

Sugar, Sea and Power

How Franco-Mauritians Balance Continuity and Creeping Decline of their Elite Position

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‘What will keep us [in Mauritius] if we don’t have the seaside anymore?’, a Franco-Mauritian woman told me after the government had proposed to raise the leasehold of the *campement* (seaside bungalow) sites. She was voicing the widely shared opinion of the white Mauritian elite, ‘officially’ called Franco-Mauritians, that the government’s 2006 proposal to increase the leasehold was unjust. Franco-Mauritians, who own by far the most *campements*, feared that the proposal would jeopardise the continuity of their pleasant (elite) lifestyle along the island’s sandy beaches and turquoise lagoons. The Franco-Mauritians, the subject of my thesis, argued that back in the old days nobody had wanted this land. Now that spending leisure time at the seaside had become popular, however, the government wanted to get rid of them to cash in on the land’s new-found value. And, in a clear departure from the colonial heydays, there was little that the Franco-Mauritians could do to stop the government from pursuing its intentions apart from complaining.

The island of Mauritius, located in the Indian Ocean some 800 kilometres to the east of Madagascar and infamous around the world because of the extermination of the flightless dodo in the mid-seventeenth century, was uninhabited when European seafarers first set foot on it. These colonisers, of whom the Franco-Mauritians are in a way the living heritage, established a new society in the following centuries and via land acquisitions and a favourable colonial system relatively easily obtained an elite position, with slaves from Africa and later indentured labourers from India acting as their subordinates.

The influx of other people from the many corners of the globe – present-day Mauritians have origins in locations as distant as China, Europe, India and Africa – easily outnumbered the Franco-Mauritians and the white elite nowadays constitutes only 1% of the population of 1.2 million. During the colonial period, however, this hardly jeopardised their position. As the woman’s remark shows, it is a different story nowadays. The island left the colonial period behind in 1968 with the dismantling of the

colonial structure that so favoured the Franco-Mauritians. Their power has decreased even more since then because many more Mauritians are now competing for political and economic influence and privileges. Nevertheless, the Franco-Mauritians are still very much in existence as a socio-economic elite, if only because of their continuing involvement in the sugar industry and their possession of large tracts of land.

Research Focus

The research focuses on the (historical) developments relating to the Franco-Mauritian community and its elite position in contemporary Mauritius, which has so far received little attention in academic literature. The transition from colonial times to the present-day situation as experienced by Franco-Mauritians constitutes an interesting case with respect to the theoretical understanding of elites, a fact that has led to the following research question:

What challenges to their dominant position do the Franco-Mauritian elite in Mauritius face and via which social, political, economic and discursive practices have they met these challenges in order to achieve continuity of their position?

To answer this question, I conducted ethnographic research on the Franco-Mauritians in Mauritius, South Africa (Durban and Cape Town) and France (Paris, Montpellier and Toulouse) during several visits made to these places in 2005, 2006 and 2007 – I focused predominantly on Franco-Mauritian students in South Africa and France in order to get their opinions on the Mauritian situation and information about their future prospects on the island. I used multiple methods and sources: participant observation, interviewing, network analysis, a questionnaire and written sources. This enabled me to analyse numerous (historical) challenges of decline to the Franco-Mauritian elite position and the efforts of the Franco-Mauritians to deal with these.

The thesis has a theoretical framework strongly focusing on phenomena such as power, (elite) culture, distinction and boundary marking, this framework having been adopted in order to better understand how the Franco-Mauritians coped with the transition from the colonial period to the postcolonial state as well as other challenges to their elite position. Despite a few notable exceptions, such as Abner Cohen (1981), George Marcus (1983), Cris Shore and Stephen Nugent et al. (2002) and Jean-Pascal Daloz (2003), studies of elites generally pay little attention to cultural dynamics. Trivial

aspects of life and daily routine and practices will, therefore, also be analysed as this will contribute to a better understanding of the behaviour of elites. Cris Shore rightly argues that an anthropological perspective helps to convey the way social reality is constructed by actors themselves as well as making clear the importance of grasping *their* conception of the world (Shore 2002: 5). This theoretical framework will, moreover, help to explain the interdependency of different aspects involved more holistically. It is important to grasp the multidimensionality of elite culture: its internal relationships, its power, its social history and its relationships (historical and contemporary) with other social groups. This approach enhances our understanding of how Franco-Mauritians have dealt with change, especially in relation to the transition from the colonial system to the post-colonial period. This case, therefore, contributes to knowledge about practices elites employ in order to achieve the continuity of their privileges in the face of change.

