2. Who Stays at the Top?

Towards a Theoretical Understanding of Practices of Elite Consolidation in the Face of Change

Elites come in many forms but a trait shared by most is their resistance to change. In their comfortable positions at the top change is suspect because it may jeopardise status and privilege: ‘[t]he highest classes, as everyone knows, are the most conservative. … No change can bring them additional power, and every change can give them something to fear, but nothing to hope for’ (Simmel 1957: 99). At the same time, however, it is argued that elites create the crises (Dogan and Higley 1998: 23, 24), such as politico-economic conflicts, which often result in change.

Since change is part and parcel of human life some elites have inevitably disappeared and new ones have arisen (Cohen 1981: xiii), showing that their positions cannot be taken for granted: their scepticism about change is based on real threats. The Franco-Mauritian case, thus, offers an interesting theoretical challenge. The transition from the colonial period to the postcolonial state was a major change and, in essence, presented a crucial threat to their position. In order to better understand how the Franco-Mauritians coped with this and other challenges to their position, I will, in this chapter, set out the theoretical framework of the thesis, with a strong focus on phenomena such as power, culture, distinction and boundary-marking.

The anthropological perspective used here will contribute to a better understanding of elites ‘from within’ (Shore 2002: 9). Cris Shore rightly argued that:

[Most anthropologists] go beyond the abstract and deductive models of social science in order to understand the way social reality is constructed by actors themselves; to grasp their conception of the world and the way they related to it as self-conscious agents (Shore 2002: 5).

Our understanding of elites, elite behaviour and elite maintenance will be enhanced by addressing group and individual levels of agency, the elite’s perspectives and their practices (recently Jon Abbink (Abbink 2009) has noted that attention to elite agency in the study of political culture is theoretically of great importance). This chapter will, moreover, constitute a theoretical framework for explaining the interdependency of those aspects involved more holistically. It is important to grasp the multidimensionality of elite culture, its internal relationships, power, its society’s history and the elite’s relationships (historical and contemporary) with other social groups; the
importance of ethnicity will also be assessed. This will be achieved by including both agency and more systemic phenomena, as both are important for understanding what practices elites have at hand in their pursuit of prolonging their privileges in the face of challenges to their position. A solid theoretical framework should then allow us to understand how Franco-Mauritians, especially in relation to the transition from the colonial system to the postcolonial period, have dealt with change. It may allow us, moreover, to grasp the variety of power resources that elites can rely on, adding to a better understanding of the intricacy of both losing power and consolidating an elite position.

2.1 Defining an Elite

When the term 'elite' is mentioned most people have an image of what this represents, even though this often remains somewhat undefined. In academic literature the term 'elite' is often taken for granted and barely explained. It seems to be a container concept. However, it is necessary here to define the term more precisely, as the anthropologist Abner Cohen has done:

An elite is a collectivity of persons who occupy commanding positions in some important sphere of social life, and who share a variety of interests arising from similarities of training, experience, public duties, and way of life (Cohen 1981: xvi).

Cohen’s definition is a good starting point but needs elaboration. John Scott, for example, explicitly argues that only those collectivities based in positions of command should be seen as elites – this, he writes, distinguishes an elite from privileged or advantaged groups (Scott 2003: 156). According to Scott, an elite in the fullest sense is a social grouping whose members occupy similar advantaged command situations in the social distribution of authority and who are linked to one another through demographic processes of circulation and interaction (Scott 2003: 157). However, this concept is not only about the actual possession and exercise of the commanding positions. An elite is indeed constituted of people in command, as Scott mentions, who are linked to one another and yet they are also linked to a wider group that does not directly exercise command but shares a way of life and a variety of interests arising from similarities. Thus, I would argue, an elite includes more than just those in positions of command.

Firstly, the younger generation of a specific elite may have privileged access to these commanding positions at a future moment in time. In that sense, they share similarities with the elite members in commanding positions. These similarities bring an elite together and it should, therefore, be assessed what these interests are and how elites perceive and define these interests
themselves. The American sociologist C. Wright Mills, for instance, states in his 1956 book *The Power Elite*.

When it is asked of the top corporate men: ‘But didn’t they have to have something to get up there?’ The answer is, ‘Yes, they did.’ By definition, they had ‘what it takes.’ The real question accordingly is: what does it take? And the only answer one can find anywhere is: the sound judgement, as gauged by the men of sound judgement who select them (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 141).

Probing this idea of ‘sound judgement’ may illuminate what elites consider important for occupying commanding positions. Subsequently, it may also illuminate what elite members consider as their interests and who is entitled and who is not entitled, according to them, to enjoy these interests – i.e. who belongs to the elite.

Secondly, widening the elite’s functioning beyond their occupying of commanding positions is necessary from another perspective. Contrary to Scott’s argument, not everyone in the specific wider social group may exercise command, but these people may nevertheless have influence on the persons who are in the commanding positions through, for example, a shared way of life. Scott does not deny a shared way of life: ‘[t]rue elites have more than a merely formal or nominal existence, and they may show more the kind of solidarity and consciousness that makes them real social groups capable of acting in common’ (Scott 2001: 32). But this seems to be limited to the ones in commanding positions. Partners and families of the ones in command may, though, influence the construction of a shared way of life. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Creole society was so integrated and structured that the ‘non-elite’ among them played a significant part in making it possible for other members to assume and maintain commanding positions (Cohen 1981: xix).

In my opinion, it is thus precisely the combined feature of possessing commanding positions and exercising control over particular resources along with sharing socio-cultural characteristics, customs and a mode of life, in short a *habitus*, with a wider group that defines an elite – even though a certain level of internal stratification may exist. This distinguishes an elite from the ‘upper class’, or from other privileged and advantaged groups, although often there tends to be a correlation between them. Class, for example, is too generalising a term and predominantly focuses on economic aspects, while elites appear in many different forms and are not always defined by their economic position.
Power

Elites, almost by definition, rely on power to maintain their position. But what is power? This is a question that many great thinkers have addressed over the centuries, as has been described by Sallie Westwood (Westwood 2002). This has resulted in two different basic perspectives used to conceptualise power: actor-oriented approaches and systemic approaches (Eriksen 2001: 159) – the latter is also referred to as the structural perspective.

Max Weber was one of the most influential thinkers propounding the actor-oriented perspective. Briefly put, Weber defines power as one actor having power over another and thus the imposition of one person’s will on another. He argued, “‘[p]ower’ (Macht) as being the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests’ (Weber and Parsons 1968: 152). Thus power is not an independent quality but a relational one. It is an attribute of, for example, economic, social and political relations – most often asymmetrical relations (Brennan 1997: 71, 72).

A structural perspective provides a more comprehensive definition of power. It is advocated by, for example, Michel Foucault and his followers; in the Foucauldian sense, power is overlapping in all social relations, discourses and institutions (Westwood 2002: 19, 135). Power can be found in the obedience to norms and implicit rules (Eriksen 2001: 158) or in academic degrees and diplomas (Bourdieu 1989: 182). According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, a systemic perspective runs the risk of including any action dictated by cultural convention in the definition of power; power then ‘risks becoming diluted and synonymous with conventions, norms and, ultimately, culture’ (Eriksen 2001: 158). This does not imply, Eriksen argues, that the structural side of power should be ignored: ‘[t]he great challenge of all social science, one might say, consists of trying to do justice to [actor-oriented and systemic perspectives]’ (Eriksen 2001: 159). In my opinion, structural (or systemic) phenomena cannot ‘exercise’ power themselves in the way the Foucauldian perspective argues; however, these phenomena can be very important in empowering certain players – for example, over a long period of time the colonial structure facilitated much of the power that came to be in the hands of the white colonials. Consequently, structural phenomena are important in the analysis of power without having to grant these phenomena power as such. This is further illustrated by looking more closely at the execution of power.

