

Introduction

Coralie walks quickly in a procession of about a hundred practitioners who wear the goddess's bright saffron color. Under the sound of beating drums, in an atmosphere of enormous suspense, with the sun going down, they enter the temple ground where hundreds of spectators and cameras welcome them. The crowd is clustered around a large pit filled with glowing embers. Little space is left for the procession to pass between the spectators and the pit. An incredible heat emanates from the coals, even when standing two meters away. I sit down among other women near the milk basin at the end of the fire pit. Movements are hectic. I lose sight of Coralie. It is getting darker. The coals blaze in grey, orange, and red. The drums keep beating. Their rhythms increase the tension. The priest conducts the final preparatory ceremonies. Where is Coralie now? How does she feel? With the drums accelerating, the priest is the first to step barefoot on to the glowing embers. He crosses the field in eight strides and steps into the milk basin. Now, one devotee after another walks across the fire pit. From my spot, I do not see Coralie, but I see Amandine when she crosses the field. Her steps are fast and her eyes are wide open.

Fire walking is a popular Hindu festival in La Réunion, a French overseas department and remote region of the European Union in the Indian Ocean. Coralie and Amandine¹ are eighteen and twenty-eight years old. They, together with the other participants, took a vow to the goddess Pandialé (Draupadi) at the beginning of the festival. During the subsequent eighteen days spent together in this temple fasting and praying, the practitioners have become like a family, myself included. The final moment of the fire walking is particularly emotionally intense for us. For both those who fire walk and those who watch, the tension that has built up and the fear that some devotee developed over the last days increase even more now in the moment before stepping into the field. After about eight steps, fear and pain turn into relief, thankfulness, and pride for having accomplished this act of penitence.

"Religion is a source of pride to me" (French: *La religion, c'est une fierté pour moi*), Coralie had declared on one of these eighteen days. Now, after the ceremony, I find out that she did not cross the fire pit in the end; she found it too hot. She nevertheless claims pride in her successful fasting and in her devotion to the goddess. Some days later, the priest asserts his pride in his temple, which holds, in his opinion, the most beautiful fire walking festival on the island.

Reunionese Hindus' claims of pride—not in the negative sense of haughtiness, but as a justified form of self-esteem—repeatedly attracted my attention during my twelve months of anthropological fieldwork on the island in 2014–15. Without knowing then that I would focus on pride in writing this book, I sometimes employed words such as "proud" and "proudly" over ten times on one page of my field diary. Similarly, the recorded conversations include frequent usages of *fierté* (pride) and *fier/fière* (proud) by Reunionese Hindus. Pride was something that people spoke about throughout my fieldwork. And the display of pride goes far beyond its concrete formulation in words. It runs like a golden thread through people's actions and their ways of living and belonging in La Réunion.

A little more than 350 years old, Reunionese society is the result of multiple strands of migration, mainly from France, Africa, Madagascar, China, and India, to the previously unpopulated island. *Métissage*, which translates as ethnic mix or ethnic mixing, carries a wide variety of possibilities for religious orientations. Reunionese Hindus are French citizens with Indian, but often also African, Madagascan, Chinese, and European origins. Among their often-diverse origins, most Reunionese Hindus have at least one ancestor from South India who had migrated to La Réunion in the colonial context of indenture in the nineteenth century. However, most do not speak Indian languages and do not have family links to India anymore. Since the second half of the twentieth century, some Reunionese Hindus have started to orient themselves toward India to acquire knowledge about Hindu religion. New orientations toward ancestral cultures, with a view to acquiring religious knowledge and prestige, have emerged in many places around the world since the late 1960s and 1970s: Brazilians of African origin have been searching for Candomblé in Africa, French Polynesians of Chinese descent have been "reviving" Chinese ancestor worship, and more such examples exist. In the historical context of French assimilationist politics and Catholic dominance in colonial La Réunion, neither traveling to India, nor pride in being Hindu had been possible. From the 1960s and 1970s

onward, favored by the decline of colonial hegemonic power in many parts of the world, French Reunionese society opened up more toward both local Creole culture and ancestral cultures. Only at that time did Reunionese Hindus get the chance to develop a feeling of pride based on ancestral religion—parallel to and overlapping with claims of pride in Creole culture or other ancestral traditions, such as Chinese religion. A more complex picture unfolds in people's lives, their dreams and fears, and in what some perceive as their struggle for recognition.

In this book, I combine the often separately treated debates on religion, globalization, diaspora, secularism, and recognition. With my focus on aspirational pride, I wish to enrich these debates by paying attention to the social and emotional dimensions of people's desire for recognition. Recognition from others in the context of migration and diversity is a valuable asset that individuals and groups aspire to. Debates on recognition and religion often focus on the relation between religion and the state. To the people in this book, however, the emotional dimensions are at least as important as the institutional dimensions of recognition processes. Although often neglected in discussions on the making of religious minorities, contemporary political dynamics in different parts of the world show how extremely powerful such felt dimensions of recognition are.

Felt Recognition

A politics of pride and recognition frames this ethnography. I have observed how Reunionese Hindus assert pride on different levels and toward different audiences: in the form of social distinction from other Reunionese Hindus, for social status in Reunionese society, and to claim recognition as a religious minority by the French state. The ways some Reunionese Hindus formulate their claims for recognition in the French state complicate universal assumptions about French *laïcité*. Despite the official narrative that the French Republic does not recognize any religion, state institutions do indeed recognize religions, and in doing so sometimes reveal different attitudes toward different religions (Bowen 2008; Liogier 2009). Furthermore, in contrast to state and public discourse, *laïcité* is much more about exceptions and adaptations than one may assume (Asad 2006; Bowen 2008; Fernando 2014: 11). As in many other parts of France, *laïcité* in La Réunion undergoes multifaceted adaptations (Waldis 2008). Unlike in Metropolitan France, where debates

around Islam are prominent, a common discourse in La Réunion is to praise the *vivre-ensemble*—the peaceful art of living together. Nevertheless, there are important negotiations in La Réunion about how to manage the diverse origins and to celebrate or grant recognition to ancestral religions.

