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(Dis)unity in Diversity: How Common Beliefs about Ethnicity Benefit the White Mauritian Elite*

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ABSTRACT

White Africans are particularly associated with the troubles South Africa and Zimbabwe have faced throughout their histories. The story of the Franco-Mauritians, the white elite of Mauritius, and how they have fared during more than forty years since the Indian Ocean island gained independence, is much less known. However, their case is relevant as a distinctive example when attempting to understand white Africans in postcolonial settings. Unlike whites elsewhere on the continent, Franco-Mauritians did not apply brute force in order to defend their position in the face of independence. Yet the society that emerged from the struggle over independence is one shaped by dominant beliefs about ethnicity. As this article shows, despite a number of inverse effects Franco-Mauritians have benefited from this unexpected twist, and part of the explanation for their ability to maintain their elite position lies therefore in the complex reality of ethnic diversity in postcolonial Mauritius.

INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is known around the world for the extermination of *Raphus cucullatus*, the flightless bird commonly known as the dodo. Today the dodo serves as an important Mauritian mascot and its image is ubiquitously found in the form of tourist souvenirs. Less known to most of the foreign tourists is that the dodo is also used as the symbol of one of the island's whites-only clubs, the Dodo Club.[1]

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Almost fifty years after Mauritian Independence in 1968, a whites-only club seems to be an anachronism, contradicting a postcolonial state that has departed from institutionalised colonial racism. Club members I spoke to would argue that nowadays they are more open, yet this openness appears to be limited, and only applies to Mauritians who differ relatively little in skin colour from the members (there are no members with very dark skin). If at all noticeable to other Mauritians, this 'change' is certainly not the result of their own objections to the club's whites-only character. Surprisingly, most Mauritians I asked took little offence at the existence of a whites-only club. Conversely, however, many Mauritians, and especially the island's politicians, do take offence at the fact that the white elite continue to control a substantial part of the island's economic resources – and that this is associated with the island's (unjust) colonial legacy.

Setting the stage

In the colonial period racial and ethnic differences largely overlapped with class categories, with groups like the Franco-Mauritians defining themselves as an elite using the argument of their supposed racial superiority (e.g. Boudet 2005; Salverda 2011). Popular objections against this colonial reality originated in the political exclusion of the majority of the population – on the basis of assets, class and racial differences (Jahangeer-Chojoo 2010: 123). Their demands for political representation resulted in the island's independence and the loss of Franco-Mauritian political power. As a result Franco-Mauritians are no longer the island's only elite. Yet they remain the community with the highest socio-economic status, and the island's dominant business elite. As a small minority, they control about a third of the hundred top companies and five of the ten largest companies (Business 2013), and maintain control over large parts of the island's agricultural land.

Franco-Mauritians are estimated to constitute slightly less than 1% of the population, which nowadays numbers about 1·3 million people, originating from such distant locations as China, Europe, India and Africa. Creoles, largely of slave descent, number about 28% (including a small elite group of so-called *gens de couleur*). The largest group are the Hindus (52%) and there is a smaller minority of Muslims (16%). Both groups originate from India (and are also referred to as Indo-Mauritians). Finally, there are the Sino-Mauritians, who make up 3% of the population (Eriksen 1998: 15).[2]

Sustained by the incorporation of 'ethnic' classifications into the island's constitution, the cultural politics of the postcolonial state fostering ancestral cultures (Eisenlohr 2006a), and ethnic homogeneity being perceived favourably (e.g. Hollup 1994; Boswell 2006; Hempel 2009), ethnicity remains a significant influence, dividing Mauritian postcolonial society both politically and socially (e.g. Eriksen 1998; Bunwaree 2002; Boswell 2006; Eisenlohr 2006a, 2006b). This has an ambiguous effect on the Franco-Mauritians. They have lost (political) power due to their exclusive physical characteristics and the unjust past these characteristics symbolise; this resembles the resentment white Africans elsewhere face, though a main difference is that Mauritius was uninhabited when European seafarers first landed. At the same time, common beliefs about intra-ethnic homogeneity and about ethnicity as a dominant principle in the structuring of private and social life in Mauritian society contribute to the maintenance of their elite position.

Elites

A shared understanding of the term *elite* is important for my explorations in this article, because it is a term that has been defined differently over the years (Schijf 2013) and often refers to a variety of power and status groups that are not necessarily classified as elites in some definitions. There are two main criteria that define an elite in the sense in which I will be using the term. An elite 'is a collectivity of persons who occupy commanding positions in some important sphere of social life [and, secondly, who] share a variety of interests arising from similarities of training, experience, public duties, and way of life' (Cohen 1981: xvi). The Franco-Mauritians, evidently, hold commanding positions in important spheres of Mauritian social life, the island's private sector in particular, while they constitute a collectivity with a distinctive way of life. In line with the second criterion, businessmen in actual command can be linked to younger generations, partners and families with whom they share a variety of interests arising from a shared way of life – which in the case of the Franco-Mauritians is furthermore reinforced by a shared ethnic identity. In other words, the Dodo Club cannot necessarily be disentangled from the maintenance of control over economic resources.

To sustain their positions, elites have privileged access to, or control over, particular resources that can be mobilised in the exercise of power (Woods 1998: 2108). These resources may include land,

economic means, political control, religious control and access to (state) force. During the heyday of colonialism, many white elites were virtually hegemonic and controlled most of the resources in their respective colonies. The demise of the colonial projects often saw the end of regimes favourable to dominant white groups, with many of those groups actually departing and leaving the newly independent realities behind (Rothermund 2006: 178). A number of white elites and/or populations also remained and, in the case of Rhodesia, unilaterally established a racist state in response to the changing situation. South Africa, though not directly facing independence, also established a racist regime in order to prevent the majority of the population from claiming their rights. The Franco-Mauritians, who tried to change the tide in Mauritius without applying force, watched their hegemonic power dwindle, and in its place a number of functional elites came to share control over the island's political and economic resources. Distinctions could now be drawn between elites, such as business and governing (or political) elites (Shore 2002: 4).

