

Understanding the Mauritian Kitchen through Primary and Secondary Sources

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Abstract

The kitchen is the multifunctional space in a home where family and friends spend quality time to prepare food, cook, eat as well as discuss daily things and most importantly create strategies for the future. The evolution of the kitchen in Mauritius is very complex given the complexity of the population itself and to better understand this issue, the primary and secondary sources compiled by the Mauritian Heritage Funds (Appravasi Ghat, MGI Folk Museum and Le Morne – Trou Chennile Village) depicting the life of slaves, labourers, and traders, who brought their tangible and intangible heritage, were extensively studied. In addition, to understand the transition of Mauritians from the silent and the baby boomers' generation, a qualitative study using the snowball sampling method on 22 participants aged between 55 and 95 years was conducted. Elders from both rural and urban areas of the north, south, east, center, and west of Mauritius were targeted to conduct this study. Their kitchen histories and adjustments done over the years in the kitchens were recorded and transcribed during face-to-face interviews. The results show that many have maintained the traditional methods and elements of cooking such as the 'roche cari', 'foyer', and 'rechaud' against all odds and others have reluctantly migrated to "so called" modern kitchen but still have countless memories of these items.

Keywords: Elderly, History, Kitchen, Mauritius

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Introduction

In Mauritian families, the kitchen has always been multi-functional and a space where the “real manager” of the family, the mother, could easily be found. The kitchen is thus considered as being the heart of the home, usually a warm and cozy gathering place where friends and family gather daily or occasionally to prepare food, help the kids with homework and discuss important topics. Hence, it should always be outfitted with lively hues to make it as much livable as it is functional. The kitchen mainly revolves around the work triangle (sink, refrigerator, and stove); the cabinets that store food goods, dinnerware, pots and pans, tableware and cooking utensils; the shelves, the floor tiles, the lighting, the backsplash and the countertop. This multifaceted room remaining mostly the women’s main area (Hema & Sidhu, 2011; Mahajan & Patwardhan, 2015) also extends its presence in all houses be it the culture. Each kitchen has a different story: from classic kitchens to smart and ergonomic ones that include technologies to boost the efficiency, convenience, and productivity. Kitchen remodeling can also be nerve-wracking due to the myriad of choices involving the aesthetic and practical reasons, as well as budget constraints.

Mauritius has transitioned from being a mono-crop low-income African country to a high income one. The ethnic diversity of the 1,265,985 inhabitants (Mauritius, 2019) from different ancestral origins reflects not only in the cuisine, but also in the dressing style, art and literature, as well as in the beliefs and faiths. The Mauritian kitchen history is quite different from the rest of the world. The arrival of slaves and indentured labourers (Mishra, 2009) brought in different kitchen items and accessories to facilitate daily meal preparation either in the morning prior going for work or in the evening for dinner. Today, it is a complex environment where individuals interact with electronic appliances during food preparation (Martin et al., 2016). The types of meals prepared were adapted to the types of work performed by the population concerned e.g. a labourer will have heavy meal consisting of rice or pharata and curry early in the morning before leaving for work.

Mauritian elderly actually makes 16.6% of the 1.3 million citizens and is expected to rise further in the next few decades. They are our sole connection to the past and to our origins and have transferred both tangible and intangible cultural heritage for us to be emerged as Mauritians. Ancestors also brought their wisdom, their memories, their experiences, and their history which survived the harsh working conditions under the Dutch, French and British colonization periods.

Understanding the Mauritian history as well as the past kitchens through secondary sources was helpful but through primary sources, empathy can be the turning point in discovering the kitchen. This paper deals with a section of a project titled “*Transforming the kitchen of the elderly people of Mauritius for an easier life: Inclusive Design*”, and initially investigates the history of the Indian immigrants and the maroons on bequeathing their native culinary culture to the current generation. Secondly, through open-ended questions, selected older adults are interviewed about their lifetime kitchen experience after ethical clearance approval from the University of Mauritius ethical committee.

1. Mauritian Kitchen History - Indian Immigrants and Slave Heritage

Mauritius during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries has witnessed the tangible and intangible cultural heritage brought by the slaves, indentured labourers, and traders. Some historical places depicted in Figure 1 that marked their presence are as follows: The Appravasi Ghat (red dot) symbolizes the place where the 'girmityas' climbed the symbolic sixteen (16) steps to enter Mauritius; the Folk Museum (green dot) disseminates the cultural heritage of the Indian Immigrants and Le Morne (blue dot) symbolizes the commemoration of Abolition of Slavery. The Government of Mauritius has earmarked these landmark regions to highlight the contribution of slaves/indentured labourers/ traders the creation of modern Mauritius and some additional information are given in the next section.

