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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Balancing (re)distribution: Franco-Mauritians landownership in the maintenance of an elite position

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Sugarcane, once a vital component of the Mauritian economy, now makes up less than 10% of GDP. The land on which it grows (and grew), however, remains essential to the island's politico-economic power balance. Large tracts of land are still owned by Franco-Mauritians, the island's white former colonial elite, thus leading to an ambiguous relationship between landowners and the government in postcolonial Mauritius. This article argues that both resentment and collaboration contribute to the consolidation of the Franco-Mauritian elite position. Pressure from the state may have compelled Franco-Mauritians to redistribute some of their land, but this 'pay-off' hardly jeopardised their elite position. Their striking a balance between opposing redistribution and giving in to government demands is key to explaining how landed (white) elites are, in the absence of (state) violence, able to maintain their position long after the end of colonialism.

Keywords: power; landownership; colonial elite; Mauritius; postcolonial

Mauritius, nowadays a renowned tourist destination, relied almost solely on sugar production during colonial times. Most of the land on which the sugarcane was grown was owned by Franco-Mauritians, the white (former) colonial elite of the island. They were given large tracts of the island's uninhabited land at the start of the French colonial project, which they used for the cultivation of sugarcane. This helped them to accumulate wealth and to remain at the peak of the socio-economic pyramid relatively easily until the 1930s. From then, the apex position of the Franco-Mauritians began experiencing challenges with the emancipation of the other sections of the Mauritian population and democratisation of the political process, culminating with the independence of Mauritius in 1968 as its apogee.¹ In this process, Mauritians of Hindu origin, who make up about half of the population, became the dominant force within the political domain and state apparatus. Nevertheless, more than 40 years after independence Franco-Mauritians, who are currently estimated to number around 10,000, making up slightly less than 1% of the total population,² still control large parts of the island's agricultural land, and they remain an elite. They are the island's wealthiest community and no Franco-Mauritian tends to be found among the working class (Eriksen 1998, 62). Today, Franco-Mauritians have diversified their economic interests, while mergers and buy-outs in the sugar industry have also led to a concentration of Franco-Mauritians

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possessing agricultural land. The origin of the community's wealth, nonetheless, is undeniably tied to the land and associated with colonial injustices. This explains why land remains important to understanding the position of the Franco-Mauritians.

White landownership in former European colonies, especially in Africa, is contentious. In Zimbabwe, white farmers have been driven off the land, while in South Africa as well, the redistribution of land remains a prominent item on the political agenda. The Mauritian case, and thus Franco-Mauritian landownership, differs from mainland Africa, because Mauritius was uninhabited before the arrival of the European colonists, which gives white landownership a different meaning than on the continent.³ However, the privileges enjoyed by the Franco-Mauritians during the colonial period closely resembled the ones that white populations elsewhere in Africa benefited from. Landownership was one of the most, if not the most, prominent of these privileges. This advantage of ownership shapes memories of colonial injustices and the heritage of a system favouring Franco-Mauritians up till today, and makes the land question in Mauritius and the sentiment around this question comparable to white landownership in Africa more generally. It is important to note that white African farmers do not always enjoy the same elite position as Franco-Mauritians, even if they tend to be better off than the majority of Africans. The Franco-Mauritian case, then, is not only about being white but also about being an elite. In this sense, the Franco-Mauritian case is comparable not only to African whites but also to elites more generally as it helps to explain the functioning of land (and other resources) in the maintenance of an elite position. The Creole elite of Sierra Leone (Cohen 1981) and the Indian Parsis (Luhmann 1996), for example, had little control over tangible resources. In the case of the Parsis, who were an administrative elite during the colonial period, the decolonisation of India led to their demise. They were more easily outdone by newly emerged elites because they did not have assets that 'protected' them against rival counter-forces. Franco-Mauritians, however, could 'mobilise' their lands.

Agricultural products, sugar in the case of Mauritius, obviously generate wealth for the landowners. This article, however, is concerned with the functioning of land in the relationship between the landowners and opposing groups and/or institutions, the Mauritian postcolonial government in this case. While the generation of wealth is related to this process, it is not the core of my focus. Rather, the article aims to illustrate how the ambiguity of Franco-Mauritian landownership in the relationships between landowners and the government contributes to the maintenance of an elite position. To better understand land in contemporary Mauritius, I will first address the historical power base of the Franco-Mauritian community and the impact of this heritage in the postcolonial period. Second, I will address the present-day role of land with respect to the maintenance of the Franco-Mauritian elite position. For many Mauritians, land symbolises the white elite's unequal economic power and unfair colonial heritage. Mauritian politicians, who are predominantly of Hindu origin, often criticise Franco-Mauritian landownership and also challenge Franco-Mauritians to (re)distribute parts of their land. The manner in which Franco-Mauritians face these challenges is key to the understanding of their elite position, in terms of wealth as well as a shared sense of belonging among members of this community. In the negotiations on the restructuring of the sugar industry, for example, the government pressured Franco-Mauritian sugar estates to redistribute part of their land to retrenched labourers. Franco-Mauritian landowners opposed

any restitution, and garnered the support of most members of the Franco-Mauritian community. Yet, they eventually had to concede to the majority of the government's demands. While Franco-Mauritians may have had to distribute some of their land, this 'pay-off' nonetheless gave them some respite and hardly jeopardised their position. This striking a balance between opposing redistribution and giving in to government demands may help to prevent substantial decline for a long time to come – as elaborated below, I describe this process as an elite applying its power 'defensively' (Salverda 2010). Hence, as elsewhere, 'land remains a particularly vexing and contested form of property. It is both material and symbolic' (Fay and James 2010, 42).

