3. Unexplored Territory

A Historical Survey of the Franco-Mauritian Elite Position

Every elite has origins and history is, therefore, vital in the study of elites because it allows us to better understand these origins. In this chapter I will illustrate how the Franco-Mauritians became a hegemonic elite, why skin-colour became a marker of elite distinction and in what way the Franco-Mauritians exercised their power (political, economic and socio-cultural). Addressing these issues and the colonial context in which they operated will contribute to our knowledge about how Franco-Mauritians dealt with resistance to their power and through which practices they faced the first challenges to their position. This not only increases our understanding of the (historical) relationship between the island’s different social and ethnic groups and of how balances of power were shaped in the colonial period, but also allows us to better grasp some of the significant processes and structures existing in contemporary Mauritius, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

3.1 Discovering Mauritius

Until five centuries ago, Mauritius was uninhabited and its existence most likely unknown to the rest of the world. The first people to discoverer the island were probably Arab sailors who were involved in trading between the lands bordering the Indian Ocean because the first evidence of its existence is an Arab map dating back to Calino in 1502. On this map Mauritius is drawn along with two other islands that together go to make up the Mascareignes islands: the Mauritian dependency of Rodrigues and the neighbouring French island of La Réunion. There is no evidence that the Arab sailors landed on the islands, however, and neither, it appears, did the Portuguese, the first European power to explore the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century and set up permanent settlements there (Benedict 1965: 9; Toussaint 1971: 23). The arrival of the Portuguese, however, marked the beginning of an important era, namely that of European expansion and the development of the lucrative trade route to Asia. Mauritius’ history is shaped by this period and by the competition between the European powers to control this trade route.

The first attested Europeans to land in Mauritius were the Dutch in 1598. They named Mauritius after their stadhouder Maurits van Nassau (Pitot 2000 [1914b: 13]). The Dutch ‘occupation’ of Mauritius was, however, not very successful. They only permanently settled for
the first time from 1638 to 1658, and then returned again to settle in 1664 to prevent the French and British from settling on the island. The Dutch were predominantly interested in securing the trade route with the spice islands of the Dutch East Indies (where they had a trading post in Batavia, on Java). They finally abandoned Mauritius in 1710 and withdrew to their already well-established and better-situated settlement at the Cape of Good Hope (Toussaint 1971: 27; Vaughan 2005: 4-12). Despite their failure to establish a permanent and long-lasting settlement the Dutch left indelible traces on the island (Ross 2000: 7-15).

One notorious event, probably more generally known around the world than on Mauritius itself, was the extermination by the Dutch of *Raphus cucullatus*, the flightless bird commonly known as the dodo. Today the fate of the dodo is one of the most illustrative examples of the extinction of fauna caused by humans. The Dutch did not cause this disappearance only directly (by slaughtering the dodo for food), but also indirectly. With the Dutch ships came rats and other non-indigenous animals that found their way onto the island, wreaking havoc on its ecological balance.\(^\text{18}\) Today the dodo serves as an important Mauritian ‘mascot’ and is ubiquitously found in the form of tourist souvenirs and on stamps and is also used as the symbol of the exclusive Franco-Mauritian social and sports club, the Dodo Club (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 2002 [1773]: 34; Heuvel 2000). On the more positive side, the Dutch introduced sugarcane and deer (Toussaint 1971: 27), both from Java, which, as will be shown in this and subsequent chapters, are now in their specific ways very important to the Franco-Mauritians.

### 3.2 The French Period

The French, who colonised Mauritius after the Dutch and renamed it Ile de France, started a permanent settlement which led to the development of the island. This settlement also laid the foundations for the emergence of a white elite. French colonisation was prompted by the fact that after the Dutch abandonment Mauritius was left idle for some years. This worried the French because the island had become an outpost for pirates and in 1715 they took possession of the island. Yet, the French, much like the Dutch, initially colonised Mauritius mostly for its geographical position on the route to Asia and in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of rival powers, something which would have represented a direct threat to their interests. The new colonizers did not directly settle on the island. It was only in 1721 that the French started developing Ile de France together with the neighbouring French colony of Ile de Bourbon.

\(^\text{18}\) It was argued, however, that also the Portuguese sailors had already left rats, monkeys and goats on the island (Vaughan 2005: 4)
nowadays known as La Réunion, when it came under the control of the new French East India Company. (MacMillan 2000: 17, 18; Selvon 2005: 76, 79; Vaughan 2005: 35).

It was not an easy task for the French to establish a self-sustaining colony and Robert Chaudenson refers, following J. Petit Jean Roget, to this first period as la société d’habitation: the installing of settlers, acclimatisation and the first minimal development of infrastructure. The white settlers, in the absence of a native population and with the help of slave labour, were the first to sow the seeds of an agricultural economy (Chaudenson 1992: 93-95). The East India Company (hereafter referred to as the Company) tried to attract settlers by granting them land concessions. The absence of natives facilitated this and the first concession was granted on 5 June 1726 to the highest ranking officer of the Company in the East, Pierre Christophe Lenoir, who was in charge of the island (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993: 98).

Successive concessions initiated by Lenoir were geared at giving the colonisation of the island an essential boost by distributing land to white settlers. Today there are still several places on the island that have preserved the names of the first concessions holders, according to the Mauritian amateur historian Sydney Selvon (Selvon 2005: 86).

A more successful period in the development of the colony dawned with the arrival of Mahé de Labourdonnais, who ruled the island from 1735-1747. He laid the foundations for the capital, Port Louis, on the west coast, creating a good harbour and building docks and a fortress (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993: 155-182). Besides this he promoted agriculture and under his governorship the first plantations were set up, assuring the economic development of the island (Benedict 1965: 10; L’Estrac 2004: 74; Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993: 260-263). It was during the governorship of Labourdonnais that Ile de France became a slave colony since during this period large numbers of slaves were imported from Madagascar and Mozambique – they quickly came to outnumber the white settlers (North-Coombes 2000: 7).

Nevertheless, Labourdonnais’ wish to develop the island into a plantation economy was hardly achieved. Most of the few large land concessions were only being marginally exploited by 1766. Commerce at that time seemed more profitable than agriculture. Megan Vaughan writes, ‘contemporaries estimated that one could make a return of 25 to 35 percent on trade with India, and up to 100 percent on goods imported from Europe.’ The products traded ranged from Bordeaux wines and clothes from Paris to fine textiles and carpets from India (Vaughan 2005: 63, 64).

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19 In the Filipines, in contrast, ‘Spanish policy prohibited settlers from appropriating native land’ (Billig 2003: 36).
20 The original spelling seems to have been Mahé de la Bourdonnais, yet in present day Mauritius and most secondary literature this is spelled as Labourdonnais.
21 The Dutch imported small numbers of slaves to the island, too, but since they never really established a plantation economy their presence never led to a slave colony as it did under French rule.
Settlers and Settlements

Officially, the society of Ile de France was divided into two classes: freemen and slaves. However, the freemen, who were initially mainly of white European origin, were not a homogeneous group. Wealth marked a clear division and, according to the late South African historian of Franco-Mauritian descent, Daniel North-Coombes, poor whites were not racially privileged (North-Coombes 2000: 7).

On the one hand, there were whites who had arrived on the island as sailors, soldiers and labourers. They worked as cabinetmakers, carpenters, masons and domestic staff, sometimes in deplorable conditions. On the other hand, there was a small group whose wealth, in the early days of the colony, was largely related to land concessions and positions within the Company whose employees held the main jobs on the island (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 2002 [1773]: 119). This small elite of Company officers de facto ruled the island. They controlled everything and had a monopoly on trade. Not surprisingly, these officers were despised by other employees and settlers. As Vaughan writes, ‘[s]eemingly all-powerful, the Company and its representatives were highly unpopular among “poor whites,” who regarded them as something like feudal lords without the legitimacy conferred by history’ (Vaughan 2005: 29, 44, 63). At the same time, however, the governors and the Company were complaining about the quality of the island’s colonists. According to them the majority of early French colonists were unqualified to administrate the island; consequently, they were unable to find colonists with adequate qualifications to occupy these administrative positions (Selvon 2005: 87). Labourdonnais even curbed the immigration of poor whites to the island in favour of men of substance and capital (North-Coombes 2000: 8).