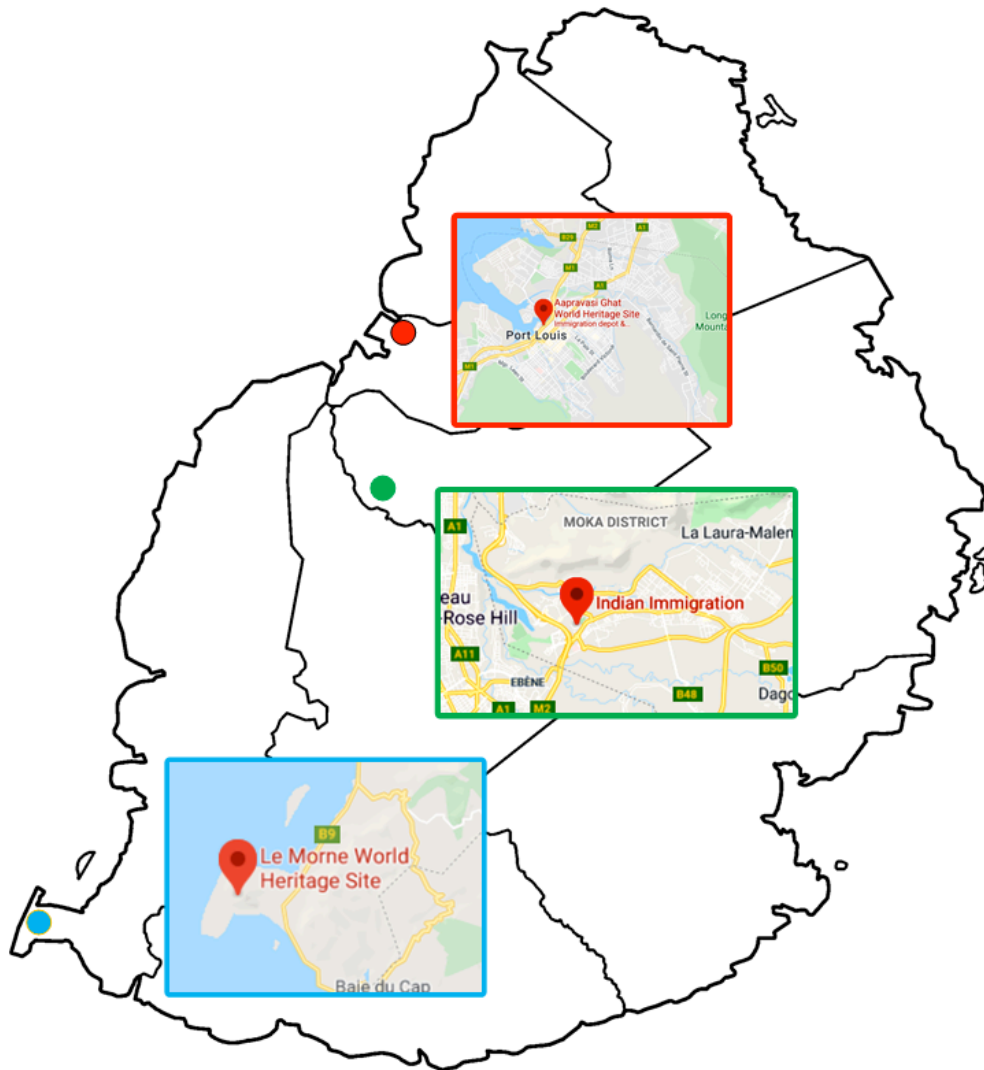


Figure 1: Locations of Historical Places

1.1 Appravasi Ghat

The Appravasi Ghat (1849) inscribed in June 2006 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is an Immigration Depot located in Port-Louis, Mauritius. This historical site previously known as the ‘Coolie Ghat’ witnessed the beginning of the modern indentured labour diaspora by being their first point of contact (Swift, 2007) with the island. Between 1853 and 1859, the Depot was expanded and improved to accommodate 600 immigrants. 97.5% of the Indian indentured immigrants (Teelock, 2018) came from Bihar, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra to work in the sugar estates. Upon arrival, they stayed in sheds for two days in the Depot to complete administrative procedures and prepared meals in the Immigrants kitchen (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Immigrants Kitchen (Past cooking area v/s Restored cooking area)¹

Later, immigrants were marched to sugar estates where they stayed in ‘camps’ consisting of long rows of huts built with wood and straw (Figure 3(a)) and barracks (Figure 3(b)). Their kitchens located in a sort of veranda outside the huts, consisted of hearth stones for preparing pharata, roti, rice, kasar, curry, kheer, dahi, matha (butter milk), and tea as well as drying clothes and newborn care. There was a garden to grow vegetables (taro, breadfruit, cassava) (Bhurosy & Jeewon, 2016) and medicinal plants as well as sheds for the goats and cows.



