

## Article

# Mauritians and Latter-Day Saints: Multicultural Oral Histories of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints within “The Rainbow Nation”

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**Abstract:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emerged within the Mauritian landscape in the early 1980s after the arrival of foreign missionary work. With a population of Indian, African, Chinese, French heritage, and other mixed ethnicities, Mauritius celebrates multiculturalism, with many calling it the “rainbow nation”. Religiously, Hinduism dominates the scene on the island, followed by Christianity (with Catholicism as the majority); the small remainder of the population observes Islam or Buddhism. Although Mauritian society equally embraces people from these ethnic groups, it also has historically marginalized communities who represent a “hybrid” of the mentioned demographic groups. This article, based on ethnographic research, explores the experiences of Mauritian Latter-day Saints as they navigate the challenges and implications of membership in Mormonism. Specifically, it focuses on how US-based Mormonism has come to embrace the cultural heritage of people from the various diaspora and how Mauritian Latter-day Saints perceive their own belonging and space-making within an American born religion. This case study presents how the local and intersecting adaptations of language, race, and local leadership within a cosmopolitan society such as Mauritius have led to the partial hybridization of the Church into the hegemony of ethnic communities within Mauritian Latter-day Saint practices. These merging of cultures and world views prompts both positive and challenging religious experiences for Mauritian Church members. This article illustrates the implications and pressures of the Church trying to globalize its faith base while adapting its traditionally Anglocentric approaches to religious practices to multiracial, multicultural cosmopolitan communities such as Mauritius.



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## 1. The Paradox of Multiculturalism

In Mauritius, we are proud of our multiculturalism society. Mauritius stands out for its unique blend of cultures, races, religions, and celebrations thanks to its ancestral lines that are very diverse. But when all the ethnicities and races are united under a common religious faith, which in this case is Mormonism, suddenly, race, ethnicities, and cultures become a taboo subject.<sup>1</sup>

Samantha, Mauritian Latter-day Saint woman, USA

Samantha, a middle age Mauritian Latter-day Saint living in North America is of a mixed ethnic background. This quotation is an illustration of the tension members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints feel in Mauritius.<sup>2</sup> They hear messages from the Church directing equality and color-blindness, but at the same time, in Mauritian culture with its ideal of a “rainbow nation”, ethnic and cultural difference is very important. Thus, Mauritian church members struggle to reconcile this ideal of unity with the existing cultural and ethnic tensions in Mauritian society.<sup>3</sup>

Why does Samantha feel it is taboo to discuss race, ethnicity, and culture in a country that prides itself on its multiculturalism? Exploring the intersections between race, ethnicity, religion, and identity in Mauritius offers a rich opportunity to examine how the Church is

tackling this situation. More broadly, this case study informs discussions of Christianity and religious politics in the Global South.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I explore the challenges and implications to the Church arising from their embrace of the cultural heritage of people from the various diaspora. I also illustrate the challenges and implications that Mauritian Latter-day Saints face, coming from a myriad of cultures, as they embrace Mormonism. Offering a multifaceted perspective on the history of religiosity in Mauritius will help situate how Mauritian members at the intersection of their “rainbow nation” experience an American-born Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Mauritius, a small island located off the east coast of Madagascar, gained its independence on 12 March 1968 (Addison and Hazareesingh 1989; de l’Estrac 2007). Because of the intermingling of ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages, the newly independent Mauritian government began promoting the island as the “rainbow nation” out of fear of potential ethnic clashes.<sup>5</sup> With a population of Indian, African, Chinese, French heritage, and others of mixed ethnicities, Mauritius society celebrates multiculturalism as a positive aspect of everyday life. Throughout the years, Mauritius emerged as a positive example of the success of embracing multiculturalism on a societal and legislative level. It emphasizes and encourages its citizens to embrace a national identity as well as an ethnic identity. This duality of national and ethnic identity is not seen as hindering but rather as enhancing the mutual respect and recognition between different ethnic groups in Mauritius (Ng Tseung-Wong and Verkuyten 2015). Indians form the dominant ethnic group on the island, followed those of African descent (Creoles), Franco Mauritians, and Chinese Mauritians. Religiously, Hinduism dominates the scene on the island, followed by Christianity (with Catholicism as the majority); the small remainder of the population observes Islam or Buddhism.

Although Mauritian society equally embraces people from these ethnic groups, it also marginalizes anyone who represents a “hybrid” of the distinct demographic groups. Consequently, the title “rainbow nation” is also problematic, as Mauritians remain racially, culturally, and ethnically segregated while still embracing their Mauritian identity. Multiculturalism in Mauritius masks the complicated power structure between ethnicities. In the religious sphere, most Mauritians are also still divided along racial and ethnic lines. In many cities and towns on the island, it is common to see a Catholic Church, a Mandir, a Kovil, and a Mosque in the same neighborhood. Hindus pray at the Mandir and Kovil, Muslim Mauritians attend the mosque, and Catholics go to the Catholic mass. By worshipping at their respective religious buildings, each ethnic community maintains a distance during religious worship.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emerged within this complicated society in the early 1980s. When converts of many ethnicities and races attend The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, all members, regardless of race and ethnicity, worship in one place together. To the white expatriates or North American Church leaders overseeing the Church in Mauritius, all the members are the same: Mauritians. However, that is not the case. In Mauritius, dominant ethnic communities interact with marginalized ethnic communities such as the Creole community, making the relationships between Mauritian brothers and sisters in the gospel more nuanced and complex. In this article, I will discuss two factors, holiday celebrations and language, that illustrate that ethnic conflict and hegemony in Mauritian society persist in Mauritian Latter-day Saint congregations despite leaders’ pleas for color-blindness. I begin the discussion by elucidating how the history of ethnicity and race in Mauritius impacted the arrival, development, and growth of the Latter-day Saint Church in the “rainbow nation”.

