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At first glance, ‘Hinduism in diaspora’ sounds like an oxymoron. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the term Hinduism first appear in a political context when anti-British Indian nationalists were eager to unify all Hindus, and to promote a reformed version of Hinduism able to compete with monotheist religions (Vertovec 2000). Hinduism was then invented as coterminous with the Indian national territory. Hindu fundamentalists have constantly argued that one could only be truly Hindu while living in India (hence the sometimes-violent campaigns against India’s Muslims and Catholics). Conversely, this meant that one could not be Hindu outside India’s sacred territory (dharmabhumi). Such an argument was all the more problematic since it was developed roughly during the same period (from 1850 to 1950) when half a million mainly Hindu Indians left India for Mauritius and settled down there quite successfully.

If India is the paramount reference for Hinduism, how can Hindu pilgrimage develop outside this country? This chapter will seek to answer this question by studying the role of Hindu pilgrimage in the Mauritian context, both as a paradigm for domesticating displacement (when Mauritian pilgrimage is built on continual references to India) and a tool to promote emplacement (when Mauritian pilgrimage echoes Indo-Mauritians’ rise to power). We will also explore the way in which this pilgrimage case study parallels the changing institutional links between Mauritius and India.

Mauritius is an island in the Indian Ocean, some five hundred miles east of Madagascar. This young nation, uninhabited until the seventeenth century, is now densely populated (1.2 million inhabitants for 787 square miles). It was first briefly colonized by the Dutch (1658–1710) and then the French (1715–1810). The latter imported slaves from Africa and Madagascar but also from India, before developing a plantation society around the sugarcane industry at the turn of the nineteenth century. The British eventually took over the island in 1810 and ruled it until 1968, while the abolition of slavery in Mauritius was declared on 1 February 1835. The subsequent demand by the French sugar barons, who still controlled the booming industry, for a cheap workforce was met through indentured labour.

Indentured workers were recruited as ‘volunteers’ in British India and were brought to Mauritius to replace the former slaves, who either refused to work for their former masters or asked for decent wages. According to available estimates, from 1835 to 1907, five hundred thousand Indians were brought to Mauritius. Even if a five-year contract was signed that guaranteed a wage and free passage back to India, work and living conditions were very close to slavery, at least during the 1837–53 period (Tinker 1974).
Mauritius is often described as a ‘world centre’, given its position at the ‘crossroads of the three continents’. True enough: a quarter of the Mauritian population come from Africa and Madagascar, while two thirds come from India and the remainder originate from France and China. Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism (but also Chinese religious traditions and various Charismatic traditions) are all practised, and you can hear Creole, English, French but also Bhojpuri and other Indian or Chinese languages fluently spoken in Mauritius. The island is often described as a ‘rainbow nation’ in tourist brochures as proof of cultural richness and general tolerance, even if these realities are more endured than accepted with enthusiasm. Indeed, the ‘world centre’ denomination matches a historical fact: Mauritius has more than anywhere else been embedded in globalized contexts. Let us mention, chronologically, the naval rivalry between the French and the British for control of the sea route to India; the slave trade and sugar monoculture meant for export; the transfer of half a million Indians between two British colonies; the current emigration of Mauritians looking for better opportunities in North America, Europe, India, South Africa or Australia; the successive development of textile manufacturing, tourism and ‘global finance’; or the newly revived links between India and its Indo-Mauritian ‘diaspora’.

Globalization means far more than a catch-all, fashionable phrase from the Mauritian point of view. In less than 150 years, the Indian indentured labourers and their descendants have experienced a remarkable collective success story, from a quasi-enslaved (or lumpen proletariat) status to national political and cultural hegemony. Let me mention a few stages of this success story. First: demographic majority. As early as 1861, Indians accounted for two-thirds of the colony’s population and, before the end of the nineteenth century, Mauritius-born Indians outnumbered those who were born in India. Second: access to the land. Around 1880, economic difficulties led planters to sell their lands and the richest among Indian labourers (the sirdar overseers) started acquiring sugarcane plots, became small planters and soon emerged as important economic agents. Third: political power. Thanks to a new constitution and voting system established in 1948, Indians finally became a political majority. Afterwards, the only ‘fight’ for independence involved a struggle between the British and the colonized population that pitted pro-independence Indo-Mauritians (confident that the democratic majority law would ensure their political future) against anti-independence Creoles and Franco-Mauritians, who feared that Mauritius would become totally Indianized. As a matter of fact, the rainbow nation image of a harmonious multicultural society conceals the Indo-Mauritians’ hegemony and their temptation to disengage from a Mauritian identity born out of the plantation and shared with slave descendants (Claveyrolas 2012). These emplacement processes and strategies within the country are best analysed through religious transfer. Hinduism (a religion declared by half the population in the last census) has rapidly taken root in Mauritius. This happened first in the plantation, where small popular shrines (kalimai) but also bigger temples were installed soon after the first labourers arrived (1860–80), and then at the edge of the plantations, when the first villages were set up by Indian small planters, who rapidly financed Hindu temples (1880–1920). More recently, with labourers being easily able to leave the plantation premises, Hindu celebrations (mainly village processions during calendar festivities) have grown steadily. Impossible to miss thanks to their recurrence and easily identifiable Indian characteristics, they are sometimes perceived as an aggressive claim on village public spaces that reflect a wider (national) communalist development (Claveyrolas 2010b).