Figure 3: (a) Row of huts; (b) The Old Labourer's Quarters of Trianon²

¹ Source: Mr. Satyendra Peerthum - Appravasi Ghat Trust Fund (AGTF) Collection

² Source: <http://vintagemauritius.org/culture/trianon-old-labourers-quarters/>

1.2 MGI Folk Museum

This Folk Museum inaugurated in 2017 focuses on some people who fought for the cause of Indian immigrants namely, Adolphe de Plevitz, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and Manilall Doctor. The museum hosts the kitchen items, clothes, agricultural tools used by immigrants as well as a school (baitka) made using straw.



Figure 4: Collection of cooking utensils/items (Courtesy: MGI Folk Museum)

Some of the kitchen items/cooking tools shown in Figure 4, on display at the Beekrumsingh Ramlallah Interpretation Centre (BRIC) and the Folk Museum are as follows: Janta, Marmite, Dal Ghotni, Caraille (Kadhahi), Senni, Roche cari (Silbatta/silora), Hokri Mousar, Chawki-belna, Attukal, Ghara, Rechaud (Resso), Foyer (Chulha), Tawa, Katori, Tharia, Lotah, and Gilass. A pictorial representation with the English equivalent name of each kitchen item is shown in the Appendix.

1.3 Le Morne

Le Morne (Boswell, 2005) is also a UNESCO world heritage site proclaimed National Heritage on 24th January 2006. Located on the South side of Le Morne Brabant mountain, it served as a shelter by maroons (runaway slaves) (Eichmann, 2012; Owadally, 2009) from East African countries like Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania, and Yemen. It is the living example of the people who fought to be independent, free, and respected for their values and cultures. Ethnographic studies (N. Gopauloo, Essoo, & Panyandee, 2010) conducted by the Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund with the natives of Le Morne (Trou-Chenille), and neighboring villages revealed through an oral interview the following points:

1. Houses of Trou-Chenille were square shaped straw huts and triangular shaped sheds.
2. The maize mill (Stone mill) and the coffee pounder were regularly used to make maize powder and ground coffee. The staple food was primarily maize powder and inhabitants used to mix rice with maize to make “du riz maille”, maize soup, maize cake, as well as pancakes made with flour and banana. Wood fire or “four di son” also known as compacted sawdust in the form of a log.

3. Most maroons owned vegetable gardens where they grew manioc, maize, sweet potato, and songe root. They also reared poultry, pigs and hunted for hare, wild boar, deer, and “tang”.

2. Overview of Participants’ Profile and Background

The Mauritian culture (Maurer, 2015) has emerged through the diverse religious landscape such as the temples, shrines, mosques, pagodas and churches that can be seen all throughout the island. The Hindus constitute around 52%, the Christians around 28.3%, the Muslims around 16.6% and people from other religion around 3.1% of the population (Wiafe-Amoako, 2019). Twenty-two (22) participants were chosen using the snowball effect with the help of the University of 3rd Age of Mauritius (U3AM). Proper attention was given to ensure that selection was made from people coming from the different cultural and religious background so as to get a true picture of the evolution of the kitchen in each person’s life. The director of U3AM helped in identifying the participants as well as conducting the interviews to ensure that the elders feel secure and confident to share their personal experience freely during the oral interview.

3.0 Kitchen History of Participants

The Mauritian kitchen history is quite different from the rest of the world because of its blend of cultures and richly mixed cuisine. This plethora of cuisine grew during the 1930s from an unorganized cooking space with meal preparation being done on the floor to a ‘foyer’ placed on a worktop, until came the structured kitchen with zones pertaining to specific tasks. Cooking for heavy meals (rice, pharata, and curry) was mainly done on the foyer in contrast to preparing light meals on the primus or the rechaud, which allowed the space to multitask conveniently. The use of concrete sinks placed next to the foyer/rechaud/primus stove within the kitchen space occurred much later in comparison to the initial days when utensils were cleaned/washed outside the huts/wooden houses. The beginning of the 1940s brought major challenges for the inhabitants of Mauritius in terms of housing, kitchen accessories, and water distribution. For a better overview, the happenings lived by the inhabitants during the period 1940s to 1970s are illustrated in the subsections.

