A Future-Oriented, Non-Ethnic Nationalism?

Mauritius as an exemplary case*

by Thomas Hylland Eriksen

University of Oslo, Norway

This article consists of a critical application of recent theory of nationalism to the unusual case of Mauritius. It is a poly-ethnic and poly-religious society whose inhabitants neither share a mythical distant past nor consider themselves culturally identical, but where nation-building has nevertheless been moderately successful since the late 1960s. Through an examination of the processes of institutional and cultural nation-building in the island, it is argued that the current Eurocentric view of the nation (notably as a culturally homogeneous imagined community) must be modified to fit cases like this one. Thus, the value of nationalism and nationhood as comparative concepts is questioned.

If by nationhood we mean "the same people living in the same place" (Joyce 1984 [1922]: 329) or—more accurately—if by nationalism we mean a political doctrine which holds that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries (Gellner 1983), two key notions require closer examination. One concerns the notion of *political boundaries*: do they always have to encompass a state? This question is perhaps particularly pertinent in our day and age, where alternatives to the nation-state are being tried out in several ways; from the segmentary structure of the European Community to the relative statelessness of self-governed indigenous peoples.

The other question, which is the point of departure for this essay, concerns the notion of *cultural boundaries*. Does nationalism, seen as an ideology of cultural similarity, necessarily imply ethnic homogeneity, or could a variety of ethnic categories together make up a nation? Are there any minimal requirements of cultural homogeneity in order for us to speak of a given population as a nation? And, by extension, if a shared ethnic or national identity requires a shared myth of origin

(Nash 1988) an ideology of fictive kinship (Yelvington 1991), how deep does the genealogy of the nation have to be? Can a national myth of origin be twenty-five years old, and still be effective?

Most of the world's states are non-European. Although the very idea of nationhood is more or less European in origin (but cf. Anderson 1991; Handler & Segal 1992), there are important variations between particular nationalisms. For this reason, comparative work on European and non-European nationalisms is important for the development of the theory of nationalism. My example is Mauritius,[1] and I shall use recent political experiences of the island to illuminate several related theoretical issues.

The question of nationhood has been hotly debated, explicitly and implicitly, in many public and private arenas in Mauritius since the mid-1960s. This essay analyses these issues on the basis of theory of ethnicity and nationalism,[2] with particular reference to the period between independence (1968) and accession to Republican status (12 March, 1992). After a short presentation of the island, I shall discuss the ways in which social identities are depicted and negotiated in Mauritius, particularly focusing on the ways in which the Mauritian nation is being imagined and reconfirmed in social interaction. Then, I turn to a detailed analysis of a main problem in Mauritian nation-building, namely the relationship between poly-ethnicity and national unity. Finally, I shall discuss notions of shared history and shared ancestry as criteria for nationhood. In this way, nationalisms such as the Mauritian one may pose conceptual problems for theory of nationalism and ethnicity, and by way of conclusion, some comparisons will be drawn with other nationalisms.

The Mauritian Nation-state

In the 1990s, Mauritius is a newly industrialised country with slightly over a million inhabitants (1,056,660 at the latest count, including its smaller dependencies), and none of their ancestors arrived in the island earlier than three hundred years ago. There was never an aboriginal population. Located some eight hundred kilometres east of Madagascar, the island was French from 1715 to 1814 and British from 1814 to 1968, and was then an independent constitutional monarchy from 1968 to 1992. Since March, 1992, it has been a republic within the New Commonwealth. The country is a multi-party parliamentary democracy; the latest General Elections were held in September, 1991.

The ancestors of today's Mauritians came from France, Africa, Madagascar, India and China; 65 per cent of the Mauritian population are of Indian origin, while some 28 per cent are of African or "mixed" origins. The main religions are Hinduism (51 %), Christianity (31 %) and Islam (17 %); in addition, there are a few thou-sand Buddhists and others again who practice both Buddhism and Christianity. Officially, fifteen languages are spoken in Mauritius, while the actual number is much lower (cf. Stein 1983; Eriksen 1990). The vast majority of Mauritians speak Kreol, a French-lexicon creole; there are also minorities who speak Bhojpuri, French and Hakka, although most of them are also fluent in Kreol. The most important written language is French, the language of the press and of most Mauritian fiction; whereas English, a language with no strong ethnic connotations, has proven to be an acceptable compromise as an official language.

Mauritius is often cited as a success, both in economic and political terms (Bowman 1991; Leffler 1988; Eriksen 1992: Chap. 5). I shall refrain from discussing this issue here, but in order to understand Mauritian nationalism and ethnicity in comparative terms, it is important that we keep the facts of political democracy and economic growth in mind. In addition, the small scale of the island is an important factor. The island, fifty-five by forty-five kilometres, can be crossed by car in a matter of a couple of hours, and the communications infrastructure is very good. The inhabitants are integrated politically and economically into a relatively uniform system—unlike in many other countries, where rural peripheries are frequently relatively autonomous from the state.

A further function of scale is the variable distance between elite and masses. In Mauritius, that distance is short, and very many Mauritians know somebody who has a high position in the state administration.

The Mauritian state has, as a matter of indisputable fact, existed since 1968; the Mauritian nation is a more uncertain project. As Massimo d'Azeglio said after the unification of Italy: "Now that we have succeeded in creating Italy, the most difficult task remains; namely, to create Italians." A remarkable feature of Mauritian nation-building is its ostensibly non-ethnic dimension: official policies have since independence actively sought to reconcile shared Mauritian nationhood with ethnic diversity.[3]

Mauritian Concepts of "Nation"

Talking of their country's population (lepep[4]) in roughly the same way as academic students of nationalism talk of nations, Mauritian intellectuals, politicians and lay people alike are uncertain of whether the population of their country can be said to constitute a people (en lepep) or a nation. The major problem in the attempt at creating a Mauritian "Nation-für-sich"—an imagined community of people who consider themselves not just as people, but as a people—concerns the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism as rival ideologies and principles for social organisation (cf. Eriksen 1991a; 1991b). This duality, which has many connotations, is the central issue in public debate and in Mauritian politics.

As a starting-point for an elaboration of the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism, it can be useful to examine the different meanings of the term *nasyon* (nation). Thus we may indicate that Mauritian society is potentially deeply divided along several different, if sometimes overlapping, criteria. Class divisions and rural/urban oppositions add further to the complexity in social classification implied here (Eriksen 1988: Chap. 4; 1992: Chap. 9).

