

We and Us: Two Modes of Group Identification*

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This essentially theoretical essay is intended as a contribution to the ongoing discussion on the relationship between social identification and enemy images. Empirical material from Mauritius is used to illuminate various dimensions of identification, and a number of general points are made: First, identification shifts circumstantially and is contingent on symbolic legitimation as well as personal experiences. Second, and perhaps less evidently, the composition of groups shifts accordingly – both as relevant system boundaries change and as perceived social contrasts change. Third, identification is contingent on two basic mechanisms: we-hood or internal principles for cohesion, and us-hood or contrasting with others. Fourth, the encouragement of multiple loyalties may reduce conflict potential.

1. *The Issue*

It is an obvious fact that every community is defined in relation to that which it is not; that is, outsiders, aliens, non-members of the group. Social identities and groups are by default relational in the sense that they are defined in relation to other identities, other groups. Do these identities, in order to be efficient in integrating people and creating solidarity, necessarily define the Other as inferior, as a potential enemy, as untamed nature or as matter out of place? Through a discussion of some aspects of the contemporary attempts at creating a shared national identity in Mauritius, which is simultaneously a poly-ethnic island and a recently founded independent state, I illuminate this question in social philosophy by way of social anthropological field material.

The point of departure is the following quotation from Sartre:

Especially the fact of my being engaged with the others in a common rhythm to whose origin I contribute, serves to develop my experience of being engaged in a 'we-as-subject'. (. . .) I do not exploit the collective rhythm as a tool, nor do I regard it – in the sense I might, for instance, regard the dancers on a stage – it surrounds me and fascinates me without being my *object*. (. . .) But this is, as one knows, only necessary if I initially, through my acceptance of a shared aim and shared tools, constitute myself as undifferentiated transcendence through relegating my own aims to second place, after the collective aims now being pursued (Sartre, 1943).¹

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2. *'We' and 'Us' in National Identification*

Following Sartre, we may suggest that there are two modes of group belongingness; we-hood and us-hood or, as Sartre puts it – French lacking a separate word for 'us' – we-as-subject and we-as-object. In the following discussion about the ongoing attempt at creating a shared identity for an ethnically and culturally diverse population, I focus on these two modes of social identification and group cohesion.

For the members of a group to see themselves as *we*, they must experience interdependence and internal cohesion by virtue of a shared task. Being *us*, by contrast, signifies cohesion by virtue of an external agent, Sartre's *Tertius*, which is frequently a real or imagined enemy. The normative starting-point for the following discussion is the indubitable fact that some situations where *Us-hood* is invoked, where the Other is imagined as a brute or a threat, are dangerous and volatile. It would be easy to find examples of this; let me briefly mention Britain's Falklands War, where the British, otherwise profoundly divided along class, regional and ethnic lines, suddenly emerged as a nation with a shared will against the enemy (Aulich, 1992); President Daniel arap Moi's determined persecutions of real or imagined Kenyan Communists (the feared, and partly phantasmagoric Mwakenya group); the enemy images created by European neo-Nazis of immigrants (Bjørge & Witte, 1993); many heterosexuals' dedicated an active hatred of homosexuals; and

the historically important European contrasting of Europe with the Ottoman Turks (Neumann & Welsh, 1991). All of these examples – and hundreds of others – indicate that enemy images strengthen group identity, and they seem to confirm the general principle sometimes attributed to Georg Simmel and thus described as Simmel's rule, namely that *the degree of group cohesion is contingent on the degree of external pressure*.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that the *kind* of group thus activated and integrated depends on the kind of pressure experienced by persons. Classes appear as groups in periods of perceived class tension; women appear as a group when women leaders perceive the gender conflict as fundamental, and so on. In some contemporary societies, *smokers* indeed take on group characteristics in particular situations, as smoking is increasingly seen as an illegitimate activity in those societies. Groups, like individual identification, are situational and relational phenomena and have no permanent and objective existence, although some of them are evidently more inert, more strongly institutionalized, than others.

