

**THE ROLE OF MARRIAGE IN THE MAINTENANCE OF ETHNIC GROUP
BOUNDARIES: THE CASE OF MAURITIUS**

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Introduction

As the 20th century comes to a close, the surprising stability of ethnic group boundaries seems irrefutable. In Africa as elsewhere, ethnic groups seem to survive the changes of political tides and reemerge even after enormous efforts to consciously quell them. The endurance of ethnic boundaries is shaped, in part, by the low incidence of inter-ethnic marriages. Even where mixed marriages occur, they do not seem to diminish the strength of ethnic boundaries. Marriage is further implicated in ethnic group boundaries by tying together the reproduction of culture, genes, and economic resources, adding to the covariance between ethnicity, race, and class. Thus by understanding the nature of spouse choice, a clearer picture emerges of the mechanisms perpetuating ethnic boundaries and the ties to class and race. Mauritius provided an excellent natural laboratory for differentiating between these variables.

Why Marriage is Important to Ethnicity

Ethnic group boundaries are defined largely by rules of endogamy. Non-assortative mating would quickly distinguish any ethnic divisions which depended on inheritance and not personal achievement. The reasons why are fairly intuitive. Ethnicity is defined by a shared corpus of cultural traits. These traits are primarily transmitted during an intense period of child enculturation. Massive inter-marriage would eliminate the cultural divisions between groups as the children would be brought up in an amalgamation of these different cultural traditions.

Ethnic group boundaries are defined by, or at least coincide with, rules of endogamy, precisely because of the nature of cultural reproduction through enculturation. Mothers play an essential role in providing their children with the cultural capital required to function within their society and to adapt to the local environment. Consequently one finds that spouse choice, particularly among males, is strongly influenced by the cultural identity of the woman.

The most notable exception to this rule are the Tukanoans of Northwest Amazonia (Jackson, 1983) who practice linguistic exogamy. It remains unclear why linguistic exogamy

developed among the Tukanoans, who as a group comprise a multitude of intermarrying sibs who speak related languages. Perhaps in this context, language is not a strong marker of ethnicity as all Tukanoans share a corpus of cultural traits, including subsistence patterns, kinship terminology, and mythologies. Here language may be more a marker of partilineage, significant in the formation of political alliances. The presence of multilingualism and the similarities of languages enables this unique form of language exogamy.

In general, however, language is a strong marker of cultural differences and thus ethnicity. Around the world, language endogamy is the norm and rates of inter-ethnic marriage are relatively low. Mauritius is no different. Although Kreole may have become the lingua franca, ancestral language is still used as a marker of ethnicity, even when not spoken (Hookoomsing, 1986). Other cultural traits learned with high fidelity and which significantly influence behavior are equally important markers of ethnicity as well.

Why Rates of Intermarriage Are Low

Several theories have been developed to explain why rates of intermarriage between ethnic groups are low. Two schools of thought have predominated the literature, neither of which is adequate. These include distance-decay models and class-based theories of marriage choice. Distance -decay models note that people tend to marry others who live in close proximity (Clarke, 1952; Kephart, 1961). This is because the opportunity to interact with someone is related to the probability of meeting the person, a function of distance. This model presumes that residence and ethnicity tend to coincide, as indeed it does in much of the world.

But Mauritius is marked by residential integration. While some degree of ethnic clustering occurs, most notably among Muslims and Chinese in the capital of Port Louis, most every suburb and small village has members representing most ethnic groups living in close proximity. Despite this, the rate of inter-ethnic marriage in Mauritius is quite low, approximately 8%. The distance-decay model can thus be discarded.