The academic concept of the nation as a self-defined people either aspiring to statehood or already in a dominant position in a state (Gellner 1983), has gained widespread currency quite recently in Mauritius. Nevertheless, the term "nation" (*nasyon*) is still used in at least five different meanings in the island: (i) Jāti or caste, (ii) ethnic community, (iii) race, (iv) language community, (v) imagined community of citizens with a shared state. All these meanings denote communities of people with shared culture, but each of them would divide the Mauritian population into segments along different lines.

Nation (i), the caste concept, notably distinguishes between *ban gran-nasyon* (high castes) and *ban ti-nasyon* (low castes) within the Hindu population; of the former, there are two (Babojee and Maraz), of the latter two (Rajput[5] and Ravi Ved); all of them are relatively small groups, and the majority of Mauritian Hindus belong to the middle caste Vaish. This principle of social differentiation has not only separated high castes from low ones, but it has also contributed to accentuating the differences between Mauritians of North Indian and South Indian origins, since the Biharis tend to regard Marathis, Tamils and Telegus as low-caste people regardless of their actual caste origins. The Biharis (or "Hindi-speaking" as they are sometimes, misleadingly, called nowadays) are the politically dominant group, and the non-Bihari Hindus as well as the *ban ti-nasyon* are in general not followers of the Hindu dominated Labour and MSM parties. There are also sanctions against intermarriage betueen all groups, practised with varying degrees of rigour.

One also sometimes talks of *ban gran-nasyon* with reference to the Muslim, White, Creole, and Chinese ethnic groups as well. They contain endogamous elites with cultural markers distinguishing themselves from other members of their ethnic group, and sometimes with different voting patterns. In such a context, the concept of nation (i) seems to be used metaphorically—but on the other hand, the Mauritian Hindu castes do not have a much wider field of relevance than other endogamous groups.

Nation (ii), meaning ethnic community, is still commonly used in Mauritian discourse. According to this concept of nationhood, the Mauritian population is divided into at least four categories endorsed and reified in the Constitution of the country; the Hindus (here including Dravidians), Muslims, Chinese and "General Population" (largely Catholics of European, African or mixed descent). However, several Hindu subgroups insist that they are communities or *ban nasyon*, and fur-

ther, nobody would regard Creoles as members of the same ethnic community as Franco-Mauritians. This concept of nation overlaps strongly with nation (i), but fails to distinguish between endogamous elites and "commoners" within each category.

Nation (iii), referring to race, is less important socially and politically than nation (i) and (ii). It is largely invoked in discourse relating to "ancestral cultures," so that the Franco-Mauritians can consider themselves as members of the same "nation" as Frenchmen, Indo-Mauritians as the same "nation" as people living in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, and so on.

Nation (iv), referring to language community, is potentially more encompassing than the three others. Since a growing majority of Mauritians speak Kreol as their mother-tongue, this concept potentially includes the bulk of the population. And indeed, the Kreol language was the main symbol of national unity used by the anti-communalist Mauritian Left, notably the MMM party, during the 1970s and early 1980s (Oodiah 1989; Eriksen 1990; Bowman 1991). However, even this concept of nationhood is potentially divisive, since a sizeable minority (roughly 15-20 per cent) are bilingual in Bhojpuri and Kreol, many of them regard Bhojpuri as their mother-tongue, and further, Mauritians sometimes refer to their *ancestral language* when asked about their language community. At the latest census (Mauritius 1992), only 35.8 per cent stated that Kreol was their ancestral language, whereas 61.7 per cent stated that it was the language they usually spoke at home. (This figure is too low, even if we take into account that an additional nine per cent stated that they usually spoke Kreol and one other language at home.)

Nation (v), finally, refers to the community of citizens. Although this concept of nationhood is more frequently encountered in political speeches than in every-day language, its implications are readily understood by Mauritians. They associate it with the official campaigns against communalism and nepotism, and some fear the loss of privilege or even cultural identity in a future Mauritius where unity rather than diversity is emphasised.

The word nation, it should be noted, is not used to describe a religious community in Mauritius. A reason for this may be that there is no simple one-to-one relationship between religion and ethnic membership in Mauritius, and therefore such a concept of nationhood would contradict some of the others, notably nation (i), (ii) and (iii). There are Catholics who belong to the Chinese, Franco-Mauritian, Coloured and Creole ethnic groups as well as a few thousand "Indo-Catholics," who may consider themselves Hindus in an ethnic sense.

Imagining the Mauritian Nation

Benedict Anderson (1991) has pointed out that although we may trace the origins of nationalism to European political philosophy, many of the early nationalists were

exiles, members of diasporas and "creoles" (people of Spanish origin, but born in the Americas). Many nations have first been imagined by homesick migrants or exiled intellectuals. In the latter case, the double qualification of being exiled and intellectual (cf. African students and leaders of clandestine movements in Europe) goes a long way towards explaining that they are in a better position than others to imagine the nation. They are severed from their cultural environment of origin and are thus enabled to discover, as it were, that they have a culture; sometimes they also face ethnic discrimination where they are and may thus romanticise their place of origin as a secure haven; and finally, the education of an intellectual encourages abstract identifications such as nationality, as well as teaching that nationhood is a goal for struggling peoples.

In the case of Mauritius, it is clear that the Mauritian nation has at crucial historical junctures been imagined by exiles in France and Great Britain. The leading force in post-independence Mauritian politics, the MMM, was founded by Mauritians studying in Europe in the late 1960s, and they were the first to imagine a Mauritian future beyond communal (ethnic) conflicts. Their nationalism depicted Mauritius as a unitary cultural system based on shared idiom (Kreol) and equal opportunities. Yet, few of the MMM leaders married outside their own ethnic group.

It remains true that the most fervent Mauritians are usually to be found abroad. Many of my middle-class informants stress that they have to go abroad to feel truly Mauritian. In European cities where many Mauritians are present (notably Paris, Strasbourg and London), there are clubs and informal networks which transcend ethnic boundaries: in this kind of milieu, one's shared Mauritian identity may become more important than one's ethnic identity. In the diaspora, a Mauritian Muslim may discover that he has more in common with Mauritian Hindus and Creoles than with North African Muslims. One Muslim informant thus has told me of the parties he used to attend while working as a nurse in England, which featured national séga music as well as national dishes (various curries served with Mauritian condiments) and national drinks (beer and rum), and where ethnicity was irrelevant. Returning to the island, exiles and students abroad continue to play an important part in imagining the Mauritian nation at home. This central role of Mauritians abroad has been well depicted in Gilbert Ahnee's award-winning novel *Exils* (Ahnee 1989), which deals with Mauritian students in Paris in the 1970s.

