

# Goni: Unpacking a Mauritian sugar sack

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When I was at art school, a drawing lecturer taught us a singular technique. We cut a window from a sheet of paper, placed it flat over another sheet of the same size, then drew a continuous image across both. Three images emerged: the drawing inside the window, the one on the cut-out, and the full picture when reunited. That same frame could be placed over blank sheets for new drawings, or different frames over the same drawing, revealing multiple combinations and interpretations.

The way we view the past works much the same way. Mine begins with sugar.

I grew up on sugar, literally. It was in my Milo, my cereal, jam, milkshakes, cakes, sweets, and fizzy drinks every day. The sugar industry was the island's oldest and largest, employing and sustaining generations of Mauritian families, including my own. For the majority, gruelling physical labour prevailed, whether in the cane fields, loading trucks, working in sugar mills, or carrying sugar sacks.

In *Kreol Morisien* (Mauritian Creole), *Goni* refers to a hessian or sisal sack, a term derived from Hindi and Sanskrit. Dockers loaded ships manually with goni, each containing up to 80 kilos of sugar, until bulk shipping replaced them in 1980.

A worn document, passed down to me by my uncle, links my family to goni. On 22 February 1911, under British rule, my paternal grandfather Joseph, who worked at Customs at Port Louis harbour docks, was formally granted a licence as a 'Sworn Weigher' by the Colonial Secretary on behalf of the Governor. It authorised him to certify the weight of exported and imported goods, especially sugar packed in goni.

Today, I think of goni as an archive embodying Mauritius' entangled history with the sugar industry – from slavery and indenture to the widespread employment that drove the economy and generated both stability and wealth. Beneath the tropical postcard myth of paradise and abundance lie uncomfortable, foundational contradictions: paradise built by whom and built for whom? I see goni as a vessel holding both the sweetness it once carried and the toil behind that sweetness, hidden in plain sight.

As a child in Mauritius in the 1960s, our history was simplified in neat cycles: allegedly first visited by Arab sailors, later by Portuguese explorers, then colonised by the Dutch, the French and the British, before independence in 1968. Mauritius had no Indigenous people, only the colonisers and those they brought. Mauritian history was absent from secondary education, while English history was taught.

In my community and schooling, the dominant narrative portrayed French and English heritage and culture as noble, superior and aspirational. Hierarchies inherited from colonial rule continued to underpin everyday interactions. As a young adult, I chose to migrate to Australia.

About fifteen years ago, a relative in Mauritius traced our shared ancestry through my mother's side to Philippe Ducasse, whom we knew only vaguely as a French doctor. Ducasse's name (misspelled) appeared in the online transcripts of English explorer Matthew Flinders' [Private Journal](#), held by the NSW State Library. The location recorded by Flinders correlates with what we know of where Ducasse lived (verbatim):

*'Sunday 11. we walked to the habitation of a Mr. Ducas and breakfasted. Close to his house are several extensive subterranean excavations, formerly the refuge of a bandido of maroon negroes, consisting of 33 or 53 men. When they were surprised, the chief, named was killed, and his skull remained at the entrance of one of these caverns where he was placed as a sentinel and killed when the band were surprised.'*

The term *maroon* from the Spanish *cimarrón*, came to denote enslaved people who fled captivity in imperial colonies, forming independent communities across the Indian Ocean islands and the Americas.

Thus wrote Flinders on Sunday, May 11, 1806, while held in detention in Mauritius for six-and-a-half years. At the time, the idea that an ancestor had hosted such a lionised figure felt to me like a brush with history. I knew that under colonial rule, enslaved and indentured labourers powered the sugar economy, but I wasn't aware of the facts or concerned about their daily realities.

In my experience, these histories were treated as painful but distant pasts. Attempts to discuss them were dismissed as futile and fractious; voices critical of the violence and lasting damage caused by slavery and indenture provoked an equally defensive 'biting the hand that feeds you' reaction.

Perhaps that's why my mother remained circumspect about the brief family connection to Flinders. She used to say the colonial history of Mauritius is too often staged like a set from *Angélique, Marquise des Anges*, a 1960s film series about a fearless noblewoman's adventures in 17th-century France – romantic, theatrical and selective.

Like Flinders, I overlooked the caverns' darker truths – the subjugation of the escaped enslaved people and the gruesome image of their leader's skull displayed as a warning. I did not scrutinise the history I was being handed. Given his French name and Flinders' deferential use of 'Mr', was Ducasse a landowner and possibly an owner of enslaved people? Did records exist? Were Flinders, Ducasse and I – each from a distinct historical context – altogether blind to the human cost behind these events?

Life happened and that window quietly closed. Then, seven years ago, I holidayed in Mauritius. Since my previous visit, two new cultural heritage centres had opened in Port Louis: the UNESCO World Heritage Site [Aapravasi Ghat](#), whose name, derived from Hindi, means 'Landing place of immigrants', and next door, the [Beekrumsing Ramlallah Interpretation Centre](#).