## 2. The Beginning of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: Ethnicities, Race, and Local Adaptation in Mauritius



On 25 February 1982, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints organized its first branch in Mauritius. Six years later, Marvin J. Ashton offered a dedicatory prayer in Mauritius, stating, “We know this land is a link between Western and Eastern cultures. . . . We dedicate this beautiful island . . . in accordance with thy present and future plans for not only the growth but the prosperity and peace that the gospel can bring.” The picture above shows the Mauritian Latter-day Saints of various ethnic communities who were members of this branch in 1982. Over the years, the branch’s demographics shifted, and the once multiracial, multiethnic community became more racially homogeneous.<sup>6</sup> The first early members came from various religious and ethnic backgrounds, such as Creoles, Indians (Hindi-speaking, Tamilians, and Telegus), and mixed ethnic Mauritians.

This section discusses the experiences of Mauritian Latter-day Saints in relation to local adaptation, race, and power from 1978 to 1999. The Mauritian case study shows that converts do not cross over to a new religious community with a clean slate. Rather, they bring with them their cultural and previous religious beliefs.

### 2.1. Latter-Day Saint Experiences of Hybridity

Historian scholar Peter Burke argues that hybridization “sometimes takes place at someone’s expense”, reminding us of the power struggle between groups of people (Burke 2009, p. 6). This case study demonstrated that the attempts at hybridization are accepted only so long as Mauritians stay within their respective ancestral religious spaces—namely, Christianity for Creoles, gens de couleurs, and Franco-Mauritians and Hinduism for Mauritians of Indian descent. For the Creole Latter-day Saint community, the process of hybridization in Mauritius is an ongoing positive experience, as the Kreol language and Creole culture are gradually influencing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mauritius.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the Indo-Mauritian Latter-day Saints, by contrast, hybridity is limited as the Creole-dominated Church in Mauritius is less willing to adapt to Indian culture. The skepticism about incorporating elements of Indian culture into the Latter-day Saint community likely stems from the fact that Mauritians of Indian descent are associated with the Hindu religion as well as from the segregated form of multiculturalism that permeates Mauritius.

Historian scholar Baer argues that the process of conversion is divided into four categories: acculturation, adhesion or hybridity, syncretism, and transformation (Baer 2014). This article focuses primarily on one of the categories mentioned by Baer: hybridity. It analyzes the relationships of interviewees with their Latter-day Saint faith, demonstrating that hybridity affects the interviewees' religious and cultural spaces differently depending on their ethnicity. Creoles are able to hybridize Mormonism with their local cultures and traditions successfully, while Indo-Mauritian Saints face challenges to their attempts at hybridization. One example of the successful hybridization of Mormonism with Creole culture is the use of the Kreol language during worship services.<sup>8</sup> The use of Kreol in the Church demonstrates that, to some extent, the Church is willing to adapt to local cultures. However, the backlash following the Diwali celebration in the branch in Mauritius underscores that there are limits to what the Church's local leaders will accept when it comes to local adaptations.

Indo-Mauritian Latter-day Saints likely find resistance toward their attempts at local adaptation due to the cultural tendency of Mauritians to embrace diversity only so long as different demographic groups remain separate and independent. The Church's reluctance to embrace local Indian cultural adaptations is alienating Indo-Mauritians from the Church and undermining the diversity within the Mauritian Latter-day Saint community. Yet, one can argue that because Creoles continue to be politically and socially excluded by the Indian dominated government, Latter-day Saint Creoles are reluctant to give up their power privilege in the Church in Mauritius, thus demonstrating that race and power relations on the island influence the Church. The broader implication for Mormonism is that in cosmopolitan societies such as Mauritius, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' willingness to be open to the idea of consciously embracing local adaptations from every ethnic group will create a multicultural theology, where all of them are invited to "come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female . . . all are alike unto God."<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2. *The Diwali Saga*

In general, the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints meet every Sunday to worship together. In addition to Sunday worship, members are encouraged to meet for wholesome activities, where they are "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the Saints" (Ephesians 2:19). The main objective of these activities is to "foster unity and personal growth", "giving [members] a sense of belonging and mutual support" within their congregation.<sup>10</sup> The following case study explores the interactions between cultural, ethnic, and religious identities in the Latter-day Saints branch in the 1990s in Mauritius.

Hybridity is best defined as "an umbrella covering a variety of different phenomena and processes" (Burke 2016; Baer 2014). In other words, hybridity refers to any attempt to blend elements of two or more cultures in a single act. The first model of hybridity and acculturation that I will analyze is the celebration of the Diwali festival in Mauritius. The following interviews of former Indian Latter-day Saints, a current Franco Mauritian practitioner of Latter-day Saint faith, and a current practitioner who is Indian offer different perspectives of this event in the Church in Mauritius.

Diwali, which literally means "a row of lights", is a Hindu festival. Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated in different ways and by several religious traditions (including Jains, Sikhs, and Christians) with the primary focus on the triumph of light over darkness. The historical narratives of the Diwali festival vary from the celebration of the harvest season to the start of a New Year, but the most well-known is the epic Hindu story of the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after defeating Ravana. Cast out from the northern kingdom of Ayodha, Lord Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshman experienced perilous adventures by fighting against Ravana, a force of evil. After 14 years of exile, the trio started making their way back to the northern part of India. During their journey, Hindus lit Diyas (earthen lamps) in their honor to celebrate the conquest of good over evil. Since



then, Diwali has become known as the symbolic celebration of light overcoming darkness. Hindu members of the Indian diaspora celebrate Diwali as a religious observance, but for Indians of other faiths, Diwali is “a celebration of one’s Indian identity” (Kulkarni 2011). Some Indian members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wanted to communally honor their Indian cultural identity and the symbolic triumph of light over darkness, which prompted them to propose hosting a Diwali branch activity.