The Company was also worried about ‘the lack of white women’. In order to tackle this problem, it decided that the family should be the nucleus of the new colony: ‘[i]n a sometimes farcical, certainly tragic episode, women and girls were sent from France expressly for the purpose of providing their labour of biological and social reproduction.’ The first group arrived in 1728 and this was followed by a group of girls from poor families from rural Brittany which ‘was in the midst of a deep economic depression.’ The girls seem to have fulfilled their ‘biological duty’ but, even so, there were doubts about the ‘quality’ of these first girls (Vaughan 2005: 28). Nevertheless, this marked the beginning of a self-reproducing community – according to Catherine Boudet, one can only speak about a more or less stable community from 1728 onwards as this was when the arrival of the first women allowed for the creation of families (Boudet 2004: 54). Yet, Mauritius was still a far cry from a gender-balanced community and white women were outnumbered by white men by the ratio of two to one as late as 1806 (North-Coombes 2000: 8).
This imbalance made the men turn to another source of women, slaves. These men are, consequently, not only the local ancestors of the present Franco-Mauritian community, but also the forebears of other Mauritians as will be illustrated below.

**Establishing a Slave Society**

In 1725, Ile de France had a known population of 213 people: 20 officers of the Company, 100 troops, 28 workers, 5 servants, 13 women, 24 company slaves and 10 privately owned slaves. As Vaughan states, ‘[t]his was the only moment in the history of Ile de France when free people outnumbered slaves; the situation would soon be reversed’ (Vaughan 2005: 24).

The slaves on Ile de France arrived predominantly from Madagascar and Mozambique and in smaller numbers from other parts of Africa and French colonies on the shores of the Indian peninsula. In the beginning, the slaves were mainly used for daily chores and almost every household had a few. Some masters also had large numbers of slaves, whom they used to work their concessions or, occasionally, who were rented out to the Company (Vaughan 2005: 125). The plantation economy only developed slowly, as explained before, and this was reflected in the master–slave relationship. There tended to be a relative mildness to the racism and, despite being a slave society, Ile de France was not a society over-determined by ideas of inferiority and superiority based on physiological differences (North-Coombes 2000: 9; Vaughan 2005: 156).

Slavery, however, was undeniably a system based on coercion, exploitation and unequal power relations and despite the relatively ‘mild’ racism slaves were not exempt from harsh treatment. Slaves were also obliged to convert to their masters’ Catholic religion. The Company and, subsequently, the French colonial administration also obliged the masters to christen the slaves’ children and to regularly marry the slaves to each other (Nagapen 1996: 13; Pitot 2000 [1914]: 291; Selvon 2005: 84). As will be shown later on this shared religion led to interesting alliances at other points in the island’s history.

The slaves’ dependency on their masters was considered as natural by most white settlers and was hardly challenged. In the southern states of America (the present day US) Southerners also defended slavery as a historically recurring and justifiable feature of well-ordered societies that had existed from ancient times up to the present. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese argue, ‘[t]he great majority of Americans accepted slavery as an unexceptionable part of the social order until the second half of the eighteenth century, when many in the North and the South began to have moral qualms’ (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 70, 71). In Ile de France, slavery was to be brought into question around the same time as the publication in 1773 of Bernardin de Saint Pierre’s *Voyage à l’île de France* - a series of letters, later also translated into
English, in which the author wrote down his account of life in the colony after he had visited the island from 1768-70. He specifically criticised the system of slavery and wondered why there were no white workmen to carry out the slaves’ tasks (Bernardin de Saint Pierre 1999 [1800]: 120). Of the slave-owners, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre said, ‘I have never known men so wretched in terms of morality as the landowners, for they constantly mistrust their blacks and live among them as of surrounded by the enemy, their hate always leading them to cruel punishment and injustice’ (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 2002 [1773]: 178).

Some slaves escaped and tried to flee back to Madagascar or simply disappeared into the wilder parts of the island. Sometimes slaves just took ‘a break’ from their daily lives of repression and temporarily disappeared into Port Louis or the bush. The ‘problem’ of maroonage, or runaway slaves, was dreaded by Ile de France’s free population because maroons frequently undertook assaults on the domiciles of the white settlers – parts of the slave population also feared them as they could potentially be subject to kidnapping. The maroons were, therefore, forcefully hunted down. Although the actual percentage of slaves marooning was probably limited, ‘[t]he violence directed against the maroon slaves’, according to Richard B. Allen, ‘has accordingly been regarded as yet another manifestation of colonial paranoia and racism, an important aspect of class exploitation, or additional evidence that coercion was the cement that held these societies together.’ Furthermore, he states that ‘[t]here can be no doubt, for example, that the maroon legacy influenced social and economic relationships on Mauritius long after the abolition of slavery’ (Allen 1999: 36-40).

The close co-habitation of slaves and masters also led to more friendly relationships. As a consequence of these, masters occasionally granted freedom to slaves for good conduct. There were also sexual relationships between white male masters and their female slaves and, consequently, mixed offspring – some of the offspring remained enslaved while others were granted freedom. It has been argued that offspring from a slave mother and a white father were hardly unusual on the island – these relationships produced the other descendants of the white settlers. ‘Indeed’, writes Vaughan, ‘the great founding father of the colony, advocate of the white family and importer of Breton girls, Labourdonnais, had himself fathered illegitimate children on the island.’ Yet the tendency among the colonists was to deny their paternity since recognition of this also brought with it the presumption of economic responsibilities (Vaughan 2005: 130, 131).

**Free Blacks**

Partly as a result of the mixed offspring, ‘a small but growing community of mixed-race mulâtres (a term that locally referred to a mixture including “white” blood), some of whom had slave
status, some of whom were free,’ developed. These free mulâtres together with the manumitted slaves and a small number of freeborn immigrants – the latter were mainly immigrants from the Indian subcontinent – and their descendants constituted the free black population (Vaughan 2005: 84, 234). In the 1767 Census the free blacks officially appeared for the first time as a class in themselves separate from the slaves and the white population (Boudet 2004: 53; North-Coombes 2000: 8).

This group, which because of its variety could hardly be considered unified, was at the beginning of its existence relatively free and had rights comparable to those of the whites. In colonial societies these free blacks often functioned as intermediaries between the white settlers and their slaves: together with colonial-born slaves they were considered more ‘reliable’ because they had ‘absorbed the masters’ ideology’ (North-Coombes 2000: 5). In Ile de France the free blacks were important in the development of the island as well. Labourdonnais and his successors depended heavily on the labour of freeborn sailors from southern India in particular.

A close relationship with the white population remained persistent because of the imbalance of the sexes within the (free) black population which had twice as many women as men. Many of these women became their masters’ lovers and bore their children (Vaughan 2005: 235, 239). In spite of legislative prohibition, co-habitation between white men and slaves or free black women prevailed: ‘the law remained a dead letter in view of the small number of white women on the island’ (North-Coombes 2000: 8). For much of the eighteenth century, this led to a society of white settlers, free blacks and slaves with relatively fluid boundaries between and within the groups. For instance, slaves, although forbidden to do so, also resided in the Camp des Noirs in the capital Port Louis, a place which was theoretically the home of the free blacks. In practice slaves lived there as did poorer whites and soldiers and sailors; in certain cases, the slaves even ran small shops for their masters in the Camp de Noirs (Vaughan 2005: 125).

