



Embodied Signs of Elite Distinction: Franco-Mauritians' White Skin-Colour in the Face of Change

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Abstract

This article examines the symbolic elite distinction of the Franco-Mauritians' white skin colour, as a contribution to literature on symbols of elite distinction. The case study is set to analyse how Franco-Mauritians' white skin colour works as a sign of elite distinction in addition to cultural differences between them and other Mauritians – which are influenced by labour division and reinforced by the structure of Mauritian society. The article underlines the intricacy of physical appearance in the transition from the colonial period (ending in 1968) to independence. It also shows how such embodied signs are persistent and ambiguous.

Keywords:

elite, symbols of distinction, physical appearance, white skin colour, Mauritius

To the elite, there is more than the control of scarce resources and, ultimately, power: elites need to noticeably distinguish themselves from others. Large and richly ornamented residences, expensive jewellery and lavish parties are just a few renowned external signs of superiority. But elite distinction can also be marked through physical appearances. This article examines the symbolic elite distinction of the Franco-Mauritians, the white elite of the island Mauritius, focusing on skin-colour as a distinguishing characteristic. It shows the intricacies of physical appearance in the transition from the colonial period to independence. The case study

analyses specifically how Franco-Mauritians' white skin-colour acts as a sign of elite distinction in addition to various historically informed (cultural) differences between Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians. These factors of differentiation are influenced by labour divisions and ascription, and reinforced by the structure of Mauritian society. Such an examination will enhance the understanding of how embodied signs of elite distinction are persistent and ambiguous, representing elite superiority and "simple" cultural distinctions at the same time.

Embodying Distinction: The Innate Aspect of Physical Appearance

The symbolic distinction of white skin-colour has been the result of contact between white and non-white people and between superiors and subordinates. The European colonial expansion was an important setting in which this racial superiority occurred, although Ann Laura Stoler argues that the onset of colonialism was relatively free of it:

Housing, dress codes, transport, food, clubs, conversation, recreation, and leaves marked a distinct social space in which Europeans were internally stratified but from which Asians were circumstantially and/or formally barred. However, when the colonial industry saw its position threatened, new measures were usually sought to identify its members, their affinities and common interests, along racial lines (Stoler 1989: 146).

This constant pattern of readjusting the parameters of the colonial elite to delimit those who had access to property and those who did not (Stoler 1989: 154) led to an embodied superiority. In colonial Brazil, for example, whiteness became equated with the possession of material resources and wealth (Linke 1999: 135). At the same time it signified superiority, because a dark skin-colour was commonly associated with poor manual labourers working outside (Hunter 2007: 3). Hence, colonial projects were the driving force behind the gradual superiority of white skin-colour, affecting all layers of the colonial societies.

The need for marking distinctions in new social settings indicates that whiteness was (and is) originally a social construct, although one visualised through physical appearances. According to Uli Linke, this is particularly effective as "social categories are articulated onto material objects, like the

body, in order to render them natural, irrevocable, and permanent” (Linke 1999: 136). Physical appearance as sign of distinction, therefore, is different from conspicuous and vicarious consumption (Veblen [1899] 1994) or fashion (Simmel [1904] 1957). As an indicator of elite distinction, physical appearance is an inborn symbol, contrasting with other signs of superiority which are manufactured, such as luxurious cars or jewellery.

The innate aspect, consequently, makes an elite group highly impenetrable for people without the specific physical characteristics; one cannot overnight become white, in contrast to the overnight purchase of certain prestige goods. Equally, it is a symbol which cannot be “shaken off” like one could discard luxury products – thus, in situations where white skin-colour becomes problematic, physical appearance cannot change overnight.

Nowadays, white skin-colour is much more contested. Global developments, such as the decolonisation process, have exposed the fact that “white privilege is an entrenched, powerful and ultimately irrational system that needs to make itself appear natural and benign in order to perpetuate itself” (Vera and Feagin 1995: 297). White skin-colour is no longer automatically accepted as sign of superiority, as it is considered to be a form of monopolisation and exclusion which is incompatible with current world images (Murphy 1988: 2). Moodley and Adam (2000: 59) argue the “aesthetic racism of the colonial past” has been shed under the influence of globalised consumerism and corporate wealth. Despite these changes, the symbolic value of the white skin-colour has not become obsolete. Whiteness continues to have a worldwide impact as a symbol of superiority due to memories of the (colonial) past and continuing “white” Western domination. Some even argue that ideas about the superiority of the white “race” have increased, illustrated by the “aestheticization of white skin” (Linke 1999: 133). Indeed, in countries like Saudi Arabia and Uganda women are using toxic skin bleaching creams in an attempt to modify an apparently immutable physical trait (Hunter 2007: 12).¹

¹) It has been suggested that the “bleaching syndrome,” the internalisation of a white aesthetic ideal, is the result of the historic legacy of slavery and colonialism around the world (Hunter 2007: 3). But since a dark skin-colour tends to be associated with outdoor manual labour, this suggestion raises an interesting question. Elites have always been exempted from manual labour and thus the symbolic superiority of a lighter skin-colour may have already existed before the white Europeans forced their colonial projects upon many parts of the world.

