

KITCHEN BANALITIES INTO TOURIST MAGIC

Tourism Cosmology and Tour Guide Mediation in La Réunion

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Drawing on ethnographic research in the Indian Ocean island of La Réunion, the article explores how tour guides transform the banalities of local everyday life into deeply moving tourist stories, and by that means position themselves as social characters within a wider tourism cosmology. At times they become actual extensions of the projected magical qualities of the destinations, at times enlightened mediators of a post-traditional condition in which a common global humanity melts into a perpetual movement of creolisation.

Keywords: tour guide, mediation, magic, La Réunion

Introduction

Drawing on detailed ethnographic descriptions of tour guiding contexts and practices in a village of the island of La Réunion in the Western Indian Ocean, this article aims to explore the role of intercultural mediation between hosts and guests as a means to playfully engage, locate, attribute, subvert, transform, reproduce, or deceive conceptions and ideas that both tourists and locals hold of themselves and various types of others. The analytical frame builds on Mary-Louise Pratt's (1991) revived concept of contact zone, especially her emphasis on the analysis of transculturation processes by means of which a presumably politically dominated subject appropriates and self-consciously transforms images of Self projected by a dominant Other. The work explores the role of tour guides as mediators between the different often-discrete imaginary and social spaces that separate and connect tourists and destinations.

In line with the overall aim of this special issue, the work is to push the study beyond a structural

representational analysis of host-guest relations that has been a common approach in tourism studies for the past forty years. MacCannell's (1976) semiotic study of touristic sign worlds, Graburn's (1983) theory of tourism as a ceremonial anti-structure to quotidian life, Bruner's (2005) study of touristic meta-narratives as a kind of wider frame guiding and motivating travel experiences and Urry's (1992) study of collectively formed and performed tourist gazes all seem to establish tourism as a social fact defined by abstract collective worlds of images, narratives and gazes that impose themselves upon individual travellers.

At the same time, a growing number of works focusing on the multifaceted spaces of mediation between tourist populations and various intertwined local and translocal actors argue for a more dynamic (and politically informed) approach to tourism which takes into account the complex dynamics at play in the tourism contact zone. Great examples are the works on postcolonial nation-making in Indo-

nesia by Adams (2006), Bruner's (2005) work on the politics of the subtle adaptations of cultural performances produced in the tourism realm, or del Marmol's (2014) fine ethnographic study on the political grounding of seemingly banal aesthetic choices underpinning current landscape and urban architecture projects in Cataluña, Spain. This relatively new body of ethnographic research shows that what was precisely termed as "host-guest" relationships cannot merely be captured as an expression of bipartisan relationships between discrete populations and their respective projections of images of Self and Other, without an understanding of the wider political contexts in which such populations act. Various ethnographic studies centred on the role of the tour guide have proven particularly effective in investigating these complex dynamic relations observed on the ground (Cohen 1985; Graburn 2002; Bunten 2008; Salazar 2010; Weiler & Black 2015), progressively dissolving the epistemic boundaries between different categories of actors and considering them as temporarily bound co-creators of experience.

In this study on tour guides in La Réunion, I wish to deepen this latter aspect by approaching the guide as a social-theatrical character whose relationships to, and interactions with, different local and tourism actors evolve within a form of societal play. I conceive the guide as a specific temporarily-adopted role whose performance is framed by the choreographic frame of the "tourist plot" (Picard, Pocock & Trigger 2014; Picard & Zuev 2014; Picard 2016) that orchestrates the tourism realm and leads tourists through their journey. The guide's specific character role within this play, not unlike that of half-divine Dionysian messenger gods in Greek and Roman mythology, is to mediate between the discrete social worlds of humans and divinities, gods and ghosts, social, gender and age classes, tourists and locals, etc. In doing so, it challenges tourists to renegotiate the meanings and boundaries of such worlds and eventually reposition themselves within a wider cosmologic narrative.

A second aspect of this work explores the aesthetic and political contours of these theatrically drawn social worlds and their ability to act as socially meaningful metaphors for the symbolic and geopo-

litical situation of La Réunion as a particular place within a wider world order. Pratt's (1991) conceptual approach to the contact zone comes in handy here as an analytical category to study the "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991: 34). The focus on tour guides as social and political actors of the contact zone can usefully build here on previous works by anthropologists like Smith (1989) who investigated the role of marginal people like foreigners or children of foreigners, often at the boundaries of local social life, as driving forces for innovation and change. The focus on the actors of the contact zone would then allow us to articulate the study of narrative frames, gazes and representations performed for tourists with the geopolitical and social dynamics observed in a given local social context.

