Unity Through Belonging:
A Grounded Theory of Division in the Mauritian Church

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Abstract

This study constructs a grounded theory that suggests division occurs within the Mauritian Church when believers attempt to reconcile a contested sense of belonging. The study draws upon 30 interviews to uncover how Mauritian Christians experience social loss and institutional invisibility. The interviews suggest that colonial epistemologies exacerbated by foreign influence provide explanatory power to data collected. The article advocates for an adaptive ecclesiology rooted in Mauritian cultural forms and the reimagining of leadership as a dialogical, inclusive practice to foster unity among believers.

Key Words: Mauritius, church unity, contextual theology, grounded theory, religious conversion, colonial mimicry, adaptive ecclesiology, belonging, church leadership, decolonization

Introduction

Christianity in Mauritius has functioned as a tool of colonial power, as well as a cultural movement. But it is currently more divided than ever. Schisms are so frequent one demographer commented, "For a population of 1.3 million, having more than a hundred separate churches and denominations calls for deep reflection" (Phiri et al., 2016).

Local believers agree: "Unity is not yet happening… People have the desire and then the reality of those walls," said one (U., personal communication (henceforth "pc") March 30, 2024). "I can see some divisions even if we don't say it," said another (Y., pc, March 13, 2024). Sources of division are "not really theological, but more like ways of being spiritual" (C., pc, February 6, 2024), as if Christians are "try[ing] to find what is uncommon… and look at these differences instead of looking at what is common" (Bm., pc, March 13, 2024).

This study begins with a brief history of the island, then proposes a grounded theory to explain the Mauritian Church's division. It argues that Mauritian Christians experience contested belonging and that their attempts to reconcile this strain are often rooted in inherited colonial epistemologies and result in schisms in local churches. Finally, the study leans on postcolonial theory to support its thesis.

Methodology

This article employed constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to arrive at its thesis. CGT "fits empirical situations and is understandable to sociologists and laymen alike" (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p. 1), allowing both researcher and subject to mutually engage with theory. The methodology therefore proposes "that both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed…. In this view, any analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131). This study's theory emerged from life experiences of Mauritian Christians, while reflexively acknowledging the interpretive role of its researcher.

Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted. They were semi-structured to elicit exploratory narrative (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 59) and were coded "in-vivo" to stay close to informants'

words (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). When broad categories emerged, formal coding took place and theory was developed based on qualitative saturation (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). The constant comparison method was employed to ensure the theory accurately reflected what Mauritians indicated themselves, and memos were written frequently to aid the researcher in bracketing his own biases (Glaser & Straus 2006, p. 102).

Additionally, one focus group was held, and an online survey of 125 people was given to provide supporting data through elicited response (Charmaz, 2006, p. 36). Findings were shared with informants to ensure resonance (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183). Demographic information on informants relevant to the study is presented in Table 1 below:

Ethnicity		**Broad Denominational Affiliation**	
Creole Mauritian	14	Pentecostal	12
Indo Mauritian	12	Catholic	3
Sino Mauritian	4	Other Protestant	15
Gender		**Church Role**	
Men	18	Pastor/Leader	14
Women	12	Layperson	16

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Informants

History of Mauritian Christianity

Mauritian Christianity is often traced to the nineteenth-century, French Catholic missionary Jacques Laval, affectionately known in Mauritius as *Pére* Laval. "Freed slaves in Mauritius were in a very bad situation," explained one informant. "The life was very not good. And he [Laval] wanted to come here in the colony to be with these black peoples" (I., pc, June 13, 2024). Despite persecution from landlords, Laval was well loved by the people and innovated new forms of liturgy and catechism to meet their needs (Campion, n.d., p. 23).

Roman Catholicism has thus been the dominant expression of Christianity for much of Mauritian history, but Pentecostalism grew explosively in 1968 when Assemblies of God (AOG) missionary Aimé Cizeron arrived. In the midst of an independence movement, Cizeron held healing and deliverance meetings in movie theaters and libraries (Cizeron, 1992, p. 109). Reports of miracles spread quickly, and many conversions to the AOG began.

