Rhodes University Inaugural Lecture

Re-imagining Ourselves:
Odyssey and Anthropology in the southwest Indian Ocean Islands

By

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Abstract

How is identity reconstructed in places where oppression still lingers? This question has intrigued me for the past 15 years and I have sought to answer it by undertaking a voyage back to the Southwest Indian Ocean region, the place of my birth and space of incredible diversity and early globalisations. My proposed lecture discusses the politics of identity, as well as the influence of contemporary social phenomena on the islands, specifically international tourism and heritage management. I argue that the islanders are keen to re-imagine self and community so as to produce alternative identities, networks and sources of power in a still oppressive context – and that this process is vital to care, solidarity and the pursuit of social justice. Doing research in Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles and Zanzibar also revealed to me that anthropology is perplexing and rewarding, since it involves difficult ‘returns’, learning with others and seeing power where the apparently powerless reside. I conclude that being in the Indian Ocean region positively changed the way I perceive and experience fieldwork, and that my findings thus far, underscore the relevance of anthropology to contemporary Africans and their ‘cousins’ in the African Diaspora.
‘Of course, after all this drama I did not have the heart to tell him that I was not Afro-Caribbean, or any kind of Caribbean, not anything to do with the Atlantic – strictly an Indian Ocean lad, Muslim, orthodox Sunni by upbringing, Wahabi by association and still unable to escape the consequences of the early constructions.’

(Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Admiring Silence*, pg. 10)

‘[There is] no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still [the] colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.’


**Still I Rise**

…Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

*Maya Angelou*

**Snow**

World is crazier and more of it than we think,  
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion  
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel  
The drunkenness of things being various.

*Louis Mac Niece*
Introduction

From the earliest times humans have sought to categorise and to distinguish between self and other. The process of distinction was (and is) not merely to establish boundary and difference but also to achieve ‘internal’ solidarity, a sense of place and belonging in a complex world (Barth 1969). Slavery and colonisation, macro-level processes which wreaked global havoc, publicly circumscribed the qualities and capabilities of those oppressed, presenting identity as primordial and justifying the violent subordination of people of colour. Human beings are however, profoundly resilient and infinitely creative. Despite unyielding oppression, they continuously unsettle dominant inscriptions in order to achieve personally meaningful senses of self.

In the 20th Century scholars of identity have deeply criticised the ongoing oppression of those designated as ‘non-Western’ and inattention to the legacies of oppression, for, the stereotyping and marginalisation of this population, driven by the ‘West’s’ greed for power and money resulted in the impoverishment and ‘othering’ of this incredibly diverse, creative and productive segment of humanity. ‘Othering’, a process of social distancing and marginalisation also creates the impression that human beings are not interdependent and that identities are not historically informed. ‘Marginals’ as Hooks and Spivak have argued, are seemingly silenced by the process making it difficult for them to speak for and represent themselves. Thus for good reason, scholarly reflections on the legacies of oppression are laden with pessimism. In these, ‘non-Westerns’ are described as the ‘wretched of the earth’ (Fanon 1964), ‘children of colonialism’ (Caplan 2001), the ‘people without history’ (Wolf 1982) or simply, the ‘lost people’ (Graeber 2007).

The creation of arbitrary (territorial) boundaries and associated effort to objectively construct identity and imagine community (Anderson 1991) required significant effort on the part of national leaders. These constructions necessitated instrumental constructions of identity. However they did not deter existing, subjective reconstructions of identity. In the Caribbean, authors such as Chamoiseau, Bernabé and Confiant interrogated the instrumental construction of identity under colonisation, arguing that people are resilient and creative and that they continually seek to reconceptualise and reproduce identity even in the most difficult, often racially inscribed spaces.

In the late 20th Century, as global migrations increased, new international divisions of labour emerged and information communication technologies surfaced, social theorists critically reflected on the increasingly deterritorialized and hybridised nature of identity (Papastergiadis 2000). Nations were becoming unbound (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1994), subalterns were speaking back (Spivak 1988), ethnicities were on sale (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), contributing to a rise in angst about the state of the world and humanity. In all of this, there remained deep silences about Africa’s history, particularly the legacies of slavery and colonisation (Depelchin 2005). Inattention to these glaring facts created the impression of uncertainty and opacity, no discernible ‘logos’ (with which) to understand the ‘globalizing oikeumene’ (Rabinow 2001:136).

