

# INTRODUCTION



Mauritius is a small island with a multi-ethnic population in the Indian Ocean. Starting with the Europeans who settled first on the uninhabited island, Mauritius and its inhabitants have experienced events similar to societies elsewhere in the (colonial) world. One of the most significant events it witnessed in the last century was independence in 1968, this also marking the end of a regime favourable to the island's white colonial elite, the Franco-Mauritians. Many observers around the time of independence were critical about the prospects for Mauritius, as the island was overpopulated, rife with ethnic tension and relying on one single crop, sugar-cane (see Naipaul 1972; Eriksen 1998). Mauritius, though certainly not without its problem, has fared remarkably well over the more than four decades that followed independence, while the Franco-Mauritians have also relatively successfully maintained their elite position in the postcolonial period. The island is often considered a success story, transforming from an island with little hope to a middle-income country – especially from the 1980s onwards. Deborah Bräutigam (1999) refers to it as the 'Mauritian miracle', with a prosperous economy and a stable political system. Certainly not all Mauritians have benefited and many remain in poverty, but much larger numbers are advantaged by the island's economic wealth, and income inequality has diminished since independence (Sandbrook et al. 2007: 126, 127).<sup>1</sup> Many have tried to explain this success, though in-depth analyses of the role and position of a white elite in a postcolonial setting are largely absent.

This book presents an anthropological study of how Franco-Mauritians have fared in the midst of the transition from the colonial period to postcolonial independence. Whites in present-day Africa are particularly known with regards to their situations in Zimbabwe and (post-)apartheid South Africa. The relevance of the less known Franco-Mauritian case lies particularly in how they have balanced continuity and creeping decline of their elite position in the transition. Like Zimbabwe and South Africa, Mauritius is

not without inter-group hostility. Independence, and the process towards it, has undoubtedly undermined the Franco-Mauritian elite position. Memories of the colonial period, moreover, are never far away in postcolonial Mauritius. ‘The politicians who [verbally] attack the whites want to kick them out [of Mauritius] and take their place. It’s revenge for the past’, said the Franco-Mauritian politician Eric Guimbeau.<sup>2</sup> This comment reflects the view that after Mauritius became independent in 1968, a regime favourable to the Franco-Mauritian position ended – white politicians like Guimbeau and the iconic Paul Bérenger, whose recent attempt to become prime minister for a second time failed and who I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, are nowadays more an exception than the rule. In postcolonial Mauritius, Franco-Mauritians often feel themselves to be under pressure, and perceive others as competitors vying for their privileges. This is a clear departure from the colonial heyday, undermining, moreover, the assumption that elites are all-powerful and only use their power expansively. Despite the challenges that Franco-Mauritians face, however, they have been able to maintain their elite position into the early twenty-first century. Behind Franco-Mauritian anxiety about their position in the postcolonial period, there seems to be a level of collaboration between Franco-Mauritian businessmen and the island’s new political powers that may contribute to explaining the prolongation of the Franco-Mauritian elite position, as well as that of the Mauritian success story.

### **Setting the Stage**

Mauritius, which is situated some 800 kilometres to the east of Madagascar, has a land surface area of 1,864 square kilometres. It is the principal island of the Republic of Mauritius, which includes the smaller islands of Rodrigues, Agalega and Saint Brandon (and has a total land surface area of 2,040 square kilometres).<sup>3</sup> When European seafarers first set foot on the islands they were uninhabited. This absence of natives facilitated white settlers to establish an elite position without much competition or resistance. With the help of slaves, mainly from Africa, and, after the abolition of slavery, indentured labourers from India, whites secured a cheap workforce for their plantation economy – the solid base of their elite position during most of the colonial period. This, however, also sowed the seeds of a counter-force to Franco-Mauritian domination. In postcolonial Mauritius, the population has grown to approximately 1.3 million,<sup>4</sup> with origins in such distant locations as China, Europe, India and Africa. Exact data on the number of Franco-Mauritians is absent, though it is often estimated that they constitute slightly less than 1 per cent of the population, numbering approximately 10,000.<sup>5</sup> Relying on relatively dated statistical information (the latest statistics on the island’s ‘ethnic’ composition date from

1972, as I will explain in Chapter 5), Creoles constitute about 28 per cent, which includes the *gens de couleur*, a small elite group often considered to stand between the Franco-Mauritians and the Creoles (their skin colour shades can range from black to as white as the Franco-Mauritians). The largest group are the Hindus (about 52 per cent), and there is a smaller minority of Muslims (16 per cent). Both groups originate in India.<sup>6</sup> Finally, there are the Sino-Mauritians, who make up 3 per cent of the population. The emancipation and political participation of the more populous groups have reshaped the island's power constellation, jeopardizing the Franco-Mauritians' position at the top of the (socio-economic) hierarchy.

When a transition between different social structures, political environments and economic systems takes place, elites can run into problems. Elite mechanisms for maintaining power may become ineffective or problematic. Mattei Dogan and John Higley write, 'One kind of crisis often occurs when territories achieve national independence. Especially after a violent secession struggle, national independence may involve the ascendancy, *ex abrupto*, of a new political elite' (Dogan and Higley 1998: 8). Accordingly, Franco-Mauritians, and they share this trait with elites more generally, did not favour change. In their comfortable position at the top, change is suspect because it may jeopardize the elites' status and privilege (Simmel 1957: 99). Some elites have inevitably disappeared and new ones have arisen since change is part and parcel of human life – a point which resonates with Vilfredo Pareto's famous aphorism: 'History is a graveyard of aristocracies'. Understandably, the Franco-Mauritians feared independence, as the transition from the colonial period to the postcolonial state was a major change and, in essence, represented a crucial threat to their position.<sup>7</sup> They found themselves in a very inconvenient situation, since they were the only whites in Mauritius, strongly associated with colonial injustices. Their (historical) position coupled with their physical appearance became a liability, and in this context opposing the (political) emancipation of the much larger communities appeared to be a 'lost' battle.

