

# The Mauritian Paradox

Fifty years of Development,  
Diversity and Democracy

EDITED BY

RAMOLA RAMTOHUL AND THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN



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# The Materiality of Multiculturalism

## An Archaeological Perspective

KRISH SEETAH, DIEGO CALAON, SAŠA ČAVAL,  
ALESSANDRA CIANCIOSI AND ALEKSANDER PLUSKOWSKI

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### Introduction

The power of materials, of materiality, lies in the nuances and contours of how objects can be read, and interpreted. The trend in archaeology has seen an important transition from observing finds as static objects, to having their own biography (Appadurai, 1986), with a distinct capacity to connect people through time and across space (Joy, 2009). More than this, as we look more closely at what an object biography actually entails, it becomes clear that the ability to connect people, by design, creates a network (Meskell, 2013: 338) and that performance can be an integral part of the production, consumption and discard of 'things' (Shanks, 2004). This is the theoretical position from which the authors approach the study of artefacts as discussed in this chapter. When engaging with materials in this way, there is an obvious aim of providing a voice to the groups, the workforce, that made up the larger part of the diaspora to the island; specifically, a voice in addition to the historic narrative, be that complementary or contradictory. Ultimately, this view of materials places a particular emphasis on hybridity, the coming together of different ethnic groups, with disparate social and economic positions. The chapter will develop to discuss a range of more commonly considered artefact groups; however, rather than an object *per se* we start with a commodity, one that shaped the lives and landscape of Mauritius.

Sugar defined the colonial economies of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean from the period of European expansion, marking the transition of sugar from a luxury product limited to high-status consumers to a widely available commodity with a global market. This transformation of the commercial and social value of sugar, which took place over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, also involved a dramatic shift in the infrastructure associated with its production; from small-scale Mediterranean installations to Atlantic plantations powered by large numbers of slaves. Sugar production, originating most probably in India, spread to the Middle East and following the Arab conquests, was introduced to North Africa and the Mediterranean islands (Galloway, 1989). Following the establishment of the crusader states in the Levant from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans also adopted cane sugar



production, provided a growing market for it and became heavily involved in its trade. The direct material traces of sugar production centres consist of assemblages of ceramic sugar mould vessels and molasses jars, as well as the remains of presses and mills. However, a crucial component was their supporting settlements which provided the labour, and which remain less well known (Burke, 2004). In the western Mediterranean, sugar production was adopted following the incremental Christian conquests of Iberia. The shift occurred when the Portuguese and Spanish established sugar plantations on the eastern Atlantic islands, particularly in the Canaries where the rapid expansion of the industry in the early 16th century reflected the exploitation of the enslaved indigenous population for labour and the clearance of native woodlands for fuel and fields. Sugar cane and its associated production culture were then transported to the Caribbean. Whilst sugar-processing technology changed in the 17th century, its reliance on slave labour also resulted in a new, integrated relationship between processing centres, settlements, communication networks and landscapes (Singleton, 2016). The sugar economy of Mauritius, which grew rapidly in the last decades of the 18th century and after a short hiatus again from 1815, must be situated in this broader context (Teelock, 2009: 88, 226). Growing, processing and exporting sugar cane defined the physical relationship between settlements, landscapes, and people in Mauritius. For example, the demand for labour following the growth of the industry and the abolition of slavery prompted plantation owners to contract indentured workers.

### **Objects of Memory**

Having briefly set the stage for how objects and commodities have come to have meaning and formed a bridge between the wider global context and Mauritius, the following now looks at how materials can serve as a form of memory to help us better understand the nuances of colonialism, and the post-independence period. Moving from the level of landscape to specific personal objects, the next section traces the ways in which material studies can shed light on the modern island.

