

RESEARCH ARTICLES

# Remembering the Forgotten: Chosen Traumas of Mauritian History Evoked in Sega Music

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Similar to other former colonies that have achieved independence, the small island state of Mauritius emphasises certain elements of its history to maintain peace and identity cohesion in a heterogeneous society. Such cohesion is achieved, *inter alia*, by the construction of the collective memory and inherent processes of remembering and forgetting. While certain events are remembered in the public, others are kept silent to avoid spurring conflict in a diverse society. This paper explores the relationship between the remembrance of traumas in official contexts and how these differ from the remembrance of traumas in unofficial settings, such as through local music. With the aim of uncovering the everyday, unofficial memory of history, the study uses sega songs, the national musical genre on the island. This discussion places itself within the wider study of silence as a strategy to keep the peace after an episode of violence in a heterogeneous society and contributes to the literature on collective memory and music studies in social sciences.

## Introduction: Peace in a multi-cultural, multi-racial, post-colonial island state

The island of Mauritius, around 1,000 km off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, gained independence from the United Kingdom on March 12, 1968. The small island state is known for its sandy beaches and political and economic stability, repeatedly scoring high in terms of economic and human development in the African region (Dusoye, 2016). Despite its success story, the island's cultural heterogeneity caused scholars to doubt its prospects for development (Hillbom, 2019). Cultural groups are usually divided into four categories for demographic purposes, and this study follows the same categorisation: Indo-Mauritian Hindus (estimated at 50% of the population in 1972, the last census year collecting data on communal identity), the General Population (31%), Indo-Mauritian Muslims (16%), and Sino-Mauritians (3%) (Statistics Mauritius, 2018). From these, the General Population can be seen as a residual category comprising the Franco-Mauritian whites and the Creole population, descendants of African

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slaves with a mixed heritage with Europeans and East and South Asians, a consequence of the various migration waves throughout the island's history (Eriksen, 1993; Srebrnik, 2002).

The heterogeneous Mauritian population has called for a unique nation-building process. Communities are encouraged to gather beyond their ethnic and religious groups and conflict between ethno-religious groups is rare. Symbols such as the dodo bird and deer as national animals, the colours of the Mauritian flag, and the peace-justice-and-liberty inspiring lyrics of the national anthem are thus promoted to craft a national Mauritian identity. Yet, behind this climate of apparent perpetual tolerance lie two instances of racial riots in the years preceding independence. Racial violence resurfaced in 1999, despite a period of sustained economic growth of almost 30 years, termed as a “growth miracle” since independence in 1968 (Hillbom, 2019, p. 10).

Interestingly, there is little mention in the everyday of the tense climate seen in Mauritius's last days as a British colony. In contrast, the memory of the trauma of slavery is publicly rehearsed to remember the roots of the Mauritian nation and the suffering of its people's ancestors. It is the contradiction in the silence around certain traumas and the public remembrance of others that shapes the backbone of this research puzzle. The aim of this paper is thus to explore the relationship between the official remembrance of traumas, notably in writing, and remembering traumas in unofficial settings, primarily through local segga songs. What are the traumas that are chosen to be remembered to the expense of others in remembering Mauritian history?

### **Managing inter-ethnic peace through silences**

Throughout its young history, political parties in Mauritius have sought to “judiciously manage” the island's inter-ethnic relations (Sellström, 2015, p. 241). From this perspective, past inter-ethnic tensions are absent from official and unofficial public instances for fear that they resurface and disrupt the peace (Mistry, 1999). The collective memory thereby rests on the salience of certain events that are remembered publicly and others that are absent from public discussion. At the same time, not remembering past traumas might lead to a lack of knowledge transmission to future generations, eventually leading to the re-occurrence of the very events that want to be forgotten. The silence around the racial violence of the 1960s did not prevent the resurfacing of racial riots in 1999, as will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. Can silencing the past effectively prevent the outbreak of violence on the island in the future, or does it act as a loose band-aid until wounds left untreated open again?

To assist the study of remembrance of past violence in a diverse society, Mac Ginty (2021, p. 2) proposes the concept of “everyday peace” in portraying normal citizens as having the power to disrupt conflict and foster social change. Based on fieldwork in Kosovo, Albanian and Serbian work colleagues are observed greeting and talking to each other and transgressing their differences; they do so by following a “script of manners” involving the

avoidance of contentious topics (Mac Ginty, 2021, pp. 10, 34). Although this can be considered insincere or restrictive and prevents individuals from freely expressing themselves, this insincerity is justified if it serves the greater social good and prevents a further collapse into violent conflict (Mac Ginty, 2021).

In the absence of initiatives from the government to shape a consensual shared narrative about past violence, ordinary citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina develop their own strategies for peace, one of which is silence. Silence here does not equate forgetting but is rather seen as a form of communication with an emphasis on empathy and respect for the other. It has a pragmatic concern at its heart: putting aside conflict narratives to focus on managing the present instead of being obsessed with the past (Eastmond & Mannergren Selimovic, 2012). Silence here provides a feasible, day-to-day strategy, especially in situations where reconciliation between groups and ideals of harmony and forgiveness can seem quite distant. “Generational life stories” are then expected to carry memories of violence, with varying levels of outspokenness, across generations, hoping that future generations would one day disclose what was “forgotten” (Eastmond & Mannergren Selimovic, 2012, pp. 508, 511, 524).

