

# *Archaeology and religious syncretism in Mauritius*

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# NINE

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## Archaeology and Religious Syncretism in Mauritius

SASA ČAVAL

SLAVERY AND INDENTURE ARE central to understanding the Mauritian past. The forced and free labor diasporas that brought hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children from Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and China to the island during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries still constitute key elements in shaping modern Mauritian identity.<sup>1</sup> These immigrants also brought their religious beliefs and practices with them, beliefs and practices that included traditional African religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.<sup>2</sup> Although the Code Noir of 1723 required Mauritian slave owners to instruct their bondmen and bondwomen in Catholicism and have them baptized,<sup>3</sup> the conversion attempts remained sporadic and, at best, half-hearted before slave emancipation in 1835. It was only because of the efforts of Père Jacques-Désiré Laval, a French missionary who resided on the island from 1841 until his death in 1864, that tens of thousands of the colony's former slaves converted to Catholicism during

the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The indentured immigrants—mostly from India but also from China, the Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique, Southeast Asia, and Yemen—who reached the island after 1835, on the other hand, were permitted to retain their faith, and the estate owners for whom they labored intruded less into their religious lives.

Mauritian slaves and indentured workers thus seemingly differed from one another in terms of their ability to preserve their original religious beliefs and use various cultural tools to maintain or recreate this important component of personal and community identity.<sup>5</sup> However, as anthropologists and historians have long appreciated, one consequence of various belief systems cohabiting with one another in close proximity is cultural and religious syncretism. Mauritius is no exception. An early example of such activity is the annual festival known as the Yamsé (Yamseh, Yamsey), which was being celebrated in Port Louis, the island's principal city, no later than 1780.<sup>6</sup> Nineteenth-century accounts of Mauritian life note that this festival, the origins of which are to be found in the Shi'ite commemoration of Hussein's death during the month of Muharram, brought together all of the colony's Lascars (Indian sailors) and other Indian and "oriental" residents, many of whom were Christian and Hindu.<sup>7</sup>

The beliefs and practices known as Longanis attest that modern Mauritians, especially those descended from the colony's African and Malagasy slaves, continue to engage in the kind of religious syncretism frequently found in complex multicultural, creolized societies.<sup>8</sup> Information about the religious practices of their slave ancestors is, however, extremely limited in the archival record.<sup>9</sup> Our knowledge about and understanding of Mauritian slave belief systems is further constrained by the nonexistence of religious structures, similar to temples or mosques, that are clearly associated with the indentured Indians who reached the island during the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> As other contributors to this volume have observed, archaeology has the potential to open a window onto otherwise opaque elements of a people's past and culture. Because of its focus on recovering and analyzing material remains, archaeological research holds out the promise of not only deepening our knowledge and understanding of religious practices associated with slavery in Mauritius and, by implication, elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, but also permitting us to compare such practices with similar phenomena in the Atlantic.<sup>11</sup>

## THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN MAURITIUS

Although religion has long been inextricably intertwined with seafaring, trade, commerce, and migration in the Indian Ocean,<sup>12</sup> historians have paid much less attention to religious syncretism in this oceanic world than in the Atlantic.<sup>13</sup> However, the fact that the Mascarenes drew slaves from a truly global catchment area requires us to pay due attention to religious syncretism in the islands. Early nineteenth-century sources record the presence in Mauritius of slaves of Comorian, Ethiopian, Indian (Bengal, the Coromandel and Malabar coasts, Orissa), Southeast Asian (Bali, Java, Makassar, Nias, Sumatra, Timor), West African (Bambaras, Guineans, Wolofs), and Chinese origin. Slaves exported from Madagascar, Mozambique, and the Swahili Coast, the most important sources of Mascarene chattel labor, came from diverse ethnocultural populations. Those of Malagasy origin included individuals identified as Ambanivolo, Andrantsay, Antaisaka, Antalaotra, Antanosy, Antateime, Antatsimo, Betanimena, Betsileo, Maninga, Merina, Marvace, and Sakalava. Those from eastern Africa came from at least fourteen populations that can be identified with certainty, including the Bisa, Ekoti, Kamanga, Lolo (Lomwe), Makonde, Makua, Maravi, Mrima, Mujao (probably Yao), Ngindo, Nyambane, Nyamwezi, Sagara, and Sena.<sup>14</sup>

While some slaves of Malagasy / East African and South Indian origin may have been acquainted, respectively, with Islam and Christianity, most of the slaves who reached the Mascarenes did so imbued with traditional African belief systems that included polytheism, various forms of animism and anthropomorphism, and ancestor worship.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary accounts of Mauritian colonial life indicate as much. Eighteenth-century visitors to the island commented, for example, on Malagasy slaves' fondness for amulets, objects the French called *gris-gris*.<sup>16</sup> Early nineteenth-century observers of Mauritian life made similar observations. Jacques Milbert notes that the colony's Malagasy slaves exhibited knowledge and interest in magic and "all things uncanny" and believed that "their talismans ... protected [them] against every kind of accident and attributed to them the power to obtain any desired object, the preservation of a good master, or a favorable change in their state."<sup>17</sup> Almost fifty years later, the British missionary Patrick Beaton likewise observes that the colony's slaves had "retained the superstitions and practiced the idolatrous rites peculiar to their native

land” including “a peculiar and extravagant feeling of respect for their ancestors,” the practice of casting lots to predict the future, and the wearing of amulets. Many of the colony’s emancipated slaves, he continues, still wore gris-gris even though they were nominally Christian.<sup>18</sup> Beaton also notes that slaves’ attachment to their native land was an integral component of their religious belief system, so much so that the desire to be buried in their homeland was “perhaps as influential as the love of liberty” behind the attempts by some slaves to escape from the island and reach Madagascar in small canoes or open boats.<sup>19</sup>

