

DISGESTING THE TROPICS:

The aura of Indo-Mauritian spirituality implicit in the aestheticisation of coconut water's social life



A Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts (Coursework and Research Report) **in**

Social Anthropology

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August 2017

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ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic study of two Indo-Mauritian families in eastern Mauritius, their gatherings and their rituals based on an Hindu faith, this research report studies the relationship between aesthetics, spirituality and aura in the mass commoditization and advertising of bottled coconut water. Using participant observation, in-depth interviews and semiotic imagery analysis, this report suggests that the coconut, in Hindu belief, has a vital materiality and carries an *aura* in its physical composition and physiological content which: 1) allows it to travel across space and time 2) endows it with a 'divinity' that validates its economic exploit and representation and 3) stands as an Orientalist macrocosmic symbol for the micro realities, intimacies, social relations and lived experiences of everyday life on a 'paradise' island.

Key words: aura, aesthetic, spirituality, Hindu, Indo-Mauritian, vital materiality.

DECLARATION OF PLAGIARISM

I, Rita Asso'o Kantu, do hereby declare that this research report has not been previously accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree. I state that this research report is the result of my own independent investigation/work. I hereby give consent for my research report, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and understand that any reference or quotation from my report must and has received acknowledgement.

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Date:

After having adjudged all other foodstuffs unclean by process of elimination, Engelhardt had abruptly stumbled upon the fruit of the coconut palm. No other possibility existed; Cocos nucifera was, as Engelhardt had realized on his own, the proverbial crown of creation; it was the fruit of Yggdrasil, world-tree. It grew at the highest point of the palm, facing the sun and our luminous lord God; it gave us water, milk, coconut oil, and nutritious pulp; unique in nature, it provided humankind with the element selenium; from its fibers one wove mats, roofs, and ropes; from its trunk one built furniture and entire houses; from its pit one produced oil to drive away the darkness and to anoint the skin; even the hollowed-out, empty shell made an excellent vessel from which one could manufacture bowls, spoons, tankards, indeed even buttons; burning the empty shell, finally, was not only far superior to burning traditional firewood, but was also an excellent means of keeping away mosquitoes and flies with its smoke; in short, the coconut was perfect. Whosoever subsisted solely on it would become godly, would become immortal. August Engelhardt's most fervent wish, his destiny in fact, was to establish a colony of cocovores. He viewed himself once as a prophet and a missionary. For this reason had he sailed to the South Seas, which had lured infinitely many dreamers with its siren song of paradise.ⁱ

Christian Kracht's most recent literary offering plunges us straight into the hearth of this semiotic research report which explores the relationship between aesthetics, advertising and spirituality which are involved in the local and global consumption of coconut water. Kracht's novel sets itself against the backdrop of a German idealist on a lone voyage to German New Guinea who was mesmerized by the purity of the coconut tree. Albert Engelhardt, a sun worshipper and naturalist, soon acclimatized himself to the daily life of island survival; parading nude and sustaining himself with nothing but coconuts thus becoming a *cocovore*¹ himself. He later convinces two of his fellow German disciples to join him in this new extreme idealist religion. Apart from weaving together satire with Eurocentric idealism, *Imperium*, based on the true experience of Engelhardt, bridges the gap between north-south, good-evil, object-subject and the natural-supernatural relations involved in the perception of *the proverbial crown of creation*, furthermore revealing the true nature of assemblages between human and non-human

¹Similar to a herbivore that only eats plants or a carnivore that only eats meat, 'cocovore' implies a primal (instinct) diet consisting solely of coconuts.

actors. Almost immediately we begin to see a shift in contemporary western thought moving away from the epistemology of banal objects as inanimate and without agency to thinking about *things* as politicised subjects with intrinsic value who exude an aura, have their own social life and natural politic. Although entering from a predominantly European canon, *Imperium* presents itself as an appropriate axis upon which the theme of this paper unmasks the points where aesthetics and politics in advertising and spirituality meet. Kracht's timeless approach to cocovorism mirrors that of the current Superfood movement which crystallises mundane foods like coconuts, açai and goji berries as belonging to an 'ancient' and exotic time and sing the 'siren song of paradise'. Foodie David Wolfe, quite familiar to Engelhardt, preaches about the benefit of raw, organic, super health foods as though they were indeed proverbial crowns of creation that cured every ailment known to man and essentialised a long, happy and healthy life.

