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Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Oct., 2007, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Oct., 2007), pp. 968-996

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4497713>

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# Creole Publics: Language, Cultural Citizenship, and the Spread of the Nation in Mauritius

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On 12 March 1983, at the official celebrations of the fifteenth anniversary of the independence of Mauritius from British rule, the Mauritian government took an unprecedented action in cultural politics. Leaders of the government dominated by the leftist Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), which had come to power in a landslide victory in the general elections of the previous year, had the national anthem sung in Mauritian Creole instead of English at the celebrations in the capital, Port Louis. The performance was announced on state-controlled Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation television as “the national anthem sung in the national language.” This triggered a storm of protest that had immediate political consequences. The Vice-Prime Minister and leader of the Hindu ethnic faction within the government coalition, Harish Boodhoo, dismissed the director of MBC, and the government coalition broke apart the same month. In the ensuing general elections five months later, the MMM, whose leader Paul Béranger had been responsible for the performance and broadcasting of the national anthem, was defeated. Why was there so much resistance against official recognition of Mauritian Creole and according it the status of national language, given that Creole is the dominant vernacular of Mauritius, known and used on a daily basis by almost the entire population regardless of ethnic background? In particular, why were members of a Hindu state bourgeoisie so concerned to protest the promotion of their own

Acknowledgments: The University of Chicago Council for Advanced Studies in Peace and International Cooperation (CASPIC), the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Washington University supported the research for this article. The University of Mauritius provided valuable help and support during my research, and here I would especially like to thank Vinesh Hookoomsing. I am above all indebted to the many Mauritians whose help and friendship sustained my research. I benefited from critical commentary on earlier versions of this article by audiences at the University of Chicago and the University of California, Los Angeles. My particular thanks go to Andrew Apter, Ned Alpers, and Françoise Lionnet. I especially thank Sara Friedman, Aisha Khan, and Viranjini Munasinghe for their careful readings of an earlier version of this article, and Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr for repeated critical readings at various stages.

vernacular, Mauritian Creole, effectively blocking its recognition as a national language of Mauritius?

In what follows, I analyze how different images and characterizations of Mauritian Creole emerge in the public circulation of discourses about Creole identities, and produce contrasting visions of membership in a Mauritian nation as they are linked to different practices of inclusion and exclusion. Mauritian understandings of nationhood, which some have interpreted as models of ethnic compromise and pluralism (Bowman 1991; Carroll and Carroll 2000; Eriksen 1992; 1998) are nevertheless the outcome of a struggle for symbolic domination over the nation. As I will show, evaluations of Mauritian Creole are linked to contesting claims on the nation and are crucial to the shaping of national subjects.

At the same time, I suggest that analyzing the importance of language for emerging postcolonial nationhood provides a unique vantage point for reexamining the spread of the nation form. Linguistic formulations of nationhood like those evident in the politics of Mauritian Creole are a particularly useful avenue for engaging what Benedict Anderson has called the modularity of the nation, the replication of the nation form, first created in Western Europe and North America, in other parts of the world (Anderson 1991: 4, 87). Linguistic ethnonationalism, the notion that identification of a shared vernacular language constitutes people as bounded ethnic groups and justifies claims for popular sovereignty, was a crucial dimension of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe, as Anderson and others have amply documented (e.g., Hobsbawm 1990: 52–64, 95–100, 111–18). Scholars of the colonial world have, in turn, demonstrated how Herderian ideas of linguistic ethnicity so central to nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe strongly informed colonial practices, in particular linguistic and ethnic classifications by colonial scholars and administrators. Colonial administrators, census-takers, missionaries, and linguists assumed the prior existence of clearly bounded vernacular languages with “original” or “pure” forms among their subjects, and produced new standardized forms of vernacular language. Furthermore, they engaged in the mapping of perceived linguistic difference on assumed ethnic boundaries, which resulted in the interdependent construction of standardized vernacular languages and ethnicities (Errington 2001; Harries 1988; Irvine and Gal 2000: 47–59; Meeuwis 1999; Washbrook 1991). While such colonial creations of linguistic ethnicity were often very influential in shaping postcolonial ethnicities and senses of nationhood, they also interacted with local or regional traditions that linked language difference to the making of communities (Burghart 1996: 362–408; Mitchell 2005; Ramaswamy 1997), and this ultimately problematized the modularity of linguistic ethnonationalism.

I will argue that the spread of the nation form that Anderson has sought to capture in the concept of the modular nation is best understood as the effect of successive appropriations, rejections, and recastings of publicly circulating

discourse about the nation. My argument proceeds as follows: First, instead of identifying the creation of a national public with the standardization of a vernacular language, I contend that analyzing the public circulation of discourse about language and nationality can provide new ways to illuminate the transposability and the transformations of the nation form in new contexts. I draw on recent linguistic anthropological approaches on languages and publics to suggest that linguistic ideologies affect and condition the global spread of the nation form as they shape the decontextualization and recontextualization of nation discourse in new settings. Therefore, the analysis of such ideologies needs to be part of any investigation of the transposability of the nation.

Second, I investigate the social and historical contexts of the spread of linguistic ethnonationalism in postcolonial Mauritius, by analyzing the decontextualization and recontextualization of public discourse (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Briggs and Bauman 1992; Goodman 2002; Silverstein and Urban 1996) about Mauritian Creole and Creole identities. In particular, I discuss how this process has led to the emergence of three competing ways in which Mauritian Creole, the predominant vernacular, is central to the production of a Mauritian nation. The social and historical contexts that have enabled and shaped the domestication of linguistic nationality in Mauritius are best understood as histories and traditions about language, systematically linking linguistic forms and practices to social and political differentiation. Such linguistic ideologies have also influenced the appropriation and transformation of ideas about the nation as Mauritians have responded to and perpetuated publicly circulating discourse about Mauritian Creole and Creole identities. Two of these contrasting regimes of membership in a Mauritian nation that I describe closely imitate the forms Anderson has described as models of the nation “available for pirating” (1991: 67). A third, however, which in contemporary Mauritius is also the dominant one, points to possibilities of a postcolonial nationalism rather different from modular extension and “piracy” of European and North American nationhood. In particular, the prevalence of a certain diasporic notion of cultural citizenship tied to a form of “ancestral” linguistic ethnicity in contemporary Mauritius illustrates the complex interaction of colonially constructed linguistic ethnicity with alternative regimes of language and community. I show how this particular understanding of nationhood has emerged as the inter-discursive effect (Bakhtin 1986; Gal 2006: 173; Irvine 2005) of the selective appropriation and rejection of previously circulating public talk about Creole identities and Mauritian Creole by proponents of “ancestral” linguistic ethnicity.

#### LANGUAGES, PUBLICS, AND THE SPREAD OF LINGUISTIC ETHNONATIONALISM

Anderson’s thesis of the modularity of the nation has been a key focus in recent scholarship on nations and nationalism. Scholars have drawn attention to the

transposability of the nation form, which enabled the rise of the nation to a hegemonic form of political organization. However, the Andersonian thesis of modularity has also been criticized by scholars of nationalism. Partha Chatterjee (1993), for example, has argued that anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalisms are grounded in fundamentally different historical experiences than European and European American settler nationalisms, and therefore exhibit different forms. Along with other scholars he has asserted the historicity of nationalist experiences, which resist subsumption under a grand theory of the nation as a modular form (see also Calhoun 1998: 107–8; Sedgwick 1992: 240–41; Ivy 1995).

Nevertheless, it is hard to discount the stubborn recurrence of certain dimensions of nationality in the most diverse locations, such as an orientation towards cultural and linguistic homogenization, the concern with a congruence of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries, the mapping of these on a national economy and a national territory, and the institutionalized link between state and nationhood, which constitute a “family resemblance” among nations and nationalisms (Goswami 2002). Here I address Manu Goswami’s (2002) recent critical reformulation of the Andersonian thesis of modularity. Goswami charges Anderson with an ideal-typical conception of modularity, in which a model of the nation first conceived in Western Europe and in its American settler colonies is spread and “pirated” elsewhere in a “path-dependent” and otherwise rather unmediated fashion. Goswami calls for more attention to the social and historical contexts that enable and condition the transposition of the nation form throughout the world.

