Two Beaches: The Globalization of Mauritian Waterfronts

1. Introduction

In this article I examine the socio-cultural life of Mauritian beaches.\(^1\) I shall argue that, although the beach is a special kind of place, studying it can provide some important insights concerning society and culture of Mauritius in general. In the sense used here, then, a beach is more than just a geographical fact, as when dictionaries describe this kind of the landscape somewhat humourlessly as a “sandy stretch of land” or in similar words. Rather, in this article I consider the beach in the increasingly conventional and popular sense of a stretch of land which people visit in order to find some sort of recreation close to the water. And, as Löfgren (1999: 215) rightly points out, “In … global history some beaches occupy a limited stretch of sand but take up a huge mental space”.

In order to understand the situation on the island of Mauritius fully, a basic distinction must be introduced, namely that between “public beaches” and “hotel beaches”. Although there is a certain overlap between these two categories, with visitors on either sort of beach coming into contact with each other, “public beaches” and “hotel beaches” are marked by important differences in their natural and social environments. The most obvious difference refers to their respective clienteles, but also to the trees found on them. Roughly speaking, public beaches have filao tress and are frequented overwhelmingly by Mauritians and others living permanently on the island, whereas hotel beaches are spotted by palm trees and are enjoyed by tourists who have come long distances and stay for a short period of time only.

By studying Mauritian beaches, therefore, the observer and interpreter is confronted with dimensions of beach life and of socio-cultural life beyond beaches which transcend the local and the national to embrace the global phenomenon of tourism. This industry, arguably the world’s largest today, is not

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\(^1\) Research on this topic was carried out during several stays on Mauritius from 2002 to 2006. My wife Cornelia was an integral part of my research activities, and this article could not have been written without her expert contribution. Part of the research undertaken for this article was financed by the Thyssen Foundation, to whom I express my gratitude.
only a truly global phenomenon, but – more than most other transnational industries, agencies or agents – is itself “globalizing” in its effects, being one of the strongest, if not the strongest such force in the world today. Tourism globalizes so heavily and sometimes irreversibly because it moves around, not only goods, technologies, money and other materials, but also people by the million. Tourism thus brings its customers into contact not only with other tourists and with touristic infrastructures (such as hotels and beaches), but also with the locals they are “visiting”. More often than not, each of these (unequal) parties to the deal has its own ways of acting and interacting, as well as its own habitus, etiquette, moral standards and values. More than in most other “contact zones” of the world, then, it is within tourism that a global world is created, or rather, that “the local” and “the global” meet and clash, sometimes even being merged into new forms of living. And within this touristic field, for more than a century now, beaches have been the favourite ground to play (and work) on.²

2. Mauritian Waterfronts

The total coastline of Mauritius measures about 323 kilometres, not all of which is beach in the sense being discussed here. Take the following official statistics:³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Kilometres (Km)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Beaches</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Sites</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bungalow Sites</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Sites</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse Activities</td>
<td>12.78</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grazing</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under Vegetation</td>
<td>76.24</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal Road</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliffs</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliffs/Grazing</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Antoine Sugar Estate</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>322.5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² Beaches and life on beaches have been relatively neglected in anthropology, history, sociology and cultural studies. Among the few studies that deal with the topic, especially Löfgren (1999: 213-239) provides many insights into what he calls the ‘Global Beach’. Other studies to be mentioned here are Dening 1980, Enloe 1990, Edgerton 1979, Lenček/Bosler 1998, Urbain 1994. See also the valuable remarks in Pearson 2003: 37-38.

The “beach kilometres” which concern us here are the first three: “public beaches”, “hotel sites” and “bungalow sites”. Of the total kilometres of coast, 120.5 kilometres or 37.2% consisted of beaches of these kinds in 1996. In greater detail, 13% of the coastal zone was fronted by hotels, 16% by private bungalows, and 8.2% was open to the general public. In other words: Of the beaches available for recreational purposes on Mauritius, in 1996 more than four times as many kilometres (taking bungalows and hotels together) were accessible for private users as there were for the Mauritian public. In the following discussion, I concentrate on the two paradigmatic types of beach mentioned above, namely “hotel beaches” and “public beaches”. And here, the proportion of “beach kilometre” used by hotel guests to publicly used beaches was a little under two to one.

It should be emphasized that the total length of Mauritian beaches has not been stable, but has increased, especially in recent decades, and that it is still growing. Two modes of extension can be considered. To start with, new beaches can be developed by making semi-rough but still suitable coastlines into smoother, socio-culturally usable ones, which are good enough for picnicking, relaxing and sometimes bathing. At weekends these beaches will be frequented not only by local tourists, but also by ice-cream vans, food vendors and hawkers. If the sea is rough or the currents dangerous, signs warning of dangerous bathing conditions or even forbidding bathing altogether will be put up. Where it is possible to swim and bathe, floating buoys may mark the area beyond which swimmers should not go. A second way of extending the length of beach is more drastic, labour-intensive and costly, but it generally leads to beaches of a higher quality than that just mentioned. For example, to develop beaches for some new luxury hotels in the south, the coastal road, which previously ran immediately parallel to the ocean front, was moved in a semi-circle some five hundred metres inland returning to the sea again approximately one kilometre later. The land in the semi-circle between this new road and the sea was first cleared of most plants, bushes, trees, sugarcane plantations and so on, the houses of local inhabitants were expropriated, and an old sugar factory dismantled. The ground was then flattened and otherwise prepared to construct bungalows, restaurants and other buildings connected with the new hotels. On the actual beach, the immediate approach to the water was smoothed, white sand brought in to supplement the local sand of poor quality, and to replace pebbles and grass in some areas. As a sort of crowning act, palm trees were planted to fill the empty spaces of the beach line and to replace the supposedly less spectacular and less appropriate casuarina (filao) trees that had been growing there before. In such

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4 See Figure 1.
5 On the environmental problems created by the (sometimes illegal) mining of sand in Mauritius, see http://www.intnet.mu/iels/Mining_mau.htm.
major reconstructions of the coastal zone, changes are made even under the water, with a large underwater vacuum cleaner clearing the bathing area of stones, rocks, broken pieces of coral, sea urchins, seaweed and ugly sea-cucumbers, though environmental laws now prevent the sea-bed from being cleaned as thoroughly as before. In places where the sea is rough or the currents are tricky, barriers such as stone walls or piers are built out into the sea, as well as jetties to cater for water sports. As is obvious, the first type of extension usually leads to public beaches, the second to hotel beaches.

Where these two ways of increasing beach length have ceased to be possible, there is yet another way to provide new beach kilometres, namely to extend one’s own beach at the expense of a neighbouring one. In practice this means, and ever so often in Mauritian history has meant, that a hotel beach encroaches on a public beach, which then vanishes or becomes smaller. One variant of this is that some hotels, usually simpler and cheaper ones, come to dominate the second line of hotels near a public beach, from where they send their clients – “alternative” tourists, European old-age pensioners who spend the whole winter on the island, not-so-well-to-do families with children, local tourists, and other less affluent tourists – to the public beach across the road. Some public beaches of this sort then acquire a different character in many ways: i) visitors will now be more mixed, being local and foreign in origin; ii) beaches become more crowded, especially at weekends; and ii) certain amenities start to be provided which were not there before and which turn some stretches of the formerly unstructured public beach into a kind of “hotel beach”. This might happen, for example, when some business men start to provide deckchairs, parasols and/or boats. This way of encroachment has been the fate of many Mauritian public beaches.