At the same time, Franco-Mauritian landownership – and economic power more generally – forges collaboration between the government and the Franco-Mauritians. Investment of wealth originating from Franco-Mauritian landownership – and their control of the sugar industry – has contributed to the economic development of the island from the 1980s onwards. Recently, the conversion of agricultural lands was equally the result of a combined effort between landowners and the government to improve the economic conditions on the island. With the sugar and textile industry in decline, the search for new economic inroads has given Franco-Mauritian land new value. To attract foreign investment, the government initiated the Integrated Resort Scheme (IRS), that is the possibility for rich foreigners to buy residential property. Under this scheme, Franco-Mauritian landowners converted their agricultural land into luxurious villa resorts. In the postcolonial reality, then, Franco-Mauritians apply their land in different ways to sustain their economically powerful position. Hence, a closer look at the ambiguity of Franco-Mauritian landownership, which on the one hand instigates resentment but on the other shapes collaboration, helps to enhance the wider understanding of how land facilitates the 'defence' of an elite position. This helps to explain how landed (white) elites are, in the absence of (state) violence, able to maintain their positions long after the end of colonialism – yet, this equally explains why 'land-issues' will remain omnipresent in postcolonial Africa in the foreseeable future.

Unexplored territory

Mauritius was uninhabited when the first European seafarers set foot on the island in the sixteenth century. The French, who colonised Mauritius after the Dutch, started a permanent settlement in 1721, leading to the development of the island (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993). These settlers can be considered to be the ancestors of the present Franco-Mauritian community, although they were not a cohesive group from the start, as the island attracted whites of various social ranks during the French period (Vaughan 2005). The French East India Company tried to attract settlers by granting them land concessions. The absence of an indigenous population facilitated this and the first concession was granted on 5 June 1726, with successive concessions geared towards giving colonisation of the island an essential boost by distributing land to white settlers (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993, 98). Despite these efforts, the French ambition to develop the island into a plantation economy was barely achieved. Most of the large land concessions were only marginally exploited by 1766. At that time commerce seemed more profitable than agriculture. However, commercial trading weakened towards the end of the French period, and with few alternatives,

the colonists had little choice but to turn their attention to further development of the sugar industry (Allen 1999, 21–22) – due to the hazards of cyclones in this part of the Indian Ocean region, sugarcane was considered the least risky crop to grow. Although expansion of the sugar plantations was encouraged further through access to the London market, which came with the inclusion of Mauritius in the British Empire, it was not until the late 1820s that sugar began to fully dominate the island's economy (Benedict 1965, 15).

In December 1810, during the Napoleonic war, the British arrived with an armada of 70 ships and forced the French out of Mauritius. The British took over the island to help safeguard their interests in India. They only took control of the island's administration and never made attempts to completely control the island or evict its French citizens. Property was not confiscated and most of the plantations remained in the hands of white French planters. Moreover, Britons never settled in large numbers and, consequently, direct British cultural influence was minor with French remaining the dominant European culture and language (Benedict 1965, 13–14). This, with the sugarcane plantation economy, also marked the gradual unification of the Franco-Mauritians as an elite, owning large tracts of land and distinct from the rest of the population by their white skin-colour and European ancestry (Salverda 2011).⁴ As such, the small Franco-Mauritian community came to dominate the economic and political activity in Mauritius (Mozaffar 2005, 270).⁵

Shortly after their arrival, the British posed the first real challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position by abolishing slavery. This was part of an attempt, initiated in Britain, to ban slavery globally which was extended to Mauritius, rather than other Mauritians opposing Franco-Mauritian hegemony locally. The intention to abolish slavery was met with much resistance from the slave-masters, though they were unsuccessful in their attempt to stop the British from finally abolishing slavery in 1835. But they did manage to negotiate and obtain a huge compensation for the loss of their slaves. Franco-Mauritians did not have enough political clout to determine the decision-making process, but their economic position still gave them major influence in order to negotiate compensation. A side effect of the power struggle, moreover, was to the advantage of the Franco-Mauritians: they reinforced their elite position because they were unified not only by their shared economic interests but also by their joint resistance to British interference in their affairs (Vaughan 2005, 262). '[T]he Mauritian plantocracy as a whole, therefore, did not suffer drastic property losses from [slave] emancipation' (North-Coombes 2000, 23), and they remained powerful in the political and economic domain. But they had to turn to another source of labour. This was India, which they accessed with the help of the British colonial government. Thus began a new episode in Mauritian history, and the establishment of a new potential counter-force to white Mauritian hegemony: within 10 years of the arrival of the first indentured labourers one-third of the population were Indians, while by 1861 they numbered two-thirds of the population (Benedict 1965, 17).

Change

During the colonial period, Franco-Mauritians gained wealth and obtained and controlled the island's land relatively easily. Contrary to mainland Africa, they did not confront indigenous populations occupying the land, while communal lands,

like elsewhere in the world, did not exist. From the onset, Mauritius, as a matter of fact, formed part of the capitalist world system, relying on the export of its sugar. This reliance on a mono-crop is also explanatory to the understanding of the Franco-Mauritian elite. In Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), for example, the white farming community faced conflicts of interests between producers of cotton, tobacco and tea, between different regions, and between well-endowed company estates and undercapitalised family farmers (Palmer 1985, 215). In Mauritius, the focus on one product united the landed elite, also called the sugar oligarchy, even though when the process of production from planting to milling and trading is divided among several groups, as in the case of the Philippines, there is a potential for clashing interests (Billig 2003). But the Franco-Mauritian sugar estates also controlled the sugar mills. Together with the British colonial government, they had a shared interest in the maintenance of a large and cheap labour force for the production of sugar (for the British market), which now were Indo-Mauritian descendants of Indian indentured labour. Any resistance was suppressed without much difficulty: the colonial system was a hegemonic one facilitating power for white Franco-Mauritians. Only a small group of relatively wealthy non-whites called *gens de couleur* (people of colour), descended mainly from manumitted slaves and (illicit) sexual liaisons between white and black people, had been granted equal rights and were allowed to participate in the island's affairs (Boudet 2004, 53). They were, however, a minor threat to Franco-Mauritian domination, because they were relatively few, less wealthy and continued to be excluded from Franco-Mauritian society (Allen 1999, 79–104). Nevertheless, changes crept in that paved the way for challenges to the Franco-Mauritian elite position. These were prompted initially more by developments in world markets in the late nineteenth century than they were by resistance to colonial rule: falling sugar prices led Franco-Mauritians to sell part of their land, predominantly to Indo-Mauritians, thereby allowing the latter to become gradually more prominent in the island's economic and political affairs.

