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Malcolm de Chazal and Hervé Masson; Two Avant-garde Mauritian Artists, Bear- ers of a National Ideal: Mauritianism

The 1930s saw the emergence of a new generation of artists, namely two major figures, bearers of new aesthetic demands, Malcolm de Chazal (1902-1981) and Hervé Masson (1919-1990). During this period, prior to and immediately after the acquisition of national independence in 1968, Malcolm de Chazal and Hervé Masson sought to prefigure a new national ideal, based on a breaking off from pre-existing representations that had, up to then, contributed to shaping society in terms of “communities.” The epistemological quality of the theories of these two intellectuals and artists is convincing: it can be discovered in their works, their numerous editorials and newspaper articles, but also in other documents such as the collection of radio interviews of Malcolm de Chazal and the catalogue of Hervé Masson’s works. It must be noted that the works of these two painters, poets and witnesses of their time, cannot be found in any of the museums of Mauritius, aside from one foundation dedicated to Malcolm de Chazal which is void of all content or works.

The best texts of these artists are without ambiguity. Moving away from official discourses, which overdetermined differences that they considered as pretences, they sought to consolidate economic and political independence through the practice of interculturality. Their major contributions include public addresses on the advent of the nation’s independence. The columns of that time, those of Hervé Masson as well as those of Malcolm de Chazal, suggest the idea of a new socie-

ty to be built thanks to and through national Independence. Even though they were French-Mauritians, they both belonged to the pro-independence Labour Party. Therefore, and for the time period, their position was at the same time courageous and unusual, given their original social group¹. Consequently, they contributed to demystifying the pseudo-threat of a certain “Hindu hegemony,” the main argument of anti-independents. The method that they suggested to reunite the broken society was linked to the creation of an educational system that was geared towards a common conception of mauritianism. They both shared the idea that political independence must go hand in hand with cultural independence, the latter being the condition for the former to exist.

Marcel Cabon (1981: *Namasté*), a writer of the same epoch, said that these two Mauritian figures were inseparable: if we read one, we must also listen to the other.

These two names cannot be separated, Cabon wrote. Both are standing at the same point in the immense map of modern sensitivity. Hervé Masson is not modern in the same way as Picasso and Dufy, or as Breton and Paul Éluard. He is modern as is Malcolm de Chazal. He would already be so in his search for a coincidence between man and nature. (cited by Lehembre, 2005, 192)

Both of them, having an strong relationship with nature, are impregnated with the cultural heritages that have been brought to the island for two centuries, and thus bear the

¹ The history of Mauritius reveals the weakness of the nationalist trends at the time of Independence: “Deep conflicts reign over the nation concerning the Independence. There is no unity in the struggle for liberation from the colonial yoke. Mauritius as an independent island was born in a situation of conflict and disagreement amidst its population: 44% of the population voted against Independence. The anti-colonialist feelings sprang from the Hindu majority in the Island. This division amidst the population and the United Kingdom’s wish to grant the Independence are factors that definitely hindered the building of a Mauritian nation. The “imagined community” of a new nation to be born did not attract all the groups. There was no solidarity of an imaginary ‘us’ against a symbolic ‘them’.” (Bunwaree, 2000, 240)

message of the great thinkers of India. Faced with the prejudices of their time, Malcolm de Chazal and Hervé Masson, who are incontestably men of exception, fought to defend their vision of the new society they were yearning for. Their writings, their works and their actions bear witness to their great project: to set in Mauritius an intermingling of Western and Eastern cultures and civilisations. This was what mauritianism was during the time of Independence, whereas Malcolm de Chazal said: "Mauritius is losing its originality, its character, and its folklore. She is on the way of being commercialised." ("L'américanisation de l'île Maurice," *Advance*, 5 April 1963).

Malcolm de Chazal

If the genius of Malcolm de Chazal is recognised in Mauritius today (as suggested by the title of the publication of his columns in 2006, *Malcolm de Chazal : comment devenir un génie ?*), it has not always been the case. The absolute originality of his literary works, as well as that of his paintings which reveal a way of thinking that seeks to get off the beaten track and voluntarily uses provocation to the extreme, provoked a storm among his contemporaries. Malcolm de Chazal was considered by the "good" white society as a delirious madman, rejected by his own community, treated like a pariah, even among the Mauritian literary institutions and circles that were made up of the white elite.

