

Who belongs to the elite?

Insights from the study of the Franco-Mauritians

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Abstract: Anthropology tends not to be associated with the study of elites, notwithstanding that investigating elites ethnographically has much to contribute to our understanding of power. To facilitate this pursuit, however, a good understanding of who can be defined as members of an elite is helpful. A narrow group of only those persons directly in command, or a wider group including, for example, the elite's family members? By means of investigating the Franco-Mauritians, the white elite of the island of Mauritius, this article aims to explain why it matters to pay attention to the differences between narrower and broader definitions.

[elite, class, power, Mauritius]

Anthropology tends to be associated with the study of marginalised groups, notwithstanding that the discipline has seen a number of remarkable studies on elite groups since Nader's (1972) appeal for anthropologists to 'study up'. Cohen (1981), Marcus (1983), Werbner (2004) and Wedel (2009), for example, have provided highly relevant insights about the value of studying elites anthropologically. Other studies of powerful actors, such as bankers (e.g. Zaloom 2006; Ho 2009; Ouroussoff 2010; Ortiz 2013), corporations (e.g. Rajak 2011; Kirsch 2014; Welker 2014) and bureaucrats (e.g. Shore 2000), are also examples of what anthropology has to contribute to the understanding of the powerful.

But who can actually be defined as members of an elite? A narrow group of only those persons directly in command, or a wider group including, for example, their family members? And in the case of a broader definition, to what extent does this differ from (upper-)class categories? Moreover, should we perceive the idea of an elite as a (self-)descriptive or an analytical concept? The Franco-Mauritians, the white (economic) elite of the island of Mauritius who feature as the case study in this paper, would often shun the term *elite* while at the same time they consider themselves of a higher class than most other Mauritians.

To address these questions, this article will follow up in particular on Carola Lentz's (2015) recent publication *Elites or middle classes? Lessons from transnational research for the study of social stratification in Africa*, as well as personal communication with her

on the subject.¹ I will not be able to do justice to Lentz's full argument, as her main aim is to offer a programmatic orientation regarding the future of middle-class studies in Africa. Her reflections on how to define elites, however, are well worth exploring in their own right. I will argue that in the case of the Franco-Mauritians it is meaningful to analyse what the elite concept in its wider meaning still has to offer. In contrast to much of the African mainland, where, as Lentz describes, the term *elite* is often used for groups for whom *middle-class* would be a more fitting classification, the Franco-Mauritian case is different. Franco-Mauritians cannot be mistaken for a middle class, though, because Mauritius has relatively well-established (historical) middle classes – which include members from various ethnic and/or racial backgrounds. Yet, they *can* be defined as an upper class. This, then, leaves it open for debate as to whether *upper class* or *elite* is the most appropriate concept to define Franco-Mauritians.

Setting the stage

Located in the Indian Ocean about 800 kilometres to the east of Madagascar, Mauritius was uninhabited until European seafarers settled on the island. Nowadays the republic numbers about 1.3 million people, with the ancestors of the present inhabitants coming from such distant locations as China, Europe, India and the African mainland. The small group of Franco-Mauritians are estimated to constitute slightly less than 1% of the population, while Creoles, largely of slave descent, number about 28% (including a small 'elite' group of so-called *gens de couleur*). The largest group are the Hindus (52%), who, together with a smaller minority of Muslims (16%), originate from India. Finally, there are the Sino-Mauritians, who make up 3% of the population (Eriksen 1998:15).

Despite the fact that class stratification is present in Mauritian society (e.g. Neveling 2015a), nowadays it hardly functions as a means for political mobilisation and identification. When the position of the Franco-Mauritians started to be seriously challenged, from the 1930s onwards, class was for a short period of time functional in opposing Franco-Mauritian and colonial power. Until then, the Franco-Mauritians had held both the political and the economic power, particularly due to their position as proprietors of the sugarcane plantations (and the land) on which the mono-economy of Mauritius relied. In opposition to the fact that most Mauritians were excluded from a say in the island's affairs, the Labour Party started to mobilise large parts of the working classes, disregarding their ethnic affiliations. In the transition to independence, however, ethnicity gradually became the dominant factor in political mobilisation, this diminishing the role of class (e.g. Salverda 2015a). This nevertheless affected the Franco-Mauritians position, though instead of readdressing class structures, the Franco-Mauritians lost their (direct) political power in the preamble to independence in 1968, in particular to the Hindu majority. As their continuing control over (diversified) eco-

¹ I would like to thank Carola Lentz and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

conomic resources illustrates, however, they have maintained their elite position relatively successfully in postcolonial Mauritius, albeit mainly as an economic elite. Distinction and mechanisms of exclusivity, which are important to successfully sustain an elite position from other Mauritians, nowadays depend on a variety of registers, including race/ethnicity, class, and (competing) political elites.