However, in apparent contradiction to my own findings, recent research on Mauritian labour migrants to France indicates that contrary to expectations, ethnic and religious identities persist in these milieus (Vuddamalay 1991). Assimilation to larger groups here generally takes on the character of religious assimilation, so that Creoles are assimilated to the French Catholic church, Muslims to the larger French Muslim community, and so on. We must stress, therefore, that the exiles who first imagined—and who continue to imagine—the Mauritian nation are, as a general rule, students and intellectuals.

Mauritius as a nation is imagined, situationally, in relation to several significant others. The contrast to the neighbouring Indian Ocean island societies is important, although Réunion, the Seychelles, the Comoros and Madagascar are perceived as close neighbours. Indeed, during a sports tournament encompassing these neighbouring societies in 1985, a strong and unexpected wave of nationalism swept across Mauritius (Eriksen 1992: Chap. 8). The image of Mauritius as constituted relatively to these neighbours can be described thus: In relation to Réunion, Mauritius is independent; in relation to Madagascar, it is rich; in relation to the Comoros, it is politically and ethnically pluralist, and in relation to the Seychelles, it is cosmopolitan and sophisticated.

Mauritians also imagine their nation in relation to Africa and India, which are both considered chaotic, poor and underdeveloped places. Africa and India are nevertheless regarded as remote neighbours; remember that the great majority of Mauritius' population originates from these areas. Finally, the Mauritian nation is imagined in relation to Europe in general and to France in particular. In this relationship, the Mauritian nation appears small, peripheral and relatively unsophisticated.[6] Although France has not been Mauritius' colonial power since the Napoleonic wars, it is still the main "big brother" that Mauritians generally relate themselves to and measure their economic and cultural achievements in relation to. When Mauritian singers tour France, they receive a great deal of attention at home, since this depicts Mauritian culture as being equal to, yet different from, French culture.

Three distinct images of Mauritian nationhood may be discerned. The early MMM image (dominant in the 1970s) can be described as *the proletarian nation*. Its impact was based in its appeal for social justice and solidarity between oppressed workers in different ethnic groups. The major strikes of 1970 and 1979 mark the heroic moments of this vision; during these strikes, Muslims, Creoles and Hindus joined forces against local and foreign capitalists. By the 1990s, this view of the nation is largely a relic of the past.

The second image can be described as *the creole[7] nation*. This view stresses the emergence of a peculiar Mauritian culture on Mauritian soil, marked by the flowing together of a variety of cultural influences—by, to quote Rushdie (1991:21), a "polyglot family tree" fused by Kreol and by shared experiences on Mauritian soil. This view has many adherents, radical and moderate. Some retain their ethnic identity while stressing that it is a *Mauritian* ethnic identity; others reject the idea of ethnic boundaries and stress the *mixed* nature of their cultural origins. The growth witnessed in inter-ethnic marriages since the late 1980s indicates that this perception of the nation is becoming more widespread.

The third important image of the Mauritian nation depicts the nation not as a "cultural mix" but rather as a plural society held together by a uniform political and economic system. This view, which seeks to reconcile ethnicity with nationhood, acknowledges the importance of ethnic identity to individuals, while at the same time recognising the importance of *sharing* for social integration to be effective. This view, which will be dealt with in greater detail below, is typical of Mauritian state ideology, which accepts ethnic diversity insofar as it does not interfere with the state's interest in political stability and economic integration of the population.

Similarity and Difference—Ethnicity versus Nationalism

Modernity and the modern state require, and contribute to creating, certain forms of cultural uniformity among the citizens of any country whose inhabitants participate in the institutions of the state and greater society (through education, politics and/or the labour market). Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Mauritian population has, thus, in important respects become culturally homogenised. The quick spread of the Kreol language into the Hindu countryside during the twentieth century is a clear indication of this ongoing integration at the level of representations. Officially, some 90 per cent of the population is literate, and although this figure is exaggerated, a majority can read and write French and sometimes English. The largest newspaper, the French-language weekly *Week-End*, has a circulation of 60,000, and 90 per cent of the Mauritian households have a TV set. The system of education is nearly uniform, and primary schooling is in principle free and compulsory. There having been no significant peasantry or "traditional" mode of production in the island, the entire population has long been integrated into a capitalist system of production and consumption, but this integration is growing in intensity with increased education, social and geographic mobility, and mass media consumption.

A more recent development concerning cultural homogenisation is linked with the pattern of settlement. Due to an historically important ethnic division of labour in the countryside (Allen 1983), which is still dominated by the sugar industry, many Mauritian villages are still ethnically segregated. There are also distinctive ethnic quarters in the capital, Port-Louis, but with a few exceptions, it is difficult to discern a similar pattern in the other towns. By the early 1990s, there are indications that this kind of ethnic segregation is decreasing in importance. There is presently a great housing shortage, and people are eager to move towards the new industrial and commercial centres of the island. The residential suburbs being built for this purpose will not be ethnically segregated as the villages used to be. A complementary, and more significant, change is that the criteria for recruitment to the labour market—at least in the private sector—no longer are primarily ethnic. People increasingly compete for the same jobs and work in the same places.

One could elaborate further. The point is that at the level of representations and conventionalised practices, the various ethnic segments of the Mauritian population are becoming more similar. On the other hand—and this is a common paradox of ethnicity—there has been an inverse relationship between the development of ethnic self-consciousness and the development of shared culture crossing ethnic boundaries: during the process of cultural homogenisation, ethnic self-consciousness and incorporation have also been strengthened. However, the island is too small for a secessionist movement to be viable, and the level of participation in the shared political institutions is very high. The parties are associated with ethnic groups, although they almost without exception try to present themselves as supra-ethnic, national alternatives.

In Mauritian daily life as in Mauritian politics, there is a continuous tension between similarity and differences. When asked casually, people will always say that they get on well with the others, but in confidential situations, most will admit that they have prejudices against some of the other ethnic groups. Importantly, rules of endogamy are still strong in all ethnic groups except among the Creoles. Even in the emphatically multi-ethnic Mauritian towns, there are still important mono-ethnic contexts, notably contexts relating to the family, and, to a great extent, contexts relating to religion.

One may say that there is a continuous swing between homogenisation and ethnic differentiation; indeed, that the two processes are taking place simultaneously. On the one hand, Mauritian sports have to a great extent been successfully de-communalised since the early 1980s. During the same period, however, the nationalist or pan-ethnic Kreol movement has been weakened, and an increasing number of Indo-Mauritians now take evening courses in their ancestral languages.

There can be no doubt that the majority of Mauritians do not wish ethnic boundaries to vanish altogether, although there are differing views on what the relationship between similarity and difference ought to be. When the MMM government tried to abolish ethnic groups from the population censuses in 1982-3, popular reactions were so hostile that the policy had to be abandoned. In this ideological climate, proponents of nationalisms must tread carefully, and moreover, it seems difficult to invest any nationalism with substantive content, since most of the available symbols can be interpreted as expression of ethnic interests.

