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Heritage Tourism in Island of Martinique (West Indies). A case of study of *Le Tour des Yoles* and the Festive Nautical Heritage

Le tourisme patrimonial à la Martinique (Petites Antilles). Le cas d'étude du Tour des Yoles et du patrimoine nautique festif

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Introduction

We must accept the idea that negation does not mean nothingness, and that when the mirror does not reflect our image, it does not prove that there is nothing to look at. Simply put: just as our culture has come to recognize that primitive man is not a child, but individually an adult, will it make some progress if it recognizes its equivalent collective maturity».

Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'État* (1974).

- 1 In the Caribbean islands, the heritage issue is particularly complex. It is part of a young and violent history, marked by brutal and exclusive domination (Butel, 2007; Sainton, 2004, 2012; Rogers, 2015). The heritage participates in the re-reading of a suffered past, a history full of incompleteness (Glissant, 1981; Chivallon, 2002; Cottias, 1993, 1997). But heritage is approached, recurrently, lightly, in an apolitical way, between review and classification (Bégot et Mousnier, 1987; Mousnier, 1995; Bégot, 2000; Huyghues-Belrose, 2007; Breton, 2009, 2011). The "elected" historical remains - institutionally supported - are then reinvested in simple and utilitarian tourism enhancement processes, which

consider them in terms of resources, with an announced economic scope - in fact supported by public funds - and which naturally incorporate a local population supposed to collectively and unanimously share a passion for these so-called monumental remains (Breton, 2017). Tourism is then announced as the panacea for this heritage, everything being only a question of technicality, the expression of professional know-how; the host population can only be flattered by such interest...

- 2 In other words, in the West Indies, emblematic places in the history of slavery, colonial fortunes built from sugar and rum should today be places of heritage and cultural tourism with a unanimously recognized value (Dehoorne, 2006; Dehoorne & Augier, 2011; Theng *et al.*, 2015). In this approach, the monumental heritage is supposed to benefit from legitimate support. However, in these segregated societies, the memory spans and symbolic dimensions differ according to the categories of individuals. Divergent and contradictory representations are opposed according to the relationship to history, such as, for some, belonging to the dominant groups - descendants of the supporters of the plantations system and the harsh forms of capitalist exploitation that took over -, or, for others, that of the vast camp of the dominated, the hard-working and the invisible, a whole small diverse proletariat without access to land.
- 3 In these islands where history is difficult to write, the question of heritage is fundamentally political. This reflection proposes to revisit the experience of the skiff tour, the most popular event in Martinique. The experience has been studied by Brival (1987), Pruneau *et al.* (2006) and Moravia (2011), but it seems interesting to us to take up a critical reading, far from the tourist propaganda of the moment, to highlight the identity and political significance of an event that is far from being a simple show for tourist purposes.

1. Field Studies and Research Method

- 4 We have chosen to combine different approaches. First of all, in terms of academy resources, results are limited. There are a few scattered studies on nautical practices in the West Indies. The main texts approach the question more from the angle of sport and sociology (Ilies *et al.*, 2014).
- 5 The team of researchers composed to conduct this study is also at the crossroads of several disciplinary fields (geography, anthropology, sociology, tourism) to question a territory, its actors, its identity and open up reflection on questions of valuation, of development.
- 6 Field research practises are essential to identify the issues around this object, to be able to measure its importance in the local society, in the culture, in its identity. We have broken down this approach to the field by following different temporalities, according to the different perspectives of researchers, with formal and informal qualitative surveys.
- 7 In terms of temporalities, teamwork was structured around researchers with long-term knowledge of the object (twenty years for one, ten years for the other). A knowledge of the object that is part of daily life in the territory, researchers who have been following these festive nautical events for more than a decade, who follow the discussions that animate the local fabric around this object, throughout of the year. But the object studied in the present text was not their object of research. It was not included in their

investigation on tourism, which did not include the dimension of heritage. This researcher pair made it possible to have a long-term follow-up, with a certain knowledge of the object, its importance in local society, sensitivities, identity and political issues.