So far I have spoken about the “extensification” of beach kilometres. While this will eventually reach a natural limit or prove to be more costly the rougher the landscape in need of conversion, or simply because it is not possible for political reasons, there are other ways of getting more out of existing beaches, of increasing the yield produced from the same amount of land. Such an aim of “intensification” can be achieved simply by increasing the number of hotel beds and by improving the occupancy rate. For the corresponding beach this would mean that the hotel is putting out additional deck-chairs, parasols or shady palm trees, or else that it is increasing the size or number of swimming pools as artificial substitutes for the beach. This kind of intensification has its limits in terms of the available space, as well as of how much crowding a hotel’s guests are willing to accept. Generally, one can say that the less space a guest has to him- or herself, the lower the category of the hotel and the lower, consequently, the amount of money it can charge for accommodation and other services. So even if there is still some space in which further amenities for sunbathing and swimming might be added, some hotels hesitate to do so, lest they lose their
reputation and/or guests in the future. For those hotels that do not wish to make any compromises as far as the quality and carrying capacity of their beaches is concerned, there is another way of increasing the yield of the beach: they can increase their profile by improving the quality of the rooms, the service and other facilities, for example, rising from three-star to four- or even five-star. This has happened to many hotels in Mauritius, such as the Hotel Paradis or Le Tousseroc, which started as simple bungalows and today are luxury hotels. The tendency to improve hotels and charge more for the higher standard is in line with the island’s declared policy, which is not to attract mass tourism, but to compete on the world market for the upper and more affluent sectors of the business. In this sense, the same stretch of beach still caters to the same number of people, but is more profitable.

Figures confirm the ever-increasing demand from hotels on Mauritius for beach space. In 1968, the year of independence, the number of tourists entering Mauritius was 16,000. In 1970, the tourist sector, which up to then had been almost completely controlled by the Mauritian company *New Mauritius Hotels*, was opened up to foreign investors at the instigation of Gaetan Duval, the then minister of tourism. As a result of this policy and of the world-wide expansion of tourism that was taking place at that time, the number of tourists visiting Mauritius more than quadrupled within six years, to 72,000 in 1974. Since then the number of tourist arrivals has constantly increased, from around 150,000 in 1985 to 200,000 in 1987, 536,000 in 1997, 680,000 in 2002, 702,000 in 2003 and 719,000 in 2004. As far as the number of hotels, hotel rooms and hotel beds is concerned, in 1985 there were 55 hotels on Mauritius, while eleven years later, in 1996, there were already 90 hotels with 6668 rooms. In 2004 there were 103 hotels on the island with 10,640 rooms and 21,335 beds. From 1985 to 2004, therefore, to take these two decades as frame of reference, the number of hotels on Mauritius almost doubled, while the number of rooms and beds probably more than doubled. This increase in hotel capacity has also been accompanied by an increase of the amount of money that tourists spend on the island. According to figures provided by the Bank of Mauritius, tourist expenditure increased from 845 million Mauritian rupees in 1985 to 11.5 billion in 1998 and 23.5 billion in 2004. This means that in 1985 each tourist spent around 5,650 rupees, while in 1998 the average tourist spent about 28,530 rupees; in 2004 this increased to 32,638 rupees per tourist. In other words, from 1985 to 2004, not only has the number of tourists multiplied almost five times, the money that the average tourist spends has also risen almost six times. While in general these increases reflect exchange rates fluctuations and the increasing

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6 The following data are taken from the publications of the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure 2000, 2001, 2004, and 2005, a critical discussion of which can be found in Carlsen and Jaufeerally 2003 and Jaufeerally 2000. The socio-cultural impact of tourism in Mauritius is also discussed in Jahangeer-Chojoo 1998.
cost of living on Mauritius, these figures are also due to the intensification of the tourist business, and especially the fact that not only more, but also better (and more expensive) hotels have been built and filled in recent decades. Consequently, beaches have become the third largest source of income in Mauritius, immediately after sugar and textiles. And as these are undergoing a severe and fundamental crisis, tourism might soon overtake them both.

3. **Public Beaches and Hotel Beaches**

Strictly speaking, that is, from the legal point of view, the distinction between public beaches and hotel beaches is not entirely valid. In Mauritius there are no private beaches in the strict sense of the term, for according to the law all beaches are open to the public up to their “high watermark”. Since this is the farthest point to which the water may reach at high tide, there is usually a narrow strip of sandy or pebbly beach where anyone may picnic, bathe, walk, run or simply pass by at any time. As regards the property relations or ownership patterns of the hinterland, all stretches of land from the high water mark up to 81.21 metres inland, known as the *Pas Geometriques*, belong by law to the government, which, however, can lease it to private individuals or hotels for periods of up to thirty years. The cost of these leases has been low, and they can be and are renewed easily and cheaply. It will be remembered that of the altogether 120 km of beaches on Mauritius, approximately 42 km (or rather, the *Pas Geometriques* behind of these beaches) were leased out to hotels in 1996, a figure that has been increasing ever since through new beaches being built or hotel beaches being extended at the expense of public beaches and bungalows. With all beaches being open to the public, one might then well stroll along the beach of, let us say, the six-star Dina Robin Hotel, and even get a glimpse of Zinedine Zidane by the swimming pool or of some other celebrity in a deckchair. However, this is only possible from some distance and under the eyes of the hotel’s watchmen, and if one tries to take the path ten to twenty metres inland, or indeed tries to enter the hotel premises, one will be sent back in a friendly but firm manner to the “public” part of the beach. Hence, although the beach up to the high watermark is by law open to the public, leases of the *Pas Geometrique* land immediately behind it decisively influence what happens on the beach in front. In other words, *de jure* all beaches are open to the public, but *de facto* this is the case only with so many restrictions and obstacles that most members of the public will not dare or bother to use the public part of a hotel beach.

One further qualification must be introduced here. So far I have spoken of “public beaches” in the colloquial sense of beaches which are open to the public or accessible to all. But there is another, more official meaning to the term.
According to the Beach Authority Act of 2002, a “public beach means a space along the coast which, by notice published in the Gazette, has been declared to be a public beach by the Minister responsible for the subject of housing and lands” (Beach Authority Act 2002: Part 1, Section 2a). Thus, in this sense a public beach is specified land owned and controlled by the state, which has to take care of it, see to law and order and security over it, provide certain amenities on it, and, in the most general terms, allow users to “derive maximum enjoyment” (see ibid.) from it. Hence, according to law all beaches in Mauritius are (open to the) public, but not all are “public beaches” in the meaning of this Act.7

There are certain basic differences between public beaches and hotel beaches. Even if a visitor does not look at the hinterland of a particular beach – let us imagine, for the time being, that s/he has arrived by boat from the sea and sees the immediate coastline only – s/he will note a number of differences, which at second glance also conform to the distinction between hotel beaches and public beaches used here. Generally, public beaches are rougher: there are more pebbles, and even if there is white sand, it is thinner and coarser, being mixed with broken pieces of coral or stones and with dark sand. The direct approach to and from the water is often a little steep, that is, there is a broken shelf, sometimes a metre or more high, where the water has washed away the earth and uncovered tree roots during a storm or flood. Furthermore, in the picnic and parking areas of public beaches one usually finds filao or casuarina trees as well as sometimes baobab and pine trees. Public beaches and their hinterland, though they are generally well maintained by the Beach Authority, tend to be messier than hotel beaches, especially at the end of a long and sunny public holiday or weekend. Furthermore, on public beaches you find dogs constantly searching for food and playmates.