The data presented in this paper are based on ethnographic research conducted on the island (and in South Africa and France) during frequent visits since the year 2000. I have used multiple methods and sources, such as interviews, participant observation, network analysis, a questionnaire, and written sources (see also Salverda 2015b, my recently published ethnography of the Franco-Mauritians). The interviewees included CEOs of the island's largest business groups, other businessmen, company staff, clergy, politicians, students, school children, retirees and so forth. In this paper I will particularly discuss why I think that the concept of an elite in the wider sense offers the most advantages in defining the Franco-Mauritians. Central to this explanation is the investigation of how they have maintained their position of economic power from the colonial period to the present, particularly symbolised by their control over a relatively high number of the island's biggest companies. I will start the paper with a short theoretical overview. I will then present the network analysis of the top hundred companies, and the overrepresentation of the Franco-Mauritians in this network. This serves as a helpful starting point for the parts thereafter, in which I illustrate why I define the Franco-Mauritians as an elite, how the narrow and wider boundaries of the group can be interpreted, and what the differences from and/or similarities with class categories are. I will end the paper with a conclusion.

Elites

Notwithstanding the work of numerous theorists (e.g. Pareto 1991; Mosca 1923; Michels 1911; Mills 2000), defining elites is still not a simple task. Neither anthropology nor other disciplines with a stronger tradition of studying elites, such as the political sciences and sociology (e.g. Dogan and Higley 1998; Hartmann 2007), seem to have a unified solution. There is little agreement or discussion with regard to the term, not least because scholars rarely define it (Khan 2012:362). Adding to the complexity, furthermore, is that elites often do not consider themselves to be elites, since, it is argued, 'elite' is a term of reference rather than of self-reference (Marcus 1983:9).

When defined more precisely, 'an elite is a collectivity of persons who occupy commanding positions in some important sphere of social life, and who share a variety of interests arising from similarities of training, experience, public duties, and way of life' (Cohen 1981:xvi). Stemming from their commanding position, an elite is a social group that has privileged access to, or control over, particular resources which may be mobilised in the exercise of power (Woods 1998:2108). The Franco-Mauritians easily

fit these definitions since they have control over many of the island's economic resources, while prior to independence they were also politically and socially dominant.

With these more precise definitions in mind, however, it still not obvious who to include. Resonating with Scott's (2001; 2008) definition of an elite, Lentz (2015) argues that the term *elite* should be narrow rather than wide, only applying to the persons in command and not also including, for example, their family members – which we have actually argued elsewhere (Salverda and Abbink 2013). The function of the persons in command, e.g. as members of economic, political, military and bureaucratic elites, should be central to the analysis (see also Dogan 2003a; Shore 2002). Although I fully agree with the analytical relevance of defining elites according to their function, I am not sure whether this solves the issue of exactly who belongs to the elite in question. How, in the case of the Franco-Mauritian businessmen in their commanding position, do we understand shared interests between them and other members of the Franco-Mauritian community?

Neither Lentz nor Scott deny the relevance of wider ties and a sense of belonging that may extend beyond the individuals in the commanding positions. Yet, this wider group may be better defined as an upper class or a privileged group. The functional leadership of an elite, accordingly, remains conceptually separate from questions about social background, which particularly relate to class; depending on the elite, this does not necessarily have to be the upper class, but may also involve other class backgrounds. In the case of the Franco-Mauritians, however, this seems insufficient to explain the maintenance of their position of power over an extended period of time – the power of the persons directly in command as well as that of the wider group. It can certainly be argued that the Franco-Mauritians constitute an upper class, yet for a number of reasons that may be specific to the Mauritian context, it seems that a wider definition of an elite that also allows for the inclusion of partners, children, etc. offers more explanatory strength. This carries a risk of devaluating the concept, however, because as Lentz and Scott rightly point out it becomes less evident where exactly to draw the line between who is a member of an elite and who is not. In the case of an elite that only comprises those individuals in commanding positions this is undoubtedly easier.

Racial and/or ethnic categorisation influences the discussion about which concept is most appropriate to define Franco-Mauritians. One could argue that their background makes it relatively easy to delineate the boundary of the group compared to other elites, because it is defined by white skin colour and family names. But with not all members necessarily fitting the definition of members of an elite, why not apply a narrower definition? The difficulty, as I will illustrate, is that in their case a concept like class or privileged group does not sufficiently cover their affiliation with the wider group. All classes include Mauritians of various ethnic backgrounds, from the working, to the middle and upper classes. In the case of the Franco-Mauritian businessmen their affiliation is not with all people with a similar upper-class background, but, importantly, with other Franco-Mauritians. In particular this is also because their distinction

from other social groups, from the working classes to other parts of the upper class, is informed by their white skin.

Like Cohen's (1981) Creole elite in Sierra Leone as well as the elites Chua (2003) has analysed, it is particularly criteria of kinship, race/ethnicity and a sense of belonging that tie partners and so forth to the persons in command. Why, then, not simply define them as ethnic group? Compared to the island's other ethnic groups, who group people of a wider variety of class backgrounds together, the historical logics of the Franco-Mauritian group are very much tied to maintaining control as an elite, even when not all of them strictly fit the definition nowadays. To understand their position ethnicity alone does not seem to offer sufficient explanatory strength, though in the case of other research questions it may certainly do so. In other words, it is partly the analytical investigation itself that determines what concept is most appropriate. As Lentz (2015:40) argues, the concept of elites is particularly helpful for addressing questions of agency and leadership, while it is less helpful for analysing social stratification. The same group may actually be defined as an elite in the context of a particular investigation, while in another, the notion of an upper class – or an ethnic group, such as in the case of the Franco-Mauritians – may be the most suitable concept.² Moreover, It could be that in the one case a broader definition of elites is more applicable because of the prevalence of shared interests coming from a strong sense of belonging, while in another a narrower definition, plus a reference to class, offers more explanatory value.

