Attitudes towards 'Racial Mixing' in Colonial French-India

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Resumen

Actualmente Puducherry es como un coctel en términos de nacionalidades, lenguas, religiones y varios marcadores sociales. Esta situación es una consecuencia de la historia de la Unión de Territorios, en gran parte, influenciada por la herencia colonial. Este ensayo sirve de telón de fondo a la investigación que propongo realizar como tesis final del Máster en Antropología Social y Cultural, y se centra en la dinámica actual de exclusión e inclusión en contextos determinados en White Town, Puducherry. Con este ensayo me aproximaré a las diferentes actitudes que las colonias tenían hacia las poblaciones de 'razas-mixtas' en la India francesa.

Palabras clave: Pondicherry; *Métis*; Raza-Mixta; India francesa

Abstract

Present day Puducherry is a mixed pot in terms of nationalities, languages, religions and various social markers. The situation is a consequence of the Union Territory's history, largely influenced by Its colonial heritage. This essay acts as a backdrop to my proposed research project for the final thesis for the Master's in Social and Cultural Anthropology, which focuses on the current dynamic of Inclusion and Exclusion under certain contexts in White Town, Puducherry. This essay begins to study the different attitudes colonies had towards 'mixed-race' populations, primarily in French India.

Keywords: French-Pondicherry; *Métis*; Mixed-Race; Colonial Governance; French-India; Exclusion

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Introduction.

Cultures and cultural differences have gained new importance in the past decade in anthropology. This stems from the exploration of not only how globalization affects the discipline's classical themes but also to focus on the various ways in which cultural differences and wedges are conceived at their source. Stemming from a few basic ideas of Verena Stolcke in her paper, *Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe*, I will use the theme of new forms of racism, human nature to reject 'strangers' and the rhetoric of exclusion (Stolcke, 1993) in my research field of Puducherry[1]. It would be helpful to note here, French India, or the *Établissements français dans l'inde*, began in the second half of the 17th century and lasted until 1954. The establishments included Pondicherry, Karaikal, Yanam, Mahé and Chandernagore[2]. This paper begins with a brief explanation to justify why a historical approach has been used for the purpose of this essay and moves on to introduce the topic using Verena Stolcke's "problem" of Third World immigration in the 1990s, based on cultural differences. Under the following heading, the field sites of Pondicherry and Chandernagore are presented which are the prime examples used in this essay. Under the different attitudes on 'racial-mixing', the paper will follow different subjects of religious conversion, colonial soldiers in Europe, the idea of 'whiteness' and *métis* and *topas* populations; respectively. The matter then moves to the difference among 'citizens' due to colonial realities and the importance of "blood over law" in the 19th century. The paper will briefly introduce Danna Agmon's paper on trading on kinship in colonial India to highlight the different trajectories colonial governance took on the premise of rule. The conclusion is a brief one simply closing the essay on the ambiguous nature of the dynamic of differences and the role played by colonial taxonomy.

I propose a historical approach for this essay in order to provide a necessary base to begin the discussion of what kind of differences one may witness in this particular population today. While the final thesis is to be a product of ethnography, this essay aims to explore causes through the temporal colonization of Pondicherry, now Puducherry, which led to the sentiment of segregation and difference.

Stolcke postulates in her paper that human nature tends to reject 'strangers' (Stolcke, 1993). She addresses this with regard to the "problem" of Third World immigration in Europe and the development of the political rhetoric of exclusion in which Third World immigrants are seen as potential threats to the "host" country on grounds of being culturally different. I would like to use this premise to explain the different kinds of discrimination occurring in Pondy, not as a threat to national security but as members of a society.

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[1] Puducherry is the current name of the Union Territory previously called Pondicherry. It was renamed in 2006. As called by the locals, this paper will also use Its colloquial term 'Pondy' in a few instances.

[2] Retrieved from www.wikipedia.com.

Pondicherry and Chandernagore.

The French colonies of Pondicherry and Chandernagore were both divided into 'white' and 'black' towns to spatially differentiate the European residents and colonial officials from those classified as the 'natives'. Two divergent worlds were so created in accordance with the spatial politics of imperial power grafted by the urban landscape. *La ville blanche*, in both cities, are situated in a manner to accustom for the main buildings of the Company and French administration, the docks and trading warehouses (Carton, 2012: 63). So in Chandernagore *la ville blanche* is situated on the banks of the Hooghly river and in Pondicherry *la ville noir* is situated inland while *la ville blanche* lies facing the Bay of Bengal.