The free black population, more and more often referred to as gens de couleur, increased together with the slave population: in 1767 there were 587 free blacks compared to 3,163 whites and 15,027 slaves. Forty years later, in 1806, there were 7,154 gens de couleur compared to 6,798 whites and 60,646 slaves (Allen 1999: 40, 82). The gens de couleur frequently possessed slaves as well and land grants made to them increased from the 1770s onwards. Yet, their land possessions and economic activities appear to have been limited and never posed an economic threat to the colony’s whites; thus, the gens de couleur could hardly be regarded as competitors or a potential counter-elite (Vaughan 2005: 235, 240). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the whites wanted to keep them on their side on the issue of slavery (North-Coombes 2000: 12). The boundaries between black and white were, however, bound to become stricter over time.
Establishing a White Elite

In Ile de France’s colonial system, the white community was at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy. The structure, we might say, placed the power in the hands of the whites even though they were a diverse group of people. Many came from Brittany in France; indeed, on the southern coast of Brittany, in the city of Lorient, the seat of the Company was located (Boudet 2004: 54). Often these people were from poor rural backgrounds; the deplorable economic conditions in Brittany made many sign up for the Company’s ships, as mentioned by Jean-Marie Le Clézio. Therefore, argues Selvon, ‘[i]t must be borne in mind by the students of history that in Brittany, France, for example, people who were the ancestors of many of the Mauritian colonists were living in extremely miserable conditions’ (Selvon 2005: 97).

A small number of people from aristocratic backgrounds also settled on the island and many of these served in the Company. Their motives for their settling on Ile de France seem to have been diverse. According to Vaughan, ‘[t]he island had always been home or exile to the disowned, disinherited, and disreputable sons of French families for whom a colonial career, far away, appeared to offer a last chance of rehabilitation or (perhaps more likely) a continuation of their former activities away from the gaze of superiors’ (Vaughan 2005: 182).

The hodgepodge of whites was criticised for its ‘sexual immorality’ by visiting or settling contemporaries on the island (Vaughan 2005: 162). Bernardin de Saint-Pierre also criticised the local white population on Ile de France for its lack of culture and manners (Bernardin de Saint Pierre 1999 [1800]). Nevertheless the first signs of a white elite taking root can be seen from the 1780s onwards. The whites even ‘began to assume, more confidently, the cultural attributes of a colonial elite, [and] the possession of exotically dressed Indian slaves may have become an important marker of wealth and status’ (Vaughan 2005: 161). A number of developments seem to have been important in this process.

Free Trade

A period of free trade started when the Company went bankrupt in 1769. The administration of the island changed hands from the Company to the authority of the King of France who broke with the trading monopoly of the Company and granted freedom of trade. This led to the arrival of many traders from different parts of French rule who took advantage of Ile de France’s strategic location on the profitable trade route between Europe and Asia. The economy of the island developed and free trade (combined with war in Europe) brought prosperity to the island’s colonists; much money was spent on building beautiful houses and luxury items during this

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22 Even today one can still find a few of the family names which were published in 1874 in Familles Nobles Françaises in the section Etablies a l’Ile Maurice.
period (Boudet 2004: 56; Toussaint 1971: 44-46). The white settlers and traders were able to enlarge their privileges and power without much competition or resistance: the land did not belong to anyone else because of the absence of a native population and trading was simply taken over from the bankrupt Company.

At the time of the Company’s departure, the island had already experienced several generations of settlers. Family ties and networks had been established and these subsequently, facilitated the configuration of an elite. This was, however, not a unilinear process because ‘[w]hile the consolidation of an elite was undoubtedly taking place through marriage and business alliances, this was a process constantly disturbed by the influx of newcomers, particularly at times of war’ (Vaughan 2005: 80). There was an important economic division relating to the number of slaves one possessed, this being both an indication of economic status and a division between wealthy and poorer whites (Boudet 2004: 58). Even within the upper layers of society, rivalry, jealousy and conflict over status were rampant amongst the whites, this sometimes leading to economic and social ruin. Origins appear to have been important in these matters, too, as illustrated in a dispute in which a settler insulted another by saying, ‘people who are bottle washers in France arrive here and think themselves the equal of their superiors’ (Vaughan 2005: 182).

At the same time as this was happening, white skin-colour became a marker of distinction in a way that had not been seen in previous times. As mentioned earlier, the number of slaves and free blacks increased significantly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Until the 1780s sexual ‘transgression’ was part of the ‘colonial order of things’ and mattered only when it threatened relations of property and class. From the 1780s, however, this type of sexual behaviour became more closely associated with a discourse on race. According to Vaughan, ‘[t]he reason for this is easily identified in the emergences of a larger (though still comparatively small) free black population, dominated by women. Sex and race begin now to look like two incestuous siblings, producing offspring from their illicit union’ (Vaughan 2005: 169).

In France, the French monarchy, whose influence had led to a prosperous period for the Île de France, was losing its popularity. In due course this led to the French Revolution of 1789. As a result of this momentous event the relationship between France and its colony deteriorated when news of it reached the island in 1790. The French revolutionaries’ demand to abolish slavery aroused fierce opposition among the slave-owners in French colonies in the Caribbean and Île de France (Houbert 2000; Selvon 2005: 151). This resistance was, in a way, important for the establishment of a white elite because on the issue of the abolition of slavery Île de France’s colonists were most clearly united – they opposed abolition in 1794 and they would oppose it
later again under British rule (Vaughan 2005: 250). By the time of the French Revolution, the
dominant slave-owning classes of the Ile de France had been able to build up a substantial power
base. They used this to defend their interests and took the affairs of the colony into their own
hands. And since the French revolutionaries were faced with their own internal problems and
were not, therefore, able to deal with rebellious colonists such as those on the Ile de France, this
led to a short period of autonomy.

**Racist Ideology**

Despite the fact that the extension of the rights of citizenship to the *gens de couleur* was granted by
the National Assembly in Paris in May 1791 (Vaughan 2005: 240), resisting the abolition of
slavery seems to have reinforced a racist ideology used in order to defend the institution of
slavery itself. According to North-Coombes it was not until the 1790s that a racist ideology, in
the real sense, was first articulated (North-Coombes 2000: 4, 7). The white colonists’ resistance,
however, had several causes:

> It was not only the threat that emancipation posed to their material interests, which put
the Mauritian plantocracy on the defensive. There were also deeply held and almost
irrational fears that it would plunge the colony into a state of anarchy and wholesale
destruction. These fears fed on the spectre of Saint Domingue where the slaves had gained
their freedom by force of arms. The planters had access to impressionistic first hand
accounts of the atrocities which accompanied the Haitian slave revolution and the
subsequent civil war between the *grands blanc* and the slaves and their *libres* [i.e. *gens de
couleur*] allies. They were convinced that emancipation would spark off large scale unrest on
the same lines in the island (North-Coombes 2000: 11).

Bernardin de Saint Pierre’s account on the horrors of slavery was, therefore, dismissed – out of
fear that abolition would have a negative impact on the planters’ privileges. The Mauritian planter
C. Thomi Pitot, for example, felt he was like a David against the Goliath, Bernardin de Saint
Pierre (who was a famous writer in early nineteenth century France), and argued that slaves were
well-looked after and happier than peasants in miserable Europe (Wilson 2002: 17, 18). The
Southerners in America similarly argued that many people (i.e. slaves) lacked the capacity to live
freely and that the freest societies in world history were based on slavery – indeed, many of the
slave masters had an interest in history and the great thinkers of ancient and modern Europe
(Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 225).
The brief period of Ile de France’s autonomy increased the political power of the local white settlers. During this time the island was ruled by the Colonial Assembly which had been set up before news of the French Revolution reached Mauritius in 1790. Together with a new constitution, drafted in 1791, this marked the beginning of an elective system of government on the island, an elective system, however, in which only a limited number of white males had the right to vote. The Colonial Assembly would maintain its authority for some years because the French revolutionary government was unable to devote serious efforts towards restoring order on Ile de France at the time. It was only after Napoleon had gained control of France that the colony was brought back into the French empire (Selvon 2005: 151, 168-171).