### 2.3. *The Indian Latter-Day Saint Perspective*

In the late 1990s, the branch in Mauritius decided to celebrate the Diwali festival, not as a Hindu celebration but a celebration of the Indian culture. It is noteworthy to understand that in Mauritius, Indian culture is synonymous with Hinduism. Diwali is a public holiday on the island, and so it is a well-known festival. At the time, the Branch president, a Franco-Mauritian who had lived abroad for years, moved back to Mauritius. The Relief Society President, a recent convert of Indian descent, proposed the idea of celebrating an Indian cultural event to the Church leaders in Mauritius. Both Nathan (who is Indian) and his wife, Rachel (who is of mixed ethnicity), attended the event and related their experiences:

The Diwali branch activity was a hit. Since we live in a multiracial and multiethnic country, we wanted to bring that Indian cultural touch in the Church activity. They were approximately 60 people attending. We had Indian food and Indian sweets. We all got dressed up in Indian attire. We put little diyas on the front lawn of the Church. The Church emphasizes family history and family heritage. This is our heritage.<sup>11</sup>

As happy as the celebration was for Nathan and Rachel, not all members of the branch in Mauritius approved of the event. Nathan explained, “After the Diwali celebration, some members of Creole descent were not happy that there were Indian lamps during the activity. They said that it was Hinduism. They complained to the branch presidency.” Nathan and Rachel felt alienated by this hostile response. They did not understand the reason for the hostility. Nathan reasoned, “When we became Latter-day Saints, it doesn’t mean that we need to change our cultural heritage and forget where we came from.” Like other Indians in the Church, Nathan expected to be able to bring his culture with him to the Latter-day Saint Church. However, Nathan explained that the reaction made him feel as if the branch was “asking [him] to completely uproot his identity because [he] chose to join the Church.”<sup>12</sup>

The Diwali incident illustrated the constant negotiation that occurs within the Latter-day Saint community in Mauritius. Among some demographic groups in the Latter-day Saint community, such as the Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, “... there still are many people who are able to switch between cultures as they do between languages or linguistic registers, choosing what they consider to be appropriate to the situation in which they find themselves” (Burke 2009, p. 143). The Diwali episode blurred the lines between religion and cultural identity for Indo-Mauritians, however, showing that not all Latter-day Saints can switch between various parts of their identities with equal impunity. The experience of Indo-Mauritians in terms of their attempts to integrate their Mormon faith with their Hindu cultural identity opens the door to conversations on hybridity. Some Indo-Mauritians who have converted to Mormonism have sought to create a hybrid version of their Indo-Mauritian Latter-day faith by infusing it with elements of their Indian traditions and culture—elements that, although historically associated with Hinduism, only carry cultural or communal (as opposed to religious) significance for these Indo-Mauritian Latter-day Saints.

### 2.4. *The Creole Perspective*

During one of the interviews, Rebecca, a member of Indian descent, related an experience during a Relief Society meeting around 2016:

Two or three years ago, the topic of culture came up during one of the Relief Society lessons. Jane, a Church member who is Creole, shared an example of how sometimes culture can be a hindrance for the Saints. Jane shared how she and her family reacted to the Diwali celebration held at the Church in Mauritius. While waiting for her husband to get back home, Jane and her children were getting ready to attend the Diwali night at the Church. At that time, the Church building was in the city of Quatre-Bornes. When Jane's husband got home, he told them that they were not going to the activity. This was because, on his way home, Jane's husband had driven by the Church building and saw lights lit up all around the Church. He stated that they [Church members] were celebrating Diwali in the Church. Jane went on to say that once we join the [Latter-day Saint] Church, we should cut off all the cultural ties related to our previous faith.<sup>13</sup>

After Rebecca related this story, I asked her if anyone in the Relief Society meeting made any comments following this sister's remark. "No, no one said anything", recalled Rebecca. "Even though I am of Indian descent, I stayed quiet, too. I think this is because most members in the Church are Creoles, with a few Indians." Rebecca did not feel comfortable speaking up because, as an Indian, she was in the minority, indicating that the multiculturalism that is embraced in Mauritius at a national level does not permeate all subcultures.

Converts generally feel that part of embracing a new religious tradition requires giving up previous religious practices. However, not all religious practices have religious significance; some may only have cultural or social significance.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the Diwali example shows that Jane saw the Diwali celebration as a Hindu religious festival. For Indo-Mauritians, however, Diwali may not have any religious significance; Diwali may instead just be an Indian cultural holiday that they wish to celebrate without any Hindu religious overtones. The controversy surrounding the Diwali event in the branch raises questions about the fluidity between culture and religion for Indo-Mauritians and other Latter-day Saint converts. Are the Church leaders equipped to understand the various and sometimes conflicting cultures and ethnicities in Mauritius or in countries where there is tremendous diversity?

