) under successive governments (Eisenlohr, 2006).

Identity is said to be composed of acts of being and doing. Chapter 3 of the aforementioned book differentiates between being and doing, emphasizing that the latter component, such as ritual performances, takes identity to the social domain and can vary in space and time. It suggests for anthropologists to engage in research on the doing aspect of identity, exploring for example on interactions and relations developed in social productions. Use of arts, music, and theatrical productions can give another dimension to respective religious identities beyond religious divides. State televisions thus become instruments for governments to promote a national identity within a plural population. In parallel, religions become contributors to citizenship and nationhood (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten, 2013).

1.8 Self-Identity (knowing, doing, being)

This research shall, lastly, examine available research and findings on identities, particularly on self-identity, on how it is projected, experienced and developed in space and time. How does someone born in a Christian or Hindu family, for example, put into practice a religious identity acquired through parental heritage? Do all native-born Muslims in Mauritius, for example, experience their identities as in the being and doing of their parents' or grandparents' religious worldviews? Apparently, someone is declared, or assigned a religious identity, be it Hindu, Christian or Muslim according to their ancestors' traditions or parental heritage, as was assumed in past national census (Bowman 1991). However, we

[3] Kanwars are decorated bamboo structures, at times voluminous and labour-intensive in their constructions, requiring carriage by a group of devotees across the streets of Mauritius.

noted that consciousness and psychological capacity to appreciate the sacred, usually develop in early adulthood. It was highlighted that this characteristic feature of adolescence may not necessarily trigger for affiliation and identification, as it depends on the religion itself, whether it is a minority or majority group, the religious institutions and the parents' responsibilities in their role as the first educators of their children.

Margit Warburg examines in Chapter 8 of her book *Citizens of the World*, the identity of the Danish Baha'i in relation to the adherence or the sense of belonging to the Baha'i religion and community. As she stated, belonging means membership and Baha'i scriptures require that Baha'is voluntarily adhere to this membership by signing a registration card only at the age of 15 or above when considered as matured (early adulthood) (Warburg 2006, 226). This is also described as a 'commitment' to the cause and culture of Baha'i and is an integral part of the self-identity. In turn, commitment entails other human factors like behavior or an attitude. This fact depicts that the Baha'i religious identity is a declared and registered one, after having taken cognition of the implications. It can be deduced here that becoming Baha'i is neither an act by birth nor parental heritage, in comparison to other religious traditions. Further, Warburg attempts to classify Danish Baha'is into two groups: active and inactive. For example, those who attend Baha'i celebrations or devotional gatherings (prayers in group), may be considered as active ones. Alternatively, those who do not show up in any activity, may be considered as being inactive with no sanctions prescribed, while being still registered as members (Warburg 2006, 227). If this classification impacts identity, it would be interesting to research on active and inactive members of other religious traditions either in Denmark, Mauritius or elsewhere.

Based on the above analysis of self-identity, Warburg suggests for the study of the aspects of 'knowing', 'being' and 'doing' associated with membership or the 'belonging' to a religious group. These dimensions were previously suggested by anthropologist Joshua Fishman (1926-2015) in his studies on language and ethnicity (Elahi, 2006). In this line of thought, it would imply that different religionists can manifest variable degrees of these aspects in their individual lives, worldviews and interactions with coreligionists (intra-community) or with the society at large (inter-community). Warburg explained that the knowing-aspect of self-identity can be measured by the extent of knowledge of the scriptures, the obligations and ability to express on a pre-defined worldview. The doing-aspect will imply the identity derived from the practice of the religion, such as recommended and forbidden acts. Baha'is, for example, in abstaining from participation in partisan politics develop a kind of neutrality or dispassionateness in their identity. They would rather involve themselves in the promotion of unity. Lastly, the being-aspect put emotions, feelings or faith (dealing with the human heart) in the identity, like expressions of joy and love to be with coreligionists or fellowship.

Mauritius being a small island of 2040 square kilometres, located in the south-west of the Indian Ocean, one could expect that very few scholars have researched on the identities of the Mauritian plural nation. But I came across quite a few interesting works, from both

local and foreign scholars. This thesis shall therefore be an opportunity to highlight and argue some of these academic findings in relation to the topic examined here. Ramola Ramtohul and Hylland Eriksen (2018) are the editors and co-authors of *The Mauritian Paradox: fifty years of Development, Diversity and Democracy*. Together with other authors, they have attempted to examine a broad range of subjects, such as multiculturalism, the constitution, the electoral system, the Mauritian diaspora and the persistent issues linked with corruption. This book shall thus be one of my main sources of data on Mauritius. Other authors, like Maya de Salle-Essoo and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2014), have published on the 'wayside shrines' of Mauritius, documented by findings from an ethnographic examination on intercultural and popular religion. Together with other research papers, the aforementioned works shall be used as support throughout this research for discussion, analysis and interpretations. This research will attempt to examine the gap between the rigidity of multiculturalism and the fluidity of interculturalism. The existing academic sources have focused on the nexus between ethnicity and religion and self-identities as derivatives of this equation. I will explore, for example, how in the learning from and about the other religion relative identities are being developed. Moreover, ethics and morals of a cosmopolitan nation such as Mauritius as sourced from the commonalities of multiple sacred texts have not been treated to now.

Although Mauritius calls itself a secular state, religion is in general very present in the everyday life of its citizens who may either demonstrate their religious belonging or simply behave as believers without showing any firm affiliation. Ancestral heritages are manifested in performances, rituals and public discourses across cultures and celebrations yearly with the concourse of the state, sociocultural organizations and mass media. We have seen above that when worldviews of immigrants interact, identities are confronted and learnings on the identity of the other becomes part of an organic process of continuous understanding, adaptation and tolerance. While the categorization of the nation into four communities by the constitution is still legal, the aesthetics of a plural nation develop a sense of dual-identity across generations. Self-identities overlap with a common identity of citizenship or of legitimate patriotism. In this state of 'living together' and in the application of ethics derived from respective sacred texts, sustainability of a plural nation goes through a learning curve for the individual, the business and the state. With interactions at different levels, the dynamics of identity may be seen as both rich and complex, which this research shall explore in the following chapters. It is evident that identity in a plural nation like Mauritius, after decades of cohabitation is not limited to ethnic boundaries, but also subjected to an increasing fluidity under a combination of factors.

This first chapter provides a historical account of the development of Mauritius, outlines the research focus and conceptualizes the key concepts. Chapter 2 examines the Mauritian population and its sustainability, from a historical context, through the enforcement of the national Constitution at independence, to its composition into declared communities. Chapter 3 outlines the core of this research on ethno-religious identity

transformations occurring in the post-independence period. An inexhaustive list of developments is critically investigated from the interactions with the religious landscape, through new religious entrants up to including the experiences of foreign Mauritian diasporas, supported with my family stories and autoethnography. Lastly, Chapter 4 explores the role of religion in the Mauritian secular state and its active participation in the social construct of the plural nation. Since most Mauritians are believers of different faiths according to the national statistics, transversal ethics is examined showing that spiritual capital is a common resource to fight the ills of modern society. Reading and understanding the reality of Mauritius offer a significant first step in the examination of the development in self-identifications. Needless to say, this research does not aim to be a comprehensive study of religion in Mauritius but is a qualitative examination focused in particular on the period 1950-2022.

Chapter 2

From immigration to constitutional communities

On the 10th of February 2021, the Council of Religions (henceforth CoR) of Mauritius, in collaboration with the Mauritius Film Development Corporation (MFDC), launched a documentary film entitled 'Religions in Mauritius',[4] at the MCine Movie Theater of Trianon City Mall in Quatre-Bornes. The Theater was crowded, and the event was marked by the presence of the President of the Republic of Mauritius, dignitaries, representatives of ministries, various religious organizations, NGOs and students of secondary colleges. According to the film presented, some fifteen different religions are being practiced in Mauritius. This kind of initiative and others in the pipeline, provide first-hand data in the study of religion, ethnicity or identity in the Mauritian context. Although these inter-ethnic interactions occurring in the public domain have already been identified in earlier academic research (see for example Sambajee 2016), they constitute a natural development in the process of loosening of ethnic boundaries after a long period of cohabitation of communities. A parallel can be drawn here with Tajfel's Social Identity Theory mentioned earlier, regarding in-group and out-group relationships (Zakiryanova and Redkina, 2020). It is also known that by nature individuals cannot stand alone, similarly, communities cannot be separated and if so, at some point interactions are not only inevitable but become essential for a plural nation's sustainability.

The film documentary retraced the history of Mauritius from the early 1700s, with the arrival of the first human settlements, mainly from Africa, Asia and Europe. The European colonizers (Dutch, French and British) brought slaves and indentured workers, with their traditions and cultures, from other continents to develop the island. Much later, after the abolition of slavery in 1835 and under the governance of the United Kingdom (1810-1968), indentured labor was sought from India, mainly to cultivate land, like sugarcane planting (Maudarbux, 2016; Sambajee, 2016). Other migrants also came to the island, like free traders from China, who raised up different wholesale and retail shops around the island. All these peoples formed different diasporas in relation to their respective homelands ethnicities, but on the same land. Sambajee (2016, 215-216) stated that ethnicity and language (ancestral) are the basic variables of identity and proposed a contextual analysis of Mauritius with regards to its demographic, religious, economic, linguistic and political situation. Much earlier, in comparing Trinidad and Mauritius, Eriksen (1992) found that ethnicity might be irrelevant for both countries in certain social contexts given the occurrence of considerable inter-ethnic interactions. He also noted that almost all Mauritians of both Indian and African descents share Creole as the common spoken language and tend to prefer French to English (both are colonial languages taught in schools) as a literary language. Moreover, after decades of cohabitation in the colonial and postcolonial Mauritius, ancestral languages under the rubric "Asian Languages and Arabic" are still being offered as options in the primary curriculum (Maudarbux, 2016) and their public usage is on the decline (as per Mauritius statistics 2011).

[4] https://councilofreligions.org/uncategorized/religions-in-mauritius-the-film/

In comparing the evolution of the Tamil diasporas of Reunion island and Mauritius, for example, Mooneegadoo (2018) found that only 20% of the Tamil population in Mauritius can speak the Tamil language. On the other hand, Creole has been introduced in schools in 2012, after having been standardized and codified (Pyndiah 2016, 493). Table 2.1 compares first-hand data on the evolution of "resident population by language usually spoken at home" from national censuses of 1990 and 2011 (over a span of 20 years). The table does not capture other ancestral languages such as Tamil or Chinese.

Census	**1990**	**2011**
Total population	1,022,456	1,236,817
Creole language	618,226	1,069,874
Hindi language	12,845	8,690
Bhojpuri language	201,616	65,289
Urdu language	6809	814

Table 2.1: Resident population by language usually spoken at home in Mauritius

Source : Statistics Mauritius ; https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/

It can be observed, on a population of 1,236,817 in 2011, Creole has emerged as a popular dialect and the 'unofficial national language' (Sambajee 2016, 216) of the Mauritian nation. Moreover, as will be discussed here in the context of Mauritius, other dimensions have impacted the 'ethnic identity', like fears or common sufferings (colonial and post-colonial struggles within communities and in the construct of a national identity), faith (inter-faith dialogue gaining significance), cultural (intra, inter and new) and the religious element (intra, inter, conversion and new denominations). We cannot overlook the influence of modernity (Sambajee 2016, 219), technology and social media like Facebook (Rambaree and Knez, 2017) on the younger generations, as hidden dimensions, which not only negotiate but shape their identities shifting the locus of priority from ethnicity to citizenship.

Conversely, Nave (2000) and Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten (2013) have opined that ethno-religious factors are central in the choice of friends, dating or marriage. Yet, earlier the same authors, Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten (2010) stated that each community is indispensable in a mosaic society and shares its own characteristics to the make-up of the rainbow nation, which suggest the construct of a dual-identity (national and ethnic/community). Rambaree and Knez (2017) added another variable in the examination of identity, that of new generations' opportunities with the advent of digital media to challenge conservative discourses on ethnicity and 'pure' identity. In the same vein, Ragoo (2020) argued that 'neutral names' now emerge in the naming of new offspring across communities, making it difficult to equate or identify Mauritian names with ethnicity or religion as was possible in older generations. I suppose, one cannot also ignore the effect of globalization and opportunities of travel since, for example, many Mauritian students do pursue higher studies abroad and come back after many years of exposure to other inter-ethnic or non-ethnic relationships and mindsets.

In light of the above perspectives, I see two principal notions of identity which are not necessarily incompatible and in opposition to each other. There is like a cosmopolitan identity

in constant construction under the influence of external factors overlapping with an identity of cultural inheritance. Leuprecht (2012) argues that there is nowadays an emerging Mauritian population with logics of both ethnic and non-ethnic identity. He compared ethnically diverse societies from a political demographic perspective, in particular Fiji and Mauritius, and singled out Mauritius for having no military coup since its independence while Fiji has gone through at least four coups and other constitutional crises. Leuprecht (2012) argues that the comfortable majority Indian diaspora in Mauritius (consisting of immigrants' population only) in contrast with the sizeable minority Indian diaspora in Fiji (close in numbers to the predominant native population) generated different outcomes. By all means, isolated, and with no natural resources, like gold, diamond or petrol, relying largely on its plural labor force, the island of Mauritius seems to have therefore intelligently manage its human diversity, and is often labelled as the 'Mauritian miracle' (Subramanian and Roy, 2001). It was even foreseen to become a 'high-income country' by 2021 (Svirydzenka and Petri 2017, 82).

2.1 The Mauritian Constitution

After more than 300 years of its history, the island is now known for its plurality with the co-existence of various religious traditions living in peace and harmony (Leuprecht, 2012). Different determining factors have contributed to this cohabitation, which shall be discussed later. As a starting point, a brief history of the Mauritian constitution is examined, particularly and in respect to identity. Different constitutions have been written, which date back to 1885 and 1947 (Salverda 2015). The 1947 version was drafted by the British colonial system after a long period of struggle, starting in the 1930s, to accommodate changes in the political domain, such as the formation of the Labour Party which was founded to principally stand for the workers' class. Prior to 1947, politics was then more driven by economic and class interests, such as formation of the first trade unions, than by cultures or communities. There was a shift of power from the white colonial system and an aim for the independence of Mauritius. Voting rights, for example, were granted to all persons above 21 years and who had basic literacy in English, French or mother tongue languages, like Hindi, Chinese or Tamil. In 1947, women became eligible to vote as well. Gradually the working class gained power by an increase in the suffrage base and representations in the Legislative Council.

This process and period (1947-1968) of representations in the Legislative Council eventually led to the quest for independence. Salverda (2015), Meetarbhan (2018) and others claimed that the political motives then shifted from income/class interests to community-based representations. In this particular context, Leuprecht (2012) stated that the independence of both Mauritius and Fiji, in 1968 and 1970 respectively, were managed and negotiated by the London's Colonial Office. Colonialism ends up in institutionalizing racial communalism and classification of the population in four ethnic communities. Consequently, the 1968 constitutional mandatory identification of community belonging and of the Best Loser System (BLS) (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018) for example, have ensured a fair and adequate representation and participation of minority ethnic groups in the Legislative Assembly. The BLS, considered as unique and accepted by all political parties, was thus introduced in the general elections of August 1967 and a maximum of eight additional seats

are allocated by the Electoral Service Commission, following the election of first-past-the-post (FPTP) of 62 candidates (Fessha and Nam, 2015; Sookrajowa, 2021). It could be deduced here that the individual identity demonstration, as belonging to a particular community with cultural and religious practices, suddenly became important and took a political dimension. Politicians tapped on these religious traditions and values as resources for competing in successive elections and conquering votes. Thus, after the general elections of 1967, the motion for independence was adopted by the Legislative Assembly under the British governorship of Sir John Shaw Rennie.

The existing Mauritian constitution,[5] which dates back to 1968, mentions at the very beginning that: "Mauritius shall be a sovereign democratic State which shall be known as the Republic of Mauritius".[6] Mauritius thus gained the status of a sovereign state on 12 March 1968 and Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam became the first Mauritian Prime Minister (of Indo-Mauritian descent and of Hindu religion). The first schedule of the constitution, under section 'Communities', makes provision that the population is to be regarded as composed of four communities; the Hindu community, the Muslim community, the Sino-Mauritian community and a fourth community, the General Population. The latter also regrouped every person who does not appear, by way of life, to belong to any of the three other categories. In fact, the new constitution institutionalized the rise of community-based politics. This statement in the constitution was apparently the result of many consultations and negotiations between Mauritian political leaders (led mostly by the new Hindu elites) and the United Kingdom Colonial Office prior to independence (Salverda 2015; Meetarbhan 2018).

As to the subject of human rights, the constitution guarantees freedom of rights to the individual "without discrimination, by reason of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others…" Provision is also made for the protection of the freedom of conscience. According to a person's own consent, this freedom includes: "freedom of thought and of religion or belief, freedom to change his religion or belief…". It could be argued that, on one hand, the population is classified into four communities as a resource for competing political power, among other purposes, but, on the other hand, the constitution also allows the freedom to change religion. Interfaith dialogue, intercultural activities, inter-ethnic marriages, new religious entrants, conversions are among the many unintended consequences of this constitutional clause. Different scholars noted that since 1972, no national census has counted communities' belongings again (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018; Leuprecht, 2012). We have also seen above that today both ethnic and non-ethnic identities may be present in the population. This may be reason for Ramtohul and Eriksen (2018) to coin "the Mauritian Paradox" in the title of their book. In many aspects Mauritius has been exceptional. Notwithstanding inter-ethnic tensions and economic stagnation around 1968, Leuprecht (2012) singled out Mauritius among other British colonies (Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Fiji) because there was no national struggle as such to acquire independence.

[5] https://electoral.govmu.org/Pages/Legislation/CONSTITUTION%20of%20Mauritius.pdf

[6] The status 'Republic of Mauritius' was an amendment made in 1991.

Unlike the other British colonies which experienced coups, Mauritius' transition to independence was therefore rather peaceful and developmental despite pre-independence ominous predictions. Diversity as a resource and good governance seem to have been favorable factors for the Mauritian social and economic growth. In 1996, Mauritius was classified in the 'high human development' category of the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) placing itself among developed countries (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018). Notwithstanding the drawbacks of an ageing population, such as labor-force shortage, Statistics Mauritius (2019)[7] noted that ageing is a 'triumph of development' and that Mauritians are living longer, with better nutrition, sanitation, health-care, education and economic well-being.

On the other hand, Leuprecht (2012) argued that Mauritius' successful independence and sustainable peace among the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), who are known to be among the conflict-prone countries in the world, could also be explained by its political demographic structure. He analyzed the population statistics and opined that there is a historically significant gap between the numbers of majority Indo-Mauritians community and those of the minority Creoles (General Population community) in contrast with the narrow gap between conflicting communities competing for power in Fiji. He posits that a large gap between the population numbers of two communities is an enabler for democratic consolidation. In my view, one cannot neglect, in the Mauritian political interplay, the role of the smaller but economically powerful community of Franco-Mauritians (less than 1% of the population) who are the historical main land-owners and sugar estates tenure. Both Indo-Mauritians and the Creoles have struggled together, and continue to, for social justice and economic independence. The Franco-Mauritians can as well be compared to the Melanesian natives of Fiji in the defense of their lands for being the first settlers, except that the former had no choice to but leave political power in the hands of the majority Indo-Mauritians' elites at independence in 1968. In result of this political power transition, the capital gains from the exports of cane sugar have helped successive governments to build the infrastructure of the island, to consolidate a strong welfare state and democracy. Moreover, well-designed rules of participation and parliamentary representation, such as the unique Best Loser System, has proved effective in ethnic diversity management and conflict resolution (Fessha and Nam, 2015). The question is for how long? Or what next?

The 'Mauritian Paradox' could also imply that community self-identity is not bound to be rigid, in both space and time, but called to be dynamic as well, and such 'mobility' or fluidity is likely provisioned by the constitution. This examination shall examine this fluidity in identity, and provide grounds for consideration in a next constitutional reform. Further, during this research I have found that two cases have been brought to the attention of international institutions, where concern has been raised about community identification in Mauritius; one complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee and another one with the Privy Council of UK. In both cases, it has been argued that statistical figures on community, which date back to 1972, are too old now and cannot be used arbitrarily (Meetarbhan, 2018).

[7] https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/

2.2 The 1972 Census and the Communities

The last national census that counted the numbers for each community goes back to 1972, when the total population recorded was 826,199. Tables 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 below give the numbers and details for the four communities, as stipulated in the 1968 Mauritian constitution, and respectively, those with the associated numerous religious denominations. To appreciate the demography at this time of the Mauritian history and subsequent social changes to be accounted later, these figures provide a starting point for analysis. A national self-identity was quite immature fifty years ago, and community identification was primarily oriented towards descent and religious classifications (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018). However, in subsequent years, it seems that classification by communities was becoming more complex, with intermarriages as suggested by Christopher (1992) and Sutton (2007), or probably other reasons like religious conversion. Mooneegadoo (2018), observed that due to the impact of other cultures, there are now few cases of younger Tamils, for example, marrying other ethnic partners. Besides, Christopher also noted that it was the statement of the householder that defined the community identification for the family members, which largely followed religious affiliations. Undoubtedly, in the earlier decades of the 20th century, the patriarchal rule was dominant and determinant in this self-identification exercise. One could therefore argue on the accuracy of the 1972 official statistics figures on community data. Everyday interactions with other communities became a reality (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018), and the legal flexibility on interfaith marriages, in comparison with other independent British colonies, (Christopher, 1992) could be reasons motivating the political decision of discontinuing with the ambiguous question on community as from the 1983 census.

Statistics Year	**1972**		**2011 (assumption)**	
Demography	**Persons**	**%**	**Persons**	**%**
Republic of Mauritius	826,199		1,236,817	
Males only	413,648		610,848	
Females only	412,551		625,969	
Indo-Hindu Community	428,167	52	600,327	48.5
Indo-Muslim Community	137,081	16.6	213,562	18
Sino-Mauritian Community	24,084	3	5, 275	0,4 (Chinese only
General-Population Community - (including Franco-Mauritians)	236,867	28.7	404,553	32

Table1.1: demography details: a comparison of National census of 1972 and Housing census 2011. **Source**: Statistics Mauritius; https://statsmauritius.govmu.org

Statistics Mauritius made a Housing and Population census in 2011, in which data on religion was also collected. A grouping of the religions under the assumed communities of 1972 is done here and provide indicative new percentages of the different communities. It can be seen that almost 70% of the 1.2 million people are migrants from India. One can also observe from these statistics available online (https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/) that the

number of persons who declared 'no religion' has increased from 923 in 1972, to 8,634 in 2011. Again here, it would be interesting to know whether these persons would be keen to be accounted to their respective descent communities or not, and if yes, this can show the spread of 'no religion' across the communities. This shows the complexity of the relations interconnecting identity, community and religion, and its evolution through the generations over the last four decades.

Main Religion	**Christian (General Population)**	**Hindu**	**Muslim**	**Other Religions**
Number of Religious denominations	15	23	9	5
Examples of	Roman Catholic, Church of England, Church of Scotland, Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal and other groups	Sanatanist and Samajist (Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Telegu, Gujrati). Rajput, Vaish, and other groups	Sunnee Hanafee, Sunnee Shafee, Shiah, Ahmadi and other groups	Buddhist, Confucian, Chinese Baha'i Jewish and No religion

Table 1.2: Examples of Religious denominations

	Gen. Population		**Hindu**		**Muslim**		**Other Religions**	
	1972	**2011**	**1972**	**2011**	**1972**	**2011**	**1972**	**2011**
Classifications by Religions	15	22	23	19	9	4	5	5

Table 1.3: Comparison of classifications of religions; 1972 & 2011 figures

The contexts of the four communities mentioned above are discussed below and this section is closed with the note from the census commissioner of 1881 (Christopher 1992, 58):

> It has so far been comparatively easy to distinguish the one from the other, but the day is not far distant when such a distinction will be next to impossible, unless the parties themselves give their origin.

2.3 The Hindu Community

The Hindu community in Mauritius is a collective group of Indian descent, mostly from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, and is composed of people of various religious denominations (see table1.2). They have diversified cultures and languages, like Hindi or Tamil, and together they constituted 52% of the population at the time of the 1972 census. What were the motives of this massive immigration from India? According to the historical narrative, prior to the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, in 1834, the intensive-labour

on the sugar-estates consisted of a majority of slaves from Eastern Africa and already of a minority of labourers from India (Allen, 2008). To meet the rising demand for sugar on the international markets, the Franco-Mauritians, owners of the sugar-estates, negotiated with the British administration for additional labour. Thus as from 1834 and up to 1924, agreements between India and Mauritius allowed a massive migration of indentured artisans, labourers and skilled workers. It has been reported that some 450,000 Indian workers (including Muslims) left India, from poorer living conditions, in the hope of a better future. They were apparently engaged on their arrivals, for example, in five-year contracts, which they ultimately renewed and eventually settled permanently (Kothari 2013, 1047). The British administration offered them plots of land, as bonus, and loans to start their own plantations (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2007, 124), which helped them to become economically independent and to provide education for their offsprings.

Their identity as Hindus did not apparently matter much in their venture as they were more driven by the hope of a better life. Some authors have argued that under the capitalist (colonials represented by the Franco-Mauritian administrations of the Sugar-Estates of that period) powers indentured labourers might have experienced a new form of slavery, or relative freedom as compared to the African slaves (Kothari 2013, 1049). However, discussions on their freedom or conditions to migrate as indentured labourers are beyond the scope of this study, emphasis is rather laid on the religious and cultural characteristics of these first immigrants and their native-born Mauritian offsprings, as expressions of their identities. The Hindus, together with the Muslims, are also known as the Indo-Mauritians or the Indian diaspora settlement in Mauritius. Forming 68% of the population, they apparently constitute the highest concentration of Indians diaspora in the world (Leuprecht, 2012) The indentured system involving the indentured diaspora has been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage in 2006 with the inscription of 'Aapravasi Ghat' (Hindi words for immigrant interface) on the site of the Immigration Depot, in Port-Louis (Seetah, 2015; Gest, 2021).

Eriksen (1992) also observed that Mauritius has a strong 'gravitational pull' from India, given that more than half of the population are Indo-Mauritians. It is therefore very much likely that a kind of Hindu hegemony prevails in Mauritian politics. For example, Kasenally (2011) observed that since independence to date, there has been more than ten general elections in Mauritius, and every time a Hindu Prime Minister of the *Vaish* caste was elected, leading to successive coalesced governments. This is like an unwritten reality of the Mauritian democracy, which apparently unifies the Hindus, as a majority community, in the exercise of political power. For how long? An exception to this chain of singular communal leadership, occurred in 2003, when prior to an agreement before the elections, the Hindu prime minister handed the leadership at mid-mandate, to a coalition Franco-Mauritian partner (Kasenally, 2011). As a Mauritian Hindu native-born, this was like a maturity test-case of a mentality shift to a national identity (three decades after independence) as supreme and that any individual of capacity can assume the highest political office. However, Kasenally (2011) observed that a few Hindu socio-ethnic groups showed their uneasiness to this situation, meaning that political power is to some extent still seen in the interest of ethnicity. Fessha and Nam (2015), argued that the BLS (Best Loser System) has encouraged coalitions among political parties in

the hope of seeking the maximum votes from the electorate across communities and which probably has enabled a Franco-Mauritian to become prime minister.