In choosing to draw on material from Mauritius in this essentially theoretical discussion, I have wished to place the emphasis elsewhere: rather than reiterating familiar mechanisms of conflict formation and resolution, I describe (i) ways in which contrasting with others may be exploited for peaceful and harmless ends, and (ii) how the relational aspect of group identity must necessarily be linked with an internal sense of community; that is, what I propose to call *we-hood*. Although the ethnographic sketch which follows is exclusively Mauritian, and even if Mauritius is in some substantial ways unique, the argument is intended as a general one, and may hopefully shed light on contexts in other societies as well. This delineation of the problem restricts the scope of the essay, and it should therefore be stressed that the degree of group cohesion is, of course, dependent on institutional factors as well as the self–other relationship. In the particular case of Mauritius, its being an island, its peculiar colonial

history and the lack of an indigenous population are important parameters for its identity politics. Since the argument focuses on largely formal aspects of identity formation, many substantial features of Mauritian society have been left out of the present discussion.

2.1 Mauritian Identifications

Mauritius, an island-state in the southwestern Indian Ocean (independent in 1968, a republic since 1992), is a parliamentary democracy with a currently high rate of economic growth, and the country has been undergoing rapid industrialization for two decades, but at a particularly accelerated pace since the mid-1980s (Bowman, 1991; Leffler, 1988; Oodiah, 1992). Although the new wealth is not completely evenly distributed, a majority of the population clearly benefits from it. The island has about a million inhabitants, all of them descendants of comparatively recent immigrants; the island was first settled permanently in 1715. There are several self-defined ethnic groups – of origins as diverse as Chinese, Indian, African and European – and their number varies situationally: at elections, there are generally four ethnic groups; in matters relating to marriage, there may be as many as twenty. An island of some 2,000 square kilometres containing four major religions and fifteen languages (although most Mauritians speak a French-based Creole and understand French and some English), using the British Westminster electoral system and a largely French penal code, with the rupee as its currency and an extraordinary abundance of diverse cultural manifestations, the public culture of Mauritius is qualitatively different from that of European nation-states. It is, briefly, a 'new world' kind of society shaped by settlers who have engaged in compromise and competition for two centuries, and who have periodically been forced to adapt to economic, demographic, cultural and political changes. The substantial parallels to Caribbean and some Pacific island-states are obvious (cf. Eriksen, 1991a), and the Mauritian discourse on multiculturalism versus national unity resembles the situation in the USA, Canada, South

Africa and Australia, but it should be noted that other nation-states as well, including the European ones, are today confronting some of the same challenges of change and creolization that Mauritius has been handling for generations.

The dominant political discourse in Mauritius can be described as ideological competition between a variety of groups, some based on ethnicity, others on class or profession, all of which try to appear as truly universality and non-ethnicist, while, simultaneously, they are occasionally accused by others of representing particularist interests.

Mauritian politicians as well as other citizens are always careful to stress that their island is poly-ethnic and *multi-raciale*. Tolerance and respect for people regardless of their religion, physical appearance, geographic origins and language is considered an absolute prerequisite for the functioning of Mauritian society. Here I shall not go into interethnic relations and ethnic conflict resolution, or the unique character of Mauritius as a post-colonial island society of non-autochthonous peoples with no 'natural enemies' (see Eriksen, 1988, 1991a, 1991c, 1992, 1993a for these issues), but instead I propose to discuss some of the ways in which national Mauritian identities are negotiated and fashioned in relation to significant others, and how they may situationally transcend ethnic identities.

The self-conscious plurality of Mauritian society gives its inhabitants a sense of uniqueness and can as such function as a source of national pride when it is directed outwards, through communication with the outside world. 'We are the tomato of the Indian Ocean', say promoters of tourism: 'We go with everything.' This statement implies an identity of *us-hood*. Mauritians are, here, defined as Mauritian relatively to what others (non-Mauritians) are. Seen from the perspective of the collectivity of *we* (i.e. the system viewed from within, without direct reference to the outside world), Mauritians tend to experience the daily multi-ethnicity more as a perpetual source of anxiety and frustration than as a national asset.