- 8 The study was enriched by the involvement of researchers from outside the territory, the country. One was on his second study trip, the other researchers were discovering this island for the first time. The objective was to combine a form of long-term knowledge (which could produce explanations within the framework of a form of daily normality) with new external views, having no knowledge on the island and the local society. But these researchers have other experiences on other islands and mountain territories, an international approach.
- 9 We crossed the surveys between formal and informal. Formal surveys are part of a conventional academic framework for official, identified interviews, within a defined and therefore prepared framework. They are very important to meet the public, private and associative actors who contribute to the public life of this object, actors are also the living memory of this very little documented object. This is an essential step, but it also has limits in the collection of finer data, in a deeper perception of the issues. Hence the importance of also engaging in informal surveys. Being a simple onlooker, a simple spectator, curious or passionate, melting into the crowd, sitting on a bench or participating in the most festive moments. They are also discreet approaches, of observation, of listening. The *chameleon researcher* who blends into the show. Who looks, anonymously, behind the scenes, rubbing shoulders with the protagonists on stage and off stage (Debord, 1967). The result is a collection of a multitude of disparate, sometimes contradictory materials, which it is then a question of assembling, putting into perspective, giving meaning to all these fragments. A rich collective experience where the singularity of each other's gaze (due to life experiences, their gender, their original sociocultural context) makes it possible to treat the object with nuance and distance (Bourdieu, 1972).

2. A Taste for the Small Maritime Heritage

- 10 In the Caribbean context, where, as Memmi (1957) points out, "the drama of the man-produced and victim of colonization" is that it cannot "coincide with itself", the identity of the "heritage" object is essential. And Ngugi wa Thiong'o recalls that colonialism was nourished by the control of wealth, but also by the "control of all the relationships maintained by the inhabitants in everyday life (...) [and] the most important field on which it cast its influence was the mental universe of the colonized". Through the prism of culture, it was a question of "controlling the colonized person's perception of himself/herself and his/her relationship to the world. Economic and political control cannot be total without mind control. Controlling a people's culture means controlling its representation of itself and its relationship to others" (2011: 38). In a postcolonial approach, the process of patrimonialisation, the apprehension of the object, the value attributed to it, can no longer be the choice of dominant minorities, supported by externalities (institutional or not), who elect the object.
- 11 Thus, like the masterly building, an essential witness to the early days of the occupation, the beginnings of an economic system - like the more or less well-preserved buildings of a plantation - do not have the same significance according to the

angles of reading. How can we ask a descendant of slaves today to share the value of such a place, which materializes historical violence and to participate in its tourist exploitation, to make it a place of memory, of forgiveness, while the forgotten - and long taboo - slave cemeteries silently sink under urbanization and tourist activities.

- 12 The construction of a new and proud identity contributes to the decolonization of minds (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2011; Dehoorne and Theng, 2011). It is now a question of daring to elect one's own referents through one's values, one's reading of history. The construction of this identity does not care about the great history - that taught in history books - or the purely commercial concerns of "tourism makers" who want to regulate any heritage event and divide it into codified products intended for the market. No, this making is popular, thoughtless, it is spontaneously built, driven by the commitment that fuels its success. Hence the interests that became clearer around the modest and festive nautical heritage: it is at the heart of the identities being built in these islands. This is the origin of the history of the skiff, this small fishing boat of insignificant appearance which has established itself in the space of a few decades as one of Martinique's major identity references, if not the most important!
- 13 The skiff belongs to all the objects more or less necessary, vernacular, which are part of the small heritage. Considered with some disdain: an unstable fishing boat, without a rudder, with a "square" sail, built by inexperienced carpenters who worked without a plan... But this object is also the working tool of fishermen and who better than fishermen embodied the manifestation of the freedom gained than those liberated niggers who took to the sea? Without land or resources, deprived, but free, with an empty stomach, with the maritime horizon as their only perspective, they left for the sea, often without knowing how to swim, between themselves, ignorant. Here in Martinique, there has been no learning phase in the sea world with descendants of Breton fishermen, as in the case of the schooner "saintoise" (Guadeloupe), with Scottish navy carpenters, as in the Grenadines islands with the manufacture of the famous sloops.

Photo 1. The start of the 2017 Tour des Yoles on the beach of Fort-de-France



Source: screenshot -Facebook, the page of the round skiffs of Martinique

Photo 2. A traditional boat Yole at the start of a race for young people.



