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Islamisation Processes among Mauritian Muslims

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Introduction

Islamisation has strongly underlined the socio-cultural and political evolution of the Muslim community in Mauritius, where they constitute a minority of 17 % in a highly heterogeneous population. Over a period of 160 years since the settlement of Indo-Muslims on this British sugar island, islamisation has acquired a variety of meanings and played different roles. It has accompanied the rise in socio-economic status of the agricultural and trading classes by providing cultural idioms belonging to the upper classes in Indo-Muslim societies. More importantly, it has served to articulate the identity and interests of its adherents in changing political contexts and in the pursuit of integration in a specific cultural context. Diasporic ties and global links have inspired this community and influenced its thought patterns.

In this paper, the negotiation of sometimes conflicting processes of islamisation that accompanied the socio-economic evolution and political integration of Muslims in colonial and post-colonial society will be brought under focus. Besides, the significance of religion and religious ideology as a basis of social identification and articulation of the group's political interests will be clarified.[1]

Islamisation and change in socio-economic status

Institution building

The great majority of Muslim settlers in colonial Mauritius hailed from lower socio-economic strata in India's rural areas. Some of them came from impoverished middle classes, a few were literate. They indentured them-

[1] The bulk of the material for this article was drawn from my PhD thesis entitled: *La communauté musulmane de Port Louis. Une étude de géographie sociale*, presented in 1997 at the Université Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux III, France.

selves to work as labourers on sugar-cane plantations for specified periods, and most of them settled in the island. It is likely that knowledge of Islam, its doctrines and rituals, was quite limited for the majority of the workers and their families. Parallel to indentured immigration, some thousand odd free Muslim immigrants, mostly from Gujarat, India, settled to conduct trading activities.

Socio-economic mobility gained momentum during the *Grand Morcellement*, between the 1860s and 1904, when sugar estates suffering from a difficult economic situation were parcelled out and sold to former indentured labourers. However small the plot, land-ownership and settlement in villages instead of estate camps, provided an initial rise in status. This was automatically accompanied by the acquisition of norms and values pertaining to the Indo-Muslim middle and upper classes through islamisation. A few individuals, probably among those who had a greater knowledge of and attachment to religion, took the lead in building mosques in the countryside. The first rural mosques appeared in 1863, and by the year 1900, 30 mosques had been built in villages.

The parallel settlement of Gujarati Muslim traders in Port Louis from the 1840s onwards was to provide considerable assistance in the institutionalisation of Islam on the Mauritian soil. The Gujaratis built a mosque in the city centre in 1852 and a Muslim cemetery in 1872. As they were economically stronger, they played an important role in mosque-building initiatives. They showed the way by setting up several rural mosques in areas where they had commercial interests. This was the case for the Suratis, who set up shops in village agglomerations. They also provided funds and technical help in the formal registration of donations for religious purposes.

The building and running of a mosque requires the formal organisation of the congregation (*jamaat*) at village or local level. This gave rise to a rudimentary form of political organisation conducive to the articulation of the identity of the group in the local set-up. Mosque attendance and membership in a *jamaat* became the mark of the new rural elite.

Dress and behaviour

Change in status was complemented by a change in clothing in order to demarcate from the masses. Men therefore rejected the costumes worn by agricultural workers, namely the loin cloth (*dhoti*) and small turban (*pagri*), in favour of the loose shirt (*kurta*) and pants (*pyjamas*), assorted with different head-dresses and a beard. Women discarded the traditional *saris*, long skirts (*lahenga*) with blouse (*peignoirs*) and adopted Punjabi and Lucknowi costumes worn by upper classes in their regions of origin.

Behavioural changes were also noticeable. Seclusion of women (*purdah*) was practised to a greater extent: women abandoned agricultural work and stayed at home, developing their cookery, stitching, embroidery and other refinements. The extended family became the normal family structure in the villages. The *jamaats* exercised both formal and informal control of the community through their members, who were exclusively males. The patriarchal order was thus re-established as islamisation progressed.

Education and language

Together with the mosque the *jamaats* established madrasas where children were taught to read the Coran in Arabic, and learn Urdu, through which religious instruction and culture were inculcated. Therefore the early phase of islamisation implied the acquisition of Urdu as the language of religion and the North Indian upper class Muslim culture. Diasporic influences through the agency of religious functionaries and preachers tended to reinforce this situation. Urdu emerged as the Muslims' language of identity while Hindi was that of the North Indian Hindus, like in India.

