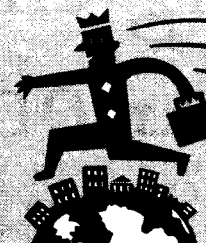


A Case Study from the Trobriand Islands The Presentation of Self in Touristic Encounters



ETHNIC IDENTITY

■ 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 Kibola and Nuwebila, two neighbouring villages on the northern tip of 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 Goffmann 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 vil-

lages 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 Mali-

nowski (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)presents 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. ■

Gunter Senft is Senior Research Fellow in the Language and Cognition Group of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, PB 310, NL-6500 AH Nijmegen, The Netherlands.