The Case Study

The Franco-Mauritians currently number about 10,000 out of a population of 1.2 million in Mauritius. The remaining groups comprise of approximately 52% Hindus, 28% Creoles (including *gens de couleur*), 16% Muslims, and 3% Sino-Mauritians. During the heydays of colonialism, the Franco-Mauritians were the dominant group, and the superiority of the white skin-colour was hardly challenged. With Mauritian independence in 1968, the Franco-Mauritians lost their political power, but were able to consolidate their economic power (for an elaboration on Franco-Mauritian elite power, see Salverda 2010). Forty years after the end of the colonial period, they can still be considered as an elite group though in a much more ambiguous way; their white skin-colour is much more contested, yet at the same time they are still associated with the prestige of an elite position.

Likewise, in South Africa, Brazil and the United States, white skin-colour remains ambiguously associated with superiority, racism and colonial injustices (see, among others, Wildman 2006; Garner 2006; Hunter 2007). In the case of South Africa, white skin-colour as a symbol of superiority applies to both elite and middle-class whites. While it is virtually never the case in Mauritius, many middle-class members of South African society, such as shop attendants, are whites. White skin-colour is thus not always exclusively linked to elitism; it is associated more generally with whites' better chances, relative wealth, and so forth.

Interestingly, whites often assume that blacks conceptualise whiteness as benign and non-threatening. “[Whites] do not imagine the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness” (Hooks 1992: 340–41).

In Mauritius, on the contrary, white skin-colour functions almost completely as a marker of the boundaries between the Franco-Mauritian elite and the rest of the population.² It symbolises Franco-Mauritian (economic) power, their colonial past, family names, class, and education. It has given them their colloquial name: *blancs* (whites) – used both externally and internally. The Franco-Mauritians thus make an excellent comparative case study to examine embodied signs of elite distinction.

² It must be noted that in many other cases ethnicity can function as marker of elite distinction and thus a variety of physical characteristics may function as symbols of superiority (see, for example, Chua 2003).

Franco-Mauritian Embodiment

Maintaining the elite distinction and category of physical appearance requires certain rules. Impenetrability can only be sustained by, for example, marrying other whites and rejecting non-white spouses. In many colonial projects, *métissage*, mixing of races, was seen as a threat to white prestige and considered as an embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay (Stoler 1992: 515). Below, it will be analysed how the new (structural) reality of independent Mauritius influences this maintenance because whiteness is far more contested nowadays. Symbolic white elite distinction has become paradoxical: while people resent elite symbols, they continuously ascribe to and reproduce such symbols.

Mauritius was completely uninhabited until the Dutch settled there in 1598. After they abandoned the island in 1710, the French settled in a few years later and imported large numbers of slaves from Africa and Madagascar. The Europeans settling during this period were allocated much of the uncultivated land. In the beginning of the French period, the settlers' white skin-colour hardly functioned as a symbol of elite distinction – as Stoler argued the onset of colonialism was relatively free of the superiority of the white skin-colour. In the case of Mauritius, it was only after the British had conquered Mauritius in 1810 that physical appearance as embodied sign of superiority became pertinent.

The British conquered Mauritius in order to establish a strategic presence in close proximity to their colonies on the Indian peninsula. They considered the well-established French planters to be a valuable asset (Eriksen 1998: 9) and allowed them to stay almost entirely on their own terms: they could keep their land, elite position, culture and language throughout the entire British colonial period, which lasted until 1968. Already during the French period, the consolidation of an elite had undoubtedly taken place. Yet, it was constantly disturbed by the influx of white newcomers (Vaughan 2005: 80). With the arrival of the British, who never settled in large numbers themselves, the influx came to a halt. At the same time, a plantation economy developed; this required a need for racist ideology to justify domination and legitimise class exploitation (North-Coombes 2000: 1), and intensified distinction from the free black population³ – a process that was already latently present during the French

³ The free blacks were a mixed group: manumitted slaves, children born out of liaisons between the slave masters and Indians who had come to the island independently.

period (Simmons 1982: 24–25). Hence, an elite marked by its white skin-colour was established.

The British, being white themselves, more or less endorsed the symbolic superiority of the white skin-colour, notwithstanding the fact that the colonial government abolished the “colour bar” in 1829 – the constitutional distinction based on skin-colour – and slavery in 1835 (Boudet 2004; Simmons 1982). This, however, hardly challenged the Franco-Mauritians elite position, as they remained socially distinguished from the *gens de couleur*, the black (Creole) elite. Despite sharing an almost similar culture, French language and Catholic faith, Franco-Mauritians considered themselves superior on the basis of their skin-colour. When appreciation was expressed for the *gens de couleur*, Franco-Mauritians often highlighted their white forefathers: “the members of which have an appreciable quantity of European blood in their veins” (Leclezio [1914]2000: 139–40).

It was only from the 1930s that the situation gradually started to change. Not the *gens de couleur* but especially the majority of Hindus challenged Franco-Mauritian (political) power. With the abolition of slavery, large numbers of Indian Hindus and Muslims had arrived as indentured labourers to work on the Franco-Mauritian sugar plantations.⁴ The Hindus eventually grew to constitute the majority of the Mauritian population, and gradually pressured for universal suffrage and subsequently independence. The Franco-Mauritians opposed these changes unsuccessfully and in 1968 Mauritius became an independent nation. Franco-Mauritians did not easily accept the collapse of more than 150 years of hegemony and a number of Franco-Mauritians remained active in politics after 1968. However, the Franco-Mauritians associated with the private sector could no longer mobilise much support.