Meanwhile, the Muslims were fast abandoning Bhojpuri as their *lingua franca* as they rose in socio-economic status and urbanised, adopting Creole and sometimes French. Bhojpuri held the double disadvantage of being associated with a low-status agricultural past and with a culture shared with the Hindus. A rise in ethnic consciousness made it necessary to develop clear boundaries with other groups, especially the culturally closest ones. This movement was further intensified by political developments in India, which culminated in partition.

The early Muslim intellectuals chose to write in French and the first newspaper they published, *L'Islamisme* (1906), was in French, though some issues had pages in Urdu and Tamil. French was and still is the dominant language, side by side with English. They also used the developing corpus of Islamic literature in French and English to deliver religious discourses. In fact, most of the religious publications of the 20th century use French as a medium, and since the 1970s, Creole, the present *lingua franca* of the majority of Mauritians, has become increasingly popular. From then on Urdu lost its status both as the language of religion and the language of culture.

Although the local linguistic evolution favouring the use of Creole and the European languages had initiated the demise of Bhojpuri and Urdu other more subtle influences have precipitated it. From the 1970s onwards the oil-exporting Arab countries saw their income rise abruptly. With other believers Mauritian Muslims share the creed of the global identity of *ummah* or Community of the Prophet. This identity lies dormant or is reacti-

vated depending on circumstances. During the oil crisis and afterwards, local Muslims felt their sense of belonging to the global Muslim community intensify. They became interested in establishing contact with their rich brethren. The interest was reciprocated as organisations such as the World Arab League and states like Libya established offices in the country. They actively supported the teaching of Arabic and donated funds for building/ renovating mosques and charitable institutions.

These actions initiated an unprecedented pro-Arab feeling among local Muslims. Arab dress styles as well as the Iranian head-dress *(hijab)* were introduced. Arab music and other cultural paraphernalia became popular. Meanwhile attachment to India and Indian culture was at its lowest ebb. Muslims even tried to "forget" that they originated from India and many tried to assert some Arab connection in their ancestry. This process of detachment from Indian links is still current, though attachment to Arabic and Arabism has since long dwindled, with the decrease in petro-dollars.

The relative ease with which the Mauritian Muslims seem to change ethnic markers and linguistic loyalties should not surprise the observer, as the Mauritian context is highly pluralistic and heterogeneous. In fact, like other Mauritians they are living multiple identities, activating any one or the other at will, depending on the context.[2] For the Muslims in any case, the basis of the ethnic group is neither language, nor folklore nor dress but religion itself. However, religious ideas are contingent on contemporary, more material and political preoccupations, as seen in the following section.

Islamisation and political consciousness

Struggles in the colonial society

The political order in Mauritian colonial society in the 19th and 20th centuries was highly hierarchical: the British colonisers were situated at the top, the Franco-Mauritian land-owning and other classes and the Coloureds occupied the upper and intermediate rungs, while the working classes consisting of ex-slaves and indentured/ex-indentured Indians made up the base of the pyramid. This hierarchy closely corresponded to racial characteristics, which further reinforced ethnic consciousness among the population.

Franco-Mauritians followed by the Coloured elite contested this political order and demanded a greater say in the running of the colony's affairs. A reformist movement was formed in the 1880s, which brought about the

[2] For a theory of ethnicity see Barth 1969, Cohen 1974, Desprès 1975.

constitutional reform of 1885, where a new Legislative Council made up of elected, nominated and ex-officio members was set up. Restricted voting rights were given.[3]

There was a feeling of discomfort among the Indian elite, mostly traders, whose numbers had increased to several hundred by the end of the 19th century, as their demeaned political status did not match their economic position. They realised that they could wield more power by mustering support from the rising rural Indo-Mauritian middle classes. The natural allies of the Gujarati Muslim trading classes were the rural Muslims, with whom they shared beliefs, values and common ideals of brotherhood. Therefore, by helping with the mosque-building movement, they were not only performing religious and social duties but also fulfilling political needs of incorporating support. In this move the two main trading castes, the Meimons and Suratis, were competitors, as they were competitors on the marketplace.

The Gujarati traders and Muslim intellectual elite never seemed to have thought of seeking the support of the Hindu middle or working classes, although they were more numerous than the Muslims. Perhaps they thought that a shared country of origin would not constitute a strong enough rallying cry in the face of innumerable differences, ranging from religion, regional culture, language and caste to economic divergences. It is more probable that they were merely repeating the processes taking place in India, where a separate political consciousness among Hindus and Muslims was developing.[4] Diasporic influences were strong during the 19th and first half of the 20th century.