The reasons behind the Indo-Mauritian communities’ success story lie first and foremost in the island’s history of sugar plantations and not back in India or in some Indian cultural genius, as is often argued locally. However, the links with India have indeed been instrumentalized by Indo-Mauritians.
to galvanize or legitimize their historical rise to power. One of the best-known examples of India’s influence on Mauritius is the day chosen to celebrate Mauritius national independence – 12 March – since this was the very day of Gandhi’s Salt March in India.

Early in the twentieth century, the new Indo-Mauritian elites forged links with Indian nationalists. Gandhi himself had stopped in Mauritius when sailing from South Africa to India, and met with local elites before sending his emissary, Manilal Doctor, to represent them in court and promote their empowerment. Even recent Hindu reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj, founded in India in 1875, were implanted in Mauritius at the beginning of the twentieth century, and have had a major influence on the island’s religious and political life, by promoting religious reform and a revival of Indian-ness. Anouck Carsignol’s study of the Indian diaspora perfectly illustrates how the indentured labourers or their descendants were a major lever for the nationalist movement in India. It was a matter of solidarity between colonized victims of the British, forged through the ability of indentured labourers to focus nationalist protest on behalf of those who were being abandoned and ill-treated.

Some of the influential political individuals among the Indo-Mauritians were born in India (Manilal or Gandhi), while others were from Mauritius (the Bisoondoyal brothers – Basdeo Bisoondoyal having been influenced by a trip to India), and some (like Ramgoolam, the ‘father of Independence’) met Indian elites while studying in London. Besides individuals, Indian institutions, whether religious such as the Arya Samaj reformists or political such as the young Indian Congress Party, were deeply invested in the Mauritian situation. When the centenary of indenture was celebrated in 1935, for instance, members of Indian elites helped their Indo-Mauritian counterparts to organize a staging of their history that culminated in the erection of an obelisk in the courtyard of the Mauritian Arya Samaj building commemorating, according to the written text, the first hundred years of ‘Indian colonization’ (Carsignol 2011: 211ff.).

Yet relations between India and Mauritius loosened during the following decades (1950–70). On the one hand, Indo-Mauritians had to secure their place on the island and prove their loyalty towards this new nation they were going to rule. On the other hand, Nehru, who became Prime Minister in a recently independent India, did not want to interfere in the fate of emerging nations or abandon his vision of India as a nation-state defined by a territory that excluded Mauritius. Note that Indian nationalists also tended to criticize indentured workers as ‘traitors’ since they left when the country most needed them (Carsignol 2011: 65ff.).

Only in the 1990s did the links with India flourish again, culturally, politically and economically. This was mainly the result of a reciprocalinstrumentalization: India was discovering again and enhancing the assets of its worldwide diaspora (in terms of financial flows and of diplomatic ‘soft power’), while Indo-Mauritians strengthened their political legitimacy and their perception of belonging to a civilization made all the more prestigious through its emergence as a worldwide political and economic power (Carsignol 2011: 203ff.).

From the 1990s we also note an ever-growing institutionalization of Mauritian Hinduism (Claveyrolas 2014). All over the island, Hindu temples were built or renovated, according to an ‘orthodox’ Indian model. This Indianization of local Hinduism was monitored by national temple federations, which called for a Sanskritization of temples and practices that sharply contrasted with popular noninstitutionalized Hinduism linked to the plantations. These federations, financed by the Mauritian secular state as ‘socio-cultural associations’, have brought priests, architects and craftsmen from India in order to counter or ‘correct’ local forms of Hinduism. Even the ritual statues installed in these renovated temples are now made in India and contrast with the stones ‘discovered’ or ritually installed...
in plantation temples. Temple federations are also powerful political actors, promoting an Indian-ness that often encourages communalism. They have become more and more concerned with political issues outside the country, such as the Ayodhya affair in 1989 when they joined the Hindutva [note 1] worldwide campaign to send consecrated bricks to India to rebuild god Rama’s temple, supposedly destroyed and replaced by a mosque (Eisenlohr 2006: 36). Furthermore, South Indian Mauritian Tamil authorities have regularly protested against the ‘genocide’ of Tamils in Sri Lanka, forcing the Mauritian government to boycott official meetings held in that country. On a general level, the institutionalization of Indian links has been promoted by Mauritian para-governmental organizations (temple federations, the Hindu House, the Voice of Hindus) in support of the Hindutva agenda as ‘provider of [nationalistic] values for overseas Hindus’ (ibid.: 37).