This research initially intended to discuss the material and cultural transformations of coconut water from palm tree to Tetra Pak packaging with its primary focus on Coco-Up - a company specialising in coconut by-products primarily coconut water and coconut sorbet in mainland Mauritius. Unfortunately, upon my arrival at the company's premises I was denied access to entry and information and instead advised to email my concerns which I did to no avail. My research took a slightly different and unexpected turn becoming intimately involved with several aspects of Hindu spirituality and island aesthetics. As such, the findings articulated in this report reveal the use of spirituality and animism as fundamental building blocks in the aestheticisation of commercialised, bottled coconut water. Using a semiotic analysis of advertising and participant observation in Hindu rituals I found that there exists a politicised aesthetic that exudes a taste for the tropics and reproduces itself in the advertising of most brands of bottled coconut water. The macrocosmic aesthetics of island life in the global South is made

visible and given a voice among a consumer audience possible only through the delimitation of space and time and the presence of a spiritual aura whose materialism disturbs the common knowledge held regarding the materiality, lack of vitality and objectivity of non-living objects.

“Our food is more than nutrition. It contains energy that unlocks certain feelings in our being. These feelings range deeper than feelings of euphoria but [they are also] feelings that condition us into a certain way of thinking and perceiving”². Considering food and ‘feelings’/energy this paper thoroughly explores the idea of collectively thinking about the coconut, the meanings it carries and how we might recognize the recollection of forgotten colonial histories that subtly emerge in mass media advertising. The idea of food having feelings becomes less absurd when we begin to unpack what these ‘feelings’ could actually mean if set within a different context other than trivial emotions like happiness, sadness and frustration. Per se, if we substitute the word ‘feelings’ with ‘*aura*’, it might capture our attention to the possibility that food has its own aura, life force and vitality independent of external disturbance or influence, similarly to Matsutake mushrooms³. We might begin to wonder whether material objects have agency and intrinsic value and perhaps challenge the Marxian idea that objects only possess exchange or use value. Returning to August Engelhardt⁴ and his cocovore philosophy, Kracht bridges the gap between the natural and the supernatural, man and nature proposing that Engelhardt believed “the coconut grew high up in the tree, closest to God and closest to the sun, it was godlike ... and since it had hair and looked like a human head, he thought it came closest

² This quote was taken from a recent Facebook post by a close colleague and fellow cultural anthropologist.. K. Moopelo (February 2016)

³ With reference to Anna Louwenhaupt Tsing’s (2015) *Mushroom At the End of the World*.

⁴ See Appendix A, figure 1 for an illustration of the real August Engelbrecht on Kabakon island, German New Guinea. Source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_Engelhardt

to being a man”ⁱⁱ. For Engelbract, to be a cocovore was to be a theophage – an eater of God. What are the odds that Engelhardt’s beliefs were in fact a realisation of multi-species cooperation that would only decades later, fall under the theoretical banner of animism, naturalism and post-humanism? What if, coconut consumption not just gastronomically but through spiritual ritual, was indeed an act of consuming God? How do we begin to re-learn the processes through which things, materiality and consumption become entangled in the realm of the supernatural/spiritual thus becoming part and parcel of the ways in which food conditions us into a certain way of thinking and perceiving?

My observational research findings were based in the small town of Palma south of Quartre Bornes Mauritius, where Hindu rituals and family gatherings became the primary area of focus. The semiotic analysis of advertising was based in Johannesburg, predominantly observing the setup of farmer’s markets and health food stores. In recent years the coconut has made a profitable reappearance in the lives of contemporary health conscious consumers. Swaying along warm and sunny coastal plains for centuries, coconuts have travelled from dusty street vending corners in developing countries to becoming yoga essentials, appearing at farmers markets and posh Thai restaurants. Vegetables such as collard greens (Swiss chard spinach) and kale, quinoa and cacao, coconuts and goji berries have encountered a surge in demand due to the re-emergence of these items in mass media marketing as ‘organic, raw Superfoods’. Coconut water is one such item that is continually changing the way we think about our bodies in relation to our external world and our impact upon it. Once a convenient source of hydration for islanders, coconut water became the Justin Bieber of overnight YouTube sensations in the beverage

industry. Endorsed by a handful of other celebrities⁵, coconut water jazzed up from being an overlooked island crop into a competitive multimillion-dollar by-product of the ‘tropical experience’ through companies like Zico, O.N.E. & Vita Coco. What these brands have in common is their use of static, crystallised representations of paradise island life as one of sun, sand, and sea using the three of the most consistent symbols in the advertising of coconut water: the ocean, the palm tree and the coconut. The role of aesthetics, representation and aura is necessary for understanding the dynamics through which advertising not only creates brand loyalty but urges consumers to question and understand where their food comes from, how it is produced, its intrinsic value and how they can use the knowledge gained to make sense of their existential position and potential for self-actualisation.