Mannergren Selimovic’s (2020) work on the case of Bosnia provides a typology of silences serving a range of purposes intertwined with the individual and collective memory: silence for erasure, denial, shame, speech, coping, protection, resistance, or to make claims. A past event is remembered, or silenced, either as an individual agential act or as part of the wider mnemonic process of remembering and forgetting at the societal level. Again, an important consideration is to not equate remembering with voice and forgetting with silence; in fact, silences can even be “the ultimate example of acknowledgement and remembrance” (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1108). The multiple facets of silences thereby reinforce the relevance of researching instances in which the memory of a trauma is relived publicly and instances where it is avoided.

It becomes interesting to see the silences that group members, either consciously or unconsciously, coincide in maintaining every day. Although it might be hard to research what is silenced, it is however possible to observe what is remembered in the public, and by extension, the contexts in which these histories are absent from public spaces. A concern here becomes how to minimise conflict between groups that want to remember an event and others that do not wish to relive its shameful or traumatic aspects (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010). While silence does not mean forgetting, scholars debate whether silence promotes forgetting; indeed, deliberately refusing or failing to speak out differs from refusing or failing to remember (Stone et al., 2012). The former can enhance memory as the rememberer recognises an explicit memory is recognised but decides not to share it. In the second scenario, however, the individual does not recognise the implicit memory,

making it less likely to be expressed in speech (Schacter, 1987). Silence around the memory of an event, if not rehearsed, is tied to higher chances of forgetting over time, both by the individual and wider society.

In conceptualising the events selected for salience in the collective memory of Mauritian time, the term “chosen traumas” is used in reference to Volkan’s (2001, p. 88) work on the subject. Once made authoritative, either as part of top-down nation-building or bottom-up everyday peacebuilding processes, chosen histories become part of a group identity by highlighting a common past of suffering. They are likely to be remembered over time and generations as they are part of the official memory that is frequently rehearsed in public spaces (Volkan, 2001).

In discussing official and unofficial remembrance, the role of local music is interesting in making the memory of an event travel across generations. Music serves to “reinforce, or relate people more closely to, certain experiences which have come to have meaning in their social life” (Blacking, 1974, p. 99). The literature exploring the influence of music and culture in shaping national identity is already present and robust (Čvoro, 2014; Kelly, 2008; Morra, 2014). Morra (2014) even writes “popular music is never *just* [emphasis in original text] music: it claims a dominant role in voicing an essential national identity, history, and experience” (p. 11). In Mauritius, sega music is the national musical genre closely attached to the Mauritian identity, crossing ethnic and religious lines in the process (Miles, 1999). In the words of Mozambican movie director Sol de Carvalho, this can be seen as a form of “traditional popular culture” (de Freitas & de Carvalho, 2022, p. 216). It is *traditional* as it is inspired by folk music. It is *popular* as it bears values transmitted from one generation to the next, perhaps in contrast to bourgeois society, and it is *cultural* as it reflects people’s everyday lifestyles.

### A thematic analysis of Mauritian segas

This paper conducts a thematic analysis (TA) of sega songs to study the remembrance of chosen traumas in Mauritius. The material sampled dates the period between 1959 and 2023, to capture the remembrance, in official and unofficial spaces, of a variety of traumas in contemporary Mauritian history. The written sources of evidence consists of the following: (a) Government Gazette issues published by the Governor General of the colony of Mauritius to the Queen of England from the 1960s; (b) newspaper articles, both archival prints and online versions; (c) academic books; and (d) letters, leaflets, and promotional booklets presenting Mauritius to an international, mostly tourist, audience. While this written material uncovers the remembrance of traumas in official instances and documents, it is complemented by sega songs to explore the differences in unofficial remembrance vessels.

Sega songs, 43 in total, are selected based on their relevance to the research topic (Knott et al., 2022). A factor affecting the inclusion of segas to the sample is the assumed knowledge of the sega singer – or *ségatier* – of the everyday in Mauritian society and social dynamics between groups. For

this reason, segas performed by Seychellois *ségatiers* are excluded from the sample as they are less likely than fellow Mauritian musicians to revive the memory of a trauma in Mauritian history. Segas that do not relate closely to at least one of the traumas selected for the analysis are also excluded from the sample, irrespective of their popularity among the Mauritian public. Examples include segas that express the themes of wedding life, domestic violence, and gender inequality, all valid topics for further research on Mauritian culture.

The rationale for using TA as a method is to identify themes from text – in this case, documents and sega songs – and translate these themes into chosen traumas. The remembrance of certain traumas here contrasts with the forgetting of others in the collective memory in Mauritian society. An early coding process yielded codes and a structured codebook which was then applied to the material, following the “coding reliability TA” approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 6). The latter is preferred to the “codebook TA” documenting the occurrence of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 207); indeed, the frequency of a trauma does not contribute to uncovering the silence around other traumas. Similarly, while the “reflexive TA” approach treats codes as never fixed, the study seeks to crystallise themes to establish their remembrance in the public realm (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 207).