Hotel beaches in Mauritius, by contrast, generally conform to the world-wide image of beaches on tropical “paradise islands”. The sand is white and smooth, the water sparkling clear, and one can see the nicely maintained underwater floor when gradually walking or swimming into the sea. This sea is smooth and “civilized”, because the currents and the waves, the sharks and other large and potentially disturbing fish are kept well away by the coral reefs that lie some hundred metres offshore. At the high watermark, the beach gradually slopes upwards to the first stretch of firm land, usually a patch of grass, which belongs to the hotel and is not open to the general public. At this boundary line, one might find signposts saying “Private property” or posts restricting and

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7 In the discussion that follows, I shall use the term “public beach” in this more official sense. The most important public beaches in this understanding of the term are in Péreybère and Mont Choisy in the northwest of the island, Flac en Flac in the west, Tamarin (“La Prenèuse”) and Le Morne in the southwest, and Blue Bay and Belle Mare in the southeast and east respectively.
forbidding access in other ways.\textsuperscript{8} Just on the other side of this line, one usually finds a row of deckchairs, which in the higher category of hotels are often arranged in groups of two or three around parasols and with some distance from the next such group. At hotel beaches, the trees providing additional shade and flair are palm trees planted in equal rows and at equal distances. Usually, at both ends of the hotel beach, we find boat houses, bars or even restaurants; in the middle is usually the hotel’s main restaurant and the swimming pool, which, seen from the inside, looks as if its water stretched without interruption out into the green-blue-turquoise sea beyond. Dogs are totally absent from these beaches, and if any do appear, they are immediately and aggressively chased away by the hotel guards.

The differences between public and hotel beaches that I have pointed out so far are basically environmental and infra-structural in character, even natural. However, those beaches that might be considered as the remains of a so far undiluted paradise – sandy beaches with slightly drooping palm trees and clear water – are actually the more artificial or less natural ones. This is not to devalue their beauty – on the contrary, by many standards these are public beaches that have been significantly beautified, as well as made more secure, convenient and pleasurable. In this context, it should also be remembered that the island was only populated relatively late, not really before the middle of the eighteenth century. Since then, however, the environment has been altered and cultivated continuously and radically in order to make human habitation and exploitation of its resources possible, so much so that not only all the human population, but also most of the plants and animals to be found on the island today (sugar and deer being prime examples) are foreign and have been imported, while many indigenous animals and plants (such as the famous dodo and most of the high-quality timber) have vanished.\textsuperscript{9} Or, in other words, both the filao trees on the public beach and the palm trees on the hotel beaches are imports, the former from Australia, the latter from Madagascar and East Africa.\textsuperscript{10}

4. ‘Sur les Plages’: Social, Ethnic and National Compositions

When it comes to identifying the social, ethnic and national background of life on Mauritian beaches, one of the first and most obvious differences to be observed is that of the skin colour of their respective users. While on public

\textsuperscript{8} See Figure 2.

\textsuperscript{9} That this statement applies to the human population as well is an obvious and important but sometimes forgotten fact: There was no indigenous population on Mauritius when it was colonized, and none of the ethnic groups to be found there today have a greater claim than any other to be “first-comers” and hence to own the land. If anybody, the Franco-Mauritians could make such a claim.

\textsuperscript{10} See Figure 3.
beaches it tends to be dark or brown, on hotel beaches the overwhelming majority of users are white to red in skin colour. The reason is obvious: public beaches are frequented to a high degree by Mauritians, hotel beaches by foreign tourists. But let us look more closely and comparatively at the actual composition of these two beach populations.

As far as hotel beaches are concerned, a good overall indicator of the social composition of those who use them can be found by examining the countries of origin of the tourists who arrived at the airport in 2004. All in all, 66.4% or 477,041 (total 719,000) came from European countries, 24.4% or 175,649 from African countries, 6.3% or 45,325 from Asia, 12,068 from Oceania, and 8,409 from America. From within Europe, the largest group, namely 210,411 (or 44.1% of the European category and 29.3% of total tourist arrivals), was of French nationality. The next largest group came from the United Kingdom (92,652), followed by Germany (53,277) and Italy (41,277), with Switzerland, Austria and Spain accounting for between 16,000 and 8,000 visitors each. The African category is somewhat misleading, because most African tourists came from the neighbouring islands and from South Africa only. Réunion led this category with 96,510 visitors, followed by visitors from South Africa (52,609) and the Malagasy Republic (8,256). Of the Asian contingent, Indians made up the majority with 24,716, followed by the Chinese (6,127). The label “Oceania” refers overwhelmingly to people from Australia (11,373), while the category “America” basically means citizens of the United States (4,305) and Canada (2,341).

Some amendments have to be made when transferring these figures to the beach. The label “tourist”, as officially used by the government, does not just refer to holiday-makers. Only 91% of “tourists” arriving on Mauritius in 2004 were tourists in this strict sense of term. The rest were visitors who had come to Mauritius for conferences, business reasons, social visits, sport events, or who were in transit. These people seldom go to hotels with beaches, but stay in business hotels or with friends, family members or business partners. For a variety of social, historical and economic reasons, it is reasonable to assume that most of the “tourists” from Réunion and Madagascar, as well as many from India and China and a considerable number of French and South African visitors, belong in this category. Hence, a smaller overall proportion of these will be found on the hotel beaches. Furthermore, many “proper tourists”, that is, those who belong to the remaining 91% and come to Mauritius as holiday-makers and thus primarily for the beach, do not stay in hotels with beaches either. Rather, they rent rooms, apartments or bungalows in the informal sector.

