

The role of Mauritian Creole in the religious practices of Mauritian Muslims

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Abstract

It has been observed that in post-colonial Mauritius, linguistic practices are an important way for Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and/or Indo-, Franco-, Afro- and Sino-Mauritians to construct, assert or redefine their ethnic, religious and national identities. In the past, Muslims used Arabic and/or their ancestral language(s) in their religious practices and also, to define their religious identity. It has been noted that nowadays, imams tend to make increasing use of Mauritian Creole (MC) for preaching. This paper analyses the role of MC in the religious practices of Mauritian Muslims. The history of the Muslims in Mauritius and their present socio-economic situation are briefly discussed. Their religious practices and the ways in which they construct their religious identity are described. Results from a survey analysing the use of and attitudes to the use of MC in the religious activities of twenty-five Muslims are reported. Attitudes to the use of MC in these practices are discussed with respect to the above findings. It is shown that the use of MC in the mosque is not perceived of as a movement towards the creolisation of the Islamic faith and a threat to the maintenance of Muslim religious practices on the island.

Keywords: Mauritian Creole, Muslim identity, religious practices

1. INTRODUCTION

Mauritius, an island with 1.2 million people, at least six recognised distinct ethnic groups and ten languages, is an example of a multicultural and multilingual country *par excellence*. Because of the multilingual nature of the country, Mauritians have the choice of using a wide array of languages in any given context, including the religious domain, and these choices may change over time.

My aims in this paper are first to identify the languages associated with Mauritian Muslims. Also, based on my native knowledge of Mauritian society and the information gathered from 25 members of the Muslim community, I discuss the attitudes of some Muslims towards the use of Creole for religious sermons. Factors such as age, mother-tongue, ancestral languages and ethnicity are taken into consideration when describing the language beliefs and attitudes of the twenty-five

Muslims. Finally, we assess whether the use of Mauritian Creole in the mosque or during prayer at home is perceived as a threat to the maintenance of Muslim religious practices on the island.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first section, the current linguistic situation of Mauritius, the Muslims on the island and their way of praying are described. In the second part, I discuss the methodology and the findings of this study. Some of the findings, as we will see, raise interesting issues regarding the concept of *diglossia*. These are discussed in the third section. Finally, I conclude with a brief summary.

2. MAURITIUS AND ITS PEOPLE

2.1 Demographic situation of Mauritius

The history of Mauritius is characterised by colonisation and immigration (Toussaint 1972). The current population is made up of people of Indian, African, Chinese and European origins (Eriksen 1998). The country's history explains its current linguistic situation.

2.2 Languages in Mauritius

English is thought to be the official language of the nation although there is no legislation that explicitly says so (Robillard 1989). There are very few native speakers of the language on the island. For most Mauritians, English is the language acquired at school.

French is widely used by Mauritians. It is the native tongue of the Franco-Mauritians but has also become that of some Mauritians of African, Chinese or Indian origins (Baggioni & Robillard 1990).

Mauritian Creole is the native language of many Mauritians. Although it is not officially recognised, it is the language of solidarity. Its status has been described as that of “an ‘unofficial’ national language” (Eriksen 1990: 14) but it is stigmatised by some segments of the population (Stein 1982).

Arabic, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Gujerati, Kutchi, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu are associated with ethnicity and/or religion (Baker 1972, Stein 1982, Eriksen 1998). Some of these languages, like Gujerati and Kutchi, seem to be in a precarious position. Creole appears to be taking over some of the domains in which these ancestral languages were used.

2.3 Muslims in Mauritius

Muslims make up 17% of the current Mauritian population (Muslim Directory 2001-2). The Muslim community can be divided into three ethnic groups on the basis of historical, cultural and linguistic characteristics. The Calcattias, the largest ethnic group within the Muslim community, are the descendants of the indentured labourers. Their ancestors spoke Bhojpuri. The ancestors of the Surtees and the Memans – the

other 2 groups – came from Gujerat as traders. The Surtees spoke Gujerati while the Memans used Kutchi.