Anthropology, described as the ‘handmaiden of colonialism’ (Asad 1979) was said to be partly responsible for the damage caused by colonisation (Mafeje 1996, Depelchin 2005). Questions regarding power relations between the observer and the observed, as well as the history of the discipline and the practice of past anthropologists arose. Contemporary
practitioners, engaging with the complexity of humanity ‘on the ground’ were not deemed exempt from this corrosive past. In the last 30 years however, the world has changed in ways unanticipated. Anthropologists, increasingly diverse and politically aware, have critically engaged with these issues, seeking to transform theorisation and practice while critically reflecting on and engaging a wide range of people on the issue of enduring inequality.

These ‘new’ anthropologists, deeply conscious of the sins of their forefathers are navigating various, ideologically complex terrains. They remain keenly aware of the politics of research and are standing up to and self-reflexively encountering ‘communities’. A brief overview of anthropological research topics worldwide shows that anthropologists today are doing vital work, researching and writing on politically charged issues such as: expatriate communities, sexual paradigms, ethical consumption, the politics of genetic testing and the discourses of corporate social responsibility.

Tonight, I continue this trend in the discipline by reflecting on (1) how and why identities are being re-imagined in the southwest Indian Ocean (2) What the re-imaginings might tell us about the nature of identity in the region and (3) the relevance of these imaginings to our understanding of identity globally. In the course of my reflection, the following becomes apparent:

While new directions in anthropology make it difficult to establish the ‘external’ contours of the discipline, I argue here tonight, that it is possible to discern the internal landscape via analyses of complex spaces such as the southwest Indian Ocean world. The island societies of the southwest Indian Ocean are globally and politically inscribed and these inscriptions are encouraging re-imagined selves, which, although tenuously anchored across multiple spaces of influence, empower the islanders in specific ways.

Secondly the emerging complexity apparent in this region and global society as a whole is altering the internal landscape of the discipline and re-inscribing anthropologists, resulting in more politically and socially nuanced accounts of our social world.

And third, it is not only scholarship which makes an anthropologist and her concerns, but also the social relationships and self-reflexivity which arises out of fieldwork. This process is political for it re-orients the researcher enabling her to question the underlying assumptions of theory and research practice. Research in anthropology today is different to what it was all those years ago. It is acknowledged as a deeply political process but also experienced as an epistemological one – in which knowledge is generated for many different kinds of audiences.

Setting sail

Writing about islands, the anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, once said that ‘they are expensive to govern, prone to political inbreeding… and [are] usually economically vulnerable in their dependence on one of few marketable goods’ (n.d. 3). The novelist, V.S. Naipaul described 1960s Mauritius as ‘An Overcrowded Barracoon’ that everyone wanted to leave. Gurnah, who writes about the Zanzibar archipelago nostalgically, describes islands as places to which one wants to but can never return. Fortunately, more favourable discussions of islands prevail. Islands are now said to be ‘sites of innovative conceptualizations, whether of nature or human enterprise’ (Baldacchino 2006). They are no longer perceived as quasi-laboratory settings for social and natural experiments, instead they are discussed as places
situated in and influenced by a historically and politically inscribed ocean (c.f. Amitav Ghosh), places integral to a wider geopolitics (Houbert 1992).

In the age of international tourism and offshore banking moreover, the perception that islands are isolated has diminished and their allure has increased. Presented as exotic, distant and different from the humdrum of the mainland, islands have become places to which one escapes and from which one can expect better returns. Global environmental concerns and economic consortia have also put islands on the map. The Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) network now discusses the environmental and fiscal vulnerabilities of islands and the latter are incorporated into regional politico-economic entities such as COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) and SADC (Southern African Development Community). Finally, people in general are motivated to migrate to islands. Some 550 million people in the world today live there. This population is scattered across the globe, from the remote Easter Island to the populous island of Java and the vast territories of Greenland.

How have islands and regions been analysed in the discipline? The earliest anthropological research has been done on islands. Malinowski, the ‘father’ of British Social Anthropology initiated the contemporary field research method of participant observation during his research in the Trobriand Islands off Papua New Guinea. Radcliffe-Brown refined his theory of structural functionalism after research in the Andaman Islands, while Margaret Mead made significant contributions to reflections on sexuality and youth identity after her fieldwork in Samoa and the Admiralty islands and Clifford Geertz advanced symbolic anthropology in his work on Indonesia. Anthropologists in the southwest Indian Ocean (Sharp, Cole, Graeber, Lambek, Eriksen, Eisenlohr, Evers and Astuti), have in the last 30 years have explored and analysed history and identity in the region. Indian Ocean historians (Alpers, Allen, Campbell, Teelock, Vaughan and Sheriff) have also contributed to scholarship on the region, reviewing colonial history to articulate the histories of those previously marginalised. In the Caribbean, critical reflections on creolization have enriched island studies, encouraging analysis of multiply situated and subjective constructions of identity.