The Political Economy of the Indenture Journey: From Trauma to Pilgrimage

Given India’s standing as the true home of Hinduism, the Indian Ocean came to symbolize a space where Indian roots were severed or transferred. Once in Mauritius, Hindu labourers built their own sacred places that were deeply rooted in local plantation structures. Finally, during the twentieth century when the descendants of these labourers progressively left the plantations, Hindu communities began to claim the entire Mauritian national territory, most of all through an ever-growing network of sacred places and religious circulations.

In the globalized, transnational context of Mauritius, the concept of territory is far from obsolete. Indeed, I will argue, along with Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 3–4), that mass migrations and transnational cultural networks oblige the anthropologist to explore ‘place-making’ and ‘people-making’ processes. In other words, Mauritius, as a territory and nation born out of migrations and typical of a globalized world, urges us to study both displacement and emplacement processes.

Religion (its loss, transfer and reconstruction) has played a major part in the Indian indentured experience, just as in most other migratory trajectories (Bava and Capone 2010). As so often, analysis hesitates between the creation, via religion, of hybrid identities, and the reaffirmation or hardening of identities perceived as authentic (Claveyrolas 2010b). In the Mauritian context, the stakes are particularly high. Indeed, within the young nation, which only became independent in 1968, there is still a precarious balance between different communities whose identities are strongly associated with particular religions. Moreover, the Mauritian communities that originated from Indian indentured migrants are not a diasporic minority dependent on their country of origin but a majority community that has been in charge of the concrete and symbolic construction of the Mauritian nation. Given this hegemony, the temptation to focus on a ‘pure’ identity rooting the Indo-Mauritian community in a distant India is very conflictual (Claveyrolas 2012).

Before turning to a case study of a Mauritian Hindu pilgrimage, it is important to note the importance and characteristics of the local reference for mobility, i.e. the original displacement of indentured labourers. Such a detour is all the more necessary since we will see that quasi-coerced labour migration can be reformulated into an ideal frame shared with pilgrimage mobility.

In a famous quote, William Crooke (1897) describes the Hindus as having no ‘migratory instinct’. While pilgrimage has been widely acknowledged as part of the Hindu tradition for centuries, analysing the general context of mobility and migration among Hindus remains hindered by the cliché that Crooke’s comment illustrates. On the contrary, those who became indentured labourers must be seen as constituting a workforce in a rapidly changing world. They were certainly not living in harmonious self-
sufficient villages that were suddenly confronted with strange, entirely new worlds full of violence and alienation. Such an image of an India made of static villages hides a profusion of circulations, whether religious or economic, that has been the rule from at least the beginnings of the colonial period (Markovitz, Pouchepadass and Subrahmaniam 2003).

Let us take the example of the Bhojpuri world from which most of the Mauritian indentured labourers originated. It is specifically renowned for its migratory traditions which, well before indenture, encouraged Bhojpuri merchants, soldiers and agricultural labourers to leave their homeland. Their travel along rivers and across oceans, initially as far as Nepal and Burma (Myanmar), resulted in popular traditions, such as song repertoires, often focusing on exile (Servan-Schreiber 2001, 2010). In fact, the so-called inability of Hindus to travel and the taboos linked with leaving India and crossing the ocean only concerned orthodox high castes, which were very poorly represented among indentured labourers. As a consequence, the debates regarding indenture would benefit by digressing from displacement issues and focusing on emplacement issues in the ‘host society’.

In Mauritius, as in most societies based on slavery, the ocean is closely related with the original trauma of the crossing that followed the uprooting. Many narratives draw on the comparison between indenture and slavery. Crossing the Indian Ocean can get close to the slaves’ Middle Passage experience in Mauritian literature. It can also be embedded in competing victimization strategies between contemporary communities of the descendants of slaves and indentured labourers. Yet, among the Indo-Mauritian elites, many promoted a break away from the history of slavery. The Mauritian historian Hazareesingh, who was involved in the Mauritian independence movement, for instance, insisted on a vision of indenture that radically promoted Indian culture. According to this reading, rightfully tagged as ‘revisionist’ by Marina Carter (1995: 6), poverty could never have sufficed to explain the decision to leave India. Only the desire to bring to distant lands ‘India’s message and the light of its culture’ (Hazareesingh 1973: 21) could help a ‘true’ understanding of indenture.

Indeed, like the ‘colonization’ associated with the process of indenture migration, the displacement from India has gradually come to be seen as a glorious process of emplacement in Mauritius. One of the most obvious demonstrations of this reversal is the date generally (not only in Mauritius) associated with indenture: whereas 1 February commemorates the abolition of slavery, 2 November celebrates the arrival of the first indentured pioneers.