#### *Landscape: materiality of settlement and the roots urbanisation*

The Old Labourers' Quarters at Trianon were listed as National Heritage on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1974 (Peerthum, 2010). The monument is one of the few standing structures that witnesses the daily-life of the sugar plantation workers brought to the island during the period of indenture (Green, 1976; Teelock, 2001: 229-30). As such, Trianon barracks represent a significant heritage structure connected with the indenture experience (Andiapien and Nemchand, 2011; Nemchand, 2014). Archaeology has added to this idea, highlighting the complexity of the social relations that the monument



incorporates (Calaon *et al.*, 2013). The barracks' materiality demarcates the shift from slavery to indenture. The monument reveals the multifaceted notion of 'house', and 'private or social space', during a period that was pivotal to the development of contemporary Mauritius. Archaeology undertaken on the topography surrounding the barracks evidences a transformation in the use of land and its relationship with the local workforce. The barracks' design depicts contested negotiations between different social agents: colonial elites, slaves, and indentured labourers. If we enlarge the picture, it is possible to use archaeological tools not only to describe Trianon sugar estate, but also to rethink the development of urbanism in contemporary Mauritius.

Trianon Barracks are rectangular stone accommodations with vaulted roofs arranged in terrace fashion. They present serial dwelling units, slightly elevated from the soil, with front and back doors, and a window on the façade (Calaon *et al.*, 2013: 123-4). The design is derived from the well-known military British colonial architecture (Home and King, 2016). Following an army cantonment model, the architecture follows a principle by which similar buildings are orthogonally organized around a courtyard, creating functional and organized spaces hierarchically positioned on the estate. The organisation of the cantonment model addresses key social issues in the colonial settlement, such as racial segregation and ethnic superiority (Mitter, 1986). The design also tackles public health concerns (Home, 2013: 122-5). The model fits with the need to house groups of people, probably divided by gender, who were supposed to spend only their nights and short spans of free time in the barracks. Kitchen, privies, and work-related spaces were meant to be collective and were placed in specific common areas.

This architectural arrangement provided good control over the workforce. Scholars related the military type of housing with the impacts of abolition: with the contraction in the number of workers, the planters were mandated to improve conditions for their workforce and, at the same time, control them in an effective manner (Nelson, 2016: 116). The historical documentation shows that the idea of a salubrious space in the masters' mind, collided with the sense of 'a good' place to live for the labourers; they abhorred the barrack-type building, essentially because they were not adequate for a family unit and they did not address health standards (RCIM, 1875: 2098-99). In other words, masters and landlords were providing dwellings to the new contract workforce using an old notion of housing, suited for the late slavery era, which diverged from the ethnic, social and religious requirements that the mainly north-Indian workers were looking for in a house.

Archaeological research has demonstrated that, when Trianon barracks were seeded to the indentured labourers, substantial improvements were made to house



single-family units. For example, wooden divisions and a garret were set up to create interior rooms. A canopy was added to the back to be used as a kitchen area (Calaon *et al.*, 2013). Family type groups, also marked by a significant degree of religious and caste varieties, disliked living in such communal environments and they preferred single hut-type dwelling units, with straw roofs. The huts were less robust, but they provided much more flexibility in the internal division, and, being positioned in the landscape of the camp in a less structured and hierarchical way, they offered the possibility to have a private courtyard for cooking and social activities.

Were the stones barracks the standard slave dwelling type in late 18th and early 19th century Mauritius? At this stage of the research, we do not have an unequivocal answer, but historical, landscape, and archaeological surveys have pointed to similar structures, previously not identified. Examples from other estates have similar stone dwellings constructed during the early period of indenture, some of which have survived. Additional examples are documented in the historical sources (RCIM, 1875). It is unlikely that all were as monumental as those at Trianon, and probably many of the barracks were built with simple dry-stone walls. This seems to be the case, for example, on the Bras d'Eau sugar estate. Archaeological surveys point to two different areas of dwellings, with two different construction types. Barrack-terrace type units, with shared spaces, characterize one form. The second is clearly defined by the presence of several basements of single huts, with small family courtyards and private open-areas. Subsequent phases of archaeological excavations will prove if the chronological/typological data can be used to distinguish slave and indenture dwellings.

