Island Magic: Tourism and the Dialectics of Self-Imaging in La Reunion[1]

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Introduction

Island magic as an emic discourse of island populations

I would like to begin this paper with the observation of an apparent paradox. People living in islands, especially tropical islands visited by Western tourists, widely and commonly affirm that organic matter imported into such spaces grows bigger; fruits get juicier, flowers more odorous; animals wilder; humans more sexual and happier. According to these discourses, tropical islands appear imbued with magical powers able to liquefy the ontology of 'natural' boundaries, to awaken the historically repressed 'real' nature of the human being, especially its sexual qualities, to rejuvenate bodies and transform dullness into beauty, and to induce new forms of cultural or natural symbiosis. A guide I followed over several months in the Indian Ocean island of La Reunion, during his tourist performance, usually described European plants that grow out of proportion when introduced to the island, flowers that started to look, smell and taste like sexual organs, natures of varied geographical origins that once brought together in the island started to creolise, to generate new forms of organic and human existences. Very similar discourses, often adopting the same floral semantics and metaphorisms, were performed in local museums, during village festivals, through newspaper articles, through jokes, cultural policy programmes, urban regeneration projects and artistic exhibitions. Discourses about a specific magical quality of the island appear hegemonic in nature transcending public and private narratives; at a deeper level they have become a phenomenological property of social life allowing people to think islands as ontologically separate entities, as island localities symbolically and socially separated from a world outside. The same phenomenon of self-glorification can be observed in other forms especially of land based 'islands' (e.g. valleys, mountains, oasis, etc.); yet it appears most clear cut in tropical islands where a specific form of locality is built within the clearly identifiable geographical boundaries of the island space.

Island magic in tourism advertisement

If we now look at tourism marketing material[2] advertising tropical islands to Western tourists, material that is strategically produced to appeal to the mindset of Western middle- and upper-class tourists, we rediscover, almost word by word, image by image, the same discourse. Tropical islands are magical! They welcome you to

[1] This paper has been written for presentation at the 2008 EASA conference in Ljubljana. It should be quoted as: Picard D. (2008) Magical Island: Tourism and the Dialectics of Self-Imaging in La Reunion. Paper presented at *Experiencing Diversity and Mutuality. 10th Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)*, 26 to 30 August 2008, Ljubljana, Slovenia (Panel 10: Looking, Seeing and Being Seen: Connecting and Controlling through Visual Representation, directed by Thomas Fillitz and Helena Wulff).

[2] Here from the national tourism board websites of Mauritius, Seychelles, Samoa, Jamaica, Zanzibar and the Maldives.

‘another world’, a world that will ‘transform’ you, that will ‘uplift your soul’ and make your ‘heart beat faster’. A world that makes you feel that ‘you belong to the chosen few’. Tropical islands are filled with ‘sweet fragrances’ and ‘spicy flavours’, ‘cascading waterfalls’ ‘dropping into rivers’ that ‘cut jagged lines through the floor’ of ‘lush green fertile’ valleys as ‘they make there way to the ocean’. They are ‘postcards of natural beauty in the heart of the ocean’, ‘surrounded by massive lagoons with infinite shades of blue and turquoise’, ‘dazzling underwater coral gardens’. In these advertisements, tropical islands appear as ever-blooming timeless gardens of delight, micro-worlds bound by the natural enclosures of island shores, composed by sandy beaches, blue lagoons, lush vegetation, eternal sunshine, rivers floating from an inner sanctuary towards the ocean and local people seemingly unconcerned by the heaviness of time and being.