In the years preceding independence, Franco-Mauritians collaborated with other Mauritians, especially Creoles and *gens de couleur*. They not only shared a Catholic faith, but also feared Hindu domination. After 1968, however, this alliance disintegrated and the Franco-Mauritians’ role in the public debate increasingly came to be perceived by many Mauritians as “not opportune” any more, since their physical appearance had become a symbol of the injustices of the colonial past. Ultimately, the newspaper

⁴ Compared to the *gens de couleur* and other blacks, the distinction with these groups was also importantly made on religious and cultural grounds.

Le Cernéen, the mouthpiece of the Franco-Mauritian private sector, had to close its doors in 1982. The newspaper frequently attacked (political) opponents, but when criticised for these attacks, it accused its opponents for being anti-white and racist. *Le Cernéen's* main political opponent, the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (MMM), was active in criticising Franco-Mauritians. However, Adele Smith-Simmons argues that the MMM was a class party and not an anti-white one. If it appeared anti-white, she states, it was because most whites were capitalists (Simmons 1982: 195). Politicians successfully pressured the newspaper's financiers, the Franco-Mauritian private sector, to cease financial support. Franco-Mauritian businessmen realised that openly expressing the symbolic elite distinction of the white skin-colour jeopardised the maintenance of their economic privileges. Equally, on the Caribbean island Martinique, the local whites had to accept a new role; they argued that they could no longer stand for elections as blacks would be up in arms, arguing that whites would again dominate and exploit them (Kovats Beaudoux 2002: 160).

In Mauritius, “white,” to a certain extent, is still equivalent to power. This certainty is visible despite the end of the colonial period, when “an oligarchy, with a racial origin, exercised a complete hegemony, political, social, cultural and religiously; with as consequence making the black inferior and powerless” (Chan Low 2005: 280). Franco-Mauritians still have significant economic power, which is comparable to South Africa, where the white elite have lost their political power but maintained a strong foothold in the private sector (Moodley and Adam 2000: 63). In South Africa, for instance, while non-white wealth is on the rise, old distinctions still have an impact: “[t]he black elite feels patronized. Status-conscious achievers experience the subtleties of condescending white arrogance as a continuing sub-text of superiority and implicit exclusion” (Moodley and Adam 2000: 58).

Consequently, in democratic and independent Mauritius the status of the Franco-Mauritians and the embodied sign of their white skin-colour are as ambiguous as they are persistent. A Franco-Mauritian businessman said:

Our situation is difficult because we are a small community, we are perceived as rich and this perception does not imply that it is [an] incorrect [one]. In a way we set the standard and other communities don't like that; and what is

the lowest job Franco-Mauritians have? Salesman? There are not many secretaries. Other communities don't like it that the Franco-Mauritians are always the bosses.⁵

Resentment about Franco-Mauritian wealth and economic power tends to be symbolised by their white skin-colour. Unlike in the past, it can be challenged and attacked and the highly visible Franco-Mauritians are depicted as the symbol of colonial injustice.

Understanding Symbolic Distinction from Inside

The Franco-Mauritians make up a small community with a strong sense of belonging. Contrary to, for example, South Africa, it is necessary to prove that one is white from both the “inside” and the “outside,” suggesting that visible aspects of distinction are not enough. Franco-Mauritians are often asked to “prove” that they lack “black” blood (Bullier 1981: 73–74). For example, while a number of *gens de couleur* have become equally white as many Franco-Mauritians in terms of their skin-colour they are excluded from the Franco-Mauritian community because they have black ancestors. Symbolically marking distinction by a white skin-colour is thus not always sufficient. The Franco-Mauritian community needs additional ways to quickly establish whether someone is *pur-sang* (“pure of blood”), as a Franco-Mauritian has to be of the “white race” and needs to be recognised by his/her community (Boudet 2005: 28).

Franco-Mauritians easily establish whether one is “in” or “out” by surname, because most surnames distinguish Franco-Mauritians from other Mauritians with equally white or darker skin-colours. Franco-Mauritians, in fact, need hardly to refer to themselves as Franco-Mauritian; surnames will tell enough. At an opening of an exhibition, for example, a Franco-Mauritian asked a *gens de couleur* woman her maiden name since he knew she was married to a foreigner. Later she said, “[the Franco-Mauritian] asked my name in order to place me. It is difficult to place me, because I'm white but not Franco-Mauritian. If I had been Chinese, [the man] would not have asked my name, because he could have easily placed me.” It shows how a surname has an additional function when a direct judgement about

⁵ Interview: Mauritius, 1 June 2006.

the “whiteness” of a person is impossible. But it also helps to position someone within the Franco-Mauritian community; as the *gens de couleur* woman said, “in the case of Franco-Mauritians themselves, they also ask the name in order to place the relevant person.”⁶

Owing to wealth, family status and position, there are some class and status distinctions within the Franco-Mauritian community between the *Grands Blancs* and *Petits Blancs*. The sugar barons and a number of families with a noble lineage have traditionally been the *Grands Blancs*, while the *Petits Blancs* were often “lower-ranking” employees. In the past, the two did not frequent each other and there are examples of children whose parents forbade them to socialise with children of lower social ranking. This has changed since and Franco-Mauritians appear more united than before. Pressure from (non-white) counter-elites appears to have drawn them together. Likewise, in Martinique relationships between whites of different social positions have been easier and better tolerated than relationships between whites and non-whites of the same social positions (Kovats Beaudoux 2002: 168).