In parallel with the Middle Passage of African slavery, the crossing of the Indian Ocean can also draw on specifically Hindu paradigms, such as the kala pani (dark waters) taboo, that added a cultural trauma to the harsh conditions of the experience. Catherine Clémentin-Ojha (2016) precisely explains what is at stake behind the idea of kala pani, and what the crossing involved, at least for nineteenth-century orthodox Hindus. In her novel about indenture, Les Rochers de Poudre d’Or, Nathacha Appanah (2003) also describes the tearing apart of Hindu cultural markers on the boat, where socializing is not only forced (separation, suffering, humiliation) but also transgressive vis-à-vis Hindu ideology. Piled into the boat and cut off from village society that was organized according to Hindu ritual purity requirements (endogamy, avoidance of contact and commensality), the indentured labourer was directly exposed to a dangerous anonymity incompatible with caste identity.

Even if it seems highly doubtful that lower (or even middle) caste indentured labourers ever shared the taboo against crossing the kala pani, the Mauritian literature constantly uses the loss of caste to symbolize the experience of indenture as a threshold and a rite of passage (Claveyrolas 2013). Indeed, the tearing apart of cultural markers focuses on the (at least theoretical) impossibility of returning to the previous status. Another Mauritian novelist, Ananda Devi, describes indentured workers as truly dead to their relatives: ‘They had all crossed “Kala pâni”, the ocean’s dark waters, and they knew that
2018, “From the Indian Ganges to a Mauritian lake: Hindu pilgrimage in a diasporic context” in S. Coleman & J. Eade

they were already dead to those of their caste who stayed in India, that the ritual for the dead had been celebrated in their name’ (Devi 1993: 47).

In contrast to the *kala pani* taboo but consistent with the rite of passage paradigm, recent re-readings of indenture have compared the passage across the Indian Ocean to a Hindu pilgrimage – a kind of liminal egalitarian state widely resulting in being reborn to a better status. The original crossing here evokes the passage from one territory to another and from one identity to another. Through this pilgrimage paradigm, many narratives focus on a *communitas* experience similar to that theorized by Victor Turner (1974), reflecting Hindu beliefs (only partially confirmed by practical realities) that pilgrims go socially undifferentiated in an exceptional, liminal *communitas*-like experience. Hence, on the ocean, the indentured workers are presented as ‘brothers of the ship’ (*jahaji bhai*), whatever their caste or religion, and the narratives repeatedly draw on a comparison with the boats bringing pilgrims to the Jagannath temple, a famous pan-Indian Hindu pilgrimage site. However, when focusing on regeneration, Mauritian narratives also transform the very meaning of the indenture crossing and make Mauritius a promised land or a territory to be seized.

Whatever the historical realities behind such narratives, Hindu pilgrimage definitely serves as a major paradigm to domesticate displacement (Coleman 2002: 364) for Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius.

The Political Economy of a Mauritian Pilgrimage: Translating the Hindu Sacred

Once they had left India, crossed the ocean and reached Mauritius, the Indian labourers lived a coerced sedentary life within the plantations’ confines, i.e. the sugarcane fields they were working in and the plantation camp they were residing in. It took nearly a century before the first – often religious – mobility echoed the community’s rise to power, both through freedom from the plantations and the appropriation of the national territory. I will study this Hindu Mauritian mobility through a pilgrimage case study, constantly articulating national and transnational issues.

In one of the *Contes de l’enfant Bihari* (coming from Bihar, the main recruiting region for North Indian indentured labourers) published in 1966 by the Mauritian writer Marcel Cabon, the central figure is a child who took refuge in the Mauritian forest that Cabon describes with constant reference to the Indian landscape pervading the child’s Hindu culture.

> How magnificent is the valley! How wide open the view we have from here!
> Can it be true that I am not travelling in one of those countries they talk about at the baitka [village club] in some mountain where Hanoumane lives and that Parvati loves so much? Or in a little while am I going to see come out of the foliage one of those old masters the pandit talked about and who, in times past, in the land of our grandparents, on the bank of the river Ganges, ran a school in the forest? ... The moon sits in the sky, as in the time of Krishna, as in the time of Ram, as at the beginning of the world. (Cabon [1966] 2006: 30f., my translation) [note 2]

Beyond the literary image, the local rooting of Hinduism finds its source in the assimilation of Mauritius to the country of origin.
In Mauritius, global toponymy is also sometimes pervaded by the Indian reference. Let us mention its naming as ‘Little India’ (*Chota Bharat*) or its touristic branding as ‘India Abroad’, even if most towns and villages bear French or English names. Most importantly, the first Hindu sacred places have been named after the titles of the sugar estates they were attached to. With the claims to Indian-ness, most recent temples reconnect with Indian names and references. A Tamil temple in Port Louis, for example, is known as ‘Madurai’, one of the main pilgrimage towns in South India, while the Quatre-Bornes ‘Palani’ temple refers to the main Murugan pilgrimage temple in Tamil Nadu. Again, a small shrine amid cane fields greets the devotee with the inscription on its pediment, ‘Welcome to Vrindavan [Krishna’s main pilgrimage site in North India]’. Hinduism is specifically prone to this logic of substitutes: I have discussed elsewhere how Banaras is easily recognized in each and every Indian sacred town, and the Ganges in each and every river /p. 30/ (Claveyrolas 2010a). No wonder then that the subterranean flows of the Ganges finally resurface in Mauritius.

