

Indigeneity in Mauritius, Réunion and Seychelles: Legacies of Métissage and Colonial Rule

Abstract

The word "indigenous" continues to evoke discussion and scholarship throughout the ages as a highly culturally and politically loaded term that has gained global importance. The Islands of Mauritius, Réunion and the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean are fascinating examples of the changing uses of the notion of "indigeneity" because although there are no known "indigenous people" that resided on the land, there is still a distinct hierarchy of privilege that continues to reinforce colonial ideals of indigeneity onto those of Creole or African backgrounds. How do Creole peoples view themselves? Do they see Creole identities as "more indigenous" than Indian or White settlers? How does their relationship to a complex Métissage (mixed heritage) relate to global discourse of indigeneity? In this paper, I plan to use the above island nations to explore notions of indigeneity in a global context and to understand how many residents define themselves within this framework. I argue that the indigenous-settler binary is deeply rooted in colonial discourses and that it has not simply disappeared but evolved through the legacy of Creole people (Métissage) and the complex relationship that they have with France, their former colonizer.

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When discussing indigeneity and the word “indigenous”, it is problematic not to acknowledge the complex political, cultural and linguistic terms that arise from the binaries of such definitions. Anthropologist Adam Kuper asserts in “The Return of the Native” that “similarly, in the rhetoric of the indigenous peoples movement the terms “native” and “indigenous” are often euphemisms for what used to be termed “primitive”. The generic definition of the word “indigenous” is an *adjective meaning originating or occurring naturally in a particular place*. If we choose to rely solely on the dictionary definition and not on alternative definitions of this term, then being indigenous or native will be reduced to being the first settler or natural inhabitant of a place. Yet this is limited in many ways, the United Nations defined indigenous populations as being:

**“Indigenous populations are composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial condition; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they now form part, under a state structure which incorporates mainly national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant (UN, 1972).”**

The Indian Ocean nations of Mauritius, Réunion and Seychelles complicate this narrow definition of indigeneity due to their lack of an “indigenous” or “native” population prior to large-scale French colonial efforts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that the idea of indigeneity as a cultural construction of identity can still be applied to unique places where although there are no known “natives”, there is still a distinct hierarchy of privilege that continues to reinforce colonial ideals of indigeneity onto those of Creole or African descent. In what ways do the residents of these islands view themselves in this framework of indigeneity? Does miscegenation and métissage (mixed heritage), which has led to the Creole community, exclude them from this discourse of indigeneity?

*“The essentialized Indigeneity thus formed coalesces around specific fantasies of exclusivity, cultural alterity, marginality, physicality and morality, which leave an increasing number of Indigenous people vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity (Yin C. Paradies)”*

To understand the settler-colonist binary and the origins of the term “indigenous”, we must look carefully at the idea of the colonial encounter. The savagery associated with indigenous people stemmed from the accounts of white Europeans encountering cultures and peoples vastly different from their own. This concept known as **“othering”** popularized by literary theorist Edward Said refers to the act of emphasizing the perceived weaknesses of marginalized groups as a way of stressing the alleged strength of those in positions of power. By viewing the peoples they

encountered on their journeys as savage and foreign and then after colonizing, making this discourse of “otherness”, a mainstay of the colonial framework, it allowed for the development of inferiority complexes and discord amongst the populations they controlled and of the word “indigenous’ as an extension of the other.

Yet this idea of an encounter has been oversimplified in history as solely acts of conquest and subsequent annihilation of a resident ethnic group. As Foucault pointed out: *‘The savage—noble or otherwise—is the natural man whom the jurists or theorists of right dreamed up, the natural man who existed before society existed, who existed in order to constitute society.’* The furthering of the idea that peoples encountered by settlers were savage and not a developed society allowed for settlers to impose laws, annihilate ethnic groups, and divide regions with arbitrary borders.