The aesthetic of imagery (sun, sand, sea and palm tree) of island life used by advertising performs three tasks; firstly, and with help from the Superfoods health foods movement advertising bridges the distance between geography and time; affording contemporary consumers anywhere in the world the luxury of experiencing the island aesthetic without ever leaving their homes. Secondly advertising’s use of buzzwords like ‘pure’ and ‘nature’s source’ demystifies Marx’s consumption-production fetish in that the tropics (once sites of colonial administration) where these coconuts are sourced are made visible as sites and producers of a divine spirituality. Finally, visibility via advertising reinforces these sites as historical macrocosmic narratives of an ‘exotic Orient’, further reducing the identities of various cultures in the Indian & Pacific Ocean as merely sites of pristine sun, sand and sea island destinations of the Year⁶. These three

⁵ See Appendix A, Figure 2,

⁶ See ([https://www.google.co.za/amp/amp.timeinc.net/travelandleisure/worlds-best/islands%3Fsource%](https://www.google.co.za/amp/amp.timeinc.net/travelandleisure/worlds-best/islands%3Fsource%3D)) (accessed 1 March 2017) for a top 10 list of the 2017’s ‘The World’s Best Islands’ where Palawan, Philippines sits at No.1. The Philippines is also the largest producer of coconuts in the world next to Indonesia and Thailand.

processes or moments are made possible through advertising's ability to encapsulate and reproduce the aura of the spirit, the pure and the divine that is inherent in Hinduism's belief in certain animals and objects that have a *vital materiality* and *animist unconscious*. It is the animist unconscious that disturbs the general partition of knowledge concerning objects as without vitality or a life force (*anima*) of their own. Moreover, the presence of aura reveals that foods like coconuts in fact harness animist properties, as seen in Hindu religion, with the ability to heal/ harm, protect and bestow blessing unto the receiver.

Through investigating the relationship between advertising and spirituality, this research paper utilises Walter Benjamin's construct of the *aura* as the common denominator between advertising and spirituality. My research study initially intended to follow the cultural and material transformation of coconut water production from palm tree to Tetra Pak to analyse the consumption choices of Mauritians. However, I was denied access by my primary field site and my research interests took a slightly different turn. The objective of this research was to investigate where the advertising and marketing of bottled coconut water as "pure" and "divine" came from. Through participant observation at Hindu rituals in the homes of two Indo-Mauritian families, I discovered that the branding of bottled coconut water is based on a Hindu spiritual aura which it uses to promote colonial perceptions of tropical island countries. I also discovered that health food advertising influences the perception that superfoods like coconuts have a social life and thus, a vital materiality of their own. Furthermore, the contemporary consumer in urban surroundings gets the opportunity to 'digest the tropics' gastronomically through taste, smell, and sight but also philosophically through perception and re-presentation. To reach this conclusion, I asked how is Hindu spirituality implicit in the advertising of coconut water brands and how does

brand advertising contribute to disturbing the contemporary idea that objects and things are non-living, and inanimate?

LITERATURE REVIEW

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Superfoods Renaissance

Branching off from the Organic Food Movement⁷, 'superfoods' is the new buzzword hot on the lips of every raw foods chef, fitness nutritionist-wannabe, Bhakati yoga enthusiast and self-made culinary blogger. Nationwide chain stores like Dischem, Clicks and more recently Checkers, dedicate designated aisles that house the latest and greatest in health foods trends. Special promotions follow items like coconut flour and oil, BPA Free Soya Milk, gluten-free bread sticks; "buy 2 1Lt Vita Coco and win a Nutribullet", and the 'Try-ME I'm new' promotions⁸. Advertising such items as "healthy alternatives" to plain water and cold drinks changes the status quo whereby every day, banal items like coconut oil become the Alpha Omega of all essential oils known to Man and are able to cure anything⁹. Consumers around the world have become increasingly conscious of what they put into their bodies and how it affects them in the long and short term. They wilfully seduce themselves into reading the back of every product's RDA page and falling prey to advertising's Venus fly trap masquerading as 'healthier alternatives' for a happy, healthy and longer life based on overly exaggerated medical claims.

⁷ The Organic Food Movement began at the time as the industrialization of agriculture in 1920's Europe. For more information see (<http://theorganicsinstitute.com/organic/history-of-the-organic-movement/>) Accessed on 23 February 2017.

⁸ Previous promotion at Checker's Hyper (Mall of the South – February 2017). See Appendix A, figure 3.