Franco-Mauritian commanding positions

Having addressed the first task, that of defining an elite, here taken to refer to a collectivity of persons who occupy commanding positions in some important sphere of social life, it is evident that a segment of the Franco-Mauritian community can be defined as an elite – in the narrower sense of the concept. More than forty years after the colonial period came to an end, Franco-Mauritians continue to control about one-third of the island's top hundred companies and half of the largest ten companies (e.g. Business 2005; Business 2006; Business 2007; Business 2012; Business 2013). When we look at the interconnections between the island's largest businesses – the interlocking directorates, a term frequently used in (sociological) elite research – in Figure 1, it becomes even more evident that Franco-Mauritians not only still control, in relation to their numbers, large parts of the private sector, but they are also highly interlinked.

The business networks in Figure 1 are by definition an illustration of the elite's commanding positions, in this case Franco-Mauritian board and management positions in the island's largest companies. What is particularly significant in Figure 1

² Personal communication with Carola Lentz, 19 January 2016.

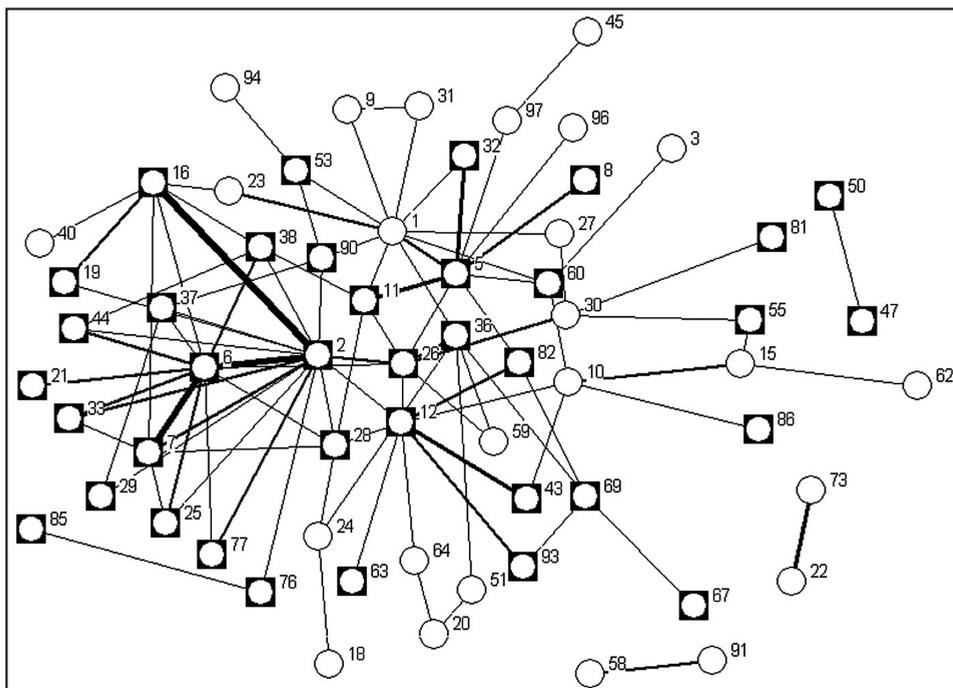


Figure 1: Interlocking directorates of Mauritius' top one hundred companies, 2007. Note: Numbers correspond with ranking in the list. Circles inside the bold box nodes are Franco-Mauritian-controlled companies or joint ventures between Franco-Mauritians and foreign companies, with the lines representing people holding directorships at companies at both ends of the lines. The graph of interlocking directorates is made with the help of the program UCINET 5.0 Version 1.00 (Borgatti, Everett and Freeman 1999).

is that these are not solely about commanding positions, but also illustrate connections between the top one hundred companies in 2007 through interlocking directorates: sixty-two out of a hundred are interlinked, with only six not being directly connected to the grid. In sociological studies on elites, interlocking directorates are often considered an indication of a high level of elite cohesion. The assumption is that when the boards of directors are linked to each other by individuals holding directorships on several of these boards, interests are more likely to be identical as these linkages imply a relatively strong crossover of opinions, interests, practises and strategies among board members (e.g. Davis, Yoo and Baker 2003; Heemskerck and Fennema 2009). To a large extent this stems from the focus on elite networks more generally (e.g. Brandeis 1914; Mills 2000; Domhoff 1978; Dahl 1961). The assumption is that these foster a shared way of life and facilitate the sustaining of shared interests. Depending on whether one follows a wider or narrower definition, apart from boardrooms, the range, or origin, of possible networks can be substantial:

educational institutions, ties of friendship, clubs, hunting parties, families and so forth.

The functions of networks and exclusive spaces alone do not justify the term *elite*, because these may equally play a role in class stratification. It needs to be investigated how these networks and spaces foster a shared way of life that plays a functional role in the elite's agency and maintenance of control over resources. The argument is that especially those spaces in which the people in command informally meet and often make important decisions are central (Woods 1998), partly because they promote exclusivity, a key quality associated with elites (Marcus 1983:11). Accordingly, it is argued that focusing on formal networks, such as public information about board positions, may limit the potential for spotting the importance of informal networks and other sources of interconnection (Camp 2003:149). This is an indication, in fact, of the value of studying elites anthropologically, since ethnographic methods and long-term fieldwork are particularly suitable for uncovering the relevance of these informal spaces.