I, I am of noble birth [he would write in 1958 to André Masson.] but I have two flaws: I don't accept the prejudices of the Whites and I deny that money confers anything to a man. In this regard, I, of noble birth, I am despised. And I, White, I am a White-Negro, since I cannot be a mulatto. (cited by Lehembre: 2005 72-73)

If this ostracism can be considered as an indication of the ferocious racism of the colonial society of that time, his social exclusion had also made his strength, as he explained in various radio interviews. In quest of total freedom, he considered himself as a poet-prophet and loved to sustain this absurd and grotesque image that his fellow citizens had of him. During a radio interview, then in a newspaper article, when he was asked whether he loved his country, he gave this eloquent answer: "Mauritius would be a paradise if it wouldn't have been for the Mauritians." (*"L'île Maurice serait un paradis s'il n'y avait pas les Mauriciens," Le Mauricien*, 30 June 1958). In France however, Jean Paulhan established his recognition by his peers during his lifetime. Right from the beginning, his book, published by the Gallimard Editions, was a great success, particularly in the Surrealists' milieu.

Bringing Mauritius into existence: the construction of the myth

Malcolm de Chazal's personal story is quite singular. He belonged to an economically and politically powerful French-Mauritian family settled in Mauritius since 1763. He was thus an heir trained abroad to become an engineer in the sugar production. Despite all odds, he chose to break up with the sugar oligarchy to which he belonged and picked a humble job, that of a simple civil servant in the telecommunication services. At that time, opting for such a social downfall could not in any way be justified. Such a decision was inconceivable to his family. He joined the public service in spite of his diplomas and militated for independence. Malcolm de Chazal reveals in this way a higher level of consciousness about the future of his society which very few of those who belonged to his social circle could share. But the "worst" was yet to come. What deeply shocked his contemporaries was the contempt

and aversion that he had developed for the narrow mentality of “the men of Mauritius” that he qualified as “bourgeois,” backward people, and racists. As an archetype of the Mauritian who is void of identity (Chazal: 2004a 35), the nickname of Paul Mokko reached a peak in the derision and rejection of a population that he judged as having no culture and, according to him, no proper existence either. Paul Mokko, a “*zabitant*,” a “doubly insular and sweet” (Chazal: 2004b 50) spirit filled him with horror. When a journalist asked him what Mauritius represented to him, he replied:

Nothing, absolutely nothing because first, there is no Mauritius. It has no personality; it has no soul; it has no folklore² and yet an infinite pretension. (Malcolm de CHAZAL, “Les champs poétiques,” Archives sonores de la Littérature noire et de l’océan indien (Radio France International / Club des Lecteurs d’expression française, 2001).

Beyond this type of voluntarily provocative discourse—Malcolm de Chazal enjoyed shocking people—, there is a real form of visionary genius: Mauritius did not exist; it was yet to be created. Far from focusing on the reality of Mauritius that he abhorred—the absence of culture and the narrow-mindedness of its inhabitants among whom colour prejudices prevailed—all along his work, through his writings and paintings, he endeavoured to express and affirm this ideal, this vision of the future of the island that was meant to be “modernised” (Chazal: 2006 19-20). Therefore, he underlined that with the artists of his time, as he sought to contribute to the creation of a Mauritius that would dispose of a “collective soul” (340). He sought to free the island from its communalist attitude which he viewed as a partial effect of the expansion of

² In Malcolm de Chazal’s vocabulary, « folklore » does not have a pejorative connotation; on the contrary, it is what constitutes the soul of a people.

the local capitalism which, according to him, had developed precociously and had gone to the very end of its logic. Competition was without limit (291). Malcolm had anticipated the Mauritian soul mainly by contemplating the mountains, and particularly the Pieter-Both, which inspired the novel of *Petrusmok*:

It was during solitary walks—which quickly became real pilgrimages—that the poet was bedazzled by the lively enchantment of Pieter-Both. He discovered there mythical characters and animals reproduced with such precision that he asked himself if Mauritius's mountains had not been shaped by extinct people. Were the inhabitants of the ancient Lemurie the genius sculptors or had a mysterious demiurge organized this chaos in an esoteric way? Whatever the answer, Malcolm de Chazal had, according to him, found the lost key and he was reading on the rock curious occult poems. (cited by Lehembre: 2005 192)

Petrusmok expresses a quest for the origins and can therefore be qualified as a mythical novel. This book might even, in part, have been written to set the literary and intellectual basis of the independence that Malcolm de Chazal was yearning for.

Petrusmok can indeed be considered as a gesture from the Mauritian people who, until the publication of the work, had no founding myth that would enable them to bring together populations of very different origins in the same history and momentum. (Chabbert: 2001 313)

Malcolm de Chazal himself defended this thesis by declaring that “Mauritius was born about ten years ago with a book that I created and which is called *Petrusmok*” (Brindeau & Lebreton 313). By creating the myth of “Lemurie,” the lost continent, the Indian Ocean “Atlantis,” Malcolm de Chazal was the creator of the founding myth of the Mauritian nation. He refreshed the myth of “Lemurie,” which was invented by Jules

Hermann,³ a Reunionese politician, and thus constructed an insular cosmogony which enables to relate the people of Mauritius to a fictitious ideal genealogy, instituting the Mauritians as the descendants of primordial giants, the Lemurie people. In another work, Malcolm de Chazal explains his point of view as follows:

One fact covers in whole the proto-historical, folkloric and legendary Mauritius. In the Indus plains, on clay plates, there is a tale about a CONTINENT that covered the entire Indian Ocean basin, and which extended to the East towards the Pacific, and to the West, detaching itself from Madagascar and joined Patagonia in South America. To the North, this CONTINENT formed a whole with what is today known as India [...] *Western occult* archives refer to it as LEMURIE [...] The Lemurie Continent having been swallowed up by the waters, MAURITIUS would be one of its remaining rare peaks. (Chazal: 1973 11-15)

The Lemurie people seem to possess all the characteristics of a people elected and chosen by God. The blossoming of this people in this mountainous environment contributes to making them symbols of a community which aspires to have an extraordinary destiny, that of a nation chosen to represent a superior humanity:

The shaped mountain would thus be the First Altar associated to the gods. And the Worship of Mountains would be related to a solar worship, of which the dolmens and menhirs found all over the world would be the degenerated vestiges [...] so, like a jewel case,

³ Jules Hermann (1846-1924) traces in his work, *Révélations du Grand Océan*, the discovery of the origins of language through the geophysical transformations of the planet. According to Hermann, the Lemurie continent would be the original continent, the forgotten cradle of humanity. It looked like a crescent, stretching from the Indian Ocean to Patagonia, going from the south of Ceylon, and encompassing the Mascareign Islands and Madagascar, and passing beyond the Cape of Good Hope. Hermann bases his theory on the scientific and archaeological research done on this continent, also called Gondwana, or Lemurie, due to the existence of primates and lemurs that can no longer be found elsewhere, except in Madagascar (48).

Mauritius would hide the world's mystery related to the cosmic worship which is now extinct. (Chazal: 1973 38)

One can affirm with Jean-Louis Joubert that "Malcolm de Chazal has offered to the islanders of the Indian Ocean a beautiful history that will help them master their feeling of exile and will literally make them the sons of their island" (Chabbert: 2001, Preface, 11-15). Malcolm de Chazal's attempt to create a founding myth for the Mauritian nation, as his most ardent desire at the time of Independence, is totally unique. However, the majority of Mauritians do not know the literary works of Malcolm de Chazal. In this sense, the author's efforts remained fruitless in the collective imagination.

National reconciliation

Malcolm de Chazal would bring up the necessity of national reconciliation on several occasions in his columns, a theme which became more and more central in his work as the time of independence approached. According to him, national reconciliation is the fundamental subject of the sought of social transformations, in order to counter the effects of communalism related to the sugar industry capitalism. In a column entitled "*La collusion du capitalisme et du préjugé de couleur*" (*Le Mauricien*, 28th December 1958), he qualified the close relationship between the dominant local capitalist model and colour prejudice as anti-human, asserting that its origin is economic, and that it sustained itself through the mechanism of social production of the families based on segregation and endogamy. For him, national reconciliation could not occur unless colour prejudice was abolished. Otherwise, it would never happen (Chazal: 1961). Fifty years later, in 1999, during the riot that caused the death of the singer Kaya, the same need for national reconciliation manifested itself again strong-

ly. One could see the same breaches then, those that had to be at least overtaken politically, so that the effects of the relationship between the capitalist system and colour prejudice could be attenuated. The same reality could be seen: the least rich, the poorest, were always the “Blacks,” called “Creoles,” the descendants of slaves, who were as marginalized in the past as they are in contemporary globalisation. In the same vein of thought, Malcolm de Chazal analysed two founding myths which had stigmatised Mauritius, the myth of *Paul et Virginie* and that of facility. For him, *Paul et Virginie* (Saint-Pierre, 1999) is a text that is falsely pure and moralistic, of a naive romanticism and without any character, a novel he qualifies as “a depthless myth.”

While Malcolm de Chazal denounces racism, the “Mauritian leprosy,” it is easy to understand his rejection of *Paul et Virginie* which represents a form of internalisation of the racial duality that characterizes the birth of Mauritian society (Chazal: 2006, 240). The second myth can be drawn from the usual representation of Mauritius as a little paradise, that of facility which is grounded on the sugarcane industry, the royal way of getting easy wealth without any sacrifice, primarily through the enslavement of Africans, and then of Indian immigration (49-50). These two myths carry this particular mentality which reigns in Mauritius, the one which arises from the “*préjugé de grandeur*” (115), by which everyone wants not only to be more than the other, but to be much more than himself. Malcolm de Chazal had at length written on those prejudices, going from skin colour to greatness, one completing the other, and both at the source of the contempt and superiority that the rich feel towards the poor. According to him, the only ideal that everyone shares is how to get richer and to go up the social hierarchy of prestige, a notion easily confused

with what makes wealthy. The struggle against prejudices, more particularly colour prejudices, led Malcolm de Chazal to refute the arguments of the anti-independentists, particularly those that justify the fear of Hindu hegemony, an argument that he considered as one of the most hidden aspects of racism.