### 2.5. *The Franco-Mauritian Perspective*

Some non-Indian Latter-day Saints who are members of the Church enjoyed themselves during the Diwali celebration. Esther, a Church convert and Franco-Mauritian who has fair skin, recalled her experience of celebrating Diwali at Church:

The Relief Society President at that time was a woman of Indian descent who grew up Hindu and was a new convert. Since Diwali is a public holiday in Mauritius, this Relief Society President asked the Branch President if the Church could do a Diwali branch activity, focusing on the cultural aspect of the celebration.<sup>15</sup>

Esther noted, "This was not about Hinduism. It was about the celebration of light over evil." Esther enjoyed the celebration. She explained:

We were all dressed up. I borrowed a saree from one of my Indian friends. My friend helped me to wrap the saree around. The members made Indian food and Indian sweets. There were lights everywhere in the Church's front veranda and front yard. Members of all ethnicities wore sarees, churidar, and even the Elders wore the kurta. We all had a wonderful time.

When asked whether she ever felt offended that the branch decided to do the Diwali branch activity, Esther laughed:

Look, my grandfather was a Franco-Mauritian, and he married a Creole woman. I have cousins who are half Muslims, half Tamilian, half Chinese, etc. In my family, it is a mix of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. I can proudly say that I come from a 'true Mauritian family'. Regarding the Diwali activity, I think some

members overreacted because they do not understand the difference between culture and religion. Everyone knows in Mauritius that Diwali is the festival of lights. It means victory of good over evil. For us, Latter-day Saints, where do we first mention light in our Church history? When Joseph Smith was in the woods, he prayed, and, before witnessing the presence of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, he felt the presence of darkness surrounding him. It was the light that broke through the darkness. The Indian Relief Society President, who suggested having Diwali at Church focused only on Indian culture, not the religion.<sup>16</sup>

The statement “this was not about Hinduism” scratches the surface of the debate about the appropriate boundaries between culture and religion. In Jane’s case, Diwali represented Hinduism, while for Nathan, Rachel, and Esther, the Diwali activity at Church represented an Indian cultural celebration. For decades, scholars and religious practitioners have been debating and arguing about the dividing line between culture and religion. To what extent are they separate entities? Where do we draw the distinction between what constitutes cultural practices accompanying converts into a new religious tradition, and what constitutes former religious practices intruding into and contaminating the new faith community? Lastly, how does hybridity play a role in the celebration of Diwali by Indo-Mauritian Latter-day Saints? The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the only Christian faith wrestling with such questions. For example, the Indo Catholics in Mauritius celebrate Diwali in the Catholic Church: Mgr. Maurice Piat, a Franco-Mauritian, often officiated a Diwali Catholic mass in Mauritius in order to make Indo-Mauritian converts feel more welcome. On the opposite side of the spectrum, some protestant pastors in Texas forbade their Indian practitioners from celebrating Diwali, arguing that it is “a major Hindu festival, Christ is not part of the celebration.” (Chitwood 2014) In the case of Mormonism, to what extent will the Church embrace hybridity when it comes to its theology and practice? More importantly, which approach—embracing hybridity as a necessity for attracting diverse congregants or rejecting hybridity as an adulterant of the faith—will dominate the Latter-day Saint theology?

### 3. Language, Belonging, and Multiculturalism at Church

As mentioned above, this article looks at how multiculturalism plays out in Mauritius and its impact on power relations in the Latter-day Saint Church. It also looks at how the Church is responding in a multilingual nation such as Mauritius. After noting the primary language(s) used during worship services among Latter-day Saints in Mauritius and how representative these languages are of the island, it analyzes the nature and relative success of the Church’s ambition to welcome members of diverse ethnic backgrounds into its membership.

As mentioned previously, Kreol is the unofficial dominant vernacular for the majority of Mauritians. Most Mauritians are fluent in French, given that it is the major language of newspapers and media. Government officials use English for written communications and legislation, and teachers use English in public schools. In addition, the government and sociocultural groups promote the use of ancestral languages (Urdu, Tamil, Telegu, Hindi, etc.) among ethnic communities. The mosaic of languages in Mauritius puts many Mauritians in an advantageous position for seeking educational opportunities and jobs overseas. However, the multilingual characteristics in Mauritius also open the door to complex interaction among ethnic groups. Anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr, who writes about the promotion and challenges of language in Mauritius, argued:

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 formed by the cultivation of such “ancestral cultures”, while the Creoles, having recognized claims on an “ancestral culture”, inhabit a more marginal position in the nation. (Eisenlohr 2007, p. 974).

While it is true that many ethnic communities are attached to their ancestral languages for various reasons, including political gain and social and economic benefits, I agree with Eisenlohr that the multilingual environment in Mauritius carries a double burden. The French and English languages are the vestiges of colonial power. Today, Mauritian society considers the French and English languages as elite languages for the upper-middle-class Mauritians, and Kreol is looked down upon despite considerable efforts from the government and pedagogues to promote the Kreol language. Consequently, it is worth studying the relationship between language, race, power, and local leadership in the Mauritian Latter-day Saint congregations.

In addition, the Creole community cannot solely claim Kreol, the Mauritian vernacular, as its own, since most Mauritians—regardless of their ethnic backgrounds—use it in their everyday lives. To many Mauritians, the Kreol language “is central to what many regards as the only unifying cultural process supporting a Mauritian national identity”.<sup>17</sup> In light of the controversies over language, my research regarding the Church in Mauritius sought to answer the following questions: How is the Kreol language accepted in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Rose-Hill, Phoenix, and Flacq branches?

Since the beginning of the Church in Mauritius, the Church leaders have conducted meetings in French. There is no record of the reactions of Mauritian members regarding the mandatory use of the French language at Church. From 1980 to 2004, Church members in Mauritius used French during worshipping time. However, my oral history interviews with some Mauritian members revealed that the members feel uneasy when it comes to the languages used at Church.