In his inaugural lecture at Leiden, Adam Kuper made the case for area studies, arguing that one might understand particular cultural traits within a society by interrogating corresponding traits within a region (Barnard 2000). Using Kuper’s ‘lens’, I have approached the islands as part of a region but recognise that they contain discursive and historically informed identities. In my earlier work on Mauritius for instance, I discuss the phenomenon of *malaise Creole* – an accumulation of social pathologies which are said to produce negative social experiences for African descendents in Mauritius (Boswell 2006). Building on Eriksen’s (1999) earlier argument concerning creolization (the acquisition and restructuring of cultural traits to produce new cultural forms), my sense is that while identities are historicized and culturally influenced, they are also continuously reworked. Thus creolization is an ongoing process, critical to re-imaginings of self and society, limited only by macro-social processes of influence (cf. Kostopoulos 2010). This view of creolization is endorsed by Cohen and Toninato, who argue that creolization involves continuous “internal restructuring, inventiveness and creativity” (2009:13).

Imagination, eloquently discussed by Ricoeur (cited in Taylor 2006 and Kostopoulos 2010), is also useful here, since creolization involves what Ricoeur identifies as productive imagining. The latter, he argues, is neither marginal nor occasional, as it is linked to and often informed by reproductive imagination (ideology). Ultimately however, productive
imagination produces something new. Following Ricoeur I suggest that creolization not only signifies productive imagination but also contributes to renewal. In my ethnography, I suggest that this something ‘new’ results in a re-imagining of self, offering empowerment and spaces for freedom.

Thus, while Malinowski offered detailed and incisive accounts of life in the Trobriands and possessed the kind of towering intellect and commitment that produces path-breaking methodology and theory, it has been difficult to replicate his contributions to the discipline. This is because of his talents and education of course but also because the world is a dramatically different place today to what it was 100 years ago. Moreover, we now see theory differently. Specifically, deterritorializations and new reconfigurations of place and community are changing scholarship, while the complexity of contemporary society is requiring scholars to adopt multiple theoretical entry points. Social research is no longer an objective, abstract, extractive process. It has come to be experienced as a profoundly personal, subjective and mutually implicating process in which the purpose of research is not only to ‘produce’ knowledge but also to address the political inequities which we encounter in the world today (Strathern 2000) and enrich our own humanity through experience. The territory of theory then, previously paramount to the framing of knowledge is gradually and persistently being eroded by a concern with political inequality and increasing focus on experience.

Recognising and being in this kind of intellectual and political setting meant that ‘setting sail’ into the southwest Indian Ocean became an intellectual, experiential and deeply political journey. Like Odysseus’ return to Ithaca, my research in Mauritius involved a difficult return to a place that I knew and grappling with the kind of theory that was not (at the time) adequate for the task. As a Mauritian and a Creole (a person of African and slave descent), involved in unravelling the oppression that I had been subjected to, I felt traumatised by this process of interrogating a past which has not ended and in which I and family members have been affected. Thus in the hope of more positive accounts of culture and identity, I travelled to the Seychelles in 2005. I also ‘set sail’ to Zanzibar (2004-2008) and Madagascar (2009-2010) hoping for similarly positive stories.

What I encountered was the southwest Indian Ocean as a vast ‘territory’ with a long history of Arab, Chinese, Indian and European globalizations. A territory scarred by slavery and currently inscribed by international tourism, pharmaceutical prospecting and environmental degradation. I offer a quick view of this next, since coherent analysis of the present is impossible without an appreciation of the past.

