



New Car Blessing:

Creolisation, Modernity and Religious Beliefs on Reunion Island

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Andre Mary (2000) in his work on popular religions in Africa suggests that syncretic forms of religions present a type of resistance to modernity and to the proselytising practices of Christian missionaries. This study, while acknowledging that syncretic religions are forms of resistance in some cases, questions the generalising tendency of this assumption by looking at representations of creolised religious practices within a secular state, the overseas French department of Reunion in the Indian Ocean.

In contemporary theory and practice, terms like 'syncreticism' and 'hybridity' (which carried pejorative connotations in the past) are now viewed in a more positive light and are seen to describe the resilience, creativity, and inevitability of cultural mixing. Yet another concept, 'creolization', in cultural criticism has gained wide currency (Lionnet and Shih, 2011; Cohen and Toniato, 2009). However, it must be noted that as a concept to understand cultural mixing, this term can be potentially confusing as it takes on different meanings at different moments in history and in different disciplinary usages (anthropology, linguistics, literature). An analogy taken from linguistics, creolisation also refers to a specific aspect of colonialism, namely the uprooting and displacement of large numbers of people in colonial plantation economies. All groups who participated in this economy during slavery in the Caribbean basin as well as in the Indian Ocean, were described as Creoles. Today, as Stewart (2007: 1-25) notes, even if accurate definitions of 'Creole' as a language exists in linguistics, the vernacular use of the term to designate its speakers varies

from island to island – in Reunion everyone born on the island is Creole whereas in neighbouring Mauritius, darker skinned Mauritians of African descent are called Creoles. While anthropologists like Hannerz (1996) have employed the term to study the world of mobilities and mixtures, it is to Edouard Glissant, the Martinican novelist and essayist, that we owe a detailed elucidation of creolisation as a theoretical concept that explains how meanings are made, contested and reconstructed in ambiguous zones, located in the spaces between boundaries. Even if Glissant's definition of creolisation in *Caribbean Discourse* (1989 [1981]) invokes a specific geographical and historical setting (island topography, plantation culture and slave histories in the Caribbean) suggesting an unending, fluid process that captures the creative, unpredictable results of cultural contact, he extrapolates his ideas to identify creolisation as a process occurring globally.

Founded on French colonial enterprise, African slave and Asian indentured labour, Reunion Island (which has no indigenous populations) presents a complex multiracial and a multicultural profile today similar to the Caribbean islands. Reunionese scholars Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou have in their essay, *Amarres- Créolisations india-océanes* (2005), elaborated a definition of creolisation for the Indian Ocean region based on Glissant's concept:

'We would defend a philosophy of borrowing, forgery, imitation, and a dynamic of patching up, making do. Fixing up, mending. A world quick to imitate, but which creolises the thing imitated to make some-

thing else of it, which invents the quotidian. This is a dynamic of alterity where we see no alienation or submission, rather a creativity of a world subject to continual conflicting inputs.' (*Amarres- Créolisations india-océanes* (2005), Trans. Vergès and Muecke, "Mooring-Indian Ocean Creolisations", 2010)

Readings of creolised practices and those of creolisation as a cultural descriptor tend to be celebratory and often ignore the politically managed realities of cultural distinctiveness that co-exist with spontaneous cultural mixing. My use of the term *creolised* rituals in Reunion follows from the above definition of *Indian ocean creolisations* (my emphasis) in that it describes syncretic practices as creative inventions of the quotidian, and subject to 'continual conflicting inputs' thereby suggesting constantly shifting negotiations.

Post-Departmentalised Reunion Island

Reunion Island is

'an island onto which history tossed Malagasy, Africans, Indians, Chinese, Indochinese, Malaysians, Europeans and French atheists, Catholics and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, Christians, animists and polytheists. But this cannot be a simple question of juxtaposition. The island makes it such that one can be simultaneously Christian and Hindu, Christian and animist, Hindu and animist. It is an island of the Creole world, on the route between Africa and Asia, a sub-French Island and island archipelago. It is an island of the India-Oceanic world, an island of Indian Ocean creolisations.' (Vergès 2006: 43)

Colonisation began in Reunion Island around 1665 with the arrival of the first French settlers. From the 17th century onwards, French colonial immigration which in turn generated the arrival of African slaves, Chinese traders, Malays, and Indian indentured laborers resulted in an island society of multi-ethnic texture as Vergès (2006) points out. It was only in 1946 that Reunion Island changed administrative status – from a distant colony, it became an overseas French department. Since the sixties, the massive transfer of public funds and the arrival of the French people (mainly administrators, teachers, investors and traders) from metropolitan France initiated rapid modernisation on the island (Vaillant, 2008: 9-40). Public funds fi-

nanced electrification, construction works, and improved the islander's quality of life, creating a new middle class that has transformed the complexion of Reunionese society.