In parallel to this fierce analysis of his society, Malcolm de Chazal dreamed of Mauritius. As a poet, he imagined Mauritius heading towards her destiny, moulded by a Creolism built on the succession of generations with the same motherland. Therefore, all Mauritians are, according to him, Creoles (215). This ideal is stated in the “Mauritian entity” as a representation of an “integral mauritianism” that is quite different from “assimilative mauritianism”,⁴ since working for the Mauritian agreement comes to harmonizing diversities, to “proving that Asia and Europe, the East and the West are made to get along within the divine humanism” (233). His columns questioned the dominant myths and envisioned the future independent Mauritius, conditioned by the advent of “integral mauritianism,” through which the island would appear to the world as the mirror of a crossroads of civilisations (138).

Close to Camille de Rauville’s thinking, the author of a thesis on Indianoceanism,⁵ Malcolm de Chazal presented an innovative message of which Mauritius would be the bearer, one that the island could spread all over the world, bearing in mind the multiplicity of races, of communities and of beliefs that came into contact there. The poet endlessly praised Hinduism throughout his columns in a context where the Indo-Mauritian was despised. He then insisted on the idea of a spir-

⁴ As discussed in part 1.

⁵ This is the theory of a mixed civilisation, common to the islands and nations of Indian Ocean that the author exposed in 1968 in “Indianocéanisme, humanisme et négritude.”

itual coexistence between India and Mauritius (Chazal: 2006, 432). By pleading for a union of the East and the West, he brought up the possibility of a cultural fusion between Western and Eastern values (154-55). In his writings, culture took the shape of an entity based on exchanges and reciprocal influences. In this regard, Malcolm de Chazal also defended the creation of a national Museum which would provide a panorama of all cultures existing in Mauritius. Concurrently to this, several columns pointed out the cultural poverty of the island and he militated for a patronage in favour of the artists, which suggested a conversion of the rich to the artistic passion and a willingness, individual or as a State policy, to protect art and the artists (70). Far from the snobbery of the bourgeois, far from the often reactionary ideas of the White intellectuals' circles of the island, Malcolm de Chazal pleaded for an in-depth support of the artists in terms of distribution (118).

As early as 1959, the author insisted on the creation of a "mixed" university, not in the sense of racial intermingling, but in the sense of sharing Western and Eastern values. All his work praises the values of interculturality and the fusion of cultures. All his discourses, whether political or written in the perspective of the future independence and the building of a great nation, or militating against racism and prejudices of all kinds, claim the advent of a new spirit which he wishes to call the "mauritianism of the unity of races." In the same logic, the stand he took to defend the artists of the island joins this unique ideal of life, the realization of which he also wished to see in the field of artistic production as it should add price to the complementarity of Western and Eastern values.

His visionary spirit led him to anticipate the importance that tourism would shortly come to represent for Mauritius, when it was barely beginning to develop with only two hotels

for the whole island. His suggestions regarding art and culture became real assets for affirming Mauritius's place in the world. He saw in the island the possibility of conveying a "new humanity" based on cultural fusion. Tourists would come in large numbers to see "the Athens of the East and West Indies sea », if ever "Mauritius would become a high cultural centre" (99). And while, on the eve of Independence, in the 1960s, all the streets of Port-Louis had been renamed after the new political figures, Malcolm de Chazal kept his distance by inciting the politicians not to erase the past completely (308).

In trying to indicate the ways to follow for the future of Mauritius, Malcolm de Chazal was one of the rare intellectuals of the "general population," among the most progressists or not, who did not leave the island between 1950 and 1968, a period during which the change from household to universal suffrage occurred and led to independence. Despite the numerous offers he received from abroad, he would refuse them all, while the Whites and the Mulattoes were the most numerous to leave. Until the end, he pursued his dream and demonstrated his ideal for this island which, according to him, would in the future be the scene of an "integrated artistic revolution," which would give it its place and value in the international sphere, its universality and its uniqueness (*Le Mauricien*, 29th April 1970).