An informant explained, "Because so many people were being converted, the Hindu community was not happy. And at that time most of the members of Parliament were Hindus… So they just expelled the missionary" (M., pc, January 29, 2024). Since then, AOG has become by far the largest Protestant church in Mauritius but has also seen many groups break ties with the denomination. As another informant said, "Many came out of the Pentecostal church and then actually they became independent. But then afterwards they associated themselves with other churches in other countries…. One example is the LVD—*La Voix de Deliverence*—which is associated with the Full Gospel Church of South Africa" (C., pc, February 6, 2024).

Contested Belonging

A diverse people, Mauritians navigate complex identities. In addition to their Mauritian identity, "everyone has this home community" (C., pc, February 6, 2024) made up of ethnoreligious bonds. According to Patrick Eisenlohr, colonial rulers defined communities racially. In the early twentieth century, however, Indo-Mauritians redefined themselves based on religion (Eisenlohr, 2022, pp. 61-62). Hindus and Muslims could then identify as representatives of an international faith community, restoring a sense of belonging.

One informant explained, "I was a Hindu by birth and very racist… fighting for our community, for our religion" (Q., pc, February 7, 2024). The largest group on the island, Hindus who become Christian give up social privilege: "Here in Mauritius there is the Hindu-dominant culture where sometimes [it can] kind of create issues when you are trying to convert" (S., pc, March 15, 2024). Another noted how Hindu converts become "excluded from society… We had a persecution in the school, in the job, etc." (P., pc, February 13, 2024).

Hindu-background believers also experience familial tension: "I stopped attending many of the festivities, you know, because of the food sacrificed to idols. It was really hard" (Af., pc, September 15, 2024). Another informant shared, "[My father] didn't talk to me for many years…. I think all of us have to go through that" (Q., pc, February 7, 2024).

The Creole population, however, had no ancestral religion on which to redefine itself, so it remained racially defined (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 74). Mostly Catholic, Creole Mauritians report a lack of belonging in church: "Like I was part of a community I felt that was lacking in the Catholic Church," said one informant (At., pc, March, 13, 2024). "I was just like being a Christian in knowledge, but not really being in a church" said another (V., pc, March 1, 2024). Again: "I'm the only one who actually withdrew from Catholic church because I was looking for something more" (Bm., pc, March 13, 2024).

Some associate Catholicism with forced conversion: "They call it *Madras Baptisé* because they worked for white people in their house. So I think those white people made them baptized but then it's not like immersion in the big water. It's just the way the Catholics do it" (X., pc, March 12, 2024). Creoles may see their faith only as a "traditional religious background they can follow blindly" (At., pc, March, 13, 2024).

Because Creoles "do not control and own their religious institutions in a way Hindus and Muslims do and are therefore unable to position themselves as a separate religious community in the same way" (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 66), they experience a lack of belonging. Hindu Mauritians, however, enjoy a privileged place in society, but converting to any form of Christianity is "becoming like Creoles" (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 74). One informant even described the social ramifications of conversion as a feeling of "being downgraded" (D., pc, December 12, 2025). The phrase c*ontested belonging* captures both the lack Creoles feel and the loss Hindus feel in the church.

Leadership

When discussing division in the church, Mauritian Christians are quick to bring up pastoral leadership. According to one, "There is no unity in the churches, which is very sad, because it is, to what I understand, the ego of the leaders that are not allowing them to work together" (W., pc, March 13, 2024). "…as I become a leader I forgot where I come from, and I started to criticize

others, saying they are doing wrong and I know better," admitted one leader (H., pc, December 15, 2025). Many characterize pastors as controlling and motivated by personal gain:

> "[Many pastors] take advantage of this and like try to use the name of Jesus for their own personal purpose" (B., pc, October 12, 2025).
>
> "They have complete control over everything that goes on" (E., pc, December 14, 2025).
>
> "The pastor is… the head of everything. He decides for everything" (V., pc, March 1, 2024).