While Hindu religious activities are highly visible in Reunionese society, some Reunionese Hindus aim for more recognition. Formulated as identity politics, the struggle for recognition also reflects people's underlying desire for social mobility. *Fierté* in the form of aspirational pride is closely linked to recognition in terms of social status, including political participation and redistribution (Fraser 2000, 2003) in French Reunionese society. I suggest that the pride of those Reunionese Hindus who engage in what they call a struggle for recognition emerges where their status in Reunionese society, which is often associated with economic and social success, intersects with their ongoing aspirations for social mobility and their efforts for recognition of Hindu religion as integral to their French national identities. Reunionese Hindus' claims of pride are at least as much about the process of claiming pride and recognition as about an actual state of feeling or an achieved position in society. Several examples (chapter 2) of efforts religious associations undertake to gain more state recognition in a local context that already recognizes Hindu religion to a considerable extent demonstrate that the process itself of demanding recognition can become a source of pride (see Tully 2000). Reunionese Hindus' aspirations highlight the importance of institutional recognition, social status, and the felt dimensions of recognition.

What scholars and members of religious and cultural associations often call a struggle for recognition is as much a struggle for difference (see Fuchs 1999). The processes of recognition of difference reveal a relation of tension, as the one to be recognized first needs to exist as something that then can be recognized (Bedorf 2010). In the case of Reunionese Hindus, apparent members of this religious minority in the making realize that they first have to form a group and make their understanding of religion conform to the category "religion" in the eyes of the French state. Or rather what they think the state would regard as religion, which is tricky when the state does not officially recognize religions. Those Reunionese Hindus who engage in negotiations with the state attempt to adhere to Hinduism as a larger religion that exists worldwide—an image that is impacted by the dominant status of the Catholic Church in France. The work of fashioning Hinduism as a

“world religion” in La Réunion exemplifies the invented character of the idea of a world religion in close connection to ideas about secularism (Masuzawa 2005). Reunionese Hindus’ attempts at shaping Hinduism as a world religion, which are linked to wishes for institutional recognition as a religious minority and social recognition as origin-conscious French citizens, take different forms: by trying to organize themselves as a group that can negotiate with state institutions, by developing an educational infrastructure, by comparing Hinduism with Catholicism, and by orienting themselves toward India as a source of ancestral religious knowledge.

Religion, Globalization, and Diaspora

While debates about the relation between religion and globalization often focus on how globalization leads to religious transformations (Altglas 2011; Dawson 2014), religious aspirations can themselves present driving forces behind globalizing processes (Csordas 2007; Stamatov 2010). Similarly, while much scholarship on religion and diaspora focuses on how diaspora contexts engender religious transformations (e.g. Hausner and Garnett 2010; Vertovec 2004), religious projects can drive subjects to create a diasporic consciousness, for instance by drawing on perceived ancestral religions to locate themselves with regard to past, present, and future residential or symbolic places. The Reunionese case demonstrates how religious aspirations can present important globalizing forces. After a long period of sparse contact with India, some Reunionese of the younger generation began an important new orientation toward India in the 1960s and 1970s. Those who shared a feeling of having lost their ancestral religious traditions and who had enough money began to travel to India with the wish to acquire religious knowledge. Some of them also began to learn the Tamil language and create religious and cultural associations, and bring priests and temple architects from India. What started as a religious orientation has come to encompass other relations with India, including economic ones. Thus, in contrast to common assumptions about globalization provoking religious transformations, it was Reunionese Hindus’ interest in religion that led to the recent establishment of trans-local connections.

The ways Reunionese Hindus relate to India show how religious aspirations can produce different senses of diaspora (chapter 3). Diaspora does not result from mere migration but requires the active creation

of belonging—and that is not a desire all Reunionese Hindus pursue. Rather than thinking of diaspora in terms of a community, I am interested in diaspora in terms of a consciousness (Clifford 1994; Vertovec 2000: 146–53). While a visible, yet probably smaller, part of Reunionese Hindus engages in the making of a diasporic consciousness, a probably larger part does not. The ways Reunionese Hindus create and practice diaspora as a claim (Brubaker 2005) and a politics of positioning (Hall 1994) reveal the importance of the local context. While possibilities of belonging to India remain limited, even those who create contact with India do so for an origin-conscious self-positioning in Reunionese and French society.

Aspirational Pride

Rather than a mere inner state of feeling, pride is an emotion expressed in public, as well as a social practice, a discourse, and a strategy. Recent scholarship acknowledges the importance of the material and sensorial aspects of religion (Meyer 2009). Scholars of Hindu religion have emphasized the aesthetic and sensorial experiences of religion, which can engender particular emotions (Hüsken 2012; Polit 2014). The performance of rituals can cater to the multiple dimensions of Reunionese Hindus' aspirations, including their economic, social, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being. These are addressed during collective rituals, which best suit the needs of many aspiring devotees. Such rituals offer bodily and highly sensorial experiences, experiences of success, and possibilities to display wealth, faith, aesthetics, and emotions in public. Rather than focusing on the common differentiation between personal feelings, historically, socially, and culturally qualified emotions, and autonomous affects (Massumi 1995; Shouse 2005), I focus on learned and ritualized emotions (Michaels 2012) and rehearsed emotional spontaneity (Mahmood 2001). The public display of emotions during Hindu rituals and talking about these emotions, even anticipating them, repeatedly attracted my attention. Pride stands out among the other emotions expressed during Hindu rituals, like fear, pain, and relief. Although all these emotions are relational (Ahmed 2004) and can be oriented toward the public, pride in particular requires recognition from others. As Thomas Stodulka defines it, pride can be the "joy of acknowledged membership or felt inclusion within a social group" (2009: 334).

Scholarship acknowledges the importance of emotions in migration processes (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015) and the affective dimensions of transnational relations (Wise and Velayutham 2017). However, Reunionese Hindus' pride appears less as a transnational affect that connects Tamils abroad with family and society in Tamil Nadu (Wise and Velayutham 2006), and more as an emotion grounded in the socio-historical context of being French citizens with a colonial past of migration, (epistemic) violence, and cross-cultural interactions.