In what follows, I focus on politically charged notions of language and its uses as central to the social and historical process of spreading the nation in new contexts. Language and language difference are sociocultural categories, susceptible to a wide range of possible interpretations and conceptualizations. Even though Anderson to a large extent bases his theory of nationalism on the issue of language, language and sociocultural ideas about language difference have so far played only a minor role in discussions of the transposability of the nation form.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that to adequately understand the spread of the nation form and its limits we must pay attention to the multiple ways in which perceived language difference is reworked into regimes of membership in the nation.

I argue that linguistic ethnonationalism does not spread in an unmediated fashion, but is reshaped and modeled by such sociocultural assumptions and practices related to language in the local and regional contexts in which the

<sup>1</sup> Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of new literary genres in modern Bengali is a partial exception (1993: 7–9, 51–53). He focuses on the creation of such genres as suitably “modern” but recognizably different from Western models, but does not explore how this process may be related to diverse sociocultural notions of language and language difference.

spread of nationalism takes place (Kroskirty 2000). Perhaps the most important aspect of the social and historical contexts that condition the spread of the nation form is the modalities of publicly circulating discourse about the nation. Publics come into being as people respond by decontextualizing such circulated discourse, and recontextualizing it in new interventions, which inevitably leads to the transformation of such circulating discourse, even if participants seek to align their interventions in a relation of continuity and likeness to previous discourse (compare Briggs and Bauman 1992).

Anderson's work provides a rich starting point for a discussion of nations and publics. A central theme in his analysis of the rise of the nation is the circulation of print commodities such as books, pamphlets, and newspapers in vernacular languages. First, the awareness that others far away engaged in the regular and quasi-ritual reading of the same books and newspapers led to a gradual emergence of national communities, experienced as a public of co-readers (Anderson 1991: 44). Second, since the use of a particular print vernacular separated such reading publics from those using a different linguistic print medium, nations came to be necessarily imagined in the plural, in opposition to other such communities established through the circulation and simultaneous consumption of print commodities. According to Anderson, preexisting vernacular linguistic boundaries in Europe also functioned as communicative boundaries and therefore demarcated separate reading publics, and ultimately nations, whose multiplicity is in no small part due to the "fatality of human linguistic diversity" (1991: 43).

Anderson's identification of vernacular linguistic boundaries with the boundaries of emerging nations is at odds with linguistic anthropologists' engagements with linguistic difference and the creation of communities, who have long been skeptical about the notion that shared vernacular language leads to the creation of groupness (Gumperz 1972 [1968]; Hymes 1984 [1968]). They have argued that the production of communities based on language is not necessarily a function of more frequent communication, whether face-to-face or through print, but is mediated by cultural ideas and practices about language and its users. More recently, anthropologists have studied such mediating assumptions and practices that connect linguistic differentiation with social difference through a research paradigm of language ideology (Silverstein 1979; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Engaging with the problem of language and nationalism, linguistic anthropologists have demonstrated how such politically charged practices and ideas about language and linguistic difference have enabled the creation of national communities (Errington 2000; Gal 1993; 2001; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskirty 1998). That is, they have assigned linguistic ideologies a centrally productive role in the rise of the nation. While they concur with Anderson in treating the nation as a relatively recent and dynamically constructed cultural and political form, linguistic anthropologists also consider the construction of languages and language

communities a key part of this process. From this perspective, they have analyzed the claim that imagined communities emerge from shared print-languages as “unified fields of exchange and communication” (Anderson 1991: 44) as a powerful modernist linguistic ideology to be studied in its historical context and as therefore a symptom rather than an *explanation* of the nation (Silverstein 2000; Wogan 2001). Also, examining the discursive practices through which publics are constructed, linguistic anthropologists have questioned the identification of the creation of publics with the making of standard vernacular languages. They have pointed out that publics not only often emerge through the circulation of discourse across the boundaries of standardized languages, but actually come into being through performative acts such as commenting, imitating, parodying, translating, refuting, or elaborating circulated discourse (Gal and Woolard 2001; Gal 2006: 174). At the same time, linguistic ideologies profoundly shape the public as a modern form of political authority (Gal and Woolard 2001), while also constituting the shifting boundaries between the public and private (Gal 2002).

The importance of language ideologies as they interact with the public circulation of nation-talk illustrates that the vantage point of language is particularly suited for an interrogation of the spread of the nation form. Practices of linguistic unification and standardization, as well as ideological elaborations of assumed interrelationships between certain linguistic varieties and identifying characteristics of national communities, while not universal, nevertheless represent frequently recurring dimensions of nationalism that have lent themselves to transposition into different social and historical contexts. On the other hand, the transformations that publicly circulating nation-discourses always undergo as they are being appropriated, rejected, and recontextualized also make clear that there can be no modularity of the nation form in the strict sense of the term. Above all, language shapes the spread of the nation form by making particular forms of cultural citizenship imaginable. The marginality of the language question in previous discussions of the modular nation is therefore all the more surprising, as culturally embedded images of language and its uses are very consequential for the spread of the nation form, once established, in other historical and social contexts.

#### LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MAURITIUS

Mauritius is a predominantly Mauritian-Creole speaking society, in which most of the population is of Indian origin. Hindus and Muslims of Indian background constitute 52 and 17 percent of the population of 1.2 million, respectively. Other communities are the Creoles, who are of mixed African and European background (28 percent), Sino-Mauritians (2 percent), and a small but economically powerful Franco-Mauritian community. A local variety of Bhojpuri, a north Indian language current among rural and older-generation Indo-Mauritians, is also used by roughly a quarter of the total population in a

bilingual situation with Creole. English, the language of the former colonial power, is the official language of state administration and education. French, however, is predominant in both print and electronic mass media and the private-sector economy, a large part of which is under Franco-Mauritian control. French is also the first language of Franco-Mauritians and upper middle-class Creoles. As I will show, the slippage between “Creole” as the predominant vernacular language of Mauritius and “Creole” as referring to the main non-Indian ethnic group plays a crucial role in debates about language and nationality.

Mauritian state institutions, which are dominated by Hindus, strongly encourage the cultivation of diasporic ancestral cultural traditions and ancestral languages. These ancestral languages are Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Arabic, and Mandarin, which are never used in everyday life, and were in most cases not even current among the immigrating ancestors of the people who claim them as their ethnic patrimony. They are, however, regarded as important components and mediators of “ancestral cultures” and therefore are very important in marking ethnic differences among Mauritians. Mauritians of Indian origin and Sino-Mauritians claim ancestral languages, while the Creoles lack any such officially recognized affiliations with a particular ancestral linguistic and cultural heritage. The over 70 percent of Mauritian students who do not belong to the Christian “General Population”—a cover term used in the Mauritian constitution for Creoles and Franco-Mauritians—are automatically assigned to the study of one of these ancestral languages starting on the primary level. School authorities primarily use students’ names and local knowledge about their family background to decide which particular ancestral language they should study. The promotion of ancestral languages is part of a state policy that strongly encourages “ancestral cultures,” alongside generous subsidies for the activities of religious organizations. The state provides massive assistance toward public celebrations of religious holidays and pilgrimages, and contributes financially to “cultural centers” with ethnic-religious agendas. Cultivation of ancestral languages as components and mediators of “ancestral cultures” is part of a hegemonic notion of cultural citizenship, according to which Mauritians are primarily conceived as subjects with origins in other parts of the world and ongoing commitments to diasporic “ancestral cultures.” Accordingly, full membership in a Mauritian nation is performed by the cultivation of such “ancestral cultures,” while the Creoles, not having recognized claims on an “ancestral culture,” inhabit a more marginal position in the nation (Eisenlohr 2006a; 2006b).

