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Cultural Identity of Mauritius through Kovils

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to understand how Tamil-speaking Indo-Mauritians vehicle their cultural identity through their attendance to kovils (Tamil temples). A kovil is space of meanings and also a language on its own where specific rituals, celebrations and activities (treated as ‘texts’) blend together creating a communal sense that demarcates Indo-Mauritians fluent in Tamil and their rituals from the globalization effect of homogeneity. In that sense, there is a postcolonial movement through the perpetuation of faith in Mauritius. This study demonstrates also that culture itself is in constant movement; the postcolonial island of Mauritius in fact continually re-defines amidst the flow of different ‘texts’ at three selected kovils located at Quatre-Carreaux, Camp-Diable and Rose-Belle.

Keywords: identity, kovils, Mauritius, postcolonial, culture, ecology

Introduction

Benedict Anderson says that nations are imagined communities and this could not be more than correct in the imagined community of kovils. The imagination is not only endorsed by the architectural bloom but also by the womb-like framework provided by the kovils. During my first visit to Singapore with my father in 1998, I was amazed by and attracted to the Dravidian style of the Hindu Tamil temples there. That was the first time I was staring at such intricate and beautifully-designed and colourful structure of the Tamil temples, also known as kovils in Mauritius. Years later, I started seeing that style replicated in many places around the island. My idea for this paper germinated through my conversation with some people in Mauritius who regularly attend prayers in the kovil at Quatre-Carreaux and at the same through my discovery or re-memorisation process of my ancestral roots and cultural connection to kovils. Culture survives through architectural framework that is ‘physical’ and this creates an ‘abstract’ or ‘semantic’ framework that further produced more meanings and hence reinforcement of identity to a particular group of Hindus in Mauritius. The aim of this paper is to show that there is a connection between the formation of cultural identity of some Indo-Mauritians and their regularly visit to kovils. The physical space has an impact on the formation of the individuals in terms of Tamil culture.

School of languages and dance at Arulmigu Mariamem Thirukkovil, Quatre-Carreaux is an example of ‘text’ encoded in physical spaces of the kovil. As my colleague Leo Couacaud (2016, p. 181) says, we must pay attention “to the manner in which Mauritians utilize the built environment and nature landscape to symbolize their ethnic identities.” Activities, prayers, rituals and schools are forms of ‘texts’ that encode particular meanings to different people but at the same time they are also a form of space detached from the post-independent Mauritius that has encouraged paradoxically a homogeneity and heterogeneity to intra-cultural collapse of spaces (within the country) and inter-cultural blending (with the past colonial influences of England and France as well as the neo-colonial shadow of American culture).

Methodology

For the purpose of this work-in-progress, three kovils are here the focus. Conversation with the devotees as well as members of the executive committees of the associations of each individual Tamil temples prove to be eye-opening about the cultural-wealth inherent in the practice of those Tamil-speaking Hindus. There is more to be done in terms of digging into archives and collection of information through inter-personal communication. But for the purpose of this paper, we are providing an introductory materials can be taken up cooperatively with another scholar.

The Arulmigu Mariamem Thirukkovil, Quatre-Carreux, located at Eau-Coulée in the town of Curepipe is the kovil where my father was once either secretary or treasurer as per family oral history and also as concurred by some members today. As a dynamic and much involved Mauritian Customs and Excise officer of the 1960s, he was among those in the team to work towards the idea and fulfilment to register Mariamen Temple Association as no. 399. Later on it can be cogitated if, in the process of the independence of Mauritius, whether, in parallel, there was an echo of the endeavour for the fermentation of an authentic non-European identity in a cultural manner through the establishment of association of cultural spaces. Significant to my own self-identity as Mauritian Hindu that speaks neither Hindi nor Tamil, this kovil is a sacred space not only in terms of what it is as a temple but also as memory site; my father was so involved (as I was informed by my aunts, uncle and mother) that he would bring us his three children along in most activities that were held there. As far as I can remember, my first contact with Hindu traditions (in Tamil language) were within that premise. Family history recalls also that my grand-father used to light the lamps there, and long ago, there was something called 'marche les sabres' (translated from Creole as 'walking on sabers'). This has stopped a long time back at this kovil at Eau Coulée.

I interviewed some individuals informally, either through face-to-face- interaction or by telephone, depending on availability. Mr. Mareemootoo Munusami, a long-time devotee and assistant to the priest of Quatre-Carreux informed me that it is still practised at other places in Mauritius. As per family oral history, my grandfather used to walk on 40 hatchets as part of his participation in the rituals and prayers. This was a way for the family to demarcate and differentiate from colonial or, if I may be allowed to say, Europeanised Mauritius. They did not embrace European culture but continued to pave their way as Mauritians through traditions brought by their ancestors but also contextualised (as island space).