The above methodology aligns with previous studies of Mauritian society using segas as empirical material to demonstrate decolonising discourses held in the Kreol language (Boswell, 2006; Pyndiah, 2016). As Eriksen (1993) indicates, the Mauritian public arena is constituted through mass media (education, newspapers, TV, radio, and cinema) and songs broadcast on the TV or radio are easily accessible to the majority of the population. The content of sega songs reaches far, confirming the role of music as an important vessel in communicating messages and rehearsing the memory of a trauma to an audience. Once the coding is done, relevant parts of the songs are translated from the local language Kreol – not to be confused with the Creole community – into English. Literal translations are preferred but are not always possible. For example, a word-to-word translation of the Kreol expression “*kriye dife*” (“shout fire” in English) fails to convey the effect of looking down on someone. In such cases, the translation process prioritises conveying the message intended rather than a direct translation of the exact words.

The origins of sega can be traced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century during French colonial rule. As European settlers brought slaves to Mauritius from Africa, mostly from Madagascar, their rhythms, instruments and dances later shaped today’s sega upon reaching Mauritian shores (Benedict, 1965). Sega performance represented a moment of relaxation and consolation after a hard day’s labour in the sugar cane fields, both as an expression of joy and lamentation (Boswell, 2006; Young, 1971). Pavard (1974) offers a vivid

description of the dance “primitive choreography that spellbinds its participants in a mounting fever as the irresistible musical force frees their bodies until exhaustion” (p. 20).

Young (1971, p. v) depicts the dance as “extremely erotic,” causing the Catholic Church to forbid it for a while. Catholic opposition notwithstanding, and with the help of the tourism industry, sega has become a cultural marker of the country, while still being closely associated with the Creole descendants of African slaves (Boswell, 2006; Eriksen, 1993; Schnepel, 2023). In any case, sega has now been “de-ghettoi[s]ed” and is now appreciated by tourists, hotel operators, and the wider Mauritian population alike (Miles, 1999, p. 220).

### **Remembering chosen traumas in Mauritian history**

The next section presents four chosen traumas that emerged from the research: (a) pre-independence social unrest; (b) the 1999 “Kaya riots”; (c) slavery; and (d) uprooted Chagossian populations. Each trauma is associated with varying levels of salience in the official remembrance, represented by the written documents researched, and the unofficial, or the sega songs sampled. The analysis is followed by a discussion on the implications of the observations derived from the main findings.

#### **Pre-independence social unrest**

In May 1965, riots erupted between Creoles and Hindus, causing the death of three people and requiring the intervention of British troops posted in Aden, Yemen to restore peace in Mauritius (Miles, 1999; Sellström, 2015; United States Department of State, 1966). While this event is recorded in official documents, it is absent from the sample of sega songs. Whether the silencing of the 1965 riots in unofficial remembrances is a conscious societal act to foster peace or not, it did not deter tensions from disturbing social order. Indeed, riots broke out again three years later in January 1968 and saw fighting between Creoles and Muslims in the capital city Port Louis and its suburbs two months before independence in March of that year.

Witness accounts remember the effect of internal gang quarrelling in starting the riots, which claimed the lives of between 24 and 29 people and required yet again the intervention of British troops (Hein & Hein, 2021; Ng Ping Cheun, 2018). The tense atmosphere divided the town of Port-Louis and a state of public emergency was declared on between January 21, 1968, and February 12, 1968. Emergency powers, including the need for a curfew, the control of arms and motor vehicles, as well as restrictions on public events and entertainment, were deemed necessary to restore peace, stability, and order on the island (*Legal Supplement to the Government Gazette of the Colony of Mauritius, Government Notice No. 35 of 1968, No. 21 of 12th February 1968* 73, 1968; *Legal Supplement to the Government Gazette of the Colony of Mauritius, Proclamation No. 3 of 1968, No. 5 of 22nd January 1968* 5, 1968).

The 1965 and 1968 race riots are indicative of the tension between social groups in the decade preceding independence. Ségatiers took the role of fostering coexistence and tolerance sentiments among culturally diverse neighbors. If sega songs are to provide a background to the atmosphere reigning in the years prior to the riots, the themes of partying and time spent by the beach appear as key identifiers of favoring entertainment over violence in the pre-independence period. Roger Augustin's (1961a) "Picnic" encourages rejoicing about moments of happiness and leaving one's worries behind:

We will not come here everyday  
 Tomorrow we will think about  
 How we made it here  
 How much money we spent  
 Have fun, don't beat or kill each other (...)  
 I like it when there is no war

Pa touzour ki nou pou vinn isi zoto  
 A dime ki nou pou mazine zoto  
 Kou manier noun vinn isi  
 Koumie lamone noun depanse  
 Amize pa bate pa touye zoto (...)  
 Mwa mo kontan kan pena laguer zoto

It should be noted that the joyful tone of segas does not preclude the existence of interracial tensions in the everyday. The mention of "war" in the above song four years before the first race riots recorded could evoke one of two things. On the one hand, it could refer to the recent Second World War that saw the participation of Mauritian soldiers as a part of the British Empire (Jackson, 2001). On the other hand, it could also represent a noticeable climate of tension between social groups that would eventually lead to acts of racial violence a few years later. More generally, this commitment to forgetting the troubles of life aligns with the original purpose of sega music during slavery, whereby music allowed enslaved people to gather and express joy together, far from the hardships of a long working day (Boswell, 2006; Young, 1971).