Self-awareness of being Mauritian as

opposed to non-Mauritians implies a re-definition, an expansion, of the relevant cognitive system boundaries. This can be described as the process of emergent Mauritianity as *us-hood*. Unity as *we-hood*, conversely, must be founded in shared or complementary representations of shared practices. I discuss these two aspects of social identity separately for the sake of clarity; it seems, however, that every empirical context must encompass elements of both: that is, internal criteria for cohesion and solidarity articulated through sharing of certain practices, and the communication of a difference that makes a difference to all who are *not* included. A dimension which is necessary in every ideology of social inclusion, the process of exclusion or 'boundary maintenance' in Fredrik Barth's terminology (Barth, 1969, cf. Eriksen, 1993b), becomes more important as the contact with outsiders increases. The process of economic change in Mauritius has brought the islanders into increasing contact with foreigners, and has in this way created necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for the consolidation of a shared Mauritian identity as forms of *us-hood*. I first describe some of these processes, before moving to a consideration of the possibilities for Mauritian *we-hood*.

3. *New Forms of 'Us-hood': Expanding Systems Boundaries*

In Mauritius, sports have frequently been invoked as important symbols of ethnic inclusion/exclusion mechanism, and this was until recently considered legitimate. In 1982, however, following strong political pressure, several of Mauritius's leading football teams changed their names (from Hindu Cadets, Muslim Scouts, etc. to Cadets, Scouts, etc.), and the official policy has since been to encourage non-ethnic sports. Yet ethnic allegiances are still strong, despite the change in names (and the inevitable odd player or two from an 'outside' ethnic group in every team).

In March 1986, I attended the finals of a local football tournament at George V Stadium in Curepipe. I had arrived in Maur-

itius only a few weeks earlier, and asked my companion, a young Creole (Mauritian of African origin), whether the teams had any link with the 'communities' (Mauritian term, following the Indian usage, for ethnic group). He assured me that they hadn't. 'Formerly, it used to be "Hindu Cadets"; now, it's only "Cadets", see?' However, I couldn't help noticing the very visible ethnic clustering of Creoles and Indo-Mauritians in different parts of the stand. We took our place amidst the Creoles, and, not unsurprisingly, when the Cadets scored, cheers and handclaps soared from the other side of the stand, whereas the people surrounding myself silently lit another cigarette.

Lately, other foci of group allegiances have consciously been created (notably through the creation of a *Ministère de la Jeunesse et des Sports*). In 1986, the first *Jeux des Villes de l'Océan Indien*, an inter-town tournament with participation from Reunionian towns, Victoria (of the Seychelles) and Antananarivo (Madagascar), attempted to change the focus of identity from ethnic group to locality. The interest in these new proposed allegiances was extremely low. In tiny Mauritius, where one town merges into another in urban Plaines Wilhems from Coromandel to Curepipe, and where each town is socially and spatially differentiated along the lines of class and ethnicity, any Creole *cité* dweller (working class) in Beau-Bassin would rather identify with Creole *cité* dwellers in Curepipe 20 kilometres away (with whom he may well be linked by way of kinship or friendship) than with the bourgeois Sino-Mauritians and Franco-Mauritians a few streets off. The attempt at redefining the content of us-hood, through creating a form of pressure identifying the town as a focus of identity, did not work since it failed to communicate with the ways Mauritians experienced their world.