Undoubtedly less than 5 per cent of the indentured labourers in Trianon lived in the barracks; 95 per cent inhabited huts distributed around several camps (Calaon *et al.*, 2013; Seetah *et al.*, 2017 - see maps as part of Figure 11). The fact that the perishable construction materials of those camps did not last, and, on the contrary, the stone barracks are still standing today, provoked an overexposure of the barracks themselves. In the historical narrative, they became the prototype of habitation for the indentured experience. Archaeology is helping to provide a new narrative, re-contextualizing the setting of the estates, and focusing on the material and spatial evidence.

As seen in the Atlantic, where the archaeology of slavery has been able to describe the passage from barrack style co-residential dwellings to family-unit-type architectures (e.g. Chesepeake area in Virginia, with the representative case of Monticello; see also Singleton, 1985; Vlach, 1992; Morgan, 1998; Fesler 2004; Heath, 2010), material culture and Geographic Information System (GIS) analyses are helping



to better explain the intricate spatial hierarchy that shaped the Mauritian sugar estate landscape, and the built environment. Taking a broader view, Trianon serves as a point of departure for assessing the development of urbanization on the island as a whole. The built area of the estate, constructed after abolition but obviously retaining colonial design cues, is structured around the master's house, detached by a garden from the other parts of the estate. We can define this model as the 'Big House and Slave quarters' pattern, well known from the Atlantic context. The monumental master's house sits as the top of a private territorial system, governing the workforce through a physical and material juxtaposition: hierarchy became a physically reinforced social distinctions, substantiated through design and materiality of the buildings (Anthony, 1976; Ellis & Ginsburg, 2010). Stables and service areas were located near the workforce, but not too far from the master. The plantation was understandably distant, but still within eyesight. The barracks were located between the house and plantation. The design mandate foresaw that at least a group of workers needed to reside in the vicinity, providing services, and serving as a liaison between the master's family and the sugar mill. We can imagine that this setting was almost the standard during the French period in Mauritius. The main shift in spatial organization during the period of indenture was the introduction of camps. These were located some distance from the master's house, connected to both the plantation fields and the chimneys, and were well defined and enclosed. New rural landscapes started to appear: groups of family houses, internally organized according to social/religious elements rather than hierarchy/working needs. Roads and paths were opened to connect the new settlements, proto-villages, to the core of the estate and to specific areas, i.e., the temple, the river, etc.

When considering the general urbanisation of the island through time, one can appreciate how critical the landscape/material perspective is. During the French period, the estates were hierarchically orientated around the master's house, with the slave quarters and the infrastructures centralised. During the British period, a dispersed settlement gradually started to emerge with camps/villages scattered around the property: a direct result of increasing numbers of indentured labourers. After the sugar crisis at the end of the 19th century, many workers purchased land to build their own homes (Allen, 1999: 115-30). The distribution of the recent, self-generated, rural villages replicates the design of the camp. In the absence of urban planning, the new villages were constructed along the main thoroughfares, and strongly connected to family ties, i.e., the next generation building adjacent or above the parent's property, much more than hierarchical social patterns.



In concluding this section, it is worth briefly applying the same principles developed from a GIS approach to other aspects of the island's built environment. French Port-Louis followed an ordered design, built along military cues. Government and martial zones dominated the space between the city and the harbour. Free people were settled in a European style planned city, with public spaces, churches, the theatre, squares, etc., and houses open to the street. Slave and other non-free individuals employed in the city had their quarters nearby (AGTF, 2014). This urban model did not fit with the new society created after the transition to indenture and the implications this had on settlement design. The communion between the master's house and the camp did not form the same bond as during the period of slavery. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mauritius has abandoned the French Port-Louis city-like landscape, adopting a progressively dispersed settled pattern. Rural villages, production areas, and affluent, mainly coastal, residential areas now form distinct settlement types. This has created a unique landscape that typifies Mauritius, encompasses in its materiality tangible features of the negotiated social history of the island.

*Religion: the intersection of tangible and intangible*

While we readily observe the possibilities for using changes in landscape to understand urbanisation, for the Mauritian context specifically, the 'religious landscape' is also of particular relevance to any assessment of how the modern island developed. The Mauritian iteration captures Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and *Longanis*, the local syncretic religious practice (Vaughan, 2005; Seetah, 2015a; 2015b; Allen, 2015; Teelock, 2009; Čaval, 2018). Since all identified religious structures (i.e., churches, temples, mosques, shrines) in present-day Mauritius are still in use, archaeological excavations of these locations are unnecessary. In the (temporary) paucity of religious material culture associated with the past and obtainable through archaeological excavation, landscape is a fundamental point of departure from which to undertake research into religious plurality.