The island is only 63 kilometers long, 45 kilometers wide, and covers 2150 square kilometers. Given its size and history, Reunion's parachuting into modernity has created social complications. Departmentalisation, and the drastic transformation it has engineered, has brought about changes in health behaviour and demographic patterns: rise in birth rate, drop in mortality, mass education, and move towards the cities. Ironically, the transfer of metropolitan funds has also led to the validation of metropolitan culture re-introducing a new form of assimilationist/neo-colonial practices in a post-colonial/post-departmental era. Notwithstanding this rapid and significant cultural and economic 'metropolitanization' of the island in the last 60 years, the cultural identity of the local Reunionese islander in post-departmental Reunion is more complex than the label 'culture créole' attributed to it. Undoubtedly, Reunionese 'culture' includes the common elements that constitute a dynamic hybrid culture forged historically on the island. At the same time, it is also composed of different elements borrowed from the diverse ancestral traditions of the Reunionese people. The cultural space of religion(s) presents an interesting focal point for the study of identitarian practices on the island where religious traditions are practised both separately and syncretically.

Pourchez (2005) argues that the intricate intertwining of the sacred and the everyday is a dominant characteristic of this 'modern island state' in the Indian Ocean. Even the passing tourist is amazed by the numerous churches dedicated to Virgin Mary, the profusion of private and public Hindu temples near sugarcane fields and urban ghettos, and the countless altars to Saint Expédit and other saints and divinities along roadsides and ravines. This cultural complexity of Reunion has been rendered invisible in public discourse that has sought to very quickly represent Reunionese culture as homogeneously 'creole' in an unproblematic sense – representing the island as predominantly made up of métis peoples and foregrounding the hybrid nature of everyday culinary,

linguistic and musical practices. As Laurent Médéa points out, *métissage* or cultural mixing as described by the French State and celebrated as Reunion Island's unique identity is a political strategy in that it forges a false unity of the various racial, religious and cultural constituents into a unique and justifiable concept, supported by a 'tolerant' Catholic church, thus promoting it as the most advanced form of European universalism (Médéa in Labache, Médéa and Vergès, 2005:177). Such a discourse on cultural identity, while being different from that of metropolitan culture, does not threaten the fundamental *laïcité* of the modern French State. In fact, it allows for the maintenance in the public discourse of the presence of 'domesticated plurality' represented in the media as a series of well documented discrete rites and festivals (*Kavadee*, Deepavali, fire-walking, Chinese New Year, Ramadan, etc) that add to island 'otherness' for metropolitan consumption. Consequently, while culinary and artistic syncretism is applauded and the Creole language is accepted as one of the prime characteristics of 'Réunionité', religious syncretism is never factored into the state's discourse of multiculturalism, i.e., in its promotion of Réunionese *métissage*. Metropolitan culture like orthodox anthropology likes to see clear demarcated lines between Hindu, Muslim and Malagasy practices on the islands. This emphasis on plurality constructs Réunionese culture as the domesticated 'Other' of a secular metropolitan tradition. Hence, it is not surprising that such a discourse refuses to accept the predominant forms of *creolised* religious practices on the island, these being relegated to lower forms of belief systems like superstitions, folk religions and witchcraft. Even if religious pluralism is overtly accepted in public discourse a 'distancing' is established in between two temporal modalities, that of ancient religious rituals and that of modern secular beliefs. The heavily mediated representations of more *discrete* religious rites and ceremonies such as fire walking, body piercing (*Kavadee*), and *Deepavalli* also coincide with the return to purist traditions amongst the *Malbar* (Réunionese people of Indian origin) bourgeoisie of Reunion Island (Ghasarian 2002). I argue that in reality religion on the island is the crucible for the expression of cultural complexity where

cultural reinventions exist not merely to resist modernity and public discourse on plurality and secularism, but to accommodate it in diverse ways.

New Car Blessing Ritual

Through a reading of Laurence Pourchez's visual anthropological publication, *Loto Bon Dié* (2003), this paper explores the usefulness of visual ethno-narratives in understanding creolised religious practices on Reunion Island, and more importantly demonstrates that these creolised practices do not oppose modernity but are complicit with it. I argue that these rituals by growing out of the very core of a modern Réunionese society challenge the metropolitan narrative of religious pluralism and managed secularism. Furthermore, they question the overemphasis on religion as a fixed signifier in the religion/modernity dichotomy that underlies the notion of French *laïcité*.