Contested Symbols

Unlike European and many Asian nationalisms, Mauritian nationalism cannot draw upon either a shared mythical past or ethnic unity in its ideological self-justification. It therefore seems to be what Smith (1991) has labelled "territorial nationalism" as opposed to "ethnic nationalism"; being an island, Mauritius can

easily be construed as a natural territory. On the other hand, this distinction confuses matters somewhat in so far as it seems to presume that territorial nationalisms do not require an ethnic or cultural element to be successful. On the contrary, the territorial battle was won decades ago by the political rulers of the Mauritian state, while the project of nation-building remains a major issue in identity politics as well as in economic strategies, and most Mauritians would agree that it has only just begun.

In order to avoid the symbolic identification of the Mauritian state with one ethnic group, Mauritian nation-builders have followed two strategies. First, they have chosen uncontroversial national symbols, many of them colonial, such as the English language. The national coat of arms is adorned with a deer and a dodo, neither of which has ethnic connotations. The national motto, "The Star and the Key of the Indian Ocean," dates from eighteenth-century French imperialism. Secondly, they have sought to depict the Mauritian nation as being identical with the "mosaic of cultures" that make up the country. As prime minister Jugnauth said in a public speech preceding the country's accession to Republican status (March, 1992): "Our unity as a people lies in our diversity." A cultural show organised on Independence Day would typically comprise Indian songs and dances, Chinese dragons, European songs and *ségas* (the musical genre created by the slaves) and would in this way depict the Mauritian nation as being identical with its diverse constituent components.

There is nevertheless competition between kinds of national symbols. Particularly in the years from independence until 1982, there were strong cultural movements seeking to create a Mauritian nation independent of the colonial heritage. The Kreol language and the *séga* music were important markers for this movement, and some of the more innovative activists introduced Oriental instruments and harmonies into the *séga*. While the overtly anti-ethnicist MMM was in power in 1982-3, a Kreol translation briefly replaced the English version of the national anthem played every evening at the end of TV transmissions. This caused a great uproar and contributed to the dissolution of the MMM government along largely ethnic lines (Oodiah 1989).

The strong hostility against making Kreol the national language was in part due to its being identified with the Creoles as an ethnic group and with urban people in general, but there were also other factors (cf. Eriksen 1990, for details). Around 1980, further, the main slogan of the MMM was *En sel lepep; en sel nasyon* (One single people; one single nation). A typical reaction among the sceptics was that this would imply that "*tu dimun pu vin kreol*"; that is to say, everybody would become a Creole. The *séga* music as a potential national symbol has faced similar obstacles, as it is still associated with the Creole ethnic group. The radical nationalists, most of whom were not ethnic Creoles, chose as their markers of nationhood symbols which were uniquely Mauritian, but they also happened to be symbols associated with the Creoles, who are the only Mauritians who have not created an ancestral culture.

Entropy and Negentropy

It is difficult to disentangle processes of homogenisation from processes of differentiation since they feed upon each other (cf. Friedman 1990). A few further, more recent, examples will illustrate this.

In January, 1992, several ministers, including the prime minister (who is a Hindu), declared war on "parasites" and "incompetent bureaucrats" in the civil service, claiming that if Mauritius was to enter its "second phase of industrialisation," the state administration would have to become more efficient and meritocratic. This was interpreted as an attack on ethnic organisation in general and the Hindu community in particular, since the Hindus have since independence dominated the civil service—and it is widely held, among Hindus and non-Hindus alike, that they are partly recruited because of their personal connections or ethnic membership. Reacting against this move, a weekly newspaper which openly represents the sectional interests of Hindus attacked the prime minister for not looking after his own community. A well-known Hindu opposition politician also held a public meeting where he denounced the government and stressed that "we Hindus have to do better in taking care of our own interests," adding that Hindus couldn't be communalists since their religion was so tolerant and accomodating. In a word, the government's bid for homogenisation was immediately countered by public calls for renewed differentiation and strengthening of ethnic boundaries .

Another issue with a bearing on the relationship between homogenisation and differentiation concerns the status of confessional schools, sanctioned in a law known as the GP 114. A certain number of Mauritian schools are run by the Catholic Church, although they receive financial support from the state, and they have traditionally hired more Catholic than non-Catholic teachers. This practice was brought to court in 1991, when the complainant held that it was anti-constitutional. The church won the case on the grounds that religious knowledge may be a relevant qualification for a teacher in a confessional school.

In the slightly earlier case of the Muslim Personal Law, however, homogenisation won over differentiation. The law, which allowed Muslims to settle domestic disputes in accordance with Muslim law even when it was in conflict with Mauritian law, was removed in 1987. The public debate over the MPL demonstrated, among other things, that there can be rivalling interests within ethnic communities. Among the Muslims, many women were opposed to the MPL whereas many men wished to retain it.

The face of ethnicity and its social relevance changes continuously in Mauritius as in many other societies. It nevertheless remains a powerful social force and an important locus for individual identity. The degrees and forms of resistance against intermarriage may indicate the relative strength of ethnic ideologies and ethnic organisation, as well as indicating the intensity of the perceived threats against ethnic identities, for if intermarriage becomes sufficiently widespread, that will mean the end of ethnicity as we know it. The vast majority of Mauritian marriages have always been and remain intra-ethnic, and in fact, much of what goes for ethnic favouritism is actually nepotism. The family is still important as an organisational unit although this seems to be about to change in the towns. Ethnic boundaries remain intact even if the transformation of Mauritian society is swift.

The Paradox of Multiculturalism

As the preceding discussion suggests, the most successful policies in Mauritian social life—whether in politics or elsewhere—have been those which do not overtly aim at the eradication of ethnic differences. An official slogan states that the island is a *société à l'arc-en-ciel*, a rainbow society. When the Catholic Church had won the case concerning the GP 114, the Archbishop for the Mascareignes said that one ought to keep the colours apart for the rainbow to remain pretty. A similar metaphor, also frequently invoked, describes the future alternatives as the *salade de fruit* versus the *compote de fruit*. Few support the idea of the *compote de fruit*, and to the extent that this is an empirical fact, it is not very effective to state, as some Mauritians (and foreign researchers) do, that the melting-pot has in fact already happened in many a respect. Mauritians of different communities are determined to remain discrete. The politicians try to argue that they are simultaneously favourable to granting all citizens equal rights and to guaranteeing their rights to be different, even if, as the examples of the MPL and the GP 114 show, the two principles may contradict each other.