Questioning the dialectics of island magic

Why are the discourses that seem so essential for the constitution of island populations’ being in the world so similar in form and content to the seeming shallowness of tourism advertisement images produced for Western audiences? What is the relationship between what people in tropical islands like La Reunion conceive as the ontological grounding of their social existence, and Western imaginaries of tropical island magic? In this paper I will study processes of constituting local selves in La Reunion, the dialectic process of self-imaging in the mirror of the non-local other; the transculturation and auto-ethnographic use of mainly European 18th and 19th century tropes introduced to, and reworked in, the island by European travellers, local European elites, and the island's 1960s decolonisation movement. I will show that in the recent and contemporary past, these tropes and their visual embodiments are once again picked up and re-twisted in the intersubjective space of tourism and related museum and heritage projects. The concept of magic works here at three different levels: firstly as a quality associated by tourists with the physical realm of island spaces which they capture through different techniques and then carry home; secondly as a sign-object mobilised and exchanged in the tourism contact zone; thirdly as a symbol of local modernity through which people in La Reunion think their participation in a global world. In this paper, I will address these three levels, first by focusing on the social phenomenology of island magic in tourist experience, then by analysing the political economy of island magic as a sign-object exchanged in the tourism contact zone of the island of La Reunion, Indian Ocean, and finally by studying the role that the production of ‘magic’ attributes to tropical islands at the scale of world society.

Island Magic in Modern Tourism Culture

Island magical as a cultural trope

The idea that islands and island-like territories are imbued with specific magical qualities or inhabited by powerful spirits is not uncommon in the history of human societies. Examples have been reported from almost all over the world. In some cases, these socially assumed magical qualities have been interpreted in terms of political economy, as a tool to govern the access to rare resources, to security providing harbours, dangerous passes and passages or geo-strategically important positions. Whether or not such a functionalist aim can be established or be seen at the basis of

specific belief systems related to islands and island-like territories, in most cases the latter appear embedded in imaginaries that ascribe them specific qualities and powers. In these geographically situated mythologies, islands and island-like territories are often seen to be inhabited by powerful spirits that police their access. Accidental or unsolicited access is seen as highly dangerous; the accidentally shipwrecked, the curious and the thug risk to be transformed forever, to become a prisoner, to be petrified. On the other hand, soliciting the powers of islands and island-like territories can proof highly efficient where the appropriate procedures are being followed. In many societies, pilgrimages to specific islands, mountains, valleys, and cities (who sometimes host monasteries and permanent priest populations) take place as part of the social festival calendar. Through various festive and ceremonial practices – sacrifice, performance, prayers – believers bring alive these space related imaginaries and connect to some form of authentic bases that is, in most cases, imbued with some form of magical power constitutive of social life. At the same time, the myth is reproduced and the powerful who control access to islands and island-like territories, and to the spirits that guard them, reaffirm their authority.

Island magic and modernist thinking

The historicity of European representations of islands has been rooted back to pre-biblical descriptions of 'happy islands' ('*Iles Fortunées'*); descriptions that later merged with biblical visions of the Garden of Eden and leading to the belief in the earthly existence of paradisiacal islands (Delumeau 1992). Throughout European intellectual history, ideas of Eden or Eden-like islands have been cyclically rediscovered and revitalised through artworks, literature, pleasure gardens, TV series (e.g. Lost) and projections into specific geographical spaces (ibid.). As I have shown earlier, tourism advertisements emphasise the transformative power of tropical islands; the idea that islands allow tourists to rediscover and connect to an essential form of human nature. Also the policies of many of the most influential international natural and cultural conservation programmes formulate and cultivate specific sites, people and places across the world as authentic embodiments of nature and the human condition. Through these programmes, specific sets of endemic people, cultural practices, plants, historical sites, artworks, or forms of wilderness are framed and elevated as 'heritage', and then put into forms of conservation that usually respond to an ideal of authentic condition related to the specific historical contexts, tropes or primordialisms these heritages are made to refer to. According to Dean MacCannell (1976), the very idea of authenticity is embedded in the ideology of modernity and a steadily progressing time; it stems from a subjectively perceived feeling of nostalgia for a lost condition of innocence, an unconditional symbolic departure point whose periodic evocation – among others through tourism – allows the modern subject to reaffirm the order and separations of everyday life. Following this argument, the journey through the tourism specific settings and ceremonial spaces created in tropical islands should allow tourists to connect the conditions of modern social life with modern myths of origin; to establish a form of contact with specific mythical spaces and transport the magic that stems from these spaces into the realms of their everyday life.