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11 As far as their official nationality is concerned, citizens from Réunion should be included properly under the rubric “French”, as Réunion is a “Department d’Outre Mer” of France.
12 See the brochure published by the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure in 2004.
of what I call here the “second row”, or else stay in the grey market of adjacent towns like Flic en Flac, Grand Baie, Trou d’Eau Douce or La Gaulette. It is estimated that about 25% of tourists do not stay in hotels.\textsuperscript{13}

All in all, therefore, on hotel beaches on Mauritius we basically find Europeans, with French tourists still forming the majority, followed in number by British, German, Italian and Swiss. This group of Europeans using hotel beaches is substantially completed by (overwhelmingly white) South Africans and increasingly, since the Bali bombings of 2002 and again in 2005 and the Tsunami disaster on Southeast Asian coasts in 2004, Australians. Moreover, as a reflection of the greater wealth and new spending patterns that have developed in their countries in the last decade, there are more and more Indian, Chinese and Russian tourists.\textsuperscript{14}

In order to obtain an approximation of the social and ethnic composition of the users of the public beaches, let us first consider the composition of the Mauritian population. One way of classifying it is to state that, of the nation’s 1.2 million citizens, 68% are of Indian origin, 27% are Creoles, 3% Chinese, and 2% French. However, certain other criteria are used in the last official government census, carried out in 1982, where the Mauritian population is given as consisting of 52% Hindus, 16% Muslims and 3% Sino-Mauritians, with 29% belonging to the category of the “General Population”. Obviously, the first two categories have been created along religious lines,\textsuperscript{15} while the third reflects country of origin (China). The fourth and final category is an amorphous one, including Creoles (a term which on Mauritius denotes the descendants of former African slaves), French and “Coloureds” (i.e., the “mixed” descendants of French and Creoles). In order to complicate the matter still further, the “Indian” section of the population can also be divided according to where exactly on the Indian subcontinent their ancestors came from and what their (presumed) ancestral languages had been. The majority of the ancestors of today’s Indo-Mauritians came from the north of the subcontinent and were Bhojpuri- or Hindi-speakers. About a third, however, came from the south, which in its turn implies a further dividing line between Telugu- and Tamil-speakers. There are also groups in Mauritius who emphasize that their ancestors were Marathi- and Gujarati-speakers from the west of India. Finally, using the criterion of religion again, almost one third of Mauritians are Christians, mainly Roman Catholics,

\textsuperscript{13} See Jaufeerally 2000. On the basis of the fact that one quarter of tourist arrivals in Mauritius do not stay in hotels, Jaufeerally argues that the Mauritian government should establish and maintain new public beaches, not only for the sake of the pleasure of its own citizens, but also with a view to strengthening the tourist industry. See ibid.: 7.

\textsuperscript{14} From the statistically less well-informed but nevertheless significant point of view of hotel staff, the French and the British form the two largest groups, with the Germans and the Italians clearly taking the next places, in equal numbers.

\textsuperscript{15} Note that the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” could each be divided further into different “sects”, and that followers of both religions originate from India.
which cover all the groups belonging to the “General Population”, as well as most Sino-Mauritians and many Tamils. A number of other criteria, most importantly caste and class, could also be applied, which would mean creating yet other sub-groups and/or overlapping groups of belonging.¹⁶ All these “identities”, or better criteria for “making and unmaking differences”,¹⁷ play an important role, not only in the census, but also for the actors themselves in their socio-cultural, political, economic or religious lives, although the question of which identity comes to the fore, and when, depends on situational dynamics and relativity (i.e. who is speaking to or dealing with whom, in what situation, for what purpose, etc.).¹⁸

How do these figures translate on to the beach? Do more Hindus frequent beaches in Mauritius and do they do so more often or longer than, say, Muslims? Do Sino-Mauritians like the beach better than the Creole descendants of African slaves? On a given beach at a given time, how many come from this or that group? How many are men or women, young or old, twice-born or low-caste, rich or poor, educated or uneducated?

There have been, to my knowledge, neither quantitative nor qualitative investigations into these questions, and so one cannot say with any scientific accuracy to what degree the census figures given above are reflected on the beach. But what can be said quite confidently from observations and interviews is that there are no striking imbalances or even absences. In other words: All ethnic and/or religious groups, all generations, both genders, poor as well as rich, use the beaches, and in significant numbers, reflecting their numerical proportions away from the beach. This result could not have been taken for granted, nor is it as obvious as it might seem; as a matter of fact, it should astonish us, because some Mauritian groups have the reputation as well as a self-image of being more oriented in their ethics towards work and discipline (namely the Hindus), while others (namely the Creoles) are regarded and often regard themselves as being more focused on enjoying life.¹⁹ Alternatively, it might have been expected that Muslim communities, especially Muslim women, could not be found at all or at least in fewer numbers on the beach on account of the stricter morals and restrictions on exposing the female body in Islam. But on the public beaches of Mauritius there are Creoles and Coloureds as much as Indo-Mauritians and Sino-Mauritians; or, to reshuffle the criteria, Hindus as well as Christians and Muslims, men as well as women, old as well as young, rich as well as poor, low caste as well as high caste. Only Franco-Mauritians seem to be rare visitors, even taking into account the fact that they make up just 2% of the population. As they represent the strata of the population which has the highest

¹⁷ See Rottenburg, Schnepel and Shimada (eds.) 2006.
¹⁸ See Schnepel 2005.
¹⁹ See Eriksen 1998.
income and wealth, they are more likely to be found in much larger proportions and even to dominate the beaches in front of private bungalows. But this does not mean that “white” skins are totally absent on public beaches. We must remember that not all tourists end up in hotels with beaches. Even though the desire of members of this group to go to the beach may be weaker than in the case of more prototypical holiday-makers, it is likely that many of these will eventually appear on public beaches, and may even start to dominate some of them, where the “hinterland” has been filled up second-row hotels, private apartments and bungalows for rent.

So far we have looked at the social, ethnic and national composition of the users of public and hotel beaches from an overall perspective. Looking more closely at who is actually to be found on the beaches and where exactly people take up their abode, it transpires that existing public beaches are not divided between the island’s population according to ethnic or religious belonging or to other criteria such as class, caste, gender or age. Generally, all groups can be found on all public beaches, or in other words, and remarkably: on Mauritian public beaches, there are no implicit or explicit rules of distribution such that, for example, Sino-Mauritians go to one beach while young people go to another, Christians yet another one, and so on. On hotel beaches too, one can also find a good mixture of all the nations we have identified above. Of course, hotels are largely filled by the tour operators with whom they have contracts, which are usually organized nationally. However, there are very few if any mono-national or bi-national hotels. Users of a given hotel beach, then, usually come from many nations; and, especially in the large hotels, they will be found roughly in the national proportions indicated above with regard to “tourist arrivals”.

The hotel beach is frequented by small groups: prototypically we find couples, some of them honeymooning, or families with one or two children, a unit which in some cases is supplemented by accompanying grandparents, who may also have volunteered to pay the bills. Only occasionally does one find larger groups of friends or relatives who have booked a holiday together. If one finds larger groups at all, these are not formed by family connections, but consist of company employees having been sent on a holiday together by their employers in appreciation of their good work in the past or as an incentive aiming at lifting the team’s spirit in the future. Alternatively such groups may consist of people united by common interests such as participating in golf or fishing competitions.

Groups on public beaches tend to be larger than those on hotel beaches. One prototypical “peer group” on public beaches, seldom found on hotel beaches, consists of extended families, such as when brothers or cousins join up with their respective families, or when families who are friends unite for a picnic. These groups tend to huddle close to the car, van, pick-up truck or even bus that has brought them there. Sometimes the cars are arranged in groups, forming a
sheltering and somewhat inward-looking semi-circle within which the group gathers. Within such a typical group of anything from five to twenty individuals, there may be some internal dividing lines, not necessarily between nuclear families, but according to criteria of sex or age. Elderly men sit under one tree to play cards and drink, while women, girls and small children make themselves at home on a carpet on the other side of the tree, where they chat, play or relax in other ways. Similarly, young unmarried men like to get away for a while, to play soccer on an open space elsewhere, go down to the beach or just stroll about to see whether friends or anyone interesting can be seen. But the effects of these centrifugal tendencies are always countered by phases of reunification, especially when it comes to having a barbecue together or going for a bathe.