The Franco-Mauritian estate-owners had problems in raising capital and by selling land they were able to extract substantial sums of ready cash from the Indian immigrants and their descendants – this process was referred to as *grand morcellement*. These Indo-Mauritians then became small landowners and planters themselves, which allowed them to steadily increase their economic and political power. South Africa, on the contrary, witnessed a reversed process with the white community appropriating 90% of the land surface under the 1913 Natives Land Act (Hall and Ntsebeza 2007, 3). As Allen argues, this access to and control of land was crucial to enhancing the standing of the Indo-Mauritians in the Mauritian colonial order (1999, 73–74, 138). But with support from the British, the Franco-Mauritians prevented any change that would seriously jeopardise their elite position, such as widening suffrage, for another half a century.

The British attitude, however, was about to change when the 1930s saw the emergence of serious challenges to the Franco-Mauritian position as large numbers of Mauritians who had been excluded from the island's affairs began to prosper. Observing the increasing influence of the European working classes, who had already proven a substantial challenge to the establishment (Hartmann 2007, 5–7), the Mauritian working classes, notwithstanding their ethnic background, started to raise their voice. This was fuelled by dissatisfaction with their situation and the global Great Depression of the 1930s that had devastated the economy of Mauritius, which

was solely reliant on its sugar exports. The situation further deteriorated when the sugar mills reduced the buying price for a specific cane mainly produced by small planters. The sugar mills were in Franco-Mauritian hands, as was the control of the island's scientific institutions – 'access to sugar cane was a central grievance of protestors' (Storey 1997, 142). In August 1937, this led to a number of strikes and riots pitting workers against their employers in the sugar plantations. These were the first riots in Mauritian history which also had fatal casualties. These riots are considered a turning point in Mauritian history; the British colonial government could not ignore the grievances of the working classes anymore and as a result, changes were made: 'the Mauritian government began to incorporate non-elite groups within the structures of the state, to guarantee the peace' (149).

After the Second World War pressure built on the Franco-Mauritian position, as the general shape of events was influenced by new anti-colonial superpowers, the birth of the United Nations and a significant shift in the metropolitan view of empire (Jackson 2001, 152–155). Until then there had been mutual support and close cooperation between the British and Franco-Mauritians. But under growing pressure from non-white Mauritians, especially Indo-Mauritians, the British drafted a new constitution in 1947, which widened suffrage substantially. Franco-Mauritians were furious with the British because the colonial administration virtually ignored their suggestions for the new constitution. This marked a change in the relationship between the two parties. The Franco-Mauritians knew that a radical change in suffrage would increase the political power of the Indo-Mauritians, especially the majority Hindus. But the British had already decided that, for the well-being of the colony, the labouring classes and the upcoming (counter-)elites should be given a voice. This change in attitude, which led to the extension of the franchise to all adult literate men and women in 1956 (Seekings 2011, 172) and was a clear defeat for the Franco-Mauritians, had Mauritian independence in 1968 as its apogee.

Franco-Mauritians lost their political dominance in the transition (Salverda 2010, 394–396; Seekings 2011, 172), which led many to rethink their position. They felt anxious about their future and the island's economic prospects under Hindu rule and a number of them left for South Africa (Boudet 2004) despite the fact that their economic base was scarcely challenged. Contrary to Zimbabwe, for example, where land redistribution featured prominently on the agenda at the time of independence, landownership was less of an issue in Mauritius. Franco-Mauritian economic dominance could be maintained because the new political elite, predominantly of Hindu background, initially sought political power only and were able to identify areas of common interest with the Franco-Mauritians. As Simmons noted, 'both understand that political instability would destroy their own positions' (1982, 193). Also, South Africa witnessed no large-scale asset redistribution in the transition, while, contrary to the prominence of land redistribution in the prelude to independence, the issue of land reform fell silent during the first decade of Zimbabwean independence. The new regime hardly challenged the white commercial farmers in the 1980s. At the time of independence, partly as a result of the war, white commercial farmers were producing some 90% of the country's marketed food requirements. According to Palmer, Mozambican's Frelimo, the new government's wartime ally, advised Zimbabwe's new rulers to retain white experience and skills. Frelimo had cared little about the exodus of Portuguese settlers when it fought its way to power in 1974, but later came to regret this (Palmer 1990, 167). The whites

were crucial to the economy. Zimbabwe, as history tells us, has since changed its approach on white landownership. Mauritius has not followed the same path, yet the colonial legacy of landownership, as the next section will illustrate, is both a blessing and a threat for the Franco-Mauritians.