3.1 Housing

From 1945 to 1975, the British Government together with the Mauritian Government, the private sector, and the sugar industry constructed Industrial Estates, “*Dépendances*” houses such as little huts made of thatched roofs to accommodate the labourers recruited for working in the plantations. Between 1945 and 1955, a total of 1,000 units of those type of houses were built and rented to house the employees along with their family. During that period, most of the participants in the survey rented small straw huts, iron sheets and wooden houses shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Straw huts (AGTF) and Iron Sheet-Wooden Houses

Between 1963 and 1991, the Mauritian Government in partnership with the British Government developed and constructed a new housing model called the EDC (European Development Community) houses (Figure 6) in the southern part of Mauritius. The materials used to construct the EDC houses were mainly concrete slabs, iron sheets roofs, and asbestos panels; these houses were rented at a low cost to those who could not afford a house.



Figure 6: EDC House³

However, the EDC houses were not constructed with any proper infrastructures such as road, water distribution, sewage or indoor facilities such as the kitchen and toilet. Two participants modestly rented EDC houses for approximately 19 years, since 1974. One of the participant's husband had constructed a wooden kitchen with a concrete floor and a small concrete sink outside the EDC house while the other participant converted one of the rooms into a kitchen.

³ Source: <https://www.lexpress.mu/article/maisons-edc-des-milliers-de-mauriciens-vivent-toujours-en-contact-avec-de-l%E2%80%99amiant>e

3.2 Preparing and Cooking of food

In the 1940s, food had to be cooked outside in the open on a “*foyer*” by placing and joining three blocks together on the ground to form a triangular wooden fireplace (Figure 7(a)). The cooking pot was then placed on top of the blocks to cook food. One participant living in Curepipe narrated:

I had to find small bamboo sticks to mix up with the wooden sticks as during winter it was very tough to light the woods in the ‘foyer’.

Another participant who was living in Reduit stated:

My sister and I accompanied our grandmother to cut and carry piles of wood. We placed them on our head while walking back home.



Figure 7: (a) Foyer, (b) Rechaud⁴, and (c) Petroleum Stove⁵

During the 1950s, cooking was also done using the charcoal stove also known as “rechaud” or the coal pot (Figure 7(b)) as well as the primus stove (Figure 7(c)) that had a small circular tank at the bottom in which either kerosene or fuel was poured to light the stove. During the nineteenth century, the “*Roche Cari*” (Figure 8(b)), a thick and flat rectangular mortar, was introduced by the Indian immigrants in Mauritius and it was used by all Mauritians at that time irrespective of their ethnicity to crush and mix their spices.



It was fixed in concrete/ bricks installed outside the house. Thin channels were also drawn on the slab/mortar surface to keep the spices/dough on the mortar. The “*Baba Roche Cari*”, a small cylindrical roller of around thirty centimeters made from cut stone was used to pound, grind, and crush various combinations of spices on the mortar to obtain an aromatic paste. In fact, even today the “*Roche Cari*” has a special place in the culinary heritage of Mauritius.

Figure 8: ‘Roche Cari (Courtesy: AGTF and MGI Folk Museum)

⁴ Source: <https://ghanagogo.wordpress.com/2018/06/14/firewood-and-charcoal/>

⁵ Courtesy: AGTF (BRIC)

Indians immigrants also brought the stone mill (Figure 9(a)) and the wooden mortar-pestle (Figure 9(b)) in Mauritius to grind wheat for making flour, rice for making ground rice and corn for making corn powder to cook traditional Indian cakes.



Figure 9: (a) Stone mill and (b) Wooden mortar – pestle (Courtesy: MGI Museum ad AGTF)

Likewise, in the mid-19th century, the Indian immigrants brought the ‘*caraille*’, which is a deep cooking pot made of heavy cast iron (now available in aluminum also) in the form of a hemisphere and equipped with two metal handles for handling. The ‘*caraille*’ (Figure 10) was used by all the participants to cook food at that time. In the 1960s, most kitchen utensils used were in enamel where people could use them for one whole year as they were durable.



Figure 10: ‘Caraille’

One participant living at Curepipe stated that

“Each year my mother would buy new enamel vessels from the mobile kitchen utensils sellers and we threw the broken vessels”.