5. Beach Life in Comparison

Up to this point, I have described some characteristic features of socio-cultural life on the beach in general terms. I shall now look in greater detail at how people actually fill the Mauritian beaches with life. What are the more typical patterns of behaviour and etiquette on each kind of beach?

To start with, it is necessary to consider the temporal dimension of it all. When are beaches frequented the most? When do they tend to be full, and when empty? One obvious answer, which applies to both kinds of the beach equally, is that, when the sun is shining and the temperature is warm or even hot, then beaches tend to fill up. However, other common features are less striking and even end. Public beaches, in being used mostly by Mauritians, are more densely visited at weekends or on public holidays (of which there are many). An increase in numbers can also be found in the late afternoon and early evenings of fine days during the week. Hotel beaches, by contrast, are filled equally and continuously throughout the week, provided, again, that the weather is fine. This is hardly surprising, because the life of a holiday-maker is not determined by his or her working routine. All days are there for the tourist to enjoy. Differences in the numbers of those using hotel beaches depend rather on external factors, such as whether it is the season for travelling in Europe or tourism is experiencing a boom or a crisis. By and large, then, and seen within the temporal framework of a single week, public beaches experience greater fluctuations in use than hotel beaches. During normal weekdays they are filled, if at all, only sparsely by tourists from the informal sector or by Mauritians enjoying a day off, whereas at weekends they sometimes become crowded to bursting point. Hotel beaches tend to be emptier and more even in use, being crowded only at peak seasons such as Christmas and New Year.

As far as the distinction between night and day is concerned, both hotel beaches and public beaches tend to empty once the sun has gone down. But life
in the area immediately behind the high watermark, in the *Pas Géométriques*, goes on, albeit in different ways. Public beaches tend to empty completely in this hinterland, though at weekends, on warm summer nights and on the more popular public beaches, some groups of people stay into the night and even overnight. Some sleep out in the open, while others rest in their cars or under makeshift plastic sheeting, while yet others bring tents. Just as on the public beaches, on hotel beaches the direct sandy waterfronts and the areas of deckchairs and parasols tend to empty after dark. Certainly in the early evening some people still use the swimming pool or even the sea for a last refreshing swim; and in some hotels, on certain days of the week, there is a professional séga group offering a short *séga typique* performance on the beach to the delight of some of the guests. The occasional person alone or couple strolling leisurely along the beach or lying dreamily on deckchairs during moon-lit or fine starry nights can also be found. However, in the evening the centre of social and cultural activities shifts just behind the sandy and grassy line of the beach proper. Hotel bars and restaurants are usually near the waterfront, so that tourists can take a cocktail while viewing the sea and, if on the west coast, with a view of the sun setting beautifully into the sea. From around 7.30 o’clock onwards there is dinner, with the hotel buffets often sporting a theme on particular days of the week: e.g., a Creole night on Wednesday, an Indian night on Thursday, a Chinese night on Friday. Later at night, there will be a music show, further within the hotel’s open-air entertainment area, which sometimes continues the theme of the dinner, so that, in the example used here, on Wednesday hotel guests will be able to enjoy a show of *séga modern*. Ironically, tourists will be told that the *séga*, as they are seeing it within their all-inclusive shelter, is exactly what they see on the public beaches if they were ever to go there. In fact, those who do stay overnight on the public beach will witness no such thing. There may be a cassette player blasting out the latest song by Cassiya and Gangsta Beach, or more often the latest MTV hits by Madonna, James Blunt, Shakira, or the like. There will be the occasional young Creole or Hindu with a guitar interpreting a *séga* song by, say, Serge Lebrasse. But, more often than *séga*, one will hear songs from the world-wide outdoor musical repertoire, from *No woman, no cry* by Bob Marley to *Leaving on a jet-plane* by Jefferson Airplane. In general, however, ‘unplugged’ manifestations of musical talent on public beaches are rare, and the kind of *séga* dancing and singing that tourists, safe behind their own stretches of beach, believe to be the authentic, contemporary Mauritian folklore are almost never found on public beaches.

Returning now to the daytime as the main time-space of comparison here, let us point out some of the most common forms of behaviour then and there. Users

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20 See Figure 4.
of hotel beaches spend much of the day lying on deckchairs sunbathing and tanning. This leisurely activity, which entails some careful timing in turning one’s body so as to achieve an even bronze colour on all parts of it, can be combined with other activities, such as sleeping or day-dreaming, massaging one’s own and others’ bodies with sunlotion, exchanging caresses, or trying to take a secret (sometimes critical, sometimes appreciative) glance at the bodies of others, comparing their tans and other physical features with one’s own. Hence, much of the time is spent creating and displaying “the properly relaxed beach body” (Löfgren 1999: 214). When this becomes boring, many people take up reading, albeit light stuff.22

Moving to the public beach, one finds a somewhat different situation. While lying in the sun is not completely unknown among the users of public beaches, this activity does not figure as prominently as one might expect if one comes from a culture in which achieving a tan has acquired a cult status, the “cult of bronzage”, as Löfgren (1999: 223) calls it. Prototypically, a public beach user sits rather than lies, and chats with others rather than day-dreaming or reading a book. Sometimes plastic chairs and even sofas are brought along in the van or pick-up, but more often people sit on mats and carpets. Most set up their picnic areas a little inland, just across the high watermark. The reason for this different attitude compared with behaviour on the hotel beach lies in a combination of a lower interest in sun-bathing and tanning and in the fact that on public beaches there are no parasols or other permanent artificial structures to provide shelter from the sun. Hence, in order to find shade and a cool place, one has to move into the Pas geometrique area, with its filao and pine trees. What happens there can aptly be described as “car camping”: people sit next to their cars, and occasionally some plastic sheeting is put up between cars or trees to act as a sun roof or to allow an undisturbed change of clothes. In these little enclaves people have barbecues, or spread out the tupperware they have brought from home containing spicy food.23 Instead of the water bottle (a must for the European tourist on the hotel beach), we find more coke and other sweet drinks for the women and the kids, or Phoenix beer and even stronger stuff for the adult men. And instead of the seaside restaurants and bars of the hotel beaches, we find stalls selling samosas, dhol puris, coconuts, pineapples, sweet drinks and other refreshments. One can also buy ice cream from one of the ever-increasing number of vans, called “Baby neige”, which can easily be spotted on account of the loud jingles they repeatedly play, drowning out everything else. There are other noises too: the sounds of ghetto blasters, the yelling of hawkers, the screaming of kids, the shouting of men and the laughing of women, all mixed up together. In general, then, the scene on public beaches on a lively weekend is

22 See Figure 5.
23 See Figure 6.
more crowded, noisy, active, lively and filled with the smells of different foods than life on the hotel beaches, which rather displays a certain serenity, an atmosphere of contemplation and meditation, of dreaming the day away, filled with the smell of sun lotion.