Comparatively speaking, moreover, there is little real poverty in the Franco-Mauritian community and even “poorer” Franco-Mauritians have a higher living standard than most Mauritians. In cases where a Franco-Mauritian falls below a certain threshold, the family and community are often willing to help out financially. A Franco-Mauritian committee that financially supports needy Franco-Mauritians was established for several reasons related to this. It was, for example, generally argued that Franco-Mauritians felt they could not apply for healthcare in the public hospitals. To line up with all the other Mauritians is considered degrading and, consequently, support is provided to those who need it to apply for private health care. This further reinforces the symbolic distinction of the white skin-colour.

A historical pattern of exclusion correlates, in the perception of many Franco-Mauritians, with class differences and differences in education and lifestyle. This is rooted in a wider discourse about the negative image of *métissage*, which is perceived as a weakness. A Franco-Mauritian said: “my grandmother used to say that if I didn’t work hard enough at school I would become a mulatto.”⁷ Gestures involving pointing at the skin and

⁶ Interview, Mauritius, 19 June 2006.

⁷ Interview: Mauritius, 13 April 2006.

waving ones hand in an expression of doubt can be made when Franco-Mauritians refer to someone who is not purely white. Moreover, a lack of “pure” white blood is used to gossip about and disqualify other Franco-Mauritians. Behind their backs, Franco-Mauritians denigrate other Franco-Mauritians for not being purely white. This discourse appears to be so engraved in the Franco-Mauritian psyche that even a number of liberal Franco-Mauritians who disassociate themselves from the white stereotype, perhaps unconsciously, uphold the discourse, despite their criticism of it. For example, one of them wondered whether a Franco-Mauritian with a reputation for strongly defending whiteness could not cope with a *métissage* “problem” in his family.

“Boundaries exist only if they are repeatedly defended by members of the inner groups” (Lamont 1992: 3). The long history of a small white minority indicates that Franco-Mauritians have successfully defended the boundaries of their group and married among whites – though endogamy is a common practice among all Mauritian ethnic communities (Eriksen 1998: 60–62; Nave 2000). Marrying outside the Franco-Mauritian community has never been well-perceived and has led to disinheritance and virtual banishment. In the past, white skin-colour corresponded largely with class boundaries and marrying outside the community was considered a misalliance – and a violation of the superior position of Franco-Mauritians. The increase of social stratification among all Mauritian communities during the last half a century, however, has hardly led to a decline of Franco-Mauritian endogamy. Only recently, many Franco-Mauritians approved of two mixed marriages because the non-white spouses were considered to belong to the same class. In general, marrying a non-white continues to be associated with lacking the capacity to find a white partner, even though younger generations of Franco-Mauritians tend to be more open to mixed marriages than their (grand)parents. In turn, virtual banishment is now something of the past.

Despite the negligibility of mixed marriages, the arguments for justifying endogamous marriage patterns has changed. Whiteness now has different connotations and many Franco-Mauritians present cultural and educational differences as more important objections than the argument of skin-colour. This new narrative stems from the fact that Franco-Mauritians are now well aware of the racist connotations of using skin-colour as justification for their choices. In a way, as Moodley and Adam (2000: 57) state: “many analysts have noted how biological heredity [in race related

discourses] has been replaced by cultural difference.” Nevertheless, the significance of white skin-colour remains noticeable; marrying white foreigners is not considered a breach or disqualified due to cultural differences, and numerous spouses come from South Africa and Europe. This pattern equally occurs among insular white elites in Jamaica (Douglass 1992: 144) and Martinique. Emily Vogt writes, “[French metropolitan whites] can serve as acceptable marriage partners because they help to keep the group white” (Vogt 2005: 205).

The persistence of marrying someone of the same (white) skin-colour is related to a number of things. In the case of the Franco-Mauritians, much remains at stake in marriage as being completely “white” still implies many privileges; marrying a foreign white thus pays off equally well, as it guarantees that one will remain within the community. Internal pressure for “marrying white” is, therefore, strong. Franco-Mauritians are aware of how difficult life could be for them if they were to marry a non-white, as contacts with the Franco-Mauritian community are often severed. Some remember how they were unable to visit their cousins because the uncle had committed a sin and married outside the community. Franco-Mauritians, also among younger generations, fear for the future of their children and grandchildren in the case of mixed marriages; the offspring of these marriages will not belong to the community and can, for example, be excluded from becoming a member of the Dodo Club, a white only sports and social club. In the rare cases of acceptance, the skin-colour of children can be a concern. For example, a marriage between a Franco-Mauritian man and a *gens de couleur* woman, which appeared to have been accepted by the Franco-Mauritian family. However, several things revealed the family’s concern. The Franco-Mauritian family anxiously awaited the outcome of the birth of the couple’s first and only child in the 1980s, as they hoped it would be a girl. The reason for this was that she could, in the future, marry and take her spouse’s name. This was seen to continue the white patrimony and status of the family name. In addition, they hoped for a baby with a fair complexion so it would be hard to notice from the outside that it had a non-white parent.⁸