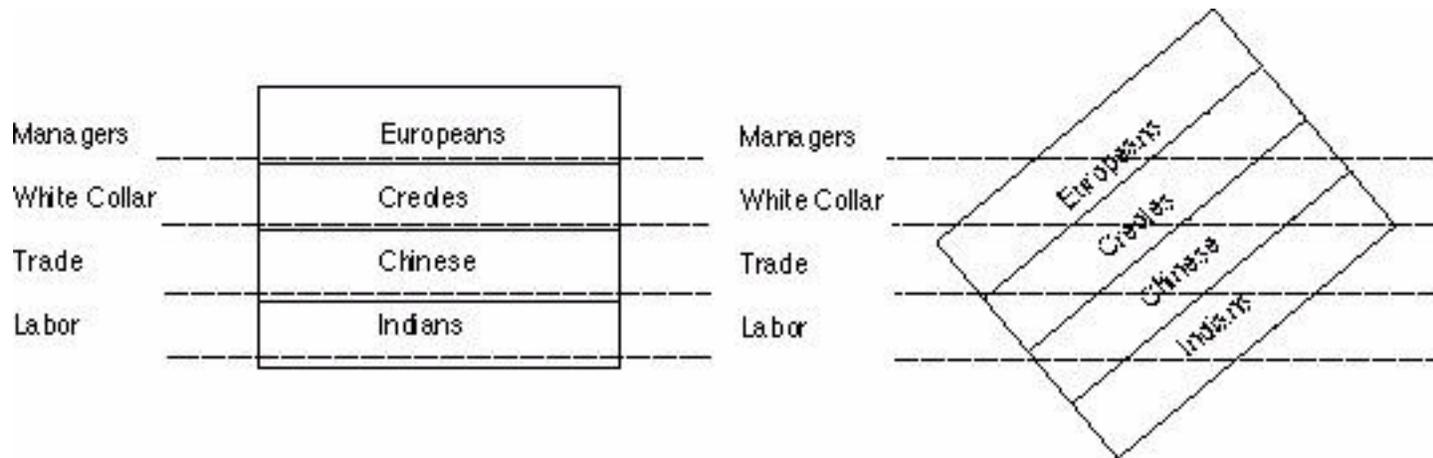
Class-based theories of spouse choice have also been used to explain the lack of inter-ethnic marriages (Eckland, 1968). Correlation between class and ethnicity would result from class-based residential segregation in conjunction to distance-decay models. But again, the distance-decay model can be jettisoned for the reasons just noted. Alternatively, parallels between class and ethnicity may be reinforced due to a class-culture which is intertwined into the ethnicity itself. One might argue that caste did just this. In Mauritius, caste only exists among some ethnic groups. Even among communities where caste influences spouse choice, caste no longer accurately predicts occupation of class position. While class-based culture no doubt has impact on marriage choice, economic position itself generally seems to take a back-seat to ethnicity in formulating marriage choices. When forced to choose between ethnic and class endogamy, people invariably choose the former.

Mauritius provides a clear contraindication to a class-based theory of spouse choice. A prototypic plural society, historical patterns of colonialism and labor exploitation resulted in a high correlation between ethnicity and class position in Mauritius. Wealthy sugar plantation owners of French descent composed the elite ruling strata of the society. Even when the island passed from France into British hands, the power wielded by the island's plantocracy was heavily felt by the governor appointed by the Queen (Addison & Hazareesingh, 1984). Creoles constituted a class of white collar professionals. Chinese traders predominated the third economic stratum, followed by Indian indentured laborers and their descendants (Benedict, 1962).

Within such a context, class-based models would predict few inter-ethnic marriages as this also entailed inter-class marriages. In this model, class position was the more fundamental issue and ethnic endogamy was more a manifestation of class relations.

Changes in the island's political-economy had weakened the correlation between class and ethnicity. In fact, it is questionable how accurate the assessment was in the first place. For example, many Gujarati-speaking Muslim traders came to Mauritius as merchants, not indentured laborers. As a community, the Gujaratis were successful and amassed wealth. Economic position did not dictate the marriage choices of Gujaratis as much as ethnic ties. Many found

Muslim brides from the Gujerat-speaking regions of India. However, we can cede that the parallels between ethnicity and class, while a generalization, nevertheless held true during much of the island's history of habitation.