In brief then, hundreds of thousands of slaves were shipped from Zanzibar and Madagascar to Mauritius in the 18th Century. It is estimated that 45 percent of the slaves arriving in Mauritius came from Madagascar and about 55 per cent came from Mozambique. Slavery was extremely violent. Recaptured slaves on the islands of the Indian Ocean islands had their ears cut off or their Achilles tendon slashed. Families were routinely separated and rape was a common feature of life on the plantations. In Zanzibar, slaves were forbidden from wearing shoes. In Madagascar they were treated as outcasts and were forced to bury their dead on the outskirts of the city. Slaves were considered property and under Napoleon’s Code Noir or Black Codes, they were not allowed to marry, were forbidden from congregating in public places and denied an education. Punishing work schedules and appalling living conditions led to a high mortality rate in the slave population, which slave traders ‘remedied’ by simply capturing and selling more slaves (Allen 2001).
Despite oppression, those enslaved survived either by learning the language and cultural practices of their oppressors, escaping the plantations to join Maroon communities and/or producing new cultural forms and dialects to create locally distinct communities (Nwulia 1981). Mobility between the islands meant that new arrivals brought ‘cultural’ knowledge with them or the impetus to respond to oppression. Ratsitatane, a Malagasy prince for instance, who was exiled to Mauritius in 1822 attempted to organise a slave rebellion there, striking fear into the hearts of the French colonials, who remembered or had heard of the Haitian Revolution.

In the 1830s, as it became clear (in Mauritius and Seychelles) that slavery was going to be abolished, the French slave owners demanded compensation for the loss of their labour. Compensation was paid and the British imported Indians to replace slave labour. The importation dramatically altered the social and economic landscape of the island, as well as the cultural landscape of neighbouring Reunion Island, since the Indians brought with them music, new languages, ritual practices and culinary traditions.

As slavery came to an end in Zanzibar, freed slaves were sent to the Seychelles from the islands in the 1880s, reinvigorating the Seychellois’ experience of African identities. The Comoros archipelago, which I have yet to encounter, features in this narrative of exchange. Comoros islanders have long travelled to both Zanzibar and Madagascar as royalty, slaves and immigrants, their beliefs and ideas of piety and commensality influencing local mores.

The history of the islands shows that identity is historically inscribed by multiple waves of globalisation and that European colonisation is not the only or major force, impacting on identity.

**Rough Seas and Deep Water**

When I started research in Mauritius in 1998, I considered it an isolated island situated in this vast and complex social territory, close to its Mascarene island neighbours (Rodrigues Island and Reunion Island) but not influenced by them. This kind of thinking came to an end during my PhD fieldwork because I soon discovered that African descendants in Mauritius, commonly referred to as Creole, were diverse and connected to those living in Seychelles, Madagascar, Reunion and Rodrigues Island.

On the edges of the Mauritian capital city, Port Louis, a vibrant group of Rodriguais, a subsection of the Creole group, remembered and had ‘brought’ with them not only their knowledge of pig raising from Rodrigues Island but also their native pickles and their version of the polka. The Rodriguais, *Kreol* speaking and Catholic, knew about the Polka because Scottish missionaries sent to the island shortly after abolition, had introduced them to the English language, the polka and ‘sword dancing’. Thus, every Saturday afternoon during the mild tropical winter of the island, I joined the Rodriguais in home based parties, learning about their pickles, how to raise pigs in a backyard and how to dance their version of the polka.

Encounters with the Rodriguais revealed that identity is porous and is multiply constructed, that colonisation has multiple impacts even though a people may form part of category which, in public discourse, is stereotyped as undifferentiated and marginal. The Rodriguais are descended from slaves, they do occupy a marginal position in Mauritius but they have taken on and adapted the Scottish dances and producing their own ways of anchoring and re-
signifying identity by making and sharing pickles or becoming known for pig-raising in a context increasingly hostile to the practice. The reconstruction of identity was not easy because living in Port Louis also required the Rodriguais to adjust to a potentially dangerous environment in which drug addiction and crime is a reality. The group had to publicly re-inscribe positive views of their identity since the media played a role in emphasising stories of addiction and criminal activity in the area, fostering in the minds of outsiders a singular, unchanging identity for the inhabitants.

Intrigued by the discourse of homogenisation, I decided to do fieldwork in five distinct locations across the island, interviewing nearly 200 people. I found a remarkable diversity and plasticity of identity in ruralised and urban contexts, among women and men, old and young. The conversations revealed that the construction of identity, and the encountering of identity construction, happens in an ethically perilous and politically inscribed terrain.

Research in the islands also reveals that identity is continuously constructed regardless of imagined social status or history. Because identity can guarantee access to resources in the islands, (material or symbolic) even ‘superior’ racial (white) identity, often presented as undifferentiated, needs to be reasserted, protected and defended. This was certainly the case with ‘whiteness’ in the islands which to me, seemed to become increasingly precarious and marginal.