It is usually now assumed that ethnographic texts like any other verbal or visual narratives are 'representations' (Pink 2005). Réunionese filmmaker and anthropologist Laurence Pourchez's visual ethno-texts can therefore be viewed as *exercices in ethno-fiction* to borrow Marc Augé's term (*Studies in Ethno-fiction*) – creative visual narratives that present explicit perspectives on ethno-cultural practices. Pourchez has a number of audio-visual productions to her credit on religion, healing, and creole childhood on Reunion Island. In this study, I look specifically at her short film *Loto Bon Dié* taken in 2003.

My Réunionese postgraduate student reminds me time and again that 'à la Réunion la voiture est religion' ('Car is a religion on Reunion Island'). *Loto Bon Dié*, is a picturisation of 'a new car protection' ritual. Those of us who are familiar with Hindu practices in India know that when anyone buys a new car, it is customarily 'blessed' before it is taken out on the road for the first time. The car is adorned with flowers and vermilion powder, and a lime is placed under each tyre. In India, usually, it is the driver or the cleaner who 'officiates' this ceremony of 'removing the evil eye' – prayers are recited, coconuts and pumpkins 'offered' to the Gods are broken, and then the owner/driver drives over the four limes placed under each tire. The

car is considered 'road worthy' and safe after this brief ritual (normally conducted at the residence of the owner). Pourchez's film narrates the importance of a 'creolised' version of this ritual in modern Reunion. Such syncretic forms of the ritual may be found elsewhere in the Indian diaspora, but as we will see, it takes on a very special significance in post departmental Reunion Island, a 'microscopic space of European modernity' in the vast Indian Ocean.

Pourchez's narrative is that of a Creole woman who has brought her new car to the house of a *devineur*, M. Gilbert, who will bless, purify and protect it before she takes it on the road. A *devineur* is not a *poussari* or an *ayer* (names given to officiating priests in Hindu temples). At the same time, his status is distinct from that of a *guérisseur/sorcier* (healer/sorcerer) associated with 'African Creole' and 'Malagasy' traditions on the island. Much like a private consultant, he undergoes 'voluntary possession' to heal or to protect in his domicile or in small rural temples. He is remunerated for his 'possession' after which he reintegrates into his 'secular' world. To enter into voluntary possession, he uses certain religious Hindu symbols like drums, camphor, bamboo stick etc. (Ghasarian, 1994).

In the film, we see the *devineur* wearing a tee shirt with (the names of prominent tyre manufacturers Nankang /Silverstone printed on it) and loose pants over which he has tied a white sarong. *Loto Bon Dié* is the story of the 'rite of passage of the car', which after the ritual is transformed into a 'protected object' and placed under divine protection so that the owner/driver can confront the hazardous traffic on the overcrowded and congested roadways on the island. It is also the story of the young woman (the new car's owner) which is inserted between the external and recently imposed narrative of urbanisation on post-departmental Reunion Island and the internal and locally produced performance of religious creolisation.

The film begins with pictures of road congestion in Reunion and a *voice over* that explains the social importance of owning a car on the island, and also informs that one of the largest car showrooms in

France is on Reunion island. The images of the showroom then give way to shots of mangled car debris. We are given to understand that the island's mountainous topography and heavy road traffic has created serious road safety issues. The pictures of wrecked cars demonstrate that the addiction to automobile culture has not only invented a 'new religion' but it has also created new risks to individual well being as the number of fatal road accidents rise continually. Pourchez's (*the voice over*) then asks what could happen when modernity and consumerism confront a society where the sacred and the everyday are closely interlinked? The filming of the ritual follows the introduction as an answer to the above question. There is no explanatory voice-over during the filming of the entire ritual. The *voice over* is heard at the end to explain that the evils spirits removed from the new car ('contained' in the ritual offerings wrapped in a piece of red cloth) are then placed at a junction and that the first car that drives over it will recuperate the malignant spirits chased away from the 'protected car'. This framing, at first instance, come across as oppositional providing a conventional reading of creolisation as resistance to modernity. I argue that the film suggests a more complex construction of Reunion's negotiations with modernity if we analyse some of the 'silences' that mark this film, namely those associated with the 'anomalies' that underlie Reunion Island's post-departmental socio-economic realities.

