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Becoming elite in a contested terrain: The post-colonial experiences of the Franco-Mauritian population in Mauritius

Review by Serah Shani

The Franco-Mauritian Elite: Power and Anxiety in the Face of Change

By Tijo Salverda

Berghahn Books, 2015

Reading postcolonial Sub-Saharan African political history books usually evokes a sense that African indigenous people, mostly phenotypically black Sub-Saharan people, were subject to a heroic European colonial conquest and suffered the effects of political domination at every level of society thereafter. Such books portray militant control, identity reclamation, and spatial ownership tied to pre-conquest origins. In this sense, indigenous Africans are perceived as the rightful claimants of geographic ownership and identity. However, according to author Tijo Slaverda, the case of Mauritius is unique, in that there were no original inhabitants in the country by the time the first Europeans arrived. Through an anthropological approach, the author writes an ethnography of the Franco-Mauritian elite in six chapters. In his writings, he breaks down the contested elite category of the Franco-Mauritians and discusses the struggles they experience in order to defend and maintain their elite positions. The author traces Franco-Mauritians' history, politics, and culture within a complex, diverse population of people who arrived in Mauritius much later and whose elite status is continually threatened. The author argues that, "This absence of natives facilitated white settlers to establish an elite position without much competition or resistance" (p. 2). According to the author, the island was empty at the beginning of the colonial period, and Europeans of French origin were the first to inhabit and populate the island. Other immigrants from Africa and other parts the world arrived later and became subservient to Europeans. Later, immigrants were brought to Mauritius mainly as indentured workers and slaves to boost and further European economic and political dominance.

The author points to another factor contributing to the uniqueness of this island: the arrival and presence of the Indo-Mauritians, who, at the dawn of independence, became the leading political elites. In the case of Mauritius, Indo-Mauritians, a group that migrated as indentured workers, won a majority of political contests. Regardless of the Indo-Mauritians advantage of power in numbers, the island's population was very ethnically diverse at the time of independence: "...the island was overpopulated, rife with ethnic tension" (p. 1). And yet, the author shows how, despite ethnic political competition, Franco-Mauritians have historically carved out ways to maintain and negotiate their elite social position and dominance in the country, even after losing their elite such places within the political arena.

Salverda describes elite positions and categories as contested and fluid terrains. He argues that, contrary to the traditional notions of elite positions as an all-powerful and all-controlling group, the Franco-Mauritian elites display insecurity and conflict, and they employ persistence as a technique to maintain their status quo—a status perceived to be attractive to competitors vying for those very privileges. During his fieldwork, Salverda noted that "Elites often seem to be perfectly aware of their vulnerability" (p. 3), and "this shows, in my opinion, that for understanding elite practices, we have to take seriously these feelings of anxiety (p. 34). Historically, the Franco-Mauritian ethnic category is understood as having enjoyed elite positions of privilege in several ways, such as pre-independence political, economic, and social spaces. Traditional notions of elites' use of power based on political and economic privilege worked well when unchallenged or minimally challenged. However, when new forms of political elites emerged, dominated by the Indo-Mauritians, the Franco-Mauritian elite's expressions had to be adjusted and deconstructed to adapt to the new government, where excessive power use became rationed or expressed in non-coercive ways, taking, instead, more influential and persuasive forms. The author states that "this is a clear departure from the colonial heyday, undermining, moreover the assumption that the elite are more powerful and only use their power expansively.... Franco-Mauritians oppose, fear and have an attitude of adopting a low profile" (p. 2–3). Tied to a motherland that is shared by a large and diverse population, Franco-Mauritians struggle to maintain their elite position while also working to develop their country and striving to "maintain a balance between continuity and change" (p. 4).