This pride is linked to shame to a certain extent. Scholarly assumptions of a close relation between pride and shame go so far as to describe shameful experiences as necessary to even think about pride (e.g. Sueda 2014). Members of minorities invoke the term "pride" to encourage other members to justify their claims of living their minority specificities, as for instance in LGBT Pride parades. Pride refers to the celebration of difference in public, in contrast to hiding, isolation, and shame. Despite the transformative promise of social movements from shame into pride (Britt and Heise 2000), the relation between pride and shame is ambiguously juxtaposed, as attempts to assert pride do not typically eliminate shame but remain closely linked to it (Halperin and Traub 2009; Sedgwick 2009). Reunionese Hindus' aspirational pride differs from shame-based pride to the extent that many aspiring Reunionese Hindus I met were constantly striving for a pride that focused less on a shameful present—many are indeed well-situated and self-confident—and more on their desire for greater well-being, social status, and success. Nevertheless, some Reunionese Hindus feel expected to know about their origins and may therefore feel shame when a lack of knowledge is revealed. More importantly, one can trace a historical development from shame to pride when considering former accusations of Hindu religion as sorcery.

The pride Reunionese Hindus claim in their religion is a historically grounded emotion. It embodies the awareness of the ancestors' difficulties and efforts the current generation now benefits from, and the development from an often-negative stigma to a mostly positive image of Hindu religion in La Réunion. Reunionese Hindus understand this kind of pride as something positive that people aspire to, rather than in terms of arrogance or sin. When Reunionese Hindus talk about their pride, they employ the French term *fierté* (pride, as in national pride) instead of the term *orgueil* (pride or haughtiness). A common local discourse traces a historical development in the perception of Hindu

religion from accusations of sorcery (especially by Catholic priests) in the (post)colonial era to greater recognition in Reunionese society as a legitimate world religion with orientation toward India and the world, beginning around the 1970s. *Fierté* in this sense is inherently justifiable and necessary for self-esteem, and resonates with ideas about recognition as vital for the self (Honneth 1996; Taylor 1994). In addition to justification (see Kristjánsson 2002), balance is important in Reunionese Hindus' conceptions of pride as positive, in contrast to an imbalanced or unproportioned amount of pride, which is understood as vanity or conceit (see Kövecses 1986: 59–60). *Fierté* in this sense of claiming justified pride in one's religion is different from *honneur* (honor), which Christian Ghasarian (1991) identifies as a key value to Reunionese of Indian descent and which is in many cases closely tied to the family and notions of purity.²

Fierté in the form of aspirational pride is closely linked to social class. The ways Reunionese Hindus claim pride often reflect their "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004). The struggle for recognition of Hindu religion as it is formulated by religious associations and the orientation toward India are primarily socially mobile middle-class endeavors. Middle class is a vague term. In the Weberian sense of people's economic life chances (Wright 2015), it is difficult to decide where to draw the boundaries and decide who is in the "middle." When considering people's social and cultural capital in addition to their economic capital (Bourdieu 1986), class becomes even more multifaceted. Furthermore, other aspects such as race, gender, or religiosity, as they intersect with class, can present important stratifiers. Analytically distinct from class, class consciousness denotes a "collective positional awareness vis-à-vis other groups," as Andrew Dawson assumes for the "new middle class" (2013: 135). This conscious "middleness" shows in people's acts and relationships (Chatterjee 1993: 35). Although the term "middle class" does not account for the complexity of people's social situations and life chances, and although I cannot assume that all those I saw as pursuing "middle-class aspirations" share such a consciousness, I was still often able to relate the aspirations to "advance in one's life"—as many Reunionese Hindus so often say—to their position of having both the means to engage in optimizing projects and the desire to reach out for more. "Class identities are always in the making and the 'middle class' is equally a site of belonging and a site of aspiration" (Donner 2017). Although the different forms of capital that Reunionese Hindus possess are complex, these people share the belief that they can and should reach higher. "Advancing," which has an

economic dimension but also importantly includes social status, health, and well-being, becomes a major project in their lives. Claiming pride in Hindu religion can be part of this drive to advance.

However, aspirational pride is not limited to aspiring middle class devotees. Reunionese Hindus are present in all social classes and find different ways to assert pride in their religion alongside, or even in opposition to the formulated struggle for recognition. Furthermore, the relation between Reunionese Hindus' different social positions and their relationships with India is not always straightforward. Although a certain financial and educational capital is necessary to acquire knowledge about Hindu religion by traveling to India or to display wealth and devotional aesthetics during public processions, some who would have the necessary capital choose not to relate to India. The local context, which is decisive for the study of "Hindus" in La Réunion, is complex.

Reunionese Hindus

My decision to speak of Reunionese "Hindus" was not an easy one. Many Reunionese employ the local appellations *Malbar* or *Tamoul* rather than the French term *Hindou*, but not everyone identifies with these terms, wherein religious orientation and ethnic origins are conflated. In addition to *Malbar*³ (denoting Hindu and/or Indian origins), local appellations in La Réunion include *Kaf* (African origins), *Malgas/Malgache* (Madagascan origins), *Zarabe/Z'arabe* (Muslim Indian origins), *Sinwa/Chinois* (Chinese origins), *Yab* (descendants of *Petit-Blancs*, European settlers who typically lived in the mountains rather than in coastal areas), and *Zorey/Zoreil* (Metropolitan French). All terms have variant spellings and can have negative connotations. As some people may even be offended by either of these local terms, I only use them when reproducing the exact terms people used.

Writing about "Reunionese" Hindus emphasizes the local particularities of the historical and ethnographic context. *Métissage*, strict assimilationist politics, and the dominant role of the Catholic Church come together to produce a setting wherein most Reunionese Hindus have ancestors from different parts of the world, are also Catholic and/or pursue other religious orientations, and speak French and Creole, while very few can speak Indian languages. While there are Hindus of Gujarati and Pondicherrian origin, many of whom have maintained (ethnic) endogamy, the majority of Reunionese Hindus have South Indian

roots combined with ancestors from places such as Madagascar, Africa, France, and China. Furthermore, linked to this importance of *métissage*, I witnessed very little evidence of caste during my fieldwork.