Deliberate efforts to build up Muslim ethnic consciousness could be observed with the publication of a daily, *L'Islamisme*, in 1906. This paper was published by the Société Anjuman Islam, constituted mostly of Surtis, who had enlisted the support of the Muslim intellectuals of that time. The paper tried to stress the common denominators among Muslims, namely Islam, and the political idea of belonging to the then globalising agent, the Ottoman Caliphate, while minimising the various divisions among local Muslims. In fact, in those days the community was tending to the wounds left by the *Mosque Case*[5], which had involved bitter fighting between 1904 and 1906 among the various Gujarati castes over the political control of the

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[3] The political evolution in Mauritius is succinctly analysed by Smith-Simmons 1982.

[4] See Bayly 1985; Freitag 1980.

[5] From the *Decisions of the Supreme Court, Vice-Admiralty Court and Bankruptcy Court of Mauritius. The Mauritius Reports, 1880–1989*. Port Louis: Printing Establishment of Le Mauricien.

prestigious mosque, the Jummah Mosque of Port Louis. Control over this institution was to play a major role in internal and national politics.

As islamisation progressed among the rising middle classes, ideological differences became apparent. The creed to which the bulk of the Muslims adhered in the 19th century was naturally the traditional religion prevalent in India, where practice of the five pillars of Islam according to Sunni Hanafi rites was mixed with beliefs, rituals and traditions of popular Sufism (Ahmad 1984:3). These ideas and practices were challenged around 1915 when new doctrines and creeds were introduced. Ahmadism and reformist ideas were brought in more or less simultaneously, through the agency of an Indian and an Arab preacher. Both of these currents originated from India, where they had developed. Ahmadism denotes the doctrines and practices brought forward by Mirza Ahmad of Qadian, India (1835–1908), while the reformist current aimed at purging Indian Islam of non-Islamic practices and advocating the study of religion at its sources. It had developed with the works of Shah Waliallah (1703–1762), pursued by various movements, including the Deoband theological school, set up in 1867.[6]

Ahmadism attracted a group of intellectuals, and despite efforts by the Sunnis to minimise its influence and marginalise its adherents, it survives to date, with a few thousand adherents. Reformism for its part, gained currency among the urbanised elite. Its diffusion was to increase when it enlisted the support of the Surtis, who backed the movement by inviting preachers of that school to deliver lectures throughout the island, and supporting the building of mosques devoted to its ideas. In so doing, they were merely repeating the practices of their rivals, the Meimons. In fact, the Meimons were devoted supporters of traditional Islam. They had been converted to Islam from a Hindu caste, the Lohana of Sind (Engineer 1989: 169, 192), through the missionary work of a descendant of Abdul Qadir of Jilan (1077–1166). Since then they display a particular attachment to that master (*pir*) who was the founder of the Qadiriyya order, which is quite widespread and popular in India. The Meimons have greatly encouraged the propagation of this order in Mauritius. They invited preachers and religious dignitaries from it ever since the early days of their settlement. The burial ground of one of the early visitors, Syed Jamal Shah (died 1858), was converted into a mausoleum, which people began to visit and pay homage or ask for intercession. Similarly, burial places of Qadiri masters became places of saint worship and magnificent buildings were raised on the site as mausoleums.

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6 For a discussion of Ahmadism see Lavan 1974, and of reform movements in India see Rizvi 1993.

Qadiriyya missionary work acquired a new dimension between the 1930s and 1960s, taking on a clearly political character. The missionary, Abdool Aleem Siddiqui, was invited by the Cutchi Meimon Society on five occasions during that period. He was a powerful orator and he toured the country, giving lectures on religion. He also dispensed attention and cures through prayers and amulets (*taviz*). He mobilised crowds wherever he went and started initiating them into the Qadiriyya Order. At the same time he promoted Abdool Razack Mohamed, a Meimon trader, as the political leader of the Muslims.

The missionary work of A.A. Siddiqui contributed substantially to raising the political consciousness of the Muslim masses and shaping the ethnic group. His ideas and methods were similar to those of Indian preachers and religionists who were acting on the Indian masses in order to incorporate their support into political movements headed by the urban elite[7], and likely to serve the interests of that elite. Thus, during the 1930s and 1940s, when the working classes were hit by the depression and were rallying through trade unions, the Muslims were, for their part, mobilising along ethnic lines and articulating the demands of their elite.