Beaton’s account attests that even though Mauritian slave owners sought to suppress these traditional belief systems, Mauritian slaves, like their counterparts in the Americas,<sup>20</sup> adapted, modified, and recreated traditional religious beliefs and practices in various ways. Evidence of such religious syncretism can also be found on Réunion and in the Seychelles. The practices known as *sorcelrie* (sorcery) on Réunion, for instance, are very similar to those associated with Longanis.<sup>21</sup> A strong belief in *nam* (spirits) and gri-gri (sorcery) exists in the Seychelles where shamans, known as *bonom di bwa* (from the French *bonhomme de bois*, or “man of the woods”), are consulted regularly for supernatural guidance in solving everyday problems in a manner comparable to practices in Haitian Vodou. Echoes of this Seychellois tradition are documented in colonial Mauritius, where people in the southern part of the island believed in a mythical giant known as the *om de bwa* (forest man), a figure who, however, apparently lacked the spiritual qualities of his Seychellois counterpart.<sup>22</sup>

## LONGANIS: AN OVERVIEW

Although Longanis is unique to Mauritius, it is not unlike syncretic religions in the Americas such as Candomblé, Obeah, Orisha, and Vodou.<sup>23</sup> While based largely on traditional African beliefs and rituals, it also utilizes Christian and Hindu religious elements, such as crosses and oil lamps. The term Longanis (*longaniste* in French) appears to originate from the French *onguen* (ointment) from which the word *onguenniste* (one who manufactures ointments) was derived. The name is indicative of the therapeutic function that Longanis practitioners are expected to perform.<sup>24</sup> According to Danielle Palmyre, the word means more specifically “a sorcerer who deals with the forces of evil.”<sup>25</sup> As such, the

general understanding is that if the Longanis practitioner can handle the evil forces that can possess a person and cause illness or death, then they can also heal the afflicted both spiritually and physically.<sup>26</sup> In Mauritius, as well as Réunion and the Mauritian dependency of Rodrigues, a Longanis religious ritual is called the *servis* (system).<sup>27</sup>

Longanis encompasses a range of practices to control and channel spiritual forces to divine the source(s) of misfortune, to cure and protect against harm, to avenge injustice and offense, and to influence people's character and destiny; in short, Longanis seeks to bring spiritual and earthly forces into proper balance and harmony. It cannot be considered, however, as an organized religion since it lacks a unified system of cosmological beliefs and practices, a divine pantheon, commonly agreed upon communal or public rituals and ceremonies, gathering centers, or spiritual leaders of congregations. Practitioners can be men or women who work individually or in groups and who perform their services either to meet their own needs or on behalf of clients.<sup>28</sup> Practitioners can also come from different ethnoreligious backgrounds. In 1979–80, medical anthropologist Linda Sussman worked with four “sorcerers”—one Hindu, one Tamil, and two Catholic Creoles.<sup>29</sup> During my own fieldwork in 2013, I had access to three Hindu practitioners. These men and women have been influenced by traditions that Sussman characterizes as a combination of “old European sorcery and alchemy, early Freemasonry, Hindu, Tamil and folk Indian beliefs, Mauritian herbalism and folk beliefs, and Christian beliefs and practices.”<sup>30</sup> Longanis knowledge and techniques are acquired in various ways: by transmission within families, through apprenticeships, through direct communication with a “higher power” or by receiving an “education” in Madagascar. “African” or Malagasy practitioners are regarded as especially knowledgeable and powerful.<sup>31</sup>

People in Mauritius often associate inexplicable misfortune or illness with an act of witchcraft or supernatural evil. An individual's or community's social and economic success is attributed to positive help from supernatural forces, the strength of their gods and saints, and the fervor of their prayers. Understanding this cultural reliance on supernatural forces such as ancestors, spirits, and gods requires us to understand the relationship between these forces and a community. Traditional African religions do not dichotomize between the body and the soul, and Mauritian Creoles (i.e., those of African and Malagasy descent) share

this belief. When a person dies, his or her soul does not leave the body, but the unity of the soul and body become an immaterial entity called *nam*. Because the *nam* possesses the agency associated with a living person and owns the power of the material body, it is more powerful than the soul itself. Death is accordingly viewed not as an end or a separation but as a transformation into immaterial form, a rite of passage par excellence. Funerals prepare the *nam* for its new role; after a funeral, the *nam* becomes a vehicle for assuring a family's social future (e.g., marriages, births of children). By transitioning into the spirit world, the recently deceased becomes an ancestor and acquires the power that ancestral spirits possess. This ancestral spiritual power manifests itself among the living and increases or decreases depending on the extent of these spirits' interaction with the living, which is determined by the number and intensity of prayers, rituals, and sacrifices performed by family members.<sup>32</sup>