While France does not allow a religious census, my interlocutors usually estimated the number of Hindus or people of Indian origin (*Malbar/Tamoul/Hindou/Indien*) at around 30 percent of island's more than 850,000 inhabitants. This percentage may represent a generous self-assessment, especially by activists who work toward recognition of Hindus as a religious minority. The fact that religious and ethnic categories are often conflated in these estimations makes the percentage even more problematic.⁴ Both Hindu religion and Indian origin are difficult to define as categories in Reunionese society because of people's diverse religious orientations and rich *métissage*. For the same reasons, estimated numbers I have heard of a *Kaf*-mixed majority population with more than 30 percent, and smaller minorities of *Zarabe* and *Sinwa* with less than 10 percent each, are equally problematic. Creole is particularly difficult to define. While Creole in the Caribbean refers to the encounter of African and European heritage, which excludes Indo-Caribbeans ideologically and conceptually (Munasinghe 2006), and many Indo-Mauritians look down on those referred to as Creole in Mauritius (Eisenlohr 2006), many of my Reunionese interlocutors did not use the term to specifically denote a particular ethnic group. Despite perceptions that contrast Reunionese of Indian descent with Reunionese Creoles, here referring to descendants of French impoverished colonizers, also called *Petits Blancs*, who mixed with people of other origins (Andoche 2000; Benoist 1979: 13,19; Ghasarian 1991: 147), many of my interlocutors spoke of Creole more to refer to Reunionese society at large, with its diverse compositions of cultural forms. *Malbar* and Creole therefore do not necessarily exclude one another.

Whatever the percentage of Hindus in La Réunion, Hindu religious activities are very visible in public and have especially attracted young Reunionese in recent decades. Hindus are more visible in La Réunion than in the French overseas departments Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean, where Indian immigration was not as numerous (Singaravelou 1990). Furthermore, the majority of Indian immigrants to these three French overseas departments came from South India, whereas many other postindenture contexts in the Caribbean, on Fiji, and on La Réunion's neighboring island in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius, had more immigrants from North India. In La Réunion, the Hindu landscape of temples and practices therefore has primarily South Indian roots.

Just as it is impossible to describe the situation of Hindus in Reunionese society in numbers, their situation cannot be described in hierarchies. The relational field of religious, ethnic, and social identities is complex. In contrast to Caribbean societies, which scholars view as emerging from a dialectical relationship between white ruling and black subordinate classes and between white racism and black nationalism (Hall 1977; Mills 2010), ethno-social hierarchies are less clear in La Réunion. Ethnic differentiations and conflicts do exist, but they are complex in the context of rich *métissage*, where ethnic identification becomes even less self-evident as in some other societies. Furthermore, Reunionese Hindus can be found across all of La Réunion's social classes. Thanks to their presence in prestigious professions, including the transport business, in the town hall administration, and as teachers, lawyers, or medical doctors, Reunionese Hindus are often associated with social mobility. The visibility of the community and the display of costly aesthetics during religious festivals contributes to this image. This reputation should, however, not overshadow the difficult economic situation of other Reunionese Hindus. I have met Reunionese Hindus of diverse social backgrounds who claim recognition of their religion and pursue the desire for social mobility relative to their social situation.

La Réunion is a peculiar social-economic construct, where a high population density coincides with high levels of unemployment and simultaneously with a high cost of living. After the colonial sugar industry declined, La Réunion was left without any significant economy. In 1946, it became a French overseas department, but the 1950s and 1960s were still characterized by social disillusionment, increasing unemployment, and an understaffed health system (Combeau 2010). It was only in the 1980s that the French socialist governments introduced a social welfare system. Furthermore, as a result of their attempts at decentralization, La Réunion gained the status of a *région*, in addition to that of a *département*, which raised the level of self-governance, for instance with regard to economic development, infrastructure, and education. Today, the island's economy is strongly subsidized by the French state and by the European Union. Some call the *département's* strong dependency on France "neocolonial." La Réunion had attained 65 percent of the national GDP per capita in 2015, the time of my fieldwork.⁵ Unemployment stood at 52.4 percent for young people aged fifteen to twenty-four, and 24.6 percent for the total population in 2015.⁶ Many young Reunionese are confronted with a combination of unemployment and an extremely

high cost of living, with prices 7.1 percent higher than in Metropolitan France in 2015. For instance, the price of a car, an essential means of transport given the underdeveloped public transport system, is 24 percent higher than in Metropolitan France,⁷ an issue I also had to deal with. Despite unemployment, many Reunionese are reluctant to seek work overseas. Government schemes to encourage migration to Metropolitan France tend to be associated with coercion and negative experiences of desolate living conditions and racism (Ascaride and Vitale 2008). Against this trend, a recent increase in student migration (Watin and Wolff 2014) was also reflected in my young interlocutors' paths, many of whom showed an interest in the world and went abroad for their studies or work, for example as *au pairs*. Furthermore, the official numbers of unemployment do not take into account the undeclared work that numerous Reunionese perform in addition to receiving state aid. Although the scolarization rate is still lower than in Metropolitan France, young Reunionese have benefited from longer education than their parents' generation, who grew up in plantation-society-like conditions, and are said to have become more aspirational (Roinsard 2008).

Reunionese Hindus' religious practices and identification can help with working toward successful selves and pursuing aspirations for bodily, emotional, and economic well-being, and social status. Reunionese Hindus' claims of pride in their religion are part of a wider trend to draw on ancestral religions for an origin-conscious self-positioning in Reunionese society, which can overlap with claiming pride in Reunionese Creole culture or other ancestral traditions. Although Hindu pride is an important aim and tool of Hindu nationalism in India and in the diaspora, also favored by experiences of racism, aiming at making people proud of their heritage, wherein "Hinduness" and "Indianness" are conflated (Falcone 2012), Reunionese Hindus' quests for religious knowledge are not linked to Hindu nationalist organizations and ideologies. Those who travel to India have started to do so as individuals. Even those who frequent the Chinmaya Mission or Arsha Vidya Ashram, two of La Réunion's ashrams, are in most cases unaware of these networks' links to Hindu nationalism. Few Hindus in La Réunion are interested in Indian politics. At the same time, the Indian government seems less interested in the small French island than in neighboring island Mauritius, or in other places in the diaspora that have a large number of non-resident Indians who contribute considerable remittances. Rather than engaging in Hindu nationalist projects, Reunionese Hindus seek recognition from Reunionese society and the French state.

