



**CURTIN UNIVERSITY
ETHICS EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

CULTURAL AWARENESS

MAURITIUS



CURTIN CULTURAL AWARENESS

The cultural awareness notes in this pamphlet are meant to inform staff and students about some of the customs, traditions and etiquette in a country where Curtin University operates. Cultural awareness is about being mindful that similarities and differences exist between people; that people from different cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds may have different worldviews and sometimes dissimilar perspectives on life matters. It is also about being conscious to not assign positive or negative (better or worse) values to what may be different to one's own culture.

The notes in this pamphlet also include general information about some of the laws and regulations that govern particular behaviours in the host country. Some social norms in a host country may be significantly different from the Australian context and we need to be aware that breaking rules around these may be punishable offences. We also need to be aware that some behaviours that are considered anti-social and distasteful, but not criminal in Australia, could violate laws in other countries and be subject to severe penalties.

Curtin University acknowledges the sovereignty of nations and respects the rules and laws in the countries where we operate or have alliances. While we are confident that staff and students will live Curtin values and practise Curtin's signature behaviours, as representatives of the University, we also expect that staff and students will respect the customs and traditions of these countries and not violate their laws and regulations if residing in or visiting the countries.

It should be noted that the profile in these notes is of the dominant culture and not demonstrative of sub-cultures or individual characteristics. As features of societies change and evolve, some cultural normatives are maintained while others alter significantly. These notes should therefore be taken as a general awareness. Also, as this pamphlet provides a general overview of the customs, traditions and legislation, it is advisable to keep informed about any recent changes especially with regard to legislative reforms in the host country.

CHARLES TELFAIR INSTITUTE, MAURITIUS

Curtin University has a partnership with the Charles Telfair Institute in Mauritius to deliver its academic programs. A private university, the Charles Telfair Institute is located in the city of Moka and offers Curtin University's foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate courses to nearly 2000 domestic and international students from neighbouring countries. The campus has modern, high-tech facilities that enable students to participate in lectures taking place in any of Curtin's many locations. The Institute works closely with the private sector to provide students with a range of projects and internships to ensure that they are ready for the workplace on graduation.

Charles Telfair Institute, Moka, Mauritius



MAURITIUS

INTRODUCTION

Officially the Republic of Mauritius, Mauritius is an archipelago nation in the Indian Ocean, off the south east coast of Africa, 800 kilometres east of Madagascar. With a combined land area of approximately 2040 square kilometres, Mauritius is one of the smallest countries in the world. It comprises the islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues, Agalega, St Brandon and some territories that are in dispute with Britain. Together with the Reunion (a French territory), these islands form part of the Mascarene Islands that share common geological origins. Surrounded by coral reefs and enclosed by mountain ranges of varying heights above the sea level, their topography has waterfalls, rivers, craters, lagoons and natural forests. The islands resulted from underwater volcanic eruptions and have distinct fauna and flora, some of which like the dodo bird are now extinct.

Situated in the inter-tropical zone, the islands experience the monsoon winds characterised by hot weather and frequent cyclonic activity that brings severe storms and heavy rains. Daily average temperatures range from a low to a high twenty degrees Celsius between the winter and summer months. Mauritius has a long history of sugarcane farming and its economy and society, through slavery and indentured labour, has evolved around sugar production. Refined sugar and molasses are to this day of economic importance. However, clothing and textiles together with chemicals, metals and machinery, IT and renewable energies have become significant exports over time. Tourism is also an important source of revenue for the country. One of the wealthiest nations in the continent, Mauritius has the third highest per capita income in Africa.

Due to their remoteness and not being on a major sea route, historically, the islands were not inhabited until the 16th century. Although there is evidence of Arab sailors stopping here, it was the Portuguese who were the first Europeans to encounter the archipelago, followed by other nations that wanted to establish trade in the Indian Ocean.

The Dutch took possession of Mauritius in 1598 naming it after Prince Mauritz of the House of Nassau. Later in the 18th century, the island became a French colony and was renamed Isle de France. The French, who ruled it from 1715, lost it to the British during the Napoleonic wars and the name was reverted to Mauritius. However, French institutions and language remained a part of the administrative structure. The British brought both economic and social changes including the abolition of slavery. Slaves were first brought to Mauritius during the Dutch colonisation and this continued when the French occupied it. At the time the British took over and it became a Crown colony, 70% of the population of the islands was slaves. As slaves were treated harshly and those that rebelled were punished severely, the abolition of slavery on 1st February, 1835 is an important commemoration for Mauritian society and marked by a public holiday.