Culturally, I have observed that typical Indian dress wearing like the saree or *churidar* for women and *dhoti* for men, had gradually disappeared in the post-colonial daily public space. Both men and women of the 21st century are more inclined to western-type outfit in their daily activities or professional spaces. However, modern Indian clothes are worn at religious celebrations or for events like weddings. As a last observation here, comparing census reports of 1972 and 2011 (see table 1.1), the decrease of the Hindu Community from 52% to 48.5% cannot be overlooked; it can partly be explained by the rise in numbers of Pentecostal churches of different denominations and other new religions like 7th day Adventist church or Bahá'í to which many Indo-Mauritians have become adherents, as will be discussed later. Leuprecht (2012) also examined the incidence of a general decreasing fertility rate along the ageing process of the Mauritian population. Besides, emigration could be another factor. Moreover, Fessha and Nam (2015), stated that Telegus and Tamils do not consider themselves as Hindus, being of different religious affiliations. The Hindu community is thus described as being heterogeneous and ambiguous. Otherwise, the different groups of the Hindu community, project a rich variety of religious markers, cultures and traditions, from various temples to oriental foods and cookies, throughout the year for different celebrations.

2.4 The Muslim Community

As mentioned above, the Muslims also form part of the Indian Diaspora in Mauritius. Though the majority of them originated from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, under the indentured system of migration (1834-1924), a few Muslims were already present during the French settlement (1715-1810). Around the 1840s, wealthy Indian Muslim merchants of the high-class Memons and Surtees, mainly from Gujarat and Bombay, migrated freely to Mauritius for business purposes (Hollup, 1996; Eisenlohr, 2006). Immediately, they demarked themselves both economically and socially from the *Calcuttyas* (those who embarked at the Calcutta port) or the lower-class Muslims of the 'local' Indian diaspora ('local' is used here as we shall see later 'foreign' Indo-Mauritian diaspora of UK). These prominent traders practiced endogamous marriages who would often take wives from India and would not marry with *Calcuttyas* (Hollup, 1996). They helped to establish the first Muslim institutions like mosques and Madrassas (religious school). For example, the now famous Jummah Mosque in Port Louis, was constructed in the 1850s.

The 1972 demographic census recorded more than 16% of the Mauritian population as belonging to the Muslim Community. However, similar to the Hindu Community, the Muslims belong to different schools of thoughts and practices, as shown in table 1.2. For example, the minority Ahmadiyyas group, considered as non-Muslims by the majority Sunni group, are however recognized as Muslims by the government of Mauritius (Hollup, 1996). The Ahmadiyyas, believe in the prophet Mirza Goolam Ahmad, as a reformer of Islam, and have their own mosques on the island. Thus both Hindus and Muslims belong to complex heterogeneous communities with different economic powers, cultures, or religious beliefs.

All of them have come to share a common island space and resources far from the same homeland, India. Can a pattern of nationalist ideology emerge out of the inter/intra-community divides after decades of access to a common national educational system? School, for example, is a space from early childhood for discovery of the other and interactions. Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally (2020) argued that, as a result of cohabitation, negotiated compromises and an internalization of the need to preserve peace between communities has emerged. In their study on 'Mauritian Muslim women and the negotiation of porous interfaces', they found that distinctions made between Surtee or Maymon Muslims, for example, (classifications made on either the ancestors' region of embarkation from India or the family status/caste belonging) are probably becoming less important in the minds of daughter generations. However, this does not mean that endogamy, for example, is no longer practiced. This calls for further research on the intersection of castes among Muslims in Mauritius (Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally, 2020).

Apparently, initially the first Muslims and Hindus shared common values for example, their originating Indian national identity, or 'ancestral culture', more than their respective religious traditions (Eisenlohr, 2006). This 'common identity' is often relayed in Mauritian political public discourses in the construct of a plural nation. Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff (2007) argued that this common ancestral unity was dominant up to late 1940s, probably due to the common negotiations with the colonial power through trade unions for better income. As we have seen above, from 1947 onwards, inter-community tensions based on religious grounds started, on one hand, due to the fight for local political representations in parliament, and on the other hand, apparently to the foreign partition of British-India from Pakistan (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2007). This could explain the split of Indo-Mauritians into Hindu and Muslim communities in the 1972 census despite both Hindus and Muslims originating from the same villages in India and speaking the same dialect, known as Bhojpuri. (Hollup, 1996). Bhojpuri was popular from the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh and is now spoken mostly by rural and the older-generation of Indo-Mauritians (Eisenlohr, 2007). In the same vein of boundary creation, Sutton (2007) noted that the stalls for the sale of beef and pork were separated for the first time in 1948 at the central market of Port Louis. However, culturally the fellowship within Muslim groups, whether Ahmaddiya or Sunni, is exemplary. Nevertheless, over time, some new generations Muslims tend to be more lenient in accepting, for example, to marry with outgroups (Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally 2020, 1107-1108). Mothers who traditionally wear Muslim dress are more tolerant to their daughters' stance of modernity, considering family harmony and happiness as more important. Otherwise, traditionally Muslims show solidarity among themselves and firmness in their faith, like responding collectively to the call for their daily obligatory prayers. Nationwide, interactions with Muslim culture is also visible; the Muslim biryani for example, '*briani*' (in Creole), is of a typical unique Mauritian touch and very well appreciated by all Mauritians.

2.5 The General Population Community

The General Population community group constitutes mainly the Creoles (nearly 28% and mostly of African descent), the white Franco-Mauritians and small numbers of Colored or

mixed-race people. The mixed-race group are often considered as children of the Franco-Mauritian plantation owners and slave women (Ramtohul, 2021). The people of African descent and those of the mixed-race came to be known as Creoles. It should be noted, firstly, that under the 1968 constitution, the Franco-Mauritians who are less than 1% of the population, viewed as the white elites, based on racial superiority and their historical economic power as the first settlers on the island (Salverda, 2015), are grouped together with the Creoles. Secondly, the majority of citizens falling under the General Population community practice different religions classified under Christianity (See table1.2). Apparently, the General group was constituted around 1850, due to the physically diverse population (Christopher, 1992). From 1947 onwards, the Franco-Mauritians would gradually lose their political power, since the populated working class rallied with the Mauritius Labour Party and was composed of Indo-Mauritians and Creoles. This, however, did not prevent them from remaining the historical elites, maintaining their colonial land acquisitions and economic power base to date (Salverda, 2015).

Lallmahomed-Aumeerally (2017) and Christopher (1992), argued that this group of coloreds, descendant of slaves (known as Creoles) and the Franco-Mauritians were grouped under the category 'General Population' due to their shared Catholic belief, and because of their inclination to the French language. However, in my opinion, the rationale behind this categorization stands around the period leading to independence in 1968 only because firstly, it cannot be ignored that other Christian faiths, like the 7th Day Adventist or the Pentecostal faiths have also been placed in this same category (See table 1.2). My fieldwork reveals that today the adepts are a mix of ethnicities, including Indo-Mauritians. Secondly, we have seen above that the General Population community together with the other three communities increasingly use Creole, the 'unofficial national language' as a common spoken language, with a rising usage above 80% across the population. Moreover, in the recent decades, the general population community indirectly also constitutes the majority of Sino-Mauritians who largely practice Catholicism. Although they are a minority group, with relative economic powers as compared to the Franco-Mauritians (Hempel, 2009), they are accounted as a separate community group in both the 1968 constitution and the 1972 census. The General group became even more complex for census officers to manage with the inclusion of Christian Indo-Mauritians constituting a population of 16,000 in 1952 with a mix of Euro-Christian first names with Indian family names (Christopher, 1992).

On the other hand, Creoles who constitute the majority of the General Population community are often considered as being marginalized due to their limited access to resources, and belonging mostly to the manual labor force. However, they find themselves classified in a heterogeneous community together with the rich Franco-Mauritians who share a different reality (Hempel 2009). The term 'Malaise Creole' (feelings of inferiority caused by socioeconomic injustices) was coined in 1993 by late Father Roger Cerveaux[8] (1948-2013) during a homily in commemoration of the abolition of slavery. He dared in his discourse, on that particular day, to raise the taboo question of the responsibility of the Catholic clergy in the discrimination against Creoles. An 'unprecedented critique' was even raised in the 1990s

[8] https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/societe/necrologie-pere-roger-cerveaux-voix-qui-seteint/99959/

against the Church's practices of privileging the Franco-Mauritian elites (Lallmahomed-Aumeerally, 2017). These particular classifications and discrimination practices, either by the Church or the Mauritian society, caused Hempel (2009) to argue that unity and political coordination within the General Population community are real challenges. Does this justify the claims by some Creole public figures for a 'fifth category' (mentioned by Lallmahomed-Aumeerally) in the next constitution? Conversely, almost all new generations of Mauritians feel themselves Creoles, being native-born on an island, and particularly when dancing on the *Sega*, a traditional folklore of African descent. Additionally, there have been some recent developments in recent years which this study will explore.

2.6 The Sino-Mauritian Community

The Sino-Mauritian community constitutes people of Chinese descent and was initially accounted as 'Chinese' in the first population surveys (Wan, 2015). Apparently, some Chinese came as slaves under the Dutch colonization during the 18th century, but the bulk travelled freely to the island under the British rule, mostly as traders, carpenters or joiners. The 1901 census, for example accounted for more than 3,000 Chinese which gradually increased to about 24,000 in 1972. However, the Housing census of 2011 revealed that only 5,275 persons practiced the Buddhist/Chinese religions in the Republic of Mauritius explaining why Table 1.1 above shows the Sino-Mauritian community at less than 1% of the population. This can be interpreted by the fact that most Chinese converted to Roman Catholic after 1972 and were subsequently classified under the General Group (Fessha and Nam, 2015). Their identity thus became complex. Are the new generations to be considered as pure Catholic or a mix of Catholic/Buddhist and are they to be considered as belonging to the Sino-Mauritian or General Population communities?

Christopher (1992) also found that a concentration of the Chinese population could be located in the city of Port Louis in the later decades of the 20th century, namely the now vibrant and popular Chinatown. Year 2011 statistics counted nearly 2,000 Buddhist/Chinese in Port-Louis, but this concentration is now decreasing over the years. In parallel, the General population community increased from 28% (1972) to 32% (2011). However, it is to be noted that significant emigrations, during post-independence, also impacted both communities' percentages, fearing the government led by the Hindu majority (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018). Besides, young generations from Sino-Mauritian descents have migrated to countries like Canada or Australia for university studies and subsequently settled permanently abroad due to better salaries and prospects (Wan, 2015).

Consequently, the older generations of Sino-Mauritians, presently face the difficulty and worries of running their local traditional businesses. It was very popular from the early 20th century, to encounter with a '*la boutik Sinwa*' (Creole expression for a Chinese retail shop) in every remote corner of the island. It was the only place of shopping in the neighborhood. I can remember from my own childhood years in the 1970s, the friendly relationship developed with '*la boutik Joseph*'. Indeed, it was common practice for Chinese to take a Christian name, for an easier pronunciation and integration with the wider community.

Though the Chinese family name and trade license were displayed at the shop entrance, customers would call on the shop owner by '*Misye* Joseph' (Mr. Joseph). Around 2010, '*la boutique Joseph*' and since then many others are gradually closing because the children are engaging in other professional jobs, getting married and moving away from the traditional family retail shop to urban areas or even overseas.

Though, few in numbers, about 3% of the population as per 1972 census, Sino-Mauritians are however considered as the second economic power after the Franco-Mauritians and recognized for their contribution to the success of the Mauritian economy. Their engagement in different sectors of the economy and trades from textile to distilleries to restaurants, is an established footprint for the nation. They are reputed for their discipline at work, high ethical conduct and mindfulness about profit in business. The constitution's clause on communities guarantees at least one Sino-Mauritian as Legislative member, often appointed as minister (Wan, 2015). However, compared to the Franco-Mauritians group, the Sino-Mauritians socialize easily across communities, interacting easily with all cultures. On the other hand, as pointed out by Christopher (1992), Sino-Mauritians marrying into other immigrant groups is happening increasingly. They are culturally strong with traditional Chinese pagodas and famous restaurants around the island. The Chinese new year (Spring Festival) is a national holiday. Traditional menus like '*diri frir*' (fried rice) or '*minn frir*' (fried noodles) have become popular national flavors. These cordial interactions, both culturally and religiously, across communities shall be analyzed in line with the object of the present inquiry.

The above contexts on the Mauritian constitution's declared communities compound to some extent the last hundred years or so of a common history and intermingling of local diasporas and offsprings from their distant origins. Undoubtingly, the 20th century has been very rich in terms of the co-existence of different religious groups and sociocultural organizations, experiences generated, challenges tackled, policies and legal framework put forward to contain the different interests. As a plural nation, independence in 1968 was like a first milestone achieved in the organic development of a cosmopolitan society. Undeniably, safeguarding the freedom of thought and religion within the protection of human rights, have been consolidated by the constitution and successive governments. Mauritius has thus built up a solid and unique reference in the African region and worldwide, on matters of governance of a multi-religious and multi-cultured society. Despite one or two outbreaks of community conflict, the unity of a nation has been preserved. The causes of these communal conflicts shall be covered in chapter 3. Ethnic categorization was definitely a capital for political power and even a safeguard for politics stability during post-independence. In the lens of this research, there has been a gradual loosening of the link between ethnicity and religion. Complexities have arisen with time, for example while Sino-Mauritians were initially mostly Buddhists, today the majority of them are Christians. But, in the development of relational identities, religion still has its place in the process of nation building and the development of ethics.

Various scholarly studies on Mauritius, realized in the recent decades, have raised expressions and arguments on the subjects of ethnicity and multiculturalism. Many predicted failures around independence, like Noble Prize winner James Meade in 1961 (Leuprecht,

2012; Fessha and Nam, 2015). Surprisingly, at the turn of the 21st century, Mauritius was among the top successful and sustainable African economies with diverse local footprints (Subramanian and Roy, 2001). For instance, the different cuisines, cultures, ritual performances, temples and celebrations, in combination with beautiful beaches and luxury hotels, attract almost a million tourists yearly. The sustainable economic growth reached after almost four decades of independence, was definitely another milestone in terms of achievement. But as Subramanian and Roy (2001) argued, the diversity of the Mauritian population, seen as a challenge by others, has in many ways contributed to the economic success. The next chapter will examine these contributions through an exploration and update on the dynamics of diversity, multiculturalism and the emergence of interculturality within the framework of an organic development of identity.

Chapter 3

Religious fluidity and the formation of Mauritian*ness*

3.10 National anthem and flag as national identifiers

We have seen how a plural independent nation has been created from different communities of African, Asian and European descents out of a 'no-nation' state in 1968. Though the preceding months leading to independence were marked by inter-community tensions and riots, the Mauritian Quadri color[9] flag was born. To mark the event, as was the expected practice, a national anthem and as a national symbol were put forward with invitations from the public for proposals. Common to many African countries, the anthem reflects the political nationalist discourse of the time (Cusack, 2005), the post-colonial context and the struggle to promote the unification of different peoples and cultures. In the case of Mauritius, the anthem could be considered as the first building block in the construction of a 'national identity'. Jean-Georges Prosper (1933-), a popular poet, won the open competition for the anthem's words which read as follows:

Glory to thee, Motherland

O Motherland of mine.

Sweet is thy beauty,

Sweet is thy fragrance,

Around thee we gather

As one people,

As one nation,

In peace, justice and liberty.

Beloved Country,

May God bless thee

For ever and ever.

Joseph Philippe Gentil (1928-2021), a police band musician composed the anthem's music which fitted well with the lyrics of Jean Georges Prosper. Cusack (2005) noted that

[9] https://defimedia.info/alain-laridon-struggle-independence-was-not-easy

while most of the African countries' anthems make their nations 'fatherland', the nation as a father, Mauritius and few other countries praise their nations as 'motherland'. The national anthem describes the beauty and natural landscape of motherland in the island of Mauritius. Further, the phrase 'as one people, as one nation' (loosely translated to: '*enn sel lepep enn sel nasyon*' in the Mauritian Creole), common to all Mauritians, calls on the different communities to internalize a kind of nationalist ideology. This was like the very first step in the circulation of public discourse as a key mode of spreading and transposing the nation form in the Mauritian post-colonial context of communities (Eisenlohr 2007, 970). It is reported that in the 1967 general elections, which would determine the vote for independence or not, almost 45% of the population voted against (Salverda, 2015). Further, we noted in chapter 1, the account that the independence was mostly led by political elites belonging largely to the majority Indo-Mauritians and the apprehensions expressed by the elites of the minority General Population group (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018). Thus the national anthem composition and the four-coloured bands flag intended to unify the Mauritian population, to recall that all communities share one common land, the motherland, and together they are like national markers of legitimate patriotism. Eisenlohr (2007) noted that on 12 March 1983, the national anthem was sung in Creole but was immediately contested by some members of the Hindu bourgeoisie who themselves use this vernacular as their everyday language. The contest is apparently motivated by the fact that the vernacular Creole is associated with the minority Creole community.

Prior to independence, the anthem was put on air and played daily on the MBC radio which remains a souvenir of my childhood. Not many households could afford a TV set in those days,[10] as television transmission was launched in 1965. The lyrics were written on the blackboards in schools and students were requested to memorize the words. Every morning the school assembly, under the guidance of the teachers and the headmaster/mistress, would sing the hymn loudly and proudly. Around and on 12th March 1968, official representations were held with flag raising ceremonies and serving of lemonade and pastries offered by the government. As far as my memories can recall, there was no cultural exclusivity in the celebrations marking the independence, since in the classroom all classmates, of different communities, fully and joyfully participated. However, it could be noted that the selection of both Gentil and Prosper in the composition of the national anthem was not a matter of pure coincidence, because their Christian first names undoubtedly reflect a belonging to the General Population community. Was it a calculated political motivation, beyond their recognized merits, to rally opponents and proponents to the independence cause? Sutton (2007) explained that the first Hindu Prime Minister who led Mauritius to independence, carefully and virtually used religious association to facilitate a secular politics. How could it be otherwise? At this period in the Mauritian history, the logics of ethnic-belonging definitely predominated the minds and Leuprecht (2012) appropriately observed that the social importance of ethnicity depends very much on the political circumstance. It seems as well that Mauritius has benefitted from good leadership from the very beginning of independence managing intelligently the multicultural population. Salverda (2015) argued that although

[10] https://mbcradio.tv/history

ethnic tensions were immediately overcome after independence, the nexus of politics with ethnicity is a lasting heritage as are the stances of non-ethnic belongings as mentioned above.

3.11 Culture Politics - (Mauritian*ness*)

To reiterate here, multiculturalism was like a starting point at immigration in the development of both intra-groups and inter-groups processes and its maintenance was very much dependent on State support at independence while at the same time it proved essential for competing political power. However, with time, multiculturalism almost becomes a precursor to inter-culturalism. In-group and out-group relationships, according to Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, overlap horizontally across cultures. Eisenlohr (2007) examined the Creole publics (interpreted as describing the lives of all natives of islands, like Mauritius) where language together with cultural citizenship are essentials to the spread of the notion of nationhood. In the Mauritian context, Afro-Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians, Indo-Mauritians and Sino-Mauritians, all of them assume a Creole identity where the Creole vernacular becomes an engine of inter-connectedness. Eisenlohr (2007) opined that Creole as a common vernacular can provide different images and characteristics in the public circulation of discourses on Creole identities in the formation of a nation. I provide below a few examples where Creole as a vernacular becomes an engine of unification in the nation building.

Prior to independence, beyond the dynamics of prevailing political conflict, artist Bahal Gowry (1935-), of Indo-Mauritian origin, composed the popular Creole song '*donne to la main, prend mo la main, a nou batir nation mauricien'* (loosely translated to 'give me your hand, take my hand, let us build the Mauritian nation'). The song was approved by the British Governor Sir John Shaw Rennie (1917-2002), for release in 1967. Also available in *Bhojpuri* (a hindi vernacular), it was very much appreciated and used by the political elites leading the independence campaign, and by the wider population. It has become together with the national anthem, legendary songs vibrating the Mauritian population as a whole for peace and unity, especially at the annual celebrations of independence day.[11] A new recording of the song, in a rhythmic and remix *sega-bhojpuri* style has been realized together with voices of other local artists on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the independence in 2018, and was played on the state-controlled MBC-TV and other online video platform like YouTube.[12] This shows that fifty years after independence, Mauritian culture politics in terms of artistic promotions, national vernacular, national heritages like the Aapravasi Ghat, cultural centers and even annual subsidies to religions are all ingredients that have proved useful in the nation building process. Eisenlohr (2007) posited that linguistic formulations of nationhood are evident in the politics of Mauritian Creole. He compares linguistic ethno-nationalism in Mauritius and the shared vernacular by different ethnicities, as one of the crucial dimensions for the rise of nationalism and popular sovereignty in 19th century Europe.

[11] https://defimedia.info/bahal-gowry-auteur-de-donne-la-main-prend-mo-la-main-je-suis-fier-que-cette-chanson-aide-faconner-lunite-nationale

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYTvBTsoyhA

The above artistic creations of Gentil, Gowry, Prosper and others, are aspects of the 'doing of identity' (Hughes-Freeland 1998, 47; Warburg 2006, 332-334) which collectively, with the concourse of the media and the audience, reinforce the social fabric and create a sense of 'Mauritian*ness*'. When the two vernaculars come together, the fusion symbolizes inter-culturalism. Contrasting visions of membership to a Mauritian nation (Eisenlohr, 2007) are formed and they shape the belongings to it of both the Indo-Mauritian and the Afro-Mauritian. Conversely, though Gowry claims in his song to: "*met de kote kominote*" (to put aside community), the national constitution tunes diametrically the opposite making the identification and declaration with a community (among the four communities specified) law-abiding on candidates running for any general election of the Legislative Assembly. A judgment made in this sense, in a case before the UK Privy Council in 2011, maintained such requirement, and rather suggested for constitutional reform. [13]

While examining the development of the Mauritian Creole vernacular, I found that some ten millions people are using the Creole language in different forms in the world. Since 1983, 28th October is a UNESCO international day to celebrate the Creole language and culture. Creole has been introduced in the primary schools in Mauritius in 2012. Debates on its introduction in the Mauritian Parliament continue. The Prime Minister pointed out that an *Akademi Kreol Repiblik Moris* (Mauritius Creole academy) was constituted in 2019 to precisely develop the Creole lexicon.[14] The Mauritian Creole culture is thus being institutionalized and narrows down the gap between cultures in creating inter-cultural dialogue. Musical creativity becomes an essential link among local artists and even in the region with Creole cultures of neighboring islands like Reunion or Seychelles islands.

More recently in June 2021, Mauritian popular Creole singer Zulu launched a new album "Kouler mo lapo" (colour of my skin) with Jean-Yves Bestel (a Franco-Mauritian) on the occasion of the International Music Day.[15] Zulu described in the song that during childhood, when kids play together, there are no barriers of race or colour. Differences are highlighted in adulthood and prevent mixing of inter-groups. He uses language to remind Mauritians to look beyond their differences, to 'mix colours' (to be colour-blind), and that the red, blue, yellow and green colours of the Mauritian flag are found in the hearts of Mauritians.[16] Folkloric songs like *segas* and fusion of *segas* with Hindi/Bhojpuri languages by artists from different ethnic origins, create across generations this belonging to 'Creoles des iles' (people born in the islands). Thus, in the spread of the nation form, immigrants of various ethnicities find in a circulating musical discourse, through the common vernacular what Eisenlohr (2007) termed as 'regimes of membership in the nation' (Eisenlohr, 2007). Further, Hollup (1994) stated that Indians, for example, have come to live in environments populated by other ethnic communities causing participation in other traditions while preserving theirs. With increased urbanization and common education centres, processes of acculturation or 'creolization' take place. Almost no Mauritian will deny the fact that singing and dancing on the *sega* have

[13] https://www.jcpc.uk/cases/docs/jcpc-2010-0070-judgment.pdf
[14] https://english.lematinal.media/international-creole-language-day-still-not-allowed-in-parliament/
[15] https://english.lematinal.media/kouler-mo-lapo-zulu-sings-about-crossbreeding/
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubuYGrt0RoM

become popular entertainments at birthday parties or wedding celebrations across communities.

Nevertheless, as of September 2021, the leaders of political party "Rezistans ek Alternativ" are still awaiting the ruling of the Supreme Court of Mauritius on their long contesting the obligation by the constitution to declare one's ethnicity for eligibility to sit as candidate at the Legislative Assembly. In this case, where the adverse parties are the State and the Electoral Supervisory Commission, the lawyer of "Rezistans ek Alternativ" is of opinion that this challenge addresses the foundations of parliamentary democracy and that the rejection of a candidate based on non-belonging to the four communities of the constitution is nowadays arbitrary.[17] Sookroojowa (2021) found that the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) has recommended to reconsider whether the community-based electoral system is still useful and argued that despite the subject of ethnic classification seems contentious in Mauritius, it has received limited scholarly attention. An assessment of the role of the state in maintaining ethnic boundaries in population censuses is also suggested. These circulating discourses, either through creative songs that 'mix colours' or political moves or even academic interests to re-examine the need of the declaration of community are therefore elements of a continuous narrative leading probably to a new constitution in the future.

3.12 Economic Growth and the Welfare State

As a plural nation, undoubtedly, the discourses and cultural productions around the independence project, have consolidated the acclaimed diversity and multiculturalism, beyond religious, cultural or ethnic differences. In the ensuing decades, a strong sense of collective belonging thus emerged, particularly among the new generations, while the past apprehensions and uncertainties faded away. Apparently, both economic and political elites, under successive governments, have collaborated successfully to manage the cash cow (based on the monocrop sugar production), for the benefits of the whole population (Subramanian and Roy, 2001). Gradually, the economy shall diversify from monocrop sugar to textile manufacturing, to tourism industry and to financial and offshore services. The infrastructure and the welfare state developed accordingly, for example free access to health services at public hospitals and dispensaries around the island, free education, and a basic retirement pension scheme for all citizens as from age sixty.[18] Leuprecht (2012) found that Mauritius invested in a consolidated welfare state, during the post-independence era, in spite of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity recommendations. Ironically he said, today the same IMF uses Mauritius as a 'poster-child' for Africa's economic and social development. Attaining the status of an upper-middle-income country in the beginning of the 21st century, Mauritius has subsequently been classified in 2020 as a high-income country by the World Bank excluding the recession impact of the covid-19 pandemic.[19] The material

[17] https://english.lematinal.media/ethnic-declaration-the-state-and-the-esc-put-forward-new-arguments/
[18] https://socialsecurity.govmu.org/Pages/Department/BRP.aspx
[19] https://www.mcci.org/en/media-news-events/business-updates/world-bank-classifies-mauritius-as-high-income-country/

development and economic achievement indicators, like the gross national income per capita of USD 12,740, is yet another milestone in the track record of a plural nation.