Photo of the author, 2017

3. The Round Yawl Tour of Martinique

3.1. The skiff, a hybrid indigenous boat

- 14 The round skiff is a so-called "light" boat, without keel or ballast, without daggerboard or rudder, with a shallow draught. It can sail with one or two sails. This indigenous canoe is a continuation of the history of Caribbean shipping.
- 15 Martinican fishermen first used the gum tree, a boat of pre-colonial origin named after the gum tree in which the boats were dug. Over time, with the increasing scarcity of this tree, the gum tree was replaced by the skiff. Their general appearance is similar in many ways, but the skiff is designed by assembling boards fixed horizontally on a frame. The first carpenters, faced with a lack of wood, used recycled materials, such as cod box boards. In the end, this hybrid canoe is inspired by both the gum tree and the European skiff. The thickness of solid wood boards is now in the order of fifteen to twenty centimetres. It has no slatted assembly. Its mast is integral or may have an attached part - only a quarter of the length of the mast. The square rigging is suspended from a bamboo yard fixed horizontally, in the middle of the mast, perpendicular to the boat.
- 16 This boat, born from the creativity of a few carpenters who worked with rudimentary tools, is now a high-performance boat, a "work of art", which has surpassed the world of fishing to become a competitive boat.

3.2. From fishing to racing

- 17 Canoe races between fishermen have always existed, challenges were launched and were willingly the subject of a few bets. Regattas were also held on the occasion of patron saint celebrations. The "Société des Yoles et Gommiers de course de la Martinique" was founded in 1964 to structure and regulate these various races, which were becoming increasingly popular. A first racing experience around Martinique was launched in 1966. Two consecutive years, four fishing crews fought in a five-stage competition and completed the tour of the island. But the difficulties of navigation did not encourage the continuation of the race.
- 18 The name of the company evolved and was eventually named, in 1981, the Société des Yoles Rondes de Martinique. The first edition of the Round Yawl Tour of Martinique was launched in 1985, the date since which this annual competition has continued. Eight crews covered 110 nautical miles in six days (Brival, 1987). Twenty-one skiffs are currently affiliated and participate in the various competitions.
- 19 The maximum authorized length of the boat is 10.5 metres. The larger sails (around 84 m², and up to 100 m² when there are two sails) allow you to reach up to 16 knots in downwind conditions. A scoop at the rear fixes the steering and erect woods (long rigid poles) on the sides allow to keep the balance by a subtle game of weight transfer on board: crew members hang on the poles, from one side of the boat to the other, to maintain the precarious balances. The skiffs quickly fill with water, so it is necessary to bail out regularly and refloat it when it capsizes.
- 20 The crew consists of about fifteen crew members. First of all, there is the "boss" who is the captain of the ship. He composes his crew, decides on materials and training; he is

the master on board. He is supported by one or two "boss's helpers" who assist him in particular to maintain the paddle. The "listening boatswain" is in charge of the ropes. The "trained bwa", up to ten members depending on the ships, are the training crew members who act as counterweights, using the lever technique. The "ropes", two members at the front of the boat, are attached to the mainsail mast by means of ropes. They transmit to the "boss" all the information necessary for navigation. Finally, the "bailers" empty the water that enters the skiff.

3.3. A Growing Popular Success

- 21 The competition brings together about twenty crews representing the island's municipalities and different districts. The municipalities on the south Atlantic coast, such as Le François, Le Robert, are particularly present. The crews are dressed in the colours of the sponsors who support their boat and the boat's sail area constitutes a very popular advertising space. Private sponsors are necessary to support the different teams organized in association. The budgets are always larger (in the order of fifteen to twenty-five thousand euros per boat). Professionalization of the race required better and more expensive equipment, so the cotton sails were replaced successively by nylon, kevlar and then dacron. The fishermen of the early days of the competition have given way to sharp athletes who are dedicated to their passion. Of the two hundred participants, remain few of the last fishermen, especially since the aging profession is struggling to renew itself. Competition takes on a new dimension.
- 22 The tour of the island is made in seven stages, starting at the end of July. From one stage to the next, some 30,000 to 50,000 people follow the competition. The estimates are quite broad, there are no specific counts. But each place of reception is overwhelmed by the crowd. Supporters encourage the crews at the start, they follow the skiffs throughout the stage, both on land and at sea, as close as possible to the boats - within the authorized limits - and hurry up at the finish. Everyone supports one's team, that of one's commune, one's district. The beach is then invaded and the festivities begin, which will continue in the evening. Music, alcohol, outdoor dining, all the ingredients for summer holiday celebrations are brought together, between meetings and reunions. And every year, the battle resumes again.