Such beliefs and practices exist in many cultures where rites involving the ancestors reinforce the links between the living and the dead and, in so doing, provide protection from the kind of disorder than can threaten society. Illness, for example, is often regarded as being caused by ancestors' unhappiness over social conflict or transgression of sociocultural norms.<sup>33</sup> In Mauritius, and especially among Mauritian Creoles, ancestors also serve an important function in establishing the kind of foundation myth that can be important in creating and maintaining personal and group identity. Known ancestors become, in essence, a way of connecting people with their real but unknown ancestors, thereby connecting the living with their ancestral homeland. The Creole mythical ancestor called *Gran-dimounn Malgas* (lit. "Great Ancestor Malgache") or *Papa Malgas* ("Father Malgache"), for example, embodies a powerful spirit-protector from Madagascar that people who claim Malagasy heritage often consider as the first of their kind to reach Mauritius.<sup>34</sup>

Mauritian Creoles live in a universe marked by apprehension about the disorder that ancestors can create through witchcraft.<sup>35</sup> Since they do not perceive themselves as masters of their destiny, Creoles refer continuously to their gods/spirits/ancestors to avoid making choices or decisions that might give offence or create disorder. *Longanis* is used to resist, counter, or retaliate against attack. Such ritual treatments are deemed effective only if the malevolent spell is turned back on the person



who initiated it. In severe cases, the spirit(s) have to be diverted and the interaction between the sacred and the profane must be secured by a sacrifice, such as that known as the *poul nwar* (black hen). Such sacrifices usually occur at night and require “a gift of a life,” which can be a chicken or any other small animal or, more recently, a vegetable such as a squash (*courgette chinois*), lemon, or coconut.<sup>36</sup> The black hen service, which is also practiced in Réunion, is often considered to be of South Indian origin given its similarity to the ritual conducted in honor of the Hindu goddess Petiaye. This ritual, however, is associated not just with persons of African or Indian descent. French colonists brought *La poule noire* (black chicken) and *Le petit Albert*, popular eighteenth-century grimoires or books of natural and cabalistic knowledge, with them when they came to the Mascarenes.<sup>37</sup>

In 1928, the widespread belief in “sorcery” prompted the Catholic bishop of Mauritius to complain about its popularity among the island’s inhabitants. He associates this belief in sorcery, which he referred to as “that witchcraft or Petit Albert,” with the island’s uneducated classes who also professed some form of Christianity. The bishop, who compares this activity to the cult of the devil, notes that those who relied on such practices did so for personal gain or to injure their enemies, and describes these practices as having an erotic or obscene character, including using Christian sacred names and phrases and the crucifix in blasphemous ways. The bishop notes that he had also seen pins stuck into various parts of saints’ images.<sup>38</sup> The bishop’s negative remarks about Longanis echoed early European accounts of Obeah in the Caribbean.<sup>39</sup>

Longanis rituals use personal objects such as clothes or hair associated with the intended victim to channel the spirits into possessing the victim and causing illness or death. To ensure this supernatural intervention’s effectiveness, rituals are performed in places that, because they are perceived as being situated between this world and the next, are deemed to be especially powerful because they are where spirits are frequently present. Such locales include cemeteries, crossroads, and places with large, old trees, including forests. Rituals performed in cemeteries or at graves are referred to as “raising the dead.”<sup>40</sup> The graves of those who died a violent and/or premature death, including children, are regarded as especially powerful spiritual locations. Longanis is also performed near religious shrines or sacred buildings, such as temples or

mosques, and even in old colonial forts. In addition to being recognized as places of powerful supernatural spirituality, such sites must be remote enough to ensure that practitioners will not be disturbed during the performance of rituals.

Mauritian Creoles commonly associate witchcraft not only with their own community, but also with Indo-Mauritians. While people may consult specialists and visit temples and shrines associated with all of the island's major religions during times of illness or misfortune, they usually deal with specialists from their own religion and/or ethnic group. This practice reflects the fact that those seen by one ethnoreligious community as religious specialists may be regarded by members of other communities as sorcerers. The power attributed to ancestors is also often seen as community specific. Hindu priests, for example, are regarded as the most powerful interlocutors to invoke or remove spells involving Hindu gods and saints, while among Creoles, the power of Malagasy ancestors is seen as surpassing that of any other ethnic ancestors.<sup>41</sup>

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND LONGANIS

Excavations at cemeteries near Le Morne Brabant and Bois Marchand and archaeological surveys of two other sites at Bras d'Eau and Mon Loisir sugar estate afford an opportunity to begin exploring this particular manifestation of religious syncretism in the southwestern Indian Ocean in greater detail.

### *Le Morne Cemetery*

Le Morne Brabant and its surrounding landscape are strongly associated with slavery in modern Mauritian consciousness.<sup>42</sup> Le Morne, an imposing inselberg with a flat top situated at the far southwestern corner of the island, is popularly believed to have served as a refuge for fugitive or maroon slaves during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Stories of these runaways and their creation of a "maroon republic," where those who had been enslaved became free again, have become an integral component of Creole oral history.<sup>43</sup> In 2008, the Le Morne Cultural Landscape was inscribed as a UNESCO WHS to commemorate slave resistance and maroonage around the globe.<sup>44</sup> Located within the WHS's buffer zone is a burial ground that is the only archaeological site

on the island associated with slaves or the island's free(d) population of color (*gens de couleur*) that has been excavated to date. Documentary information about the cemetery is, unfortunately, almost nonexistent. The first known reference to it comes from an 1880 map of the area. The cemetery is not considered to be consecrated ground; no recognized religious or ethnic entity or group, including the Catholic Church, claims it.