In 1842, the British Colonial Secretary Edward Stanley wrote:

*'The abolition of slavery has rendered the British Colonies the scene of an experiment whether the staple product of imperial countries can be raised as effectually and as advantageously by the labour of free men as by that of slaves...'*

As the display panels explained, Mauritius was the site of the first large-scale use of indentured labour after the abolition of slavery, particularly within the British Empire. Between the 1830s and 1910, more than 462,000 people arrived, the vast majority from India, with two-thirds remaining permanently. Contracts promised freedom, yet laws allowed fines or imprisonment for perceived disobedience. Between 1860 and 1865, labourers filed over 110,000 complaints, with magistrates largely ruling in their favour.

I was struck by the curatorial authority of the exhibits. They revealed the workings of the British colonial machinery through the experiences of indentured labourers in a space that literally carried their footprints. The rationale behind the ‘experiment’ – the ongoing production of sugar for imperial consumption and profit – and what it meant for the people whose labour made it possible stood in glaring contrast. The paradox of goni was everywhere.

Back in Australia, I slipped into routine and missed the chance – again – to look deeper. It wasn’t until 2024, while researching Mauritius’ colonial past for an art project, that I began to grasp just how profoundly the island had been marked by violence, coercion and erasure. The scale was vast, as was the body of academic and creative work on the subject that had accumulated since my youth.

I compiled dozens of pages of links, articles, and archives – but what did it actually mean to live and work under such systems?

Three recent works broke the fourth wall for me: Nathacha Appanah’s 2023 book *La mémoire délavée* (*The washed-out memory*, untranslated); the catalogue for the 2024 exhibition *Faces of Ancestors: The Froberville Collection Returns to Mauritius*, curated by Klara Boyer-Rossol; and Simon Moutairou’s 2024 film *No Chains, No Masters*.



Mauritian-born writer Nathacha Appanah, now based in France, explores, among other themes, displacement and memory. In [\*La mémoire délavée\*](#), she examines the legacy of indenture in her family. Although the system ended over a century ago, its structures linger in subtle ways. She weaves a hybrid tale from national archives, oral histories and poetic inquiry, holding both tension and affection.

She returns to 1 August 1872 when her forebears, including their 11-year-old son, arrived in Port Louis from their Indian village of Rangapalle and were assigned the identification numbers 358444, 358445, and 358448. This registration drew them into a chain of invisibility: first imposed by the British colonial administration and maintained by the desire of subsequent generations ‘to move away from that past, from the ship’s holds and the filth’. What emerges is how that history continues to shape what is spoken, whispered, or left unsaid within her family.

Appanah doesn’t depict her forebears’ experience directly. Instead, she brings candour to her grandparents and wider family, recalling how indenture filtered into family lore. She eschews blame, moralising and tragic heroes – even when what lies beneath her family portraits points to backbreaking livelihoods unequally dependent on the sugar industry and marked once by a dramatic confrontation with a white overseer. *La mémoire délavée* unravels memory across generations, from the personal to the collective.

Her writing hovers between fragments and apparent voids, inherited shame and pride. Within this, she examines ‘the caste of language’ in Mauritius and its divisive cultural power. Her grandparents, who spoke Hindi, Bhojpuri, Telugu, and Kreol Morisien, were made to feel inferior.

These languages, associated with colonial labour, were – and despite changing attitudes remain in some circles – viewed as markers of limited education.

I was reminded of my own school years, when those who might have excelled in science but did not speak French at home or with ease were similarly diminished. This linguistic prestige still extends into how social standing is judged; language can become a form of power – a means of defining, justifying and excluding belonging. Now, Kreol Morisien has entered the [HSC](#) and [university](#) curricula.

During my years living in Mauritius, Appanah's family stories had no platform, and so, it seemed, they did not happen or matter. She nudged me to listen and bear witness to voices reduced to numbers.

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The process of having one's face cast is intimate. As an artist, I know how overwhelming the claustrophobia can be. For the East Africans from present-day Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania cast by French ethnologist Eugène Huet de Froberville, this raises questions about their agency across language and cultural barriers. According to oral family history cited in the exhibition catalogue, Froberville offered alcohol to the sitters, with no record of payment or recognition. His family's wealth, linked to the sugar industry, gave him social authority over those he documented.

The 2024 French exhibition, [\*Faces of Ancestors: The Froberville Collection Returns to Mauritius\*](#), featured 53 surviving plaster busts made in the late 1840s by Froberville during fieldwork in Réunion and Mauritius. He also produced over 300 interviews and extensive notes. Although slavery had been abolished in Mauritius by then, those he documented were legally free yet remained socially and economically vulnerable.