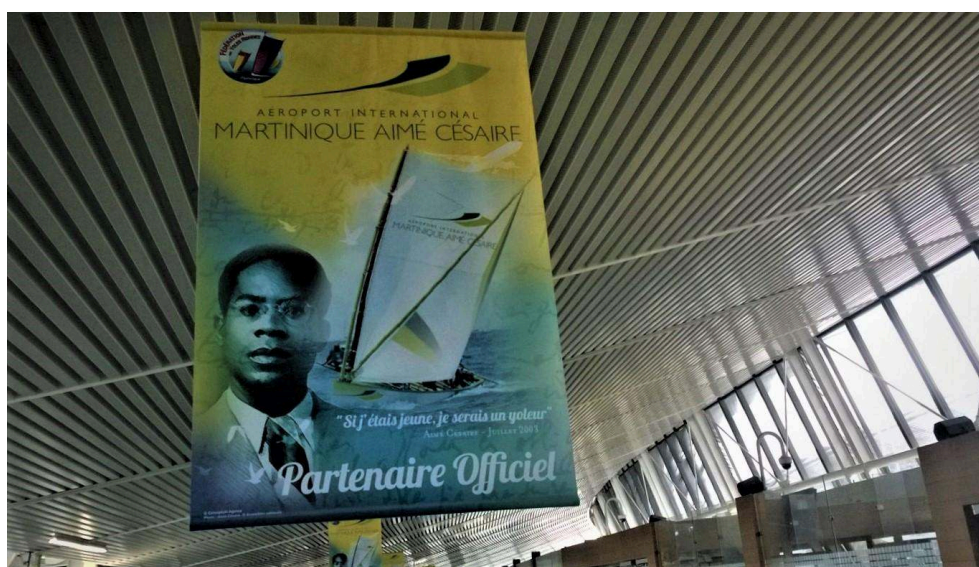
4. The Tour des Yoles' Impact in Martinique

- 23 The Tour of the Yawls of Martinique is the major event of the island which moves crowds, daily, for a week. The "bosses" of these boats are well known. This race around the island, on unstable, rudimentary boats, keeps a whole population on their toes and brings together Martinicans of all ages, those who live on the island, but also all those migrants, mainly settled in the greater Parisian suburbs, who come back "home" during the summer holidays. It is time for big festive gatherings, reunions. A privileged moment of Martinican identity.
- 24 The Tour des Yoles does not fall into the category of a heritage whose preservation would require the support of tourism. This popular festival, which is enjoying growing success driven by an identity value, makes no compromises. Certainly, the yawl object is integrated into the construction of a tourist decorum that contributes to the exoticism of the island, with boats arranged at the entrance of certain municipalities, on sea

fronts or roundabouts. Occasionally, some demonstrations and introductions are offered to tourists, especially from the Club-Med beach. But the celebration, the great annual event of the Tour des Yoles de Martinique, remains uncompromising for those who are not able to share the meaning of this event. The festival is marked by an unlimited consumerism and multiple and varied overflow that contrast with the "doudouism" maintained on a background of folk images in tourist communication. The one-day visitor is suddenly immersed in the heart of a young and vibrant society.