This shows that elites cannot take their positions for granted. Hence, John Scott argues, '[o]ne of the errors made in much elite analysis ... has been to assume, or at the very least to imply, that elites are all-powerful and that organizationally dominant groups will hold all the other power resources of a society' (Scott 2008: 38). Elites often seem to be perfectly aware of their vulnerability (see also Salverda and Grassiani 2014). Numerous Franco-Mauritians, for example, questioned me during interviews, asking whether I was writing for local newspapers. They were anxious about too much public attention, something also noted in the case of the white Jamaican elite: 'People in positions of power may fear that information about them might be used against them by their critics' (Douglass 1992: 37). And yet,

Franco-Mauritians did not automatically accept their defeat during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period. I will analyse whether this has contributed positively to their relatively successful maintenance of their elite position. Today, Franco-Mauritians remain the most important players in the sugar industry, still possessing large tracts of land, and they also have a large say in the private sector more generally – they control about a third of the top one hundred companies and five of the largest ten companies.<sup>8</sup> Despite the challenges Franco-Mauritians have faced, they have been able to maintain their elite position into the early twenty-first century. In this book I will analyse the behaviour this relative success seems to rely on. Franco-Mauritians oppose, fear and have an attitude of adapting a low profile. At the same time, they seem to ‘give in at the right time’, collaborate with new (and often opposing) powers, invest in the local economy, and initiate projects that contribute to expanding their power. This behaviour illuminates the paradox of a former colonial elite in a postcolonial society, both losing power and in the case of Mauritius playing a role in the island’s economic success story. The Franco-Mauritian case, in that sense, is a very interesting one with regard to the comparative understanding of how (white postcolonial) elites maintain a balance between continuity and decline.

## **Relevance**

The 2007/8 financial crisis, growing global economic inequality and declining socio-economic mobilization has put the (unwelcome) consequences of elite power in the limelight. Contrary to the past, however, there has been limited research on elites in the social sciences over the last few decades. Mike Savage and Karel Williams (2008) wonder whether this correlates with an increased focus on quantitative data gathering in the social sciences. It may be due to their small size that elites are easily overlooked in quantitative studies. There are exceptions to this trend in political science (e.g., Dogan and Higley 1998; Dogan 2003a; Higley and Burton 2006; Best and Higley 2010), (comparative) sociology (e.g., Hartmann 2007; Savage and Williams 2008; Daloz 2010; Rahman Khan 2012), geography (e.g., Hay 2013), and anthropology (e.g., Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima 2000; Shore and Nugent 2002; Abbink and Salverda 2013). These studies – many of them edited collections and journal special issues – deliver valuable insights, yet due to the lack of space to elaborate in these venues they often only address specific aspects. Ethnographies of elites, which offer the opportunity to grasp elites and the workings of their power holistically, have been virtually absent since Abner Cohen’s *The Politics of Elite Culture* (Cohen 1981). His work shows that there was much to gain from the combination of in-depth

ethnographic data with the theoretical interpretation of elite practices. That his book has few if any successors should be considered an omission.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that many studies have not dealt with elites and their power, yet they often do not tend to take forward elite theory as such.

A former white colonial elite which still holds centre stage, almost half a century after European rule in most African colonies came to an end, offers a welcome case with which to address anew how an elite aims to prolong its position over time. It could be said that the Franco-Mauritian case confirms an analogy that has been noticed across countries in the case of abrupt regime changes: 'economic and administrative elites resist better the upheaval than ... political and military elites' (Dogan 2003a: 13). But what if the elite's position is not only defined by its (economic, political or other) function, but also by distinctive physical characteristics? At first sight, the Franco-Mauritian case, due to their strong association with colonial injustices, would offer an opportunity to illustrate all that is bad about a (white, former colonial) elite. But this would not do justice to the complexity of the situation, and I hope to avoid what Richard Werbner deems 'the Machiavellian suspicion of elites' (Werbner 2004: 8). Elites acting for the public good, according to Werbner, are not by definition disguising their real aims: maintaining domination. Instead, 'anthropologists have to bring to elites, and to their public conduct, the same empathy and insights that anthropologists bring to the rest of people they study' (Werbner 2004: 8).

This ethnography of the Franco-Mauritian elite aims to analyse the intricacies of an elite position – and its prolongation over time – by unravelling the multidimensionality of an elite position. Certainly, I aim to grasp how an elite tries to maintain its position over time. The analysis of power is crucial in this respect. Neither do I deny the tendency among elites to conspire. Hence, one of the foundations of this book is some (Machiavellian) scepticism about power. In my opinion, however, power can only be fully grasped if we take up the approach propagated by Werbner that elites are not necessarily tricksters who intend to maintain domination. I start from the premise that Franco-Mauritians and elites more generally do not necessarily act with a predetermined plan. Their practices and patterns need to be understood without assuming that elites are perpetually and consciously amassing and applying power and suppressing subordinates. Elite power, in my opinion, is equally influenced by other aspects like social and cultural patterns and structural aspects, but also through collaboration with other social forces and/or the attribution of an elite position by other social groups. Some of these aspects can inhibit 'unintended' but favourable effects to the maintenance of power. By adopting an open and holistic view, I hope that this book helps to increase our knowledge about the complexity of elite power.

