

## **Family structure and house Architecture in Mauritius: Perspectives from Architectural Anthropology**

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates the evolution of family structure of Asian settlers in Mauritius since their arrival as Indentured Labourers and traders. Changes have occurred in family structure, house typologies, with drastic increase in level of education as well as great improvements in Social-economic status. The change in family systems from extended to nuclear has been gradual over a few generations while house types have evolved in parallel to cater for the demands of the new systems even though abrupt changes in the use of new construction materials in the 1960s have not been properly documented vis-à-vis the resultant loss of culture. Values, memories and cultural strengths can be emphasized by Architecture given that there is enough thought invested into it. This article will try to iterate how the evolution of family structure has affected house Architecture in Mauritius by identifying what has been lost and what can be reinvented to be made applicable for the new contemporary needs of the Mauritian family. According to data published by The World Health Organization, the population of Mauritius in 2023 was 1,237,588, out of which, 180,849 were 65 years of age or above, representing 14.2% of the population. A sample population of 10 individuals aged 65 years and above was randomly interviewed with questions pertaining to the memories of their childhood homes and neighborhood. The information obtained roughly related to Mauritian families and their houses as from 1950's.

**Keywords:** Extended and nuclear family systems, Syncretic cultures, Mauritius, Architectural Anthropology, culture

### **Origins of Extended family system in Mauritius**

It was around 1924, when the practice of importing Indentured labourers to work the fields of Mauritius stopped, that the prevailing Majority population was broadly established (Ramtohol R, 2021, p:4). A survey of 1931 indicates that out of the total population of 393,238, there were 268,649 Indo-Mauritians and 8,923 Chinese-Mauritians, together representing a 70.5% majority of people of Asian origin (Holmberg 1962, p:19). The remaining 29.5% comprised of a mixture of Franco-Mauritians, Creoles<sup>2</sup> and people of Mixed African and French descent (Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota P, 2023, p:13).

At first, after an initial period in which the Indentured labourers stayed in several '*Camp Sucrier*', accommodation mostly provided by Sugar estate owners,

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Creoles' encompassed mostly people of African origin, who had become natives of Mauritius by then, and people of Indian (Tamils) and Malagasy Origin who had passed over their real identities of Origin since they were brought as slaves.

those who decided to stay, were first allocated land on a lease system and were later allowed to acquire land and set up villages following the social structures they knew, (De L'Estrac, J, 2020, p:72).

The Chinese families, on the other hand, were not allowed to own property in Mauritius for many years during the British rule, (Vizavi ltd, 2016, p.39). Even though the Chinese had already established themselves as traders in Mauritius from before, it was only after the law was abolished in 1970 that they could consolidate their position on the Island. As a result, there has not been Chinese house typologies established on the Island. The only Chinese expressions in Architecture can be seen in the few *Pagodas* they built. Nonetheless, the many Chinese families who settled in Mauritius built and occupied buildings in timber, metal sheets and stone resembling the common houses of Mauritius at that time but adapted them to function as shop house, accommodating business as well as two to three generations of family members.

Large family system is also very common in African countries. However, settlers of African origin, brought by force as slaves well before the Indentured labourers, spent many years in great turmoil, (Teelock V, 1998, p:290), denied of education and training, forgot their origins and any significant principle of social organization due to many generations spent in suppression and without freedom. After the abolition of slavery, some adopted the social systems of their previous Franco-Mauritian masters while others integrated villages and lived alongside people of other cultures. This article will focus on the Asian families while acknowledging that there is scope for in-depth research on the African family systems and the reminiscence of their respective Architectural representation in Mauritius.