Church leaders sometimes forbid congregants from interaction with other Christians: "When I proposed that, he said, 'if you do something like that I will write to all the church leaders I know and tell them to boycott you'" (C., pc, October 12, 2025). Another: "I got problems there, because I was also meeting people from other churches, and I got in trouble with the president" (E., pc, December 14, 2025).

Mauritian Christians suggest their leaders are defensive of others "stealing" church members. "[They are] kind of wary, kind of defensive, because they said, okay, we will go there, and they will take all our people, you see, and this is continuing still" (D., pc, December 12, 2025). The size of a congregation and the control a pastor wields over it is connected to social status: "There's some fear that they will lose people, they will be mocked, maybe by other pastors, and they will lose the finances" (E., pc, December 14, 2025). "I think it's jealousy plus pride. 'I want to be in front of the church and do a show,' things like that" (H., pc, December 15, 2025). One linked the desire for power with colonial history: "The British came and we were like, 'Okay, you are here, you are the boss.' So, [Christians] will be like, 'Okay, you are here, you are the master'" (C., pc, October 12, 2025).

Research suggests people in postcolonial cultures replicate authoritarian styles of leadership, often with exaggeration:

> If subjection appears more intense than it might be, this is because the subjects of the *commandement* [sic] have internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life—social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, styles of dress, rhetorical devices, and the whole political economy of the body (Mbembe, 2001, p. 128).

Foreign Interference

Homi Bhabha calls postcolonial authoritarianism *mimicry.* The Empire, he said, believed others were fundamentally different and should become *civilized* like them. But in being civilized they would cease to be fundamentally different. Therefore colonialism required a mimicry that was "almost alike, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 129).

Mimicry takes the form of Western expertise through an "epistemic overhaul" in which "a whole set of knowledges… have been disqualified as inadequate" (Spivak, 1988, p. 25). Indigenous ways of knowing have been "defined by the 'civilized' laws of Europe. No 'native' institutions [are] recognized" (Mamdani, 1996, p. 16). Mauritian pastors project the appearance of expertise: "From what I've seen, it doesn't really depend on education. It really depends on the character of the person like, his way of communicating. Like you know some person that's really

outgoing, and I've seen that those type of persons would be the most important" (G., pc, December 15, 2025). "Most pastors I know… I won't say education, but intelligence, because it's not actual education. If we have someone logical or who knows how to talk, and how to communicate this is very important" (H., pc, December 15, 2025).

Connections with a foreign institution were mentioned in conjunction with church schisms more frequently than any other element:

> "I saw many other people coming from other countries and they are trying to help" (R., pc, March 15, 2024).
>
> "I see that they have a lot of missionaries, a lot of pastors from overseas" (X., pc, March 12, 2024).
>
> "…We had either pastors, mission pastors who came from [a foreign organization], or pastors from South Africa" (U., pc, March 30, 2024).
>
> "A preacher or an apostle from America or Europe coming to Mauritius, and people want to go there" (E., pc, December 14, 2025).
>
> "There's a ministry… they've got a big hotel in Hawaii. I was chosen to go there. They paid everything. All the rich American Christians paid for everything. I mean your travel, your hotel. You're treated as a VIP" (D., pc, December 12, 2025).

In Mauritius, a strong sense of belonging is conferred through connection with foreign expressions of Christianity. One informant explains that it "is more international, which gives like more credibility…. Like for example they have a name, they have the recognition" (C., pc, February 6, 2024).

Division often occurs in the Mauritian church when leaders receive training from foreigners, especially from the West:

> I think if a leader went to a [training overseas] that will do something. Maybe the leader will come with a mindset to change things. Putting in the church what he learned in the training and things like that. Because some pastors are a bit insecure about their position some of the time. They don't really welcome other opinions because I think they are scared people would listen to someone else more (G., pc, December 15, 2025).