The main ethnographic informants – and lead characters that guide the reader through this article – are Orom and Laslo (both pseudonyms), who developed a flourishing tour guiding activity at the end of the 1990s and whom I followed over a period of several months in 1999 and 2000. During that time, I stayed in the mountain village of Hell-Bourg, in the eastern valley of Salazie. Through systematic participant observation of the daily lives of these and other tour guides living and working in the same village, I progressively gained more access to the inner organisation of local tour guiding culture and the local social lives of the guides. I participated in approximately twenty half-day tours guided by Orom, took notes, observed and at a later stage recorded once with a small tourist-style video camera. I started these observations before the actual interactions with tourists and continued afterwards, often doing other things with the main informants. As this was part of a larger study on tourism and social transformations in the island, I also investigated the historical contexts of the demographic, geographic and geopolitical situation of La Réunion, and later combined these different types of data into a common analysis.

Orom

A typical tour would start in the morning at the square in the centre of the village. Orom would wear his tour-guide uniform – a straw hat, khaki shorts, a white T-shirt, heavy hiking boots and a black mountaineering backpack. He would welcome the group and invite them to walk along the main road leaving the village towards the coast. The rhythm, itinerary and performances of the tour would then follow a largely invariable script, as typified by the description of one tour that took place in autumn 1999.

On that day, Orom made the group halt in front of a camellia tree. The group formed a half circle around him, waiting to see what would happen. He started telling a story about a woman who disliked the odour of flowers. She would not use perfume and the only flowers cultivated in her garden were camellias. Why only camellias? He asked the people surrounding him. There was a moment of silence. The tourists guessed at different reasons. They were all wrong. Because camellias are odourless, he said and smiled. And they are also beautiful. This is why the lady was called *La Dame aux Camellias*. He picked a couple of flowers and passed them around. The people raised the flowers to their noses trying to grasp the absence of a scent. They looked at each other, smiling and affirming that the flowers effectively had no, or only a very fine, odour. Orom announced he would tell them about “proper” Creole ways of using camellias. During processions, he explained, people would throw the flower’s petals onto the path before people passed. However, he added, possibly the most interesting use of the flowers, especially of the white ones, was simply as soap. The tourists looked doubtful, facing him with a questioning gaze. He picked a large white camellia flower and started rubbing it between his hands. On continuing to do so, after a certain period of time, a white soapy mousse appeared between his fingers. Ah! The tourists seemed astonished. He smiled, happy about the effect of his demonstration. Two of the tourists themselves started to repeat the experiment and, just like Orom, generated soapy foam. Before, Orom explained, everything was used. Today we constantly bypass flowers and plants that previously had multi-

ple uses. Some people still know about these flowers and plants, but they are no longer in use. However, he added, to make the children – his children – use them – no, that’s not what he wanted to do. Yet, he concluded, he believes that it is important for the children to know about these flowers and plants and how these were used in the past. So, the white camellias were used for washing cloth. Efficient! He had finished his explanation and the tour was ready to continue.

I first met Orom during the late 1990s. He was then around forty. He had grown up in Hell-Bourg, a village deep inside the valley of Salazie – the village we had just left as part of his guided tour. His parents did not own land and so had worked for local farmers. These had mainly small farms, with narrow patches of land and small herds of cattle. The surplus of the local produce was usually sold to the markets and the large domains outside the valley. During the 1960s, the period that followed La Réunion’s transformation into a *département d’outre-mer* (DOM) (in 1946), most of these small-scale family-run agricultural enterprises faced increasingly fierce competition from imported goods. In 1963, Michel Debré, French Prime Minister under President de Gaulle and fervent defender of France’s overseas colonial interests, was elected a member of the French parliament, representing the first circumscription of La Réunion. During his mandate, he engaged in an eager struggle against the communist party of La Réunion, a movement led by Paul Vergès striving for autonomy for the island (Gauvin 1996). To counter the political influence of the local communist party, Michel Debré often violently instrumentalised the colonial rhetoric of France as a motherly *Mère-Patrie*. He distributed free milk to the newly created school canteens and initiated a wide-ranging economic and social development programme for the island (Vergès 1999). The French welfare state was introduced, giving the population previously unknown access to consumables, especially the women who received family allocations for their children. It often left the men in a socially and symbolically ambivalent role, as disempowered heads of families, incapable of providing the main income.

At the same time, in a drive to make the agricultural sector more productive, many rural hamlets were regrouped into villages, new routes to better access the mountainous inside of the island were built and a land reform was initiated to increase the size of agricultural exploitations. The majority of the rural population who did not own any land, including Orom's parents, remained with little to do and left for the urban centres at the island's coast or the French mainland in far-away Europe. It was in this context of rural decline that Orom – among thousands of other rural Reunionese – moved to Saint-Denis, the largest town on the island's coast. In the years that followed, he worked as a musician for private parties and as a waiter in local restaurants. It was here that he discovered and cultivated his skills for entertainment.

In 1996, Orom was approached by local development agents who were about to initiate a training programme for local tourist guides. The training was accompanied by a study bursary. Orom was offered a place and accepted. From 1996, he spent a year undertaking classroom teaching and learning, with modules in enterprise management, heritage communication and project development. As part of this training, he did a professional internship with a mountain hiking company then new to Salazie. He also collaborated with the eco-museum of Salazie, a new museum initiated by local development agents and university researchers that was then preparing its very first exhibition. Tutored by the director of this new museum, a French anthropologist, Orom had then developed the ethno-botanical guided tour that had taken us, that day, to the camellia tree.