Asian societies have a strong tradition of extended families<sup>3</sup>. An example embedded in Hindu scriptures emphasizes the concept of *Matru Devo Bhava* and *Pitru Devo Bhava*, meaning Mothers and fathers are God-like. Thus, elders are treated with respect and hold important responsible positions as head of the household. This system still prevails in many Asian societies today though in a declining trend. Similarly, Asian families give great importance to ancestors and lineages. The Sanskrit term *Kul* and the Mandarin term *Zǔ*, both carrying ideas related to patrilineal lineage are strong concepts commonly used in these societies. Many Asian cultures, predominantly in rural areas, also have ancestor veneration practices that are believed to not only keep the family closely together but can extend to a whole village or clan.

The social structure of the early Asian settlers of Mauritius mimicked that of their countries of origin and followed the same extended family system and

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<sup>3</sup> 2 According to Cambridge Dictionary, the definition of Extended family is "a family unit that includes grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles, etc. in addition to parents and children".

hierarchies. Furthermore, probably owing to the high proportion of people of Asian descent in the country, most village dwellings were built following roughly similar layouts and construction techniques as houses found in regions from which the Indentured labourers came (Ramhotar A, 2025, p:19) although the use of some locally available materials were adopted. These huts, although small, often housed several generations of a family. This practice was perpetuated in Mauritius for a few generations up to around the 1960's before fundamental changes occurred not only to the basic family structure but also to the construction techniques and materials used.

### **The Mauritian family structure – pre-Independence**

The population growth during the post-World War II years was very high, (Hein, C, 1977, p:316). In 1950, 52% of the Mauritian population was aged 19 or less (Holmberg ,1962, p:20). This further consolidates the idea that during the 1940s and 1950s, families were large with many children, reportedly 6-8 per household, living together under one roof in extended family systems. The overall life expectancy was around 51.9 years, according to Database Earth (2025), and people married at a very young age. By the age of 25, many were already parents and grandparents by 50. Stories of orphaned children brought up by grandparents after death of parents or that of fathers marrying two or three consecutive times after the death of previous wives, were very common.

Mauritius also faced major economic and social problems all the way through 1980s (Ramtohl R, 2021, p:6). There was major lack of work for the population. This, coupled with low literacy rate<sup>4</sup> was among the major factors that was fueled by and, at the same time, fueled a rapid increase in population. Many children had to discontinue their schooling, at a very young age, to work and help support their families or pay for education of younger siblings. Those who went to schools faced hard childhoods as many had to help with the work of parents or grandparents before attending school or in the afternoon after coming back from school. The tiny habitation of the Mauritian families of Asian descent was made of basalt stone walls and sugarcane straw roofs, with walls and floor smeared with a mixture of cow dung with red soil<sup>5</sup>. Most of the materials could easily be found, neither requiring much economic input or major technical knowhow to work with. Houses were built by male members of the family or with the help of one or two workers if required.

In addition to the perpetuation of century old, although imported, traditions, the extended family system offered an effective way for families, despite being large, to live together under one roof, share scarce resources, face the numerous difficulties of the time. Family members selflessly supported each other and resolve problems as

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<sup>4</sup> Free primary schooling was introduced in early 1940s while free Secondary schooling was introduced in 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Process locally referred to as 'massoner.'

one entity. It valued wisdom based on experience of life, repetition of traditions and continuation of established habits that passed down from generation to generation. Elders, considered head of the family based on their wisdom and life experience, took decisions that were diligently followed by other family members.

Thus, the hierarchy of the family was such that, the grandfather, if alive, usually owned the land and the house in which everyone stayed. Together with the sons who were old enough<sup>6</sup>, they would earn for the family. Indo-Mauritians typically worked in sugarcane fields or cultivated their own land. Sino-Mauritians mostly were shop owners. The female members, namely the grandmother, unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law would stay home, gather wood for cooking and hay to feed cows, apply cow dung, clean the house, get water from the village common tap, wash clothes in the nearby river, look after younger ones and prepare food for the family. Therefore, all decisions pertaining to the running of the house was taken by the women of the family while matters pertaining to construction of house, and land transactions were taken by the male counterparts. Oftentimes, the grandmother would also own land through inheritance from her side of the family though, in those days, sons were often privileged and given bigger shares of inheritance.

