7. Distinction and the Other

Ethnicity, Exclusivity and Universalistic Tendencies

In the previous chapter, I showed how Franco-Mauritians successfully organise themselves particularistically: to a large extent they differentiate themselves both class-wise and culturally from the majority of Mauritians. But in order to better understand how an elite faces up to challenges to its position it is also necessary to more closely analyse how elites are embedded in a wider spectrum of social relationships. Elite distinction is shaped vis-à-vis other social groups, through (structural) phenomena and because an elite position tends to be in some senses assigned to the elite by others – in this sense, the adjective socio-economic elite is the appropriate term instead of only economic or business elite. Elites, nevertheless, have to actively pursue this state of affairs as they have to enhance their image and seek legitimacy for their high status by assuming universalistic functions (Cohen 1981: xiii). They have to reconcile tensions between ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’ (Shore 2002: 2), as the stability of their position depends on the fairness of an elite system (as argued by Marcus 1983: 70). The colonial system, for instance, lost its fairness and as a consequence Franco-Mauritians were deprived of their political power, this, however, leading to a politico-economic domain marked by ethnic contrasts (see Chapter Four and Chapter Five).

In this chapter I will analyse a number of more general patterns and structural phenomena that have shaped independent Mauritius in order to better understand the consolidation of Franco-Mauritian economic power (see Chapter Five) and their strong sense of belonging (see Chapter Six), beginning with the present role of ethnicity in Mauritian society. This will help to explain how the Franco-Mauritian elite position is influenced by the structural phenomenon of ethnicity. At the same time, I will illustrate the persistence of certain symbols of elite distinction, as these are part and parcel of the relations existing with other social groups and counter-elites. These relationships are, moreover, inextricably related to how Franco-Mauritian elite status is (still) ascribed to Franco-Mauritians by other Mauritians as well as to how Franco-Mauritians try to ‘advertise’ their universalistic functions in order to obtain vertical loyalties. These are complex tasks because in a society experiencing resentment over the past and the present Franco-Mauritians (symbolically) stand out because of their skin-colour. I will illustrate how, in order to establish common ground with other Mauritians, they have to move carefully
within this complex situation, a situation that has changed substantially since the heydays of colonialism.

7.1 An Ethnic Society
The heterogeneous population of the Indian Ocean island has often led observers to depict the country as a ‘rainbow nation’, a place where culturally different groups live in harmony. Ethnic violence and clashes are, in fact, indeed exceptional. According to Eriksen a number of elements are responsible for this interethnic peace: the small size of the island and the spatial spread of the different ethnic groups over the island; the absence of a large ethnic majority; the absence of groups claiming aboriginality; the division of power between different ethnic groups; and the existence of constitutional rights for minorities (Eriksen 1998: 183, 184). Eriksen argues that the complex ethnic balance is, furthermore, maintained because of an existing difference 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 1998: 185).

Eriksen subsequently remarks, ‘[i]t is unclear to what extent symbolic ethnicity can reproduce itself without a political dimension’ (Eriksen 1998: 185). Indeed, in practice, as will be illustrated, symbolic ethnicity and instrumental ethnicity are difficult to separate. The wide acceptance of symbolic ethnicity is to a large extent indebted to this situation. Franco-Mauritian endogamous marriage patterns and exclusivist patterns of social interaction closely relate to symbolic ethnicity and are, as suggested, hardly challenged. These patterns are part and parcel of all Mauritian communities and criticising these aspects would thus potentially jeopardise one’s own position and even the overall cohesion of Mauritian society. Besides, ethnic homogeneity is an important trait and is highly valued among most Mauritian ethnic groups. For the achieving and maintenance of culture, dominant groups like the Franco-Mauritians and Hindus treat homogeneity as a necessary element, claims Rosabelle Boswell. Her study illustrates how, in the case of the Creole community, a hybrid identity is considered problematic in the Mauritian context (Boswell 2006). Consequently, the strong emphasis on ethnically distinct groups appears to be a far cry from a truly shared Mauritian identity: ‘[p]eut-on accepter le fait qu’un centre culturel mauricien n’existe qu’en théorie, alors il existe déjà des centres culturels africains, indiens, chinois, français ou
Moreover, a Mauritian (supra-ethnic) national identity can be interpreted as a threat, as it can be perceived as denying the significance of official diasporic ‘ancestral cultures’, a practice of empowerment for, for example, Hindus in the state apparatus (Eisenlohr 2006: 60).

An intricate situation

The organisation of Mauritian society strengthens Franco-Mauritians’ cultural and social patterns and their identity. These, in turn, again reinforce the continuity of economic privileges. In the preceding chapters we saw how the Franco-Mauritian elite gradually became identical to an ethnic community as well as the way in which social and cultural patterns were significantly interlinked with business practices. Symbolic and instrumental ethnicity are, therefore, often difficult to separate and many (not only Franco-Mauritian) issues revolve around ethnicity and cultural differences and thus strongly relate to power within Mauritian society. According to Richard Sandbrook et al., ‘the complex of overlap of class and ethnic divisions facilitated a social-democratic compromise by separating economic from political power’ (Sandbrook 2007: 133). The balance of power in Mauritius is largely defined along ethnic lines and in democratic Mauritius none of the groups can establish ‘permanent hegemony’ (Boswell 2006: 208). The different sides are mutually interdependent. Economic and political powers do not represent separately operating entities but, rather, interlocking elements that are competing with each other at the same time, as will be shown in Chapter Eight.

The whole of Mauritian society is, moreover, affected by this intricate situation. In general, day-to-day contact takes place on friendly terms even though Mauritians often perceive the unequal economic and political distribution that they experience to be ‘ethnically motivated’ and often consider others to be favoured over themselves. Hence, although there is little violence, amongst all the communities one can note prejudice, racism and hostility directed at Mauritians from other ethnic backgrounds. For example, regarding access to the state apparatus, Creoles consider themselves to be in an especially disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the Hindu population (Boswell 2006: 126). And some Hindu activists and politicians in Mauritius link fears about the loss of ancestral Indian languages (due to the rise of Kreol) to concerns about the reproduction of diasporic identity, i.e. they worry about the disappearance of the Hindus as a distinct group in the face of ‘deculturalization’ (Eisenlohr 2006: 53). At the same time, local Hindu organisations offering their political influence to the national political parties can cause problems at village level between members of the same ethnic community. Hindus with

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223 Translation: ‘Can we accept that a Mauritian cultural centre exists only theoretically, while there already exist African, Indian, Chinese, French and English cultural centres?’
connections in the new government ‘pressure and cause difficulties for neighbors known for their sympathies to the [former government party]’ (Eisenlohr 2006: 87). In many of these cases Franco-Mauritians hardly play a role because they are simply absent from many of the local disputes: most of the Mauritian villages and councils do not have Franco-Mauritian voters.

In another case, Franco-Mauritians were also only indirectly connected with what was going on. Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff, as previously mentioned, referred to the split of the Indo-Mauritians into Hindu and Muslim parts. This had both an international and a national component. In some respects this rift was caused by the 1947 partition of India, perceived as a separation of the Hindus and the Muslims. In the local context, however, the newly educated Hindu middle-class was in strong competition with the Franco-Mauritians and emphasised the need for a ‘united Hindu front’ thus indirectly causing more internal division of the Indo-Mauritians (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2007: 125, 126).