Deborah joined the Church in Mauritius in the 1990s. She continues to be active in the Church and currently lives outside of Mauritius. In her interview, she reminisced about her first year in the Church in Mauritius:

The French thing was a weird thing [at Church]. French scriptures, French hymns, and everybody was pretending to be like the French people. It felt awkward. Very few members [at Church] spoke Kreol. There was one woman who was a Church leader of Creole descent, and she made me feel welcome and comfortable. Everyone speaks Kreol in Mauritius. It is a spoken language, not a written language. I think lessons should be in Kreol, and talks should be in Kreol. When talks are given in French, it sounds too formal or posh; it makes people back away. It intimidates people who are not fluent in speaking French or English. Then they think, “Oh, this is an upper-middle-class church.” Mauritians don’t mind having the scriptures in French, but if they have to speak and engage in French only, then it is a problem.<sup>18</sup>

Deborah’s comments echo the comment of a former member, Neil, on the Church meetings in French and English:

One day, I was driving by the Rose-Hill chapel with one of my co-workers, and I told him that I used to go to this Church there. “It is called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church.” My co-worker said, “I heard of that Church. I could never go there; only people that speak French and English can attend Church there.”<sup>19</sup>

Deborah and Neil’s comments and reactions touched on a sensitive point regarding the political, economic, and ethnic associations that different languages carry. In public spaces, colonial languages such as French and English compete on the national level with ancestral languages such as Hindi while the Kreol language is under-valued, unofficial vernacular. Scholar Patrick Eisenlohr, who researches the Kreol language in Mauritius, argued:

Not only were French and Mauritian Creole radically different languages, but 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. (Eisenlohr 2007, p. 982).

The irony of the Latter-day Saint case in Mauritius is that the Creole community had distanced itself from “emancipatory aspirations” in the Church. By avoiding using Kreol during worship time, Mauritian Latter-day Saints have consciously or subconsciously established themselves as members of the upper-class. Because Mauritian society marginalizes the Creole community, the Creole members of the Church have favored the French language over their native tongue in church to reinforce their sense of social upward mobility.

### 3.1. *Clashes of Tongues within a Latter-Day Saint Context*

In January 2004, Church leaders overseeing the Indian Ocean region divided the Rose-Hill branch into two branches: Rose-Hill and Phoenix.<sup>20</sup> The Rose-Hill branch continued to hold its meeting in the Rose-Hill chapel; the Phoenix branch met in a rented building in Vacoas as the Church began construction of the new Phoenix chapel. The creation of the Phoenix branch also came with a twist, with Mauritians and expat Latter-day Saints coming together in one branch. Mauritius is best known for its tourism sector, but over the years, it has also developed as a financial hub for many foreign investors. Today, Mauritius attracts many foreigners from Europe, India, and Africa. In the late 1990s, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mauritius experienced an influx of foreign members, which I will refer to as expat Latter-day Saints. Some of these expat Latter-day Saints spoke English and settled down in Mauritius, leading to ‘a new normal’ during Church worship.

Since the majority of the expats transitioned to the Phoenix branch, the Phoenix branch adapted its practices and guidelines regarding Church languages. Joanna, a life-long Church member in Mauritius, explained: “Sunday school and Relief society [including Priesthood classes] were done in both French and English. The sacrament meeting was done in English and French. Depending on the speakers, there was always a translator available [during Church meetings].”<sup>21</sup> The Rose-Hill branch, which did not have as many expat Latter-day Saints, continued to conduct Church meetings in French.

In the 2000s, the Church leaders in Rose-Hill transitioned to Church worship in Kreol with the limited use of French for the sacrament prayers and hymns. The Church body in the Rose-Hill branch is comprised mainly of people of African ancestry along with a few Indo-Mauritians. However, Church members in the Rose-Hill branch and other branches still debate which language(s) should be used in Church—Kreol, French, or English.

In 2019, I traveled to Mauritius for three weeks and planned to attend both the Rose-Hill and Phoenix branches. The last time I had visited Mauritius was in 2013. When I visited the Rose-Hill branch, I noticed that although members used the Kreol language during Church meetings, some members spoke French when informally addressing each other. Based on my observations at the Rose-Hill branch, Mauritian Saints prefer to use the French language as a way to show that they have moved up the social ladder. In Mauritius, as in many postcolonial countries, languages carry strong implications regarding people’s class and socio-economic status. In Mauritius, the Franco-Mauritians maintained their French language as their primary language; the gens de couleurs and the Creoles speak Kreol but feel a stronger connection to French as opposed to English. This choice of languages reflects the fact that the gens de couleur and Creoles tend to feel more affinity toward the French colonial power. Indo-Mauritians, by contrast, feel more affinity toward the British colonial power and prefer English.

Before I continue describing the changes within the Phoenix branch, it is essential to understand the leadership structure descending from the top or general, the Mission presidency, to the district presidency, and finally to the local branch presidency.

In the Phoenix Branch, Church members are constructing a different narrative regarding the use of languages. As mentioned above, Phoenix branch Church leaders run services in French and English with only a touch of Kreol. This use of both French and English reflects the fact that in 2017, the Phoenix Branch underwent a significant development:

with the approval of the Madagascar mission presidency, two distinct groups emerged into the branch, the English-speaking group and the French/Creole speaking group. The English-speaking group mainly consisted mainly of white expats living in Mauritius, while the French/Creole speaking group consisted mainly of native Mauritians.