Nevertheless, this hegemonic form of Mauritian nationalism, according to which membership in a Mauritian nation and intense cultivation of diasporic ties are not only compatible but actually reinforce each other, has not gone unchallenged. Representations of linguistic difference are also central to alternative visions of Mauritian nationhood. Their proponents have often

criticized official politics of “ancestral cultures” and ancestral languages for what they see as their encouragement of “communalism” along ethnic lines and for impeding the emergence of a “real” nation in Mauritius that overcomes such divisions. The Mauritian term for ethnic politics, “communalism” (*kominalis* in Creole, *communalisme* in French) follows Indian usage, where “communalism” is a label for the predominance of ethnic and religious communities as actors in colonial and post-colonial public spheres. Instead of the promotion of diasporic ancestral languages, the critics of official politics of “ancestral cultures” and ancestral languages wish for more identification of a Mauritian nation with Mauritian Creole. This is because the practice of Mauritian Creole is central to what many regard as the only unifying cultural process supporting a Mauritian national identity. Almost all Mauritians know French-lexifier Mauritian Creole, and the vast majority uses it on a daily basis. This has given occasion to describing Mauritius as a “Creole island,” and several writers have maintained that Mauritian Creole is the central and perhaps only key cultural symbol that can “unite” Mauritians and credibly constitute them as a nation (compare Jourdan 1995). This view has been also shared by a number of postcolonial Mauritian intellectuals and political activists. They have seen in the promotion of Mauritian Creole and its institutionalization as a national language a way to overcome ethno-religious divisions and political “communalism,” which many Mauritians view as profoundly characteristic of their society. Ideas of nationality have thus been primarily concerned with linguistic practice and ideology, especially the status and characterization of Mauritian Creole.

In the following, I explore the different ways in which nationalism in Mauritius is mediated by language and perceived language difference, and highlight how this results in alternative regimes of cultural citizenship. Specifically, I will discuss how public debate about the nation has resulted in three different visions of Mauritian Creole which have contrasting implications for what it means to be a Mauritian, and which emerge as the successive interdiscursive effects of countering and transforming prior discourse on the nation. The first two perspectives both cast the practice of Mauritian Creole as central to Mauritian nationhood, but in opposing ways. One highlights the contribution of French colonialism and links to the francophone world, while the second nationalizes Mauritian Creole as the true vernacular of a Mauritian people, conceived in explicit opposition to a hegemony of French linguistic and cultural traditions. A third politics of Mauritian Creole foregrounds the compatibility of Indian diasporic allegiances and membership in a Mauritian nation and privileges ancestral languages over Mauritian Creole as a focus of ethnolinguistic belonging. The first two perspectives highlight the possibility of modular adoption of linguistic ethnonationalism in a postcolonial context. The third illustrates the limits of such modularity by demonstrating how a postcolonial politics of diaspora produces

identifications with language that are fundamentally at odds with nineteenth-century European linguistic ethnonationalism.

BLURRED LINGUISTIC BOUNDARIES ON THE “CREOLE ISLAND”

The first national vision mediated through images of Mauritian Creole that I outline is the characterization of Mauritius as a “franco-creolophone island” (Stein 1982: 622). Proponents of this view accord central importance to a perceived proximity of Mauritian Creole to French and the powerful legacy of French colonization from 1715 until 1810. This way of imagining a Mauritian identity emphasizes Mauritius’ European colonial heritage, and in particular sidelines Indo-Mauritians in defining Mauritian nationhood. Accordingly, since Mauritians predominantly use a French-lexifier Creole language, Mauritius is part of a formerly French Creole world linking the Caribbean with the Indian Ocean.

In the study of the Caribbean, creolization has functioned as a key gate-keeping concept (Khan 2001) that describes processes of cultural interaction which primarily unfolded in the oppressive contexts of slavery and indentured labor migration (Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]; Price 2001; Trouillot 1998). These processes of interaction have resulted in the creation of new cultural traditions and identities out of what is often described as a process of cultural “mixing.” Several Caribbean postcolonial nationalisms have recast such histories of creolization into positively valued national identities that celebrate what they portray as the blending of a plurality of cultural traditions into a unifying sense of national belonging that is now decidedly “native” to the place. Nevertheless, the formation of such plural national ideologies has provoked controversy in some Caribbean locations such as Trinidad, as some cultural traditions and symbols may occupy a more central place in the new nation than do others (Munasinghe 1997; 2002). Discourse about creolization and Creole identities often re-inscribes perceived pure cultural origins, which many portray as the starting points of a process of mixing and fusion. In practical terms, the foregrounding of a “mixed” national identity has therefore raised the question of which components of such creolized ensembles have greater weight than others. Imagining Mauritius as a francophone “Creole island” illustrates this dynamic. Those who propose this perspective on Mauritian national identity do not deny that Mauritius features a combination of different cultural traditions with origins in other parts of the world, which have interacted in a way uniquely particular to the place. Nonetheless, they clearly privilege French traditions as most central to such a creolized ensemble by foregrounding the issue of language. The Creole language is the most significant manifestation of Mauritian cultural blending, but Mauritian Creole is cast as a non-standard variety of French, or at least as a language very close to French.

Until the 1970s, this perspective on Mauritius as a place shaped by processes of linguistic and cultural creolization was most explicitly argued for in writings

by a number of Franco-Mauritian researchers and intellectuals. Even today, everyday discourse on language difference in Mauritius often echoes this viewpoint, as many Mauritians regard Mauritian Creole and French as linguistically very closely related because of proximity and overlap in vocabulary and the use of “formal” or French-influenced registers of Creole (*Creole fransise*), which challenge the linguistic boundaries between the two languages.<sup>2</sup> The politics of a francophone “Creole island” originate in nineteenth-century Franco-Mauritian attempts to safeguard their privileged position as a colonial settler elite by being recognized as the original and most “native” Mauritians. In several respects this language-focused strategy of legitimization recalls Anderson’s scenario of “official nationalism” under imperial rule, and illustrates one possibility of modular adoption of the nation form in the colonial and post-colonial world.

The *locus classicus* of describing Mauritian Creole primarily in terms of its parentage with French is Charles Baissac’s *Étude sur le patois créole mauricien* (1880). As the first scholarly work on Mauritian Creole, and one of the first systematic studies of Creole languages in general, it had a profound influence on the perceptions of the relations between French and Mauritian Creole throughout the entire remaining colonial period. Baissac defined Creole as the language of slaves, and as *patois*, a broken substandard form of French, “rudimentary” in its construction, and incapable of expressing abstract thought (1880: iv, vii–ix). The author was a member of the Franco-Mauritian plantocracy, who after the conquest of the island by the British in 1810 remained attached deeply to France and successfully maintained their economic and political dominance even under British rule. Nineteenth-century British policies to establish English as the official language of Mauritius provoked sharp opposition from the francophone plantation owners and resulted in calls to defend the French language against “foreigners” and their languages (Toussaint 1969). In this situation, a certain valorization of Mauritian Creole became part of the ideological agenda of the Franco-Mauritian plantation owners, as long as it permitted presenting Mauritian Creole as part of an authentic Mauritian patrimony, which in turn was understood as principally French (Sheikh Amode Hossen 1993). When, in 1891, the colonial Council of Education debated the issue of the medium of instruction in Mauritian schools, George Guibert, the Franco-Mauritian president of the Council, argued that French was the true language

<sup>2</sup> This sense of hierarchical proximity of French and Mauritian Creole is persuasive for many users of Mauritian Creole because of long-standing use of intermediary varieties described as “acrolectal Creole” by linguists, exhibiting strong French influence in phonology, lexicon, and even morphology (Chaudenson 1993: 427; Robillard 1989a: 153), which have also been reported in other French-lexifier Creole settings (Managan 2004). At the same time, the lexical similarities between Creole and French often result in the use of bivalent linguistic items (Woolard 1998), which, especially in formal registers of Creole, are not clearly attributable to either linguistic code by native speakers or linguists.