Let us discuss a specific case of Mauritian Hindu pilgrimage, which I will examine through two congruent ‘elite’ eulogistic discourses, one advanced in a booklet edited by the institution managing the pilgrimage site (Mishra, Ramchurn and Sewtohul 2005), and the other by a book written by one of the main temple’s founders (Dayal n.d.). We will see how the articulation of the reference to India and the local stakes, as dealt with by those in charge, fits into the transnational context of Mauritian Hinduism.

Regularly presented as the most prestigious Hindu sacred place in Mauritius, Ganga Talao (the sacred lake or *talao* in Bhojpuri) is known as a resurgence or the equivalent of the Ganges (the North Indian sacred river assimilated with the goddess Ganga). A series of temples has gradually been installed on the banks of this volcanic lake, which stands five hundred metres above sea level more or less in the middle of the island. The site mainly comes to life during the annual Shivaratri festival when it is the focus for the most popular Mauritian pilgrimage (Claveyrolas 2010b). Various foundation narratives help us to understand the construction of the site and pilgrimage as an authoritative Hindu complex in a transnational context.

The link between Mauritius and India first looks like a consolation. Having lost their culture and missing their homeland, indentured labourers decided to re-create a place where they could represent what they had lost. At least this is the argument put forward in the 1950s (thirty years before the construction of the first temples around the lake) by Hazareesingh:

*The first Indians who reached Mauritius remembered with nostalgia the pilgrimages they performed on the banks of the Ganges ... where Krishna played the flute accompanied by his gopi [shepherdesses]. They began looking for a place where they could, in this land of exile, maintain a tradition very dear to them. But as, in the island, there was no majestic river comparable with those of the Indian peninsula, they finally elected Grand Bassin which, with its still, solitary waters and its majestic setting, appealed to the imagination of olden days pilgrims, who saw there a place suitable to the veneration of their antique gods. (Hazareesingh 1973: 18)*

Edited by the Hindu Maha Sabha (HMS), the Mauritian institution controlling the site, the ‘Guide de Ganga Talao/Grand Bassin’ (Mishra, Ramchurn and Sewtohul 2005: 7) also draws on this idea of consolation by presenting the pilgrimage site, its temples and deities as substitutes for an Indian
came to Mauritius while he was still in his teens. He was a budding priest from the banks of the Ganges. The flow of emigrants caught him, too ... Gossagne missed the Ganges in Mauritius and he longed for its sacred water. He had premonitory dreams of the existence of a lake whose water oozed from such depths as to have direct links with the Ganges in India. (Mishra, Ramchurn and Sewtohul 2005: 7)

In another direct reference to India, the pediment of the main temple located on the banks of the lake carries the title ‘Kashi-Vishwanath’, the name of the famous Golden Temple which stands at the heart of the sacred geography of Banaras (‘Kashi’ being the town’s mythological name). The re-enactment of the Indian sacred geography is supported by the fact that every crucial element of the ritual site comes directly from India, whether it be the sacred water, the divine image of Shiva (in the form of his lingam – phallic representation) or the main priest (hailing from Banaras).

Dayal, one of the founders of the first temple, notes in his book that its construction was necessary in order to repair the forgetting of rites and the absence of a skilled priest. He narrates how, after many pilgrimages to the lake in the 1970s, he regretted the absence of ritual assistants:

> It was during one of those [yearly] pilgrimages when I reached the sacred lake, there was hardly a big crowd of pilgrims, there was no officiating priest to guide us for the prayers and the rituals. I waited for a while meditating .... Still no officiating priest turned up. Goaded by a spiritual intuition I climbed down the dressed stone steps leading to the waters of the sacred lake meticulously chiselled by our ancestors who came as ‘Coolies’ (indentured workers) ... There I was in the sacred lake with water up to my knees facing a small murti [divine statue] of Shiv and Parvatee consecrated in a small metallic casing. I did the devotional rites best known to me. I implored forgiveness for being unable to fulfil the rites as prescribed in the sacred Shiv Puran [ritual normative text]. (Dayal n.d.: 12)

In 1983, while Dayal was in India for military training, he also went on pilgrimage and was inspired by a divine message to install a Shiva temple on the banks of the Mauritian lake, ‘where an officiating pundit [specialist] will officiate [sic]’ (ibid.). In Dayal’s eyes, it was a matter of filling a crucial gap in the Mauritian Hindu practices of the time.