Though continuing concerns on social discrimination prevail, like the 'malaise Creole' issue raised up in 1993 (Lallmahomed-Aumeerally, 2007), progress made in social justice and protections are quite significant. In 2018 for instance, after that Trade Unionists[20] went on a hunger strike to fight against female cleaners' exploitation, a minimum wage salary has been made legal and applicable to all employees working in either public or private sectors. [21] These socioeconomic measures ensure that equity is maintained particularly in a plural nation and eliminate perceptions of political discrimination or preference towards any community. Moreover, because of diversity, as Subramanian and Roy argued (2001), participatory politics was a must immediately after independence to appease opponents and, because of minority and majority communities, representations on institutions were crucial. Definitely, diversity has been a common denominator in both economic and political orientations in the decades following independence, aiming at consolidating the unity of the nation. In the expectation of a distributed institutional representation and other benefits like cultural centres, the idea of belonging to a community and personal identification with it, have been and apparently continue to be resources for politics. From politics of class (prior to 1947) to politics of community (around independence to the present), now that Mauritius has been classified as a high-income country with a unique welfare state, is an identity based on Mauritian*ness* and meritocracy beyond religious identity a consideration for any future constitutional reform?

3.13 From local to foreign diasporas

The years that followed after independence were indeed difficult and challenging in terms of economic orientation and political stability. With dependence on the cash cow only (monocrop sugar) and rapid growth in the population, unemployment rate rose rapidly to attain nearly 35,000 in 1972. It is reported that from independence to the early 21st century, about 200,000 Mauritians have left the country for other destinations like UK, France or Canada, out of which some 40,000 were living in the UK only (Carey, 2018). This is in contrast with the large numbers of people of various descents who came to settle on the island, under different circumstances in the early 19th century. These early migrants were somehow the first generations of Afro/Euro/Indo/Sino-Mauritians who formed the local diasporas while their offspring, born in Mauritius, and who left after independence for different reasons, constituted the foreign diasporas. This cycle of local and foreign diasporas recalls that populations around the world, excluding the historical indigenous, are essentially migrants and assume different identities.

My only sister, left Mauritius in April 1974 when she was 18 years old. After her schooling, she was unable to find herself a job due to the high rates of unemployment. Although her application for registration as student nurse in Wolverhampton, UK, was

[20] http://www.industriall-union.org/mauritius-seven-on-hunger-strike-for-living-wages
[21] https://labour.govmu.org/Pages/National-Wage-Consultative-Council-(NWCC).aspx

successful, it was quite a hard decision for her to emigrate. Strong kinship bonds prevailed in those days when internet and mobile phones were inexistent. I remember that the whole family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins accompanied her to the airport.

This was a real culture shock given some 10,000 kilometres away from Mauritius. In the mid-seventies, she said, Asian and black peoples experienced racism and discrimination with regard to job promotions. Immediately, the comradeship of other Mauritians, irrespective of their religious affiliations, who settled earlier or at the same time was a great comfort. This detachment from the homeland Mauritius and culture, in fact, brought more attachment to their common native identity. In 1989, she eventually acquired the British nationality after having secured employment with the National Health Service. Her two UK-born children identify themselves as British.

My sister's story of emigration and self-identities is but one of the 200,000 Mauritians who left Mauritius for different reasons. Nevertheless, it highlights a process of feeling, being and doing 'more Mauritian' in a foreign land. She often participates in Mauritian parties or regional gatherings in the UK, where the being and doing aspects of personal identity within multiculturalism finds expressions in traditional dressing, cuisines or artistic performances. They enjoy companionship and true distant patriotism, beyond their respective Mauritian religious or community affiliations. They speak in Creole and would sing and dance on the folkloric *sega* or *bhojpuri* popular tunes. Mixed marriages often take place in these circumstances, either with a different Mauritian culture or any local UK citizen.

In the UK census of the Office for National Statistics (ONS)[22] in March 2021, my sister identifies herself as British for the national identity question and as 'other Asian' for the ethnicity question, claiming that she is still very much Mauritian even after having spent almost fifty years in Britain. Bilimoria (2017) evokes a 'dislocated identity' to the diasporic subject such as 'living without belonging in one' or 'belonging without living in the other'. Though my sister adapts to the British way of life, she speaks Creole at home and with her Mauritian friends. Being British, she says, does not mean she has lost her Mauritian identity, and that she can be described as 'first-generation self-identifying Mauritians' (see also Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018). She is now identified to what I called earlier as one of these 'foreign' Indo-Mauritians (in UK) or even Indo-British-Mauritian citizen. Beyond 'Overseas Citizen of India- OCI[23]', would an identification as 'World Citizen' fit better here? In his book "Leçons d'un siècle de vie" (Lessons of a centenary life), Edgar Morin, the French philosopher who celebrated his centenary in July 2021 depicts self-identity as complex. Depending on circumstances it can be plural but also one, considering himself as 'citizen of the world'. He argues for the denial of a reduction to a monolithic identity in favour of a consciousness built on unicity.

While the story of my sister, with a Hindu background, may probably resemble stories of many Mauritian immigrants, it nevertheless asserts more Mauritian*ness* of first-

[22] https://www.ons.gov.uk/census

[23] https://www.mgirti.ac.mu/index.php/indian-immigration-archives

generations in a foreign diaspora than religious or community identification. Another friend of mine, of Muslim background who also migrated to UK a long time ago, affirms on a WhatsApp group that he made enormous sacrifice on a personal level because of islamophobia and racism, in favour of his profession and service to the British society, to offer the very best of Mauritian immigrants. In so doing, Mauritius established economic and cultural links with both Asia and Europe. But more importantly, these links created heavy-traffic airline routes with different destinations. Parents and relatives started to travel significantly to visit their emigrated children in the later decades of the 20th century. My parents travelled overseas for the first time in the 1980s, to visit my sister in UK. The point is that travel in itself, while promoting openness to other cultures and discovery of different ways of life, can shape one's perspective on self-identity.

In the development of Mauritius from a low-income to high-income revenue country, and from local diasporas to the formation of foreign diasporas, arguments and stories brought up here claim for this mauritian*ness* beyond local frontiers. Besides, the narrow paradigm constructed on the local ethnic boundaries in the previous centuries gradually opened up in the connections with foreign diasporas, while being particularly useful in the rapport with other ethnic/racial groups overseas (Ramtohul and Eriksen, 2018). Also, emotional ties with their homeland, for those who left Mauritius, have contributed to remittances to parents and to the social and economic welfare of the Mauritian population in general (Ramtohul, 2021). Further, Subramanian and Roy (2001) also argued that both Asian and European ancestral relations with local and foreign diasporas, have been significant and crucial for a sustainable growth in Mauritius. They posit that diversity of its population helps Mauritius to create international business opportunities, like the Hong Kong investors in Mauritian Textile industries due to their relations with the Sino-Mauritian elites. Similar positive economic benefits for the whole Mauritian population are derived from the relations of Indo-Mauritians or Franco-Mauritian elites with India and France respectively.

The religious landscape development

3.14 Material Expressions

In the "Materiality of Multiculturalism" from an Archeological perspective, Seetah et al. (2018) place the settlements of diverse populations in Mauritius in the context of sugar production around the 18th century. Sugar estates thus played a historical role on the island, in connecting the African, Asian and European traditions and cultures. To recall, the European colonial centres employed African slaved labour and Indian indentured labour in the cultivation of the 'white gold' (cane sugar) (Kasenally, 2011). In the same vein, churches, temples or shrines find their way in and through the Mauritian landscape, as material expressions of these traditions or even in the rise of a kind of popular religion (de Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2014). At the crossroads of these traditions and cultures, ethno-religious considerations shall also become resources for politics with the perception and fear of a kind of Hindu hegemony, particularly in the forefront at election time (Kasenally, 2011). With time deities, wayside shrines and other material incarnations of the divine, which I shall

develop below, become heritages of a multi-ethnic population and populate the religious landscape. In the second half of the 20th century, the religious landscape shall be marked by the entrance of new religious faiths which somehow have started to modify the religious data. At the turn of the present century, a rise in interfaith dialogue has also gained significance and importance to address underlying sporadic ethno-religious conflicts in order to maintain a sustainable unity.

3.15 Hierophany (Hanuman, mother Kalima, Virgin Mary, Amma Tookay and others)

The Oxford dictionary describes hierophany (sourced from Greek *hieros*, 'sacred' and *phainein*, 'to show') as the manifestation of the divine or the sacred, especially in a sacred place, object, or occasion. Religious beliefs and practices from ancestral origins, have been markers of identity particularly along immigrants' settlement in a new land (Seetah et al. 2018, 160-161). Faced with the challenges of a relocation, religion provided a sense of comfort and compensation for hardship. Rituals often take new forms and meanings and, in the interactions with other cultures, a pattern of 'Mauritian tradition' is even created (de Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2014). During the British colonial period, housing huts and camps, to contain the increasing arrival of indentured labour, spread around the sugar estates.

Most of the Hindu labourers, with a majority of men than women, apparently derived spiritual force from their *Hanuman* deity as venerated in the northern villages of India (Seetah et al. 2018, 162). Somehow, the *Hanuman* god thus travelled with the immigrants to Mauritius; perceived as a common feature and religious heritage of Indian diasporas, the latter represents among other characteristics, loyalty, force and heroism (Nugteren and Swamy 2020, 5), that the first-generations of Hindu Indo-Mauritians worshipped for religious compensation in the new tropical land of Mauritius. It is noteworthy that in this religious encounter with the other, the Franco-Mauritians sugarcane planters, of Christian background, provided and facilitated land spaces, stones and skilled labour for the erection of Hindu shrines, mosques or temples on the sugar estates. Seetah et al. (2018) argued that this arrangement was not to be seen as acts of generosity but rather as a motivation for better performance in the sugar cane fieldworks. While going across Mauritius today, one can still appreciate the many places and varieties of shrines, particularly in the rural areas and near sugarcane plantations, a direct consequence of the spread settlement of indentured workers. In the Muslim traditions as well, beyond veneration to Allah directly, some believers do worship at a *Dargah*[24] (shrine of a revered religious figure), like that of Dadi Amina at Les Salines garden, Port Louis. Some Muslim locals told me that these religious figures are like intermediaries with Allah, though not prescribed in the Quran, they are gifted with spiritual power and can intervene in their life difficulties and are often venerated by non-Muslims as well.

[24] https://dargahawlia.wordpress.com/dargahmauritius/

In sum, these venerations of the divine, often in associations with material expressions, constitute the very first pattern of multiculturalism, creating the Mauritian way of religious experiences. The sacred becomes accessible through the presence of hierophanies which can be a stone, a tree or a venerated object (Capps 1995, 143) and are quite present in the Mauritian landscape like popular wayside shrines of various designs. To describe the act by which and in which the sacred is manifested (Reno, 1972), the hierophantic objects are not venerated for what they are, as stones or mountains, but for what they 'reveal' as something other than themselves. Reno argued that in Eliade's attitude, the hierophany acquires a dimension of sacredness distinct from its profane identity. However, he also observed that Eliade's description of hierophanies took rather a Christian orientation, with Jesus as the sum of hierophanies, a supreme incarnation of the sacred. My point in mentioning Eliade's hierophany here, is of course not limited to his Christian perspective, but rather to his suggestion that 'the forms and manifestations of the sacred vary from one people to another and from one civilization to another'. I will examine a few of these Mauritian hierophanies below.

3.16 Mother Kalima and Virgin Mary

Another popular Hindu hierophany in Mauritius which is geographically spread, is the prominence of the goddess 'mother Kalima' and her sisters, housed in a *Kalimai*, a vernacular term known by all culture groups. *Kalimai*, usually built in stones or concrete, may be located at crossroads, street corners or wayside sugarcane fields. From fieldwork and conversations with locals, Mother Kalima represents the triumph of good over evil, the preserver of nature, and particularly, she embodies feminine energy. Many Hindu women, for example, would worship in a *Kalimai* to resolve their fertility problems and asking for more sensuality in their lives. Other devotees also compare mother Kalima with mother Mary of Jesus. From their sourced origins, India or Israel, these sacred places create a unique adaptation in the Mauritian context of multiculturalism and their popular statues as visible identifiers in the materiality of religious pluralism.

According to them, Mary saw in Jesus a savior against the evil spirit of the Jewish oppressors. Similarly, Kalima as wife of the god *Shiva,* is seen as a supreme power standing to fight the evil. She is also venerated for protection of those working on the sugarcane fields and assurance of good harvest, to the benefits for all communities. In Flic en Flac, a few metres from my homeplace, there is a *Kalimai* where has been placed a statue of the Virgin Mary as well, which is also mentioned in the research of de Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2014) on wayside shrines in Mauritius. Indeed, various shrines can be located on roadsides or at crossroads in Mauritius, with no necessary connection with the doctrines of the main traditions. Aside, at places where road accidents occur, new shrines can be created by the bereaved ones following cases of fatalities, depending on their respective choices, emotions and beliefs. Other hierophanies might have been organized out of 'popular religion', such as '*gardien landrwa*' (Creole words for neighborhood watch or protection). Beyond theological perspective, mother Kalima, Virgin Mary or any other hierophany therefore represent popular inter-religious identifiers, symbols or compensations within the

materiality of multiculturalism in Mauritius. Dreadful hierophanies along dangerous roads, for example, are not venerated for what they are as a structure made of stone or wrought iron but for what Reno (1972) described as the 'embodiment they reveal'. Here it is about the sacredness of life and death at these dangerous fixed points reminding all drivers passing by to pay respect and to be careful. Unnatural death can also awake the thought of the presence of the *mal mor* (evil dead) of a wandering soul in the daily living at a particular place and representing a source of constant danger (de Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2014).

3.17 Amma Tookay temple

Last but not least, it is noteworthy here to mention the historical importance of the Amma Tookay *Kovil* (Hindu/Tamil temple) in the proximity of sugar cane fields at Camp Diable, Mauritius, where annual prayers are said to mark the opening of the sugar cane harvest.[25] Mooneegadoo (2018) claimed more than 125 Tamil temples have been erected in Mauritius aiming to preserve the Tamil culture and faith. The Amma Tookay ceremony, relayed by the media, annually sees the participation of mainly Tamil religious leaders, political elites and the Franco-Mauritian elites (owners of sugar estates). Amma Tookay or the Mother goddess of the universe is considered as a legendary protector of the sugar cane fields since the 19th century. A few metres tall and of Dravidian architecture with vibrant colors and sculptures, the temple is the attraction of locals from relatively all faiths and tourists. This is like another pattern of multiculturalism in the connection with, the identity of a plural nation and economics of harvest and tourism. Trouillet (2012) observed that after having shared the same shrines with Hindus, Tamils gradually separated their places of worship after having received access to landed property in the plantation camps. Ramsoondur (2018) argues that though the Indo-Mauritians are part of the Indian diaspora, the cultural identity of *Kovil* attendees, or of any other place of worship created in Mauritius, is new, unique and adapted to the 'production of a Mauritian identity in a plural nation'. In some way, this is reflected in the objective of this study, that of identities in an organic process of development leading to a sustainable plural Mauritian society. Moreover, in comparing Tamil communities of Reunion island and Mauritius, Mooneegadoo (2018) argued that due to the fact that Reunion island is still dependent on France (the colonizer), the preservation of the culture is less significant than in Mauritius. Apparently, the British colonizers in Mauritius have been more 'tolerant' towards immigrant cultures and faiths, an attitude preserved after independence.

3.18 From diasporic origins: Re-location naming, identifiers and popular religion

Seetah et al. (2018) recalled the various places in Mauritius named according to these settlements on sugar estates and in their connections with homeland Indian villages, like Benares or Tranquebar for the Hindus. Christians also named local locations accordingly, like Verdun in France, or Muslims locations with Medine (Medina in Saudi Arabia). These

[25] https://www.lexpress.mu/article/amma-tookay-une-l%C3%A9gende-incontournable (I refer to this website of the Mauritian daily newspaper, as it provides latest update on the importance of the Amma Tookay Kovil.

geographical connections of diasporic sources and adopted as Mauritian places of locations create other kind of identifiers in the religious landscape of the island. It is also recorded in the archives of the Department of Immigration in Mauritius that the Indian immigrants, of Hindu background, carried with them India religious texts, like the *Mahabharata*, as a sign of their willingness and resistance to preserve their religious heritage (Hazareesingh, 1966).

This is in contrast with the people of African descent and of slavery heritage who today constitute the Creoles group on the island. According to the 'Code noir' (Black Code), under French colonization, the slaves had to be baptized to Roman Catholicism on their arrival to Mauritius (Seetah et al. 2018, 161). This was like forced conversion and rejection of African religious practices, and the blacks were often considered as peoples with 'no religion' on other frontiers (Chidester, 1996). After slavery, this process of conversion and religious education continued under the missionary work of French Père Laval (Father Laval, 1803-1864). The latter died on 9th September 1864 in Mauritius after having helped many to confirm in their new Christian faith. He was beatified in 1979 by the Pope John Paul II and his shrine erected in Sainte-Croix, Port Louis, which represents for Catholics a place of great spiritual power (de Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2014). Every year from 8th to 9th September, believers, not only Christians, undergo a long pilgrimage march to the shrine, where prayers are said. [26] The mass media participates actively in this pilgrimage in the form of annual audiovisual reports and written articles. The national television, MBC, broadcasts the pilgrims' march, capturing participants' feelings from Christians, Hindus or Muslims.

This event in itself therefore engages social interactions, shows another pattern of Mauritian multiculturalism or pluralism development and an "interrelated system of modalities of the sacred" (Capps 1995, 144). De Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2014) argued that by his mode of living among the poor and caring for them, Father Laval was able to integrate many of the Creoles (of African descent) in the Catholic church. He is thus now considered a saint and can be venerated at his dedicated tomb or in a *lagrot* (Creole word for a wayside shrine) where an altar can display his statue or figurine. Apparently, adherents of folk Catholicism (popular religion) in Mauritius usually have recourse to God by the mediation of spirits or saints, like Father Laval. In my view, therefore, Father Laval statues, figurines or pictures reflect modalities of the sacred, due to his exemplary life as a missionary in different aspects such as healing, caring or protection of the poor. They embody the sacrality of the religious life of Father Laval as an intermediary with God. His shrine or *lagrot* has thus become in the religious landscape of Mauritius a historical hierophany. Wayside shrines in Mauritius seem to permanently provide religious experiences and are charged with spiritual power (de Salle-Essoo and Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2014).

Beyond boundaries of religious traditions, the Mauritian landscape thus offers historically and materially a variety of recognized spiritual or sacred identifiers spread over the island in both space and time. Churches, Shivalas, Kovils, Mosques, Pagodas and other places of worships, of different sizes and architectures, are visible from place to place on the island. From the first settlements during colonization around sugar estates, when an

[26] https://www.eventsmauritius.mu/en-uk/pere-laval-pilgrimage

identification with the homeland or ancestral beliefs was crucial, later through religion as a political capital for parliamentary representation, to the organic accommodation of multiculturalism and pluralism, Mauritius develops its own concept and means in the cohabitation of religion and the secular. Though religions may be perceived as segmented given the different doctrines, beliefs and rituals, religion is popular, omnipresent and a unifying agent in society organization.

On one hand, rituals and festivals in a land composed of diasporas, can imply the contribution or concern of different cultures or groups in the maintenance of respective identities, often based on 'hybridity' (Seetah et al. 2018, 155). On the other hand, government rulings such as the civil service Friday time-off for Muslims attending prayers, demonstrate the secular recognition and accommodation of religious differences intrinsic to a diverse nation.[27] In this plural worldview, Mauritius is often portrayed as a 'rainbow nation' (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten, 2015). Yet along with economic and material development, religions also adjust. A Hindu wedding, for example, may last over three days with different rituals and ceremonies. Compared to traditional settings in the limited space of homes, wedding halls and garden venues are now common on the island to accommodate these events and customs. There is a kind of shift from holding a traditional wedding in the home and/or Shivala to these more grandiose spacious halls/venues. My son married a Hindu girl in 2020 and one of these venues was hired to organize the event and religious ceremonies, which I will develop here under interfaith marriage. My niece recently organized her Baha'i marriage with a Christian, which I had the privilege to preside, on the white sand public beach of Flic en Flac on the west coast of the island, at sunset.

3.19 Religious festivals

Religious festivals, of different traditions, are celebrated annually and public holidays decreed for the main ones have become customary.[28] This government arrangement again shows the kind of nexus between the secular and religion in Mauritius. In 2021, nine public holidays are religious over a total of fifteen that have been ordered by the Prime Minister's Office. This undoubtedly aligns with the constitution's declaration of different communities and/or the co-existence and freedom of religious traditions and beliefs. It can also be seen as one of the secular measures to maintain peace and harmony among the different groups. Some of these religious festivals, like Diwali or Christmas celebrations have even assumed a quasi-national dimension after decades of cohabitation and with the emergence of the modern Mauritian population.[29]

Along with economic growth and Mauritius classified as a high-income revenue country, Christmas celebration for example, beyond its religious meaning, is almost a national

[27] https://civilservice.govmu.org/documents/past%20circulars%20library/2008/CL40.pdf

[28] https://pmo.govmu.org/Communique/Public%20holidays%20-%202021.pdf

[29] https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/noel-au-temps-de-la-covid-19/393954/

cross-cultural event, either directly or indirectly, with the full participation of the media and commercial agencies.

It is not uncommon to see people from different cultures buying fresh-cut Christmas trees (pine tree) about a week before every 25th December, usually made available by the Mauritius Forestry Service (Ministry of Agro-Industry and Food Security 2018, 37). These natural pine trees are displayed in homes, though artificial ones are also extensively used now, with decorative items ranging from running lights to hanging bells to ornament balls purchased at different points of sales. Christmas has become through generations a special time for commercial promotions, well-wishes, gifts, parties at restaurants, of excitation for the kids, with late-night shopping involving large masses of consumers and heavy road traffics. Companies, radio stations and other non-governmental organizations also bring in their contributions in solidarity actions, such as raising gifts and donations for kids in poverty areas. This cross-cultural participation in Christmas celebrations goes beyond self-identification with a particular community and rather subscribes to a pattern of national identity within pluralism. When I was working as an engineer in North of Iraq for the United Nations 'Oil-for-Food Programme', in 2002, Christmas was unknown to the local Kurdish population, being of majority Muslims. It has only been recognized by the Iraq government in 2018 and 25th December then made a public holiday in respect of the minority Christian group.[30]

This is in contrast with the relative minority Christian group in Mauritius (see table 1.1, General Population), and the quasi-national recognition and participation constructed around Christmas over decades of communities' cohabitation. During my fieldwork and living experience as a Mauritian, I have come across many non-Christian families celebrating this tradition which defeats the very principle of community classification or identification under the 1968 constitution.

3.20 New Religious Entrants

Other faiths made their way in the religious landscape in the 20th century. A few of these are examined here in light of their development and impact on the Mauritian society and formation of new patterns in identities. In contrast with a forced conversion during colonization, or an ancestral heritage of diasporic immigrants, these new faiths have emerged out of different circumstances. Their propagations have somehow been possible by the clause at section 11 of the national constitution, that was mentioned in chapter 1: "freedom of thought and of religion or belief, freedom to change one's religion or belief."

[30] https://gds.gov.iq/the-cabinet-announces-christmas-day-to-be-an-official-holiday-across-iraq/

3.21 Baha'i faith

In November 1953, Ottilie Rhein, a German lady (1903-1979) traveled from the United States to Mauritius as a Baha'i missionary.[31] She came to introduce the Baha'i faith and spread the teachings of the prophet founder Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892). According to Baha'i archives in Mauritius, the first believer was a Sino-Mauritian man. Gradually, the faith expanded to reach some 7,000 adherents at the turn of the 21st century, as per records of the Baha'i National Council. Baha'is do not proselytize their faith, but rather engage in social activities like junior youth programs for youngsters in their adolescence aiming for their spiritual development and engagement in acts of service in the society. Through these activities, open to all religions, people come to know and experience the teachings. The new faith obtained the religious status in 1966, by an Act of Parliament, under the British governorship of Sir John Shaw Rennie, prior to the independence of Mauritius. Much later, Baha'i became one of the five founder members of the Council of Religions which was constituted in 2001.[32]

As the faith expands, with adherents from different ethnic origins and religious traditions, a new community is formed cutting across cultures. This can classify Baha'i as a religion with no direct relation to ethnicity or in the words of Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten (2013), an 'ethnically diverse' religious group. While discussing with first-generation Baha'is, the main reason for adherence was based on the three core principles that God is one, religions are one and mankind is one, rather than on religious compensations such as healing or salvation. A new identity is developed based on world citizenship as demonstrated by the Baha'i presence in almost every country and also due to the saying of Bahá'u'lláh that: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Warburg 2006, 16).[33] The community is now composed of almost four generations of believers with backgrounds from a majority of Hindus (Indo-Mauritians), and minorities of Christians (General Population group), Muslims and Sino-Mauritians. Though by names, or by precedent cultures they are linked to their diasporic origins or ethnicities, the adherents declare themselves as Baha'is, a new identity with a new culture in the Mauritian religious landscape and other countries as well (Warburg 2006, 60-61), an identity incorporating a diversity of cultures (traditional outfits, cookeries, music and arts) rather than uniformity. Overlapping identities are thus not limited to Chinese Catholics, Indo-Christians or Muslim Creoles in Mauritius. The traditional high correlation between ethnicity and religion (Fessha and Nam, 2015) is thus challenged by the new Baha'i identity also, cutting across ethnicities in developing a sense of common identity. Baha'i adherents see themselves as belonging to the Baha'i community, practicing a common religion, either at national level or international level. Is ethnicity being dismissed here? Moreover, Baha'is within their community, are marrying across (previously) different ethnicities, across communities (inter-religious) and across international frontiers as well.

This new identification has begun to appear, for example, in the Mauritius Housing census of 2011 (https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/). A new religiosity and worldview are thus being experienced, and founded on the concept of 'progressive revelation' of religions and

[31] https://bahaimauritius.org/mauritius-bahais/history-of-faith-in-mauritius/
[32] https://councilofreligions.org/about/
[33] https://www.bahai.org/national-communities/

principles like non-involvement in partisan politics (Warburg 2006, 498-499). This stand differentiates Baha'is with the aforementioned arguments of labeling religion as a political resource or capital in Mauritius. The examination here is also the first one to point out to a new multiculturalism approach, where adherents from different ethnicities create a new community and a new pattern in identity, in contrast with the multiculturalism based on groups of ethnicities (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten, 2015) maintaining their respective identities. It can also be argued here that a challenge of change in attitude is quite tangible with new generations of Mauritians in respect of identification with traditional communities, partisan politics and religions.

3.22 Pentecostal churches

Over the last decades the Mauritian religious landscape has also been marked by the emergence of various Christian churches, sometime ambiguous to classify, some claiming to be 'Assembly of God', others 'Full Gospel Church of God', or 'Pentecostal' and even 'Universal'. However, all of them are known to be non-Catholic Christians, with focus apparently on the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' (Johnson, 2014) as a common denominator. Beyond respective claims, they are being referred here under the header 'Pentecostal' with emphasis on an ethnographic examination.

