

Remembering Hassan

Bernard Appassamy | 21 May 2008

6 Comments



Practically anywhere I stood on Mauritius, I could see a basalt mountain in the distance. In year 9, our geography teacher asked us to trace from a map onto paper the contours of all the scattered mountains, and then join them. They formed the ring of the giant volcano from which my island had erupted 8 million years ago.

A mountain-like figure, always on my horizon, was Hassan.

Hassan owned a fabric shop in the capital, Port-Louis. He was a Muslim who had known my four grandparents, and sold wide ranges of fabric to four generations of my extended Catholic family.

Before the advent of imported ready-to-wear in the late '70s, Mauritians had all their clothes, linen and furnishings custom-made. A number of fabric shops, mostly owned by Muslims, were spread out over the island. His was the oldest and, in its heyday, the biggest. My mother accumulated most of her dowry at Hassan's, as did my two sisters. Later, my nephews' baby clothes were planned there.

On the phone last week, my mother apologised. 'I thought I'd told you, I'm sorry ... About six months ago ... How old? I imagine in his late 90s ...'

He lived above the wooden and corrugated iron shop with his wife and family. I never caught more than a glimpse of their quarters, which were accessible through an outdoor spiral staircase that overlooked a single tree, an old mango. That tree had a history of bearing fruit earlier than the mango orchards throughout the island, and every summer, before any mangoes went up for sale, Hassan had already treated us to a raffia basket filled with his Maison Rouge mangoes.

As a child coming to the shop with my parents and sisters, I made a beeline for the basement, a cramped space with a low ceiling where the latest shipped-in stock was delivered. I snooped around the aisles, peeped into half-unpacked pine crates and marvelled over the suppliers' foreign stamped addresses. Through the floorboards above my head, I eavesdropped on muddled conversations punctuated by the sound of stiletto and the snipping of large tailor scissors.



By the time I eventually made it back upstairs, my parents had gathered a pile of fabric rolls mostly to clothe the family until the next season. My mother thought out loud the appropriate length needed from each roll which Hassan then swiftly unravelled. I was fascinated by his skill at either carefully cutting through a piece of fabric or boldly tearing it across.

My more recent visits to Hassan's now weathered shop followed different rituals. Soon after my arrival on the island, I received a message through the grapevine: 'Please come and say hello.' I was first welcomed at the front counter by one of his elderly, grey bearded nephews who ushered me through a familiar meander of gleaming corridors. Each room was dedicated to a type of fabric; some rooms were even subtly gender specific.

I avoided venturing into the silk and chiffon for-ladies-only room, as my mother and sisters did the wool for-men's-suits room. Generally, boundaries around cotton and linen were more fluid.

Hassan's office was right at the back and filled floor to ceiling with swatches. I would find him sitting at his desk with his short, increasingly crouched figure almost disappearing behind large amounts of paperwork. He would rise from his chair, straighten his immaculate white Kurta and white crochet cap, and greet me.

The conversation covered a set pattern. We both knew what we felt comfortable talking about, which rooms we could share. The quality of Australian and New Zealand wool, customs duties and sales tax, unreliable suppliers, his declining clientele and health, my job, and living so far from my family. With time, he replaced 'And when are you getting married?' with 'Will you come back to live here again? You don't want to grow old overseas, do you?'

Invariably, he loomed to 'Now, surely you need at least one suit. Shall we have a look?' Later at the cashier, he asked conspiratorially '... on Papa's account?', and we both laughed.

Today, through my bedroom window, a skyline of inner city terraces and satellite dishes stare back at me. Nine thousand kilometers away, standing under the front verandah of my family home, I would be facing the Corps de Garde mountain, named after its resemblance to a sentry — like Hassan, always on duty.



Bernard Appassamy is a Sydney freelance writer and artist who grew up in Mauritius.

Flickr image by f2b

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EXISTING COMMENTS

Thanks for this reminder of the delights of Port Louis. I was in Mauritius in 1982 or 83 for three weeks just a fortnight or so before the colonial govt was thrown out in favour of the MMM et al. There was a new women's centre, a network of preschools teaching in creole, LPT - adult literacy, anti-apartheid movement with Lindsay Collen and her village doctor husband running education health clinics. I loved it.

Cecily McNeill | 21 May 2008

Great Bernard! A wonderfully nostalgic read. Makes me want to go explore Mauritius!

James Blackwell | 21 May 2008

Cher Bernard, j'ai trouve ton article fort interessant - il est magnifiquement bien ecrit. Bravo. Je suis la fille de Pierre et de Monique Dinan - cela fait 2 ans que je suis installee a Melbourne avec mon mari Guglielmo et mes 3 enfants. Ravis de te lire. A bientot et bonne continuation, Anne

Anne Gottoli | 22 May 2008

Congratulations, this looks awesome in print. What a wonderful story and memorial. You have given Hassan and his family a priceless gift.

Jenny Gering | 22 May 2008

Salut Bernard. On s'y croirait vraiment! j'ai même les yeux qui piquent et c'est pas seulement à cause des odeurs d'encens et les produits anti mites...

Jacqueline Masson-M | 22 May 2008

merci d'avoir choisi une de mes photos pour illustrer votre article...

frédéric de Brugada | 30 June 2008

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