of Mauritius and should therefore be compulsory in all schools: “Mauritius is a French speaking country. French is I may say universally spoken here. . . . It is true that young children of all classes and grown up persons who have not received any education, speak French in the form of the Creole patois, but the Creole patois is nothing but French badly pronounced and free from the ordinary rules of grammar.”<sup>3</sup>

Constructing Mauritian identity as a “Creole island” embedded in a wider francophone world is indeed traceable to such nineteenth-century Franco-Mauritian efforts to cast themselves as the true “natives” of the island. Perhaps the most important element in this strategy was linguistic ideology, the effort to portray French as the true language of Mauritius by claiming Mauritian Creole to be a substandard form or *patois* of French. This policy was in part a response to the ultimately unsuccessful British efforts to “anglicize” the colony, and the vast demographic changes brought about by the indenture system that resulted in an Indo-Mauritian majority by the 1860s. These efforts of a small colonial settler elite, so different in ethnicity and everyday language use from the vast majority of Mauritians, to claim “native” Mauritian status display interesting parallels to what Anderson has described as “official nationalism,” or “Russification” in imperial contexts (1991: 83–112). Anderson describes “official nationalism” as a nineteenth-century strategy by imperial elites such as the Romanov and Hohenzollern dynasties, also manifest in British imperial policies of Anglicization. In aggressively promoting a nationality these imperial elites sought to neutralize the potential dangers of popular nationalist movements for their continued supremacy. While the Franco-Mauritian claim to be the foremost and most native Mauritians emerged primarily as a reaction to British control, it became reinvigorated by impending decolonization and the emerging political claims of Indo-Mauritians in the middle of the twentieth century.

In the 1940s Indo-Mauritian political mobilization went hand-in-hand with frequent strikes and labor unrest, which began to put pressure on the colonial government (Simmons 1982: 71–90). At the conclusion of the Second World War, the British Empire was headed toward decolonization, while constitutional reform with its radical widening of the franchise enabled many Indo-Mauritians to vote for the first time in the 1948 elections to the Legislative Assembly. These developments were a severe blow to the political dominance of Franco-Mauritians who became concerned that their control over the affairs of the island was rapidly coming to an end. As a consequence, the claim to be the original and most authentic Mauritians gained a new importance for Franco-Mauritians in a colony set to become an independent nation-state in which nearly 70 percent of the population was of Indian origin and Franco-Mauritians

<sup>3</sup> Council of Education Papers. Annexure I to Minutes of Council of Education No. 5 of 11 June 1891.

only a small minority. Since no claims of dominance could be made based on numbers, language emerged as the main justification for a central position in a Mauritian nation. Franco-Mauritians had uncontested ideological ownership of French, and they argued that French was the language of Mauritius because nearly all Mauritians spoke *patois créole*, presumably corrupt French. More specifically, debates about the medium of instruction in Mauritian schools again prompted the claim that French was the language of the country, which supported the central significance of the small Franco-Mauritian plantocracy for an emerging Mauritian nation. In a 1941 debate of the Council of Government, the Franco-Mauritian delegate A. Raffray reiterated the point George Guibert had made fifty years earlier: “There is no doubt that education in this colony is based on the Western system, our civilization in this colony is the Western civilization . . . if a medium had to be chosen that only should be chosen which would be the medium best suited to all the boys [*sic*] without distinction and it should be the vernacular, the Creole language, which is itself a corruption of the French language . . . . I think the basic medium of instruction is French and it has to remain so.”<sup>4</sup> Thirteen years later, another Franco-Mauritian delegate to what in the meantime had become the Legislative Council complained against the British insistence on compulsory English and the growing importance of Indo-Mauritian ancestral languages in school curricula. He claimed that French was about to be ousted from its rightful place in Mauritian schools. According to him, French was the “*de facto* medium of instruction,” and moreover he insisted that in reality “Mauritius is a French colony governed by the British,” here claiming to quote an unnamed former British governor of Mauritius.<sup>5</sup>

The colonial image of Mauritian Creole as a French *patois*, originally formulated by Baissac and shaped by a struggle between different groups of colonizers, has been extremely influential even under changed political circumstances. Despite later efforts of Creole linguists, it has remained a widespread characterization of Mauritian Creole ever since and has been articulated especially by Franco-Mauritian and some Creole writers.<sup>6</sup> During my fieldwork

<sup>4</sup> Delegate A. Raffray, in: Colony of Mauritius. Debates of the Council of Government 1941, session of 27 May 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Delegate Koenig in: Colony of Mauritius. Debates of the Legislative Council, 30 Mar. 1954.

<sup>6</sup> The Franco-Mauritian scholar Noël Marrier d’Unienville concluded, “French—with its derivative the *patois créole* remains, one could say, the language of the country” (1949: 94, quoted in Stein 1982: 163). The subsuming of Creole under French as a *patois* allowed the Franco-Mauritian writer Camille de Rauville to declare French as the true “vernacular” of Mauritius: “. . . French and *patois*, like Siamese twins with a common physiognomy, cannot dissociate themselves from each other in Mauritius and are the two complementary aspects of the vernacular language of the country” (1968, quoted in Hookoomsing 1987: 119). According to the Franco-Mauritian scholar Karl Noël’s assessment of the language situation in Mauritius published in the early 1970s, the *patois créole français* of Mauritius, even if “degenerated and simplified,” represents a French dialect (1972: 15–17). And more than a century after Baissac, Benjamin Moutou in his recent

I frequently heard Mauritian of all socio-economic and ethno-religious backgrounds express similar viewpoints. Nevertheless, as I will describe presently, a new group of postcolonial intellectuals vehemently rejected and radically transformed this image of Mauritian Creole, which has been circulating in Mauritian public discourse since the nineteenth century. But despite these intellectuals' powerful campaign for Mauritian Creole as national language in the 1970s and the early 1980s, the characterization of Mauritian Creole as a substandard *patois* symbiotically linked to French remains pervasive in Mauritius and has important implications for the kind of creolization that makes Mauritius conceivable as a "Creole island."

Since the 1980s, efforts to demonstrate the centrality of the French heritage for Mauritian identity have shifted away from the claim that Mauritian Creole is a substandard version of French. Instead of describing Mauritian Creole as inferior or non-standard French, some scholars, as well as representatives of the francophonie network, now highlight a hierarchical "complementarity" between the languages, which they still see as closely linked.<sup>7</sup> In the past twenty-five years the image of Mauritian nationhood as centered on French traditions, still very significant in the final decades of colonial rule, has lost much of its support in Mauritian debates about nationality. Nevertheless, this perspective still informs outsider characterizations of Mauritian social and cultural contexts. Some foreign anthropologists continue to underline the importance of French cultural and linguistic traditions for present-day Mauritian identities, describing Mauritius as a French-influenced "Creole island" while emphasizing cultural and historical commonality between the Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, and Mauritius.

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work on the Christians of Mauritius qualifies Mauritian Creole as "nothing but a *patois français*" and "French of the humble, illiterate folk" (*français du petit peuple analphabète*) (1996: 390, 378).

<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarly work on the language situation in Mauritius attests to the widespread practice of hierarchically linking French and Mauritian Creole as a functionally complementary and closely related pair of languages. The perceived proximity of the two languages, especially, results in a vision in which "Creole participates partially in the prestige of French," while "French supports itself also, taking into account its proximity with that language, on the large demographic base of Creole" (Robillard 1990: 34). In contrast to other languages used in Mauritius, "Creole is lived as an intermediary step towards French" (Baggioni and Robillard 1990: 61). In this context it is highly significant that the attitude of institutionalized francophonie towards Creole languages has evolved in a similar manner. Originally founded as a French government organization solely dedicated to defend and expand the use of standard French, the promotion of bilingualism in French and the various national languages of the member states has now become one of the main stated goals of the francophonie network (Ager 1996: 73–75). This vision of complementarity also constitutes the backdrop of the renewed interest in the funding of Creole studies and the publication of works on Creole languages and literature by the French government and francophonie agencies. For example, one of the first scholarly summaries and analyses of Mauritian Creole literature can be found in a volume edited and financed by ACCT (Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique, now known as Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie [AIF]) (Hookoomsing 1984).

