

Methodology for a Creole Museum, For a Postcolonial Museum of the Living Present

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Abstract

The *Maison des civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise (MCUR)* will open in Reunion Island at Plateau Caillou, Saint-Paul, historical site of the first human settlement. Built in a garden with a large vista on the ocean, the museum will house a reference exhibition; temporary exhibitions; a gallery of contemporary art; a library on-line; an amphitheatre for spectacles, colloquiums, conferences and seminars; archives; a bookstore and a shop; a cafeteria, and a restaurant. It will welcome artists and scholars in residence, and house educative programmes for children. Rooms will be specially dedicated for visitors to experiment with oral expression in the Creole language. All indications will be in Creole, French and English.

The MCUR is Regional Council's major cultural project for Reunion. The cost is evaluated at 60 million euros, inscribed in the State and the European Union budget. It will be part of the network of museums, cultural centres and natural parks in Reunion, linked as well as to the network of culture and civilization museums worldwide. Research centres will be its privileged partners. The MCUR is supported by eminent personalities and researchers from all over the world.

On Reunion, six worlds have met: the African, Chinese, European, Hindu, Muslim, and the worlds of islands - Madagascar, Comoros, Zanzibar. Comoros, South China, Europe, France, Gujarat, South India, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mozambique, Vietnam...the sites of origins of the Reunionese are extremely diverse. The MCUR will show the roots and routes of exile and migration, the transformations of cultural expressions and practices, their creolization, (still at work on the island). MCUR will evoke the conflicts, the revolts, the festivals, the creations, the sorrows and the joys that construct a history and a culture.

Keywords: Indiooceanic Creolization, immaterial culture, memory, postcolonial

Introduction

We started with the following questions: How can creolization processes be represented, performed, visualized? How can slavery, engagisme and colonialism be shown? How can the physical, human, economic and political constraints that shaped the island of Réunion and its inhabitants be staged? How can a culture arisen from constant contributions of waves of voluntary or forced migrations to a territory where there was no first, pre-colonial culture be visualized? How can the struggle against a colonial system backed by despotism, brutality, force and contempt, be told? That is, what visual forms are there for showing the life and cultural practices of a slave, a maroon, a freedman, a master, an engagé? What visual forms are there for representing the everyday life of a small planter, a docker, a washerwoman, a female civil servant...? What is a museum without "objects"? What is the status of the immaterial archive in a world of colonial archives? These questions framed our reflection, and we drew our conclusions from works in the past twenty years on museums, post-coloniality, the politics and poetics of representations and visual theory.

In Réunion we have to invent a place that does not fossilize history or memory, that remains a site open to revisions and reinterpretations, that shows creolization processes and practices

while restoring the spaces and histories that led up to this creolization. The spirit is one of non-linear interpretation where the viewers are invited to “dialogue” with what they see, where they can suggest other meanings for things and objects. Réunionese anthropology, history, and culture offer so many layers of intersecting meanings that clash and connect that it is impossible to extract a homogeneous narration and draw a straight line from A to B. Meeting this challenge by juxtaposing spaces of signification is another evasive device, since handling the heterogeneous and the polyvocal requires thinking about the space of the presentation as much as about the presentation itself. This exigency does not concern the MCUR alone, yet before undertaking a program we still have to conceive this space in connection with its environment and its content. Its environment: it is impossible to “represent” creolization without talking about the physical territory (mountains, ocean, plains, rivers, fields, towns), its constraints (cyclones, fragility of the soil, steep slopes) and its influence on the imaginary. It exists as a non-material and material heritage. Its content: the challenge is to present intersecting stories and views, never letting one of the terms prevail, yet nonetheless give meaning.

The MCUR wants to provide the public with very diversified and complex information and to give time for reflection, to spawn a movement of curiosity, a desire “to know more”, while providing surprise, emotion and enjoyment. Notwithstanding, the MCUR cannot do without a reflection on the issues of a museum of the present time, a space that must display episodes where violence, brutality and poverty prevailed, without becoming a space of expiation. It is by starting from the present that another future can be imagined. The MCUR proposes a highly innovative conception of space, in terms of both scientific and organizational systems. The MCUR has to solve this difficulty: how to show extremely different civilizations at very different periods of their respective historical trajectories and their translation on Réunion. These civilizations arrived in the form of traces, and were further altered during creolization. The creolized traces will be represented not only by material testimonies but also by mechanisms we have to invent to render tangible and intelligible the contexts in which they were created, the finalities and functions that had been assigned to them, and the meaning attached to them.