Hotel beaches are, of course, not devoid of all bodily movement. People tend to move along the well-kept little lanes between their apartments, on the one hand, and the bar, reception, souvenir shops, spa and, invariably, the beach, on the other. This moving between places within the microcosm of the hotel provides an opportunity to try to, and ultimately show how to, walk slowly and in a relaxed way, forgetting the hustle and bustle of life back home. One can find many activities and even a degree of exuberance going on at and in the nearby swimming pool, the favourite playground for families with little children – and for those who like the pool bar a lot. On the beach, peddlers have to be kept at bay or, if one is in the mood, one might start negotiations with them about the quality and prices of what they are offering.  

Out on the sea, in a safe lane demarcated off from the swimming area, others are trying to stay upright on water skis, some showing some expertise in doing so. Yet others, usually groups of teenagers, let themselves be towed behind speedboats while clinging to small rubber boats and trying not to fall into the water when there is a sharp turn or a big wave. These speedboats create the loudest noise on the hotel beaches, noise of a kind that is usually absent from the public beaches. Yet other people take a more relaxed excursion in a glass-bottomed boat to the nearby coral reefs to admire the wonders of the sea from the dry, while more sporty hotel guests go snorkling or even diving to get closer to the reefs. Most hotel beach users, however, restrict their activities to the occasional plunge into the water just in front of their beach. Some do so just to get some refreshment and to put salty water on their skin so that the tanning process can be continued in somewhat cooler circumstances and with the enhancing effects of the salt. Others swim leisurely around, gliding, floating, paddling or diving, or simply crawl and get some distance behind them. In the late afternoon, just before sunset, there are other activities such as strolling along the beach, finding some nice corals or stones, and maybe even venturing beyond the hotel beach to see “native” life on the nearby public beach. Others at this time use the hotel’s sports and spa facilities, playing tennis or golf or enjoying a massage and a facial cleansing. Yet other guests prefer a sun-downer at the bar. Watching the sun set and taking photographs of it, preferably with a loved one in front, is yet another one of the favourite activities to be observed on hotel beaches.

Users of hotel beaches, should they walk towards and along a public beach, will be struck by a difference there: while on hotel beaches people tend to swim alone or as couples, public beaches are more often than not characterized by

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24 See Figure 7.
some sort of communal bathing, reflecting the communal patterns found on the beach itself. One seldom goes into the water alone, but prefers to do so in the company of family members and friends. It is possible to see groups of anything between five and fifteen people of all generations in the sea together. They seldom go far into the water, but prefer to keep close to the shore so as to be able to feel the ground beneath their feet. The most common activity is to linger leisurely with the body up to the waist or shoulders under water, sometimes chatting the time away. Teenagers and young men may fool around, splash water in their faces, try to push one another under and even swim a little, though never too far from the group. Women and young children stay closest to the coast and to each other, forming a sort of inner group surrounded by the more daring and active men and teenagers. While this kind of behaviour may mirror the strong feeling of belonging within picnic and barbecue groups, it also seems to express a certain need for security. In the absence of lifeguards or other safety measures, and on account of the sometimes rather dangerous bathing conditions off the public beaches, there is a practical side to this. The sea may be rough, the waves and the current strong, there may be some shells and animals, like sea urchins, that one wants to avoid stepping on, and not all family members are able to swim, at least not well. Some bathers may still be made cautious in their activities by the traditional Hindu view of the ocean as kala pani or “black water”. Hence, these communal expressions of bathing also offer psychological and emotional shelter, creating a feeling of social security which may reflect, and be reflected back upon, what is happening out of the water.

Finally, dress codes on the two types of beach differ to a certain degree. Certainly the same kind of globally known beachwear can be found in both cases, consisting of shorts or trunks for men, and bathing suits or bikinis for women. But the actual interpretation of this global code may differ, especially with regard to women. On hotel beaches, women often wear very slim bikinis and even tangas, not a few of them tanning and swimming without a top. On public beaches, Mauritian women are more conservative in their dress, wearing bathing suits rather than bikinis. In addition, they often wear pareos and T-shirts; some bath in salva kamis or even saris. Occasionally, Muslim women can be seen totally clad in black, with only her eyes showing.25

6. From One Beach to the Other

So far we have discussed the two major kinds of Mauritian beach as if they were completely separate from each other. But, in fact, there are certain zones of transition and points of contact where they overlap and where their two

25 See Figure 8.
respective clienteles see and meet each other. To start with and as already mentioned, by law all Mauritian beaches are accessible to the public. Nonetheless, hotels are able to offer their users some sort of privacy and “shelter from intruders”: members of the public may walk along hotel beaches, but they are not allowed to cross the boundary beyond the high water mark. Moreover, even as far as moving from one beach to another is concerned, there are some means and devices which discourage too many people of nearby public beaches from moving over to a hotel beach. Certainly there are no fences or other solid constructions physically restricting or hindering access. What one can find, however, are walls separating the Pas Geometrique area leased to the hotel from the adjacent land, though these invariably stop at the high water mark and do not go all the way down to the water. In addition, boats and other equipment are sometimes placed close to this wall in order to reduce still further the gap between the wall and the sea, so that, especially at high tide, there is only a narrow stretch of beach left for one to move along. Sometimes there are physical obstacles like a big rock or the roots of a tree, which have been left standing on the public side of these points of transition, or else there is a creek which is difficult to cross. Finally, at these entry points, at both ends of a hotel’s land, there are invariably small houses or huts where some of the hotel watchmen are stationed. Day and night one or two of these, nicely dressed in uniforms and with caps, can be seen monitoring everyone entering and leaving the hotel beach. They do not prevent people from moving around, and contact with the users of the public beach is generally friendly, as the latter may also be the watchmen’s neighbours from a nearby town or village. But it is their duty, especially at the better hotels, to report anyone suspicious to their colleagues stationed further down the beach by walkie-talkie, in particular whether anyone is walking there with the attention of trying to cross the magic line on to the hotel premises. Hence, the borders between public and hotel beaches, where they are adjacent to each other, are marked, if only subtly or invisibly. And, by and large, the great masses on the public beaches are kept out, or rather they stay away of their own free will. Not being allowed to cross the high water-mark of the hotel beaches also means that it is not possible to find any shade and picnic grounds there, and in any case one would have to move some distance from the car, carrying all one’s things and possibly one’s children too.

