

Defining Communities, Groups and Individuals : Observations and Comments from a Mauritian perspective

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The purpose of this paper is more to pose questions as to the nature of communities in Mauritius rather than to define them. This might have relevance for young, non-traditional societies and has particular relevance for those State parties which have experienced successions of settlement from people of different cultures. Such “corridors of migration” within countries are perhaps more common than initially thought.

Background – UNESCO ICH Convention in Mauritius

Mauritius was the second State to sign the UNESCO Convention and held its first National Workshop on ICH in June 2005. The aim of the workshop was to sensitise a wide spectrum of stakeholders – government servants, leaders and actors in civil society – on

1. the concept of ICH
2. the UNESCO Convention
3. the responsibilities of Mauritius under the Convention in the safeguarding and promotion of ICH
4. the construction of a national inventory of ICH for the Republic of Mauritius.

This two-day national event also served to make the general public aware of the above issues through television and newspaper reports and interviews. It also permitted the government - both politicians and civil servants – to be made aware of their responsibilities regarding the implementation of the UNESCO Convention. It is commented here that while this was effective in the immediate term, elections held shortly afterwards returned a new government to power and it appears, less than one year later, that further communication exercises will certainly be needed in order for the new leadership to be fully informed. This also indicates the difficulties of civil servants in guiding the practices of government.

Finally, it served as a first forum for non-governmental organizations and concerned individuals to voice their opinions on the implications of the ICH Convention in Mauritius. One of the first points which arose was on the relative paucity of ICH practitioners at the workshop (compared to government servants) and the practicalities of bringing them into such forums. This might stem from the absence of a comprehensive inventory of ICH thus poor knowledge of all the fields and major practitioners of ICH. It is also certainly an artifact of the nature of government-run workshops which invite the “known” ie. other civil servants, rather than the civil society.

Background - National and community identities in Mauritius

Mauritius has no indigenous population. All the islands were settled first 400 years ago by people from Europe, who then brought slaves from Madagascar, Africa and parts of Asia and later contract labourers from India. Other settlers arrived from China, India and elsewhere. Mauritius has been a Dutch colony (17th C), French colony (18th C) and British colony (19th & 20th C). It became independent nearly 40 years ago. The 21st century population of just over one (1.2) million individuals, perceives itself as “Mauritian” – however, many individuals also easily fall into “ancestral – ethnic” / religious / language groupings. Such “community” allegiances and identities have changed over the centuries as the political and social dispensations have changed. The various communities continue to marry between themselves creating less well-defined “communities”. Also, with changing mores, individuals might choose to seek an identity which previous generations sought to hide – this is true of the part of the community descended from slaves.

The significance of understanding the construction of such communities in Mauritius is that ICH is frequently linked or even dependent on these communities. Knowledge of music, dance and other art-forms, oral traditions, dress and cuisine, are usually passed on within such communities. Although generally self-defined ie. by the individual, the Society at large also classifies individuals as being part of a particular “community” whether or not he / her wishes to be included. Another important facet of defining groups is the phenomenon of politicians frequently using and accentuating the “communal” identities and community differences for political gains. Similarly, individuals of all “communities” and “groups” which have felt threats or perceived benefits, often resort to consolidating or re-enforcing their “group identity”.

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which may have been previously weak. All these factors influence the construction, identity and the transmission of ICH within groups and communities in Mauritius.

Practical implications of “community / group” identities vs “national” Mauritian identity

What is it to be Mauritian? The country is multi-cultural and the individuals pluri-cultural, as they hold facets of more than one identifiable culture. This is the case of many States worldwide. The Mauritian people show a continuous shifting of their national identity. When it suits an individual, he can be “Indian” flying the Indian national flag at his home or temple, if he is a descendent of an Indian immigrant. He can support the teaching of his child Mandarin or Hakka as part of his Chinese heritage despite not being able to speak the languages himself – if he is a descendant of an immigrant from China. And so on. And yet at other times, he will speak Créole, the national language spoken by all Mauritians, and search for his identity common to all Mauritians, for example when the country faces an economic threat.

The rather eclectic attitude to a “community” identity appears to be a feature of Mauritian society in general. Is this a feature of all young nations? Much of decision-making on a national level is based on checks and balances – between religion (Islam, Christianity and Hinduism) or between economic muscle (of the descendants of immigrants from China and Europe) and political power (of the majority descended from Indian immigrants). Even this is more complex than it appears, since the cultures from India include Telegu, Marathi, Tamil and Gujarat, which sometimes form blocs with other non-Indian groups. This eternal shifting balance is possible through a vibrant democracy which to a large extent votes according to perceived “cultural identity”.

There is currently an international political issue with the “Chagos community” of several thousand people who were moved off the Chagos islands (previously belonging to Mauritius) many of whom now live on Mauritius island. In their efforts to return to their natal islands, they have forged a solid and separate identity from their Mauritian one, to the extent of now being declared an “indigenous population” by international instances, and being given British passports. Mauritian nationals who now have a British nationality! This group organizes “cultural manifestations” where they show-off their cultural heritage but is now fractured into two rival groups, each more or less acceptable to government of the day. In the recent past, there have been instances of the government obstructing their efforts, favouring one faction over the other, supporting their efforts to consolidate their non-Mauritian identity, and numerous other confusing tactics. How does this augur for the safeguarding and maintenance of the ICH associated with the Chagos islanders?

Implications for implementing the Convention and insights into “community / group” identity

The 150 individuals who attended the first national workshop were clear about many of the practical realities of what constitutes a “community” in Mauritius. It is an identity of self which is mobilized along shifting lines, frequently for political purposes and involves ancestry, religion and language. A great deal of ICH is thus related to a group identity which can change, evolve and develop with astonishing speed, especially if there is an economic or political motivation.

The importance of being able to accurately inventory and monitor ICH of “communities” is likely to be extremely important in Mauritius and the role here of researchers and non-partisan institutions is believed to be primordial as objective assessors of ICH. This is perhaps an anomaly in the general trend where the role of the community itself is the focus of the ICH Convention. It is the State party which signs and implements the UNESCO ICH Convention. Yet it is the practitioners – individuals, group or community – which maintain and safeguard the heritage. The Convention is clearly placing special emphasis on the communities to be involved in all the processes of implementing the Convention. But we have seen above that in Mauritius, “community” is a often a loose and manipulated concept, and in practice often very dynamic. So who does the State deal with in implementing the Convention? In so many of the ICH in Mauritius, there will be choices to be made on the selection of the group – will the choice be judicious and as wide-spread as possible? Or will the temptation to deal only with groups and communities which share the short-term political ambitions of the day, be involved?