French historian and curator Klara Boyer-Rossol cross-referenced Froberville's notes with the inscribed names on the busts, reassembling and foregrounding the personal stories of each sitter. The catalogue engages with Froberville's language in 'a context of domination'. He documented 'the superstitious fears of my models', which he saw as an obstacle in 'a population corrupted by long slavery and childishly distrustful of Whites', and how he sought consent, assisted by the Catholic missionary [Abbé Jacques-Désiré Laval](#), later beatified by the Catholic Church and venerated to this day as the 'Apostle of Mauritius'.

Looking at photographs of the casts felt unsettling, even voyeuristic; I wondered about Froberville's gaze and about the ethics of my own. How does one look at these embodied archives? Traditionally, busts are created as symbols of remembrance and reverence. The closer the likeness, the more immediate the recognition, the more powerful the assertion of the subjects' legacy. These busts were made within an altogether different relationship and for a different purpose. The closed eyes, an unavoidable requirement of casting someone alive, carry an additional asymmetry: Froberville could look at his sitters, and we can, but they could not. Nor could they offer any insight into their experience.

The catalogue references the ethnologist's skin-tone matching and colouring method, in which squares of paper were glued to the sitters' skin and tinted until a match was achieved (Nott & Gliddon, *Indigenous Races of the Earth*, 1857, [p. 608](#)). Froberville's further extraction now reads as disturbing and, to me with brown skin, deeply offensive.

Froberville's documentation remains significant because it was not the French colonial norm to record the original birth names of the enslaved. Instead, they were often given imposed names, such as 'Lily', taken from the ship that had brought some of the sitters – a family name that survives among their descendants to this day.

At the [Château Royal de Blois](#) in the French Loire Valley, which has owned the busts since 1940, Froberville's specimens could be encountered by their descendants as ancestors, re-establishing, however partially, a sense of lineage and roots erased through enslavement. Even the château, a monument to inherited privilege, wealth and power, was confronted with its own past.

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Simon Moutaïrou's 2024 French film, [No Chains. No Masters](#), opens in 1759 on a sugar plantation on *Isle de France*, now known as Mauritius. The owner reads aloud to his enslaved people the punishments for escape, as prescribed in the [Code Noir](#). An enslaved overseer translates French into Wolof, still widely spoken in Senegal. Article XXXI stated (verbatim, translated by the author):

*'A runaway slave who has been in flight for a month from the day his master reported him to justice shall have his ears cut off and shall be branded with a fleur-de-lis on one shoulder, and if he repeats this for another month from the day of the report, he shall have his hamstring cut and shall be branded with a fleur-de-lis on the other shoulder, and the third time he shall be punished by death.'*

I had never heard of the *Code Noir*. First issued in 1685 by Louis XIV, it regulated enslaved populations in French colonies, defining them as 'movables' – property akin to furniture. The 1723 [Letters Patent](#) adaptation for *Île Bourbon* (Réunion) and *Île de France* (Mauritius) controlled their lives with bureaucratic meticulousness through [54 articles](#).

The *Code Noir* returned to international attention on 21 May 2026, when France's National Assembly voted unanimously [to formally repeal it](#), almost 180 years after the abolition of slavery. While largely symbolic so far, this decision has renewed public debate about the need for a deeper reckoning with the enduring consequences of slavery. In Mauritius, influence and wealth are now more dispersed than in the past; yet unequal opportunities continue to marginalise those born into families with fewer resources, while subordination remains an overt and socially accepted currency.

When the overseer's daughter escapes the plantation, her father is whipped, fitted with an iron mouth bit, and imprisoned to reveal her whereabouts. Instead, he flees as well, determined to

find and rescue her. The film portrays the French colonisers' conviction in their superiority as a logic of power, combining law, religion and physical abuse. Terror is tiered, recited and sanctioned in the production of sugar. Moutaïrou has described his perspective as rooted in Creole identity, challenging stereotypes of the enslaved as eternal victims and highlighting historical defiance. He refrains from demonising the French, adding to their moral complexity.

Viewing *No Chains, No Masters* was visceral for me. It shook my comfortable ignorance and prompted identification with the characters and the injustice. The film is bookended by the song 'Dellu', meaning 'to return' or 'to go back' in Wolof. In the final scene, a group of Maroons sing 'Dellu' as they march together, choosing freedom over submission regardless of the tragic cost. Again, Moutaïrou does not translate the Wolof lyrics, enabling the Maroons to reject a single French narrative and affirm their sovereignty.

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If sugar and Goni form the backbone of Mauritian history, that past remains etched in the island's landscape. As my Air Mauritius plane nears landing, lime-green sugar cane fields unfurl within geometric patterns.