Laslo

Having left this tree behind, Orom led the group into a forest. Following a rather well-established script of explanations and performances (to which I will return below), he introduced different plants and the ways these had been used “before”. The group then left the forest and followed a road for a couple of hundred metres. It eventually arrived at Laslo's garden plot.

Laslo was Orom's maternal uncle. Around 65 years

old at the end of the 1990s, he was a former forest labourer and dockworker in the harbour of La Réunion. Since his retirement, he spent most of his days in his garden plot, maintaining the courtyard, the kitchen and a small wooden house, looking after the fruit trees and vegetables, and receiving friends for a talk and a coffee. He had also started selling fruits and vegetables that he put on a table by the road. The garden plot had previously belonged to his parents and he was brought up there. Some members of his immediate family still lived in small houses next to it. Laslo had then recently moved to a purpose-built house in a nearby village called Mare-à-Poule-d'Eau and only came back to his garden during the day. I first met Laslo through his sister in whose house I was renting a room. Both treated me like a member of their extended family. Laslo, when I met him, kissed me on the cheeks, a sign of social intimacy as opposed to the more common handshake.

Following his training, Orom, Laslo's nephew, was temporarily employed by the eco-museum of Salazie to help with a new exhibition on the theme of “The nature of know-how” (*La nature des savoir-faire*) inaugurated in 1998. Along with ethnographers from the University of La Réunion, he participated in the collection of objects and in the erecting of exhibition displays. Laslo, who by then had just moved out of his old house, wanted to demolish the old wooden buildings in order to expand the garden. Orom convinced him to keep these and to transform the plot into a “heritage site”. To make the garden more accessible, Orom and Laslo built a ramp between the road and the pathway leading to the old wooden house. With the financial and technical help of the eco-museum of Salazie and the ethnologists of the University of La Réunion, Orom and Laslo added a straw hut to the existing structures, using traditional building materials and techniques. The building of this straw hut was visually documented by a team of university ethnologists (Pandolfi & Quezin 1998). From 1997, Laslo became a privileged informant for the ethnologists working for the Salazie eco-museum. Repeatedly interviewed, observed, photographed and filmed, he progressively transformed into a public figure representing and embodying the

presumed essence of an immediate past, of a popular culture that had just been “lost”. Various fragments of his life, especially those related to “traditional life”, were visually widely present at the 1998 eco-museum exhibition. He also appeared in academic articles published in the journal of the National Museum for Popular Arts and Traditions (MNATP 1999) and in numerous journalistic photo-reportages in international and local media. Since 1998, local tour operators programmed visits of Laslo’s garden as a tourist site. International travel journalists invited by La Réunion’s tourist board were taken to Salazie to visit – and write about – his garden.

While Laslo was transformed into a kind of popular heritage star at the local level, he seemed little concerned about this new public persona. In private, in the presence of his friends and family, he usually avoided talking about it. Only once did he show me a collection of French and US-American travel magazines in which he appeared. These he had put out of sight in a toolbox in his kitchen. Otherwise, he seemed to have continued life as before. In the morning, he usually started his day by sweeping the courtyard of his garden plot and the floor of the wooden house. As with most people in La Réunion, he wanted his courtyard and house clean, free of dust. He then built a fire in the kitchen to boil water and make coffee. The doors of the kitchen were usually wide open and a radio was turned on. He fed his cats and then spent the rest of the morning looking after his plants. At lunchtime, he usually ate a meal that he had brought with him to the garden and then slept for a while in the kitchen and, later, in the newly built straw hut.

This daily routine was slightly altered when tourist groups were expected for a visit. In most cases it was Orom who would bring these groups to the garden, but sometimes other guides working for coast-based tour operators would come. The relationship with these guides was always personal; Laslo knew them individually and the guides knew they had to call him before paying a visit. As a sort of entrance fee (Laslo would not call it this), Laslo received the equivalent of one euro per visitor. Sometimes tourists also left tips. Tourist groups usually arrived be-

tween 10 and 11 a.m. and the site visit took about one hour. When such groups were expected, Laslo, after sweeping and cleaning the courtyard and the house, and after lighting the fire and making coffee, usually went into his garden to pick a selection of fruits and vegetables – bananas, passion fruit, tree tomatoes, lychees, mangoes, pineapple, etc., depending on the season. These he placed on a table in the wooden house. He also placed a chayote fruit (*chouchou* in Creole) on a rock in the courtyard between the house and the kitchen. He rearranged the fire so it would not smoke too much. Orom had told him to do so, Laslo once explained me. And he turned off the radio and hid it under a pillow.