Furthermore, my focus on Reunionese Hindus' claims of pride should not let the reader assume a "Hindu pride movement" similar to Gay Pride or Black Pride movements. No such thing has been proclaimed in La Réunion. Reunionese Hindus' claims of pride do not have any institutional link to movements outside of the island either. Although the socio-historical circumstances of postindenture contexts differ, for instance in terms of the regional backgrounds of Indian immigrants (for example, coming more from North or South India), their percentages of the postindenture populations (presenting a majority or small/significant minority), and the state forms of the postindenture societies (for example, being an independent state or an overseas department), there are some similar themes and questions when it comes to local self-positioning and claiming pride in ancestral and local heritage. In a 2010 letter to the editor of a South African newspaper by a South African of Indian descent, the writer states four times that he is proud of his heritage and of his ancestors who carried out difficult work and fought for justice (Schröder 2015: 377–78). Such public assertions of pride demonstrate the necessity to point out this pride to others. They often explicitly claim pride in the background of Indian indenture. In 1973, the Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh called for a self-confident identification with the term "coolie." She asked descendants of Indian indentured laborers in postindenture societies to proudly valorize the historical hardships and achievements of their ancestors and to state the words "I am a Coolie" (Singh [1973] 1996). In the 1990s, the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully formulated *coolitude* in the style of *négritude*, considering the indenture background of people of Indian descent and emphasizing the dreadful transoceanic journeys that indentured laborers had to survive (Carter and Torabully 2002). However, Reunionese Hindus rarely claim the notions of *coolitude*, *indianité*, or *malbarité*.⁸ Rather than forming an official movement, claiming pride shows in many Reunionese Hindus' everyday lives and presents a core aspiration that underlies their religious and social negotiations.

Following the People: Challenges and Serendipity

The idea behind conducting twelve months of anthropological fieldwork in La Réunion (2014–2015), followed by five weeks in 2017, was to experience a full festival cycle. But long-term ethnographic fieldwork was beneficial in many more ways. It was necessary to see what more

there is than what people say. It made me find out about what is beyond people's claims for formal recognition and to recognize the importance of the emotional dimensions. Long-term ethnographic fieldwork also shows us how everything is in process. It impacted my attention to pride as one form of felt recognition and as a social strategy that works as a process rather than as a state of affairs. But anthropological fieldwork also comes with multiple challenges. In the following, I describe the insights I gained through my stays with two different host families. I reflect on how I conducted research about Hindu religion as a woman and without being Hindu. I also discuss how I dealt with the importance many of my interlocutors attributed to Facebook.

Without any contact in La Réunion prior to arrival, I found my first host family in the capital Saint-Denis via airbnb.com. It was a Catholic family of Madagascan origins and consisted of sixty-year-old Michelle, her mother, her daughter Anaïs, and two sons who stayed at her house more or less regularly, while another son was living in Metropolitan France. I never met Michelle's husband during my stay, but one of her brothers sometimes came over to lie drunk on the sofa. While I got along well with Michelle and Anaïs, conflicts between Michelle and a son's girlfriend, Elodie, gradually evolved and also affected my stay. Elodie often talked to me about temples and her Hindu family on the west side of the island. By contrast, although Michelle skeptically allowed me to go to most temples in the beginning, she became less and less approving. As the tension between Michelle and Elodie increased, Elodie started telling me about Michelle reproaching me for bringing evil back home from the temple. My naïve act of once placing sacrificed cooked goat meat, which I had been given after a ceremony in a temple, in Michelle's fridge did not help improve the atmosphere. At the time, I had not yet known about the severity of food distinctions between *Malgaches* and *Malbars*.⁹ Those Reunionese who value their Madagascan origins distinguish themselves through eating beef but refrain from eating goat. By contrast, those who cherish their Indian origins do not eat beef, but goat sacrifice is an important identity-establishing practice in many Hindu temples. In the first four months of my stay, I thus learned much about the mutual descriptions of *Malgache* and *Malbar*, and I myself experienced different levels of being an outsider/insider. I tried to be part of my host family and learned to be careful about how to describe them to people in the temples, who suspiciously asked me whether they even allowed me to come to the temple. As I became closer to the devotees in the temples, my perspective on my host family increasingly

vacillated between feeling part of it and belonging to another group. Then I decided that it would be good to move. Elodie invited me to her grandparents.

These lovely grandparents, whom I call Mémé and Pépé, adopted me as one of their many (grand)children. After the first four months in the capital, I spent the remaining eight months of my fieldwork with them on the west side of the island. Their bright and colorful living room with glass doors leading to a terrace presented a big difference from my first accommodation—one of the small flat houses in the island's capital with little sunlight and covered with corrugated iron, under which you almost suffocate during the hot nights. At the age of seventy-nine, my new host grandparents did not hesitate to take me, a new acquaintance of one of their grandchildren, as a long-term guest and treat me like a family member. Although I am around the same age as their grandchildren, Mémé affectionately called me *ma fiy*, which can mean “my girl” or “my daughter.” When meeting people on the street, Pépé jokingly presented me as his youngest daughter (*ma dernière fille*). I at once took part in family life with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, who stopped by every day. They included me in their family rituals, and I observed everyday religious practices at home, such as Mémé lighting the lamp at the shrine in the living room, or a grandchild coming by with flowers to clean the family temple and pray.

As George Marcus (1995) suggests for multi-sited ethnography, the researcher should define her field of study by following the people, the thing, the metaphor, the story, the biography, or the conflict. While I did not physically follow people in their transnational movements—although listening to several-hour narrations on their trips to India felt as if I had actually joined them—I nevertheless adopted the idea of following the people. Rather than limiting my fieldwork to some specific places of worship, I followed the practitioners. They led me to numerous different places, including public temples, their family temples, shops, Bharatanatyam classes and performances, Tamil classes at university, and India-related cultural events, as well as Facebook. But this also included activities and places without religious connections, such as hanging out in people's homes or joining them at the beach, to go hiking or on road trips. This was sometimes pleasant and at other times exhausting; sometimes it felt rewarding and at other times like a waste of time. I loved hiking but could not develop a passion for driving around for hours just for the sake of a road trip. But whatever the case, I felt this was necessary to observe different ways of life.

Although I had not known anyone in La Réunion before my fieldwork, after two months I was overwhelmed by the activities that I could take part in. Reunionese Hindus can choose from a vast number of temple festivals and other cultural events, which can also lead to social stress. Busy families sometimes become quite tense about the number of decisions they need to make, between invitations to life cycle rituals of family members held at the same time as important festivals in temples, *bhajans*¹⁰ at an ashram, and other cultural events. I was also quickly overcome by these stresses—I was invited to a Karly¹¹ festival, an international Indian Arts festival, and Dipavali¹² celebrations all at the same time—and the management of priorities remained a difficult task throughout my fieldwork.