Five months pregnant, I travelled to the Seychelles on a postdoctoral grant from the Dutch government. There, in the southernmost village of Mahé, after a series of climbs up steep, verdant hills, I met the descendents of English and French settlers, living in dilapidated houses. The interview with one particular family was revealing. The mother took time to explain her ‘roots’. She said that her maternal family had received a land concession from the French crown to settle on Bourbon (Reunion Island) in 1807 and that her paternal family had come from England. Unlike a Franco-Seychellois woman that I had interviewed earlier, whose father’s land had been seized in the 1977 socialist revolution in Seychelles, this family had not owned land. The man of the house had been a gardener, carpenter and farmer, tilling land that belonged to another family and selling manioc to the public. She said ‘still, we do not forget who we are’, suggesting that even in a sea of change, memory (partial and instrumental) can be called upon to contain and keep particular identities afloat.

The memorialisation of an illustrious past, formed part of the continuous construction of identity. Everyone seemed to speak of their connection to a pioneering ancestor and to a certain and politically untroubled past. But as Amadiume, Araujo, Mbembe and Werbner so cogently argue, memory-making is a profoundly selective and political process, which can contradict everyday practice and plays an increasingly important role in contemporary re-imaginings of the self.

Thus the settlers kept to a small community of whites, independent of the Seychellois as a whole – they understood Kreol, identified local foods (breadfruit, tripe and local seafood dishes) as their favourites and attended the local mass conducted in Kreol but nevertheless continuously referred to their connection with a colonial past. The African descended Seychellois on the other hand, spoke about the recent past, the legacy of a socialist government in the islands, the scarcity of goods and the need for people to develop multiple sources of income in order to survive. For them, forgetting the past of slavery was an important way in which to re-imagine identity. Brewing bacca (indigenous alcohol), fishing, planting manioc, working on the plantations, making musical instruments, composing songs and stories – these are among the many and various activities foregrounded by older men
interviewed in the capital of Mahé. The daily schedule of the men as brewers, fishermen, farmers and artists and their composing of riddles and telling stories, helped to produce an alternative set of identities, identities produced by a recent past rather than one anchored in racial discrimination and marginalisation.

Language use further assists in the re-imagining of identity creating possibilities for new social worlds or at least, alternative sources of knowledge. Speaking Kreol in the Seychelles and listening to the local music there, the Sega, unveiled a bewildering diversity. First, the Seychellois have more English words in their Kreol than the Mauritians do, but overall the Seychellois Kreol is in fact more French than Mauritian Kreol. According to the Mauritians the Seychellois Kreol is ‘compromised’ because the French in it is historically saturated and reminiscent of contact with petit blancs (poor whites and sailors). My ability to speak Mauritian Kreol, a hopefully more Parisian French and English allowed for a negotiation of different kinds of identities in diverse spaces across the island. Secondly, English in the Seychelles is the language of business and speaking it well endows the speaker with an elevated class status in the public sphere. Third, French is the language of the land-owning gentry, to speak that language well allows limited access to and respect within this group. Fourth, Kreol is both the language of the nation (codified in law) and the language of the African descendents. To speak that language in the Seychelles opens the door to local folklore, music, politics, humour and oralature.

Although Zanzibar is ‘attached’ to what is known as the Swahili Coast (from Mogadishu to Maputo) and is a world away from Mauritius and Madagascar, the islands share a deep respect for and knowledge of oral expression. They have produced an intoxicating mix of creolised music, poetry, speech making and storytelling. Taarab music, Dikhr of the Sufis and epic poetry from Zanzibar or Sega and Seggae (Reggae Sega) and Bhangra of the Hindu Mauritians or the Kabary (elaborate speeches) of the Malagasy, indicate a common and yet diverse oral heritage.

In the 21st Century identities in the islands are being objectively re-imagined by global regimes of value. The imaginings of these regimes intersect with local and historical inscriptions of identity. As a heritage ‘regime’ for instance, UNESCO is inscribing identity in the islands, as it is tasked with the identification of heritages of ‘universal value’. UNESCO has been mostly interested in the islands’ tangible heritages. Epics, poems, oralature, dance and culinary traditions, the intangible cultural heritages of the islanders, are not really considered by the organisation. Zanzibar however, inscribed like the Seychelles by a history of socialism, contains a people immersed in religion (Islam), whose concept of the self is influenced by scent, which in turn influences notions of homeland and belonging. For the Zanzibari, aroma is deemed holy, pleasant and constitutive and is associated with the islanders (insiders or Afro-shirazi). Bad smells are associated with evil (and mainlanders) and is considered potentially debilitating. Scent use, integral to the life cycle (birth, puberty rites, marriage and death), form part of the historical definition of identity.

