# Justice, Loyalty and Cosmopolitan Politesse in Mauritius

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It is a privilege and a pleasure to have the opportunity to comment on this issue's forum, which is yet another challenging and beautifully written piece on cosmopolitanism and anthropology from Nigel Rapport. Taking his concept of cosmopolitan politesse as a departure point, Rapport here discusses the possibilities of cosmopolitanism as something which is not reducible to a specifically Western or European philosophical trajectory or political persuasion, as well as comparing justice with loyalty.

Engaging with the Other as Anyone (not to be confounded with Heidegger's faceless *Das Man*), presuming 'the common humanity and the distinct individuality of whomsoever we engaged with, but [classifying] the Other in no more substantive fashion than this', is naturally easier said than done. As every anthropologist knows, the proof of the pudding is not in the recipe. Discussing one of his earlier works (Rapport 2012), Rapport describes cosmopolitan politesse as a form of liberal, tolerant and respectful practice allowing others to 'come into their own', but without presuming 'to know in any detail, or seek to influence in any substantial way, what another individual's "coming into their own" might entail.'

Complicated pragmatic issues and value conflicts nevertheless crop up continuously in this kind of setting. In Mauritius, where the official multiculturalism of the state is being challenged by cosmopolitan tendencies in parts of civil society, these problems are endemic and seemingly inevitable. Most Mauritians identify strongly with their ethnic group or 'community' while simultaneously considering themselves Mauritians (for recent contributions from Mauritian and foreign scholars, see Ramtohul and Eriksen 2018).

The ideal of *mauricianité*, or Mauritianness, has much in common with Rapport's concept of cosmopolitan politesse. The first Mauritian prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (1900–1985), once advised his people not to discuss politics and religion. By this, he meant not

ideas about politics or religion, but rather the way in which they were being organised corporatively – and, one might add, divisively. The downside of this approach is that it encourages us to engage with difference but not with inequality.

Cultural and phenotypical diversity is not seen as problematic in Mauritius, nor is religious intolerance a major problem in the island. Some attribute the remarkably tolerant and respectful attitude to others' religions to the fact that the largest religion is Hinduism (about half the population are Hindus according to a conventional definition). There is certainly an argument to be made, *contra* Western academics who see cosmopolitanism as a uniquely North Atlantic contribution to the world of political virtues, about the centuries-old Indian tradition of accommodating difference (often hierarchically) instead of suppressing it. Overt missionary activity aiming to convert adherents of other religions to one's own is frowned upon. (Reformism such as Arya Samaj, evangelical Christianity and so on is another matter, as long as conversion between the major religions of Christianity, Hinduism and Islam is not on the agenda.) When, in 1984, the Libyan embassy was suddenly closed down without an official justification, it was widely believed that the Libyan state had paid Catholics to convert to Islam. Long before the end of apartheid and the invention of the South African 'rainbow nation', Mauritian politicians and religious leaders alike spoke of their society as *une société à l'arc-en-ciel*.

It must be kept in mind that these and other policies, discourses and practices do not challenge the boundaries between groups and are therefore best described as multiculturalist rather than cosmopolitan. Yet, the cosmopolitan ideals of *mauricianité* are also practiced every day. A Tamil bus driver meets and greets his Creole colleague as Anyone, or even as a friend and colleague. In principle, the friendly banter over beer and rum in cheap restaurants includes everyone and Anyone (although mainly men, and Muslims are underrepresented), and while it draws on common knowledge and a shared sense of humour, people are almost instinctively aware that they 'walk on eggshells' and automatically avoid topics that might be understood as ethnically charged.

For, despite the remarkable fluidity, willingness to find compromises and religious respectfulness characterising Mauritian civil society, politics and everyday discourse about societal matters are massively dominated by ethnic differences, and allegations about discrimination, nepotism and hierarchies inherited from colonialism are the order of the day. The main political parties are divided not so much by ideology as by ethnicity, and until ethnic football teams were banned

a few years ago, nearly all clubs were associated with particular ethnic groups. The discrepancy between the symbolic and the social that I am hinting at is important, as also pointed out by Rapport. As Ghassan Hage (2017) has recently reminded us, racism is a practice, not a matter of opinion. And, in so far as crucial resources flow within the ethnic, or religious, community, tensions are bound to occur, notwithstanding a healthy dose of indifference towards the religion of others and widespread interaction, formal and informal, across ethnic boundaries. It is perfectly possible for a society, such as Mauritius, to celebrate cultural diversity and practise religious tolerance on an everyday level, and at the same time reproduce ethnic hierarchies whereby some segments of the population (notably Creoles, mainly of African and Malagasy descent) are being systematically excluded from positions of power – economic as well as political. Interestingly, Alexandra Hall (2012), in her study of everyday cosmopolitanism in a British refugee removal centre, finds that the opposite may also be the case: in her material, many of the guards who hold strong, generalising prejudices about the refugees tend to get along well with the inmates in practice, for example, at sports events.