The Franco-Mauritian case offers the opportunity to address the role of a white elite in the success story postcolonial Mauritius is often deemed to be (Mbeki 2009). It seems of particular relevance to the understanding of white elites, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, to analyse exactly how Franco-Mauritians collaborate with the postcolonial state, and how we could interpret their contributions to the island's economic development. This should not be confused with arguing that whites are needed for economic success. The main aim is to better understand the role and position of Franco-Mauritians in relation to Mauritian postcolonial society. The Franco-Mauritians offer an insightful case, as they have characteristics that closely resemble white elites in predominantly non-white societies, not the least because skin colour is significant to Franco-Mauritians' elite position (Salverda 2011). The intricacies of the Franco-Mauritian elite position are comparable to cases that have equally experienced the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism. Elite formation and elite rule by Europeans in the colonial period were closely related to racist notions or ideologies placing whites at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy. In many colonial societies, slavery was practised along with the suppression of the non-white population. After the abolition of slavery, the hegemonic position of elites often continued to be supported by racist ideologies through processes of group reproduction, via education and the control of sexuality and marriage. With the transition to independence in former colonies, many white elites left the scene entirely (Rothermund 2006: 178), and the acceptance of racial superiority declined dramatically. However, not all white elites left the scene to 'repatriate' themselves to their European 'motherlands'.

White communities in South Africa and Zimbabwe make compelling comparisons, though with substantially different trajectories. South Africa institutionalized a racially exclusive system. In Mauritius, though the colonial era certainly favoured the white Franco-Mauritians, the trajectory was different – also because contrary to most Africa countries it did not have an indigenous population. An interesting comparison with Mauritius concerns the fact that, when the apartheid regime came to an end in South Africa, the white population – and white elites – remained. After 1994 they lost much of their (direct) political power because this shifted to black political elites representing the majority of South Africans. Yet, the whites could maintain much of their economic power, a situation comparable to that of Mauritius. Following his argument that in African states the transition to postcolonial independence has in many cases been an (ongoing) process and not an event, Frederick Cooper illustrates that in South Africa the first free elections in 1994 may have shaped the political field, but the history of resources – land, gold mines, factories, urban real estate – into the hands of particular people, and the consequences of this, did not suddenly turn a new page (Cooper

2002: 11). It is argued that this is the result of unintended effects of global processes: 'Emerging in the midst of all the hopes generated out of the collapse of apartheid and desperate to reintegrate into the global economy, [South Africa] was partly persuaded and partly coerced by the IMF and the World Bank to embrace the neo-liberal line, with the predictable result that economic apartheid now broadly confirms the racial apartheid that preceded it' (Harvey 2005: 116). The Franco-Mauritian case may shed some light on other patterns that facilitate the position of white elites in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, it may contribute to our understanding of white elites in the Caribbean islands, where white elites have equally remained at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy – for example in Martinique (Vogt 2005; Zander 2013).<sup>10</sup> These islands, if they have become independent, are similar to Mauritius in the sense that hardly anyone could claim the land as their ancestors'. Contrary to Mauritius, this is not because they were uninhabited when the Europeans arrived, but because the colonists' arrival led to the virtual extermination of the original population. The Franco-Mauritian case, in that sense, may help reveal differences and similarities between countries with and without large indigenous populations.

By addressing the parts and how these together contribute to the maintenance of an elite position, the Franco-Mauritian case bears relevance to an understanding of elites beyond former colonial elites alone. My analysis of 'defensive' power (first discussed in Salverda 2010) is, for example, applicable to all kinds of elites. Equally, the attribution of an elite position by others is of wider significance. The sum of the parts, moreover, offers the possibility of an analysis of the interdependency of aspects involved in elites' pursuit of prolonging their privileges and their position. To grasp the maintenance of an elite position, after all, it is relevant also to understand how elites deal with challenges to their position. This, and especially the relative success of Franco-Mauritians as well as other (postcolonial) elites facing challenges, is in my opinion not sufficiently explained by existing theories of elites and power. The aim of this ethnographic study of the Franco-Mauritians is to contribute to a better understanding of the intricacy of losing power yet at the same time consolidating an elite position. Accordingly, it is relevant to grasp the interaction between elite culture, the elite's internal relationships, (defensive) power, the impact of race and ethnicity, and the elite's historical and contemporary relationships with other social and ethnic groups. These aspects are certainly not applicable to all elites, but by analysing how different aspects interact this book aims to shed new light on a number of theoretical issues regarding the position and power of elites.

## Staying at the Top

Elites have received substantial scholarly attention in the twentieth century, especially from sociologists, historians and political scientists. Among the early sociological theorists who looked into Western elites were Vilfredo Pareto (1991), Gaetano Mosca (1923), Robert Michels (1911) and Max Weber (1958, 1997). These scholars laid a solid foundation for the understanding of elites. In the decades after the Second World War this was further developed by, among others, C. Wright Mills (2000), Robert Dahl (1961), George William Domhoff (1978) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu and Clough 1996).

Although not in an equally concise manner, these scholars have helped to define what an elite is – Pareto, for example, defined an elite as ‘a class of the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity’. Shamus Rahman Khan (2012: 362) rightly states that defining elites is not a simple task as there is little agreement and discussion over the term, largely because scholars rarely define it. Indeed, in a lot of academic work the term ‘elite’ is often taken for granted and barely explained. It seems to be a container concept. According to Cohen, ‘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). Scott explicitly argues that only those collectivities based in positions of command should be seen as elites – this, he writes, distinguishes an elite from privileged or advantaged groups (Scott 2003: 156). According to Scott, an elite in the fullest sense is a social grouping whose members occupy similar advantaged command situations in the social distribution of authority, and who are linked to one another through demographic processes of circulation and interaction (Scott 2003: 157). Stemming from their commanding position, an elite is a social group that has privileged access to, or control over, particular resources which may be mobilized in the exercise of power (Woods 1998: 2108).