The artistic revolution that he wished to see happen is described in the columns which present the touristic attraction of the island. The most explicit column in this regard is "*Malcolmland ou la poésie incarnée*" (Chazal: 2006, 413-15), which evokes a fairy enchantment that is the exact antithesis of what Disneyland is as a tourist product. For him, the Mauritian style, which is unique, is centred on the idea of the existence of a Mauritian fairy enchantment, whose nature and

identity do not belong to the first degree and do not therefore need any advertising like Disneyland. This notion of « fairy-culture » originates from his paintings, through which Malcolm de Chazal seems to have reached spaces made of sincerity, not unlike the primary truths of childhood that are to be rediscovered. Through the creation of fairy-objects, fairy-tapestry, fairy-dresses, fairy-clothes, fairy-ceramics and fairy-jewels as well as through the importance that he gives to artists and their place in society, Malcolm de Chazal drew the contours of the unique and universal culture of Mauritius, which, according to him, should attract the artists, poets and millionaires of the whole world (415). The ultimate vision suggested by the artist, which is somewhat megalomaniac, is matched with an immense humour which takes part in the artist's ability to anticipate the future, as well as in the visionary content of the "Malcolmland."

Malcolm de Chazal had thus put into prospect the sharp consciousness that would haunt him until his death, moved by the need to embody his island just like that to suggest an ideal life, "this fairy-island of Malcolmland," at a given moment of Mauritian history, that of the arrival of national Independence. In trying to personify the Mauritian future in his work, a future differing by essence from the recent past of the pre-independent 1960s, Malcolm de Chazal contested the utilitarianism of money, colour prejudice and capitalism that were reigning then, thus showing Mauritius the way to modernity (309).

His message was not heard. Of Malcolm de Chazal, nothing is seen; nothing, or almost nothing, is read in Mauritius. And yet, his work is vast: at least ten books or so, a thousand newspaper articles and hundreds of paintings. His foundation, "Malcolm de Chazal Trust Fund," created in 2003 on

behalf of the Prime Minister, is almost empty. In fact, it is an institution not controlled by the State which has lain asleep since 2005, for reasons pertaining to the local political stakes. Malcolm de Chazal's pictorial work is partially misconstrued and there is no museum which could help its promotion. Only individual people have preserved the artist's canvases, but these paintings have not been listed anywhere. His literary work is unknown, outside the circle of specialists.

Celebrated in 2002, the centenary of Malcolm de Chazal's birth was the occasion for a whole series of events: cultural events about his work as a writer, exhibitions and sales of several creations (paintings, ceramics and tapestries) at the *Alliance Française* of Mauritius, exhibition of other painters whose work clearly showed an affiliation with Chazal, at the Blue Penny Museum. But, in spite of the importance of such a celebration, one of our interviewees strongly condemned it for its artistic non-modernity. Moreover, he denounced the taking over of his work by the artist's community of origin—French-Mauritian—, while they had treated him as a pariah in his lifetime. This event, far from bringing visibility to the work of the artist, has only contributed to maintaining it confined in a circle he never belonged to in his lifetime, he who denounced the racism and the communalism that are still prevailing in Mauritius today.

This analysis of Malcolm de Chazal's views on mauritianism and the artistic revolution of which he wanted to be the mentor reveal the failure of the Mauritian society. It has not risen up to the dream of the artist who sought in vain ways towards a cultural and political decolonization. The central idea of the cultural decolonization advocated by Malcolm de Chazal was the promotion of unity through cultural fusion, through an exploitation of the singular capital of the history of

Mauritian migrations and capitalist expansion. This history was to lead to a kind of alliance between the West and the East, encouraged by the development of a cultural policy centred on national reconciliation in order to reduce and to control the social mechanisms of community and racial integration.

Hervé Masson's views seem to assert the unfinished aspect of the national construction expressed by Malcolm de Chazal, and even if his views are different from the latter's, they stress the same vision of Mauritius.

Hervé Masson

Hervé Masson, a very close friend of Malcolm de Chazal, had quite a singular position, like him, considering his origins which are the same: the French-Mauritian community. Hervé Masson was the youngest of a family of eight children. His father opened an attorney's study a short time before his birth. Although French-Mauritian, the Massons were modest. Right from adolescence, Hervé Masson would free himself from the family's protection as well as from the too strict white colonial society. In 1941, at the age of 22, he started painting:

I started painting because my future brother-in-law made water-colour copies of classical paintings and this annoyed me with the pretext that I was certain to be able to do better. (Letter to Claude Haza of the 21st June 1963)

At that time, there was already a long pictorial tradition in Mauritius.⁶ A Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius had been constituted under the French colonisation. The paintings belonging to this tradition are representative of

⁶ Several publications about the Mauritian Fine Arts underlie (this fact): Georges-André DECOTTER, *Panorama de la peinture mauricienne* (1986); Georges-André DECOTTER, *Port-Louis, visions d'artistes* 1991); Yves DAVID, *La peinture à l'île Maurice* (1996); Hans RAMDUTH, *Art in Mauritius—Post Independence issues and perspectives* (2007).