The Madagascar mission president oversees all of the missionaries serving in Mauritius and members of the district of Mauritius. Since the beginning of the Church in Mauritius, mission presidents in the Indian Ocean region have all been white members coming from an American or European background; many of them previously served in two-year missions in francophone countries. We should also note that many colored Latter-day Saints have only recently become members of the Church; most members with seniority in the Church are white Americans and Europeans. The Church decided which people to send to Mauritius based on candidates' experience with missionary work in French-speaking countries and based on their history with the Church. Since most lifelong members with knowledge of French are white, it is understandable that predominantly white members rose to the top of the list as being most suitable for establishing the Church on the island.

In 2017, Church leaders organized the first Church district in Mauritius. Specifically, the Rose-Hill, Phoenix, and Flacq branches joined to form the district of Mauritius. Leading the district of Mauritius is a South African leader; he is the District President, and he serves with two Mauritian counselors of mixed Indian and African ancestry. At a lower level of leadership under the District presidency are the three branch presidencies in Mauritius. Each branch presidency is made up solely of local members, most of whom represent African ethnicities.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the languages used at Church, members in the Phoenix branch, regardless of race, had mixed reactions to this change. Paul grew up in Mauritius and is of mixed ethnicity but identifies primarily as Creole. Paul joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1980s in Europe. There, he attended a ward, learned about the basic principles of the gospel, and fostered new friendships. His first impression of the Church in one of the cities in Europe left a strong impression in his memory. There, he obtained a glimpse of what a global Church should look like:

My first experience as a member of the Church, I was in a multicultural ward. There were white members and African members in the same ward. One day, the bishop of the ward invited me over for dinner with the missionaries. The bishop was wealthy, and he came to pick me up from my place. I felt uncomfortable, and I felt very small. [For example], a Franco-Mauritian inviting you to his place, that doesn't exist in Mauritius. After dinner, I told him that I could take the train, but he insisted on dropping me at my house. That's something that you will never see in Mauritius. Here [in this Church in Europe], I saw a culture in the Church that is different. I saw a fraternity between members, and that touched me deeply.<sup>23</sup>

Paul's first experience in a multicultural ward impacted him profoundly. He experienced the functioning of a multicultural ward in which diverse people of different social classes felt welcomed and felt as if their voices were heard. A few years after living in Europe, Paul moved back to Mauritius. Since then, he has served in many callings and has witnessed the highs and the lows of Church activity in Mauritius.

During our interview, he related a conversation he had with a recent convert from the Phoenix branch. Paul explained that two to three years ago, a newly baptized member asked him, "Why are the white members in a different room while the people of color are in another room [during Church worship]?" Paul told me, "I explained to him that it wasn't a question of skin color but more of a language barrier."<sup>24</sup> I cannot help but wonder if Paul's argument convinced the new member regarding the Church structure in Mauritius.

Ethnic power dynamics continue to influence Mauritians and Mauritian Church members. This section of the article looks at linguistic hegemony among the Latter-day Saint community in Mauritius. It explores the following questions: How do local

Mauritians and expat members interact in the Church in Mauritius, and what does language have to do with it? How does the nature of these interactions affect the Church leadership on the island? Does the Church in Mauritius follow the same formula as other countries who have experienced an influx of expats in their Church congregations, i.e., by creating an international branch (commonly known as the expats' branch/ward)?

During my stay in 2019, I also attended the Phoenix Branch. This was my first time attending the Phoenix branch since its construction in 2006. I arrived at 9 a.m. before the 9:30 a.m. Church meeting. I saw familiar faces as well as new faces in the branch and enjoyed visiting with the congregation. Some members explained to me the breakdown of the sacrament meeting and classes. As the majority in number, the Mauritian members typically congregate in the chapel for sacrament meetings to be held in French and Kreol; the English speakers, on the other hand, attend the sacrament meeting in a smaller room. Before the sacrament started, I was told that only native English speakers were allowed to attend the English-speaking group; exceptions were made only for the spouses of native English speakers. The local members of the Phoenix branch told me that they felt confused, shocked, and hurt that Church leaders had implemented such measures in their branch. They explained that none of the leaders within the mission presidency or district presidency or local presidency had sought their input regarding the creation of two groups in the branch. One member related her experience to me:

We [as Mauritians] don't have any problem with having native English-speakers with us [in Church meetings]. But we don't know if they are interested in being with us. We, the colored people, all agree that they should be with us [during Church meetings]. This is a barrier [in the Phoenix branch] . . . When they are with us, we make an effort to learn English. I am learning English, and now I can understand when they speak English.<sup>25</sup>

Members also explained that at first, the segregation of members by language made it appear as if there were two different branches within the Phoenix branch: a church for white members and a church for people of color. Elizabeth, another Mauritian Church member, offered her perspective regarding the situation in the Phoenix branch:

Now, in the Phoenix branch, the foreigners are doing their class separately, and the Mauritians are doing theirs separately too. But for a long time before this division, how come they [Mauritians and foreigners] were able to do Sunday school all together [with the help of translators]?<sup>26</sup>

Since the creation of the two groups, one in English and one in French, the demographics in the congregation have shifted slightly, adding new complexities. A few African members studying in Mauritius joined the Phoenix branch; most of these African members attend the English language service.

### 3.2. Observations of Mauritian Mormonism

On my Sunday in the Phoenix branch, I decided to attend the first portion of the church meeting with the English-speaking group and the second portion (Sunday school) with the local Mauritian members. When I entered the Relief Society room for the English-speaking sacrament meeting, I noticed a small crowd mainly composed of white expat members with only a few African members. As the sacrament meeting started, the branch president—who is of Chinese, Indian, European, and African descent—conducted the meeting in English, which is not his native tongue. As the first opening hymn started, I heard the same hymn being sung in French by the Mauritian members in the chapel. After the bread and water were distributed among the members, instead of listening to the talks given by the English-speaking members in the Relief Society room, I joined the Mauritian members in the chapel. One of the local members spoke in Kreol about her experiences as a convert. The second speaker, the district president, spoke in English as a missionary translated his talk into French.