In the transition to postcolonial states, in particular those characterised by liberal expression more than repressive forms, the division of power did not occur overnight – indeed, it was often already evident during the colonial period, as the Mauritian case also illustrates. Frederick Cooper (2002) shows that in African states, the transition to postcolonial independence has in many cases been an ongoing process and not an event. In South Africa, for example, the first free elections in 1994 may have reshaped the political field, but historical control over resources – land, gold mines, factories, urban real estate – did not suddenly change hands (Cooper 2002: 11). Equally, Franco-Mauritian political power proved more vulnerable in the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period than their economic power. Like white South Africans after Apartheid (e.g. Moodley & Adam 1998; Davies 2012), post-independence Franco-Mauritians could maintain their economic position because private property was not expropriated – in contrast to, for example, the situation faced by whites in Zimbabwe (e.g. Shaw 2003) and Indians in East Africa (e.g. Chua 2003).

Based on a historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork and over 150 interviews with Franco-Mauritians and Mauritians of other ethnic backgrounds, conducted in Mauritius, South Africa and France during several periods between 2005 and 2014, I will explore in this paper whether part of the explanation for the maintenance of the Franco-Mauritian elite position is related to a taboo against addressing patterns

of ethnic homogeneity underlying the ethnically heterogeneous society – and the perpetuation of wealth that comes with it. Central to this analysis is that a society shaped by dominant beliefs about ethnic differences and intra-ethnic homogeneity seems to influence mutual acceptance of other communities' claims to ethnicity as central to the organisation of their social lives. Or, in the words of Patrick Eisenlohr (2011: 262), peaceful coexistence through the acceptance and promotion of ethnic and religious pluralism is considered 'a supreme common good' in Mauritius. This, paradoxically, makes Mauritius a far cry from the picture-perfect image of ethnic groups living in harmony as presented in tourist brochures, since refraining from addressing the underlying patterns also perpetuates the role of ethnicity in the political domain. Politicians, often in indirect ways, play the ethnic card in the hope of gaining votes, with Franco-Mauritians finding themselves targeted on the basis of their white skins every now and then. And yet – a point that is relevant in explaining Franco-Mauritians' elite position – dominant beliefs about ethnicity also contribute to their maintenance of economic power. The Franco-Mauritian elite position seems to be only superficially challenged because of the taboo that rests on addressing the complex interactions between the control over resources and private (ethnic) expressions of a shared way of life. It appears remarkable, after all, that Franco-Mauritians' political opponents do not object to the Dodo Club or to other private expressions of ethnicity, notwithstanding their strong objections to the unjust (economic) legacy of the colonial period.

TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE: ETHNICITY GAINING POLITICAL PROMINENCE

Mauritian history incontrovertibly shows how the colonial system was a hegemonic system that facilitated power for the whites – during both French colonisation of the island, from 1721 to 1810, and British colonisation thereafter. Starting with easy access to land in the absence of a native population, this allowed Franco-Mauritians to maintain their power base throughout the colonial period. Only a small number of *gens de couleur*, a more prosperous group with mixed white and non-white ancestry (Boudet 2004: 53), and, from the Constitution of 1885 onwards, Indo-Mauritians with sufficient assets, had been granted equal rights. As they were relatively few in number, less wealthy, and continued to be socially excluded from Franco-Mauritian society, they posed only a minor threat to Franco-Mauritian domination (e.g. Allen 1999).

The colonial system was in essence a 'political quid pro quo' between the British colonial administration, who were interested in maintaining control at low cost, and the Franco-Mauritians, who controlled the revenue-rich sugar factories (Mozaffar 2005: 269–70). The legacy of this history is evident, as many Mauritians I spoke to still resent Franco-Mauritians for the colonial injustices.

It was only from the 1930s onwards that changes paved the way for a challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position (e.g. Storey 1997). With the establishment of the Labour Party, this was initially more on the basis of class differences than ethic differences, as the party represented the (formerly) disenfranchised, regardless of those people's ethnic backgrounds (Simmons 1982). This culminated in the British drafting a new constitution in 1947, which the Franco-Mauritians vehemently opposed. They knew that a radical change in suffrage would increase the political power of their more numerous opponents, in particular that of the Indo-Mauritians.

Ethnic Politics

Simultaneously with the demands for greater political participation, there was a trend towards the official recognition of the island's variety of (ethnic) cultures and languages (e.g. Nagapen 2010). This opened the way for a political system in which income no longer determined the right to vote and increased the electorate substantially. The new constitution granted the right to vote to everyone above twenty-one years old who could pass a simple comprehension test in one of the specified languages of the country: English, French, Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Chinese (in the case of Mauritius Hakka) and the local Creole. Although it was not until 1958 that universal suffrage became a reality, the 1948 elections, the first under the new constitution, marked the fact that 'the [political] power of the Franco-Mauritian elite was conclusively broken' (Seekings 2011: 172).