The end of the brief period of autonomy hardly jeopardised the strong base of the local white colonists’ power. In fact, a changing economic structure seems to have reinforced their position. The beginning of the transformation of Ile de France into a sugar colony in the early nineteenth century, under the Napoleonic regime, led to the elaboration of a self-serving, explicitly racist ideology, turning back the clock on a number of social issues and institutionalising a harsher slave regime (Vaughan 2005: 250, 257). According to North-Coombes, sugarcane was the culprit, because it is the most labour intensive of all plantation crops. The sugar boom raised demand for slave labour and underlined the economic significance of the system of slavery (North-Coombes 2000: 11). Contrary to during earlier decades, the white masters did not consider it necessary to keep the gens de couleur on their side by maintaining their equal rights. The gens de couleur, thus, lost their equal status when the French governor of the Napoleonic era issued laws designed to separate the free coloured population from the whites in 1803 (Simmons 1982: 24, 25). Like in other colonial projects, there was a gradual process towards white skin-colour becoming an embodied sign of superiority:

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

It was the constant pattern of readjusting the parameters of the colonial elite to delimit those who had access to property and those who did not (Stoler 1989: 154). This led to a strict distinction in which skin-colour and racism seems to have been more important than a notion of cultural differences. Economic change thus further accentuated the distinction with other social groups and was an important factor in the creation of a united white. In the case of Mauritius,
though, it was only during the British period that many of the differences within the white community were bridged.

3.3 The British Period

In December 1810, the British arrived with an armada of seventy ships and 10,000 troops and forced the French out of Ile de France. They proceeded by restoring the island’s original Dutch name of Mauritius. It was a relatively simple conquest, partly because the British had become so powerful and were the first colonial power to virtually control the Indian Ocean: ‘Great Britain had carved for herself the lion’s share of the land bordering the Ocean, and the capture of Isle de France had given her the command of the Ocean’s ways’ (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1984: 11). Like their predecessors, the British took Mauritius in order to prevent competitors from intervening in their affairs. Once again Mauritius became a colony of a European power mainly in order to safeguard interests elsewhere – in this case the significant British interests in India.

The limited British interest in Mauritius itself is demonstrated by the fact that the British only took control of the island’s administration and never made any attempts to completely control the island or evict all its French citizens. The transition involving the handing over of Mauritius from the French to the British was actually marked by its peacefulness and the capitulation treaty itself gave generous terms. The British chose not to take any prisoners of war and paid to send French troops back to France. Free Mauritians who so wished could leave the colony and were even allowed to take their assets with them. For those who remained, their property was not to be confiscated. The inhabitants were given the guarantee that they would be able to keep their religion, laws and customs; the only thing they were obliged to do was to swear an oath to the British crown (Boudet 2005: 27). This accommodating British approach can be explained by the fact that they recognised in the well-organised community of planters a valuable asset (Eriksen 1998: 9; Sornay 1950: 88, 262). Moreover, Britons never settled in large numbers in Mauritius and most of the plantations remained in the hands of white French planters. Consequently, direct British cultural influence was minor with the dominant European culture and language remaining as French (Benedict 1965: 13, 14; Toussaint 1971: 80). It also appears that a number of French colonists were not hostile to the transition. The absence of resistance on their part might have had to do with the fact that the British Empire was still a monarchy – a number of the white colonists had not approved of the end of the French monarchy in 1789. Part of the island’s white population had already decided that they would not really oppose an
eventual British invasion, using the argument that an all out war would destroy their wealth and families (Selvon 2005: 189, 193).

**Franco-Mauritians**

After an economically prosperous period in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a British blockade of the island preceded its capture. This spelled the beginning of the end of Ile de France’s prominence as a commercial hub. When the British gained control a number of the wealthiest inhabitants returned to France, weakening with their departure the local economy and the investment possibilities. With commercial trading – which had led to prosperity – eroding away, few other viable alternatives remained and the colonists saw no other option than to turn their attention to the further development of the sugar industry (Allen 1999: 21, 22).

This sparked a significant increase in the area of land under sugarcane cultivation. Expanding the sugar plantations was indirectly encouraged through access to the London market, which came with the inclusion of Mauritius in the British Empire. This, together with the high price of sugar near the end of the Napoleonic wars, generated a great incentive to produce sugar although it was not until the late 1820s that sugar began to fully dominate the island’s economy (Allen 1999: 12, 22; Benedict 1965: 15). An expanding sugar industry required sufficient labour to work and the demand for slave labour increased. The British colonial government had, however, introduced legislation in 1808 which forbade the importation of slaves to a British colony (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1984: 12). This led to a paradox. Sir Robert Farquhar, the first British governor, recommended that Mauritius be exempted from the ban because the sugar industry was so important to the island’s economy and also because he wanted to keep the island’s white population content. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, however, denied the request, thus forcing the slave trade to go underground. With the local authorities most likely turning a blind eye, Mauritius became notorious for its illicit slave trade (Allen 1999: 14).

For the white community life continued, in a sense, as before. ‘The French on the island may have felt humiliated at their reduction from colonial rulers to colonial subjects, but the terms under which the British “annexed” Ile de France were hardly oppressive to them’ (Vaughan 2005: 260). The early British period represented the first step towards the real establishment of a white hegemonic elite since the arrival of new French immigrants also came to a halt. Newcomers no longer constantly disturbed the process of establishing an elite. The British and their generous

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23 Matthew Flinders, a British navigator and cartographer, was held captive on Ile de France for several years preceding the British invasion. When the British navy interrogated him after his release, shortly before they invaded the island, he provided them with precious information. Flinders also communicated the desire of a number of wealthy white landowners, who he had befriended during his forced stay on Mauritius, to remain neutral in the case of an invasion (Roy 1960: 13; Selvon 2005: 189, 193).
conditions for capitulation were, then, important in the making of a Franco-Mauritian identity (Boudet 2005: 26). The French colonists started to manifest the traits of a single unified elite, as defined in the chapter on theory: they had commanding positions, control over resources and power; they shared a (Creole) French way of life; they were connected to each other through, among other things, family ties; and boundaries were clearly marked between them, the British and others. Despite some internal class differences, which have continued to exist up until the present, one could for the first time in Mauritian history speak of a Franco-Mauritian elite, although the term Franco-Mauritian would not be coined in written texts until 1908 (Boudet 2005: 36).

**Gens de Couleur**

At the same time, the arrival of the British hardly diminished the distinction between the white population and the *gens de couleur*. The latter campaigned for a change in their position because they were dissatisfied after the 1803 colour bar and were demanding the same rights as the whites. Their objections to their position specifically focused on three symbolic aspects: the illegality of marriages between whites and free persons of colour; their inability to gain admittance to the Royal College of Mauritius; and the prohibition preventing them from being buried in the same cemeteries as whites. The campaign proved successful in some senses because after the *gens de couleur* had pressed actively for the removal of the colour bar in the early 1820s the British colonial government appeared to be more receptive. And then, in 1828, there was an immediate repeal of all legislation which discriminated against the *gens de couleur*. The colour bar was abolished and the *gens de couleur* were granted equal rights with the white population one year later (Allen 1999: 79, 80; Boudet 2004: 53).

The children of the *gens de couleur* could now enrol at the Royal College, Mauritius’ most prestigious secondary school. Their share in the island’s agricultural wealth also increased via land acquisitions. As a consequence, the *gens de couleur* became more politically involved although their political presence was largely mediated on Franco-Mauritian terms as they represented the most powerful local political player. A number of the *gens de couleur* also continued to own slaves and actually remained on the whites’ side on the issue of the abolition of slavery (Allen 1999: 104; Simmons 1982: 24, 25).

However, abolishing the colour bar and increasing participation in the economy and politics did not mark the end of the social distinctions between the whites and the *gens de couleur*. The latter did not gain full social acceptance from the whites, because of persistent racist ideologies, and remained a separate group even though they had many cultural and social features
in common, such as the French language and the Catholic faith (L’Estrac 2005: 91). The Franco-
Mauritians remained the model; as in the New World, argues Allen, the Mauritian *gens de couleur*
conformed to white social values, especially in the realm of family life, to increase their standing
in colonial society. The *gens de couleur*, greatly affected by the racism endemic to the slave-
plantation societies of the day, could be considered a community in between the whites and the
large slave population (Allen 1999: 80, 104).

