

# SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MAURITIAN CULTURAL IMPACT ON AUSTRALIA

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Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Mauritian cultural impact in Australia has been the extent to which Mauritians have participated in and strengthened broader French cultural activities in Australia. Mauritians are represented in organizations such as the *Alliance Française* and over the years a number of them have been among the *Alliance's* office bearers. Between 1939 and 1941, Dr Louis Ernest Séide Gellé (1881-1972) was president of the *Alliance Française* in Western Australia. In 1976 Claude Rochecouste was President of the *Alliance* in Canberra. There are numerous Mauritians who are employed as French language teachers in Australia. They are also involved in French language broadcasting and have done much to promote French as a community language rather than as a mere elective in secondary and tertiary education.

Muritians have also made an important contribution to amateur French language theatre in Australia. In professional theatre, Mauritian-born Odile Leclézio is a rising young star. Her sister Sylvie Leclézio is a familiar figure in the Australian film industry. In the early 1970s, Sylvie Leclézio helped organize the Perth Film Festival with David Roe. In 1975 she established *Leclézio Films*, a distribution company which played a major role in introducing French New Wave films to Australian audiences. She also produced Marian Wilkinson's thought-provoking *Allies*, and co-produced the acclaimed *Coca-Cola Kid*.

Muritians have often capitalized on their "Frenchness". Aside from the more distinctive Mauritian cuisine of restaurants such as Sydney's *Le Dodo* (and in a restaurant with the same name in the Victorian coastal town of Lorne), numerous Mauritian chefs, waiters and restaurateurs are engaged in the preparation of more traditional French food.

In the fashion industry, Mauritian-born model Lily de Ch Alain gained a significant reputation in Melbourne in the late 1970s. Similarly, a number of Mauritians have, over the years, been able to trade on a certain French chic, in hairdressing and styling. Rudy Marie, for example, won the Australian-Pacific Hairdressing Award in 1978.

Muritian involvement in French language cultural life in Australia was also noticeable in Melbourne in the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, Oscar Comettant, in his book *Au Pays des Kangourous et des Mines d'Or*, noted Mauritians among the five hundred members of the "French Society of Victoria". From the late nineteenth century Mauritians have been involved in

French language publishing in Australia. Léon Henry Magrin (1874-1942) secured a position with *Le Courrier Australien* in 1897 and later purchased the paper. Magrin stamped an indelible mark on the *Courrier* which is today the oldest foreign language newspaper in Australia.

In Sydney, today, Mauritian-born Philippe Tanguy (b.1951), a specialist in multilingual editing, typesetting and publishing, has made an important contribution to multicultural communication through his own publishing agency.

Without doubt the most important Australian cultural figure with a Mauritian connection is the landscape painter Lloyd Rees (born 1895). Rees' mother Angèle Burguez was born in Mauritius and came to Australia with her parents, Léon and Elizabeth Burguez, on the *Clyde*, in May 1878.

Important among Mauritian-born writers in Australia today, is Alfred North-Coombes (born 1907). North-Coombes was for many years Chief Agronomist, then Director of Agriculture in Mauritius and for four decades Editor-in-Chief on the *Revue Agricole et Sucrière*. He emigrated to Australia in 1964. Aside from being a distinguished agricultural specialist he is also known and respected as a historian. His first book, published in 1937, was *The Evolution of Sugarcane Culture in Mauritius*. In 1971 he published the first comprehensive history of the island of Rodrigues. His *Vindication of François Leguat*, a serious appraisal of the observations made by the Huguenot naturalist Leguat on the island of Rodrigues was published in 1979. In 1979 he also published *La Découverte des Mascareignes par les Arabes et les Portugais* which challenges a number of assumptions about the history of exploration in the Indian Ocean.

The most famous Mauritian-born performing artist in Australia today is Henri Wilden (born 1935). He emigrated to Australia in 1971 and auditioned, soon after, with the Sydney Opera Company. Wilden was the company's principal tenor from the beginning of 1972. His first role in Australia was as the Duke of Mantua in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. At the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973, he performed the role of Rinuccio in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*. In 1974 Wilden sang Hoffmann with Joan Sutherland in Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. He performed again with Sutherland, in Delibes' *Lakmé* (1976) and as Don Giovanni (1978). In recent years Wilden has again sung Hoffmann and also performed as leading tenor in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, but is now semi-retired.