Subsequently, with the quest for independence, political divisions based on ethnicity increasingly replaced the (colonial) racial and class divide in politics in the period between the 1948 elections and 1968. Ethnic differences that were already present in Mauritius, albeit in a less politically expressed way, now became relevant for political mobilisation – with 'cultural forms, values and practices of ethnic groups [becoming] political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage' (Brass 1991: 15). Illustratively, the Labour Party's focus on class instead of ethnic affiliation did not last,

and as a result certain features of the island's inequality remain untouched, as I will show below.

The transition was partly a reaction to the exclusionary mechanisms of the Franco-Mauritians. As a white elite, the Franco-Mauritians had a history of using many 'ethnic' traits to shape their symbolic superiority and maintain exclusive control over resources. In contrast to South Africa this happened in the absence of explicit racist laws, yet even socially prominent Hindus remained often excluded from Franco-Mauritian networks (both socially and in business), notwithstanding relative similarities in class. This contributed to ethnicity gaining political prominence. To challenge the existing order in Mauritius, Hindu politicians realised the advantages of stressing their ethnic background in a political system relying on universal suffrage. In contrast to the Franco-Mauritians, they could mobilise substantial numbers on the basis of ethnic affiliation. In other words, just like established powers, subordinate groups can choose to apply ethnic characteristics in their aim to obtain power. Once this process is set in motion and the political prominence of ethnicity is on the rise, feedback effects may further enhance ethnic solidarity (Nielsen 1985: 135).

Owing to ethnicity gaining political prominence, intra-group cultural and class differences were increasingly downplayed. In the Hindu community, caste was replaced by ethnic identity – a process that had already started earlier, but a common Hindu ethnic identity was further intensified during the political transition (Hollup 1994: 297–8). Similarly, among the heterogeneous grouping of Muslims, with wide socio-economic differences, an ethnic consciousness developed (Jahangeer-Chojoo 2010: 126). This downplaying of intra-group differences affected the intensification of inter-group differences. The changing political landscape, for example, intensified the separation between Hindus and Muslims (Eriksen 1998: 52). Both were initially classified as Indo-Mauritians, but the political process set in motion a legislative process that would officially classify them into two different groups from 1962 onwards (Bal & Sinha-Kerkhoff 2007: 124).

Franco-Mauritian aims to preserve their power further contributed to intensifying ethic rivalry, in particular through the instigation of fear of the Hindu community's potential to politically dominate. With the support of the *gens de couleur* and the Creoles, who shared Franco-Mauritian opposition to and fear of Hindu domination, they proved initially successful. The renowned writer V.S. Naipaul (1972: 283), who visited Mauritius in the 1960s at the invitation of the (Hindu) politician

Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (who was to become the first prime minister of an independent Mauritius), writes:

> The coloureds [i.e. the *gens de couleur*], following the white example, became anti-Indian. Then the Creoles (blacks) also fell for that. The main agent for that change was [the Creole politician Gaëtan] Duval. That is the importance, the malefic importance of Duval; bringing over the blacks on to the sides of the whites.[3]

The decisive 1967 elections, in which the final decision over independence was made, illustrated how divided Mauritian society had become, even leading in the final months before independence to the first ethnic riots in Mauritius, resulting in numerous fatalities (Simmons 1982: 186) – something Mauritius has since luckily avoided, with the more recent exception of riots in 1999 (in both cases the Franco-Mauritians were not involved). The elections were a close call between supporters and opponents of independence: the pro-independence block won, but received 'only' 54·82% of the votes. This figure corresponded closely to the percentage of the population who were Hindus, although it would be wrong to simply equate the supporters of the pro-independence movement with the Hindu community. In the end, for example, Ramgoolam did manage to gain the support of a Muslim political party. The election results, nevertheless, reveal the fact that many Mauritians feared Hindu domination.

FRANCO-MAURITIANS AND COMMON BELIEFS ABOUT ETHNICITY

Ethnic tensions did not escalate after independence, but quickly calmed down. However, a lasting heritage of the struggle for independence is the continuous (political) prominence of ethnicity. Owing to the politicisation of ethnicity, the British, in their management of the political process leading to independence, had to find a balance between the Hindus' demand for independence and the smaller communities' fears of being swamped by the Hindus. Muslims, for example, were not opposed to independence but wanted constitutional safeguards for their guaranteed representation in parliament (De Smith 1968: 608). This resulted in the introduction of the Best Loser System (BLS) as part of the new electoral system. The aim was to guarantee political representation of 'all' communities, especially minority groups. With the introduction of the BLS, ethnic distinctions were incorporated in the island's constitution. Via a complex weighting system based on figures relating to the four official ethnic classifications of Hindus,

Muslims, Sino-Mauritians and General Population, the BLS guarantees parliamentary representation for the smaller ethnic communities. The criteria for dividing the population into these four groups only partly correspond to the colloquial perception of ethnic differences, and, moreover, are inconsistent: 'two of the categories are essentially religious ones, one of them is based on geography, and the final one is a residual category' (Eriksen 1998: 15). The Franco-Mauritians and Creoles (and *gens de couleur*), for example, belong to the official category General Population, though hardly any Mauritian would argue that they all belong to the same ethnic group. Similarly, among Hindus a certain level of internal variety can be witnessed, such as between the largest group of Hindus, originating from the north of India, and smaller groups like Tamils, Telegus and Marathis – with especially these smaller groups not always feeling represented by a broad category dominated by a majority of Hindus originating from the north.