One example taken from the *gens de couleur* is Rémy Ollier who was born in 1816, the son
of a freed slave and a former artillery captain. He was an important spokesman in the battle for
equality. In one of his editorials for *La Sentinelle de Maurice*, a journal which he founded in 1843
and which was the mouthpiece of his community, Ollier stated:

We do not want to make ourselves white (blanchir). We are the equals of whites in terms of our
rights, and if Mauritius closes her ears to our complaints, London will listen to them…. we
are the equals of the whites in our hearts and in our intelligence, and if we are not the
equals of the whites in terms of education and customs, tomorrow we will sacrifice
everything to acquire these customs and education. Those are the prerogatives of which
we are envious. But the color of the skin? Origins? What rubbish? (quoted in Vaughan
2005: 273)

Yet the distinction of skin-colour, so important at that time, even left its traces in the thinking of
Ollier. According to Vaughan, ‘while Ollier passionately argued for the unity of the “people of
color,” no matter what their origins, he often distinguished in his writings between so-called
mulatrês (those with some assumed white blood) and the hommes de couleur’ (Vaughan 2005:
273).

Sharing the French language, ‘French’ culture, morals and values and the Catholic faith
could not prevent the *gens de couleur* from being discriminated against on the basis of their skin-
colour. Most likely the Franco-Mauritians considered themselves, as whites, to be the designated
hegemon. Not only did the distinction reinforce the Franco-Mauritian elite position directly, i.e.
by excluding others from their ranks, it also did so indirectly. The *gens de couleur* valued the
Franco-Mauritian mode of life as the desirable model and, consequently, to some extent put the
Franco-Mauritians on a pedestal.

**The Abolition of Slavery**

Another significant aspect that reinforced unity among the Franco-Mauritian elite was, once
again, related to slavery. As mentioned before, the sugar industry was booming in the 1820s – it
was grown on Franco-Mauritian-owned estates but increasingly backed by significant amounts of British credit and mainly exported to London. One of the paradoxes of the situation, according to Vaughan, was that ‘Mauritius came increasingly under the heavy scrutiny of the British abolitionists … Mauritian planters had come well and truly in abolitionists’ limelight, and allegations of atrocities committed against slaves were numerous. There is little doubt’, she writes, ‘that many of these allegations were well founded, but it is also clear that Mauritian slavery and Mauritian planters were coming to assume a symbolic role within British abolitionist discourse as the epitome of evil’ (Vaughan 2005: 261). According to Adele Smith Simmons, the abolitionists’ vehicle, the Anti-Slavery Society in London, argued that Mauritius would be a good place to begin abolition because no English financial interests would be seriously affected (Simmons 1982: 19). This sparked the second and final demand for the abolition of slavery on the island.

As for the first time during the French Revolution, the British intention to abolish slavery was met with much resistance from the slave-masters. This resistance led to the first serious power struggle between the British colonial administration and the Franco-Mauritian slave-owners. The Franco-Mauritians applied their power defensively, as they did during the French Revolution, in order to halt the decline of their privileges. In response to this (perceived) challenge to their position, the Franco-Mauritians further reinforced their elite position: they were unified not only by their shared economic interests but also by their joint resistance to British interference in their affairs and the demand for the abolition of slavery (Vaughan 2005: 262). The British colonial government had sent John Jeremie, an avowed abolitionist who would not bow to the planters’ interests, to the island and the slave-owning planters were infuriated. Crowds gathered to protest his arrival, shops closed and people refused to work. Pressure on the colonial administration mounted and the British had to give in, dismissing Jeremie (Simmons 1982: 20). Here was a victory for the planters demonstrating how Franco-Mauritians, through practices of resistance and political pressure, could get their way, at least temporarily; in this case the victory was short-lived.

Adrien d’Epinay

The main figure on the Franco-Mauritian side at this time was the rich planter Adrien d’Epinay (Toussaint 1971: 85), whose statue still stands in the centre of Port Louis – this statue, as will be shown in a subsequent chapter, continues to influence the present. D’Epinay went to London personally to argue the Franco-Mauritian case since, due to their French background, the planters had limited direct access to the political decision-makers in London. During this visit he persuaded London to grant Mauritius freedom of the press and in 1832 d’Epinay founded the
first ‘independent’ newspaper of the island, *Le Cernéen*. The paper was named after the original Portuguese name for Mauritius, Cirné (meaning swan), and can be considered symbolic in the struggle with the British (Boudet 2005: 29). The newspaper opposed the abolition of slavery and would during its long life function as the mouthpiece of the Franco-Mauritian community and, specifically, its interests in the sugar industry.

D’Epinay spent two years in London lobbying for the slave-masters’ interests and became more and more entrenched as the leader of the Franco-Mauritians. He could not stop the British from abolishing slavery in 1833 but he did manage to negotiate huge compensation for the slave-owners. Franco-Mauritians, thus, did not have enough political clout to set the decision making process in their favour but their (economic) position still gave them considerable political influence. The British paid 69 pounds per slave to 6,874 slave-holders for a total of 68,613 slaves (Benedict 1965: 17; Toussaint 1973: 83). According to North-Coombes, ‘the Mauritian plantocracy as a whole, therefore, did not suffer drastic property losses from [slave] emancipation’ (North-Coombes 2000: 23) and they remained very powerful in the political and economic domain. In Martinique, on the contrary, already a separation between economic and political power set in after the abolition of slavery in 1848: ‘whites in Martinique withdrew from public life. *Mulâtres* moved in to take control of the political domain, while whites retained control of the economic domain (Vogt 2005: 263).

The main change for the Franco-Mauritians was that they had to look for new sources of labour. Initially, they relied on the general system applied to the British slave colonies which was meant as a transition to effective emancipation: the apprenticeship system in which ex-slaves were coerced into becoming labourers for a fixed period of time. North-Coombes argued, ‘[t]hough partly designed to integrate slaves into free society by preparing them for freedom, [this] functioned essentially to maintain economic and social stability in the slave colonies.’ As soon as the apprentices could, they withdrew almost completely from the plantations (North-Coombes 2000: 22, 23). The ex-slaves had no desire to work for their ex-masters and wanted, more than anything, land on which they could labour on their own account. Some managed to achieve this either by buying or by squatting on small plots of land. In other cases, established estates subdivided part of their property and sold it, this becoming known as the *petit morcellement* (Allen 1999: 114). It appears, however, that the land possessions of the ex-slaves were only temporarily. Vaughan argues that by the late 1840s the ex-slaves and ex-apprentices were being forced by economic circumstances to sell their pieces of land (Vaughan 2005: 269). As a

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24 When Ile de France had passed under the control of the French king a printing press was installed, called *L’Imprimerie du Roy*. In 1773 the first newspaper in French came out of that press, announcing information about the arrival and departure of ships, sales of property (slaves, houses, land and animals) and captured maroons and publishing news about Ile de France, Ile de Bourbon and elsewhere.
consequence of the never-ending need for labour to work the plantations and the limited number of ex-slaves, the Franco-Mauritian planters and the British colonial government had to turn to another source of labour already before the end of the apprentice system, this marked the start of a new episode in Mauritian history.

**Indentured Labour**

Seventy-five Indian immigrants, the first of thousands of indentured labourers, arrived in 1834 (Vaughan 2005: 269). ‘From 1834 to 1839, 25,468 Indian labourers were introduced into the colony at a cost of nearly £280,000. This substantial immigration was, in all likelihood, funded with compensation money or with loans raised on compensation claims. Much of the expenses were eventually recouped from the labourers themselves by a combination of devices, which turned contract labour in Mauritius into a species of debt slavery’ (North-Coombes 2000: 28).