> In 1756, Chandernagore had a total population of 27,856, which comprised of only 444 Europeans who inhabited *la ville blanche* and 27,412 Indians who inhabited *la ville noir*. The white town comprised of 267 houses for the 444 European resident, while the blak town had 6,307 smaller dwellings for the 27,412 Indian residents. (Carton, 2012: 63)

The ratio of houses to number of people prominently appears to be in favor of the Europeans. They were privileged in terms of physical space and their proximity to sites of institutional power. The visible economic distinctions between white and black towns were clearly pronounced.

Attitudes Towards Racial-Mixing in India.

The racial demarcation on the basis of color as it so prominently suggests was largely arbitrary and artificial. In his book, Carton writes of a British army officer in the 1840s; Albert Hervey, while travelling through India, remarked on his finding of how "tawny-faced Frenchmen and their families" were living in Pondicherry in the wide grid-patterned streets, walking along the seafront promenade and the imposing whitewashed colonial buildings reminding him of the ambience of any coastal town in the south of France (Carton, 2012: 63). The 1789 census for Pondicherry had already revealed by that time at least one third of the population of *la ville blanche* in Pondy had Indian origins (Antony, 1982). The number was double in Chandernagore where those of *métis* and *topas* origin formed the majority of the 'European' population. The point I am trying to make at this juncture is that those who were eligible to be classified as Europeans and lived in *la ville blanche* hint at what may be defined to be 'white' in these French settlements. In the words of Charles Mills, "whiteness if not really a color at all, but a set of power relations' (1997: 127).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the notion of what it meant to be part of the 'French race' was different from the modern conception of race and meanings of color as part of lineage of type, in France and Its overseas settlements. Rather than simply the color of skin, what it meant to be French was based on a cultural, religious and linguistic belonging. 'Frenchness' was defined by aspects such a cultural practices and behaviors, Catholic and non-Catholics, etc.

Catholic conversion was tied to the establishment of trade and permanent settlement in the subcontinent from the very beginning in the proclamation in the charter of the *Compagnie del Indes Orientales* in 1664 (Irvine, 1909). This

was in stark contrast from the British regime who saw evangelization as unethical and until 1810 deemed commerce and religion to be separate activities. The French, however, used religious conversion to strengthen commercial activity and produce new Catholic alliances. This process was intimately tied with cultural assimilation of *francization* (Max, n.d.).

What this conversion meant to the converts themselves is much more complex. For example, conversion was voluntarily favored by those in the lower castes in Bengal. However, the differentiation and stigma continued alongside the rituals of Roman Catholic worship with the new converts retaining their Hindu status in the eyes of other Hindus and lived as lower-caste fringe dwellers in Chandernagore's black town (Carton, 2012). Catholics themselves could be sub-categorized as 'Europeans, *métis* who are the children of Europeans established here, and native Christians who are either free or slaves' (Montalambert, 1725)[3].

On the subject of attitudes towards the contentious issue of 'racial-mixing', the different colonial powers had different attitudes according to their methods of governance and the existing colonial realities (Max, n.d.). Interracial relationships became a norm of colonial life, even amongst elites. In French-India, interracial marriages were not met with the same degree of moral condemnation as faced in other colonies. Portuguese Eurasians were already favored to be taken as wives with Governor-General Joseph Francois Dupleix himself married to a Portuguese Eurasian at the advent of the 18th century. He urged his men to marry daughters of Europeans (Max, n.d.). This led to the production of a large number of 'mixed-race' or *métis* children who were considered European as the concept of 'whiteness' in this context was based on religious, cultural and linguistic identities and not on the rigid idea of color.

On a similar note, the Introduction to *Colonial Soldiers in Europe 1914-1945*, by Eric Storm and Ali Tuma gives a backdrop to the attitudes being addressed here. It sums up a point of view, largely disregarded up until the last few decades, of the soldiers brought into Europe from European colonies. Although none of the chapters deal directly with the Indian soldiers who were part of the French army, the book does offer some valuable insight.

The mere presence of these soldiers was a crossing of cultural boundaries that the colonial powers had tried to maintain between the colonizers (Europeans) and the colonized, racialized, hierarchical colonial order. This, of course, would eventually help shape late immigration policies through all the concerned nations. A few preliminary conclusions drawn show the French using a more assimilationist approach in employing colonial soldiers where the colonials could eventually become French by adopting the French language and culture[4]. The relations between European women and colonial men was frowned upon by all European authorities, however, the French seemed less concerned. Contrary to their counterparts, the French actually assigned French godmothers to colonial prisoners and soldiers on leave. That said, the French too, along with the likes of the Spanish, discouraged sexual encounters between colonial soldiers and 'white' women (Storm & Al Tuma, 2016).