Stanley De Smith (1968: 614), a former British Constitutional Commissioner in Mauritius, states, '[t]he most regrettable aspect of the electoral aspect of the electoral system is that candidates must declare, at the time of their nomination, to what community they belong; but this was the price paid in order to obtain agreement [about independence] between the parties in 1966' – a rather ironic statement given that the British often played a very active, if not the main, role in dividing the populations in their colonial empire. As a result, ethnic affiliation is included in the island's constitution (First Schedule, Section 31 (2)), notwithstanding that the official use of ethnicity is ambiguous and does not correspond to the everyday reality. The four ethnic categories that are still used officially were only systematically accounted for in the 1961 and 1972 censuses (Christopher 1992). In the following census, in 1982, in response to widespread criticism on the ethnification of Mauritian politics at that time, the government abandoned the counting of ethnic categories. However, neither it nor any successive governments officially abolished the constitutional position of ethnic categorisation.[4]

BLS seats may number only eight out of a total of seventy parliamentary seats, and representatives are seldom awarded executive power, i.e. cabinet seats (Wake Carroll & Carroll 2000: 136). This arrangement nevertheless reproduces a political system with a strong focus on ethnicity. The argument is that ethno-political tensions have been mitigated as a consequence, because small communities are politically represented (Mozaffar 2005: 265). Others have challenged the BLS, either because it does not reflect their perception of the island's ethnic groups

(Mukonoweshuro 1991: 221) or because they believe that ethnicity does not belong in the political sphere – in 2013 the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ruled in favour of the political party *Rezistans ek Alternativ* opposing the BLS. Despite the ever-returning discussions about amending the electoral system among the established political parties, they have so far expressed little intention of abolishing the system.[5] Besides, it is questionable whether the removal of the BLS will stop ethnic voting (Jahangeer-Chojoo 2010: 130). The postcolonial state, more generally, privileges 'ancestral cultures' over new forms of Mauritian nationalism, as Eisenlohr illustrates (2006a). According to him, religion is the most prominent criterion of division when it comes to these ancestral cultures (Eisenlohr 2006a: 397). This privileging of ancestral cultures, moreover, spills over into a wide acceptance of ethnic expressions, as with the case of the Franco-Mauritians' white skin colour.

The disadvantages of ethnicity

Unlike political leaders, especially of Hindu background, who can obtain support on the basis of religious (or ethnic) affiliation, Franco-Mauritians face a problem in a political system based on universal suffrage. Abner Cohen, in his seminal ethnography *The Politics of Elite Culture* (1981) on the Creole elite of Sierra Leone, argues that an elite has to reconcile tensions between two ends of a continuum. On the one hand, an elite needs to enhance its image and to seek legitimacy for its high status by assuming universalistic functions, i.e. by promoting its service to the public. On the other hand, the success of an elite relates to how well it succeeds in organising itself particularistically, i.e. sharing a number of characteristics that foster cohesion and distinguish it from other social groups (Cohen 1981: xiii). The conclusion is that a failure to reconcile tensions between the two ends leads, inevitably, to the disappearance of existing elites and the rise of new ones. Mauritian independence, in line with Cohen's continuum, marked a watershed moment for the Franco-Mauritians.

In postcolonial Mauritius, Franco-Mauritians have difficulty in reconciling the tensions between their particularistic and universalistic tendencies, since they are associated with colonial injustices and are virtually the only whites on the island. In contrast to white Africans in Rhodesia and South Africa facing similar issues when the majority demanded a voice, Franco-Mauritians did not resort to force in order to prevent universal suffrage from happening (see Chua 2003 for a

comparative discussion on the challenges ethnic elites face when they are confronted with majority groups). This eventually led to the decline of their political and public voice. The closing of the newspaper *Le Cernéen* in 1982, which was characterised by its defence of both the whites and the sugar industry, is illustrative in this respect. Franco-Mauritians, as a community, stopped voicing a public opinion in order to safeguard access to their economic resources. In order to maintain their economic dominant position and control in the Mauritian private sector, they rather avoid attracting unwanted (political) attention. Instead, Franco-Mauritians, and white elites elsewhere in Southern Africa, try to publicly portray themselves as supporters of the public ideology of non-racialism and equal opportunity – or at least, they avoid public statements or behaviour that might counter this image. Their particularistic interests, then, need to be performed hidden from the public eye as far as is possible, since openly pursuing their own racial and/or ethnic group's political and economic interests is contradictory to the public ideology – this resonating with Cohen's argument (1981: xvi) that in liberal societies adhering to the principle of equality of opportunity (usually upheld by their constitutions) the furthering of the elites' particularistic tendencies tends to be performed secretly. As I will illustrate below, however, pursuing elite interests in 'secrecy', even when these are racist and exclusionary in nature, is facilitated in Mauritian society because ethnic and cultural diversity is encouraged.

Despite their aim to minimise public attention, as a result of the absence of universalistic tendencies – after 1968, their anti-independence alliance with Creoles and other communities quickly became defunct – Franco-Mauritians often serve as an easy target. The Franco-Mauritian politician Paul Bérenger illustrates this perfectly, even though he is an outlier in many ways and as such his rich political career is unique, rather than exemplary of the wider Franco-Mauritian community. As a matter of fact, Bérenger gained prominence by criticising Franco-Mauritian economic privileges in the 1970s, for which many Franco-Mauritians still dislike him today – one Franco-Mauritian female informant even referred to him as a 'clown' (Int. 2015). Nevertheless, owing to the continuous prominence of ethnicity in the political domain, his political opponents frequently associate him with white privileges in order to discredit him (see for a more detailed analysis Salverda 2015). As a result, some argue that Bérenger's political career has been severely hampered by the fact he is white (*Le Mauricien* 2015).