Despite the fact that younger generations may be more open to mixed marriages, history and rejection stemming older generations looms over

⁸) Twenty-five years later, the young woman is embedded in the Franco-Mauritian community, even though she still feels a bit apart.

their decisions. It is commonly argued that young people resist marrying “outside” because the older generations, who were raised in a different era, cannot cope with mixed marriages. Older people, it is argued, are less reflexive about whiteness and more quick to deploy racist discourse (Garner 2007: 76–77). Younger generations, who do not want to upset their (grand)parents, thus sustain endogamous marriage patterns. Hence, in the new Mauritian reality with a larger variety of elites, the Franco-Mauritians have maintained their white skin-colour because “love,” in a sense, is bounded by the colour of the skin, but love also does not easily find its way outside the Franco-Mauritian community.

When Franco-Mauritians are “recognised” by their community, life is determined by the family and the community. In the case of a number of exclusive (elite) clubs, Franco-Mauritians uphold exclusivity by their white skin-colour. In the colonial days, these white-only clubs made sense because the Franco-Mauritians and British were virtually the only elite. Today some clubs have changed their membership policies. For example, the famous Turf Club, an elite club concerned with horse racing and thus situated at the race track in the capital Port Louis, was the exclusive domain of Franco-Mauritians and British colonial officials. But horse racing is now very popular among all Mauritians; with the democratisation of Mauritius, the Turf Club had to follow through and today its members belong to all communities (and colours).

The most (in)famous bastion of embodied exclusion, the Dodo Club, remains, however, exclusively white. New members are screened for the possibility of having non-white ancestors even though a little inconsistency is not uncommon with the Franco-Mauritians. A few white members are known for having black ancestors, but they have been accepted because of their socio-economic position. These cases, however, hardly affect the symbolic elite distinction of the white skin-colour; they are exceptions unknown to the majority of Mauritians. Nor, in the case of the clubs, do most Mauritians really care, as social life is importantly an ethnic affair in Mauritius and other communities tend to have their exclusive clubs as well. The impact of this exclusiveness is apparent; reflecting the Franco-Mauritians’ occupation of only one percent of the population, the national Mauritian rugby team is virtually all-white, as the only islanders playing rugby are members of the Dodo and other Franco-Mauritian dominated sport clubs.

The distinction based on skin-colour is also reflected in other domains of Franco-Mauritian social life. Many Franco-Mauritians have seaside bungalows (*campements*) where they spend weekends and holidays with family and friends; nowadays some also permanently live in these *campements*. It is one of the least infiltrated parts of Franco-Mauritian socio-cultural life as it centres on the family and close family friends. Here, as with rugby, essential differences set over time appear to mark the distinction; historically, only Franco-Mauritians vacationed at the seaside and, as a result, certain nautical activities remain predominantly a Franco-Mauritian affair.

In addition, the majority of Franco-Mauritian children attend a small number of French private schools. Despite English being the country's official school language, many other Mauritians also attend these schools because they are known for providing a quality education. But while the schools may not be exclusively Franco-Mauritian, attendance does reinforce Franco-Mauritian cohesion. Moreover, Franco-Mauritian children tend to go to the same sport clubs, meet each other at their *campements*, and go to a nightclub in the north that organises nights catering almost exclusively to Franco-Mauritians. In these ways, the "irrational" facet of partner choice is eliminated by the limits of social life: love simply does not easily find its way outside the Franco-Mauritian community. To a certain extent it could be compared to the white Jamaican elite:

Similarly, elites 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 (Douglass 1992: 270).

This is seen to undoubtedly have advantages beyond the Franco-Mauritian private sphere. Through their exclusive socio-cultural life and endogamous marriage patterns, Franco-Mauritians keep their stake in the island's richest economic networks and increase their chances for a prosperous life.

White-Collar Work: Labour Division and Symbolic Elite Distinction

The exclusive structure of Franco-Mauritian social life has an impact on the maintenance of economic privileges. In Mauritius, the most powerful factions of the private sector are associated with the Franco-Mauritian

community; they own much of the land and control the sugar industry and a substantial number of the largest companies. Historically, they have employed Mauritians of all backgrounds because Franco-Mauritian companies create a great number of jobs. However, close-knit (socio-cultural) networks have given Franco-Mauritians a historically rooted “inside track” into management positions.

Despite a nationwide focus on merit and a higher education standards, which has led to more and more Mauritians occupying positions previously reserved for Franco-Mauritians, the latter remain with an advantage. Franco-Mauritian businessmen, when asked about employing their own kin in upper management positions, often refer to the benefit of a shared culture and an inherent trust emanating from familiarity with the employee’s family. Consequently, almost all Franco-Mauritians have white-collar work in the private sector and many have managerial positions. Virtually no Franco-Mauritian is working as labourer (Eriksen 1998: 62), and from earliest childhood Franco-Mauritians are raised and served by non-white nannies, servants and gardeners. This contrasts with whites in other countries such as South Africa and Brazil, where there is a larger variety in positions occupied by whites.