Derailment of Ethnicity and Class in Mauritius (Benedict, 1962)

Even prior to independence, Banton noted that economic changes were beginning to increase class stratification within each ethnic group. Increased job mobility and the creation of political parties based upon class interests strengthened the importance of economic position. He predicted that class-based interests would break down the barriers between segments of the population, diminishing the plurality of the society. In discounting the importance of ethnicity as a catalytic fundamental property, Benedict relegated plurality to a descriptive term, arguing against its use as an analytical concept.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no strong indication that inter-ethnic marriage is on the rise or that ethnic group boundaries in Mauritius are dissolving in response to existing inter-marriages. However, increased economic stratification within ethnic groups is a reality. Thus while class is certainly an important element in influencing spouse choice, ethnicity is more forceful in shaping spouse choice.

The idea that inter-marriage is increasing seems to be fueled, in part, by the patchy and noisy nature of the data. There are no accurate records on inter-marriage rates or patterns in time.

There are several reasons for this. One of the primary contributing factors to the confusion is the inaccuracy of the *de jure* definitions of ethnic groups as outlined in the Mauritian constitution. Four communities, or ethnic groups, are defined by the constitution: Hindus, Muslims, Chinese, and the General Population (e.g. everyone else). With the exception of the Chinese who constitute only 3% of the population, none of these broad categories accurately designate ethnic groups as much as corporate political groups who tend to coordinate behaviors, if anything at all.

The “General Population” is in fact comprised of several distinct ethnic groups which do not inter-marry. Most notably are the Franco-Mauritians who are very insular and who go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from Creoles who are also grouped under General Population. Deep divisions also exist between people of the Hindu faith, making it questionable whether or not there is a Hindu ethnicity in Mauritius. For example, Hindus differentiate between Northern and Dravidian Indians based upon linguistic, racial, religious and caste differences. Separate Gujerati, Sunni, and Ahmadi communities are also clumped together as Muslims under the constitution. The Chinese community is perhaps the only ethnicity designated in the constitution which exists, as linguistic divisions between Hakka and Cantonese speakers have disappeared with the adoption of Mandarin as marker of Chinese ethnicity.

The Civil Status Office in Mauritius has performed poorly in tracking inter-ethnic marriage, partly because much discord exists as to what constitutes an ethnic group. Furthermore, after 1982, it became illegal for Civil Status officers or other government employees to ask information related to ethnicity. This was done in an unsuccessful effort to divert attention away from ethnicity as an important social element. As noted previously, ancestral language simply became a marker of ethnic identity, but a noisy one (Hookoomsingh, 1986). Civil Status officers continued to record the ethnicity of people getting married based upon their religion, surname, linguistic background, and appearance. These records were tallied and transferred to the Central Statistics Office.

The rates of intermarriage reported in the popular press were drawn from these records. The rate of mixed marriage was reported to be 4.69 % in 1982 and 8.83% in 1987 (Patel &

Raumiah, 1988), leading people to believe that rate of intermarriage had risen at an alarming rate, doubling in just 5 years. The article happened to notice that inter-ethnic marriage was most common among female Muslims, leading to the formation of a reactionary “Comité Pour La Prevention du Mariage-Mixte” by conservative Muslims. Unfortunately, the conclusions drawn by the public bear no validity in statistical fact. Of course, any two samples with such a large variance indicates a low confidence in the values. To compare these estimates, I conducted a survey in Mauritius to ascertain the general rate of inter-ethnic marriage for the entire married population.