Conditions at the cemetery at the beginning of an initial survey in 2009 can only be characterized as extraordinary. The five readily visible graves were delineated by basalt rock, only two of which had a covering cairn or stone structure.<sup>45</sup> These graves were positioned around the two oldest trees in the area together with the remains of a burned cross at the burial ground's "center."<sup>46</sup> These trees had a number of bottle caps nailed to their trunks, under which were small packets containing pieces of fabric with names written on them. The presence of rusty nails in the tree trunks without attached bottle caps indicates that the cemetery has been a site of ritual activity for some time. West of these five graves was a mound containing various materials, including halved coconuts mixed with fragments of thin red and white candles, empty metal food tins, pieces of red ribbon and black fabric, plastic cups and bottles, glass rum bottles, hundreds of earthenware *diya* (Hindu oil lamps), plastic bags that often contained fruit such as pineapple and papaya, and the remains of small animals such as dogs, birds, and poultry, some of which were decomposed while others were still "fresh." The same kinds of objects were distributed carefully on and around the graves, together with burned cigarettes, incense sticks, and coins, the oldest of which was dated 1955. Three of these five graves also had the remains of sacrificed animals, either on top of the grave itself or nearby. The villagers who assisted us with the survey considered the cemetery to be a place where Longanias was practiced, a view reinforced by their unease about people roaming around a site associated with beliefs they viewed in negative terms.

The excavation of nine of the cemetery's graves in 2010 yielded evidence that point to the existence of African or Malagasy religious beliefs in early nineteenth-century Mauritius.<sup>47</sup> The graves' orientation is perhaps the most obvious evidence supporting such an interpretation: the longitudinal axis of each grave was aligned toward Le Morne Brabant and ultimately toward Madagascar and/or the East African coast.<sup>48</sup> The grave goods found during excavation likewise point to these being

non-Christian burials.<sup>49</sup> The cemetery's long-term association with non-Christian beliefs and practices was reinforced when two dolls made of organic materials including small branches and moss were uncovered about twenty centimeters below the surface of one grave (fig. 9.1). Careful review of the grave's stratigraphy revealed that these dolls, which were similar to those found elsewhere on the cemetery's surface, had been placed on the grave about two decades earlier during a Longanis ceremony.

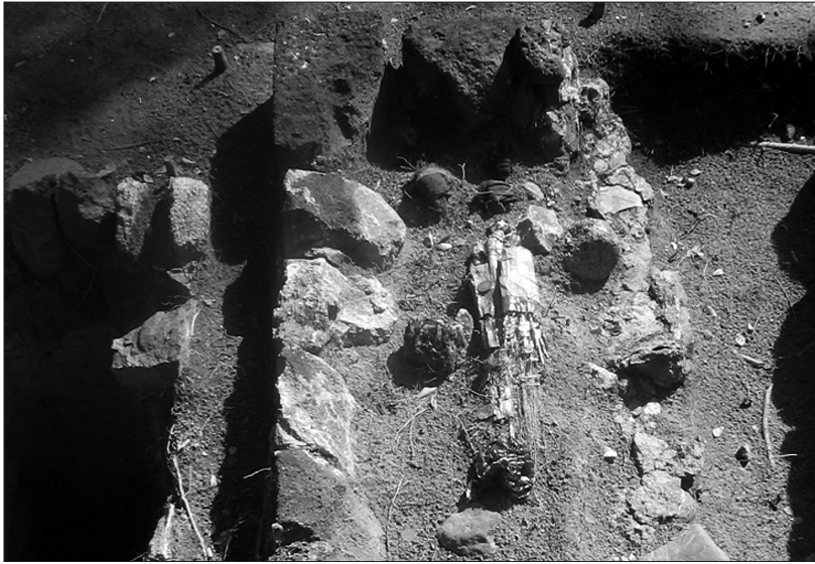


FIGURE 9.1. The two dolls, discovered in the fill of grave seven in Le Morne cemetery. (Photo by D. Calan.)

### *Bois Marchand Cemetery*

The practice of Longanis is not limited just to the southern parts of the island where most Mauritian Creoles live. Bois Marchand cemetery, located approximately twelve kilometers northeast of Port Louis, was the third largest cemetery in the world at the time it was established in 1867 by the colonial government to handle the remains of some of the tens of thousands of men, women, and children who died during the malaria epidemic that ravaged the colony during 1867–68. Bois Marchand

provides a different perspective from which to view Longanis. More specifically, Longanis is practiced at Bois Marchand in both officially sanctioned sacred areas, such as those containing large Christian crosses, and in areas that are not normally considered as sacred, such as the crossroads between the cemetery's different sections.

Does this mean that Longanis as practiced at Bois Marchand differs in any significant way from that practiced at Le Morne? At Bois Marchand, the places where rituals are performed are not secret and, indeed, these rituals can be performed in broad daylight without being apparent even to people who happen to be nearby. On several occasions, for example, Longanis was obviously performed after a funeral while the archaeological team worked less than fifty meters away. Although we saw no one in the area after mourners had departed, we came across evidence of a ritual performance as we left the excavation site. The elements commonly associated with Longanis ritual practice—a cut lemon marked with red powder, flowers, money, cigarettes, and, in one case, a decapitated chicken—were laid out in the center of a crossroad. Our Mauritian colleagues asked us not to drive over these objects, but to avoid them.

Longanis rituals were also performed at a large Christian cross in one of the cemetery's more prominent sections. After this cross was destroyed, these rituals moved to a new location next to a historic stone building, an abandoned railway station that, because it has a little cross at the end of its gabled roof, is often referred to as a church (fig. 9.2). Longanis offerings were placed on the concrete base of the cross next to the building (figs. 9.3a and b) while the two trees closest to the cross have bottle caps, like those found at Le Morne, nailed to their trunks.