The Franco-Mauritians’ role in Mauritian society also indirectly influences relationships between other ethnic groups. For example, older Hindus still remember how in the past most school teachers were Creoles, many of whom favoured the children of the Franco-Mauritian and Creole estate employees over the Indian children and many of whom made fun of Indian culture and religion (Eisenlohr 2006: 83). One elderly lady from a relatively well-off Hindu family (one of the first Indo-Mauritian girls to attend a Catholic secondary school) remembered how the Indo-Mauritian girls had to accept a Christian name at that time. She said that many teachers had looked down on them. The teachers considered them ill-bred, uneducated and inferior. According to the woman, they had to put up with a lot and Indo-Mauritian girls like her also probably concealed much from their parents so as not to shame them (Salverda 2002). Resentment is not only focused on Franco-Mauritians, then, but also, as in this case, towards Creoles. Conversely, Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, even though they have their own troubled history involving former slave masters and descendants of the slave population, have long been linked to each other by their shared Catholic faith and, during the preamble to independence, by their fear for Hindu domination. This does not imply that Creoles and Franco-Mauritians represent a united block, however; Creoles do not only admire white families, they also make fun of Franco-Mauritians and often resent them (Boswell 2006: 51, 148, 184).

This shows that Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians alike are involved in multidimensional relationships with several ethnic groups, while it also shows that the relationships between Franco-Mauritians and other Mauritians differ from one Mauritian (ethnic group and individual) to the other. The relationship with the Hindu population, for example, has been notably different to those with Creoles and Sino-Mauritians. Ethnicity as a structural
phenomenon thus has a significant impact on the Franco-Mauritian elite position and elite status, especially on the way they (symbolically) distinguish themselves from all other Mauritians.

### 7.2 Distinction and Exclusivity

It has already been illustrated how Franco-Mauritians *de facto* distinguish themselves from other Mauritians through exclusive socialisation patterns, as seen from their club life, hunts and *campements*. As Veblen argued, ‘it is not sufficient to merely possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only in evidence’ (Veblen 1994 [1899]: 24). Elites need to noticeably distinguish themselves from others – for intra- and inter-group purposes – through displays of (external) signs of ‘conspicuous consumption’ or other markers by which they can make their superior position known.

For the case of the Franco-Mauritians, symbolic distinction through conspicuous consumption and ostentatious behaviour is rather limited. Franco-Mauritians do own expensive cars and seaside bungalows but these are rather modest compared to other elites around the world. Arguably, in small-scale societies these elements are less necessary for the granting of respectability and for establishing one’s status (Veblen 1994 [1899]: 37). One South African of Franco-Mauritian descent said, ‘it was [in the past] hard to tell who were the rich in the Franco-Mauritian community because there was a culture of inconspicuous wealth.’

The small size of the community means that almost all Franco-Mauritians know which family one belongs to and how wealthy one approximately is. A distinction a number of Franco-Mauritians made between their community and the Hindu community is interesting in this respect. They argued that Hindus have a preference for more tangible possessions, such as a piece of land or a bus, instead of intangible shares in a company (preferred by Franco-Mauritians) – following Veblen’s argumentation, we could say that it is the large size of the Hindu community that proves the key factor in shaping their preference for more tangible and visible symbols of wealth.

Franco-Mauritians do not completely abstain from ostentatious behaviour, however. Many, for example, take holidays abroad and go skiing in Europe. Apart from for reasons of pleasure, this appears to have the purpose of showing off within the Franco-Mauritian community itself. In relation to other social groups and counter-elites, holidays, luxurious products and conspicuous consumption have hardly ever been significant markers of (visual) distinction. And when counter-elites try to show off their wealth, Franco-Mauritians criticise them using the ‘old money v nouveau riche’ paradigm. One Franco-Mauritian, for example, referred to the ‘horrible interior design’ of the ‘Indians’. ‘[Hindu X] may have a Mercedes, but he

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does not have the necessary taste to decorate his house’, he told me. Taste, it seems, is not something that you can acquire overnight but relates to a long tradition of constituting the island’s elite.

**History as Distinction**

Franco-Mauritians clearly distinguish themselves when it comes to their historical involvement in the island’s affairs. Their tradition as an elite is a distinctive feature particularly vis-à-vis counter-elites and socially mobile Mauritians, this having both internal as well as external consequences. Like the patrimony of the family names, history functions almost like the patrimony of the whole Franco-Mauritian community. This explains, to a certain extent, (the perception of) class differences. Franco-Mauritians like to define themselves as the first occupants who laid the foundation for Mauritian society and many Franco-Mauritan ancestors were important elite figures in the development of the island (for better or for worse), while the majority of other Mauritians and newly emerged elites have no ancestors who can claim that (historical) elite status.

Throughout the course of the last century, the Franco-Mauritian community showed a keen interest in studying history and Franco-Mauritian patrimony. This started with the establishment of *La Société de l’Histoire de l’Île Maurice*, founded by the Franco-Mauritian Auguste Toussaint on 10 February 1938. Franco-Mauritian interest in the preservation of historical sites and the writing of biographies of important historical figures is interesting. Especially in the light of new realities, one would perhaps expect the Franco-Mauritians to shy away from history because of the darker side of their ancestors’ legacy. But, like the Békés in Martinique actively involved in *La Société de l’Histoire de la Martinique* (Vogt 2005: 323), Franco-Mauritians only appear to avoid the darker sides of history, the other parts seeming to be cherished. This characteristic, as shown in the previous chapter, also importantly influences Franco-Mauritian marriage patterns, keeping the memory of historical distinctions alive.

If we take into consideration the turbulent times just after the riots of 1937, the foundation of *La Société de l’Histoire de l’Île Maurice* would appear to have been fuelled by the emancipation of the masses and the rise of counter-elites, a fact that stresses the emerging practice of marking distinction through history when facing challenges of decline. By pointing to history and the biographies of important figures, Franco-Mauritians could show that they mattered and that they should not be forgotten now that they felt their position being challenged. An interest in the past probably not only occurs when elites feel ‘threatened’, history certainly seems to play a role in consolidating an elite position. C. Wright Mills, for example, refers to upper-class families in the US who cultivate an interest in the history of the region in which they

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have so long played an honourable role (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 32). Initially, the (amateur) historians in Mauritius mainly focused on the (white) Franco-Mauritians and the British, but gradually they started to include other Mauritians of importance as well. Nowadays, the society is more diverse, though it still has a strong Franco-Mauritian influence.

*La Société de l’Histoire de l’Ile Maurice* and Franco-Mauritians in general, however, pay little attention to slavery and its brutalities. In Martinique the Békés also want to forget slavery and move on. Vogt writes, ‘[a]s one [Béké] said, “Why do blacks have to dwell on it? Okay, slavery was horrible, but it’s the past, and why don’t they let it go?”’ (Vogt 2005: 313). It is here, though, that we do indeed find the contradictory aspects of history in both cases since white former colonial elites are most easily remembered for the system they operated in which they acted as a superior power. The Franco-Mauritians, however, choose instead to focus on the patrimony of historical figures that provide a ‘positive’ outlook. They have named Franco-Mauritian (associated) hotels and schools after French, Franco-Mauritian and British people who sympathised with the Franco-Mauritian elite but who at the same time were not symbols of colonial injustices. As already mentioned, the first French lycée and one Franco-Mauritian-owned hotel are named after the French governor Labourdonnais. A French primary school is named after the famous novel by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie.* And the private tertiary educational institute that recently received a financial injection from a number of Franco-Mauritian business groups and the MCB was renamed the Charles Telfair Institute. Charles Telfair is the only Briton among these historical figures and his inclusion is probably due to the good relationships he had with the Franco-Mauritian planters of his time. He was himself, as a planter, also an important figure in the development of the sugar industry during the early period of British occupation. Slavery still existed and ‘en janvier 1827, il [Charles Telfair] fait partie des 52 membres fondateurs du Comité colonial qui se charge de défendre les intérêts des propriétaires mauriciens, menacés par les partisans de l’émancipation des esclaves’ (L’Express, 17 November 2004). Because of his scientific involvement in the sugar industry and the establishment of *La Société Royale des Arts et des Sciences* (L’Express, 18 October 2004) Telfair did manage to get a school named after him despite his above described role. He seems to have got away with his reputation for resistance to abolishing slavery. In contrast, Adrien d’Epinay, the dominant symbol of the struggle against abolition, has little chance of having a hotel or school named after him because he is too strongly associated with colonial injustices.