Although the cultural radicalism of the 1970s has waned, there is still some resistance against every form of ethnic segregation. The most difficult obstacle to overcome for these radicals seems to be religion, which usually presents the most difficult problem in mixed marriages, particularly with respect to the children. Not surprisingly, then, the most vocal critics of ethnicity are atheists; they are the members of a small Trotskyist party called *Lalit de klas* (Class Struggle) that militates for the Kreol language and social justice, and which has since the late 1970s consistently refused to accept that ethnicity is a profound feature of Mauritian society. When they stood for general elections in 1987, Lalit decided to demonstrate against the ethnic character of Mauritian politics, which is indeed embedded in the constitution. Owing to an ingenious "best-loser system" which is intended to en-sure a fair representation of all ethnic communities in Parliament, every candidate for general elections has to state his or her ethnic membership. Lalit decided to decide their members' ethnic membership at random, by drawing lots. In this way, they succeeded in calling public attention to a paradox in the prevailing multicultural ideology of Mauritius: it places a great stress on ethnic membership, and thereby makes it difficult for anyone to be simply Mauritian. One has to belong to a community, and one's community membership is necessarily something different from one's citizenship or nationality. Multicultural ideology thus slows down the "melting-pot" or creolisation process which is in other regards taking place in the country.

Two Trends in Mauritian Nationalism

As already mentioned, there are two complementary aspects of official nationalism in Mauritius, and they are sometimes at odds with each other. One emphasises unity and similarity; the other depicts the nation as being identical with the "mosaic of cultures" which constitutes it. Neither of them can be said to be ethnic nationalisms in the common meaning of the word (as in Smith 1991; or Gellner 1983); nationalism (i) is supra-ethnic, while nationalism (ii) is multi-ethnic.

Nationalism (i) comprises, among other symbols, the flag,[8] Independence Day (Republic Day as from 1992), the national anthem, the English language, the national airline, and latterly the economic success of Mauritius. It is construed so as not to conflict with ethnic identities or to represent any one of them, as an over-arching, "encompassing" symbolic system so to speak.

Nationalism (ii) represents the Mauritian nation as being identical with its constituent "cultures." In fact, the Mauritian state positively encourages its citizens to search for (or invent) their roots and to strengthen their cultural identity. Ethnic cultural centres have been built, often with additional funding from abroad, and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, founded after independence, is a research institute devoted to investigating the cultural roots of Mauritians. Most history books written by Mauritian scholars deal with one ethnic group and argue that group's unique contribution to the "fruit salad." TV programming, although dominated by programmes in French and English, includes weekly broadcasts in Hindustani, Marathi, Hakka, Tamil and other ancestral languages. The Mauritian strategy for solving the contradictions between ethnicity and the nation-state is very different from, for example, that followed in Eric Williams' Trinidad & Tobago, where Williams warned his fellow citizens early on that there could be no Mother Africa or Mother India for any of them; that there could only be one mother, namely Mother Trinidad & Tobago. In Mauritius, multiple loyalties are encouraged to the extent that they do not interfere with the overt interests of the state. As a rule, ethnic identity is encouraged, while ethnic organisation is discouraged.

Relevant Social Identities

For ideologies and political symbols to be effective, they must be linked, in some way or other, with perceived needs or interests on the part of the target group. There must be some form of congruence between ideologies of social identity and personal experiences. At this point, we must therefore ask what the social identifications available in Mauritius *have to offer*.

Ethnic identities are still very important. Traditionally, ethnic membership has provided the individual with a religious ontology, with a measure of economic security (through ethnic networks in the labour market and the ethnic division of labour), with a political identity (since politics is ethnicised), and in the case of the non-Creole populations, with a notion of roots and origins. Kinship organisation forms an important part of ethnic organisation, and is still crucial in matters of marriage and employment.

Class ideologies have periodically tried to replace ethnic identities with class identities. Class ideologists argue that they represent people's real interests because they reject vertical solidarity and work for economic equality. They depict ethnic ideologies as aspects of the divide-and-rule strategies of the ruling class. However, the traditional correlation between ethnicity and occupation has led many Mauritians to account for class in terms of ethnicity, and this is still very common. Trade unions tend to be dominated by one ethnic group; class in general tends to be subsumed under ethnicity. In addition, ethnic ideology and organisation are more versatile and encompassing as foci for identity; ethnicity provides an entire cosmology whereas class ideology appeals chiefly to utilitarian needs.

Anderson (1991) has suggested that we should classify nationalism with religion and kinship rather than with ideologies such as liberalism and socialism. This suggestion seems valid for Mauritian nationalism as well as ethnicity. Class is not generally seen as an alternative to these principles of social classification, but as a supplement. On the other hand, as described above, ethnicity and nationhood may be seen as the main rivals in the ongoing negotiation over identity. In order to be successful, any Mauritian nationalism must persuade citizens that they are first and foremost members of a nation and not of an ethnic group; it must have something to offer. I have argued above (cf. also Eriksen 1988: Chap. 5) that changes in the labour market may already have triggered a swing away from ethnic identity towards national identity. First, Mauritians increasingly imagine themselves as competitors on the world market. Secondly, and more importantly, individual merit rather than kinship and ethnic membership is becoming the most important principle for recruitment to the labour market. Thirdly, this entails social mobility and thereby weakens that aspect of ethnicity which linked parents and children through an ethnically specific profession. Fourthly, following from this, many working-places have become poly-ethnic and people of different ethnic membership develop shared interests and have shared experiences. These and related processes encourage individuals to see themselves as members of an abstract nation rather than an ethnic corporate group. A general swing from collectivism to individualism is involved here; the importance of kinship diminishes, and the importance of individual choice and achievement increases. Nationalism postulates a direct link between the individual and the abstract, imagined community embedded in the state, while ethnicity, in Mauritius at any rate, functions at the level of interpersonal face-to-face networks. In this way, the increase in "love marriages" among Indo-Mauritians contributes to strengthening nationhood at the cost of ethnicity, even if many of these marriages are intra-ethnic.

The movement from collectivism/ethnicity towards individualism/nationalism can, as suggested above, be studied as changes in patterns of interaction and life-strategies. It can also be studied at the level of representations, perhaps most interestingly as changes in the dominant mode of imagining the past. Ancestral identities, which are created in contemporary Mauritius as individual histories, are reifications of people's current self-perceptions and change historically as perceptions of self change. An individual whose ancestral language was Urdu in the 1960s, may in this way have made a symbolic switch to Arabic during the 1970s. Here, it is interesting to note that a growing majority of Mauritians report to Census authorities that Kreol is their ancestral language (Mauritius 1992). This shift away from "primordial" languages indicates that Mauritian identity is becoming the most important ancestral identity for many of the island's inhabitants. As a friend of "pure" Tamil origin explained to me: "Although my distant ancestors spoke Tamil, both my parents and my grand-parents spoke Kreol. Since they're ancestral enough as far as I'm concerned, Kreol is my ancestral language."

