

## In which sense do cultural islands exist?\*

*To Marshall Sablins*

This essay critically examines the island metaphors which have underlaid anthropological theory and research – metaphors which in the heyday of functionalism and cultural relativism produced strong images of isolated and self-sustaining societies, but which have today been dismissed as misleading and potentially harmful by many anthropologists. Drawing on empirical material from Mauritius, I suggest that these criticisms must be well-founded since Mauritius, although a literal, geographically isolated island, has since its very inception as a society been in continuous interaction with other societies, some of them very distant. It is further argued, however, that island metaphors can be useful in the analysis of Mauritius and other societies, but that they are perhaps best regarded as aspects of social and cultural boundary and identity processes.

A transformation of the island metaphor along the lines suggested could be an indicator of a more pervasive shift in the dominant anthropological mode of reasoning. This shift, which by now seems definite, has changed the discipline's emphasis from positivist search for truth to less ambitious interpretations of ambiguous worlds; from structure to process, from causality to intersubjectivity, from stable social units to fluctuating systems of signification – and, to a great extent – from explanation to understanding.

### **The island metaphor and the social world**

The island is a powerful metaphor in everyday speech as well as in several academic disciplines. The idea of the island connotes isolation and uniqueness; in biology, for example, the island metaphor is used in descriptions of isolated gene pools, divergent evolutionary patterns and closed ecosystems. Indeed, an image of nearly totemic stature and significance in modern biogeography and evolutionary theory is that of a literal archipelago, namely the Galápagos islands, which played a pivotal part in the development of Darwinism. In anthropology, too, island metaphors have had a strong

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attraction on the discipline's practitioners, and for similar reasons. Modern social anthropology was, as we are all aware, founded on an island, Kiriwina in the Trobriand archipelago, which is in many ways to anthropology what the Galàpagos islands are to biology.<sup>1</sup>

However, just as in the case of biology, islands and insularity are first and foremost strong metaphors of isolation and the boundedness of systems in anthropology. Classical social anthropological monographs typically depict small-scale societies, frequently a village, as a largely bounded social system. In so far as the local community described was compelled to have relations with the outside world, these relations would be depicted as extrasystemic links, as not forming part of the relevant social unit. Similarly, cultures, in the cultural anthropological tradition, have also generally been conceptualised as more or less integrated and self-sustaining systems.

The notions of societies and cultures as closed social and symbolic systems have been severely criticised in recent years. It has been stressed repeatedly that no society is entirely isolated, that cultural boundaries are not absolute, and that webs of communication and exchange tie societies together everywhere, no matter how isolated they may seem at a first glance. Nevertheless, the idea of societies, groups and cultures as entities which can meaningfully be isolated for analytical purposes has not been discarded in practice. Although ethnicity, for example, is now widely agreed to be situational and relational, as being constituted through social encounters and the symbolic contrasting between groups (Barth 1969), the often implicit notion of the ethnic group as a relatively fixed, bounded unit remains strong. Further, although it has been pointed out that 'cultures', or systems of signification and symbolisation, are tied together in increasingly complex ways (see, for example, Wolf, 1982; Featherstone, 1990), the underlying metaphor for much anthropological work remains that of a culture as a distinct, relatively bounded system.

In some respects, we here seem to be approaching a parameter collapse (Ardener's expression, 1989) in the social disciplines. Some even argue that the concepts of 'cultures' and 'societies' as our central units of investigation are outdated as regulative ideas, since they indicate a stability and boundedness in social systems which is non-existent (see, for example, Wallerstein 1988; 1991). The current scepticism regarding these concepts can be traced to changes in the dominant way of thinking in academic milieux, which has in recent years tended towards attempts to conceptualise process and unpredictability instead of structure and regularity. It can also be argued that actual change in the social relations of the post-war world is an important cause of a possible parameter collapse concerning the concepts of societies and cultures. The interrelationships between social systems, this argument goes, are nowadays so omnipresent and so important in the reproduction of any social system, that they cannot be understated in any social study (see, for example, Hannerz 1989; Appadurai 1990). On the other hand, it could be argued that it is analytically necessary to isolate one's unit for investigation.

1 The analogy with modern biology may be pursued further. Like the Galàpagos islands, Melanesian islands display great internal variation. Just as several species of finches are endemic to particular islands in the Galàpagos, many languages are endemic to particular Melanesian island societies. The two archipelagoes are actually exceptional, each in their own way, in displaying typical 'insular' characteristics. Polynesia, for example, is culturally much more uniform than Melanesia, although it covers a larger area.