In Figure 1, the circles inside the bold box nodes, thirty-seven in total, represent the companies characterised by a substantial degree of Franco-Mauritian control – that is, Franco-Mauritians make up more than 50% of the boards of directors or joint ventures with foreign companies (this last category assumes that Franco-Mauritians are the only Mauritians involved). The lines connecting the companies indicate that an individual director occupies board positions in both companies connected by the line, i.e. the interlocking directorates. The thicker the line, such as between companies two and sixteen, the stronger the overlap between the board of directors of both companies. That Franco-Mauritians are the main player in thirty-seven of the sixty-two companies illustrates not only that they constitute a group of major economic players but also that compared to businessmen of other ethnic backgrounds, though potentially of the same class, they constitute the majority and are a dominant force within the network of interlocking directorates. With regard to defining an elite, it is of relevance to explore why this is the case. Is a narrow definition sufficient to explain the Franco-Mauritian commanding position, exemplified by their interlocking business networks? Moreover, does a concept like (upper) class offer a viable alternative to grasp Franco-Mauritian business networks in relation to the wider group?

The Franco-Mauritians: exploring the boundaries of a group

To understand the foundation of the Franco-Mauritian elite position, specifically their economic power and its maintenance, a wider definition may be more relevant than a narrower one with the addition of references to a class or privileged group. The embedding of Franco-Mauritians in commanding positions in the dynamics of the wider group cannot be sufficiently explained by defining this wider group as a class or privileged group. As a result of the role of ethnicity in Mauritian society the dynamics may

be different from those that obtain when the overlap with an ethnic group is less significant. But notwithstanding that studies of ethnicity provide relevant insights about a shared way of life, trust and a sense of belonging – and thus, per definition, also mechanisms of distinctions similar to those of elites – insights from studies on elites seem to have more explanatory strength when it comes to understanding Franco-Mauritian power. Below, I will first illustrate this with reference to the past. Subsequently, I will look in more detail at the role of the Franco-Mauritian family, their (exclusive) spaces, and the role of kinship, in which ethnicity and/or race certainly plays a central role. I will discuss how, together, these aspects are of relevance to understanding the interlocking directorates and the maintenance of control over certain resources – and, as such, also explaining who may (potentially) be considered part of the group and who may not.

Historical ties

The continuing dominance of the Franco-Mauritians in the private sector is to a large extent the legacy of the past. When the French took possession of Mauritius after the Dutch had abandoned the island in 1710, a more successful period of permanent settlement started (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993). They took the first steps to economically develop the island, granting settlers land concessions and importing large numbers of slaves, predominantly from Madagascar and Mozambique, and in smaller numbers from other parts of Africa and French trading outposts on the coasts of the Indian subcontinent (Tinker 1977:324). The whites who settled on the island during this time are to a great extent the ancestors of the present Franco-Mauritian community.

The arrival of the British in 1810, who seized the island to help safeguard their interests in India, hardly jeopardised the development of a white elite – and may have actually facilitated it. Most of the land and the plantations remained in the hands of white French planters, who maintained their distinction from the rest of the population due to their white skin and European ancestry (Salverda 2011). The formation of the Franco-Mauritian community, then, inseparably results from a number of elite characteristics: they had commanding positions; control over resources and power; they shared a (Creole) French way of life; they were connected to each other through, among other things, family ties; and their distinction from others was clearly marked on the basis of skin colour and (with the British) cultural background. Notwithstanding some internal (wealth) differences, which have continued to exist up to the present, one could for the first time in Mauritian history speak of a Franco-Mauritian elite, although the term *Franco-Mauritian* would not appear in written texts until 1908 (Boudet 2005:36).

During most of the colonial period, any resistance was suppressed without much difficulty, including resistance on the part of the large number of indentured labourers from India, who by 1861 represented two-thirds of the population (Benedict 1965:17). Only a small number of *gens de couleur*, a more prosperous group with mixed white and non-white ancestry (Boudet 2004:53), and, from the Constitution of 1885 onwards, Indo-Mauritians with sufficient assets, had been granted equal rights. As they were rel-

atively few in number, less wealthy, and continued to be socially excluded from Franco-Mauritian society, they posed only a minor threat to Franco-Mauritian domination (e.g. Allen 1999). It was a 'political quid pro quo' between the British colonial administration, who were interested in maintaining control at low cost, and the Franco-Mauritians controlling the revenue-rich sugar factories (Mozaffar 2005:269-270). When the British position shifted and allowed for the emancipation of the majority of Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians eventually lost their political power (Salverda 2010:394-396; Seekings 2011:172). That they have maintained their economic dominance partly resulted from the fact that the new political elite, predominantly of Hindu background, initially sought only political power, and were able to identify some areas of common interest with Franco-Mauritians (Smith-Simmons 1982).