The ambiguity of landownership

Today, Mauritius is classified as a middle-income country due to economic prosperity from the mid-1980s onwards, which was the result of the diversification of the economy away from an economy solely relying on the mono-crop, sugar. This had a positive impact not only on the population in general, but also on the Franco-Mauritians who were largely involved in the diversification. Sandbrook et al. argue that, '[r]evenues from sugar exports were used to diversify and industrialize the economy, as well as support an expanding welfare state' (2007, 124–125). In the 1970s, the establishment of the export processing zone (EPZ) took on form, an export-oriented manufacturing venture best known for textile production which, among other things, benefited from special investment promotion incentives and exemptions from customs duties (Bräutigam 2003, 458; Neveling 2006, 2). According to Handley (2008, 109), '[b]etween 1970 and 1983 Mauritian businesspeople provided almost half the total equity capital to the new sector – and 47% of that local equity capital came directly from investment by private sugar companies'. A renowned Franco-Mauritian businessman from a well-established family that was involved in the sugar industry for generations explained to me how his family, in the early 1970s, initiated activities in the EPZ – with the assistance of the Mauritian government, as the Mauritian Ministry of Industry, Commerce and International Trade brought him into contact with a European agency specialising in connecting investors and producers. Around 1990, his family ceased their sugar activities altogether and sold most of their land, and chose to focus on a variety of ventures in the EPZ as well as on other businesses in which they own shares (interview with author). The export-oriented nature of the EPZ, however, has also created opportunities for other Mauritian businessmen. They did not need large plots of land for constructing factories, while they could also avoid the Franco-Mauritian dominated local market since they mainly dealt with international clients. The EPZ, moreover, influenced the social and economic composition of Mauritian society as a whole. In 1986, the sum of EPZ industries became the largest employer in Mauritius, surpassing the sugar industry. This led to economic prosperity for many of the island's inhabitants and to a high rate of social change. Unemployment decreased significantly, women increasingly participated in the labour market and the large EPZ factories were more ethnically diverse than the traditional businesses, thus leading to increasing interethnic contact (Eriksen 1998, 153–157).

Wealth originating from the sugar industry was also invested heavily in tourism, thereby contributing to the establishment of Mauritius as a luxurious holiday and upmarket honeymoon destination. The direct impact of landownership was more decisive in this venture than in the EPZ. Franco-Mauritians may not have owned the beachfront, as all land directly bordering the sea is owned by the state, yet they did often own the land behind it. This was an advantage, as they could use this land for constructing hotels and golf courses. Apart from the large international hotel chains, then, the luxurious segment of the market is dominated by Franco-Mauritian

controlled businesses. According to Handley, '[tourism] was one of the few areas where the private sector in Mauritius [in this case the Franco-Mauritians] played the lead role in developing a vision for its long-term development. (It was only as late as 1988 that the government established a specific ministry for tourism.)' (2008, 111–112). From that period onwards tourism has contributed to the prosperity of many Mauritians, but it has also largely consolidated Franco-Mauritian economic power.

Evidently, Franco-Mauritian landownership has contributed to the consolidation of economic power. In 2007, of the 10 largest Mauritian business groups (based on annual turnover) five were Franco-Mauritian and they all were or were linked to large landowners – either the business group has a branch managing land and sugar industry assets or substantial share ownership is related to families whose wealth originates from the sugar industry. These business groups may have interests in tourism and/or other sectors, but this cannot be disentangled from their land possessions. A foreign businessman with a long experience in the Mauritian private sector, consequently remarked, 'without [control of the] land there would be no Franco-Mauritians, because the land is the wealth they rely on' (interview with author). How much of the island's land the Franco-Mauritians possess at the moment is difficult to establish. A general estimation suggests that Franco-Mauritians own approximately 36% of the total available land, predominantly agricultural land (*L'Express Dimanche*, 13 May 2007; *L'Express*, 31 May 2007). Only about 10% of the island's land is state-owned (*L'Express*, 31 May 2007), while another portion of the total land is made up of small plots of residential land (*L'Express Dimanche*, 13 May 2007). The community's wealth may no longer be as strongly linked to sugarcane as it once was; the colonial origin of the sugarcane industry and concentrated land possessions remain central to the Franco-Mauritians' relatively successful maintenance of an elite position more than 40 years after independence. In the light of this historical attachment to the sugar industry, Franco-Mauritian identity, Boudet argues, is not only marked by their white skin-colour, the French language and 'French' culture, but also by their monopoly within the sugar industry (2005, 24) – even for the Franco-Mauritians who were or are not directly involved in the industry. In other (former) colonies, one can observe similarities to this situation. For example, in Martinique, where the sugar industry has substantially declined in economic importance, 'the plantation past represents a kind of "golden age" for Békés [the island's white elite]' (Vogt 2005, 88). One Franco-Mauritian argued that possessing a mill is a significant status symbol among economically powerful Franco-Mauritian families (interview with author) – this relates to the possession of land, because in the Mauritian case the largest landowners also control the mills.

Over time, the business groups and families owning land have decreased due to takeovers and mergers. Landownership has become much more concentrated, with a small number of business groups and related families owning most of the land. In virtually all cases, ownership is not in the hands of single individuals but in the hands of family holdings that can have up to a hundred shareholders. A businessman involved in the management of the wealth of one of the island's economically most powerful family holdings, with 80 to 100 shareholders, explained that it is, 'not that all the heirs of my great-grand father, who started the small sugar estate in 1912, are equally wealthy. Some have made their own investments or sold out their shares to other family members' (interview with author). In other cases, ownership is divided

among different Franco-Mauritian businesses and/or family holdings, this also explains the relatively tight Franco-Mauritian business networks. In cases where Franco-Mauritians cannot gather sufficient capital, they often turn to other Franco-Mauritians to share the investment. This also explains the wide portfolio of the large Franco-Mauritian business groups, since these are often the result of takeovers and mergers of (family) businesses. This is not to say that there is no animosity and infighting between Franco-Mauritian businessmen and business families - or even within families. But through the Franco-Mauritian network, businesses in financial difficulties and/or with succession problems have always been first offered to other Franco-Mauritians. The successful consolidation of economic power and land-ownership is partly the result of this historical pattern: wealth may have changed hands between Franco-Mauritian families but it remained within the Franco-Mauritian community. Besides, conflicts have predominantly been about control and/or strategy and not, as in other cases, between different sectors of the economy. Franco-Mauritian landowners have predominantly applied their lands for the same purposes, be it sugarcane production, tourism or today's IRS schemes. Hence, notwithstanding some diversity and internal competition among Franco-Mauritians, they tend to have a rather uniform economic vision. As a Franco-Mauritian CEO of a family holding with large interests in the sugar industry said, '[t]here is no hardship between the different [Franco-Mauritian] groups. We compete, but not until the bitter end because socially we are also friends. I consider the competition more as a game with sportish rules' (interview with author). Understandably then, also because of its association with colonial inequalities, the correlation between Franco-Mauritian economic power and landownership remains a prominent issue. Unlike elsewhere in Africa, Mauritius may have never had large-scale policies aiming to (re)distribute land, yet the issue of landownership is prominent. According to one Mauritian journalist, 'the unequal distribution of land is at the centre of the problem; without a change nothing will happen' (interview with author).