*“The colonial system is always a way of gaining control over another people for the sake of what the colonial power has determined to be ‘the common good.’ People can only become convinced of the common good when their own capacity to imagine ways in which they can govern themselves has been destroyed (Manuel and Posluns).”*

So simply, colonialism is not necessarily synonymous with occupation and assimilation but can be much more insidious and deep-rooted in the psychology of a region. This is what acclaimed professor and writer Françoise Vergés highlights as a “colonial family romance”, she depicts

France as the benevolent mother figure and the island of Réunion as being a child looking upon its mother with an adoring gaze. She asserts that is a possible Oedipus complex popularized by Freud as a “fiction developed by children about imagined parents” and a “biographical fable is invented and expressly conceived to explain the inexplicable shame of being wrongly born, badly off and badly loved”. The depiction of Réunion as a bastard child longing for parental affection and care and France as the haughty neglectful parent is quite a vision. The black and brown children of the white parent as craving recognition and acceptance in its simplest form is a very human emotion, wanting to belong within a structure.

There was no violent takeover of original inhabitants and struggle for self-determination and expression that occurred on Réunion, instead a steady trickle of African slaves, Indian traders and White settlers that made up a colorful and diverse new population. Yet because of this perceived lack of belonging to the land, there was no prideful “native” heritage to hold onto, to create a minority superiority complex in contrast to French colonialism.

What then occurred was a reverence of French cosmopolitanism and culture as a benchmark of Creole or métissage life. The offspring of the coolies (Indian sailors), African slaves and white settlers had one thing in common, their white ancestry.

The idyllic islands of the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Réunion brim with French influence from the Parisian cobblestone streets of the capital cities, the crepes served at breakfast and most importantly, their colorful Creole

language. The varied faces of the residents connect them to their mixed heritage; it is not improbable to see young black women with piercing green eyes or dark skinned men with blonde hair. Yet there is something distinctly unique about the humid sea air that draws these islands away from the overpowering French influence and gives it a distinctly Afro-Asian flavor.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all three islands were taken under French control in an attempt to take advantage of their ample natural resources and strategic location right off of Eastern Africa. The first French expeditions were carried out by Lazare Picault in the Seychelles in 1742 as an extension of the French East India Company and then in Mauritius and Réunion in 1744.

After taking over the islands, the French led a feverish search for settlers (more importantly slaves) to establish plantations and populate these faraway islands. They traveled down the African coast to Mozambique where they bought thousands of slaves to populate and work on their recently acquired lands. Yet in their efforts to build a viable colony, slaves could not fulfill the political and social roles needed but simply an economic role in developing the agricultural market. This led to coerced migration of French men and women who were historically of lower standing to stand in as skilled workers (masons and carpenters) and to fulfill those social and political roles of citizens of the new holdings. Many accounts of early settler history in both Mauritius and Réunion include stories of young French women coerced with stories of bridal trousseaus and eligible bachelors on the island to marry and bear children with, furthering the French empire's

aim of creating a viable population upon the islands. The inhabitants grew in number, slaves and whites living alongside each other in relative peace. Indian sailors (also known as coolies or lascars) were brought to the islands as indentured workers meaning they were brought over to work until they had paid back their debts for travel and lodging. Many of these Indians were from the southern regions of India (spoke Telugu and Tamil) and were forced to integrate into Francophone islands.

In 1735, the French governor, Mahé de La Bourdonnais set upon the ambitious task of transforming Port Louis, Mauritius into a naval base. He brought several groups of lascars to help him in the construction of Port Louis harbor and the port infrastructure. The Indian men involved in this undertaking stayed behind and opened the door for many more indentured workers from the subcontinent who flocked to Réunion, Mauritius and Seychelles in search of work opportunities and new lives. Many were attempting to escape the rigid caste system of India, which left many trapped within a hierarchal structure allowing for very little flexibility in career or life opportunities. This created a veritable melting pot of various cultures and languages marking the creation of Creole (kreol) languages on all three islands.

Present day, the islands are no longer focused on agriculture as a viable economy but instead sustain themselves on a flourishing tourism industry that has earned worldwide acclaim. I became interested in researching these islands as a tourist in the Seychelles over my Christmas holiday. It was



fascinating to me to note the performative aspects of the tourism industry and the role of Creole people in the workforce. Upon our arrival at the newly renovated Seychelles International Airport, I became aware that my family was one of only 2 African families on our flight; the remainder were German and French tourists.