The village was like a large family with close knit neighbors. Neighbours were oftentimes close relatives that had inherited land through subdivision of their elders. When this was not the case, there was seldom any difference made between people based on religious belief or cultural belonging. People enjoyed great social proximity and togetherness despite or perhaps because of their low socio-economic status, (Cohen A and Varnum M, 2016, p:5). Boundary lines between neighboring plots were blurred with no rigid physical boundary demarcations other than row of plants or loosely put together stones. Children went to neighbour's place unannounced as if walking into their own house and could play anywhere without restrictions. Families regularly helped each other, shared food, and could take vegetables from anyone's cultivation for consumption without even having to ask for permission. Families helped each other to survive hardships. The Chinese shops, established in Mauritius well before the arrival of Indentured labourers, played a major role in the socio-economic life of the country, (Vizavi Ltd, 2016, pp.60). The Chinese shopkeepers introduced a credit system<sup>7</sup> in Mauritius that also helped countless families survive by providing them with daily necessities on credit which they would normally settle when they received their salaries at the end of the month. People regularly too necessary items from the shops, locally referred to as 'laboutik sinoi', of the locality solely on a trust basis. The Chinese shopkeeper would keep a record of the items taken in a small red booklet, kept in two copies, and the amounts accrued would

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<sup>6</sup> Many started work early in their lives as life was difficult and families were large.

<sup>7</sup> People would take items from the shop that would be recorded in 2 red copybooks. The shopkeeper would keep one and the customer would keep the other. Generally, accounts were settled monthly but could go beyond as well.

usually be settled at the end of the month when salaries were received. The idea that low Socio-economic status brings people together (Cohen A and Varnum M, 2016, p:5) was reinforced by the Mauritian extended family system of the time and the close bonds that people had with each other regardless of cultural or religious belongings.

“In the years immediately after World War II important changes took place in the living conditions in Mauritius. Sugar production rose to new record levels. At the same time the health services were greatly improved.” (Holmberg, 1962, p:18). Indo-Mauritian sugarcane farmers suddenly amassed new wealth by selling bigger volumes of sugarcane and at a much higher price than before. As a result, many families could afford better built houses than their original huts, with better materials namely timber and corrugated metal sheets. However, even these new houses were still small given the number of persons that they accommodated. Some kept their existing stone and straw house and built their new house in timber and metal sheets, close by, on another part of their land. Grandparents would stay in the old house while young growing families would occupy rooms in the new ones. Others rented rooms of their new house to other families in need and earned additional income.

Two successive cyclones, namely Alix and Carol that hit Mauritius in January and February of 1960 respectively, devastated thousands of houses of the country. The straw houses, built without any major technical expertise, stood no chance against the strong wind gusts of the cyclones. Most were destroyed while some of the timber and metal houses that endured sheltered many families. It was after the devastation of these cyclones that the use of cement block, and reinforced concrete for house construction grew rapidly. The drastic shift meant that house building required more financial resources and expertise that many did not possess at the time. Therefore, many families would save money to partly build room walls with cement block and kept roofs and other parts of the house in timber and corrugated sheet. Reinforced concrete roofs were then cast at a later stage, once they saved enough money. Another common building system that people devised was the construction and occupation of small, oftentimes unfinished units, according to the available means and later slowly finishes and add new components of the house as and when resources could be saved.

### **Evolution of the family structure – post Independence**

After that Mauritius obtained its Independence from the British in 1968, the then elected Government recognizing the lack of natural resources invested on strengthening the human capital as a major means to combat prevailing poverty and achieve economic development. Two major successful measures, among others, set by the Governments to aid this endeavor. First, national family planning campaigns were done during the 1960s and 70s to sensitize the population towards reducing family sizes to a three-child family system. ‘A population policy was included in the nation’s first four-year plan for 1971-75, (Hein, C 1977, p: 317). Second, the introduction of

free Secondary education in 1977 for the population that aimed at increasing the literacy rate of the population was introduced as part of an electoral promise by the Independence Party government<sup>8</sup>.