Given the fact that power is relational, it tends, simply put, to be exercised through domination and/or authority. Exercising power through domination and authority relies, most often, on the possession of certain resources (Gremmen and Westerbeek van Eerten 1988: 131).
Hence, an elite is a social group that has privileged access to, or control over, particular resources which may be mobilised in the exercise of power (Woods 1998: 2108). These resources have many forms ranging from land, financial means, parliamentary control, knowledge, access to the ancestor world and access to force. For this reason, a distinction can be drawn between, for example, ‘business/economic elites’, ‘military elites’, ‘governing/political elites’, ‘religious elites’, ‘academic elites’ and ‘administrative/bureaucratic elites’ (Dogan 2003b: 1; Shore 2002: 4). Suzanne Keller goes further and argues that it is practical to make a distinction between fundamentally different elites: the ones who are only significant in their own field and those who are of significance for society as a whole because their decisions and actions have consequences for many members of society (Suzanne Keller in Hartmann 2007: 31). But even the elites that are significant for society as a whole – such an elite is the focus of this thesis – are not all the same when it comes to access to resources and the exercise of power (and since access to resources can be subject to change, different forms of power may shift from one group or another). Briefly put, elites that have privileged access to government, parliament and the state apparatus can mobilise these resources in the exercise of political power, while privileged access to land, import and export of products and private companies can be mobilised in the exercise of economic power. This explains the varieties in the exercise of power depending on the ‘functional backgrounds’ of elites, and this is also the case when it comes to positions of authority.

**Authority**

Power and authority, though related, are two distinct concepts. Defined in simple terms, authority is voluntary and recognised by people who are not in position(s) of authority: ‘[i]n a situation involving authority, B complies because he recognises that [A’s] command is reasonable in terms of his own values’ – either because its content is legitimate and reasonable or because it has been arrived at through a legitimate and reasonable procedure’ (Lukes 1982 [1974]: 18). Similarly, Weber argues, ‘a relation of authority naturally does not exclude the possibility that it has its origins in a formally free contract’ (Weber and Parsons 1968: 325). In these definitions power and authority exist together: the powerful have power because of their commanding positions and, at the same time, they have authority because their command is considered reasonable in terms of the subordinates’ own values. On the contrary, power and authority can also exist independently since one does not need the other to exist. Power, for example, can be exercised over others without their ‘approval’ and does not require consensus as such – mere control over resources can be sufficient. Authority can, thus, be absent in power relations. Conversely, authority can exist with little power. One can be in a position of authority without
having a powerful position. For example, elderly people, religious figures and academics can have authority in moral issues without having much direct power over others; within an elite elderly people may have authority and, consequently, influence the decision making of those in commanding positions. Yet, it is argued that naked power rarely survives and that, conversely, authority without power to act is rarely desired (Skalnik 1999: 162). As will be shown further on, elites often try to find a balance between authority and power. Furthermore, power and authority are also closely related to structural phenomena.

**Structures**

It is argued that ‘[t]he capitalist entrepreneur’s ability to enforce his will on the worker, for instance, is conditioned by the nature of modern capitalism. In point of fact, the entrepreneur is already in a structural power position’ (Brennan 1997: 73). This indicates that structures can facilitate power for certain persons. I have, therefore, opted to also refer to ethnicity, culture and ideologies as structural phenomena instead of only referring to class and politico-economic systems as structural. Ethnicity, ideology and culture, for example, may be more fluid, changeable and subjective but in their nature as relatively constant and more or less internalized, permanent social features they also function, in some sense, beyond the sphere of influence of actors and hence determine, or limit, their agency. Conversely, actors also use their power (or agency) to ‘direct’ and ‘use’ structures to their advantage. As Anthony Giddens argues, social structures are not simply forced upon individuals; these structures are, at the same time, the means and result of the individuals’ social interactions (Giddens in Gremmen and Westerbeek van Eerten 1988: 126). elites use and manipulate structures (social, economic and political) to their own advantage. But elites are also influenced by structures because these structures often function beyond their sphere of control and determine to a certain extent their room for manoeuvre. Changing structural phenomena, moreover, may alter the power balance. An ideology that becomes increasingly popular and gains momentum over large parts of the population may, for example, cause a ‘structural’ change in which others may adapt more successfully than elites and, consequently, gain access to the elites’ resources or other resources important for exercising power. Structural phenomena, like a new ideology, may provide the elite with or deprive it of power. Elites are, thus, not ‘above’ these phenomena.

**Understanding Elite Power**

Scott argues, ‘[o]ne of the errors made in much elite analysis, however, has been to assume, or at the very least to imply, that elites are all-powerful and that organizationally dominant groups will
hold all the other power resources of a society’ (Scott 2008: 38). This existing conceptualisation of power and the prevailing perspective of domination from a ruler’s perspective does, in fact, have a long history in Western thought (Brennan 1997: 92). Weber’s notion of ‘power over’ and the imposition of one person’s will on another (Westwood 2002: 133) defines one side as having power and the other as resisting power. And yet it is argued that power is an evaluative concept: it is only at the end that one can define which side was the powerful side in a ‘conflict’ (Gremmen and Westerbeek van Eerten 1988: 134).

Thus ‘power is intrinsically tied to the possibility of resistance, and the power of the elite must be seen as open to challenge from the resisting counteraction of its subalterns’ (Scott 2008: 38). In order to increase our theoretical understanding of the relationship between power and elites, I would, therefore, like to propose an analysis of power without the a priori assumption that elites and/or other powerful groups use power expansively and pro-actively, set the agenda and are the main driving forces behind the exercise of all power in society. Power tends to be multidimensional, with two or more sides exercising power, even though often without the power being equally distributed. Hence, I argue that elites, in the multidimensional context of power, often use their power defensively.

Because of the belief that elites, through their control over resources, have the most power at their disposal, it is often assumed that they are the ones exercising power expansively – but also through non-decision making, i.e. keeping opponents’ preferences off the political agenda because these may be potential threats to the elite’s power (Dahl 1961). But it needs to be stressed that elites in the face of change, for example, tend to defend their interests and privileges as a reaction to external challenges of decline to their positions. Owing to their advantageous position and their control over certain resources, they possess power that may help to resist this pressure. Instead of exercising power over others in order to increase their power or privileges, then, elites have to exercise power to prevent losing their power base and their privileges. This implies that the ‘weaker’ side – subordinate groups, counter-elites and other social groups – can exercise power (pro-actively) to the extent that they force elites to ‘defend’ themselves. The non-elite may have less power but they can nevertheless use this power to push for change and partly determine the agenda.

An elite may lose some of its privileges, resources and power and its opponents may gain some of these. Consequently, when applying Weber’s actor-oriented analysis of power, the elite, because of the exercise of power by others, does something it would otherwise not have done. Nevertheless, the elite may still have unequal control over resources, be the dominant group and thus have the most power – they only have a bit less power than before they were challenged. All
in all, exercising power is not a zero-sum win or lose situation. In the analysis of power and elites one ought, therefore, to closely examine which groups and/or individuals exercise power, what kind of power we are talking about (political, economic, etc.), who exactly initiates a power struggle and whether elite power is used ‘expansively’ or ‘defensively’. It is instructive to analyse how elites adapt to external pressure from groups and/or structures and whether this has any influence on their power base. Moreover, it should be assessed how power and its use(s) are perceived by the elite and other actors themselves.

**Self-defining elites**

Elite, it is argued, is a term of reference rather than of self-reference (Marcus 1983: 9) – this is probably influenced by the fact that those who look up often see more homogeneity than the people at the top themselves observe (Fennema and Heemsker 2008: 29). Elite members may not, therefore, use the elite label defined according to the above-sketched characteristics. This also shows when power is discussed. Wright Mills argues that in the US ‘[m]ore generally, American men of power tend, by convention, to deny that they are powerful’ (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 17). Social psychologists confirm that there is a paradoxical misuse of power by those who perceive themselves as powerless but who are actually in a socially recognised position of authority (Bugental and Lewis 1999). In such cases, people’s subjective sense of power has more impact on their thoughts, feelings and behaviour than their objective sense of power. From this analysis one could argue that elite members who feel powerless will think and behave like powerless people even if by objective standards they actually have significant power.\(^{15}\)

For a better understanding of elite behaviour, I argue that how elites perceive themselves and the rest of society should be analysed. An elite may, for example, see itself as under pressure and perceive others as competitors vying for its privileges. This perception may consequently be the driving force behind the elite’s (defensive) use of power. Conversely, other social groups may only see the elite flexing its muscles being unaware, as they tend to be, of the elite’s internal logic. Hence, analysing the self-definition of the ‘declared’ elite can enhance the understanding of its use of power, elite practices, group cohesion and elite distinction.