“In 1971 after the opening of the airport on the administrative island of Mahé and in the first eight years (1971-1979) the number of foreign tourists rose from 3,175 to 78,852 arrivals (Seychelles Tourism Authority, 1980)”

After clearing customs and passport control, we were met by a grinning young man holding a sign marked “Creole Travel Services”; he introduced himself as Jean-Michel and led us to the shuttle that would take us to our resort. My father made conversation with him and my sisters speculated in the backseat about his race. He had piercing green eyes yet distinctly African features and dusky brown hair. His racial ambiguity was fascinating to my younger sister and harkened to his apparent métissage (mixed heritage). As I watched the stunning scenery pass by, I could not ignore the unsettling scenes of rural poverty alongside world-class international resorts. Jean Michel said haltingly to my father:

*“Seychelles is a beautiful place, it was blessed by God with beauty but for Seychellois people, the opportunities for work outside of the tourism industry are nearly impossible to find....What kind of life is that though? We cannot find adequate work when we finish school so even our best and brightest, must*

*kneel down and serve people drinks on the beach as they enjoy our beautiful beaches and cuisine”- Jean Michel*

His statement haunted me throughout our weeklong trip as I became more and more aware of the disparities outside of the gilded gates of the resort complexes that dot the archipelago. I also wondered where Jean Michel would fit in within the greater demographic framework of Seychellois society and although he wanted to resist, he is also entrapped in this performative post-colonial system. When we reached the resort, which was part of a French owned conglomerate with hotels in Mauritius as well as the Maldives, we were greeted by a polite young Creole woman who presented us with an iced fruit punch and a map to the sprawling resort.

One incident, just hours after our arrival highlighted the continuing tension between the elite Whites and lower-class Creoles. A man swimming with his daughter on the private beach had a sudden heart attack and medics were called but after much delay. Beachgoers rushed to his aid when he was finally dragged out of the tide and there were murmurings of displeasure at the lengthy wait time for a medic or ambulance service. After 15 minutes or so of disorganized CPR efforts, a tall man most probably the resort manager ran onto the beach in a sleek suit and tie and began to yell in French at the Creole boat hands, calling them derogatory names and cursing their apparent incompetence. It was painful to watch grown men be reduced to mere children, looking down and wringing their hands as they endured his tirade. It somehow reminded me of a plantation owner chastising his slaves,

they could not retort back or attempt to explain the events, instead they chose to look down and endure the abuse in order not to lose their jobs. The hierarchies of power here can not only be attributed to economic factors but simply the fact that the manager is a Frenchman and within the established social system of the Seychelles, there is a distinct hierarchy of privilege that continues to reinforce lower class citizenship and standing of Creole people. My discomfort of the situation made me wonder about the standing of Creole people within the multicultural fabric of the islands and although they are not “native” to the region, whether they have become the inevitable colonial scapegoats in this society.

Thus began my research interest into the fascinating archipelagos of the Indian Ocean. I began interviewing a good friend and fellow college student of Réunionnais descent, Bryan Valery who offered some excellent insight into Creole society and culture.

*“In my view, which I think is shared by most Réunion Creoles, we do not view ourselves to be more indigenous than the Indians or White settlers. First, we view ourselves as descendants of an intricate yet very simple Métissage: 99% of the people is thought to have at least two or three different ethnicities in their family tree. It is common knowledge for the Islanders that the Island was a wild uninhabited realm before the settlement of Men. I think we view ourselves more indigenous than the motherland French, and in this respect, we tend to accentuate our Creole identity (through shared festivities such as Ramadan, Diwali, Christian Careme; through gastronomy: there is no single Creole, of*

*whatever descents, who would not eat rice, with our traditional massalé, with our Creole version of baked beans; and numerous other ways.*

*On the other hand, there are those who advocate the use of Creole only in private spheres. This could be explained by a will for a French integrated island. Creole in this case is not necessarily (in fact not at all) forbidden, only restrained to certain situations. For the upper middle class people, speaking French is a sign of higher education and upbringing, whereas only speaking Creole is synonym of a less significant social status*

*(Valery, 2014)”*

Putting his remarks in conversation with critical analysis of Creole society in the Islands complicates the notion of Verges “family romance”; an idea of peaceful Creole subjects following French trends and culture to the tee has been disrupted. Yet he does acknowledge the status that French as a language has on the linguistic structure of the society, Creole is still viewed as a second class language although in Mauritius alone, an estimated 90% of people reported speaking Creole more than both French and English combined in their daily conversations. The Creole language alone is a depiction of its people in a linguistic form, dotted with phrases from a variety of coastal African languages, Hindi, Tamil, Malagasy and Arabic. The apparent bastardization of the French language has been met with resistance in mainland France with many French tourists scoffing when they hear islanders speaking their distinctive Creole twang.