The British also implemented the recruitment of indentured labour from India. From 1849 to 1923, around half a million contract labourers were processed through the Aapravasi Ghat, (immigration depot) in Port Louis to work on plantations throughout the British

Empire. The sizeable migration of Indians established a change in the demography of Mauritius where nearly 70% of the current population is of Indian sub-continent ancestry.

From 1947, Mauritius started a momentum towards independence which was gained from Britain on March 12, 1968. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam became the first Prime Minister of Mauritius; however, the country remained under the Commonwealth for more than two decades before being declared an independent republic on March 12, 1992. From independence in 1968 to when it declared itself a republic, a Governor- General representing the British monarch presided over the parliament.

Socio-demographics	
Population	Mauritius has a population of approximately 1.29 million (est. 2018).
Ethnic groups	Indo-Mauritian (compose approximately two thirds of the total population), Creole, Sino-Mauritian, Franco-Mauritian. Note: Mauritius has not had a question on ethnicity on its national census since 1972.
Language	Creole 86.5%, Bhojpuri 5.3%, French 4.1%, two languages 1.4%, other 2.6% (includes English, the official language of the National Assembly, which is spoken by less than 1% of the population), unspecified 0.1% (est. 2011).
Religion	Hindu 48.5%, Roman Catholic 26.3%, Muslim 17.3%, other Christian 6.4%, other 0.6%, none 0.7%, unspecified 0.1% (est. 2011)
Time	Australian WST minus four hours.
Currency	Mauritian rupee AU\$1 = 26.12 Mauritius rupees (est. Jan 2018).
Capital city	Port Louis.

THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL SYSTEMS

Modelled on the British system, Mauritius is a presidential democracy where the constitution guarantees the fundamental rights and freedoms of its people. The legal system is derived from both English and French sources and combines civil and common law practices. While the head of state and commander-in-chief is the president, the prime minister is the head of government and has full executive powers.

The office of the prime minister was created in 1968 when Mauritius gained independence from Britain. Before that, Queen Elizabeth II was the head of state and her executive powers in Mauritius were delegated to a governor-general. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam was the first Prime Minister of Mauritius and in office until 1982 when Sir Aneerudh Jugunath was elected and took office. The office of the president was created after 1992 when Mauritius became a republic and replaced that of the governor-general, the representative of the Queen. Sir Veerasamy Ringadoo was the Governor General of Mauritius from 1986 to 1992,

when he became the first president of the republic. The current President of Mauritius is Ameenah Gurib-Fakim who was inaugurated as the sixth president and the first female president on 5th June 2015.

The sixty-two members of the National Assembly (the Parliament) are elected every five years. The current Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, who is the leader of the Militant Socialist Movement, was appointed to office on 23 January 2017 following the resignation of his father, Sir Aneerood Jugnauth who held the post until 2016.

The Mauritian judicial system is led by the Supreme Court which also serves as the Court of Criminal Appeal and the Court of Civil Appeal. However, some legal and constitutional matters of unascertained jurisdiction are referred to Britain's Privy Council.

The Mauritian Constitution provides for the freedom of religion. Nearly half of the population is Hindu. About 26% are Roman Catholics and 6% are of other Christian faiths. Around 16% are Muslim; the majority of which follow Sunni Islam. There are a small number of Buddhist and other religions. Most festivals of the major religions are celebrated as official national holidays.

SOCIETY, CULTURE AND ETIQUETTE

Evolving as an establishment of European colonisation and settlement, as well as slave and indentured labour migration, Mauritian society is multi-faceted. The majority of the population are Indo-Mauritians descended from the Indian immigrants who arrived in the 19th century. The Indo-Mauritians are politically and economically very active members of Mauritian society. Both the current President and the Prime minister of Mauritius are of Indian origins.

About one-fourth of the population is Creole (of African mixed descent), and there are small numbers of people of Chinese and French descent. Creole-Mauritians are people of mixed descent largely of African origin together with Indian or European roots. Their language and culture are influenced by the interaction between the European, other settlers and Africans brought over from neighbouring countries during early times. The origins of Afro-Mauritians are associated with African countries such as Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania from where they were captured to work on the sugar plantations in Mauritius.