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226 Most likely Franco-Mauritians ignore Bernardin de St. Pierre’s fierce criticism on the slave society and may even dislike him for that, yet, at the same time, they appreciate his novel *Paul et Virginie* and rename a school after it.

227 Translation: ‘On January 1827, he [Charles Telfair] belonged to the 52 founding members of the Colonial Committee, which was in charge of defending the interests of Mauritian [slave] owners who felt threatened by the partisans of the emancipation of slaves.’
Arguably, Charles Telfair and Governor Labourdonnais belong to the general history of Mauritius, yet they seemed to be particularly appreciated by Franco-Mauritians in present day Mauritius because, at key moments in history, they did not criticise Franco-Mauritians. Adolphe de Plevitz, the plantation owner who took a stand on behalf of the Indian immigrants, for example, seems to be ignored by Franco-Mauritians even though he is an important historical figure. His statue is found at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI), founded by the Mauritian government in collaboration with the Indian government in 1970, which has a strong focus on Indo-Mauritian culture.

Negative memories of the past bring to mind for the Mauritians the humiliation factor of white superiority during the colonial period and this means that Franco-Mauritians have to move carefully when referring to history as the past can easily create a backlash, tarnishing their public image. In 2006, it was once again Adrien d’Epinay who came back to haunt the Franco-Mauritians, although this time with a little help from Jean-Pierre Lenoir. In a letter to the editor, Jean-Pierre Lenoir publicly attacked a politician’s proposal to remove the statue of Adrien d’Epinay from its pedestal in the centre of Port Louis. The statue has been standing there ever since the nineteenth century but for some politicians Adrien d’Epinay’s statue, shown in Picture 7.1, remains an eyesore because of its association with slavery – someone even placed a placard saying ‘coupable, condamné par l’histoire’ around the statue’s neck in 2006. Almost every year some time around the first of February, which is when the abolition of slavery is commemorated, it is suggested that the statue be removed. Lenoir and a number of other non-white Mauritians stressed that d’Epinay was one of the first people to advocate freedom of the press and that his campaign to get financial compensation for slaveholders should be seen in the context of that period in time (see, for example, L’Express 31 January 2006). They, therefore, argue that the statue is part of Mauritian history and that it should not be removed by politicians who, according to them, are only using the debate around the statue to further their own political aims.228

Counterarguments given by Mauritians in favour of the removal mainly focused on Jean-Pierre Lenoir because of the fact that he, as a Franco-Mauritian, openly took a stand for the Franco-Mauritian community. This illustrates why Franco-Mauritians have adopted a low-profile in the public debate; Jean-Pierre Lenoir’s frank speaking was, thus, not appreciated by all Franco-Mauritians, as it could potentially create further challenges to their position. A Franco-Mauritian

228 A truth and reconciliation commission has also been put in place to deal with the issue of slavery in Mauritian history (L’Express, 1 February 2008). What will come of this remains to be seen but it is unlikely that it will have a major impact on the Franco-Mauritians as they cannot be blamed for a historical episode that ended in 1833. Moreover, Franco-Mauritians are not the only descendants of the slave-masters. Other Mauritians, like the gens de couleur, have both slaves and slave-masters as ancestors, making the issue of liability particularly difficult.
businessman who was against the removal said, ‘I would have preferred Jean-Pierre [Lenoir] not to have [publicly] reacted to [the suggestion to remove the statue]. It would have been better if it had just been [one of the non-whites], because now with Jean-Pierre people think [all] Franco-Mauritians think the same.’ As a result of these tensions, Franco-Mauritians tend to study other historical figures since, apart from Jean-Pierre Lenoir, they do not want to get their fingers burnt by handling the historical personality of Adrien d’Epinay.

Franco-Mauritians’ (selective) interest in certain important historical figures appears, nevertheless, to signal the importance of their community in the development of the island. The fact that they are descended from the elite that shaped island society distinguishes Franco-Mauritians from others, even though only a limited number of them actually have an active interest in history. Knowledge of this nevertheless gives the rest of the community an awareness of the community’s historical patrimony and historical position at the top of the class hierarchy, a fact closely related to their origin.

229 Interview: Mauritius, 23 February 2006.
Franco-Mauritian patrimony is associated with their French ancestry, an aspect that has throughout much of the island’s history been very suitable for establishing distinctions; today though, this patrimony is increasingly coming under pressure. Their French background was always at the core of the Franco-Mauritian elite position as it set them apart from the British colonial government from the beginning. It also distinguished the Franco-Mauritians from subordinate groups: French was originally only spoken by the Franco-Mauritians and the gens de couleur. The majority of Mauritians spoke Kreol while a number of other languages such as Bhojpuri (an Indian language spoken by many of the Indian indentured labourers), Hakka (a Chinese language spoken by the Sino-Mauritian community), Urdu, Tamil and Telegu (see, for example, Benedict 1961: 34, 35) were also spoken.\footnote{A number of the island’s languages, more than they were actually spoken on a daily basis, functioned as symbolic markers of ethnic boundaries. These ancestral languages still have an important symbolic function and frequently issues related to language have flared up in the public sphere (see, for example, Eisenlohr 2006).} The language situation in colonial times was thus closely related to socio-economic hierarchy:

French has a prestige value among Franco-Mauritians and Creoles. Members of the Creole population who are rising in the social and economic scale give up speaking Creole [i.e. Kreol] in favour of French, and their wives may even pretend to be unable to understand Creole. Franco-Mauritians make a point of using French among themselves, only employing Creole to address servants or employees of low status. To use Creole in the wrong context is to commit a serious blunder. Politically, especially for the Indo-Mauritians, the French language has come to symbolize the economic and political dominance of the Franco-Mauritians. The Franco-Mauritian and upper class Creole also tend to see any attack on the French language as an attempt to undermine their position in Mauritian society (Benedict 1961: 36).

