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# How Surfing Creates an Ecosystem?

## An Investigation about Surfers in Madagascar

Lilia KHELIFI<sup>1</sup>

***Abstract.** As a part of my research, I am investigating what surfing means to individuals who define themselves as surfers. The qualitative survey I led a month in Madagascar allowed to grasp the complexity of a surfer's identity construction and the ways individuals appropriate a globalised practice. Cultural geography and maritime anthropology are the research fields I focused on to apprehend the interactions between the respondents and their environments, and also with themselves. Indeed, surfing does not only consist in a physical practice in waves using a board. It is rather a complex whole including an intellectual and physical work on oneself, leading to the development of alloæsthesia, which allows to learn how to feel movements produced by oneself but also by all kinds of surroundings.*

***Keywords.** Surfing, Madagascar, Individual, Ocean, Identity, Movement, Feel, Experience, Body*

### Why is a Qualitative Survey Required?

On September 2017, I began my field research in Madagascar to study how surfing is spreading and appropriating by inhabitants. I was convinced that the few results on the Internet about that in the Big Island, especially by local inhabitants, did not reflect reality. That is why I led a qualitative survey for a month in some localities: Tananarive (the capital city), Mahambo (a village on the east coast, where the first surfing school was created in 2003), Ambatomalama (a fishermen hamlet close to the preceding one), and Fort-Dauphin (a city in the south-east where there are the most surfers, according to several respondents across the country).

I was inspired by the method used by sociologist Wacquant (2004), who integrated a gym in a Black ghetto in Chicago for three years to understand what boxing represents to the men. Indeed, the share of daily trainings, the sensations and feelings - like sweating, hurting oneself, winning or losing a sparring match, etc. - expressed and felt by the researcher and his respondents were necessary to seize what does boxing mean to them. It is how I worked during my field, that is why I tried hard to spend as much time as possible with my respondents, by sharing meals, journeys to their place of work, evenings at their home, which had resulted in more and more conversations and improved my field data. Besides, I endeavoured to fill out my field notebook everyday.

I wanted to grasp what does surfing mean through my questions to persons who practice. I preferred an emic method, that I consider better to catch the conceptual frameworks and words used by my interlocutors without influencing them (Becker, 1970). I must acknowledge that there is necessarily a bias introduced by research since I have

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constructed the interview grid and I asked at times some precise questions. My only presence and my status - I introduced myself each time as a French student in University - were enough to emphasise potential biases in their behaviours and answers. But I strived to adapt to each respondent and interrupt him/her as little as possible, even if I had to skip some questions from my grid (Olivier De Sardan, 2008). The habit of seeing me everyday for a while also contributed to gain confidence and to cross-check information from one day to another. Observations and conversations were finally in most cases richer in data than formal interviews.

Regarding observations, I walked on beaches several times a day to note who - in terms of sex and age essentially - and what persons observed were doing: walking, playing with water, sitting, etc. These observations have provided undeniable evidence that most inhabitants consider beaches as paths to circulate. These are also points of sale for fishermen. But nobody sits on the beach, whether alone or in a group, to take advantage of the place - apart from surfers. I observed only in Fort-Dauphin the youngest playing with the backwash. The ocean is strongly feared by most Malagasy, that explains partly why beaches are rarely perceived as recreational areas.

Practicing surfing or being a surfer is not easy to define. I will try to analyse this category through the following plan.