An elite is not only about the actual possession and exercise of commanding positions, as ‘those in command are linked to a wider group that does not only directly exercise command but also *shares a way of life* and a variety of interests arising from *similarities*’ (Salverda and Abbink 2013: 6, original emphasis). This becomes apparent when an elite overlaps with an ethnic community, as I will show in Chapters 4 and 5. Shared characteristics tend to be essential for (potential) access to commanding positions – skin colour, manners, pedigree and education. I would argue, in line with earlier work (Salverda and Abbink 2013), that an elite includes more than just those in positions of command. The younger generation of a specific elite, for example, may have privileged access to these commanding positions at a future

moment in time. In that sense, they share similarities with the elite members in commanding positions. Contrary to Scott's argument, not everyone in the specific wider social group may exercise command, but these people may nevertheless have influence on the persons who are in commanding positions through, for example, a shared way of life. Scott does not deny a shared way of life: 'True elites have more than a merely formal or nominal existence, and they may show more the kind of solidarity and consciousness that makes them real social groups capable of acting in common' (Scott 2001: 32). But this he seems to limit to the ones in commanding positions. Partners and families of the ones in command, however, may influence the construction of a shared way of life. The spaces in which this shared way of life is most explicitly expressed tend, moreover, to be the elites' back-spaces (or back regions): spaces in which the people in command informally meet and often secure important decisions (Woods 1998). It is thus precisely the combined feature of possessing commanding positions and exercising control over particular resources, along with sharing socio-cultural characteristics, customs and a mode of life with a wider group, that defines an elite – even though a certain level of internal stratification may exist.

Anthropology is especially suitable as a discipline to probe the influence of socio-cultural characteristics, customs and modes of life on the operations and power of people in command. Anthropological studies of elites, such as the ones I have referred to above, highlight, for example, that ethnographic methods can deliver new insights into our understanding of elites. As Cris Shore notes, his aim to study elites anthropologically was 'to understand the way social reality is constructed by actors themselves; to grasp their conception of the world and the way they related to it as self-conscious agents' (Shore 2002: 5). Taking up this approach, however, reveals a potential conflict with regards to defining elites. Elites often do not consider themselves as elite, since it is argued that 'elite' is a term of reference rather than of self-reference (Marcus 1983: 9). Neither are elites always visible (Parry 1998: 2148–51). Nor do they necessarily have boundaries that easily distinguish them from others; notwithstanding that I argue that an elite includes more than those in commanding positions only, this tends to further complicate the setting of well-defined boundaries.

In the case of Franco-Mauritians, it is relatively easy to establish the boundaries because Franco-Mauritians are marked by their white skin colour and family names – and in the strongly ethnicized context of postcolonial Mauritius they have to a large extent become classified as an ethnic group, *les blancs* (whites), both by themselves and by others. But Franco-Mauritians often consider the term 'elite' as something not applicable to them. They deny being an elite by referring to other wealthy Mauritians and/or other elites, even though Franco-Mauritians at the same time often refer to themselves

as being of a higher class than most other Mauritians. This denial appears to come from the negative associations the term 'elite' evokes. As Rahman Kahn argues, 'in the postwar period elite scholarship made a critical turn and began to articulate the question of elites as an almost moral one' (Rahman Kahn 2012: 364). The result, according to him, is that, generally speaking, elites and illegitimacy are often tightly coupled. To the Franco-Mauritians and other elites, then, this terminology does not correspond with their self-perception. However, I do believe that it is justified to identify Franco-Mauritians from an analytical perspective as an elite for several reasons. Firstly, during most of the colonial period Franco-Mauritians stood at the top of the island's socio-economic hierarchy. For a long time they were in control of the island's political and economic affairs, this giving them many privileges that others did not have – a fact few Franco-Mauritians deny. Classifying the Franco-Mauritians as an elite is therefore justified in terms of studying how their historical elite position developed in the transition from the colonial period up to the present, even if they had lost all their power. Secondly, Franco-Mauritians have been able to extend their dominant economic power and privileges well into the postcolonial period. They have maintained control over large parts of the island's agricultural land, and they tend to perceive themselves to be at the top of the island's socio-economic hierarchy. Franco-Mauritians may not be as powerful as they were during the colonial period, but they certainly have resources at hand with which to exercise power.

### *Elite Power*

It is the elite's privileged access to, or control over, particular resources that to a large extent determine the elite's power. These resources have many forms, ranging from land, financial means, parliamentary control, knowledge, access to the ancestors or access to force. In liberal and democratic societies, one elite rarely controls all resources, such as land, financial means, parliamentary control, knowledge and access to force (Dahl 1961). Hence, distinctions tend to be drawn between 'business/economic elites', 'military elites', 'governing/political elites', 'religious elites', 'academic elites', 'cultural elites', 'administrative/bureaucratic elites' and so forth (Dogon 2003a: 1; Shore 2002: 4). These functional elites are often not the same when it comes to access to resources and the exercise of power. Cultural elites tend to have little power but are often able to exercise a great deal of influence on those who hold power (Dogon 2003b: 64). While elites that have privileged access to government, parliament and the state apparatus can mobilize these resources in the exercise of political power. And privileged access to land,

imports and exports, and private companies can be mobilized in the exercise of economic power.

What, subsequently, defines power is a question that many great thinkers have addressed over the centuries. This has resulted in two different basic perspectives used to conceptualize power: actor-oriented approaches and systemic or structural approaches. Eric R. Wolf states, '[s]tructural power shapes the social field of action so as to render some kinds of behavior possible, while making others less possible or impossible' (Wolf 1990: 587). The risk of this systemic perspective is that any action dictated by cultural convention may be included in the definition of power. Power then 'risks becoming diluted and synonymous with conventions, norms and, ultimately, culture' (Eriksen 2001: 158). This does not imply that the structural side of power should be ignored: 'The great challenge of all social science, one might say, consists of trying to do justice to [actor-oriented and systemic perspectives]' (Eriksen 2001: 159). In a critique to the discussion of power in anthropology, Wolf argues, '[t]he notion of structural power is useful precisely because it allows us to delineate how the forces of the world impinge upon the people we study, without falling back into an anthropological nativism that postulates supposedly isolated societies and uncontaminated cultures, either in the present or the past' (Wolf 1991: 587). Hence, it is important to take the structural side of power into consideration, though in my opinion, structural (or systemic) phenomena cannot 'exercise' power themselves. These phenomena can nevertheless be very important in empowering certain players. 'The capitalist entrepreneur's ability to enforce his will on the worker, for instance, is conditioned by the nature of modern capitalism. In point of fact, the entrepreneur is already in a structural power position' (Brennan 1997: 73). Equally, over a long period of time the colonial structure facilitated much of the power that came to be in the hands of white colonials. Consequently, structural phenomena are important in the analysis of power without having to grant these phenomena power as such – I apply, in other words, a narrower definition of power in the analysis of the Franco-Mauritians than the Foucauldian perspective (e.g., Foucault 1991).

