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# FORGING A NEW COMMUNITY: INDIAN IMMIGRANTS AND CREOLE CULTURE, SAINT LUCIA, 1859-1903

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May 6th 2011 marked 152 years of Indian presence in Saint Lucia. Unlike the Trinidad and Guyanese Indian Diasporas, the Saint Lucian community exists in some degree of obscurity to the rest of the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora and to much of the academic world. Its existence as a mere shadow in the Indian diasporic discourse is understandable since less than five thousand arrived in the island during the period of indentured labour (1859 to 1903) and today it comprises less than four per cent of the population. There are few elements of Indian cultures which are publicly manifested although a number of activities and celebrations take place within the private sphere of Indo-Saint Lucian homes today.

The main thrust of this paper is to highlight that in creating a settled community in Saint Lucia the Indian migrants who arrived on the island between 1859 and 1893 had some degree of agency in determining aspects of the Creole culture[1] that they chose embrace. It was not always the case that Indians merely accepted the imposition of Creole culture, but they were very much involved in making calculated decisions. On the other hand the paper does acknowledge that there were also many instances that the options available were sometimes so limited that it often seemed that immigrants had little choice but to accommodate local values and customs as part of their new lifestyle.

## Introduction

The migrant population was confronted from very early in its stay in the colony that accepting aspects of Creole society was essential for survival, but in spite of overpowering and overwhelming conditions it showed resilience in its attempt at recreating "India" in the receiving country. It worked towards reconstituting Indian communities beyond the sugar estate, re-interpreting the physical environment, remigration among other resistant behaviours to hold onto elements of Indian culture. Thus, today because of this resilience Indo-Saint Lucians constitute the largest minority on the island. The history and present status of Indo-Saint Lucians provide a useful counterbalance to other communities in the region and to understanding some of the dynamics which has created such different Indian Diasporas within the Caribbean.

A relatively small Indian population which was in close physical proximity with the Afro Creole community, mountainous terrain in which sugar estates were scattered throughout and isolating parts of the island from others, as well as the socioeconomic situation of a plantation economy among other factors were directly responsible for a rapid acceptance of Creole culture by the Indian immigrant community. This differs to the situation in those colonies where more significant

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numbers of Indian migrants were imported and which developed sugar belts such as Trinidad and colonial Guyana. In colonies with similar circumstances with those observed in Saint Lucia, including Jamaica and Guadeloupe, it is possible to come across documents pointing to sexual relationships between Indians and Afro-Creoles, the adoption of local Creole language as well as Indians who had been baptised in Euro-Christian churches within the period of Indentureship. These developments do not point simply to Indian immigrants being "victims" of Creole cultures but rather tell tales of Indians' survival strategies where they sought to maximise whatever advantages that were available to them among which the adoption of various aspects of Creole culture was one.

**Culinary Traditions**

Colonial officials wittingly and unwittingly, influenced Indians towards adopting Creole culture. One area where this was obvious from very early in the encounter concerned the culinary preferences of the migrants. The attitudes of colonial officials and estate owners were premised on the notion that the stranger had to accommodate to what was considered acceptable by this privileged class. These members of the upper class seemed to either not consider or were not too concerned that the foods made available to Indians may have been unfamiliar to them, a situation which would pose a health hazard and a threat to the ability of the migrants to carry out assigned tasks. To be fair there were a few estate owners concerned enough to distribute pots and utensils to the workers on their estates. However, the intention was that meals would be composed of local ingredients and eaten according to the norms of Euro-Creole society. The foods made available to Indian migrants either via estate shops or the system of food allowances included some of the following: rice, ground provisions, salted and meats all staples of the Creole diet. Since little attempt was made to procure foods with each the immigrants were familiar they had to adopt the local cuisine. Yet still there is evidence that they attempted to defy such impositions.

In Indians' attempt to survive in the new environment they re-interpreted the foreign landscape within their own knowledge system. Unfortunately, in some instances this resulted in very negative outcomes, some of which were even fatal. On the Canelle estate the assigned doctor noted that some of the deaths of Indians on that estate was owing to the "the practice which they had adopted of roasting pieces of manioc and eating them."[2] Here the medic was referring to the poisonous cassava which was a staple of the Afro-Creole society. The tuber required the removal of the poisonous liquid in a labour intensive process before it was fit for human consumption. The technique was not known to Indians who most likely encountered the plant for the first time on arrival in the region. Other Indian migrants were less adventurous choosing instead to stick with what was more familiar and substituted local items for the Indian counterpart. For example, it was observed

that local rats were being caught and eaten by Indians on certain estates, an obvious substitution for the field rats which was part of the culinary heritage of some Indian cultures. On the Reunion estate the owner protested to the Immigration Agent that, "A party of Coolies…killed a rat…a Calcutta man took it up, saying it was good to eat."[3] Reports were sent to the Immigration Agent documenting the Indian tradition of curing goat meat and mutton by hanging them to dry[4]. Another planter complained that Indians on his estate refused to use the pewter and eating utensils with which he supplied them and instead the women preferred to eat out of their skirts and with their hands. Officials also noted that Indians were chewing tobacco leaves as a substitute for betel nut seeds; the assumption was that they were replacing one stimulant with another. These reports are testimony that in spite of attempts in the early period to force Western traditions on the Indian population Indians instead tried to transplant their own customs in the new place.