The installation and evolution of the Ganga Talao pilgrimage, paralleling the institutionalized standardization of Mauritian Hinduism, reflected the attempt by Indian elites at the end of the nineteenth century to resist popular, lower caste practices, which were less dependent on sacred texts and high caste ritual specialists. Installing a resident priest at the Shiva temple would require the observance of orthodox, Brahmanic Hinduism, /p. 32/ despite the standardization of Hinduism. (Indeed, many shrines and ritual practices in Mauritius (and India) still lack a ritual specialist.) Besides these representations of Ganga Talao as a substitute for the Indian Ganga, Mauritius has also been progressively interpreted as a Hindu land by itself. The very landscape is summoned to support such a claim. Hence, Dayal was reminded by the ‘extraordinary’ local scenery of (Indian) Hindu mythology: ‘Ganga Talao is perched as a natural lake embedded in the Central Plateau high grounds just like the Mansarовар of the Himalayas, the ancestral abode of Lord Shiva’ (Dayal n.d.: 9). The site is
seen as predestined: the author provides pictures to support his argument that, in Mauritius, ‘even mountains have the shape of the lingam’ (ibid., 8). More than a consolation, this time we see the discovery of an eternal Hindu nature in the local landscape. Even Western commentators could not support the idea of a Mauritian Hindu-ness without referring to India. As early as the 1850s, the future British governor of Mauritius, for example, described ‘a mud hut, bedizened with sundry bits in dabbled dripping calico of every sort of colour [which] bespoke an Indian place of pilgrimage’ (quoted in Mishra, Ramchurn and Sewtohul 2005: 5).

Another legend insists on the fortuitous dimension of the Hindu presence in Mauritius. It stages Shiva who, while shaking his unmatted hair where the goddess Ganga dwells, involuntarily pours a drop of the river goddess onto the Mauritian soil. Is it precisely because of this fortuitous incarnation of Hindu-ness in Mauritius that the general idea of a subterranean link between the Ganga river and the Mauritian lake seems to be insufficiently convincing? Indeed, in 1972, an Indian priest ritually poured into the lake Ganga river water that he had specifically brought from the Indian pilgrimage site of Haridwar. This ritual translation was financed jointly by the Indian and Mauritian governments, and promoted by a Mauritian minister, Dayanand Basantrai, well known for his connections with Hindu activism, both in India (as leader of the Mauritian delegation to the right-wing Hindu nationalist VHP conference in Allahabad in 1979) and in Mauritius (as leader of the temple federations) (see Eisenlohr 2006:37 passim).

This ritual transfer of Hindu territory and identity from India to Mauritius not only demonstrates the Indianization of Mauritian soil and the resulting legitimization of the lake as a Hindu sacred place, but also puts it under the auspices of Hinduutva. The attempt to change the name parallels the process: with the transfer of ritual water, the place passes from ‘fairy lake’ (Paree Talao) to Ganga Talao (Ganga lake), a name it actually still shares with the more commonly used French ‘Grand Bassin’, including among Hindu devotees. Moreover, Hindu authorities insist that the lake waters are flowing into the Indian Ocean (Dayal n.d.: 9), which they see as a space linking Mauritius and India. Indeed, the ashes of the Hindu Mauritian dead are ritually poured into the sea in order to allow them to join the territory of their ancestors. The very fact that ‘Ganga was realized in Mauritius’ implies that ‘all Hindus were still in the land where the Ganga flowed’, which ‘led them to accept to die [sic] and be cremated there’ (Mishra, Ramchurn and Sewtohul 2005: 7).

While reassessing this intimate connection with India in the transnational context of a Hindu Mauritius, discourses gradually tended to claim also a specifically Mauritian Hindu legitimacy. This process has involved the construction of many temples and the growing institutionalization of rituals and global management of temple sites. Yet, as we have seen above, legends have also been mobilized. Again, returning to the link between the Indian river and the Mauritian lake, the latter finds its origin this time in the goddess Ganga herself, who is said to have shed a tear at the sight of her sons, the Indian indentured, leaving their motherland (Eisenlohr 2006:248). Through Ganga, therefore, the Hindu territory is directly embodied in Mauritius.

Furthermore, the Ganga Talao’s main image of Shiva as his lingam was officially recognized on 2 March 1989 as the thirteenth ‘lingam of light’ (jyotirlingam), and authorities and devotees alike proudly insisted that it was ‘the only one outside India’. The lightning miraculously striking the image during the ritual consecration ceremony underpinned this designation as a ‘lingam of light’. The event was acknowledged by many Indian spiritual authorities, whose legitimacy is repeatedly mentioned when introducing the sacred lake to the pilgrims. It is usually added that this legitimacy is established by the strict procedures observed in India: ‘This has already occurred in the holy land [India] where the Ganges flows and where the twelve Jyotir Lingams have been divinely graced by supernatural
happenings’ (Dayal n.d.: 57). It also claimed that these miracles have repeatedly occurred at each and every consecration of a secondary shrine or statue around the lake. Even the landscape was mobilized as living proof: the small island on the lake took the shape of a crocodile during the consecration of a statue of Ganga, whose ‘vehicle’ (vahana) is precisely a crocodile. The Mauritian Hindu-ness is far from merely symbolic here. Many pictures bear witness to all those divine manifestations and confirm the concrete appropriation of the Mauritian territory by Hindu deities.