Non-Pentecostals in Mauritius popularly refer to these churches by the denomination 'Mission' or 'Misyon' (in Creole). This is probably due to the first 'Assembly of God' church, introduced in 1967 by missionary Aimé Cizeron, 'Mission Salut et Guérison' by its French denomination, meaning 'Mission Salvation and Healing'.[34] For a detailed analysis on the classification of these churches the reader may refer to the article "Counting Pentecostals Worldwide" by Johnson (2014). It is worth pointing out here that the adherents consider themselves as Christians. While conversing with a few religious leaders of these movements, they neither consider themselves as part of the 'General Population' community nor any affiliation with their respective originating communities. According to the Pentecostal leaders, in 2018, they numbered the 100,000, which could be true given the 2010 national census revealed figure of 68,000. Going through the island, from towns to villages, these churches are quite visible in either spaces like houses or newly built spaces for the purpose. It can therefore be reasonably argued that the population comparative percentages of the respective communities, mentioned in the constitution, are subject to continuous modification given the occurrence of dynamic 'conversions'. Similar to the Baha'i case, does multiculturalism apply for the Pentecostals? Yes, or no, they are composed of adherents from previously different ethnicities, who now affirmed they are also Christians. In the same vein, there is like an apprehension or fear of fragmentation due to modification of minority and majority percentages, which motivate political parties and the government for status quo since last census on ethnicity realized in 1972 (Sookrajowa 2021, 131-134).

[34] https://defimedia.info/plus-de-50-ans-dexistence-pentecotiste-un-mouvement-qui-attire-de-plus-en-plus-de-fideles

My mother joined the 'Assembly of God' church, in 1970. She claims she was healed after a long suffering from asthma. Since then she has been a fervent Christian adherent and no longer practices the Hindu faith, though she might still be identified as a Hindu, by her family Indian name 'Ragoo' and physical characteristics. I remember the small Hindu shrine which was in a corner of the house, amulets and pictures of Hindu Saints, all were discarded. While a child, she took me with her a few times to the prayer sessions to experience what Bakker (2013) phrased as the "sensual appeal and congregations' passionate singing" of Pentecostalism. I could witness as well her baptism with water, at a Pentecostal church in the town of Rose Hill, which represents for her an identification with the death and resurrection of Christ. She was like the first in the immediate circle of relatives to join the Pentecostal faith and embrace Christianity. Soon after, my grandparents, aunts and a few cousins followed her in this religious path.

On a few occasions when I stayed with my now deceased grandparents, I could listen to my grandfather's fervent prayers, from simple communion to aesthetic intercession in the name of Jesus with interspersed 'Amen and 'Hallelujah', up to his voicing out words of a strange language which one and himself cannot understand. According to him, it was the gift of the Holy Spirit in his faithful devotion to the new belief. In the course of my living existence in Mauritius I have come across many other Mauritians of different ethnic origins who have embraced Pentecostal churches. In the recent years, one can also observe the increasing display of the ichthus (sign of the fish or Jesus fish), fixed to the back of cars of most Pentecostals. In the taxonomy of religious symbols in Mauritius, the ichthus can be viewed as a new identification in the religious landscape. During my fieldwork for this research, I had a conversation with an Indo-Mauritian leader of one of the churches of the 'Assembly of God'. He left the Hindu faith and Tamil culture, to join the new church in 1985, after being healed of some medical complication, and is now married, with children, all being members of the church. Healing again thus appears to be one of the main triggers for adherence to Pentecostal. Though he recognizes his ancestral Indian origins, he now values his dual identity of being both Christian and Mauritian. He displays the ichthus on his car, as a symbol of Christianity. The freedom to change religious identities, as provisioned in the 1968 Mauritian constitution, has therefore gained significance and popularity in the recent decades, as substantiated by different accounts on social media, like Facebook. [35] Further, the aforementioned argument of different ethnicities forming a new community, as in the Baha'i case, also applies to the Pentecostal church.

It is also noteworthy that for the first time, a Mauritian Prime Minister attended one of the major events of the Pentecostal church, for its jubilee of 50 years in Mauritius, celebrated in 2018. Every now and then, Pentecostal concerns and growth are also reported by the media, like the quest for recognition as a religion by the government.[36] While Baha'i received its incorporation in 1966, by an act of Parliament very early in its growth process, Pentecostal with larger number of adherents are still awaiting a stand from the government.

[35] https://www.facebook.com/aogrosehill/

[36] https://www.lexpress.mu/article/341491/eglises-pentecotistes-en-quete-dieu-et-reconnaissance

On the other hand, in 2019, a Hindu leader has expressed the wish for the state of Mauritius to enact a law against religious conversion, given the attraction of believers to other religions.[37] Conversely, moving from one religious belief to another might instead be a change in understanding the purpose and meaning of religion and in the relation with the divine (Ragoo, 2019). Does mobility from one faith to another necessarily have to be seen as 'conversion' or rather as a personal change in the understanding and acceptance of the existence of different religions? It might also be argued that movement from one faith to another may result out of proximity and daily interactions with diverse diasporic communities.

Religious identities seem to shift from static to dynamic states, from a mutually exclusive nature to the overlapping of cultures in a plural nation. Further, the examination here again demonstrates on one hand, the particular nexus between religious identities and secular politics, and on the other hand, reiterates the formation of a new pattern of multiculturalism in Mauritius. Religion and religious adherence, based on majority or minority, are becoming less and less of an acquired capital or resource for either political or parliamentary representation. It can also be argued that multiculturalism in Mauritius, unlike Western discourses, is not meant for minorities' motivations only but is the concern of all the population, including the majority Indo-Mauritians (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten 2015, 684). The above ethnographic analysis thus questions the assumed historical high correlation between ethnicity and religion (Fessha and Nam, 2015) and its implications on the Best Loser System, for example. In contrast, we have seen above, examples of the practice of a common religion that generate a sense of a 'new' community. There is also an inclination for academic research to examine only the four main traditional religious-cultural groups of the Mauritian Constitution (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten, 2015).

3.23 From orthodoxy to modernity

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, these interactions, both culturally and religiously, across communities are being developed here, in line with the object of the inquiry. The case of Sai Baba (1926-2011), preaching the 'religion of love' and service to society, cannot be ignored in the examination of the Mauritian religious landscape. As per the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization of Mauritius (SSIOM- http://www.saibabamauritius.org/), the spiritual movement was introduced by late *Pundit* (Hindu priest) Jasodanand in 1965. He set up the Sai Baba *Mandir* (temple) in the town of Curepipe. Gradually the teachings of Baba spread across Mauritius with the erection of 33 Centres, including the registration of SSIOM with the Mauritian Registrar of Associations. Some devotees consider Baba as a *Guru*, others as an *Avatar*.

According to the devotees whom I met with during my field work, weekly spiritual activities like *kirtans* (spiritual chanting with audience participation) and *balvikas* (children

[37] https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/video-indienne-controversee-somduth-dulthumun-reclame-une-loi-contre-la-conversion/282365/

spiritual classes) are open to all religions and communities of Mauritius. The guidance and curriculum for the activities in Mauritius originate from Prasanthi Nilayam (Sathya Sai Baba's main ashram based in Puttaparthi, India, where Sai Baba was born). On the occasions of other religious celebrations in Mauritius, like Christmas, Eid or the Chinese Spring festival, SSIOM invites respective religious leaders to offer prayers and deliver talks. It adopts a multilingual and multicultural approach with other religions based on the principle of the 'religion of love'. Last year I had the opportunity to assist an interfaith marriage of a Baha'i with a Hindu Sai Baba devotee. The wedding was organized in a modern spacious venue where both religious ceremonies, Baha'i and Hindu, took place on the same day. The audience on that day was composed of friends and relatives from diverse cultures. In his speech at the wedding reception, the toastmaster highlighted that this marriage symbolizes the fusion of the teachings of the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Baha'i sacred text) with those of the *Vedas* (Hindu sacred text). Among the many innovative entertainments planned for the event, though he does not understand the hindi language the Baha'i groom interpreted '*seekha maine jeena jeena…'* (I learned how to live life…), a Bollywood song from the Indian movie Badlapur, accompanied by the musical orchestra. Wrapped in the traditional saree for the Hindu ceremony, the bride later changed into a white robe for the reception party. The musical entertainments included dances with the guests' participation on Indian Bollywood tunes, European hits, as well as the traditional Mauritian folkloric *segas*.

A parallel is drawn here with Fiji-Indians in the United States, in their preference to create their own temples and spiritual chanting, based on new teachings from a major Guru like Sathya Sai Baba (Bilimoria, 2017). In the above encounter with the Sai Baba philosophy and its interactions with other religions in Mauritius, cultural boundaries are seen to transcend, as in the case of the diasporic citizen, up to the formation of what Bilimoria (2017) calls a 'more fluid identity'. Wider moral perspectives and religious reconciliations develop beyond orthodoxy with the reconfiguration of traditional hermeneutics. In the same vein, Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally (2020) found that some Muslim women, particularly those occupying high posts in the private sector may show more independence and freedom in terms of the ways they can choose to practice their faith and social mobility in attending other faiths' spiritual ceremonies. In their study, they shared the experience of a Muslim lady who attended a Sanskrit session, and who came to realize that all major religions have the same message. There seems to be an element of comfortability in crossing the boundaries of spiritual experience, given the proximity of different communities in the Mauritian social context.

Far from the Indian homeland, from the distinct religious practices of the first-generation immigrants to the 21st century modern generations, the 'religion of love' of Sai Baba, the 'unicity of religions' of Baha'i or other current religious streams are promoting fluidity. Higher levels of education, social media connectivity or the wish for a matched partner in the cosmopolitan environment could also be other causes of cross-border relations. Often the clergy or priests must adapt to the new situations which arise out of modernity or other causes. My wife and myself were invited in May 2021 by our catholic neighbors to participate in an evening reflection in their home with other neighbors on the Holy Spirit and the significance of the Pentecost. A catholic priest was directing the reflection

live on TV with families seated at homes and participating, because of restrictions on gatherings at churches due to the prevailing Covid-19 sanitary protocols. Everyone shared his or her understanding on the Holy Spirit, based on the bible verses read and commented by the priest. Due to the impact of Covid-19 on the world populations, in Mauritius this unprecedented circumstance has made intra-faith and interfaith virtual gatherings a reality.

3.24 Media and Commercials multiculturalism

We have seen earlier how diversity has been and continues to be a contributor or common denominator in political orientations or policies of successive governments with the aim to consolidate the nation's unity. Besides the state concerns and interests in promoting cultural centres and ancestral traditions in direct link with different religions practiced in Mauritius, we shall examine here the interests of the media and firms in the advertising of religions and traditions. They act as constant reminders of the Mauritian plurality while creating a relative identification with the religion of the other.

During this research, Mauritius lost Sir Anerood Jugnauth (SAJ) (1930-2021), a former prime minister and ex-president who passed away on 03 June 2021. He was a central figure in Mauritian politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Being of Indian descent he was cremated according to the Hindu tradition and rituals at the Pamplemousses botanical garden in the north of the island.[38] The funeral is exceptional in the sense that it occurs under the Covid-19 imposed sanitary restrictions on large gatherings. A comparison can be drawn here with the British public experience of the passing away of 'Princess Diana' in August 1997, where a 'unique funeral for a unique person' was organized, combining ritual, performance and media negotiations (Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998, 1-2). While respecting the sanitary restrictions and measures, like wearing of masks, members of parliament from both government and the opposition, institutions, agencies, religious organizations and individuals paid tribute to SAJ. It has been a national event with two days mourning declared. The news was relayed by the local and international press and India declared a one-day state mourning due to its close relation with Mauritius and as a mark of respect to SAJ.[39] Beyond the sanitary constraints, creativity takes over, from the organized ritualized performances to media mobilizations around the funeral procession of a statesman up to the cremation. The media, both public and private, including social media, thus play a critical role in the transmission of images between the funeral rituals and spectatorship, from SAJ private home to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to the Aapravasi Ghat (site of the indentured Immigrants Depot in Port Louis) up to the cremation point in Pamplemousses.

Compared to ethnicity as a political capital, rituals based on religious diversity thus become resources for media content and engagement, including their consumption and

[38] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmRUjQ3qYsc (This event was recorded and uploaded on YouTube)

[39] https://inside.news/2021/06/05/deces-de-saj-la-presse-internationale-en-parle/

impact in the construction of relative identities within a public plural audience. There have been various research works on the political economy of television broadcasting, like for example in Nigeria, particularly with regard to the public representation of religion, and the role of the state in the regulation and deregulation processes in this respect (Ukah 2011, 39-40). While this funeral in Mauritius relates to a public figure of Indian descent and culture, similar Mauritian mass media normative engagement cuts across all religions in the interest of social cohesion. Thus Mauritian media gets involved with all the existing religions and their practices in fairness. For example, Christmas, Diwali, Easter, Eid, Spring festival and others are subject to press and TV coverage.

This interrelationship of traditional media or social media, under the support of digital communications, with the audience interactions can be of particular interest for analysis, particularly in plural nations like Mauritius. It involves a range of negotiations and interpretations from ritual performances and meanings to ritual participation as spectators up to reframing self-identities (Hughes-Freeland 1998, 45-47). Hughes-Freeland examined the case of Balineseness and how spectators participate in ritual performances, gearing a shift in focus, from original meaning to participative actions and creativity. In other contexts, like for maintaining the rhythm of a religious life during the current Covid-19 pandemic with its restrictions on congregational gatherings, Mauritian believers have extensively switched to digital platforms like Zoom or Facebook lives. As Eisenlohr (2009) observed, contemporary media technology allows the immediacy of spiritual interactions and could even help to bypass established forms of interacting with the divine.

Major private media outlets in Mauritius consists of historical and contemporary print newspapers together with a range of private radio stations since the liberalization of radio airwaves in 2002 (Mohabuth, 2014). The MBC- Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation is the only public 'State-controlled Radio and Television' (Eisenlohr, 2006) and television was officially launched in 1965, much earlier than in South Africa. Scharnick-Udemans (2018) found that TV was initially banned in South Africa mainly by the policies of the National Party government under the regime of apartheid. Ruling politicians of the time, backed by Christian Nationalists, perceived television as devil, a 'spiritual danger' or even causing the unfavorable fate of 'racial mixing' to happen (also referred as an example of 'wild religion'). From 1994, during post-apartheid period with the gradual democratization of public broadcasting, South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the public broadcaster, has screened religious contents of different religions principally aiming for national unity. However, under the Religious Broadcasting Policy of 2003, although all religions are considered equal, complaints are recurrent, like the African Traditional Religion claiming unequal airtime or the SABC being accused of being Christian bias (Scharnick-Udemans 2017, 271-272).

In contrast, from their early conceptions, written or audiovisual media in Mauritius have shown an increasing engagement in their interactions with religion, mostly in the context of promoting social cohesion. However, in Mauritius, despite different governments intentions for the introduction of private TV licenses, the latter has not yet been

implemented.[40] This has not prevented the introduction of various web-TV services in the recent years, operated by either private local press media groups or other investors in editorial networks like ION news (formerly Indian Ocean Network Ltd).[41] With the advent of extensive installation of FTTH (Fibre-to-the-Home) providing optical fibre connectivity to almost every home and business as at 2019 and a mobile market penetration exceeding the population count of 1.3 million, Mauritius has built a strong internet access infrastructure across the island. Thus, live broadcasts of Christian mass, Indian *kirtans* or Jummah prayers have now become popular, particularly on smartphones, widening the spectrum of accessibility to religious data and the audience across communities. These pre-recorded religious contents, produced by both believers and religious organizations, with the support of traditional media and social media, can be viewed and reviewed on digital platforms like YouTube. The question: 'who owns the sacred' (Scharnick-Idemans 2018, 16) in contemporary societies, particularly in diverse populations, may therefore be quite legitimate.

Media outlets therefore, both public and private, have consequently developed innovative means of access to both information and entertainment reaching out to a very wide public. In parallel, a solid regulatory framework has been developed, with amendments brought along for an ethical usage of media, including social media networks, through institutions like the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority and the ICTA (Information, Communication and Technology Authority). The technological innovations and policies put in place over the last two decades have therefore contributed to qualify Mauritius as 'the most mature telecoms market in Africa' with substantial social impact on communities.[42] In the second schedule of the IBA Act 29 of 2000 on 'code of conduct' there is a safeguard placed against any licensee to broadcast content of religious offenses which reads as follows: "*not broadcast any material which is indecent, obscene or offensive to public morals or offensive to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the population or likely to prejudice the safety of the State or the public order or relations between sections of the population*".[43] In the quest for political stability or social order, states can justify policies for the control of the media marketplace (Ukah 2011, 41). Religion, media and politics may not only be in opposition to each other, but also related with regard to the ways religion can be defined, presented and negotiated in religiously diverse populations, with appropriate safeguards in the broadcasting regulations. Scharnick-Udemans (2018, 3-6) argues that the political economy of the sacred and the political economy of the media are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the abovementioned safeguard in the Mauritian broadcasting regulations has, in my view, prevented the occurrence of what she describes as 'wild media' producing unpredictable and unauthorized presentations of religion.

[40] https://business.mega.mu/2014/04/09/private-television-seven-companies-interested/

[41] https://ionnews.mu/about-us/

[42] https://www.itu.int/en/myitu/News/2020/03/23/15/33/The-digital-transformation-of-Mauritius-QplusA-with-Minister-Sawmynaden

[43] https://www.iba.mu/documents/IBA_Act_2019.pdf

Hughes-Freeland (1998) argues that in Bali, television plays a positive role in relaying, reproducing and sustaining traditional performances, dances and rituals which promote balineseness to the outside world, to the tourist or the general audience. It is indeed now popular that recorded media tends to highlight or capture much better the 'doing' aspects of rituals than live spectatorship or even the 'being' identity of the performers themselves, especially with modern techniques of recording and editing. It definitely creates virtual participation and consumption of ritual media by the audience which can be viewed and reviewed or simply imposed in space and time. Ukah (2011, 43-45) evokes that electronic and broadcast media are the most potent instruments of influencing thought in modern society. In Mauritius, the public television MBC-TV, broadcasts religious news and activities in line with the government policy to maintain unity among the different religions. The recording and broadcasting of performances of live rituals, religious events and discourses at the temples, kovils or mosques in the evening journal are regular productions and repetitive practices to which Mauritians are accustomed. Television also exposes foreign cultures beyond local frontiers into homes. For example, on a Friday night, I saw 'Come on Let's Dance' on television, an MBC weekly show, showing local female dancers performing an *Apsara* dance of Cambodia which, according to the animator, is based on a choreography built from both Hindu and Buddhist mythologies.[44] Therefore, television and smartphones, modern audiovisual means like web-TV platforms, live facebook videos or radio transmissions act as ubiquitous vectors in the projection of either religious or cultural performances of the other. Eriksen (1992) observed that in both Trinidad and Mauritius, one finds oneself in a cultural environment where one is constantly exposed to the ethnic other's culture. Modern media outlets are thus instrumental in the formation of relative identity patterns in a plural nation like Mauritius, promoting mutual understanding, knowledge and respect of the other religion/culture.

The MBC-TV 'Tipa Tipa Nou Avanse' (a Creole expression meaning we advance by small steps), for example, is another recurrent television production which often treats on cultural and religious matters inviting guests to talk on subjects like world day celebration of cultural diversity for dialogue and development, or on the theme of 'music in religions' for world music day.[45] During this research, I viewed one such production developed on the occasion of Easter celebration during the sanitary crisis Covid-19 and national confinement.[46] Three members of the Council of Religions were invited to discuss on the theme 'Esperance' (Hope). They talked about the spiritual potency of Mauritians, hope and research for truth at times of crisis. 'Tipa Tipa Nou Avanse' thus contributes to the formation of the Mauritian*ness* pattern.

In this context, I have observed that media and commercials invest themselves intensively and increasingly at times of religious festivals. It has also been identified earlier in academic research on countries like Trinidad and Mauritius, that cultural messages or ethnic commercials are so common on TV, that they are perceived as usual for all the audience (Eriksen 1992, 5-6). It is very common, often as a repetitive reminder of the Mauritian

[44] https://english.lematinal.media/watch-come-on-lets-dance-with-jerry-nayna-on-mbc-1-from-friday/

[45] https://mbcradio.tv/tipa-tipa

[46] https://www.facebook.com/mbcmaurice/videos/tipa-tipa/496954414633155/

plurality, to come across a flux of articles, reports, radio briefs or even well-wishes from the public itself using social media platforms, like WhatsApp groups, on the occasion of religious traditions and celebrations. On 01 July 2021, the sanitary restrictions due to the second wave of Covid-19 were lifted with gradual de-confinement. Religious gatherings for up to fifty persons at places of cult were authorized and flashed in the morning headlines of radio stations on that day. Priests declarations and plans for managing the gatherings were recorded and broadcasted.

During the days of Ramadan, Christmas season or Diwali lights, both public and private radios advertise intensive promotional campaigns from commercial firms containing religious well wishes like 'Ramadan Kareem' or 'Happy Christmas'. Some radio stations even go on field to meet with poor families and relay on the air and social media offerings like Christmas toys for kids or 'Iftar packs' during Ramadan.[47] Mauritians are exposed to products at shopping malls, like Easter chocolates, fresh dates from Arabic countries for Muslim celebrations, or Indian decorative packages and sweets at Diwali time. On the occasion of the Hindu pilgrims' march to the Grand-Bassin lake, I have seen many firms seizing the opportunity to display banners along motorways, waysides in towns or on facebook pages showing their engagement for a pious *Maha Shivaratri* and protection from Lord Shiva.[48] Bus companies provide facilities to devotees.[49] Same applies for other pilgrimages like the Christian march to the shrine of Father Laval. Other commercials like Telcos invest in both radio and television adverts played on prime airtime, the one more creative and impactful than the other, combining religious celebrations with promotional sales.

The engagements of the media and commercials with the religious fabrics of the island are not exhaustive here. They are like bricks in the construction of a Mauritian pattern on plurality, based on virtual participation, reciprocal engagement of the audience and the public in general, cutting across religious boundaries. They also help to appease sporadic communal conflicts which may arise now and then, to the benefit of the nation as a whole. We saw earlier how diversity has contributed to the economic success of the island, and here I show how it is a capital resource for both media and commercials, in terms of contents and sales. Conversely, these agencies therefore also promote the construction of Mauritian*ness* and contribute in developing a local pattern of progressive integration of identities. Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally (2020) argue that faith in Mauritius is characterized by boundaries which are neither resolute nor absolute, but, which are flexible, mobile and porous. Identities based on ethnicity are thus being reframed constantly since independence in 1968, in permanent relations with the identity of the other. Furthermore, in my opinion, with the advent of social media in the recent years, social patterns based on affirmation or display of religious identities are becoming gradually subordinate to nativity as Mauritian, despite claims that ethnicity still counts in different aspects of Mauritian social life, such as

[47] https://defimedia.info/radio-plus-offre-des-iftar-packs-une-quinzaine-de-familles

[48] https://www.facebook.com/velogicgroup/videos/pious-maha-shivaratri/2165293090468233/

[49] https://ionnews.mu/maha-shivaratree-un-service-de-bus-special-pour-les-devots/

marriage and the maintenance of ethnic group boundaries (Nave 2000) or multiculturalism based on groups of ethnicities (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten, 2015). In their research on young people's identity and Facebook behavior, Rambaree and Knez (2017) argue that with the advent of internet-based technologies and usage of digital media in Mauritius, the younger generations have more possibilities to negotiate identities in online platforms, which can be of a challenge for conservative discourses on 'pure' identity. This is very much in line with the shift from orthodoxy noted earlier and the opening of wider moral perspectives due to modernity.

3.25 Communal conflicts and learnings (my experience)

As mentioned earlier, I am from a family of Indian descent. In my early adolescence I came across the Bible teachings at the Adventist college and also due to my mother who joined the Pentecostal church. I spent my childhood and youth in Cité Kennedy, a sub-urban locality of the town of Quatre-Bornes, where low-income people mostly from the General Population group (majority being Creoles of Christian background and African descents) struggle to make a living on menial jobs. Similar places of impoverishments separated from the island's arable soil (Gest, 2021), can be found across the island (can be compared with townships in South Africa) and many residents earned their living as housemaids, craftswomen or tradesmen with different skills in carpentry, masonry, housekeeping or shoe repairs. According to my parents, these townships flourished in the early 1960s after major damages to housings caused by either cyclones and the local migrations happening around independence. My dad initially was a blacksmith but later secured employment with the government as clerk due to his good command of English. My mum was a dressmaker working at home with an old foot-controlled Singer sewing machine. Cité Kennedy and other similar localities around the island are often known by their French appellation "Cité Ouvrière" (concentration of manual workers in housing estates).

Adversely, in the recent decades these locations have also become hotspots for vices like juvenile delinquency, drugs addiction and trafficking. In February 1999, Cité Kennedy and other similar places were in the limelight with riots following the death of Kaya, a famous "seggae" (a fusion of Mauritian folklore *sega* with reggae) singer in police custody.[50] Groups of Creoles revolted with acts of vandalism which immediately resulted into communal conflicts. They were targeted from outsiders mostly from rural areas and mainly Hindu nationalists. The riots took a violent form of communal confrontation with damage to and closure of economic activities. I personally experienced this unrest period, being on guard over a few nights together with my Christian neighbors to protect our families and children. The main road to Cité Kennedy was blocked by a hostile Hindu mob around Candos, a nearby locality, and I could only reach home via the nearby Victoria Hospital by climbing its boundary walls with a ladder placed by the military force. Casualties have been reported on the island,

[50] https://pmo.govmu.org/CabinetDecision/1999/Cabinet-Decisions-taken-on-26-February-1999.aspx

with at least three deaths, and properties like homes and churches were looted and damaged.[51]

According to the press, the death of singer Kaya added fuel to the ill-being under the prevailing 'Malaise Creole' (French expression used to characterize the social injustice and discriminations felt by the black minority Christian Creoles of African descent) and it was apparently the interventions of Cassam Uteem (himself of Muslim background), an ex-president of the state and local priests of different religious affiliations in the riot areas which help to calm down the tensions.[52] Being also on field at that time of unrest and as a local resident amidst turmoil, there were to my knowledge other social leaders, from both Christian and Hindu sides who intervened to re-establish peace. According to the ex-president of Mauritius, an interfaith committee was also set up in March 1999 to bring back peace among the different communities. The communal conflicts of 1999 gave rise to a number of social associations led by the residents themselves in the sub-urban areas to give a more positive image of their localities (like a blessing in disguise). I was part of the leading team in my locality, together with residents of diverse cultures, and we initiated different projects for the benefits of the whole neighborhood. We set up, for example, a program of evening classes on adult literacy in Creole, the local dialect. We took another initiative with the local municipality council to change the name of Cité Kennedy to that of "Residence Kennedy", to display a more positive image.

The communal conflict of 1999 targeting the 'Creoles' in sub-urban areas, by Hindu nationalists from mainly rural locations, conversely generated a kind of solidarity among local residents of these "Cité Ouvrières", comprising of a majority of Christians and minorities of Hindus and Muslims. I show here the development of a kind of relational identity in solidarity actions, and a negotiation on commonalities of religions rather than their differences. In contrast, Hackett (2018, 199-202) evokes the creativity of indigenous religion in post-apartheid South Africa between urban and rural settlements, in creating a 'migrating sacred' and a 'hybrid sacred'. In the approach to religion in populations where exists a religious diversity, like in both South Africa and Mauritius, there is also the negotiation of a 'human identity' (Hackett (2018). At Residence Kennedy, we identify ourselves as "Zenfan Cité" (loosely translated as children of these sub-urban areas), as something sacred, whatever be our respective religious identities.