In other cases, Franco-Mauritian economic power is more directly targeted, such as was the case with the government suggesting to 'democratise' the economy in 2005 (*L'Express* 2005). The idea was to reform the economy, open it up internationally, break the economic monopolies and, especially, to increase chances for other local players. Partly owing to the government's communication on the subject, many Franco-Mauritians perceived it as specifically targeted at them. In line with their aim to avoid public attention, this was mainly voiced privately. Only one Franco-Mauritian openly compared the government to that of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe (*Le Mauricien* 2007) – something of an exaggeration, as Franco-Mauritian property has not been appropriated. Yet the belief that Franco-Mauritians were unfairly targeted was shared more widely. In the 2010 African Peer Review Mechanism country report on Mauritius, the fact that Hindus lack a solid economic base (except, via their political power, their control of numerous state-owned and parastatal companies) was considered an inspiration for the democratisation of the economy (APRM 2010: 185). Or in the words of a retired *gens de couleur* journalist: 'the democratisation of the economy is suspect. [Prime-Minister] Ramgoolam [the son of the first prime minster] wants to take the wealth from the whites and give it to his community. It is aimed at the consolidation of his power' (Int. 2006). Whatever the (hidden) intentions were, it did not alter much. It hardly features on the political agenda anymore, or at least not in the same way, and when I visited the island in early 2014 as well as during the elections later that year Franco-Mauritian economic power barely faced political opposition. While Franco-Mauritian control over large parts of the island's private sector has continued – as a matter of fact, in the words of a retired university professor, 'Franco-Mauritians have never had it so good as today' (Int. 2014).

To a certain extent, the targeting of Franco-Mauritians in the public political discourse can be considered to be a similar situation to that faced by white Africans elsewhere, though the Zimbabwean case illustrates that a small minority of whites can do relatively little when their opponents resort to the use of force. As Andrew Hartnack (2014) argues, the Zimbabwean case is more nuanced than the image presented by the polarised public debate, yet it is evident that white farmers stood little chance against Mugabe's mobilisation of force (see also Pilossof 2012) – and as recent developments illustrate, the position of the small number of white farmers still left remains precarious (*Mail & Guardian* 2015). Franco-Mauritians and white South Africans have so far avoided similar challenges to their position, though in South Africa

discontent about the whites' perpetuation of economic power and land ownership remains looming as a contender for the mobilisation of political support. In Mauritius, it is often believed that the island is too small for (state) violence aimed at particular ethnic groups. Yet, as the mobilisation of native populations against 'newcomers' in the case of, for example, Fiji illustrates, it is not only size that matters. If Mauritius had had a large indigenous population, the rhetoric (and consequences) may have been different.

Mauritius is certainly not the picture-perfect image of 'unity in diversity'. Ethnic categories remain associated with the distribution of power (Hempel 2009), with 'ethnic identity [providing] clear lines to determine who will be excluded and who will not' (Horowitz 1993: 18). This instrumentalisation of ethnicity is hard to undo, and, beneath the façade of inter-ethnic compromise, determines competition and struggle between the various ethnic groups in attempts to establish political hierarchy and control (Boswell 2006). 'All communities in Mauritius are hindering each other', a Creole informant said (2006). Political struggles often have an implicit ethnic undertone, with ethnic groups competing over resources. As a result, not only Franco-Mauritians but also other communities have difficulty in obtaining support from other communities. The Hindus may have the largest support base, which is translated into their political power, yet too much power in the hands of the Hindus is, like in the preamble to independence, met with suspicion. The Hindus are, for example, kept in check as a result of tensions between them and the second largest group, the Creoles. It is a competition in the middle over state resources such as access to education and to jobs in the civil service, with the Creoles being the poorest and most hybrid community (see also Boswell's 2006 account on *Le Malaise Créole*). This enhanced suspicion between other communities to a certain extent facilitates the Franco-Mauritians. A Sino-Mauritian informant said, 'because politics aren't neutral, the Franco-Mauritians are of the opinion that they better stay out and let others fight in politics' (Int. 2006).

Correlations between private and public ethnicity

Often the strong focus on ethnic differences is dismissed as politically motivated. In Mauritius, and following up on the Indian example, this is referred to as communalism, a term 'invented by the colonial rulers in the nineteenth century, to refer to the use and manipulation of religious and/or ethnic differences for "political" ends antithetical to the

national (or colonial) interests' (Bates 2000: 1). It is evident that many political leaders sense advantages in pursuing ethnic differences and tend not to be inclined to give this up. They do have to walk a fine line in using ethnicity to their advantage, though, because too openly criticising other ethnic groups contradicts the island's dominant beliefs and mutual respect for each other's (private use of) ethnicity.

The prevalence of the politicisation of ethnicity nevertheless has an impact on the organisation of Mauritian life more generally, even though, much more so than in the past, Mauritians of all backgrounds now benefit from the island's economic development (e.g. Sandbrook 2007). Politicians have to maintain an image of intra-ethnic homogeneity: 'polarization in the religious field is not encouraged as it poses a threat to Hindu unity, which is important in maintaining certain alliances of political power' (Hollup 1994: 308). The widespread belief that 'only those ancestral traditions deemed authentic and validly founded have the power to shape Mauritian national subjects in a spirit of peaceful and equitable coexistence' (Eisenlohr 2006a: 400) also contributes to the prevalence of differences. As a result, ethnicity is reinforced in the private domain, as multi-ethnic societies like Mauritius lack any strong impulse towards social and cultural integration (Ramtohul 2013: 5). Most Mauritians see themselves through a mental framework of ethnic belonging and accept ethnicity as a dominant organising principle of social life. This positively impacts on the maintenance of Franco-Mauritian economic power.