When the time of the visit approached, he usually got nervous – like an actor before going on stage. He repeatedly went back and forth between the kitchen and the house for a last check, picking up leaves fallen in the courtyard, stroking the cat. During this time, he would hide behind bushes and trees, not to be seen, watching for signs that would announce the arrival of the tourist group. Once he spotted the tourists through the woods, he would jump into his kitchen and hide behind the half-closed kitchen door. Sometimes I hid with him and, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, he explained to me what would happen next. The tourist guide, usually Orom, or one of the tourists would ask, in a loud voice, if someone is home (*Il y a quelqu’un?*). Once this sentence had been uttered, he would open the kitchen door, slowly step down into the courtyard and walk down the path towards the street, to welcome the visitors.

Orom and Laslo at Play

Orom had gathered the tourist group at the entrance to Laslo’s garden plot. In the Creole garden, he explained, there is no entry gate. However, there is an invisible boundary that visitors should not trespass without being invited by the owner of the plot. A specific type of plant marks this boundary. The group halted and Orom explained that there were three questions one can ask in order to be granted licence to enter a house. The group chose among these options and, all shouting together, loudly enquired if

“someone is home” (*Il y a quelqu’un?*). After a short while, an elderly man appeared on the path under the trees, smiling and inviting them to come in. Orom presented the man as Laslo, his uncle. Laslo and the tourists shook hands and then entered the garden plot. Orom took the group to the courtyard between the kitchen and the wooden house. What followed was a relatively sophisticated performance acted out in an interplay between Orom, Laslo and the tourists. Orom usually started by announcing that he (Orom) had “his own way of seeing things”, but that he also respected the way his parents understood and still understand the world. He picked up different plants in the garden and explained the way they had been used by his parents. Laslo intervened at specific moments, when Orom – seemingly spontaneously – asked him to develop or confirm one of his stories or explanations. Orom spoke in French, with a slight Creole accent, and Laslo in Creole. When Orom addressed Laslo, he talked to him in Creole and then explained to the tourists, in French, what he had asked him or what Laslo had answered. In most cases, this “translation” was not strictly necessary as Laslo’s Creole was pretty much understandable for French language speakers. Orom and Laslo largely followed a kind of unwritten script, which seemed to have emerged from the frequent repetition of the visit. They played different roles: Orom the mediator between “tradition and modernity” and Laslo the living representative of a lost past. Orom talked about contemporary issues, about scientific proofs for the naturalist knowledge of his parents, about economic, social and environmental problems. Laslo talked about his parents, about how life was before, about how to use certain objects, about the medical use of plants. Laslo confirmed Orom’s explanations by adding stories of his childhood, his own past. The same set of stories was told, again and again, during this standard itinerary. They were often based on objects, plants, fruits or buildings “found”, as if by coincidence, along this itinerary. Many of these were props that had been purposefully placed in specific locations.

After his introduction in the front yard, Orom asked the group to enter the wooden house. Laslo

no longer lives here, he explained. He lives in the village down the road. However, he explained, his uncle would come to this garden every day and he – Orom – found it fantastic that he has kept this kind of traditional life while everything around him has changed. This is why, Orom said, two years ago he had the idea of showing this place to visitors so that its memory would not be lost. He explained various aspects of the architecture of the house and Laslo pointed out where exactly he, his brothers and sisters and his parents had slept before. Orom explained the building technique of the house, the wood used, the beliefs related to the position of the door and the windows. Laslo added short anecdotes. The visit to the house concluded with an invitation to the tourists to try some of the fruits placed on the table. The group then left the house and entered the kitchen, a wooden construction around an open fireplace, covered by a straw roof. The kitchen used to be the place for people to meet, Orom explained. It was here that people received visitors, where the family came together to eat, where important decisions were made. The house, by contrast, was only used for sleeping. It was always kept clean and nicely decorated, so people who passed by could look inside. His parents rarely received visitors in the house; it was far more convivial to receive people in the kitchen. This, he concluded, is proper Creole hospitality.

The tourists sat down on wooden benches around the fire. Orom talked about different objects in the kitchen, how these were used in former times. Laslo talked about how the family came together here, how they were not allowed to talk while taking their meals, how his father used to punish him and his brothers, how his mother was compassionate with them when they were punished. Orom’s stories about “how the world has changed so quickly in recent years”, often triggered more generic conversations, typically¹ about “how globalisation has left the world empty of values”, “how young people cannot connect to the world and have become violent”, “how hard it is for people to find jobs”, “how the Americans have imposed their values on the world”. Orom usually took a specific position within these conversations. He explained that his motivation for

guiding tourists was to bring people from different locations together; so that he could bring to life a commonly lived Creole moment. He often explained that his past, the traditions he grew up with, were disappearing as well. After these “kitchen conversations”, he usually got out his guitar and suggested singing a song, normally *Mon Ile*, a popular song about La Réunion. Although this suggestion appeared spontaneous, it was part of the standard visit programme. The song’s lyrics were about the singular beauty of the island, a declaration of love by the singer for the place in which he grew up. Through the emotion in Orom’s voice, the ambience of the fireplace in the dark and smoky kitchen and the mood created by the conversations, this song generally generated an emotionally very moving moment. It was not unusual for some of the tourists to start crying, hiding their faces with their hands. Even I, who had many times participated in this highly choreographed moment, had the shivers.

