INDIAN OCEAN ISLAND CULTURES: AFRICAN MIGRATION AND IDENTITY

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Cultures of the Indian Ocean World are varied and complex, and the Indian Ocean Islands were often sites of multicultural interactions. In this paper, I will focus on African migration to the islands of Sri Lanka and Mauritius. Taking into account historical, socio-political and cultural factors, this paper will examine the identities of the Africans who migrated to these two islands in the same oceanic waters. It will question whether the descendants of the African migrants in the two Indian Ocean Islands have retained an African identity.

Some uninhabited Indian Ocean Islands - Mauritis, Reunion, Seychelles, Rodrigues and the Chagos - were populated during the struggle between different European states for hegemony over the Indian Ocean region and trade monopolies in the Orient. Other Indian Ocean Islands - Sri Lanka and the Maldives - had been inhabited for thousands of years and had deep-rooted cultures before the Europeans set sail in the Indian Oceanic waters. It is necessary to examine how these different scenarios affected the identities of African migrants to the Indian Ocean area.¹

According to Hall,² identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. This definition of identity seems appropriate when discussing the identities of Africans who migrated to Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

**Mauritius**

The islands of Mauritius, Réunion and Rodriguez were populated due to European colonisation which resulted in bringing together slaves and indentured labourers from Africa and Asia to work on plantations. The multietnic and multilingual situations have given rise to creole societies and creole languages.

The first Portuguese dictionary, in 1712, describes a Crioulo as 'a slave born in his owner's house, like the chicken born at home, not bought outside.'¹

Houbert argues that these particular Indian Ocean Islands have more in common
with the far off islands in the West Indies than with their non-creole neighbours in the Indian Ocean World.\textsuperscript{3} Newitt also states that a second Caribbean was created in the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{4} The demand for

slaves grew with the tobacco and sugar industry. Madagascar was the principal source of slaves. It is estimated that 70,000 out of a total 160,000 slaves who came to these Islands between 1610 and 1810 were from Madagascar. Teelock states that community life in Mauritian plantations was akin to that in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{5}

Together with Rodriguez and Réunion, Mauritius forms part of the Mascarenes group of Islands, which were named after the Portuguese explorer who first charted the area in 1514. After two attempts, the Dutch abandoned their plans to colonise Mauritius. Two maroons who survived the Dutch in 1710 were the first settlers of Mauritius. The French occupied Mauritius from 1715 to 1810. Moutou estimates that 200,000 Mauritians out of a total population of about one million, could claim African roots. Creolisation first occurred in Réunion which the French began to colonise in 1663. After the Napoleonic era, the Mascarenes came under British rule, but in 1815, Réunion was returned to France while Seychelles, Rodrigues and the Chagos, became part of the British Crown Colony of Mauritius. At this time, it was estimated that 160,000 slaves had been brought to these Islands.\textsuperscript{6} This intra-African migration resulted in 45% Malagasies, 40% East Africans and 2% West Africans migrating to the Creole islands. The black creoles are the descendants of the Malagasies and Africans, and they are aware of their African origins. The term Masambiki is used to distinguish the Africans from the Malagasies and are not referred to as Afro-Mauritians. This is quite striking as the other migrants, the Chinese and the Indians, are referred to as Sino-Mauritians and Indo-Mauritians. In contrast to that of non-Creole Mauritians who have been able to carve out their own ethnic identity, Mauritians of African origin express their ethnic origins. Alpers draws attention to the absence of articulate intellectuals who could express African sentiments and place them in public discourse, as a major factor in silencing African identity, whether it be defined racially or culturally.\textsuperscript{7} This scenario is different from that in the Atlantic world.