Western canons of art, a realistic and decorative painting, reserved for the good society, landscapes, and scenes from popular life, classical portraits. Hervé Masson is viewed as breaking away from this tradition. He learned the work of painting and broke off from his peers, so as to turn to modernism, towards a more intellectual painting, and more metaphysical than plastic. He denounced the cultural ignorance of the elites of the local bourgeoisie, their perception of culture as being European, and advocated an art which shows a consciousness of mauritianism. Hervé Masson expresses himself as follows in *Léonard ou la déchirure*:

All the Mauritian painters of that time [referring to the years 1940-48] were fierce realists. They painted the “encampments” at the seaside, old fishermen and their huts, violet and blue cardboard-paste mountains, as they are, as faithfully reproduced as possible. On demand, a few roses were added to the canvas of the garden of the wealthy ship owner’s opulent villa [...]. I was the first Mauritian painter to get off the beaten track. I imported to Mauritius the orientation of the school of Paris that I did not know otherwise than through reproductions. Largely scandalizing the right-minded people and with the howling of the media, I painted and regularly exhibited paintings where cubism and expressionism are displayed and intermingled. I have quickly established a reputation that smelt of rebellion, contestation and most of all a challenge. I also wrote for local newspapers. This people that I pretended so much to love. Those black workers always imprisoned by enslavement. Those people had also the right to express themselves through me, the right to live my life. (Unpublished pages written in Paris in 1978, cited by Lehembre, 2005, 67)

Hervé Masson’s strong personality was forged at the contact of important figures of the intellectual and artistic life of the island, such as Henri Dalais, a lawyer and literary critic, the painter Hugues de Jouvancourt and Malcolm de Chazal himself. Later on, with the help of his wife, he would initiate

the *Cénacle*, a circle that gathered many artists at Hervé Masson's residence. Madeleine Mamet, a philosopher famous for her teachings and the original place she occupied in society as a woman activist and an intellectual, talked of the *Cénacle* in the years 1942 to 1949, in those terms:

This was the good time for Mauritian culture. The Reign of thought, the expression of knowledge. Those who have survived this particular time can still testify it. We were then those live beings, who felt innerly strengthened in a particular form of life. (Mamet 57)

The stand taken by Hervé Masson was one of resistance in front of the ignorance and the low level of culture of the colonial bourgeoisie and its inability to listen to what could be prefiguring at that time the Mauritian modernity. Hervé Masson's epistemological viewpoints rest on the need for a cultural unification as much as economic and political.

A White man in love with brownness

His recent biographer, Bernard Lehembre, wrote an analysis of the life of Hervé Masson in which he recalls the story of Hervé Masson's family and underlines that, like Malcolm de Chazal, he lived like a pariah at a very young age, like a white man in love with brownness. In choosing his relationships, Hervé Masson came out of his cultural universe in order to integrate the Creole cultural space and identity, which led him to partly abandon the values of his upbringing. Masson went as far as Malcolm de Chazal did, in terms of social marginality. During a love affair, he totally immersed himself into a Black family at the back end of the Beau-Vallon forest, and discovered the magical world of the Creole *longanistes* (sorcerers) for about a year. Hervé Masson situated his engagement and his radical choices from this point on:

I have tasted the miserable and yet, so enriching existence of this people. The culture, the logic, the thinking of the Blacks of the island are peculiar to them. It is not as crude as we believe to be: it is different. Since the free will of the Whites and their political knaves are keeping this people at the fringes of western ethic, the ways of living and thinking of the West are partly beyond those men and women who were at a time the slaves coming from Africa or the 'coolies' who have been exported at a small coast from next door India. Their culture is a mixture. Their thinking and their reactions are properly theirs. In order to understand this people, in order to love it, in order to fight for and with it, one needs to have lived its life. Intimately. (Lehembre: 2005, 78)

From then on, Masson's thinking can be summarised in those words: "In Mauritius, there is no need for French, Indo, or Afro-Mauritians: it would be enough to have Mauritians" (Masson: 1964). Firoz Ghanty, a painter of the group One, who was spiritually affiliated with the pictorial work of Hervé Masson, recognizes the historical dimension acquired by the artist.

He is a page of the history of our tiny island, a reference. His work is our common heritage. He is one of those who gave birth to Mauritian identity, who have forged with their hands, their bodies, their souls, a nation, a people, a country, a history. (Ghanty: 1998)

Hervé Masson would be the first White to be a cardholder member of the Labour Party, created in 1936 by Doctor Maurice Curé, the pundit (a Hindu priest) Sahadeo and Emmanuel Anquetil. This social movement had been heeded by thousands of workers, without any distinction of community of origin, except the white society which had no member. This can retrospectively be understood as regards the social claims made by the Labour Party when it questioned the sugar industry capital, which in turn defended its own class interests. In the 1940s and up to late 1948, Hervé Masson, Malcolm de

Chazal, Henri Dalais and other disobedient spirits of the colony met in order to promote the key ideas contained in their various works within the *Cénacle*. The revolutionary ideas which circulated within this milieu were in accordance with those of the Parisian surrealist movement. This avant-garde declared their opposition to colonial oppression and demonstrated in favour of Blacks or mixed identities.