⁹ See Appendix A, Figure 4

One man “committed to us all finding our inner joy through the miracle of growing and eating the best food ever”, is founder of the ‘Superfood Movement’ David Wolfe - a self-proclaimed world leading authority on nutrition and superfoods. Author of various books on health foods and nutrition¹⁰, founder of the non-profit Fruit Tree Planting Foundation¹¹ and manufacturer of *Sacred Chocolate*^{TM/2}, Wolfe prides himself on disseminating ‘ancient’ knowledge about Goji berries as the “fountain of youth”, Aloe Vera as the “Essene & Egyptian secret of Immortality”, coconuts as a “symbol of paradise” and Açai as the “ancient Amazonian extract”¹³. The son of two medical doctors, Wolfe has committed his time to developing and distributing “some of the world’s most wonderful and exotic organic food items”ⁱⁱⁱ. According to his book *Superfoods*, Wolfe was the first to distribute and introduce North America to raw and organic products: cacao beans/nibs (raw chocolate), goji berries, Incan berries, cacao butter, cacao powder, powdered mangosteen capsules, maca extract, cold-pressed coconut oil, and Sacred ChocolateTM^{iv}. For Wolfe, Superfoods are valued because they nourish us at “the deepest level possible” but more importantly because they usher us towards “a more natural and aboriginal diet”^v.

¹⁰ See *The Sunfood Diet Success System, Naked Chocolate, Eating for Beauty, and Amazing Grace* by David Wolfe.

¹¹ FTPF (Food Tree Planting Foundation) is an NPO that collects “tax-deductible charitable investments” to build 18 billion trees to “benefit needy populations and improve the surrounding air, soil, and water” (Wolfe, 2009: 220).

¹² “From the cacao bean to each chocolate bar, *Sacred Chocolate*TM is infused with love, prayer, and gratitude. *Theobroma cacao* is the scientific name for the chocolate tree, which means the “food of God.” To our Sacred ChocolateTM team, this food is a holy sacrament, an offering to the higher power, and a superfood for positive life transformation” (Wolfe, 2009: 218).

¹³ See pp. 17; 108; 129.

The Sisterhood of Travelling Coconuts

For Gunn et. al, the *cocos nucifera* (coconut palm) is closely linked to human migration and played a critical role in allowing “humans to voyage, establish trade routes, and colonize lands in the Pacific Rim and regions throughout the Old World tropics”^{vi}. Examining the DNA of some 1300 coconuts Gunn et. al concluded that coconut genetics of the *niu kafa*¹⁴ (tall) and *niu vai* (dwarf) preserve a record of prehistoric trade routes and the colonization of the Americas and north-east Africa¹⁵. Domesticated *niu vai* coconuts emerged only in the Pacific (Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia) and a mixed genealogy was introduced to southern peripheries of the Indian Ocean¹⁶ “a couple of thousand years ago by ancient Austronesians establishing trade routes connecting Southeast Asia to Madagascar and coastal east Africa” excluding Seychelles which fell outside the trade route¹⁷. According to Gunn et. al the Portuguese seafarers carried these coconuts to the African west coast, establishing plantations and sources of material which later found their way to the Caribbean and Brazil hence the appearance of *niu kafa* in Florida. During the pre-Columbian epoch Austronesians, moving eastwards, transported coconuts from the Philippines to the Pacific coast of Mexico and surrounding areas.

¹⁴ The **niu kafa** type is triangular and oblong with a large fibrous husk while the **niu vai** variety is rounded and contains abundant sweet coconut water when unripe. "Quite often the *niu vai* fruit are brightly colored when they're unripe, either bright green, or bright yellow. Sometimes they're a beautiful gold with reddish tones," says Olsen“(‘Deep history of coconuts decoded: Origins of cultivation, ancient trade routes, and colonization of the Americas’. Information retrieved from (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/06/110624142037.html>), (Accessed July 2016)

¹⁵ "Almost all the dwarfs are self-fertilizing and those three traits -- being dwarf, having the rounded sweet fruit, and being self-pollinating -- are thought to be the definitive domestication traits. The traditional argument was that the *niu kafa* form was the wild, ancestral form that didn't reflect human selection, in part because it was better adapted to ocean dispersal," says Gunn (2011: 3)

¹⁶ This includes India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Laccadives and later, Madagascar and Comoros islands.

¹⁷ An interesting note: a recent study comparing rice varieties in Madagascar and Southeast Asia concluded that the descendants of the ancient Austronesians are in fact “... present-day inhabitants of the Madagascar highlands”, (Gunn, Baudouin & Olsen, 2011: 37).