A random sample was drawn of the population over 20 years of age using the Electoral Commissioner’s List. 1000 surveys were solicited by mail, telephone, and in-person interviews using a team of volunteers from the University of California’s Research Expedition Program. Of the 1000 randomly chosen names, 642 replied while 70 were unreachable, reducing the sampling universe to 930. While a response rate of 69% was obtained, only 497 of the 642 (77%) respondents had been married at one time. These 497 represent a statistically significant sample of the population of married individuals in Mauritius. Using both religion and ancestral language as markers of ethnic identity, a rate of intermarriage was calculated at 8.2% (Nave, in press).

Preliminary results would also seem to indicate that the rate of inter-ethnic marriage is not increasing, but is a stable function of the number of marriages in general. The distribution of inter-ethnic marriages in time follows the distribution of marriages which, in turn, is a function of attrition of the population and a fairly constant rate of marriage.

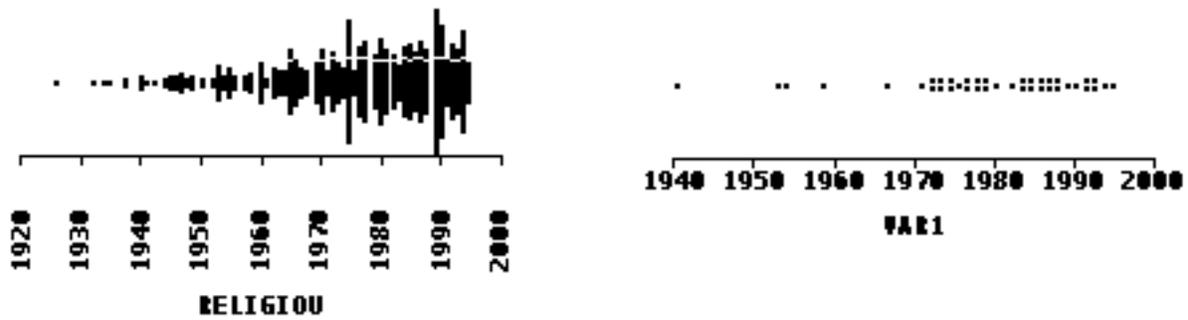


Fig. 2: Number of marriages per year, compared to number of inter-ethnic marriages per year

Thus we must explain why the rate of inter-marriage is generally low. In addition, the existing evidence suggests that, even in the presence of constant moderate levels of inter-marriage, ethnic group boundaries remain stable. Why is this the case?

Marriage Choice

Inter-marriage rates are low because people have evolved a predisposition for conservative decision-making. This conservative nature developed in response to culture.

The capacity for culture did not evolve in our species by accident. Culture is an adaptation. It enables us to obtain information about the world around us through the enculturation of ideas rather than through personal experimentation. The process has advantages and disadvantages. One obvious benefit is the ability to make decisions when confronted with choices which are too costly to permit learning through trial and error. Choosing between a lethal and a delicious mushroom demonstrates how certain decision cannot be made on the grounds of rational choice.

Consequently, we rely more heavily on culture to make certain kinds of decisions, while depending upon on personal experimentation and experience to make other kinds of choices. This

depends upon several variables such as the potential costs for making a wrong choice, the variation in the sample, the number of samples available to draw inferences from, and the inherent ability to test the consequences of a choice. People depend less on culture to decide which plant to cultivate than to decide which god to believe in as the former is more susceptible to validation.

Marriage, in Mauritius as most elsewhere, is a decision which young unmarried individuals must make on the basis of little personal experience. Individuals rarely live together before getting married and divorce is highly frowned upon. Thus without having a sample of personal experiences to draw upon, young adults must choose with whom they will live and have children. A wrong choice in the marriage game has severe negative consequences, such as a miserable life being beaten and mistreated. It should come to no surprise, then, that people rely heavily on culturally learned preferences and beliefs in shaping their decision on whom to marry. In other words, a heuristic mechanism has evolved where people incorporate the most frequent occurring cultural beliefs found in the immediate environment.