In the case of the Franco-Mauritians, the groundwork for an elite position was relatively easily laid during the French period (1715 to 1810). I will illustrate this in the historical analysis in Chapter 1, which is an important starting point for understanding the position of the Franco-Mauritians since 'elites can only be meaningfully understood in their wider historical context' (Shore 2002: 12). Mauritius had no indigenous population, and land was, therefore, occupied without much effort. The arrival of the British in 1810 hardly jeopardized Franco-Mauritian power. For virtually the whole British colonial period, the Franco-Mauritians could be considered the island's (proxy) hegemonic power as they exerted political, economic, ideological

and cultural power over subordinate groups. With Franco-Mauritians still at the top of the island's socio-economic hierarchy, this past is never far away in present-day Mauritius. Hence, in Chapter 1 I will equally illustrate how historical events and structures are contested and often function as symbols for present-day power struggles between Mauritians of different backgrounds.

In many colonies, the hegemonic position of white elites was sustained by the use of force and by the capacity to use force. This possession of 'coercive powers that provide an ultimate last-resort back-up for [the elite's] authority' (Scott 2008: 33) was often based on the capacity to use force, not necessarily the exercise of that capacity (Lukes 2005: 12).<sup>11</sup> It was only in the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period that Franco-Mauritian hegemony was brought to an end. Regarding the workings of hegemonies and their (potential) disintegration, it is worthwhile to take Steven Lukes's analysis of three views of power into consideration. Under colonial rule, the 'two-dimensional view of power', controlling the political agenda and keeping potential issues out of the political process (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 2005: 20–25), certainly applied to the colonial elites. Lukes's third and 'radical view of power' has substantially contributed to the sustained domination of colonial elites. Here, dominant ideologies tend to work against people's interests by misleading them, distorting their judgement and applying the ruler's power in such an effective way as to prevent conflicts from arising (Lukes 2005: 13, 27). Only gradually were these ideologies, thus the hegemony and power structures of colonial elites, challenged by overt opposition to the status quo. Overt conflicts, Lukes's first dimension of power, became common, eventually resulting in independence. After independence, there was a reversal of the power structure, though the Franco-Mauritians maintained much of their economic, and some of their status, position.

How the transition affected not only the absolute power of the Franco-Mauritians, but especially how they have applied their power since, is an important issue in this book. Following up on Scott's (2008) notion that elites are not necessarily all-powerful, Chapter 2 show that a new perspective on elite power is required. I argue that the Franco-Mauritians, especially since the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, as well as many other elites, use their power in many occasions 'defensively' instead of 'proactively' or 'expansively'. Notwithstanding this observation, it should be noted that different forms of power may occur more or less simultaneously, as I will show in Chapter 3. That Franco-Mauritians apply their power defensively does not prevent them from, for example, also benefiting from collaborations with 'new' political powers and applying their power expansively. It is especially the combination of different forms of power that appears to explain how they have prevented the substantial decline of their

position, while also playing a role in the successful economic development of the island. The direct workings of power are, however, only one part of the explanatory trajectory of this book. To more fully understand an elite position, and its potential maintenance, we must also look beyond the direct exercise of power.

*Elite Culture*

To better understand Franco-Mauritians and their relationships to change, power and economic development, a closer look at the group's internal elite culture is required. This shows the importance of studying apparently trivial aspects of life, such as daily routines and family. Cohen remarks, '[c]ulture and power ... interact dynamically in the formation, definition, and continuity of the group in response to changing circumstances' (Cohen 1981: 40). Bourdieu's concept of habitus equally shows how an elite's internalized behavioural routines and social ideas of a defined social group shape their practices. This is not to say that elite cultures are bounded entities – cultures have, as many anthropologists nowadays emphasize, fluid, shifting boundaries, and different cultures overlap and intermingle (Crehan 2002: 49). What culturally distinguishes (real or perceived) an elite from other groups should thus feature in the research agenda. Apart from notable exceptions, culture has received little attention in the study of elites: 'The schematics of elite organization and its place in larger system frameworks have been much more commonly addressed than its internal culture and practices' (Marcus 1983: 10). Twenty years after Cohen's pioneering work and George E. Marcus's comments, elite culture still receives little attention, as Shore (2002: 10) has noted. Yet elites are also influenced by similar cognitive patterns to those of other social groups, and these patterns thus tend to have an impact on their cultural behaviour and practices. Elite habits, customs and cultural behaviour patterns, for example, can be passed from generation to generation in roughly the same way as material benefits are passed down (Hartmann 2007: 105).