Mauritians, however, are not merely bearers of a colonial variant of French culture. Indeed, they have a distinctive culture of their own, which has been profoundly influenced by Africa and the Orient. At the centre of these overlapping cultural patterns is the Mauritian Créole identity. One of the most striking elements of Mauritian culture in Australia, which has

strong African origins, is the *sega*. The name *sega* is probably derived from the West African word *chéga* which means "song". The *sega*, however, is also a dance with strong African roots. Like the calypso, the *sega* often reflects the melancholia of the poor. In other instances it is rich in humour and eroticism. In Australia it has shown itself to be particularly adaptable to the rhythms of modern rock music. Mauritian Créole cooking, in this country, is still characterized by a fusion of African and French cuisines—incorporating distinctive aspects of the Indian and Chinese culinary traditions—but now embraces the use of a much wider range of ingredients.

### Mauritian Organizations

The major foci of Mauritian cultural activity, in Australia, are the various Mauritian community organizations. The oldest of these is the Stella Clavisque Club (founded in 1966), which owes much to the untiring efforts of Jean Commins, who emigrated to Australia in 1950. Although Stella Clavisque now has only a regional following among Mauritians in the Springvale area of Melbourne, it was for several years the only Mauritian organization in Australia, and provided a model for the other Mauritian clubs that followed. One of its off-shoots has been the highly successful Keysborough Sporting Club, which is effectively the largest Mauritian organization in Victoria.

The Melbourne-Sydney based Australian Mauritian Research Group is the only organization in Australia exclusively concerned with historical and sociological issues of relevance to the Mauritian community. Beside the Stella Clavisque Club, the other Mauritian organizations in Melbourne are the Victorian Mauritian Association, the International Service Association and the Rodriguan and Mauritian Social Club (RAMS). The latter has a membership largely made up of immigrants from the Mauritian dependency of Rodrigues. A much smaller Mauritian group in Melbourne is the so-called "French Eleven".

Similar organizations exist in other states. In Sydney these include the Australo-Mauritian Association and the Copains Social Club. The Australo-Mauritian Association also has an affiliated sporting club. In Canberra, there is only one Mauritian organization—The Mauritian Australian Association, which was founded in 1982. In Perth, Mauritian loyalties are divided between the French and Mauritian Society of Western Australia, and the Western Australian branch of the International Service Association. All these organizations arrange social activities and issue newsletters with community news. Despite an unsuccessful attempt to create a federation of Mauritian clubs in the 1970s, 1985 saw renewed moves towards unity in the form of a national newspaper for the Mauritian community in

Australia under the banner of *Amitié* and also the formation of the Alliance Mauricienne de Victoria.

The majority of Mauritian community organizations have a pervasive Roman Catholic influence. Devotion to the Catholic missionary Father Jacques Désiré Laval (1803-1864) is particularly obvious. Laval is revered in Mauritius for his work among the liberated slaves of the island and for supposedly performing a number of miracles since his death. In Australia this devotion is expressed in the form of French language masses which have been known to attract congregations of several thousand Mauritians at one time. Despite the secular influences of Australian society, religious ritual and Roman Catholic institutions continue to have an important place in the cultural life of many Mauritians in Australia. An organization which seeks to reaffirm traditional Roman Catholic values among the Mauritian community in Melbourne is the Victorian Mauritian Pastoral Council, founded in 1973.

Perhaps the most unusual and noble Mauritian groups in Australia are the independent state-based branches of SACIM (Society for Aid to Children Inoperable in Mauritius), which has the exclusive aim of arranging operations, in Australia, for sick children in Mauritius (suffering mainly from heart disease). The first SACIM branch in Australia was established in Melbourne by Dr Georges Domaingue, 1974.

While there are perhaps difficulties in describing Mauritians in Australia as representing a single ethnic group (given that some Mauritians in Australia have no African or Asian ancestors), the fact remains that the vast majority of Mauritians in Australia have a common French heritage. On a racial level it may be a question of degree, but on a cultural level Gallic traditions are extraordinarily pervasive. Mauritians in Australia, regardless of the colour of their skin, share the same place of birth and largely share the same religion (Catholicism) and language. While some may not be completely fluent in French, all speak Créole (a language with strong African and Indian influences, but with a basically French derived vocabulary). It is on the basis of these common elements that we can refer to Mauritians in Australia as a single ethnic group.

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