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[3] As per Carton, 2012.

[4] Such as the Treaty of Cession between the Indian and French Government, 1962.

During the second World War, Pondicherry supported France with men and material. Long before that in 1881, the French East India Company beginning with students, gave Indians under French rule the choice to renounce their Indian citizenship and become French, given they would convert to Catholicism and get French or "Frenchified" names (Arpi, 2012).

European colonization, on a whole, led to the dispersal of young single European men to various parts of the world where European women were scarce, inevitable leading to interracial exchange. India received diasporas principally from Great Britain, Portugal and France. What is interesting here is the different attitudes the colonial powers held with regard to the growing hybrid population stemming from their diverse methods of governance and colonial realities. 'Mixed-race' populations might have been marginal in number but hold importance in their status in society, even today, as I propose to deal with in my thesis, concentrating on Pondicherry.

In colonial India, the competing imperial ventures diverged immensely in their form of governance and the colonial governance structures they used, influencing opposing views on their own concepts of 'whiteness' and 'mixed-race'. These perceptions led to new political and social structures. By the end of the 18th century, the colonies aimed to achieve a political dichotomy of the colonized and the colonizer, thus, leaving the 'mixed-race' in a zone of ambiguity. Due to the blurred lines of 'whiteness' at this point, it was not possible to categorize the 'mixed-race' population as 'white' and 'modern' or 'native' and 'degenerate'.

By the advent of the 18th century, the large population of 'mixed-race' or *métis* children were considered European (Max, n. d.). This is consequence of the concept of 'whiteness' being based on religious, cultural and linguistic inclination rather than the rigid idea of the color of one's skin. During the early stages of the French colonization of India, similar to the Portuguese, Catholicism was the principal figure of a French identity. From the beginning, the *Compagnie des Indes* stated that the process of Catholic conversion was embedded within the permanent settlement of the French and cultural assimilation. *Francization* was a step towards bringing natives within the larger French constituency. The process of *Francization* was primarily for *métis* children who were essentially considered French subjects (Max, n. d.). Christianization was a means of 'peaceful conquest', fortifying French influence over the 'colonized'.

The status of *métis* in French India was not contested much, as long as they were legitimate, as was contrary in the case of the *topas* community by the French authorities. This community were Catholics who claimed Portuguese decent but their heritage was often undisclosed. They embraced signs of cultural assimilation and were recorded as Europeans. They considered themselves Europeans and became an essential part of the French East India Company. However, they were treated more akin to the natives than Europeans and enjoyed a lower social standing in European society. This was primarily due to their inability to prove their ancestry while the claim the *métis* made to 'whiteness' was based on confirmable ancestries. While the *métis* were treated much more inclusively in political discussions under the French rule as compared to their British and Portuguese counterparts, what demonstrates the

conflicted structure of 'whiteness' is how the *topas* were excluded; they were included but marginalized as a 'degenerate' version of whiteness.

The India Act of 1784[5] transformed the nature of governance in British India. Six years later, a different kind of political change began to alter French colonial governance. The revolution in Paris further had strong repercussions in the colonies; the definition of 'whiteness' came under question with the new citizenship law. Local circumstances dictated what transpired in the 'political arenas' that were colonies at the time. The French Revolution of 1789 came with the promise of *'liberté, egalité et fraternité'* but the concept of French citizenship was discriminatory from its onset. Citizenship was limited to men, under the age of 25 who had resided in their local canton for a year at least. Natives never enjoyed the principle of domicile and thus the concept of citizenship never fulfilled its promise of equality. The central paradox here is that while universal rights had been proclaimed, the majority of population in French colonies were under colonial subjugation. Hence, the *Métropole* definitions and laws could not apply within colonial realities where colonial populations considered themselves accultured Europeans. The situation in India dictated that the *métis* were still white subjects based on the natural right of descent, however, the *topas* were excluded from the list of citizens in 1790. This exclusion of the *topas* highlights the shift towards racial outlines to classify 'whiteness' where their cultural assimilation and Catholic conversion were no longer enough. "Race should not be a barrier to citizenship" pleaded the *topas* in a petition to the Colonial Order to be re-included on the list, on the premise that they were equal to the *métis*[6].