When Mauritius gained independence, the choice of an official language was quickly made. English had neutral connotations in an ethnically tense context as the British had never settled in large numbers on the island and no other ethnic group claimed it as its ancestral language. After independence the situation changed with French becoming much less of a marker of elite distinction. Every Mauritian is exposed to the French language now because the most important newspaper and many television programmes, such as the main news, are in French. Notwithstanding that, Kreol is the mother tongue of most Mauritians, including those whose ancestors spoke Bhojpuri and Hakka; many Mauritians also master the French language well too
though. At the same time, Kreol has become less stigmatised and is now the *lingua franca* of the island, being used in everyday conversation, in political rallies and in parliament – the only people still having French as their mother tongue are more or less the same ones as during the colonial period, the Franco-Mauritians and the *gens de couleur*. In a way, for better or for worse, this challenges French as a marker of Franco-Mauritian elite distinction, a fact that was underlined by the case of Franco-Mauritians becoming a minority in the *Alliance Française*. Serious challenges, apart from this, have come from the large influx of tourists, expatriates and French television. As a consequence of increasing international exposure and globalisation, many Mauritians came to realise, for example, that Franco-Mauritians speak French differently to the French spoken in France. Boswell writes, ‘*[w]hen Creoles make fun of Franco-Mauritians, they often point out that “those Mauritians can’t even pronounce French properly” and in fact, speak a “bastardised” version of the language*’ (Boswell 2006: 148). French culture in its culinary form, especially cheese and wine, has also become more available to everyone. Consequently, French culture as a whole is nowadays less associated with the Franco-Mauritians than before. This may partly be a sign of (successful) elite emulation: Mauritians want to identify themselves with the symbolic markers of elite superiority, thereby jeopardising these markers as exclusive symbols of elite distinction. The decline of French culture and language as exclusive Franco-Mauritian symbols of elite distinction was, however, also partly caused by international politics. As a Franco-Mauritian said, ‘a new current in which the importance of France gained weight was caused by the English government. They [i.e. the British] always say “we don’t have any money” and are purely in it for economic reasons. The French use active propaganda, which is strongly culturally based. At first sight at least.’ In independent Mauritius some note how ‘French propaganda’ focuses on all Mauritians, disregarding their ethnic background. One of the founders of the *École du Nord*, the French private school established in the 1970s, recalled the problems the school had had with the French embassy. Initially, the French embassy was willing to support the school but then they pulled out because the French state did not want to be associated with a small pocket of white Mauritians only. According to the informant this decision also had to do with Mitterrand and the *gauchistes* coming to power in 1981. More than a decade after the school opened the French state has, however, become involved and nowadays the school is part of the global network of schools backed by the French state. Even though Franco-Mauritians benefit from this, the assumption is that the French actually only changed their mind in favour of supporting the

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231 Even for many Franco-Mauritians, French cuisine forms only part of their gastronomic culture. As a Franco-Mauritian priest said, ‘*[o]rdinary Franco-Mauritians eat rice and curries.*’


233 Interview: Mauritius, 27 February 2006.
French school when they had made sure that the French culture and language was not strictly associated only with Franco-Mauritians.234

The change is not always well-perceived. Jean-Pierre Lenoir, the last editor-in-chief of *Le Cernéen*, said, ‘we don’t get along that much with the French expatriates; 95 percent of them come to Mauritius with prejudices, thinking that a white man in the southern hemisphere is obliged to be a colonialist and slaveholder etc. etc. … Even at the [French] embassy level they don’t care about us and I have stopped going to [their] cocktail parties.235 [The French] care about everything that’s not white.’236 Here a clear reference is being made to the most distinctive feature of Franco-Mauritian physical appearance.

**Embodied Signs of Superiority**

Arguably the most important symbol of Franco-Mauritian elite distinction is their white skin-colour, a fact demonstrated, for example, by the colloquial name for Franco-Mauritians: *blancs*. This distinctive and intricate feature is maintained internally (as shown by Franco-Mauritian marriage patterns), through the structural phenomenon of ethnicity in Mauritian society and as an ascription – the ascription is a paradoxical phenomenon involving both resentment and emulation. A Franco-Mauritian student said, ‘Mauritius is a multicultural island which is like a rainbow where the colours don’t blend.’ According to him, the distinction of skin-colour is not specifically racist but is rather ‘communalist’, the term coined in Mauritius for favouring one’s own ethnic community.237

The anthropologist Uli Linke argues that whiteness has been effective because ‘social categories are articulated onto material objects, like the body, in order to render them natural, irrevocable, and permanent’ (Linke 1999: 131, 136). Physical appearance as a sign of symbolic superiority is innate and consequently almost the opposite to conspicuous and vicarious consumption (Veblen 1994 [1899]) and fashion (Simmel 1957): these latter markers are manufactured and brought into play to function as symbols of superiority. The innate aspect, in contrast to these, makes an elite group highly impenetrable for people without the specific physical appearance required for membership: one cannot change to become white in the same way that one can purchase certain prestige goods. In the same way, whiteness is a symbol which

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234 A Franco-Mauritian CEO was surprised that no anthropological research had been done on the Franco-Mauritians up to now, especially with respect to French researchers. He said, ‘[m]aybe the French feel a bit ashamed of the Franco-Mauritians. They want this island to be under the influence of French and French culture, which it is, but the Franco-Mauritians have an important stake in this.’ Obviously, he was not aware of Astrid de Gentile’s work when he made this comment, as she received her PhD from the University of Bordeaux.

235 Numerous other Franco-Mauritians, however, still attend these cocktail parties as well as other celebrations organised by the French embassy.

236 Interview: Mauritius, 7 February 2006.

cannot be shaken off unlike conspicuous consumption or fashions which can – thus, in situations where white skin-colour is problematic, a white elite member cannot simply hide his/her physical appearance. Indeed, as a consequence of global developments such as the decolonisation process white skin-colour is no longer automatically accepted as a sign of superiority (Moodley and Adam 2000: 59). It now represents a form of monopolization and exclusion which is considered incompatible with many current world aesthetics (Murphy 1988: 2). Nevertheless, the symbolic value of having a white skin-colour has certainly not become obsolete, either. Whiteness continues to have a worldwide impact and remains strongly linked to historical domination in the colonies and the continuing domination of the ‘white’ Western world. Some even argue that ideas about the superiority of the white ‘race’ have increased, illustrating this viewpoint by, for example, talking about the use of toxic skin bleaching creams in an attempt to modify an apparently unmodifiable physical trait (Hunter 2007: 12).  

Labour Division

In Mauritius, whiteness continues to be perceived as something equalling economic power, although not to the same extent as in the past when ‘an oligarchy, with a racial origin, exercised a complete hegemony, political, social, cultural and religiously; with as a consequence making the black inferior and powerless’ (Chan Low 2005: 280). Due to Franco-Mauritians’ historical position as bosses, as illustrated in Chapter Five, generally both Franco-Mauritians and Mauritians alike, though by no means all of them, assume that whites are better suited as bosses than other Mauritians. This appears to have similarities to the case of the Békés in Martinique where a black boss badly treating a black was considered worse than a white boss doing the same thing; a white boss was typically seen as ‘dur, mais juste et bon’ (Kovats Beaudoux and Giraud 2002: 171). It has also been argued that numerous Mauritians have (subconscious) feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis whites, this fact being influenced by the legacy of white superiority.

The pattern of employment among other Mauritians, especially for those employees in Franco-Mauritian households, further reinforced the elite status among the Franco-Mauritians as well as the symbolic superiority of having a white skin-colour. Many Franco-Mauritians were raised by nannies and almost all Franco-Mauritian households have at least one bonne (domestic

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238 It has been suggested that the ‘bleaching syndrome’, the internalization of a white aesthetic ideal, is the result of the historic legacy of slavery and colonialism around the world (quoting Ronald Hall in Hunter 2007: 3). However, it raises an interesting question. Dark skin has frequently been associated with outdoor manual labour. Considering that elites have almost always been exempt from manual labour, the symbolic superiority of a lighter skin may, then, have already existed before the white Europeans forced their colonial projects upon many parts of the world.