Govinden (prayers for Lord Krishna), Thaipooosam Cavadee (for Lord Muruga/ Karthikeya) and Timidhi (walk-on-fire and prayers for the Goddess Ammen) are important key events during the year which demand a highly organised cooperation of members and also devotees, commonly termed as bhaktans. The kovil is a place where all Hindus are conjoined as one regardless whether they can utter a Tamil word or not. The sense of national unity is strong and it is not nationalism towards India but mostly nationalism towards a Mauritian identity, pristine in the sense that it debarred from totally fledged traditional Indian (India - ancestral land) belonging as well as any European (colonial nuances) echoes.

According to the current President of the Mariamen Temple Association Selven Kuppadu and Secretary Viswen Thondrayen, this temple is more than 100 years old. So, there has been ongoing bonding of the community through the premise of the kovil. In the only secondary material available (Souvenir Magazine, Sunday 25 May 2014, Imprimerie H.S.3, Rose-Hill, Mauritius), is stated the kovil was founded by Ramsamy Narainen in 1914 but there is an important part "...selon la mémoire populaire des personnes de la localité il est fort probable que le kovil soit antérieur à cette date." (p. 6) (according to collective memory, the creation of the kovil dates further back). Even in the magazine is highlighted that the kovil is a platform for the transmission of values ("Le Kovil occupait une place central et a joué un rôle important, non seulement comme lieu de culte mais aussi comme un lieu de rencontre pour la

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transmission des valeurs culturelles.” p. 6) It is a place of meeting however not only of cultural values but also of cultural identity without any European/formerly colonial interference.

Secondly there is Rose-Belle Tamizh Maha Jana Sanghama Kovil, located in the South-East and a few kilometres from SSR International Airport where the architecture of the temple is even more impressive. The then-Prime Minister Aneerood Jugnauth laid its foundation stone in 1994 for its reconstruction and this kovil, like the others, hosts different events like the Saraswadee Poosai, Varusha Pirappu (celebrating the Tamil New Year), Thaipooosam Cavadee, Timidhi and Govinden where I attended some prayers. Even if an individual does not attend all the events, Facebook photos and videos are available. Facebook has also become another space perpetuating and reinforcing cultural identity through social media, and thus allowing more visibility to that part of the Indo-Mauritian community not only locally but also globally. The third one, known to all Mauritians of all faiths, is the Amma Tookay Kovil located in Camp-Diable in the South-East of Mauritius among sugar cane fields. This is another place of cult that I have been going regularly with my family since my birth. I have very clear memory of the place when it still looked a tiny house but with a beautiful small courtyard. The website abounds with information and forthcoming events. Like the Grand-Bassin (also known as Ganga Talao) is mentioned by Patrick Eisenlohr (2013) to be a very popular place of pilgrimage, the Amma Tookay kovil too is well known and regularly visited by Mauritians.

There is a desire to have mini-spaces that are translated echoes of memories of India through the temples, lakes and other forms of connections with the sacred. The sources or beginnings of Amma Tookay or Ammen at Quatre-Carreaux have slightly different versions. However, as per the website of the Amma Tookay Kovil:

...there are a few legend about the origin of the powerful Goddess. Some believe that that more than a century ago, some workers whilst working in the cane fields to plant new cane shoots, they came across a heavy stone which they were unable to displace and even could not work at this particular place. The owner at that time of European origin came and deployed all efforts to move the stone but to no avail. The latter eventually faced many difficulties in his life and died. The workers started to pray at this particular place, as the stone proved to them to be very powerful.

However it is important to note though there can be different versions in the oral history, but still, in narrating the story, there is another text being written here and that is the attempt to create this sense of source in Mauritius itself and not India, and the sense of having a start on the Mauritian soil just as the people here. So, the ancestors' travel over the kala-pani (the dark sea) was a form of baptism (without having to dip in) and identities were in-the-making the moment our ancestors left their ancestral land. Independence started from that moment and a refreshed identity has been cultivated through generations and still ongoing.

The space englobed by the physical 'structures' (the word is in plural because my family and I were regular devotees at the old small temple and the newly designed one (the Amma Tookay was reconstructed in 2002 as per the information of Mr. Anbananda Chengee, Treasurer of the Savanne Tamil Benevolent Society. The Amma Tookay Kovil, crucial to my family identity and history, has now become a tradition. Following the birth of my daughter, a few weeks' old, she was laid in the arms of the Goddess as a symbolic gesture as Amma Tookay herself giving me that child. It is a form of spiritual and cultural DNA inscribed in my lineage and that is followed and perpetuated for generations to come. The connection with the traditions are still being transmitted through my constant contact there but also through the writing of this paper.