Franco-Mauritians are the descendents of the French who came as settlers in the 1700s when it was under French rule. Mauritius has a distinct French identity due to the terms of French surrender to the British who defeated them in the 19th century. The terms of capitulation allowed the settlers to live as a separate language group. Predominantly French, some Franco-Mauritians also have other European ancestries. The Sino-Mauritians or Mauritians of Chinese origins came to Mauritius in the 1700s on British, French and Danish ships. They were employed in various craft trades such as blacksmiths, carpenters, cobblers, and tailors. Even after the British takeover of the island, migration from China continued.

As well as being used in education and the media, both English and French are official languages. However, nearly 90% of the population speaks Mauritian-Creole which is French-based and considered the native language of the country. The language was developed by slaves to conceal communication amongst themselves from the slave owners. Other languages spoken are Bhojpuri, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Chinese as well as Arabic. Mauritius is a member of both, the Commonwealth of Nations (an association of countries currently or formerly under British rule) and La Francophonie (an international organisation representing countries and regions where French is a common language and there is significant affiliation with French culture).

Although Mauritius' multicultural society comprises both western and eastern cultural elements, it is conservative and traditionally a communal society. The collective culture has been shaped through the interactions between the different ethnicities, languages and religions which also characterise its social etiquette. Individual community identities have been maintained through preserving cultures and traditions of countries of origin, as well as endogamy (the practice of marrying within one's own community). With changing eras of colonisation, migration, modernisation and now globalisation, a common, shared Mauritian national identity and culture continue to evolve.

There is a strong emphasis on kinship and family ties, children are brought up to respect parents and elders who often play an important role in household decision-making. Extended relatives tend to live nearby for economic and social support, as well as care of the young and elderly. Age is honoured through addressing older people by titles such as uncle (*tonton*), aunt (*tantine*), grandfather (*grandpere*) or grandmother (*grandmere*). Children are socialized into using these titles for all elderly people, not just for family and it is considered polite to greet and ask about older people's well being.

Although household hospitality is distinguished by ethnicity, most Mauritian homes are welcoming even when guests come unexpectedly. It is common to offer drinks, tea or finger food to guests or be asked to share a meal if visiting at mealtimes. It is anticipated that such spontaneous offers of food will be taken up and received in goodwill. Even though guests are not expected to bring gifts, presents are accepted graciously.

While handshakes are common with greetings such as '*bonjour*' (how are you?) and colloquial terms such as '*ki position*' (how are things with you?), greetings may also depend on ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Muslims from traditional background may not be comfortable with shaking hands with the opposite sex. In such cases, a smile or a nod of acknowledgment would be a courteous salutation. Similarly, traditional Hindu Mauritians may prefer a customary greeting of holding hands up with palms pressed together with a smile and nod in acknowledgement.

Mauritius cuisine is a blend of Creole, Indian, European and Chinese influences and meals reflect combinations of dishes from these backgrounds, as well as local ingredients which give them a unique Mauritian flavour. Although table manners are mostly western (eating at dining tables and with cutlery), some Hindus and Muslims eat using their right hands. At mealtimes, using the left hand is inappropriate, both for serving and for eating. The left hand is used for washroom purposes and therefore avoided at the dining table. In terms of

precedence, elders are served first and it is polite to wait for them to be attended to before reaching for food at the table.

Religious food restrictions are practised in some households. Hindu Mauritians generally don't eat beef, and many are vegetarian, with some avoiding eggs and root vegetables too. The cow is revered as a sacred animal in the Hindu religion. As such, Hindu households may serve only vegetarian food or food that does not include beef. Alcohol and pork do not feature in Muslim Mauritian meals. Like in other Muslim societies, the holy month of Ramadhan is observed by Muslim Mauritians by abstaining from food and water from dawn to dusk.

Appropriate gifts for hosts are flowers, sweets or toys for the children. It is best to avoid giving leather products (especially cow leather) to observant Hindus. Giving alcohol to Hindus too may not be suitable unless one is certain that the recipient drinks. Items to be avoided when giving gifts to observant Muslims are alcohol, perfumes containing alcohol, pork, pigskin products, toy dogs or gifts with pictures of pigs. While most Muslims consider the saliva of a dog to be impure and do not have dogs in their houses (many prefer to keep dogs outside the house), Muslims in general agree that all parts of a pig are *haram* (forbidden to Muslims) and therefore would consider it inappropriate to have even as a toy. Foodstuff offered as presents to Muslim households should be '*halal*' (meaning permissible for Muslims).