Author Shona Jackson in her book “Creole Indigeneity” asserts that *“becoming native, however, or forming an indigenous identity out of or from a position of objecthood or non-personhood (the slave) is not just a performative act. The attempts to limit creolization to cultural processes, even when they assert that Creole culture is tied to labor, miss the fact that creolization as a process of indigenizing is conceived within the time, geography, and discourse of the Western encounter and as such requires negation (Jackson)”*

This idea that **creolization** and the creation of a Creole ethnic group is merely a cultural phenomenon is controversial because it negates the possible indigeneity and connection that Creole people have to the islands they live on. Regardless of their mixed heritage, Creole people that resemble their African ancestors and have not genetically expressed their white ancestry face similar struggles to indigenous peoples across the world. The idea that “whiteness” allows certain Creole people to be acceptably mixed is absolutely unacceptable.

Author Megan Vaughan of “Creating the Creole Island” incorporates Creole as “both a racial category (those who allegedly look most “African” in their features are members of it, though their descent is likely to be very mixed) and a residual category, and therefore, one that signifies a lack.” I noticed these ideas of acceptable blackness whilst visiting the Seychelles as nearly all the staff in tourist destinations fit a narrow and exoticized ideal of Seychellois people as being a beautiful hodgepodge of races. You will rarely see a dark skinned man or woman employed at any resort for the simple

reason that they do not fit within this fetishized discourse of mixed heritage.

Kim TallBear discusses theories of blood quantum and of DNA in contemporary Native American society yet although her piece is geographically distant from the Seychelles, the ideas of European definitions of race and belonging as restrictive resonate clearly. By attempting to fit Creole people into strict racial categories in order to assess their indigeneity and classifying those with more Aryan features as being better than, it is perpetuating the same poisonous settler rhetoric of white superiority that has been regurgitated across the globe.

This also begs the question, are Creole people who are darker skinned and more African looking considered to more indigenous and/or having greater claim to the land than their fairer skinned counterparts?

*They have no “authentic” culture, since authenticity can come only from origins elsewhere, as if nothing which the island had produced itself, though its own complex history could be real (Vaughan).”*

The idea of authenticity has been heavily included in discussions of Creole culture and of indigeneity because it is a matter of who qualifies as indigenous by standards set by governments and organizations like the UN (defined above). Yet Vaughan asserts that authenticity can only come from origins elsewhere which is not only powerful but mobilizes this idea that Creole people of Mauritius, Reunion and the Seychelles cannot be

considered as indigenous in the literal sense because they simply weren't there first and their culture was "produced" from the melding of various "authentic" cultures.

*"Authenticity has also been associated with and explained in terms of "the social regulation of [a person's] emotions" and "a personal ethical ideal" (which of course makes authenticity something which may be approached but hardly fully attained and/or sustained (Veronique Lacoste))"*

This paradox of authenticity has been complicated by the growth of trade and international immigration; people are migrating and learning more and more about other cultures than ever before. With the advent of the Internet, young people in Japan were learning about American slang and food from articles, advertisements and television shows subsequently leading to the opening of McDonald's franchises in the country and the steady Americanization of the native populace. You can fly from Dubai to Seattle on a direct flight, transporting yourself from the Middle Eastern metropole to the northwest United States in mere hours. The fluidity of travel and trade has led to neoliberalism as the dominant economic and social system governing our modern world. The neoliberal period has been distinguished by changes in social inequality and a marked reduction in government responsibility to provide basic services (ie: education, healthcare and has created large-scale social movements, and protests in response to these failures.

In the Seychelles, Mauritius and Reunion, these job cuts and decreases in government funding for education and opportunities have led to youth dissatisfaction and increase in employment in the tourism sector as a last resort. The tourist sector on the Islands can be described as performatively colonial, the grand resorts playing the role of the colonist and the young Creole people playing the role of the indentured servants brought from faraway places to work off their debts.