There is one prayer at the Amma Tookay kovil which demarcates from other kovils and this is the Crop Season Prayer. Before the cutting of the sugar cane, prayers are held in gratitude to the successful crop that would occur. Now what is interesting to note is that many individuals involved in this sugar cane industry, of different faiths, attend the prayers. The prayers are broadcast on the national television to ease for those who cannot attend the prayers. Hence, through media,

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Mauritians in general can virtually attend. But when the camera zooms in and out on the physical attendees, there is not only some recognition, in many cases, of friends and families (it is well-known to Mauritians that ‘tout dimoune konn tout dimoune’, meaning that we all know each other and which is partly true) but also a connection binding the Mauritian community as one within that premise at the kovil at Camp-Diable.

Cultural identity, as defined by Vivian Hsueh -Hua Chen from The Center for Intercultural Dialogue, “... refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion.” And in this particular case, cultural identity is embedded with religion; kovils provide the structural space that promotes a homogenous identity connected with culture. Tamil-speaking Hindus nurture that identity through this connection with the traditions perpetuated and also encouraged by the physical set-up of the temple. The kovils there provide a physical structure that give a feeling of belonging to a specific community. In the post-colonial era, this become a way for individuals to provide another edge to ‘hybridity’.

Therefore, considering the three kovils, and as Mr. M. Munusami shared, all the prayers, rituals, serving of blessed food demand preparation and also the cooperation of many individuals. Throughout time, and also due to this attempt to nurture their sense of belonging, Tamil-speaking Indo-Mauritians have been keeping in touch, producing not only a cultural identity but also social identity. From mouth-to-mouth and through that growing community of devotees, people are informed of events of which they attend and hence keep meeting the same people in most cases. The kovils are therefore spaces where not only human relationships are bound but also made through friendships. It is not necessary to be a Tamil-speaking Indo-Mauritian to attend the prayers. Leo Coucaud (2016, p.189) writes that religion provides a boundary and not language as claimed by Eriksen. From my experience, devotees and members are very welcoming and have this sincerity in sharing information about forthcoming events and what to bring to participate in them as well as welcoming individuals that automatically create a sense of belonging. And this is done through the use of our mother tongue: Creole.

A form of code through the use of Kovils

In my goings to the kovils, I realised that I was the only one who did not have any cognisance of the Tamil language, but because of my father’s involvement with the Quatre-Carreaux kovil I unknowingly was in regular contact (with my elder brother and sister) with all Tamil traditions. The music, the saris, the colours and the feeling of home has amalgamated in my childhood to become part of my cultural roots. And during my years at a Roman Catholic primary and secondary school as well as my father’s cultural connection to French and British culture (which could not be avoided for a man born in 1942 before the independence of Mauritius in 1968) there was this ‘métissage’ of cultural awareness that grew into me and that in fact today helps me in appreciation religions, peoples and cultures worldwide.

The sense of belonging to the community helps Tamil-speaking Indo-Mauritians to cultivate their own identity debarred from the effects of globalization. What I noticed is that all devotees would wear the traditional dresses within the premise of the kovil. Meeting those same people in another context dressed in normal clothes (I am not inferring that traditional dresses do not fall in the normative code) gives rise to another dynamics of identity from the gaze of an observer where this identity is not only hybrid as postcolonial/post-Europeanised self but also in the context that there is a homogeneity of cultural identity collapsed into the Mauritian threads of identity-construction. Kovils provide a kind of simulacra to the home place giving a semblance that displacement has not occurred. But whether we want it or not, displacement from the place of origin is inevitable the moment there has been the ‘kala pani’ (black sea) transition from India to Mauritius. In fact the movement of culture started at that moment.

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Leo Couacaud (2016, p. 179) also mentions that apart the Telegus and Marathis, the Tamils form part of the “non-Hindi speaking Hindu groups in Mauritius”. All in all, reverence to the deities in major case is quasi the same but the language and the process of rituals can be different. However, all of them are considered as Hindus if we have to demarcate religion *grosso modo*. Individuals need to validate their identity to be able to showcase where they belong though there is no real ancestral connection and finding this validation in physical demonstrations through rituals and structures of the places of worship add a heightened effect especially through media.

In my research work about kovils I paid particular attention to the photos available. Even on the website of Amma Tookay kovil, the photos of the temple when it was a tiny building (which I remember so well and enjoyed going because it was like going home) act as anchor point to a ‘beginning’ in some sort. The internet is this virtual space that is perpetuating the encoding and decoding of messages about kovils and their importance in the Mauritian social fabric.