Salverda also explains how, in former colonies, historical and political transformations, and sometimes oppressive pasts, are used to legitimize the political power of the majority over the masses and to

denigrate minority elite as unfit for contemporary political arenas. These trends cut across many countries in Africa where economically and politically viable minority white populations, though economically powerful, could not take political positions at independence. The examples of countries in Africa that the author cites most are South Africa and Zimbabwe. In Mauritius, such invocations involved fossilized reminders of many years of slavery, indentured labor, and white political and economic dominance during the colonial regime. When these bygone days were invoked, the Franco-Mauritian elites chose to refrain from public political debate, and instead take a more passive political approach by remotely participating from the margins of society. However, because of their economic dominance and influence, they own the most suitable land for sugar plantations — the primary economic base for the island—they are able to transform their economic power into political influence, negotiating the political arena surreptitiously with the political elites from another ethnic majority group, mainly the Indo-Mauritians. Hence Franco-Mauritians adapt to political change over time, addressing challenges as they appear, prompting the author to state, “I start from the premise that Franco-Mauritians and elite more generally do not necessarily act with a predetermined plan.” (p. 5). However, the author demonstrates how modes of inclusion into and exclusion from the elite category can play a significant role in maintaining status, such as controlling who is allowed into the elite networks, social clubs, job opportunities, schools, and neighborhoods. The Franco-Mauritian case demonstrates how these inclusionary and exclusionary undercurrents become more complex when physical characteristics become a prerequisite. Physically, “Franco-Mauritians’ most prominent sign of elite superiority is their white skin color” (p. 15), a controversial reminder of the bitter past of colonialism and slavery. Whites are also widely acknowledged as the main custodian of the islands’ economic power. These economic power spaces are a terrain that Franco-Mauritians “jealously” guard from other ethnic groups, especially the Indo-Mauritians, the custodians of the political arena.

The author portrays the configuration and consolidation of elite categories as continuous activities. Franco-Mauritians strive to maintain their white hegemony and cohesion by adhering to a system that perpetuates a reproduction of white elites. Culture becomes crucial as a mechanism for social reproduction. Ethnic endogamous marriages are reinforced, and exogamy is frowned upon to the extreme; marrying outside of the elite could mean the loss of elite inclusion. Phenotypical attributes become crucial, and genealogies are used as a form of social control to prove “absence of non-white genes” (p. 123), and patriarchy demands that wealth is passed on from generation to generation. While culture plays a big role in maintaining boundaries, the author argues, elites use other means to compete

and excel beyond their challengers. For example, the author speaks of how the elite take their children to elite schools and are also able to take them for further studies abroad, especially to France. Their children later come back to compete for better-paying jobs within their networks. In a country where ethnic seclusion and identity is acceptable, Franco-Mauritians are also able to have their own elite social clubs, where most elites gather for networking, job information, dating opportunities, and political discussion. Social clubs act as spaces where they educate their young on elite habitus. Consequently, these particularistic approaches (p. 147), coupled with the control of land, sugar markets, and banks, position them as the main economic power on the Island and increase cohesion and solidarity. Hence, the author states that “They share a number of characteristics, a habitus, which shapes a strong, multidimensional sense of belonging and eliteness” (p.147).

Elite studies can sound conventionally obvious, mostly in relation to economic power and political power, until one considers the dynamics of how elite statuses are configured, consolidated, maintained, protected, transformed, challenged, changed, and manipulated over long historical periods and within different political regimes. The elite status may become even more complex when associated with skin color, specifically “whites,” in 21st century Africa, where elites, by an almost agreed-upon political consensus, are meant to be legitimately and selectively indigenous ethnic groups. The author acknowledges these complexities by stating, “but what if the elite position is not only defined by its (economic, political or other) function, but also by its distinctive physical characteristics” (p. 4), referring to Franco-Mauritians, where their white skin operates as a symbol of eliteness.

From an ethnographic perspective, Salverda used a holistic anthropological approach to capture how Franco-Mauritians have managed to prolong and protect their elite status over a long period of time. The author precisely states the role of the research: “This ethnography of Franco-Mauritian elite aims to analyze the intricacies of an elite position—and its prolongation over time—by unraveling the multidimensionality of an elite position. Certainly, I try to grasp how an elite tries to maintain its position over time” (p. 5). The book aims to reveal the many complexities that exist in elite power, particularly the anxieties encountered in maintaining their status.

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