Owing to Franco-Mauritians’ historical employment positions, it is assumed by many (but by no means all) Franco-Mauritians and Mauritians alike that Franco-Mauritians are better bosses than other Mauritians. A foreign white businessman established in Mauritius claimed that it is due to the (continuing) psychological problem many Mauritians have with having grown up in a society where whites were favoured. Likewise, in Martinique a black boss badly treating a black was considered worse than a white boss doing the same (Kovats Beaudoux 2002: 171). Conversely, some Franco-Mauritians have difficulties to accept Mauritians occupying positions previously reserved for them. The white foreign businessman, who appears to be critical about the racial hierarchy, said, “I had appointed a general manager of Indian descent [a Mauritian Hindu] above two white [Franco-Mauritian] guys. They could not cope with it. The whites have a huge psychological problem with having a Mauritian as superior.” According to this businessman, the Franco-Mauritian employees did not voice their disapproval of the new Hindu manager with so many words, but it was clear to him anyway. He suspected that the Franco-Mauritians were being laughed at by their friends because they were now the subordinates

of a non-white. He said, “one of them tried to influence my decision by trying to convince me that appointing him would open doors. He was probably right that it would open doors, because compared to the Indian guy he has more friends and acquaintances at other companies. But being the general manager involves more than opening doors.”⁹

With the arrival of white expatriates and tourists, Franco-Mauritians faced another reality regarding the symbolic aspect of their skin-colour. Like the Franco-Mauritians, most expatriates work in white-collar and management positions – mainly for international companies and hardly for Mauritian businesses. They live in the same upmarket residential areas as many Franco-Mauritians. White tourists predominantly stay in the luxurious hotel resorts – many of them owned by Franco-Mauritians – and have much more to spend than the average Mauritian. Thus the influx of foreign actors continues to equate white with wealth.

Many foreign whites, however, come from European societies where the symbolic aspect of the white skin-colour is less apparent in stressing elite status. In these societies, the majority of the population is often white, and as a counter-reaction to Europe’s colonial history, many disqualify white superiority in former colonies. The expatriates (especially the French) consider Franco-Mauritians to be an anachronism. Conversely, many Franco-Mauritians feel a bit “looked down upon” by them and as a counter-reaction automatically disqualify many of these expatriates from their group, seeing them as belonging to a lower class. Equally in Martinique, Vogt writes, “[white French] are generally disdained in cultural terms and for their class status” (Vogt 2005: 205). However, as illustrated above, whites in Martinique and Franco-Mauritians accept white foreigners as partners. In these cases, Franco-Mauritians hardly refer to class and cultural differences. A Franco-Mauritian lady said, “French who have been living in Africa understand us better than the French from France.” They know about the relationship between whites and blacks while white Europeans do not have a clue, she suggested.¹⁰ The expatriates and tourists’ limited adherence to the symbolic aspect of the white skin-colour results in a more open mentality towards non-white Mauritians. Consequently, many Mauritians hold little resentment against whites in general; they can often perfectly distinguish a foreign white from a Franco-Mauritian. However, according

⁹ Interview: Mauritius, 13 July 2006.

¹⁰ Informal conversation: Mauritius, February 2005.

to a Franco-Mauritian, Mauritians' interest in white foreigners does relate to their skin-colour. He said, "Mauritians are proud if they can receive a white and therefore they tend to be hospitable."¹¹

The strong position of Franco-Mauritians in the private sector and the advantages it creates for the whole community, make the Franco-Mauritian community the wealthiest community of the island. This consolidation of wealth is partly influenced by the structure of Mauritian society. Endogamous marriage patterns and social exclusivity of Franco-Mauritians are rarely challenged as these are features of all Mauritian communities. Criticising these aspects would jeopardise one's own position and the cohesion of Mauritian society more generally. But Franco-Mauritian endogamous marriage and socio-cultural patterns affect the maintenance of wealth positively. The structure of the Mauritian society is thus indebted because, despite the fact that Franco-Mauritians have lost their political power, the ownership and division of labour sustain the embodied sign of elite distinction. Moreover, Mauritians reinforce the white skin-colour as an elite symbol. A Franco-Mauritian explained how he sometimes felt a bit awkward when entering a shop and being attended first when there were non-white Mauritians in line in front of him.¹² The symbolic superiority of the white skin-colour is thus also ascribed to the Franco-Mauritians by Mauritians themselves, though this sometimes manifests in a negative manner.

The Disadvantage of Physical Appearance as Symbol of Elite Distinction

Compared to the colonial period, Franco-Mauritians are more of an abstraction in Mauritian society. For example, there are relatively fewer Franco-Mauritian general practitioners and priests now than in the colonial period – although the bishop is still a Franco-Mauritian. Franco-Mauritians previously lived in more villages, while nowadays the majority has withdrawn to a few seaside hamlets. There is less direct contact between whites and non-whites, hence the perceived abstraction. A Mauritian journalist said, "a non-Franco-Mauritian goes to school, where there are no Franco-Mauritians. Then to the university, where there are no Franco-Mauritians either [because they predominantly study abroad]. By the time

¹¹) Interview: France, 18 October 2006.