The stark contrast between the two sacrament meetings in the Rose-Hill and Phoenix branches raises questions regarding linguistic domination among the different racial and ethnic communities in the Church in Mauritius. The use of the Kreol language in the Rose-Hill branch is one of the positive signs of hybridization and decolonization in the Church. Still, ancestral languages such as Hindi, Tamil, or Urdu are not even on the radar of local church leaders in Mauritius, since Creoles, who dominate numerically, do not perceive non-European languages as the languages for Christianity. This means, for example, that members whose background is Indian often feel disadvantaged in relation to Creoles. Progress in one linguistic arena also signifies inhibition in another. Karen, a Mauritian Latter-day Saint woman who joined the Church in her youth, spoke on the lack of linguistic diversity at church in Mauritius. She stated:

I think members have forgotten how to feel the spirit in different languages when singing hymns. For example, I don't understand any Indian languages, but when one of my friends' mom, who is Christian, sings hymns in Tamil or Hindi, I can feel the spirit. Music is universal. You don't always need to understand the words, but it's the spirit that it brings in your heart that matters. After all, we are singing about God.<sup>27</sup>

Karen's comment illustrates a change in attitude among some of the Mauritian Latter-day Saints of a younger generation. It demonstrates that the Rose-Hill branch can indeed implement various aspects of hybridization in Church experiences. Currently, the Rose-Hill is embracing a form of hybridization by using the Kreol language at Church. However, will the local leaders in Mauritius and regional leaders in the Southeast African region become more cognizant of integrating more greater languages in Latter-day religious space in Mauritius? We do not know yet if members of the Rose-Hill branch will only support a limited form of hybridization since Indian culture reminds them of the Hindu hegemony on the island. On a macro level, the Church leaders in Salt Lake, overseeing the church affairs globally, recognize the importance of translating their messages into several languages.

#### 4. Discussion

This case study illustrated that the Church is present in many cosmopolitan societies such as Mauritius and that it embraces a limited form of cultural diversity locally and globally. Still, the Church in general fails to comprehend how to build a multicultural theology instead of imposing a standard Americanized version of the gospel. Despite the Church's limitations in adapting to its global membership, this article also demonstrates that practicing Mauritian Latter-day Saints such as Ruth and Karen embrace Mormonism and use personal revelation to fill the gap when the Church's formal instructions are unclear regarding hybridity between faith and ethnic and cultural traditions.

Religious scholar Taunalyne Rutherford whose work has been groundbreaking regarding Mormonism in India stated:

Pioneering converts who hail from non-Christian traditions will act as important bridges and "translators" as the church builds institutional resources to operate in genuinely pluralistic environments. The prominence of these bridge figures, as well as the pure necessity of adapting to local contexts if substantial conversations are desired, will necessitate and facilitate localization and indigenization in the church. (Rutherford 2016)

In Mauritius and abroad, Ruth, Karen, and many other Mauritian Church members are acting as "bridge figures", connecting their faith with their cultural and ethnic identities. While Rutherford's words reflect the importance of non-westernized bridge makers for globalizing the Church, these "bridge makers" also bear an undue burden in having to navigate the nuances of Mormonism without clear guidance from the centralized Church administration in Salt Lake City, Utah. As long as Church leaders at the headquarters and in local areas demonstrate uncertainty toward the indigenization of the Church, members living in non-westernized countries, such as Mauritius, and Saints of color in diverse na-

tions will “remain in the footnotes, endnotes, or even in the addendum of Mormonism, but never in the main text except as a complement to the larger white narrative” (Garcia 2017).

## 5. Conclusions

Cosmopolitan societies such as Mauritius exist in a space where racial, ethnic, and religious hegemonies are part of everyday life. The examples of the Diwali saga as well as the linguistic undercurrents in Mauritius demonstrate that traditional ethnic divides and power imbalances persist in Mauritian Latter-day Saint congregations. The Diwali celebration also exposes the underlying tensions between the different ethnic groups that, in Mauritius, are historically associated with religions other than Mormonism. The conversation surrounding local adaptations within Mormonism comes down to the main issue facing US-based religions expanding on a global level, i.e., cultures. Global Mormonism is no exception. In his essay, “Church Unity and the Challenge of Cultural Diversity”, Walter E. A. van Beek argues that cultural differences matter: “even if cultures cannot be defined unambiguously, the differences between cultures are real” (van Beek 2016). The polysemic nature of the word culture complicates its nature within religious context, yet it remains a powerful force among religious institutions and within Mormonism in particular.

Often, we speak of cultures as the other or the exotic thing. As anthropologist Sally Engle Merry articulates, “culture more often describes the developing world than the developed one” (Engle Merry 2006). In other words, when referring to culture, we frequently speak of the global south or the non-white immigrants in the global North. In the case of global Mormonism, it started with a predominantly European membership, and European cultures permeated the newborn faith. In order to address the challenges and implications of Mormonism globally, the church needs to first acknowledge the continuing dominance of the white culture—or more precisely Wasatch-based front culture—in the Church.