## **Enter a Sensory World**

### *Take Heed to Oneself*

When I asked the question in my interview grid "what does surfing mean to you?," it was difficult for people met to answer. Sometimes, it was because they were lacking words in French to express themselves, but it was also because their practice is based on a complex combination of elements. I realised that by joining them on their surfing sessions. Indeed, an important part of my methodology consisted in spending as much time as possible with my respondents. Besides, since they knew that I was investigating about surfing, they systematically offered me to join them. The arrival at the beach was always a moving moment for the surfers I observed. They took a deep breath with a smile and bright eyes. They were hurry to plunge into the water with their board but they took time to enquire about the state of the ocean. Several minutes of observation and discussions with fishermen returning from the sea were necessary to avoid any accident. Even if surfing means to deal with a risk, which is accepted and pursued by surfers (Barthe-Deloizy, 2010), those moments were strictly respected as a ritual. And it is not proper to Madagascar, it concerns surfers all around the world (Booth, 2001; Augustin, 1995). Once in the water, sight tends to be less and less important while it was essential for the observation from the beach. All body senses are used together to feel movements provoked by the ocean. Some respondents insisted on the fact that surfing is about dealing with what the ocean gives. According to them, no one should influence the functioning of the ocean, otherwise it would cause damage. So, the best behaviour to adopt, as a true surfer, is to accept movements induced by the ocean and accommodate them with your own ones. This brings us to kinæsthesia notion. I realised what means to feel the wave during my own surfing initiation by one of the respondents in Mahambo. Experience through the body will never be able to replace intellectual perception. That is why my methodology includes physical commitment in addition to personal involvement. Besides, this is a way to overcome my foreigner status to the country and to the social group I study (Fassin, 2009). When a surfer comes into water, all his sensory sensors are on alert. He has to row in order to move away from the shoreline and then he turns to face it. Since waves take shape behind his back, it is his entire body who feel the right moment

to soar and evaluate the wave power he chose, and not his sight.

Individuality is often emphasised in this practice, while it is rather a collective moment shared with friends in water and also with those left seated on the beach. It is rare to meet a surfer alone in the sea. Although hazardousness is a factor that explains how not to be alone is important, surfers interviewed argued that surfing deals mostly with moral values, such as sharing and humility.

### *What About Coexistence With Marine Species?*

The sharing value does not seem to apply to everyone. On the one hand, interactions between marine species and humans are still uncommon in some parts of the world, even regarding coastal inhabitants. Yet the majority of world's population live nearby coasts and water covers about 70% of the planet's surface. I noted during interviews and conversations how the ocean repulses most Malagasy in localities surveyed. Indeed, strong beliefs surround the ocean, qualifying it as dangerous and deadly. Most Malagasy have never learned how to swim, even amongst fishermen. This reminds how coastlines have become slowly attractive to people in the Western world during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while it was strongly feared formerly (Corbin, 1988; Urbain, 2002). This huge body of water contains unknown, which participates to its apprehension. That explains partly why surfing is developing slowly in the Big Island.

On the other hand, as I demonstrated before, surfing means to deal with the body of water, according to its own mood. But the latest 'shark crisis' in Reunion Island - close to Madagascar - raised issues about human presence legitimacy in the ocean. Several Malagasy met and those I interviewed mentioned spontaneously their thoughts about marine species and even the "shark crisis" faced by their neighbours. I did not anticipate those questions in my interview grid, which points out how it matters to them. A few researchers conducted studies in Reunion Island to analyse the interactions between sharks and humans in regard to social sciences (Thiann-Bo Morel & Duret, 2013; Taglioni & Guiltat, 2015). It questions 'waterman' concept, which can qualify both surfers and fishermen due to their strong connection with the ocean. Public authorities finally decided to forbid access to the sea in the beaches where shark attacks were the highest (prefectoral decree adopted in 2013). This sparked heated debates on social networks in particular and surfers through the whole world feel concerned. Malagasy queried explained the absence of shark attacks on humans despite their passage close to their coasts by the fishing authorisation of this species and the absence of industrial overfishing, unlike their neighbours. Sharks have become enemies to surfers, whereas other fishes are appreciated, according to the interviewees. One of the respondents in Mahambo claimed that he enjoys surfing with dolphins, turtles and other fishes. Whales are also welcome, even if they disturb the practice by smashing waves. That is why each time a sea lion or a dolphin grounds on a beach in Madagascar, people put him back into water, while it would not be the same treatment for a shark, according to the interviewees. Furthermore, advice is given to avoid an encounter with a shark, such as not to swim in the following days when a whale or any other living body is stranded on a beach. Discussions with fishermen are also essential to enquire about potential presence of sharks.