Translating the Hindu sacred through a local pilgrimage soon arose as a properly Mauritian issue, demonstrating how local identity issues could transcend the India-Mauritius relationship. We can first mention the administrative and legal dimensions. The forest landscape surrounding the lake used to be renowned for hunting activities where animals were butchered on the very banks of the lake. In 1962, legal jurisdiction passed from the Forest Department to the Hindu Maha Sabha, an association financing, managing and promoting many (Bhojpuri) temples and so-called ‘socio-cultural’ activities in Mauritius. The Ganga Talao Shiva temple became officially known as ‘Mauritiuseswarnath’, meaning ‘The Lord of Mauritius’. The island was thereby designated as a sacred territory (kshetra) where Shiva reigned symbolically as ‘the only master and protector of the whole of Mauritius’ (Dayal n.d.: 127). These Hindu claims on Mauritian territory have only strengthened in recent years. Along with the growing number of shrines and statues, a 108-foot-high statue of a standing Shiva – again built by an Indian artist – was inaugurated in 2007. Impossible to miss and intended to be complemented by a statue of Durga, it marks the entry of the site.

As a pilgrimage centre and a sacred place, the Ganga Talao complex not only sacralizes the lake, it Hinduizes the whole Mauritian territory through the pilgrims’ circulations connecting various villages. From the very beginning, Ganga Talao has been connected with other Hindu sacred places in Mauritius, since it was the destination of the original pilgrimage of Giri Gossagne that started from Maheswarnath temple in Triolet (north-west Mauritius) accompanied by its founding priest, Sajibon. More recently, a Shivaratri pilgrimage stages annual processions from every corner of the island, and they eventually converge on the lake. Each carries its chariot (kanvar) with the name of the temple, village or association it represents. As early as the 1920s, the first village temples served as meeting points for pilgrims walking to the lake and gave them refreshments (Indradanush 2004: 7). Like the inaugural pilgrimage, many of these processions appropriate the Mauritian landscape by overcoming natural obstacles (distance, heat, rain, mountains or the absence of facilities): ‘White-dressed pilgrims carrying kanwars appeared on the scene and snags in the form of roads and bridges were overcome to reach the lake’ (Mishra, Ramchurn and Sewtohul 2005: 11). Of course, this was not just about building roads and bridges but also about unifying the Hindu community in a communitas-like experience: ‘Hindus from over the whole country met along the roads, rest shelters, etc. The rich and learned rubbed shoulders with the poor and the unschooled galvanized by the spirit of service to Lord Shiva and each showered respects on the other’ (ibid.).

As was the case after the initial pilgrimage of Giri Gossagne, the water is ritually taken back across the island by the pilgrims, who pour it on the temples’ sacred images or on the domestic shrines. This process, where pilgrimage activates a territorial national network, is well known in India (Claveyrolas 2008) but lacks any equivalent in Mauritius where festive processions are usually confined to the village space. /p. 35/

For the Indian indentured labourers, the Ganga Talao pilgrimage symbolized their ability to leave the plantation territory. Not only was this mobility hindered for a long time by ‘vagrancy laws’ and a ‘pass system’ (Carter 1995: 200; Tinker 1974) but, until recently, labourers did not have many occasions to
travel. Yet once the first authorizations to leave the plantation were given by planters, Hindu circulations increased exponentially. The road to the lake was opened in the 1920s (Indradanush 2004: 23), but when Burton Benedict did his fieldwork in 1957, he mentioned fifteen to twenty thousand pilgrims involved in Shivaratri (Benedict 1961: 38). Today, the number is estimated to have reached several hundred thousand.

In a context where territory used to be quite clearly divided between communities and mobility was very limited, travelling beyond plantations and villages on pilgrimage was initially a political act of emancipation, and then a political act of appropriation, both deeply rooted in the local, Mauritian issues in an overall communalist context. Furthermore, it comes as no surprise that the same individuals who founded the first temples in the villages – elites often born outside the plantation (sirdar) and fierce promoters of the social empowerment of Mauritian Hindus – were again those who promoted the first Hindu pilgrimages in Mauritius. The subsequent expansion of Hindu circulations, which claimed Mauritius as Hindu, logically paralleled the cultural and political success story of the Hindu community during the second half of the twentieth century (Eisenlohr 2006: 9).

The Mauritian pilgrimage’s success has attracted prestigious Indian visitors to Ganga Talao. As early as 1977, the Hindu nationalist politician Vajpayee, who was then India’s Secretary for Foreign Affairs, initiated the construction of a Hanuman temple in Ganga Talao while visiting the site. Today, when Indian political or religious authorities visit Mauritius, they take care to pay homage to both the Apravasi ghat (the landing place of the indentured labourers and a symbol of the original displacement from India) and to Ganga Talao (the symbol of the indentured descendants’ successful emplacement in Mauritius). And when, in 2015, an Indian businessman launched a five-star hotel in Mauritius, he donated a life-size statue of Sai Baba to Ganga Talao, which was installed facing the main temple. Ganga Talao definitely serves as a catalyst for most representations of Mauritius as a Hindu diasporic land.