Sometimes, however, such conscious redefinitions of systems boundaries may actually have social repercussions which are *stronger* than predicted. In August, 1985, Mauritius was responsible for the second *Jeux des Îles de l'Océan Indien*, an international sports tournament involving various states and territories in the Western

Indian Ocean. The event led to a spontaneous and powerful upsurge of national sentiment that could still be noticed years later. Afterwards, there was an immediate growth in the number of interethnic marriages. In 1986, a schoolboy wrote in an award-winning essay that 'the country of Mauritius was born in 1968, but Mauritianity was born in August, 1985'. This is a highly significant statement: From being 'us, the Hindus/Creoles, etc.', one suddenly became, within a larger system of relevant relationships, 'us, the Mauritians'. This system can be defined as the sum of social relations created and activated during the *Jeux des Îles*; the important aspect is nevertheless the tournament's enduring influence on the representations of many Mauritians. After the event, the system depends on certain representations, which have to be shared by a certain number of Mauritians, in order to be reproduced as a relevant symbolic system of identification. For this to happen, the mere sports event could never have been sufficient. The more recent *Jeux des Villes de l'Océan Indien*, as noticed, never led to town-based patriotism, and there have been other, more spectacular failures of the same kind in other parts of the world. The attempt to create an East German identity is one good example. Despite the fact that the GDR was among the top three countries in the world of competitive elite sports, nationalist frenzy never appeared, clearly since the sportsmen and women were the symbolic representations of a state which lacked legitimacy. Although groups may in any society form along several lines (class, gender, ethnicity, age . . .), it is not possible to create groups out of thin air through the mere introduction of symbols stressing its existence in opposition to others. It is therefore more accurate to say that potential groups are *activated* than to say that they are *created* through the development of an abstract self-other distinction mediated by symbols.

The success of the *Jeux des Îles* in stimulating national sentiment indicates that there was already a potential self-awareness as *citizens* among Mauritians, who already felt that they were participants in a system

of a greater scale than those reproduced locally, but who had not yet articulated it; a self-awareness which became visible and explicit in the strong manifestations of national sentiments symbolically conceptualized as 'international sports'.

The underlying processes of expansion of systemic boundaries, that is, those which made the interethnic fraternization following the *Jeux des Îles* possible at all, are those of internationally-linked social and economic change, notably the development of communications, tourism and industrialization. Tourists bring knowledge and awareness of the greater systems where Mauritians potentially take part, and encourage the creation of representations of a rather loftier scope than those they potentially replace. Industrialization creates, demonstrates and reproduces a variety of these representations in practice. Mauritius is being served by an increasing number of international flights (and the capacity of the airport was increased in 1990). In addition, many Mauritians have emigrated, permanently or for a number of years, during the first decades after independence.

The enthusiasm encountered during and after the *Jeux des Îles*, then, can be traced back to a self-awareness of 'us, the Mauritians' stemming from growing interaction with the external world – in search, as it were, of a vehicle for its visible expression. At this point it must be remarked, lest we fall into the functionalist trap of considering 'the real as the rational and the rational as the real', that poly-ethnic (or supra-ethnic) national self-awareness was never a *necessary* result of the increased contact with the outside world. My point is that it was a definite possibility activated through the development of symbolic international contrasting in the *Jeux des Îles*. Such contrasts do not develop in a vacuum, and therefore their relationship to social organization must always be considered. In this case industrialization, migration and tourism form the main institutional underpinnings of supra-ethnic identification.

If we compare this situation briefly with the situation in the European Union, some interesting parallels can be drawn. There, it

is clear that the European flag, the ECU and any European football team can only replace their national alternatives as sources of identification if and when the nation-state is being perceived as illegitimate, irrelevant or obsolete. So far, judging from the popular sentiment in Europe after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, the attempts at deeper integration have chiefly led to a strengthening of national and regional identification rather than identification with Europe. The national us-hood has, it seems, been strengthened through the pressure from European centralization. In the Mauritian case, post-independence nation-building has also inspired counterreactions in the shape of ethnic revitalization movements. Only the moment the pressure was perceived as an external one (through sports, trade, migration and tourism), did a national identification become meaningful.