Kovils and place-identity

Haritharan Arumugam and Manimaran Subramaniam investigate to why shrines are built within compounds of Malaysian Hindus and demonstrates their findings of the literature. But it is interesting to note that even in Mauritius this is a common practice. In addition, there is also the building of kovils, shivalas and pagodas as well as churches that bind the community not only culturally but also geographically. True that in Mauritius we do not have issues of individuals making complaints about prayers conducted at home (Haritharan Arumugam and Manimaran Subramaniam explain in their article that this happens in Malaysia). But attending prayers and having shrines as well as temples are common practice for all Hindus in Mauritius.

Place-identity (Proshanksy, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983) is a term used to refer to the connection between an individual and his/her sense of the self within a larger context related to memories and feelings related to “specific physical settings” (Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983, p. 60). In fact place-identity is directly pertinent to the discussion about kovils here as memories are attached (as in my personal case) that have given rise to my values, thoughts and feelings about my own cultural identity as well as questioned my place as an Indo-Mauritian educated in Roman schools living in a melting pot. My feeling of homecoming has been associated not only with the physical setting of the kovil (firstly connected with the gaze set upon the Singaporean kovils) but also with my involvement with the three kovils mentioned in this paper.

Individuals will automatically be drawn to places and spaces where they feel more valorized. In my case, the kovils bind my Self to a root that has been deeply ingrained in my understanding of family, ancestral rituals and home. As Twigger-Ross, et al (2003) affirm, some places refer the possibility of maintaining positive self-esteem while others can downgrade your self-esteem. Kovils, being specific spaces for spiritual, religious and cultural purposes, uplift the identification connected to a sense of existence within a community.

The narratives of the past (through religious texts/chanting of mantras) become a site of memory. As Glusac (2015, p. 37) writes: “By narrating the stories and myths of ancestral homes...the memory of these places is kept alive and in turn, projected onto the landscape and the sites of ancestral homes, externalising what is internal, the ancestral memory and past of these places.” What is even more interesting is that for the Indo-Mauritian, the site of memory which is anchored into India is transferred onto the kovil, mixed with a cultural contextualised ‘métissage’. However the belonging to Mauritianness remains strong; the Aya (priest) talks in Creole for everyone to understand, food are cooked using the local vegetables (though there can be echoes of India through the use of spices) and offered after prayers as sacred food.

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Providing a womb-like space of protection

Indo-Mauritians of Hindu faiths of different linguistic backgrounds often place a shrine or are aware about the spatial proximity of their temples. Leo Couacaud (2016, p.211) relates of a field of thinking about how Mauritians connect their natural environment with supernatural forces (true the population is mostly geared towards believing in other forces unseen by the physical eyes. I have a friend who once said that he has not been in any country where there are so many shrines on road of different faiths so much, Every corner he turns there is either 'une grotte de la Vierge Marie' (a Virgin Mary mini-grotto) or a Kalimai or a Hanuman shrine etc.)

The kovils become a 'third-space' as termed by Homi Bhabha (1994), which is neither the homeland nor a host land. Hence, for Tamil speaking Indo-Mauritians, the physical space of the temple becomes that place of identity re-formulation where specific cultural codes are transmitted. We can apply Judith Butler's performativity theory (initially the theory was linked to linguistic theory of Carl Ginet,1979) here in the sense that though all born in Mauritius, individuals perform an identity of Hinduism in performing certain rituals, using a specific language that lead to think we come directly from India. This is an argument on the Butler's premise that we are what we perform. So, the more we perform specific rituals and evoke some mantras in Tamil or other language, the more this sense of belonging become accentuated.

Colors and meanings

What was noticed during the various celebrations I went to through the kovils was the use of colors for specific celebrations. Yellow was worn by the devotees for the Timidhi (walk-on-fire), fuchsia was used for Cavadee and sometimes members of the association would select a specific colors of saris/pavaday or veshti/Tamil dhoti to demarcate themselves from other people attending the ceremonies. It was a way to encode that they belonged to a specific group within the larger group. I thank Mr. Mareemootoo Munusami for enlightening me on the use of the colors.. Leo Couacaud (2016, 209) firmly states that "the use of color symbolism is a powerful medium for transmission of messages in the public domain..." and hence it was a way to also bind a group and bestow a sense of belonging not only associated with religion but also an identity. For prayers related to Lord Muruga, the color fuchsia is used, for Ammen, yellow is used and for Lord Ganesha, the color white is used. The color code and dress code are forms of texts to be transcribed in the meanings they hold for the community.