Reunion Island boasts of some of the most sophisticated road traffic technology in the world. The latest project, *Route des Tamarins*, completed in 2009 crosses a high-altitude terrain marked by ravines, gorges and cliffs. It has meant the traversing of 120 gullies and the construction of 48 civil engineering structures, four of which are large viaducts. The roadway has nine interchanges, three tunnels and 23 bridges. The project cost was over 1 billion Euros. By 2015, between 40,000 and 69,000 vehicles are expected to use the road per day. Another very highly developed road traffic system is one that is used in the only coastal roadway that circles the island. To protect road users from rock falls triggered by torrential rains and high winds over a 13 km of coastal road, traffic managers

use automatic lane closure barriers on lanes near the cliff, and movable barriers to delineate travel lanes closer to the coast. This technique increases safety by separating opposing traffic flows, reducing speed limits and incident response times.

With more than 400,000 cars on the road for 817,000 inhabitants, asphyxiation and traffic jams are a daily issue.¹ By 2025, Reunion will have an estimated one million inhabitants and 800,000 vehicles and if public transport (tram/train) is not developed the current 'all car' system will produce the 'the equivalent of a 3,000 km bumper-to-bumper traffic jam.'

'More than half the population (52%) lives on less than €817 per month (the national poverty threshold), compared with 13% in metropolitan France. Moreover 17% live on less than €473 (the regional poverty threshold), and 147,000 people receive the minimum social benefit...The unemployment rate is three times higher than in metropolitan France (24% in 2007, compared with 8% in France), especially among the under 25-year-olds who make up 49% of the unemployed'"(Leymarie 2010).

It seems obvious that for a population of less than a million, with 24% unemployment and spread over a 2500 km² surface area, the island boasts of disproportionately huge car sales- every year an extra 30,000 cars, about 10 percent of existing traffic, appear on Reunion's congested roads. It is estimated that there are more than 300 000 private cars, one for almost every two inhabitants (J. M. Cremer/J.-Y. Del Forno/J.-F. Klein, 2011: 1). The State provides the unemployed what is called RMI (*Revenu Minimum d'Insertion*, the French form of social welfare), which allows even the jobless islander the means to own a car. The automobile constitutes the 'neo-assimilationist' life style that has come with express urbanisation, intense 'metropolitanisation' of life-styles, access to high technology transport, road and traffic systems and importation of metropolitan style consumption culture. This disproportionate link between unemployment and status consciousness, an aspiration to modernity at all costs, is not conveyed directly in the film, but as we will see, it comes through in some of the less obvious details.

The main participant in the ritual filmed by Pourchez is the *devineur* who confronts the new car supposedly full of evil spirits. Accompanied by three young boys on drums, he begins by dancing in front of the altar in the yard and then moves towards the car where he continues to dance and twirl around emitting short cries. He does not speak throughout the entire ritual. The high point of the ceremony is reached when the *devineur* stands on a sickle held by two helpers in front of the car. A lime and a coconut are broken and bundled into a red cloth and kept inside the car. The owner, who for the whole duration of the ritual was a mere observer, gets into the car and drives over the set of 4 limes and other offerings which had been placed at the start of the ritual under each wheel. The ritual (belief, practice, objects used) borrows from the various traditions present on the island, *Malbar* and Catholicism – the people present are a mix of *Malbars* and Creoles.² The rural decor is clearly indicative of a lower socio-economic zone. The air is neither festive nor celebratory; there is a clinical way in which the entire process takes place. Apart from a few times when the camera strays towards the young drummers who drum on quite dispassionately, the camera focuses entirely on the *devineur* who dances frenetically in a 'possessed state'. The *devineur's* ritualistic performance of ridding the car of evil spirits is embedded in the more significant narrative of the Reunionese woman entering modernity as a professional (she is the owner of a tourist car), with renewed assurance in her newly imported 'metropolitanised' acquisition and economic status. The last shot taken is of one of the many crossroads on the island. The ritualistic offerings lie scattered on the ground symbolising the impure spirits driven out of the car. The syncretic ritual filmed in *Loto Bon Dié* is a clear example of the imitation/re-invention of what could have once been a *Malbar* practice prevalent in colonial times, which has been re-negotiated with a stronger emphasis on a 'client-driven' performance in post-departmental Reunion Island.