3.1 *Significant Others*

An interesting phenomenon which emerges when identification is analysed as a set of relationships concerns the role of the 'Significant Other' in definitions and codifications of self-identity. Estonian identity, for example, appears West European and 'sophisticated' when it is defined in contrast to Russian identity, but it appears almost as semi-Russian and 'underdeveloped' when it is defined in contrast to Swedish identity. Many national identities are defined in relation to one dominant contrast. Thus French identity is often conceptualized as the opposite of German identity and vice versa; English identity is conceptualized as the opposite of French identity, Irish identity is contrasted with English identity, Kenyan with Ugandan, Pakistani with Indian, Swedish with Danish, Danish with Swedish, Norwegian with Swedish, and so on. The substantial content of the definition of self necessarily changes when the Significant Other is replaced, which happens everywhere in different situations. In the case of Mauritius, Mauritius appears as a large and dynamic country compared to the other small islands of the region (La Réunion, The Comoros, The Maldives, The Seychelles); compared to Madagascar and

Africa, it appears as a well-organized, prosperous (if small) island. Compared to India, Mauritius seems small and insignificant but rich. Compared to France or 'Europe' (which in Mauritius is often seen as more or less synonymous with an image of France), finally – arguably the most important significant other in the formation of national identification in the island – Mauritius appears as a remote, peripheral and insignificant island desperately trying to keep in touch communicationally and culturally, and to reach the same standard of living as the metropolises.

Above, I noted that expansions of systemic boundaries are transformed into Mauritian *us-hood* in the social context of industrial, export-oriented production. From a different perspective than the factory owner's, the national authorities are painfully aware of the Mauritian industry's dependence on the interest of foreign investors – and the presence of competitive sources of cheap labour (Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, etc.). Their implicit plea to the workers-cum-citizens goes roughly like this: 'We need to increase our productivity. Otherwise we, Mauritius Ltd., go bankrupt.' We now consider two examples of *us-hood* which are caused by expanding systemic boundaries in other regards. In the first example, the new types of social relations emerge because of geographical, physical mobility; in the second, the ultimate cause rather consists in changes having taken place *outside* Mauritius.²

3.2 *Us-hood and We-hood in the Diaspora*

For obvious reasons, national identities are often developed and maintained particularly strongly in diaspora situations (cf. Anderson, 1991). When abroad, Mauritians (like members of virtually any other nationality) tend to cling together to a greater extent than they do at home. A Mauritian Muslim, definitely sceptical of the Creoles at home (he would tell me, sternly, 'You shouldn't mingle so much with those people, Tom!'), told me this about his stay as an assistant nurse at a British hospital:

And every Friday night, we'd have a huge *séga* party at somebody's place [Séga is a Mauritian

musical form and dance] where we'd drink some rum – even I had a few glasses sometimes. . . . Man, there were so many Mauritians there – Creoles, Hindus, you know; it's so nice to meet fellow Mauritians when you're far away from home.

This is a very familiar expression of *we-hood* *directly caused* by an *us-hood* resulting from expanding systems boundaries – when the difference that makes a difference appears at a level outside of and above ethnicity because the outsiders are non-Muritians. In Britain, being Mauritian as opposed to British can often be more important than being Muslim as opposed to Creole or Hindu.³ This example also illustrates the general theoretical point that ethnicity is essentially *conditional* pertaining to persons-in-situations and not *categorical* pertaining to persons-as-such.

The Muslims' shift from subcontinental (Indian/Pakistani) to Arab 'ancestry identity', which has been taking place since the early- to mid-1970s (Eriksen, 1988, 1992), can plausibly be interpreted as a wish to participate in a system of larger scale, rather than as 'ethnic revitalization'. Embracing Pan-Arabism and later Pan-Islamism, local Muslim leaders thereby stressed that they, as Mauritian Muslims, supported the Arab world in geopolitics and, indeed, that they contributed to it.