There exists a great deal of folktale literature on the origins of coconuts from the Polynesian islands with folk songs like “Niu-ola-hiki” (O life-giving coconut of Tahiti) “Niuloa-hiki” (O far-traveling coconut) to the stories of sage Vishwamitra who created the palm (leaf) to afford his pal King Trishanku a safe landing when he got kicked out of heaven^{vii}. The early Spanish seafarers referred to them as ‘cocos’ or monkey face seeing as though the three dents resembled that of a monkey meanwhile, in India the coconut palm tree is referred to as the sacred ancient ‘Kalpavriksha’ tree, “the tree that provides all the necessities of life”. The Malays refer to the tree of one thousand uses as “Pokok seribu guna” and in the Filipino and Indonesian regions it is known as the tree heaven/ life and the ‘Three generations tree’ respectively^{viii}. No matter what it’s called in whichever region, coconut’s DNA preserves not only a genetic but an aesthetic record of human cultivation, trade voyage, and colonization. In tandem with the coconut’s life history, the history of Mauritius describes the entanglement of voyage, trade, human cultivation and colonisation making investigating the social life of coconuts through the lens of an Indian Ocean historiography a compelling case study. The earliest mention of coconuts in the epigraphic records of India claim that they were bequests to temples and that Saka Ushavadata the son-in-law of king Nahapana of Ujjain (54 to 100 AD) endowed Brahmins with entire coconut plantations during 120AD. Other instances of coconut gifts include epigraphs from Sri Lanka’s King Aggabodhi I (575–608 AD) and Ermanayak who donated whole groves to Lord Bhavanarayanawamy of Bapatla (1163–1180). Regarding its origins, some say the coconut was created by Sage Vishwamitra^{ix}, one of the more popular and revered sages of his time. Thereafter the coconut was known for possessing human qualities like dried fibrous coir that adorned its head, the three dents/ holes emblematic of the eyes and mouth and the rounded shape of the coconut itself that resembles a human head.

A Brief History of the Mascarenes Islands

Regarded as a must-see tourist destination where “photographs of its palm beaches... alone have come to represent Mauritius for most people”^x, the island’s significant diasporic history is essentialised as a pre-colonial paradise. Without expansively engaging the history of Mauritius, this overview mentions important historical events that led to its current socio-economic and political climate. What must be stressed however, is the tightly-knitted moments of interdependence and collaboration between (once formerly known as) île de France (Reunion), Bourbon (Rodrigues), Seychelles and Madagascar.