While being a white person never affected my permission to enter temples—and I was not the only white person—access to temples requires the respect of certain purity rules. These include, for instance, removing footwear before entering the temple, and very importantly, observing certain food restrictions. What is called *karèm/carème* (fasting) usually consists of the abstinence from meat, fish, eggs, alcohol, and sexual relations or other pleasures, such as attending parties. To be on the safe side, I always fasted at least three days before going to a temple, although some priests told me that one day was enough, so long as I ate only chicken or fish, but not pork or beef. Apart from some meals prepared by my first host mother in the first few weeks of my stay, who was not at all pleased to see me go vegetarian to assist ceremonies in Hindu temples, I never ate beef during that year. In addition to the usual three days of fasting, I also conducted the ten- or eighteen-day fasts for the *kavadi*¹³ and fire walking¹⁴ festivals that I participated in. While I was rather relieved not to have to eat meat twice a day, renouncing meat, and poultry in particular, was much harder for most Reunionese than for me. Fasting played an important role in many conversations in the temples. During the longer fasts, people often articulated their shared suffering or exchanged recipes that met the requirements. Furthermore, there are many different personal interpretations of fasting rules, including sleeping on the floor when fasting before an act of penitence, refraining from shaving, or abstaining from watching television or using Facebook, etc.

Purity rules also prohibit women from entering the temple when menstruating, which I solved by carefully planning my intake of hormones to meet all important dates. In addition to certain access rules for temples, being a woman also influenced my willingness to follow

the people in certain situations. When my questioning about magical practices was answered with sexual advances by two men, I decided not to pursue the topic any further. I had been completely unprepared for these advances, as both were from men I thought I had built trust with and who were related to my host grandparents. This shows that increasing intimacy with people in the field can also increase ones' vulnerability, and the "home" can become a particularly vulnerable place (Kloß 2016: 411). Although in retrospect, I think that the two men's attempts would probably have happened independent of the topic of my inquiry, I did not feel like pursuing the topic much further at the time, and I unfortunately never met women who shared with me how they performed magic. From these and other fieldwork experience, I have come to understand fieldwork as a highly gendered and emotional experience.

My status as a researcher undertaking participant observation changed gradually. In contrast to the role of a student, which people in the temples had often seen me as at the beginning of my research, the first time I was seen as a practitioner was during my car's blessing ceremony. To follow the practitioners in their sometimes highly mobile religious lives to numerous temples on the island, I needed to buy a car. Aware of the dense traffic, the high number of road deaths, and the sometimes dangerous weather conditions (with heavy rainfalls and landslides during cyclone season), I was enthusiastic when Elodie asked me whether I wanted to have my car blessed. Her family planned to conduct a hair cutting ritual for a grandchild, and Elodie suggested that they could perform a car blessing ceremony on the same day. I immediately agreed and quickly managed all the paper work with the insurance company, which was not a problem when I told the insurance staff the reason for the rush. The staff told me that almost all of them had protective figures in their cars, although mostly Catholic ones. In the meantime, Elodie's uncle had given her a list of the ceremonial utensils and offerings we had to buy. For me, a student, it all seemed quite expensive: 50 euros for the ceremonial items, plus another 50 euros as an offering to the temple. However, when I learned over the course of my research about the usual costs in other temples, especially during festivals, 100 euros seemed like nothing. We prepared my offering plate, and after prayers, wherein my name was included, to all the divinities in the family temple, and after the baby's hair cutting ceremony, it was my car's turn. Elodie, who had seen me film and take pictures of religious events before, suggested documenting us performing the ritual. Sitting

on the veranda of the house, several meters away because she was menstruating and therefore considered ritually impure, she took pictures with my camera of her uncle's and grandfather's ritual acts in the courtyard. She then took a series of pictures of me as I was encouraged with gestures by her brother and grandfather to drive back and forth over limes on betel leaves in front of each wheel of my car. Throughout the remaining ten months of my fieldwork, I did not have a car accident.

In addition to my car, my camera was an important tool. When I could not assist at another family ritual some months later, Elodie asked me to leave my camera with the family so that they could document it for me. People also sometimes asked me to print pictures I had taken during ceremonies. One family asked me to film a ceremony. My camera's presence, in addition to my own presence, certainly impacted on the situations that I recorded and observed. However, I was not alone; many practitioners also take pictures. Some seem to observe the rituals more through the lenses of their cameras and smart phones than directly (Figure 0.1), and semi-official photographers document most temple festivals and upload their pictures on particular Facebook pages.



Figure 0.1. Spectators taking pictures and filming a fire walking ritual, La Réunion, 2015. Photo by the author.

My taking pictures rather lined up with the common practice of documenting Hindu practices in La Réunion.

At the beginning of my research, several priests, temple presidents, and practitioners told me that they were proud of having a German student studying them. In contrast to Metropolitan French and other tourists, I was seen as a serious student, who even knew some Tamil and had been to India several times. Moreover, many appreciated that I was learning the Creole language, which helped me to better understand my interlocutors, in particular those who only spoke Creole with me. Furthermore, the families who were most involved with organizing the festivals acknowledged my engagement in helping the women with the cooking and other preparations in the mornings, while they often reproached some other practitioners for not helping enough. Although the intimacy with the women meant I was, unfortunately, sometimes caught up in conflicts and backbiting, it allowed me to listen to the women's life stories and their daily problems. In the temples where I conducted the ten- and eighteen-day fasts, it was very important for the responsible families to tell me that I had become part of the family. My status as a student became increasingly unclear. I wore Indian clothes (necessary when entering most temples), I learned to always carry a piece of camphor to burn at the end of ceremonies, I held the fasts with the practitioners, I helped with the preparations, my name was included in the prayers. Eventually, I was asked whether I wanted to walk on fire!