At the same time, as the country developed, the healthcare system not only improved massively, but also, through a gradual development of a strong L'État-providence, free treatment for the Mauritian public at public hospitals was introduced. Measures aiming to combat child mortality, diseases and increase life expectancy of the population were set in place. These were unquestionably successful as the average family size decreased from 6 to 8 children per family in 1960s and 70s to 1-2 children per family in 2019.

During the years immediately after the independence, the University of Mauritius was established offering only degrees in Agriculture. Children aspiring for a tertiary education in other fields had no choice than to travel abroad to universities. Many families worked hard and sent their children abroad for tertiary education. Lack of available work, less pay, and the hard living conditions that existed in Mauritius at that time caused major brain drain as well. Many who studied outside of Mauritius found work and settled abroad while others, without tertiary education, emigrated to work as nurse and under various other categories. Those who decided to come back after spending years studying abroad, gradually adopted more independent ways of living that the increasingly busy lifestyles of a country under development required. These were drastically different and more complex than the traditional ways of their childhoods. Education and development helped the country improve its economic status but, at the same time, they also altered the old family structure and Architectural expressions in the country. The cold and rigid Architectural ideas of modernism and post-modernism, relevant at that time in the western world, transpired in the houses of Mauritius as well, though not in a very structured manner since awareness of Architecture has consistently been limited in Mauritius.

Eventually, every smaller family cell, originally within an extended family system, developed more individual goals, achieved greater financial freedom, and had lesser children. Living together under the guidance of elders, as was traditionally done, only became problematic. Disputes among siblings and their families due to increasingly diverging point of views and sometimes over heritage matters became frequent in almost every Mauritian family. Thus, many saw fit to move out of the ancestral village home and to own a house elsewhere, while those that stayed in the villages, inherited smaller, subdivided portions of the land, originally owned by their parents and built their own individual houses. Thus, the extended family system started to give way to a more contemporary system, the nuclear family. In many instances, families could not totally adopt a solely nuclear family composition but rather a mixture of both extended and nuclear system whereby one child of the family

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<sup>8</sup> Primary schooling was already free in Mauritius since the 1940's.

housed the elders with them in their new house or several siblings buying land and built their houses close together in a locality. However, these solutions were adopted in an unplanned manner, without reference to any precedents, and certainly with little or no future planning considerations.

### **Evolution of the house typology**

Socio-spatial relations may have been pivotal to the evolution of the house typology in Mauritius, but they were not the only factors. An amalgamation of several other factors such as size, affordability of land and rapid development have also contributed and accelerated change of the family structure and house typology in Mauritius. Since the 1980s and 1990s, a more urban model of residential *microelements* undoubtedly supplying the inherent demand of society have been sprouting in Mauritius. Like in all urban areas of the world, the urban residential microelements offered much smaller plot sizes compared to the traditional village plot sizes. However, despite their small sizes and comparatively higher price, they have been considered more economically viable, trendy, and appropriate solution for the contemporary needs of the Mauritian family. It is hard to say whether it was the smaller house types that created demand for smaller plots or vice versa. Nonetheless, both are closely intertwined and indicate fundamental change to the family system. Since then, the trend of owning land in one of these residential agglomerates has risen as a greater number of options have become available all over the island especially with an improved road network easily connecting parts of the island that were previously hard to reach. Furthermore, ownership of private vehicles has also increased sharply with an increase in car buying options, the introduction of various new vehicle brands adapted to the market demands and reacting to the rise of the buying power of the Mauritians.