It seemed to me that Orom’s performance was dependent on his living in two worlds, which allowed him to evoke the nostalgia for a world he belonged to but that was no longer lived. The success of his guide’s performance as mediator depended on his situating himself as both a member of the visitors’ world he could connect to through shared references to science and technology, and living (if tenuous) ties to a warmer, more familial, and intimate disappearing traditional world.

When the song was over, Orom stood up and invited the tourists to go back into the garden. He led them to the old-style straw hut that he and Laslo had built close to the kitchen. The tourists entered, and it was Laslo’s turn to explain that people “really lived in this kind of house before”. Orom usually watched through the window and commented that the bed doesn’t “run”, smiling. It was fixed to the wall so it can’t “run”. Before, as it was often raining and people like Laslo’s parents had no TV, it was important that the bed didn’t “run”. He smiled again. It explains, he said, the large number of children in the Creole families. The tourists smiled as well. They understood Orom’s underlying suggestion that a bed that “didn’t run” – a bed solidly fixed to the wall – al-

lowed for making love very frequently. Laslo usually added, seriously, that even during a cyclone, the bed didn’t “run”. Orom, again smiling with a wry face, repeated “even during a cyclone” (implying the double sense “even during making love like a cyclone”). The juxtaposition of Laslo’s seriousness and Orom’s double-meaning of “during a cyclone” amplified the comic nature of this double act. So, the bed doesn’t run, hmm, Orom concluded, again with a smile. For the rest of the day, sentences about things that “don’t run” became running jokes among the tourists. The joke almost always worked.

Once again, by employing a comic and distanced mode, Orom marked himself as an inhabitant of the tourists’ world as well. The sexual innuendo is thus communicated by Orom, the younger mediator-guide, whereas the older native presents himself as unaware of the humour in his own explanation. He doesn’t share the joke and remains excluded from the micro-sociability formed around the humorous moment. He is the “straight man” in the humorous interaction. The task of self-consciously joking devolves to the mediator between the two worlds, not the inhabitant of the traditional world. In this way, the mediation is also a scripting of particular ways of looking at generations, of different modes of communication assigned to the guide-mediator, who belongs to both worlds, and the somehow “untouched” native. Otherwise said, there is a generational style of guiding that overlaps with cultural distance from “once upon a time”.

Allegorical Flowers

Anthropologists have shown that the ability and efficiency of interacting with tourists derives from a learning process which more often relates to the experiences of repeated interactions with tourists than to classroom learning (Cohen 1985; Bunten 2008; Salazar 2014). In a similar fashion, Orom had learnt to interact with tourists. He had observed their reactions, understood how to anticipate expectations, how to throw rhetorical hooks, build tension and then nullify it through forms of comedy or tragedy. Orom constantly flirted with social, gender, phenotype, time, space and moral boundaries. He pro-

jected tourists into a kaleidoscope of possible roles and existences, of selves in which tourists could recognise their own histories and desires of being and belonging. Through the quick juxtaposition of such possible roles and existences – images of poverty against images of progress, cruelty against happiness, order against chaos – he frequently took them on an emotional rollercoaster ride. At one moment, they could identify with Orom's implicit critique of modernity, his pessimism towards a disarticulated social life, the loss of beauty and social solidarity of an idealised past, all of which constitutes, as a critique of modernity, a central rhetoric pillar of modern cosmology (Picard 2010, 2011). To evoke this anti-modernity narrative, Orom repeatedly talked about the rich naturalist knowledge of the generation of his parents – a knowledge that, he explained, was now being forgotten. People do not know how to use plants anymore, he repeatedly explained. In the next moment, he challenged this nostalgic narrative through an optimistic one of social progress. He talked about his children who now could go to school for free, who had access to modern medicine, to mass media, to travel. He talked about himself, of black phenotype, born into a family that owned no land, who was now able to look after his children, who had become part of modernity at a time when the striking poverty of the past, the cruel times of slavery and social injustice, of severe punishment, were over. In the next moment, he often once again juxtaposed this optimistic narrative of social progress to a narrative of social complexity, of social fragmentation – where people belong to a variety of different, usually non-articulated contexts, where they are lost, where they search for roots.

A core set of rhetoric-based and non-verbal performances appeared in all his guided tours. They formed a kind of core register of narrative possibilities, of scripts that were acted out through his guide's performance. These were usually based on the opposition between an immediate here-and-now, and different types of alien worlds: the past, Western modernity, female gender, wilderness, etc. The tourists were habitually made to identify with roles and characters related to these alien worlds. In many