Two priests asked me this question several times, sometimes less and sometimes more seriously. Their inquiry in turn raised questions for me about my role as an ethnographer: Should I walk on fire or not? Carry *kavadi* or not? Contribute financially to the festivals? And if so, how much? These decisions not only concerned festivals, but already started when entering the temple. Should I make the tour of the temple to pray to all divinities when entering or not? Should I fall down on my knees in front of the divinities or not? Should I burn camphor at the end of the ceremonies or not? How should I find a balance between participation and observation? I dealt with these questions in a rather inconsistent manner. I did not walk on fire. I did not carry *kavadi*. But I did join the practitioners in many other practices. In effect, I did what many Reunionese Hindus do: I chose to perform certain acts and not to perform others.

The fact that I usually do not practice any religion myself may seem problematic when it comes to finding out why people invest so much

time, energy, and money into religion. However, this does not mean that I could not empathize with the practitioners or that I could not relate to the sensory aspects of religious rituals. I could, for instance, learn to experience certain emotions (see Hüsken 2012: 135). Despite my sensitivity and intrinsic hate for noise, I became so used to the deafening drums in temples during ceremonies, which create an atmosphere of intense excitement and have now come to symbolize the social atmosphere of the temple to me, that I missed these rhythms during the Reunionese church services I attended on important occasions like first communions and funerals. These emotional reactions to the drums still come back to me when I watch videos and listen to the sounds back home at my desk. After all, the difficulty of grasping religious experiences is similar to the fundamental challenge inherent in participant observation itself, the sheer impossibility to achieve an emic perspective. Furthermore, an important challenge of participant observation lies in the difficulty of uniting the contradiction between the closeness reached through participation and the distance needed for observation. It is the aim of the anthropologist to gain an inside perspective and at the same time see what is unnoticed by others. I have tried to find a balance. My attentiveness to pride results from my focus on the material, bodily, and sensory religious experiences and their social implications.

Following the practitioners also included following their life stories and their hopes and dreams. I recorded narrative biographical interviews, which sometimes required several meetings. In contrast to interviews with officials in education and administration, which were loosely guided by more precise questions, I usually asked people to tell me about their lives and their religious practices since childhood, which they often positioned even earlier, starting their narrations with their grandparents and parents. I then tried to follow the topics that came up during this first narration. I tried to ask narration-generating instead of "why" questions to again encourage narrations instead of explanations. Only at the end of our conversations did I ask prepared questions that indirectly approached the aspirations behind their acts of penitence, their relations to other religions, to India, to Metropolitan France, and to other places. This approach allowed me to decipher the role that religion played in people's lives. It particularly helped me to avoid thinking in terms of an Indian diaspora. However, even when unstructured, interviews have their limitations. I was impressed by how many interviewees were able to narrate their lives in such a coherent order, as if they had reflected upon it several times beforehand. What people say and what

people do can differ, and their actions may be more ambiguous than their narrations. By joining them in their daily lives, by sharing moments inside and outside the religious context with them, I tried to balance their narrations and my observations, which I see as complementary.

Following the practitioners also included retracing people's social networks, offline and online. The masses of information provided on the social platform Facebook were quite challenging for me as a researcher. I could have spent twenty-four hours a day scrolling through the happenings on Facebook. I therefore decided to focus my analysis on selected users I regularly spent offline time with to see the continuations and differences between their offline and online self-presentations. Even if "only" Facebook friends could see their profiles, one can perceive it as a rather public space, as the circle of Facebook friends often includes distant acquaintances. At the same time, Facebook users sometimes share very private moments. Observing the choices of what to display on Facebook and how to comment was extremely interesting from the beginning, and remained important, even after my fieldwork, especially when I realized that I wanted to write about pride. Many people pursue the ideals of pious and beautiful selves both in their offline and online lives, where they often take the form of selfies. Like in offline interactions, people seek others' appreciation on Facebook. This appreciation can then be measured qualitatively through the comments and quantitatively through the number of comments and likes. The self can therefore be understood as "co-constructed" on Facebook, as it is "produced with an audience in mind, it is constructed through ongoing performative interactions, as well as consisting of the contributions of Friends" (Owen 2014: 2). Although the researcher needs to be aware of the different sets of data, I did not want to undertake a strict hierarchization in the case of Facebook. Interactions on Facebook are not less "real" than offline interactions, which is why I refrain from terming the online world "virtual." Instead, communication on Facebook is often continuous with offline communication. For instance, discussions started in the temple are continued on Facebook and vice versa. In most cases, communication does not happen anonymously but is embedded in already existing social networks. Thus, rather than examining the online world as separated from the offline world, I regard them as "integrated spheres of interaction" (Campbell and Lövheim 2011: 1083).

Every generation finds new ways of living and negotiating religion. The what could be called 1968 generation of Reunionese Hindus initiated a reorientation toward India and enjoyed increased visibility in

public. Today's younger generation introduced Facebook as an important space for religious negotiations. More developments will come. The insights I obtained during my fieldwork in 2014–15, with a five-week follow-up in 2017, therefore present a snapshot in time.

Structure of the Book

In the chapters of this book, I show different ways Hindu religion can become a source of pride in La Réunion. Often presented as a historical development from accusations of sorcery to being able to take pride in Hinduism (1), Reunionese Hindus claim pride in their very acts of claiming recognition (2), in India and in local religious practices (3), in religious knowledge (4), which is diverse (5), and in ritual emotions and aesthetics (6).

I open the book by contextualizing Reunionese Hindus (1) and how they relate to France (2) and India (3). In chapter 1, I trace some historical developments of Hindu religion in La Réunion and the complexity of the diverse Reunionese society with reference to the global phenomena of colonialism, slavery, indenture, and other contexts of migration, and with regard to La Réunion's status as a French overseas department today. The chapter also includes a bird's eye view on Reunionese Hindu temples, deities, and festivals.

Recognition from Reunionese society and the French state is a key aspiration of some Reunionese Hindus. In chapter 2, I show how the creation of religious associations works toward shaping a religion administrable by the laicist French state and toward a knowledge-based religion through the creation of educational media. In particular, I look at two cases of "struggling" for institutional or formal recognition: the debate about public holidays and the presence of Hindu religion on television. These struggles show that the French state does not give Hindu religion the recognition that some Reunionese Hindus demand, but that the local administration finds ways to locally adapt French laicism. As the process of claiming recognition can itself be a source of pride to Reunionese Hindus, the felt dimensions of such recognition processes are at least as important as any achieved institutional recognition.