Economy Of Catching Up

In Réunion we have to take into consideration an *economy of catching up and of urgency*. This demand to catch up, and its vocabulary, stemmed from anti-colonial struggles and the discourse of progress. They were based on the acknowledgment of facts: malnutrition, wretched condition of the infrastructure, non-application of labor legislation, extremely brutal employers, racist schools and churches... Equality was the key notion in the struggle for social and political emancipation in 1946. The demand for equality expressed in the colonies was a demand for social equality (application of the social and labor legislation). It was expressed as well as a demand to catch up, and the anti-colonial movement was the first to emphasize its urgency. In the 1960s, under the pressure of unrest, the State adopted the expression “catching up”, adapting it in its own way.

Since then, that notion and its representations have become the framework and central issue of every discussion. This economy of making up for lost time met several demands: of the State, of elected representatives, of the population. In just a few years, “providing” became the key issue. The gap between the different worlds in Réunion – haves and have-nots, those who have a permanent job and those who have a temporary one, those who work and those who don’t, the legacy of a colonial system, deeply unequal development - all this legitimated this “catching up”. However, the notion has also blocked us inside the rhetoric of urgency. The catching-up economy cannot do without a reflection on policies, time and place, tools

and strategies. We borrowed models that were not necessarily appropriate, and notions, concepts that we did not necessarily seek to adapt.

There are scores of examples of poorly-designed and poorly-made infrastructures. The need to catch up has served consumerism. The case of the automobile is the most symptomatic. On an island of 750,000 inhabitants, 300,000 cars travel a perimeter of 250 kms because there is no public transportation policy (which ought to have been part of a catching-up policy); you can easily see the perverse misuse of that type of economy. Since the notions of catching up and urgency lie behind every discussion, culture was caught up in them as well.

The Demand for Social and Cultural Equality

However, the demand for social equality opened new fields of protest, expressed in the 1960s by a critical approach to the colonial policy with respect to culture: mimetic reproduction of the model of a certain France, denial of the language, contempt for non-Catholic religions, folklorization or negation of popular expressions, rewriting of history canceling non-European contributions, racism, paternalism, mediocrity of cultural productions. A movement for the assertion of Creole language, of Réunionese history and culture invested the public sphere. It was a turning-point. But the field of culture did not elude the catching-up principle. Gradually the demand for infrastructure prevailed over the demand for content and esthetic elaborations. Since then, cultural action has only too often been confused with entertainment. Towns encourage petty bourgeois prettifying, supposedly picturesque, to the detriment of reappraised and historicized esthetics. A neo-Creole aesthetics has been invented and sold for consumption. Besides, the legitimate demand for historical recognition leads to a race to build monuments without thinking about their esthetics and function. Obviously the monument comes to fill a lack of representation and recognition and replaces a missing archive. The monument is a form of recognition of presence and filiation in the public space. Commemorating the ancestor or the longing for an ancestor, it gives meaning to present existence. Lately the accumulation of stelae, statues, and busts at traffic circles, crossings, and places of remembrance proves the need to situate history on the territory and raise a pantheon of great men who are missing in the colonial archive. The monument fossilizes the interpretation of history by replacing the document and instead lends itself to reinterpretation.

Heritage

Owing to colonial history, that lasted officially up to 1946, and owing to a certain amount of denial, including during the contemporary period, issues of remembrance or heritage are essential in Réunion insofar as they question the dominant story, personal or group stories, ideological or fanciful reconstructions, the desire for roots or genealogies. You cannot talk about remembrance and heritage without placing them within the frame of heritage and debt. The challenge is to allow the actors of the present to appropriate a past that is theirs only because inherited, that opens onto the future and as much as possible avoids dwelling hopelessly on what once was and will no longer be.