Mauritius was a British Colony from 1810 to 1968. The English language did not become widely used in Mauritius although it is the official language and the language of
administration, politics and the school system. French remained the language of the rich and powerful and was associated with the cultured and educated. An ability to speak French fluently and flawlessly is still a measure of high education and culture. The possession of similar linguistic skills in English is considered less prestigious. Mauritius Creole French is also known as Morisyen/Maurysen/ Kreo/ Kreo. It is the lingua franca of Mauritius as everyone speaks it in order to be able to communicate in Mauritius. However, it has not become the official language. It is important to note that the French Creole of Seychelles, on the other hand, has become the official language.

In 1820, British Abolitionists estimated that 40,000 slaves, mostly Africans, had been introduced to Mauritius since 1810, the date when the Island was taken over by the British. These slaves had been shipped from East Africa but they had originated from the interior of the African Continent. Under the Code Noire (French legislation on slaves and the labour market) slaves had to be baptized as Catholics. Slave-owners had encouraged music and dancing even on board slave ships as they were not detrimental to their interests. African cultural retention is apparent in Sega which has become the unofficial national music of Mauritius. Medeiros states that the Sega is the only Afro-Malagasy cultural trait that has survived.

The ethnic composition of Mauritius is 66% Indians, 27% Creoles, 4% Europeans and 3% Chinese. The religious affiliation of the population is 51% Hindus, 27% Roman Catholics, 16% Muslims and 6% Others. For the purposes of the official statistics the term Creole in Mauritius describes people of Afro-Malagasy descent. This is in contrast to the definition of the term in academic circles, particularly in Creole Studies where all Creole-speakers (which is not limited to the ethnic origins of the people) are considered as Creoles. In a scenario of plantation slavery the ethnic origins of the slaves did not matter; what mattered was that there was adequate labour to work the plantations. The labourers had various ethnic origins: African, Malagasy, Indian and Chinese. Contact languages - Pidgins and Creoles - evolve in such situations, where a medium of communication was necessary between people who did not speak each other's mother-tongue. A Creole is generally accepted as a mother-tongue of a speech community unlike a Pidgin which is nobody's mother-tongue. Mauritian French Creole is the bridging tongue in this multilingual situation.

**Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka (called Ceylon by the British) as yet has no adequate written history of African migration. I have been researching the historical and sociological aspects of the Afro-Sri Lankans over the last 10 years. In the fifth century, when Sri Lanka was an emporium in the Indian Ocean, Abyssinians were trading in Matota (Northern Province). A significant African presence does not seem to predate European colonisation. The only known exception so far, is that in the fourteenth century; 500 Abyssinians served in the garrison of Jalasti, the Wazir of Colombo.

The Portuguese empire was an amalgam of Europeans, Africans and Jews. In 1630, the Portuguese were saved from defeat in Sri Lanka only by a reinforcement of African
soldiers who were sent from their base in Goa. Use of African labour continued under the Dutch. For them, Africans built fortresses, worked as nannies, housemaids, gardeners and water carriers. There was gender differentiation; male and female slaves were given different tasks. Sick and pregnant slaves were either exempt from work or given 'light' work. Slaves who converted to the Dutch Reformed Church were liberated after the death of their master and his wife. The children of converted slaves were freed.

British rule in Sri Lanka began in 1796 before Britain’s ‘Abolition of the Slave Trade Act’ of 1807. Frederick North (1798-1805), the first British Governor, bought slaves from Goa and Bombay. Due to the inadequacy of the Sepoy and Malay regiments, the British strengthened their forces with African soldiers. De Souza states that a Goan native family who acted as slave-brokers had supplied a large number of slaves to the Government of Ceylon in 1813 through Bruce Fawcett & Company on the advice of their friend in Bombay, Sir Rogerio de Faria, who was an opium dealer.

In the nineteenth century, the 3rd and 4th Ceylon Regiments included 874 Africans. In 1865, when the 3rd Ceylon Regiment’s detachment in Puttalam (in the North Western Province), was disbanded, the soldiers were given plots of land and resettled there. Leopold Ludovici, a surveyor, was instructed in the late nineteenth century to survey the different claims with the object of granting suitable titles to the holders of these land grants.