- 25 Aware of the political and economic significance of the event, the Collectivité de la Martinique financially supports its organization: 460,000 euros was granted to the Fédération des yoles rondes in 2016. This sum was divided between the organization of the Tour (300,000 euros), communication (95,000 euros), rewards for the crews (30,000 euros) and media coverage (35,000 euros). The total budget for the 2016 edition was €1,225,000. It is also supported by the various municipalities hosting the event. The turnover of the various merchants participating in the festival, such as the outdoor restaurants and the many small vendors of drinks and other sweets, justifies the subsidies from the municipalities that host the arrivals of the various stages. The beaches are then saturated, queues of parked cars stretch outside the towns and the jubilant crowd consumes abundantly. The coastline is covered with larger boats each year, like the many outboard. Catamarans loaded with guests who compete in decibels and festive atmosphere. This spectacle of the skiff race has given rise to a whole parallel economy of selling tickets for private parties on the boats, many of which are rented for the occasion. This trade thrives in this microcosm where it is necessary to display oneself, to distinguish oneself - especially for the female population - between postures and show-off. "The sea is transformed into a space of social exhibition, where it is essential to be seen and recognized" (Moravia, 2011). For some people, there is then the celebration at sea and the celebration on land, very popular for others. No politician can ignore this competition; everyone strives to be part of it in the company of one's loyal supporters. It is also an opportunity to suggest to the crowd the new political alliances underway.

Figure 3: Promotion of the skiff at Aimé Césaire airport in Fort-de-France (Martinique)



Source: O. Dehoorne, May 2018

- 26 This display at Aimé Césaire airport in Fort-de-France combines the words of Aimé Césaire, Martinique's guardian figure, with the yawl, the cement of Martinique's identity.

Conclusion

- 27 These festive meetings around this boat are one of the three highlights of the Martinican calendar, along with the carnival and Christmas celebrations. Anyone can participate in the celebration, but the deep meaning, its identity, remains exclusive. The race itself, with rather slow boats, rectangular sails, without rudder, which regularly capsizes, does not arouse the adrenaline excess among the uninitiated visitor. The success of the nautical events around the skiff is explained by their symbolic significance: families reunited with relatives who have returned from "over there", a happy time with one's peers amidst these festive outbursts.
- 28 The tourist scope is not the issue, but, in fact, these festivities satisfy Martinicans emigrants who are identified, in terms of market, with an affinity tourism (Dehoorne, 2022). But these emigrants do not buy a "yawl product", they simply come to spend their holidays with their families, with relatives, and fully experience the event. It would be foolish to imagine making it an "attractive" product intended for a wider range of customers. To make the event more spectacular, it would have to be redesigned and the rules of the competition changed: in a word, it would have to be emptied of its substance to keep only the postcard dimension. This can be done occasionally in the year during secondary demonstrations that maintain the image. But the population seems little inclined to make concessions for the Tour des Yoles de la Martinique, which remains above all its celebration, with the tone it intends to give it.
- 29 This event is not of international scope. That is not its purpose. It is a festive identity event around a shared popular heritage that contributes to the construction of a sense of belonging "to the Martinican people", uniting Martinicans from inside and Martinicans from outside (first and second generations), for a privileged moment. The skiff race embodies Martinique's young identity, under construction.

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ABSTRACTS

Tourism in the Caribbean islands is approached mainly under the prism of the beach, the sun, with a whole series of clichés that forget the indigenous populations, their daily life, their culture and their tradition which make their identity. The tourist industry imposes itself, denying everyday life. Our study is devoted to understanding a nautical festival in Martinique (West Indies). This festival, which is part of the history of the island, endures in culture and identity. It becomes a major festive event for the destination, without being planned as a "tourist attraction". It is a tourist event that is part of a cultural continuity between the Martinicans of Martinique and the diaspora returning to the country for the holidays.

Le tourisme dans les îles des Caraïbes est abordé principalement sous le prisme de la plage, du soleil, avec toute une série de clichés qui oublient les populations indigènes, leur quotidien, leur culture et leur tradition qui font leur identité. L'industrie touristique s'impose en niant le quotidien. Notre étude est consacrée à la compréhension d'une fête nautique en Martinique (Antilles). Cette fête, qui fait partie de l'histoire de l'île, perdure dans la culture et l'identité. Elle devient un événement festif majeur pour la destination, sans être envisagée comme une « attraction touristique ». C'est un événement touristique qui s'inscrit dans une continuité culturelle entre les Martiniquais de la Martinique et la diaspora de retour au pays pour les vacances.

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Mots-clés: tourisme insulaire, culture, festivités, nautisme, identité, développement local, Martinique, Antilles

Keywords: island tourism, culture, festivities, boating, identity, local development, Martinique, West Indies

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