The local conceptualisation of scent (influenced by the historical cultural connection with Islam and Oman) contributes to a positive view of sexuality in which much attention is given to the achievement of pleasure rather than the control of desire (Foucault 1979). Using patchouli, ylang ylang, cloves, sandalwood and vanilla, the Zanzibari demonstrate their profound knowledge of the natural environment and make deeply symbolic use of plants and manmade artefacts to live a thoroughly scented (good) life. In Zanzibar, re-imagining of self involves the creation of spaces and places significant and specific to women. For seven days before marriage for instance, a Zanzibari bride is exfoliated and massaged with concoctions
made up of fragrant spices. When she gives birth, she is attended to by her trainer or *somo*, who for 40 days, cares for, massages and assists the woman to recover from the rigours of birth. Women are socially segregated from men but they have, as Annette Weiner discovered in her work with women in Papua New Guinea, a space of deep value, a woman’s ‘world’.

Global religious schisms are also contributing to the re-imaginings of identity and the location of the self. The schisms do not determine the form of identity but influence it, because identity in the islands is creolized producing unique expressions of self. In 2007 for instance, men interviewed in Stone Town, spoke about the problem of racial profiling in the US and how Muslim men were being targeted and why Islam needed to be defended. While grounding their identity in the context of a global Islam, the same men spoke about the fact that their wives had *somos* and that this was necessary if one was to have a satisfying marriage. Men acknowledged the social and political role of the *somo*, her role in smoothing over marital conflict and assisting in marital enrichment.

Contemporary (and yet also historical) globalisation, in the form of Islam in Zanzibar is also diversified via class and fashion. For the women interviewed in Stone Town, a class oriented approach to the religion is allowing for a different kind of femininity expressed through increasingly ‘conservative’ dress which includes *burqas*. No longer wearing the traditional (working class) *kanga*, which in itself offers a form of political independence for women via the Swahili proverbs and vitriol (usually against unfaithful husbands and difficult mothers-in-law) printed at the bottom of the fabric, women in the town are now expressing a modern and politically assertive identity anchoring their fashion choices in internationally identified clothing of resistance.

Subjective inscriptions of identity are however, potentially destabilised by deep awareness of lingering political inequality. Spurred on by a discourse of social justice and reconciliation, scholars encourage an excavation of the past. Group invocation of slave history however, risks anchoring identity in a narrative of trauma and victimhood. In both Zanzibar and Mauritius, the history of slavery has received governing party attention and response to this history has been anchored in projects to achieve social justice. Recently, the tourism industry has become involved in this process identifying slave history sites for tourism purposes. The inclusion of these sites in tourist activities either risks reinforcing trauma and a narrative of victimhood or it can diminish the significance of these locations by producing a sanitised version of the past. The African curator at a museum in Stone Town for instance, said, ‘indeed, slaves are buried alive in the foundations of this building, but do go upstairs and see our Arab ancestors and read about [the Afro-Shirazi] Princess Salme. You will know all you need to about the Zanzibari’.

Beyond the confines of the museum, in a forested grove called Kwandwi, I met an octogenarian and his two friends. The old man told me about the military training camps for the youth, their learning of army songs. He also told me about the breath of life, *rusha roho* a form of singing that invokes the spirit of the ancestors and helps to reconstitute a personal link with the ancestral world. The Sufis in Stone Town make use of this in *Dhikr*, a form of guttural singing to produce a state of ecstasy in prayer. In a southern village of the island, I experienced a complete ‘occupation’ of my body as I passed a giant baobab tree in which the ancestors are said to reside. I became breathless and needed help to move forward. The experience and the stories from Kwandwi suggested that the accounts of a life in which the ‘dead’ play a part, produces another layer to the narrative of re-imagined identities. It suggests that identity, expressed as part of everyday experience, is also embodied and
simultaneously located between distinct but interrelated dimensions, the present and the afterlife.

In Madagascar, one of the world’s largest and oldest islands, separated from the Indian subcontinent about 85 to 90 million years ago and presently populated by 19 million people of some 13 different ‘ethnicities’, the dead play a crucial role in the life of the living. On the highlands of Antananarivo, every seven years, finances permitting, key ancestors are disinterred, sprinkled with perfume and alcohol, danced with, spoken to, re-wrapped and buried again (Graeber 1995). Famadihana or dancing with the dead, is a valued ritual indicating not only the continued weight of the past (Lambek 2002) but also its continued relevance in the life of the living. The ancestors indicate their displeasure by bringing misfortune into the lives of their descendents. Misfortune can only be removed if dietary and behavioural modifications, as advised by a diviner, are adhered to. The ancestors, defined by the political era in which they lived, or their personality, can possess the living altering identity temporarily or permanently, causing women to behave as men or men to adopt the clothing, speech styles and political convictions of their ancestors (Sharp 2001).