As Chapter 4 illustrates, culture is relevant to the explanation of the (changing) Franco-Mauritian elite position. The success of an elite partly relates to how well it succeeds in organizing itself particularistically (Cohen 1981: xiii) – that is, how it shares a number of characteristics that shape cohesion and distinguish it from other social groups, both for internal and external purposes. At the same time, it is argued that an elite group, which by its very nature only represents a small minority of society, needs support or consent from wider parts of society for its existence. Universal tendencies – that is, their service to the public (Cohen 1981: xiii) – are key aspects in

obtaining support, although different functional elites often require different mechanisms to achieve support (Salverda and Abbink 2013: 17). To be successful, an elite needs to reconcile the tensions that often exist between its universalistic tendencies and organizing itself particularistically (Shore 2002: 2). Any overlap with ethnic characteristics contributes favourably to organizing itself particularistically, as ethnic groups tend to have a strong conviction that they share exclusive cultural characteristics, and a history different from other groups. Cohen (1981) illustrates the role of ethnicity in the making of the Creole elite of Sierra Leone, especially by means of a distinct elite culture and (religious) rituals. Also, as the Franco-Mauritian case shows, distinct physical appearance, often a trait of ethnic groups, can be very helpful to elites as this symbolizes their distinct (ethnic) culture and elite status. As a white minority in a virtually non-white society, a sense of distinction is reflected in the structure and organization of family life, and without a profound understanding of family and community life we cannot fully grasp Franco-Mauritian business practices and, hence, the maintenance of their elite position. In that sense, the maintenance of an elite position may be more about the (unintentional) effects of mundane 'logics' than about elite strategies.

An elite successfully organizing themselves particularistically bears a threat to obtaining universalistic functions. The elite has to establish vertical loyalties with other social groups (Fennema 2003), for example, when it wishes to serve as its political representatives. As Dogan and Higley state, '[e]ven the most dogmatic elite theorists acknowledge the political importance of mass publics, the need of elites for mass support, and the difficulties elites have in gaining and maintaining that support' (Dogan and Higley 1998: 214). This loyalty might be difficult to obtain or easily jeopardized in case differences between the elite and other social groups are marked by racial and/or ethnic boundaries. When access to commanding positions is related to having a certain ethnic background, it is difficult to 'sell' this *modus operandi* to the other social groups, as I will analyse in Chapter 5. In this case it becomes implausible to argue that access to these positions is a matter of merit. Uneven or asymmetrical power relations between ethnic groups then easily become 'visible'. Protecting the elite's interests and exclusivity often requires some secrecy, which tends to interfere in terms of the visibility of the ethnic group's physical appearance: the elite simply cannot blend in with the rest of the population. Accordingly, Franco-Mauritians found themselves in a very inconvenient situation once pressure mounted on the colonial system, since they were the only whites in Mauritius, strongly associated with colonial injustices. Their physical appearance and other ethnic characteristics that had been very beneficial to their elite position, which limits access to the group controlling the resources, became a liability.

As a result of the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, however, (perceived) ethnic differences have become very a dominant means of marking distinction in Mauritius. This lingers on in the organization of public and private life and appears, paradoxically, to have contributed favourably to the Franco-Mauritian maintenance of their elite position.

*Distinction*

In Chapter 6 I address Franco-Mauritian markers of elite distinction, in particular their white skin colour. Franco-Mauritian physical features, and how they and other Mauritians interpret these, are relevant to the understanding of the elite position of Franco-Mauritians. Often the position of elites is explained according to the resources and power they possess. Yet markers of elite distinction, such as the white skin colour of Franco-Mauritians, may evoke resentment and/or attribution of status by other social groups. The elite's power and position may accordingly be influenced beyond what is 'justified' by control over resources alone. The Norwegian-American sociologist Thorstein Veblen argued, in his well-known work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, that: 'It is not sufficient to merely possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only in evidence' (Veblen 1994: 24). Depending on the elite and cultural and historical circumstance, there is a variety of symbols available to mark distinction, such as conspicuous and vicarious consumption (Veblen 1994), fashion (Simmel 1957), rituals and cults (Cohen 1981), refined manners (Daloz 2007: 46) and physical appearances (Daloz 2007: 199–200; Salverda 2011). Creoles in Sierra Leone, for example, symbolically distinguished themselves through rituals and ceremonies (Cohen 1981), while in certain industrialized societies one was able to preserve great prestige without providing public proof of this through costly display (Daloz 2003: 29).

Franco-Mauritians' most prominent sign of elite superiority is their white skin colour. Accordingly, they were classified as a racial elite during most of the colonial period. Franco-Mauritians' white skin colour in a predominantly non-white society, a means of symbolic elite distinction observed in many colonial situations, served them well in the colonial project. The colonial system approved of access to commanding positions based on a culture closely associated with the physical appearance and superiority of white skin colour. But the postcolonial state and the present world order does not approve of this – at least not openly – and Franco-Mauritians' skin colour has since become a (potential) liability, due to association with racism and injustices perpetrated in the past. This would suggest a significant change in the symbolic usage of their skin colour after 1968. Franco-Mauritians

had to deal with the possible inconsistencies that give rise to their symbols of distinction, as their physical appearance could only be shaken off (if so desired) over several generations.

As I will show throughout the book, Franco-Mauritian white skin colour has maintained a prominent role in postcolonial Mauritius, although Franco-Mauritians tend nowadays to be classified as one of the island's ethnic groups instead of a racial elite. The evolution of ethnicity (and race), which I analyse in Chapter 5, has partly contributed to this shift. In the postcolonial and multi-ethnic setting, the symbolism of white skin colour ranges nowadays from resentment due to the association with colonial injustices and superiority to the attribution of an elite position. In line with elites' universalistic tendencies, then, the complexity of relationships between elites and non-elites is relevant for a thorough understanding of the maintenance of an elite position. The correlation between the Franco-Mauritians, their elite status and the legacy of slavery and indentured labour continues to be meaningful in contemporary Mauritius. That Franco-Mauritians' white-skin colour can be a threat to their position, however, does not exempt it from a symbolic distinction that can equally work in their favour – a nuance often missed. Similar to professional elites, for example, whose status and associated abilities may be attributed to them by others (Skovgaard Smith 2013), Franco-Mauritians also benefit from the role other social groups have in shaping their elite status and position. Whiteness, for example, continues to be perceived as something equalling economic power. In the case of the Franco-Mauritians, the symbolic aspect of their white skin colour appears to be influenced by the ambiguous colonial legacy of white superiority. Rosabelle Boswell argues, 'where dominant groups continue to emphasize the value and importance of whiteness, it is difficult for Creoles not to see "whitening" as central to their survival in social and practical terms' (Boswell 2006: 95). There is a tendency among Creoles to emulate Franco-Mauritians, to have a preference for marrying whites and, in certain cases, to resent their own blackness (Boswell 2006: 51, 85, 95). However, it is not only Creoles who attribute elite status to white skin colour, as I will illustrate. To more fully comprehend how Franco-Mauritians balance continuity and creeping decline in their elite position it is thus important to also address the role of others in the attribution of an elite position, especially because Franco-Mauritians themselves also notice the behaviour of other Mauritians towards them and their skin colour. But let me first reflect on the role in the research of my own skin colour and on my methodological approach.