According to an informant, "When a white man here tells you that you're a big thing, it's this psychological 'wow'" (D., pc, December 12, 2025). Leaders who receive training from foreign sources gain new expertise and therefore higher status. They become a threat to the current pastor who resorts to authoritarian mimicry, responding harshly, forcing other leaders to leave and start a new church. A portion of the congregation follows, increasing defensiveness of leaders, and a vicious cycle begins.

Culturally Ingrained Models of Division

Gaining a sense of belonging in one's community by influencing a large following to switch allegiances has historical roots in Mauritius. On the plantation, indentured servants developed a role called the *sirdar* (Chazan-Gillig & Ramhota, 2022, p. 22). Sirdars were responsible for recruiting immigrants from their own social networks in India and overseeing them upon return to Mauritius. Landowners disliked the role because sirdars could negotiate better conditions. They

often led workers away from a sugar estate, having made a better deal elsewhere, or managed to purchase a small plot of land themselves (Bates & Carter, 2017, pp. 463-465).

Sirdars are strikingly similar to the way groups of Mauritian Christians migrate away from a church under the leadership of someone with status. Said one informant, "He was attracting more people or maybe he was having a lot of miracles… and then being so young he just said 'everybody follow me' so we just followed him blindly" (X., pc, March 12, 2024). According to another: "People create[d] churches by taking all from the Assembles. Yeah, it was not church *planting*. He just changed names" (D., pc, December 12, 2025).

Another culturally ingrained situation became the central topic of a focus group. In a Mauritian family unit, "Most of the time there is some elder who is in charge, you know? Like, if they call the family to dinner, you have to go. It's not a question. No matter what you have to be there" (Cf., pc, September 15, 2024). This revered elder is called a *gran dimun* in the local language, literally "big person." In both Creole and Indian families, the *gran dimun* is the most important source of authority, as well as their connection to their community: "I think more than folklore, we just talk about the way our grandparents worked hard so that we would not be poor" (Cf., pc, September 15, 2024). The *gran dimun* has also taken on some religious significance as a kind of syncretism of Hinduism and African indigenous beliefs: "Despite the ongoing trend towards modern Hindu reformism with its global ramifications, ritual practices typical for the time of indenture continue to exist today. These are practices that involve worship of minor deities *(gran dimun)* at trees or through non-anthropomorphic objects such as stones and rock" (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 63).

When the person identified as *gran dimun* dies, the family's sense of belonging is disrupted: "What usually happens is, once that respected elder grandparent passes away, the family usually ends up fighting" (C., pc, September 15, 2024). Factions form from within the family and compete over inheritance, property, or some other locus of belonging. This *gran dimun crisis* is widespread enough that one informant's grandmother expected it to happen upon her death: "She knew before she died this would happen, so she recorded a video before she died, telling the family to please, stay together" (Af., pc, September 15, 2024). Through this lens, the breakup of a Mauritian fellowship can be seen as a church-wide *gran dimun crisis*.

Discussion and Conclusion

As this study has shown, Mauritian Christians experience contested belonging, either as historically marginalized Creoles or as Indo-Mauritians who have lost status. To reconcile this contested sense of belonging, leaders mimic colonial authority and demonstrate Western expertise, while laypeople change allegiances to another leader as a sirdar or *gran dimun*, according to those interviewed. This study now concludes with discussion about how Christian unity may be promoted in Mauritius.

Believers on the island must come together to develop a stronger sense of communal identity, not just as Christians, but as *Mauritian* Christians. Adaptive ecclesiology is one way to achieve communal identity as Mauritian Christians. In his book *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Jesus Movement,* Ralph Korner analyzes every instance of the word *ekklesia* in the epigraphic record as well as all known Greek and Jewish literary contexts and comes to the conclusion that the early church borrowed its model of meeting from the culture, modifying it to provide a greater sense of group identity (2017, p. 12). Mauritians, too, can reconcile contested belonging by borrowing models of church from their culture rather than from abroad.