The context of landscape occupancy plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of diaspora. Economy, and particularly land use, guided the location of migrants' settlements and thus indirectly influenced the spread of religions around the island. In Mauritius, this is exemplified in settlement distribution following indenture. Facilitating an imagined sense of continuity with the past is an important function of religion during periods of diaspora. As part of the territorialisation of communities on the island, sacred structures were erected, initially corresponding to the religious denominations of workers on respective sugar estate. Eventually settlements were named according to meaningful places from, mainly but not exclusively, the workers' homeland. With the adoption of imported geographical terminology, the villages



became markers of identity, and also served as waypoints for other communities and religions within the context of public space. The significant factors for the distribution of such names were the status of religion in society, social attitudes towards cultural pluralism, the numbers of 'co-ethnic' and 'co-religion' people settled in an area, and the size and presence of other religious and ethnic groups. Such was the practice not only by Hindus, who adopted geographical names (such as Benares, Gohkoola, Tranquebar, etc.) but also by Christians (e.g., Verdun, Britannia, Albion, Helvetia) and Muslims (e.g., Medine, Yemen) (Trouillet, 2012; McLaughlin, 2005).

Religion is a unique cultural resource that frequently marks ethnic identity much more distinctively than customs. Religious beliefs and practices have been essential to immigrants for adaptation and reorganising their domestic and public lives in a new environment. Having come to Mauritius, either as estate owners, merchants, and craftsmen, or as slaves and indentured labourers, settlers gradually transformed and reinvented their rituals, festivals, traditions, and ceremonies. People turned to religion, particularly when the new setting was unfavourable (Mol, 1979; McLaughlin, 2005; Fogelin, 2007).

During slavery, the prohibition of slave gatherings made it almost impossible for slaves to stay connected to their religious practices. In 1685, the French king, Louis XIV issued the Code Noir, regulating slaves' main (non)rights: the life, death, purchase, religion, and treatment of slaves in all French colonies. The significance of religion is exemplified by the fact that the first seven of 59 articles focused on the religion of slaves, providing an idealized picture of religious life for enslaved peoples. Subsequently other Code Noirs were designed to define the conditions of slavery for individual French colonies respectively. The Code Noir for the Mascarene Islands was issued in 1723. Article I. indicated that all slaves had to be baptized within the first week of arrival, but only as Catholics, and not Protestant. Compared to Madagascar and Mozambique, where slaves were baptised before embarkation, in Mauritius, the Order of St. Lazarus was given responsibility to baptize slaves within two years of arrival. This directive was only moderately observed, although the names of slaves were changed to traditional Christian ones. The fact that many slaves had not actually been baptized became evident after abolition, with the missionary work of Père Laval (Tamby, 2011; de Vaux, 1801; Nagapen, 1984; Boswell, 2006). Seeking to emphasize the differentiation toward slaves and their descendants, with whom they ultimately shared the same religion and denomination, French planters started to practice Roman Catholicism more traditionally, for example celebrating Mass in Latin or French (Boswell, 2006; Nagapen, 1984; Eriksen, 1998). However, it is noteworthy that during this time, *Longanis*, a religious practice unique to Mauritius, was formed. Slavery has



been referred to as 'social death' for bonded people; however, elements of intangible heritage, alongside traditional knowledge and customs which slaves incorporated into local *Longanis*, helped them in dealing with hardship and adversity (Čaval, 2018).

In contrast, during the period of indenture, especially relevant in the Mauritian case as the administration implemented a distinctive system, labourers were permitted to retain links to their own religions (Younger, 2009; Benedict, 1980). During the early stages of the indentured system, from 1834, men heavily dominated the migrant population, which in turn facilitated the emergence of Hanuman worship in Mauritius. Hanuman was and still is venerated as a great village deity in north India; however, he became particularly important for Hindu immigrants in Mauritius. The god was known for its celibacy, was mainly venerated by men, and was seen as a deity who could provide strength to overcome daily struggles. These are plausible reasons for his popularity among early indentured labourers. Popularly known also as Mahabir Swami, his shrines are still found in almost every Hindu Mauritian home (Hazareesingh, 1966; Ramhota, 1998; Selvam, 2012).