This internationalist ideology based on religious boundaries is not compatible with the Mauritian nationalism, which is based on territorial boundaries. In January, 1984, the staff of the Libyan Embassy in Port-Louis were expelled. Whether this 'quixotic expulsion' (Bowman, 1984, p. 8) was due to 'a judicial accommodation to the sensitivities of Washington and Riyadh' or to 'an authentic revulsion toward Colonel Qaddafi's admonition to Christians to read the Koran' (ibid.), is uncertain. There are rumours to the effect that the Libyan diplomats bribed Christians into conversion (which would have upset the precarious ethnic equilibrium in the capital); whatever the case may be, Pan-Islamism is compatible with neither Mauritian foreign policy nor with its complementary nationalist ideologies of interethnic compromise and supra-ethnic belongingness, respectively.

3.3 *We-hood: Growing Areas of Shared Meaning*

A nationalist ideology must have elements of the *we* aspect of unity ('pulling together', 'sharing the fruits of our labours', etc.), although the *us* aspect is perhaps always its *raison d'être* ('We're better than the X'es' – put more directly: 'We, Mauritius the actor in international affairs, are competitive'). Nationalism becomes pervasively relevant the moment it seems more relevant for a Mauritian to compare himself (his country, its products, etc.) with the foreigner than with his neighbour. Ultimately this has to do with expansions of the system considered most relevant at any given moment in the actor's life. If her status as an industrial worker, and the meaning produced therein, is more important (to her) than her status as a temple-going Tamil, then she is a Mauritian before she is a Tamil. This process cannot be measured, and it appears difficult to infer from observation: when, after all, do we know that Mademoiselle Dimba's identity as a worker becomes more pervasive than her identity as a Tamil? We don't know.

What we can do, however, is to extrapolate from what we do know: Mlle Sheila Dimba, 19, is the eldest daughter of a small-planter near Petite Rivière, a large village with a rapidly growing industrial sector. There are three more children; two girls and a boy. Sheila passed her CPE (Certificate of Primary Education) five years ago, but there was no money to send her to secondary school. For a while she helped her mother in the house and her father in the fields; eventually, the father decided that she should work at one of the new factories in the area. One of his sisters had a job there already, and she could look after Sheila. At this time, there were still relatively few women of Asian descent at the factories: the great majority were Creoles. Sheila was sometimes harassed by some of the Creole girls, she says, but she also made friends with some. Two years ago, she fell in love with a Creole boy working as a chauffeur at the same factory as herself. Since her aunt was always nearby, she could never see him for more than a couple of minutes at a time

– but somehow they managed to agree to marry. Like virtually anybody in a similar situation, she had to make a choice between her family and her lover; she opted to remain faithful to her family and abandoned him, but she kept her job – even though her aunt quit during this period. Later, she comments,

It's all very silly. To me, there's no reason that I should marry a Tamil rather than anybody else. But I'm fond of my family, and don't want to offend them. After all, I'm still young. Perhaps later I'm stronger and can marry whomever I want.

Concerning her religion, she says:

I am a Tamil, but I don't know what that means. I go to the temple and I like it. Anyway, *Sakenn pe prie dan so fason* [Each prays in his/her way]. I dislike the Muslims because of their fanaticism; not as people, only their religion – but Christians are very nice. Did you know that some Catholics have done a lot of good for us girls at the factories?

Her identity as a Mauritian seems in several respects to be practically prior to that as a Tamil, at least at a cognitive level. The chief criterion is her openness toward intermarriage. She also perceives her status as a factory worker as an important one (referring to *nous, les filles dans les usines*, in French incidentally, as it would clearly have been beneath her dignity to speak her vernacular, Kreol – a French-lexicon Creole – to a European like myself). The fact that Sheila spends a significant part of her day in a social context where the participants are mutually defined through sharing a task horizontally, seems to have liberated her from consistent application of ethnic taxonomies altogether. There is no relevant difference between herself and her Creole, Hindu and Muslim workmates – on the contrary, they are united in 'we-hood' through the non-hierarchically shared work, and in 'us-hood' as underpaid workers. If we compare this situation with the division of labour in the sugar estate, the difference is obvious. At a typical sugar estate, the director is Franco-Mauritian (white), the middle managerial positions are held by Sino-Muritians and *gens de couleur* (of mixed African–French origin), the artisans and mechanics are Creoles, and the labourers in the fields are