Uses of metaphors of insularity, usually implicit in anthropological research and theory, can be used to summarise these fundamental issues. The general problem I shall address here can thus be stated as follows. In which sense can cultural phenomena and human societies meaningfully be said to be discrete, bounded and distinctive from each other; and conversely, to what extent is the entire cultural production of humanity woven together in a seamless, continuous pattern of communication and exchange? The issue is of great importance to social anthropology, and I shall argue that it can be fruitfully approached through a reflection over processes of social and cultural isolation, what we may provisionally call cultural island phenomena.

### **Literal and metaphorical islands**

I shall deal with islands both in the literal and the metaphorical sense. If regarded literally, the island is not necessarily more isolated in socio-cultural respects than other places.<sup>2</sup> A great deal of scholarly effort has in recent years been devoted to the task of demonstrating that seemingly isolated island societies have always – that is to say, before the coming of Columbus, Magellan, Captain Cook and their successors – migrated, and have always been involved in extensive networks of communication and exchange with their neighbours (e.g. Wolf 1982; Sahlins 1985; Hviding 1991). Their presumed ‘pristine isolation’ turned out to be an incorrect European assumption.

Seen as a metaphor for isolated sociocultural phenomena, the concept of the island summarises major, very complex issues in the comparative study of society and culture. A main problem here consists in deciding in which ways societies change when in extensive contact with each other, and in which ways they do not. Are, for example, changes brought about by colonisation instances of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*; superficial changes which do not affect the fundamental modes of thought, beliefs and forms of social organisation in the societies? Conversely, one may ask where to draw the boundaries between different societies in the contemporary world, which knows no absolute boundaries between societies. Dominant systems of communication and exchange in the modern world are global, and they are seemingly becoming universal (compare, for example, Robertson 1987; Giddens 1990). If one ventures to visit places which were until recently white spots on the map, such as certain highland communities in Papua New Guinea, one may be offered frozen foods flown in from Australia to buy; in central Africa, which was labelled ‘dark Africa’ only a generation ago, the inhabitants may follow World Cup soccer games on radio and television; in remote Chinese villages, the Gulf War was discussed vividly on the basis of daily, international news reports, and so on. This emergence of a seemingly continuous world must provoke us to re-think our concepts of societies as being relatively closed, isolated entities. In a sense, a dominant paradigm in social anthropology still defines societies as islands – as virtually self-sustaining systems to be understood primarily in their own terms. Although it is useful in comparisons, this idea should be abandoned since it was wrong from the beginning.

2 A main shared insight emerging from the conference where this article was originally presented, which included biologists, social anthropologists and a linguist, was that literal islands are *not* isolated in an absolute sense. Indeed, in both biological, linguistic and sociocultural respects, islands tend to be less isolated than, for example, mountain valleys. Water tends to unite; mountains tend to divide.

On the other hand, it is obvious that worldwide cultural variation remains discontinuous, notwithstanding the effects of globalisation. There are, in other words, strong entropy-resistant mechanisms at work preventing the dissolution of cultural and social boundaries, which enable anthropologists to delineate the boundaries on which we depend in order to study cultural variation and social integration. With reference to a literal island with which I am familiar, namely Mauritius,<sup>3</sup> I shall discuss a few aspects of this duality between similarities and differences. In discussing the insular metaphor with reference to a geographic island, it is my wish to follow Bateson's suggestion concerning the use of analogy, which he warmly recommends as a technique for combining 'loose and strict thinking': '[T]he first hunch from analogy is wild, and then, the moment I begin to work out the analogy, I am brought up against the rigid formulations which have been devised in the field from which I borrowed the analogy' (Bateson 1972 [1940]: 75). In other words, if we are to try out analogies from islands in thinking about society, then we ought to investigate what actual islands are like.

Allow me, before turning to the empirical case, to remark on two, officially abandoned analogies used to describe social and cultural change, in order that the subsequent discussion can be related to a wider context.