At immigration, I present my Australian passport. The officer reads aloud, 'Appassamy'. As I nod, he points to his name badge – the same as mine except for one less 's'. We laugh, both aware of the distinction one letter can make in Mauritius. A family name carries layers of meaning – ethnicity, cultural heritage, social status and religion – as well as obscured personal stories.

My earliest traceable paternal ancestors in Mauritius, Appassamy Soupa Chettiar and Sindamany Chelembon Virapa, are recorded in a [study](#) of Chettiar migration and identity in the colonial Indian Ocean diaspora. In November 1851, after both had lost their parents, a council was convened to ratify their marriage, with an attorney's clerk representing Sindamany's interests. Later, their son Comarassamy's own marriage required him to convert from Tamil Hinduism to Catholicism to marry Anne Euchariste Clam, of European ancestry. This compulsory conversion marked more than a change of religion: the generations that followed distanced themselves from anything Indian, favouring French language and culture, such that my family name is the only remnant of that history.

Mauritius is as much intersection as hierarchy. On that visit, Diwali night carries all at once Bollywood music, Chinese crackers going off, and the Muslim muezzin's call to prayer – not necessarily in harmony but as overlapping histories in action. On the plane back to Australia, when dinner is served, I overhear, 'A kot pima?' (Kreol for 'Where is the chilli?').

Through the research of other descendants, I learned that my maternal forebear, Philippe Ducasse, fathered six children with Gertrude, an enslaved woman born in *Isle Bourbon* (now Réunion), within a household where he owned enslaved people. Gertrude appears without a documented family name. She remains central to this lineage, yet almost entirely invisible. The focus remains on Philippe's French origins, his profession as a doctor and his achievements.

As with Froberville's interactions with his sitters, the power imbalance complicates any reading of the liaison as simply consensual. Yet some of Philippe's decisions reflect the moral ambiguities explored in *No Chains, No Masters*. By manumitting Gertrude and their children and giving the children his family name, he altered their legal and social futures.

Gertrude and Philippe upended my understanding of Flinders' meeting with Ducasse (Philippe) and his visit to the Maroons' refuge. The three of them disrupted my projections, revealing nuances of coercion, intimacy and agency I had not imagined.

Over recent decades, conversations about slavery and indenture have become more visible in Mauritius. The [Truth and Justice Commission](#) sought to give shape to this evolution, though its recommendations have progressed [glacially](#). One such proposal was realised with the opening of the [Intercontinental Slavery Museum](#) in 2023. Three of Froberville's busts were subsequently loaned to the museum in 2025 for five years.

In June last year, on the Mauritian national TV channel, journalist and writer Shenaz Patel, hosted a panel titled [Esclavage: Ki Dialog?](#) ('Slavery: What dialogue?'). Conducted in Kreol and French, Patel brought together two enslaved people's descendants – one a writer and activist, the other a historian who acknowledged that her own ancestry might include owners of enslaved people – alongside two descendants of owners of enslaved people and a French writer with an enslaved Mauritian female ancestor. I sat there transfixed, having never imagined such socially stratified Mauritian narratives could engage in sincere conversation. I noticed the historian tearing up when one of the descendants of owners of enslaved people read an apology – to my knowledge, an unprecedented first in Mauritius.

It's been two years since I started this journey. If some of my searches yielded answers, more often they expanded my inquiry. Appanah, Froberville and Moutairou each offered me different registers for approaching some of the labour histories behind Mauritian sugar through archives, representation, memory, language, law and resistance. Like Diwali night, the legacies they reveal coexist without resolving into a single coherent account or a neat family tree.

Slavery and indenture need not compete. Pitting them against each other in national discourse risks re-engaging colonial hierarchies of value. The experiences of enslaved and indentured labourers were distinct, yet both are woven into goni.

How we frame these histories, and the tensions around responsibility, remembrance and reparations that arise from them, can reveal just as much about our own blind spots. In his book, *How to look at a painting*, writer, art critic and curator Justin Paton proposes, "Before answering the question 'What do I think?' try 'What did I notice?'" Perhaps history is not only something we attempt to define, but something we continue to encounter and interrogate, that in turn questions us.

I question 'lost in translation'. On 1 January 1805 in Mauritius, Flinders wrote in his [Private Journal](#):

*‘...all the black people and servants were running about in the morning calling banana, banana, with flowers in their hands...’.*

Flinders’ *banana* was in fact *bonane*, Kreol for the French *bonne année*, meaning happy new year.

In 2023, a supermarket chain opened a store in my Sydney suburb. I found myself shopping there weekly and came to notice one of the employees, a tall man in his early twenties, who always greeted me.

This year, as I was scanning my shopping at the self-checkout, he happened to be standing there; out of the blue, he blurted out, ‘Excuse me for asking – are you from Mauritius?’. When I answered, ‘Yes’, he exclaimed, ‘I knew it! *Moi aussi. To koz Kreol?*’.

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