In 1947 the British conceded an important constitutional reform, the enlarged franchise, where adults capable of elementary reading and writing in any of the languages used in the country were given the right to vote. Elections were held in 1948 and A.R. Mohamed stood as a candidate but failed to be elected. In fact, none of the Muslim candidates were elected. The results came as a shock to the Muslims who realised that they were but a minority in a multi-ethnic society, where the rules of democracy were going to prevail. Subsequently a lot of effort was to be invested in the establishment of a common Muslim platform. This was to prove elusive, as internal divisions along class/caste, religious ideology lines undermined political unity. The political elite tried to negotiate its differences and eventually set up the Comité d'Action Musulman (CAM), in 1958. Elections were due in 1959, for the first time with universal adult suffrage. The CAM formed an alliance with the Labour Party, headed by Dr. S. Ramgoolam, who had a good following in the countryside. It thus had 5 of its candidates elected.

The CAM was to split soon afterwards, as the co-habitation of the two major religious ideologies was an arduous task. In fact, the then president of the party, Ajum Dahal, was to set up the Islamic Circle – a movement to propagate the reformist ideology in Islam – as well as a competing Muslim Democratic League (MDL). A.R. Mohamed's support came mainly from the followers of Siddiqui who called themselves the Sunnat Jamaat. The

[7] See Minault 1982 and Smith 1979.

alignment of politics with religious ideas was to prove highly divisive for the Muslims throughout the 1960s, when the important issue of Independence was at stake. The CAM and the MDL bitterly competed for the Muslim vote and professed to be working for their interests. Both came forward with ideas such as separate electoral rolls, reserved seats for Muslims, and raised the stakes by asking for a Muslim Personal Law. The CAM eventually joined the alliance in favour of Independence, and the MDL the one opposed to it. The Muslim vote was thus divided between the two but it remained unclear whether the Muslims had voted for political ideas, religious ideology or the personality of the candidates. In any case, the Independence Party won the crucial elections of 1967, which decided in favour of Independence, but Mohamed was narrowly beaten in his Muslim majority constituency of Port Louis. He had been nominated through the Good Loser System[8] he had helped to set up. The CAM was to survive for a few more years but its style of ethnic politics lost its appeal for the Muslim voters.

Evolution during the post-colonial period

During the 1970s and 1980s the Muslims shifted allegiance in favour of a different style of politics: subtle ethnicity in the guise of nationalist ideas. Soon after Independence the main parties in the two opposing alliances formed a coalition, a move which their supporters could hardly comprehend. The economic situation deteriorated after a few years of development boosted by high sugar prices. There was a general dissatisfaction among youth, hit by high unemployment and demoralised by bleak projections. In this context a youthful party, influenced by Marxist ideals, came forward with ideas of class-consciousness in order to build an egalitarian society based on socialism.

Although Marxism was hardly understood, many of the ideas brought forward by the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) appealed to the ethnic minorities, including the Muslims, who felt that the prevailing order was unfair to them and advantaged the Hindu majority community. The Muslims were to vote overwhelmingly in favour of the MMM in subsequent elections.

The change of emphasis away from an ethnic party curiously released the pressure on differences of religious inclinations among the Muslims. An

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[8] The Good Loser System provides for the allocation of 8 seats, in addition to the 62 seats for elected representatives, in favour of members of under-represented communities who have stood as candidates but were not returned. The first 4 seats are allocated to the best performing candidates from under-represented groups while the other 4 go to parties.

elusive unity was finally achieved through political support for a non-Muslim national party. The ethnic group was thus consolidated. In theory this should have increased the group's bargaining power in resource allocation, but in reality this did not occur. On the contrary, during the 1980s the Muslims faced the worst political marginalisation ever since the introduction of universal suffrage: they were not represented at ministerial or any other decision-making level for several years.

Meanwhile the MMM evolved into a pragmatic party where *realpolitik* gave way to ideology. Besides, it seemed unable to stay in power for any length of time and put in practice a meaningful programme. At the beginning of the 1990s its supporters were disappointed and ready for new ideas. The readiest at hand seemed to be fundamentalism.

Muslim political behaviour in particular changed noticeably during the 1990s. They now opted to divide votes among the major national parties/coalitions, while forming pressure groups in order to influence policy decisions in all the major alliances in power. This political pattern resembled that pursued by the Mauritians in general, who have become astute in dealing with ethnicity in politics. One such pressure group was an Islamist movement, the Hizbullah, which formally joined politics as a party in 1991. The Muslims were ready to play the fundamentalist card in local democracy.