Unlike those at Le Morne, the graves excavated at Bois Marchand did not contain any vestigial evidence of Longanis practice in them. This is not unexpected, since the cemetery is not in an isolated location and it has been subject to governmental regulation, since its establishment in 1867. It is worth noting, however, that the cemetery's association with Longanis extends beyond its being a site where rituals such as those described above are performed. More specifically, we were warned at the beginning of our excavations that any human remains we uncovered might be stolen for "sorcery" use (i.e., for Longanis). Therefore, we had the excavation site guarded at all times when the archaeological team was not present.



FIGURE 9.2. A view of the former train station at Bois Marchand from the cemetery side. In front of it, in line with the door, is the big Christian cross. The concrete foot of the cross is being used for Longanis practices. (Photo by the author.)

### *Bras d'Eau Cemetery*

The cemetery at Bras d'Eau is situated on the island's northeastern coast about five miles from the eponymous sugar estate, which is now protected as a national park. Although a small part of the cemetery is still in use, most of it is abandoned. A large Christian cross has been set up more or less at the center of this burial ground. All the ritual objects associated with Longanis religious practice that we have seen elsewhere were found on the cross's concrete base, the only significant difference being that the earthenware oil lamps at Bras d'Eau were differently shaped and substantially larger than those found elsewhere. A large number of dolls dressed in black clothes were scattered on a heap of ritually used objects that were moved from the central ritual spot. A distinctive feature of Longanis ritual activity at Bras d'Eau was the red thread that was wrapped around the bottom of the cross. The use of the thread in this manner is consistent with Hindu practice in which these are tied to the betel tree, usually found next to Hindu temples or





(a)



(b)

FIGURE 9.3. Remains of Longanis rituals practiced at Bois Marchand cemetery, by the cross at the former train station (a), and in Le Morne cemetery (b). (*Photos by the author.*)

shrines. Since the northern part of the island is home to many more descendants of indentured Indian laborers than African or Malagasy slaves, such activity suggests that the Longanis practitioner or client was Hindu and that this particular practice has been transferred from a Hindu temple to a site that is different but still considered to be ritually very powerful.

### *Mon Loisir Sugar Estate*

The religious syncretism and diversity of ritual practice that is a hallmark of Mauritian Longanis is also illustrated by evidence from a cane field that is part of the Mon Loisir sugar estate near Rivière du Rempart in the northeastern part of the island. Here Longanis is practiced in a crossroad between sections of a cane field next to a *kalimai*, or shrine to Kali, a well-known and widely worshipped Hindu goddess closely identified with empowerment and the destruction of evil forces.<sup>50</sup> As Linda Sussman has noted, a shrine to a goddess such as Kali imbues a site with even greater ritual power than it might otherwise have because it brings worshippers' prayers and invocations directly into the deity's presence. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine just how old the Mon Loisir shrine is, but the shrine's location, its simple structure and the equally simple form of the goddess's statue housed in it suggest that this *kalimai* was constructed during the second half of the nineteenth century.

## MATERIALITY AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

Recovering the religious beliefs and practices of Mauritian slaves entails asking the same kind of questions that Charles Orser has posed about African-American slave religions: What did these men and women believe? What components of their original belief system did they retain? How did they negotiate the preservation of their religious beliefs and practices in a multicultural society? What, if any, artifacts or traits of these beliefs and practices survive in the archaeological record? How do we recover and interpret the remains of syncretic belief systems?<sup>51</sup> We will never know with any certainty what religious practices, beliefs, and worldviews slaves brought with them to Mauritius, in part because archival and other contemporary accounts of such beliefs and practices are few and far between and often problematic. Even on those limited



occasions when slaves speak directly to us, as in the complaints they filed with the Protector of Slaves during the late 1820s and early 1830s, their voices were invariably mediated through local whites or colonial officials and tell us little, if anything, about the social, cultural, and religious universe in which these men and women lived.<sup>52</sup>

However, by drawing on the insights provided by anthropology, archaeology, history, and spatial studies, we can begin to tease out a fuller, deeper understanding of slaves' religious attitudes and the roots of Mauritian socioreligious practice. Careful analysis of the material culture recovered from the Le Morne cemetery sheds potential light, for example, on how gens de couleur and/or slaves used burial as a mechanism to maintain links with their ancestral homeland. The ways in which the cemetery's graves are positioned indicate that the people who established and used this burial ground possessed a distinctive sense of the land- and seascape in which they existed. As noted earlier, the graves' longitudinal axes correspond generally with an azimuth toward Madagascar, evidence that suggests the cemetery was essentially a Malagasy burial ground. However, aDNA analysis of the eleven sets of skeletal remains recovered during the 2010 excavation highlights the need to appreciate the complexities of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mauritian life. While this analysis demonstrated that the Malagasy matrilineal line predominated among those buried in the cemetery, it also revealed that the cemetery housed the remains of people of African descent.<sup>53</sup> Such ethnic admixture is consistent with the fact that slaves and free(d) persons of color from different parts of the globe regularly lived in close proximity with one another. What we know about marriage and residential patterns among Mauritian gens de couleur during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries confirms as much. Almost one-third of all free colored marriages during the 1770s and 1780s, for example, involved partners of different ethnicity, while in 1828, 14.6 percent of the 1,056 persons who resided in Port Louis's western suburb, the site of the old Camp des Noirs Libres that had been reserved for persons of African and Malagasy origin or descent, claimed India as their place of birth.<sup>54</sup>