All the same, the elite’s self-perception also needs to be critically assessed and one should remain wary of the elite’s internal discourse. For instance, when an elite downplays its position this does not automatically imply that it does not occupy an elite position; that American men of power downplay their power does not imply that they are not powerful. As a matter of fact, identifying the aforementioned characteristics that define an elite does not need the approval of the group itself. A proper approach will, therefore, be a combination of analysing the elite’s self-

\(^{15}\) Personal communication from Pamela K. Smith, 26 August 2008.
definition and ‘probing their intimate space rather than relying on their formal self-presentations’ (Herzfeld 2000: 227).

2.2 The Wider Picture

For understanding elites and elite maintenance, it is important to address the context in which elites move and operate. Only with the information from the wider picture can the investigator of elites proceed to the in-depth analysis of elite maintenance. Shore, for instance, argues that ‘elites can only be meaningfully understood in their wider historical context’ (Shore 2002: 12). Addressing historical events and the role of the respective elite(s) in the past allows us to address socio-economic, political and cultural processes that challenged or affected the elite’s position. Besides, it helps to understand the historical relationships with other segments of the respective society as well as with the world beyond the local society.

The past needs not only to be scrutinised historically but also through studying the elite and other social groups’ present perceptions of historical events. This may lay bare the functioning of the past in the present and may also elucidate certain aspects regarding the power relations in the society as a whole. For example, elites have a tendency for ‘monumentalising the past’ (Herzfeld 2000: 234), i.e. in the pursuit of maintaining authority vis-à-vis society at large, elites try to use history to their own advantage. It is useful to study to what extent these aspects shape the elite’s behaviour and their relationships with other segments of society – all the actors involved, the elites and other social groups, should be heard in this respect. The significant transition from colonialism to independence, for example, may have altered the local society’s balance of power. Memories of the past may also still have an impact on the present. On the one hand, a former colonial elite may be ‘trapped’ in its history of reproducing a culture which has its origins in the colonial past, the elite’s memory of the past still acting upon its behaviour. On the other hand, other social groups may associate the former colonial elite with the ‘unfair’ colonial system and contest the elite’s position; they may, within the new socio-economic and political realities of an independent nation, more openly express their resentment.

Space

It seems likely that elite behaviour is influenced by the geographical space in which they and other actors move. There is, therefore, a need to take into account the notion of space and to assess its impact on elite behaviour, culture, maintenance and the relationship of the elite with other segments of society. First of all, a small and densely populated remote island, such as Mauritius, may, it should be noted, accentuate local differences. The absence of neighbouring
states may prevent elites – and other social groups as well – from directing more attention to differences and competition with these states and/or their social groups. Secondly, small spatial locations may reinforce relationships within the elite. Elite members are more aware of each other’s existence and behaviour. Social control may also be stronger. And there may be less room for fluidity in terms of the elite’s social boundaries. Thirdly, small spatial locations may engender a different set of relationships between the elite and other social groups. They are bound to meet each other more often than in other situations and are, therefore, almost inevitably more aware of each other. In comparatively small locations, elites’ behaviour may be importantly shaped by perceptions of the world beyond the boundaries of the elite. In larger spaces the elite world and the outside world can be, literally, worlds apart and, as a consequence, the elite may be more preoccupied by internal elite relationships and elite competition.

Space, obviously, does not only matter in the confines of the local setting. It is also important in the elite’s relationship with the international domain. For instance, one important question is whether an elite is more locally embedded or whether it is more embedded in transnational elite settings? This is a factor which may have an important influence on an elite’s behaviour because it might focus more on the world beyond the local boundaries and thus neglect its relationship with other local actors. Global and regional developments should, therefore, be taken into consideration because they may be significant variables in the maintenance of an elite position or even play a decisive role in change.

2.3 The Direction of Change

As indicated, an important objective of elites is to prolong their position at the top of the (socio-economic) hierarchy. In that pursuit, the success of an elite strongly depends on how elites deal with challenges to their position. Elites can, for instance, run into problems when a transition between different social structures, political environments and economic systems takes place because ‘the justice (or fairness) of an elite system affects its operation and stability over time’ (Marcus 1983: 70). Elite mechanisms for maintaining power may become ineffective or problematic because the perceptions of the fairness of an elite system in one social structure and/or political system do not automatically correspond with fairness in another social structure and/or political system. Additionally, an elite may not be able to cope with a changing economic system, whilst other social groups may successfully adjust and thus appropriate (part of) the elite’s resources.

Understanding how elites cope with change, therefore, necessitates analysing what is changing and in which direction. The importance of this fact shows up, for example, ‘in the case
of abrupt regime changes, [where] an analogy has been noticed across countries: the economic and administrative elites resist better the upheaval than the political and military elites’ (Dogan 2003b: 13). In this respect the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe is telling as, here, the political elites were most prone to change: ‘[t]he revolutions of 1989 were political revolutions, aimed directly at changing the institutional character of the political sphere and removing the old political leadership’ (Böröcz and Róna-Tas 1995: 777). Noteworthy, however, is that many of the elites just ‘swapped functions’ which enabled them to maintain their elite positions. The legalisation of private property, the privatisation of many state enterprises and a significant expansion of the private sector led to new opportunities for the former political and state elites. Many of the former communists were rather successful in obtaining and maintaining top positions in the countries’ private sector although the enormous expansion of the private sector created opportunities for the emergence of new elites as well (Böröcz and Róna-Tas 1995; Bozoki 2003; Dogan and Higley 1998; Szelényi and Szelényi 1995).

Colonialism

Of a different order – and highly significant in the case of the Franco-Mauritians – was the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism, which after the Second World War in many countries was framed within the discourse of a new (Cold War) world order.¹⁶ Dogan and Higley write, ‘[o]ne kind of crisis often occurs when territories achieve national independence. Especially after a violent secession struggle, national independence may involve the ascendancy, ex abrupto, of a new political elite’ (Dogan and Higley 1998: 8). Moreover, the transitions to independence as they occurred in many of the former colonies were, in many ways, unique.

Firstly, elite formation and elite rule by Europeans in the colonial period were closely related to racist notions or ideologies placing whites at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy. In many colonial societies slavery was practiced along with suppression of the non-white population. After the abolition of slavery, the elites’ hegemonic positions often continued to be supported by racist ideology through processes of group reproduction, via education and the control of sexuality and marriage. In Kenya, for instance, education was racially segregated until the 1960s (Tonkin 2002: 138).

Secondly, the transition to independence in the former colonies was unique in other ways: in many cases the white elite left the scene entirely and the acceptance of racial superiority

¹⁶ There are significant varieties within the decolonisation processes that make generalisations quite risky (Duara 2004: 2). I mainly focus on the most recent decolonisation processes in Africa and Asia; I will only deal in a limited way with the earlier decolonisation processes in Latin America where, contrary to many colonies in Africa and Asia, independence was pushed by the (originally European) elites – the decimation of the indigenous population in Latin America gave them little voice in the decolonisation process.
declined dramatically. However, not all white elites were willing to leave the scene and ‘repatriate’ themselves to their European motherlands. In a number of Southern African states where the European powers withdrew, minority rule was established by the whites who remained behind. The transition was arranged to their advantage (at least temporarily, because in all these cases the white regimes eventually could not resist local and international pressure). The last and most notorious white regime to come to an end was the Apartheid regime in South Africa. This is an interesting example of a transition in which the white population – and white elites – did not ‘repatriate’ to their European motherlands even then. For generations South Africa had been their homeland and, in general, they had little in common with Europe, the continent of their ancestors. The whites who stayed in South Africa after 1994 lost much of their political power because this shifted to black elites representing the majority of black South Africans. Contrary to the former communist states, change in South Africa was essentially geared to changing the whole system of inequality and not just to changing the political system. However, it is argued that one unintended effect of global processes was that whites could maintain much of their economic power: ‘[e]merging in the midst of all the hopes generated out of the collapse of apartheid and desperate to reintegrate into the global economy, [South Africa] was partly persuaded and partly coerced by the IMF and the World Bank to embrace the neo-liberal line, with the predictable result that economic apartheid now broadly confirms the racial apartheid that preceded it’ (Harvey 2005: 116).