Hindus and Muslims. The division of labour, in other words, is strongly ethnically correlated and contributes to reproducing ethnic boundaries. At Sheila's job, a clothing enterprise employing some 90 people, the director is an Indian from India, who uses a youngish Creole woman as interpreter when addressing his non-Anglophone workers. The white-collar positions are held by a Sino-Mauritian, a Mulatto and a Tamil. The majority of the employees, female *machinistes*, work together in a large, noisy hall; here, the four largest ethnic groups (Hindus, Creoles, Muslims, Tamils) are represented, almost in statistically representative numbers.

An ethnically similar division of labour is found in the large hotels as well. Frequently, the upper managerial positions belong to foreigners, and Sino-Mauritians are often overrepresented among those of highest rank. But further down in the hierarchy the pattern of employment does not reflect ethnic power asymmetries. This implies that the employees in question have a shared understanding of meritocratic principles. This further means that they face each other in a competitive situation, unlike Sheila and her workmates at the factory. Unlike the factory worker, the hotel employees frequently consider the possibility of individual promotion, and the conditions for 'we-hood' therefore seem weaker. But the adoption of principles of meritocracy entails a weakening of cultural and social boundaries; it entails a tacit acknowledgment that everybody is essentially up to the same thing – and here, too, there is no relevant difference between employees on roughly the same level in the hierarchy. The social context of the hotel, like that of the factory, provides a system of shared representations, confirmed in action, which is virtually independent from ethnicity. Through paying increasing income taxes to the state and receiving increasing welfare benefits in return, the worker and her family further develop a tangible understanding of the *we-hood* inherent in the abstract model of nation-building: *We* take care of each other. It is obviously much more difficult to be we than to be us, but the two modes of

community ultimately depend upon each other.

4. Implications

In a classic study of interethnic relationships between Sami and Norwegians, Harald Eidheim (1971) distinguished between different aspects of ethnicity in a way which seems related to my proposed distinction between *we-hood* and *us-hood*. His terms were *dichotomization* and *complementarization*: Dichotomization, on the one hand, refers to the establishment, through contrasts vis-a-vis the other, of a distinct identity. The Sami would thus hold that the Norwegians were 'negative contrasts' (the opposite) of themselves; they were assumed to be greedy, egotistic, ruthless and uncompassionate – unlike the Sami themselves, who defined themselves as the incumbents of opposite character traits. Complementarization, on the other hand, refers to the creation and reproduction of a comparative terminology for dealing with cultural differences, so that one can speak of for example Sami handicrafts, language, etc. and Norwegian handicrafts, language, etc. comparatively. One of Eidheim's central points is that complementarization – the development of a shared language for comparing group characteristics – is necessary for a group to present itself as 'a culture' at all, and especially in order to present itself as equal to, but different from, another group. International sports, a very popular form of symmetrical competition, evidently expresses both complementarization and dichotomization. Mauritian nationalism is largely a gesture of complementarization; as I have analysed at length elsewhere (Eriksen, 1991a), a major preoccupation for politically minded Mauritians is to be full members of the global community – citizens of a real country comparable with, and thus equal to, any other country. This kind of preoccupation must surely bring about nods of recognition from struggling nation-builders all over the world.

Dichotomization creates what I have called *us-hood*, but complementarization is not the same as *we-hood*. Rather – and this

ought to be a relevant point here – it indicates a method for handling ethnic contrasting in a non-conflictual way; it is a *different* form of us-hood depending on comparability rather than enemy images. Instead of strengthening own group identity at the symbolic or social expense of the Other, one strengthens it through establishing a matrix for comparison whereby one's own identity is seen as equal to that of the other. At the same time, a potential sense of we-hood is a condition for both dichotomization and complementarization.