The influx of these labourers led to a radical change in the composition of the Mauritian population. Within ten years of the arrival of the first indentured labourers one-third of the population were Indians while by 1861 two-thirds of the population were Indians (Benedict 1965: 17; Walter 2000 [1914]: 216). Apart from the need to replace the slaves, the arrival of substantial numbers of Indian labourers was due to the increase in the amount of land under sugarcane cultivation – this was a crop that by now had become inextricably linked with the island. Looked at in reverse, one could say that the steep increase in cultivated land was actually only made possible by the relative proximity of India and its abundance of cheap labourers – the average length of the voyage to Mauritius was six weeks from Madras and Bombay and eight weeks from Calcutta, while it took between nineteen and twenty weeks to get from India to the West Indies (Carter 1996: 32). Mauritius thus had an advantage over the other main sugar producing colonies which were principally in the Caribbean (North-Coombes 2000: 33). These producers all experienced similar problems in the post-abolition period but ‘Mauritius was offered the opportunity to become the site for this “great experiment” in the use of free labour to harvest sugar because of its previous experience with Indian workers, its large expanse of virgin land and its proximity to the source of supply. … It was a model for other British sugar colonies to follow’ (Carter 1996: 19, 21).

In the beginning the living conditions for the indentured labourers were little better than those of the slaves before them (Benedict 1965: 17). When the labourers were asked about their conditions and whether they communicated with their motherland, they said, “we do not like the island and more particularly our master”! (Carter 1996: 9). According to Allen, ‘[t]he often harsh treatment of indentured labourers was conditioned by the colony’s prior experience with slave
labor and maroonage. … For their part, the colony’s newest inhabitants resorted just as quickly to the same tactics slaves had used to resist exploitation and oppression. Flight from their employers was the most public of these tactics and, until the late nineteenth century, the struggle between Mauritian “masters” and “servants” would be epitomized by the local preoccupation with illegal absence, desertion and vagrancy. Accordingly, the colonial government tried to manage the labourers by means of legislation that impinged on the lives of the indentured labourers. Yet, Allen writes, “[t]he purpose of this legislation … was clear and unequivocal: to ensure the continued presence of a large pool of inexpensive labor for the colony’s sugar estates’ (Allen 1999: 56, 57, 64). Marina Carter equally notes, ‘[b]y 1867, the planting interests, aided by a succession of sympathetic governors, had been able to gain such influence with the Mauritian Council of Government – with the notable exception of W.W. Kerr – that the most far reaching moves against the large ex-indentured population were ready for implementation’ (Carter 1996: 118, 119).

W.W. Kerr, who was the Advocate General, and Adolphe de Plevitz, who was a plantation owner, were, indeed, the exceptions. They were representative of the few whites who were motivated by a sense of humanitarianism to take a stand on behalf of the indentured Indians. ‘For their actions they were rewarded with the general opprobrium of the planting community’ (Carter 1996: 12, 13). However, in 1872, the government installed a commission to investigate ill-treatment with Adolphe de Plevitz as principal witness – ‘[t]he collective bargain of “old immigrants” that was organised by A. de-Plevitz was the first challenge to the authority of the white plantocracy’ (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1984: 82, 83). At the same time the Governor-General of India, under pressure from Indian public opinion, pressured the local Mauritian authorities and even halted the traffic of indentured labourers in order to improve the treatment of the labourers (North-Coombes 2000: 28). Yet, in general, the Franco-Mauritian plantation owners were so powerful that they did not really have to worry about the treatment of the indentured labourers. Nor did they have much to fear from local British colonial officers because ‘the Franco-Mauritian elite dominated island politics despite the façade of British rule’ (Storey 1997: 37).

The strong position of the Franco-Mauritians could not, however, prevent the island from substantially changing in another way. The arrival of large numbers of Indian immigrants signified a major change for the religious and cultural practices on the island. These immigrants brought with them new habits, customs and religions – the majority practising Hinduism with a smaller number professing Islam. In contrast to the French period (of slavery), under British rule the plantation labourers were not forced to convert to the plantation owners’ Catholic religion.
Another difference to the slaves was that the Indian immigrants could return to their homeland if they chose to do so. Eventually, a third of them did, in fact, return to India (Allen 1999: 75). The remaining two-thirds would go on to become the majority Mauritian group. The arrival of the Indian indentured labourers thus had a substantial impact on society even though the Franco-Mauritian elite position was not directly challenged.

### 3.4 The Consolidation of a Society

Owing to the vast source of labour available on the Indian subcontinent, the white elite, predominantly relying on the sugar industry, was not seriously jeopardised by the abolition of slavery. Moreover, the strong position of the Franco-Mauritians within the plantation economy gave them significant influence in the colonial administration of the island. North-Coombes states, ‘the colonial state was, moreover, predisposed to favour Mauritian planters for reasons that can be roughly described as structural.’ A harmonious relationship between the British colonial administration and the planters was required since sugar represented, by and large, the main tax revenue of the colony. Besides, as North-Coombes argues, ‘harmony of interests was likely for yet another structural reality, that is, the deep integration of the island as a sugar exporter in the peripheral circuits of the world economy which linked colonial and metropolitan ruling groups’ (North-Coombes 2000: 79).

Notwithstanding a marked distinction between the Franco-Mauritians and the British, family ties were created between them as the British arrived on the island. As mentioned before, although the British did not arrive en masse, small numbers of British traders did settle on the island. ‘Many of the merchants who established themselves on the island married local [Franco-Mauritian] women, and it is reasonable to assume that significant sums of merchant capital subsequently found its way into the colony’s agricultural sector via familial connections’ (Allen 1999: 21). Today, the legacy of these liaisons is still clearly present in Mauritius and a number of Franco-Mauritian surnames are clearly English in origin, though now pronounced in a French way. There has also been some cultural exchange between the British and Franco-Mauritians. However, in general, the Franco-Mauritians’ ‘French’ culture was the dominant one in the island’s elite circles, as is indicated by the integration of British families into the Franco-Mauritian community.

There were also some difficult moments for relations between the Franco-Mauritians and the British. The abolition of slavery showed how the Franco-Mauritians and the British colonial administration could seriously clash, with the British having the ultimate decision making powers. And these clashes did not cease after the abolition of slavery because the two sides occasionally
differed on the treatment of indentured labourers. However, ‘these acts only convinced the sugar barons they needed to lobby the British colonial government of Mauritius even more effectively. The governors were generally receptive, while the Franco-Mauritians continued and refined their lobbying efforts’ (Storey 1997: 37). Hence, in order to maintain their elite position, Franco-Mauritians addressed potential decline via practices involving lobbying and the cultivation of political power.

As has been shown, the Franco-Mauritians’ and the British’ white skin-colour was also important for the consolidation of an elite position. ‘In Mauritius, it was racism which was used,’ according to North-Coombes, ‘very successfully, to provide for the preservation of the status quo.’ Nevertheless, the demographic realities and the long history of miscegenation make the concept of whiteness in any absolute sense a myth, according to North-Coombes. ‘[T]his myth of racial purity has been assiduously propagated through the generations, while simultaneously being associated with economic dominance, by Franco-Mauritian planters and their descendants’ (North-Coombes 2000: 38, 39). Regardless of whether or not racial purity was a myth, it was undeniably a real marker of distinction with regard to gens de couleur. Other communities and new communities experienced racism as well: ‘Indian immigrants were ostensibly the most alien element in society and were crudely stereotyped and relegated to the lower reaches of the scale of social worth, according to a number of imputed racial characteristics’ (North-Coombes 2000: 39). Nevertheless, their situation improved from 1865 onwards and the number of complaints employers and labourers lodged against one another declined dramatically in the early 1870s (Allen 1999: 70, 71).