But there seems more to this than the neo-liberal ideology because, as Dogan notes, economic elites are generally speaking better able to resist upheaval than political elites (Dogan 2003b: 13). Moreover, in the transition to a democratic South Africa another pattern emerged. During much of the twentieth century the white Afrikaner elite were concerned with the poor within their own (ethnic) segment. Consequently, these ‘poorer’ whites had many privileges relative to the non-whites. But with the end of the Apartheid regime and a challenge to its position of profound magnitude the Afrikaner elite peacefully negotiated away its position of ethnic dominance as a form of realpolitik. The result was that the Afrikaner elite maintained much of its economic power though at the expense of poorer Afrikaners who were effectively left to fend for themselves since their shared ethnic background with the Afrikaner elite became ineffective for obtaining privileges (Kalati and Manor 2005: 171, 172).

Similar Changes, Different Outcomes

Some elites are, however, less fortunate in the face of change. Numerous indigenous elites that had been co-operating with colonial governments, but for whom departure was more difficult,
found themselves in tricky situations. For instance, the Parsis in India lost much of their former influence (Luhrmann 1996), while in Indonesia tensions arose between representatives of ruling classes who had benefited from the patronage of the Dutch colonisers and a new more democratically inspired stratum (Watson 2002: 112). In the case of Nepal, the aims of the 1951 revolution were sufficient to deprive the Rana elite, who had been ruling Nepal for over a hundred years, of much of its power (Lotter 2004) while elsewhere in a number of Central American countries upheaval and civil wars in combination with global processes shattered existing elites (Booth 2000; Robinson 2000). More benign change could also jeopardise elite positions. In the case of the old British economic elite which controlled the financial centre, the City, the influence of globalisation and the related deregulation of the British financial system were sufficient to transform the elite in the early 1990s. According to Scott ‘the deregulation of the City of London had finally broken the solidarity and cohesion of the old City families. The unity of the City was greatly weakened, and traditional mechanisms of self-regulation became less effective’ (Scott 2003: 169).

This shows that the direction of ideological changes has a significant influence on whether or not elites succeed in maintaining their power (or at least part of it). Nevertheless, similar changes can have different outcomes and thus seem to only partly explain these transformations. The influence of global economic changes, for example, had a positive impact in the case of the white elite in South Africa while it had a negative impact in the case of the old City elite in London.

2.4 ‘From Within’

Studying elites ‘from within’, i.e. looking at their daily practices, culture and (self-)perceptions, provides an opportunity to enhance the theoretical knowledge of internal aspects of elite organisation and of what kind of ‘tools’ elites have at hand to face challenges. Because an elite needs to establish some sort of group cohesion it has to be effective in protecting a variety of interests; and in order to constitute itself an elite needs to differentiate itself from other social groups (Shore 2002: 2, 3) and, accordingly, organises itself ‘particularistically’ (Cohen 1981: xiii). The group is essentially reinforced by establishing ‘horizontal loyalties’ between elite members (Fennema 2003).

Networks

The privileged, according to Pierre Bourdieu, not only maintain their power by means of economic capital, but also through cultural capital (for example, prestigious academic titles),
symbolic capital (for example, noble titles and membership to the most exclusive clubs) and social capital (either inherited directly from their family or acquired through marriage, or service on the board of directors of a top-ranked company) (Bourdieu and Clough 1996: 331). By means of these different forms of capital the privileged have access to influential networks and contacts not accessible to the majority of people (Westwood 2002: 49). Analysing these networks may reveal a great deal about elite power, group cohesion and the operation of elites; and, as Shore has argued, close attention to elite kinship structures and networks is required in the study of how elites ensure their own survival (Shore 2002: 13). One should, therefore, address the variety of formal, informal and less visible networks existing in order to see how and where professional and social elite networks are enacted. Wright Mills and his contemporaries G. William Domhoff and Robert Dahl, who dominated the American academic debate around the study of politics, elites and power in the 1950s and 1960s, have already emphasised the importance of networks. In fact, their analysis of elite power was mostly based on assessing the structure and impact of their networks.

In the mid-1950s, C. Wright Mills argued that in the US, from the Second World War onwards, elites of different origins – military, business and political – were becoming interlocked through the overlapping of top-ranking positions. Effectively, different functional and geographical elites were becoming shaped into a single ‘power elite’ (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]). But this analysis by Wright Mills and also that of Domhoff (Domhoff 1978), who posited the existence of a power elite largely organised with regard to a common interest, was not shared by everyone. Dahl in Who Governs? (Dahl 1961), for example, put forward the existence of different elite factions which did not have enough overlap to actually constitute a unified ruling elite. Through his analysis of networks (achieved by, for example, studying the membership of sport and social clubs, boardrooms and so forth), he concluded that different elite factions were not directly connected. Dahl’s analysis was criticised too, however. According to Domhoff, Dahl only studied the informal networks through the guest list of the annual debutante ball while Domhoff himself had extended his analysis to include the membership of three exclusive clubs. Domhoff subsequently analysed the cohesion between different elite members and the exercise of power differently (Domhoff 1978: 14, 15).

The differences emerging from the assessments of elite power undertaken by Wright Mills, Domhoff and Dahl show the importance – and related difficulties – of understanding elite networks in terms of how, where and why elites constitute cohesive groups. The range of possible networks is substantial: from boardrooms and educational institutions, to ties of friendship, the openings of exhibitions, official events, clubs, hunting parties, families and so
forth – all these also tending to differ in terms of functioning and importance. Unfortunately, a commonly used method for assessing elite networks is through analysing only publicly available information about (formal) positions, such as positions on the boards of directors of business companies or representative bodies, the guest list of the annual debutante ball and so on. This often proves insufficient and Savage and Williams argue that elites cannot be understood adequately by only looking at, for example, interlocking directorates (Savage and Williams 2008: 3). Hence, it seems likely that many scholars who predominantly focus on these formal networks that have a high degree of visibility fail to spot the importance of informal networks and other sources of networking (Camp 2003: 149). Cohen, for instance, argues that in liberal societies adhering to the principle of equality of opportunity (usually upheld by their constitutions) the networking serving the particular interests of elites is often performed secretly (Cohen 1981: xvi). There is, thus, a necessity to uncover the hidden networks and to understand their functioning and importance. Obviously, this should be established for the cases of formal and informal networks alike (with or without written records). Establishing the functioning and importance of these networks may enhance the understanding of where, why and how exchanges of thoughts and ideas, the defence of common interests and the exercise of power take place. It may also provide an understanding of where, why and how relationships between the members in commanding positions and the wider elite group are established.

Informal Networks

As already mentioned, elites often operate outside the limelight away from public view. Elite networks may, for example, operate in exclusive ‘back-region’ spaces (Woods 1998). Wright Mills stresses how in order to understand the group cohesion of an elite a whole series of smaller face-to-face milieus needs to be examined. According to him, the most obvious historical case is the upper-class family although this needed extending to secondary schools and metropolitan clubs as well (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 15, 61). This, once more, shows how an elite is more than just those in commanding positions, as Scott has argued (Scott 2008).

Studying the everyday practices of elites may, furthermore, establish the impact, importance and role of their networks, back-region spaces and smaller face-to-face milieus. For example, back-region spaces may be used for recruitment or for the transmission of influence or patronage (Woods 1998: 2108). Educational institutions tend to be relevant in understanding the impact of networks as well – for many elites good education is highly valued and strongly desired. Elite members often share similar educational backgrounds and attend the same schools and universities. Networks may sometimes more or less originate in educational institutions; ‘[t]he
Formative years are crucial in laying the foundations for a network and concomitant social capital that lasts one’s entire life’ (Heemskerk 2007: 110). Consequently, schools and universities are important for the education, training and recruitment of younger elite generations (Hartmann 2007: 61-88). For a better grasp of the behaviour and networks of elites it is, therefore, important to study how elites perceive education. How do elites, for example, define the prestige of education and of going to the ‘right’ school? Does it pay off when American elite members (try to) buy their way into the American elite colleges (Golden 2006)? Could it be, as Wright Mills argued, that this importance stems, partly, from the idea that for those who are educated in similar ways school naturally leads to marriage (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 68)?