Adaptive ecclesiology has already shown to be a fruitful strategy in Mauritius. During the Pentecostal movement, "In the beginning, they were going into those private picture theatres because a lot of people could get into it. But because you rented, it cost a lot of money. So then they went into the houses" (M., pc, January 29, 2024). At that time, church structures were further reimagined for the Mauritiuan context: "Singing in Creole! We were writing our own songs. And preaching in Creole for the first time" (M., pc, January 29, 2024).

Though foreign models confer social power to Mauritian Christians, many interviewees suggested they would like to see church adapted to the feel of a Mauritian family meeting, centered around good food and music. "How many people get up when we go to church right after the service? There's some tea and coffee, but we've got to stay, at least. It's not ideal, but at least [it is something]" (C., pc, October 12, 2025). Others indicated the feeling of family is what draws them to a church: "It's more like a family to me because we know each other very well" (Y., pc, March 13, 2024).

Theology, too, can become contextualized. Missiological parallelisms are "a literary, rhetorical, and missiological device in which a cultural or religious form mirrors a biblical narrative, image, or idea that subsequently both clarifies what God is doing within a culture and confronts the spiritual distortions within the form" (Amberg & Cooper, 2026, p. 8). Christ as *gran dimun* seems a promising parallel for the Mauritian context.

In this role, Christ is the revered elder of His family, the Church (Eph. 2:19-22 NIV). He must be respected and obeyed (John 14:15 NIV) as He passes on His way of life to us, expecting us to pass it onto others (Matt. 28:18-20 NIV). Though functionally the same as a *gran dimun*, His ontological distinction is preserved by casting Him as the *gran dimun* who never dies. In His resurrection He provides a sense of stability. He is the better *gran dimun* for Mauritian society.

Foreign workers, too, should approach ministry in Mauritius more thoughtfully. Rather than employing Mauritian leaders to implement their organization's approach or sending them abroad for training, they should "[focus] on understanding the peculiarities of a people group with a view to seeing how God is at work in those peculiarities" (Cooper, 2020, p. 88). They should practice missiological theology that is "grounded in God's will and multiplies his worshippers as people see that their story and God's story are the same story" (Cooper, 2020, p. 127).

Finally, leadership in Mauritius must reimagine expertise "not as a tool for governance, but a site of negotiation" (Gauthier, 2025). Leaders should amplify the voices of those around them, bring them into conversation, and facilitate greater collective intelligence (Amberg, 2025). In an online survey on the topic of leadership, 47 out of 125 Mauritian respondents overwhelmingly defined good leadership in terms of listening to those under them. Listed here are just a few of those responses:

"Listen to others and ability to lead a team."

"A good leader listens and helps."

"I think a good leader should be a good listener…"

"Someone who… cultivates an open mind to listen and act with standard."

"One who listens to EVERYBODY, not just the one near him and that goes to ask question of those who don't talk to him."

> "A good leader is a charismatic good listener. They are not the smartest person in the room. They are aware of their people's strengths and relies on others accordingly."

Although colonial paradigms of leadership are deeply ingrained, responses like these show Mauritians have a clear idea of the kind of leadership that appeals to them.

This study has shown that the Mauritian Church has struggled to maintain unity because of attempts to reconcile contested belonging through colonial epistemologies. Controlling styles of leadership mimicking qualities of former oppressors, and careless foreign ministries exacerbating the problem by conferring qualities that predispose leaders to break away from churches, are some examples of such attempts. Unity can be promoted through adaptive ecclesiology more at home in Mauritian culture, reinterpreting local expressions of theology through missiological parallelisms, and reimagining leadership as a locus of dialogue.

Mauritius is an island of many cultures and a rich history. It has much to offer the global church through its partnership and unique vision of Christ.

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