Colonial Times

Franco-Mauritians were clearly not an elite right from the start, as the island attracted whites of different social rank. The French, who colonised Mauritius after the Dutch and who renamed it Ile de France, started a permanent settlement there in 1721, this leading to the development of the island. This period laid the foundations for the emergence of a white elite, yet it was only with the plantation economy, relying on a racial hierarchy, and the arrival of the British in 1810 that the establishment of the Franco-Mauritian elite was fully achieved – the British renamed the island after its Dutch name, Mauritius. The French planters became more and more united in the form of a single white elite, identified as Franco-Mauritians, with a culture and language that distinguished them from the British colonial officers. The Franco-Mauritians were able to keep these and their land as the British had little interest in the island's internal affairs. The British occupation was mainly strategic and the Franco-Mauritians were, therefore, able to remain the dominant force in politics and the economy.

Shortly after their arrival, the British, nevertheless, also posed the first real challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position by abolishing slavery. Through practices of lobbying, resistance and political trafficking, however, Franco-Mauritians used their power in order to try to consolidate their elite position. At first sight they appear to have lost since slavery was abolished. Remarkably, however, especially with regard to an understanding of elite maintenance, is that this fact rather than jeopardising their position actually reinforced elite cohesion. Franco-Mauritians became more aware of their shared

interests and of their shared background, these being symbolised by white skin colour interpreted as sign of superiority. With little resistance from the British (or better said, support), the Franco-Mauritians were able to relatively easily maintain their elite position until the early twentieth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, things started to change, though, because, as John Scott argues, ‘power is intrinsically tied to the possibility of resistance, and the power of the elite must be seen as open to challenge from the resisting counteraction of its subalterns’ (Scott 2008: 38). The massive influx of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent, which had begun after the abolition of slavery, gradually became a threat. From the 1930s onwards the Indo-Mauritians could no longer only be considered a cheap workforce for the sugar industry as the Franco-Mauritians had originally intended them to be. With all the means at their disposal the Franco-Mauritians tried to face mounting resistance coming from this direction and to effectively turn the tide. This failed though and they had to accept the new political dominance of the Mauritian Hindu elite, backed by the large Hindu community (about 50% of the population). After the Second World War, and with support from the British, political power was redistributed, even though this did not happen overnight because the Franco-Mauritian elite did not easily accept defeat. Only gradually after 1968 did the Franco-Mauritians come to realise that their (in)direct political role was played out in a democratic Mauritius and that they no longer represented the designated political power. The outcome of serious challenges to Franco-Mauritian elite power was that, after the closing down of the Franco-Mauritian newspaper *Le Cernéen* in 1982, Franco-Mauritians chose to adopt a low-profile attitude in the context of public debates related to their ethnicity, withdrawing to the private sector.

Economic Privileges

After Franco-Mauritian political power was made ineffective, the Franco-Mauritians devoted themselves to their economic interests in order to maintain their elite position. Strategically this appeared a wise move since in a democratic society economic power is less subject to the moods of the electorate: political power can be lost overnight, while the expropriation of economic possessions is not a foregone conclusion for situations largely involving a peaceful transition. Indeed, the Franco-Mauritians were not dispossessed of their land and thus kept control over their original and principal resources. Money originating from the sugar industry was heavily invested in new

economic activities, a phenomenon which contributed to the prosperity of the island as a whole as well as reinforcing Franco-Mauritian economic power. This development was managed, moreover, in close collaboration with the counter-elites that had deprived Franco-Mauritians of their political power: the government needed Franco-Mauritians for revenue purposes and to invest in the local economy since Franco-Mauritians, especially in the first decades of the independent Mauritius, were the only ones who had the necessary wealth to make significant investments.