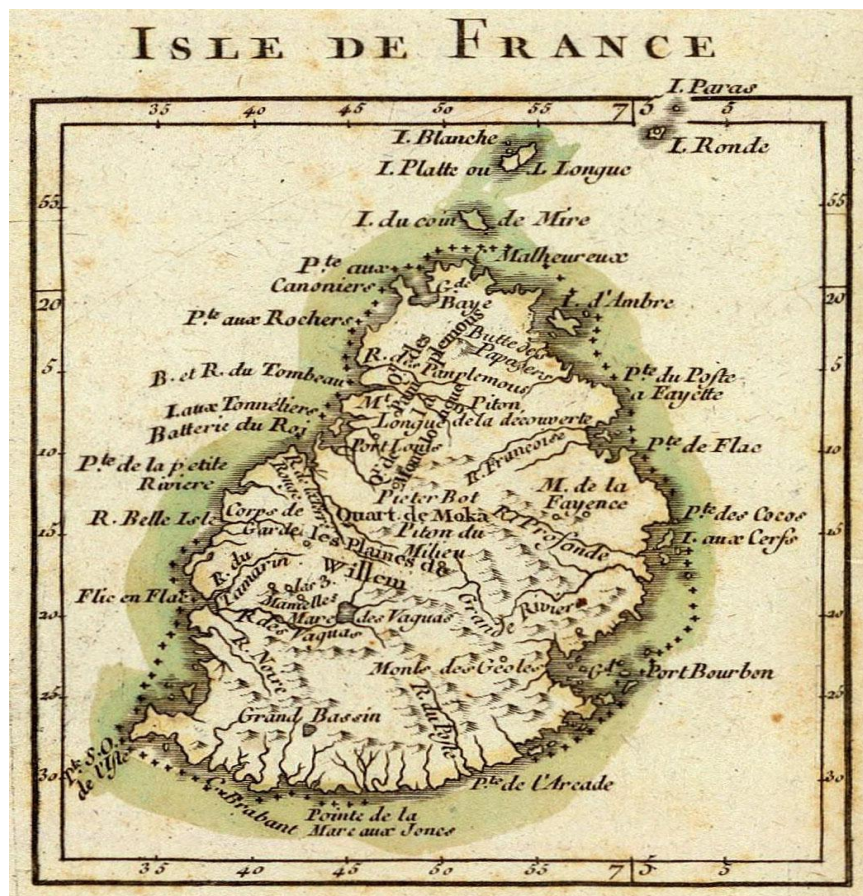


Image 1: Colonial map of Mauritius (île de France) during French administration

Between the 7th and 8th Century the Mascarenes islands began to appear in Arab charts^{xi}. Nearing the end of our first millennium Arabs established trading posts on the East African coast of Azania¹⁸, most notable was Kilwa. One early migration from the Persian Gulf reached the Comoros islands and although Kilwa brought it under its authority in the 12th century the entire Mascarenes and Seychellois remained uninhabited. Centuries later in 1498 the Portuguese rounded the Cape discovering for themselves what the Arabs had. The island was quiescent until the arrival of the Dutch (and English) who in honour of their *stadthouder* Maurice of Nassau named and claimed it ‘Mauritius’ but it was only in 1638 that the Dutch East India Company sent an expedition to ward off any intentions by the French and English to occupy the island¹⁹. While the Dutch were solidifying their foothold in the Cape of Good Hope in 1664, the French plotted their occupation of Bourbon and a year later it was settled by the French East India Company^{xii}. Less than a decade after the Dutch abandoned the island to a European pirate captain Dufrense d’Arsel, and on his way to Bourbon he took possession and renamed it ‘île de France’ in 1715²⁰ but settlers only arrived seven years later. Once “destitute of resources ... ravaged by rats and cyclones” île de France had its administration taken over by Mahé de Labourdonnais in 1735 whose transformation of Bourbon and île de France was “all the more wonderful in that it was effected in less than five years”^{xiii}. Not only did Governor Labourdonnais establish the islands as “two colonies with complementary functions” that encompassed a colony of seafarers

¹⁸ Most likely the area of the east coast comprising of current day Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar. “From the end of the 9th century, Arab authors refer to the inhabitants of Azania under the name *Zanj*, and they call the sea which washes the coast of Azania the *Sea of Zanj*” (Toussaint, 1977 [1971]: 15).

¹⁹ Their efforts failed as the French took formal possession of Bourbon and Rodrigues in 1638 but it was only confirmed in 1642 by French office Pronis on behalf of the French Eastern Company (Toussaint, 1971: 21-22)

(port) and one of farmers (granary) but he also launched the first sugar factory in Pamplémousse and appointed île de France as the seat of government and indefinite dependent of Bourbon²¹. The subsequent 65 years saw a mass importation of slave labour from the more docile east Africans and Malagasy; the liquidation of the French East India Company (1764); the creation of a French Republic after the revolution (1793) and the Mascarenes rebellion (1796) against the Republic after they ordered the abolition of slavery two years prior.

The proceeding 70 years witnessed the capture of Mauritius by the British administration (1810), the arrival of half a million Indian immigrants (1834) in anticipation of the emancipation of black slaves (1835) and the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) which historians believe, caused the decline of the Mascarene islands but more than anything, it brought them even closer to Europe^{xiv}. Up until 1914 when the Great War brought a second drop in the price of coconut oil, Seychelles had made significant economic progress in its establishment of coconut plantations (1850-1881). At the end of the 19th century the Mascarene islands faced a decline in the sale and export of sugar, a wave of natural disasters and devastating fires, and Seychelles' separation from Mauritius into its own colony in 1903 after nearly 170 years of aid and assistance. Economically depressed and over-populated and the 20th century witnessed a massive migration of Mauritian islanders to Madagascar and South Africa (Cape, Natal, Transvaal) meanwhile labour unrest unfolded in the sugar estates (1937-1943). Nearly one century after their arrival, Indian immigrants transitioned from uneducated indentured labourers to forming their own political labour party (1936) together with other races who challenged the social and economic

²¹ For more on Labourdonnais' two most significant achievements concerning maritime affairs, See Toussaint. 1971: 30.

modus operandi of the island. The last 30 years before Mauritius' independence in 1968²² saw a slight turn-around in the island after malaria - plaguing the island for 113 years - was eradicated; the Labour Party successfully demanded changes at legislative, executive and local government level (1964) and Port Louis became the capital city in 1966^{xv}.