During my fieldwork amongst the largest Afro-Sri Lankan community in Sirambyadiya, a village near Puttalam, I enquired whether they wished to live in Africa. They said that they did not want to live in Africa but that they would like to visit it. They said in Sinhala, which is their mother tongue, and also mine, Ape rata Lankava meaning 'Sri Lanka is our country'. On the other hand, they identify their physiognomy with Africans. Referring to a Nigerian visitor to their village, they said in Sinhala Ape jatiye ekkene av which means 'someone of our race came'. They are well aware of their African roots and narrate various oral histories pointing to different African countries as possible places of origin of their ancestors.

The Indo-Portuguese of Ceylon which is called Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole now, was the mother-tongue of Afro-Sri Lankans. Today, only the elderly in Sirambyadiya can converse in Creole. This is in contrast to the other group of Creole speakers, namely the Burghers (people of Portuguese and Dutch descent) in the East Coast of the Island who are teaching Creole to their young children. The Indo-Portuguese of Ceylon was the lingua franca of the Island for almost 350 years and was the language of external communication and trade. It was the bridging tongue between not one but three colonial powers and the Sri Lankans. It only gave way to English later on. Sinhala, however, has been the language of interethnic communication in multicultural Sri Lanka. The Sirambyadiya community are now mother-tongue speakers of Sinhala.

The entire community sing Manha in the Portuguese Creole. The lyrics of these songs provide valuable clues in piecing together the African connections of this community. They do not compose new Manhas; they only sing Manhas that have been taught by their ancestors through an oral tradition. Their instruments are mostly home-made (a spoon...
and a fork, a hard dried hemispheric coconut shell is used to keep time by striking it against a wooden surface such as a wooden plank, wooden bench or a wooden stool) but they also use the Sri Lankan drum and a tambourine to emphasise the rhythm. Their dance movements are characteristically African with pronounced hip movements and body bent forwards whilst dancing. These songs are limited to the Sirambiyadiya community. The African contribution to Sri Lankan popular music and dance is signalled through two cross-cultural genres: Baila and Kaffrinha. Kaffrinha is from the Portuguese word cafre, which the Portuguese, in turn, adopted from the Arabic word kafir meaning 'non-believer'.

As Basu points out, most of the historical literature dealing with the African presence in India follows one of two assumptions: Africans are either reported as being completely separated and isolated from the host societies or they are seen as being in a process of assimilation which ultimately would erase their 'African-ness'. The Afro-Sri Lankans in Sirambiyadiya seem to be in-between these two discrete worlds; for five generations they have been in a village which had a sufficient number of Afro-Sri Lankans. Therefore they have been able to keep their progeny's phenotype. The change in education policy which has enabled all Sri Lankans to obtain a 'free education' has meant that the young Afro-Sri Lankans are attending schools. They have a greater chance of meeting partners outside their community and in-marriage is now a rarity. As the octogenarian Ana Miseliya who died 6 years ago remarked, 'Even when the curly hair of our descendants disappear due to out-marriages, it is from the way our children can dance and produce music that we will be able to tell them apart from the other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Inter-marriage between different ethnic groups was never legally prohibited in Sri Lanka. This meant that the descendants of thousands of Afro-Sri Lankans have become less conspicuous. In Sri Lanka, the child assumes the father's ethnicity. The children of Afro-Sri Lankan women who out-marry are not counted as Afro-Sri Lankans. Heredity is all powerful with inbreeding; determination is absolute: the group, the population, the caste or the race is invariable. With out-breeding, on the other hand, heredity disintegrates; gene recombination produces unpredictable variability and endless innovation. Some Afro-Sri Lankans have a paler skin colour than the indigenous population. Skin colour is not seen as a determinant of group identity. The Afro-Sri Lankans were called Cafres by the Portuguese, Kaffers by the Dutch and Kaffirs by the British. The Sinhala word K?piri is a borrowing from Portuguese. In Sri Lanka, people of African descent are called K?piri and not Creole. There seems to have been an adequate supply of men and women for
the African gene pool to continue.