The current situation indicates that a long tradition of shared economic activities has led to strong cohesion among the Franco-Mauritians, with the success of Franco-Mauritian (business) networks being reinforced by social and cultural practices. CEOs illustrate this when they talk about ‘sportish rules’ and sharing a ‘lifestyle’. Not only do these features align the interests of proprietors, they also allow wealth to trickle down into the whole community: Franco-Mauritians are employed by other Franco-Mauritians because they are trusted and because the employers know their families. Moreover, Franco-Mauritians can open doors because they always know someone working for another Franco-Mauritian company through their social networks; many, for example, know each other through a shared passion for hunting if there is not a family relation in the first place.

Probing into the Franco-Mauritian sense of belonging is thus part and parcel of understanding Franco-Mauritian business practices and the consolidation of their elite position. Franco-Mauritian marriage patterns and the small size of the community have led to a community that is closely knit. Many Franco-Mauritians are to a certain degree related and when they are not related they often know each other personally. This is furthermore reinforced by (historical) patterns of exclusive leisure activities and the structure of Franco-Mauritian social life. Marrying ‘white’, sports clubs, life at the *campements* and exclusive leisure activities undertaken from earliest childhood strongly contribute to a sense of belonging. In short, the combination of the Franco-Mauritians’ long tradition as an elite, their cohesive identity and their assets and privileges reinforce horizontal loyalties and group dynamics. This helps the Franco-Mauritians to consolidate their position although increasing acceptance of mixed marriages may (gradually) undermine this. Their exclusivity, moreover, explains the higher levels of cooperation among Franco-Mauritians in the private sector compared to the counter-elites. Sino-Mauritians, for example, are far less of a close-knit network while Franco-Mauritian businessmen, due to the maintenance of exclusive social networks, are more easily drawn

to each other, this leaving other Mauritians on the outside. As Cohen argued, '[c]losure is most effectively attained through the operation of a network of amity which knits the members of the elite together. Such networks are developed to coordinate corporate action informally through mutual trust and cooperation' (Cohen 1981: 222).

The fact that Franco-Mauritians perceive themselves to be oppressed and to be victims of (Hindu) politicians appears, moreover, to 'suppress' dissident opinions within the Franco-Mauritian community. A number of Franco-Mauritians declared straight out that they were willing to pay the increase of the *campement* lease as this would give them more security to maintain their *campements* as part of their lifestyle. Within the community, however, one could hardly express this sentiment as the government was being portrayed as anti-white. This shows how an elite often acts according to the self-perception of itself as powerless (i.e. 'the government wants to get rid of us'), despite the fact that objectively the elite still has more power than others (i.e. the financial means to pay the increase of the leasehold).

Interdependency

To better understand how an elite faces up to challenges to its position it is necessary to analyse more closely how elites are embedded in a wider spectrum of social relationships. Elite distinction is shaped vis-à-vis other social groups through (structural) phenomena and because an elite position is partly assigned to the elite by others. I would argue that the successful maintenance of distinctive characteristics has to a large extent been facilitated by the structural phenomenon of ethnicity as this works in (contemporary) Mauritius. Ethnicity is one of the prime identifiers in Mauritius and many political debates are intricately related to ethnic difference even without Franco-Mauritians playing any role in these debates. Equally important, Franco-Mauritians have historically been at the top of the social hierarchy, this effectively clearly distinguishing them from most other Mauritians. There are no white labourers, for example, and none of the domestic staff employed are white. Numerous Mauritians value the symbol of white skin colour, be this the skin of the Franco-Mauritian or the white foreigner. The symbolic superiority of white skin colour is, therefore, also an ascription of elite status. The fact that whiteness has been more challenged since the end of the colonial period has so far had only a limited impact on this embodied sign of elite superiority. Many Mauritians still emulate Franco-Mauritians even though this behaviour is, paradoxically, mixed up with memories of humiliation.