The Hizbullah was one of the numerous Islamist movements that sprang up in the 1980s and 1990s, heralding a new era in islamisation. They were headed by educated young people, often graduates in Islamic Studies, who advocated the introduction of Islamic principles in every sphere of life, and rigorous practice of rituals and precepts. Together with missionary works (*da'wah*) they got involved in social work for the educational and moral benefit of the poor and the marginalised. They thus appealed to these sections of the population. The Hizbullah distinguished itself by fighting against drug trafficking and starting rehabilitation programmes for addicts. The leader, Celh Fakeemeeah, managed to develop a good following which, eventually, became a distinct religious group, praying in special meeting places. This pattern was common to most of the neo-Islamist groups which eventually built their own mosques, breaking away from *jamaats* which had other ideological inclinations.

The emergence of neo-Islamic fundamentalism greatly perturbed the prevailing order. Competing ideological currents were forced to rearticulate their ideas and values in order to assert their legitimacy and keep their followers. The tendency moved towards a renewal in ritual practices in order to match the Islamist groups. In fact, the former differences among various ideological currents tended to be minimised as they made a common front

against fundamentalist groups that were gaining ground. The Mauritian Muslim society, like many others, has now settled in its ideological pluralism, but the dominant voice remains that of fundamentalism (Gellner 1992: 2–22, cited by Bagader 1994: 123).

The political career of the Hizbullah has been marginal: it has managed to win some 30 % of the votes in the Muslim majority constituency of Port Louis and even returned a candidate in 1995, through the Good Loser System. No clear political action has, however, emerged. Its leader and several members are at present facing trial on various charges of organised criminal activities and suspicion of gang violence and murder. Three of its members suspected of political assassinations committed suicide to avoid being caught by the police. These actions greatly perturbed public opinion which suspected linkages with international organisations.

International influences

The idea and feeling of belonging to one community (the *ummah* of the Prophet) is deeply entrenched in the Muslim psyche: it can lie dormant or be reactivated depending on local and international events and crises. Throughout the short history of Islam on Mauritius the Muslim community has been affected by several identifiable international influences. At the beginning of the 20th century the feeling of belonging to the Ottoman Caliphate was strong. It was expressed in *L'Islamisme*, which regularly published news on the health, activities and whereabouts of the Sultan. There were contacts between the Mauritians and the Caliphate; the organisation which published that paper was set up in 1909 on the advice of the President of the Ottoman Parliament. The Sultan also gave decorations to local personalities and received them in audience. When the Caliphate was abolished in 1924, the local Muslims, like their Indian counterparts, were greatly upset.[9]

Another form of foreign relations that has influenced Mauritians was diasporic links with the Indian sub-continent, as well as Indian communities settled in the Indian Ocean region and elsewhere. The partition of India affected the local Muslims, who felt cut off from their homeland and they identified themselves for some time with Pakistan. After a few years this support dwindled as Pakistan grappled with its problems: it did not pay to claim relationship with that state.

Foreign influence again asserted itself in the wake of Arab post-oil boom activism and the Iranian Revolution. Islamic fundamentalist ideas

9 For a discussion on the Caliph as a Symbol of Islamic Solidarity see Minault 1982: 4–7.

began to appeal to many, especially the young and vulnerable. Competing ideological currents stepped up ritual and devotional practices. Mass media and new technologies play an important role in the diffusion of information on other Muslim societies as well as of ideas likely to influence thought patterns and behaviour (Ahmed and Donnan 1994: 1–4).

Have recent local developments dampened the average Muslim's attraction to or tolerance of fundamentalist movements? Possibly, although this is not clear. It is clear that though the local socio-political situation spurred fundamentalism international links have encouraged the dissemination of such ideas and groups. The generally shared feeling that Muslims are dealt poorly with by "the West" on the international scene, and "the others" in the local context, whips up various types of responses. The supporters of fundamentalism on the local scene know quite well that ideals of Islamic laws and state apparatus cannot realistically be applied to a minority within a state. Therefore, they are consciously or unconsciously using it as a pressurising tool in the pursuit of other, material and political gains.

Conclusion

The Mauritian Muslim community is an example of how various types of influences have creatively been utilised by a group, in order to assert itself in the political and socio-economic fields, and in its search for its identity. It can be concluded that islamisation processes, although at times contradictory in character, have been crucial in shaping thought patterns and behaviour, particularly in the cultural and political fields. In fact, over a relatively short period several ideologies and approaches were tested, adopted or rejected, while religion and religious ideology have served as a basis of social identification and communal boundary maintenance. They have also supported the pursuit of material and political well-being.

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