Pay-off

The Franco-Mauritian relatively successful maintenance of economic power well into the twenty-first century is a recipe for resentment. Politicians openly criticise this power by, for example, using strong symbolic rhetoric about the sugar or even white oligarchy. In other cases, they just simply refer to the five (Franco-Mauritian) families - as the supposedly most powerful families economically. In 2005, a new government was elected after a campaign that had been rampant with 'white-bashing' that is (indirectly) criticising the economic power and privileges of the Franco-Mauritians.⁶ This is not unusual during election campaigns, and Franco-Mauritians are aware of their role as targets - they tend to ignore the criticism voiced during election campaigns and present an image of neutrality. Franco-Mauritians argue that politicians, in order to gain votes, criticise Franco-Mauritian economic power because, as a Franco-Mauritian CEO said, 'there are so few whites that if the [political] mechanism of "white-bashing" doesn't work for you, it doesn't work against you' (interview with author). A widely shared perception is that after the elections politicians tend to tone down their criticism because in the end the private sector and the government need each other - a Franco-Mauritian businessman said, 'when I'm having a drink with politicians they tell me that [white bashing] was just

talking politics' (interview with author). This ambiguous relationship between public rhetoric and private consent to the status quo has gradually led to consensus among Franco-Mauritian businessmen that it is best to support the government in place and remain neutral during the electoral campaign. In the government's criticism of Franco-Mauritian unequal economic power, moreover, landownership often features prominently, notwithstanding that unlike other countries on the African continent, Mauritius does not have a large class of peasants or groups that previously occupied the land. The close relation between landownership and economic power, however, seems to justify the aim to distribute the land more fairly. Paradoxically, political actions geared towards offsetting the unequal possession of land give land a prominent function in negotiations with the government. My concept of 'defensive power' (Salverda 2010) is key to understanding this.

Elites are often considered as all-powerful because of the view that elites, through their control over resources (such as land), have the most power at their disposal. The assumption is that they are the ones exercising power proactively and expansively. But it needs to be stressed that elites are not necessarily all-powerful (Scott 2008, 38), and that they, especially in the face of change, tend to defend their interests and privileges as a reaction to external challenges to their position. In the transition to independence, Franco-Mauritians, for example, reacted to pressure from especially the Hindu population of Mauritius that aspired to obtain a political say in the affairs of the island. Elites, then, apply their power to resist pressure in order to maintain the status quo. History indicates that elites have had varying success in defending their interests and privileges. It is obvious that colonial and white elites have lost their hegemony – their initial dominance over virtually all (public) spheres of life. Their relative power has declined, though not necessarily their absolute wealth. In a number of cases, like South Africa and Mauritius, white elites have succeeded relatively well in maintaining an economically powerful position. This shows that elites have to move from exercising power over others directly to applying their (remaining) resources in such a way as to prevent them from losing their power base and privileges. In Weberian terms of the workings of power, the elite does things it would not otherwise have done due to the exercise of power by others. One could argue then that the elite resists, as if they were subalterns, yet I argue that from an analytical perspective a distinction ought to be made between an elite applying power defensively and identifying an action as subaltern resistance. As an analytical concept, the resistance of subalterns should be considered as the means to try to undo an unbalanced situation. The two principal forms of subaltern resistance - pressure and protest - are active forms employed to challenge the established power structure (Scott 2001, 27). The elite, however, applies power defensively in order to achieve maintenance of the status quo instead of trying to alter the situation. Thus, in this case the elite is more passive, instead of proactively using its power. Demands for the redistribution of land in Mauritius aptly illustrate this.

In Mauritius, sugar traditionally has been the 'country's cash cow' (Handley 2008, 108–109), not only as an important source of revenue, but also through a pattern of applying economic power in the form of financial contributions and donations paid by Franco-Mauritian businesses to government-related projects. According to a retired Mauritian businessman of Muslim origin, in the deals between the government and Franco-Mauritians land is often exchanged (interview with author). For example, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI), which promotes

(research on) Indo-Mauritian culture and was founded by the Mauritian government in collaboration with the Indian government in 1970, is situated on a plot of land donated to the government by a large Franco-Mauritian business group. Here land helped to smooth relations with the government. This pattern of obtaining support through the distribution of land actually has a long tradition, as many Franco-Mauritian sugar estates give – or sell cheaply – plots of land to civic and religious groups, which are often affiliated with their workforce. Franco-Mauritians hereby have to seek a balance between maintaining control over resources and smoothening relationships with larger social groups or the government – the latter, of course, serves the former. One sugar estate, for instance, wanted to change its policy of parcelling out land in a haphazard manner. Instead it decided to draft an integrated plan that set out the development of the area. One of the shareholders in the estate said, ‘not all the directors of [the sugar estate] found the [new] ideas convincing, because too much was given to the public and the government. [But] times have changed and this is the way to do it. It was really well received by the government’ (interview with author).