Heritage has to do with the remembrance of the past in the present. How can we present a common heritage of a 'we' that is shaped but not fossilized, because if it were, then heritage could be a pretext for the closing of this 'we'? In Réunion this is a particularly important question. There are at once several pasts (those of the different groups that shaped the population) and a past. But this is a widespread condition. What is special for Réunion, as for many territories that were colonized, is that the construction of what Paul Ricoeur has called a *récit partagé*, a shared story was postponed, prevented by the colonial power. Its construction is now under way.

As Jacques Derrida observed, heritage is something we receive without being able to choose. You might say heritage “chooses” us. However, nothing forces us to preserve this heritage as it is. That would mean making heritage a prison, trapping ourselves in a genealogy we would not be allowed to transgress. We have heritages. We inherited the systems of thinking and practices of slavery, of engagisme, and colonialism, along with the ideals and practices of anti-slavery, the Enlightenment, and anti-colonialism. We are heirs to various civilizations - African, Malagasy, Indian, European, Asian - heirs to various religious and cultural beliefs and practices. These different heritages that merged and dissociated from one another did not remain static over the centuries: they were creolized. Some aspects were lost; others were transformed. Over the centuries, new traditions have appeared, new practices, new beliefs, and that impetus is still under way.

The goal of the MCUR is not to set off searching for lost origins, trying to restore an authenticity that is imaginary, or defend a nostalgia that “things used to be better”. There is nothing in our heritages, no matter how painful they are, that gives us the right to claim a moral superiority; nothing in our heritages that deprives us of the right to claim we are different.

Cultural Difference

Cultural difference is now part of an economy that needs to increasingly extend its range of action (as soon as they are discovered, spaces, artifacts, images become part of the consumer economy. The popularity of shops featuring “ethnic items” testifies for the appetite for the “exotic”). There is no point in complaining and regretting a more “protected” past (this notion of protection is often an illusion: temples, libraries, artefacts destroyed and peoples massacred speak of a more violent past; colonialism profoundly upset practices and brought about the creation of museums where the cultural difference was staged in a scenario featuring a retrograde scientism), nor in censuring a tourist industry that provides employment and also allows us to encounter the diversity of cultures. Instead, we should undertake and pursue reflection of the representation of cultural differences, receptive to international research and the Réunionese public’s comments, and work with the tourist industry, with the arts and crafts movement, in connection with cultural exchange.

Pitfalls

There are two pitfalls that must be avoided: the illusion of a harmonious life and that of pure, protected origins. Postcolonial critique insists on the *transculturation* of forms and practices. Far from embracing the approach to *multicultural managerialism*, it seeks to represent lines of contact, exchange routes and trajectories, creolization, mixtures of memory traces. It insists on the need to visualize new maps of the past and the present where Europe does not speak in the name of others, does not shape their lives and territories, to restore the history of the men and women who have no “archives”.

The Archive

The archive is not a talisman, nor a fetish, but a *document*. *The archive is meaningful in its context*: it is not “truth”, but it belongs to an entire social environment (thus the notarized deed of the sale of a slave is meaningful when it is replaced in a social and historical framework; the deed itself is merely a notarized deed). The MCUR cannot be content to display archives. There has to be a space where these archives are contextualized and reinterpreted: thus the Code Noir (Black Code) has to be presented in a context where what founds the law in France and Europe is explained, and put in perspective with other codes regulating slavery. It must not become a “sacred” text (that cannot be discussed), but a testimonial text on special laws, on the justification of exclusion. In this way it helps us understand what this state of exception with respect to French legislation meant for Réunion,

and more broadly, how this text is inscribed in the long history of special exclusionary laws (look at current laws on foreigners, immigrants, refugees).

The Object

Rather than looking for the lost object, trying to fill a gap, we started with the following challenge: “If there are no objects, how do we imagine a museum without objects?” It might be truer to say: the object cannot be central to the MCUR. We know how important it has been for non-Western countries to impose a new reading on the object so that the latter (African mask, Inuit sculpture, Aboriginal painting ...) was seen as equally legitimate to a sculpture or painting by a European artist. The importance of that movement is still being felt. Yet, considering our own situation, we judged it better to start with an accepted absence.