A central characteristic of ethnicity in Mauritian society, according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1998: 185), is a differentiation between symbolic and instrumental ethnicity:

> *Symbolic ethnicity*, expressed, for example, through ritual is encouraged: while *instrumental ethnicity* in some of its expressions, notably political communalism, is discouraged. In other words, the 'expressive' or 'meaningful' pole of ethnicity is accepted while the 'strategic' and 'political' role is rejected.

Eriksen, however, remarks, '[i]t is unclear to what extent symbolic ethnicity can reproduce itself without a political dimension' (Eriksen 1998: 185). In practice symbolic and instrumental, or private and public ethnicity (Bowman 1991: 63), are difficult to separate. Hence, as Eriksen (1998: 14) argues, '[ethnicity is] so pervasive and multifaceted in everyday interaction that it cannot be accounted for as a purely political phenomenon'. This interrelatedness of the different poles of ethnicity prevents an open attack on Franco-Mauritian privileges.

Franco-Mauritians remain economically powerful and many of their businesses are often highly connected, while wealth trickles down to the whole community because Franco-Mauritians relatively easily find employment within Franco-Mauritian companies – similar findings have been reported by Vito Laterza (forthcoming) on Swaziland, where a relatively small white elite retains control of a large share of the business sector. Many Mauritians dislike this concentration of economic power (and wealth) in the Franco-Mauritian community, especially due to the association with colonial injustices. Consequently, and as I have already shown above, Franco-Mauritians are not very successful in obtaining support on the basis of universalistic functions. Certainly, there are Mauritians praising the Franco-Mauritian business spirit and their contribution to the economic development of the island, yet even then they point to the continuing concentration of wealth in the community.

Economic power may be less vulnerable than political power (Dogan 2003: 13) notwithstanding that politicians frequently target Franco-Mauritian economic power, occasionally even to the extent that they are pushed to distribute part of their wealth (Salverda 2010). Key to my argument, however, is that there is a limit to the criticism. Mauritian governments seem not to want to alienate Franco-Mauritians too much because they are aware of the substantial role Franco-Mauritian capital and skills play in the development of the island's economy – with Franco-Mauritian capital even financially contributing to the island's public infrastructure, such as a publicly accessible bridge in the vicinity of a recently developed shopping mall in the centre of the island. To improve economic conditions, then, the government and Franco-Mauritian capital depend on each other, though this contributes to the maintenance of the latter party's elite position. Besides, too openly and vocally criticising the benefits of ethnicity will undermine the island's social cohesion: in order to maintain (interethnic) peace in a small island many Mauritians consider it best to respect each other's private focus on ethnicity, i.e. the symbolic pole of ethnicity. Franco-Mauritian endogamous marriage patterns and exclusivist patterns of social interaction, for example, are hardly challenged. These patterns are part and parcel of all Mauritian communities and criticising these aspects would potentially jeopardise the cohesion of Mauritian society and even one's own position. Criticising the 'private use' of others' ethnicity may indirectly jeopardise the politicians' own political power, as their positions very much rely on the prominence of ethnicity – in everyday life. The fact that the complex interaction between

private and public ethnicity remains unchallenged works to the advantage of the Franco-Mauritians.

Franco-Mauritians' preference for marrying 'white' is not criticised as it confirms the endogamous marriage patterns of all Mauritian communities (Nave 2000). Conversely, exogamous marriage patterns are less appreciated in Mauritius. For Franco-Mauritians, marrying outside the Franco-Mauritian community has, historically, never been well thought of, and has often led to disinheritance and effective banishment from the community. Today, marrying a non-white is less sanctioned and gradually becoming more accepted, though it would still depart from the Franco-Mauritian norm. Many Franco-Mauritians I interviewed and spoke to referred to the (perceived) social disadvantages: a 'mixed' marriage jeopardises the socio-cultural embedding of the couple and their children in the Franco-Mauritian community. They rarely voiced economic arguments, despite the fact that the so-called 'right' partner choice helps to keep a stake in the island's richest economic network. This confirms the common Mauritian discourse, as the rejection of 'mixed' marriages is widespread among all communities and is, in reality, prompted by the widespread (social) consequences these may have and by concerns people have about the identity of the offspring. The importance of ethnic affiliation in Mauritian society does not lend much appeal to having a hybrid identity: 'the most difficult aspect of mixed marriages in this kind of setting – the self-defined plural society with no hegemonic group – may be the identity of the children' (Eriksen 1998: 125). Among Franco-Mauritians, as a result, marrying a white (Catholic) foreigner is regarded as equally bearing fruit because such foreign partners blend into the community.[6] The offspring, furthermore, can attend the whites-only clubs without any objections. Accordingly, the (historical) perception of the Franco-Mauritians as a united white group prevails, despite the fact that the community is not necessarily a united block and that there exists also a level of variety within it (on the grounds of openness and wealth, for example).