French anthropologist Jean Benoist classifies all four of them as “Creole islands” united in a common “destiny” and forming a “true family of societies” (1985: 54). Not only the shared history of French colonization but also, and above all, the practice of both French and French-lexifier Creole languages is central to the location of Mauritius as part of such a Creole archipelago. Language ideology thus plays the main role for conceptually linking a world of creolization in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean to a zone of French cultural influence. This had led another French anthropologist, Jean-Luc Bonniol, to proclaim the existence of a “Creole area” centered on French imperial legacy: “The Creole islands (*îles créoles*) . . . form what is now proper to be called ‘Creole area’ (*aire créole*) because one speaks Creole there, that is to say a language with a largely French lexical base, and if the use of such a language is widespread there, this is because these lands have known French colonization at a particular moment of their history . . . In this way the Creole area appears as the present-day projection of the maximum of French colonial expansion in the Southern Seas in the eighteenth century” (1985: 77).

Accordingly, a particular relationship between language and cultural creolization is fundamental for locating Mauritius in a wider political and geographical setting linking the Indian Ocean with the former French colonies in the Caribbean. The use of Mauritian Creole is evidence that Mauritius, similar to Réunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, has become a creolized island society centered on French traditions, with the practice of French-lexifier Creole languages as a central determinant of this process.

Recalling the dynamics of what Anderson has called “official” or imperial nationalism, the longstanding Mauritian debates about language and nationality concerned with a perceived close relationship between French and Mauritian Creole illustrate the possibility of turning an imperial language into a central symbol of the postcolonial nation. As I will show, this discourse is far from hegemonic in contemporary Mauritius. Still, this discursive position in the ongoing public debates over Mauritian nationality underlines how a particular linguistic ideology highlighting an intimate and hierarchical relationship between French and Mauritian Creole has facilitated the spread of the nation form to Mauritius. It has done so through the production of a national heritage defined by a particular reading of linguistic boundaries.

#### CREATING A NATIONAL PRINT VERNACULAR

Language and perceived language difference also played an important role in the campaign for Mauritian Creole as a national language of Mauritius in the 1970s and early 1980s, which was in stark contrasted with imaginations of Mauritius as a “Creole island” embedded in a wider francophone world proposed by Franco-Mauritians and some French scholars. The project of institutionalizing Mauritian Creole as national language emerged as a response to the long-circulating discourse about the language as a subordinate form of French,

which provided evidence for the relative subordination of its speakers. Its proponents hereby appropriated and re-contextualized the traditional discourse that Mauritian Creole is a language above all defined by its relationship to French by radically recasting and inverting its ideological implications. Whereas the traditionalists, following Baissac, saw this relation as one of hierarchical complementarity and linguistic proximity, the new Mauritian Creole nationalists viewed Mauritian Creole as above all defined by a break with French. Not only were French and Mauritian Creole radically different languages, they also represented opposed ideological vantage points, one associated with the old colonial order and the small but wealthy Franco-Mauritian community that still controlled most of the economy, the other the language of the “people” and their emancipatory aspirations.

The explicit opposition to hierarchical complementarity of French and Creole was a key motive for Mauritian Creole nationalists in promoting Mauritian Creole as central component of an emerging national culture. Viewing Mauritius as plagued by deep divisions between its main ethno-religious groups, they argued that the only way to overcome the colonial legacy of “communalism” would be to create a unified and more homogenized Mauritian nation. Language activism became a central mode of trying to convince Mauritians of such a shared nationhood. The Mauritian Creole nationalist campaign under the slogan of *enn sel lepep, enn sel nasion* (‘one sole people, one sole nation’),<sup>8</sup> led by the MMM, sought to institutionalize Mauritian Creole as the national language, and presented it as the language of the “people,” regardless of ethno-religious distinctions. In this way, the campaign for the officialization of Mauritian Creole integrated elements of both class struggle and nationalism, which in turn rested on intense highlighting of linguistic boundaries between French and Mauritian Creole. But Mauritian Creole nationalism also emerged within a conflictual public dialogue with another discourse about the nation—the growing emphasis on state-sponsored “ancestral cultures” and associated ancestral languages in postcolonial Mauritius.

Mauritians often disagree on the significance of Mauritian Creole for Mauritian identity and the place of Mauritius in the world. Jacqueline, a middle-aged teacher of Creole background, lives in an old wooden house in the central town of Vacoas, which she inherited from her family. Our conversation at her home in February 1998 turned to the Hindu festival of Shivratri the week before, a national holiday and the most prominent event in the Hindu ritual calendar of Mauritius. Each year between 300,000 and 400,000 pilgrims out of a population of 1.2 million converge on Grand Bassin, also known among Hindus

<sup>8</sup> *Nasion* is a polysemic concept in Mauritian Creole, which apart from “nation” is in everyday usage more often taken to mean “caste” among Hindus, or is also understood to be synonymous with “African” or “person of African phenotype,” or “Creole,” depending on context. See Eriksen (1994) on the confusion this caused during the 1982 campaign.

as Ganga Talao (Ganges lake), a sacred mountain lake whose waters are believed mythically connected to the Ganges in India. Her observations of the Hindu pilgrimage made Jacqueline think of “communalism” and the possibilities for overcoming it. Jacqueline lives near one of the main roads to the mountain lake, which tends to be jammed with pilgrims on their way to and from the site of pilgrimage, carrying colorfully decorated structures of bamboo (*kanvar*), often in the shape of Hindu temples and displaying images of Hindu deities. In February 1998, the 100th anniversary of the pilgrimage, the congestion and traffic jams were so severe that Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, himself stuck in heavy traffic on the road to Grand Bassin, spontaneously declared an additional special holiday for Hindus so they would all have the opportunity to perform the pilgrimage. This met with widespread public criticism, especially by non-Hindus, and Jacqueline, too, rejected what she saw as an arbitrary “communist” decision. Starting with a condemnation of the “special holiday” for Mauritian Hindus declared by a Hindu Prime Minister, she then expressed her displeasure with the way in which Hindus with massive support from Mauritian state institutions very ostentatiously occupy public space near her house during the pilgrimage. “Everybody should be free to follow their religion. But in a diverse society like ours it is not right to block the roads as if Hindus were alone on the island. I have been to Grand Bassin and I like the place very much, its peace and quietness. But we are not in India, and this is a bit much; it could be more discreet. The way Hindus take over the streets at this time of the year is very communalist. It is fine to continue your traditions, but the problem here is a lack of national unity.” Jacqueline thought that her Creole community is more tolerant and willing to incorporate a diversity of cultural traditions, something she saw as lacking in what she experienced as a display of Hindu power in the street. “We Mauritians come from different parts of the world and have different religions, but we all speak the same language. We should not spend so much time on what divides us, but we should remember what can unite us so we will be a real nation one day.”

Jacqueline hereby responded to the emphasis on boundaries between the different ethno-religious communities of Mauritius that pervades postcolonial public discourse about the nation, in particular discourse circulated by state institutions and representatives. For her, remembering the shared status of Mauritian Creole is a way to make progress towards constituting a nation. In Jacqueline’s view, the cultural openness and downplaying of boundaries of religion and ethnicity is best exemplified by the practice of speaking Mauritian Creole. Accordingly, the Creole language is an emblem of the Mauritian nation because nearly all Mauritians use it and because Mauritian Creole symbolizes a mixing of peoples and traditions that one day might yield a unified Mauritian nation, a view also suggested by several scholars (Bowman 1991: 164; Eriksen 1990: 21; 1993: 118).