No vernacular object before 1848 has survived (and we wish to underline: there was no collection of testimonies of slaves after the abolition of slavery. No one (freemen, abolitionists, Writers...) thought of collecting oral testimonies of the freed slaves. Their reaction was lost forever). The voices of 60, 000 freed women, children and men were lost. They survived in oral literature, songs, poetry, and also in police and trials reports, but no direct testimonies remained. Wealthy Whites did not collect much, and there exists no great private collection of paintings, books or objects. Archeological work is in its infancy, and so many popular vestiges (cemeteries, calbanons housing slaves and engages, popular neighborhoods, boutik sniwa...) have been destroyed or built over in recent years that it is doubtful we can recover much. Starting from an absence led to revisiting the notion of the object and then integrating what exists (the trace of the object, a reconstruction...) within that approach. Thus, the object is treated as a trace whose meaning emerges from a scape.

It is worthwhile investigating the notion of “anonymity”, the lack of patrimony, and its connection with the archive in Réunion. Only freedmen; that is, a minority, had a patronymic that inscribed them in a filiation and a genealogy. The great majority was deprived of this inscription. Genealogy and filiation were passed on orally but with lacunae, blanks, masks and reelaborations. These breaks, these lacks surface in denials, in the obsessive quest for origins, filiations, ties: who is my mother? Who is my father? How can I talk to my ancestors? It recurs in appeals for recourse, for help, addressed to the gods, to the powers that be. This is the ground in which the Réunionese individual and collective relationship is rooted. The postcolonial archive is an archive of traces, ghosts, missing and anonymous persons.

Material And Immaterial Culture, Creole Language

The material heritage – the island itself, factories, fishing ports, docks, houses, forests, ruins, ravines, stations, sacred places– should be preserved, but the way this preservation is carried out should be discussed. Do we want to just save them from destruction? Turn them into tourist attractions? Give them back a social context? All that at once? We know how difficult it is to transform a place, a building into a heritage: it can lose its soul, become a consumer item.

A reflection on buildings, industrial remnants, sites of popular memory cannot avoid a reflection on the habitat and architecture. The vernacular architecture of the past has disappeared; what remains are popular “Creole” style houses built forty, fifty years ago, and houses of wealthy Whites reminiscent of colonial houses the world over. Bidonvilles (shanty towns) and their organization of the space (private vs. public, spaces for animals, for plants) have been torn down before visual and audio recording could be done on the lives of their inhabitants (there are few notable exceptions). Popular neighborhoods have been gentrified. The mutations and deep transformations of society, its need for housing and all the facilities

that go with it (schools, day care centers, playgrounds, stores, movie theaters...) radically altered the landscape and lifestyles. The clash between these mutations and these needs led to the creation of the “lambrequin Creole house,” a neo-Creole style. This invention of nostalgia produces Disneyland-style or folkloric town centers.

The pull between modernization and nostalgia leads to a fictitious model of an illusory “art de vivre,” a desire to embellish the environment and a falling back on conventional forms. As a result, architects and planners either forgot or folklorized vernacular forms they were unable or unwilling to adjust to modern requirements. But they were equally unable to invent new forms, so they chose conventional solutions. The change from shantytown to social housing was hardly ever designed in dialogue with the inhabitants. The time has come to reflect on the materials and forms of a third-millennium architecture in a densely populated, increasingly fragile island. The material culture world is caught between revised colonial forms (elite Creole architecture) and metropolitan urban models. The creation of new forms of habitat should be drawn from the encounter between vernacular inventions that allow for natural air conditioning and flow: a balanced relation between plants and housing and postmodern proposals.

Immaterial heritage concerns the following spheres:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle for the non-material cultural heritage;
- Performing arts;
- Social practices, rituals and festive events;
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- Skills pertaining to traditional crafts.

During the Etats Généraux de la Culture (Convention on Culture) (October 2004), the participants in the “Heritage” workshop proposed drawing up an inventory of the material and non-material cultural heritage under these main headings:

- what is intangible, that cannot be subject either to consumer or administrative logic because it appeals to the very foundations of history and the imaginary (myths, legends, places);
- what should be made accessible to the general public and could be introduced in the economic circuit (museums, cultural centers);
- what belongs to the commercial circuit (crafts, ethno-medicine, etc.).