The political coup in Madagascar in 2009 destabilised notions of identity as well as the economy in Madagascar. The coup resulted in the ousting of a democratically elected president and the installation of a new contender in the form of a 34 year old disc jockey (DJ). In January 2010, Madagascar experienced major disinvestment, starvation increased across the island, people lost their jobs as international trade agreements (AGOA) came to an end.

In Madagascar, I found that political instability and economic change can potentially destabilise the social landscape in which identities are inscribed. However these changes sometimes result in the transformation of tradition, drawing the ‘modernised’ back into historical cultural practices. Thus circumstances arise which create conditions for the re-imagining of identities. In Antananarivo, a year after the coup, people attempted to survive. Children were renting out other children as beggars. Men and women were selling rare (possibly taboo) animals, precious stones and indigenous remedies. Mauritian businessmen were in town negotiating tenders with representatives from the military elite. In the new Chinatown, a few blocks from Independence Avenue, Chinese shopkeepers attempted the Malagasy language, encouraging locals to buy imported gadgets and clothing emblazoned with international brand names. And, not far from the city centre, people confirmed that many had abandoned the traditional concept of care for strangers (which the Malagasy are known for), since economic circumstances made it difficult to be charitable. In northern Madagascar however Jafar a spirit medium, was outsourcing his skills, establishing his credentials via a long-term client, who ‘allowed’ his royal ancestors to be channelled by Jafar, so as to assist politicians in their effort to determine their political future, while in Hellville (Andoany), sex tourism and the use of children in prostitution increased.

While the other islands were not experiencing political troubles, tourism was inscribing the economy and reconstructing identity, ‘reorienting’ it in Zanzibar to produce an exotic place or re-colonising identity in Mauritius in the glamorising of French castles and the reintroduction of a servile population. Speaking to hoteliers and visiting establishments in Stone Town, Zanzibar to ‘see’ how spaces are being configured, I happened to read travel brochures referring to fantasy tales of a bygone era in which the unequal power relations of slavery is glossed over. Needless to say, in the newly constituted spaces, local inhabitants are primed to produce temporary versions of themselves which ‘fits’ the narrative of the place, thereby momentarily replicating historical relations of power. Servants in appropriately
historical clothing for instance serve to authenticate and appease the guided tourist gaze (Urry 1990). Thus international tourism is adding yet another thoroughly political layer to the re-imagining of identity, temporarily (but regularly) subverting a subjective but potentially independent process of identity construction and sanitising a brutal and horrific past.

By focusing on the re-imagining of identity in the southwest Indian Ocean, I aim to show that identity is extremely malleable and open to reconstruction. In the contemporary world, identity construction is a profoundly discursive process that defies existing social theory. Primordialism, instrumentalism, poststructuralist theory cannot capture the nuance and unpredictability of human identity. This raises questions (again) about the value and ultimate ‘usefulness’ of theory in a globalising world. The process of re-imagination for instance, may be influenced and directed by forces of oppression and those of liberation. The latter became evident in my work with the Mauritius Truth and Justice Commission (TJC), where the publicising of victimisation and trauma was part of the process of achieving social justice. Reflecting on and re-engaging with this history however, was traumatic for those identified as slave descendents and it publicly re-inscribed them as victims, re-associating them with slavery and identity that was not yet publicly valued in the country. My conclusion from this is that the public re-imagining is therefore not an ethically easy process, since one might be compelled to risk harm, in order to do good.

Reaching the shore

Today, the concept of identity retains our attention. Some attribute this to uncertainties in our present time, while others argue that deep awareness of racial inequality is on the rise (Delgado 2006) encouraging critical reflections on identity and oppression (Gibson 2011). Anthropologists are socially embedded in contexts where these experiences of identity are unfolding.

Discussing anthropology, anthropologists and context Maurice Godelier (2009: 5) asks that we thoroughly consider the context in which researchers are situated. He says that it is ‘indispensable to consider the world in which individuals become anthropologists and then pursue [the] profession’. I arrived at anthropology as someone who had experience of the kind of disjuncture which I later saw in the southwest Indian Ocean. As a child, my parents migrated between the island (Mauritius) and the African continent, exposing me to multicultural encounters in a time of ethnic conservatism, placing me in spaces where I discovered multiply constituted identities profoundly inscribed by racial and gender stereotypes. Thus I have always wondered about the nature of inequality, about partial social inscriptions of identity, possibilities for reversal and the legacies of the past.