In the eyes of its partisans, Mauritian Creole had to be asserted as an autonomous language and its differences from French emphasized (Hookoomsing 1980). Originating as a rejection of the image of Mauritian Creole as part of the francophone world, credibly fashioning Mauritian Creole as an autonomous language emerges as a key element in a postcolonial nation-building project. At the same time it involves the construction of indigenosity in a setting with no precolonial population. But as the conversation with Jacqueline made clear, the promotion of Creole as national language also rejected the emphasis, so central to postcolonial state discourse, on diasporic ancestral traditions as constitutive of a Mauritian nation.

Of all the representations of the Mauritian nation produced by images of Mauritian Creole, this nationalization of Mauritian Creole as a “language of the people” most clearly fits into the Andersonian paradigm of the modularity of the nation. The issue here is vernacular standardization against the background of the celebration of the presumably native and autochthonous, according to the Herderian assumption that a separate vernacular language constitutes a “people” with a right to national self-determination (Bauman and Briggs 2003). The construction of autochthony through linguistic ideology is central to this discourse, which in the Creole context described here is even more saliently at odds with the diversity and historicity of linguistic and cultural traditions than in the European cases Herder was mostly concerned with. In this sense, the project of creating a standardized Mauritian Creole and institutionalizing it as a “national language” strongly echoes the European nineteenth-century “lexicographic revolution” (Anderson 1991: 72), the rapidly spreading efforts to create and standardize vernacular “national print languages” on the grounds that they were, presumably, the “language of the people.”

Yet this imitation of nineteenth-century European linguistic ethnonationalism turned into a political failure, while proponents of an alternative mode of linking language and national identity emerged dominant. Trying to boost the image of Mauritian Creole as national language, the MMM campaign emphatically de-ethnicized Mauritian Creole through a shift to a leftist rhetoric that downplayed the importance of ethnicity in favor of class. Most importantly, the intention was to strip from it any associations with the Creole ethnic group evoked not only by homology of labels, but also by the fact that the language has identifiable creators. Baissac (1880: xii) had unambiguously assigned the creator role to African and Malagasy slaves and their descendants, the Creoles, a position that today is shared by most linguists, and is largely uncontested among the Mauritian public. Thus, in this postcolonial nation-building project centered on nationalizing the shared vernacular as distinctively Mauritian, there was always the potential for the recognized creators of Mauritian Creole to inhabit a uniquely central position in the national imagination, with others relegated to a position of marked ethnic difference from a national “mainstream.” Institutionalizing Mauritian Creole as national language opened

up the possibility for Creoles, especially in comparison to Mauritians of Indian origin, to make their own ethnicity “invisible” in a bid for symbolic dominance over the new nation, and many Indo-Mauritians immediately anticipated and resisted this scenario.<sup>9</sup>

The Mauritian writer, politician, and linguist Dev Virahsawmy was the central figure of this nationalist movement. Freshly returned from the University of Edinburgh shortly before Mauritius’ independence in March 1968, he started to denounce what he considered a colonial prejudice of refusing Mauritian Creole the status of a legitimate language. Virahsawmy is of Indo-Mauritian background, which helped his campaign since it made it more difficult for his opponents to label pro-Mauritian Creole activism an expression of ethnic minority interests. Virahsawmy, who intensely believes in the ideological de-ethnicization of Creole, also became the most prominent author of an emerging Mauritian Creole literature in the 1970s. He called for the official recognition of Creole as national language and for its use in primary education. For this purpose he proposed a new orthography for Creole that would replace the French-oriented orthography used previously for the relatively rare occasions on which Creole was written.<sup>10</sup>

The movement to establish Mauritian Creole as the national language encountered resistance from several groups, but most consequential was that from Hindu elites who dominated the state apparatus and suspected the pro-Mauritian Creole campaign was an attack on the legitimacy of their claims

<sup>9</sup> Here I draw on Brackette Williams’ work on the intersection between ethnicity and class in nation-states, where dominant groups make their own cultural practices and symbols appear as part of an unmarked national “mainstream,” whereas marked visibility of ethnic difference indicates not only inferior class position but also a peripheral position in the putatively homogenized nation (1989: 412). Thus, in the cultural struggle over the nation, avoidance of ethnic visibility may represent a strategy of dominating others less able to downplay ethnic markedness in relation to the nation. I thank Viranjini Munasinghe for sharpening my understanding of this point.

<sup>10</sup> Virahsawmy and other pro-Creole activists devised a system of writing Creole according to “phonemic” criteria, which was also the main feature of the orthographies outlined by Virahsawmy in 1967 and Philip Baker (1972), who proposed the spelling *Kreol* for *créole*. Also, the leftist activist group Ledikasyon Pu Travayer (LPT) introduced its orthography in 1981, proclaiming an opposition between *sistem franziise* and a “scientific” *sistem fonetik* (Robillard 1989b). Philip Baker and Vinesh Hookoomsing presented another orthographic system for Mauritian Creole, which they named *lortograf-linite* since their goal was to provide an alternative system of writing that could also be extended to Mauritian Bhojpuri (Baker and Hookoomsing 1987). Similar to other debates about French-lexifier Creole orthographies (Schieffelin and Doucet 1998), the conflicting ideas about the orthography of Mauritian Creole are linked to contrasting visions of Mauritian nationhood, in particular its relationship to the French colonial past.

Following a request from the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research in 2004 to the University of Mauritius and the Mauritius Institute of Education to devise a “harmonized way of writing Mauritian Kreol with a view to making use of that language in the education of young Mauritians” (Hookoomsing 2004), Vinesh Hookoomsing proposed *Graf-larmoni*, a new orthography largely based on a synthesis of previous attempts to standardize Mauritian Creole (2004). To date, however, state authorities have taken no concrete measures to implement this latest orthography or to increase the so far unofficial role of Mauritian Creole in state-sponsored education.

on the nation. This led to the campaign's failure after the events of Independence Day in March 1983 (Houbert 1982–1983). Virahsawmy was concerned that many Mauritians, especially those of Indian origin, would reject the official recognition of a language called Creole, which also designates the main non-Indian ethnic group, and he had already proposed in 1967 to rename the language *Morisyen*—"Mauritian." However, this label has so far failed to gain wide acceptance and its usage has been restricted to the discourses of pro-Mauritian Creole intellectuals. The slippages between "Creole" as a particular ethnic group, and "Creole" as a national language proved fatal to the project of nationalizing Mauritian Creole.

More specifically, Hindu elites prominent in the state apparatus responded by reinforcing a long-standing trend towards ideologies of ancestral and religious purity and highlighting the importance of performing such ancestral traditions for membership in a Mauritian nation. They decontextualized discourses of Mauritian Creole nationalists, and, in an official discourse, recontextualized "ancestral cultures" and ancestral languages in a way that recast the notion of "Creole" as only standing for one particular ethnic group. This strategy was evident in other ways. For many Hindus, "creolization" also evoked the social memory of oppression and disdain of their religious traditions by the Franco-Mauritian plantocracy in the colonial period, when there were attempts to convert Hindus to Christianity (see Ramdoyal 1977: 90). Many Hindus understood "creolization" as a corollary of identities centered on the label "Creole," and as a process of turning Hindus into Creoles, a Christian population with no recognized "ancestral culture." Members of the Hindu middle class have dominated Mauritian politics since independence, which many Hindus consider a vindication and just compensation for the injustices of the colonial period, in particular the experience of indenture. In this context, the project of making Mauritian Creole the national language was bound to fail. The creation of a national print vernacular in the context of a larger effort at nation-building found enthusiastic proponents in Mauritius, but it was hampered by conflicts around the image of Mauritian Creole.