Because of the very heterogeneity preceding its formation, Creole language necessarily bears the stamp of the languages, dreams, imaginaries that ruled over its birth: unconscious, underground, cryptic. But one way or another it surfaces in the everyday speech of exchange, in poetic speech, in the texts of the ségas and the maloyas, proverbs, puns, riddles. It indeed surfaces, but altered by encounters that shape the imagination of the place; it surfaces in crossings and appropriations. Creole language is evolving. The space of a constantly enriched shared heritage, it is a vector of knowledge about practices and imaginaries; Creole singers, poets, storytellers, and all those who speak Creole safeguard and transmit entire areas of the living Réunionese cultural heritage, giving inhabitants the means to survive and develop.

Non-material heritage cannot be limited to memory or tradition. It is by definition alive and belongs to social practices. So it is important, next to past practices, to take into consideration new ones like hip hop, rap, contemporary dances, etc., as well as the transformation of

practices (christenings, wakes, weddings, carnival...) and the creolization of imported practices (table manners, French cuisine, world music..).

The Indoceanic Space

The Indian Ocean is the oldest sea space humans shaped into a space of exchange: a 5000-year history, while the Atlantic (as a space shaped by humans) is 500 years old and the Pacific, 2000 years old. At one time or other in the history of the rim, each civilization tried to exert control over the Ocean and the circulation of wares and men, therefore boosting decisive elements for the interpenetration of cultures. This process led to the formation of exchange networks that lasted several centuries. From a historical angle, we should speak of globalization that led to regionalization. Toward the fourth-six centuries A.D., the southwest part of the Indian Ocean gradually entered a time world characterized and defined by one or more dominant poles. Control over communication and exchange networks was often a source of contest.

The Indian Ocean connects six worlds: Eastern Asia, Southern Asia, the Muslim world, Africa, Europe and the islands. Arabs, Chinese, Malayans and Indians shared the knowledge of the ocean. Marco Polo pointed out that in the fifteenth century, Chinese maps were far more accurate than European maps. Exchanges between China, India and Africa preceded the arrival of Islam in the seventh century.

The Indian Ocean remains a cultural space of encounters and exchanges between areas of civilization. It is up to the MCUR to represent the cartographies of these layered areas of civilizations that have been interacting for 5000 years. Réunion belongs to that oceanic space with a long history as a cultural space of contacts and conflicts. Its population comes from these areas of civilization. Showing these networks before the arrival of Europeans as well as since then helps re-place the island in a broader, more complex space. The place of origin is not the place of lost purity. It is a place of culture, with a social, political and economic organization. The individual is a member of a group, whether of Picardy peasants, inhabitants of villages of Mozambique, villages of Southern China, Southern India, western Madagascar... There are bits of Europe, Asia, Africa, that meet, and these bits and pieces of culture in contact with one another never remain intact. Nor is the native place the place of an elite. The native place is already a place of interculturality, crossed by conflicts and tensions. History is always the history of interculturality, conflicts and exchanges.

Creolization

Creolization refers to a dynamic process which comes about by forgetting, abandoning the illusion of authenticity and of entity of native cultures. All that is left of them is traces. The matrix of creolization was the slave system: the human being was subject to a series of traumas and violence that produced aphasia and amnesia, if we believe the conclusions of studies in psychology that examine the effects of brutal violence on memory, speech, and ability to integrate this experience in its intensity (for self-protection human beings sometimes have to 'forget' their victimization through an erasure of the most morbid facts remembered through symptoms, depressive thoughts, nightmares).

The slaving system was a machine the captive was put through to become a slave and a Reunionnise. The creolization process is a dynamic of loss, of borrowing, and creating something new that adds to the creolized culture but that will again be challenged by the next wave of slaves, of indentured workers, and recent immigrants like groups from mainland France or the Comores.