The status of the lake as a symbol of Hindu-ness has transformed today’s pilgrimage as a place for communalist assertions. The growing stranglehold of radical organizations, such as Voice of Hindus (VOH), known for its violent intolerance based on Hindutva principles (it proposed to set up tents here as shelter for pilgrims), cannot go unnoticed. /p. 36/ Moreover, each year, not only do Mauritian politicians use the pilgrimage as a platform for vote-catching purposes, but many Indian religious or political authorities, such as Hindu leaders or government ministers, are officially invited.

However, criticisms are often made, including among the Indo-Mauritian communities, that religious pilgrimage has been perverted by politics. It is indeed arguable that, for the time being, the Hindutva agenda mostly meets the Mauritian elites’ interests and points of view. Most Mauritian Hindus are actually not very interested in this transnational, ‘diasporic’ context (Claveyrolas 2014) and go on pilgrimage across the island mostly to make individual votive offerings. They also criticize Indian specialists for sometimes overshadowing their Mauritian counterparts. Some religious artists, for example, were offended when no Mauritian was officially invited to Ganga Talao. They claimed that Shiva was offered a ‘deplorable show, with songs only worthy of a local fancy-fair ... We would have wanted to listen to our local artists rather than to these artists and musicians brought from India at huge cost’ (Le Mauricien, 13 February 2007).

Last but not least, the formerly ecumenical pilgrimage that had brought together Catholic Creoles and Indian Muslims side by side with Hindus has now become the symbol of Hindu hegemony in Mauritius. Indeed, non-Hindu Mauritians are becoming more and more frustrated and concerned by an Indianized pilgrimage where all the key actors (from the stone gods to the official guests, musicians and priests) come from India, where Mauritian flags along the road are largely outnumbered by VOH-
Indian flags, and where Mauritian and Indian speakers alike insist – in an Indian language they do not understand – on the Indian roots of Mauritian Hindus.

As well as this sectarian development, even intra-Hindu pilgrimage does not escape institutional conflict. In June 2013, the government granted land around the lake to the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation (MSDTF) to build a temple. This may well be announcing a possible paradigm shift in the management of Ganga Talao (Défimédia, 11 June 2013), since the MSDTF is controlled by the majority Vaishya caste. Vaishyas have been challenging the Brahmin Hindu Maha Sabha ever since a split in 1985 around the issue of the Brahmins’ monopoly on priesthood. To bypass the Brahmins’ refusal to share their ritual knowledge, the MSDTF called on Indian Brahmins to have Mauritian non-Brahmins initiated into the priesthood. In the Mauritian political economy of Hinduism, the transnational links with India mostly benefit the majority (Vaishya) population, rather than always supporting Brahmin definitions of orthodox belief and practice.

/p. 37/

By duplicating India as the unique sacred motherland of Hinduism, the Mauritian pilgrimage site of Ganga Talao has gradually acquired local uniqueness by translating and transforming the Hindu sacred. As soon as the first local elites emerged, Indian-ness appeared as a major issue among local Hindus. Eventually though, with the rise to hegemonic power of Hindu communities on the island, the Indian reference has appeared as a way to break away from the indentured past and from a Mauritian identity shared with those descended from slaves. Local promoters of Mauritian Hindu-ness, especially paragovernmental institutions, have also drawn on the Hindutva agenda and networks and promoted the development of pilgrimage on the island, but without systematically importing Indian issues.

Hence, the creation and development of the Ganga Talao pilgrimage perfectly parallel institutional relations between India and Mauritius and stand as a very meaningful example of the passage from a transnational, diasporic problematic (translating the sacred from the genuine Indian reference to a non-Hindu land) to a national problematic (promoting political hegemony through the appropriation of a national territory).

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Notes

1. Hindutva is a political and aggressive claim to Hindu-ness as opposed to all other possible Indian identities.

2. Que la vallée est belle ! Que la vue est large que l’on a d’ici ! Est-il vrai que je ne voyage pas dans un de ces pays dont on parle a la baitka, dans quelque montagne habitée par Hanoumane, aimée de Parvati ? Ou ne vais-je tout a l’heure voir sortir des feuillages un de ces vieux maîtres dont le pandit nous a parlé et qui, jadis, au pays des /p. 38/ grands-parents, au bord du Gange, tenaient école dans la foret ? … La lune est dans le ciel, comme au temps de Krishna, comme au temps de Ram, comme au commencement du monde.
2018, “From the Indian Ganges to a Mauritian lake: Hindu pilgrimage in a diasporic context” in S. Coleman & J. Eade

References

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/p. 39/