239 Translation: ‘tough, but fair and generous’

240 Low labour costs make having domestic servants a possibility for middle class Mauritians; the difference with the Franco-Mauritians, however, is that all the other communities, except the Sino-Mauritians, know that there are servants with their own background.
servant) and a gardener. In the past Franco-Mauritians tended to have even more domestic servants. An elderly Franco-Mauritian woman, whose late husband had been a manager at a sugar estate, said, ‘before there were cooks, gardeners and servants working seven days a week. They lived at the premises and were paid by the sugar estate.’\(^{241}\) It was her son, working as a field manager, who had already mentioned to me that they lived like *milliardaires pauvres*, since they ‘had all the servants but weren’t rich.’\(^{242}\) Nowadays, the domestic servants often tend live elsewhere and only occasionally are they to be found next door to the Franco-Mauritians in servant quarters.\(^{243}\)

None of the domestic staff are ever white. Nannies and domestic servants tend to be Creole or Hindu women, while the gardeners can be from any community apart from the Sino-Mauritians – the latter are, like the Franco-Mauritians, not available for work as domestic servants. From earliest childhood, Franco-Mauritians inevitably notice that no white is working as domestic servant or in any other working class function, something which distinguishes the Franco-Mauritians from most other people. Whether this has an impact on whether the Franco-Mauritians have a sense of superiority differs from person to person; many Franco-Mauritians do not treat other Mauritians as inferiors. However, as has been shown by the arguments around partner choice, most Franco-Mauritians do share a strong sense of class difference which is associated with their white skin-colour.

Social stratification has led to an increase in the number of Mauritians who can afford domestic staff but since Franco-Mauritians are still part and parcel of the wealthiest sections of society this has hardly affected the symbolic aspect of their white skin-colour. Historical consciousness among Franco-Mauritians also still marks this difference once more showing how their discursive practices focus on their historical position. A Franco-Mauritian student in Cape Town said, ‘the granddaughter of my *bonne* studies here. But we aren’t at all from the same social class. It’s great that she succeeded, but we don’t have a lot in common, because we aren’t from the same social class.’\(^{244}\)

Social stratification in the household has, moreover, an important language component.\(^{245}\) In Mauritius, Franco-Mauritians, from earliest childhood, learn Kreol from their nannies and domestic servants. This is the language spoken by the majority of Mauritians while, as previously

\(^{241}\) Interview: Mauritius, 21 December 2005.
\(^{242}\) Interview: Mauritius, 21 December 2005.
\(^{243}\) The elderly woman, whose present domestic worker lives elsewhere, said, ‘there is [a Creole woman] living in the small place behind [my house]. She has been living with me for forty-six years and it’s almost if she’s part of the family. She has retired now because she’s eighty-nine. Now I actually take her food!’\(^{244}\) Interview: South Africa, 11 September 2006.
\(^{245}\) This is similar to, for example, the Macanese (Portuguese) elite in Macau. There the nannies would teach the children how to speak Cantonese and made them familiar with Chinese domestic habits (Pina-Cabral 2000: 216).
shown, within the Franco-Mauritian community the standard language is French. For the Franco-Mauritians Kreo predominantly functions as a means of communication with the domestic personnel, acting, then, as a clear symbol of distinction. Within the community it is only Franco-Mauritian men who use Kreo to crack jokes among themselves. But these men would never address a Franco-Mauritian woman in Kreo, even though Franco-Mauritian women tend to be as fluent in this language (although some argue that this is not the case and that they do not, in fact, master Kreo).

These connotations mean that Franco-Mauritians have nowadays to sometimes carefully consider what language is the most appropriate to use, since the legacy of Kreo as the servants’ language can be sensitive. A young Franco-Mauritian man explained how a white addressing, for example, a policeman can be difficult. The policeman may consider the Franco-Mauritian arrogant if the latter addresses the former in French, as French is associated with Franco-Mauritians’ colonial hegemony. But if the Franco-Mauritian addresses the policeman in Kreo the policeman may interpret that the Franco-Mauritian thinks he does not speak French and that he is, consequently, looking down on him.\textsuperscript{246}

Domestic staff simplify Franco-Mauritian life and are an important aspect having to do with enjoying life on the island. A Franco-Mauritian grandmother said, ‘life is too hard in Paris because you don’t have nannies like in Mauritius. How could you raise a baby all by yourself? Every time you want something from the bakery you have to fully dress your baby and bring it downstairs with you’ – the latter aspect is, according to her, also a consequence of the individualistic lifestyle in Paris since in Mauritius, by contrast, neighbours help each other.\textsuperscript{247} One possibility is that Franco-Mauritians also cherish their lives in Mauritius because of the symbolic elite distinction of their white skin-colour: in Europe they are one of the many and their skin-colour is not a symbol of elite distinction, as will be illustrated below, while in Mauritius it assigns them elite status.\textsuperscript{248}

\textit{White Equals Power and Wealth}

White skin-colour, thus, remains associated with wealth even though Franco-Mauritians often point out that poverty also exists within their community. But this is relative. Franco-Mauritians who argue they are not wealthy always compare themselves to the economically most powerful and wealthiest Franco-Mauritians families or to other rich Mauritians who, according to them,}

\textsuperscript{246} Interview: France, 18 October 2006.
\textsuperscript{247} Participant observation: Mauritius, 24 December 2005.
\textsuperscript{248} Obviously, this is intricately entangled with the advantages of a nice climate, a strong family life and having domestic staff, all these, in general, being more difficult to attain in Europe. Franco-Mauritians also argue that life in Mauritius is less hectic and competitive which gives them more time for leisure. Thus, conspicuous leisure (Veblen 1994 [1899]) still counts as something important for the case of the Franco-Mauritians.
drive big cars and are much more affluent. Franco-Mauritians virtually never compare themselves with poor Creoles, Muslims or Hindus. Comparatively speaking, then, it must be said that there is little real poverty in the Franco-Mauritian community. No Franco-Mauritians work as labourers; the survey also confirms the accumulation of wealth in the community. In cases where a Franco-Mauritian falls below a certain threshold, moreover, the family and community are often willing to help out financially. The Franco-Mauritian committee *Entreaide*, which financially supports needy Franco-Mauritians, was established for several reasons related to this. It was, for example, generally argued that Franco-Mauritians felt that they could not apply for healthcare in the public healthcare institutes. To line up at the hospitals with all the other Mauritians is considered degrading and, consequently, support is provided to those who need it to apply for private health care.\(^ {249} \) This provides an interesting and relevant contrast to the case of the Afrikaners in South Africa. The Afrikaner elite in South Africa stopped supporting ‘poorer’ sections of the Afrikaners, something which resulted in the appearance of a visible group of poor whites. The Franco-Mauritian community is much smaller than the Afrikaner one, though, and ‘poorer’ Franco-Mauritians are normally personally known. Consequently, the ‘poorer’ whites are looked after and therefore have a living standard above that of most Mauritians; they are also prevented from sinking into the working classes. A successful Franco-Mauritian businessman said:

Our situation is difficult because we are a small community, we are perceived as rich and this perception does not imply that it is [an] incorrect [one]. In a way we set the standard and other communities don’t like that; and what is the lowest job Franco-Mauritians have? Salesman? There are not many secretaries. Other communities don’t like it that the Franco-Mauritians are always the bosses.\(^ {250} \)

A Franco-Mauritian is thus both associated with white skin-colour and (relative) wealth, a fact which has a significant impact on the symbolic aspect of Franco-Mauritians’ white skin-colour for other Mauritians. It seems as if Franco-Mauritian symbolic elite distinction coming from their white skin colour is something that is also ascribed to them. Boswell argues, ‘where dominant groups continue to emphasise the value and importance of whiteness, it is difficult for Creoles not to see “whitening” as central to their survival in social and practical terms.’ There is a tendency among Creoles to emulate the Franco-Mauritians, to have a preference for marrying whites and, in certain cases, to resent their own blackness (Boswell 2006: 51, 85, 95). A Franco-Mauritian priest talked about the difference in colour of the hands of the (black) men and women

\(^ {249} \) Equally, Franco-Mauritians hardly ever make use of public transport. They would sometimes argue that if you see a white on a bus then you know it is not a Franco-Mauritian but probably a tourist.