With Franco-Mauritian economic power largely left unchallenged, the colonial legacy is reflected in the interlocking directorates. Most of the largest companies represented on the graph in Figure 1 have their origins in the sugar industry, and often still possess large tracts of (agricultural) land, or have substantial shareholders whose wealth relates to the sugar industry. Today these family holdings have a diverse portfolio of interests, because they had the financial means to diversify when the island's economy underwent significant structural change from the 1970s onwards in order to move away from a mono-crop economy (Lincoln 2006:59). Money (and land) originating in the sugar industry was heavily invested in, for example, the development of the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) (Sandbrook et al. 2007; Neveling 2015b) and the tourism industry (Grégoire 2008). Later waves of economic diversification, such as into the IT industry and offshore banking, have at the same time provided opportunities for non-Franco-Mauritian businesses and strengthened the position of Franco-Mauritians. In particular in cases where land was involved, large Franco-Mauritian landowners profited from new economic initiatives, such as the Integrated Resort Scheme (IRS) (for a discussion on the effects of this on Mauritian citizenship and society see Ramtohul 2015).

The elite family

Due to consolidation of ownership, a few large family conglomerates in particular have a central position in the graph presented in Figure 1. This implies that family is important to understanding the logics behind the commanding positions, especially also vis-à-vis other Mauritian (business) communities, while, as I will show further below, trust in relation to kinship is equally key to understanding Franco-Mauritian business networks. It could, of course, be argued that the importance of the family may not be that much different in other social groups. However, correlated economic privileges appear to influence family relations and vice versa. As Douglass (1992:212) notes with respect to the white Jamaican elite, a long tradition of wealth shapes family life (and marriage patterns) into something different from that found among most other social groups. Indeed, all the interlocking directorates of the top one hundred companies in 2007 have a strong family component. The businessmen with the seven highest ranks in terms of

board and management positions, for example, represent the economic interests of five different (extended) families. This illustrates that the family is an important starting point for understanding Franco-Mauritian leverage and business practices.

A common perception in Mauritius is that the private sector is predominantly a family affair, with especially the legacy of the Franco-Mauritians being highlighted: 'During the 1970s the MMM [Mouvement Militant Mauricien] numbered 14 families; today the ones who matter most on the economic chessboard are restricted to: ... These four families own or control at least one out of every two hectares under sugarcane cultivation. They also control the largest business groups in the country'.³ However, most Mauritians have a strong tendency for family businesses, and there are a number of almost equally economically powerful families from other ethnic communities. Family businesses, moreover, are not uncommon in many other parts of the world: 'a large part of the French industrial, financial and commercial enterprises in 1996 were in the hands of private owners of capital, represented in most cases by families rather than individuals' (Dogan 2003b:28). It is often assumed that it is easier to maintain economic wealth within the family than to maintain political power within the family since the transmission of political positions by direct inheritance is impossible (Dogan 2003b:30). In business elites, in contrast, the transmission of positions is possible, with the family often being central to the prolongation of businesses and succession issues of elites (Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima 2000). It may be argued, then, that when political dynasties are absent a narrower definition may be more applicable to explaining political elites, because the family and/or social circle is less directly tied to their functional position. In the case of particular business and/or economic elites, such as the Franco-Mauritians, however, a broader definition may offer more explanatory value.

Owing to the long tradition of many Franco-Mauritian families in the private sector, wealth has been passed on from generation to generation. Thus, successfully dealing with family matters is of great importance in the pursuit of prolonging the business over time. Comparable to the case of French elite families (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1998:328), in most cases the current CEO is not only an individual managing the family business, but he (so far mainly men have occupied this position) also has a function and role within the family structure: he manages the family assets and has to make sure that they are safeguarded for future generations. In other words, the role of the family is involved in a feedback loop that impacts the organisation of economic practices, in the sense that it may shape the decisions of the individuals in command. It is expected of the person in charge of the family business that he will add value to the business for the coming generations – for instance, by diversifying and successfully investing in other sectors of the economy. To grasp these logics, I would argue that *elite* in the wider sense is a more applicable analytic concept than defining the wider group as a class or privileged group. Although there may be overlaps with the latter categories,

³ *L'Express*, 15 March 2004.

the concept of an elite appears to better explain how the operations of the persons in command are closely tied to the family and vice versa – and, thus, seem to be better captured in one category.

As a result of Franco-Mauritians' historical involvement in the private sector, they often consider themselves superior to other Mauritians. Yet, they rather associate this with being members of a higher class – even when others are equally wealthy – than with the term *élite*, which they tend to perceive as too negative. One Franco-Mauritian said, '[A wealthy Hindu] may have a Mercedes, but he does not have the necessary taste to decorate his house.' Class, then, is not so much an economic concept for them but also relates to taste (e.g. Bourdieu 1984), which one supposedly cannot acquire overnight, but which relates to a long tradition of involvement in the island's affairs. Interestingly, in the case of families with other ethnic backgrounds but a similarly long tradition, a sense of upper-class belonging may be present, and has even led to marriages. In one case, a Franco-Mauritian married a daughter from a well-established Muslim family, and in the other case a Franco-Mauritian married a daughter from a well-established Hindu family. Both the Muslim and Hindu families were economically powerful, with a history in the private sector little different from that of the powerful Franco-Mauritian families. Many Franco-Mauritians approved of the marriages because the Hindu and Muslim families were considered to belong to the same class, and were not associated with a history of indentured labour, such as is the case with many Hindu and Muslim politicians.