### **Evolutionist and diffusionist theories of cultural change**

At the beginning of this century, there were two dominant kinds of theories about social and cultural change in non-European societies, namely diffusionism and evolutionism in all its varieties. The diffusionists held that societies changed because of influences from the outside; that is, the borrowing of alien cultural traits and subsequent reconfiguration of the local culture. This theory bears some resemblance to David Hume's theory about the emergence of new ideas. Hume held that apparently original, imaginative thought normally consisted in new combinations of old ideas. The diffusionists, like Hume himself incidentally, were in their time criticised for not being able to account for the ultimate origins of what they called cultural traits: how does something new appear? In addition, their explanations, notably those proposing the existence of common sources for different cultural phenomena, were regarded as highly speculative. Radcliffe-Brown thus warned his contemporaries against the pitfalls of what he condescendingly spoke of as 'conjectural history' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). The history of non-literate peoples, he maintained, could not be researched in a scientifically defensible way, and the comparative study of societies should therefore be synchronic only. This notion remains a forceful one in social anthropology, even if diffusionism lurks behind as an implicit premise for much anthropological work (see Holy 1987; Kuper 1988). The evolutionists, on the other hand, held that it was in the 'nature' of human society to develop along certain lines. Most evolutionist schools would even specify particular stages through which every society would necessarily pass, although some, such as most marxisms (including that of Marx), would allow for local variations such as the 'Asiatic mode of production'. Evolutionist theories about society were eventually strongly criticised for ethnocentrism by British structural-functionalists and American cultural relativists: they were, it was argued, using their own society as a standard for human evolution, and were thus ranking other societies

3 Fieldwork in Mauritius was carried out in 1986 and in 1991-2.

and cultures from a vantage-point which was deeply ideologically biased and which made no explanatory sense.

The evolutionists and diffusionists borrowed their central metaphors and concepts from nineteenth-century natural science. Some powerful diffusionist metaphors, which were presented as explanatory concepts, were osmosis and the second law of thermodynamics. The notion of long-range dispersal, further, was borrowed from biogeography. The central metaphor of evolutionism was, of course, that of the evolution of species through natural selection. Society was envisioned as a 'natural species' deemed to evolve according to certain general laws. The explanations engendered by these, admittedly seductive analogies, were ultimately unsatisfactory. They left a mass of data unexplained.

Today, many social anthropologists and sociologists are linking up with late twentieth-century developments in the natural sciences, and therefore tend to borrow their concepts and analogies from systems theory and chaos theory instead of Darwinism and Newtonian physics (see, for example, Wilden 1980; Morin 1986). This move may eventually contribute to a solution to the problem of delineating boundaries of societies, through restating the issue within new conceptual parameters. Nevertheless, although evolutionism remains discredited, core ideas from diffusionism remain alive and well in central branches of the social disciplines. In discussing the concept of islands in relation to the comparative study of societies, I shall actually suggest that an updated version of diffusionism may be a useful model for understanding social and cultural change. When all is said and done, we are all diffusionists in the end – lest we become ignorant believers in absolute insularity or absolute entropy. The focus on single, presumably isolated societies, as pieces in an enormous mosaic, championed by nationalists as well as by anthropologists for decades (cf. Handler 1988), has become tangibly obsolete. We have acquired new concepts for thought and research, and besides, the world has become a much smaller place than it was during the late Victorian era.

### **Is Mauritius an island?**

In the literal meaning of the word, Mauritius is doubtless an island. Mauritius, its origins volcanic and geologically recent, has an area of 1,850 square kilometres and lies in the middle of the southwestern Indian Ocean. The African mainland is about a thousand kilometres away; India is almost twice as far. Seen from the perspectives of biogeography and biological evolution, Mauritius is also famous, although not as famous as Madagascar or the Galapagos islands, for displaying typical island characteristics. When it was discovered by Europeans in the seventeenth century, the biology of Mauritius was unique and provided several examples of divergent evolution. The flightless dodo was to become the most famous indigenous inhabitant of the island. However, the agency of man quickly intervened against the law of the evolution of species by natural selection. The defenceless dodo was exterminated in a matter of decades by hungry Dutch sailors, and within a century, little was left of the original Mauritian ecosystem. It had by and large been replaced by a man-made ecosystem. The sugar-cane, the Javanese deer and the rat were brought in by the Dutch from their colonies in the East Indies. When, in 1715, the French took over the management of the island, sugar plantation on a large scale was introduced, and additionally, an ambitious plan intended to introduce as many new plant species as possible was

implemented (Toussaint 1977). Mauritius still contains endemic species of birds and insects, but most of its densely populated area bears pervasive and persuasive marks of human agency and planning, and it is totally dominated by nonendemic species. When Charles Darwin visited Mauritius briefly in 1836, he was more concerned with his own disappointment at its slight degree of Anglicisation – it had, after all, been in British hands for over two decades – than with charting its biology (Hollingworth 1965).