\(^ {250} \) Interview: Mauritius, 1 June 2006.
he had married in his life: almost always the women’s hands were lighter-skinned. This was symbolised in a wedding picture that a young Creole, who had been in his parish as a poor boy, had sent him from France: it showed the Creole boy with his white French bride. According to the priest this was the perfect symbol of the boy’s success for his friends and family in Mauritius. It can be seen then that the superiority of a white skin-colour is reinforced by other Mauritians, especially because Franco-Mauritians themselves also notice the perception of other Mauritians towards their skin-colour. For example, one Franco-Mauritian informant explained how he sometimes felt a bit awkward when entering a shop and being attended first when there were non-white Mauritians in line in front of him. Other Franco-Mauritians argued that some Mauritians liked to befriend them because they wanted white friends.

Challenging the Skin

In contrast to the decline of French language and French culture as symbols of elite distinction, increasing encounters between Mauritians and white foreigners have so far had little impact on perceptions of white skin-colour as a marker of, most specifically, wealth. Like Franco-Mauritians, most white expatriates work in white-collar and management positions – more often for international companies than for Mauritian businesses. They tend to live in the same upmarket residential areas as many Franco-Mauritians do while the white tourists stay predominantly in the luxurious hotel resorts and have a lot more to spend than the average Mauritian. Thus, white continues to be equated with wealth.

White foreigners, however, challenge the symbolic aspect of white skin-colour in another way. European whites come from societies where “[w]hiteness for the majority of “white” people is so unmarked that in their eyes, it does not actually function as a racial or ethnic identity, at least outside of particular contexts when they might perceive themselves to be in a minority’ (Garner 2007: 34, 35). As a response to Europe’s colonial history there was a counter-reaction to disqualify the symbolic superiority of white skin-colour in former colonies. The expatriates and tourists (especially French) consider Franco-Mauritians to be an anachronism – as has already been indicated by Jean-Pierre Lenoir’s complaint about them. They also tend to have a more

252 A preference among Creoles for a whiter skin appears to be more for intra-group purposes than for getting closer to the Franco-Mauritians. Access to the Franco-Mauritian community would still be denied because of the community’s self-definition that one needs to have white ancestors to be a member. In this respect, skin bleaches are thus useless. Whether skin bleaches are used among non-white Mauritians for intra-group purposes is not completely clear, because there is little information about this. Boswell, for example, only refers to Creoles using hair straighteners and not to any other groups. It might be that some of the Hindus use skin bleaches but that would probably relate to the Indian obsession with fair skin – under the influence of the popular Bollywood films this value may have been exported to Mauritius.
open mentality towards socialising with and marrying non-white Mauritians. Conversely, many Franco-Mauritians often feel looked-down upon by them and as a counter-reaction automatically disqualify many of these French and Europeans from their group, seeing them as belonging to a lower class.\footnote{An elderly Franco-Mauritian woman said, ‘French who have been living in Africa understand us better than the French from France.’ They know about the relationship between whites and blacks while the white Europeans do not really understand this, she suggested.} Equally in Martinique, Vogt writes, ‘[white French] are generally disdained in cultural terms and for their class status’ (Vogt, 2005: 205) – when, however, (as was illustrated in the previous chapter) Franco-Mauritians (and Békés) accept foreign whites as partners, they hardly refer to class and cultural differences at all. Franco-Mauritians also argue that Mauritian interest in white foreigners relates to their skin-colour. A Franco-Mauritian said, ‘Mauritians are proud if they can receive a white and, thus, they tend to be hospitable [to white foreigners].’ Most Mauritians thus seem to have little resentment towards whites in general and can most often perfectly distinguish a foreign white from a Franco-Mauritian. Unlike many people in former colonies the Mauritians do not especially dislike their former white colonisers, in this case the British. It seems that resentment over colonial injustices focuses more on the Franco-Mauritians, in fact.

7.3 Universalistic Tendencies

In a society where Franco-Mauritians distinctively feature as an elite and as a focus for memories of colonial injustice and the perpetuation of inequality, it may be difficult to face challenges to an elite position by assuming universalistic functions. Matters are further complicated because in Mauritian society perceptions of cultural and ethnic difference have a substantial impact. Cultural similarities are often ignored, with Mauritians judging other Mauritians according to their ethnic background.

Franco-Mauritians’ small numbers means that many Mauritians hardly ever meet them or only in certain, often hierarchical, settings. It is argued that compared to the colonial period there are now (relatively) fewer Franco-Mauritian general practitioners and priests. Franco-Mauritians, moreover, only frequent a small number of private schools and visit private health clinics instead of making use of free public health care. A Mauritian journalist said, ‘a non-Franco-Mauritian goes to a school where there are no Franco-Mauritians.’\footnote{Interview: France, 18 October 2006.} Then to the university, where there are no Franco-Mauritians either [because they predominantly study abroad]. By the time this Mauritian turns twenty-three and is employed in his first job he might, for the first time in his

\footnote{Franco-Mauritian children attend only a few schools that follow the European school year, while the Mauritian system is accustomed to the southern cycle.}
life, shake the hand of a Franco-Mauritian [manager]. The situation is so exaggerated that in one case a Franco-Mauritian woman actually had to show her passport to a nineteen-year-old colleague who could not believe that white Mauritians existed. Most Mauritians, however, are aware of their existence even though they may only be familiar with whites as the 'big bosses' depicted in newspapers and on television. Creoles, Hindus and Muslims, then, perceive the economic situation of the Franco-Mauritians in relation to their own economic positions as superior (Hempel 2009: 468).

Franco-Mauritians are, therefore, in a difficult position for establishing vertical loyalties and assuming universalistic functions. They may establish some vertical loyalty because Franco-Mauritian businesses are among the largest employers on the island, but their economic power is also one of the prime reasons for the resentment felt towards them. This makes creating rapport with other Mauritians a complex and precarious process.

**Religion**

Most Franco-Mauritians are Catholic, a faith also adhered to by most of the Creoles and the Sino-Mauritians. In 1722, the Catholic Church established itself on the island. Subsequently, the white settlers' slaves and slave descendants were also baptised (Nagapen 1996). From the very beginning the Catholic Church in Mauritius was a hierarchical institution with the whites at the top and non-whites as followers. Priests were predominantly white Mauritians or whites coming from overseas. During mass some benches were reserved for whites (Chan Low 2005: 280) and church wardens were only either Franco-Mauritians or gens de couleur. The majority of Catholics were, however, non-whites, which has made the church an institution ideal for obtaining vertical loyalties. This facet of the church has been used to potential threats, as is shown by the alliances made between Creoles and Franco-Mauritians during the political campaign against independence. The church, however, has now changed according to one of the first non-white Mauritian priests:

> The composition of the church wardens … gradually changed from the 1960s onwards. Laymen were steadily recruited from all walks of life. Little by little the power within the church changed to all ethnic communities. Today you have wardens who are policemen, labourers etc. ... Except in a few churches, like St. Thérèse in Curepipe, Kreol is used as the language for sermons. Before many people … who spoke Kreol amongst themselves would shift to French when they addressed me. Today this happens less.
In the early 1970s, the system of benches reserved for Franco-Mauritians was abolished as well, though according to a Creole priest the people who experienced this talk about it as if it were yesterday. This might have been one of the first signs that the church belonged to everyone, according to him. It was also a challenge to Franco-Mauritian rule as they had to accept the growing voice of other Mauritians within the church. Today, the church appears to be much more of an advocate for the problems of poorer, mainly Creole, followers, although in many cases the institution still looks like something of a Franco-Mauritian stronghold. For example, the head of the church in Mauritius, the bishop, and a number of priests actively involved in social work are Franco-Mauritians, thus reconfirming the traditional hierarchy. Franco-Mauritian priests, even when their parishes are completely non-white, also tend to receive more financial aid. A Creole priest who worked at a church near a sugar estate said, ‘when I asked the estate for some financial support, they said they couldn’t afford it. After me a white priest took over [the parish] and then they were suddenly able to provide financial support.’\textsuperscript{260} Noteworthy here is that this priest thought, like some other priests, that Creole priests might be less accustomed to asking Franco-Mauritians for financial support than others. Despite this image favouring Franco-Mauritians, the Catholic Church is less hierarchically divided by skin-colour than it was in the past. Franco-Mauritian churchgoers also appreciate their non-white priests and, in general, seem to have accepted the changing situation and adapted to the shift in the balance of power within the church.

Sharing the Catholic faith with certain sections of the Mauritian population still functions to establish vertical loyalties, though sometimes the other way around to what one might expect. When the work and residence permit of a French priest was not renewed by the government in 1986, the argument was heard that this could be explained by the fact that the priest had been preaching among the workers in the EPZ, encouraging them to organise themselves in unions. Apparently, he claimed rights on behalf of all the workers, not merely the Christian ones. A widely shared perception was, however, (especially among Christians) that the priest was evicted because of his Christian background. In relation to this Eriksen states:

\begin{quote}
The fact that most Mauritian Catholics perceived [the priest] primarily as a Catholic, rather than as a champion of social justice, exemplifies the pragmatic primacy of ethnic identity/membership, community overruling class in this case; and it is true that virtually any political issue is immediately interpreted (or re-interpreted) by ordinary people as dealing with ethnic conflict rather than with any conflict in society (Eriksen 1998: 96).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{260} Interview: Mauritius, 15 February 2006.
Franco-Mauritians, who could be perceived as the target of the French priest in this case (since they owned many of the EPZ factories), actually supported the Christian side in this conflict. Most likely, this was effective in creating ties between them and the much larger Creole population with, as shared enemy, the government controlled by the Hindus. These ties are, at the same time, also maintained by Creoles. As Boswell argues, ‘[s]ome [Creoles] assumed that in return for their loyalty and service to the church and to the white communities, they would receive the kind of patronage and support that other ethnic groups seemed to be getting from their religious and social leaders’ (Boswell 2006: 88).

Whether solidarity shaped by the Catholic faith will continue is open to debate; the loss of vertical loyalties is certainly possible, though. It is argued that the next bishop will certainly not be a Franco-Mauritian because of the church’s (colonial) history. Moreover, Franco-Mauritians are, in general, practising less and less compared to before the 1960s when many visited mass regularly. According to a non-white priest, ‘[the Franco-Mauritians] are influenced by travelling, Europe, and a western style of living.’ Nowadays, virtually no Franco-Mauritians study to become a priest, while there is a growing vocation for this (and for the practising of Catholic religion in general) among Creoles. Similarly, a gens de couleur woman, herself a devoted Catholic, argued that this aspect of bonding between Creoles and Franco-Mauritians was declining.  

Charity

The Franco-Mauritian community may be the island’s wealthiest community but it does share its wealth with others, at least to a certain extent. Traditionally, Franco-Mauritians have been involved in charity work and social projects, a trait they share with many other elites around the world – ‘[p]hilanthropy is an integral and defining element of elite culture [in the US]’, writes Francie Ostrower (Ostrower 1995: 6). According to Odendahl elites have, in general terms, a vision of the world that they want to share with others; ‘[t]hey believe they set an example in their local communities and nationally. In this regard, much of their work is paternalistic’ (Odendahl 1990: 8). Indeed, some Franco-Mauritians themselves referred to the paternalistic behaviour of certain Franco-Mauritian women involved in charity work. At the same time, charity is considered a practice useful for the social reproduction of the upper class (Odendahl 1990: 232). Franco-Mauritians have, for example, supported the French private schools both financially and by donating land. This appears to have been motivated by the desire to safeguard quality education for the whole community – their sense of belonging appears, once more, to be

261 Interview: Mauritius, 16 March 2006.
262 Interview: Mauritius, February 2005.
beneficial for the whole community. Wealthier Franco-Mauritians and/or businesses (for example, sugar estates) contribute financially not specifically for their own offspring but in order to improve the educational facilities for all Franco-Mauritians – and, subsequently, also for the other Mauritians attending these schools.

Odendaal critically remarks, ‘[t]he rich do not necessarily get richer because of their philanthropy, but the poor are rarely made better off because of it either’ (Odendahl 1990: 44). In Mauritius, for example, Creoles contest the view of wealthy local Franco-Mauritian landowners that sees them as charitable (Boswell 2006: 184). Nevertheless, this charitable role does seem part and parcel of Franco-Mauritian culture as, historically, this group has been involved in charity and social work through the Catholic Church. Bertrand Caudrelier, a Franco-Mauritian businessman, and his wife are practicing Catholics and through their faith they are engaged in social work. According to Caudrelier, the social work is not directly related to the church even though the project, which helps promote effective communication between couples, was initiated by a priest. Others are involved in social work directly related to the church, such as church campaigns to prevent drug abuse. The fact that many Franco-Mauritians are still practising Catholics means that their financial contributions and the dedication of time represent an intricate mixture of inner-conviction and self-interested motives establishing vertical loyalty with Creoles and other Catholic Mauritians.

Charity seems, to a certain extent, to be religiously based in Mauritius. It has also been argued that in comparison to Hindu groups, Catholic and Muslim religious organisations are more involved in social work. As illustrated previously, Franco-Mauritian priests find it easier to contact Franco-Mauritians for financial support. This connection between Franco-Mauritian charity and the Catholic Church has been maintained up to now. Franco-Mauritian families and companies continue to support the church, for example, in cases where the renovation of an old church is necessary.

Franco-Mauritians are also involved in a range of other charities, both personally and through their enterprises, and mainly focus on social work. Personally, they are, for example, involved in a detox centre for women suffering from alcohol abuse, anti-smoking campaigns, a school teaching illiterate children how to read and write and the local AIDS NGO. Although there is close co-operation with other Mauritians in these projects and NGOs, Franco-Mauritians have often been the initiators of these and/or tend to be importantly involved in the

263 Interview: Mauritius, 23 February 2006.
264 Owing to the small size of the island and the absence of art museums Franco-Mauritians are not involved in making ‘high culture’ accessible to the wider society, something which is an important quality of elite philanthropy in the US (Odendahl 1990) and of the old elite families in France (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1998: 227).
management. To a large extent the initiators of such projects and organisations have been women, a situation similar to the philanthropy of the US elite.

Nonprofit work, more than anything else, engages them, giving them a sense of identity and meaning. This is particularly true for rich women, who view themselves as having fewer opportunities than wealthy men owing to a relatively rigid division of labor by gender in the upper class. Historically, charity work has been a meaningful activity allowed but not limited to wealthy women (Odendahl 1990: 5).

Franco-Mauritian men do contribute to charity as well, though. This help mainly comes from the involvement of Franco-Mauritian businesses (run by men) in social work and related public causes.