A certain level of class-consciousness, is present, therefore, though in the case of the two Hindu and Muslim families it should be noted that they are exemplary role models in their respective communities. As there are relatively few Muslim and Hindu families as economically powerful as they are, they are not directly part of an ethnic counter-élite challenging Franco-Mauritian economic power – which would be different in the case of political elites. The small number of Mauritian families with a comparable history in the island's private sector may, therefore, have only a limited effect on Franco-Mauritian marriage preferences, even though the two mixed marriages referred to signify a definite change from the past. Despite Franco-Mauritian self-reference, then, it seems that defining the wider group of Franco-Mauritians as an elite rather than a class still makes sense. One could argue, of course, that together with a few other families they are of a different class than other Mauritians even when they are equally wealthy or wealthier. Yet, to define this nuance every time seems to cause more confusion, while it also risks losing the explanatory strength of the elite concept regarding how the internal logics of elite families influence Franco-Mauritian business practices and networks. Moreover, the exclusionary logics from the spaces in which Franco-Mauritians operate – and where they may find eligible partners that 'help' to keep the business within the family – have to a certain extent remained off-limits for members of the upper classes with different ethnic backgrounds.

Exclusive enclaves

To understand whether or not elites are cohesive groups with shared interests that include individuals beyond those persons in commanding position, it is of relevance to ethnographically study the geographies in which elites operate – beyond the public available data of boardrooms, on which the graph in Figure 1 relies. In the case of the Franco-Mauritians, their geographies are of significant relevance to understanding the group and how they have aimed to defend and/or reshape their exclusive enclaves, such as whites-only clubs, educational institutes, and private life and leisure activities at the seaside (Salverda and Hay 2014). By and large, the aim has been to maintain exclusive enclaves inaccessible to Mauritians of all other backgrounds, including those with a similar upper-class background.

In defence of their exclusive geographies those in command and the wider group have evidently collaborated, as the example of financial support for Franco-Mauritian private schools coming from Franco-Mauritian businesses illustrates. As Bourdieu has elaborately described, schools and universities are central to the education, training and recruitment of younger elite generations (Bourdieu and Clough 1996). In the case of the Franco-Mauritians, there was a widely shared interest in maintaining access to high-quality education when the community felt this was increasingly under pressure due to increasing enrolment of other Mauritians in (state) schools that had previously been dominated by Franco-Mauritians. In other words, it was about the maintenance of privileges for the whole community, and potentially nurturing future generations suitable for commanding positions. As a result, virtually all Franco-Mauritian children now attend private schools, which, due to the status associated with them and the level of education offered, have also attracted many Mauritians of other backgrounds – though with similar levels of wealth. As the initial aim was to guarantee good education for the Franco-Mauritian community only, I would argue that this was not about class identification. Nevertheless, over time relations between Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians may change. When this leads to a diminishing importance of Franco-Mauritian identity, upper-class identification may become more prominent on the island.

Until now, though, the private schools as well as other exclusive spaces remain relevant to the reproduction of the Franco-Mauritians by means of facilitating their marriage patterns – an important theme in elite research (e.g. Hartmann 2007), as reproduction allows them to maintain control over resources across time and generations. Endogamous marriage patterns are not exclusively a Franco-Mauritian characteristic; they are, in fact, a common feature of all of the communities in Mauritius (Eriksen 1998:60-62; Nave 2000). More than in other communities, however, the long tradition of endogamous marriage within a small community has linked many Franco-Mauritian families to one another. There may have been some class divisions within the Franco-Mauritian community, in particular between the so-called *grand blancs* and *petits blancs*. Today, these are not completely absent, yet differences seem less obvious,

and certain Franco-Mauritian families have altered their status through financial advancement.

Central to the marriage patterns is the maintenance of a white racial identity, which also explains the fact that marrying a white foreigner is often regarded as equally bearing fruit – in the end, a community that is colloquially named *blancs* effectively ‘has to’ marry white. This is a trend observed with other insular white elites as well. For example, the white Jamaican elite refers to this practice of marrying foreign partners as marrying ‘out’ (Douglass 1992:144) while, talking about the case of Martinique, Vogt writes, ‘[French metropolitan whites] can serve as acceptable marriage partners because they help to keep the group white’ (Vogt 2005:205). With the right choice of partner then, one keeps everything within the family and the community, which brings with it a lot of economic advantages. Conversely, to prevent the community from becoming diluted, and thus very important in the maintenance of an elite position – as it is virtually a ‘self-regulating’ mechanism – Franco-Mauritians have relied, to a large extent, on the practice of sanctioning and disqualifying ‘deviant’ partner choice with respect to intra-group norms. It must be said, however – as the two cases above have illustrated, not to mention intermarriage with partners from less prominent families – Franco-Mauritians today are less strict in this regard.

The level of acceptance differs from family to family, although many may have some reservations about the consequences of marrying outside the confines set by the Franco-Mauritian community. The concerns relate especially to worries that people have about the identity of the offspring of mixed marriages. The importance of ethnic affiliation in Mauritian society does not allow much room for hybrid identity: ‘the most difficult aspect of mixed marriages in this kind of setting – the self-defined plural society with no hegemonic group – may be the identity of the children’ (Eriksen 1998:125). Franco-Mauritian discourse confirms this. Many of the counter-arguments against mixed marriages focus on the position of the children. Franco-Mauritians fear a situation in which their children could not become members of the several Franco-Mauritian whites-only sport and social clubs, of which the most well-known is the Dodo Club. Membership admission of many elite clubs around the world is actually indicative of the fact that the relevant group is often narrower than class alone. Prospective members must be appointed by existing members following a thorough process of scrutinising their credentials. In the case of the Franco-Mauritians this contributes to shaping a culture in which from childhood onwards Franco-Mauritians operate in the same social spaces, with many of them eventually marrying other Franco-Mauritians. As Douglass (1992:270) notes, with reference to white Jamaican elite: ‘[E]lites are not required to marry within their social circle, but they usually do. They marry within their circle not because they are restricted by prejudicial beliefs about color and class, but simply because they tend to fall in love with someone like them’. Yet, as the Franco-Mauritian case illustrates, this is informed by the structural level of race and kinship, such as a historical pattern of disqualifying marriage to non-whites confirms. As much

of this is performed in their exclusive spaces, though, these spaces are essential to the understanding of their elite position.