ways, they were identified with representatives of a global modernity and the former coloniser: France. Within the same type of narrative structure, Orom projected himself into the role of the noble castaway, the underdog rising up against the presumed non-liberty defining the modern condition, the powerful metaphorical figure of the runaway slave who escaped the cruelty of a society dominated by the French. He thus created a situation unusually uncomfortable for the mainly French tourists who, at least implicitly, were identified with the role of the villain. In some cases, by addressing the tourists through terms like "your ancestors did that...", Orom made this attribution quite explicit. Yet he also had a particular talent for dissolving these uncomfortable situations through forms of comedy or tragedy. He joked, for instance, about the difficulty slaves had when they tried to run away with thorns in their feet. Part of the violent story of slavery and hardship was told in a comedic mode that Orom and the tourists laughed about. The tourists could allow themselves to laugh about the past because Orom (who identified his ancestors as slaves) laughed about it. The rhetorically-built ontological difference between the self-victim and the other-colonial exploiter (implicitly projected onto the local-tourist relationship) was nullified. In the end, everyone was on the same level – a member of a common contemporary humanity. At other moments, Orom concluded his stories about social progress through a form of tragedy. He talked about a commonly experienced loss of authenticity and disenchantment brought about by the modernisation of the world. Here again, he merged the initially ontologically separate entities of tourists and La Réunion into a collective condition. Everyone was caught up in the same types of contradictions marked by the desire for social progress leading to better chances and equality on the one hand, and, the fear of dissolving forms of order and traditional forms of solidarity on the other.

Through his experience as a tourist guide, Orom could anticipate how tourists would react to these stories and their endings; how they projected their own contradictions of life into the narratives he used to structure his stories. He could anticipate fairly well

that tourists perceived the tragedy of his life to be an allegory for their own lives. Orom was a brilliant performer, able to spontaneously re-arrange scripts and interpret them in ways that would surprise. His performance was marked by changing rhythms and the staccato of dramaturgic turning points, by a juxtaposition of moments that created deep aesthetic emotions, feelings of heart-breaking sadness, thrills of erotic temptation, joyful happiness and profound sensations of existential human connectivity. Particular situational contexts generated further possibilities for refining the role-play. Sometimes, it suddenly started raining and Orom spontaneously improvised his rhetoric in this specific context. He would use the rain to talk about modernity and the progress brought about by “good roofs” – to evoke nostalgic images of the past, of being a child walking through the warm summer rain. Or, if he spotted particularly pretty girls among the tourists, he would develop a juicy, sexualised metaphor about the effect of rain on flowers, or the effect of La Réunion on organic matter imported onto the island. The tourists often threw images back to him and the dialogue that developed from there sometimes reached hilarious climaxes. Orom invariably mobilised explanations, grimaces or jokes out of a pre-existing personal register, which he adapted to the situational context. Sometimes, new jokes or stories emerged through contact with tourists. Sometimes, tourists made spirited or funny jokes or connections that Orom would later re-adapt and, if these proved successful, integrate into his repertoire. Orom’s performance worked because he shared a common register with most of the tourists, which allowed them to effectively communicate. This would probably work less well if Laslo were to do it. Attributed the role of older native, Laslo instead served as a foil or a contrast in verifying the persona of Orom as guide. For Orom’s performance to work, the collaboration, or actual lack of social distance between Orom and Laslo needed to be partly obscured. The difference between generations must be essentialised in order to make the power of Orom’s performance as mediator effective.

Fashioning Creole as an Existential Condition

Through his guide performances, Orom persistently related his personal existence to a form of belonging to La Réunion – excluding the tourists as members of a world outside, usually the European French mainland. The separation between these worlds was discursively marked by the ascription of respective attributes and qualities. La Réunion was depicted as a plentiful place of juices, colours and flavours, luscious odours, monstrously magnified vegetables and plants, flowers that look like sexual organs. It appeared imbued with magical qualities capable of transforming imported things, of awakening the vitality of ordinary European garden flowers, of sexualising people, plants and objects, of making things bigger, tastier, juicier. Orom constructed the island as a magical garden able to liquefy categorical boundaries between people and things, to dissolve ontological difference, to reinstate the reign of an idealised essential nature of all things.

To define the product of this specific quality of the island, Orom constantly returned to the term “Creole”. In his narrative, this term was made to signify a form of solidarity between flowers in Laslo’s garden, populations in La Réunion, humans and nature, male and female gender, La Réunion and the world outside. “Creole” became a way of being in the world, a romanticised ethno-method to living contradictory relationships. It became a way to package the accidents and complexity of social history in models and stories, a kind of remedy to make sense of oppositions and boundaries other than through racial or class categories. It was a narrative that suggested an alternative cosmos based on forms of solidarity and fluidity, an idealised world of harmony, a utopia come-real within a here-and-now. Tourists could make sense of this narrative; they could identify with this Creole world, with La Réunion as an island that enabled peace and intercultural understanding.

By emphasising his belonging to the island, his being Creole, Orom constituted himself as one of the island’s products, a Creole ontologically linked to and imbued with its “magical” qualities. Through his tourism performance, he constituted himself as part of the island’s nature; as a man with an in-

timate connection to this nature; a man talented with the spiritual and sexual power of this nature. At the same time, through other references (e.g. his narratives about social progress and nostalgia), he portrayed himself as a self-conscious and cultivated person, as a man who speaks the language of humanistic culture, who defends humanistic values.