3.26 Communal football

From the pre-independence period, football in Mauritius used to be organized on a communitarian model, with teams like Muslim Scouts, Hindu Cadets or Fire Brigade (mostly Creole players from the General Population community). The matches attracted thousands of

[51] https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/06/07/hrp01mauritius.pdf

[52] https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/cassam-uteem-ex-president-de-la-republique-sur-les-emeutes-post-kaya-eviter-les-discours-creux-et-parler-avec-le-coeur/262865/

excited fans and occupied headlines of newspapers in those days. Hooligans, with behaviors and character of communal belonging often caused public unrest and divide after a match. However, this popular communal partisanship associated with football, as the king of sports, shall last for about three decades only and was banned by the government after the February 1999 communal riots. Football was de-communalized in favor of a regional model with the result that the king of sports no longer attracted spectators. Apparently, the motivation to attend football matches was primarily due to communal belonging. Football federations, together with the government, have since 1999 been unsuccessful in attempts to revive traditional clubs and public interest in football without waking up the communal spirit. Even with different club names like Scouts (for the previous Muslim Scouts) or Cadets (for the Hindu Cadets), fans were no longer motivated to attend stadiums. This makes me conclude that Mauritians and the authorities have experienced communal conflicts, whether as outcomes of the 'malaise creole', of communal football or some other cause and the sufferings ensued. They now know the difference between periods of unrest and periods of peace. Motivation to manifest one's religious identity in a worldview based on differences and division is something of the past. Moreover, it has been observed that the Mauritian civic network effectively ensures input from different ethnic communities in the development and implementation of public policy (Caroll and Caroll 2000, 31-32). Out of fears of revival of communal motives, religious identities are now leaning more towards creating inter-religious bridges.[53]

3.27 Foundation of the Council of Religions

Since 1994, there have been attempts at encouraging interfaith dialogue and to bring together religious leaders. On the occasion of the International Year of Family, the minister for Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare took the initiative to assemble religious leaders requesting them to set up a committee for reflection and advisory to the ministry with the aim of improving the quality of life of the Mauritian society.[54] Cassam Uteem, the former president of the state, consolidated these initiatives by leading a 'President's Advisory Council' from 1996 to 1999 which later in 2001 developed into the Council of Religions (CoR).[55] Five religions, namely the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam then constituted the founding nucleus of the Council with the mission of sustaining the interfaith dialogue, peace and mutual understanding among the different communities.

During recent years, I have had the opportunity to be associated with many activities of the Council. Beyond its principal aim of promoting an interfaith dialogue and its contribution in appeasing social conflicts, CoR has played a significant role in different aspects of the Mauritian society. Interfaith education, for example, has been developed and initiated

[53] https://business.mega.mu/2013/11/11/budget-fears-revival-communal-football/
[54] https://www.uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/council-religions-mauritius

[55] https://councilofreligions.org/

with some schools to promote mutual understanding, tolerance and values of different faiths from early childhood through the ICE (Intercultural Education) project. The Council has also collaborated with the University of Mauritius to run a 'Peace and Interfaith Studies' program from certificate to diploma level in which I have the privilege to be a tutor for one of the faiths modules of the curriculum over the recent years. In 2020, for the diploma course, 18 students of different faiths have been enrolled. Among different components, the curriculum covers the history of each religion in Mauritius, the sacred texts, the social implications, the practitioners' obligations and the celebrations. From my interactions with the students in class, and the questions raised by them, I can observe their commitment and enthusiasm to learn on the religion of the other. This on-going project, which aims to achieve the university degree level in a near future, is another brick in the process of consolidating the diversity of a plural nation and in developing Mauritian*ness*. Different religious identities are thus brought together to reflect on religion from one's perspective and that of the other's belief. Common denominators like transcendence, love, compassion and ethics emerge out of the different religions under study. According to feedback from students, this university program has cleared out many prejudices that existed on the other's religion. For practical assignments, many students opted to research on religions different from theirs and similar observation is made in the choice of optional questions in written examinations.

Every year, on the third Sunday of January, the Council of Religions in Mauritius celebrate the World Religion Day. In 2021, different religious representatives were gathered at the Baha'i Convention Centre in Rose Hill to reflect on the theme of the family. I acted as one of the facilitators in this activity which saw the participation of around fifty persons and which was reported by the local press.[56] In his address, the president of CoR highlighted that "religion has an important part to play in building our national unity in times of crisis." The participants reflected on gender equality and the importance of the family bond, as a unit, of positive impact in the social fabric. Another recent achievement of CoR, in uniting different religions on common projects of interest, is the production of a booklet on the "Status of Women in Sacred Texts".[57]

This year as well, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare has invited CoR representatives for a joint discussion and roadmap definition to address societal norms and beliefs that are against principles of gender equality and equity. The council thus continues to build positive experiences and its recognition by the state in the consolidation of a plural nation by addressing and reducing the divide between religions practiced in Mauritius for better social integration and Mauritianness. Knowing that different forms of secular states exist, it can be argued here that Mauritius is a particular case of secularism, with a more nuanced conception of the separation of church and state. Religious leaders are often solicited for counseling at times of social crisis, and where religion can significantly contribute to the good conduct of the country affairs. Former Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth, for

[56] https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/societe/journee-mondiale-de-la-religion-pere-philippe-goupille-la-religion-a-une-part-importante-pour-batir-notre-unite-nationale-en-temps-de-crise/399451/

[57] I was assigned the write-up for Baha'i in this project. At the time of write-up of this research, the booklet reaches its final stage of approval and publishing.

example, declared in one of his public discourses: “in politics and statecraft the Ramayana has been my greatest ideal.” While inaugurating a Ramayana Center in 2002, he claimed that socio-cultural organizations (politically well-connected religious organizations) could be the answer to today’s social problems (Eisenlohr 2018, 197-198) such as domestic violence, family breakups and divorces. In general, Mauritian political elites are closely connected with religion, whether they are believers or not. In this kind of relationship, there is a kind of reciprocity and consensus between the state and the public regarding human values as being primarily sourced from sacred texts, in contrast with western secular states. In the various forms of separation between church and state, it is observed that western democracies tend to commit to an ideal of ideological neutrality on the level of political decision-making (Winandy 2015, 837-839).

3.28 Council of Religions - new constitution

In 2021, the Council of Religions has started a process of writing its new constitution. I participate in this process, together with representatives (mostly priests) of other religious organizations. The consultations proceed in a very cordial atmosphere, at the seat of the Council located at G 15, St James Court, St Denis Street, Port-Louis. As at date, the new constitution draft makes provision for the membership of sixteen religious organizations which read as follows:

1. Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation;
2. Arya Sabha Mauritius;
3. Mauritius Tamil Temples Federation;
4. Mauritius Telegu Maha Sabha;
5. Mauritius Marathi Mandali Federation;
6. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Port-Louis;
7. The Anglican Diocese of Mauritius;
8. The Presbyterian Church of Mauritius;
9. Orthodox Christian Church Association;
10. The Jummah Mosque;
11. The Muslim Citizen Council;
12. The Khoja Shia Ithna Ashary Jamat;
13. The Association of Buddhist Temples of Mauritius;
14. The Dharmarakshita Mahayana Buddhist Study Group;
15. The Baha’i Community of Mauritius;
16. The Jewish Community of Mauritius.

The objects and purposes of the Council of Religions are:

(a) To promote inter-and-intra faith dialogue, national unity, comprehension, and harmony, together with intercultural activities in Mauritius;
(b) To organize any activity, of any form whatsoever, aiming at building bridges amongst the various religious communities of the Republic of Mauritius;
(c) To promote national unity, mainly among all stakeholders of the society;
(d) To take a stand, in any form whatsoever, in order to promote the human being, each and every human being, and all human beings, and their holistic and integrated development throughout the Republic of Mauritius; and
(e) Fight against all forms, causes and effects of oppression that hinders the progress and development of mankind, in collaboration with public authorities, non-governmental and other stakeholders of the society.

It can be seen that all religions, represented on the Council, aim at promoting national unity, interfaith dialogue and intercultural activities. Since the beginning of 2021, I have participated in at least three interfaith forums. In January, for the World Religion Day celebration, religious leaders met at the Baha'i Convention Centre, for a reflection on the case of domestic violence and the importance of the unity in the family nucleus. During the course of the year, members of the Council have contributed to the production of two booklets. The first booklet presents on the scriptures and rituals of different religions around birth, marriage and death, the three stages in human life. The other booklet highlights the status of woman in the different religions practiced in Mauritius. The third activity addresses the stands of religious scriptures in respect of the sustainability of natural resources, like water. These on-going activities of the Council of Religions, bring together religions for the promotion of the common good. Religious identities in these interfaith spaces bring to light commonalities and develop inter-faith fellowship. It can therefore be concluded that the approach used in this examination contributes to the teleological analysis of religious identities more in their doing aspects than in their being contents. Though identities are preserved in these interactions, they are as well in a state of relativity and becoming.

3.29 My self-identity

I close this research on fluidity in identity in the plural society of Mauritius by examining my own identity as a Mauritian. Self-identity may be seen as complex, composed of sub-identities, which in the words of the centenary French philosopher, Edgar Morin (2021) can reflect varied importance according to circumstances. He starts his book "Lessons of a Centenary Life" by describing himself as French, of Jewish origin, partially Italian and Spanish or even culturally European up to being a citizen of the world. I was born in Port-Louis, in Mauritius, in a Hindu family, a few years before the island gained its independence from Britain in 1968. My family name, Ragoo, normally (I will explain why 'normally' below) reflects

a possible affiliation with the Marathi tradition or culture within the constitutional Hindu community group. Otherwise, one can also find in the Mauritian telephone directory a few Christian first names attached to the family name Ragoo, probably through interfaith marriages. At birth, it was my uncle who gave me my first name, Ramesh, essentially Indian by appellation (other Indo-Mauritian names like Nivesh, Oumesh, Rakesh, Sailesh or Vikesh, all ending with the 'esh' are popular). During the migration of Indians to Mauritius, essentially as indentured workers in the 19th century, many traditions came along, including Marathi. The family name Ragoo and others like Mahadeea or Nawjee are appellations that no doubt denote some link with the Marathi tradition. Apparently, this tradition originates from the state of Maharashtra[58] in India and the Housing and Population census of 2011, revealed some 20,000 Marathis in Mauritius.[59]

Though my ancestors came from India, my grandparents or parents and myself have not visited India yet. At school, besides the study of English and French as mandatory languages, because of my name Ragoo, I was placed in a Marathi class though my parents did not speak this ancestral language. I did my best to learn the language of my ancestors but I failed at the exams, probably due to a lack of interactive oral expressions. Moreover, I know no member of my immediate and extended families in the existing generations who can either speak or understand Marathi. At an interfaith forum, a Marathi priest told me that schools do provide resources for the study of Marathi as an oriental language, but he observes that very few students attend to. Conversely, as a legacy of the nexus between religions and state power in Mauritius, Marathi along with other traditions have since colonial history, rather been used as religious markers of ancestral heritage up to 'delineating communities' by the state and governments (Eisenlohr, 2013). Moreover, as mentioned earlier in this examination, erection and support of cultural centres continue to be on the agenda of the state, under successive governments, including some religious organizations receiving funds.

My grandfather who was working for a Franco-Mauritian family named me Harry (sounds American or British), which has become my nickname. The name Ramesh Ragoo that appears on my birth certificate therefore invariably describes me as being someone of Indian descent, and most probably as a Hindu in the minds of others. While growing up and interacting with the different cultures in Mauritius, I end up to be known as Ramesh by some people (in more official spaces) and as Harry by my family members and friends. Knowing quite well that the name Ramesh equates me to an Indian origin and of belonging most probably to the Hindu community in the minds of Mauritians, I have come to develop a preference for my nickname Harry which seems to widen my perceived identity to the 'citizen of the world' of Edgar Morin. This is not to say that the name Ramesh cannot be an appellation for a world citizen. As to my physical appearance, I often convey a Muslim identity in the minds, like some people, particularly Muslims, will salute me with a *Salaam Alaykum* in public

[58] https://www.indianmirror.com/culture/states-culture/maharashtra.html

[59] https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/Documents/Census_and_Surveys/HPC/2011/HPC_TR_Vol2_Demography_Yr11.pdf

spaces. This is a lived reality to which I have become accustomed and would salute back *Alaykum Salaam*. When I travel overseas, people often wonder whether I am of Afghan or other Arabic origin. But once I start conversations in either English or French with them, I can notice interrogations on my identity from their facial expressions and they finish by asking.

Here I cannot prevent myself to recall my experience in Iraq when I was working as an engineer for the United Nations (UN). People in public spaces took me for an Iraqi due to my physical appearance, which helps my integration in public areas easily as a foreigner. At the Baghdad's UN office, I made friend with a guy named Yusuf, whom I thought was Muslim, out of my own prejudices, but I noticed he did not go to the mosque. When asked why, he told me that he was of Sabaean religion, an old tradition from the time of Adam and practiced by a minority community in Iraq. The mistake and lesson here are that I took him for a Muslim because of his facial physique with a beard and his name Yusuf. In Mauritius, names like Yusuf, usually connects someone with the Muslim tradition except in rare cases of converts, while in Arabic countries, same name can also denote affiliation with other religions. This means that the identity reflected by names or physical appearances may differ from the real self-identity. My study of the Bible at the college and the affiliation of my mother with the Pentecostal church in my early childhood develop in me some kind of Christian affinity. Much later, I came across the Baha'i faith and adhered to the teachings like 'mankind is one' or 'religions are one'. My membership with this religion adds complexity to my identity, as per the words of Edgar Morin. Though I can be a Baha'i in my mind with a Marathi background, in a given circumstance, I may be seen as more Marathi than Baha'i. For example, at a funeral or any other Marathi ceremony, some family members can take for granted that am a Marathi practitioner though I would not participate in rituals, being unaware of my affiliation with Baha'i. However, we would pleasingly salute ourselves by *namaskar* (Hello in Marathi) and enjoy traditional Marathi cookies.

Similarly, in my interactions with Baha'is over the last twenty years (in-group relationships), it has become a natural culture for me to say *Allah'u'Abha* (a greeting gesture and invocation which also means God, the All-Glorious). My self-identity is also ritualized by the daily spiritual obligation mentioned in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Baha'i Scripture): "It hath been ordained that every believer in God, the Lord of Judgment, shall, each day, having washed his hands and then his face, seat himself and, turning unto God, repeat 'Allah-u-Abha' ninety-five times".[60] The being and doing aspects of my self-identity, either publicly or privately, therefore manifest in me and can vary according to circumstances. Beyond Mauritian*ness* and legitimate patriotism, the Baha'i principle "the earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Warburg 2006, 16) also shapes my identity to the 'citizen of the world' of Edgar Morin. My identity is thus not static, it is rather fluid between exchanging forms, becomes relational within a plural society due to interactions with others, and organic, being in constant development from my ancestral heritage to present day experiences.

In both space and time, multiculturalism for me is therefore not only a learned characteristic of a plural nation, but it is quite present in me as an individual, and it adds to

[60] https://www.bahaiblog.net/2020/10/why-do-bahais-say-allahuabha-95-times-some-personal-thoughts/

the dimensions of my identity as a Mauritian. In other words, my identity can also be defined by the way I think, act and feel, as per the Canadian psychiatrist Eric Berne's (1910-1970) transactional analysis concepts on the three ego-states present in us: parent, adult and child. Part of my parents' identities and behaviours, blended with cross-cultural interactions of my own generation, manifest to form in my identity a new paradigm, a new worldview, which I in turn, on pass to my children who recast theirs. From this perspective, identity is seen as constantly changing along a continuum, acquiring new forms, from multiculturalism to interculturalism or 'interculturality' (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten 2015, 683), from generation to generation. Interculturalism can take a pluri-cultural nation to even greater heights beyond inter-cultural or interfaith dialogue.

In Turner's theories on social change, we find that the minds and society create each other. Transposed to a plural nation like Mauritius, there are negotiations between intra-group and inter-group relationships at the individual level. I have shown here that "We" as a nation dominates the "I" in self-identities of Mauritians and the formation of relational identities across generations is very much in contrast with the rigid delineation of communities, almost a legacy now, created by the Mauritian constitution since 1968. In the same vein of this legacy, other scholars have found that religious identification, particularly during adolescence, was stronger than national identification (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten, 2013). Because of my engagement in social networks and forums in Mauritius, I have the opportunity to discuss with many Mauritian youths of different backgrounds. They are primarily focused on their professional careers and studies; knowledge or interest in religious matters and practices are minimal on their personal agenda. In some cases, to avoid the parents' taboo on interreligious marriage, for example, some get engaged by civil law only or simply living together by common-law marriage. In these cases, it shows the independence being developed by young adults, with regard to their parents, in terms of decisions for partnership. Further, a pattern of being 'global Mauritian', due to transnational identities or simply thinking globally and the formation of a 21st century 'collective Mauritian consciousness' are but rising waves of social change among the younger generations.[61] Further research is therefore suggested here to explore the in-depth development of relational identities within the 'unity in diversity' of the Mauritian cosmopolitan nation. After decades of cohabitation, I have shown that interculturality among Mauritians are more promising than multiculturalism in the formation of a sustainable plural nation. In the next chapter, we shall explore ethical perspectives as derived from the religious texts. With the rise in pressing social ills, cutting across communities, religious ethics and spirituality are other common denominators for citizenship and nation-building.

[61] https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/21st-century-mauritian/187649/

Chapter 4

Ethics of a plural nation

In the previous chapters I have explored the presence and importance of religion in Mauritius and how it continuously relates with the state despite declared secularism. Mauritian secular state ensures the freedom of religion and belief without the latter imposing any public law or policy. New religious movements have also emerged in the decades following independence which proves among other motives, the interest of Mauritians in leading a religious life and the quest for new congregations, at such point that the 2021 new constitution of the Council of Religions has had to make provision for membership on its board of management for sixteen different religious denominations. Besides, statistical figures from 2011 population census revealed that out of a total population of 1,236,817 only 8,772 citizens declared 'no religion' (0,7%). Though this very small percentage does not necessarily equate to all of them being non-religious, it can be compared with the quite higher figure of 11% declared 'no religion' in France (a highly secularized country, with a majority of Catholics) around the same period, showing a general decline in the 'religious sentiment' of the French nation, in a study made by Melchior.[62] From informal conversations with some locals, 'no-religion' declaration could largely include those having 'no affiliation to any specific church', which does not necessarily imply their faith resignation, and includes to a lesser amount non-believers. Even if Mauritius is considered as a relatively high-income country, with quite significant material development and an advanced welfare state, it can therefore be argued that the spiritual capital of the Mauritian people is highly linked with religious affiliations, spirits and practices.

I have also shown here that the Mauritian nation is primarily composed of immigrants from different origins and in varying percentages, committed to the Weberian organization in communities, with regular events of cultures' representations and state recognition of temples, traditions and new entrants. Though the relevance of the Best Loser System (BLS) is the subject of contemporary debates, for example, it is still in force and has ensured ethnic representation in the national parliament (Fessha and Nam, 2015) since independence. The nexus between community or ethnicity and religion being still remarkable in Mauritius, a high level of religiosity is therefore maintained by the different religious institutions and transmitted across generations, with political and financial support (in the form of government subsidies) (Sookrajowa 2021, 136). These religious institutions often play an important role in influencing the social and political structures. The government guarantees, for example, a range of subsidies, grants and land/property transfer tax exemptions (see Government Notice GN 168 of 2018, page 91) to many of the religious bodies mainly for the

[62] https://www.melchior.fr/synthese/etude-de-la-pratique-religieuse-en-france-entre-secularisation-et-renouveau

maintenance of churches, organization of religious activities and allocations to priests.[63] Investment in cultural centers, as expressions of religious heritage, has continuously been on the agenda of successive governments. Presence of politicians and the opportunity for political discourses of different governments at religious gatherings and celebrations prevail despite pledges made by recent political elites to discontinue with such practices.[64] In their public address at these gatherings the religious leaders themselves, often praise the policy decisions of the government of the day.

Religion is thus actively present in the social construct and sustainable development of the 'rainbow nation'. Moreover, we have seen how ritual performances of different religious groups are also largely relayed by the media. Additionally, the freedom of the press in Mauritius allows the discourses of both politicians and religious leaders to be analyzed and criticized by editorialists and other public writers.[65] However, it seems the population's opinion is still divided in the struggle for a 'common identity', due to the close tie between communalism and political power representations. Can the 'Mauritian identity' supersede religious identities? Mauritius is said to be secular, with its own model of 'citizenship and religion' (Blanc, Droeber and Storrie 2020, 1-9) founded on immigration, definitely different from western secularism. Eisenlohr (2006) also found that religion is not absent in the Mauritian secular and public space. Ramtohul (2021) identifies the presence of a 'strong state' as one of the key contributors to the successful development of the Mauritian democracy because all political leaders have shared a national consensus on core issues like religious tolerance. Lastly, we found that despite the tendency of religious institutions to resist change in the maintenance of traditions and cultures, the younger generations' orientations gear more towards citizenship and inter-culturalism aided with the advent of going global, modern technology and social media.

4.10 Religious Ethics

In the given context, assuming that 99% Mauritians are thus religiously affiliated, as demonstrated by the 2011 statistical figures, my argument here is that religion, with the belief in God or a supernatural spirit, whether of monotheism or polytheism, is one of the primal sources of motivation in the practice of ethics in all spheres of life. The Oxford Dictionary defines ethics as "moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity". Ethics therefore address a person's capacity in deciding what is right or wrong and what is generally accepted as good or bad in a given society. Academic research contends that religious cues have contributed significantly and continues to do so in its primary purpose of influencing human civilizations forward, provided an appropriate democratic environment and constitutional religious freedom co-exist (Sommer, Bloom and Arikan 2011, 287-290). Moral codes of conducts and societal foundations have often taken their inspirations directly

[63] On ethical principles, excluding the land/property transfer tax exemption, a few religious bodies, like the Baha'i community, do not subscribe to or apply for government subsidies.

[64] https://www.5plus.mu/node/20781

[65] https://www.lemauricien.com/opinions/forum/rainbow-nation-myth-or-reality/186274/

or indirectly from religious thoughts. Stepanova (2015) examines the 'spiritual and moral foundation of civilization' with focus on the Russian traditional public discourse and the *Moral Code* of the Soviet Union. It is said that tradition is often associated with religion and in the case of Russia, national tradition and national identity are increasingly identified with the Orthodox Christian tradition. Traditional values are considered as 'universal values' such as faith, love, honesty, chastity, responsibility and solidarity. According to the Russian discourse, from both secular and religious sides, these values are embedded in the human nature by God and are shared by all world religions (Stepanova 2015, 121-122). Whatever be the polities and the strategies of the Russian discourses, my point here is that moralities of religious inspiration contribute in many ways to the development of spiritual intelligence.

McKay and Whitehouse (2015, 462) indicated that "cultural systems from diverse regions of the world are capable of connecting moral and religious foundations in a variety of ways." In their examination of "the politics of religion and corruption", Sommer, Bloom and Arikan (2013, 289) point to Weber's perspective "on the values and beliefs embedded in Protestant religion", as example, where Protestantism is usually associated with low-levels of corruption. Virtue-based ethics of religious inspiration can thus, in my view, provide a logical coherence with rationality based on natural reasoning. Virtues acquired and developed in a personal life, like honesty, influence one's character, attitude and behaviour, and can differentiate with actions carried out merely because of established ethical rules. For example, does my neighbor's mango tree falling on the boundary wall between us gives me the right to pick mangoes without his/her permission? Some may think it is just and right, in this particular situation, to take without permission. Others more virtuous, either from religious or non-religious backgrounds, might judge it more appropriate and respectful to ask permission from the neighbor. Virtuous ethics from religious traditions can also provide meaningful ground for constructing the interfaith dialogue to new horizons particularly in countries like Mauritius, based on transversal ethicality. Despite the lack of a shared past or common religion, Henry Srebrnik (2000) has noted that Mauritius is essentially a nation of immigrants, an ethnically-based civil society, definitely not authoritarian, and that there has been relative ethnic collaboration and stability. He pointed out that in a "democratic pluralist political system", voluntary associations such as trade unions, religious institutions and others have "an autonomous existence within the civil society and are beyond the control of the state". Srebrnik (2000) contends that despite "segmented religio-ethnic communities" which exist as "traditional solidarities" and the fact that the "constitutional structure incorporates aspects of communalism", democratic values are nevertheless accommodated. Individuals can thus act as moral agents for the benefit of the civil society even if they may be associated with communities.

Universal contingencies or social nexus where interactions occur are many, like the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the eradication of extreme poverty or equal education opportunities for all. It is now becoming a practice for the Council of Religions in Mauritius to provide inputs to policy decisions of national interest. However, although the sacred scriptures are highly valued in Mauritius and recurrently considered as primal sources of guidance on moral matters or events like marriage, unethical acts (various crimes, bad conducts, misbehaviors and socioeconomic issues) are recurrent serious concerns. This is not

to say that Mauritius does not perform well ethically; Mauritius is generally perceived and cited as a unique example of peaceful and proud multiculturalism (Lionnet and Spear, 2011), an excellent place of hospitality visited by thousands of tourists yearly.

The US department of state, for example, views Mauritius as one of the safest countries in the region for both its citizens and visiting foreigners (see Overseas Security Advisory Council-OSAC 2020 report on Mauritius).[66] On the other hand, drugs trafficking is one of the main challenges faced by the authorities despite frequent large seizures made by the coastal guards or the airport customs. In some areas of the island, with no naming here to avoid stigmatization, drugs consumption affects many families and is a main area of concern for social workers. From local media and official reports (National Drug Observatory Third Report of the Ministry of Health and Wellness 2020, 61-65), there is an increasing addiction to synthetic drugs among the youth, particularly teenagers of various social groups.[67]

In 2021, I participated in 'ATD Quart Monde' (a non-governmental international organization-www.atd-quartmonde.org) local workshops, together with those living in poverty in the neighborhoods, the social workers, NGOs and university researchers or specialists. The aim was to reflect on the hidden dimensions of poverty.[68] Eradication of poverty is thus considered from different perspectives with the intersection of different knowledge. Those living in poverty, for example have the opportunity to express themselves and share their daily miseries and experiences with the academics and other NGOs. The different contributions helped to produce a document identifying the hidden dimensions of poverty prevailing in Mauritius, cutting across all religious groups, and which was presented to the government in October 2021. One hidden dimension is the suffering of those living in poverty. They endure physical, emotional, mental sufferings and the incapacity to act. An old lady activist, for example, explained that she receives about USD 200 monthly from the government as old age pension (the Mauritian welfare system provides a retirement old age pension as from 60 years) but this is insufficient to pay her rent, utility bills, living and medical expenses. She therefore has to engage in undeclared works to earn an additional income and supplicates God that she stays in good health.