Ségatiers demonstrate their agency in choosing to write texts that promote peace and coexistence. To a certain extent, it can be argued that they consciously avoid spurring tensions in an already divided society. The musicians exert their influence over the Mauritian audience as everyday peacebuilders to disrupt existing, whether visible or not, tensions among the populace (Mac Ginty, 2021). Music here builds on common themes seeking to bring a community together and avoiding messages that could divide more than unite, as well as identity markers that exclude or attack some groups and not others (Howell, 2023). Notwithstanding the need to avoid fueling conflict in a charged social environment, ségatiers judiciously use identity

markers to promote *vivre ensemble*, or peaceful coexistence, among ethnic groups on the island. Cultural diversity is not a necessary nor a sufficient condition for conflict, as showcased by Roger Augustin (1961b) in “Segga Banane” (“Segga For The New Year”) presenting Mauritius as a meeting point of world cultures:

If you want to enjoy China  
 On Laramp Street noodles are everywhere  
 In Mauritius, you get a bit of every country  
 If you go to Triolet, you are in India  
 Just like Europe in Curepipe  
 And don't forget Rose Hill  
 And Beau Bassin on a beautiful Sunday  
 Creoles have their towns too

Si ou a kontan ou ale amiz an Sin  
 Dan lari Laramp ou napa mank mine  
 Dan pei amoa a gagn inpe preske tou pei  
 Si ou ale Triolet la ou ale dan linde  
 Koma dan Lerop a ou ale Curepipe  
 Dan tousala pa bliye Rose Hill  
 Beau Bassin enn zoli zourne dimans  
 Kreol osi ena so lavil

In the two songs mentioned above, *ségatiers* seek to promote peace where they can, and when it is acknowledged, the multi-racial nature of the island is not presented as a source of violence. Still, the occurrence of racially motivated violence in 1965 and 1968 demonstrate that the silencing of tensions and taboos is not enough to prevent the emergence of race riots. In other words, despite their good intentions, the messages of peace promoted by *ségatiers* may not be enough as a peace strategy. This is where the role of the government is influential in propelling the potential for peace that musicians bring. In 1967, a few months before the January 1968 riots, the Gowry Brothers (1968) are commissioned by the government to write a song focusing on the unifying factors of the Mauritian nation, instead of its dividers. “Lame dan lame” (“Hand in Hand”) thus sees the light and becomes the unofficial independence musical symbol in parallel with the official national anthem “Motherland” on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1968:

Give me your hand, take my hand

Hand in hand  
 Let's build together the Mauritian nation  
 Whether you're Hindu  
 Whether you're Muslim  
 Whether you're Creole  
 Whether you're Chinese (...)  
 Whether you're White

All those who were born  
 In this country  
 We walk together  
 Hand in hand  
  
 Donn to lame pran mo lame  
 Lame dan lame (x2)  
 Anou batir, nasion morisien (x2)  
 Ki to hindou  
 Ki to mizilman  
 Ki to creol  
 Ki to sinoi (...)  
 Ki to enn blan  
 Tou saki finn ne  
 Dan sa pei la (x2)  
 Nou bizin marse  
 Lame dan lame (x2)

The catchy chorus combines different musical styles associated with each of the cultural groups present on the island, coupled with a part sung in Bhojpuri – a language mostly spoken by Indian households, although less common today than at the time of the song’s release (Eriksen, 1993). It also aligns with the key message of the national anthem:

Around thee we gather  
 As one people  
 As one nation  
 In peace, justice, and liberty

As a testament of its resounding inter-generational success, “Lame dan lame” is still sung in 2024 at official Independence Day celebrations. When asked to reflect on the writing process of the song, the Gowry brothers explained that the song’s aim is to ask Mauritians to think beyond their ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences to continuously “create a new nation and envision the future, hand in hand” (Bissonauth-Bedford & Issur, 2018, p. 1). One of the song’s lyricists, Bahal Ghowry, acknowledged the social tensions whilst writing the song in December 1967. Still, he underscored his and his brother’s desire to transgress norms related to racial divisions and instead focus on the richness of the Mauritian identity and culture (Karghoo, 2018).

The sensitivity of mentioning one’s ethnic origin pervades in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the original lyrics of “Lame dan lame” have been changed on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence Day in 2018 to “put things in today’s context” (Karghoo, 2018). Specifically, the part referring to ethnic and religious affiliation in the original text (“Whether you’re Hindu, Muslim,

Creole, Chinese, White”) is removed from the song’s latest version performed 50 years later by a group of Mauritian singers (Collectif d’artistes mauriciens, 2018):

Together we are one  
Under the same sky  
Together we choose  
A better future  
All those who were born  
In this country  
We walk together  
Hand in hand

Ensam nou enn sel  
Anba mem lesiel  
Ensam nou swazir  
Enn meyer lavenir  
Tou seki finn ne  
Dan sa pei la  
Nou bizin marse  
Lame dan lame

This could attest to the fragile nature of social relationships, bordering censorship at the national and individual level in requesting artists and citizens to be wary of their choice of words in public. Alternatively, such an approach could be attributed to the high level of emotional intelligence expressed by Mauritians and musicians as everyday peacebuilders: avoiding topics or labels of contentious nature to keep the peace and maintain tolerant relationships in an otherwise divided society (Mac Ginty, 2014).

Despite the lack of mention in segas of race riots in the 1960s, the persistence of racial tensions is documented in the years following independence. The young Mauritian nation is a fragile one, as reported by John Young (1971, p. i) on a visit to Mauritius in the early 1970s:

[...] three years ago Mauritius came to independence in an atmosphere of bitter and violent racial conflict. It has long since reverted to its normally peaceful ways but the underlying tensions and problems remain.