Franco-Mauritian kinship

Apart from the role of prolonging an elite position from generation to generation by means of finding suitable marriage partners, Franco-Mauritian kinship and sense of belonging has a more direct impact on Franco-Mauritian business practices. For example, land was often sold between Franco-Mauritian families, as there hardly seem to be families that have been able to pass on land from the first concession holders to the present generation. The exceptions are two small concessions in the southeast that have belonged to the same family since 1770 (Boudet 2004:55). Similarly, in other business ventures Franco-Mauritians are often drawn to one another, and the network of companies, linked to each other through interlocking directorates, is, importantly, also an illustration of shared investments between different Franco-Mauritian families and individuals. As a result, and reflected in Figure 1, shared ownership between different families is far more widespread within the Franco-Mauritian community than among other Mauritians. A non-Franco-Mauritian businessman said, 'joint ventures between local players are limited in Mauritius anyhow. The local joint ventures that exist are mainly between Franco-Mauritians.'

The strong connections between different Franco-Mauritian families appear to exist for several reasons. Firstly, Franco-Mauritians are frequently linked to one another by (distant) family ties. This facilitates shared investment and/or participation in one another's businesses. Secondly, there is the historical advantage of having substantial wealth within the community: in cases where a businessman cannot gather sufficient capital, he often turns to other Franco-Mauritians to share in the investment. This explains the cases above as well as the wide portfolio of the large Franco-Mauritian business groups, since these are often the result of takeovers and mergers of (family) businesses. Through the Franco-Mauritian network, companies in financial difficulty and/or with succession problems were always first offered to other Franco-Mauritians. Successfully consolidating economic power 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. Thirdly, cultural aspects, and race (or ethnicity) have an impact on Franco-Mauritian shared investment and cooperation activities, although these are not exclusively Franco-Mauritian practices. The perception, however, is that kin solidarity among Franco-Mauritians is stronger than among other Mauritians. For example, the Franco-Mauritian business practice of cooperation is in stark contrast with that of the economically powerful Sino-Mauritians. Sino-Mauritian businesses are substantially less interlocking and operate much more as separate units. According to one Sino-Mauritian businessman, 'the Sino-Mauritian community has less solidarity than the whites'. As an elite, 'the Sino-Mauritians are', he argued, 'moving upwards and fairly influential, yet not as influential as the Franco-Mauritians.' For Franco-Mauritians it appears natural to work with their kin, though, since they

have a long tradition of doing business with one another. A Franco-Mauritian businessman involved in the purchase of numerous businesses said: 'You always ask people you know first if you have something to offer. For example, people you meet at a cocktail party'. Or at a wedding, because this same businessman was at a wedding I attended in 2006. I found him in deep discussion with another Franco-Mauritian man. His wife complained, 'even when we are at a wedding, he is still talking only business'.

What seems to set Franco-Mauritians apart as an elite group, then, is that they all appear to have been prone to having similar experiences throughout their lives, shaping a strong overriding sense of belonging. This participation in a limited number of informal networks is part and parcel of understanding their business networks. Nevertheless, Franco-Mauritian businessmen would typically downplay their close cooperation, and frequently argued that there was strong competition among them. Yet, competition among most Franco-Mauritian businesses appears not to be cutthroat. As a CEO of one of the large family holdings commented when I interviewed him in his Port Louis office in 2005: 'There 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 sport-like rules'. This is facilitated by the shared background and spending of leisure time. Indeed, in July 2006, I joined a hunt with around thirty Franco-Mauritian men (and only two women, one middle-aged and another the young daughter of one of the men), among them a number of members of the most economically powerful families. Especially during the drinks and the lunch after the actual hunting, it was evident how all the men were familiar with one another and genuinely at ease – facilitating their close collaboration in their professional lives. Kinship thus ties Franco-Mauritians in command positions together into a close-knit network. Though there are increasing possibilities for other Mauritians to be employed in positions that were previously reserved for Franco-Mauritians, a preference for Franco-Mauritians persists at the level of boards of directors, as well as that of senior management positions. As one businessmen said, 'we know them, so we can trust them.' In other words, the proprietors of the top hundred companies and their close Franco-Mauritian associates tend to constitute the majority on the board of directors that constitute the dense network of interlocking directorates in Figure 1.