Social Stratification
In the second part of the nineteenth century a small group of Indian traders and merchants settled on Mauritius, predominantly coming from Gujerat. They constituted only a small part of the business community which was overwhelmingly white, but they could nevertheless obtain a strong position in trading, in particular with India. They possessed their own boats and shipped Mauritian sugar to India. In Mauritius they also sold Indian goods like vacoas bags to the sugar industry and clothing and rice to the large group of indentured labourers of Indian descent. To facilitate increasing trade with India, Mauritius adopted the Indian rupee as currency in 1876, changing it in 1877 to the Mauritian rupee. Due to their small numbers, they did little harm to the Franco-Mauritian elite position and although they supplied many goods to the indentured labourers there were significant class differences between these groups of Indian origin (an aspect that still has an impact in present day Mauritius) (Pitot 2000 [1914]: 362, 380, 390, 400 - 407).
The position of the Franco-Mauritians, however, was challenged by the much larger community of Indian immigrants (i.e. the indentured labourers) when an elite gradually emerged out of its midst. This resulted, according to Carter, in the first power struggle between the Franco-Mauritian elite and what could be considered the incipient Indian ‘counter-elite’:

As the century progressed, and Indian immigrants began to develop their own sub-elite on the plantations from amongst labourers who had risen through the ranks to become overseers and job-contractors, employers became locked into a power struggle with their own labour managers in an effort to retain control over the workforce (Carter 1996: 101).

Gradually, the descendants of the Indian immigrants started playing an economic role. Increasing involvement in commerce, trade and industry provided the communities of Indian immigrants (and their descendants) with financial resources that began to create new opportunities in the last decades of the nineteenth century. A number of them even became estate owners although these types of endeavour were not without risk:

Ramtohul, a Rajput from Patna, had arrived on the island in 1856 as a 34-year-old indentured immigrant. By 1870 he was possessed of sufficient capital to establish himself on an estate of his own, Mon Choix. Following the death of Ramtohul, his family experienced difficulties with the legal requirements for transfer and inheritance of their estate. Corbane and Sougnia, who were the heirs of the old immigrant, found that their claim to Mon Choix was blocked by the dead man’s legal representative, who was effectively reaping the proceeds of the estate himself (Carter 1996: 202).

According to Marina Carter, ‘whether indentured or free, Indians in Mauritius had to battle with a judicial system which was weighted against them’ (Carter 1996: 202). Nevertheless, their economic position was only to get stronger in the long-run.

A long-term economic crisis, due to the falling world market price of sugar and various natural catastrophes that struck the island, began to take shape in the 1860s and early 1870s. This forced the sugar industry to economise on its costs. To manage the crisis the Franco-Mauritian plantation owners wanted to import cheaper indentured labourers. However, these arrived less and less frequently and the estate owners had to look for other ways to deal with the crisis. The estate and factory owners then started trying to increase the efficiency of their local operations by centralising the milling activities and upgrading the production process. More importantly, they also started to subdivide and sell part of their land (Allen 1999: 73; Storey 1997: 40).
The Grand Morcellement

The subdividing of parts of the large estates is referred to as the grand morcellement and this process began during the mid-1870s, then continuing throughout the rest of the century and into the early twentieth century. The estate-owners had problems of capital but by selling they were able to extract substantial sums of ready cash from the Indian immigrants. As a result of this strategy, the Indian immigrants and their descendants became landowners themselves. According to Allen, ‘Indians accounted for almost one-half of the island’s independent proprietors as early as 1891. By 1909, Indians would be cultivating 30 percent of all land planted in cane, a figure that would subsequently climb to 45 percent by the early 1920s’ (Allen 1999: 73, 74, 138, 141). In total there were by that time, then, far more Indian immigrants and their descendants privately involved in the sugar industry than there were Franco-Mauritians.

In general, the new landowners possessed only small plots of land. It has also often been argued that the estates only sold their less productive land. However, according to William Kelleher Storey, ‘recent surveys indicate small planters’ land are not inherently inferior’ (Storey 1997: 41). The new distribution also made possible large-scale Indian commercial involvement in the sugar industry. A number of wealthy businessmen of Indian origin, such as the Gujerati traders, could mobilize large sums of ready cash to finance the purchase of plots of agricultural land. In other cases, Franco-Mauritian estate owners loaned money to make the purchase of land possible, thus establishing some of the first business relations between Franco-Mauritians and Mauritians of Indian origin (Allen 1999: 156, 157).

The grand morcellement initiated a new episode in Mauritian history. There was a rapid growth of Indian rural settlements outside the estates. According to North-Coombes, ‘[t]his was a change of major significance as it created new patterns of production relations and gave rise to new class forces, setting wider dimensions to class conflict.’ Furthermore, this shift from estate camps to village was considered ‘a form of liberation’ (North-Coombes 2000: 139, 140). Settlements grew in the vicinity of the estates for one major reason: the Franco-Mauritian estates owned the sugar mills, needed for the processing of the cane — controlled by the Franco-Mauritians, the mills were the main resource in the production process of sugar and guarantors of the continuity of (economic) power. Consequently, the small-scale Indian cane growers still relied on their former Franco-Mauritian employers for processing; many also still depended on wages they received from temporary employment on the large sugar estates. During this period, the centralisation of the sugar mills continued and sugar mills became larger, fewer and more efficient. In an increasingly competitive world market, where prices had fallen and Mauritian
sugar had to compete with subsidised European sugar beet producers, efficiency and cost-reducing technology was required (Allen 1999: 158, 169; North-Coombes 2000: 140).

Initially, the Franco-Mauritian elite position was barely challenged. Compared to the small planters, the Franco-Mauritian estates had a number of advantages apart from the sugar mills. When they placed all their bets on the sugar industry in the first half of the eighteenth century, ‘planters knew little about the exact effect of rainfall, temperature and wind velocity on the formation of the crop’ (Ly-Tio-Fane Pino 1984: 41) but eventually they built up an impressive and internationally recognised level of expertise in the production of sugar cane, meticulously described by Storey (1997). The sugar estates had far better yields then the small planters because they could purchase fertilizers and new canes and had the means to hire additional labour to work the land when necessary. This had an impact on the relative production figures for sugar: ‘Indians cultivated 30 percent of the area devoted to sugar but produced only 22 percent of the canes grown [in 1907].’ In 1928, ‘Indians produced only one-quarter of the sugar crop despite cultivating 43 percent of the land devoted to cane.’ This disadvantage was further exaggerated when, due to the Great Depression, sugar prices plunged in 1929 and in the early 1930s and many of the small cane growers were forced to sell their property around this time (Allen 1999: 169, 170).

Franco-Mauritians’ ‘compelled’ selling of land, the basic resource their elite position relied upon, had a positive impact on the ‘emancipation’ of the Indian population. ‘Access to land was accordingly the means adopted by Indian immigrants to recycle their economic activities and to remodel their power relationship towards other communities’ (Ly-Tio-Fane Pino 1984: 173). Just as it had been for the island’s gens de couleur and ex-apprentices, this was a crucial attempt to enhance their standing in the Mauritian colonial order.

3.5 Resistance
The dependence of the island’s economy on the sugar industry had kept the Franco-Mauritian community at the top of the island’s socio-economic hierarchy and reinforced a strong association between economic activities and cultural and religious backgrounds. For much of its history, the Mauritian economy was entirely reliant on the sugar industry and many of the Mauritian fortunes are tied directly to the fluctuations in weather conditions and world sugar prices (Simmons 1982: 7). Virtual control over the core economic resources also gave Franco-Mauritians substantial political power. Hence, they had a tremendous advantage over other communities who had hardly any political influence at all.
Only gradually did this start to change under British rule. Demands for more reform were made from the 1880s onwards, demands which the conservative sections of the Franco-Mauritians and also the gens de couleur opposed. These demands focused on a fairer electoral system and, especially, on a broadening of who was eligible for suffrage, a right which until then could only be claimed by Mauritians with significant property and education. As a result of these demands the rules of eligibility for suffrage changed although this did not lead to broadening the electorate to a very large extent. The political game was simply extended to a small number of Mauritian men, of different origins, who did not belong to the wealthiest section of the population but who nevertheless had sufficient means. Even this small change, though, frightened the conservative Franco-Mauritians. They feared the day the Indians would become dominant in the council and they, the whites, would become a minority (L’Estrac 2005: 194-198; Selvon 2005: 329).