Even in a botanical and zoological sense, then, Mauritius has been a part of a worldwide system of exchange brought about and monitored by conscious planning. The fact of human agency must therefore be borne in mind if we wish to compare cultural systems with ecosystems. The humans inhabiting Mauritius (and other islands) did not arrive haphazardly on pieces of driftwood or 'natural rafts' as animals and plants would. They went there with a purpose in mind, either their own or that of someone else.

The island metaphor may have some relevance for the biogeography of Mauritius prior to human settlement, if it is used as a metaphor for relative isolation. After human colonisation, however, Mauritius has not been an island in a biological sense, nor, I shall argue, in most sociocultural respects.

### **Mauritius is *not* an island**

Let us now look at the social and cultural system of Mauritius with notions of presumed insular isolation in mind. Like every human society, the Mauritian one is not eternal. At certain points in time, its population came to the island from somewhere else. What is peculiar to Mauritius, compared to many other societies, is the recent arrival of humans, as well as their diverse origins. All of the roughly one million Mauritians alive today descended from immigrants who arrived after 1715. Moreover, they came from three continents, some of them from very far away. The main contemporary groups of Mauritians are classified locally as Hindus (of northern Indian descent), Muslims (originating from the Indian subcontinent), Creoles (of African and 'mixed' descent), Tamils and Telugus (from southern India), Chinese, and Franco-Mauritians (the descendants of French *colons*, see Eriksen 1990; 1992a, for details of Mauritian ethnicity).<sup>4</sup>

The factors shaping Mauritian society were thus never wholly indigenous. During French times, the island was designed to be a producer of sugar and a transit port for ships on their way from Africa to India and the Far East (Arno and Orian 1986). The Britons, who took over the administration after the Napoleonic wars, saw Mauritius as a small cog in the great imperial machine, its chief task being that of producing sugar for Britons and for the world market. Since independence in 1968, Mauritians have reshaped the infrastructure of their society. They still rely on sugar exports, but have diversified the economy considerably, going into tourism and manufacturing since the early 1980s (see Leffler 1988; Bowman 1991, for details).

The island remains dependent on the outside world for trade. This dependence can also be seen as vulnerability. When oil prices rise, or when the United States government introduces new taxes on textile imports, the outcome can almost immediately be economic disaster for many Mauritians. If there is an economic recession in France,

<sup>4</sup> The word ethnicity here means an aspect of the relationships between groups which consider themselves as being culturally distinctive. It does not refer to 'essences' (cf. Eriksen 1992a; 1992b).

the tourist business suffers; if parts of Indonesia or Bangladesh succeed in their bid for industrialisation, the domestic textile industry will lose market shares. Many Mauritians go abroad for education, some go abroad for wives; their main literary languages, French, English and Hindi, are all foreign ones; the cinemas show (and lately, the video shops rent out) Indian, European and North American films; and one could go on. Mauritius would simply not have existed as a society if it had not been peopled through human design, which brought inhabitants from other parts of the world. It would also have been an entirely different place today, had it not remained tightly integrated into a global economic system.

Mauritius is peripheral economically and in many other respects, but it is no more insular in these regards than other peripheral areas, whether they are islands or not. It could be retorted here, of course, that Mauritius is not a typical island; that its culture is in a sense 'artificial' since its population consists of fairly recent immigrants. If we say so, however, then we must necessarily propose a clear distinction between artificial and non-artificial cultures. Modern culture, which is based on large-scale human planning and the reflexive monitoring of agency, would then, perhaps, appear more artificial than non-modern culture, which would then seem to evolve in a more 'natural' way. However, one need only look at other island societies to see the difficulties inherent in such distinctions. The indigenous inhabitants of Madagascar are now known to have arrived from distant Polynesian islands in historical times; the Arawaks and Caribs encountered by Columbus in the Caribbean had arrived from the mainland a few centuries earlier; and Polynesians and Melanesians alike may travel astonishing distances to trade a variety of goods (Malinowski 1961 [1992]) or in search of fame (Weiner 1988). The inhabitants of Easter Island – an astonishing case of geographic isolation – came from central Polynesia (Métraux 1966 [1941]). One famous historical insular society was that founded by Norse settlers in Greenland in medieval times. This community was crucially dependent on trade with Europe, particularly Bergen in what is now western Norway, in order to survive. When European ships no longer arrived due to the hardships and recession following the Black Death in 1348–50, the community vanished. We should be careful not to generalise from a particular course of events, but the fact of contact with the outside world clearly seems to be a universal feature of human societies.

