A Case Study from the Trobriand Islands

The Presentation of Self in Touristic Encounters

By GUNTER SENFT

Visiting the Trobriand Islands is advertised as being the highlight of a trip for tourists to Papua New Guinea who want, and can afford, to experience this ultimate adventure with expeditionary cruises aboard the luxurious Melanesian Discoverer. The advertisements also promise that the tourists can meet the friendly people and observe their unique culture, dances, and art. During my research in Kiriwina Island, I studied and analysed the encounters of tourists with Trobriand Islanders, who sing and dance for the Europeans.

The analyses of the islanders’ tourist performances are based on Erving Goffman’s now classic study The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, which was first published in 1959. In this study Goffman analyses the structures of social encounters from the perspective of the dramatic performance. The situational context within which the encounter between tourists and Trobriand Islanders takes place frames the tourists as the audience and the Trobriand Islanders as a team of performers. The inherent structure of the parts of the overall performance presented in the two villages can be summarized - within the framework of Goffman’s approach - in analogy with the structure of drama. We find parts that constitute the ‘exposition’, the ‘complication’, and the ‘resolution’ of a drama; we even observe an equivalent to the importance of the ‘Second Act Curtain’ in modern drama theory. Deeper analyses of this encounter show that the motives of the performers and their ‘art of impression management’ are to control the impression their audience receives in this encounter situation.

This analysis reveals that the Trobriand Islanders sell their customers the expected images of what Malinowski (1929) once termed the ‘...Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia’ in a staged ‘illusion’. With the conscious realization of the part they as performers play in this encounter, the Trobriand Islanders are in a position that is superior to that of their audience. Their merchandise or commodity is ‘not real’, as it is sold out of its true cultural context. It is staged - and thus cannot be taken by any customer whatsoever because it (re)resents just an ‘illusion’. The Trobriand Islanders know that neither they nor the core aspects of their culture will suffer any damage within a tourist encounter that is defined by the structure and the kind of their performance. Their pride and self-confidence enable them to bring their superior position into play in their dealings with tourists. With their indigenous humour, they even use this encounter for ridiculing their visitors. It turns out that the encounter is another manifestation of the Trobriand Islanders’ self-consciousness, self-confidence, and pride with which they manage to protect core aspects of their cultural identity, while at the same time using and ‘selling’ parts of their culture as a kind of commodity to tourists.

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