Although historically, they come from different linguistic backgrounds, the Muslims generally identify with the Arabic language and also, Urdu. Many Calcattias share their linguistic heritage with those Hindus who came to Mauritius as indentured labourers (Benedict 1961). The indentured labourers, as mentioned above, spoke Bhojpuri. However, Bhojpuri is not considered as a full-fledged language and does not have much prestige itself. Therefore, many Muslims and Hindus report having Urdu and Hindi, respectively, as their ancestral language (Moorghen & Domingue 1982, Stein 1986). Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, is associated with Hinduism, while Urdu, written in the Arabic script, is associated with Islam (Stein, 1982: 125). In the Mauritian context, therefore, Urdu has a religious unifying role which Bhojpuri, Gujerati and Kutchi lack.

It should be noted that no ethnic group in Mauritius can claim to have Arabic as an ancestral language (Eriksen 1998).

What strongly binds the three different Muslim groups (Surtees, Memans and Calcattias) together is religion. From their childhood, Muslims learn that all the Muslims in Mauritius and around the world form one community, irrespective of language, culture and race and also, that all Muslims pray in the same way. How do Muslims pray?

2.3.1 Praying in Islam

Muslims have to pray five times daily at prescribed periods of time. They can either pray on their own or in congregation. These prayers where sections of the Quran are read are performed in Arabic. Daily prayers are led in the mosque by the imam. On Fridays, the first afternoon prayer is preceded by a talk on Islam and/or current issues (called the Waez in Mauritius), and a sermon (the Khutbah). In the main mosque of the island, the Jummah Masjid, the Waez is done in Urdu. But in many mosques around the island, the imams preach in Creole. A few decades ago, the Waez and other talks on Islam were mostly done in Urdu and a Creole translation of the Quran was not available.

Moreover, because Islam promotes a close and personal relationship between Man and God, “talking to God” is an important part of the Muslim’s prayer. It is open to the worshippers which language they use when talking to God. Given the degree of linguistic diversity on the island, the language choices that Muslims actually make when talking to God can be varied and complex. The language attitudes towards the use of the various languages in the religious practices can also be diverse.

This study provides some concrete, quantitative data on language use and attitudes to the use of Creole in religious domains. Although the sample is relatively small, it gives us an important window into how some Muslims perceive the interaction between language and religious practices.

3 THE STUDY

3.1 Methodology

My methodology is as follows: I combine first-hand knowledge of Mauritian Muslim community with data from set questionnaires (appendix). Twenty-eight representatives of the targeted population were asked to complete the questionnaires which were either emailed or posted to them. However, three questionnaires were excluded from the corpus because of problems in interpreting the data. Nine respondents were Surtees, twelve Calcattias and four Memans – this division is made on the basis of ancestral language (cf. 1.3). The breakdown of respondents is given in table 1.

Respondents		Age Groups			Total
		19-39	40-59	>59	
Calcattias	Male	4	3	1	8
	Female	2	2	0	4
Memans	Male	1	1	1	3
	Female	1	0	0	1
Surtees	Male	1	2	1	4
	Female	2	1	2	5
Total		11	9	5	25

Table 1. Respondents by ethnicity, age-group and gender

3.2 Findings

The questionnaire consisted of four main questions/themes:

1. The language or languages associated with the Muslims
2. The appropriateness of the use of Arabic, Urdu or Creole for *Waez* and other talks on Islam
3. Attitudes towards the use of Creole in preaching
4. Language choice when talking to God

Some respondents gave two or more languages per section. All the languages mentioned are recorded.

3.2.1 Languages associated with the Muslims of Mauritius

Respondents	Languages associated with the Muslims					Total
	Urdu	Arabic & Urdu	Arabic & Creole	Bhojpuri & Urdu	None	
Calcattias	6	3	1	0	2	12
Memans	3	0	0	1	0	4
Surtees	4	4	0	1	0	9
Total	13	7	1	2	2	25

Table 2. Respondents by ethnicity and languages associated with the Muslims of Mauritius

As table 2 suggests, 52% of my respondents reported only Urdu as the language associated with the Muslims. 36% reported Urdu in combination with either Arabic or Bhojpuri. These percentages highlight the importance of Urdu as a marker of religious identity in Mauritius. Interestingly, Arabic was never mentioned in isolation as the language of the Mauritian Muslims. From a purely religious perspective, being the language of the Holy Quran, we might think that Arabic should be claimed as the language of the Muslims. However, unlike Urdu, Arabic has no cultural or direct historical meaning for the Mauritian Muslims who largely originated from India. Therefore, a language that denotes the historical, cultural and religious identities of the Muslims takes precedence over a language that only symbolises their religious identity. Also, we might say that the use of Urdu in talks and sermons in the main mosque of the island can act as a reinforcement for the association between Islam and Urdu.