In most cases, the transition from one beach to another is an entirely straightforward affair. One moment you are standing on the public beach among filao trees and Mauritians, the next alongside European tourists lying on their deckchairs between palm trees. There are, however, some interesting exceptions where there is some overlap and where one can find certain ‘grey’ areas which are neither hotel nor public, or alternatively both hotel and public. An example is the crowded public beach of Trou-aux-Biches, which adopted the character of a hotel beach on account of its being frequented by a relatively large number of
European tourists from “second-row” apartments and bungalows. On busy days, this public beach tends to be extended up to fifty metres on to the adjacent hotel beach, with quite a number of public-beach users putting their towels along the trees of the hotel beach up to the high water mark. Technically these people are still on the right side of the law, but they have somehow broken the unwritten law not to lie down for too long on a beach in front of a hotel. What is remarkable here is that those who have “encroached” upon the hotel beach are overwhelmingly “second-row” Europeans, not Mauritians. A similarly opaque situation can be observed on the border between Belle Mare public beach and the Hotel Residence on the east coast. There is a geophysical reason for this, for exactly at the point where the public beach ends and the boat house of the Hotel Residence marks the beginning of its land, the waterfront makes a slight curve away from the hotel into the water, resulting in a little sandy peninsular. Hence, though technically one has left the public beach and stepped on to the hotel beach, following the waterfront directly one is still as far away from the hotel proper as one was before. The sandy dunes that break up the otherwise straight line of the coast along this stretch of the waterfront have become a favourite space for recreational activities such as playing soccer and volleyball, with teams of hotel guests and staff filling their ranks with youths from the neighbouring public beach. When it comes to lying down and relaxing, this “no man’s land” is filled neither by the hotel guests nor by the Mauritian families occupying the public beach near by. Rather, groups of “alternative” Italian, French, Spanish and German tourists can be seen here, who have taken cheaper accommodation in the adjacent town. Just as in Trou aux Biches, the social background of these groups tends to reflect the liminal status of the land they occupy: they do not belong to the Mauritian public, nor to the usual four- or five-star hotel clientele. These groups are strangers to both sides, their attitude and behaviour often objectionable to both, as when they bring their own beer and food (which hotel guests would not do) and lie bare-breasted in the sun (which Mauritians on the public beach would not do). They are often also misfits in terms of their skin colour. Many of them stay in Mauritius for weeks and even months at an end, because their vacation is cheaper and they belong to the drop-out scene anyway. Thus they have a much darker tan than most of the usual tourists, though not as dark as most Mauritians. The geo-physical betwixt-and-between character of the stretch of this particular beach is therefore matched by the ambiguous and liminal social status of its users and their skin colour.

Coming back to the clearer distinction of beaches and their users that has informed this article so far, we have to ask how these two beach populations actually meet and interact. As already indicated, occasionally users of both beaches may stroll along the coast and thus along the “other beach”, where they can see what people on these other beaches look like, how they spend their time, how they bathe, etc. While there may be an occasional exchange of greetings
and even brief conversations, these kinds of contact are mostly ocular in character, a matter of seeing and being seen, though what is being observed and noticed may, of course, have repercussions, leading to comparisons, evaluations or judgements. Sometimes the reaction may be sharp and adverse, while in other cases one may feel inspired, consciously or unconsciously, by what is going on on the other side and try to imitate it.

Some of the Mauritians who stroll along hotel beaches are there to make money, namely peddlers of various goods, such as *pareos*, corals, shell necklaces, local handicrafts, pineapples or boat excursions. The contacts between these Mauritian peddlers and hotel guests are only sporadic and hardly lead to any mutual socio-cultural influences, though it seems strange that negotiations between sellers and buyers are often between scantily clad, sometimes even topless European women on the one hand and men from quite conservative Indo-Mauritian and even Indo-Muslim backgrounds on the other.

Many contacts on hotel beaches are, of course, between hotel staff and guests. In general, in the hotels there is a rough division of labour according to skin colour and “race”. The upper management is dominated by Europeans and Franco-Mauritians, the middle level by “Coloureds”; Indo-Mauritians work in the restaurants and bars, while Creoles, especially young men from nearby fishing communities, predominate in the area of leisure, especially when it comes to water sports. Among these groups, contact between waiters and guests ordering a drink or food is frequent, but limited in scope and intensity. The closest and most intensive contact is between “beach boys” and hotel guests. Due to the nature of the activities that link these two groups, these interactions often take place in a relaxed, friendly and open spirit, and there is some physical contact. Occasionally friendships and flirtation develop, especially between hotel teenagers and beach boys, who, on account of their being sporty, cool and trendy in their outfits and behaviour, sometimes impress and even attract certain visitors.

7. Conclusions

If life on Mauritian beaches has anything to tell us about Mauritian society and “the world” at large, as has been argued here, it is nonetheless true that beach life does not reflect the wider society and culture directly or as in a mirror. It may certainly do so in some respects or with regard to some socio-cultural dimensions. In others, however, patterns and styles of life on the beach rather obscure, distort, invert and camouflage what is common and valued on the streets of everyday life. Furthermore and vice versa, not only does wider socio-cultural life find some resonance on the beach, but certain beach activities, styles of behaviour and etiquette can be observed finding their way into, and shaping
life in, the streets, homes and even offices of Mauritius and beyond. Influences thus go in both directions, with the beach sometimes representing a sort of testing ground for new forms of behaviour and morals, which might well be transported back inland by those who are willing and daring enough to claim that “life is a beach”. With Geertz (1973), one may therefore argue that the beach is not only a model of, but also a model for, the usual lived-in world.

The beach itself is a “betwixt-and-between” space. It connects land and water, and, from a structuralist point of view, it even mediates between nature and culture. However, does the beach’s transitory nature mean that it is “liminal” in a social sense as well, liminal as suggested by Victor Turner (1969)? In other words, are Mauritian beaches spaces dominated by anti-structure and communitas? In order to answer this question, we must again remind ourselves of the multi-ethnic and poly-religious nature of Mauritian society, and of the fact that in “real” life the dividing lines and conflicts of interest between the nation’s various subgroups are sometimes strong. Against this background, it is remarkable that a) all Mauritian subgroups go to the beach; b) all go to all beaches; and c) only mild forms of clustering can be observed on any particular beach. And once you are on it, the beach (just like the night) represents a space which allows one to be different, or to do things differently, from what you are and do in your everyday working life. On the beach one can escape the strictures and burdens of life further inland or, with regard to fishermen, of work out in the sea. But ultimately this does not mean that we find a sort of democratic communitas on Mauritian beaches. Beaches are less the mirror images than utopian versions of reality. Hence, the mise-en-scène of the beach presents the ideal of an egalitarian “unity in diversity”, which becomes a playful reality only on the liminal space of the beach and for a limited period on a sunny afternoon.

So far in my conclusions, I have only considered the situation on public beaches on Mauritius: hotel beaches should also be considered. One aspect here is that the ever-increasing space taken up by hotel beaches, often but not always at the expense of public beaches, has started to alarm and frustrate Mauritian citizens, who see “their” beaches dwindling in size and number. Some are voicing their complaints in newspapers or in other ways, others organizing

27 On the anthropology of the night, see Schnepel and Ben-Ari 2005; Schnepel 2006.
28 In this regard, beaches are also ‘heterotopias’ as discussed by Foucault 2005.
29 The capacity of the beach to level out, to some extent, social and class distinctions has been observed with regard to British seaside resorts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Walton 1983.
30 There are indications that the Government and Beach Authority of Mauritius are taking steps to counteract such developments, without, however, preventing the building of new hotels. Thus, for example, along the coast at the St Felix sugar estate in the south, where some new hotels are being constructed, one can also find the first results of large construction works on a new, much improved and extensive public beach, which will have toilets, washrooms, wastepaper bins, a food court and palm trees, as well as a better and safer beach.
communal protests, as in a movement called “Pas tous nu la plaze” (“Don’t touch our beaches”), and yet others are even resorting to illegal means, as when some of those opposed to the Croix du Sud Hotel near Mahébourg committed arson. The heightened sensitivity of the Mauritian public in realizing that the beach is a limited, but highly sought after and therefore contested good has also been taken more and more note of by vote-seeking politicians, who have introduced stricter environmental laws and other obstacles to make it more difficult (and expensive) for investors to build new hotels and absorb more beaches. Thus, for example, one group of investors has failed in its attempts to build a ‘Blue Bay Maritime Park’ near Mahébourg, while another has been refused permission to develop the Île aux Benitiers opposite La Gaulette into a luxury bungalow resort, and yet another has faced great difficulties in building a tourist resort at the foot of Le Morne. In the latter case, opposition is being voiced by the local fishermen, who see more and more of the natural resources on which they rely for their livelihood dwindling, and not all of them want to become beach boys, watchmen or gardeners in the new hotels. But interestingly, there are also pressure groups of Creoles who see in Le Morne Brabant a national and even a world heritage (an application to acquire this status has been drawn up) on account of it being a (sacred) historical place.31 Nonetheless there are also examples, like the hotel compounds on the newly developed southern coast, where local people have welcomed or at least not objected to “their” waterfronts being converted into hotel beaches because they have been promised jobs and infra-structural improvements – promises which, however, in their eyes are not (yet?) as fully realized as promised or hoped for.32