Though it may gradually change, wealth has so far trickled down to the whole community. Where to draw the line of who belongs to the elite and who does not is nevertheless ambiguous. As I have shown, the origin of the community is closely associated with an elite identity, and today the whole community remains on average by far the richest of all the communities – there are few poor Franco-Mauritians, while other communities, probably with the exception of the Sino-Mauritians, have many more internal differences. Even when Franco-Mauritians are not proprietors themselves, they benefit from the wealth present in the community. They tend to easily find employment within Franco-Mauritian companies due to the strength of (in)formal ties as a result of similar upbringing and educational backgrounds and a history of participating in the same leisure activities. But they are by no means equally wealthy. It is

important to note, nevertheless, that their white skin provides all Franco-Mauritians with a certain elite status. Conversely, when Franco-Mauritians are relatively poor for successive generations they will no longer operate in the same spaces and networks as the majority of them – a ‘self-regulating mechanism’ that confirms that a certain level of wealth and a white skin are central to Franco-Mauritian identity. The boundaries of the Franco-Mauritian community, then, have a certain overlap with an elite position, though these are not clear-cut boundaries. Even Franco-Mauritians themselves dispute the boundaries of their community, though on the basis of whether one is ‘really’ white or not. Indirectly, however, this is often about wealth and standing within the community, with families that were formerly on the margin having become fully part of the community as a result of economic success. The (historical) operations of those in command, then, must be understood in relation to a wider group that cannot be sufficiently explained by defining them as an upper class or a privileged group. However, when Franco-Mauritian identity changes and upper-class identification starts to become more prominent, this may change.

Conclusion

The Franco-Mauritian case illustrates that the operations of their interlocking directorates should be understood by linking the persons in command to a wider group. Looking at the Franco-Mauritian commanding positions alone would not adequately explain the maintenance of their economic power until the present day. One would miss too many of the nuances that explain the (historical) origins and logics of their business networks. This also highlights in particular the anthropological value of studying elites, as it helps to explain the nuances and complexities involved in, for example, their (family) networks.

In my opinion, the notions of classes or privileged groups do not offer viable alternatives for the wider group in the case of the Franco-Mauritians, even though they may apply *upper-class* as a term of self-description. As I have illustrated above, the logics that tie those in command to the wider group are of a narrower kind than those that define membership of a class. Ethnicity and race are certainly determining factors in binding the group together, but in order to understand the maintenance of Franco-Mauritian economic power, insights from the study of elites remain central. Like Cohen’s Creole elite in Sierra Leone, of course, the Franco-Mauritians present a relatively simple case. Not only are they easily identifiable, but they also operate in the confined space of the small island of Mauritius. In larger and more complex societies it is probably more difficult to know all elite members in person and/or by reputation. According to Cohen (1981:228), though, exclusive spaces, as well as symbols, may then be even more important, because they allow elites to recognise one another as ‘one of us’ without knowing one another personally – though this could equally be said in the case of class. It may

also be that the question of power in society may result more from kin and connections than from formal institutions (Hansen and Parrish 1983:258). A broader definition, in other words, may also offer valuable explanatory power for an understanding of power in other societies. The concept of an elite, for example, seems to be better suited to explaining the working of trust, and a shared way of life and culture in facilitating collaboration than would be the case with the often more abstract concept of class.

This is not to say that I think that the broader interpretation of elites is the only way forward. I fully endorse Lentz's questioning of the definitions, and she and others rightly point to the difficulties that result from using such a broader definition. Moreover, identifying the function(s) of the elite, such as political, economic, cultural, etc. should be paramount, also in order to identify overlapping networks and/or interests between different elites. Only then can we start to understand how they operate and what forms their power and influence over other groups may take. We should avoid automatically associating the term *elite* with upper or upper-middle classes (Lentz 2015:40) – as Scott (2008) has argued, *elite* at one point encompassed so much that it meant little. It may actually be that in particular investigations the concept of an elite is not the most appropriate with which to start. Analysing social stratification may not necessarily benefit from defining the upper echelons as elites. Also, in much of the contemporary focus on inequality it probably makes more sense to categorise groups according to income and wealth. This may offer more explanatory value than applying the term *elite* to the group of wealthiest members. Discussions about whether they can actually be classified as an elite may just distract from questions that can easily be covered with another concept, such as the 'super-rich' or 'the 1%' – though even there family may play a significant role in the maintenance of wealth over longer periods of time (Korom et al. 2015).

Even when it has been determined that it could be of analytical relevance to apply the concept of an elite, it still depends on the questions we ask whether a wider or a narrower definition is most appropriate. In the case of understanding the Franco-Mauritian elite position over a longer period of time – into the twenty-first century – a broader definition seemed to offer the most explanatory strength. With succession and prolongation of control over resources it probably becomes difficult to exclude the correlation with family – in a way that is narrower than that associated with upper-class family alone. That said, such an application may come at a cost, because it is often less evident where to draw the boundary of the elite in such broader cases than when it is only about commanding positions. To explain power in other cases, however, a narrow definition may be more suitable. There are plenty of examples of groups that constitute a (functional) elite by means of their commanding position yet without any explanatory linkages to a wider group. They may, for example, have emerged from non-elite groups – or middle and upper classes, as Lentz rightly points out. Thus, a one-size-fits-all application is probably not the most helpful, and it may be useful to potentially add some nuances to the concept of elites as it stands now. We may, for example, want to follow up on Cohen's terminology and differentiate more explicitly

between the inner and the outer circles of an elite. Sometimes, such as in the case of the Franco-Mauritians, the outer circle is of relevance to explain the operations of the inner circle, while at other times it is not and/or even absent.

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