Contrary to other destinations of indentured labourers, such as Trinidad, where Indian customs and religious practices on plantations were derided and even forbidden, the immigrants in Mauritius were free to perform their religious practices. Initially, indentured workers sharing the same or similar identity were distributed between sugar estates in small numbers. As the need for labour grew, more people from the same region were employed on a single estate. Workers became more confident in expressing their religious identity, initially through the construction of shrines, and subsequently in more substantial structures, such as temples, churches, and mosques. Yet, to maintain their religious identities in the long term, they had to temporarily relinquish certain segments of their religion/culture (McLaughlin, 2005). Lesser traditions (i.e. Marathi, Tamil, Telugu Hinduism) had to be sacrificed so that the central ones (i.e. Hinduism) could survive: in the first decades of the indentured system, all Hindus shared the same places of worship, which hosted pan-Hindu deities. Gradually the Hindu subgroups individualized, and as soon as they were granted some land, they began with the construction of their own shrines and temples (Knott, 1986: 13; Ramhota, 1998). Hindus started crafting small shrines around their homes and in sugar cane fields (Figure 8) so that they could perform their daily *pujas*.



Realistically, the smallest object of public worship, a shrine, requires a negligible, if any, financial contribution compared to the construction of a larger structure, yet it provides the devotees with considerable religious consolation (Čaval, 2018). Shrines are a vital and the most abundant part of the cultural/religious landscape of Mauritius (Colwell-Chanthaphonh & de Salle-Essoo, 2014), a proper and accurate exhibit of the all-encompassing plurality of Mauritius. Set up by a religiously entangled community, they clearly display everyday needs and pragmatism. Often two or even three different religious denominations share one shrine structure. When developed even further, we observe a shrine structure of an architectural form, standardized by one denomination and used by another, as is the case of the Vishnu shrine in the former sugar estate l'Espérance, which employs the Christian architectural form of 'grotto' for a Hindu monument (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Cherie - Central structure in a Hindu shrine/temple in a sugar cane field**



**Figure 9a: The Christian 'grotto' architectural form used as a Hindu sacred architecture**





**Figure 9b: Christian shrine in Triolet**



**Figure 9c: Hindu shrine in a sugar cane field of the former L'Espérance estate**



A number of written sources highlight the instrumental role that planters played in facilitating workers' access to and maintenance of their religious customs and identities. Sugar estate owners allowed shrines, temples, mosques and churches to be built for and by immigrants. Planters were aware of the workers' dedication to their religions and were motivated to offer assistance in the construction of temples on estates. They provided the land upon which to build the temples, the building materials, financial contributions, and skilled workers to help in the construction. However, these were not acts of generosity, but rather a conscious expediency to



motivate the labourers to perform better. In 1872-73 the Royal Commissioners stated that:

*On Stanley Estate, we saw a Roman Catholic chapel built for and by the immigrants in their camps; but, on the other hand, on Stanley, as well as on several other estates, there are Hindu temples [...] Many of these temples are well and solidly built, and equal to the majority of those built in country villages in India.” (Frere & Williamson, 1875: paragraph 2880).*

The same patterns continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century: for the construction of a Shivala in the 1950's, the land and building materials were donated by the “large Franco-Mauritian owned estate which [...] gives employment to many villagers,” village residents, including some non-Hindus, covering other expenses (Couacaud, 2012; Trouillot, 2012; Ramhota, 1998). Ultimately, the particular development of religious identity in Mauritius reflects the array of influences that have come to characterise the religious landscape of the island, with now a rich mosaic of temples, mosques and churches.