This brings us to the final theme of the present essay; namely, the relationship of nationalism to the past. Could a nation like Mauritius, which has unfolded in the full daylight of recorded history, develop credible myths of origin persuading the members of the nation that they have a shared past? How distant does a past have to be in order to be considered as *the* past?

A Non-ethnic, Future-oriented Nationalism?

As the above discussion has suggested, the nation-building project in Mauritius is contradiction-ridden and requires continuous negotiation over the relationship between uniformity and diversity. The project is politically interesting in so far as it has successfully prevented inter-ethnic violence for over two decades, and it is analytically interesting because it seems to contradict central tenets in the study of nationalism. In a word, Mauritian nationalism seems to be poly-ethnic and future-

oriented, unlike the European nationalisms which have been seen as typical, which draw on notions of shared ethnic identity and shared history for their legitimacy. The two questions are linked, but I shall deal with them separately.

First question: In which sense can Mauritian nationalism truly be said to be non-ethnic? The answer is not as obvious as it might seem at a first glance. For although the official ideology of multiculturalism seems to "freeze" ethnic distinctions, the Mauritian project of nation-building can also be interpreted as an attempt to create a new *ethnie*, albeit in a cautious and gradual way. Even if this is not intentional, it may well be a result. As the entire population has already been integrated into a more or less uniform system of communication, politics and economic exchange, it can be argued that the only ingredient missing is the self-definition; in other words, that Mauritians can be a *people* tomorrow if they decide to. There are trends in Mauritian society encouraging such a development; the most important concerns the increasing contact with the external world, particularly through travel and economic competition in the world market. It is a familiar fact to many Mauritians, which has been discussed above, that they discover their nationhood, their shared Mauritian culture as it were, when they travel. But even if such an *ethnie* will largely be constituted and reproduced through the production of relevant contrasts externally, it cannot exclusively be defined locally as an inventory of shared cultural traits or shared traditions, which is the common strategy among other nationalisms. For the foreseeable future, it will have to be codified as a national unity based on the acknowledgement of mutual differences. A similar point is made in Kapferer's (1988) analysis of Sri Lankan nationalism, which he describes as a "hierarchical" nationalism based on complementarity rather than equality. Viewed in relation to global society, Mauritius appears as a nation to its citizens, and at this level Mauritians appear as an *ethnie*. It is true that they are internally differentiated, but which ethnic group is not? As Jenkins (1986) has noted, if internal cultural and social differentiation are the criteria for "pluralness," then every modern society is a plural society.

Second question: In what way does Mauritian nationalism relate to the past as a justification for the nation-state, and to what extent is it on the contrary future-oriented and depicts the nation as *becoming* rather than *being*? Central theorists of nationalism have argued that the creation of a shared mythical past is essential in the legitimation of a nation-state (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Kapferer 1988). This seems not to be an available option for Mauritian nationalists, who have since the beginning in the 1960s talked much more about the shared future than about the shared past. First and foremost, the past of the Mauritian nation is neither mythical nor shared. The entire history of Mauritian society has been meticulously recorded by bureaucrats, statisticians, novelists, journalists and social scientists; the society has evolved from its point zero to the present day in full daylight. It is true

that oral traditions of storytelling exist and that many of the stories have been recorded, but none of them can be interpreted as expressions of embryonic nationhood. An example is the story about the Malagasy prince Ratsitatane, who was exiled in Mauritius in the nineteenth century and who has since then, probably quite undeservedly, become a symbol of black martyrdom; he might serve as an appropriate symbol for the Creoles, but for nobody else.

In its essence, Mauritian nationalism in all its expressions is future-oriented; its main force in the 1990s lies in the idea of economic progress, which clearly inspires sentiments of pride and loyalty in the population. However, it may also draw upon the past, and a fairly recent series of political events seems a likely candidate for a national myth. In the spirit of the anthropological study of myth, I shall relate this story twice, first roughly the way it is described in history books, then the way it was told to me by an informant who was too young to have experienced it.

Version 1.

"The years around independence were marked by great uncertainty and economic crisis. The unemployment rate on the eve of independence was about 20 per cent, and many feared that the economy would deteriorate further with independence. Many non-Hindus also feared that an independent Mauritius would be strongly dominated by Hindus; that it would virtually become a Little India. There had been ethnic riots in 1965 and many feared a further deterioration of ethnic relations, and finally, the net growth rate of the population was among the highest in the world—in an island which was already considered as overpopulated. In the 1967 elections, 44 per cent voted against independence. There was much communal tension, fear and anxiety in the country. In 1969, the year after independence, a prolonged feud between semi-criminal gangs in Port-Louis spread and took on the character of an ethnic riot between Muslims and Creoles. Several people were killed, and the situation in the country was so tense that the government felt compelled to declare a State of Emergency, which lasted a year. There have been no ethnic riots in Mauritius since then."

Version 2.[9]

"I'll tell you about Mauritius, about the past, and how we got rid of [violent] communalism. Well, this was just after independence, in 1968 or 1969 I think, and there were two gangs in the Pleine Verte. In this part of Port-Louis, there were both Creoles and Muslims at that time, but today you won't see a single Creole there. Anyway, one of the gangs was Muslim and the other was Creole. The Creole gang was based in Roche-Bois [north-east Port-Louis], and it tried to take over some of the territory controlled by the Muslims. The Muslims for their part tried to take over some territory at Cassis [in western Port-Louis] which was controlled by

another Creole gang. You know, there were fights and threats and quite a bit of trouble for a long while. [...] Then, suddenly one day, a Muslim from the gang at Pleine Verte killed a Creole kid outside Venus cinema [at Cassis], [10] and the other gang simply couldn't accept it. They went back to the Pleine Verte and killed a Muslim. Then the Muslims struck back, and this time they killed a member of the Creole gang. Anyway, by this time many people were involved on both sides, and a lot of [Creole] people who lived at the Pleine Verte began to stay inside their house all day. By now it wasn't just a gang fight, it was a war between the two communities. Even in Phoenix [another town] there was trouble. And quite a few people got killed. People were so terrified they even stayed home from work. They started to do nasty things to each others' churches [and mosques], you know, disrespectful things. Digging up graves, smashing windows, that kind of thing. And then Ramgoolam [the prime minister] said enough is enough, and he called in the Englishmen [the British army] who put a stop to the fighting. Quite a few people were sent to jail and all. And then he called off elections and said this is an emergency. You know, we Mauritians are really peace-loving people, and this was really scary. All the Creoles who used to live near the Pleine Verte moved away, to St Croix or even further away to Roche-Bois. [...]