As had happened before with Adolphe de Plevitz, the Franco-Mauritians also faced political rivalry in their own midst. At the beginning of the twentieth century opposition to the representatives of the sugar industry, the sugar oligarchy, came from some of the more liberal parts of the community. This rivalry was partly reflected in the Mouvement rétrocessioniste which rallied for the return of Mauritius to the French flag during the second decade of the twentieth century. The main driving force for this campaign came in the form of a number of influential gens de couleur; yet it drew support from a number of Franco-Mauritians as well. A counter-force of Franco-Mauritian estate owners and businessmen, supported by a number of Indo-Mauritian businessmen, was against this move, however. In the case of the Franco-Mauritian estate owners and businessmen, they may have been culturally closer to France but they economically relied on the British. This was essentially a question that depended on a consideration of economic interests and was settled to the British sympathisers’ advantage. The 1921 elections marked the failure of the Mouvement rétrocessioniste (Boudet 2004: 109-114; Dinan 2004: 47; Simmons 1982: 29-32).

According to Simmons, the strong involvement of the gens de couleur in the retrocession movement actually had a hidden agenda:

There was more to the retrocession movement, however, than a pull toward France. What the retrocessionists believed but did not say openly was that by uniting with Madagascar and Réunion [both French colonies], Mauritius could be saved from the ‘Indian peril.’ All around they saw Indians becoming small planters and professionals, and they saw ahead to the day when these Indians could dominate politics and economics in the island. The people most vulnerable to such a change were those in the colored community [i.e. the gens de couleur].
Interestingly, both sides feared the Indians. This was because the strong aversion of most Franco-Mauritians to the Mouvement rétrocessioniste was not only determined by the economic advantages of belonging to the British empire. These people also feared that the French might grant universal suffrage and thus jeopardise their political power and control over the island’s affairs which they had enjoyed for so many years (Boudet 2004: 112; Simmons 1982: 31).

Representation of the masses
It was in the first decades of the twentieth century that the present make-up of the island’s different ethnic and religious groups became visible, even though many communities had already settled and maintained their separate identities for a long period by this point. At the top of the social hierarchy were the white Franco-Mauritians (assumed to be around 2% at the time prior to independence). Then came the gens de couleur who as descendants of slaves and of mixed offspring were grouped together with the much larger group of Creoles The largest group constituted the Indo-Mauritians, with a majority of Hindus and a smaller minority of Muslims; they were to be classified as separate groups. Finally came the Sino-Mauritians, who, compared to the other groups, were predominantly born outside the colony during the last period of British occupation (L'Estrac 2005: 88, 89; Simmons 1982: 34). The first Chinese arrived as merchants during the period of French control and they gradually increased in numbers during the British period. Many of them maintained contacts with their ancestral villages in China for the purposes of family visits and to bring spouses back to Mauritius (Bräutigam 2005: 66). After the Franco-Mauritians, the Sino-Mauritians are the smallest and most prosperous community. Nowadays, many of them belong to the island’s (new) elites and yet their community structure is less inclusive than the Franco-Mauritians’. Comparatively, they are less dominant than in Singapore where they form the large majority of the population (Visscher 2007) but also less dominant than in other parts of Southeast Asia were Chinese constitute small minorities (Chua 2003: 23-48).

During this period, the first signs of political representation for the masses took on form. Representation came initially not from the Indian communities, whose masses the Franco-Mauritians feared most, but from a small number of gens de couleur. A number of liberal gens de couleur politicians campaigned to improve the situation of the poorer classes – classes who were still deprived of the right to vote. These politicians also campaigned to combat malaria which, by
then, was mainly affecting only the poor (L'Estrac 2005: 194-198; Selvon 2005: 329; Simmons 1982: 23).

The growing attention paid to the large groups of labourers and their participation in the battle for their own fate led to the first hostilities and riots during the 1910 elections. These hostilities were generated by the election campaigns of the opposing *gens de couleur* politicians (liberals), who campaigned for more freedom for labourers, and Franco-Mauritian politicians (conservatives), who opposed this. In one incident a large group of Creoles awaited Franco-Mauritians, representing supporters of the conservative politicians, at the railway station in Port Louis in order to attack them. This plan became known about in advance, however and most of the Franco-Mauritians abstained from working in the office that day. The riots were seen as ‘proof that the blacks are not ripe for self-government’ by Henri Leclezio, a leading figure in the Franco-Mauritian community at that time (Benedict 1965: 23; North-Coombes 2000: 40, 41) The first decades of the twentieth century can, then, be considered a turbulent period of political and socio-economic changes, even though the Franco-Mauritians and British considered politics still to be an elite domain.

### 3.6 Conclusion

The historical survey has shown how the Franco-Mauritians were clearly not an elite right from the start, as the island attracted whites of different social ranking. The groundwork for an elite position was, however, easily laid: Mauritius had no indigenous population and land was, therefore, appropriated without much effort. In brief, the plantation economy, relying on a racial hierarchy, and the arrival of the British completed the establishment of the Franco-Mauritian elite.

For several reasons, the arrival of the British was a key event for the Franco-Mauritians. After this they could be considered a single white elite, identified as Franco-Mauritians, with a culture that distinguished them from the British colonial officers, however. They could maintain their land, culture, language, and so forth. As a consequence of this, combined with limited British interest in the island’s internal affairs, they could virtually be considered a hegemonic elite, dominating the economy, politics and the cultural domain. The British seem to have consistently respected the words of Farquhar, the first British governor: ‘the English have come to establish

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25 As a consequence of malaria in general and, especially, a large malaria epidemic in 1866 (which hit Port Louis in particular), the wealthy Franco-Mauritians had abandoned the capital. This led to a geographical concentration of Franco-Mauritians because they had left for the higher plateau, Plaines Wilhelms, in the centre of the island in and around Curepipe and Moka. In these new residential districts, which led to a pattern of residential segregation, the climate was cooler and the Franco-Mauritians were, therefore, less affected by malaria (L'Estrac 2005: 156, 157). However, most of the business still took place in Port Louis and the white businessmen travelled daily by train from their residential districts to the capital.
firm and perpetual friendship with the inhabitants of the Isle de France [read Franco-Mauritians]. Although shortly after their arrival the British, a challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position emerged in the form of the abolition of slavery, another key event. Through practices of lobbying, resistance and cultivating political influence Franco-Mauritians used their power defensively in order to maintain their elite position. At first sight they appeared to lose the battle since slavery was abolished. Remarkably, however, especially with regard to understanding elite maintenance, this, rather than jeopardising their position, actually reinforced elite cohesion. Franco-Mauritians became more aware of their shared interests and of their shared background, a fact epitomised by their white skin-colour which came to be regarded as a sign of superiority. Yet, their resistance had unforeseen consequences many years later. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, elites can be haunted by their opposition to decline: in this case, long after his death Adrien d'Epinay has become the symbol of Franco-Mauritian resistance to the abolition of slavery, although he is also remembered as a symbol for the freedom of the press.

The arrival of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent was another outcome of the abolition of slavery. This positively influenced the maintenance of the Franco-Mauritian elite position, as it provided a cheap workforce for the sugar industry. With the help of a favourable legal system, political and economic power and coercion any resistance during those years was relatively easily suppressed. Most ‘danger’ came from within the Franco-Mauritian community itself in the form of people like Adolphe de Plevitz who was not confined by a legal system that discriminated against non-whites. Mauritian history incontrovertibly shows how the colonial system was a hegemonic system which facilitated power for the whites. Gradually, however, changes crept in that challenged the Franco-Mauritian elite position. I would argue that these were initially prompted more by developments to do with the world markets than by resistance: Franco-Mauritians had to sell part of their land, this allowing people of Indian origin to gradually become more prominent in the island’s affairs as their economic resources increased their political power. Through the economic practices of controlling the mills, managing efficient production and having the means to invest Franco-Mauritians could still maintain their elite position. Yet, as the coming chapter will show, the lid was now off: change had become possible.