My view of the world, presented I suppose, in this lecture strongly suggests that not all historical legacies determine the present or the future. Just as creolization and other, social/cultural formations are allowing islanders of the southwest Indian Ocean to re-imagine themselves, social anthropology as a discipline is ‘no longer indissolubly tied to the West where it was born’ (Godelier 2009:174). This is not necessarily a convenient argument.

From the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, anthropologists such as Appadurai, Gupta, Fabian, Augé, Moore, Harrison, Strathern and Marcus have critically discussed and evaluated the ‘contemporaneous worlds’ (Augé 1999) before us. In their accounts, they interrogate the practice and the making of the anthropological ‘object’, arguing that anthropology is influenced by but not tied to its past. It is not just a discipline concerned with the
identification and comparison of peoples and the knowable facts which they offer. It has become a discipline in which its practitioners have been excavating, as Foucault has argued in his archaeology of knowledge, other ways of knowing and being in the world, consciously bringing this knowledge to the ‘surface’.

The bringing of knowledge to the surface (and not necessarily into a politically hegemonic public sphere) is a deeply challenging and political act because social worlds, which always overlapped, are now seen and accepted as common experience to all, including spirit mediums in northern Madagascar who channel the ancestors for party politicking, to waiters in Mauritius who don colonial gear to reproduce the British colonial experience in hotels. Moreover, new social media and information communication technologies now permit a wide range of social analyses, in the idiom and cultural context of the often indigenous interlocutor.

At this point it becomes possible to delineate the internal landscape alluded to at the start of the lecture. What presently defines the internal landscape of the discipline is a profound awareness of the world’s cultural complexity and the cultivation of a kind of political sensitivity which compels practitioners to explicitly remain ‘aware’ of self and other in fieldwork and ethnography. Contemporary anthropologists incisively and holistically document and theorise this emergent social complexity, remaining aware of the intersubjective nature of human encounter.

My documentation and analysis of re-imagined identities in the southwest Indian Ocean hints at, and attempts to achieve the same incisive and hopefully holistic account of a particular region on our globe. In my work (and in this lecture), I have hopefully shown that there are a myriad of spaces for freedom and for self-definition in colonised places and that the process of identity construction is a profoundly discursive one, in which Other priorities arise and can gain favour. Identities are not only inscribed by global processes of change (tourism, for example) or regimes of value (i.e. UNESCO), identities are temporarily altered, embodied, shaped by present situations and past conflicts requiring complex and multiple adaptations of the self in often precarious and changing spaces.

That the anthropologist is herself a politically inscribed subject is of further relevance to the discussion, since ethnographic research is a mutually constitutive process which hardly ever leaves a researcher unaffected. I carry with me the achingly beautiful image of Zanzibar’s turquoise sea in the mid-morning light, the unalloyed optimism of children living in desperate poverty in northern Madagascar, remembrances of the look of hopelessness in the eyes of some white settlers in the Seychelles and feelings of spontaneity evoked by story-telling in Mauritius. As a socially constituted subject, a dark skinned person, I, like my research participants have resisted reification, reconstituting identity through selective memory of a recent past, changing diacritical markers (dress) speaking to established social theory by foregrounding the relevance of experience and disengaging from the past by anchoring the self in a politically conscious present. These engagements are however not always rational or perfectly thought through, nor do they necessarily influence what I research and where I do research. They do however, unarguably form part of the ‘stuff’ which went into making the ‘me’ you see before you tonight.

The inaugural lecture is, in many ways a definitive piece and has certain requirements. One is required to use the lecture to discern and to perhaps shift the present contours of the discipline, thereby advancing scholarly reflection and practice. The lecture is also self defining, for what one speaks about creates not only impressions of the self but also a deep
sense of what it is that matters to us, as scholars and ordinary human beings. Thirdly, the inaugural requires that one establishes where one presently stands (politically, ethically and in the ethnographic sense) and the discussion ought to indicate where one might go subsequently. At the end of this significant reflection, I understand the work of anthropology (and indeed of social science) to be the work of a lifetime and that the inaugural is the verbal commitment to this bewilderingly difficult but thoroughly rewarding task. Not only do I look forward to, I actually relish the idea of further journeys of discovery, not least of self-discovery, into the southwest Indian Ocean.

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