What happened then? Well, I think people learnt their lesson and realised that we have to live together even if we are different. There has been no violence between Creoles and Muslims, or Hindus for that matter, later. You might say that this riot was the birth of the Mauritian nation."

The myth exists in several other versions as well.

Time and Nationhood

Analysts who stress the importance of myths of ancestry for ethnic or national identity have shown that these myths refer to a starting-point somewhere in the dim and distant past. Sinhalese nationalism (Kapferer 1988), Quebecois separatism (Handler 1988), Norwegian national romanticism (Østerud 1984) and the ethnopolitical ideology of the Huron Indians (Roosens 1989) alike, to mention four otherwise very different examples, all depict the birth of the nation or ethnic group as an event in the past. None of them implies that the nation has always been there. So, to re-phrase the question posed by my Tamil informant above: How ancient does a myth of origin have to be in order to function as a myth of origin? How deep do the "roots" of a people have to be in order for its members to consider themselves as "a people"?

The Mauritian material points in two directions. On the one hand, it indicates that young nations which demonstrably do not have a shared past have to direct their national symbolism towards the future. This is evident not only in Mauritius, but also in many other post-colonial states, where the nation tends to be identified with progress, education and modernity. On the other hand, the Mauritian material must lead us to question our analytical categories of ethnicity and shared origins. All humanity ultimately descends from the same group; ethnic distinctions are in other words neither eternal nor natural. History and comparative anthropology have also shown us that ethnic groups or nations emerge and eventually disappear— they are split into several groups, are assimilated into dominant groups, or fuse.

Perhaps we are here on the verge of what Ardener (1989) calls a *parameter collapse*: the empirical material is becoming too complex for the concepts used to handle and classify it, and the concepts must therefore be replaced by others. According to the conventional wisdom (or "our analytical concepts of ethnicity"), Mauritians may be considered an ethnic group: They have myths of shared origins (albeit recent); they reproduce cultural boundaries *vis-à-vis* others and consider themselves a group. However, sub-categories of Mauritians (Creoles, Hindus, Franco-Mauritians, etc.) may also clearly be considered ethnic groups by the same criteria.

Individuals belong to several groups. Some of them can be depicted as segmentary systems or concentric circles (family—lineage—clan—ethnic group—nation—humanity), while others are constituted on different kinds of principles (kinship—occupation—religion—gender—sexual inclination—political persuasion—language). Conflicting loyalties are bound to occur. Further, endogamy, often quoted as a criterion for ethnicity, is a relative term. Just as the conventional anthropological distinction between prescriptive and preferential rules of marriage has proven a spurious one because practice does not conform to theory, endogamy is a matter of degree and cannot be claimed to be a general principle for any category of Mauritians. Even among the assumedly highly endogamous Franco-Mauritians, ethnically exogamous (but professionally endogamous!) marriages are sufficiently common not to be seen merely as anomalies or "exceptions from the rule."

Some Comparisons

There are no clear-cut "general conclusions" emerging from this discussion, the object of which has been to shed light on political identity processes in complex modern societies. Let me therefore round off the discussion with a few sketchy comparisons, which may highlight the specific character of Mauritius, question some widespread assumptions in the theory of ethnicity and nationalism, and suggest topics for further investigation. [11]

The parameter of scale is an important one. Seen as a bounded social system, Mauritius is neither what is normally considered a small-scale nor a large-scale society. The degree of anonymity is much lower than in most other nation-states.

The public arena is constituted both through mass media (education, newspapers, TV, radio, cinema) and through face-to-face interaction and personal networks. The elites are small, and their members tend to know each other personally. In this, Mauritius is comparable to Caribbean states such as Guyana, Belize and Trinidad & Tobago, but is qualitatively different from countries like Nigeria and France. In Mauritius, the public arenas for discourse are thus only partly anonymous. Public statements are identified with persons, not with anonymous "instances." As a consequence, public debates in Mauritius are more transparent than in many other countries.

Concerning a related but different parameter, namely the degree of popular integration into national society, Mauritius must rank among the highest in the world. Not only is the scale comparatively small, but additionally, the economic, communicational, political and educational infrastructures function to the extent that the great majority of Mauritians take on identities as citizens in a variety of situations. When you go to the post office to mail a letter, you *are* a citizen; when you write an application for a job in another part of the island, or vote at General Elections (which an overwhelming majority do), or when you collect your old-age pension, you effectively *are* a citizen. In many countries of the world, also some of comparatively small scale (such as Guyana), most people are rarely citizens in this case, and the state has a small stake in competition for their loyalty. In other countries of larger scale, conversely (e.g. Canada or Great Britain), individuals are citizens in a more active way, and the likelihood of their loyalty is higher. The active participation in the institutions of the nation-state may be necessary, but not sufficient conditions for loyalty to come about.

Being an island, Mauritius can easily be conceptualised by its inhabitants as a bounded system. Its territorial isolation has been the crucial factor in its initial delineation as a territory and later as a nation. Mauritius shares this feature with other islands (Great Britain, Trinidad, Jamaica, etc.). In other cases, other criteria, such as shared language, physical characteristics of the population, or a characteristic livelihood (such as pastoralism or agriculture), may play an analogous part. Although processes of nation-building and ethnic incorporation share important features everywhere, the delineation of imagined communities can be undertaken for very different causes.

Prospects of economic growth have been important in identifying Mauritian nation-building with a shared future rather than a shared past. The project of the Mauritian nation experienced its gravest crisis at a time when both the political and the economic future were uncertain and threatening; namely, in the late 1960s, when unemployment was very high and was accompanied by uncontrollable population growth. It is sometimes assumed that romantic notions of a mythical past have an especial impact in such situations and that ethnicism and ethnic unrest are especially likely then. This assumption cannot be validated empirically; on the contrary, ethnic revitalisation and incorporation can occur both in periods of growth and prosperity, and in periods of recession (cf. Eriksen 1992: Chap. 7, for a discussion of Indian ethnopolitics in Trinidad and Mauritius along these lines).