#### *Personal materiality*

As this chapter has developed, certain themes should by now be implicit. One in particular, identity, whether informed from a tangible landscape view or intangible personal one, forms a critical topic of enquiry. Identities in Mauritius were and remain multiple and fluid. They are the result of movement of people under colonialism, whether through forced or voluntary migrations. Diaspora can be traced through material culture, as tangible remains of a process that ‘is about creating and maintaining identity in communities dispersed amongst other peoples. It is about local and non-local and how through processes of hybridity and creolization some groups of people can be both at the same time’ (Lilley, 2004: 287).

As described above, religion is one of the most important characterisations of identity and culture. In Mauritius we can see the complexity of religious practices, in particular when observed within the context of burial practice, the result of a dynamic interchange of cultures and at times can be interpreted as symbols of community power, and resistance. The best-known archaeological example of this particular phenomenon in Mauritius is the site of Le Morne, located in the extreme southwestern corner of the island. It was particularly important for maroons, because it offered an isolated place to settle for runaway enslaved people (Seetah, 2015a).



Between 2009-2013 a planned excavation was carried on the 'Old Cemetery' of Le Morne. The cemetery itself is located on a small sandy islet, which is regularly cut off from the mainland by tidal oscillations. The archaeological finds, alongside the fact that the region was a stronghold for marooned slaves from the latter part of the 18th century (Allen, 1999) and the cemetery's first appearance on regional maps in 1880 (Descubes, 1888), suggests that the cemetery dates to the mid 1830s, around the period of emancipation (Seetah, 2015a). An initial survey revealed 49 grave structures, of which 24 structures were excavated, resulting in the recovery of 26 skeletons. Basalt rocks delineated the graves. Well-constructed trapezoidal coffins made of wooden panels, held together with iron nails, were recovered with regularity. Few additional objects were found, but they are incredibly meaningful given what they represent: the very essence of personal materiality for a heavily marginalized and disenfranchised group. The recovered artefacts include a series of bone buttons, mother-of-pearl buttons, glass bottles, a small number of French coins dating from 1812 to 1828, clay tobacco pipes, accompanied by related flints, manufactured in Britain. Gold earrings and other metal dress elements were sporadically recovered.

**Figure 10: Le Morne, Grave 42**



Even though the cemetery was marked with a cross on the map dated to 1880, the burial traditions do not reflect Christian practices. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the cemetery was consecrated. The orientation of the bodies to the west, the burial of neonatal and newborn individuals, and the inclusion of grave goods would suggest that African traditions were being followed (Seetah, 2015a). In particular, among the items recovered in the burials, we can distinguish objects connected with clothing (especially buttons) from objects placed deliberately inside the grave. The mother-of-pearl buttons suggest that they were dressed in relatively fine clothes; the tobacco pipes and occasional flints could be interpreted as 'slave material culture'. In fact they are often found in slave graves in the Atlantic region, but they are not



documented in cemeteries associated with people of European descent (King, 2006: 310-311; Katz-Hyman and Rice, 2011). The burials themselves appear to reflect a population of some means, at least to the extent to which they could provision their deceased. The dead were buried in well-constructed coffins and they were placed in clearly delineated graves, which were maintained and cared for. This would seem to indicate that they were free people, but whether they had previously been enslaved remains unclear (Seetah, 2015a). We can tentatively conclude that the cemetery contains the remains of the first generation of freeborn Mauritians.

The material culture found in the graves concretely establishes that people buried in Le Morne 'Old Cemetery' participated in the British commercial economy. Most of the objects found, were clearly mass-produced outside Mauritius and widely marketed throughout the world. Pipes, buttons and glass bottles had similar wide networks of distribution during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and at present there is no way to determine how these were obtained. The most significant point is that these objects were selected, and perhaps even purchased, by a group with some (likely small) means. Other objects may have been included, those that were perishable and which have not survived long enough for archaeological recovery. In particular, inside a burial equipped with many different objects (Figure 11), we found a glass bottle that was deliberately placed close to the head of the deceased, probably inside a pouch, close to a sequence of bone buttons. The particularity of this item is the shape of the bottle, typical of those used within a toiletry context. Indeed, the find was a cologne bottle, probably of French manufacture.