Depending upon cultural information to shape behavior has disadvantages as well. The environment is constantly changing. If everyone is following a cultural tradition, and the environment changes, there is no way to alter the behavior. Alone, culturally-based learning has no way to track environmental changes in the way selection acts upon genetic information. A population of complete conformists would quickly be an extinct one, following practices which no longer make sense. Given this, one would expect that some individuals in a population would always spurn culturally transmitted information for individual experimentation. Analogous to frequency-dependent genetic selection, an evolutionary stable equilibrium will occur where a population is composed of both cultural followers and individual learners (Boyd and Richerson, 1985).

But because adaptations subject to strong selection forces rapidly spread through a population, most individuals in a population will find it to their advantage to follow existing cultural traditions. Given these forces, one would expect to find a constant pattern of

predominately ethnic endogamy but where inter-marriage always occurred. And this is what we find in Mauritius.

Evolutionary Forces of Cultural Transmission

Perhaps the phenomenon of greatest interest, however, is the apparent stability of ethnic group boundaries even in the presence of significant and constant inter-ethnic marriage. A similar phenomenon occurs among non-cultural species, where two related populations interbreed but the boundary between the hybrids remains stable. These are called hybrid zones by evolutionary ecologists (Hewitt, 1989; Harrison, 1993). Hybrid zones form when evolution selects against hybrids, against a combination of two distinct variations in a trait. In other words, suppose you had a population of caterpillars which had a gene influencing its skin pattern. The simple gene has three possible forms with corresponding physical features. Gene AA creates a black and red striped skin, useful in indicating to predators that the caterpillar is toxic. Gene aa creates a brown skin, which camouflages the caterpillar against the tree trunks, therefore avoiding predation. But the mixed gene, Aa, which results when an AA and aa caterpillar interbreeds, has a skin which is brown and black. This pigmentation pattern is useless for camouflage and does not indicate poison. Thus these individual caterpillars are eaten and do not reproduce.

This is an example of selective pressures acting against the hybrid, constantly eliminating it from the population. A similar pattern seems to follow for cultural traits. The diffusion of culture across ethnic boundaries is a wide spread phenomenon. We see in all plural societies, be it Mauritius, Los Angeles, or Pretoria, the enormous cauldron of cultural traditions, particularly in the arts. However, much of culture is internally-congruent and compatible. Ethnic groups which coexist in plural societies often have core values and beliefs which fundamentally differ. Art, being highly symbolic and abstract, leads to greater interplay between elements of distinct cultural traditions specifically because artistic expression so often allows for incongruity of abstract knowledge. The uncontrolled recombination of abstract cultural ideas is rendered harmless by occurring in a vacuum separating “art” from “real life”.

Other elements of culture, however, demand internal congruency. One cannot follow a typical Muslim diet and the Hindu religion in Mauritius. Thus when incidences of intermarriage occur, the resulting children are often forced to choose between following one tradition and another. A child of an intermarriage may attempt to mix the cultural beliefs of his or her parents, but the next generation generally identifies with only one. A young woman who's parents are a Hindu and a Muslim will probably choose to marry either a Hindu or Muslim young man, for the reasons stated above. Their children, in turn, will follow one ethnic tradition, the one which the parents predominately follow.

A culture hybrid zone differs slightly from a genetic one where heterozygotes are eliminated by not breeding. The demands of internal congruency seem more important in shaping the marriage choices of children from mixed marriages. The effects are similar: maintenance of a boundary between to inter-breeding groups.