The family, for this reason, requires attention in network analysis as one of the smaller face-to-face milieus. In the past, elite families may have been more omnipresent. Many of the world’s great fortunes and businesses were initiated by, made and maintained in the hands of certain families (Landes 2006). Despite the fact that since the 1950s these families have handed over much of their power to the executive class of managers and CEOs, without family affiliation (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 118-146), the impact of the family in the construction of elites, their networks and the back-region spaces should not be underestimated. In many companies and other elite domains, family and kinship still matters, as illustrated by Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot for the case of France (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1998).

The significance of family stems, partly, from its strong ties and shared history. Wright Mills writes, ‘[o]ld upper-class families thus tend to form an endogenous cousinhood, whose clan piety and sense of kinship lead to a reverence for the past and often to a cultivated interest in the history of the region in which the clan has for so long played such an honorable role’ (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 32). In the case of the ‘old’ French elite families there is also a strong focus on the family’s patrimony and the family members’ function in transferring the patrimony to future generations (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1998: 327-379). Similarly, the long history of the Russian nomenklatura created a strong drive, even ‘tradition’, to reproduce itself across generations – a pattern of reproduction that seems to be continuing in the post-communist era (Szelényi and Szelényi 1995: 631).

Self-defining Networks

Studying elite networks is not only about uncovering the networks and establishing their significance; it is also about the elite’s self-perceptions of these networks. Domhoff, Wright Mills and Dahl correctly established the importance of networks and smaller face-to-face milieus but they did not analyse how the elites defined these networks themselves. The elite members
involved in the networks may, however, be able to enhance our understanding of certain aspects regarding their formal and informal networks. Sometimes, for example, they specify the significance of belonging to an elite family and family networks for the family members themselves - Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, for example, have studied this for French elite families. Beyond this, how do elites define or justify their exclusivity? The fact is that the exclusivity of elite networks is an indication that elites perceive differences between themselves and other social groups: why else would they preserve the exclusivity of, for instance, clubs? This may provide a clue as to how elites perceive the outside world and how they reconcile it with their universalistic functions and vertical loyalties.

For instance, after the transition from the colonial period to the postcolonial period, Franco-Mauritian networks exclusively based on cues provided by physical appearance have become more problematic – the naturalness of racial superiority so strongly associated with colonisation has changed under the influence of the transition. This may have altered Franco-Mauritian claims on the exclusivity of their networks and sites. Furthermore, the change has led to increasing social and professional relationships with former non-elite members, relationships which, subsequently, may act upon Franco-Mauritian self-perceptions of themselves as an elite.

Resilient Networks

In Mexico the revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, which resulted in the reform and nationalisation of the oil industry, did not dislodge the old elite completely from its elite position. Many of the old elite families emerged from the revolution with their fortunes intact, and those who did not were sometimes able to rebuild them by intermarrying with newly emerging elites (Gledhill 2002: 44). Elite family networks also demonstrated resilience after their initial downfall in Guatemala. When the traditional elites lost much of their power in the turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s, part of the elite managed to successfully link up with transnational actors involved in processes of globalisation. These elite members came from the same family networks as the old oligarchy. However, their focus was more on a global and ‘neo-liberal’ programme than before and they therefore opted for social stability through consensual modes of social control rather than for the old oligarchic dictatorship (Robinson 2000: 95, 96). In the case of the Rana elite in Nepal certain families also successfully secured positions in the new elite (Lotter 2004). It seems that successful consolidation was facilitated because of realpolitik, some of them were willing to share power with those newly emerging elites. In other cases, old networks also had advantages in the newly established structures. For example, in the Russian transition to post-communism enduring networks facilitated elite maintenance (Dogan and Higley 1998: 132). Top
communist party people helped their family members to launch successful private enterprises; even after they had lost their commanding positions, informal ties were still able to facilitate special access to people and information (Böröcz and Róna-Tas 1995: 761).

Closely studying elite networks, back-region spaces and face-to-face milieus appears to facilitate an understanding of how elites operate. It may illuminate the significance of networks for the elite members themselves and provide an understanding of how group cohesion, shared interests and ideas are shaped, perceived and transmitted. The elite’s perception of why, where and how they are connected allows us to better understand elite networks and their functioning in the face of change. Moreover, as Cohen’s analysis of the Creole elite’s networks has illustrated (Cohen 1981), networks are also often strengthened by a shared culture.

Culture

Few concepts are linked as strongly to the anthropological discipline as ‘culture’. Yet in the study of elites, culture has received little attention: ‘[t]he schematics of elite organization and its place in larger system frameworks have been much more commonly addressed than its internal culture and practices’ (Marcus 1983: 10). Twenty years after Cohen’s pioneering work and George E. Marcus’ comments, elite culture still receives little attention, remarks Shore (Shore 2002: 10). Anthony D King, however, has argued that culture has always been the weapon of the powerful (King 1997: 99). A closer exploration of the influence of elite culture is, therefore, required, because specific cultural characteristics may be important in the construction and maintenance of elite networks. Culture can even be a decisive factor in the success or failure of elite maintenance. For this reason, Cohen’s remarks about the links between culture and power serve as a useful reference: ‘[c]ulture and power thus interact dynamically in the formation, definition, and continuity in response to changing circumstances’ (Cohen 1981: 40).

In this study I focus on culture – although I am aware of the fact that culture is a widely debated concept, I have to limit myself in the context of this thesis for reasons of space. Firstly, culture is a referential system of meaning. This is an approach that has been especially promoted by Clifford Geertz, who sees culture as ‘a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”) – for the governing of behaviour.’ One should avoid, he argues, viewing cultures as complexes of concrete behaviour patterns, such as customs, usages, traditions and habit clusters. Underscoring the meaning system stems from Geertz’s idea of cultural analysis as something involving guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses (Geertz 1973: 7, 20, 44).
I argue, however, that in the empirical sense cultural elements such recognisable lifestyles, traditions, habits and customs appear to be relevant in the self-referential discourse of groups, and therefore cannot be ignored, despite the contingent meaning of these traits. They have to be taken into consideration in the analysis, because these daily practices tend to be intertwined with ‘meanings’. They are relevant in the analysis of elites for other reasons, too, as culture is, importantly, also an often consciously used marker for differences between groups (Eriksen 2001: 44) and, in the case of elites, often symbolically marks this distinction from others. Kate Crehan writes, ‘the notion of “tradition” is enormously powerful; claims in name of tradition – as longs as such a claim is considered to be authentic – carry considerable weight, especially if the claim is being made by a group that is accepted as having its own “culture”’ (Crehan 2002: 53). In the analysis of elite maintenance and power it is thus important to examine how cultures influence each other, how cultures are subject to change, how culture is part and parcel of power relations and how culture impacts on the behaviour of elites.

_Learning Culture_

Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1994) have analysed how individuals are created by their cultural environment and how individuals not only recreate that cultural milieu but also change it. Well-learned cultural understandings in childhood, for example, supply the interpretations and behaviours that come to individuals automatically in later stages of their lives – this in both unintended and intended ways. These cultural understandings are transmitted to future generations and, hence, a pattern of cultural reproduction appears (Strauss and Quinn 1994: 284, 289, 291).

At the same time, cultural changes appear. As Strauss and Quinn argue, there is a strong interplay between the public world and private psyches, this helping to explain why certain cultural characteristics are so widely shared in a society. Historical events and trends, as shared patterns, and external social forces can have an impact on cohorts of individuals: their well-learned cultural understandings are either altered or discontinued, thus affecting the transmission to younger and future cohorts (Strauss and Quinn 1994: 292, 295). In other cases, cultural change has an even wider impact on societies. For example, Michael Fischer argues that several life sciences have already begun to transform basic cultural constructs. ‘Our understanding of illness … has changed from being a deviation from health toward instead being the recognition that we are all carriers of defective genes with variable predispositions for disease under the appropriate

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17 The relational aspect of culture creates a situation where culture often plays a significant role in power relations, even though cultures are often not bounded entities – cultures have, as many anthropologists nowadays emphasise, fluid, shifting boundaries and different cultures overlap and intermingle (Crehan 2002: 49).
conditions. We are all “patients in waiting” and thus are compelled to examine the cultural logics of our conditions both negatively and positively’ (Fischer 2007: 38).