In 2009, the Sugar protocol<sup>9</sup> which Mauritius enjoyed for many years, since 1975, ended as price of sugar dropped because of a liberalization of the sugar market by the European Union (EU). Sugar produced by Mauritius was no longer competitive for the EU<sup>10</sup>. Most land previously locked under sugarcane cultivation became free for other uses. In addition, the Government allowed part of the territory to be sold to interested foreign investors by introducing various schemes such as the Integrated Resort scheme (IRS) that was later changed to Property Development Scheme (PDS) and Real Estate Scheme (RES) and more recently the Smart City Scheme. As a result, several major landowners turned into property developers or embarked on morcellement projects for income generation, making price of land rise to previously unimaginable heights. The recent morcellement projects have seen

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<sup>9</sup> Before 2009, Mauritius was under the Sugar Protocol with the EU and ACP (African, Caribbean, Pacific) sugar supplying countries and had a quota of sugar to supply yearly.

<sup>10</sup> The big Sugar producers of Mauritius pulled their resources together, closing many sugar factories. Only 3 sugar factories operate today, and they process all the sugar cane produced on the Island. The large sugar producers also diversified their activities.

gradual decrease in plot sizes to remain affordable to the buyers given the sharp increase of price of land.

In addition, building construction solutions also underwent major shift from the traditional basalt stone and hay to concrete block and reinforced concrete. As previously mentioned, after the devastation caused by cyclones Carol and Alix, people took measures to prevent frequent destruction of their houses by investing in more resistant building materials. This, together with improved education levels, frequent internal problems that the conventional extended families faced and the development of urban residential morcellements have accelerated the change in style of living on the island. Owning a “*ene lakaz en beton*” in a town quickly became a status symbol representing success, education, modernity and rise in Socio-economic status. Nowadays, extended families with blurred boundaries between neighbouring plots have almost disappeared in Mauritius while well compartmentalized residential morcellements have been ever increasing.



*Figure 1: Left – Plan of typical concrete house common during 1980s and 1990s.  
Right – Photo of the typical house still existing today in Mauritius*

There have been significant changes in concrete house design and building techniques since its introduction in the country. The contemporary Mauritian houses are indeed much bigger, better designed, better built and more luxurious than the tiny huts of the Asian ancestors but families have been getting smaller, segregated behind rigid boundary walls, more stressed and lonelier than ever before. People may well be better connected through technology but there is a growing distance when it comes to relationships and bonds compared to what existed during pre-independence Mauritius.





Figure 2: Contemporary Houses of Mauritius, Ark Atelier ltd; <http://arkatelier.com>

The drastic change is visible all around the country. Culture is not static and changes constantly. According to Seetah K (2016, p:269), 'the Island's past has been based on written documentation, rather than the totality of the human experience'. Therefore, Mauritian culture may be said to have evolved more in a textbook manner, based on borrowed ideas of culture from the countries of origin of the settlers, and less on lived experience of the population.

A lack of pertinent academic research is therefore identified on the syncretic culture that has evolved in Mauritius over the generations, and on ways in which changes in family systems and lifestyles are closely linked to house types and, in turn, how house types have aided the evolution of new culture. Crucial as well as unique cultural traits worth preserving should be better identified, documented and emphasized through in-depth interpretations to inform future Architectural expressions and as means to define viable solutions for countries with similar historical and cultural backgrounds as Mauritius.

### **New adaptations for Contemporary Mauritius**

The extended family structure and neighborhood system brought by Asian settlers helped them to survive harsh conditions existing in Mauritius then. The intangible strengths of family hierarchy, wisdom of elders, and connections to neighbours, have been the cornerstones in the successful development of Mauritius as a society. These strengths may have been diluted after the independence mainly due to rapid

development and lack of proper research, but they are regaining relevance in the contemporary context as now, perhaps in a heightened sense of solitude, people are relearning to appreciate the significance of maintaining strong family bonds that have always existed but have somehow been overlooked in the recent past.