Meanwhile, government figures seek to downplay events that are likely to fuel past or future racial tensions. A clear example comes from the first Prime Minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, claiming on the third anniversary of independence, on the March 12, 1971, that:

[A]s we set out to-day an Independent Nation in our fourth year, we can look back with pride on three years of social harmony and political stability (Young, 1971, p. i).

The silencing of past tensions from the public space, whether in songs, the media, or by the government, has a pragmatic purpose that serves the common good in avoiding the resurgence of violent conflict. Certain silences work as a strategy for peace and coexistence in a multiracial and multicultural society.

### The 1999 “Kaya riots”

The peace and stability seen following Prime Minister’s Ramgoolam speech would cease with the unfortunate re-occurrence of racial violence and the so-called “Kaya riots” in 1999 (Eriksen, 2004, p. 89). Kaya, a Mauritian Creole singer with Rastafarian background, is known for combining Jamaican reggae and Mauritian segga to discuss themes related to the condition of Afro-Mauritian slave descendants who have cut ties with their African cultural and linguistic origins (Sellström, 2015). His contribution to Mauritian segga music is as memorable as his tragic death. In February 1999, Kaya died in custody after being arrested by the police for smoking cannabis in a public demonstration for the drug’s legalisation. Scholars note that 80% of the police at the time favoured the large Indo-Mauritian ethnic group (Eriksen, 2004; Srebrnik, 2002). The cause of death is still unclear today. Some reports infer murder by the police during detention while the official state version claims that there is insufficient evidence to declare that Kaya has been murdered (Eriksen, 2004).

Upon the announcement of his death, Kaya quickly becomes a martyr for the cause of Creole rights and the tragedy sparked looting and race riots around the island (Miles, 1999; Sellström, 2015). The injustice experienced by an innocent man was mostly felt by his fans and within the broader Creole social group, as showcased in “Li pa merit sa” (“He Does Not Deserve It”) by the segga music band Otentik Street Brothers (2001b):

He is a victim of a very wrong system  
 He does not deserve it (...)  
 He was a man free from violence  
 And a peaceful man  
 His only thoughts were about gathering ethnicities  
 He was interfering with political parties  
 But for the ghetto kids his voice was mystical (...)  
 What did he do wrong

Kinn ale victim enn sistem bien fos  
 Li pa merit sa (...)  
 Li ti enn zom non violans  
 E enn lom pasifik  
 Lom la dan so panse se rassemble bann etni  
 Li ti pe fer interferens kont bann parti politik  
 Pou bann zanfan gheto li ti enn lavwa mistik (...)  
 Ki li finn fer de mal

Even if the 1999 riots arose from the anger over the unfair deadly treatment received by Kaya in prison, and against the police and public institutions more generally, the uproar quickly took an ethnic dimension with violent clashes between Creoles and Hindus (Le Mauricien, 2012). The violence came as a shock to Mauritians who thought that ethnic tensions and race riots were a thing of the past (Sellström, 2015). During times of turbulences, the Catholic Church helped foster peace among the population. This is mostly of relevance for the Creole community members, a majority of which are non-white Catholics, who see the Catholic Church as a respected authority.

A few months after the Kaya riots, in August 1999, the open mass in Port Louis was held on the occasion of the Assumption, the Catholic feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Catholic priest Henri Souchon reminded the audience of the need to live in peace with one's neighbors. To illustrate his call for religio-cultural tolerance, he invited representatives from a religious Islamic group and the Sai Baba movement, a current in Hinduism, to showcase avenues for religious diversity in Mauritius. His intention was to encourage unity and spiritual reconciliation to cure the wounds caused by the recent social upheavals. Unfortunately, his undertaking was shadowed by that of fellow Catholic priest Jocelyn Grégoire; the latter spurs feelings of bitterness and resentment among the Creole-majority crowd. Before building reconciliation, the priest asks the audience to listen to Kaya's calls for social justice and truth to become aware of the social injustices that can only be tackled forcefully (Boswell, 2006).

In the case of the Kaya riots, the Creole community is fractured over the best approach to handle the memory of racial violence. On the one hand is the call for a degree of forgetting to embrace coexistence in a multi-racial, multi-cultural society, and on the other is the need to acknowledge the inequalities of the system to reify and eradicate them. In taking these stances as the two ends of the spectrum of Creole identity in Mauritius, one can observe that the desire to remember racial tensions is not favored by everyone. From this angle, there can be too much memory to the extent that it hurts social relations and dynamics. Silence of a trauma may help social cohesion and harmony more than remembrance.