Yet, surfers enjoy to be qualified as 'waterman' and do not imagine living far from the ocean. Their observation of their surroundings and their Internet research to improve their surfing skills lead them to mimic animal practices. A classic example lies in their ability to plunge beneath waves like a duck.

### *Are Surfers Geographer-Physicists?*

A few researchers have provided compelling evidence of knowledge about meteorology held by rural people in different countries (Katz & al., 2002; Pinton, 2009; Peyrusaubes, 2013). To date no work has been published on the role of surfers in their capacity of analysis of meteorology over their lifetime. However their practice is conditional on weather. Surfers must learn to observe the ocean and climate parameters, such as wind, swell and current direction and strength, wave height and direction. The seabed is also important to be identified. Their knowledge about marine topography is essential for anticipating water movements. It pinpoints where to enter, circulate and exit. Otherwise, they would jeopardise themselves. All respondents have at least scratch marks on their legs and/or their arms, when these are not more serious injuries (loss of use of one eye for example).

An anecdote from the field illustrates this point clearly. On a day with a group of surfers on a beach in Fort-Dauphin, we were all seated on the sand, when a man walked up to us. Laughter broke out and I heard the assigned nickname “Meteoman” while he was approaching. I then asked why this reaction. They told me it was because this man - also a surfer, who came from France about two years ago - used to spend a lot of time on the Internet to enquire about climate parameters before surfing. He shared with the group the results of his investigation, but they did not show much interest. Indeed, they could also consult specialised websites since they all have smartphones with an Internet connection. But it is not how they want to proceed, even when they have to drive to a more distant beach, as was the case on that day.

### **The Materials Issue**

On another note, identifying a surfer involves appearance issue. This aspect matters a lot in human societies. In her article of 2006, Jolivet examines through the example of dresses within the court of Burgundy between 1430 and 1442 how fashion is established and influences on silhouette. Moreover, it reminds the role of garments and appearance in general to place individuals in social groups. The social group of surfers is no exception to the rule. Since ruling classes dictate in large part collective tastes (Bourdieu, 1979), one should not overlook the role of dominated classes in this establishment.

First, remind that surfing dates back to 1500 B.C. and was strictly located in the Pacific Islands (Lemarié, 2016). The discovery by the Western world of these islands around 1778, and especially Hawaiï - which became a State of the United States in 1959 after its annexation in 1898 - has transformed the essence of this practice (ibid.). Today’s surfing is promoted mostly by Californian and Australian companies, which impose a surfer figure featuring a precise equipment. Surfboard symbolises the evolution of surfing in contemporary times. Indeed, material changeover from the 1950s onwards contributed to limit the practice to wealthy social classes (Sayeux, 2006). The surfboards used to be carved from wood until technological developments in materials employed and shape given led by Western companies for last century. This upheaval in the globalised organisation and spread of surfing is being overturned. From now on, people in developing countries appropriate surfing in their own way. The lack of access to the surfer contemporary equipment turns out to be a new way of claiming an ancestral practice. The first Malagasy surfers began on pieces of wood from used fishermen’s pirogues. Some respondents in Madagascar reminded that they share a common ancestor with the Polynesians, known as surfing creators - the Austronesians. This attempt to reconnect to presumed roots reveals how it matters to some individuals to forge an identity apart from the proposed model by the Western world.

Besides, the contemporary environment perception conveyed influences the role of individuals in the workings of the world. The emergence of alloæsthesia notion concerns surfers since some interviewees insisted on their responsibility in respecting the natural functioning of the world. This also involves their attention about the materials used. Local ecological knowledge seems to conflict with western science (Artaud, 2013) in the way of observing and interacting with the environment. All the elements described throughout this paper shape the making of ambiance by surfers: the different senses are summoned to produce a landscape both real and perceptual.

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