During a conversation between Andrew Teal and Jeffrey R. Holland at the online BYU International Society Annual Conference in 2021, Jeffrey R. Holland was asked to speak about his experiences and the spiritual truths he witnessed during his international trips.<sup>28</sup> He shared that “... it’s really hard to separate culture from religion. I think ultimately culture is always religious. But that’s my bias, that’s cos [because] I think that’s who we are ... ” (Holland 2021). Indeed, if culture is always religious, not only do we need to consciously tap into learning about cultures in a global context, but we also must first acknowledge how much the US white culture continues to affect the church globally.

Since my visit to Mauritius in 2019, the Phoenix branch has had multiple conversations about the clashes between the various languages involving local members, expats, and local leaders in which a compromise was reached. Before the Covid lockdown in March 2020 in Mauritius, the Phoenix branch allowed local and expat members to gather together for two Sundays a month for a unified sacrament meeting while maintaining two separate sacrament meetings (in English and French/Kreol) for the other two Sundays each month. The oral history project in the “rainbow” nation demonstrated that cultures matter.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Female interviewee’s transcript dated 21 April 2020.



- 2 In future mentions, I will refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as “the Church” or “the Latter-day Saint Church”. The terms Saints, Latter-day Saints, and Church members will be used interchangeably in this work.
- 3 Samantha is among a few Mauritian Latter-day Saints living in North America. I chose to limit her biographical framing to protect her identity since it would be easy to identify her. Since race is still a taboo subject in Mauritius, her voice matters since she is among the few Latter-day Saints who were willing to speak about it during her interview.
- 4 The *Global South* is an emerging term that refers to countries seen as low and middle income in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean by the World Bank. See ([Global South 2019](#)).
- 5 With a long-established Indian population, it is easy to assume that Mauritius is hailed only as an Indian diaspora, like Fiji. Geographically, Mauritius is considered part of the African continent and continues to maintain a cordial relationship with its African neighbors. In 1980, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was officially created, with Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe as the first southern African nations to promote socio-economic growth. Fifteen years later, Mauritius became a member of SADC, and today SADC is comprised of 16 African countries. The fact that Mauritius is part of the African continent but most of its people are Indian in origin adds to the complexity of Mauritian society. See <https://www.sadc.int/about-sadc/overview/history-and-treaty/>. (accessed on 4 August 2021).
- 6 ([Mauritius: Chronology 1989](#)) “Mauritius: Chronology,” *Global Histories*; “Mauritius: Reunion Dedicated for Missionary Work”, *Ensign*, March 1989, accessed 30 August 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/03/news-of-the-church/mauritius-reunion-dedicated-for-missionary-work.html?lang=eng>.
- 7 Kreol is the vernacular Mauritian French-based language and was developed as the slaves’ language during the French colonial era in Mauritius. See ([Salverda 2015](#), p. 29).
- 8 See Note 7.
- 9 2 Nephi 26:33 (The Book of Mormon); this scripture in the Book of Mormon denotes that regardless of our gender, race, class, or caste, humankind is equally valued in the eyes of God.
- 10 The main objective of these activities is to “foster unity and personal growth”, “giving [members] a sense of belonging and mutual support” within their congregation.
- 11 Male interviewee’s transcript dated 25 March 2020.
- 12 See Note 11.
- 13 Female interviewee’s transcript dated 24 March 2020.
- 14 A few scholars have vaguely referred to the Indian Catholic population in Mauritius. In 1952, the Indian Catholic community in Mauritius founded the Indo-Mauritian Catholic Association (IMCA), an association intentionally perpetuating Indian ancestral heritage through various cultural elements such as languages, music, clothing, visual expressions, and culinary traditions. Some of the examples of hybridized religious celebrations and rituals include Diwali, the novenas for Vaillankani (Virgin Mary), the Tamil New Year (also known as Varusha Pirappu), Pongal (the harvest festival), Indian Catholic weddings, and funerals of Indian Catholic practitioners. The IMCA excels at the reconstruction of Catholic traditions by incorporating cultural Indian elements into Catholic worship services. See ([Nagapen and Nemchand 2012](#); [Chowriamah 2010](#)).
- 15 Female interviewee’s transcript dated 20 April 2020.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Patrick Eisenlohr. *Creole Publics*. p. 975.
- 18 Female interviewee’s transcript dated 13 April 2020.
- 19 See Note 11.
- 20 “Mauritius: Chronology”, *Global Histories*; According to the Church’s official website, congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are organized geographically, and members attend worship services near their home. Each member belongs to a ward or branch. Small congregations are called branches. See ([Wards 2020](#)); most congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are organized geographically into stakes, which are similar to Catholic dioceses and are made up of individual congregations called wards. In areas where there are fewer Church members, Latter-day Saints may be organized into a district, which is a smaller version of a stake. Each district is made up of branches. See ([District 2020](#)).
- 21 See Note 15.
- 22 The Church is led by 15 apostles. The most senior apostle is the president of the Church, and he selects two other apostles as counselors. These three function as the First Presidency, which is the highest governing body of the Church. Twelve others form the Quorum of the Twelve, the second-highest governing body of the Church. Together, the First Presidency and the Twelve oversee the entire Church. Church members trace this organizational structure to the New Testament. See ([Organizational Structure of the Church 2020](#)).
- 23 Male interviewee’s transcript dated 16 April 2020.
- 24 See Note 23.
- 25 Female interviewee’s transcript dated 30 April 2020.
- 26 Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> see Note 18.

<sup>28</sup> The Rev. Dr. Andrew Teal is Chaplain and Fellow at Pembroke College and Lecturer in Theology and Religion within Oxford University. See <https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/people/dr-andrew-teal> (accessed on 11 August 2021); Jeffrey R. Holland is a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/jeffrey-r-holland?lang=eng>. (accessed on 11 August 2021).

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