## Slavery

In contrast to the pre-independence racial tensions and the Kaya riots, the trauma of slavery appears in greatest frequency in sega songs. The need for the remembrance of slavery is explicitly stated in a number of segas; for instance, Roland Augustin (1980) explains in "Rakonte" ("Retell") the need to remember slavery so that no generation ever forget about it:

In our roots, all those who came  
 All the generations who have come around  
 All our ancestors retell the story  
 So that no one will ever forget

Dan nou rasinn seki noun vini  
Pou zenerasion seki finn pase  
Tou nous zanset rakonte  
Koumsa zame pa va blie

A similar endeavour is seen in “Lesklavazis 6tem” (“Slave System”) by Otentik Street Brothers (2001a):

There was a lot of flogging  
And I know that slaves had to flee  
Some had to be carried with their chains  
Looking for a place to hide  
The suffering was too intense  
For one to admit

Inn bien bat kou de fwe  
E amo kone ki esclav la li ti pe deza sove  
Ena ti pe bizin trenn zot par zot lasenn  
Rod baz pou kasiet  
Soufrans la ti tro bel man  
Pa ti pe kapav admet

An important element in remembering slavery, which contributes to its salience in the collective memory across generations, is its close connection with Le Morne Mountain, as explained by the band Cassiya (2002) in the song “Le Morne”:

How many of them had to go up  
On top of Le Morne Mountain  
And preferred to jump because they loved freedom

Koumie ena ti monte  
La haut Le Morne laba  
Prefere zete aköz kontan liberte

Or by Carino (1991) in “Alime dife” (“Start the Fire”):

If Le Morne Mountain could speak  
It would tell us about all the blood  
That was spilled  
And all the slaves  
Who committed suicide

Si Montagne Le Morne ti ena labous  
Li ti a rakont nou kombie disan  
Ki finn koule  
Kombien esclav  
Finn suicide dan le pase

The symbol of Le Morne refers to the mountain and eponymous village where archaeological findings have confirmed the storyline of African slaves escaping their dissatisfied masters and hiding in the mountain. The myth around Le Morne and slavery in Mauritius rests on the presumed recurrent suicide attempts of African slaves who preferred jumping off Le Morne Mountain's cliff, risking death, to experiencing inhumane working conditions (UNESCO, 2008). The area surrounding Le Morne and the International Slave Route Monument erected at its foot have been UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 2008, thereby contributing to the persistence of the myth (Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund, 2014). It is remarkable that oral stories describing the lives of maroon slaves on the run passing across generations are later confirmed by archaeological findings. In fact, one of the criteria used by UNESCO to elevate Le Morne to the status of World Heritage Site is precisely the longevity of the oral traditions detailing the plight of slaves (UNESCO, 2008). The myth blends with historical truth, contributing to its strong presence in the national imaginary, as continued in "Slave System" (Otentik Street Brothers, 2001a):

Le Morne mountain  
 When I go there  
 I feel the suffering  
 That took place there (...)  
 Le Morne Brabant is a monument in itself  
 It reflects the slave system  
 Montagne Le Morne

Letan ki mo pase par laba  
 Mo santi enn soufrans  
 Ki finn deroul parla (...)  
 Le Morne Brabant enn moniman an limem  
 Li reflekte lesklavazis system

The mountain here acts as a visible – and immutable – symbol that triggers the memory of slavery in the collective mind of Mauritians, despite not directly experiencing the trauma in their lives. As long as the mountain stands, the memory remains. And chances are it will stand for a while. Helped by the virtual immortality of the symbol and related histories, slavery has become a unifying aspect of Mauritian identity, specifically among the Creole community.

While slavery and sega are both widely accepted and recognised as part of Mauritian culture today, the mention of slavery used to be considered taboo, deemed to only pertain to the Creole section of the population, similar to how sega performance was confined to the margins of society (Boswell, 2006). Ségatier Roger Clency recalls that one of the reasons for the unpopularity of

the segga genre was that the Kreol language made it too “vulgar” (ION News, 2016). This is expressed by Jean Claude Gaspard (1978) in “L’ambiance mauricien” (“Mauritian Party”):

I don’t understand why long ago  
Things were not like that  
They were not the same (...)  
Only a small proportion of the population  
Would dance our segga  
The others would just look down

Mwa mo napa kompran kifer lontan  
Sapa ti koumsa  
Sa napa ti koumsa (...)  
Ziss enn ti proporsion popilasion  
Ti dans nou segga  
Lezot ti nek kriy dife

Nevertheless, the memory of slavery, still actively relived almost 200 years after its occurrence, could be in part due to the de-ghettoization of segga as a musical genre. In fact, the rhythms and instruments used to this day are proudly portrayed as an almost untouched tradition dating the arrival of African ancestors to the island. The song “Rev nou ancetres” (“Our Ancestors’ Dream”) by Cassiya (1998) is noteworthy here

Today we dance segga with drums  
This is the best memory  
Of how long they have been tortured  
We need to thank God for the chains  
That have been removed from our hands  
We need to thank God for the chains  
That have been removed from our feet

Zordi isi nou danse segga ravann  
Sa mem gran souvenir  
Comier banane finn tortirer  
Bizin remersi le ciel pou sa lasenn  
Ki li finn tire dan nou la main  
Bizin remersi le ciel pou sa lasenn  
Ki li finn tire dan nou li pied

The link between artistic performance and the memory of slavery is further put forward by the group Ravannes sans Frontieres (2007) (Drums Without Borders), in the song “Noire la riviere noire” (“Black, Black River”), named after a village close to Le Morne:

The fire was lit  
 Smoke was going up  
 Beating the 'ravanne'(drum), I'm singing  
 To remember our history

Dife la tinn alime  
 Lafime monte dan lezer  
 Ravane bate mo sante  
 Pou fer rapel nou listwar

There is a consensus within Mauritian society that slavery needs to be remembered so that its violence and inhumanity shall not be seen again. Furthermore, the abolition of slavery is officially commemorated every February 1 since 2001, underscoring the desire, and even responsibility, to never forget the atrocities committed against enslaved people (L'Express, 2019). Remembering slavery also provides an opportunity to trace the origins of the Creole Afro-Mauritians, the second largest ethnic group in the population. The remembrance of slavery also provides two observations relevant to this research. First, a topic that was once silenced and considered taboo can re-emerge as mainstream if supported by official institutions, such as UNESCO World Heritage Lists and national annual commemorations. Second, the intricate relationship between sega performance, slavery, and Creole slave descendants performing these segas might act as an outlier in researching the remembrance of other past events that are less directly associated with the origins of sega as a musical genre.