Glass bottles, along with pipes, ceramic sherds, and iron nails, were the most frequently recovered artefact types on colonial archaeological sites. The ubiquity of glass bottles in these contexts is the result of rapid technological innovation and commercialization in the glassmaking industry during the early colonial period (Hume, 1969: 60-71; Jones & Sullivan, 1989; Jones, 2011; Herremens *et al.*, 2014). Europeans not only consumed the alcohol contained in the glass bottles, but also traded it with slaves and labourers. Once this class of object entered into slaves' cultural practices, the bottles came to have particular significance as spiritual items, often appearing as grave goods (Rubertone, 2001) or as raw materials used to create tools (Porter, 2015).



**Figure 11: Le Morne, Grave 23**



**Figure 12: Detail of the glass bottle**



### **Connections to a global context**

The material culture of Mauritius expresses a high degree of connectivity with colonial and post-colonial trading networks. Whilst various products were imported to the island, the dominant export was sugar. This became the primary crop cultivated in Mauritius during the period of British rule, particularly after 1825 when colonial officials facilitated the export of Mauritian sugar to Britain's protected markets, which in turn prompted the rapid growth of sugar estates on the island. Production peaked in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and sugar remained the principal export through to the mid-20<sup>th</sup>



century (Bräutigam, 2008: 139-140). As a result, sugar played a vital political role in state formation and Mauritius' transition from a colonial to independent state, but it also defined the cultural landscapes of the island, which today represent a palimpsest of slavery, indenture and the assertive break from the colonial past. Although sugar itself is largely invisible archaeologically, the material remnants of plantations whether as collections of buildings that now represent national monuments like Trianon, bounded spaces, fields and communication networks, represent one of the most striking material expressions that bridge the colonial and post-colonial past in Mauritius. Here, on estates such as Trianon, the daily lives of many Mauritians were organised and concentrated, and came to influence the island at large. This is well illustrated by the patchwork of religious structures that occupy virtually every type of settlement and habitat on the island, from the coast to the heart of plantation fields.

The mono-crop landscape of the sugarcane fields maintains the legacy of the colonial sugar estates, in which old Hindu shrines and temples still exist, and moreover, are still in use. Even though the former labourers' camps have been discarded, and the people have moved on, the old temples and shrines are regularly visited and provide spiritual comfort. Likewise, the religious structures in the urban locations have the advantage of never being out of sight; thus, their continuity is unquestioned. The 1968 Constitution's '*Freedom of creed and of religious belief*' gained another dimension with economic growth of the modern Mauritian population. New sacred structures, private and public, for all religions and beliefs, are being built consistently, continuing to connect people through time and across space via intangible heritage. As a complement, the material culture, some of which we observe in the most poignant of settings (the grave itself), was generated by these historic communities. Whether enslaved, indentured, free, part of the colonial administration, or the increasingly global mercantile world, it provides a tangible connection to the construction of the island's multi-ethnic and multi-social identities.

As archaeology becomes more systematic (Seetah, 2015b), and responds to a wider archaeological agenda, one that speaks to a slave and indentured past well beyond the boundaries of historic European monuments and estates – crucial elements, but unrepresentative of a common past – the subject has increasing relevance. New approaches are revealing the influence of disease and the relationship to climate (Seetah, 2018), and in the future will connect these ancient epidemics with the modern context. Archaeology is also playing an ever more important role in recognizing, promoting and valorising a broader range of heritage. A particularly noteworthy example is the Le Morne Old Cemetery, a site that is critical to our understanding of the slave past, but entirely detached from the 'estate' context. While the power of



scientific, historical, and anthropological archaeologies are brought to bear under the umbrella of 'the archaeology of Mauritius', far more important than methods and theory is a movement, one that is gaining ground each year: a recognition of what archaeology means by the local population. All too often, archaeology has been seen as simply a complement to history or anthropology; it is not. When tens of thousands of visitors to the Aapravasi Ghat Interpretation Centre see the still-exposed excavations, painstakingly protected and integrated into the broader narrative in a tangible way, they observe direct evidence of the past: that is the true impact of archaeology. In this way, the subject becomes a vehicle for nationhood.

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