Although no explicitly "African" artifacts, such as blue beads, cowry shells, pierced coins, or crystals, were found in the Le Morne cemetery,<sup>55</sup> the dolls recovered from one of the graves may be interpreted as illustrating that the cemetery has been and continues to be perceived

as an “African” religious space. Many West and Central African cultures make use of such figures in their religious practices. Among the Fon, for example, people project personal anxieties and emotions on to figures known as *bocio* as one way to resolve problems. Among the Bembe, ancestral figures, which are sometimes clothed and hatted, hold relics of the dead. The use of dolls in Mauritian Longanis is also consistent with the practices of other African diasporic religions such as Candomblé, Regla de Ocha, Shango, and Vodou where dolls and other kinds of handmade figures serve various functions.<sup>56</sup> The use of such figures may also reflect the influence of Hindu religious practice. The Mauritian slave population included significant numbers of men, women, and children from Bengal and South India: in 1806, Indians made up 10.2 percent of the island’s 60,646 slaves.<sup>57</sup> Puppet shows, which usually had religious themes and were believed to expel evil spirits and bring rain, were a popular form of cultural performance in medieval India, and such beliefs still persist in some parts of southeastern India.<sup>58</sup>

Two synergetic themes have dominated Mauritian social, cultural, and political life since independence in 1968. The first of these is that the country is a “rainbow” nation in which different communities, like the separate, distinct bands of light that compose a rainbow, live harmoniously together side by side as part of a larger entity. The second such theme is expressed in the slogan *l’unité dans la diversité* (unity in diversity) used regularly by the country’s various political parties and the national government as part of its program to foster cultural development. The tensions, if not contradictions, inherent in such themes and public discourse has, as others have noted, complicated attempts to create a distinctly “Mauritian” sense of national heritage and, by implication, national identity.<sup>59</sup>

Longanis, incorporating as it does traditional African religious as well as Christian and Hindu beliefs and practices, illustrates not only the complexity of the Mauritian experience, but also some of the commonalities shared by its different communities, commonalities that have often been ignored or obscured. We are well advised to remember that Mauritian slaves came not just from Africa and Madagascar, but also from India, Southeast Asia, and even China, that the colony’s free(d) persons of color came from equally diverse cultural backgrounds, and that religious syncretism was an integral part of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mauritian colonial life. Evidence of such activity is

not hard to find. Long before it became the most sacred Hindu space on the island, for example, the volcanic lake known as Grand Bassin in the southern part of the island was a spiritual focal point for Malagasy slaves who perceived this body of water as being connected with their homeland.<sup>60</sup>

Longan's intriguing complexity makes it a logical point of departure from which to study religious plurality in Mauritius not only in the present, but also in the past. Reconstructing religious syncretism in slave societies can be a daunting task because of the difficulties that can limit our ability to discern, much less explore, the sociocultural universe in which slaves and gens de couleur lived. However, as excavations at Le Morne and Bois Marchand demonstrate, careful, informed archaeological research and analysis can allow us to surmount at least some of these limitations and peer with greater acuity through the mists of time in ways that allow us to deepen our understanding of the heritage that our ancestors bequeathed to their descendants.

## NOTES

1. Major studies of the slave and indentured labor trades to Mauritius include: M. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*; and R. Allen, *European Slave Trading*. On the connection between slavery and modern Mauritian identity, see Edward A. Alpers, "Becoming 'Mozambique': Diaspora and Identity in Mauritius," in *History, Memory and Identity*, ed. Vijayalakshmi Teelock and Edward A. Alpers (Port Louis, Mauritius: Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture / University of Mauritius, 2001), 117–56. For a preliminary DNA-based study of Mauritian origins, see Fregel et al., "Multiple Ethnic Origins." About modern Mauritian identity, see Diego Calaon and Corinne Forest, this volume.

2. According to the 2011 census, 50.15 percent of Mauritians are Hindu, 30.5 percent are Christian, and 17.85 percent are Muslim, while the remaining 1.5 percent of the population is Buddhist or practice other faiths. Studies that examine religious history and practice on the island include: Moomtaz Emrith, *The Muslims in Mauritius* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Regent Press, 1967); Amédée Nagapen, *Le catholicisme des esclaves à L'île Maurice* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Diocèse de Port Louis, 1984); Benjamin Moutou, *Les chrétiens de l'île Maurice* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Best Graphics, 1996); Huguette Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo, *Culte chinois et catholicisme* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Mission Catholique Chinoise / Diocèse de Port Louis, 2002); Jahangeer-Chojoo, *La rose et le henné*; Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota,

*L'hindouisme mauricien*; and Marina Carter and James Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong: Sino-Mauritian Settlement and Economic Consolidation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

3. *Ordonnance ou Code Noir: Lettres patentes en forme d'Édit concernant Les Esclaves des Iles de Bourbon et de France, Décembre 1723* (Cormandel, Mauritius: Service des Archives de l'île Maurice, 2000), 21.

4. Père Laval was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1979. The annual festival held on the anniversary of his death attracts Mauritians of all religious backgrounds to his tomb.

5. Burton Benedict, "Slavery and Indenture in Mauritius and Seychelles," in *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, ed. James L. Watson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 135–68.