Nature and kovils

As Shafkat Rana, Dilip Kumar Sharma and PP Paliwal (2016, p. 27) writes: "Since the Vedic times, the human race has used various plants for ritual purposes." The use of coconut, turmeric, rice, water, rose water, honey, curd, specific types of leaves bear testimony to the necessity and power of nature to connect human with the Higher Being.

The walk on fire (timidhi) is in itself a testimonial to human cooperation with nature and nature's willingness to blend with the human. All this points to the fact that the natural elements are part of the human body. Just as temples are constructed according to Agamic rules that follow the structure of the human body, so do the elements used for prayers and rituals as important. Nature does not only bring its healing and purifying properties but the celebration of it depict a connection with the ancestral rituals, hence bridging this sense of identity.

At the same time, the use of nature encourage their continuous use and necessity for future generations. There can be no temples if these elements are not used accordingly as these physical structures of the kovils are maintained by the abstract and invisible constant necessity to the natural elements. Those Indo-Mauritians participating in these rituals demarcate themselves from the neo-colonial attempt to homogenize peoples and cultures. Whether we want it or not, plants and flowers available within the Mauritian soil are considered vital not

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only for the ecosystem but also for their use in rituals. Within the macro-Mauritius there lies micro-Mauritiuses that nurture their own structure and system of society that has to be respected as part of the natural process of identity-in-the-making for post-Europeanised individuals. The three kovils mentioned in this paper have the central deity Amman: a feminine power. The legends of Amma Tookay and Mariamem at Quatre-Carreaux echo both the idea of discovery, mystery but also this deep connection with nature. Both have unknown source and renders their power even greater in the sense that there is much respect given to the silent narrative of divine source and that cannot be grasped by the human mind. The feminine power (Shakti) is emblematic of this attempt to break that double oppression of women during colonial times. Feminine power is also associated with the idea of procreation and in that there is the ongoing transmission of values and identity.

Conclusion

Thus, we can agree that the cultural identity of those Indo-Mauritians that regularly attend kovils is deeply rich and embedded with the physical structure of the temple. The kovil remains that one space where there is an amalgamation of ancestral connections and context adaptation.

Identity is malleable and rendered new through new conditions. Tamil-speaking Mauritians deal with their cultural identity through the different parameters and dispersed meanings of the different forms of texts (through rituals, dresses and nature)

Though Indo-Mauritians are part of the Indian diaspora, but still we are unique in our ways in the sense that we are already blended with other cultural competencies that necessarily and unavoidably are brought about in the performance of culture and identity. As Stuart Hall pg. 35 puts it, "identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. Mauritian identity is plural and cannot be attached to any string, especially to the string of the global village as within the island, there are micro-spaces structured by physical framework.

The one Mauritius consists of micro-'Mauritiuses' reflected in the mirrors of its multicultural facets. Religious pluralism is evinced by the voluminous amount of temples, churches and shrines scattered around Mauritius. It is one aspect to look through the perspective of kovil attendance but it will also another launching point to investigate into other places of worship in Mauritius and/or compare notes, typically a Mauritian thing.

[If there are mistakes over names or words or facts in this article, they are totally mine and amendments will be made if the author is contacted. This work-in-progress is a churning out of my own learning process and progress.]

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Appendix

Mr. Mareemootoo Munusami is an inspiration to my writing of this article. His commitment to explain throughout the year, in his always-gentle voice, the different elements of prayers have been the most helpful. A regular attendee to the Quatre-Carreaux kovil since his childhood, our regular conversation throughout the year whether on phone or face-to-face has been the map to this paper. Mr. Munusami and I are in ongoing dialogue as I myself mesmerized by the rituals at the kovil and as the paper demonstrates, this is a work-in-progress. My most heartfelt thanks to him for his patience and for the call I gave one night and probably making his dinner cold.

Mr. Anbanada Chengen, Treasurer of the Association at Amma Tookay Kovil, has been a good source of information though he had lots to do the day after Crop Season Prayer.

I am grateful of the cultural inheritance given by my paternal grandfather Amitapersad Ramsoondur for his commitment and devotion to Ammen at Quatre-Carreaux. My father Pritum Ramsoondur, though was a busy and devoted Customs and Excise officer, had time to make sure the registration of the association of the same kovil was properly done and also for his active involvement in collecting funds for the first concrete building of the temple. He is known to many actual bhaktans and members of the association till date as it is by my name that the connection was made.

If there are mistakes over names or words or facts in this article, they are totally mine and amendments will be made if the author is contacted. This work-in-progress is a churning out of my own learning process and progress.

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I dedicate this paper to Mauritians who love their country - their rainbow nation – and its people of various faiths.