What is of interest in the context of this examination is not so much the ethnographic details of the ritual but the filmic narrative that interweaves three

stories of transaction between religion and modernity. Following from the definition taken from *Amarres* (2005), *Loto Bon Dié* is a creative invention of the quotidian and is subject to 'continual conflicting inputs' that generates shifting negotiations. Creolised rituals as shifting forms of negotiation between the secular and the sacred occur at several levels here. Firstly, they operate in the external narrative of Reunion's departmentalisation and its modernisation shaped by the needs of a growing tourist industry. Secondly, they function in the internal narrative of the young Creole woman, who is entering what Edouard Glissant (1989: 150) calls 'lived modernity', one that has been thrust open abruptly. Glissant calls 'matured modernity' that which is developed over extended historical space. It has to be noted here that the car in question here is a tourist car and tourism is the mainstay of the island's economy and its principal gateway to European modernity. Finally, in the embedded narrative of the *devineur* who by re-adapting the dominant belief about 'protection' and applying it to a consumer object, has domesticated the evil that modernity has introduced, without rejecting it. That the whole event is one that is based less on some kind of over determined sense of religiosity or faith and more on the indispensableness of the ritual (like paying car insurance) is revealed in the expressions of the onlookers and the helpers- impassive and focused at the outset and relief at the end of the ritual.

This "car blessing/protection ritual" is improvised in performance, (the onlookers have no script, they follow the *devineur* who is the only person in charge and who has no other form of textualised support as in purist traditions). Unlike atavist/purist traditions this creolised ritual is self-reflexive, it opens up a space and time for anti-structure, setting aside restraints, suspending secularising practices and creating new sacralising rites in order to better negotiate with the quotidian from where it originates. Each actor plays along with both tradition and modernity without overtly resisting or passively assimilating. Laurence Pourchez's film presents the ritual of sacralising commodities on the capitalist market as one that parallels rituals that sacralise key moments of transition in an individual's life. All sections of the Reunionese popu-

lation, Malbars and Creoles, believe that the Hindu attitude is auspicious and provides the normal way to manage the difficulties and problems of everyday life as well as an unlucky fate. As Ghasarian (1997) notes, 'Hinduism in La Réunion is a folk religion, strongly connected with the idea of protection, a protection against many things, notably the evil eye and the negative forces of the visible and invisible world'.

Conclusion

It is really remarkable to notice how religious practices have evolved so differently on two neighbouring Indian Ocean islands with similar colonial histories of plantation cultures and migratory patterns (Reunion island is 180 km southwest of Mauritius). While on Reunion Island, cults and rituals have evolved syncretically for the most part, socio-religious mixing is not the essential feature in Mauritius' plural society. In Mauritius, State sponsored maintenance of diasporic linkages, language policies based on ancestral connections, and party politics that have favoured ethnic compartmentalisation have encouraged the establishment and continuation of 'authentic' practices. As a result, religious traditions in Mauritius have evolved separately. So, while a single ethnic group can boast of following multiple religious practices, the practices and cults themselves have remained 'pure'. For example, while the tomb of Père Laval is visited by Catholic Creoles as well peoples of other faiths and religions, the actual practice of worship remains 'Catholic' in structure and presentation. The regularity of contacts between diasporic and homeland religions have also allowed for the gradual modernisation of Hinduism on the island paralleling its evolution in India as well. The same can be said for all other religious traditions on the island which even if in less dominant positions in terms of numbers of followers have nevertheless adapted themselves to trends in 'homeland' conditions (Eisenlhor, 2007). Creolisation in Mauritius operates and functions differently and does not have the same political and social connotation as on the island of Reunion. In modern independent Mauritius with a dominant population of Indian/Hindu origin, a hybrid or Creole culture exists as a legacy of slavery and

French colonial policy of assimilation but it is confined to the predominantly Christian African/métis community in contemporary Mauritius who constitute about 20% of the population. Paradoxically while Mauritian Creole or Morisyen is the island's lingua franca, the concept of a 'Creole culture' is marginalised and limited to the African/métis community on the island. In matters of religion, especially religious plurality is recognised and religious syncretism is almost absent. Most importantly, State intervention in religious matters does not hamper the progress of 'secular' modernity (Eriksen in Stewart, 2007).

On Reunion Island, the blessing of the car ritual, is one of many rituals that subverts the notion that modernity as uniformly secular and reveals other models of French *laïcité*. The Indian Ocean as the crucible where a multitude of peoples, races, traditions, cus-

toms and religions have come together over several centuries offers striking examples that subvert master narratives of modernity and secularisation and suggests multiple transactions of religious plurality and syncretism.

Notes

¹ See Leymarie, Philippe. 'Reunion, Island Experiment.' <http://mondediplo.com/2010/03/22yeswecan>

² Vehicle benedictions are also performed in certain Christian traditions and are practiced to honour Saint Christophe, patron saint of automobilists. See 'La bénédiction des véhicules au sanctuaire Notre-Dame-du-Cap', <http://www.ipir.ulaval.ca/fiche.php?id=668>. Accessed on 20 March 2012.





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