The relationship of ethnic identities to national and other identities is an extremely important topic for future research. As Hannerz (1992) and others have emphasised in recent years, ethnic differentiation is only one of several forms of differentiation in contemporary societies. The national is by default related to the state, but as this essay has shown, it may define itself in a variety of ways. Not only is nationhood an "empty vessel" (Barth's, 1969, phrase) which can be filled with very little (civil rights and nothing more) or very much (a complete cosmology), but one and the same nationalism also constitutes itself in relation to different significant others. I have already shown this for Mauritius. For a couple of further example, the British (or English?—cf. Nairn 1977) nation obviously looks different if one's gaze is directed towards France than if one looks westwards towards Ireland. The Trinidadian nation is sophisticated and modern relative to Guyana, it is frivolous and urban seen in relation to Barbados, and it is a rather peripheral and seedy place seen in relation to the USA. National identity is, of course, also related to other domestic social identities in complex ways.

In other words, nations, like ethnic categories and groups, are constituted relationally. This also contributes to explaining the crucial part played by *people who are abroad* in the imaginative creation of nations—university students, migrants, political refugees or diaspora members. The history of Mauritian nationalism confirms this general notion: the nation was largely imagined by exiled Mauritians who discovered that they had something uniquely Mauritian in common, who developed political ambitions and who were homesick. Research in Trinidad (Eriksen 1992) has revealed a similar pattern there, and there is ample evidence on the importance of exile for national identity from other sources as well—from Salman Rushdie's accounts of his Indianness to Edward Said's reflections on being a Christian Palestinian in New York. However, notwithstanding Anderson's (1991) and Hannerz's (1992) reminders, little academic attention has been devoted to this aspect of nationalism.

Mauritius has avoided turning nation-building into an ethnic project in the conventional sense of the word. Aspects of this topic may be highly relevant for comparative work—and as I have suggested, it may in important ways contribute to critical reflections on our conceptualisations of nationhood and ethnicity. In Trinidad, which is in other ways comparable to Mauritius, the state is closely identified with the black population segment, and Trinidadians of Indian origins are considered, and tend to perceive themselves, as a minority (Eriksen 1991b; 1992: Chap. 7). On the other hand, multi-ethnic ideology, as I have shown, poses its own

peculiar problems: it encourages reifications of ethnic pasts and politicisation of culture, slows down processes of integration, and creates a difficult situation for people who would prefer not to take on an ethnic identity. The relationship between equal rights and the right to be culturally different is necessarily a contradiction-ridden one in virtually every country in the world, since ethnic minorities demand some degree of autonomy as well as insisting on equal treatment. The relationship between the extreme positions—legally sanctioned divisions of power between ethnic groups and programmatic rejections of ethnicity as ideology and social practice (as in Guyana)—must be granted more attention in empirical research, in order to give a more profound, more nuanced comparative understanding of social classifications and identities in the modern world.

The final point concerns the present use, or creation, of the past. Reifications of the past and romantic nostalgia are often seen as typical of nationalism; however, Löfgren (this volume) shows, Swedish nationalism is anti-traditionalist, modernist and future-oriented. Further, the Belizean, Trinidadian and Mauritian nationalisms (as well as other comparable cases) seemingly cannot justify themselves by referring to a shared mythical past—since the countries are demonstrably composed of heterogeneous populations who have arrived in recent centuries (cf. Miller and Wilk, this volume). V.S. Naipaul (e.g. 1962; 1973), the uprooted writer par excellence, has been fond of depicting these nations as absurdities; as "unnatural" entities which came into existence through bizarre accidents of history. The inhabitants of these societies tend to think otherwise. The ways in which history is being interpreted and written in these recent societies, which are demonstrably the creatures of modernity, actually provide first-hand evidence of the creation of shared myths of origin. Some of them can be labelled ethnic (if they represent only some of the citizens); some of them can be labelled national (if they represent all citizens of a state); yet others create imagined communities on the basis of non-territorial, non-ethnic criteria.

Even in societies where the future seems to be the main *raison d'être* for national sentiment and loyalty to the state, a shared past is being fashioned. In choosing to conclude in this way, I have wished to call attention to nationalism, in its many forms, as a privileged focus for a comparative investigation of the encounter between the future and the past in the contemporary world.

NOTES

* A preliminary version of this essay benefitted greatly from discussions at the conference "Defining the National," Bjärsjölagård, Sweden, 24-26 April, 1992, where it was first presented. I am also grateful to the editors for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. Fieldwork in Mauritius was carried out in 1986 (ten months) and 1991-92 (three months). I would like to thank friends in Mauritius, particularly Elisabeth Boullé, Vinesh Hookoomsing and Malenn Oodiah, for keeping me updated while I am away.

2. These theories cannot be dealt with systematically here. Briefly, the anthropological theory of ethnicity and interdisciplinary theory of nationalism drawn upon hold that there is no necessary connection between "objective culture" and national or ethnic identity, that groups are constituted relationally, and that identities are situational; in other words, that a person may be a "tribesman" in one situation and a "townsman" in another (Mitchell 1966). See Eriksen (1993b) for full discussions of current theory of ethnicity and nationalism.

3. For details about Mauritian history and politics, see Toussaint (1971); Simmons (1983); Bowman (1991); for full discussions of Mauritian ethnicity, see Eriksen (1988; 1992).

4. The Kreol ortography used here is the *Lortograf linite* proposed by Baker & Hookoomsing (1987).

5. Although it is one of the highest castes in India, the Rajput caste is definitely a *ti nasyon* in Mauritius.

6. Further aspects of the relationship between isolation and contact in the formation of Mauritian identities are discussed in Eriksen (1993a).

7. This use of the term creole must be kept distinct from the ethnic category Creole (with a capital C), although there is a certain interrelation. By "creole" I refer to cultural identities and ideologies which are not oriented towards ancestral cultures, but rather identify their "essence" as Mauritianness. The term is also indebted to Hannerz' term "cultural creolisation" which refers to the cross-fertilisation of cultural signs and meanings characteristic of the modern age. Creole with a capital C refers to the ethnic category described as Creoles in Mauritius. Most of them are defined as Creoles because their ancestry is largely African; however, in recent years, the offspring of mixed marriages (which do not necessarily involve Creoles), and some other secularised individuals, have begun to categorise themselves as Creoles.

8. The Mauritian flag consists of four horizontal stripes: blue, red, green and yellow. They were intended to represent the ocean, the people, the land and the sun, but a popular interpretation insists that the four stripes represent the PMSD (the formerly important Creole/white party), the Hindus, the Muslims and the Chinese, respectively.

9. My questions have been omitted from this transcription. I first asked him what really happened in Port-Louis when there was fighting between Creoles and Muslims; then, I asked him if this was just a gang fight, and finally, I asked him what happened afterwards.

10. This detail is slightly inconsistent with the historical record. The narrator is a Creole.

11. For some comparative dimensions concerning peaceful co-existence in poly-ethnic societies, with Mauritius as the paradigmatic case, see Eriksen (1992: Chap. 5).

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