¹²) Interview: Mauritius, 9 February 2006.

this Mauritian turns twenty-three and is employed in his first job he might, for the first time in his life, shake the hand of a Franco-Mauritian [manager].”¹³ A Franco-Mauritian woman actually had to show her passport to a nineteen-year-old colleague who could not believe white Mauritians existed.¹⁴ Most Mauritians, however, are aware of the existence of Franco-Mauritians even though they may only be familiar with whites as the “big bosses” depicted in newspapers and on television, which seems a perfect seedbed for the frequent “white bashing” by political counter-elites.¹⁵

The embodied sign of white skin-colour is nowadays frequently used in a negative manner. Politicians link whiteness to colonial injustices and to the – perceived – unequal share of Franco-Mauritian wealth in present-day Mauritius. A Franco-Mauritian CEO said, “there are so few whites that if the mechanism of white bashing doesn’t work for you it doesn’t work against you.”¹⁶ During electoral campaigns, politicians frequently attack the Franco-Mauritian economic domination in order to gain votes from the majority; this occurs to such an extent that many Mauritians and Franco-Mauritians consider it purely political rhetoric. Another CEO said, “after the electoral campaign it is business as usual with the politicians.”¹⁷

The vulnerability of the white skin-colour is apparent in the case of Paul Bérenger, a Franco-Mauritian politician. He was the “odd one out” who chose to stay in politics after the Franco-Mauritians had retreated from the political arena more generally. Bérenger, who has been a politician since the beginning of independence, could succeed because he was not associated with Franco-Mauritian economic power. In his early career, he and his *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (MMM) frequently criticised the Franco-Mauritian capitalists and control over the private sector. Consequently, he was disliked by many Franco-Mauritians, though it gained him much support among other Mauritians. Franco-Mauritians criticised Bérenger in the most familiar way to them, by gossiping about the “purity” of his skin-colour; many years later, a retired Franco-Mauritian businessman said,

¹³ Interview: Mauritius, 20 June 2006.

¹⁴ Interview: Mauritius, 22 February 2006.

¹⁵ Mauritians who know Franco-Mauritians personally and who tend to have often more sympathetic and respectful views are few and have, consequently, limited impact.

¹⁶ Interview: Mauritius, 9 October 2007.

¹⁷ Interview: Mauritius, 16 February 2005.

“I wonder whether Bérenger’s attacks on [Franco-Mauritian] privileges had to do with the fact that he was *metisé*.”¹⁸ For much of Bérenger’s political career his skin-colour was hardly an issue as he was perceived as a politician for all Mauritians. Only when he was part of the government – he was even prime minister from 2003 to 2005 – did his skin-colour become “visible.” For the island’s economic well-being he had to co-operate with Franco-Mauritian businessmen. His political opponents now associate him with the “white oligarchy,” accused him of favouring his “cousins” and said he was a descendant of the colonists. In reality, Bérenger did not favour his community disproportionately, nor did he criticise others on the basis of ethnic difference. The accused link with white economic power appeared to be more political rhetoric than truth. In July 2005, Bérenger and his coalition lost the elections. The symbolic (historical) superiority of his white skin-colour played an important role in the defeat, yet it cannot be completely attributed to his physical appearance – economic problems made the electorate also favour a change.

The (ab)use of white skin-colour only makes sense in the context of power relations. Steve Garner rightly states, “whiteness is a phenomenon unthinkable in a context where white does not equal power” (Garner 2006: 262). White not only refers to “race” but equally to the hegemonic, historically determined situation of power in Mauritius (Boudet 2005: 29). This is illustrated by the fact that there is a difference of day and night between Bérenger as prime minister and in opposition: after he lost the elections, attacks in which the colour of his skin featured prominently disappeared almost entirely. He is also no longer associated with Franco-Mauritian economic privileges and the private sector. Franco-Mauritian economic power, however, still exists and every now and then continues to be slandered by politicians. Often these politicians have hidden techniques to refer to Franco-Mauritians without actually mentioning skin-colour. For example, the current prime minister (a Hindu) said, “one of the heritages, which continues to block development is the concentration of wealth in my country in favour of those who *benefited from slavery* [emphasis added].”¹⁹ The president of a coordinating body between the private sector

¹⁸ Informal conversation: Mauritius, 2006, exact date unknown.

¹⁹ See for a full transcription of the Prime Minister’s speech: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/pmsite/menuitem.ade81d8b85e53623040d013400b521ca/?content_id=a78c5c7483033110VgnVCM1000000a04a8c0RCRD [accessed: 18 September 2007].

and the government, a white of foreign origin, was fiercely attacked after he had criticised the public sector for its nepotism. Politicians related to the government indirectly slandered his skin-colour; one politician stated that colonialism had ended in 1968. This shows the white skin-colour's symbolic superiority from the other side: politicians easily associate it with the economic power and injustices of the past.