Land also proved key to suppress tensions between the Franco-Mauritian sugar plantations and the government when the sugar industry plunged into recession in 2005. Reform – which led to tense negotiations with the government – was needed to alter the dire state of the sugar industry. In the tense atmosphere, land redistribution became an issue, showing once more that land is not only the cause of numerous power struggles between the government and the Franco-Mauritian private sector but also a potential means to ease the tensions. Landownership put the Franco-Mauritian-controlled sugar estates in a precarious political position, despite the fact that, as said, the Mauritian economy nowadays relies far less on the sugar industry than before. At the time of the negotiations, agriculture, of which around half of the added value is sugarcane-related, made up only 6% of Mauritian GDP.⁷ In densely populated Mauritius, the land associated with the sugar industry, however, is highly symbolic and reinforces resentment even though the distribution of land is a complex matter in Mauritius because initially the land belonged to no one. To a certain extent, then, the Mauritian case is different to most cases on the African continent. Zimbabwe, for example, witnessed a violent redistribution campaign of land occupied by white farmers – the land has been expropriated on the basis that it had been unfairly appropriated by white farmers. This also shows the limits of defensive power once a powerful opponent turns to violence. Initially, there was a certain level of peaceful land distribution (Palmer 1990; Shaw 2003, 75–76), but once Robert Mugabe launched his aggressive land distribution campaign, there was little the white minority could do.

Reform would involve the closing of sugar mills and, subsequently, social programmes for laid-off workers – in these cases the government often demands land from the sugar industry to bring these social programmes to a successful conclusion. Initially, a deal was struck between the sugar estates, the government and the European Commission (EC) (which was willing to contribute financially to the reform). But the government stalled and brought the issue back to the negotiation table, demanding extra compensation of two thousand *arpents* (one *arpent*, an old French unit for measuring land, is about half a hectare) to be paid by the sugar industry for social projects, as it considered the deal to be too advantageous for the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry. The result was a deadlock. In this conflict, Franco-Mauritians perceived their position to be openly under threat and felt that

they had to stand up for their rights – contrary to them normally keeping a low profile and presenting an image of neutrality. Now they found themselves unable to avoid direct confrontation. A Franco-Mauritian businessman, without interests in the sugar industry, said, ‘[the sugar estates] don’t know what’s next; they wonder what happens if they give in, “will the government then come with other demands?”’ (interview with author). The Franco-Mauritian sugar estates accused the government of making excessive demands and not respecting the rules of fair play; at no point had the extra compensation been brought up in the (initial) deal, they argued.

Following up on Boudet’s (2005) analysis of Franco-Mauritian identity, even Franco-Mauritians without landed interests supported the sugar estates. A Franco-Mauritian couple argued that the politicians suddenly wanted land to distribute among their political friends. The distribution is not in favour of the poor, they stated (interview with author). This support for the landowners also needs to be examined in the context of the 2005 political campaign. Franco-Mauritians felt victimised and realised that politicians did not stop criticising Franco-Mauritian economic power and privileges after the election campaign. The government proposed, for example, to ‘democratise’ the economy, that is a more equal distribution of economic gains nationally. Franco-Mauritians felt that this was directly targeted at them. Echoing the thoughts of the Franco-Mauritian couple, many Franco-Mauritians argued, in private, that there was a further hidden agenda to the democratisation of the economy, namely consolidation of the prime minister’s personal power. According to this view, his intention was to take the wealth from the whites, in order to distribute it to his own community and other proxies. Also, in 2006 the government decided to change the conditions for the lease of the *campement* (i.e. seaside bungalow) sites. The *campements* and seaside life are a very significant element of Franco-Mauritian elite culture, and Franco-Mauritians considered the new policy to be a threat to their lifestyle. Franco-Mauritians argued that the increase in the lease price was exorbitant and that the government proposal was targeting them as whites.

In the negotiations about the reform of the sugar industry, the Franco-Mauritians defended themselves, but in the end they had to give in to government pressure. Then the government came back with yet additional demands. Again, the sugar industry said that it could not possibly meet these demands, before eventually agreeing to satisfy a substantial part of them. The two sides subsequently came to an agreement. The final result: the sugar industry gave two thousand *arpents* of land for social programmes and opened up 35% of the shareholding of the mills (*L’Express*, 6 December 2007). It was obvious that the Franco-Mauritians and the government were highly dependent on each other and needed to come to an agreement in order to safeguard the European Commission’s financial contribution to the restructuring programme since the EC demanded that the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry and the government come to an agreement (*L’Express*, 15 May 2007). Arguably, the Franco-Mauritians conceded the most, but not all the government’s demands were met. In essence, Franco-Mauritian economic power could not compete with the mobilisation of political power by the government, though it contributed to manoeuvring them into a negotiating position.

The Franco-Mauritian elite position was hardly jeopardised, because it is especially the balance between opposing and giving in that explains the success of defensive power. Franco-Mauritians often feel victimised and oppose change that may jeopardise their position. In the case of the democratisation of the economy,

for example, many Franco-Mauritians said that, in principle, they supported the idea of sharing the cake with everyone but opposed the idea of taking wealth from one person (i.e. Franco-Mauritians) and giving it to another (i.e. the prime minister's cronies and supporters). With respect to this issue, repeated comparisons have been made with Zimbabwe where Robert Mugabe expropriated white farmers' land, causing the free fall of the economy. A Franco-Mauritian politician justified this comparison by arguing that the government wanted to throw out the whites. Paradoxically, to fully support the Franco-Mauritian case he also needed to downplay the comparison. 'The situation is different than in Zimbabwe, because [the landowners] haven't taken anyone's land', he said (interview with author). It is hard to know if this comparison constitutes a strategy to instil anger against the government or a real fear. The rhetorical comparison with Zimbabwe certainly helped to label government's proposals as anti-white, and as a consequence, the few 'dissident' voices in the Franco-Mauritian community who have pointed out the merit of some of the proposals are hardly heard. Franco-Mauritians claim that they are in favour of true democratisation of the economy, but by discrediting, rightly or not, the government's intentions, they end up simply resisting, without contributing to, this process. But as the redistribution of land shows, Franco-Mauritians cannot oppose only. They have too many vested interests to completely alienate themselves from the government and thus have to give in to demands to safeguard their position – this may be different from white farmers who solely rely on their farming activities. Ceding resources (land), after all, helped to appease the government. The success of defensive power, thus, relies on the potential to partially handover (the control over) resources, be these land or other resources. In this sense, the Creole elite in Sierra Leone (Cohen 1981) and the Parsi elite in India (Luhmann 1996) were at a disadvantage, as they controlled few tangible resources that they could apply to defend their position. Success, however, seems to also rely on the elite's opposition, as in the case of the Franco-Mauritians, their loud opposition to government demands manoeuvred them into a negotiating position. Now they could prevent more substantial distribution of resources. I doubt, however, whether this was strategically intended. It seemed more the result of the evolution and solving of the dispute with the government. The landowners' stand also appeared to be influenced by the fact that not only does the land for them have an economic function, but also they are emotionally and symbolically attached to the land. For them, opposing land redistribution was not purely driven by economic interests. Nevertheless, finding a balance between opposing change and accepting a partial distribution of land gives Franco-Mauritians respite and helps them to prolong their elite position, even though this means a gradual decline of their landownership. At the same time, ownership of land is functional in collaboration with the government, and as such also contributes to the maintenance of their elite position.