Related to Mauritian cultural heritage, the local vibrant *sega* music and dance that originate from the days of slavery are enjoyed by all communities. Although initially performed to communicate with spirits and during funerals, *sega* is an important part of the country's traditions. Accompanied by local musical instruments, and songs in Creole, lively performances and colourful costumes vary across the islands. In its current forms, *sega* is combined with modern genres of music such as jazz and reggae. Female dancers wear brightly patterned, long flared skirts and petticoats with matching tops. Like their ancestors, the male dancers wear rolled up trousers with matching shirts and sometimes straw hats. The *sega* is a multicultural dance that unifies Mauritians under a common cultural legacy.

DRESS AND DRESS-CODES

As it has a hot and humid climate, dressing in Mauritius is mostly casual. In daily living, many urban Mauritians especially the younger generations wear western style clothing. Older Hindu women can be observed wearing *sarees* which are also worn by young women on religious or other formal occasions. The *saree* is a female garment from the Indian sub-continent. Ranging from four to eight meters, it is a long wrap worn around the waist with one end draped over the shoulder. The *saree* is worn with a short blouse and over a slip leaving the midriff exposed. Older generation Hindu men especially in rural areas, wear the *kurta* and *dhoti* (a long piece of cloth, worn over a shirt) which is traditional Hindu male attire. Devout Hindus may wear a *tilaka*, a red dot of vermilion in the middle of the forehead which has a spiritual significance.

Muslim women in Mauritius often wear the *hijab* (a head-dress that covers the head and neck) over a *shalwar kameez*. The covering of the hair is part of female Muslim modesty and

depends on personal convictions. The *shalwar kameez* is also attire that originates from the Indian sub-continent. It can be worn by both men and women, but with variations according to gender. The *kameez*, a long shirt and the *shalwar*, baggy trousers are combined to form the *shalwar kameez*.

In business environments, depending on the occupation, more formal attire is seen with men wearing shirts, ties and trousers. Jackets are usually not worn due to the hot average temperatures. Formal work wear for women includes blouses, skirts and trousers.

PUBLIC SOCIAL AND BUSINESS CONTEXTS

In business contexts, Mauritians are formal and first names are avoided unless prior contact has been made. Although handshakes are a common form of greeting in business contexts, these may not be suitable for the opposite sex where conservative individuals are present. Women may not offer a hand to shake and a nod in acknowledgement would be sufficient.

Punctuality, both at social and business occasions is expected and it is better to advise a counterpart if running late for a meeting. To build up relationships, dinner or lunch in a restaurant is a common form of business socialisation. In traditional settings food may be served all at once without drinks or appetizers, as in western restaurants. It is polite to allow the host to order the dishes and to be invited to start the meal. After the meal, guests are expected to stay involved in conversations to further build relationships.

Mauritius prides itself as a corruption-free country and as such business gifts are generally not exchanged with especially government staff. A welcome or thank you gift can be offered provided it is not an expensive item. A gift may be refused before being accepted as a polite gesture of not appearing to be 'greedy' and it is conventional to insist on its acceptance and show pleasure when a gift is accepted. A gift may not be opened in front of a guest and the recipient may briefly thank the giver and put the gift aside.

The common working week in Mauritius is five days from Monday to Friday, though some companies work a half day on Saturdays. Standard business hours are 9 am to 5 pm. Shops, supermarkets and malls are open seven days a week and on most public holidays. There are restaurants, pharmacies and clinics that are open 24 hours. Most businesses that are not in the service industry are only open five days per week.

Modest dressing is required when visiting places of worship and shoes must be removed on entering Hindu, Chinese or Buddhist temples or a Muslim mosque. Staff at places of worship are generally accommodating of visitors and may overlook minor indiscretions, but it is always better to show respect and abide by the protocols of behaviour at these places. Public displays of affection are not appropriate in such places.

DAYS AND TIMES OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

New Year's Day – Marking the coming of the Gregorian new year, both 1st and 2nd January are holidays in Mauritius.

Thaipooam Cavadee – A Tamil Hindu festival held in January or February according to the Hindu calendar. The festival marks devotion to the Tamil deity, Lord Muruga.