Culture and the automatisms of cultural behaviour and practices tend to make the deconstruction of human relations rather complex. Yet, to me it seems that when it comes to the powerful (elites), cognitive cultural practices are often almost ignored. Fischer notes: ‘[k]ey to the stabilization of ruling classes, fractions, or coalitions was the ability to make their control appear to be the natural order of things [emphasis added], legitimizing their society’s cultural forms, hierarchies, and practices’ (Fischer 2007: 6). Strauss and Quinn argue that cultural behaviour in certain cohorts can also be affected by ‘the exercise of power from above: Participation in certain institutions and allegiance to certain ideologies are enforced because this suits the interests of people in positions of power [emphasis added]’ (Strauss and Quinn 1994: 292). The notion that elites’ and other powerful people’s manipulation and control of cultural forms is due to the fact that it suits them in protecting their interests and privileges should certainly not be rejected. Yet elites are also influenced by similar cognitive patterns to those of other social groups and these patterns thus tend to have an impact on their cultural behaviour and practices. Elite habits, customs and cultural behaviour patterns can be passed from generation to generation in roughly the same way as material benefits are passed down (Hartmann 2007: 105). Another assumption is that elite culture can derive from being ‘historically in power’ in the same manner as a subordinate group’s culture can derive from being ‘historically on the defensive’ (Crehan 2002: 100).

It is necessary to probe the relationship between elites and cultures in as unbiased a way as possible. The ethnography of the Franco-Mauritians provides an opportunity to closely assess the impact of culture on the consolidation of an elite position. It may also show how certain cultural patterns are transmitted from generation to generation and it is through participation in the elite’s specific culture that the difference with others who do not share this culture is realised. Conversely, when you do not share the culture, its rituals and so forth you may realise that you are outside of and do not belong to the elite but rather to a counter-elite. In the construction of group cohesion culture may, thus, play a significant role; it may also, however, jeopardise the elite’s continuity, as will be shown below.

**Cultural Change**

Regarding change it is interesting to analyse to what extent the practices of a specific culture can cope with change. The Parsis, for example, suffered from low self-esteem and had difficulties ‘reinventing’ their culture when challenged. They were an important (administrative) elite during British rule in India and adopted many of the British masculine traits. When the British left, the
cultural climate of the Indian subcontinent changed, though. The Indian elites, who increased their power during this period, had less masculine characteristics, argues Tanja Luhrmann. The Parsis’ privileges may still have been there, yet their internal perception of themselves as an elite changed. In the past, those who could claim legitimate power appeared to have certain characteristics, such as displaying their manliness. In the new India these characteristics, within the context of elite prestige, were less valued. The Parsis had difficulties coping with this and consequently did not adapt well, eventually losing much of their former elite appeal (Luhrmann 1996).

Elites may, therefore, have problems facing challenges of decline when their culture(s) do not allow them think outside the box. Normative elite culture may sometimes sanction thinking outside the box leading elite members to refrain from engaging in this type of behaviour because of concerns about losing their social and cultural bedrock. Another important question is whether elite members all think alike or whether certain sections compete, this possibly deciding the eventual success or failure of the maintenance of an elite position. The Afrikaner elite in South Africa, as mentioned above, for instance, safeguarded their position by preferring its elite status over sharing an ethnic culture with other Afrikaners (Kalati and Manor 2005: 171, 172).

In assessing elite culture and its functioning and meaning, analysing the elite’s self-perceptions and carrying out an in-depth study of the respective culture is crucial. This approach allows us to understand elite behaviour and the impact of culture on the maintenance of its elite position. Moreover, new cultural patterns can be transmitted to future generations, adding to the explanation of the influence of culture on the adaptation to new circumstances. The Franco-Mauritian case study should, thus, contribute to a better theoretical understanding of the multidimensionality of an elite culture particularly in its relation to ethnicity.

**Ethnicity**

In plural societies (elite) culture and ethnicity sometimes overlap. Indeed, the case of the Creoles in Sierra Leone (Cohen 1981) shows how ethnic culture can play an important role in establishing group cohesion and stressing boundaries with other social groups. Cohen illustrates how the Creoles’ specific elite culture was constituted through their networks and how this marked and maintained their distinction from other social groups. For in-group purposes, though, the Creoles marked their boundaries by means of a range of (religious) rituals, (family) ceremonials and cults. Ethnic group boundaries, however, vary considerably across time and space and in intensity (Hempel 2009: 462), and in his pioneering work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1970) Fredrik Barth argued that for understanding the maintenance of ethnic groups we should focus on the
boundary that defines a group and not so much look at the cultural particularities the group encloses. Ethnicity is, after all, as much about inclusion as exclusion and ‘ethnic identity is largely defined by contrast with others’ (Eriksen 2001: 272). ‘[It] is a kind of relationship that amounts to making cultural differences comparable ... [and] a shared cultural grammar and lexicon is required for talking about mutual differences’ (Eriksen 1998: 48).

In Mauritian society a lexicon is undoubtedly present: ethnicity is nowadays an important means through which Mauritians identify themselves and it has been institutionalised, even though the (official) use of ethnicity is very ambiguous. Initially ‘race’ was used to categorise the colonial population and the ‘ethnic’ categories nowadays still referred to in the political context were only systematically accounted for in the 1961 and the 1972 Censuses (Christopher 1992). This suggests that also in Mauritius there is a constructivist element to ethnicity. Eriksen has rightly argued that ethnic differences are often perceived as ‘objective cultural differences’ even though ethnicity tends to be subjective and context-dependent (Eriksen 1998: 48). In 1982 the Mauritian government abandoned ethnicity as part of the Census, but it nor any successive governments abolished ethnic categorisation as part of the political system. Every politician still has to indicate on the ballot paper whether he/she is Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian or belongs to the General Population even though the criteria for dividing the population into these four groups are inconsistent: ‘two of the categories are essentially religious ones, one of them is based on geography, and the final one is a residual category’ (Eriksen 1998: 15). The Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, for example, belong to the official ‘ethnic’ category General Population though no Mauritian would argue that they are part of the same ethnic group. The Mauritian population is divided by a larger variety of ethnic groups notwithstanding that a number of these have never been ‘officially’ registered. Ethnicity is, therefore, a concept notably relevant for understanding the consolidation of an elite position (in independent Mauritius), especially since there is a close association between ethnicity and economic activities.

**Ethnic Economy**

Ethnicity and economic activities are sometimes closely related (e.g. Eriksen 2005: 353-369) and in the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship it has often been mentioned that a shared ethnic background increases trust, ‘the person’s reliability in economic relations’, and is crucial for doing business without written contracts (Jomo 2003: 12). At the same time, ethnic entrepreneurs, when they constitute an economically powerful minority, can find themselves in ‘dependent’ relationships with larger ethnicities, especially when these dominate the state. Keeping a low public profile and making payments to the state and/or political elites then can be part of the
entrepreneurs’ practices to achieve a continuity of their position. In the nineteenth century, for example, business ventures of Indians in East Africa were facilitated by payments made to local rulers (Oonk 2006). Sino-Indonesian businessmen have also consolidated their position by financially backing the Indonesian state elite – this gave them their colloquial name cukong, literally meaning ‘financial backer’ (Eklöf 2004: 216). This form of realpolitik yields a relevant comparison with the Franco-Mauritian case, although, of course, the Franco-Mauritians are an (ethnic) elite and not ethnic entrepreneurs (see for a discussion on ethnic entrepreneurs, for example, Zhou 2004). Bargaining between political and economic actors and businessmen ‘paying off’ in order to consolidate their businesses, moreover, does not only occur in plural settings but also in ethnically homogeneous settings (Handley 2008: 18).

Access to political and economic resources in Mauritius is undoubtedly influenced by a strong focus on ethnicity, even though access to these resources through ethnic membership explains only a modest proportion of the total variation in ethnic identification in Mauritius. There are also significant differences across groups, especially when it comes to access to ‘political goods’ (i.e. resources) and ‘economic goods’ (Hempel 2009). The impact of ethnicity in the economic context is, therefore, essential for any understanding of the consolidation of the Franco-Mauritian elite position and of the Mauritian situation in general (as economic advancement can even change one’s ethnicity; a Creole ascending the socio-economic ladder automatically becomes a gens de couleur).

**Distinction**

As has already been said, in order to establish some sort of group cohesion elites need to distinguish themselves from the masses and from counter-elites; they also need to make their exclusivity known to the outside world, however. The Norwegian-American sociologist Thorsten Veblen, still well-known for his 1899 publication *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, argued, ‘[i]t 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). Thus, as Bourdieu argues, wealth, i.e. financial power, is the ultimate basis of power but this wealth can only exert power, and exert it durably, in the form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994).