Island magic in modern tourism practice

'Magic' is in many ways an ambiguous concept. In Western culture, it has been widely used to describe qualities, forms and practices believed capable to alter the 'natural' course of life. In the dominant discourses of Western public and scientific culture, the 'natural course of life' is usually defined by the logic of historical causality where an earlier event causes a later one. Magic is what is believed to alter the logic of this historical causality. Within the rationalising and transparency-seeking ideology of modernist thinking, the very term of magic has long been used to stigmatise the 'irrationality' of cultural others, and only recently have anthropologists 'discovered' forms of magical thinking penetrating almost every level of modern social life and thinking; discovering that magic is not only *in* modernity but essentially *belongs to* modernity (Pels 2003). My own research on the phenomenology of magical thinking in Western tourist experience indicates that tourists belief to carry the presumed magical qualities of tropical islands with them back home. As they have temporarily become part of the physical realms of tropical islands, have eaten from them, drunk from their juices, absorbed their light, swam in their waters, their bodies have become imbued with the islands' magical qualities. In the post-tourism context, tourists feel 'recharged' and 'powerful'. Gastronomic ingredients taken home are ceremonially consumed during dinner parties, photos are looked at and souvenirs of the journeys are put on display. They are 'brought alive' as social communicators, but also as psychological help in moments of distress, of solitude, or bad weather – as if they were imbued with a magical energy that can help people to feel better or stronger. Souvenirs and photographs taken home from the journey thus seem able to preserve the magical quality of the island for a certain time.

Generating magical qualities and transporting them home

In tourism, magical qualities are usually generated, captured and transmitted by contact, metonymy, or mimesis. They are believed to be substantiated in matter, spaces, objects, bodies, artefacts, or ontological units, or 'brought alive' through specific practices, performances, procedures, technologies, poetic forms, texts, and words. In most cases, magic needs distance and contextual contrast; it needs ontological separation and decontextualisation; it defines a sacred[3] realm and needs to be carried outside of this sacred realm to become effective. A rose among roses is not magical; it only becomes magical when taken out of context; when put in a vase; when offered to a loved-one (de Saint-Exupéry 1995). A stone fetched from the floor of an ancient temple only becomes magical when taken out of context, reframed and elevated through forms of personal display in the home context. A photograph often only becomes magical when the materiality of the captured realm (transmaterialised by way of light and silver crystals/electronic pixels into the photograph) is taken home. Even 'religious' relics mostly gain their magical qualities only once they have been distanced from the place of their production[4]. The generation of tourist souvenirs and the 'absorption' of magical qualities by the human body represent analogies with liturgical practices in socially recognised forms of religion. The official texts of, for instance, the catholic catechism explain that 'third class relics' are being created by bringing an object (e.g. a piece of cloth, a book, a crucifix, etc.) in physical contact

[3] 'Sacred' in a Durheimian sense, not as an absolute quality of a space or person, but as a concept that defines the relative ontological difference of an individual or group, the culturally institutionalised separation of one social realm from another.

[4] This applies at least when studied from a phenomenological perspective, from the subjective experiencing of people.

with a religious shrine or first class relic. In earlier days, mirrors were used to capture the qualities of shrines, or wine, previously brought in contact with 'first class relics', was consumed by the believers. Religious relics and tourism souvenirs thus appear as variations of a same social phenomenon. Their boundary can be deconstructed as discursive in nature; the fervent defence of religious relics by church leaders and conservative powers most likely relates to concerns to preserve established frameworks of meaning, belief and order, and the power relations these are based upon.