Social Responsibility

Historically, Franco-Mauritian involvement in charity and social work has been facilitated by their networks, as already shown by the fact that Franco-Mauritian priests more easily find their way to Franco-Mauritian sponsors. Pascalle de Fleurigny, a Franco-Mauritian woman professionally involved in social work, argued that most of the funding always comes from the same large Franco-Mauritian business groups and from the semi state-controlled Air Mauritius. According to her, social work has, for most of the time, been neglected by the government. Moreover, de Fleurigny argued that one of the largest Muslim business groups never gives money: ‘it is remarkable that it is almost only the Franco-Mauritian companies that support social work.’

From this point of view, philanthropy is something that sets Franco-Mauritians apart from counter-elites and from the rest of the population who cannot afford to support charity to such an extent as the elite. But in reality, it must be said, supporting charity in Mauritius is also related to ethnic networks. Pascalle de Fleurigny said that thanks to the involvement of a Sino-Mauritian in the NGO, they had been able to approach Sino-Mauritian businesses. This implies that it is not only about others refraining from supporting charity, but also about having the right (ethnic) contacts.

Franco-Mauritian support for charity may, nevertheless, be different to a certain extent. Pascalle de Fleurigny said, ‘I don’t receive funds only because of my background, because the same companies also support social work organisations with other [ethnic] signatures.’ Other Mauritians have access to Franco-Mauritian charity as well and many temples for religious

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265 Interview: Mauritius, 10 February 2005.
266 Ibid.
worship found in the countryside were built on land supplied by sugar estates. One Franco-Mauritian heir to a sugar estate said, ‘[w]e give some financial support to the [local] parish together with another estate. And the Tamil temple [located in a village close to the estate] was given by my grandfather. Sometimes we sell a plot of land for a reasonable price to a social, religious or cultural group. But it has to be part of a master plan of the village council. We want it to be planned properly and not in a disorganised way.’

The importance of seeking vertical loyalties in the context of this financial support for charity and social projects shows. The [Franco-Mauritian] companies just want this to be known by the society at large; they don’t support anonymously. Apart from good intentions it’s strategic also, because they make money by selling products to Mauritians and in this way they support the less fortunate in society, creating a noble picture of their behaviour towards the citizens’, said Pascally de Fleurigny.

The argument of one of the upper-level managers of the MCB that the entire management sector of the bank contributes part of their income to charity without much publicity being involved seems an exception – according to him it is enough that only the beneficiaries know who the philanthropists are. Usually, Franco-Mauritian businesses publicly present their initiatives just as one Franco-Mauritian CEO, involved in the hotel business and IRS projects, did:

We have already charted out a plan of action which rests upon four pillars of intervention, namely enhancing employability through training, promoting job and wealth creation by supporting small entrepreneurship, helping upgrade collective infrastructure for a better quality of life and actively promoting inclusion and social integration through initiatives geared towards bringing about this paradigm shift among the local community (Le Mauricien 19 March 2008).

Franco-Mauritian enterprises arguably need a well-trained workforce and have interests in upgrading the local workforce and infrastructure around their projects. However, in other


268 Supporting charity has financial advantages as well; Mauritius has a long list of approved charitable institutions, among them the previously mentioned organisation Entr'aid that supports needy Franco-Mauritians. To compare, in the US ‘[i]f the group that is receiving the gift has been designated as nonprofit by the Internal Revenue Service [IRS], then the company may choose whether to take a charitable tax deduction or count the gift as a tax-deductible business expense (known as “expensing it out”)’ (Odendahl 1990: 52).

269 Interview: Mauritius, 10 February 2005.

270 Informal conversation: Mauritius, date unknown.

271 Safeguarding business interests also became apparent when there was a mosquito threatening the island with chikungunya disease in 2006. Apart from the government, Franco-Mauritians were the principal contributors for buying chemicals to suppress a mosquito outbreak (L’Express 1 June 2006) and to eradicate centres of mosquito reproduction (L’Express 21 March 2006). In the first case the whole sugar industry financially contributed and in the latter case a Franco-Mauritian family with significant interests in the sugar industry and the hotel business was involved (L’Express 31 March 2006). Not only did the chikungunya epidemic threaten the work force of the sugar
similar situations it turned out to be too difficult to train the population in some of the more remote locations where the hotels are situated. Staff needed to be brought in from the more densely populated, and often better educated, centre of the island. The nice-sounding words are probably not deliberately deceiving; it is probable, however, that proposing social projects will facilitate getting projects started. Charity and philanthropy as multidimensional phenomena are therefore also practices for facing the challenges presented by competing powers as we can see from the fact that the Franco-Mauritian companies seem to want to be one step ahead of the government.

7.4 Conclusion
As an elite, Franco-Mauritians have succeeded rather well in marking their elite status symbolically by stressing historical differences and cultural characteristics and, most importantly, by means of the distinctive feature of their skin-colour. Franco-Mauritians may have lost some exclusive markers of elite distinction, such as the French language and French culture - due, paradoxically, to the French and their recent policies - but I would argue that, even so, there has been a successful consolidation of distinctive characteristics which to a large extent has been facilitated by the structural phenomenon of ethnicity as this operates in (contemporary) Mauritius. Ethnicity is one of the prime identifiers in Mauritius and many political debates are intricately related to ethnic difference, often even for cases where Franco-Mauritians are not playing a significant role. A good analysis of these structural phenomena is, thus, necessary in order to understand how an elite faces challenges to its elite position.

The symbolic superiority of Franco-Mauritians’ white skin-colour demonstrates the complexity of interaction and structural phenomena with respect to distinction. I argue that Franco-Mauritians certainly consider white skin-colour as an ‘embodied’ sign of superiority, as shown from their marriage patterns, but that this state of affairs results from essential (socio-economic and cultural) differences established over time (see Chapter Five and Six) and is now maintained by their discursive practices involving distancing themselves from other Mauritians. Historically, Franco-Mauritians have thus been at the top of the social hierarchy, clearly distinguishing themselves from most other Mauritians by means of elite culture, skin-colour and position. There are no white labourers and none of the Franco-Mauritians’ domestic staff are

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272 Franco-Mauritian initiatives for social projects appear to also relate to increasing global attention to ‘good governance’ and ‘sustainable development’ – for that matter, this goes for other Mauritian businesses as well (see, for example, L’Express 8 August 2007).
white. Numerous Mauritians value the symbol represented by white skin, be this the skin of the Franco-Mauritian or the skin of the white foreigner. The symbolic superiority of white skin-colour is, therefore, also an ascription of socio-economic elite status. The fact that whiteness has become more challenged since the end of colonial rule has so far had only a limited impact on this embodied sign of elite superiority. Many Mauritians still emulate Franco-Mauritians even though, paradoxically, this involves memories of humiliation.

Clearly, in such a setting it is difficult for an elite to reconcile the tensions existing between ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’. Indeed, Franco-Mauritians only succeed to a limited extent in doing this as they are just too successful when it comes to marking what it is that makes them distinct from others. Via religious activities and the practising of charity Franco-Mauritians try to establish vertical loyalties in order to achieve continuity of their position. Creoles, to a certain extent, team up with Franco-Mauritians in this realm even though they also feel bitter about the Franco-Mauritians in some respects. This ‘coalition’, in my opinion, should not only be explained by Franco-Mauritians capacity to establish vertical loyalties but also by Creole resentment of Hindu domination in the public services. This situation is, nevertheless, ‘to the advantage’ of the Franco-Mauritians and seems to even serve their interests in the ongoing struggle over power as will be further shown in the next and final chapter.