Masson wished for the birth of a specific Mauritian culture. It would no longer be the outcome of French or Indian cultures born in Mauritius but an entirely new phenomenon, “a kind of syncretism, the joining an end to another of those superposed cultures without bringing any change to them.” It is from the intermingling of different cultures “that an authentic Mauritian culture, slowly but surely, comes to life, not from the superposition but from the mixing” (Masson: 1971b). The artists of the *Cénacle* claimed a political equality which was brought objectively into the public debates of the 1960s. The pillars of this circle of friends, namely Malcolm de Chazal, Hervé Masson and the writers Erenne or Cabon, had strongly claimed their support for the independence of Mauritius. Hervé Masson would do it from France where he had settled since the 1950s.

An artist in the field of politics

His political engagement in favour of independence was very important and was saluted by the one who would become the first leader of the new government, the Prime Minister of the Independence, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. The latter’s voice would weigh in convincing the readers of the columns he published from 1963 to 1967 in the Mauritian press, “*Lettres de France*,” about the necessity of independence. *L’Express*, in which he wrote, published his analyses and ar-

gumentations in favour of the struggle against all forms of domination that enslaved the inhabitants of Mauritius. At the time of the accession to independence, in 1968, after the racial riots, he made his nationalist positions known in one of his columns entitled "*Mauricianisme avant tout*" (Masson: 1968). He expressed in *L'Express* the real consubstantiality of Independence and mauritianism, the main thing, for him, being the setting up of an independent policy, specifically Mauritian, to overturn internal and external relations.

The emergence of a national consciousness was essential for Hervé Masson. If he was opposed to communalism, it is because he believed in the necessity for all the islands' citizens to take part in the setting up of the new nation. To counter communalism, he denounced at a very early time, those who sought to keep their privileges even if it meant to rise up against one another, especially the Franco-Mauritians and the half-castes, who brandished the threat of Hindu hegemony. To help a national consciousness emerge, he denounced as soon as 1963, the Constitution written under the aegis of the British, while, in his eyes, it was the active participation of the citizens which should have given birth to it: "*Pourquoi les Mauriciens ne travaillaient-ils pas eux-mêmes à cette rédaction?*" (Cited by Lehembre: 2005, 316).

His biographer stresses that Masson perceived the bad effects of what he considered to be one of the most harmful aspects of the newly independent society: the common interests that existed between the sugar industry oligarchy, the old British colonial power and the Indian bourgeoisie, who allied after the independence to the detriment of the Mauritian people, all communities put together. This resulted in the association model that stemmed from the negotiations, which have produced a new equilibrium. Catherine Boudet talked of "*con-*

sociation” in order to define the essence of the independent power that came out of the agreement between the parties. This political form was, at the time of the national construction, a way to reach an agreement between the groups that formed the new national elite, at the detriment of the evolution and progress of the national consciousness wished for by Hervé Masson, since the interests of the new nation were going to be sold in accordance to the narrow prism of interests of the powers and that of this same elite.

This is why Masson totally disagreed with the governmental coalition formed by the Labour Party, the Muslim Action Council and the Independent Forward Bloc with their opponents of the pre-independence period, the Mauritian Party. This government of national coalition was his first deception. The model called “*consociatif*” which was analysed by Lijphart and later by Catherine Boudet⁷ for the case of Mauritius, was set at the time of the national construction. It depended on the political commitment of the leaders toward the coalition rather than toward the opposition, as far as political decisions were concerned. The negotiation between the communities has, thus, been instituted between the elites of the different communities. The true question that Hervé Masson is asking himself is that of decolonisation. This aspect, which is the most important one of the new Independence, will fail, according to the author, as the new government of the national unity remains dependent on the sugar industry capital and of a constitution written by the old colonial power. Contrarily, Hervé Masson recommended a nationalisation policy for the sugar

⁷ See Catherine Boudet, “Les Franco-Mauriciens entre Maurice et l’Afrique du Sud : identité, stratégies migratoires et processus de recommunautarisation.” In her thesis, she takes over this model of analysis because it seemed to her that it correspond to the political principles of the government that exist in Mauritius.

properties, as well as diplomacy independence from the Foreign Office. Logically, he projected to create a new party, the *Front d'Indépendance Nationale et Sociale*:

Do they know in France that Mauritius has never been less independent since the day of its official accession to independence? Do they know that our government cannot refuse anything to the British government, that military and economic agreements are more than ever tying us to the old mother country? The motto in economic and financial matters that our Prime Minister is going to beg for in London will contribute even more to our subjugation. One of the dedicated supporters of the independence of Mauritius would surely have to find the courage to cry out: I did not fight for this comedy, not for this caricature of sovereignty. (*L'Express*, 2nd August 1968, cited by Lehembre: 2005, 344)