During that period, there was no malls or supermarkets. One could purchase commodities either from the nearby small shops, or from mobile hawkers or street vendors.

The mobile sellers overloaded their bicycles with items and would then roam the streets of their regions to find interested buyers. They normally sold fresh milk (Figure 11(a)), newspapers, coal for cooking food, kitchen utensils (Figure 11(b, c)), clothes, and tin cans. The advantages of buying from these hawkers were the low prices and delivery was at the door-step itself.

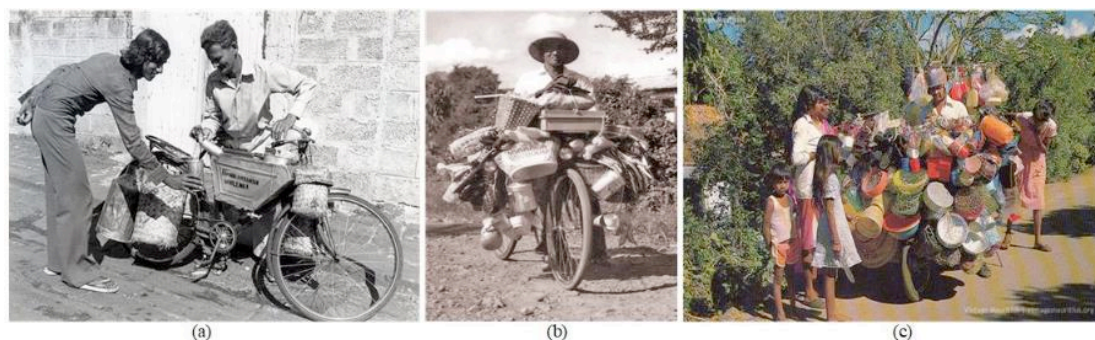


Figure 11: (a) Milkman⁶ and (b) Mobile kitchen item seller in 1960s⁷ / (c) 1989⁸

Another important kitchen utensil introduced in the late 1930s by the Chinese in Mauritius was the Chinese wok (Figure 12). During that era, only the Chinese used the wok for cooking but with time, the latter became a commonly used kitchen utensil by all inhabitants. From 1940 to 1970, none of the participants could afford a refrigerator. All the participants' family harvested fruits/vegetables in their courtyard. One participant's father who was a farmer, sold vegetables to the hospital for a better income. Meat was rarely eaten as only people who bred animals such as hens, ducks, goats, pigs, and rabbits in their yard could afford at that time. From the survey, only four participants reared hens, ducks, and pigs.



Figure 12: Wok (Courtesy: Chinese participant)

⁶ Source: <http://vintagemauritius.org/culture/mobile-kitchen-utensils-seller-marchand-mercerie-1989/#jp-carousel-1817>

⁷ Source: <http://vintagemauritius.org/culture/mobile-kitchen-utensils-seller-marchand-mercerie-1989/#jp-carousel-1818>

⁸ Source: <http://vintagemauritius.org/culture/mobile-kitchen-utensils-seller-marchand-mercerie-1989/>

During that epoch, the small straw or iron sheets kitchen was separated from the house and only one person could get inside to cook food. The lack of space forced one participant and her family members to sit on a mat outside the kitchen to have food. The kitchen was not even equipped with shelves, table and chair. Nearly all the participants' husbands helped to furnish the kitchen by building wooden shelves, cupboards, concrete sink, wooden table, and chairs. Moreover, ashes and charcoal were used as cleanser to wash the kitchen utensils.



Furthermore, there was no water distribution to individual houses. Most of the participants had to queue up to fetch water from the Public Government tap placed all around the regions (Figure 13). Two participants living near the river used to fetch water in small buckets to fill barrels, which they later used for domestic purposes.

Figure 13: Government Tap (Petit-Raffray)

4.0 Present Kitchen of Participants

In the early 1990s, nearly all the EDC houses were repealed and replaced with concrete new houses inclusive of a kitchen having proper water, sewage, and electricity distribution. In the year 1993, the two participants who rented the EDC houses demolished them to construct concrete houses. From 1975 to 1990, the government started improving the housing estates by providing the habitants with proper water and electricity connection.

As from 1975, the Mauritian economy started to take off and with the help of the Government proper infrastructure such as housing, water, electricity, sewage system and tarred roads were built. Moreover, the family income grew with both partners working to accommodate the basic necessities. New domestic equipment such as the electrical and gas oven and other accessories were bought to facilitate work in the kitchen. Along with new equipment, the kitchen floors and table tops were fitted with tiles and other decorative items in the mid 1980's.