Some 50 years after independence, what Google's search engine considers a non-racial, 'multicultural' and 'diverse'²³ paradise island after the apparent resolution of the 1999 race riots²⁴, is in fact "a deeply divided society where ethnic boundaries are maintained at a constitutional level"^{xvi}. The riots culminated in ethnic tension between Creoles and the Hindu community²⁵. From the time South African writer Peter Becker²⁶ set foot on the island in the early 60's for research until 2013, Mauritius' demographic population stood at an estimated 1.3 million citizens: 68% Indo-Mauritians, 27% Creole, 3% Sino-Mauritians and 2% Franco-Mauritian^{xvii}. Majority of the citizens speak Kreol Morisyen (86.5%) while French remains the official language of administration and legislation. The practice of and belief in Hinduism dominates the religious sphere, shortly followed by Roman Catholic and Islam.

Throughout history sugar-cane plantations maintained their foothold in Mauritius although having been taken over by the finance sector, the sugar industry remains the golden sweet spot of

²² Seychelles although having a representative government since 1848 only gained independence in June 1976 and till this day, La Reunion remains an overseas French department.

²³ Eriksen *Common Denominators* 159 as cited in Babita Thanoo, 'Rap Music in Mauritius', 2012:35.

²⁴ See Eriksen *Mauritian Riots*, 1991: 78-95 as cited in Thanoo, 2012: 37.

²⁵ For more information on the 1999 ethnic tension see, Patrick Eisenlohr (2006) in *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius*.

²⁶ Peter Becker born and raised in Rivonia, is the author of several books that describe social and cultural settings among a variety of southern Africa's ethnic groups. *Mauritius '62* (1974) is a summarised study on Mauritian social life. Peter and friend Jimmy Kiley published & distributed this book free of charge to universities, schools and libraries.

a growing global economy. Sugar-cane, rum and tobacco are the island's most profitable cash crops with Agalega, a small outer island, also contributing to the agricultural sector by way of its revenue from coconut by-products. Although coconut palms are found virtually throughout the island's coastline and further inland, Agalega is the archipelago's only commercial coconut plantation where an average 300 inhabitants rely on the production value of copra and coconut oil for survival^{xviii}. Nonetheless under the administration of the Outer Islands Development Corporation (OIDC)²⁷ Est. 1982 Agalega established its own island council (AIC) in 2004 and the small coral reef island was at a steady decline until 2015 when the AIC's first president was chosen by government^{xix}. All the same, Mauritius has remained a prestigious sun, sand and sea destination whilst harbouring some of the world's most attractive policies for offshore companies^{xx}.

'Little India' and the Coconut story

Patrick Eisenlohr asserts that the ethnic tensions of 1999 made the distinction and differences between various ethnic groups an obvious reality however it should not take away from Mauritius' history of non-violence even though the events of 1999 made it clear that "not all Mauritians feel themselves included in a new Mauritian nation to the same degree"^{xxi}. In *Little India* Eisenlohr discusses two main divisions in Mauritian nationhood – the ancestral tradition of Indians and the indigenous construction of the creole. Primarily focusing on the cultural politics of performance and allegiance to the metropole India among Indo-Mauritians, Eisenlohr regards the preservation of ancestral cultures, traditions, and languages as central to the Indian population's claim to nationhood^{xxii} and not attributable to some forlorn attempt to preserve a

²⁷ The OIDC comprises of all islands in the State of Mauritius other than the mainland.

sense of ‘Indianness’ but my observations speak differently. Across Mauritius are subtle reminders of the metropole which makes the Hindu presence of Indo-Mauritians unavoidable. The history of Hinduism in Mauritius began with the introduction of southern Indians to the sugar plantations and since then, Hindu reform movements like Arya Samaj, Krishnanand Seva Ashram and the Swami Lakshmanacharya Vishwa Santi Foundation^{xxiii} have been integral to the diasporic spread of Hinduism from India to Mauritius. To this day important festivals and rituals like Maha Shivrati, Diwali, Holi and Maha Sakranti are observed by many Hindus on the island who go for pilgrimage to providential sites like Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao) where the sacred lake is found nearing the southern edge of the island.