Mauritius is therefore not a metaphorical island, if the term is to be reserved for isolated systems. On the contrary, Mauritius is constituted as a society on the basis of extensive contacts with the outside world. Granted its unusual history, Mauritius may not be a good ideal type of an island society, but it serves well as an example of an island where isolation is not chiefly due to insularity. I now turn to the forms of isolation characteristic of Mauritius.

### **Mauritius *is* an island**

From the preceding discussion, we seem forced to conclude that Mauritius is not an island. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that there are aspects of Mauritian society which display island characteristics if by that we mean aspects of isolation and endemic process. Although Mauritius is not an island in an economic or political sense, it does contain several distinctive 'cultural island phenomena'. For although there have always been extensive and important contacts with the outside world, Mauritius is in many respects distinctive.

First of all, one may find the kind of cultural island phenomena so dearly loved by the diffusionists who tried to account for differences between otherwise related societies. These would be phenomena brought to the society through diffusion; phenomena which, perhaps, have changed or which have fallen into oblivion in their place of origin, but which thrive in their new habitat – or which have taken on a different significance in their new context. Comparative sociolinguistics has provided many examples of such phenomena. For example, Norwegian dialects which were until recently spoken in the American Midwest resisted change long after the dialects of origin had been altered; and the Faroese and Icelandic languages are regarded by linguists as only slightly modified varieties of the Old Norse language once spoken all over Scandinavia. As regards Mauritius, a number of such odd ‘survivals’ can be enumerated, both regarding language and other aspects of culture. The French spoken in Mauritius contains a number of lexical items deriving from eighteenth-century sailors’ French (Corne and Baker 1983); some of the varieties of Hinduism practised in Mauritius would be regarded as heterodox at best, or heretical at worst, in India itself; a peculiar ‘aristocratic’ ethos exists among some Mauritians of French descent, who tend to perceive society more or less in the same way as pre-revolutionary Frenchmen did, and so on.

Many other aspects of culture and society in Mauritius could be cited as documentation that it really *is* an island – remote from and out of touch with developments on the mainland. However, none of the phenomena cited were developed in total isolation; they were initially created through contact with the outside world. Insularity as an aspect of Mauritian society is therefore a matter of degree. It could probably be argued, in a more general way, that no society is either entirely closed or entirely open (cf. Dumont 1992). A society must have boundaries in some respect or other in order to be a society.

The ‘cultural island phenomena’ which have now been mentioned are phenomena which most of the inhabitants ignore. Mauritians chat away without the remotest idea that their lexicon contains terms deriving from eighteenth-century sailors’ French; Franco-Mauritian aristocrats may denounce Rousseau and the French revolution without knowing how anachronistic they may seem to a contemporary European; low-caste Hindus may worship their gods in idiosyncratic ways without knowing that orthodox Indian Hindus would have been shocked and appalled, and so on. To Mauritians, it makes no difference. As the Norwegian saying goes, ‘What you don’t know won’t harm you.’

These cultural island phenomena are directly comparable to biological island phenomena. They have been brought about in a causal way through objective mechanisms of isolation; notably, physical distance from the metropole and irregularity of contact. Such phenomena therefore seem to support the old island metaphor regarding societies as more or less isolated. However, in Mauritius, these island phenomena are few and of little overall importance. Of much greater importance are the cultural island phenomena which have been consciously developed by Mauritians in response to aspects of contact and isolation with others.

### **Mauritians and insularity**

I now turn to a different kind of cultural island phenomenon, namely those aspects of insularity which the agents acknowledge and/or create consciously. The most signifi-



cant forms of isolation in Mauritius are actually brought about because agents themselves are determined to form an island in one respect or another; that is to say, it is their conscious wish that they should be isolated. We may, of course, ask about their reasons for wanting this, or about the underlying causes; I shall not emphasise this cluster of issues here. My central task is rather to distinguish between those island phenomena which are the results of historical contingencies and those which are brought about through, or at least mediated by, conscious agency and identity processes. At least in Mauritius, the latter are sociologically more significant than the former.