Although Indians obviously tried to remain true to their culinary traditions it became increasingly more difficult when the food allowance system was introduced. Sugar planters were allowed to provide workers with food for a period determined by themselves, the cost of which was deducted from workers' wages. The list of allowances mirrored what was offered to enslaved and indentured Africans. It included ground provisions, ghee, salted meats and to supplement this diet a garden of ½ acre was available for cultivation to each migrant. Little attention was paid to sourcing food from India or at least food familiar to Indians. One suspects that this was both as a result of unconcern and financial considerations. For instance the Secretary of State for the colonies had advised the Saint Lucian authorities to source betel nut seeds for Indians either in Trinidad or Guyana, and any other items migrants may desire. The local authorities did not comply.

**Education and Religious Instruction**

Colonial officials were also hoping to influence Indians towards the formal Western education and its bedfellow, Christianity. Initially there was no policy towards educating Indian children. In fact the Saint Lucian authorities had done very little in the way of providing education for the labouring class in general. It was R.P. Cropper Protector of Immigrants, a Presbyterian with knowledge of Rev Morton's work in Trinidad, who proposed that Indian children be educated in Western culture and morals. He invited Rev Morton to extend his East Indian Mission Schools to Saint Lucia, and so between 1886 and 1890 four East Indian Mission Schools were opened in Roseau, Mon Repos, Canelles and Mabouya. The first of these schools was established on Crown Lands estate. The subjects taught were reading, writing, grammar, English history, geography, scripture history, elements of religious knowledge and arithmetic[5]. At night the school houses were converted into churches where religious instruction was extended to the adult population.

After one year in operation R. P. Cropper deemed the school a success. The Canadian Presbyterian Missions (CPM) claimed to have Christianised/educated some 500 Indians by 1895, but by the turn of the century the number of members had been reduced to 315 (S. Morton, 1916, p. 291).

The impact of the CPM was hampered by the poor attendance at the schools. The attendance records show that the numbers attending school did not correspond with the numbers registered as members of these institutions. For instance, the Roseau estate school had sixty students on its register, but average attendance was half that number. At Crown Lands school there were seventy registered students however average attendance was fifty[6]. Moreover, since these schools were State-funded Afro-Saint Lucians were also permitted and hence children appearing on the registers were not solely of Indian descent. Poor attendance was likely a reflection of Indians' scepticism of Western teachings and the economic value of children to the household (B. Brereton, 1995). For some Indian parents these schools may have been viewed more as day care facilities while they went off to work, rather than institutions providing a viable alternative to their own traditional teachings. The reluctance of Indian parents to engage their children in this form of education is reflected in the pleas of one official that they conform to the educational needs of the children. In 1891 the Inspector of schools lamented the "…difficulties to induce the Coolie parents to send their children regularly to school," and that, "Something needs to be done to induce (Indian) parents to send their children to school…"[7]. The demise of the schools was evident in that only one school was in operation by 1900.

Where the Indian Missions left off the other established churches took up. These churches were happy to report the inroads they were able to make among Indians. From very early in the period there were signs that Indians were accepting aspects of Christianity offered by the Euro-Christian churches. Church records indicate that even before the twentieth century, Indians were being baptised and married by Catholic priests[8].

I mentioned in my last half yearly Report that the Coolies were evincing an inclination to forsake their Heathen customs and become Christians. Since that time the acting Curé of Castries the Reverend M. Lespirasse has baptised 15 adults…The Curé of Soufriere has furnished me with a list of 26 Coolies baptised by him. The other Catholic Clergy in the minor parishes have also baptised eight infants born here. The Reverend M. Petretto of Micoud has married eleven couples[9].

He further noted that on, "Coconuts Estate there are four young coolies on this property whose term of service will expire next February, and they are working well, are in good health, and kindly treated. They have been baptised in the Catholic faith."[10] An account appearing later in one of the local newspapers highlighted that Indians were also adopting the dress of Afro-Saint Lucians:

> The Orientals of this part of the island have evidently been converted into the adoption of Western costumes. A few weeks ago a matrimonial procession consisting of about 40 persons on their way from River Dorée where the ceremony took place, passed through this village as they returned to the Roger (sic) their place of residence. It was really a rich treat to see these Hindoos whose attempt to adopt native customs was, not only successful but tended to add immensely to their already beautiful physiognomies[11].

This probably had more to do with the lack of access to material and time with which to create Indian styled clothing rather than a deliberate effort to be dressed in a more western tradition. Indians may have been more receptive to the established churches especially the Roman Catholic Church because they were more socially acceptable to a wider portion of the population. It was also the Roman Catholic Church to which Afro Saint Lucians were affiliated.