At the same time, Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians alike reduce it to skin-colour. After the government had suggested policy changes unfavourable for Franco-Mauritians in 2006 (though not only targeted at them) Eric Guimbeau, another exception to the rule that Franco-Mauritians abstain from politics, said, “the politicians who attack the whites want to kick them out [of Mauritius] and take their place. It's revenge for the past.”²⁰ Equally, references were made to Mauritius becoming a second Zimbabwe (Mauritian *Week-End*, 10 June 2007). The situation of the Franco-Mauritians, however, cannot be compared to that of the whites in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the white skin-colour as marker of elite distinction is highly contextual. Politicians also sometimes appear to forget this:

On a personal level, I have been accused of being anti-white. Yet if a good number of my closest friends happen to be white simply because I've lived and worked for a good 10 years or so, in Canada; a country which truly celebrates multiculturalism, a country whose pluralism is by very far, much healthier than ours. But maybe Canadian, British, Irish and French white people are not considered to be white enough? (*Mauritius Times*, 1 June 2007)

Either the politician is ignorant or feigns ignorance, because, as mentioned above, Mauritians tend to be welcoming towards white foreigners and deal with their whiteness differently. In a way, the politician, as do others falling back to simple rhetoric, reinforce the symbolic elite distinction of the Franco-Mauritians' white skin-colour: there is no smoke without fire, thus the whites “must” be an elite.

²⁰ Interview: Mauritius, 12 October 2007.

Conclusions

In the colonial past, Franco-Mauritians marked elite distinction by skin-colour not to delimit access to property, but also to justify oppression of (black) slaves on economically important plantations. It was during this period that white skin-colour became the symbol of elite distinction. With the transition to independence, the meaning of white skin-colour became more contested. Yet, the innate and historically entrenched features of white skin-colour made it difficult to “shake off” overnight. Marrying non-whites could have “changed” someone’s skin-colour, both physically and ideologically, but this did not happen for various reasons, primarily due to the patterns and practices of inclusion and exclusion into the Franco-Mauritian community. Forty years after the end of the colonial period, white skin-colour can still be considered the Franco-Mauritian elite’s most important (embodied) sign of elite distinction, though much more paradoxical than before.

Franco-Mauritians are aware of the contested aspect of their skin-colour as an embodied sign of superiority. They argue that their choice for a partner has to do with culture and class – not with skin-colour. It is true that these aspects importantly overlap, but increasing social stratification among all Mauritians has hardly led to a change. Despite a few notable exceptions, “marrying white” remains the norm. The legacy of the past appears to run deep. Historically embedded socio-cultural patterns give Franco-Mauritians the impression that they are of a higher social class and have a distinct culture. In turn, Franco-Mauritians’ white skin-colour is part and parcel of essential differences laid out over time. Consequently, they want to marry someone from the same social class and background, closing the cycle around whites marrying whites. Mauritians who bleach their skin could still never be a part of the Franco-Mauritian community as it has its own system of identifying “pure” white heritage. In turn, the Franco-Mauritian community is small and most people know each other, easily establishing whether someone is “in” or “out.”

Franco-Mauritians’ low population density, combined with the small size of the island, facilitate the maintenance of an advantageous economic position for them. Franco-Mauritians have always employed, selected and supported each other, lifting the whole community to a certain standard. Hence, white skin-colour appears to linger on in structuring an elite life. Insular white elites in Martinique and Jamaica have equally been rather

successful. However, for obvious reasons the situation differs from that in the US, South Africa and Brazil, where “racial” population distributions are different, and the ability to form a united elite minority, based on embodied signs of skin-colour, is less realistic. In Mauritius even the “poorer” Franco-Mauritians are prevented from sinking into the working classes and thus white skin-colour remains associated with wealth.

It must be iterated that, despite the focus of this paper on processes of differentiation, many Franco-Mauritians are on equal terms with non-white Mauritians and display no sense of superiority towards them. Nevertheless, this has little effect on the impact of a persistent focus on skin-colour; ostentatious behaviour and luxurious products to symbolise distinction between Franco-Mauritians and newly emerged elites are largely absent. Also, other Mauritians themselves ascribe elite distinction based on white skin-colour; currently, though, often in a negative manner. Politicians disqualify Paul Bérenger on the basis of his skin-colour in order to gain votes themselves. This rhetoric enhances the impression that white signifies wealth, exclusion, and a distinction associated with the colonial past; as long as the white skin-colour can be associated with economic power, it will remain easy to also associate it with colonial injustices. Resentment over the past appears to be the driving force rather than, as Bell Hooks (1992) argues, the terrorising imposition of the white skin-colour. Nevertheless, Franco-Mauritians often seem unaware of how much other Mauritians are affected by the symbolic aspect of their skin-colour. They mainly perceive “white bashing” as political rhetoric. In daily life there are hardly any confrontations as, in general, Mauritians of different ethnic backgrounds treat each other friendly. A Franco-Mauritian who was almost hit by car accidentally and subsequently insulted by the car driver who shouted “you bloody white, you have nothing to say here any more,”²¹ appears an exception.

The Franco-Mauritian case thus shows the complex nature of embodied signs of elite distinction. It is important to realise that physical appearance is given meaning and constructed historically; it is often a combination of various historical patterns of socio-cultural differences and usages of signs of elite superiority (e.g. wealth, class, social status, etc.). Unravelling the multidimensional character of an embodied sign of elite distinction

²¹ Interview: Mauritius, 9 February 2006.

enhances the understanding of how these signs can persist in society, and why for many (especially for Franco-Mauritians) the embodied sign cannot be separated from culture, class and other elements marking elite distinction.

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