Cultural entropy, or the dissolution of cultural boundaries, is positively encouraged by the Mauritian state. Since its main project since independence in 1968 can be summarised as nation-building, there are good reasons why cultural homogeneity should be regarded as an asset from the perspective of the Mauritian state (cf. Eriksen 1990). The state thus favours the development of a unitary educational system for all and a uniform labour market based on meritocracy. Although many contemporary tendencies in Mauritian society have favoured the systematic removal of internal sociocultural boundaries, the state has been forced to compromise on a number of issues. For example, there are legal provisions guaranteeing the cultural and political rights of the different ethnic groups. Even more significantly, ethnic boundaries are systematically and self-consciously being reproduced by the citizens themselves. The island is densely populated (the average is 500 per sq. km.); Creoles, Hindus and Muslims frequently live in the same neighbourhoods, they may be educated at the same schools, and may apply for the same jobs. A growing majority of Mauritians speak the same language, *Kreol*, which is a French-lexicon creole. In many other respects, the groups are approaching each other in terms of shared culture, due to the spread of uniform education, wage-work, nationalist ideology and international mass media, among other factors. Despite such changes, the flow of personnel between ethnic groups is very low, as well as the intermarriage rate, and ethnically distinguishing symbols are proudly protected and displayed. Why, then, do these groups remain entropy-resistant as ethnic categories, or as 'sociocultural islands' if one prefers?

One could offer several different explanations for this resistance against social entropy, not all of them mutually exclusive. A simple sociobiological explanation would be that people guard their genetical pool against the pollution (or dilution) from genetically remote populations (cf. van den Berghe 1981); a simple marxist explanation could be that ethnic tensions have been brought about by the hegemonic whites in a *divide et impera* strategy (Durand and Durand 1978); a theorist of games might regard Mauritian ethnic relations as articulations of competition for scarce resources, and so on. While neither of these single-stranded explanations are entirely satisfactory, it remains a fact that a certain degree of cultural group isolation is promoted as an absolute value by most Mauritians. They have learnt to compromise, yet they take great pains to prevent compromise from threatening the boundaries. Each group remains an island, we may say, in respects crucial to the existential well-being of its members. Ideologies proclaiming that one's own group is morally superior and in important ways self-sufficient are important among the members of every self-defined ethnic category in Mauritius. On the other hand, there are clearly ongoing processes of change in processes of self-definition and self-recognition. Following processes of political, economic and educational integration, Muslims, Hindus and Creoles develop growing fields of shared meaning. Were they not able to do so, it would have been

impossible to talk of a Mauritian society as something different from the formal trappings of the Mauritian nation-state.

So while Mauritius is and is not island, it can also be argued that the self-defined communities<sup>5</sup> of Mauritius are islands – and at the same time that they are not.

### **Insularity as a battle against isolation**

Paradoxically perhaps, the concern to reproduce ethnic boundaries at home, the urge to remain pure and untouched, is as typical of Mauritian society as the collective urge to become full participants in the global systems of communication and exchange. Mauritians dearly want investments and tourists from anywhere in the world, and many of them wish to emigrate to some distant 'mainland'. Romanticising and idealising notions of metropolitan societies are probably typical characteristics of island societies (that means, here, small and peripheral societies) all over the world, along with the related anxiety to keep up with the world.

The widespread self-awareness of its potential isolation, and the bid to overcome this, is characteristic of Mauritius and many other societies which are insular or remote either in a literal or a metaphorical sense. In this sense, insularity is relative. While, for example, Trinidadians look towards New York and Toronto for escape routes away from insularity and isolation, small-islanders from St Vincent and Grenada may look towards the larger and more cosmopolitan island of Trinidad in a similar way. There is doubtless strong resistance against various forms of social and cultural insularity in Mauritius as well as other island societies.

It is important to distinguish carefully between the literal and the metaphorical meanings of islands and insularity. Great Britain, Greenland and Easter Island do not have anything particular in common just because they are islands. Yet it cannot be denied that insularity as such has contributed to some forms of isolation in the Mauritian case. There is in this case an overlap between the metaphorical and the literal use of the term. This overlap should nevertheless be regarded as a coincidence. Relative insularity may be brought about by a variety of causes, and geographic insularity may just as easily facilitate contact as isolation. As the linguist Peter Trudgill has remarked (Trudgill 1991), the most ancient Norwegian dialects are not to be found on islands off the coast, but in inland valleys.