The responses for Bhojpuri in table 2 indicate that the two interviewees thought that the language had enough prestige to be associated with a religious group. Similar findings in a larger sample could suggest a change in attitude to Bhojpuri: the language is thought appropriate to act as a marker of Islamic identity (cf. 1.3).

The presence of Creole in table 2 is minimal. Although Creole transcends ethnic and cultural barriers and functions as a national language (Eriksen 1998), the Muslims in this sample could not identify it as their religious language. Creole, it can be said, belongs to Mauritian nation as a whole and not to sub-divisions within the nation.

So, how does the perceived association of Urdu and Arabic with Islam affect language use in mosques and other religious matters? What languages do Muslims feel are appropriate for use during religious sermons?

3.2.2 Languages to be used for talks on Islam

	Calcattias	Memans	Surtees	Total
Creole only	9	1	5	15
Creole, French with(out) English	2	1	3	6
Creole and Urdu	1	1	0	2
Other combinations with Creole	0	1	1	2
Total	12	4	9	25

Table 3. Respondents by ethnicity and language to be used in talks on Islam.

In table 2, we saw that Creole is not the language generally associated with the Muslims. However, table 3 shows that all my respondents claimed that Creole should be used when delivering talks on Islam. The important role of Creole in this part of the study cannot be contested. The other languages mentioned alongside Creole were Urdu, Bhojpuri, English and French.

One respondent claimed that talks should also be done in Bhojpuri so that the “elderly people living in rural areas can understand the message conveyed”. Like Bhojpuri, Urdu is understood mostly by the elderly (Hollup 1996). Talks delivered in Urdu will, therefore, appeal to an older audience. Yet, it is the language associated with the Muslims and used for preaching in the main mosque of the island.

None of the 25 respondents believed that Arabic should be used for preaching. Some respondents explicitly indicated that talks should not be done in Arabic because it is only understood by a small section of the Muslim community. Therefore, although Arabic is the language of the Quran and obligatory prayers, it is not thought appropriate for use in Islamic talks in the Mauritian context.

The arguments put forward for the choice of language for talks on Islam were mostly centred around intelligibility. My respondents argued that talks on Islam should be done in languages most known/understood by Mauritians. The use of Creole makes Islam more accessible to the population – Muslims and non-Muslims. This generalised preference for Creole suggests that the ethnic background and mother-tongues of the respondents are unlikely to influence their language preference for talks on Islam. We can see that there is a degree of flexibility in terms of language choice in religious matters.

3.2.3 Attitudes towards use of Creole in preaching

Respondents were also asked whether they thought that the use of Creole (instead of Urdu or other languages) in preaching implied a loss of Islamic identity. Only one respondent believed that the use of Creole entails, “to some extent”, a loss of Muslim identity. He argued that use of Creole in talks would not encourage young Muslims to learn Arabic, the language which he believed was associated with the Muslims.

By claiming that the use of Creole in Waez and other talks on Islam did not result in a loss of Islamic identity, the 24 other respondents showed a positive attitude towards the language in religious circles. Clearly, the use of Creole in this domain was not seen as a threat to the maintenance of Islamic identity. On the contrary, it was believed necessary to use this language for the propagation of Islamic values and principles.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Diglossia in the Mauritian Muslim context

Let us first consider the framework of diglossia. Diglossia can be defined as

the reservation of highly valued segments of a community’s linguistic repertoire (...) for situations perceived as more formal and guarded; and the reservation of less highly valued segments (...) for situations perceived as more informal and intimate.(Fasold 1984: 53)

In a classic diglossic situation, religious sermons represent a typical situation where the prestigious variety is thought appropriate (Ferguson 1959).