The predicament of justice versus loyalty, also discussed by Rapport, may perhaps be the best way of accounting for the powerful contrast between ethnic and religious groupthink and the lofty ideals of treating the other as Anyone, meritocracy and the individual person's right to self-identification. At a general, abstract level, or in everyday situations where little is at stake, encountering the other as Anyone can be fairly easy. The 1.2 million citizens in the island share a language (a French-based Creole) and to some extent a world of everyday experience; in important ways, class hierarchies and the rural-urban dimension are culturally more significant than ethnic or religious differences. Yet, the moment suspicions of communalism (ethnic groupthink and, especially, group practice) arise, relationships cool down beyond indifference towards open hostility. This kind of group-based suspicion usually kicks in when matters of economy or politics are being discussed. However, personal acquaintances are often exempted from group-based generalisations (as in 'Some of my best friends are Jews, but . . .'). The question raised by Rapport in this context is whether the shift from loyalty to justice takes place mainly from below or from above, as it were; the answer must be both. The expanding circle evolves through biography and experience, but legal and ethical principles also shape people's outlook and behaviour, as witnessed in major religions.

Notwithstanding the contrast between cultural tolerance and social boundary maintenance, the scalar gap between cosmopolitan ideals and group-based practices needs to be examined briefly. The example of interethnic marriages (known in Mauritius as mixed marriages) may be illuminating here. No politician of any influence, even in the heady days of cultural radicalism in the 1970s, has openly encouraged people to marry across ethnic boundaries, although this practice, if it were to become widespread, would be an effective way of replacing communalism with meritocracy, group allegiance with *mauricianité*. Parents are generally unenthusiastic when an offspring marries 'out of the group'. And the couple often find themselves in deeper predicaments than anticipated, in many cases having been ostracised and alienated from emotional, social and economic resources that they had previously taken for granted (see Eriksen 1998). Opposition to mixed marriages, however, indicates not deep cultural or value differences, but rather a fear of diluting the social capital of the extended kin group.

An even clearer illustration of the clash between the abstract ideals of cosmopolitanism, where everyone can be treated as Anyone, and the particularism of the kin group and community, is evident in the labour market. If, as a member of a particular ethnic group, you are in a position of power, you would be considered a morally deficient relative if you failed to help 'your own people', often extending from kin to caste or community, with job opportunities. The mutual gratification of kinship loyalty thus outweighs the principles of impartiality and meritocracy.

There is no easy way out of these dilemmas. Teaching and practicing tolerance and respect are insufficient as tools to replace agonistic group identities with an inclusive, disinterested humanism. Predictably, the most successful mixed marriages in Mauritius tend to take place among the very rich (who forge alliances), the very poor (who have nothing to lose) and the growing urban middle class whose lives do not rely on support from extended kin networks or their ethnic community. It may well be that Mauritius in a not too distant future reaches a tipping point where the prevalence of mixed couples reaches a critical mass whereby it becomes normalised, but this would presuppose an effective separation between the economy and job market on the one hand and kinship and ethnicity on the other hand.

Finally, I should like to comment briefly on the question of Eurocentric bias, personhood and normativity. In his *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) does a rather good job at showing that non-Western versions of cosmopolitanism can be seen as something

more than exceptions or imitations. He takes the neighbourhood where he grew up in Ghana as a starting point, but he might just as well have started in an Indian town, a Melanesian village or an eco-anarchist commune in northern California. However, Rapport's ambitions are in some ways more challenging than Appiah's; he wishes to argue that cosmopolitan politesse refers 'to a truth of common humanity and universal individuality that is ontological rather than symbolical or cultural'; that is, openness to the other as Anyone is potentially part and parcel of the human condition tout court. In the tradition of cosmopolitan thinking from Kant, it is common to connect its growth to that of enlightenment thought, the bureaucratic state and the – in theory – impartial judiciary system. However, there are other traditions of cosmopolitanism and openness to strangers. But are they directly comparable? Yes and no. The typical Indian versions resemble multiculturalism more than cosmopolitanism in that they remain group-based. In traditional India, you do not encounter and respect a mere individual as an Anyone, but you meet a group member. (Naturally, contemporary, urban India can be very different.) In Mauritius, the struggle is one between socially anchored conceptualisations of personhood – what we used to call, following Louis Dumont (1980), sociocentric and egocentric persons.

Perhaps the closest non-Western approximation of cosmopolitan politesse can be found in those Melanesian societies where people are open to social change and often speak each other's language when they meet, as a polite gesture. There are other traditions of cosmopolitan politesse as well, which have arisen independently of European social philosophy and social organisation, and I agree with Rapport that it should not be seen just as 'simply another cultural version'.

Finally, normative problems must be dealt with pragmatically but also based on a value system, lest cosmopolitan politesse becomes just a methodology for avoiding getting up close and personal towards people with whom one shares a social and political space. There can often be a deceptively thin line between cosmopolitan politesse and indifference, and although cosmopolitanism does not aim, pace Habermas, at an ultimate consensus, objectionable practices remain just that. Notwithstanding anthropology's commitment to questioning hegemonic value systems, which often have more than a tinge of authoritarianism (nowadays disguised as humanistic common sense in our kind of society), it is sometimes our duty to move beyond politeness and state our objections. At the same time, the ethos proposed by Rapport suggests that this can take place never at the first encounter but only after a certain degree of familiarity and mutual commitment have been established.

It can develop into a universalistic humanism tempered by cultural relativity, and cosmopolitan politesse can enable us to see the other's face before the eventuality of passing judgement occurs.

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