### **Is the world an archipelago of cultures?**

Until recently, anthropologists studied their communities as though they were islands. The idea of the world as a 'mosaic of cultures' – still a common metaphor in travel literature – has proved untenable. 'Cultures' are now widely held not to be fixed entities, nor are they perceived as 'things' with clear boundaries – this is particularly evident in the contemporary world with its powerful communication technology. A hundred years ago, it would take weeks to travel from Europe to Mauritius; today, it takes twelve hours.

<sup>5</sup> In Kreol, the word for ethnic group or community is *kominote* (from the French *communauté*). The word *kominalis*, which is defined as undesirable forms of group favouritism, particularly in politics and the labour market, is similar in meaning to the Indian term 'communalism'.

In this essay, I have depicted Mauritius as a single society and compared some of its features cursorily with other societies in other places in the world. This entails seeing Mauritius *as a whole* as a cultural island, contrasting it with some mainland.<sup>6</sup> In order to do this, we must always specify in which respects we choose to regard a given social phenomenon as an island, or as a relatively bounded society, culture or social system if one prefers. For, as I have also stressed, internal social and cultural boundary mechanisms may also encourage us to regard specified aspects of Mauritian society as islands in specified respects. The persistence of ethnic boundaries is perhaps the most striking insular feature of Mauritian society. This feature has nothing to do with the fact of Mauritius being a geographic island, nor with other 'objective' processes of isolation. It is manmade.

Isolation is always relative. Thus, Mauritians from different communities, when they meet in France or England, tend to relate to each other as Mauritians – not as Hindus, Creoles or Muslims. As a general rule, island identities depend on a contrast with some perception of the 'mainland'. What is to be conceptualised as the mainland and what is to be regarded as the island, varies with the social context. In the domestic context, the 'mainland' is frequently perceived as the whole of Mauritian society. When one is abroad, the mainland would rather be seen as France, England or the whole world – and in these situations, Mauritius as such may be an insular focal point of identification.

Since isolation is always relative, the term *peninsula* would perhaps be more appropriate than the term island. For although no cultural entity should be isolated absolutely even for analytical purposes, and although every human group has taken on its character through communication with other human populations, it also remains a fact that societies remain to a greater or lesser extent isolated in important respects, lest they cease to be societies. The distinction between isolated and non-isolated societies, although sometimes an important one, is always one of degree. There is nothing more natural about a human who has lived his entire life in central Borneo and who has known all of his one hundred relevant others since he was a small child, than say, a Mauritian who has studied in France, worked in England, and now lives in a different town from where he grew up. Both retain a sense of belonging, of identity, with people whom they perceive as being similar, and a sense of difference *vis-à-vis* those who are perceived as dissimilar. Although culture and society remain relative notions, this does not entail that they cannot be studied and isolated – they are isolated not only by anthropologists, but also by their 'informants'. The terms refer to processes, and should not be considered as *des choses*, as Durkheim would have it.

The world cannot be viewed as an archipelago of cultures or societies *tout court*. At a certain level (such as that of the ecological crisis), the entire globe can be regarded as one's island. At a much lower level, a dyadic pair, such as a couple deeply in love, may perceive itself as a social island. The general point is that the identification of self and others is brought about through the creation of social contrasts (thereby insularity is created). Since system boundaries of exclusion and inclusion are relative, and since humans are self-defining creatures (Geertz 1973), it may be equally true to claim that a

6 The notion of cultural 'mainlands' is neither more nor less metaphorical than that of 'islands'. One of the most common conceptualisations of cultural 'mainlands' in the anthropological literature is 'Western culture', which is a very gross reduction of perhaps as many as a billion people, living in very different societies, to a cultural *chose*.

global culture exists and that there are cultures encompassing only two persons. Insularity is a matter of perspective.

## Conclusion and some further problems

The use of the island metaphor in relation to societies or cultures, I have argued, has proved to be rather unfortunate. It does not even work properly in the field it was borrowed from. In a literal sense, there is nothing specific to island societies as a category. Nor are islands necessarily more isolated than other places.

Used metaphorically, the island concept highlights relative isolation and as such has some relevance. It can still be misleading, however, because human societies are, to varying degrees, in contact with other societies. In this sense, the diffusionists were in principle correct, in emphasising that societies react upon one another.

Used metaphorically about aspects of cultures or societies, the island concept seems a potent one judging from the preceding discussion. The operational dimension could here be the boundary whereby differences are made socially relevant (Barth 1969). It should be noted that conscious human agency contributes to defining in which respects a society is insular, and in which respects it is not. Unintentionally insular aspects of societies must be distinguished from those which are consciously wished, planned and monitored. Cultures or societies do not change according to laws of nature; the changes are at least mediated and interpreted by the intervention of consciousness, reflexivity and planning. As Marx noted: a builder erecting a house, no matter how poorly qualified he is, does something qualitatively different from a bee building a beehive: he has a model of the house inside his head before starting work on it.