Island Magic and Shifting Asymmetries between Colonial Centres and Island Peripheries

Colonial metaphors of the white mother and her ugly children

If the phenomenon of a specific magical quality attributed to tropical islands has been around for a long time, if it has been instrumentalised through different cultural policies and ultimately been made a mass fashion through tourism, it necessarily has flowed into the social realms of island societies. In what follows I wish to analyse how it has affected processes of constituting local selves in one specific island, La Reunion, within the wider context of relationships to spaces outside the island. La Reunion is an island in the South-Western Indian Ocean, first settled by French colons during the 17th century. During the 19th and 20th centuries, it became an important cash crop colony marked by extensive sugar cane plantations and the settlement of colons, forced labourers and contracted workers from Europe and the wider Indian Ocean region. It became a French overseas department (DOM) in 1946. During the Cold War, the French government and its local representatives institutionalised a colonial family narrative, metaphorically defining the people of La Reunion as children of the French *mère-patrie*. According to Francoise Verges (1999), the rationale of this narrative implied that they were given the values of the French republic as gifts – leaving them in a condition of impossible reciprocity. France became a mythified white mother whose goodness and pureness could never be reached by its 'ugly' children, seen as bastardised as a result of endogamy and the mixing of races and cultures. The narrative was mobilised both inside the island to poeticise class divisions between *Grands Blancs* (mainly white land owners) and a large creolised proletariat, and between the island as a whole and the far away French 'motherland'. In this context, deviations from cultural ideals associated with the French republican model related to kinship, gender roles, language, humour, arts, diseases, drug consumption etc. were actively pathologised by colonial agents and local elites who drew their political legitimacy by referring to these agents and 'France' as their models. A certain idea of France was consequently appropriated through forms of mimesis and metonymy. The magic that stemmed from the wearing of French style cloths, the adapting of French-style ways of talking, behaving and eating, the living in French style houses, the adopting of French leisure fashions, etc. became and, as we will see, largely remains today a powerful social means to establish and legitimate political power.

The metamorphosis of the Creole bastard

Since the late 1980s, France herself shifted away from a one nation-one culture doctrine and, adapting to a global mood for, and certainly also fear of, fluidity, started

to promote an aesthetics of diversity. According to Jean Baudrillard (1972), this aesthetics – often associated with postmodernist thinking – induced a phenomenon of cultural differentiations. Since the 1980s and especially 1990s, this was accompanied by a phenomenon of ethnicisation of social relationships often based on ideas of local origin and racial phenotype. At the same time, both phenomena remained framed by a deeper lying cultural paradigm, a new form of cultural hegemony that implies precisely the promotion and valorisation of diversity. In La Reunion, tourism and cultural policies related to tourism development would become key agents to mediate this new culture. It would have a deep and somehow paradoxical affect on processes of constituting local selves, both formally and in substance. In the eye of the newly developed tourism industry and the local elites who quickly appropriated the new aesthetics of diversity, the ugly Creole child would eventually become adult; they would become beautiful, a new reference model to the think the world and the possibilities of living together.

The figure of the beautiful Creole inverses the symbolic asymmetry of the colonial family narrative. The ugly child has come of age and shows the now aged and somehow unworldly French mother a way out of the failings of institutionalised monoculturalism. The Creole is imbued with the magical qualities of all its inputs and of the very island context that made these inputs merge. It concentrates in one persona the orientalist colours of Indian Hinduism, the mythical wisdom of Chinese Buddhism, the africanist knowledge of wilderness, the philosophy of Western humanism and, above all, the Creole art of living together. The figure of the beautiful Creole thus locally emancipates the global aesthetic of diversity – which is clearly witnessed by a local phenomenon of 'rediscovery' and 'reinvention' of ethnic references and primordialisms during the 1990s (Ghasarian 2008). At the same time, the island becomes the symbolic and physical ground that has blended these cultural inputs and created a beautiful entirely new self; it is ontologically linked to the wonder of this metamorphosis of the bastard child. People and island become variations of the same image. They are the result of a magical transformation. This narrative involves an important historicising dimension. It makes sense of time. The metamorphosis took place in a context of social violence and the now adult child has not forgotten the injustices of the past. France, the old mother now has a debt towards it, a debt impossibly to balance. She has committed what Jacques Derrida (2001) defined as the 'unforgivable' crime. The guilt money she has to pay, tourists have to pay as part of the tourism ceremony, will never be enough. She should shut up; tourists should shut up and adore the magical beauty and wisdom of the now adult child.