Another hidden dimension of poverty is the dispossession of the power to act of the poor. It is a loss of control from those who possess and rule. For example, historically in Mauritius, on the abolition of slavery in 1835, the freed slaves, mostly African blacks, were abandoned to themselves with no assets. They were also forced to convert to Christianity under colonization (Seetah et al. 2018, 161) and later categorized by the Mauritian constitution in the same ethno-community group (the general population) together with the minority Franco-Mauritians, the main owners of lands, sugar factories and economic power. I raised the issue of 'malaise creole' earlier in this study, the feeling of inferiority, of being neglected and having less political power in relation to the majority Hindu community. However, this is not to say that poverty in Mauritius affects only one community. According

[66] https://www.osac.gov/Country/Mauritius/Content/Detail/Report/df6f2522-91cd-458f-ab05-18ea33202dde
[67] https://health.govmu.org/Documents/Legislations/Documents/NDO%20Report%202020.pdf
[68] https://www.atd-quartmonde.fr/neuf-dimensions-de-la-pauvrete-2/

to 2017 statistics, some 130,000 Mauritians live in poverty, affecting mostly women. Some 10,000 households have also been identified on the government social register as living under extreme poverty.[69] There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the economic situation and affect those at the bottom of the ladder. The intersection of knowledge from different stakeholders at the ATD Quart Monde workshops shows that generosity and collective solidarity are two main necessary attributes for a nation to promote social justice.

In its 2018 Framework for Action, the National Social Inclusion Foundation (NSIF) mentions the eradication of extreme poverty by 2030 as one of its sustainable development goals (SDG).[70] As part of the legislation on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) all companies in Mauritius are required to contribute 2% of their after-tax profit to support duly approved NGOs (registered with NSIF) social welfare projects, like poverty alleviation. Different sacred texts have elaborated on the balance needed between acquiring material wealth and due consideration for the poor, like Jesus who stated in the gospels:

> Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.
>
> Matthew 19:23

In the above saying, Jesus does not blame someone for being rich. But if that individual values personal material wealth more than spiritual well-being, he or she will find it difficult to be generous towards the poor. The above saying, in my understanding, can also imply that living with moderation is much praiseworthy. It can as well challenge today's widening gap between rich and poor. Buddhism ethics of 'The Middle Way' also does not reject materialism but rather attachment to it. The rationale of these religious ethics might as well be extended to owners of business or capitalists. Sommer, Bloom and Arikan (2013) demonstrated in their research that "religion can be a source of good governance" for both the civil society and the state officials.

In Mauritius, companies have been increasingly engaging in corporate social responsibility projects over the recent years in line with Government incentives to encourage such actions.[71] Big companies operating in Mauritius have created their own foundations and trained staff for the management of CSR projects in line with the NSIF sustainable development goals. In the recent years, some companies have also introduced the practice of organizing interfaith prayers at the very beginning of the year for praising God and seeking blessings and protection for their enterprise and the staff. I have participated in a few prayer sessions, as member of the Council of Religions, in the presence of the management and the staff assembled in the conference rooms of the companies. There reigns an atmosphere where the business capital intertwines with the spiritual capital, an intersection of business ethics with religious ethics. It is also transversal ethics since different religious leaders are invited to talk and pray from their respective religious perspectives.

[69] https://www.lexpress.mu/node/400531
[70] http://www.nsif.mu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Framework-for-Action.pdf

[71] https://news.edbmauritius.org/budget-newsletter/pdf/2021_22Annexbudgetspeech.pdf

Apart from the hidden dimensions of poverty, the ATD Quart Monde research project has identified modifying factors like identity or cultural beliefs. The latter was found to be of particular importance in the case of Mauritius because of the various traditions and cultures. Rituals, religious offerings and practices, for example, can be costly for the believer. Families in Mauritius often find it an obligation to spend thousands of rupees to marry their children, with payments for the rituals, religious materials, ceremonies, wedding outfits, jewelries, entertainment and other expenses. Many of them get into debt to meet the finance required and poor families can struggle hard to meet these cultural expectations, for fear of breach towards the sacred and curses consequently falling on them. In this case, the above saying of Jesus may refrain rich believers from exorbitant expenses and invite them to exert moderation.

Escalation of domestic disputes, gender-based violence and cases of "crimes of passion" are other major concerns being constantly addressed by the authorities together with the collaboration of religions and NGOs. OSAC pointed in its 2020 report on Mauritius that most political protests, either spontaneous or scheduled, end peacefully. Inter-religious conflicts, as would be expected in a multi-ethnic population when compared to other African countries, are not common, says the report. Mauritius is said to have well managed its diversity with the help of successive governments, the religious leaders and the communities. There is much to be learned therefore on the contribution of religious ethics to the sustainability and prosperity of a plural nation as a whole.

Andreana and Putri (2020), in their study on the ethical behavior of auditors, argued that intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence are complement to each other and cannot be separated from an individual, for together they shape behaviour. Based on the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), these three forms of intelligence are, according to them, very much dependent on the person's background, which can include personal traits and social information. It can be recalled here that transactional analysis (TA) of Eric Berne (1910-1970), mentioned earlier in this study, also claims for influence of parental background in one's behaviour. Intellectual intelligence development enables skills like rational thinking, analytical capabilities and mindful actions. On the other hand, emotional intelligence helps someone to manage feelings and to understand the emotions and feelings of others (showing empathy). When they are combined and applied in interactions, they promote better socialization. However, according to Andreana and Putri (2020), for intellectual intelligence and emotional intelligence to be effective in ethical behaviour development, spiritual intelligence is also needed. The latter positively shapes and develops the individual character, generates wisdom, moral sense and judgment, alerts consciousness based on values that motivate positive thinking and actions.

Based on the above findings my focus here shall be on spiritual intelligence development as derived from religious sources and its positive impact on ethics of a population. Inter-religious collaboration is another area of interest for this research. Behaviors and conducts in Mauritius shall be examined to provide a reflection on the levels of Mauritian ethics, as sourced from religious moral prescriptions. The numerous religions practiced in Mauritius can provide ground for a transversal ethics analysis, cutting across

different ethnicities forming the plural nation. The role of religious leaders in the field of interactions with their parishioners as well as the policy makers cannot be ignored in the maintenance of an ethical society. My intention is not to defend the concept of spiritual intelligence as being sourced uniquely from religiosity only. Spiritual intelligence development, as examined by Candra and Dwija (2020), reinforces the ethics of civil societies from both secular or religious perspectives. However, "Surveys indicate that people who score higher on indices of religiosity, like frequency of prayer, reliably support more helping behaviours, while other studies have shown that religious priming also elicits a range of aggressive and prejudicial behaviours" (Mckay and Whitehouse 2015, 458-459). In my opinion, individual responsibility in self-spiritual intelligence development, in both being and doing, is capital.

4.11 Domestic Violence - a pressing social issue

One of the pressing social issues dominating the Mauritian society in the recent years is the increasing number of cases of domestic violence, namely gender-based violence (hereafter GBV). It has been reported that in 2020 and 2021, in particular, the scourge of violence against women have increased, apparently provoked by the lockdowns imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been denoted as a pandemic within a pandemic.[72] Under the 'Protection from Domestic Violence Act' adopted in 1997, domestic violence is criminalized. A 'Protection Order' of the Act guarantees protection of the victim, for example, against further harassment, violence or sexual abuse by the offender.[73] Immediately at the outset of the second phase of Covid-19 in March 2021, with the resurgence in the number of local infected cases and the national lockdown that followed, it has been reported 293 cases of domestic violence, affecting mostly women in less than a month, which made the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare and other NGOs to react and question existing legislations for the protection of women.

4.12 Gender Based Violence - GBV

In addition to considerations for revised legislations, the GBV issue has been the subject of a number of workshops organized by NGOs or jointly with the Ministry of Gender over the last months. For instance, on the occasion of the World Religion Day celebration in January 2021, the Baha'i community organized an inter-faith reflection on the theme "Family Unity: integrity of the family bond", inviting the participation of religious leaders and members of the Council of Religions.[74] Around 70 participants were present to consult in an atmosphere of oneness and spiritual reflection, through inspiring talks intertwined with

[72] https://gchumanrights.org/preparedness/article-on/the-rise-of-domestic-violence-in-mauritius-a-pandemic-within-the-pandemic.html
[73] https://gender.govmu.org/

[74] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mJrRXTQBoiks1uxySYWzI5hAJr73PQdGnWNf6CgO5g0/edit

dances on gender equality based on choreographies from Hindu or Baha'i inspirations, group discussions and prayers. It comes out of the discussions that societal challenges of the modern world are directly or indirectly linked with the family life since as the Baha'i scriptures recall, the family is the nucleus of the human society and that many of the social ills start from the household itself. If the household is well organized, around loving consultations and prayerful attitude involving both parents and children in the decision-making process, a healthy environment is created. It was pointed out that the scriptures of different religions claim for the equality of woman and man and that both are complements to each other. Spiritual education from early childhood was identified as cardinal for a real transformation in society. A Christian priest shared how it is within a unified family that individuals develop their capacity to love and to be of service to others. He explained that we need to treat others with the kindness that we would like to be treated. He said that if this basic principle is put into practice there should be no place for violence and he reminded the golden rule from the Gospel of Matthew:

> Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them, for this is the law… (Matthew 7:12)

The national education curriculum and parental motivations are found to focus more on competition and intellectual development of the child neglecting the importance of moral values, virtues and ethics. According to the participants, moral and spiritual education have been left to the sole responsibility of parents for decades. Nowadays, spouses and parents-to-be often find no time for spiritual education and themselves without any guidance on matters regarding marital life and children upbringing. Emambokus (2021, 21-22) contends that "Mauritius has demonstrated rapid socio-economic growth over the last decades", bringing along "substantial changes in the societal values of adolescents", such as early involvement in sexual activities leading to teenage pregnancy. Emambokus (2021) argues that imparting morality education in schools can be a way to awaken the adolescents, to make them more responsible and to take correct decisions in their personal lives.

During the group discussions, it was pointed out that with the development of the manufacturing sector, particularly the textile industries employing massively female labor as from the 1970s, women have left the home to support the household budget but more importantly for their own economic independence and emancipation. This increasing female workforce with gradually more leadership roles in different sectors align very much with the national strategy for the enhanced inclusive economic empowerment of women.[75] Conversely, this has impacted on the quality time spent with raising children, given that Mauritius has been mostly a patriarchal society since colonization. Although gradually it is being recognized that raising children and sharing household tasks are the responsibility of both parents, mismanagement of a home and misunderstanding of emotional family relationships could be sources of tension. On the other hand, both women and men are often required to deliver more hours of work, or to perform overtime, putting more stress on the

[75] https://govmu.org/EN/newsgov/SitePages/Gender-Equality-Minister-calls-for-more-actions-to-further-women%E2%80%99s-economic-empowerment.aspx

family. Argumentations, aggression and violence often arise top up by other causes, like infidelity, leading to increasing divorce rates and less marriages being contracted in Mauritius (see also Mauritius Statistics- https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/). [76] Thus the workshop concluded that consolidating and preserving the family bond are essentials for the well-being of a society, free from violence and gender discrimination. There was consensus on the relevant role religions in Mauritius can play, in collaboration with the authorities for the introduction of spiritual education in the national curriculum. Meanwhile religious leaders participating in the workshop have reiterated their commitment for actualizing spiritual education on family consolidation in their respective communities.

4.13 Interfaith forum with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare

A few months later in August 2021, I participated in an inter-faith forum organized by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare. The latter called on the Council of Religions to reflect on a roadmap towards implementing a sub-strategy component on 'change of societal norms and beliefs that are against principles of gender equality and equity'. During discussion with the Ministry officials it comes out that cases of domestic violence are rising despite reinforcement of the laws. Collaboration with religious leaders is thus being sought to address this social scourge on the field by addressing cultures and beliefs on gender inequality that may be contrary to the scriptures.

The Ministry officials presented statistics on cases and the forms of violence, which could be verbal, physical or sexual. The family counselors explained that they run training sessions for young adults and couples for a correct management of marital life and family consolidation. The ministry training session includes among others, communication skills, emotional intelligence development and family budgeting. They expressed the wish for a joint collaboration, to combine their scientific approach with the spiritual approach of the religions. It was highlighted that strong resilient communities need to be maintained at the local level, in the neighborhoods. They argued that gender equality is not about sameness in doing same household works in same amounts. It is more a question of balance, sharing respect, love and justice. They felt the need to gain insights on the spiritual contents of the religious courses. Religious organizations participating in the forum were thus requested to share their views on gender equality and their calendar of spiritual training sessions for incorporation in the action plan of the Ministry. Planned or on-going faith activities in the communities that promote spiritual empowerment were thus shared. Each religion presented the principles from the sacred texts that speak against violence and injustice towards women.

Two Muslim religious leaders, a man (an Imam from Sunni Islam) and a woman (Director of the 'Centre des Dames Mourides', Mauritius) explained that there is a general perception that Islamic scriptures discriminate women against men, which is not true they argued. The Imam said that Islamic texts address human beings as a whole body, as such include both man and woman equally. The Muslim woman leader explained that

[76] https://defimedia.info/increase-divorce-rate-whowhat-are-culprits

interpretations of Islamic texts have been dominated by men throughout generations, often influenced by patriarchy and ancient traditions. She deplored the fact, for example, that interfaith workshops in Mauritius are mostly attended by male Muslims. She argued that cultures must adapt to the sacred scriptures and not the reverse, with no illusion. Beliefs that woman is inferior to man in Islamic traditions need to be addressed with due considerations to evolution in both space and time, distinction between religious texts and religious practices, and civil codes particularly in a plural nation like Mauritius. For example, on the question of family heritage, she pointed out that from the days of the Prophet, it was a tradition of sharing assets or property in the ratio of two thirds for boys and one third for girls. This was justified since boys were then the main bread winner for the whole family. Today both Muslim boys and girls are equally educated in Mauritius and can bring equal income to the family from employment, which invites for new ethical interpretation of the scriptures.

A Telugu religious priest present at the workshop, humorously pointed out the now famous saying: 'love at first sight and divorce at the first fight', as becoming a reality with the younger generations. According to him, the concept of marriage is losing its profound meaning because of more selfishness characterized by more importance on physical love and less sensitiveness to relationship break-up. There is no real preparedness before engagement in marriage, with too much emphasis on the physical organization and entertainment part of the wedding. He recalled that marriage based on romantic love is made of roses and thorns and inspiration for a long-term relationship can be derived from the Vedas. The contributions made during the forum on gender equality principles and the rise of GBV in Mauritius would thus suggest that prejudices against women are mainly man-made, due to a lack of morality education at schools and misinterpretation of sacred texts. Besides, marriage being primarily a civil institution in itself has to be valued regarding both its civil and spiritual implications. Rademaker and Petterson (2019) posit that "many historians are now turning to religion to understand questions of gender and sexuality" and contend that on the "intimate and emotional side of marriage", an understanding of the "mystical spiritual dimensions" is relevant. The next section explores this understanding.

4.14 The Ruhi Study Circle

The Ruhi Institute carries action and research in a global process of learning and capacity building based on the Baha'i teachings, to bring transformation in society.[77] Books are produced by the institute in sequences on different subjects and can be studied in 'study circles' attended by both Baha'is and participants from other religious groups. According to Baha'i statistics, 56 study circles were running across the island in different clusters for 2020-2021. Ruhi Book 1, for example, treats on "Reflections on the Life of the Spirit". Following the above forum discussions and submission of the calendar of training sessions on gender equality by the religions in Mauritius, two young women, family counselors from the Ministry

[77] https://www.ruhi.org/

of Gender, visited an on-going Baha'i Ruhi study circle, book 12 Unit 1, in October 2021, at the Baha'i Convention Centre in Belle-Rose.

Twenty participants, mostly young couples were seated in a large circle (with masks and respect of social distancing, as recommended, because of the Covid-19 pandemic) studying under the guidance of a Baha'i facilitator, that is, someone who is trained in the sequence of books. The focus of the session was unit 1 of Ruhi Book 12 (on family and the community), which fundamentally treats on the institution of marriage with quotations from scriptures and comments. Each participant had a copy of the book, including the Ministry officials, and could take notes in the book itself with pencils. After a welcoming address, the facilitator invited a woman participant to start with chanting a prayer. The facilitator then asked a voluntary participant to start reading a paragraph in the text; after each reading there were like a few seconds of silence allowed for reflection. The facilitator invited every participant to share their thoughts or personal understanding of the texts read. On that evening, the study circle ended after two hours of reading and collective reflection. The different thoughts expressed generate a group discussion and possible inner meanings of the writings, for example, the following passage was analyzed:

> The pattern of communication a woman and a man establish in becoming acquainted with one another's character will, should they decide to marry, carry over to their future life together. And this pattern, to a large extent, will determine the quality of their relationship…the communication between a couple is to be shaped by genuine love and concern.

Then follows the reading of a scriptural text:

> A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit. It clotheth the words with meaning. It is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding."
>
> (Gleanings from the writings of Baha'u'llah 1935, 322-323).

The two Ministry counselors also took part in the discussion. They explained how communication is important in a couple and how both partners need to develop listening skills as well. Empathy, they said, as the capacity to understand others, is key to emotional intelligence development. A young woman, recently married, explained that she had always dreamed of a soulmate in marriage, but, in real couple life ideal partnership is almost impossible; soulmates do not exist. She added:

> a partner needs to develop patience, understanding and acceptance of the other with both the positive and negative personality traits, with all the beauties and flaws. We cannot be sure that a particular individual is our soulmate, then we fall in love and marry that person. We learn to compromise and to accept the differences.

A young person in the study circle said that one cannot expect a partner to change according to his/her needs. However, she said that the ability to feel like an equal partner in the relationship was important for her which could increase the chances for a long-term relationship. She explained that a sincere romantic relationship naturally develops to the acquaintance with the life partner's character. A couple married for a number of years explained that:

> True love in partnership is love for God first. If each partner loves God they said, pray together, and both engage in services to the community, a loving partnership is bound to last very long both physically and spiritually.

Study circle therefore creates a space for spiritual intelligence development founded on Baha'i ethics. The different books of the Ruhi Institute help to build spiritual capacity from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood aiming for the individual transformation and engagement in service to others. This initiative from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare shows a kind of collaboration between the state and religious institutions to address social issues like domestic violence and gender inequality. It is the formation of a pattern where policy decisions find inspiration from religious ethics. It confirms my earlier statement that Mauritius has its own secular model of 'citizenship and religion', where different religious scriptures can provide spiritual guidance on matters of ethics, morals and behaviors. Candra and Dwija (2020) posit that intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence complement each other in the development of ethical behaviors. In the addressing the ills that affect the Mauritian society, one cannot deny the fact that in today's society, the children and youth are exposed to new influences, like abusive technology consumption, spending long hours on their mobile phones or social media and exposure to uncontrolled violent videos or movies. We have seen above how parents are often trapped in their daily commitments to earn a living, resulting in less quality time or none at all for raising children properly and to dispense religious education. Besides, more and more teenagers are becoming parents outside marriage, as will be discussed below, worsening the situation on the field for both the state and the NGOs. Ethics therefore become a concern for all against the waves of materialism and consumerism.

4.15 National Curriculum - Religions and Ethics

During this research, I found that the Finland educational system has included religious education and ethics classes in its curriculum for all students since 2003, due to changes happening in the secular landscape mainly with the arrival of immigrants (Zilliacus and Holm, 2013). Mauritius has to date promoted only ancestral languages like Hindi, Urdu or Mandarin in the national primary education curriculum, with no formal religious classes. Eisenlohr (2017) observed that these languages are, however, never used in everyday life, but rather the vernacular Creole which predominates nationwide. Hinduism as an examinable subject, which can include the Buddhist thought is offered at secondary level only (Boodnah, 2021). Multicultural education is disseminated only informally, at times of religious celebrations for example, during morning assemblies. Though I am not Christian, I have studied and graded in "Bible Knowledge" as a subject for five years at the Adventist College, a secondary confessional school and sat for the final examinations of the Cambridge School Certificate. In contrast, Finland national curricula have been written for Evangelical Lutheran, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Baha'i, Hare Krishna and others. Under parental consent, the student can attend any religious class. Finland educational system ensures that all minority religions receive equal attention in the curriculum, realizing that this helps better social integration for students of both Finnish and non-Finnish backgrounds. Though the focus

is rather on social integration, intercultural education and consolidation of identities because of religious diversity, the Finland experience could be a model in the design of a curriculum for either religious or ethics classes. Ethics classes, for example, can be designed for students from both religious and non-religious backgrounds. However according to Zilliacus and Holm (2013), very few students are able to recognize the complex moral or religious issues. Most of them take it easy being more attracted to the cultural or artistic parts like traditional potlucks and music. Zilliacus and Holm (2013) contend that while students perceive religion as just another subject in the curriculum, a few teachers consider the instruction scope as the transmission of 'a way of life' aiming for confessional practice.

On the other hand, according to Finland statistics 10,800 victims of domestic violence offences were recorded by the police in 2020, with a majority of women as victims.[78] Finland and other Nordic European countries are usually reputed for their high gender equality practices in the public domain. Paradoxically, it seems the contrary in the private domain of homes, as revealed by the above figures.[79] Mediation is preferred to the judicial system of punishment in matters of domestic violence, apparently as a result of strong Finnish attitudes about privacy and endurance. Further, Jokinen (2020) argues that radical restorative justice could provide more potential than criminal justice. She explains that radical restorative justice (involving the offender, the victim and a mediator where often one of the opponents, usually the woman, has to do the extra mile in conflict resolution, lovingly, putting aside any thought of vengeance for example), hospitality (founded on faith) and Christian spirituality such as Jesus' teachings on welcoming strangers can be combined to address cases of domestic violence. From these perspectives, transversal ethics founded on interfaith reflections and dialogues, like in Mauritius, is an area of promising research particularly in the fight against gender-based violence.

4.16 Ethics around Marriage and Divorce

During the workshop on GBV with the ministry, the Catholic priest shared on the training offered to young couple. Before marriage there is a party session with the couples-to-be where around six couples meet with an experienced couple and a chaplain. The couples are invited to share experiences of their marriage projects, under the guidance of the teachings from the Bible. Topics of discussion revolve around love, sexuality, the family unit and the Christian way of life. Additionally, there are Marriage Preparation Centers on almost all parishes where couples and a priest meet to reflect on challenges facing engaged couples. After marriage, couples can participate in family service training, learning on how to entertain a happy married life, lead a happy family, and to be a role models for children. While discussing with some local Christians on this training program, they shared that it is very effective in raising awareness on the challenges and bounties of a married life and that there

[78] https://www.stat.fi/til/rpk/2020/15/rpk_2020_15_2021-06-01_tie_001_en.html
[79] https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/finlands-paradox-of-equality-professional-excellence-domestic-abuse/

are cases where the couples-to-be have rescheduled their marriage plan to revisit their relationship or simply dropped the marriage project due to unpreparedness.[80]

Another area where religious ethics come into play in Mauritius is the considerations given to divorce. For example, it is strongly discouraged in the Baha'i teachings because it is against the good pleasure of God, a stand almost like Christianity. It is permissible only after attempts of conflict resolution have been unsuccessful. Following a request to the local Baha'i spiritual council (composed of nine community members), for separation by either partner (both have equal rights to ask for divorce), the first duty of the council is to explore with the couple every possibility for reconciliation. The council may also appoint a mediator for reconciliation which is very similar to the aforementioned Jokinen's 'restorative justice'. The partners are called to collectively address their grievances, identify weaknesses in their relationship and to find remedies for coming back to good terms. They are summoned to forgive, to do every effort with due consideration to children and personal sacrifice to re-establish genuinely the loving relationship. If antipathy, resentment and separation persist, Baha'i laws commend that the couple starts one full year of patience in separation, during which efforts for reconciliation can pursue. Divorce can be granted if this one year of patience has also proven unsuccessful. These measures are considered as sacred by the Baha'i Institutions and failure to abide run the risk of sanctions, such as removal of administrative rights as per the Baha'i Administrative Order (Warburg 2006, 196-198), for example, the removal of the right to vote in a Baha'i election of a local spiritual assembly. The application of Baha'i ethics in the request for divorce aims at preserving the sacredness of marriage, consolidates the family bond and unity among believers. Abdu'l-Bahá (the son of Bahá'u'lláh) stated:

> Formerly in Persia divorce was very easily obtained. Among the people of the past Dispensation a trifling matter would cause divorce. However, as the light of the Kingdom shone forth, souls were quickened by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh, then they totally eschewed divorce.
>
> Lights of Guidance, section 1306, p.392

4.17 Teenage pregnancy

Another pressing issue in the Mauritian society is the increasing number of teenage pregnancies outside marriage. It is an ethical concern much in conflict with society's moral principles and religious teachings. According to 2020 statistics figures, twenty girls below the age of 15 and more than a thousand in the age group 15-19 have become young mothers. It is also known that common-law couples (cohabitation) at very young age, often below sixteen years old, or simply in adulthood, has become another pertinent social issue.[81] These social changes affecting the younger generations also challenge existing civil and criminal codes. They question the current understanding of the meaning of marriage and family life. New family patterns are emerging, such as single parenthood or cohabitation with children from

[80] https://www.preparation-mariage.info/

[81] https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/legal-age-to-marry-more-consequences-than-what-we-envisage/320579/

different biological fathers.[82] As a response to teenage pregnancy and its consequences, civil marriage has been made legal from the age of 18 as per new bills presented by the Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare in 2020. This implies that existing civil code governing religious marriages need to align with the new bills and prohibit marriages below 18 years. It also implies a revision of existing criminal code to make sexual intercourse with persons below 18 years unlawful.[83]

4.18 Conception and Pregnancy

In her popular book *Enceinte* (French translation to *Pregnant*), Dinan (2021), a Mauritian writer, raises on one hand the concerns of teenage pregnancy and its adverse effects. On the other hand, she draws attention on the prevailing low fertility rate in Mauritius. Adolescent boys or men causing these teenage pregnancies, either by consented sexual intercourse or rape cases, commit an offence under the criminal code. Dinan raises alerts by providing some figures from Statistics Mauritius. She claims for firm action and commends that babies should be raised in stable families with a quality life. The figures also reveal that Mauritius with a present population of 1.2M has a very low birth rate. If the present trend continues, it may represent a real demographic challenge according to statistical projections, with the risk of a population decrease of 200,000 by 2050. Recent academic research on Mauritius' demography has confirmed that one of the main factors of a declining fertility is the postponement of marriage. While education allows one to move up the income ladder, the average age at first marriage for women has reached 28.0 years in 2018 (Wlodarczyk, Ramlall and Acedanski 2020, 553-555).

The above demographic challenges, the worries of teenage pregnancy or the happiness around pregnancy in general appeal to the ethics, morals and sacredness of birth. Dinan raises this awareness in her book and conscious of the multi-religious composition of the Mauritian nation she invited the collaboration of the Council of Religions. She called upon the religious ethics from different scriptures in relation to pregnancy and birth. Thus Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Baha'i have contributed to the contents of the book *Enceinte.* She invited religions in Mauritius to recall on the ethics regarding love, marriage, abortion, birth, raising children and family integrity.