#### DIASPORIC CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AND INDIAN ANCESTRAL LANGUAGES

A few days before my conversation with Jacqueline in February 1998, I spoke to Raj, a young Hindu man who works as an accountant in Port Louis, and we shared our experiences of the Shivratri pilgrimage in a village in the north of Mauritius I call La Nicolière. Raj's father is a member of the local temple association and a Hindi teacher, and I frequently visited their family, who live a short walk from the home of relatives, in which I lived. I told Raj how impressed I was by the great numbers of pilgrims and the way Grand Bassin had turned into a major place of pilgrimage, now even attracting pilgrims from Réunion and South Africa. Raj said that although most Hindus in the

village would take part in the pilgrimage, they would be less likely to visit temples at other times of the year except during the major festivals. “Just go to the Shivala down the street, on Tuesday and Friday nights when they have *kirtan* and *Ramayan* sessions. How many people are there? Just old ladies, no young people. The young people here have to study, and then they want to amuse themselves. In a way, we really have become Creole.” Raj thereby engaged in another recontextualization of publicly circulating discourses of Creole identities and Mauritian Creole that have become so central to debates about Mauritian nationality. For Raj, becoming Creole is not associated with a desirable trend towards national unity in Mauritius, but with a loss of Hindu tradition. In his view, becoming Creole is equivalent to assimilation to another ethnic group, the Creoles. Many Indo-Mauritians look down on Creoles because they perceive them as lacking in ancestral cultural traditions and economic achievement, and think that Creole work and spending habits are affected by an excessive orientation to amusement and merry-making. I asked Raj whether he thought that the fact that Hindus spoke Mauritian Creole was part of what he considered their “becoming Creole.” He disagreed, and said that Hindus expect other Hindus to speak Mauritian Creole. “We all speak Creole. But we also learn our ancestral languages, and not everybody in Mauritius does that.” Like other Hindus of North Indian background, Raj has studied Hindi in primary and secondary school. He did not consider the dominant status of Mauritian Creole as vernacular language part of his concerns about a loss of Hindu traditions and unity. On the other hand, he pointed to diasporic ancestral languages as a focus of belonging and distinction.

Let us recall the failure of institutionalizing Mauritian Creole in the context of the national ritual of Independence Day in 1983, and the conversations with Jacqueline and Raj. Jacqueline saw a need for a more homogenizing Mauritian nationalism symbolized by the Creole language. But Raj’s comment that many young Hindus were “becoming like Creoles” illustrates the problematic position of the label “Creole” in discourses of Mauritian identity, where the term stands for both a language and an ethnic group. In his view, “becoming like Creoles” is to be resisted because it implies the loss of Hindu distinctiveness, a possibility that Mauritian state institutions in their stress on promoting “ancestral cultures” are also determined to prevent. While this does not imply a rejection of Mauritian Creole, the emphasis on ancestral languages and “ancestral cultures” whose diasporic character is highlighted is in tension with the idea of a national identity oriented towards locally created cultural traditions such as Mauritian Creole.

As is evident from Raj’s reflections about language, creolization, and Indo-Mauritian identity, the learning and cultivation of ancestral languages, the most important among them being Hindi, are of great significance for the production of Hindu Mauritian identities. Most of the ancestors of those claiming ancestral languages did not know or use these modern standardized languages when they

migrated to Mauritius.<sup>11</sup> However, ancestral languages are central emblems of ethnic and diasporic group identification in Mauritius. Furthermore, transnational Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), support the propagation of Hindi in Mauritius, which since the late nineteenth century has been intimately linked to the cause of Hindu nationalism in India (Dalmia 1997; Lelyveld 1993). Hindi and other ancestral languages are never used in everyday life, but are nevertheless more relevant for shaping Indo-Mauritian identities than the routine practice of Creole. Hindus of North Indian origin comprise approximately 41 percent of the population and dominate state institutions, and Hindi as ancestral language is used in contexts in which Hindu identity and the cultivation of “ancestral” traditions are publicly performed. Although Creole dominates everyday conversation, in these contexts its use is often frowned upon. In the Hindu temple (*shivala*) of La Nicolière, worshippers protested when a new pandit coming from a neighboring village occasionally used Creole while performing ritual worship and switched to Creole in his sermons (*pravachan*). One of the central acts of Hindu worship in this community is chanting from the Ramcharitmanas, the vernacular Hindi version of the Ramayana composed in a sixteenth-century variety of Avadhi. The editions of the Ramcharitmanas used in Mauritius have commentary in modern standard Hindi in the margins, the language also used by the pandit in explaining and commenting on the devotional poetry. Hindus in La Nicolière expect the pandit to use Hindi, or at least a purist, sanskritized register of Bhojpuri (Eisenlohr 2004). Similarly, at the state-sponsored central celebrations of major Hindu festivals in Mauritius, such as Shivratri and Divali, broadcast by state-controlled Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation television, Hindu religious dignitaries and politicians address the audience in Hindi or English, but do not use Mauritian Creole.

Supported by many Indo-Mauritians, in particular Hindus, and legitimized by state institutions, ideologies of ancestral language provide an alternative way of ethno-linguistic identification. They have emerged as the interdiscursive effect of public debates about the nation. The highly visible official support for such ancestral languages implies a vision of the nation in which the cultivation of intense diasporic ties and identities based on notions of cultural and linguistic purity is central to being Mauritian.<sup>12</sup> This particular language-mediated

<sup>11</sup> A large majority of Indian immigrants were speakers of various varieties of Bhojpuri, and few of them had knowledge of standard literary varieties of Indian languages such as Hindi, Urdu, or Tamil.

<sup>12</sup> The highly pluralist cultural and language policy of the Mauritian state has often been interpreted as a model of ethnic compromise and coexistence and a hopeful alternative to the homogenizing tendencies of nation-projects elsewhere (e.g., Carroll and Carroll 2000; Eriksen 1992; 1998). Nevertheless, as I hope my analysis shows, the much-vaunted Mauritian pluralism—an image also intensely marketed by the island’s very important tourism industry—represents a particular

imagination of the nation is closely linked to material and symbolic interests of the Hindu state bourgeoisie. Creoles, who cannot claim an official and standardized ancestral language with an origin outside of Mauritius, but can only draw on their status of creators of the “indigenous” Mauritian Creole, are clearly marginalized in this vision of the Mauritian nation.<sup>13</sup>

#### RECONTEXTUALIZING THE NATION FORM

Jacqueline’s and Raj’s views about the practice of Mauritian Creole express conflicting visions of Mauritian nationhood. At the same time, in establishing different relationships between Mauritian Creole as a dominant vernacular linguistic variety and Mauritian nationhood, Jacqueline’s and Raj’s perspectives on Mauritian Creole evoke different approaches to the issue of language and nationalism. Jacqueline’s call for a national recognition of Creole as the language shared by all Mauritians resonates with European models of nationalism in which vernacular standardization plays a central role. A direct link between the rise of standardized print vernaculars and the creation of national communities in Europe is a prominent theme in the study of nationalism. According to Ernest Gellner, the “objective need of homogeneity which is reflected in nationalism” (1983: 46) under conditions of modernity and industrialization also includes linguistic homogenization and standardization as necessary for the functioning of industrial civilization. Both Anderson and Gellner stress the role of standardized vernaculars as channels of communication that integrates subjects into a national community, imagined by Anderson as a public of co-readers, or by Gellner (1983: 35) as a space that enables “context-free” communication. Nationalism thus appears as a process crucially enabled and supported by vernacular standardization, a process that according to Jacqueline is, regretfully, still in its early stages in Mauritius. From the perspective of Mauritians Creole nationalists, English, the current official language of Mauritian state institutions, cannot credibly fulfill this role, since English lacks vernacular status. Accordingly, Mauritius can be considered a credible nation if Mauritians can claim a national vernacular language of their own—Creole. In contrast to English, a standard Mauritian Creole can be portrayed as representing the routine linguistic practice of a Mauritian “people” by conceptually minimizing the gap between vernacular practice

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organization of ethnic and linguistic diversity that is profoundly shaped by imbalances of power and informed by a logic of exclusion (see also Baptiste 2002; Boswell 2006).