Franco-Mauritians' ethnic identity is reinforced and maintained because of the continuity of their economically powerful position in combination with the fact that (historical) patterns of social life, such as the exclusivity of Franco-Mauritian club life and leisure activities, are hardly challenged. Although some clubs, like the Turf Club, an elite club in charge of the horse racing in the capital, Port Louis, have been forced to open up, there still remain a number of exclusive Franco-Mauritian clubs. Apart from the Dodo Club, these are clubs

such as the Grand Baie Yacht Club, Le Morne Anglers' Club, and the Club Nautique de Pointe d'Esny. In my research, I have frequently encountered political arguments against Franco-Mauritian economic power, but apart from some expressions of dislike, I have never heard any seriously voiced objections against the whites-only clubs – or against the wider exclusivity of Franco-Mauritian private life, which, as a Franco-Mauritian who was born abroad experienced, remains very family-oriented (Int. 2014), and of which these clubs form a part. This, consequently, reinforces a feedback loop: Franco-Mauritians participating in the same social networks more easily marry someone 'like them', while their endogamous marriage patterns are maintained because they fear a situation in which they or their children become excluded from these social networks, such as access to the several white-only sports and social clubs (for a more detailed analysis of Franco-Mauritian geographies, see Salverda & Hay 2014). Besides, there have historically been also a variety of exclusive (sports and social) clubs for *gens de couleur*, Muslims and Hindus, such as the Racing Club, the Muslim Scouts and the Triveni Club (e.g. Nagapen 2010). Challenges are, therefore, limited, as these would go against the dominant beliefs underlying the organisation of Mauritian private life along ethnic lines. Neither are other Mauritians particularly interested in challenging the remaining white-only clubs, because most Mauritians hardly take any interest in the leisure activities specific to the Franco-Mauritian community, such as rugby, hunting, water sports and game fishing. Widespread acceptance and lack of (external) criticism of the organisation of social life, however, facilitates the maintenance of economic power, since the spaces in which, to speak with Cohen, elite interests are pursued in 'secrecy' are hardly challenged, even when these are racist and exclusionary in nature.

A strong sense of ethnic belonging, openly observed in Mauritian private life, and reinforced by the political system, contributes to the fact that many Mauritian businesses are family businesses and/or employ people according to kin relationships. Franco-Mauritians are not unique in this practice, as it is often argued that the private sector suffers from unwillingness to expand beyond its own community:

> The core problem is actually not concentration of economic power but the hermetic nature of our business community. Our private sector suffers from an unwillingness to expand the net of economic opportunity beyond its own group or community. There is an inability to trust, work with and learn from 'others' and there is a misplaced notion that synergies means doing more in-house.[7]

Since the end of the colonial period, Franco-Mauritians have certainly become more open, and interactions within the private sector do cross ethnic boundaries. However, it should be realised that the small size of the community and the virtually one-to-one correspondence of elite boundaries with ethnic boundaries remains important to the understanding of the maintenance of their elite position. The link between economic power and Franco-Mauritian (historical) marriage patterns is illustrative, for example. Franco-Mauritians are frequently linked to each other by family ties, since a long tradition of endogamous marriage patterns within a small community has linked many families to each other. This facilitates shared investments and/or participation in each other's businesses, and thus endogamous marriage patterns cannot be separated from the circulation of wealth in the white-only community. In cases where a businessman cannot gather sufficient capital he often turns to other Franco-Mauritians to invite them to share the investment. As a Franco-Mauritian businessman involved in the purchase of numerous businesses said, 'you always ask people you know first if you have something to offer' (Int. 2006). The successful consolidation of economic power within the community is partly the result of this pattern: wealth may have changed hands between Franco-Mauritian families but it has to a large extent remained within the Franco-Mauritian community.

Finding stable employment is equally related to Franco-Mauritian social networks. A Franco-Mauritian businessman explained that as a Franco-Mauritian you could always contact a relative or other Franco-Mauritians to inquire after a job for your child (Int. 2005). In the aftermath of the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, which hardly affected Mauritius, this even led to a larger number of Franco-Mauritians returning to the island after their overseas studies since they could still easily find jobs in Mauritius, a Franco-Mauritian informant told me (Int. 2014). The reason for employing other Franco-Mauritians, according to a number of businessmen, is that the employers have more control because they know the parents and the family of the employee. They argue that a *point commun* enhances trust and confidence, which are vital elements for doing business and dealing with employees. A Franco-Mauritian businessman involved in the textile industry further illustrated this way of thinking. He said, 'I had problems with a Hindu female secretary who had breached my confidentiality. Besides, I had problems with her professionalism.' He acknowledged that the ethnification of Mauritian society was at the core of this: 'I would not have had this problem with a Hindu had I been in Europe. The cause is

the Mauritian culture in which there exists a lack of trust between the different ethnic communities.' Subsequently, he hired a Franco-Mauritian secretary who was, he said, 'very professional' (Int. 2006). Hence, the evolution of ethnicity and its continuous role in structuring postcolonial society is notably relevant for understanding the consolidation of the Franco-Mauritian elite position. They may constitute only 1% of the population, yet they still hold a dominant position in the island's present-day economy due to the fact that the organisation of their private and social life is not – and, by virtue of defending the cohesion of Mauritian society, cannot be – criticised.

CONCLUSION

The Mauritian case shows that to understand the positions of (white) elites and the whitewashing of inequality in postcolonial societies we have to go beyond the dichotomy of the liberal postcolonial state and states that fall victim to ethnic violence. Cooper (2002: 2) refers to two possible fates awaiting postcolonial African states: 'either dissolving into "tribal" or "ethnic" violence or uniting under a liberal democratic system'. Mauritius, luckily, did not fall victim to the first fate, yet, notwithstanding its relatively fair and good working political system, the ethnification of Mauritian politics appears at odds with a liberal democratic system. More Mauritians than during the colonial period may benefit economically, though inequality, to a certain extent, has not been tackled due to the taboo against addressing private expressions of ethnicity. Cultural differences are so engrained and essentialised in Mauritian society that whites-only clubs like the Dodo Club are not targeted as racist expressions incompatible with a postcolonial society. This plays into the hands of the Franco-Mauritians, as the private pole of their ethnicity cannot be separated from the maintenance of economic privileges.