If we consider abortion, for instance, though illegal in Mauritius, it is being practiced secretively.[84] It is a subject of great concern in the country, particularly for the young generation. To date, opinions differ with recurrent debates. The Baha'i ethics, for example, strictly forbids abortion to prevent the birth of an unwanted child. However, the Universal

[82] https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/des-familles-stables/21342/

[83] https://mauritiusassembly.govmu.org/Documents/Bills/circulated/2020/bill162020.pdf

[84] https://defimedia.info/should-abortion-be-legalised

House of Justice (the Baha'i governing body in Haifa) describes exceptional circumstances, such as for medical reasons or in rape cases as stated below:

> One of the most heinous of sexual offences is the crime of rape. When a believer is a victim, she is entitled to the loving aid and support of the members of her community, and she is free to initiate action against the perpetrator under the law of the land should she wish to do so. If she becomes pregnant as a consequence of this assault, no pressure should be brought upon her by the Bahá'í institutions to marry. As to whether she should continue or terminate the pregnancy, it is for her to decide on the course of action she should follow, taking into consideration medical and other relevant factors, and in the light of the Bahá'í Teachings. If she gives birth to a child as a result of the rape, it is left to her discretion whether to seek financial support for the maintenance of the child from the father; however, his claim to any parental rights would, under Bahá'í law, be called into question, in view of the circumstance.[85]
>
> The Universal House of Justice, 1992

The book *Enceinte* depicts that religious scriptures encounter with birth as a logical consequence of marriage only, excluding common-law unions. I examine in the next sections the ethics of two minority religions in Mauritius, Buddhism and Baha'i, with an emphasis on their thoughts, practices and accountability about marriage, conception, pregnancy and birth and the broader social and political fabrics. For the purpose of this examination, I cannot explore the ethics of all the religions practiced in Mauritius. Zilliacus and Holm (2013) contend that religious diversity is today a key issue and have examined the Finland multi-confessional system of instruction in the national core curriculum on pupils' own religion, according to either their religion be minority or majority in the country. Moreover, ethics and practices of minority religions in Mauritius have been less addressed, compared to previous studies which mostly focused on Christian theology, Islamic identities and practices. Eisenlohr, for example, (2006; 2009) examined 'Muslim identities' and 'devotional Islam' respectively in Mauritius. Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally (2020) researched on 'intersectional religious agency' with focus on Mauritian Muslim women. Others, like Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten (2013), in their examination of religious and national identification at adolescence have considered three religious groups only in Mauritius, namely Hindu (as majority), Christian and Muslim (as minorities). Consequently, in this examination I opt to consider two other religious minorities in Mauritius, namely Buddhist and Baha'i ethics on the question of pregnancy and birth.

4.19 Buddhist teachings on conception, pregnancy and birth

In the book of Dinan (2021), extracts from the Buddhist thought (mainly from the canonical scripture of the Mahayana School) explain that three conditions are necessary for the conception of a baby: (1) the parents' reproductive organs should be in good health, (2) the right moment in the woman's menstruation cycle and (3) the presence of a conscience ready to incarnate with a karma in harmony with the parents' karma. Accordingly, a Buddhist lama (priest from Tibetan Buddhism), can assist the parents to facilitate the karmic agreement

[85] https://bahaiquotes.com/subject/abortion

to take place. In Tibetan tradition, there is belief of *bardo* (interval), an intermediate state between one life and the next (Mitra 2018, 168). Special prayers, mantras or tantric rituals are proposed in response to the wish of parents on the desired sex of the baby or for the purification of the bad karma. There is also the belief that these religious practices can help to select the social class of a compatible disincarnated conscience in concordance with that of the parents.

Gautama Buddha in His First Sermon revealed the Four Noble Truths. The first Truth is that life is suffering, second is the cause of this suffering (ignorance and craving through the desire to exist), third is suffering can end while the fourth truth represents the eight noble paths leading to *Nirvana* (the goal of human perfection), such as the importance and reliance on meditation (Boodnah, 2021). His teachings primarily aim to eliminate 'suffering' (which Buddhists call *dukkha*). Mitra (2018) contends that the "ultimate ground for Buddhist ethics consists in Dharma, viewed as 'natural law', and that in the moral sphere, Dharma gets manifested in our moral action." The aim is to raise the intellectual thought to its highest level through the following of Buddhist teachings. Buddhist ethics aim for wisdom, with emphasis on virtues like *ahimsa* (non-violence), spiritual growth and contentment. It is worthy to recall here the immigration history of Mauritius and how the first immigrants drew their endurance, patience and resilience from their sacred texts, including the Buddhist thought, to resist the sufferings and challenges of colonization. Boodnah (2021) mentions their spiritual virtues like tolerance, compassion and respect which enable them to survive in the face of oppression. In particular, the First Noble Truth of suffering, is of primal importance according to the Buddhist teaching, explaining that births and deaths are indefinite stages in a closed karmic cycle (from karma implying one's actions and its consequences), unless the believer decides to engage on the liberation path.

In the endless cycle of rebirths, birth and death, Buddhist practice, rituals and meditation provide the necessary merits which impact positively the karma. This belief motivates Buddhist practitioners to earn credits in this life for the benefit of the next life. They come to understand and accept their new social, multicultural and economic environments through religion, and religion through the new social, multicultural and economic experiences (Jayasinghe and Soobaroyen, 2009). The Buddhist thought also states that birth and rebirth may not necessarily be of human nature since there are different kingdoms of existence. From His First Discourse, Gautama Buddha is considered a Reformer and the founder of Buddhism. He revealed the 'catvari-arya-satyani' (Four Noble Truths) as a way to eliminate 'suffering'.

According to the extracts on Buddhist literature in the book *Enceinte* of Dinan (2021), to be born human is considered by Buddhists:

> a great privilege and a rare chance, a balanced mix of pleasure and suffering, enabling the engagement on the spiritual path.

With regard to conception, as a logical consequence of marriage, sexual intercourse in this marital relationship is simply considered as a natural function integrated to the psychological and spiritual elements of life. If it is experienced:

> similar to meditation, with love, wisdom and compassion, it helps to avoid anger, attachment, jealousy, illusions and other impurities which positively converge the karmas.

In the pregnancy phase, the book *Enceinte* describes that the embryo develops physically up to the feeling of suffering when the mother's womb space becomes limited, and also starts experiencing the agonies of its associated karma; each moment in this embryonic stage is like a thousand years. On reaching the ninth month, the fetus resents disgust for the womb and the willpower to escape it, ultimately through birth.

In contrast with the western thought on the process of giving birth through delivery involving the fetus with the woman becoming a mother and her emotions, according to the explanations given in the book *Enceinte* it seems that the Buddhist writings omit to mention the role of the woman in this process. It is argued that more emphasis is placed on 'birth' rather than 'delivery' or childbirth. Besides, it is said that there is a kind of complementarity between the medical approach (Science) and the Buddhist ethics (Religion) on the development of the fetus; they both aim for healing (removal of pain) and enlightenment. Mitra (2018) opines "that both Buddhism and Biomedical science aim to do away with pain." The Buddhist text in *Enceinte* proposes the metaphor of the womb with that of the cosmos to the believer and that inspiration and meditation on the four noble truths can lead to the inner sense and meaning of *samsara* (the cycle of death and rebirth, governed by one's Karma).

For the "ordinary person", the sacred texts in *Enceinte* tend to remind that conception can be realized only through marriage. The act of conception through the uterus also reminds the believer of the presence of the karmic presence or a Buddha consciousness willing to associate with the embryo. According to the Mahayana Buddhist thought, particularly with the Tibetan tradition, there is like an intermediate state between one life and the next, every time, in the series of lives lived by an individual. It is believed that the descent of this intermediate consciousness occurs or 'enter' the womb at fertilization (Mitra 2018, 168). Taken with compassion, love, as through the practice of meditation, the physical pleasures of conception are combined with spiritual potential, like overcoming anger or violence. Though the Buddhist thought sees the sexual relation as a natural function, it undeniably aligns with the sacredness of conception, the central theme of *Enceinte* (Pregnant) of Dinan (2021). During the launching of *Enceinte*, at Labourdonnais Hotel in Port Louis, the above teachings and ethics of Buddhism were presented to an audience of some fifty persons (due to the sanitary restrictions imposed by Covid-19) and broadcasted later on the public MBC-TV in the documentary "Tipa Tipa Nou Avanse" (Creole translation to 'we progress in small steps') mentioned earlier.

Analyzing the Buddhist worldview as popularly presented in Mauritius through the lens of *Enceinte*, the book helps to raise the Mauritian awareness on pressing issues like teenage pregnancy or conception outside marriage. The statistical figures given above on these issues suggest that the egoistic character of desire and passion, mainly due to the behaviors of some male individuals in operation in the human existence gain influence in Mauritius as well. The unconscious minds or the "ordinary person" commit these immoral acts and perpetuate sufferings. Dinan's motivation in calling on the ethics and teachings of each religion in

Mauritius on the sacredness of pregnancy is, in my view, timely justified and helps to address the ignorance of the negative impacts of teenage pregnancy.

In raising concern about these immoral acts, like causing teenage pregnancy, Dinan does not wish to give a negative image of Mauritius, but rather firmly appeals for the importance of stable families, the well-being and rights of the newborns. Giving birth at 15 years, for example, is considered a serious concern not only for the young mother herself, but for the family and society. Ignorance has been identified as one of the root causes of suffering. Boodnah (2021) claims that Buddhist ethics, based on the three principles of Sila (Virtue), Citta (Mind) and Panna (Wisdom) can become strong foundations of Buddhist pedagogy, for disciplined and accomplished youth in virtue and moral. Buddhist education he said, like the four noble truths or the noble eight-fold path, is a holistic scheme that can be meaningful for individuals, schools, or communities. Its introduction in pre-primary and primary curricula in Mauritius aims at reducing ignorance issues on morals, enhancing spiritual intelligence and unlocking inherent wisdom. However, he argued that to make Buddhist pedagogy effective in schools' curriculum, to develop critical thinking and wisdom, appropriate methods of instruction as well as the spirit with which the instruction is delivered are important elements to consider. In this regard, the research of Zilliacus and Holm (2013) on the instruction methods in the delivery of religion classes in Finland national education curricula could be an example of how learnings from religion can contribute to address societal issues. Apparently, these educational classes help to promote social integration of migrants within most Lutheran Finnish-born population. Hella and Wright (2009) posit that countries like Finland and UK, "have both independently of one another, developed an approach that identifies both 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion as key educational tasks in their state education systems." In these countries, both ethics and religious education are concerned with the personal development and identity formation of students (Hella and Wright 2009, 54). I will introduce later the Mauritian experience of religious education in some schools, an initiative of the Council of Religions.

4.20 Baha'i teachings on Conception, Pregnancy and Birth

The metaphysical foundation of Baha'i ethics is based on the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and changeless God (Kluge, 2015). It provides the structure on which is built the corpus of virtues and attributes that characterize the Baha'i teachings. Therefore, intermediaries called Manifestations are necessary between God and mankind for an understanding of ethics. Kluge, in his review of Schaefer's *Baha'i Ethics in Light of Scripture* (Volumes I and II), pointed out that: "human beings are neither moral or immoral but have the capacity or potential to be either and, therefore, require the guidance of the Manifestations to live an ethical and spiritual life." Moreover, he clarifies that reason and religion are certainly not in conflict in the Baha'i writings. He confirms with the statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the son of Bahá'u'lláh) that: "Reason is the first faculty of man and the religion of God is in harmony with it." Virtue ethics, like honesty, is said to dominate the Baha'i ethical mind whether with in-group or out-group relationships. Virtues emanate from God's attributes, like eternal and uniqueness, and are therefore timeless and addressed in all

religious scriptures. With the only difference that Baha'i ethics are also strongly linked with the teachings on the unity of God, unity of religions and unity of mankind. Bahá'u'lláh, who according to Baha'i literature is the Manifestation of God for this age, has stated:

> The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 286. Baha'i Reference Library)

The laws and ethics he revealed in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Baha'i holy book) aim for the recognition and reliance on God, as the unique creator, the supreme power and source of progressive revelations in the history of independent religions. About his commandments, he said:

> True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote several mystical works as well, like the "Seven Valleys" in which he describes the stages of the soul's journey to union with its Creator, as seven valleys; valley of search, love, knowledge, unity, contentment, wonderment, and 'true poverty and absolute nothingness'.[86]

The laws governing marriage are found in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Marriage is regarded as a holy institution of, social order and sacredness, as in the following saying:

> And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation, and enjoined it upon us in that which was sent down out of the heaven of sanctity in His Most Holy Book.[87]

'Abdu'l-Bahá develops the ethics of marriage further as follows:

> Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity…The true marriage of Bahá'ís is this, that husband and wife should be united both physically and spiritually, that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other, and may enjoy everlasting unity throughout all the worlds of God. This is Bahá'í marriage.

In the above passage, emphasis is placed on the interdependence of each partner for their spiritual progress in all the worlds of God (to note in Buddhist thought, kingdoms of existence). In addition to the requirement of being in accordance with the civil laws for marriage, the Baha'i law stipulates the consent of parents as a prerequisite for the wedding. Marriage unifies two families in line with the primal aim of realizing unity of mankind, consent of parents thus becomes an essential requirement. This law also places gratitude and respect

[86] https://www.bahai.org/bahaullah/articles-resources/from-seven-valleys
[87] https://www.bahai.org/beliefs/life-spirit/character-conduct/articles-resources/compilation-family-life-marriage

in the hearts of children for their parents who gave them life. It is to be noted that both civil marriage and the religious marriage need to take place on the same day. Non-obedience to these laws may entail sanctions like removal of administrative rights of the believers. These first ethics on marriage spell out the commitment of both the engaged couple and their parents for the preservation of unity and a social fabric. The Baha'i marriage contains no rituals, in the presence of two witnesses both the groom and the bride pronounce the following marriage verse:

> We will all verily abide by the Will of God.
>
> Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Questions and Answers, p. 105

In taking this vow, the married couple pledges for placing God at the center of their relationship, to live a spiritual life through prayers, meditation on the teachings and service to the community. It goes back to the aforementioned statement of a married couple that: "True love in partnership is love for God first". The ceremony can be accompanied by selected prayers. Since Baha'i promotes unity and recognizes all religions, interfaith marriages are permissible provided the two ceremonies take place same day as for the civil marriage. According to Baha'i records, in the recent years at least five interfaith marriages are performed yearly in Mauritius, a sign of acquaintance with Baha'i ethics given the multi-religious context of the country, since both parents on both sides of the engaged couple must give their consent.

Conception is regarded as a logical consequence of marriage only. Common-law union is forbidden. Baha'i writings describe the association of the soul as a spiritual entity with the embryo. Parents are thus recommended to pray together during pregnancy. Special prayers have been revealed for this purpose, like the following:

> O my Lord, I dedicate that which is in my womb unto Thee. Then cause it to be a praiseworthy child in Thy Kingdom, and a fortunate one by Thy favor and Thy generosity; to develop and to grow up under the charge of Thine education. Verily Thou art the Gracious! Verily Thou art the Lord of Great Favor!
>
> Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá v1, p.139

The womb provides the environment for a person's initial physical development. Similarly, the earthly existence provides the experiences of life for the development of spiritual capacities and attributes which will help the soul on its spiritual journey after death, towards union with its Creator. The primary purpose in the earthly existence is thus the knowledge of God. The first words of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas read as follows:

> THE FIRST DUTY prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His Laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation.

Immediately after recognizing Bahá'u'lláh as the Fountain of the Laws of God for this day, the believer has the obligation to stay firm in the faith, to observe every ordinance prescribed. These two twin duties are inseparable. Firmness implies for example, obedience to the institutions of the faith and to the obligations regarding personal spiritual development like the daily obligatory prayer or the repeated invocation of "Allah'u'Abha" 95 times (an Arabic phrase meaning 'God the All-Glorious'). In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (note 33), Bahá'u'lláh writes:

> It hath been ordained that every believer in God, the Lord of Judgment, shall, each day, having washed his hands and then his face, seat himself and, turning unto God, repeat 'Allah-u-Abha' ninety-five times.

Allah'u'Abha is also used as a greeting in the parlance of the believers and is recognized as a form of the Greatest Name of God. Turning to God and invoking the Greatest Name wholeheartedly opens a spiritual connection for divine influence, drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit. It provides protection against suffering and brings confidence to the believer. The bounties of the divine reality are infinite, but they become finite in the realm of the believers. Faced with the challenges of the earthly existence, the believer needs to develop its spiritual capacity daily to be able to reflect the attributes of God. Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

> One cannot obtain the full force of the sunlight when it is cast on a flat mirror, but once the sun shineth upon a concave mirror, or on a lens that is convex, all its heat will be concentrated on a single point, and that one point will burn the hottest. Thus is it necessary to focus one's thinking on a single point so that it will become an effective force… The Greatest Name should be found upon the lips in the first awakening moment of early dawn. It should be fed upon by constant use in daily invocation, in trouble, under opposition, and should be the last word breathed when the head rests upon the pillow at night. It is the name of comfort, protection, happiness, illumination, love and unity.

Baha'i ethics on conception, pregnancy and birth are thus founded on both rationality and spirituality, of reason and religion. The spiritual principles are further elaborated in the sequence of Ruhi courses, discussed earlier, aiming for spiritual transformation. The Ruhi book1 study circle, for example, provides spiritual contents for personal development, like reflections on the life of the spirit.[88] The first Baha'i writing in the book states:

> The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct.

Following the reading of the above saying, a series of questions and examples in real life help the participants to develop understanding on the outer and inner meanings of the writings. In their examination of the delivery of religious education in both UK and Finland, Hella and Wright (2009) contend that a *phenomenographic approach* might be useful since students often have pre-understandings of the object of study which are valuable in class for critical understanding. In the Ruhi study, it often challenges what has been probably thought as ethical, like telling a small lie to protect oneself in daily life situations. For example, the above writing makes a distinction between pure and goodly deeds. In the exercises, examples of situations are given, such as 'taking care of and teaching children' can be considered as a pure

[88] https://www.ruhi.org/materials/embarking-path-service.php#download_book1

and goodly deed while 'helping others and expecting a reward' is not. Going deep in the meanings of the Baha'i writings can therefore challenge biased thoughts or personal attitudes, particularly toward marriage or pregnancy, believed to be fair or objective.

Other books of the Ruhi Institute address the importance of spiritual education for children and adolescents or living a happy marital life. Participants completing these studies can help to run children classes or junior youth programs. These courses of the Ruhi Institute also prepare the participants (baha'i and non-baha'i) in virtue-ethics practice, like community projects, such as starting a devotional meeting (an invitation for prayers and reflection on a theme, like generosity) with neighbors. Study circles create spaces for reflections among believers of different faiths which help to reduce ignorance and enhance both the intellectual and spiritual capacities of a community or neighborhood. Based on real-life experiences, more coherence can be developed between logical or natural reasoning and Baha'i ethics. Also, since the study circles are open to other faiths, participants can appreciate transversal ethics.

4.21 Perspectives on intercultural education (ICE) in Mauritius

Though the metaphysical foundations of Buddhist and Baha'i thoughts may differ, they both underline the importance of human values education for spiritual progress, wisdom and elimination of ignorance in this earthly existence and beyond, in other kingdoms or worlds. The corpus of their religious doctrines contains an intense elaboration on virtue-ethics to raise the potential of intellectual intelligence to its highest level. In different ways, their teachings demonstrate that material education only is insufficient for the development of the child's character and attitude. During this research and out of my personal social engagement, I have participated in different NGOs workshops or those organized by religious organizations in collaboration with the authorities on prevailing societal issues, like teenage pregnancy or domestic violence. The discussions and conclusions unanimously agree that spiritual education, religious studies or virtue-ethics from different faiths are all missing elements of the national education curriculum. Though Mauritius has a dense religious landscape, as discussed earlier here, with various religious traditions and even new entrants, formal religious education has to date not been firmly established in the primary education curriculum (Maudarbux, 2016; Boodnah, 2021). Apparently, the responsibility of religious education has been left on parents or the religious institutions and has never been a priority on the agenda of any government to date. Maudarbux (2016) pointed out that children often come to learn about the culture or religious differences of the other from their own encounters and experiences at schools. School teachers use their own initiatives to engage into conversations or informal education on religion with children. The celebration of the Independence Day, on the 12th March, is often an opportunity for discourses on the multicultural characteristics of Mauritius, described as the rainbow nation.

A few attempts have been made by the authorities, with the help of pedagogues, to introduce "citizenship education" in schools, with focus on human values, cultural heritage

and diversity, national heritage and national unity.[89] But due to criticisms, from both the public and the teachers themselves, there has been no consistency or rigor by successive governments to maintain this kind of initiative. Maudarbux (2016) found that some religious leaders still view interreligious education as a 'threat to the purity of their faith'. Many teachers believed that teaching of moral values aiming for citizenship in a multi-cultural society can be introduced within the existing disciplines and they argued that in their daily interactions with the students they are already shaping behaviors and character. Teachers would not find time to do citizenship education in classrooms, more so if it is not examinable. Moreover, it seems that when a subject is examinable, the aim is defeated, students just learn for the sake of passing exams and do not grasp the real purpose of multicultural or intercultural education. This argument aligns with the findings, mentioned earlier here, of Zilliacus and Holm (2013) in their study on religions curricula of the Finland national education. An ex-director of the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate argued that human values can best be taught in daily school activities with the right attitude of teachers for moral education, instead of formal study.[90] On the other hand, teachers do not show real commitment, he said, if the subject is not examinable. Another lecturer from the Mauritius Institute of Education stated that citizenship education or human values can be integrated in existing examinable disciplines with appropriate adjustments to contents of existing school textbooks. Moreover, he claimed that the teachers delivering this kind of education must themselves live the values of citizenship, since quite often children face racial abuse themselves. He asked: "How can we expect children to respect others if we do not do so ourselves?"[91] In an interview realized by the local newspaper *L'Express*, a teacher said:

> The most important thing is that students feel that their teachers are credible and sincere. As from that moment everything becomes an excuse for intercultural education…it is at school that seeds of peace and respect are sown and the process can't wait. The main problem is that the focus in our system is on exams and results which are short-term benefits while education should tackle the construction of human beings in the long-term. It is only a matter of lack of courage on the part of teachers which could prevent students from benefiting from citizenship education.[92]

During interventions of the Legislative Assembly on the country's national budget speech 2012, the minister of Education and Human Resources recognized the importance of introducing values and intercultural dialogue in schools for good citizenship. He made the following statement:

> Mr Speaker, Sir, we welcome the setting up at the level of the Prime Minister's Office of what is known now as the National Institute for Civic Education. This will support our efforts to promote good citizenship, values and patriotism. At my Ministry, we are working at different levels to address various problems of indiscipline and misbehaviour in schools…Mr Speaker, Sir, we have reviewed the curriculum framework recently to integrate the teaching of values in education. We are also promoting intercultural dialogue to help children understand each other better and

[89] https://www.lexpress.mu/article/does-school-prepare-life-multicultural-society
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

> respect the beliefs and traditions of their fellow students because, Mr Speaker, Sir, we believe that, at school, it must be started and taught.[93]

The minister's speech shows the willingness of the government in 2012 to implement intercultural education in Mauritius in view of consolidating the nation's cohesiveness and to promote citizenship. In fact, while examining the chronology of press articles, public discourses and academic research papers on Mauritius over the last two decades, it appears that some of the factors contributing to proposals and frameworks for intercultural education are: the effects of globalization, conflict resolution skills development to appease social tensions and the need for social cohesion in multicultural societies (Soobratty 2015, 82-83). Academics have introduced definitions, abbreviations and raised arguments on the topic. Maudarbux (2016) draws attention to the confusion of assuming that multicultural education (MCE) and intercultural education (ICE) are similar subjects. He argues that MCE and ICE are to be considered as two distinctive terms and even suggests for the term Interreligious education (IRE), considering that ICE is too broad. He underlines that ICE is about interactions among cultures and particularly learning about cultures in the presence of cultural others. Bleszynska (2008) puts it simply as IE instead of ICE. She argues that intercultural education faces the challenge of not being able to dwell on the negative historical intercultural conditions or experiences, such as slavery, colonization or recurrent inter-religious conflicts. This can make the task of ICE difficult and may not receive the unanimous approval of both the public or the authorities. In her view, the purpose of ICE can shift from its very scientific objective to some kind of indoctrination. She describes intercultural education of the 21st century as:

> applied social science promoting the dialogue between cultures and civilizations, as well as supporting the development of democratic multicultural societies.

Intercultural education and civic education are thus seen as complementary and essentials in multicultural societies like Mauritius, for human capital development and consolidating the social fabrics. In my view, ICE programs in national schools, if well planned and adapted to the local context, can positively contribute to the socialization process in multicultural societies, aiming for peace and justice, like the elimination of ethnic, racial or religious prejudices. Together with other intercultural projects, intercultural education can give more shape in the long term to the Mauritian secular model of "citizenship and religion" in the future generations of citizens. ICE can be a powerful mechanism to consolidate social cohesion and peace and which has also been confirmed in UNESCO report 2006.[94] Considering the above contributions, there is like a consensus that cognitive development built on intercultural education from an early childhood can overcome ignorance and prejudices and raise citizenship to higher levels in Mauritius.

However, in any strategic planning to introduce intercultural education in the national curriculum, each country needs to consider its own specifications like its history of immigration, demographic realities and government policies towards communities, including

[93] https://education.govmu.org/Documents/AboutUs/theminister/Documents/Pqs/minstatspeech/msbudg2012.pdf

[94] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000147878

minorities (Bleszynska, 2008). Theoretical backgrounds and academic contributions on ICE are prerequisites, but the real challenge is to come up with practical implementation mechanisms for both decision-makers and educators (Maudarbux, 2016), like trained teachers, instruction manuals, delivery methods and evaluations. We have seen here, how in Finland, for example, development has been made in the design and instruction methods of delivering religious education and ethics courses in public schools with the principal aim of integrating immigrants, consolidating their religions and cultures within the Finnish society. In so doing, the immigrants receive equal considerations from the state while at the same time Finnish-born citizens can learn on their own Lutheran religion and religion and cultural other and vice versa. In 2018, an Ethics Education workshop was organized by the Council of Religions, following which, a pilot ICE project was launched with the collaboration of three secondary confessional schools (Islamic, Catholic and Hindu) in Mauritius .[95] Ethics education basics and the benefits were introduced to fifty students and 12 educators. Participants had the opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue and learn on the religion other, like the importance and celebration of Easter. The acting President of the Republic of Mauritius and the spouse of the Prime Minister present at the event praised the learning experiences of ICE and its role in strengthening the plural Mauritian identity. To date, this kind of initiative remains to be extended throughout the national curriculum. Soobratty (2015) argues that multicultural education tends to reinforce ethnicity in small island developing state (SIDS), like Mauritius, while intercultural education is more promising for social cohesion. More Government initiatives in this direction are thus foreseen.