In Mauritius, the H(igh) varieties for Muslims are Urdu and Arabic. Creole is the L(ow) variety. Given this situation, its use in religious sermons should be absent or limited. However, in Mauritius, not only is Creole used in the mosque but also its use is supported by the Muslims themselves. The L variety is taking over a domain that has traditionally been restricted to the H variety. In fact, at the moment, both the H and L varieties (Urdu and Creole, respectively) are used for sermons in the mosque.

Interestingly, talks in the main mosque of the island are done in Urdu. This suggests that the Jumma Masjid are trying to maintain the traditional linguistic hierarchy although there is a demand for change (as indicated by the limited sample in this study). While the official representative of the Muslim community in Mauritius maintains the traditional diglossic situation of Urdu and Creole in religious sermons, many authorities on the island have recognised the need for change in this domain. The position of the Jumma Masjid can be explained by the fact that as representatives of the Muslims in Mauritius, they symbolise the more conservative approach to religion. Their role is also to ascertain that religious and cultural traditions are maintained on the island. According to Hollup (1996), because of the conservative nature of the Jumma Masjid, many young people feel drawn towards other Islamic groups. It should be noted that the Jumma Masjid and the other Islamic

groups, such as SIM (Student Islamic Movement), teach the same fundamentals but adopt different approaches to the preaching of Islam. The appeal of these movements has been partly explained by their use of Creole instead of Urdu (ibid.).

Furthermore, Creole, according to one of my respondents, is the “language of the client”. There is indeed a general consensus among my interviewees that religious leaders have to accommodate to the linguistic preference and competence of their audience – even if such an accommodation means transgressing traditional linguistic customs and practices. These views show that the traditional division of labour between the L and H varieties in the religious practices of the Mauritian Muslims is being renegotiated.

4.2 The limited role of Creole

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986: 13) said that, “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture”. However, this study shows that although Mauritian Creole plays an important role in the religious activities of the Muslims, it does not act as a carrier of Islamic culture in that it is not associated with the Mauritian Muslim community. In that sense then, its role is limited. It functions as a tool for the teaching of Islam only – that is, a means of communication. The “carrier” of the Islamic culture is thought to be Urdu and to a lesser extent, Arabic. Therefore, Creole has a functional use whereas Arabic/Urdu have a symbolic use. This state of affairs suggests some degree of “specialization of function for H and L” (Ferguson 1959: 328) – possibility the remnant of the traditional diglossic situation.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have analysed the role of Creole in the religious practices of some Mauritian Muslims. Positive attitudes towards the use of Creole in religious talks have been observed. My interviewees believed that the use of Creole during *Waez* did not “at all” imply loss of identity even though the language associated with the Muslims was generally not Creole. In Mauritius, the transmission and dissemination of Islamic knowledge is being re-engineered linguistically in that the traditional language, Urdu, is no longer widely used in the mosques. In this limited sample, Urdu is more strongly associated with the Mauritian Muslims than Arabic is.

Finally, if one defines creolisation as “the process whereby new shared cultural forms, and new possibilities for communication, emerge due to contact” (Eriksen 1999: 14), then one could argue that the use of Creole in the mosque means creolisation of the Muslim religious practices in Mauritius. On the other hand, it could also be claimed that the use of creole implies the islamization of Creole in that the language is acquiring a new dimension in the Islamic domain. The term to be used is open to discussion. But on the whole, it can be seen that although Creole is gaining grounds in the religious circles of the Mauritian Muslims, it does not serve as a marker of Islamic identity on the island – not yet?.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire: The role of Mauritian Creole in the religious practices of Mauritian Muslims

Name: _____ Age: _____

Native language(s) (mother-tongue): _____

Ancestral language(s): _____

1. Is there one language/languages that is/are associated with the Muslims of Mauritius?
If yes, which one(s)?
2. Do you think that Waez and talks on Islam should be done in Arabic, Urdu, Creole or any other language?
Why (briefly)?
3. Does the use of Creole in Islamic talks mean that Mauritian Muslims are losing their identity?
4. Which language do you use when “talking” to Allah, that is, when making personal duas?

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