Equally in other postcolonial states, which are often, in name at least, non-racial and liberal, like South Africa, similar patterns below the surface may favour white and/or elites strongly associated with ethnic characteristics. Essentialising cultural differences and mistrust between people of different ethnic backgrounds can contribute favourably to the elite position of ethnic elites. Suspicion and competition between other, larger ethnic (or, in other cases, ideological) groups may even favour elites, as it diverts attention away from them – in Mauritius, suspicion between Hindus and smaller ethnic groups seems to prevent the Hindu community from launching a full assault on Franco-Mauritian

economic power, for example. This is not to say that white (or other ethnic and/or racial) elites are not challenged, yet politicising cultural and ethnic differences may simultaneously favour white elites. As a result of common beliefs about ethnicity, many ethnic expressions are not challenged – more strongly put, these societies actually positively reinforce (private) characteristics associated with ethnic groups.

What the Franco-Mauritian case reveals is that elites with distinguishing ethnic characteristics can maintain their position in the absence of direct support. This may call for a revision of what Cohen (1981: xiii) dubbed the elite's universalistic tendencies, i.e. 'their service to the public', in multi-ethnic societies – Cohen's analysis nonetheless remains relevant in the wider understanding of elites. The strong but paradoxical focus on ethnicity in Mauritius, and the sense of intra-ethnic homogeneity and inter-ethnic differences it reinforces, seems to have served Franco-Mauritians well enough that they do not need direct support from other groups, while it contributes favourably to their organising themselves particularistically. Subsequently, the particularistic end of the continuum can only be challenged superficially. Endogamous marriage patterns and the many ethnically exclusive characteristics of Mauritian private life exist in virtually all the communities and are generally not challenged. Yet this symbolic ethnicity cannot be disentangled from instrumental ethnicity, such as Franco-Mauritian business practices – something many politicians, who tend not to be inclined towards giving up the advantages of pursuing ethnic differences, actually seem to be aware of in the case of their own power. In other words, the emphasis on ethnic differences does not necessarily jeopardise elite power but, on the contrary, can facilitate the maintenance of exclusivity and privilege of small ethnic minorities. Political change, then, which has often deprived elites of their power, does not always herald the complete collapse of elites, but can in its own paradoxical way also contribute to their preservation.

NOTES

1. The club was founded as a sports club for the Franco-Mauritian youth on 12 July 1928.

2. The Franco-Mauritian category has never been officially accounted for in the census, apart from early colonial categories of whites and/or Europeans. Moreover, owing to the absence of comparative updated figures since the last census looking at ethnicity (1972), the percentages I present here may not reflect the actual balance between the different communities. There probably have not been huge shifts, though not insignificantly the 2011 Housing and Population Census of the Republic of Mauritius, which included a section on religion (not on 'ethnicity', so Creoles and Sino-Mauritians are absent), indicates that the group referred to as Hindus may no longer constitute the majority. Though they comprised 52% of the total population during the 1972 census, this figure has since decreased to 46%.

3. In his observation V.S. Naipaul equals Creoles with blacks. Many Mauritian Creoles have black African origins, yet to a large extent they are, like the *gens de couleur*, of mixed ancestry, ranging from black African to white European, Indian and Chinese. With a wide variety of shades of skin colours, references are made to black skin in Mauritius. However, this tends to be on an individual basis. Black (or the French *noir*) is seldom applied in references to the whole community. In these cases, Creole is the most commonly used reference.

4. Despite the fact that the largest parties are often multi-ethnic in nature, they have little incentive to reduce the focus on ethnicity. Even the example of the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (MMM), which was founded shortly after independence by the young Franco-Mauritian Paul Bérenger together with an ethnically mixed group of young sympathisers, is illustrative of the dominance of this approach. It started as a new attempt to install class-based politics and made an outspoken stand against the ethnification of Mauritian politics, yet despite its efforts the MMM had to face the 'ethnic' reality entrenched in Mauritian politics. It had to abandon its own policy of, for example, putting up a Hindu candidate in a predominantly Creole constituency, and started selecting candidates in the same manner as its opponent, the Labour Party, i.e. corresponding to the ethnic composition of the constituencies. Furthermore, after the party narrowly lost the 1976 elections it created an alliance with a party strongly focusing on Hindu support (Eriksen 1998: 68). This coalition then went on to win the 1982 elections by a landslide, though its leader, Bérenger, did not become the prime minister. The relatively recently obtained political power of the Hindus represented an obstacle to Bérenger becoming prime minister since it had become an unwritten rule that a Hindu would always be chosen for this position (he did become prime minister for two years in 2003). Instead the Hindu Anerood Jugnauth took the position of prime minister in 1982, though his government did abandon ethnicity as part of the census.

5. In 2014, suggestions to change the island's electoral system, which includes a rethinking of the BLS, were widely debated. Currently the verdict is still out as to whether electoral reform will receive the support of the two-thirds majority of parliament needed to change the constitution.

6. The arrival of large numbers of white South Africans over the last years is an interesting development in the context of Franco-Mauritian (white) identity and exclusivity. As a result of Franco-Mauritians marrying white South Africans they met while studying in South Africa, the Franco-Mauritian community has over the years incorporated a number of white South Africans – mostly English- rather than Afrikaans-speaking. However, the recent influx of white South Africans to Mauritius is characterised by animosity between the two communities and has even led to physical fights, a Franco-Mauritian lady friend told me (Int. 2014). To what extent these South Africans pose a new threat to the Franco-Mauritians and to the island's ethnic balance warrants future examination.

7. A quote from Agora, a group of four independent opinion-makers related to the private sector (see *Le Mauricien*, 9 May 2007).

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