6. R. Allen, "Marie Rozette," 353.

7. M. J. Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque à l'île de France, au Cap de Bonne-Espérance et à Ténériffe*, vol. 2 (Paris: A. Nepveu, 1812), 187–88; James Holman, *A Voyage around the World, including Travels in Africa, Asia, Australasia, America, Etc., Etc.*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder, 1834), 416–18; and Patrick Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies; or, Five Years in Mauritius* (London: James Nisbet, 1859; rpt., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1971), 182–89. For recent scholarship on the festival, see Jahangeer-Chojoo, *La rose et le henné*, 134–45.

8. On Mauritian syncretic practice, see Pierre-Edmond Pulvénils de Séigny, *Vraies et extraordinaires aventures de Pierre-Edmond Pulvénils de Séigny chez des sorciers de l'île Maurice: "Traiteurs" et "Longanistes" au travail et des scènes terrifiantes d'exorcismes* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Stationery Manufacturers Ltd., 1996). On syncretism in the Seychelles, see Marion Benedict, "Fact Versus Fiction: An Ethnographic Paradox Set in the Seychelles," *Anthropology Today* 1, no. 5 (1985): 21–23.

9. See Richard Allen, this volume.

10. The earliest Hindu temple on the island, the *Murugun kovil* at Clémencia in Flacq district, was constructed c. 1846.

11. On archaeology and slave religion in the Americas, see: Samford, "Archaeology of African-American Slavery"; Jerome S. Handler, "An African-Type Healer/Diviner and His Grave Goods: A Burial from a Plantation Slave Cemetery in Barbados, West Indies," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 91–130; Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowen, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998); and Chris M. Manning, "Magic, Religion, and Ritual in Historical Archaeology," *Historical Archaeology* 48, no. 3 (2014): 1–10.

12. For overviews of religion, especially Islam, and trade in the Indian Ocean, see: M. Pearson, *Indian Ocean*, 62–112; and Alpers, *Indian Ocean in World History*, 40–64. Specialized studies include: Hourani, *Arab*

*Seafaring*; Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*; Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe*; Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barendse, *Arabian Seas*; Ho, *Graves of Tarim*; Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures*; and Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*.

13. For example: Diana De G. Brown and Mario Bick, "Religion, Class, and Context: Continuities and Discontinuities in Brazilian Umbanda," *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 1 (1987): 73–93; John Thornton, "On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas," *Americas* 44, no. 3 (1988): 261–78; Jose Canizares, "Santeria: From Afro-Caribbean Cult to World Religion," *Caribbean Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1994): 59–63; James Houk, *Spirits, Blood and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); João José Reis and Arthur Brakel, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Heywood, *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations*; J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba: African Systems of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Sweet, *Recreating Africa*; Bilby and Handler, "Obeah"; Lorand J. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Fandrich, "Yorùbá Influences"; Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Fálolá, and Akintunde Akínymí, eds., *Sàngó in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Ochoa, *Society of the Dead*; Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Engler, "Umbanda and Africa."

14. R. Allen, *European Slave Trading*, 73–74.

15. For an overview of African traditional religions, see: Aloysius Muzzanganda Lugira, *African Religion: A Prolegomenal Essay on the Emergence and Meaning of African Autochthonous Religions* (Nyangwe, Zaïre: Omenana, 1981); Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E. A. van Beek, and Dennis L. Thomson, eds., *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression* (London: J. Currey, 1994); Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, "African Traditional Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming, Kathryn Madden, and Stanton Marlan (New York: Springer US, 2010), 26–31; and Sarwuan Daniel Shishima, *African Religion: A Bird's Eye View* (Makurdi, Nigeria: Obeta Continental Press, 2014). On specific African traditional belief systems, see John Middleton and E. H. Winter, eds., *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

16. Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 91–94, 103, 122.

17. Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque*, vol. 2, 164–65.

18. Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies*, 78.
19. Beaton, 80. On maroonage in Mauritius, see R. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers*, 35–54.
20. For example: Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); John McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Herman L. Bennet, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).
21. For local religious practice in Réunion, see Christian Ghasarian, “Power and Beliefs in Réunion Island,” in *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*, ed. Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (New York: Routledge, 2010), 360–73; and Jean François Sam Long, *Sorcellerie à la Réunion* (Saint-Denis, Réunion: Anchaing UDIR, 1979).
22. The *om de bwa* no longer figures in the Mauritian popular religious pantheon. Maya de Salle-Essoo and Sophie Le Chartier, *Anthropological Survey of La Gaulette and Coteau Raffin* (Réduit: University of Mauritius Press, 2008), 347.
23. Bilby and Handler, “Obeah”; and Palmyre, *Culture créole*, 96.
24. Longanis practitioners are occasionally referred to as *le dokter san souille* (the doctor without soles [i.e., shoes]), as Mauritian slaves were not allowed to wear shoes. The notion of the Longanis as a “barefoot doctor” is also consistent with slaves having to rely largely on their own medical knowledge and practices, some of which survive in creolized form. Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 134–35; and Linda K. Sussman, “Herbal Medicine on Mauritius,” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 2, no. 3 (1980): 259–78.
25. Palmyre, *Culture créole*, 102–3.
26. de Salle-Essoo, “Le profane et le sacré,” 117–20.
27. C. Barat, M. Carayol, and R. Chaudenson, *Magie et sorcellerie à La Réunion* (St. Denis: Livres Réunion, 1983).
28. de Salle-Essoo, “Le profane et le sacré”; and Palmyre, *Culture créole*, 85–104.
29. Linda K. Sussman, “Unity in Diversity in a Polyethnic Society: The Maintenance of Medical Pluralism on Mauritius,” *Medical Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (1981): 251.
30. Sussman, 252.