### Uprooted Chagossian populations

A final trauma that is evoked in the segas sampled is that relating to the Chagossian populations. The narratives around the migration of African slaves, Indian laborers, and Chinese merchants coming to Mauritius since the 17<sup>th</sup> until the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are publicly discussed without taboo. In effect, they represent the very foundation of the diversity of Mauritian society. Migration, forced in many cases, is celebrated and associated with personal sacrifices from the past, as mentioned by Cassiya (1995, 1998) in "Our Ancestors' Dream:"

They forgot the language that was spoken  
 My mind keeps going away  
 I imagine that boat  
 Separating us from our fathers' land

Ziska blier langaz ki ti pe kozer  
 Mo lesprit continn aller zanfan  
 Mazinn sa bato la  
 Ti separ nou ar later gran papa

This is also seen in "Zistwar" ("Our Story"):

Our brothers have been uprooted  
 To come and work our lands  
 Our brothers have been brought  
 To come and cut our flowers  
 They brought their culture  
 They brought their manners  
 They enriched our land  
 They gave it its colours (...)  
 The story of a people that's being born

Inn derasinn enn ban frer  
 Pou vinn travay nou later  
 Finn amenn enn bann frer  
 Pou vinn taye nou ban fler  
 Zot finn amen zot kiltir  
 Zot finn amen zot manier  
 Zot finn enrisi nou later  
 Zot finn donn li so kouler (...)  
 Zistwar enn pep pe pran nesans

When performing these segas, Cassiya is grateful for the African slaves and Indian labourers who experienced the violence of exile and forced labour. The commonality of their journey means that roughly three-quarters of the Mauritian population can relate to an ancestor who left their homeland due to some form of oppression or colonial obligation. Official commemorations in memory of former African and Indian migrants further help to keep alive the memory of migration almost two centuries later. Indeed, in 2001, February 1 was declared a national holiday to remember the abolition of slavery. November 2 was chosen to mark the arrival of the first Indians coming to Mauritius to replace slaves and work in the sugar cane fields under British rule in 1834 (L'Express, 2019). Moreover, similar to Le Morne, the Aapravasi Ghat, the landmark of the arrival of the first indentured Indian labourers, is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2006).

As much as the hardship of forced migration of African slaves and Indian laborers appear as a central theme in the Mauritian collective memory, far fewer sources address the story of the Chagossians' exile. In 1965, the Chagos Islands, one of the dependencies of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, were sold to the British Crown for a payment of £3,000,000 and renamed the British Indian Ocean Territory. The islands were used for a strategically placed military base and for the private exploitation of resources (Barclays Bank D.C.O., 1966; Chan Low, 2008). The United States were also involved, with authors going as far as claiming that the seizing of Chagos was done by the British upon American request (National Support Front for the Ilois, 1981). The British eventually took advantage of the lack of consensus in Mauritius on the question of independence to deport the native Chagossian

population at the time – around 1,000 ilois living on a small area of 56 km<sup>2</sup> – to Mauritius Island 2,000 km away (Gifford & Dunne, 2014). The British retained control of the Chagos Islands in a move that has been criticised for violating the decolonisation process commended by the United Nations (National Support Front for the Ilois, 1981; United Nations, 1960). The United Kingdom has since then granted sovereignty of the islands back to Mauritius, although a return of the Chagossian descendants has not yet been discussed at the time of writing (Harding, 2024).

In collaboration with Mauritian curator Emmanuel Richon, Chagossian Fernand Mandarin writes about his life in Chagos until his exile to Mauritius in 1965 (Mandarin & Richon, 2016; News on Sunday, 2016). Mandarin explains that for a long time, the “deed of the criminal,” that is the British, is known, but nothing is said on the repercussions this has on the Chagossians having lost their livelihoods and culture (News on Sunday, 2016). As the Chagossians bring their songs and instruments to Mauritius, they express the violence and trauma of their forced exile in the segga sub-genre *segga tambour*. Segga tambour songs acknowledge the eviction of Chagossians from their islands as an important event in Mauritian history in ways that official memory spaces often fail to. There is, for instance, no official commemoration of the arrival of Chagossians, as compared to slaves and Indian labourers. The song “Mo ti ena 13 an” (“I Was 13 Years Old”) by Grup Tambour Chagos (the “Chagos Drum Band”) (2018), a Chagossian musical group in Mauritius, provides a vivid description of forced displacement to a foreign land:

When I was 13 years old in Chagos  
 I was 13 years old  
 The coconut knife was in my hand  
 The British came  
 The British men came on Chagos  
 The British came  
 The British took our livelihoods  
 I will not forget (...)  
 They breathed out and took all my wealth  
 And threw us in Mauritius