Mirror stages of cultural consciousness

This shift in narrative does not strictly originate in La Reunion. Similar phenomena have been reported from many other postcolonial contexts of the world. It evolves in the dialectics between an inside and an outside which, in its dichotomous nature, is part itself of its story (I will come back to this latter aspect in the last part of this paper). In a situation in which the intersubjective contact between insider and outsider is dominated by the outsider, the insider sees him- or herself reflected in the eyes of the outsider. The intersubjective contact generates a cultural mirror stage, in its structure similar to Jacques Lacan's (2004) observation of young children becoming conscious of their selves by seeing themselves in a mirror, while their mother is

watching. The far away, mythical France is the mirror, embodied in the eyes of people imbued with the magical power of this outside reference: administrative agents, tourists, European migrants, the media, branded mass consumption products, and people performing Frenchness in the public and private realms of island social life. These agents and media work as a mirrors that reflect back partial visions of the self; that render the self in a specific format; that recognise specific forms in the ocean of possibilities. In many cases people in La Reunion recognise that the 'outsiders' attach a certain aesthetic and magical value to forms of their selves, yet they are initially unable to identify the forms this value relates to. They search in the outsiders' eye trying to see what specifically is 'beautiful' or 'magical' in them; to recognise what the outsider sees when looking at them. Specific formulations of 'magic' or 'beauty', re-interpretations of what people see in the outsider's eyes, are consequently adapted in forms of self-enchantment, in what Mary Pratt called 'auto-ethnographic' theories about the self. 'Magic' and 'beauty', initially outside concepts, are transculturated (Ortiz 2003); they become emic concepts used in the building of locally meaningful stories and symbols able to make sense of the self and its relationships with the outside. At the same time, by perpetuating an aesthetic identified with the outside, they generate semantic continuity and reproduce a system where the outside is posited as an ultimate symbolic 'magical' reference point. People become 'magical' because this is the category assigned to them by the outside; adopting this category to re-image their selves hence becomes imbued in a form of magical thinking itself. It is an aesthetic that sources its magic and legitimisation from an outside world.

Tropical Island Magic and Formations of World Society

Locality as a new meta-narrative

The dialectics between an inside and an outside is itself part of this aesthetic. It gives social life a frame and a structure. The idea of a specific island locality – an island inside – becomes what Arjun Appadurai (1996) defines as a 'phenomenological property of social life' as the result of a hegemonic process, where it becomes a dominant technique to think social entities by linking them to spatially circumscribed places. Following Appadurai, it implies the symbolical and physical working of the ground, as an act to delimit neighbourhoods from various others. In islands, this highly symbolic act of working the ground works at various scales; and it creates various locals and non-locals at these scales. Following Jacqueline Waldren's (1996) observations in Mallorca, it generates new emic typologies, typically based on the opposition between insiders and outsiders. At the scale of an island, these typologies usually are a function of belonging to specific families, houses, localities, social classes, possibly gender and age groups. At the larger scale of the relation between islands and the world beyond these islands, it generates forms of belonging related to the way the nature of the very place of the island has been formulated. In La Reunion, the very doctrine of diversity implemented by the French government since the 1980s, implied a decentralisation of power and ownership, as well the promotion of cultural self-determination. Its application in La Reunion was materialised among others through the strengthening of regional governance bodies, new local development initiatives, the liberalisation of the local media, the full introduction of the French welfare state, and the development of a mass consumption society. It induced the development and emancipation of cultural policy divisions in the island's locally elected governance bodies, the Regional Council and the Departmental Council. It

generated a new paradox. While on one hand, these new institutions defended a narrative of cultural self-determination, they adopted on the other hand very precisely the techniques of heritage management, interpretation and selecting sites they had learnt in France. The form and substance of the narratives used to make visible the new local selves remained largely identical to that of 'outside' curators or site developers from France. Contestations only seemed to concern situations where 'non-locals' started initiatives to present 'local heritage'. They were in some cases violently rejected. This paradox may explain itself in that the adoption and performance of the very narratives of locality, diversity and cultural self-determination are again embedded within a form of magical thinking related to a powerful outside. They symbolise France and they allow an evocation of the magic associated with France. Locality is consequently instrumentalised as an emic category which gains its legitimate power in the intersubjective field of contact with an outside world.