Veblen has been criticised for being overly biased towards the Northern American culture of the time (circa 1900) which strongly focused on external signs of conspicuous consumption. Jean-Pascal Daloz rightly argues that elites may have different ways of symbolising their superior position apart from the use of external signs and that the symbols used for this purpose can differ between cultures (Daloz 2007: 28, 41). Creoles in Sierra Leone symbolically distinguished
themselves through rituals and ceremonies (Cohen 1981), while in certain industrialised societies one was able to preserve great prestige without providing public proof of this through costly display (Daloz 2003b: 29). There are, therefore, a variety of symbols available to mark distinction: conspicuous and vicarious consumption (Veblen 1994 [1899]), fashion (Simmel 1957), rituals and cults (Cohen 1981), refined manners (Daloz 2007: 46) and physical appearances (Daloz 2007: 199-200) to name just a few.

When it comes to distinction, physical appearance is a highly relevant symbol in the case of the Franco-Mauritians: they have a white skin-colour in a predominantly non-white society. Physical appearance is the visual symbol of their distinct (ethnic) culture and elite status and it often functions as an embodied sign of superiority. This is a trait not uncommon elsewhere in the world: South Africa and Brazil with their domination of people of white skin-colour within many elite segments (Reis and Moore 2005: 34, 157); Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines and Indonesia with their small Chinese business elites (Case 2003: 266); Nigeria with its aristocracy from the North (Daloz 2003a: 275) – all show similarities when it comes to physical appearance and elite distinction.

The Impact of Change

When elites face change, it is relevant to study how symbols of distinction may become irrelevant or how the meanings of symbols may be altered. The changing pattern of (official) ‘ethnic’ categorisation already indicates that markers of distinction are subject to change and, for example, the colonial system approved of access to commanding positions based on a culture closely associated with the physical appearance and superiority of the white skin-colour while the postcolonial state and the present world order does not approve of this – at least not openly. How does an elite deal with such a change and the possible inconsistencies this may give rise to in their symbols of distinction? For the case dealt with here this is critical since the distinction provided by Franco-Mauritians’ physical appearance could only be shaken off (if so desired) over several generations. Physical appearance, moreover, can be ambiguous, as it can both be a symbol of superiority and an addition to essential differences set over time. Once again, looking at the elite’s (self-)perceptions can be productive because this may allow us to better comprehend elite symbols of distinction. For instance, how do elites perceive symbols of distinction themselves? It is, for example, argued that consumption is often used as a means for presenting the self in a favourable light (Burke 1993: 149) while Daloz states, ‘prestige goods must also be studied taking their practical value into consideration’ (Daloz 2007: 41). Do symbols of distinction predominantly function for in-group purposes, then, or for making this distinction known to the
outside world? Is this talked about in terms of superiority? As mentioned earlier, elites have a tendency to downplay their elite position; the (self-)perceptions of their symbols of distinction may, however, indicate that there is still a strong awareness of distinction and superiority vis-à-vis other social groups. It therefore seems important to scrutinise the elite’s self-reference by these indirect means. Discussing distinction, furthermore, underscores the fact that an elite is an elite in relation to others and that elite maintenance should also be understood in terms of the relationships between elites, counter-elites and other social groups.

2.5 Interdependency

Elite behaviour, challenges of decline and elite maintenance relate to the elite’s embeddedness in society at large. For example, elites do not only have their own specific cultures but also relate to the wider culture(s) of their respective societies. Daloz shows how differences in elite behaviour in Nigeria, Scandinavia and France are shaped by cultural differences in their respective countries. The Nigerian political elite, for its prestige and distinction, relies significantly on ostentatious behaviour, while the cultures of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland emphasise modesty as an important characteristic of their political elites. And even though newly emerged business elites may have an inclination for marking their distinction through ostentatious behaviour, this tends to remain controversial (Daloz 2007).

Elites and other social groups are thus mutually dependent and an elite is forced to enhance its image and seek legitimacy for its high status by assuming universalistic functions, i.e. by promoting its services to the public (Cohen 1981: xiii). Through these techniques an elite can obtain vertical loyalties from subordinate groups (Fennema 2003). Power (without violent suppression) does not come automatically and an elite group, which by its very nature only represents a small minority of society, needs support or consent from wider parts of society for its existence and exercising of power. Universal tendencies and vertical loyalties are key aspects in obtaining support, although different elites often require different mechanisms to achieve these vertical loyalties. In a sense, universalistic functions and vertical loyalties are forms of authority: other social groups ‘voluntarily’ legitimise the elite’s position of power. In a democratic society a political elite can, for instance, obtain loyalty from its supporters by backing their ideology and/or demands (Fennema 2003: 29). More negatively, elites may use misinformation and manipulation to establish vertical loyalties.

In studying the maintenance of an elite position it is useful to study the interdependency between ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’ because there can often be tensions between the two which an elite needs to reconcile (Shore 2002: 2). In the case of business elites, these rely less on
the backing of supporters. One could argue that business elites do not represent anyone’s interests other than their own and are, thus, less dependent on vertical loyalties. There are, however, of course, still relationships with other social groups since the latter tend to be the customers, clients and employees of this elite. Business elites can obtain vertical loyalties through, for example, charitable work and through financially supporting community and/or social work. Alliances with political elites can also be used as strategies to establish some sort of vertical loyalties and universalistic tendencies. By means of donations to political parties, lobby groups and direct corruption such alliances can be shaped. In this type of scenario, politicians back the interests of the business elites.

**Opinion Makers**

All this shows the interdependency between the elites and society at large. When challenged, then, how do elites give new meaning to their universalistic functions and what new ways are explored for establishing vertical loyalties? And who influences who, exactly, in the process of change? Is the elite aware of ‘outside’ influences on its behaviour and organisation? With regard to this, advisors, spokesmen and opinion-makers are particularly relevant. They are, as Wright Mills argues, often the ‘captains’ of the elite’s higher thought and decisions (Wright Mills 2000 [1956]: 4). In France it is ‘the cultural elite [i.e. television personalities, journalists, writers, etc.], which does not hold a position of power, but which exercises indirectly a great influence on those invested with power, and which is very visible, occupying an enormous place in the media and in the mind of the masses’ (Dogan 2003a: 64). Here, then, is an example of an elite which has lots of authority but little power. The fact that elites maintained via, for example, newspapers and television channels try to influence public opinion shows that many elite members are aware of the wider population’s importance. The ‘survival’ of elites thus also appears to be related to the extent to which elites assess public opinion correctly.

In short, there needs to be a sort of shared platform of thoughts, beliefs and ideas for both elites and other social groups. Difficulties can arise when cultural and ethnic differences are strongly expressed. In this case obtaining vertical loyalties can become complicated because it tends to be hard for an ethnic elite to uphold universalistic functions. Furthermore, the general tendency of elites to downplay exclusivity and to uphold the idea that access to elite positions is not completely closed off can also be problematic and attract unwanted attention. When access to commanding positions is related to having a certain ethnic background, it is difficult to ‘sell’ this modus operandi to the other social groups. In this case it becomes implausible to argue that access to these positions is a matter of merit. Besides, protecting the elite’s interests and the
exclusivity of its networks often requires some secrecy which tends to interfere in terms of the visibility of the ethnic group’s physical appearance: the elite simply cannot blend in with the rest of the population. Amy Chua in *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (Chua 2003) shows that when a particular ethnic minority coincides with a group of power-holders frictions and explosive conditions may occur. Worldwide, the combination of ethnicity – and especially its strong emphasis on distinction – and unequal distribution of wealth tends to reinforce the perilously tense situations existing between elites and other social groups (Chua 2003). Survival in such a context can be problematic because in order to prolong their positions elites often need to successfully reinvent their relationship to the other social groups. In the case of the ethnic exclusivity of the Franco-Mauritians this may be a complicated task because of their association with injustices perpetrated in the past.