4.22 Peace and Interfaith Studies (Interreligious education)

In 2010, the Council of Religions and the University of Mauritius launched the aforementioned part-time certificate course in Peace and Interfaith studies, with a first batch of 12 students who graduated in 2012 (Maudarbux, 2016). In view of promoting national cohesion and harmony, the course aimed to lay the academic and practical foundations for interfaith and intercultural dialogue in Mauritius. It is worthy to note there were no age restriction for students and with entry requirements set to a minimum. Maudarbux (2016) who was the leading consultant for the project mentioned that to promote inter-religious dialogue, the learning program was designed to be *about*, *with* and *within*. He explained that the study in class *about* the other faith would take place *with* the other faith students present and *within* the sacred spaces, like temples and mosques, of the other faiths. Two core modules, namely "Introduction to Religions of Mauritius" (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Baha'i and Buddhism) and "Peace and Conflict Resolution". Other subsidiary modules include an Interfaith Tour and Cultural Exchange portfolio and a collaborative project portfolio. The authenticity of the religious content delivered in class was assured from qualified tutors from each religion. Since I was the assigned tutor for Baha'i, it was a unique experience to be in class with students from the above five religions. Students showed their motivation in asking

[95] https://ethicseducationforchildren.org/en/news/latest-news/1134-ethics-education-workshop-to-foster-intercultural-education-in-mauritius

many questions and placing comments to me, as well as having interactions on the presented topic among themselves with respect to their own sacred texts. It is evident that *learning about* and *learning from* religion was delivered according to the Variation Theory of learning described by Hella and Wright (2009), *an approach to pedagogy developed within the phenomenological research tradition*, and which here helps students of various faiths to interact critically and to understand better other worldviews while consolidating their own identities. Hella and Wright (2009) pointed out in their research, for example, that Lutheran students learning about Islam will also learn from Islam more about themselves. In this way, their beliefs, values and worldviews are developed.

Two inter-island academic exchanges have also been realized with Reunion island. This collaboration has enabled students from Mauritius to visit those in the Reunion island and six Reunion Interfaith students also visited Mauritius. The third batch for the certificate program has been completed in 2018 and upgraded to a 3-year part-time diploma level in September 2019. Eighteen students registered for the diploma course which covers the following modules:

1. Introduction to Religions of Mauritius
2. Communication Skills for Interfaith and Intercultural dialogue
3. Introduction to Sacred Texts
4. Philosophy and Religions I: An introduction
5. Scriptures, Peace and Violence
6. Peace and Conflict Resolution
7. Concepts and issues in Religious Studies
8. Philosophy and Religions II: Approaches to the philosophy of Religious Cultures
9. Sacred Scriptures, Social Work, Societal Development
10. Religious Intercultural Studies
11. Indian Ocean Worlds
12. Group Project (Cultural Immersion)

In the module "Introduction to Sacred Texts", for example, I make use of Baha'i sayings on different themes to discuss on their inner meanings, the Baha'i beliefs and for the student to gain insights into the religion other. For example, one saying on Baha'i salvation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá reads:

> That which leads to everlasting life, eternal honor, universal enlightenment, and true success and salvation is, first and foremost the knowledge of God.[96]

In my explanations on the above saying, students were also invited to refer to the very first words of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, mentioned earlier here, about the first duty prescribed by God for believers. In the exchanges that followed in class, students were able to explain salvation from their religious perspectives. A Christian student argues that "salvation according to the Gospels is through Christ only". One of the two Baha'i students present in the class, explains that the Baha'i stand views all religions as emanating from one God and that "salvation through the respective founders of religions is in fact a normal and rational

[96] https://bahai-library.com/mclean_concept_salvation

consequence". He said that a Buddhist, for example, can have salvation from belief in the Buddha. It is to be noted there is no Buddhist student in this batch. There is one student of Sino-Mauritian background but he is Christian. Another student of Hindu background pointed out that "whatever belief each one has on salvation, the aim is to put into practice the divine teachings and live according to the virtues and ethics of the sacred texts." Every student was thus able to appreciate salvation's meaning from different religious perspectives. The interfaith studies at the University of Mauritius thus allow students to learn about and from the religion other and in the presence of the student other, as per the objectives set for the diploma course. Continuing exchange among students happens within a learning attitude and friendship, even with the tutor. After a few Baha'i sessions a Hindu student, for example, welcomed me in class with 'Allah-u-Abha' (the Baha'i greeting, meaning God, the Glorious). During conversations with the students and tutors of other faiths, it came out that discussions in class were equally very interactive for each religious module. Interreligious education in this case helped point to new orientations and paradigms.

The diploma course for academic year 2020/2021, under program code SH222, is offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities.[97] It is to be noted that, firstly, due to the more elaborated contents of the on-going diploma syllabus, we are three co-tutors for Baha'i and each one delivers on different topics in different sessions. Secondly, I act as tutor, after having completed my Bachelor of Social Science Honors, with specialization in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town, in 2019. My participation as a tutor in the diploma program thus also allows me as an insider to collect reliable primary data for this research while ensuring ethical and objective inputs. It must also be underlined here that both the certificate and the diploma program have been possible due to the collaborative efforts of both the University of Mauritius and the Council of Religions. The entry requirements for the program have been set to the lowest secondary qualifications (Ordinary level of the Cambridge School Certificate).[98]

Maudarbux (2016) proposed for more academic rigor and standards for interreligious education in future bids. During the general assembly of the Council of Religions in December 2021, it has been suggested to plan for a Peace and Interfaith Studies at degree level in the coming years with the collaboration of the University of Mauritius. As for implementing intercultural education in all primary and secondary schools, the Council of Religions still awaits the government to come up with a firm proposal after that a pilot project has been launched with the three confessional schools mentioned above. Mauritius therefore shows the case of collaboration between religious leaders and the academics in the domain of peace and interfaith promoting intercultural education, interreligious education and transversal ethics for social cohesion. To upgrade this collaboration to higher university standards, as pointed out by Maudarbux (2016), to form a rigorous school of religious studies under the faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, to attract more students for Religious Studies and Ethics, in my view, there is need to bid for scholars of religion in Mauritius.

[97] https://www.uom.ac.mu/FSSH/index.php/programmescurrentlybeingrun/undergraduaterun
[98] https://www.uom.ac.mu/Images/Files/programmes/FSSH/YR2019/Undergraduate/SH222A.pdf

4.23 Ethno-Religious Tourism

Mauritius is known for its hospitality towards foreigners, with tourist arrivals in 2018 and 2019 reaching 1,399,408 and 1,383,488 respectively.[99] Over the last years more than a million tourists annually visit the island. However, due to the covid-19 pandemic causing Mauritius to close its borders for many months in 2020 and 2021, very low arrivals have been registered in these two years. By the end of 2021, the frontiers re-opened and latest figures from Statistics Mauritius show that tourist bookings are going up again. There is no doubt Mauritius is very competitive and attractive in the tourism industry because of its warm tropical climate, white beaches, mountain ranges and a diversified range of luxury hotels along the coasts. Above all it is also known for its peaceful plural population and stable governments.

Over the last decade, other features have been added to the tourism portfolio like the rich religious landscape, the sacred places, the rituals, religious celebrations and spirituality. Spiritual tour packages are built and offered on touristic websites around the 'impressive mosaic of faiths and cultures'.[100] In this context, we could refer to Hackett's (2018) observation on David Chidester's interest in the potential of 'religious tourism' about 'wild religion' or new forms of religious engagements where religion is being treated as an open set of resources and strategies. Special sightseeing to historical temples, shrines, pagodas or mosques are organized, like visit to the Tien Tan Pagoda, located at the foot of the Signal Mountain, at the entrance of Port Louis.

In line with government policies on national heritage, both post-apartheid South Africa and post-independence Mauritius share the common national motto of 'Unity in Diversity'. While the Khoisan people, for example, suffered during the colonial genocide, in Mauritius many of the black African slaves sacrificed their lives along with their ancestors' traditions and practices on the Le Morne mountain located on the south-western coast, a shelter for those who escaped from slavery. Today, the 'Le Morne Cultural Landscape' figures on the UNESCO world heritage list.[101] Whether for attempts of revival, cultural rebirth, a reconnection with a distant past (Hackett 2018) or an 'imagined sense of continuity with the past' (Ramtohul and Eriksen 2018, 160-166), all have been on the political agenda of both countries. Archeological excavations carried between 2009-2013 at the Le Morne old cemetery have thus revealed that burials of slaves were done according to African religious traditions. Tourists are advised to respect these sacred places by being decently dressed, ensuring that skirts or shorts are at knee length. Other respectful gestures and attitudes are to remove shoes before entering the worship places, avoid touching sacred objects or putting mobile phones on silent mode. Tourists visiting the temples, often receive blessings from the priests who place the *tilak* ("mark" in Sanskrit) in the middle of their foreheads between the eyebrows. Earlier here, we find also 'wayside shrines' of different religious practices along roads and crossroads in Mauritius. These sacred places are resourceful attractive points for

[99] https://statsmauritius.govmu.org/Pages/Statistics/Monthly/Arch-Mthly-Tourists.aspx
[100] https://mauritiusattractions.com/private-cultural-sightseeing-tour-north-mauritius-p-1527.html
[101] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1259/

both tourists and locals, around the negotiation of a human identity and ethics within a diverse population, an evocation with the past and the quest of spirituality as a potential for the island economy.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, some 40,000 Mauritians employed in the tourism industry lost their jobs due to the closure of Mauritian borders to foreigners. They found themselves in financial difficulties. The Diocesan Tourism Commission under the leadership of the Catholic Church engaged in various initiatives to support the Tourism employees.[102] Spiritual tours were organized which provide opportunities to connect with the divine and act as sources of motivation to face life challenges. Other training programs, like 'Hope is a Strategy' or 'The Miracle of Gratitude' help to find alternatives, strengthening each one's faith in solidarity actions.

Above data show that tourism is not only one of the main sources of revenue for the Mauritian economy but is also associated with religions, cultures, communities, ethics and hospitality in welcoming foreigners which are all invaluable resources of the 'rainbow nation'. Additionally, tourism offers employment to Mauritians of all faiths and cultures, who in turn, excel in providing leisure services and typical cuisines like Indo-Mauritian masala curry or tropical Creole unique culinary experience. Academic institutions have been set up, like the Sir Gaëtan Duval Hotel School since 1971, for the delivery of high standards educational programs leading to professional qualifications in the hotel and tourism industry. International academic groups, like the Vatel Hotel & Tourism Business School have also established local quarters in Mauritius, offering courses like MBA in International Hotel Management.[103]

Tourism promotions often advertise the 'plural', 'multicultural' or a model of 'racial harmony' to the outside world (Prang 2016, 151). Indirectly, this creates the Mauritian brand of 'unity in diversity' to tourists and appeal to all Mauritians in a sense of commitment and engagement for its success. Equal accessibility to tourists and the derived benefits reinforces the social fabrics and contributes to the sustainability of a diversified population. Prang (2016) argued that tourism has also helped to elevate the standard of living for vulnerable groups.[104] She refers to the village of Chamarel, located in the west of Mauritius, where many Creoles reside, classified as vulnerable groups of the 'Malaise Creole' (social exclusion discussed earlier here) (Truth and Justice Commission Report 2011, 378). Chamarel village is famous worldwide for its seven-colored earth, a place of natural beauty and attraction for tourist visits. Prang (2016) found that areas like Chamarel "suffer from a lack of distribution of benefits from tourism development, like public infrastructure." A link between ethnicity (Afro-Mauritians) and community tourism is thus considered as promising. We found earlier here how many Creoles originated from Africa under slavery and were converted to Christianity under the 'code noir' upon their arrival on the island. A kind of ethno-religious tourism is thus promoted to somehow relieve the 'Malaise Creole' in the locality of Chamarel.

[102] https://www.aciafrica.org/index.php/news/3298/church-in-mauritius-accompanying-tourism-stakeholders-amid-covid-19-restrictions
[103] https://www.vatel.mu/en/news-hospitality-school/companies/courses-offered-to-professionals-497#
[104] http://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/1140/1/PrangDavina.pdf

Negotiations between the locals and the authorities and resulting policy decisions have extended tourism benefits to the village community. The Mauritius Tourism Authority has regulated and validated a number of local residences to be able to offer 'table d'hôte' accommodation and culinary services to tourists.[105] Consequently, local residents of the village find a livelihood therein and an adapted way of living to provide tourists a charming welcome. Most of the villagers also engage in art crafts or local produce for sale to visitors. The owners of these small tourist residence facilities often advertise their locations with online accommodation rental platforms like Airbnb, marketing their homely ambience and local traditional dishes. Despite their remoteness to official centers of learning in Tourism management coupled with their lack of entry qualifications for higher academic training, the Creoles of coastal villages consequently find themselves integrated within the Hotel and Tourism industry. In the long run, they develop the necessary skills, experience and ethics to meet the expectations of tourists.

Another area of interest is the collaboration of the Council of Religions with the Tourism institutions. A memorandum of understanding was signed in 2011 with the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA).[106] The president of the Council highlighted the importance of creating spiritual and religious itineraries for tourists and other foreigners. For his part, the president of the MTPA, recalled that the intention to give a spiritual dimension to the tourism industry dated back to 1992. A Hindu priest present at the signing of the memorandum said that sun and beaches are over, it is time for innovative experiences like spiritual discoveries for tourists, creating a unique difference. Tourists are thus able to appreciate the harmony among different cultures and religions, inspiring them on their journey back to preach harmony in their home countries. This is another form of Mauritian religious tourism. Adverts on local religious celebrations can also be promoted by international airlines, like Air France. The latter, in its travel guide to Mauritius, describes some of the main ones which have become popular among tourists, particularly for those re-visiting the island.[107] Air France advertises, for example, Thaipoosam Cavadee as a colorful and spectacular procession performed by the Tamils of the island over a period of 10 days and in veneration of God Muruga. In acts of devotion, believers may undergo physical penance for themselves, like piercing the tongues, cheeks and body. I have observed tourists every year, attending the processions very early, to be able to participate and take beautiful pictures. As for the devotees, voluntary sacrifices and penances cause liberation from sufferings, sins and soul purification. According to the Tamil priests, these sacrifices and devotions to Muruga, enable the believers to become more conscious of the present social evils and to act as responsible citizens, like preserving the family nucleus.[108] In my view, while this kind of religious practice is an expression of a sense of cultural identity, it is also meant to promote correct behaviors and a way of life, contributing to the ethics of a nation.

[105] http://www.tourismauthority.mu/userfiles/file/tourismauthority/legislation/guidelines-annexes/GUIDELINES%20FOR%20TABLE%20D'HOTE-%20Appendix%20II.pdf
[106] https://business.mega.mu/2011/11/16/mauritius-will-promote-religious-tourism/
[107] https://www.airfrance.fr/travel-guide/mauritius/practical-information
[108] https://www.lemauricien.com/featured/le-thaipoosam-cavadee-celebre-ce-lundi/256725/

4.24 Diocesan Tourism Commission of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church has a long tradition of celebrating an annual mass since 1987 at one of the hotels of Mauritius. The Diocesan Tourism Commission has been created in that same year to accompany all those engaged in the tourism sector. The mission of this Commission is to accompany and understand the human experience in the tourism industry, trying to discover the potential for human development. A Code of Ethics has been developed by the commission together with people involved in the sector. The Code of Ethics, adopted by the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority, explores the relations between the host and the visitor, like mutual respect and discovery of each other. Success of the tourism industry relies, among many other factors, on welcoming the traveler with respect and showing hospitality. During the mass in 2017, the catholic priest shared a testimony of a tourist after a stay in one of the hotels, highlighting the excellence of the Mauritian hospitality and qualifying Mauritius as a piece of paradise. Tourists traveling to Mauritius are thus able to discover and experience human relationships which transform them and make their stay on the island memorable. To sustain and consolidate the Mauritian hospitality, the Diocesan Tourism Commission in collaboration with hotel training institutions organizes meetings and trainings for students on self-esteem and listening.

The priest also reminded the importance of pilgrimage, its benefits for man in his successful relation with God and the meaning it gives to life. He stated that many Mauritians of different faiths, go on pilgrimage abroad, like the Muslims traveling to Mecca. The idea thus came to organize local pilgrimages in 2017. So the Commission together with the MTPA organized visits to sacred spaces of different religions which are within a few kilometers reach in Port Louis, the capital city of Mauritius. Local tours were organized for tourist agents first who were guided to Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Baha'i and Buddhist sacred places. The priest recalled that Pope John Paul II used to say that there existed an ancient form of tourism based on pilgrimage. The Gospel reminds us that Jesus did not stay in one place but moved from location to location to meet people from all walks of life, the poor, the sick or the oppressed. Each time Jesus exchanged words of love, of compassion. The gestures, feelings and emotions during these conversations left no one in the relationship unmoved. Each one undergoes a kind of inner transformation in his/her own faith, while respecting differences. Similarly, the priest also said that this is the experience of the tourist visiting Mauritius. Beyond the pleasures of the sea, the beach or the tropical sunshine, the traveler can also experience a diversified range of sacred spaces in Mauritius through pilgrimage. These places of "social bonding may also entail a spiritual connection or a strong emotional tie for tourists" (Prayag and Ryan 2011, 343). The tourist ultimately carries back home the emotions and happiness of these meetings.

During Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns in Mauritius, churches and temples were restricted to organize mass or large congregational gatherings. Many would meet via online platforms, like Zoom Video calling, to participate in devotional sessions. On the eve of Christmas 2021, for example, parishioners under the remote guidance of neighborhoods' priests organized simultaneous group prayers in the homes. One of my Christian neighbors, for example, invited me and other neighbors of different faiths to his home. It was a gathering of about forty persons, all wearing sanitary masks, including a couple of foreigners who extended their vacation in Mauritius because of the spreading of the pandemic in Europe. On that evening, it was a time of sharing on the life of Jesus and how he visited different places

in the Holy Land to meet with different people. We prayed and chanted together. A Belgian tourist present at the gathering shared that this kind of relationship among neighbors reflecting on the life of Jesus and praying together with persons of different faiths is unique. He said it was the first time he experienced this kind of spiritual enterprise and that in his home country people are disconnected with religion and self-centered. He said that although Europe has many historical churches, few people attend the mass in contrast to the large numbers of tourists that visit these great cathedrals of Christianity. Prayag and Ryan (2011) observed that new tourism products such as spiritual tourism have been developed on the island for niche markets. A German lady said that community gathering among neighbors is something new to her and reflects the spiritual character and welcoming attitude of Mauritians. After the prayers and Gospel readings, it was a time of socializing around refreshments and snacks which each neighbor brought to share. Despite the pandemic, Christmas eve was therefore celebrated alternatively and innovatively among neighbors and with tourists on prolonged vacation. This kind of initiative might suggest the multi-cultural heritage and spiritual potency of Mauritians to unite believers of different faiths. It becomes a learning for tourists who will share these experiences with families and friends in their home countries.

Opportunities of connection with spirituality and religion are therefore many in Mauritius. I will share a last example of the connection between nature spirituality and tourism here. Mauritius is said to be one of the fourteen vortex sites in the world.[109] The vortex is located in Riambel, a coastal village in the south of the island. It is described as a place of natural energy vibration and was apparently discovered by the Swiss Cathy Muller who founded the association "Workers of Love" in 2003 to look after the vortex. Interested souls in quest for a spiritual journey with nature are welcome, beyond ethnicities or religious beliefs. The vortex is opened to public and foreigners daily and free of charge and can be another place for meditation, for inner healing from sufferings, of purification and alignment of one's *chakras* (energy points of the human body). Apparently, the vortex strong energies can influence the intellectual, emotional and spiritual capacities, make a person more positive, peaceful and loving. The place is now promoted on touristic websites and is gaining reputation among both locals and foreigners, some even come back for a second visit.[110] Shapiro (2015) suggests that vortices can "serve as a physical way to explore the realm of internal consciousness." In the same vein, Mauritius offers a variety of other opportunities ranging from reiki meditation centres to different yoga practices or cultural immersions and eco-tourism adventures, all aiming towards re-balancing body and mind.

The multiplicity of religious practices in Mauritius is thus reflected in the National Statistics figure of 99% of the Mauritian population declaring an affiliation with a kind of religion or belief. It also tells that religion in its diversity contributes significantly to the ethics of the Mauritian nation. Persons' behaviors are governed by moral principles primarily sourced from either religious texts or merely meditations. We have seen in this last chapter how Mauritian ethics may be closely related to core religious values, in helping individuals in deciding what is right or wrong and what is generally accepted as good or bad in a given society. Academic research also contends that religion can contribute significantly in developing moral codes of conduct to push human civilizations forward, provided an

[109] https://www.lexpress.mu/article/323348/riambel-vortex-pour-guerir-grace-aux-etres-lumiere
[110] https://mauritiusattractions.com/riambel-vortex-p-1626.html

appropriate democratic environment and constitutional religious freedom are in place (Sommer, Bloom and Arikan 2011, 287-290).

Conclusion

Religious freedom is guaranteed by the Mauritian constitution and there is a particular relationship between the secular and religious institutions. The state supports the organization of different religious events, like broadcasting by the public television MBC-TV, and provides funds and other tax exemptions to religious institutions. Over time, religious identities, though traditionally maintained across generations, are being subjected to more fluidity. Most academic research works on religion in Mauritius have mainly focused on the different aspects of majority self-identifications with faiths like Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. New minority entrants like Pentecostal churches or the Baha'i faith have not been examined. This study has shown that these new religious thoughts are gradually becoming more visible in terms of their interactions with other religions. For example, through inter-religious marriages or through public discourses such as in forums organized by the state. The study also gave evidence that multiple religious identities in one family circle is now more common. The study of the motives for religious conversions over the recent decades could be an interesting area of research in Mauritius.

Religious expressions can be found in different facets of the Mauritian society, for example in ritual performances, cultures, traditions, formal attires and casual dressings, culinary presentations, arts, instrumental music and many others. Fusion also gradually takes shape in these expressions. The song titled 'Zanfan Tou Kouler' (loosely translated to 'Children of all Colours') being chosen as the best hit of the year 2021, is exemplar of this, and conqueredthe hearts of Mauritians.[111] The song highlights the cultural diversity of the island and is interpreted by the Dukesbridge United choir of the Dukesbridge schools in Mauritius. This is another sign of the growing overlapping of multi-culturalism with inter-culturalism in early childhood education. In its mission to construct and consolidate social cohesion, branded in the slogan 'Vivre Ensemble' (live together), the Council of Religions has initiated inter-religious education with the collaboration of the University of Mauritius, bringing adult students of different faiths to share worldviews of each other's faith.

We have seen in this study that identity can have many variables, ranging from citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, migration, religion, intercultural, language and ethos (values). In a plural nation like Mauritius, identity can also vary according to circumstance, space and context. I have taken my personal identity as example, how I can be a Baha'i of Indian descent, and be considered Marathi in gatherings like attendance to a burial ceremony of a family relative, a status which is comfortably assumed. In the words of Edgar Morin, the French philosopher, it may even be complex to describe one's identity. Identity is thus not static. It is rather fluid between exchanging forms, becomes hybrid and relational within a plural society due to interactions with others, through constant development from my ancestral heritage to present day experiences. We have seen that across generations, despite attachment to parental heritage and traditions, new mindsets are forging among the younger minds, especially with the advent of social media and technology. Besides, as a result of cohabitation, negotiated compromises emerge and family considerations of caste, for

[111] https://mauritiushindinews.com/defimedia/disc-of-the-year-2021-on-radio-plus-zanfan-tou-kouler-conquered-the-hearts-of-listeners/

example, are becoming less important (Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally, 2020). However, further research is suggested to explore this.

Eriksen (1992) also calls for further research on inter-ethnic relations in societies like Trinidad and Mauritius from poly-ethnic perspectives, rather than studies on mono-ethnic perspectives (on preservation of boundaries which can be limited). In comparison with Trinidad or Fiji, Mauritius is said to have done well in terms of community management and welfare systems, defying all post-independence predictions, hence the term 'The Mauritian Paradox' by Ramtohul and Eriksen (2018). Since independence, the Mauritian constitution requires candidates running for national elections to identify themselves with one of the four ethnic groups which resulted in the successful transfers of political power. On the other hand, good performance over the years, like a higher Gross Domestic Product, urbanization or centralized education might be contributing to a higher national than ethnic identification (Van der Werf, Verkuyten and Martinovic 2020, 165). Both South Africa and Mauritius are considered as successful examples of inclusive politics, with accommodation in the design of their constitutions and parliamentary systems of a broader society representation (Cheeseman 2016, 541-542). I also raise here the case of "Rezistans ek Alternativ", a Mauritian political party which contests the above constitutional obligation to identify oneself with an ethnic group. In my view, these arguments and narratives construct most probably towards a future reform of the constitution to accommodate the interests of all parties and new societal dimensions like fluidity and relativity in self-identifications. At the same time, the evidences provided in this study show an inclination towards national identification.

The involvement of media, commercials and adverts in the religious lives of Mauritians contribute to the accommodation and acceptance of different beliefs on a national level. While self-identities are thus being promoted there is also the development of relational ties and identities in the public audience, among neighbors, colleagues or friends. I evoke here the collaboration between the Mauritius Film Development Corporation and the Council of Religions in the production of documentaries on the history of religions and the "living together" (*Vivre Ensemble*) of Mauritians. Besides, firms show an increasing interest to organize interfaith prayers on their premises at the beginning of every new year or for celebrating a jubilee. And with growing inter-faith and trans-national marriages, common-law unions, and movement from one religious affiliation to another, community-identity might in the long term become less significant.

The president of the Council of Religions, in a recent interfaith activity on the theme of 'spirituality in inter-faith', organized at the Hotel Labourdonnais in Le Caudan Waterfront, incorporated in his discourse the metaphorical representation of a high mountain with different pathways to reach the summit, which was shown on a wide screen. While climbing, he said, the pathways can meet, some may take a different path at these exchange points, but still they are heading to reach to the top, where all meet again. There is no feeling, fear or pressure that only one single path will lead the way forward. At other spaces, and in academic research as well, other common metaphorical representations, like 'fruit salad' or 'rainbow', are used to describe the 'unity in diversity' of the Mauritian population (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten 2015, 684). The possibilities of a growing interfaith dialogue in Mauritius are therefore quite significant in the shift from multicultural to intercultural stands.

Auerbach, Blin and Lallmahomed-Aumeerally (2020) also found that religious traditions are porous interfaces in Mauritius. Aided with technology and the social media, one

cannot predict the new horizons to which the younger generations in countries like Mauritius can lead to. On the other hand, after decades of cohabitation, the popular usage of the Creole language has brought a greater social cohesion, cutting across ethnicity and religion (Sambajee, 2016). Despite the attempts of successive governments and socio-cultural organizations to maintain cultural centres and ancestral languages, English and French, as official languages seem to predominate at the national level. While going global, it seems ancestral languages have lesser significance, if not for national heritage purposes only. It has been mentioned in this research how Christopher (1992), for example, evoked the prediction of the British census commissioner in 1881, when the latter said that the day will come when it will be difficult, or next to impossible, to identify each one with a given community in Mauritius.

Lastly, the ethos of the Mauritian nation primarily from the perspective of transversal ethics is examined. Being essentially a nation of immigrants, insights on ethics derived from different sacred texts have been considered in relation to particular social issues. Abdelgawad and Zahra (2019) have proposed that a "religious identity can be a major source of spiritual capital." It is common practice to see business owners in Mauritius displaying their religious symbols, often as marks of trust and respect, and that work is worship. Beyond established nation's ethical rules, Weber's perspective on the values embedded in the Protestant religion can be sensed in other religions as well, as examined here. Beyond in-group "traditional solidarities" there is relative inter-ethnic collaboration among individuals to act as moral agents for the benefit of a whole population (Srebrnik, 2000). Further, it has been shown how prayers and meditation practices form an active part of the lives of Mauritians in general, with above 99% of the population being religiously affiliated. I have raised first-hand data in this research from different perspectives and shown how they contribute to the sustainability of social cohesion and the process of nation building within a diversified society. In this sense, there is ground for further research on spiritual intelligence development across communities (transversal ethics) and fluidity along self-identifications in Mauritius.

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