Abolition of Slavery Day – Abolition Day is an annual commemoration of the abolition of slavery in Mauritius on February 1, 1835. The day also commemorates the death of slaves who jumped off the Le Morne Brabant (a UNESCO heritage site now) a hill located in the south-west of Mauritius Island, on the same date, in fear of being enslaved again.

Chinese New Year - The Chinese New Year typically occurring in February is also celebrated in Mauritius. The Chinese calendar is a lunisolar calendar, therefore the dates change each year.

Mahashivratri – In general celebrated in February/March, Mahashivratri is a major festival in Hinduism to honour the god, Shiva

National Day – The 12th of March commemorates two events, independence from Britain and the proclamation of the Mauritian Republic. Mauritius gained independence on 12 March 1968 and was declared a republic on 12 March 1992.

Ougadi - Observed in March, is a festival to celebrate the New Year of the Telegu Hindus. The Telugu come from Andhra Pradesh in India.

Labour Day - the 1st of May called Labour Day to commemorate a workers' day internationally is a national holiday in Mauritius.

Eid-ul-Fitr- Marks the end of the Islamic fasting month of Ramadhan. The date is determined according to the Islamic lunar calendar.

Assumption Day – Celebrated by the Roman Catholics on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary commemorates the death of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ and her entry into 'eternal life'.

Ganesh Chaturthi – Celebrated according to the Hindu calendar, this festival marks the birthday of the deity Ganesha ('the destroyer of obstacles'). It is observed during the Hindu month of Bhadra (mid-August to mid-September) and lasts for 10 days.

Diwali - Celebrated according to the Hindu calendar, this is a festival of lights that signifies the victory of light over darkness, or good over evil.

All Saints Day – Celebrated on the 1st of November it is a Christian Roman Catholic festival that honours those who have attained the beatification (declared as somebody holy).

Christmas Day - The 25th of December is a public holiday in Mauritius to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

CONDUCT SUBJECT TO LEGAL PENALTIES

Drugs possession – Mauritius has strict laws governing the control and use of drugs. This includes possession, trafficking, drug-dealing, as well as offering or selling for personal use. Imprisonment sentences or fines depend on the severity of the crime. Driving or steering any motor-powered vehicle or craft under the influence of drugs is illegal and can result in a conviction. Assets of a person convicted of such crimes can be frozen or forfeited.

At border customs, medications prescribed by Australian doctors are accepted, however if the medication is unusual or there is a requirement of syringe use, this should be accompanied by a letter from the prescribing doctor. Medical drugs such as sedatives or strong pain relievers may require authorisation from the Mauritian Health Ministry.

Smoking and tobacco: Mauritius is party to the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control since 2005. Thus smoking in indoor public places, on public transport and in some open areas is forbidden. Smoking is allowed in designated areas in such spaces.

LGBTIQ+ issues: With a strong religious presence, Mauritius is a relatively conservative society and homosexuality is not seen as acceptable. However, there is legislation on equal opportunities which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, education, in access to goods and services and other areas. Sexual orientation in this context is defined to mean homosexuality including lesbianism, bisexuality or heterosexuality. While laws do not criminalise homosexual activity, the illegality of sodomy irrespective of sexual orientation is spelt out. Although 'sodomy' is a derogatory and an outdated term in the Australian context, it is still used in other countries and convictions are possible for related offenses.

Alcohol: Recent alcohol regulations prohibit drinking in public places and the sale of alcoholic drinks to persons under the age of 18.

Imports – Bringing films, videos and publications of obscene nature into the country is forbidden. Other forbidden goods include sugarcane cuttings and plants as well as underwater fishing guns.

TRAVEL INFORMATION AND VISAS

Up to date information on travel, safety precautions and visa requirements is available on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website Smartraveller:
<http://smartraveller.gov.au/Countries/africa/east/Pages/mauritius.aspx>

USEFUL CONTACTS

Mauritius High Commission, Australia

2 Beale Crescent

Deakin, ACT 2600

Telephone: (02) 6281 1203; (02) 6282 4436

Email: canberra@govmu.org

Australian High Commission, Mauritius

2nd Floor

Rogers House

5 Kennedy Street

Port Louis

Telephone: +230 202 0160

Fax: +230 208 8878

Website: <http://mauritius.embassy.gov.au/>

Postal address:

PO Box 541

Port Louis

Charles Telfair Institute, Mauritius

Telfair, Moka

Mauritius

Telephone: +230 401 6511

Fax: +230 433 3005

Email: marketing@telfair.ac.mu

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