As the 19th century progressed, the French colonial policy continued the process of *assimilation*, although it did not grasp the realities of the then colonial environment. As a commentator remarks in 1848: "The theory of assimilation reigned supreme. Distinctions of race were ignored. No one was aware of the immense difficulty of treating a Muslim or a Hindu like a true Frenchman"[7]. French evolutionist ideas began streaming in by the second half of the 19th century to classify civilizations and racism. However, this did not directly deteriorate the status of the *métis* as the right of descent maintained that they belonged to the 'white' community. Further, it has been noted in the 19th and 20th centuries "the force of blood took priority over the force of law"[8] with a visible incline in favor of illegitimate *métis* in procedures of admission to full French citizenships. French attitudes towards racial-mixing were more progressive and less racial than other colonial identities. Religion, social class and gender framed the boundaries of the French notion of 'whiteness' under the *ancient regime*, producing a flexible European cultural identity. Nevertheless, a more pronounced notion of race emerged as 'uncertain determinant of status' with the arrival of more intense manifestations of 'modernity' after the Revolution. The aftermath of the Revolution led to a racialization of French citizenship, and consequently 'whiteness', which produced a more contested

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[5] *The Pitt's Act*, retrieved form www.indhistory.com.

[6] Carton, '*Shades of Fraternity*', p. 606.

[7] Saada, p. 109.

[8] Ibid., p. 118

'mixed-race' identity. Yet it was the *topas* rather than the *métis* who suffered from these new cultural identities and were downgraded from one racial category to another.

From the different imperial attitudes towards 'racial-mixing' what we gather is that not only did the shifting conceptions of whiteness differ from one another, but they were constantly evolving within different imperial spaces as a result of evolving political circumstances and ideas. 'Mixed-Race' communities were initially welcomed in the earlier phases of colonialism, as useful agents to the European constituency for the acculturation of native subjects. As a result of local colonial politics the definition and social standings of hybridity were fluid and advanced, where 'whiteness' was defined through religious and social traits. *Race* remained a factor in the colonial regimes to differentiate among the European-born whites and the Indian-born whites, albeit to a minor extent. Nevertheless, the fundamental pillars holding up the concept were religious and cultural traits. Religion was the important rationale on which were based later "political expression and cultural meaning" in terms of race.

As demonstrated, the evolving form of governance moved with it different concepts of 'whiteness', 'mixed-race' populations, etc.; whether it was done in accordance with law or as a social phenomenon. In Pondicherry, not only was the notion of 'whiteness' embedded in the social structure as in terms of 'mixed-race' relations but it was true on the flipside too of how social structure would influence governance. This may be seen clearly of how the French regime used kinship as an important tool at an institutional level.

Scholars have acknowledged how European colonizers would use ties of kinship and other intimate bonds as a tool in colonial rule (Stoler, 2002). The French administration, just as the French Crown (itself a familial institution), drew on family: both, as a political instrument as well as in daily practice. Although the French and the Tamil inhabitants help different conceptualizations of the understanding of familial relations, the organization of kinship was a shared idiom and gave a basis to many production encounters. The colony was a place where both these concepts came together.

The French reliance of local familial ties was segregated in commercial dealings. On the contrary, they gave importance to such ties as a way of strengthening their own relationship with the local actors. The native inhabitants, likewise, used these aspects as a way of heightening their value within their family circles. The French officials and traders understood the importance of the role played by the local associations of kin and caste. They used this in the hiring of local employees, albeit with partial success.

Conclusion.

The move from this discourse to the present day scenario is a dangerous one. While the study of the different attitudes various actors have towards one another continues, the context is constantly changing. During my first phase of fieldwork, in June 2016, I observed that the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion continues to persist, albeit under different circumstances, in *la ville blanche*; moreover, these processes and the concept of what makes a 'stranger' within a

community largely rely of cultural and religious traits, which have been playing their part through the discussed centuries.

However, finally, no one factor can be studied alone in studying such dynamics, and on the subject of this paper, the relationship among colonizers and the colonized. The interwoven dynamic is one created by various forces. In case of colonized India, a large portion of the discourse is based on labels. The labels originate from social traits but are eventually used to categorize, organize and aid colonial rule.

> In the end, the study of 'mixed-race' in India is ultimately also the study of colonialism's ambiguous taxonomy of 'mixed-race' individuals (Max, n.d.).

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