Collaboration

As already illustrated, the Franco-Mauritians in the private sector and the government have incentives to collaborate. Both have interests in the economic prosperity of the island, which to a certain extent protects Franco-Mauritian private property. The Mauritian government adheres to a global political-economy favouring private property. This has always been the case, because, as said,

its origins lie within the global capitalist system. Besides, Mauritius does not have a large peasant population, neither have populations been displaced, nor does it have a tradition of communal lands. Mauritius being a democracy the constitution also guarantees the protection of deprivation of property. Notwithstanding resentment, then, both sides share similar economic views. The government does not want to jeopardise the future of the island by completely disregarding Franco-Mauritian ownership. The same seems to apply for land redistribution in South Africa even though it is of a completely different character. Here the government equally appears to balance between a strong push for redistribution and a conviction that this push may jeopardise the economic future.

Handley argues that the private sector ‘tended to follow the policy lead given by the government rather than proactively initiating policy change’ (2008, 116) – the exception, as I have cited above, is the tourism industry. Government involvement, for example, has been a windfall for the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry. There has always been close co-operation between the Franco-Mauritians and the government regarding the issue of access to the European market under advantageous conditions, because the sugar industry has been an important employer and revenue provider (Hein 1996, 23). The government has constantly been a strong negotiator in dealings with the European Commission for selling Mauritian sugar to the unified European market. Through the Sugar Protocol of the Lomé Convention(s) and the Cotonou Agreement, Mauritius (under the umbrella of the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries) negotiated quotas and preferential prices for their sugar.⁸ These prices were well above world market prices. Considering the fact that Mauritius was the biggest beneficiary of these negotiations (Hein 1996), the Franco-Mauritians, who firmly controlled the land and the mills, thus gained substantial profits. Moreover, in spite of tense negotiations, collaboration was equally witnessed at the time of the 2005 recession in the sugar industry. With the textile industry also in decline, the government and the private sector actively tried to search for new economic inroads, thus giving Franco-Mauritian land new value.

One of the means to boost the local economy was to attract foreign investment: the government initiated the IRS, that is the possibility for rich foreigners to buy residential property. Under this scheme, Franco-Mauritian landowners converted their agricultural land into luxurious villa resorts, to allow foreign nationals to reside in Mauritius by investing a minimum of US\$500,000 in local property (Kothari and Wilkinson 2011, 11). Numerous such resorts have been built around the island, on converted sugarcane fields, and often overlooking the Indian Ocean. The colonial heritage of Franco-Mauritian landownership proves to be a substantial asset, as the IRS is a massive advantage to those possessing prime land. Others would have to buy this land at market price, which makes it difficult to compete. In many of the projects, Franco-Mauritians collaborate with foreign investors: they provide the land, the foreign companies the financial means, knowledge and/or international networks. As a CEO of a smaller and independent sugar estate said, ‘Franco-Mauritians are assets rich because of their land, but cash flow poor’ (interview with author). Hence, Franco-Mauritian landowners substantially profit from this scheme, even though it is in close collaboration with the government – which hopes that it will increase employment as well as revenue. Their move to sell off land, however, is perceived as unusual. According to one Franco-Mauritian, the IRS scheme is a break with the past, as Franco-Mauritians are now for the first time selling their land (interview

with author) – this, as the case of the *grand morcellement* shows, is not historically accurate, though it reveals the symbolic association of Franco-Mauritians with landownership. In terms of smooth relationships with the government, Franco-Mauritians need such collaboration, though it certainly brings them income as well. Economic development may benefit the whole of the country – Mbeki (2009) actually considers Mauritius as a successful example of an inclusive development in sub-Saharan Africa – it certainly enhances the wealth of landowners. The role of attachment to the (is)land should not be disregarded here, as Franco-Mauritians – but it also seems whites in, for example, South Africa – do reinvest in the country instead of only extracting wealth.