Tourism as Local Stage

Orom knew that “Orom-the-Creole-hero” was a successful figure navigating the tourism plot. Performing this role was his job and it was this job that legitimated his participation in the social life of the village. It was the performance of “being Creole” for tourists that constituted him as a social persona within the context of his immediate social environment. When the tourists had left that day, he asked me if I wanted to join him for a drink at his house. We walked up the street from the central square of the village and talked about one of the girls in the tourist group. Talking about girls was one of the themes of interest we shared. It was an easy start for a conversation. Then we talked about things that had happened in the village, the preparations for the village festivities that would take place two months later. When we arrived at his house and met his wife and kids, the emotional theatre of the morning, the songs, the stories and the tears, seemed to have vanished. They seemed only significant in terms of a job Orom had done, as his profession. It was not spoken of any further, which in a way increased the performative aspect of guiding, insofar as this Creole hero persona was not worn offstage at home. The transition from guide to father and husband was usually accompanied by micro-rituals such as the sitting down and “letting go” in his house’s backyard, the consumption of drinks and the change in mode of social interaction, less centred around heritage or the past than in the concrete daily preoccupations related to the household and children’s education.

That day, Orom’s son brought each of us a bottle of beer and we drank together. A complicity and friendship had developed between us over the many months in the same village, the many hours on guided tours. I had met his family, been invited

to some of his Sunday family picnics. We had some private parties in my house and often went to Laslo’s garden plot to fix things or just for a coffee. One day, a couple of weeks earlier, after finishing a guided tour, Orom had started a conversation about his job. He had asked me not to think badly of him, but explained that he would “normally not work every day”. I had not understood what he wanted to tell me. He explained that other people in the village guided tourists every day, even on Sundays. That they often even took several groups a day. In these cases, the contact with tourists becomes very industrial, he said. It is like slavery, he added. You do the same thing over and over, and you lose its humanistic essence. He clearly seemed to imply an existential dimension to his role as guide and mediator, connecting worlds otherwise apart.

When I had met him on one of the early days in the village, he told me about how important it was to him to “preserve” and “value” (*valoriser*) Creole traditions, a discourse not much different from the one he usually performed for tourists, local development agents or the ethnologists of the Salazie eco-museum. It was he who had invited me to accompany him during his tours. It was only later that he realised that I would eventually stay in the village for quite a few months. He told me that his wife had asked him to go work while I was around, to “give a good image” both of his family and the village.

During my fieldwork in other contexts in La Réunion, I had repeatedly come across the term “giving a good image”. It seemed to indicate a communicative dimension to individual acts where the finality of doing things seemed to lie less in the immediate transformation of a reality or the re-establishment of a kind of order, than in the public display of the very act of doing things. In this sense, acts like gardening or going shopping frequently seemed to be associated with social significations that went far beyond their presumable immediate utility. They were social performances of “giving a good image” that allowed a social actor to project a certain image of the self into a given social arena.

Within the village context, the publicly performed act of guiding tourists seemed to legitimate

a social role for Orom. This role was almost ritually reaffirmed during village festivals and public ceremonies. During these events, Orom would dress up in his usual tourist guide uniform and perform “Creole traditions”. Wearing khaki shorts, a white T-shirt with “Tour Guide” for a logo, hiking boots, and a straw hat on his head he would sing Creole songs before a local audience. In the eyes of this local audience, he looked precisely like a tourist guide. People did not dress like this in La Réunion. His dress code belonged strictly to the realm of tourism. Straw hats were for elderly men living in rural areas. “Modern men” in La Réunion did not wear hiking boots or hats. The songs Orom performed during these local events were pretty much the same ones he performed for tourists. Through this performance, Orom dramatised himself as a professional performer for tourists, as a tourist guide. Just as local farmers would use these festive events to perform their attachment to the earth and the fruits they gain from it, Orom performed his attachment to “Creole traditions” as core values of his tourism activity. At least, this was how many people in the village initially saw and accepted it.

Symptomatically, the straw hat on his head became a public symbol, not of local traditions, but of the performance of such traditions to tourists. This process is intrinsically connected to the emergence of what Bruner (2005) calls a local tourism realm and the recognition of Orom as one of its key players. Local spectators from the village who knew Orom as a lay person would situate him accordingly, as a socially somewhat marginal member of a certain generation, place of birth, and status who engaged in tourism activities as a form of livelihood. In the early stages of his guide career in the mid-1990s, concepts like “heritage” (*patrimoine*) or a revalorised interpretation of Creoleness first emerged in local development politics, and remained deeply alien to local self-definitions in the village. By employing these concepts (learnt during his state-sponsored training as a guide) before tourists and locals, Orom affirmed a social role of both successful professional in the tourist industry and ambassador for local traditions. The perfor-

mance of traditions for tourists became the particular means to affirm participation in an emerging local modernity in the village. While initially looked down at compared with the village’s traditional sectors, especially agriculture as “real” work, in the early 2000s, tourism progressively became recognised by the locals and his family as providing real, prestigious work. During this period, with the help of public subsidies, the active involvement of neo-rural villagers and the technical advice of public sector experts, houses were repainted (Niollet 1999), wooden façades repaired, a central square built, and heritage highlights were made visible through signposts. La Réunion’s Regional Development Plan (SAR) recognised the village as an “authentic Creole village” (Région Réunion 1995).