Among these bonds, having elders close to the family is of particular significance for cultural, emotional, economic and practical reasons, (Ramhotar A, 2025, p:20). An elder in a house strengthens family connections as siblings, relatives, friends and sometimes neighbours meet more regularly for curtesy visits, festivals, and religious ceremonies. Elders also act as strong pillars of selfless support during tough times. They impart values, transmit culture, and assist in the upbringing of children. Small children and their grandparents share invaluable and a unique intertwined support system as well as source of happiness, beneficial both in the development the personalities of the children and for bringing a sense of purpose and peace of mind to the elders. Furthermore, Asian cultures emphasise the moral and spiritual responsibility towards elders through a circle of support system whereby the parents selflessly sacrifice themselves in upbringing their children who, in turn, are expected to become their support in their vulnerable years.

Christian Norbert-Schulz (1979), utilizes the term *Genius loci* to define spirit or character of place. However, its ancient Roman meaning refers to a protective spirit or guardian deity of a place, a definition much closer to that of the Asian cultures. This spirit is also referred to while expressing ancestral patrilineal lineage in many Asian cultures. Hence, the importance of family systems, bonds, relationships not only towards the living but also towards the dead find representation in Asian cultures and is expressed in various ways through festivals, rituals, and habits. Architecture is a strong vehicle for societies, whether consciously or not, to carry many cultural meanings through appropriation of built spaces oftentimes over several generations. The concept of Memory of space, Peter Zumthor (2006), is a strong and relevant concept when discussing family systems. Houses where elders live can also carry many memories, accumulated over several decades that can help form the characters of the younger generations who are allowed to spend time in with their grandparents. Anything in a house such as simple furniture arrangement, plants, feel of the house, use of different textures, feel of materials or scents, among others, have the potential of leaving a lasting memory in a child. Therefore, innumerable benefits of intangible concepts such as Memory of Space should be an integral part of any discussion pertaining to the evolution of family systems in newly established societies such as Mauritius.

## **Conclusion**

The house Architecture in Mauritius underwent many drastic changes since the arrival of The Indentured labourers. Habits, lifestyle, and culture, have all changed as people live in more urban settings. Building materials, and systems as well as design have all

greatly improved and people can afford better quality of living as well as much bigger and better dwellings. It has largely lost the essence of the vernacular because of urbanization and migration. ‘Communities lose their sense of identity and association with the place in the process of migration. Tangible requirements in new places take priority’, (Fatema K, Verma T, Varma A, 2024, p:161).

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the loss of vital familial qualities, previously embedded in society, that have gradually been eroded which are now out of context and cannot be reinstated in their original form since society has undergone deep structural shifts. However, there is a great need to reemphasize culturally strong and relevant ideas such as value of relationships as a major vehicle of stability for contemporary families, by carrying important cultural lessons, and reducing solitude. The connections to the past need not be direct but, through Architecture, they can be reinterpreted, allowed to evolve to fit the contemporary needs of society, and kept alive for future generations. The new house Architecture in a contemporary Mauritius should therefore cater for both the needs of the new nuclear family system and, at the same time, be sensitive enough to recognize tangible and intangible benefits of the old extended family system and provide relevant response to bridging both systems into a new syncretic way.

### **Glossary of terms:**

- Camp Sucrier : Temporary settlements provided to Indentured labourers by the British Government when they first arrived.
- Ene lakaz en beton: Creole expression for a house in cement block and concrete.
- État-providence: French word, common in Mauritius, for welfare state.
- Genius Loci: Spirit of place
- Laboutik Sinoi: Chinese locality shops commonly found in all villages of the country. Pagoda Buddhist religious building associated with Chinese culture in Mauritius.
- Massoner: The smearing of cow dung to floors and walls of houses was commonly referred as ‘massoner’ in Mauritius.
- Matru Devo Bhava: Mother is God-Like.
- Morcellement: French term used in Mauritius for parceling of large portions of land into multiple smaller plots.
- Pitru Devo Bhava: Father is God-like.

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