Conclusion

The Franco-Mauritian case has its unique features, especially because Mauritius was uninhabited before the settlement of European colonisers. This case, however, gives relevant insights into how landed (white) elites are able to maintain their positions long after the end of colonialism. It offers theoretical insights into how control over land is simultaneously a disadvantage as well as an advantage when (landed) elites are faced with challenges to their position. Franco-Mauritians continue to face political pressure as a result of their association with their colonial past and their control over much of the island's agricultural lands. This has forced them to actually cede parts of their lands. However, landownership also supports Franco-Mauritians facing challenges of decline, in the sense that its redistribution offers some remission from both political and economic challenges. The result is a balancing act, as Franco-Mauritians defend themselves against too much loss of power (and land) at the same time as they also have to give in to some of their opponents' demands. It is to be noted that this concerns economic power more generally, though land is an important foundation of resentment and the means of 'buying time' to slow the complete redistribution of this resource. This pattern of balancing act can equally be observed in South Africa:

in the relationship between business and government, the government did not look kindly on critical public remarks by prominent businesspeople. On many issues then, organized business chose to cooperate with government and express its concerns behind closed doors. This may have contributed to some degree of self-censorship. (Handley 2008, 96)

This refutes Mbeki's claim that 'the political elite is comparatively more vulnerable since the economic oligarchy can promote new political parties to challenge a hostile ruling party' (Mbeki 2009, 83). Both cases actually illustrate that this would be highly risky to do. It is predominantly the approach of balancing between giving in and a certain level of opposing change that contributes to the maintenance of economic power – respectively, more than 40 years after independence and almost 20 years after the end of apartheid. This, however, seems to be successful only in the absence of (state) violence – Zimbabwe constituting the obvious example of the limits of defensive power.

The Franco-Mauritian case shows that opposing sides in a peaceful country characterised by compromise can simultaneously collaborate, with the potential of giving new value to landownership at the same time as the economy is stimulated and

new employment provided. For fear of losing revenue – from tourism as well as from other sources – the Mauritian government does not want to jeopardise the image of Mauritius as one of Africa’s most stable states. The government, then, is required to collaborate with the Franco-Mauritians in the private sector. This, consequently, reinforces the Franco-Mauritian elite position, yet at the same time also lays new foundations for the resurfacing of resentment about the unequal distribution of resources. With all the associations with colonial injustices, this resentment may easily resurface at a later moment in time, during election campaigns for example. The need to collaborate may partly take the pressure off the Franco-Mauritians, yet public opposition is likely to return. The South African case, though substantially different, is not likely to be solved quickly or neatly either. Resentment continues to run high, forcing landowners to redistribute all or part of their landholdings. Their opposition, however, will slow the complete redistribution of their land, while at the same time the government may not want to push it too far out of fear of jeopardising food security and the South African economy more generally. While the Franco-Mauritian case is unique inasmuch as Mauritius was uninhabited before colonisation, it does reveal the ambiguity of landownership in postcolonial settings, and explains why ‘land-issues’ will remain omnipresent in postcolonial Africa for the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. This article is based on historical data and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mauritius, South Africa and France in the period 2005–2007. Over 125 interviews were conducted with Franco-Mauritians in Mauritius, South Africa and France, while 30 official interviews were conducted with other Mauritians. The research also relies on informal conversations, participant observation, a questionnaire I conducted, and media research, both archival and from contemporary sources.
2. The total population of Mauritius is about 1.3 million. Apart from Europe, Mauritians have their origins in distant locations such as China, India and Africa. The largest group are Hindus (52%) and there is a minority group of Muslims (16%). Both groups originate in India and most came as indentured labourers when slavery was abolished in 1835. Creoles, largely of slave descent, constitute about 27% (including a small group of gens de couleur). Then there are the Sino-Mauritians, who make up 3% of the population (Eriksen 1998, 15).
3. Notwithstanding that Mauritius did not witness the displacement of people like elsewhere in Africa, there are certainly cases of Franco-Mauritians applying cunning ways to repossess the land of other Mauritians. A shared Franco-Mauritian background was not necessarily an insurance to be safe, though, because there are also stories of disputed appropriation among Franco-Mauritians – and even within families. One of the main recommendations of the Truth and Justice Commission (2011), in this light, is to set up a land monitoring and research unit in order to investigate and settle (historical) disputes regarding land transactions and title deeds.
4. The black population the Franco-Mauritians wanted to distinguish themselves from was a mixed group of slaves and free(d) persons originating from numerous locations in, predominantly, Africa and India.
5. Pointing to the remarkable life story of Marie Rozette – a freedwoman of Indian origin – who accumulated wealth, land and slaves in Mauritius in the late 1700s, during the French period, Allen (2011) observes this dominance was not comprehensive – equally there are examples during the British period of non-whites owning large tracts of land and slaves.
6. The role of the then prime minister, the Franco-Mauritian Paul Bérénger, was especially illustrative to this. Initially, Bérénger was not associated with the Franco-Mauritians, because when he started his political career in the first decade after independence, he strongly criticised Franco-Mauritian domination in the private sector. This helped him to gain wide support among Mauritians of all backgrounds. In 2003, Bérénger became the

first non-Hindu prime minister of Mauritius due to a pre-electoral agreement between his party and the party of Anerood Jugnauth, the prime minister who preceded Bérenger. That a non-Hindu became prime minister was thought to represent a break with the past and it was considered a sign that Mauritius was ready for decreased influence of ethnicity on politics. However, once in government Bérenger found himself obliged to cooperate with Franco-Mauritian businessmen, which made him an easy prey for political opponents. Now his skin-colour suddenly became 'visible': he was a 'white' favouring other 'whites'. His background clearly constrained him in dealing with private sector matters. In reality, Bérenger does not appear to have favoured the Franco-Mauritians or showed any 'racial' preferences. Yet, his white skin-colour was a liability. As a consequence of Bérenger's position as prime minister, in the ensuing 2005 election campaign there was a strong focus on the Franco-Mauritians. As many ordinary Mauritians are of the cynical viewpoint that government, in general, represents the interests of the Franco-Mauritians (Hempel 2009, 468), they easily accepted the political rhetoric that Franco-Mauritians hold all the economic power and, through the political figure of Bérenger, were becoming hegemonic again. This put the Franco-Mauritian community in a position of blame. Subsequently, Bérenger lost the 2005 elections; although it may be too simplistic to say that Bérenger cum suis only lost because of his white skin-colour.

7. See: <http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/cso/report/natacc/agri06/sumtab.pdf> (accessed 7 December 2009).
8. <http://www.acpsugar.org/Sugar%20Protocol.html> (accessed: 7 December 2007).

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