31. Sussman, 252.
32. Austine S. O. Okwu, "Life, Death, Reincarnation, and Traditional Healing in Africa," *Journal of Opinion* 9, no. 3 (1979): 19–24; and Palmyre, *Culture créole*, 94–96. On nam among African diasporic communities in the Americas, see: Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Grey Gundaker, "Creolization, Nam, Absent Loved Ones, Watchers, and Serious Play with 'Toys,'" in *Creolization as Cultural Creativity*, ed. Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 68–108; Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 66–67; and Jerome C. Branche, *The Poetics and Politics of Diaspora: Transatlantic Musings* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 53–63. On nam in Haitian vodou, see Karen McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study," in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–26.
33. Innocent Chilaka Onyewuenyi, *African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal* (Enugu, Nigeria: Snaap Press, 1996), 37–42; and Danielle Palmyre-Florigny, "L'identité créole à l'île Maurice; Une identité fermée ou ouverte? Réflexions sur le recours à l'ancestralité," *Revi Kiltir Kreol* 2 (2003): 1–6.
34. Colwell-Chanthaphonh and de Salle-Essoo, "Saints and Evil," 270–71.
35. Françoise Dumas-Champion, "Le sang y accorde. La relation culturelle entre vivants et ancêtres chez les Réunionnais d'origine malgache," in *Religions et pratiques de puissance*, ed. Albert de Surgy (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 315–53; and de Salle-Essoo, "Le profane et le sacré," 120–22.
36. It should be noted that Longanis is technically illegal, particularly because of the unregulated animal sacrifice it can entail.
37. On such texts, see: Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163–64; and Montague Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. / Courier Corporation, 2000), 77–79. French grimoires played a significant role in the development of Haitian Vodou. François Regourd, "Mesmerism in Saint-Domingue: Occult Knowledge and Vodou on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," in *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World*, ed. James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew (New York: Routledge, 2008), 311–32; LeGrace Benson, "How Houngans Use the Light from Distant Stars," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 106–35; and Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, *Spirit Possession in French, Haitian, and Vodou Thought: An Intellectual History* (London: Lexington Books, 2015).
38. M. Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, 188.



39. Bilby and Handler, "Obeah," 157–66.
40. A similar practice in Reunion is known as "disturbing the souls." See: de Salle-Essoo, "Le profane et le sacré," 117; Palmyre, *Culture créole*, 85–104; and Prosper Ève, "Quelques considérations sur le thème du 'grand voyage' à La Réunion: De la veillée mortuaire aux âmes errantes et à leur manipulation," in *L'éternel jamais: Entre le tombeau et l'exil*, ed. Jean-François Reverzy and Christian Barat (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), 33–56.
41. Sussman, "Unity in Diversity"; de Salle-Essoo, "Le profane et le sacré"; and Palmyre, *Culture créole*, 85–104.
42. See, for example: Rosabelle Boswell, "Heritage Tourism and Identity in the Mauritian Villages of Chamarel and Le Morne," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2005): 283–95; and Boswell, "Multiple Heritages, Multiple Identities: The Southwest Indian Ocean," in *Heritage, Memory and Identity. Cultures and Globalization*, ed. Helmut Anheier and Yudhishtir Raj Isar, Series 4 (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 169–76.
43. For example, Ramesh Ramdoyal, *Tales from Mauritius* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), 1–7.
44. See the UNESCO website: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1259>.
45. The 2009 survey found a total of twenty-one features; subsequent investigations have increased that number to forty-five.
46. Whether the cross had been burned accidentally or intentionally was unclear.
47. This date is suggested by the recovery from one grave of the remains of a fabric purse under the skeleton's head that contained sixteen coins minted in France and Italy between 1812 and 1828.
48. The proper orientation was the result of using major stars and star constellations as points of reference. For further information on the astronomical knowledge in Eastern Africa and Madagascar, especially on stellar navigation, see: Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, 420–36; and Keith Snedegar, "Astronomy in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (New York: Springer, 2008), 368–75.
49. For a fuller description, see Seetah, "Objects Past, Objects Present."
50. For a fuller discussion of kalimais, see Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota, *L'hindouisme mauricien*.
51. Charles E. Orser Jr., "The Archaeology of African-American Slave Religion," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4, no. 1 (1994): 33–45.
52. See R. Allen, this volume.
53. Fregel et al., "Multiple Ethnic Origins"; and Fregel et al., "Genetic Impact of Slavery Abolition in Mauritius: Ancient DNA Data from Le Morne and Bois Marchand Cemeteries" (paper presented at the 80th



annual meeting of the Society of American Archaeologists, San Francisco, CA, 13–15 April 2015).

54. R. Allen, “Marie Rozette,” 354.

55. Ross W. Jamieson, “Material Culture and Social Death: African-American Burial Practices,” *Historical Archaeology* 29, no. 4 (1995): 39–58.

56. Gundaker, “Creolization, Nam.”

57. Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque*, vol. 2, 233.

58. Victor Babu, *Popular Culture and Religion in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2005), 146–53.

59. See Calaon and Forest, this volume.

60. Anouck Carsignol-Singh, “L’Inde et la production de l’indianité a Maurice,” in *Indianité et créolité à l’île Maurice*, ed. Catherine Servan-Schreiber (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2014), 56.

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# Connecting Continents

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in the Indian Ocean World*

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