Elites also have to actively pursue the maintenance of their position, however, as they have to enhance their image and seek legitimacy for their high status by assuming universalistic functions (Cohen 1981: xiii). Essentially, they have to reconcile tensions between 'universalism' and 'particularism' (Shore 2002, 2), as the stability of their position depends on the fairness of an elite system (as argued by Marcus 1983: 70). The colonial system, for example, lost its fairness and, as a consequence, Franco-Mauritians were deprived of their political power. The power struggle caused by this change led to the reinforcing of ethnic difference. Franco-Mauritians, consequently, succeed to a limited extent in reconciling the tension between their ethnic identity and universalistic functions. This is clearly underscored by their success in symbolising difference by means of their white skin-colour. The complex interdependence of ethnicity, economic privileges and (historical) resentment complicates relationships with other Mauritians. This affects, for example, power struggles between Franco-Mauritians and (non-white) politicians in present day Mauritius: white skin-colour coupled with memories of the past and to their present economic power are things so symbolically charged that Franco-Mauritians become an easy target for politicians trying to mobilise support. Even if the mechanism of white-bashing does not work, it certainly does these politicians little harm with so few whites to vote against them.

The relationship between the Franco-Mauritians and the government is one of paradoxes. There is much rivalry but at the same time the two sides need to collaborate. The (verbal) attacks on the Franco-Mauritians come and go, even though there always seems to be a latent threat of these flaring up. The structural phenomenon of ethnicity in Mauritian society, with the function of maintaining the Franco-Mauritian sense of belonging and their economic privileges, also contributes to the complexity, then. Because politicians use the situation for electoral gain, this also gives others a 'tool' to object to (policy) change. Franco-Mauritians do resist (often principally in the form of discourse, however) and try to alter the course of events by stating that the government is after them because of the past and their white skin-colour, though, as the example of the leaseholds shows. To a certain extent this (ethnic) rhetoric helps to consolidate their position. Franco-Mauritians argue that they would adhere to a more equal distribution of wealth but that at present it is only to the advantage of the politicians who want to reclaim their economic privileges to effect this change. In short, disqualifying opponents by presenting them as being driven by ethnic prejudices helps Franco-Mauritians to maintain the status quo whatever the actual merits of the opponent's argument. It should

be noted here that some Franco-Mauritians may feel genuinely victimised just as many other Mauritians do. The structural phenomenon of ethnicity in Mauritius has left such a mark on society that the frame of reference of many Mauritians is highly influenced by it.

Conclusion

This historico-anthropological study shows the manner in which Franco-Mauritians have developed various strategies and practices to face creeping decline and to successfully consolidate their elite position. On the one hand, this concurrence of historical, social, cultural, economic and political developments is a combination of various constraints, elements and developments unique to the Franco-Mauritian case. On the other, unravelling this complexity contributes to a better understanding of elites, elite decline and elite maintenance elsewhere.

The practices by means of which Franco-Mauritians have, with and without success, faced up to challenges to their position are diverse and inextricably interlinked. The anthropological perspective shows how the socio-cultural organisation of the Franco-Mauritian community, a strong identity and the 'defensive' use of power contribute to their efforts to achieve the continuity of their position in the face of change. Similar behaviour can be observed in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (2008) with financial elites portraying stricter regulation as political rhetoric being used in order to gain votes.

The case-study presented here shows that change is often gradual. Despite serious challenges, Franco-Mauritians still have a historically rooted inside track into management positions, helping them to weather competition and increasing the participation of Mauritians in the labour market. For this case, then, an anthropological perspective contributes to a better understanding since only looking at formal business practices would not satisfactorily explain the consolidation of the elite position. Exclusive socio-cultural patterns and the logic of employers when they hire other Franco-Mauritians because they trust them and know their families clearly show how these aspects contribute to the consolidation of an elite position. Similar processes occur on Wall Street although there it is not the family that is the defining factor for establishing trust but a degree from Harvard or Princeton (Ho 2009). At the same time, Franco-Mauritians and other elites alike consider themselves to not be that powerful at all, often even perceiving themselves as victims. This affects their behaviour since people's subjective sense of power has more impact on their thoughts, feelings and behaviour

than their objective sense of power (Bugental and Lewis 1999). In securing an elite position these practices, however, appear to have a function. They increase elite cohesion, 'suppress' dissident opinions within the elite community and provide an excuse for maintaining the status quo.