Preparing and Cooking of food

Nowadays, preparing and cooking food has become easier with the electronic appliances shown in Figure 14. There is no need to cut wood or buy charcoal to cook food as in the past. All the participants have the gas oven and some of them even have both the gas stove and the oven. From the survey, only one participant did not have a microwave, but she mentioned not having one didn't matter as she heated her food on the gas stove itself.



Figure 14: Modern Kitchen (Courtesy: Participant)

Moreover, now the big stone mill is no longer seen and used while the big wooden mortar along with its wooden pestle have been replaced with a smaller version of the mortar and pestle, which is either made of stone or wood. Nearly all the participants have one in their kitchen to crush garlic, ginger, and other condiments. 75% participants still use their “*Roche Cari*” to crush and mix their spices despite having an electronic mixer and grinder at home. Moreover, the “*Roche Cari*” can still be seen in all their courtyard even though five of them do not use it now due to back pain or hand pain. The “*caraille*” and the Chinese wok are still used in the kitchen, but of course, new and more practical cookware that allow non-stick cooking (Figure 15) are fabricated using materials such as the aluminum, stainless steel, Teflon, and ceramic. With the construction of malls and supermarkets all around the country, the mobile kitchen utensils sellers have completely disappeared. All the participants now travel either by bus or their own car to buy their kitchen utensils and groceries in the nearby supermarkets and hypermarkets. Moreover, enamel kitchen vessels have disappeared from the market and only kitchen vessels made of plastic, glass, aluminum, stainless steel, and silicone are available. The major change was all participants had refrigerators to store their vegetables, fish, and meat.



Figure 15: Non-sticky cooking vessels⁹

While the majority kept up with harvesting vegetables and breeding animals, only one participant continued growing only leafy vegetables and herbs like the watercress, mint leaves, leeks, and scallions for daily use. Moreover, the size of the kitchen has definitely changed. Kitchens are now more spacious and can easily accommodate two to more persons to help and eat. From the survey, twenty-one (21) participants

⁹ Source: <https://361.mu/product/set-of-15-pieces-tefal-setp15/>

had a small kitchen and accommodated two persons as compared to only one participant having a more spacious one. Only one participant had a very small kitchen where she could only prepare and cook her food. Her family had to have meals elsewhere and even her refrigerator was placed in another room due to lack of space. Moreover, it was observed that all the participants had proper wooden shelves, cabinets, and cupboards to store their groceries, and kitchen utensils.

Liquid dish soap with sponge and dishwashers have replaced the use of charcoal, ashes and coconut coir. All houses now have proper water connection. However, only one participant complained about water supply cuts at some point in time at her place. Therefore, she stored water in buckets in the kitchen for later use when preparing/cooking food, and doing the dishes. Some kitchens are fitted with dish washing machines but often these are not designed for the traditional cookware used by the Mauritian families.

5.0 Conclusion

Over time, the kitchen being an active area has become spacious with more social interactions apart from only having meals. Transitioning from the ancient kitchen where the ancestors prepared meals right outside their houses to modern ones fitted inside the house through decades with the addition of new technologies has been fascinating. It is commendable to see how the Heritage Trust Funds of the Mauritian government have preserved or restored the old kitchens. The conducted interview also concluded how even today many elders still maintain the traditional means of cooking and have a small kitchen with basic amenities right outside their houses. Changing meal preparation techniques have throughout their lives given them lots of kitchen routines, knowledge and skills. Hence, when designing their kitchens, designers must consider their needs to ensure maximum comfort in terms of safety, ergonomics and use of technologies. The future works of this project requires interviewing more Mauritian elders, conducting role-play as well as anthropometric data collection for the product and the modular kitchen design adapted to Mauritian Elders.

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Appendix:

Traditional Kitchen Tools and Items	Given name	English equivalent
	Marmite	Traditional crockery casserole vessel
	Dal Ghotni	Wooden hand masher
	Senni	Large pandanus leaf (vacoas)/copper/aluminium/stainless steel serving tray
	Attukal	Stone mill
	Ghara	Earthen pot
	Tawa	Flat or concave disc-shaped frying pan

	Katori	Bowl
	Tharia	Round platter
	Chawki-belna	Rolling board-rolling pin
	Lotah	Globular water container
	Gilass	Steel/Copper Glass