Towards a globally integrated social theatre

For the ethnographic eye, the fetichisation of 'outside' concepts such as locality on a local scale and the social integration of the newly created local this fetichisation allows at a global scale implies another striking paradox. The semantics of emic discourses about locality as an original, spatially independent, magical entity are diametrically opposed to the social dimension of their performance. Thinking social and spatial entities through the notion of locality may initially only be a fetishisation of a form adopted from an outside, a kind of cargo cult politics where the mimesis of the outsider is believed efficient to generate a specific outcome. As an effect of time and repetition in tourism and other contact realms, it becomes more systemic in nature. It becomes a mode of social participation in a transnational world, a specific performance of being within a global social theatre, a new form of governmentality generated through the naturalisation (through the attribution of magical qualities) of specific aesthetic and moral norms. It generates new forms of transnational reciprocity and new forms of social roles. Tropical island populations become a global priest class fed by the modern tourists in search for spiritual and physical recreation. It thus generates a new world order, with vast territories transformed into gardens for the delight of Western world; gardens to conserve some form of initial innocence, to cultivate an aesthetic of diversity, to conserve nature in an imagined ur-state. Rosaleen Duffy (2002) has reported a series of cases where World Bank and IMF grants to developing tropical countries were conditioned by the parallel development of vast natural reserves and indigenous people preservation programmes. These programmes, usually co-conceived by international donors and ecological conservation agencies, do not always aim at tourism developments (although this form of contact is the ultimate moment to bring modern phantasms of wilderness and indigeneity alive). In some cases, areas are protected for, as it seems, the very sake of being protected, as a kind of secret garden that is out there, but cannot be accessed. Not far from where my parents live in Germany, a forest has recently been closed to walkers, to protect the birds from human 'impacts'. Similarly, UNESCO through its world heritage list protects many sites few people would eventually go to. Yet, a widely shared common sense among the Western and global middle classes seems to defend such actions; it seems good that these sites are protected as some form of preserved, yet inaccessible garden; a garden good to think the human existence; maybe less through its materiality per se, than through the very act of preserving this materiality. The tiling of the soil appears socially more

important than the actual picking of the fruit; it humanises time by situating the present within relations with various alien realms: the past, the future, the other.

Frictions, competing agendas and governance within world society

The phenomena described in this paper do only address one layer of global society. The conditions of life in tropical islands are generally marked by other, often competing phenomena and interests, usually related to economic development, the exploitation of resources, geopolitical strategies of global powers, urbanisation issues, etc. which often follow different logics and aspirations. They generate what Anna Tsing (2006) calls 'frictions', conflicts but also sometimes unexpected collaborations between interest groups and epistemic communities who see their objectives realised in common actions or lobby work. For instance, within the wider realm of tourism development and conservation policy in tropical islands, a widely heterogeneous group of environmental lobby groups, commercial tourism developers, postcolonial autonomy militants, tourists, international cultural policy makers, global and local media and local development agencies often share interests in 'conserving' (which usually means: to invent altogether) an 'endemic natural environment'. Conservation becomes a new form of governance (West 2006). In La Reunion, many forces play in favour of reimaging and redeveloping the island as a magical island, responding to Western tropical island tropes and the political economy of enchantment working in the tourism contact zone. As a result of these mainly heterogeneous yet co-linear forces, the concept of magic has become hegemonic as a way of thinking a local self and of participating in the world; it has become imbued with magical qualities itself. It has also generated new dilemmas and antagonistic forces; while people have widely started to subscribe to a logic of conservation in terms of a Western model of island idyll, most of them are jobless and many live in miserable housing conditions. Many have left the island to look for jobs in the French mainland. In this context, from a pragmatic position of development politics, it would make sense to promote the development of large-scale hotels in order to generate jobs. Yet the new narratives of an island locality imbued with magical qualities becomes an intellectual prison that hinders new projects to come about, that has generated an ambiguous culture of local self-admiration, and that leaves the newly created locals in an indefinite position of victims of history.

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