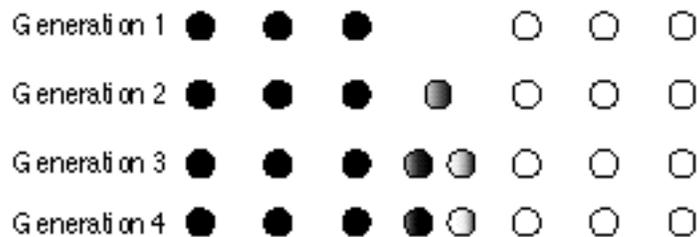


Figure 3: Cultural Hybrid Zone

Proximate Mechanisms of Spouse Choice

The patterns of ethnic endogamy which are evident came into existence due to the development of proximate mechanisms which evolved to take advantage of cultural learning. What proximate mechanisms have developed which influence spouse choice specifically? Clearly, several are implicated which interplay in complex ways, including sexual desires and affinity for cultural similarity (Byrne, 1971). Through the course of some 250 interviews with single, married, and inter-married adults it became apparent that conservative marriage choices were shaped primarily by emotional reinforcements to culturally learned beliefs and preferences. While the cultural content varies from group to group, the emotional basis of decision making seems cross cultural.

Culturally learned preferences become ingrained with emotional content. People prefer relationships with members of the same ethnicity because they feel more comfortable with such individuals. Individuals have feelings ranging from general apathy to deep mistrust and disgust for people of other ethnic groups.

A Tamil woman whom I interviewed was disowned by her widowed mother for taking a Creole husband. As a friend to her daughter, the mother was on good terms with the man. Upon getting married, however, the mother told the daughter that she had betrayed God by marrying a savage. This pattern of deeply rooted ethnic prejudice manifests itself with great frequency among parents confronting children who wish to intermarry. Eriksen found similar reactions (manuscript).

The emotional foundations for spouse choice have implications for the social structure of Mauritius, primarily resulting from differential interests between parents and their children. As mentioned previously, spouse choice is a composite of several evolutionary forces. While culturally learned preferences are important, feelings of attachment and sexual desire also play an important role. Research in anthropology and related fields is beginning to reveal the reproductive basis for these emotions (Jankowiak, 1995).

For example, feelings of love and sexual desire lead to feelings of detachment after about 4-7 years. A corresponding peak in divorce rates is found. From a reproductive standpoint, altering mating partners after the birth and weaning of a child, which takes about 4-7 years, diminished the chance that one's children will suffer from pathological genetic traits, particularly homozygous recessive genes. It is understandable why the intense feelings of love and emotional bonding give way after several years to promiscuity and detachment (Fisher, 1995).

Parents, however, are also interested in the reproductive and social success of their children, while not being subject to the same emotional motivations. Parents recognize (at least unconsciously) that a stable marriage has economic benefits which outweigh the minuscule possibility of genetic defects. They are therefore primarily interested that their children enter into a stable marriage which ensures biological, cultural, and social reproduction. In Mauritius, the

wishes of the parents carry great weight on the spouse choices of their children. Children are much more economically dependent in Mauritius, usually living at the parents home after marriage. This dependency gives the parents greater leverage over the marriage choices of their children and makes life more difficult for brides living in the homes of their in-laws. One informant from a mixed-marriage told me:

Intermarriages, mixed-marriages fail because the girl... does not have a job, and depends only on the male partner. [She] cannot adapt herself because she has no say in the affairs of the family. And depends on the in-laws. If she has to follow the dictats [of her in-laws]... she goes back to her parents. This is very unfortunate because women in Mauritius are very dominated by men, for one. And we have known some of these mixed marriage which have failed for this reason.

Conclusion

Evolutionary forces play an important role in shaping proximate behaviors which result in the maintenance of ethnic endogamy. However, evolution impacts genetic and cultural information in different ways. Cultural reproduction responds more rapidly to the environment. This leads to apparent “contradictions” between biological and cultural interests. Ethnic endogamy seems primarily the result of affect-laden cultural preferences acting upon spouse choice. Parental control further diminishes the importance of biologically-based desires in spouse selection, funneling and shaping them. Furthermore, even when marriages occur between ethnic groups, selection against cultural hybrids creates a cultural hybrid zone, maintaining the integrity of ethnic group boundaries.

As cultural, biological, and social elements are reproduced through marriage, the tendency for cultural endogamy leads to the continued correlation between ethnicity, race, and class, the origins of which are purely historical.

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