**Competition**

Finally, in the context of the elites’ efforts to maintain their position, besides looking at the interdependency of the elites and other social groups, one must take notice of who may challenge the elites’ position. Mattei Dogan and John Higley argue that ‘a change of political elites is possible only if there is an organized opposition and thus a reservoir of counter-elites’ (Dogan and Higley 1998: 23), while Scott argues that ‘[r]esistance is integral to power and must figure in any comprehensive research agenda’ (Scott 2008: 40).

Competitors can be counter-elites, i.e. sub-elites that are below the top but in a position to move upwards, but they can also come in the shape of ambitious people from non-elite layers or via the mobilisation of the masses who are discontented with the elite’s power. In the case of Dahl’s study of changes in the elite composition of New Haven, US, the power of the masses seems to have driven the change of elite composition. From 1784 to 1842 New Haven was the exclusive domain of patrician families. They had all the political resources they needed: wealth, social position, education and a monopoly on public office. They had everything, in fact, except sufficient numbers. Changes on the political and ideological front led to their downfall because once political organisations were established and the electorate increased the patricians lost on account of their numbers. This is an interesting example of an elite that did not adapt to a new structure facilitating power: the old oligarchs seem to have been crippled by their very ideology which justified their own tight rule and which left no place for the new competitive party system with its slogans and programs directed towards the ordinary voter. In this case, the inflexibility of elite culture appears to have been an important reason for the elite’s downfall – in short, they were not able to make the conversion to a form of *realpolitik*. It must have been obvious even to
the patricians that with such a small following subversion and revolt to stop their decline would be ineffective: in a violent conflict they would not stand a chance against much larger numbers. Many years later, however, the elite composed of wealthy entrepreneurs who succeeded the patricians also came to lack sufficient numbers as well. Owing to the large influx of migrants, new elites were able to gain popularity from ethnic affiliation. Politics in New Haven thus became a kind of ethnic politics. Eventually, it was the masses who transformed elite rule to a pluralist democratic system according to Dahl (1961).

Counter-elites, masses and other social groups are very relevant for the understanding of serious challenges of decline and elite maintenance. It seems that these social groups can almost always only achieve their goal of increasing their power when changes occur and the status quo is able to be altered. Consequently, these groups often represent the motor behind the changes adopted in order to seize part of the elite’s power, resources and privileges. In Sri Lanka, for example, ‘the supposed tensions between the old, urban or Westernised elite and the village or rural elite, [are] said to have been key agents in the political changes of [1956]’ (Spencer 2002: 93). Moreover, it is argued that ‘rapidly changing socio-economic conditions inevitably mean not only equally rapid transformations in the character of elites, but also emergence of new types of associations – ethnically based, voluntary, student-based, religious, regional – within civil society’ (Watson 2002: 124). In the study of elites, underlying social forces and more general sentiments should, therefore, not be excluded from the investigation.

2.6 An Anthropological Perspective
The study of elites has yielded numerous highly relevant and interesting analyses, especially in the fields of political science and sociology which have greatly contributed to our understanding of this phenomenon. A more holistic approach is, however, often lacking in the study of elites. For this reason, an anthropological perspective is very fruitful for the study of elites. This perspective principally differs from sociological and political science perspectives in the sense that it focuses more strongly on socio-cultural patterns and practices and the experiences of the actors (i.e. elites) themselves. This enables us to establish the multi-dimensionality of a range of issues and helps us better understand how an elite faces up to challenges in order to maintain its position. The aim of the ethnography of the Franco-Mauritians is, therefore, to explain a case of elite maintenance that needs to be understood both in its own right and in a comparative perspective. To summarise, the following issues are the most relevant:

Firstly, an anthropological perspective is required because, more than other social sciences, this perspective focuses on culture, the (self-)perceptions and the discursive practices of
the elite members – sociologists like Wright Mills and Domhoff and political scientists like Dahl, for example, hardly studied these aspects. In the study of elites, worldviews, cultural practices, values and modes of life tend to be only marginally addressed; having a better grasp of these aspects, however, creates perspectives for an in-depth understanding of the elites’ perceptions of distinction and how they may try to maintain the balance between particularism and universalism, as well as how their (self-)perceptions can influence this process. An awareness of these aspects contributes to the understanding of how and why an elite position is maintained or lost. The cultural practices of the ethnic Franco-Mauritians and their perception of change resulting from competitors vying for their (elite) privileges allow us to better explain how these aspects influence an elite having to cope with change. This will, in turn, allow us to see how and why certain cultural patterns are transmitted while others are not. The Franco-Mauritians’ (self-)perceptions may, furthermore, illustrate how an elite copes with new social realities and tries to (re-)establish relationships with other social groups.

Secondly, an anthropological perspective with its focus on how social realities are constructed by actors themselves tends to enhance knowledge about the exercise of power. Closely studying how elites perceive their power, use their power (expansively or defensively) and are influenced by other social groups and structures allows us to get a better understanding of power configurations within societies. This will increase the knowledge we have of how elites are able to exercise their power in the face of change and how they react to challenges to their position. This perspective also enables us to establish how power and culture influence each other and how elites are guided by their own (self-)perceptions of the exercise of power. Moreover, such an approach contributes to the understanding of the multidimensionality of power relations between the elite and other social groups. In this respect, the present Franco-Mauritian case study is of particular relevance: one hypothesis is that the Franco-Mauritians, in the shift from colonial to postcolonial conditions, negotiated away their political power, this facilitating their survival as an (socio-economic) elite. As has already been said, similar practices have facilitated the maintenance of numerous elites in general and it is, thus, important to study the impact of different resources (political or economic) on the workings of power. In the case of the Franco-Mauritian elite during the transition to independence, but also during earlier periods of the island’s history, they exercised their power in a ‘defensive’ manner, i.e. they reacted to external challenges and defended their privileges rather than always actively engaging in enlarging their power vis-à-vis other social groups. It is expected that analysing Franco-Mauritian elite power will, thus, notably contribute to our understanding of elites and their exercise of power by taking into consideration three key elements in the exercise of power: elite power itself (this
should include also what kind of power an elite possess; for example, political and/or economic),
the power of counter-forces such as the wider public and counter-elites and the influence of
structural phenomena on power.

Thirdly, studying elite networks (ranging from formal business networks to more informal
family and kinship networks) more closely enhances our understanding of the (social)
organisation of elites in specific, detailed terms. This may allow us to see how group cohesion is
constructed and maintained (consciously and unconsciously), how elites reproduce themselves, in
what way the exercise of power is made effective and how networks are embedded in a specific
(elite) culture. For this reason, it is important to address the elites’ perceptions of their networks
as this increases our understanding of how these networks function in the face of change. Here
again, the Franco-Mauritian case study is of great relevance for assessing elite networks and the
resilience of these networks under duress.

Fourthly, an anthropological perspective focuses on contextual issues such as historical
processes, global processes and geographical space. The roles of elites and other social groups
can only be understood in their wider contexts. Similarly, the impact of changing patterns beyond
the sphere of influence of elites shows how elites are affected by their respective contexts and
how they cope with these changing patterns. An in-depth study of the formation and
reproduction of the Franco-Mauritian elite combined with a detailed study of the global
processes affecting the course of the island’s history will, thus, shed light on the island’s present
social relationships.

Finally, addressing the relations between elites and non-elites is necessary because elites
do not exist in a vacuum and also because elites and other social groups are commonly mutually
dependent on one another. An anthropological perspective, in this respect, allows us to arrive at a
better understanding of the complexity of this interdependency. In addition, it addresses the issue
of superiority and symbolic distinction which may clarify how differences between elites and
other social groups are marked, changed and perceived. This will also potentially help to uncover
the (self-)perceptions of the elite, as well as the (self-)perceptions and sentiments of the wider
population. Addressing these perceptions, sentiments and relevant aspects of inter-group
evolution is important in assessing to what extent the other social groups influence the position
of the elite, as they are the ones chosen to challenge elite power. The strong emphasis on
ethnicity in Mauritius appears to reinforce the maintenance of Franco-Mauritians’ distinct culture
and the symbolic value of physical appearance. At the same time, the maintenance of a distinct
Franco-Mauritian ethnic identity and its roots in the island’s past has a negative impact on
present day relations: the correlation between the Franco-Mauritians, elite status and the legacy of

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slavery and indentured labour continues to be meaningful in contemporary Mauritius. It can be seen, then, that cognitive cultural patterns not only shape and influence Franco-Mauritian culture but also wider social processes.