## **Methodology**

I gained relatively easily access to the Franco-Mauritian community, which is known for its privacy. It is often argued that the lack of research on elites relates to the fact that elites are by their very nature difficult to penetrate since they establish barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society (Hertz and Imber 1993: 3). Businessmen, for example, are often visible but not accessible (Thomas 1993). They tend to be very busy or to act busy. Confirming my experience, Susan Ostrander states, '[m]y experience suggests that the difficulties of gaining access and establishing the rapport necessary have been exaggerated' (Ostrander 1993: 9). According to her, 'Well-thought-out strategies for access and rapport are often useful or necessary. However, luck and a willingness to take advantage of opportunities are just as valuable' (Ostrander 1993: 9).

It still remains somewhat puzzling to me as what exactly determined successful access, and the continuation of this, over a long period of fieldwork. It helped that I promised interviewees anonymity – or the use of pseudonyms. I tried to approach the actors involved in this study politely, non-judgmentally and with respect. Importantly, however, I also shared with Franco-Mauritians the distinguishing feature of having a white skin colour. This facilitated access, although not so much because Franco-Mauritians were convinced that I had a similar exclusionary understanding of skin colour as many of them did – even those Franco-Mauritians who do have racist beliefs tend to be careful not to share them with Europeans because the latter are perceived as being critical of whites in former colonies. The main advantage of my white skin colour was simply that I did not have another skin colour. I think that in the case of a non-white researcher, Franco-Mauritians would certainly have been more suspicious. Their assumption would probably have been that the researcher was only in it to confirm his or her prejudices. To a lesser extent, white French people would also have had this problem. There is substantial French influence on the island, and Franco-Mauritians often have the feeling that the French consider them as an anachronism and to be still living in colonial times. As a Dutch researcher I was in a way neutral and remained free from the (sometimes) tense relationship existing between the French and the Franco-Mauritians. I also had the advantage of the surprise effect of being a Dutch researcher interested in the Franco-Mauritians. In my opinion this facilitated the research as I was considered as an individual and not as a representative of a nation Franco-Mauritians would perceive as prejudiced.

Conversely, I did not have the impression that non-white Mauritians distrusted me or did not want to talk to me because I was white and studying white Franco-Mauritians. Only once did I receive an e-mail in which

the Mauritian author stated that (white) expatriates who socialize too much with Franco-Mauritians start to think like them – that is, to look down upon other Mauritians like Franco-Mauritians do. I did not agree with him, but unfortunately I never heard from him again. However, it is true that I developed some sympathy for many Franco-Mauritians. I find it difficult to judge for myself whether I developed ‘too much’ sympathy. A few critical Franco-Mauritians certainly wondered whether I have sufficiently addressed the racism existing in their community. I know that I do not agree with all of their behaviour, cultural patterns and their unequal share of the island’s wealth. Yet, in my opinion, and this is why I promote an anthropological perspective to the study of elites, we have to understand power in all its complexity. Without justifying behaviour, we have to acknowledge that individual elite members are subjected to the structure of the society and community they live in, for example. I would argue that you cannot blame them for that necessarily. One could, however, argue that it is in the individual’s interest not to challenge the existing system. I agree, but still I think we have to also understand the logic behind individuals not challenging the status quo; a member of the elite might well, for example, lose his/her social bedrock by challenging the status quo. In the case of ‘subordinates’, most anthropologists would understand that this may be too much to ask for. So why would that be any different in the case of elites?

### *Approach*

To hopefully come to a well-balanced analysis, the ethnography presented in this book is based on my use of multiple methods and sources: participant observation, interviews, network analysis, a questionnaire and written sources. I conducted research in Mauritius, South Africa and France. My research visits to the island date back to the year 2000. Most of the research for this book was conducted in the period between 2005 and 2007, with a short trip to Mauritius for additional fieldwork in early 2014.

I interviewed about seventy Franco-Mauritians in Mauritius, forty in South Africa and twenty-five in France, and talked to numerous others in non-interview settings, such as during informal conversations and when doing participant observation. I interviewed about thirty other Mauritians (and a few expatriates) and talked to many more about the research (whenever I could, I mentioned my research and tried to get their opinions) and about a dozen South Africans and French. The interviews were conducted in English and French, and the interviewees included CEOs, other businessmen, clergy, politicians, students, school children, retirees and so forth. The main focus was on the whole community in Mauritius, while

during shorter visits to South Africa and France I focused predominantly on Franco-Mauritian students. The age group of students tends to be absent in Mauritius, as many Franco-Mauritians study overseas. I considered their opinions on the Mauritian situation and information about their future prospects on the island valuable for my research, however.