Neoliberalism as well as neocolonialism has reared its ugly head through other systems such as **structural adjustment programs** also known as SAPS, economic austerity programs forced upon countries that rely on the IMF and World Bank for financial assistance with the goal of reducing the borrowers fiscal imbalances.

SAPs are supposed to allow the economies of the developing countries to become more market oriented. Structural adjustment is implemented through programs of decreased government regulation (of wages, businesses, environment and finance capital), reductions in spending on social provisions (health care, education, housing, welfare), utilities, water supplies and public lands. Yet SAP's are also in a way inherently neocolonial because they have allowed the historical oppressor (European and American) governments and their banks to have a say in how/what to devote resources and funding towards.

The Seychelles is one of the islands that was hit particularly hard by



structural adjustment programs in their agricultural sector, their two traditional export crops of copra (dried coconut meat from which an oil is produced) and cinnamon have declined greatly because of the privatization of government farms and the low-cost alternatives to their products. This forced many to leave farms that they had inherited from generations past to learn French and English (the language of the colonizers) and serve tourists due to lack of government subsidies for Seychellois crops.

The melding of cultures and ideas over porous borders begs the question of “authenticity”, why are terms like authentic still utilized in modern discourses of race and identity? It is interesting to note that Western style marketing has made it’s way to the far-flung isles, I remember seeing flashy billboards along the roads advertising European products (not specifically French) and the menus of restaurants including Western dishes like spaghetti and tomato sauce to appeal to the tourist palate.

Perhaps in this understanding of authenticity as a fluid term, Creole people could be viewed as more “authentic” than any other peoples who are considered or consider themselves to be indigenous. They belong to the land they reside on because of a complex racial heritage that combines the horrors of slavery and they are already mixed. Their miscegenation is nearly ahead of the times that are soon to come for many native people. In our increasingly international and interdependent world, more and more “Creole” people will begin to emerge as technology and commerce bring down racial barriers.

*“The term “creole” is eminently modern. It is not passé and colonial as some might think. Indeed it is even postmodern in the sense that it indicates the emergence of a new model of identity that we could term multiple or mosaic, in the process of being elaborated under our noses... (Stewart)”*

Returning to the UN definition of indigenous as being people **“who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they now form part”**, it is not only incorrect to assume that if people identify or are identified as indigenous, that they are incapable or unable to assimilate to the norms and ideas of the nation they reside in but also that conformity is against the ideals of indigeneity.

This conformity and intermixing is discussed by Vergès who asserts that métissage was developed in the colonial world in response to European racial structures and discourses of “mono-ethnicism of blood and nation”. The mono-ethnicism is reflected in the definition of “indigenous” so the idea of a Creole people is directly in contrast.

The métissage of people on the islands can also be viewed as a form of decolonization, by incorporating the other, black bodies into their white bodies, settlers were letting go of their white privilege and allowing the other element into their genetic code. The contemporary idea of indigeneity was simply a way for settlers to distance themselves from the populations they

were colonizing, by naming them “indigenous” or “natives”, discourses of savagery were able to flourish and they could distance themselves as well as feel superior. The often-cited binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ has found increased prevalence resulting in difference based on ethnic purity and exclusion.

Scholar Homi Bhabha’s work on hybridity and mimicry in post-colonial states is highly relevant to the Creole communities of Réunion, Seychelles and Mauritius. Bhabha argues, however, that this concept of an “authentic” people or culture in the context of an apparent observance of ethnic/cultural diversity or resistance is built into a colonial framework that views “other” cultures in a exoticized and mysticized way, and part of a discourse that provides “native” or “indigenous” people with an externally-formed identity, not with agency of their own. He continues to argue that a **hybrid** understanding of culture is imperative to develop a truly international culture, and take apart frameworks of cultural dominance.

This hybridity is well encompassed in the Creole culture and in the pride that many residents have in their mixed heritage yet the pervasive colonial notion of indigeneity is undoubtedly incorporated into this Creole framework. The residents of Mauritius, Réunion, and Seychelles may not be viewed as “indigenous” to their land but they hold true to many of the problematic discourses that indigeneity brings about. Creole people will struggle to accept all parts of their genealogy, the bitter histories of slavery, rape and violence as well as the “politics of the Self as an Other.

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