Where does this lead us? Let me summarize the argument.

- Social identities are created, strengthened and maintained through the enactment of contrasts with others.
- However, they must also be able to draw on some kind of internal solidarity or cultural commonality – be it of a political, economic, religious or symbolic nature. They must have some degree of institutional support.
- Through a discussion of selected aspects of the development of Mauritian nationhood, I have argued that we-hood, or an internal sense of solidarity, and us-hood, or contrasting vis-a-vis others, are both necessary components in identity formation.
- It should also be evident that identities are not as static as some ideologies would have us believe: that they change both situationally and historically, even if this change need not always be as quick as in the case of Mauritius. The compass of the group with which we identify ourselves changes, and so may the criteria for that groupness. Although nations are by definition made up of 'the same people living in the same place' (Joyce), the members of nations need neither be 'the same people' in every respect and every situation, nor do they necessarily live in the same place. Naturally, some of the most ardent Mauritian nationalists are permanently settled in Strasbourg, London, Melbourne or Montréal.
- The Mauritian material also indicates that to the extent overlapping identities

and conflicting loyalties are encouraged by governments, the potential for conflict may be reduced. Individuals who are members of several groups, based on a variety of principles – class, ethnicity, gender, profession, political persuasion and so on – are less likely to invest themselves uncompromisingly into conflicts than individuals whose entire self is defined in relation to a single group, based, say, on an ethnic principle (see Evans-Pritchard (1940) for a classic statement of this mechanism; see Eriksen (1992) for details from Mauritius; see Wallman (1986) for a study of urban ethnicity along the same lines).

- Finally, I have pointed out that mechanisms of contrasting need not be articulated in a conflictual way. Complementarization expresses an acknowledgement of equality, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of differences and boundaries. Rather than denouncing the formation of group identities, we should encourage their we-aspect on the one hand, and their complementarizing aspect on the other, in order to avoid the more harmful effects of us-hood as dichotomization.

NOTES

1. Sartre's distinction between 'we-as-subject' and 'we-as-object' is illuminating, but his usage of the concepts ('we-as-subject' as a 'subjective and psychological experience', his teachings on subject-object relationships, etc.) cannot fruitfully be applied here. I use the terms tentatively in referring, on the one hand, to *we*, the social and/or cultural unit held together chiefly through its internal workings, and, on the other hand, to *us*, kept together against the 'gaze of the Third (Tertius)'. He is looking at *us*, but *we* are producing meaning together. The two are, empirically, non-existent poles in a continuum. The distinction is valuable, in my opinion, because it enables us to make an important distinction. In the long run, it is not enough merely to state that identities are 'relational', which we anthropologists have grown accustomed to do: one must also distinguish between external and internal relationships.
2. The Rodriguan independence movement, existing since the mid-1970s and represented in parliament by the OPR party (*Organization du Peuple Rodriguais*), shows the importance of delineating changes in systemic boundaries. (Rodrigues is a small depen-

dency of Mauritius.) According to the OPR and some Mauritian intellectuals, tiny Mauritius has a *colonial problem* in (even tinier) Rodrigues, exploiting and underdeveloping the dependency much in the same way as the previous colonial powers (mis-) treated their colonies. Nobody thought of this before independence, as the relevant system in question was then the British Empire or, more specifically, the system containing Mauritius-and-Rodrigues, on the one hand, and the UK, on the other. The new self-sustaining system of Mauritius-and-Rodrigues provided the structural conditions for a Rodriguan independence movement. The formal relations within the respective delineated systems may be similar, although their substantial properties are not.

3. Even expatriated Mauritians sometimes activate ethnic networks, although they tend to be more nationalistically minded than those living in their island of birth. In Strasbourg, for instance, a large segment of the resident Mauritians are Tamils from a particular suburb of Rose-Hill, many of them relatives.

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