The words are sharp and they have been made more explicit in an article published two years later:

It would have taken all the Mauritians, for or against independence, once the independence has been gained, to act in a way for it to be won. And it is not in the actual state of things that Mauritius will win it. It would not win with this wrongly-started coalition, based not on the nation's needs, but on vile interests. The independent Mauritius has made a bad start. What it lacked was a mystification of the political. (Masson :1971b, cited by Lehembre: 2005 332)

This radical criticism on independence, in which the artist strongly expressed his faith in independence, was not virtual. History would give an evidence of it when the artist left France in 1970 to settle back to Mauritius where he would reside until 1977. It was at this moment that his friendship with Malcolm de Chazal deteriorated. The real reason for this distance can be found in their respective political orientations which became too diverging. Malcolm de Chazal, "expected so much from a cultural policy of the State that he was ready to adhere

to it. Masson's choice to prefer politics to art left the poet crestfallen" (Lehembre: 2005, 439). Masson, on his part, wished to work concretely to make Mauritius independent without renouncing his status of artist, as he promised one of his cousins, Paul Bérenger, whom he met in France in 1968—who advocated anarchist thinking and animated political discussion groups and wanted "to achieve the struggle for national liberation abandoned by the Labour activists and to lead the nation toward socialism" (Lehembre: 2005, 330).

If Hervé Masson had projected to engage himself, it was not to carry out a cultural, but surely a political mission. This is what he did once he was back to Mauritius by taking part in the creation of the Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM). The comeback of the artist writer to Mauritius rapidly put the new government in a difficult position. Through the Prime Minister, S.S. Ramgoolam, the government promised Hervé Masson to reward him for his action in favour of Independence and appointed him "Art Adviser," that is artistic advisor attached to the Ministry of National Education and Cultural Affairs; this position was aimed at improving the teaching of art disciplines (331). This appointment, apart from the fact that it just constituted in being the "advisor" of the Minister of Culture, was matched with a difficult condition for a writer to accept. Hervé Masson no longer had the right to write in the press from the time he took up office. Ramgoolam feared the vigour of Masson's articles. If they have served him in the past, now, at the moment of the creation of a government of national unity, they could destabilize him. The government's fear was real and the creation of this position took two years and a half. Hervé Masson only came back to Mauritius in April 1970. Bernard Lehembre noted the small interest that he gave to this position while he occupied it. He remained in this position for a very

short while, less than a year, and was rapidly relieved of his duties in January 30th 1971.

This return to the island, largely welcomed by young artists who expected a larger recognition from the State, mainly finds its *reason for being* in Masson's will to intervene directly in the political life of Mauritius. This is what he did when he chose to walk on Paul Béranger's side, founder of the MMM. Only a year after he took up a governmental function, in 1970, he would pass over to the opposition in order to defend the necessity of inventing a new society, this mauritianism which was still to be born, in spite of the fact that independence had been granted. The racial riots that took place in the capital city of Port-Louis in January 1968 only confirmed his viewpoint. The fact that Mauritian Independence coincided with the events of May 1968 had real consequences on the development of the thinking and the processes of committed sensitisation back there through the Mauritian Militant-Activist Movement (MMM). In the 1970s and then in the early 1980s, the MMM, a revolutionary movement before being an opposition party, defended a unitary model by starting the activist and nationalist slogan "*enn sel lepep enn sel nasyon*" (one people, one nation) and a platform for social justice that they opposed to the economic liberalism practiced by the Labour Party in power. But the construction of a Mauritian cohabitation, "mauritianism," did not come through in its political and ideological dimension. The very brief accession to power of the MMM (1982-83) ended up in the failure of mauritianism and the abandon of this national ideal by all the parties that came to power since 1983.

During the time of the national construction (1930-1968), some rare French-Mauritian artists and intellectuals sought to go beyond the community, religious and racial frontiers left by

the colonial period, and found themselves on the side of the independentists. Among them are Malcolm de Chazal and Hervé Masson who, more than the others, developed theories on the national ideal, and who can be considered as visionaries and precursors in their defence of mauritianism. The meaning given to this word, “mauritianism,” by Malcolm de Chazal and Hervé Masson, can be distinguished from the many meanings that it took later on. This term, which once could have been useful to the socio-cultural opening-up, is now reduced in its meanings to the point where it finally does not mean anything essential on the committed research that some Mauritians are doing, lacking now the unitary representation of the society preceding Independence.

The term “mauritianism” used to be a useful word to writers and activists in order to identify the phases of the social transformations which took place during the time of preparation of national independence. Before it became a generic word, these men sought to qualify it as it hid the committed debates around the search for a national unity.

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