Depi mo ti ena 13 an dan Sagos  
 Mo ti ena 13 an  
 Kouto dekote ti dan mo lame  
 Angle inn arive  
 Misie angle inn arive dan Sagos  
 Angle inn arive  
 Angle ou ras nou bouse manze  
 Mo pa pou bliye (...)  
 Soufle pran tou mo risess  
 Zet nou dan Moris

Here, Grup Tambour Chagos is comfortable singing about the British taking over their islands as a need to keep the memory alive. That said, the memory of forced exile can be unbearable for others to discuss, as Double K (2007) observed in “Retourn nu zil” (“Give Us Back Our Islands”):

Give us back our islands  
 Give us back our country  
 Peros Bagnos Salomon Diego Garcia (...)  
 They were uprooted and put on a boat  
 Their culture there was left behind  
 This is why grandfather does not talk about it  
 His heart aches because he lost his roots

Retourne nou nu zil  
 Retourne nou, nou pei  
 Peros Bagnos Salomon Diego Garcia (...)  
 Finn deracine fine embarque  
 Tou kiltire la bas fine abandone  
 Se pou sa kan gran papa pa rakonte  
 So leker fermal parseki line deracine

Today, initiatives both in Mauritius and abroad, especially in the United Kingdom where many Chagossians have relocated, seek to preserve the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Chagos Archipelago. For instance, the segga tambour Chagos has been inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding upon consent from the communities concerned (UNESCO, 2019). The case of the forced exile of Chagossians is hence an example of how unofficial remembrance, long absent from official remembrance spaces, encourages the need for the protection from cultural extinction. The process of formalising the collective memory of a group, through UNESCO’s work, for example, can ensure that traditional practices and historical events do not fall into oblivion. At the same time, not all group members may feel comfortable discussing a memory judged too painful to recall.

### **Keeping the memory silent but alive**

The above analysis of segga songs explores the relationship between chosen traumas in Mauritian history that are revived in official and unofficial spaces, and those that are likely to be kept silent to avoid mentioning past disturbances not worthy of recalling. Still, how does one manage to uncover the truth about past events if these are not actively remembered? In the case of Mauritius, shaping the nation’s collective memory uses ideas of togetherness, diversity, and peace as foundations of a common identity. The initial assumption was that silencing an event such as pre-independence race riots, leads to forgetting among future generations. The research has shown, however, that written records about the events, even as late as 50 years after its occurrence (Hein & Hein, 2021; Ng Ping Cheun, 2018), allows for the

survival of remembrance of silenced traumas across times. Silence does not equate forgetting and can yield an interesting peace design in a divided society crafting independence and the idea of a cohesive nation. Rehearsing the memory of previous instances of social disruption brings more harm than good in these early stages of nation-building.

My position as a Mauritian Creole woman, born 31 years after independence, has certainly influenced the research topic and methods chosen. A fellow Mauritian of a different ethnic group might have a different connection to the chosen traumas identified. While it is difficult to measure accurately the level of forgetting among a population, the study has sought to depict the salient remembrance of certain traumas in both official and unofficial spaces, compared to others that are likely to be kept silent in one type of space or the other. The trauma of slavery, for example, is now remembered in both official spaces through official commemorations and segas.

The chosen traumas and songs used in the analysis reflect my knowledge on the topic and does not provide a generalisable theory of all traumas experienced by the Mauritian population in its entirety. At the same time, my knowledge as an ‘insider’ increases the validity of the research in depicting a realistic account of events representative of Mauritian history that most, if not all, citizens recognise. An unexpected finding in the research was that traumas that are initially considered taboos, such as slavery, can become a key component of the mainstream collective memory if given the right conditions to be remembered, namely support by the government and international organizations in rehearsing the memory of the trauma.

The study places itself within several sets of literature. First and foremost, on the topic of peace and coexistence in multicultural societies, specifically on the use of silences as tool for peacebuilding in divided societies (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2017; Eastmond & Mannergren Selimovic, 2012; Mannergren Selimovic, 2020). The paper also contributes to the wider study of collective memory and chosen traumas (Volkan, 2001), and speaks to the growing interest in music in social studies, notably as a peacemaking and peacebuilding tool (Cela et al., 2022; Howell, 2023). The main contribution of the study is the following: whilst acknowledging the fragile nature of peace in a heterogenous society, openness to discussion should allow willing citizens to reflect on past traumas and how to face them in the everyday, rather than keeping them silent. This study further contributes to conveying the history of Mauritius through the content of sega songs to an international, English-speaking audience.

Silencing the past can be a strategy for everyday peace in a diverse and divided society in avoiding taboos and topics that can fuel tensions and conflicts, with the ideal caveat that these silences are eventually disclosed. Past events that have been silenced can later resurface, and grassroot-level myths can rise to the level of official and international commemoration. The silencing-remembering continuum in Mauritius is of interest to other

heterogenous societies comprising multiple ethno-cultural groups. The case of Mauritius shows that diverse societies have the potential to be brave enough to learn from the past to improve livelihoods and design narratives aimed to gather rather than divide populations. The words of Cassiya (2002) in the song “Le Morne” reminds us of the lessons history can teach in the face of divisions and threats to memory and peace:

We should not forget  
They did not jump for nothing  
History has value  
And is here to make us reflect

Fode pas nou blie  
Napa finn zete pou nanier  
Zistoire ena valer  
Me li la pou faire reflexi

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