By incorporating hotel beaches into our concluding discussion, we have reached the point at which Europeans, and as a matter of fact the “world”, enters into the picture. I have argued that two distinct, though not completely different beach cultures can be found on the two kinds of the beach in question, each reflecting to a certain degree the wider cultures of their respective ‘populations of origin’. But the two beaches and their respective populations also show commonalities in that they are only local adaptations and interpretations of the “global beach”, which visitors to both beaches undoubtedly have some common knowledge and experience of. Furthermore, we have seen that the two kinds of beach often overlap on their margins, and that there are various points or even zones of contact. It was argued that, as far as mutual influences are concerned, these are strongest when Mauritians and Europeans encounter each other on the public beaches.

31 The steep hill is mythically connected with the suffering of runaway slaves or maroons, who are said to have jumped off its cliff because they preferred death to being caught by the police. The bitter irony is that these policemen actually only appeared on the scene to tell them that slavery had been abolished (in 1834) - or so the story says.
32 The statements in this paragraph try to capture the state of affairs at the end of 2005.
This latter contact has led, at several places, to some significant changes in Mauritian public-beach culture, changes which can be observed well in Flic en Flac, the most crowded and mixed public beach in Mauritius at the present day. On the first part of this beach, one will no longer find the typical socio-cultural environment of public beaches as characterized above, but instead a preponderance of cool, hip, trendy and, more often than not, good-looking Mauritian youth, sprinkled with young Europeans. Hence, on this stretch of the beach there are fewer families or groups of adjacent families, and one no longer finds several generations on the beach or bathing together. Instead, there are young couples or groups of friends, often of diverse ethnic and national origins, no longer in saris and swimsuits, but in bikinis, some of them quite daring and chic. All in all, even though things are still not like the Mediterranean beaches or those in Rio, a decidedly trendy and sexy subculture has established a kind of a stronghold here, with the characteristics of the “global beach” emerging more and more. Only gradually, the further one walks along this public beach, does the scene become “familiar” again, with groups of families camping in front of their cars and bathing communally.

This development could be described as Mauritian public beaches starting to “go global”. This involves processes of imitation and learning which clearly go in one direction only, namely from the European tourists, who by and large know how to be “global” better, to the local Mauritian visitor to the public beach. In other words, as far as the establishment of a global beach culture is concerned, the learning and adaptation processes are hegemonic and unidirectional. And they have to be quick: within a decade or two, the Mauritian public seems to have to go through processes that in Europe and America took almost a century. It is not just the outward appearance, not just the overt exhibitions of resting, bathing, moving and behaving, which have to be imitated and, possibly, made into one’s own. Rather, all these things go together with a change of habitus in a deeper sense, that is, by changing bodily routines and even with the shaping of new bodies, and, last but not least, by questioning one’s old sexual morals and adopting new, generally looser ones, for the beach also becomes a playground for trying out new and more daring gender roles.

Mauritians are well aware of the dangers involved in these processes, and some are full of apprehension. In general, there is in Mauritian society a feeling which might be called the “Grand Baie Angst”, so called by me because all these dangers seem to be epitomized and most strongly exhibited in this, the oldest and most advanced holiday resort on the island in the north. Apart from the very real dangers of crime, drugs and prostitution, this anxiety also involves the more amorphous fear of what is conceived of as a loosening of sexual morals. One respect in which this fear seems to be coming true is in the habit of topless bathing practised by some European tourists, not only on hotel beaches, but also by tourist and occasionally Mauritian women on public beaches like
Flic en Flac; another is the not infrequent occurrence of “love affairs” between older tourist women and younger Mauritian men.

However, it would be misleading, naive and even patronizing to say that tourism is a bad thing for the island. For many Mauritians, especially for those who make a living out of it, tourism has proved a blessing, providing the means to build oneself a house, send one’s children to school, and be able not only to make a living, but to lead a better life. And it is not only the material side of tourism which is considered to be beneficial. For many Mauritians, judging from their own explicit statements, tourism has also brought improvements in a socio-cultural sense. One cook from La Pirogue hotel, who had been working there for two decades now and whose children had started to do so as well, looked back at the times when people in his village not only lived in miserable conditions, but also, in his own words, wore dirty clothes, lacked hygiene and did not know how to eat properly. This is a point of view which many Mauritians expressed in similar ways, and which is thus an important aspect in which they view themselves.

In this paper, I hope to have shown that globalization is a more complex and local process than many grand theories tend to acknowledge. Actually it can be doubted whether there actually exists, a priori, an independent “world system” or “global society” somewhere out there. Rather, I would see the global as the ephemeral, ever-appearing, ever-changing but also ever-disappearing secondary result of all the millions and millions of encounters of people at one place with the goods, ideas, technologies, cultures, and, last but not least, people from other places of the world. Moreover, even if globalization in general, and the making of a global beach culture in particular, are hegemonic in character, the simple model of the west conquering the rest does not always apply. In many parts of the world, including Mauritian beach culture, people exhibit an astonishing capacity to select from the “global” only those things which they feel to be important to them. And when they have exhibited such agency and selected certain things, ideas, technologies, ideals etc. (while ignoring or rejecting others), they often use these in ways that are at first unintended, but often quite original.

Finally, the process of globalization may move in unusual circles and unforeseen directions. One final example: a waiter of Indo-Mauritian background, who works in a five-star hotel in Le Morne, talked about a new kind of tourist who has arrived in Mauritian hotels recently: the tourist who comes from India. During the last decade, this country has produced not only a rich upper middle class with the means to travel to relatively expensive places like Mauritius, it also has changed its spending patterns and mentality: in India tourism is no longer regarded as an unnecessary waste of money, but has become legitimate and even prestigious. Now, the waiter complained, Indian tourists do not know how to eat with forks and knives, and Indian women go
into the swimming pool fully clothed. To this waiter, these and other practices are the expressions of a lack of civilization and are inappropriate for a five-star hotel. This Indo-Mauritian, whose ancestors came from the lowest strata of Indian society more than a century ago, was worried about the embarrassing socio-cultural impact of the newly arrived upper-middle-class tourists from India. How, in the coming decade, Indian tourists in Mauritius, Mauritian hotel staff and European tourists meet and possibly confront one another in the hotels and on the beaches of Mauritius is another chapter for investigation.

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