The economy of the valley and that of the entire island underwent a profound transformation from an initially agricultural to a more horticultural logic of gardening. The political economy of the colonial society, based on the production and export of sugar and the exploitation of cheap labour initially introduced as slaves and contract workers, progressively dissolved. The origin of wealth was no longer associated with the fertility and work of the soil, but with the economic value of a specific (touristic) aesthetics of natural and urban landscapes supported by French and European Union subsidies, public sector jobs and infrastructure investments. Through the floral allegories of his guide discourse, Orom talked about this historical rupture that had dissolved the moral order of colonial social life and projected him into the uncertainties of a new era. The longer I observed him, the more I gained the impression that the sense of tragedy he developed through his guiding translated his ambiguous feelings about his newly found social freedom and the simultaneous loss of a life he had grown up with. At the same time, he turned the colonial periphery rhetoric of La Réunion on its head. No longer the unworthy child of a colonial mother, being Creole metamorphosed into a global ideal, a wider model to think a global world in continuous contact, exchange and transformation.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the role of tour guides as mediators between the social spaces that both separate and connect tourists and destinations. The first aspect is the multifaceted role of guides mobilising, performing and transforming, but also subverting and deceiving representational expectations that tourists and locals hold of themselves and of others. Through the focus on the performances and actual social lives of two local guides, I show how the repetition of tour guide performances for tourists creates a tourism realm whose underlying metaphors and cosmology work as a common register enabling tourists and mediators to communicate. It is precisely the ambiguity of the contact zone that here allows several actors to differently recognise themselves in a same image or narrative, using it as a common frame to negotiate very personal meanings.

Orom the guide takes on the scripted role of the messenger between two worlds: a lost and somewhat magical world of the past, looked at with a mixture of nostalgia and relief, and a contemporary world of global modernity, equally looked at through mixed feelings of both disenchantment and liberation from a past condition of poverty and injustice. Both forms of ambivalence work in tandem to sketch an overarching cosmology that defines a common frame for the multiple interactions between guides, tourists and various types of locals. The pertinence and success of Orom's guide performance lies in his ability to dissolve the inherent contradictions of this cosmology through optimistic images of a world in creolisation. Through his discourse, the island, its people, natural substrates and selected everyday banalities become means and metaphors for a magical quality that allows precisely such processes of creolisation to take place. The cosmology allows him to formulate a new geopolitics of the world in which the island shifts from its historical role as unworthy child of a symbolically elevated French motherland to a contemporary role as medium and model for transforming the disenchantments of modernity into new forms of solidarity and meaningfulness.

The second aspect explored in this work concerned

the social and economic consequences of the emergence of a local tourism industry built upon heritage and the past as its principal economic resource base. I have shown how Orom, through performances for tourists and local audiences constitutes for himself a role as mediator belonging to both worlds – those of modernity and the traditional past. One becomes the means for the other. Laslo, belonging to an older generation, is instead attributed a role of immutable native, presumed witness-character of a social world of the past who through his performances, words and silences reinforces the power and veracity of this world that seems to just have slipped away.

Yet, Laslo and Orom have close family ties and live in the same world, respectively defined by marked struggles to gain minimum incomes, help one's children succeed in school and gain social recognition as a worthy member of society among villagers and their own families. Paradoxically, these latter aspects are partly and perhaps necessarily obfuscated from the theatrical space created through the tour guiding and interactions with tourists. Here, Orom temporarily becomes the self-confident mediator between worlds of here and there that he enjoys playing, and which also provides social recognition at the family and village levels. For both Laslo and Orom, guiding tourists eventually fulfils the function of attaining social recognition, especially when public policy narratives about the worthiness and importance of preserving heritage become more notable during the early 2000s. Being a mediator becomes a wider social role: not only immediately connecting tourists and destinations, but connecting the social worlds of local life with the realities of global society.

The co-creative role of guides as mediators (Weiler & Black 2015) hence takes place at once in various concurrent yet interwoven contact zones, whereby the narratives and scripts of the tourist plot flow into the social local worlds and transform their meanings. Through a miraculous moral and aesthetic transfiguration, the Réunion Creole, previously at the very margin of the French national society and world transforms into an idealised aspirational character, a metaphor through which to think about a global world in creolisation. The tourism contact

zone hence operates as a device both for tourists and locals to emancipate new metaphors through which to locate oneself in the world.

Note

1 The vast majority of the tourists Orom interacted with can be categorised as French urban middle class. The quasi-systematic repetition of conversational themes in a given moment of the guided tour hence could be related to a more generic French middle-class culture of communication emerging within a specific frame of the French nation state and its strongly centralised social institutions (e.g. education, media, army, public service, governance corps).

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