Lévi-Strauss' famous distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' societies (Lévi-Strauss 1962) seems to support the assumption that isolated, insular societies exist. *Hot* cultures, according to Lévi-Strauss, change unceasingly and in a feverish manner. *Cold* cultures repeat themselves cyclically; they are in this sense as regular as clockwork. Although this assumption can deepen our understanding of modernity as an ideal type, the distinction between hot and cold cultures is ultimately invalid, even if we do not take into account the contemporary processes of modernisation. All 'cultures' change and are in contact with other societies, as Lévi-Strauss has himself stressed on numerous occasions (see, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1952; 1983). We may speculate on the causes for contact and change. Could it have something to do with the incest taboo and the related quest for women from neighbouring societies? Could a Nietzschean will to power be a driving force behind travelling, warfare, trade and other techniques for approaching others? Is it population growth and scarcity of land, or scarcity of protein for that matter, which drives people towards culture contact? Is it merely a male form of compensation for not being able to give birth? Is change intentional, causal or arbitrary?

Let us not try to answer any of these questions now. Although I have argued that 'no man is an island entire of itself' (John Donne), and have shown that Mauritian society is not truly an island, I have also stressed that boundaries between societies or between groups within societies are frequently activated despite continuous pressure towards entropy. Traditionally, these boundaries have been related to topography, geography and technology, and they have also been regarded as 'natural' boundaries.

It therefore seemed natural that literal island societies were isolated. I have challenged this idea from two perspectives.

First, island societies have never been really isolated, nor have other seemingly isolated tribal societies. When Chagnon met the Yanomamö of northeastern Amazonia in the 1960s, after a long struggle through the jungle, they were growing non-endemic plantains and were using imported steel tools even in the most remote areas (Chagnon 1983). The mosaic vision of the tribal world is definitely a fiction (cf. Fabian 1983; Kuper 1988).

Secondly, the contemporary world does not allow for isolation. This should not lead us into believing that all cultural difference will eventually vanish. We may all become increasingly similar in some ways, but new differences are continuously generated (cf. Friedman 1990, for a stimulating discussion of this duality). What is peculiar to our own time consists, perhaps, in the growing self-awareness of cultural identity and the conscious, reflexive maintenance of social boundaries. When asked, Hindus of Mauritius would say that they prohibit marriage with Creoles because of a concern with their cultural identity, which they believe would be threatened if they were to allow intermarriage. They are in other words self-conscious creators of islands. Our own European societies, similarly, remain insular in so far as they refuse to allow cultural minorities the same rights as the majority, and certainly to the extent that they do not open their borders for unlimited immigration.

Modern capitalism and means of communication – which transmit people as well as messages – defy boundaries and seem to create uniformity as well as self-conscious differences where there were formerly unexplored and unknown differences. Contemporary cultural islands are, therefore, to an increasing extent thoroughly planned, their walls and moats carefully fashioned by humans who abhor the idea that humanity should be one down to the minutest detail. If it is possible that we can be ‘us’, someone else necessarily has to be ‘them’.

Commenting on the fact of ethnic animosities and so-called racism, Lévi-Strauss once said that in order to realise its creative potential, every human society must discover its proper equilibrium between isolation and contact with others. What is the proper point of equilibrium varies according to factors which are beyond the scope of this essay. Still, it can probably be argued that most aboriginal populations would have been better off if they had been allowed to retain more of their insular characteristics.

The processes of globalisation – the spread of literacy, television, formalised bureaucratic governance and so on – reinforce the assumption, fundamental to social anthropology, of the mental unity of mankind. Recent history has proved that everybody can ‘become modern’. The self-conscious, reflexive production of cultural islands has many similar features all over the world. The ‘artificial’ islands resemble one another more than the ‘natural’ islands they seek to replace. They are mediated by the interfaces of markets, states and seamless, global systems of communication. However, they manifest themselves only through an infinite number of unique local expressions. Some of the differences between societies may be accounted for through recourse to explanations which reject the idea that human agency is important in the constitution of society. Some of them, however, are demonstrably created by humans who insist on their right to retain – and worship – their sense of living in an island.

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