At the same time there were blatant examples that Indians were still holding on dearly to Indian traditions. Morton recounted overhearing the conversation of two Indian women who had heard him preach. In their discussions one of the women stated her willingness to convert, even denouncing the virtues of the south Indian gods Mahadeo and Kali. On the other hand, her compatriot sang the praises of the Indian deities and it was this that troubled Morton in light of his efforts at proselytising the Indian community (Morton, 1916).

**Language**

One of the aims of officials in making schooling accessible to Indians was to ensure that children acquired English. The authorities were desirous of this because they were of the opinion that being able to function in English individuals would be better placed to perform the roles that the oligarchy assigned to members of the lower classes. British government officials were frustrated that the lower classes continued to function in the French Creole language. The officials contended that this stunted the development of the colony. Hence, much energy was spent in recruiting persons from Barbados and the Leeward Islands to work as policemen, teachers and in clerical positions in the civil service. English-speaking Indians would function better on the estates where Englishmen now owned some of the larger properties.

Indians however, chose to adopt the French Creole spoken by those with whom they had the most contact and as such was more practical and easier to acquire. Most estates continued to have significant numbers of Afro Saint Lucian employees even with the injection of Indian workers. They worked both in the field as well as in more senior positions than Indian labourers. Afro Saint Lucians also managed the shops from which Indians purchased goods. They lived in the barracks together with Indians, and their children attended the East Indian Mission Schools together. In some instances Indian mothers left their children in the care of Afro Saint Lucian women while they went to work in the sugar cane fields. Here was an instance where Indians had to make the choice between the practical and the more socially

accepted and rewarding option. DWD Comins in 1893, when commenting on the linguistic nature of the population was able to note that both Africans and Indians spoke the French Creole.

**Conclusion: Forging a New Community**

The colonial authorities had hoped that the education of Indian children would cause Indians to grow strong ties to the colony and consequently remain, and continue to labour on estates. The offer of 10 acres of land or £10 in lieu of the free return passage to India was also expected to have similar outcomes. The fact that almost 50% of Indians who served their indentures in Saint Lucia chose to return to India, and another unspecified number re-migrated to Trinidad, Saint Croix, Grenada and elsewhere illustrates that these incentives did not have the desired effect. Stipulations in the Saint Lucian contracts offered free return passage during the full breadth of the labour scheme and Indians cashed into it. The degree of emigration is an indicator that a significant proportion of Indians who served their indentures in Saint Lucia had not fully succumbed to the Creolising forces to the extent where they wanted to remain in the island.

Even those who chose to remain in the colony continued to display a degree of resistance to Creole culture and a willingness to negotiate better terms and conditions when they could not fully defy the authorities. Hence, official records indicate that no time expired Indians chose the land offered to them by colonial authorities. In every instance, migrants chose the £10. There were obvious benefits in doing so. Firstly, lands offered by the government were not always ideal for the vision Indians had for the land. They were usually inferior lands, or land close to estates and Indians wanted good agricultural lands and the opportunity to establish themselves independently from the estates. Moreover, by careful negotiation and patience, it was possible to purchase more fertile land, in more ideal locations for the same £1 per acre. Some Indians possibly did not want to invest the full £10 in the acquisition of lands some might have preferred to invest some of the money in the purchase of cattle and other equipment to set up their own businesses. The establishment of Indian-dominated communities in Augier, Grace and Forrestierre were not organised by the colonial government but grew out of the initiative of Indians.

Creolisation is often viewed as a process in which those most affected are unconsciously transformed and lured into the practices and traditions of the host society. However, this is not necessarily the case. Those engaging in that process also make deliberate choices in adopting and adapting aspects of the new culture which will be most beneficial or which are more feasible at the time. Indian migrants to Saint Lucia evidently found themselves in situations where to fully resist the Creolising influences would have put them at even more disadvantage and hence some made conscious choices that would place them in more favourable circumstances even when it meant forsaking traditions of the country of origin. In

making such decisions Indians intended to demonstrate that they were fully responsible for determining the type of community they forged in their new space. Indians in Saint Lucia today are now fully integrated into the society.

## Notes

1. In this paper "Creole culture" refers to the existing cultural forms existing in Saint Lucia which originated from neo Indian, African, and European influences.
2. CO 253/126 Breen to Hincks, Enclosure 32, 8th February 1860.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. CO 257/12 Report on the Examination of the Primary Schools in St. Lucia for the year 1888, *St. Lucia Gazette* 1888.
6. The figures quoted included non-Indian children. CO 257/12 Report on the Examination of the Primary Schools in St. Lucia for the Year 1888. *St. Lucia Gazette* 1888.
7. CO 257/13 Report of the Inspector of Schools, 1890 *St. Lucia Gazette*, 1891, 5.
8. Civil Status records for the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, Box No. 20. SLU National Archives.
9. CO 253/134 Subenclosure, Report of Immigration Agent, 11th February 1864.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "Notes from Laborie", *TheSt. Lucia Guardian* No.16 Wednesday 25th July 1906.

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