In addition to their relation with Reunionese administration and the French state, India is important to some Reunionese Hindus for their self-positioning in Reunionese society. In chapter 3, I demonstrate how Reunionese Hindus create different senses of diaspora. To a prob-

ably larger part of Reunionese Hindus, India is of no particular interest, and some strategically reject India as a reference point in their lives. A probably smaller but visible part of Reunionese Hindus has been creating a diasporic consciousness since the 1970s that did not exist before. Contrary to assumptions that globalization merely leads to religious transformations rather than the other way round, these Reunionese Hindus' orientation toward India reveals that religious aspirations can work as driving forces in initiating new globalizing processes. However, even for those who take part in such an orientation toward India, belonging to India remains limited as most lack the transcultural skills needed, and their interest in India goes largely unreciprocated. Instead, they benefit from the diasporic consciousness they have created by adopting an origin-conscious approach to self-positioning in Reunionese society.

Chapter 4 is about how priests and practitioners pursue projects of self-making and recognition by acquiring religious knowledge, which can become an important source of pride vis-à-vis different audiences. Reunionese priests use both newly acquired religious knowledge from India and local Reunionese knowledge to claim that the Hindu religion should be recognized as a religion with the same standing as Catholicism. At the same time, priests and practitioners use religious knowledge to distinguish themselves socially and culturally among Reunionese Hindus. Gender differences in religious and social negotiations become especially apparent in some women's use of Facebook.

The performance of religious practices both to justify claims for recognition from Reunionese society and for drawing distinctions between Reunionese Hindus does not reveal clear hierarchies between different forms of religious knowledge. In chapter 5, I consider how Reunionese Hindus reveal different approaches to the locally important concept of "double religiosity," as well as to different sacrificial acts, including animal sacrifices, and different attitudes toward magico-religious practices. Their acts of bricolage demonstrate how claims of pride and recognition need to be negotiated between creative possibilities and complex limits. Some Reunionese Hindus reveal strategic ways of engaging with diverse religious and magico-religious practices that reflect their economic, social, and personal aspirations.

The relation between religious practices, personal aspirations, and attempts at distinction becomes even more evident in chapter 6. During my fieldwork, I was fascinated by the amount of time, money, and energy that people invested in religion. The decoration of temples and the

wearing of expensive clothes reveal elaborate aesthetics, as well as great effort and financial expenditure. Indeed, social capital is sometimes literally bought with this expenditure. Emotions during rituals also become part of this religious aesthetics, and the ability to feel such strong emotions is itself something to be proud of. Practitioners need to find the right balance between exhibiting too much pride, which could be criticized as showing off, and claiming justified pride and recognition.

I conclude the book by reflecting upon the importance of the emotional dimensions of recognition when studying religious, political, and other identitarian movements. Research with a sensitivity toward such felt dimensions of recognition would provide more comprehensive perspectives on the aspirations of people and social movements with their powerful emotional layers.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms that correspond to the person's gender and to the origin of their actual names (Christian/European or Hindu/Indian). Many Reunionese Hindus of the elder generation have Christian names, reflecting the historical situation of La Réunion, where parents were not allowed to give their children Indian first names (chapter 2). To protect the people in this book further, I have changed details of their life stories.
2. Our different research foci might in part stem from the different milieus wherein we undertook our ethnographic fieldwork. Whereas Ghasarian concentrated his research on Reunionese families of Indian origin that maintained ethnic endogamy, my research included many Reunionese Hindus of multiple origins.
3. Different explanations exist for the term *Malbar*. Some suggest that the term originally denoted the migrants from the Malabar Coast in Kerala who arrived in La Réunion in the eighteenth century, and that the term was then used for all following migrants from India (René Kichenin in Barat 1989: 174–75), or to differentiate South Indians in general from North Indians (Lacpatia 2009: 15). By contrast, Barat suggests that the Coromandel Coast used to be called al-Ma'bar by the Arabs in the Middle Ages, and the Portuguese and French later called the Tamil population Malabar. He documents use of the term in La Réunion in the eighteenth century, before the beginning of indenture (Barat 1989: 175–76). The Hobson-Jobson Anglo-Indian Dictionary offers more precise explanations: the term seems to originate from the Dravidian term *malai* (mountain) and the suffix *-bār* that Arabic-Persian mariners of the Gulf applied to the regions they visited. The Portuguese subsequently applied the term *Malabar* not only to the language and people in what today is Kerala, but also to the Tamil language and people (Yule

- 1903: 539–42). The term was thus already used more generally in India before coming to La Réunion.
4. Daniel Minienpoullé, president of the Fédération Tamoule, writes that 33 percent of the population are of Indian origin (2014: 153). In census estimations by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) from 1987, “Malbars” (here defined as descendants of South Indian indentured laborers) were estimated to make up 19.55 percent of the Reunionese population, presenting the third largest group behind 35.2 percent of “Caf,” who are here defined as Black and mixed Reunionese of slavery descent, and 29.33 percent of “Créole Blancs” (White Creoles) (Barat 1989: 172).
 5. Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. “Bilan économique 2015–La Réunion: la croissance se maintient.” Retrieved 16 October 2017 from <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2018740?sommaire=2018756>.
 6. Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. “L’emploi augmente et le chômage recule: Enquête Emploi en continu 2015.” Retrieved 16 October 2017 from <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2019733>.
 7. Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. “Les prix sont plus élevés de 7,1% à La Réunion: Comparaison des prix avec la France métropolitaine en 2015.” Retrieved 16 October 2017 from <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1908449>.
 8. Apart from a research group in La Réunion that works on *malbarité*: Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches sur la Malbarité (GERM). Retrieved 12 May 2017 from <http://germ.monsite-orange.fr/index.html>.
 9. I employ the local terms here, as people who explained these food restrictions to me usually contrasted these two appellations.
 10. Joint singing of religious or spiritual songs.
 11. Names of gods are written in Reunionese French or Creole and thus may differ from their Indian equivalents.
 12. Dipavali is a Hindu festival of lights.
 13. Carrying *kavadi*, which consists of carrying burdens in a procession, is a devotional practice for the god Mourouga. It often also includes body piercing.
 14. Fire walking is called *marsh dann fé* in Creole, or *marche sur le feu* in French, and sometimes *tīmiti* (Tamil).

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