In addition to the interviews, I attended a wedding, visited Franco-Mauritians in their private seaside bungalows, partied and dined with them, went on a hunt, and rented a room in the apartment of a young Franco-Mauritian woman. In 2014 I also participated in a public conference concerned with 'better understanding the Mauritians from the white community' (*mieux connaître les Mauriciens de la communauté blanche*), organized by the Institute Cardinal Jean Margéot. My analysis of Franco-Mauritian economic power is, moreover, based on a network analysis of interlocking directorships, as I will illustrate in Chapter 3. I also devised and distributed a questionnaire among Franco-Mauritians to obtain general information concerning a number of variables. The questions were predominantly of a descriptive kind – for example, what income group they belonged to, where they lived and whether they had a second passport. The answers the respondents could give were, in general, standardized. Typically, respondents could tick one of four different boxes indicating different answers – for example, I asked about monthly income (in Mauritian rupees): less than Rs 15,000; between Rs 15,000 and 40,000; between Rs 40,000 and 80,000; and more than Rs 80,000.<sup>12</sup> Since Mauritius does not have registers that state name and ethnicity, it was impossible to randomly sample Franco-Mauritians – even if there was such a register, it would have been impossible because Franco-Mauritians are not officially classified as an ethnic group. The closest option to a random sample was to send the questionnaire by post to Franco-Mauritian parents of children attending a few private schools (with the help of two Franco-Mauritians I sent it to almost all the parents). In addition, some questionnaires were also sent to a small number of elderly Franco-Mauritians and young adults who did not have links with these schools. The great advantage of the list of parents was that it represented a pre-existing list and was, thus, much more random than if I had (with the help of Franco-Mauritians) decided who was to be on it. Besides, most Franco-Mauritian children attend these schools nowadays. All in all, the strategy yielded a good result as 144 out of about 400 questionnaires were returned. The sex balance of the respondents was 77 men and 67 women. However, Franco-Mauritians born between 1955 and 1970 were overrepresented, as most parents of school-aged children were born in these years.

The primary written sources my research relies on consist of newspapers and documents such as annual reports, official government (statistical) reports, genealogies and a letter exchange with the winner of the 2008 Nobel

prize for literature, the Frenchman Jean-Marie Le Clézio, who is of Franco-Mauritian descent. I focused on just a few daily newspapers – all published in French – that are the most widely read, such as *L'Express* and *Le Mauricien*. The now defunct newspaper *Le Cernéen* was an important historical source, displaying a strong partiality in favour of the Franco-Mauritian community. The historical framework relies mostly on secondary literature, as Mauritian history has been extensively researched by numerous renowned scholars. To give a good picture of the Franco-Mauritian historical position and how the group developed as an elite, my aim is to look afresh and from a Franco-Mauritian perspective at the existing literature, as there are few historical studies that analyse the Franco-Mauritian elite position as their main subject.

### Notes

- 1 The Gini coefficient, which is a commonly used measurement for inequality with a scale between 0 (which reflects complete equality) and 1 (all wealth in the hands of one person), declined from 0.5 in 1962 to 0.42 in 1975 to 0.39 in 1996/7 (World Bank 2002a). It remained at 0.39 in 2006, but it has increased to 0.41 in 2012 (MFED 2013).
- 2 Only in the case of two public figures I interviewed, the politician Eric Guimbeau and the last editor-in-chief of a Franco-Mauritian newspaper, Jean-Pierre Lenoir, have I used people's real names. Other Franco-Mauritian names cited are pseudonyms.
- 3 The Republic of Mauritius also officially includes the contested islands of the Chagos archipelago and the tiny island Tromelin. The Chagos islands were detached by Britain from Mauritius prior to independence and have since been renamed the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT). The British subsequently made the largest island, Diego Garcia, available to the US, who used it to establish one of its largest overseas naval bases. Tromelin is claimed by both France and Mauritius, and these governments have agreed to the principle of 'co-managing' (*co-gestion*) the island.
- 4 Statistics retrieved 11 July 2011 from: [www.gov.mu/portal/goc/cso/ei880/toc.htm](http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/cso/ei880/toc.htm).
- 5 I have included a tiny number of Anglo-Mauritians, equally of white skin colour but partly distinguishing from Franco-Mauritians on the basis of their British ancestry, in my analysis of the Franco-Mauritians. Since the departure of the British, differences between Anglo- and Franco-Mauritians have become negligible, even before numerous originally British families had effectively become Franco-Mauritian due to intermarriage. The few remaining Anglo-Mauritian families, moreover, tend to mingle and intermarry with Franco-Mauritians. Socially and culturally, therefore, there tends to be little difference, even though both groups stress their distinction from each other every now and then.
- 6 It is important to note that the Muslims and, especially, the Hindus have substantial internal variation. A relevant divide among the Hindus is the one between Hindus originating from northern India and the Tamils from the south, for example.
- 7 For the fate of another, non-white, colonial elite, see Luhrmann (1996).
- 8 In 2007, only one company out of the top ten was directly related to another ethnic community, two were semi-government companies and another two were multinational

oil companies; five were Franco-Mauritian controlled businesses. Apart from some changes in the composition of the list of top 100 companies in 2012 and 2013, five of the largest ten companies were still Franco-Mauritian controlled.

- 9 For notable exceptions, see Werbner (2004) and Wedel (2009).
- 10 See also the somewhat tendentious documentary *Les derniers maîtres de la Martinique* ('The last masters of Martinique') (dir. Romain Bolzinger, 2009).
- 11 Strictly speaking, Gramsci considered pure domination and coercion the opposite of hegemony. As Fontana suggests, '[h]egemony is defined by Gramsci as intellectual and moral leadership ... whose principal constituting elements are consent and persuasion' (Fontana 1993: 140–41). It is argued, however, that Gramsci 'refers to a psychological state, involving some kind of acceptance – not necessarily explicit – of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order' instead of purely moral and prescriptive connotations of consent (Femia 1981: 37). Colonial Mauritius, for example, was not free from conflict (Allen 2011b), yet the colonial hierarchy was ideologically dominant. With this in mind, the concept of hegemony, albeit not literally in the Gramscian sense, is in my opinion applicable to understand the history of colonial projects, and especially their collapse.
- 12 In international money markets, the symbol for the Mauritian rupee is variously Mau Rs and MUR. In this book, however, I will use the Mauritian symbol, which is Rs.