<sup>13</sup> While recognizing that such a position may not necessarily favor Creoles under current political circumstances, William F. S. Miles also highlights the potentially privileged role of Creoles in the construction of Mauritian nationalism: “In not looking to any other home or motherland as their anchor of identity, Creoles may indeed constitute the most authentic of Mauritians” (Miles 1999: 228). As I seek to show, ideas of nationhood based on notions of indigenosity are not the only possible way to conceive the nation.

and national standard. Thus, from this perspective on Mauritian postcolonial nation building, the failure to institutionalize a standardized form of the only vernacular language shared by all Mauritians appears as a major deficit (see also Eriksen 1990: 21).

In contrast, Raj's perspective on language and nationality rejects the idea of a necessary relationship between vernacular linguistic practice and linguistic ethnonationalism. He articulates a form of cultural citizenship that emphasizes the primacy of diasporic "ancestral cultures," and stresses a disjuncture between vernacular languages and those of ethnolinguistic identification. In this sense, ideologies of ancestral language represent an alternative inflection of linguistic ethnonationalism, one that rejects the common assumption that vernacular language standardization is part of the imagination of the nation. The politics of ancestral language illustrate the limits of Anderson's model of vernacular standardization by pointing to the crucial intervening role of linguistic ideologies in establishing relationships between linguistic varieties and senses of community. But they also show how contrasting visions of the nation have emerged through the appropriation and rejection of publicly circulating nation talk, in which the simultaneous decontextualization and recontextualization of discourses about Mauritian Creole and creolization have played a central role. At the same time, these opposed perspectives on the significance of Mauritian Creole for Mauritian nationality are intimately related to conflicting narratives about the graduated membership of different ethnicities in a Mauritian nation.

Another important aspect of these two conflicting accounts of membership in the nation is that the linguistic ideologies on which they are based also establish different temporalities for the nation. The advocates of Mauritian Creole as national language saw their project as overcoming the colonial legacy of "communalism," and leading to a better future in which Mauritians constitute a more homogeneous, united nation based on the celebration of the "indigenous" tradition of Mauritian Creole. This is evident in Jacqueline's insistence that Mauritians must work toward becoming "a real nation one day." By contrast with such placing of the nation in an eagerly anticipated future, performing membership in a Mauritian nation through cultivating ancestral languages points to very different temporality of community, one in which being one with the ancestors is a prominent mode. Among Mauritian Hindus the cultivation of Hindi as ancestral language often takes place in ritual contexts, some of which are dedicated to the memory of immigrating ancestors, such as the local Shivratri pilgrimage (Eisenlohr 2006a). Use of Hindi in these contexts minimizes the temporal and spatial remove that separates contemporary Mauritian Hindus from the world of their ancestors who immigrated from India. In evoking the presence of these ancestors, the use of "ancestral" Hindi does not locate the nation in an anticipated future. Nor does it privilege the progressing of "empty, homogeneous" time, as Anderson's account of nationalism does (1991: 22–36). Rather, it produces a temporality akin to what Walter

Benjamin called a “messianic” simultaneity across linear time, which collapses the distinctions of past, present, and future (Benjamin 1968: 263–65).<sup>14</sup> In legitimizing their place in a Mauritian nation through “ancestral” ethnolinguistic identification, Mauritian Hindus mediate between plural temporalities. These include a sense of progress and empowerment memorized as the spectacular rise of a community of humble indentured laborers to relative prosperity and political power, as well as language-mediated experiences of co-presence with the ancestors (Eisenlohr 2006a; see also Woolard 2004).<sup>15</sup> In this, the significance of ancestral languages such as Hindi in Mauritius complicate an analysis of the nation as an imagined community based on a shift to a modernist regime of temporality dominated by the mode of “empty, homogeneous” time. Mauritian diasporic cultural citizenship centered on a legitimizing link to the world of immigrating ancestors and their languages not only demonstrates how the spread of the nation form is mediated by linguistic ideologies linking experiences of time and nationhood, but also illustrates the diversity of such possible temporalities of the nation.

<sup>14</sup> According to Anderson, the possibility for persons to experience themselves as members of a national community also depended on a shift towards “empty, homogeneous” time, which was in turn motivated through the growing popularity of the novel as a literary genre. Anderson argues that the narrative structure of the novel rests on a yardstick of empty, homogeneous time, which is linearly progressing, divisible into an infinite number of abstract, equivalent units, and independent from any particular locale. Disparate characters in a novel, who may be in different locations and completely unaware of the presence of certain other characters, and their actions in the unfolding plot can be placed in relation to each other by virtue of temporal simultaneity on such an axis of empty, homogeneous time. This narrative and temporal structuring particular to the literary genre of the novel provides an analogy to the way in which persons imagine themselves as progressing through history together in a national community, knowing that they exist together with other co-nationals in a synchronic cross-section of time (1991: 25–26). In other words, through the novel as a new semiotic technology subjects can experience themselves as existing simultaneously in homogeneous, bounded units of nations. Anderson adopts the concept of “empty, homogeneous” time from Walter Benjamin’s critique of historicism, where it is contrasted with a “messianic” temporality, a sacred simultaneity suspending progressively linear time that always leaves open the possibility for redemption and revolution (Benjamin 1968). Anderson, however, postulates a modernist transformation of temporalities, where “messianic” time, which in European scholarship is above all associated with life in the Middle Ages where many lived in constant awareness of an imminent doomsday, is superseded by the abstract linearity of infinitely progressing, “empty, homogeneous” time. This historical shift is consonant with Anderson’s larger modernist narrative of the nation as filling the void left by weakening religious worldviews and solidarities (Anderson 1991: 12–19).

<sup>15</sup> See Paul Ricoeur (1988) for an account of how senses of history and community are shaped by modes of temporality. Ricoeur specifically analyzes how subjectively experienced time and universally progressing “cosmic” time are mediated by temporalities of community, the collective senses of being in time with others fundamental to historical memory. Ricoeur’s analysis not only shows temporalities as irreducibly plural, demonstrating the implausibility of Anderson’s normalization of temporality along a single modernist measure of “empty, homogeneous” time. In focusing on narrative he also establishes language use as the arena in which such mediations and constructions of temporality primarily take place.

## CONCLUSION

I have sought here to demonstrate how conflicting perspectives on language and linguistic practice have shaped the spread of the nation form to Mauritius. In arguing for the centrality of language in assessing the spread of the nation form I have charted the diversity of its possible mediations, which are, in turn, informed by different assumptions about the nature of language and the politics of language use. Visions of Mauritian nationhood imagined through vernacular Mauritian Creole or Indian ancestral languages oscillate between a situation recalling Benedict Anderson's account of the modularity of the nation and the language question "as a history that appears almost the same, but is not quite" (Ramaswamy 1997: 21). Most significantly, the regime of cultural citizenship that has come to dominate in postcolonial Mauritius is not reducible to a history of modular linguistic ethnonationalism. The incommensurability of ancestral language as the dominant mode of linking language difference to nationhood in Mauritius, and nineteenth-century European linguistic or "official" nationalisms as models to be pirated, demonstrates how the spread of the nation is conditioned by a plurality of links between linguistic practice and political community.

The interdiscursive emergence of three contrasting ways to build a Mauritian nation by drawing on the presence of Mauritian Creole shows that practices such as imitating, echoing, rejecting and elaborating publicly circulating discourse are a key mode of spreading and transposing the nation form to new contexts. The concomitant transformations of the nation form can, at least in part, be accounted for by the effects such practices have on the domestication of the nation in new contexts. At the same time, such appropriations of nation talk by new actors in new contexts interact with linguistic ideologies, which then become part of the process of nation building. The plurality of the nation form, with its different connections between linguistic practice and senses of community, their different modalities of inclusion and exclusion, and their different temporalities of the nation, can be traced to such ongoing recontextualizations and transformations of prior discourse about the nation.

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