**Discussion**

The historical and socio-cultural factors that affected the African migrants to the Southern Indian Ocean Islands such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives are different from those that influenced the African migrants to the South West Indian Ocean Islands.

Although eastwards African migration was not initiated by the European colonial powers, they no doubt exacerbated this migration due to the requirement of personnel to man the activities of the imperial enterprise. In Sri Lanka, the identities of African migrants have been affected by the three colonial waves that washed over its shores. They have been transformed with the changing political scenarios that prevailed in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

The Afro-Sri Lankans have constructed a new identity for themselves, one which is a fusion of African, European and Sri Lankan. In terms of language, they have been assimilated within the main ethnic group on the Island. They have remained faithful to the religion introduced by the Portuguese colonisers. The host community, who are mainly Buddhists do not enforce conversions. Their African identity is signalled through music, song and dance. Their music and dance is limited to themselves and gives them a community identity. In terms of physiognomy, it is curly hair (not skin colour) that differentiates them from the other ethnic groups.

In Mauritius, African slaves working in plantations made the transition from being a first generation slave to a Creole. In their attempt to assimilate within the new host society, African slaves did not cling on to an African identity. Perhaps their varied African roots and different African languages prevented them from forming a collective African identity. They have become creolised and marginalised due to the political and economic changes that occurred after slavery was abolished which caused the influx of Indian and Chinese indentured labourers to Mauritius. At present, political power is held by Indo-Mauritians as the Prime Ministers tend to be from this ethnic group. African cultural retentions are expressed through music and dance. The Sega, with Afro-Malagasy roots is not, however, limited to the Creoles nowadays.

In both Sri Lanka and Mauritius, African migrants seem to have no African retentions in terms of language and religion. In both countries, Africans have converted to Roman Catholicism. In terms of language, people of African descent in Mauritius speak a French Creole. In Sri Lanka, some people of African descent speak Portuguese Creole but are now mother-tongue speakers of Sinhala, the tongue of the majority of Sri Lankans and the language of inter-ethnic communication.

It is in music, song and dance that the Africans in these two islands are similar. In Mauritius, those with African descent are significant in terms of population. Their music, Sega, has become the national music. In Sri Lanka, Manha is limited to the Afro-Sri Lankan community. Nevertheless, African music and dance have flowed into popular music of postcolonial Sri Lanka, through another genre called Kaffrinha. Moreover, it is through the vibrant rhythms of a third genre of music called Baila that the African presence is signalled to the majority of Sri Lankans.21
In Mauritius, ethnic identities, excepting for Africans, seem to be linked to the geographic entity from which the ethnic groups originated. In Sri Lankan cases of miscegenation, for the purposes of official statistics, the child assumes the father's ethnicity. This is irrespective of the phenotype of the offspring. Identities are not static. It is not surprising that African migrants in Mauritius and Sri Lanka should create new identities. The Afro-Sri Lankans are too small now and are not included in a separate ethnic category in population census statistics. The Afro-Sri Lankans have carved out a new identity for themselves. They are not large enough to make a political impact through the electoral system.

Slavery was the main force which led to cultural displacement of the Africans who migrated to Mauritius and Sri Lanka, and in neither case did they seem to have asserted their negritude. Investigating the reasons for this would provide a further avenue of research into the varied and complex interactions between the host nations and the African diaspora. One also needs to investigate the socio-political factors that impinged on the migrant Africans which are particularly important in situations where a host society did not exist.

Although the circumstances of cross-cultural contact in Mauritius and Sri Lanka are different and the exposure of African migrants to these two Indian Ocean Islands varies, the African retentions among the descendants of ex-slaves is vibrant in the music, song and dance in both islands.

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