There cannot be creolization without a revision of the notion of origin. Creolization should produce neither nostalgia nor a fiction of authenticity. It is both a very radical notion and one very hard to defend today: radical because it challenges all the usual approaches to issues of identity that glorify roots, blood bonds, the immutability of references to identity; and hard to defend because our time either spawns processes of identity withdrawals, to which the notion of an identity subject to dynamic constants is illusory, or glorifies a historical flexibility of the Self. The first process leads one to withdraw into what one knows, into a re-enchantment of tradition; the second rests on the idea that one lives without bonds and connection.

The heterogeneity of Réunionese society questions the foundation of shared identity. The lack of strong ethnic or national markers visible from the outside blurs the perception of identity in a world ruled by strong civilization categories founded on primordial: language, skin color, ethnicity... How can "being Réunionese" be imagined? The questioning is multiplied by the minor and outlying situation of Réunion with respect to larger, more powerful units such as the French State, the European community, that each have the means to offer cultural expressions with high added value. This results in a proneness to reinforce the signs of belonging to a community in order to 'exist' in the French ensemble by borrowing "visible" and recognizable categories linked either to 'civilization' (Chinese, Indian, European) or to "color" (Black, White). Yet what many Réunionese display is their attachment to the Réunionese territory and shared practices. That is where the process of identification takes place, in this articulation of interlocking loyalties. Réunionese unity is not exclusive: it takes into account a shifting of articulations and tensions. But this unity remains linked to a process of resistance to any form of imperialism whatever.

Since 2005, the MCUR team has been engaged in a series of actions:

- Collecting vernacular knowledge and memories: starting in 2005, a region-wide campaign has been launched, aimed at collecting items belonging to the contemporary (1900-2005) Réunionese vernacular culture. It is team work, mobilizing collectors, social workers, associations and local authorities involved in the preservation and the promotion of Réunion patrimony. These specimens can be a nursery rhyme, a song, a prayer, a brief life story, a mantrah, a bit of graffiti. It can also be the remembered map of a quarter conjured up by memories of communal experiences and everyday life shared within a group: going to the public fountain to fetch water, playing dominoes or lotto, buying at vendors' stalls, making *pti bondié* (votive offerings)...
- *Zarboutan Nout Kiltir*: the honorary title *Zarboutan nout Kiltir* was created in 2004 to acknowledge the role of a Réunionese woman or man in the preservation, the creation and the transmission of Réunion cultural heritage. In 2004, it was awarded to Lo Rwa Kaf; in 2005, to Firmin Viry, Gramoun Lélé, Gramoun Baba, Gramoun Bébé, great composers and interpreters of *maloya* music; in 2006 to female practitioners of vernacular medicine, and in 2007 to local inventors.
- *Shimin la vi* (Routes of Life): a program with schools around the notion of itinerary, of a person, a spice, a song, a word...
- A program of formation of cultural mediators: young people from modest background are trained to become cultural mediators

In 2007, the project architects Anouk Legendre and Nicholas Demazieres of X-TU, were chosen by an international jury.

Conclusion

In summary, here are the *overall goals of the MCUR* :

1. The MCUR will document culture in the broadest sense, that of peoples and not just that of the State or official culture or elites.
2. It shall respond to the expectations of several publics: the Réunionese public by giving it back its cultural history, the non-Réunionese public by giving it the desire to learn about the civilization areas that contributed to the history of mankind and about an island that proved able to assemble so many differences. It shall become a space of encounter for different publics and listen to their needs and demands.
3. The MCUR shall put contemporary society and its questionings at the heart of its reflections.
4. The MCUR shall be a place for a comparative approach to the civilizations the inhabitants of the island from: Africa, Asia, islands of the Indian Ocean, Europe. It shall help discover the ties connecting these spaces that first seem to be separated by great differences.
5. The MCUR shall help discover a common belonging, be a place where new solidarities, new projects for society are produced. It shall help the Réunionese discover the solutions found by other societies faced with the same problems and challenges as theirs.
6. The MCUR shall play a major role in improving civic life, in thinking about the territory: how to inhabit it and protect, safeguard it for future generations.
7. The MCUR shall encourage curiosity and desire for knowledge, because no knowledge in the field of research in the social sciences, no artistic expression can be imposed as a unique truth: that imposition is the source of every intolerance and violence.
8. The MCUR shall remain a space where learning is combined with leisure, reflection with play.

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