According to Muthal Naidoo, Hinduism is a blanket term that describes a macrocosm of myriad beliefs, customs and traditions and Hindus spend their lifetime liberating themselves from *karma* (action-reaction) and *samsara* (reincarnation) through the *dharma* (considered actions) in order to reach enlightenment or union with the *Brahman* (God)^{xxiv}. In bringing themselves closer to God, Hindus have attributed ‘feelings/auras’ like power, love and knowledge to human forms hence the existence of various paired deities and their statues or *murthis*²⁸ which possess these qualities. In India, no religious offering or ritual is complete without a coconut^{xxv} because it symbolises self-service and purity. The fibrous husk represents karma and is shaved off in certain rituals, while the three eyes which represent the sacred trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma are left covered. When the coconut (emblematic of the ego) is broken the water/milk or *maya* (worldly illusion) is discarded and the *athman* (soul) is released to be reunited with Brahman/Paramathman and thereafter communion is taken by eating the

²⁸ Naidoo explains that it is not the case that Hindus worship the idols of many gods. For Hindus like Christians, there is only one God and murthis are simply physical manifestations that “represent the manifold aspects of one God” (2004: 11).

fruit's flesh^{xxvi}. Weddings, naming rituals, birthdays, new possessions, observances, festivals, Gargam prayers, and funeral rites^{xxvii} all necessitate the presence and offering of coconuts for blessings and protection with each ritual having its own unique procedural activity. Coconuts form part of not only special rites and rituals but also of every day lived experience. Whether it be a formal or informal activity, coconuts remain an integral aspect of Hindu spirituality and culture.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The following theoretical overview engages the primary ideas of two critical theorists who have hermeneutically shaped my understanding of *aesthetics* and *aura* in relation to political economies existing within global conjunctures. This review, in attempting to place Jacques Rancière's conceptualisation of *aesthetics* in dialogue with Walter Benjamin's proposition of the *aura*, dissects the relationship between advertising and spirituality and encompasses two closely interrelated yet seemingly distant themes: the aesthetics of advertising and the aura of spirit which are present in the advertising of bottled coconut water. My attention is focused on the relationship between Rancière and Benjamin; the swivel at which their ideas meet and the points of departure in their disagreements. This conversation is exclusively supported by five key texts articulated by Appadurai and Kopytoff regarding the social life of things; Adorno and Horkheimer on the culture industry; Tricia Sheffield on advertising religion and Harry Garuba on animist materiality alongside a reading of vital materiality by Jane Bennet. These key texts are supported with secondary literature by Jerry Kirkpatrick and Iulia Grad's

defence of advertising; Anna Louwenhaupt Tsing's notion of assemblages; and uses Durkheim's sacred/profane dichotomy to place the reading into perspective.

These texts were specifically chosen for their thick descriptions and direct relation to my research topic, and their main themes are understood as succinctly functioning within a networked system of vibrant commodities in political economies. I chose not to rely on contemporary literature regarding mass media, consumption and ritual because these themes are not the focal point(s) of my research. I acknowledge several limitations in my review in that it may not cover the entire scope of literature on aesthetics ideology, ritual, animism, religion/spirituality, mass media, consumption and advertising. Instead, this paper focuses on thinking about the ideas of Rancière together with Benjamin in the aim of uniquely contributing towards the existing body of critical theory and the anthropology of food. This research report presents the incessant need to hone down on selective key texts that would ensure a clear delivery of its main themes: the relationship between food, spirituality and aesthetics and how we come to understand the world and the role of our positionality as acting with and against the external environment. The review is divided into two sections: *the aesthetic of advertising* and *the aura of spirituality in ritual*. For the purposes of this paper I use religion and spirituality as two distinct concepts that both embrace the idea of an external force or power operating outside of the Self. This report specifically relies on Kale's interpretation of spirituality as, "An individual's endeavours to explore and, deeply and meaningfully connect one's inner self to the known world and beyond"^{xxviii} and stays clear from the functionalist analysis of religion as an institutional tool of and for social order/power. To avoid being mistaken for a totalitarian secularist I explicitly use spirituality as a medium through which practices of ritual, behaviour and belief are enacted. As opposed to seeing 'ritual' as symbolic communication that constrains

social behaviour as Mary Douglas and Claude Levi-Strauss did, I use ritual in the same sense as Clifford Geertz²⁹ to mean language-like codes that are independently interpreted as cultural systems thus, doing away with the functionalist approach to ritual as shaping social order and imposing meaning on ‘disordered experience’.

Aesthetics, Politics and Aura

An ontologically dense criticism of social and political philology the *Politics of Aesthetics* uncovers the far reaches in the politicisation of aesthetics and the essence of politics that create possibilities for visible modes of subjectivisation towards social emancipation. Departing in disagreement from his once beloved Althusser’s ‘philosophy of order’^{xxxix} school, Jacques Rancière criticised his epistemology³⁰ and other critical theorists’ responses to the events of May 1968 whom had completely “anaesthetized the revolt against the bourgeoisie”^{xxxx}. In response to a close re-examination of political, social and historical forces that necessitate the production of theory, Rancière in two subsequent bodies of literature critiquing Althusser’s work continually challenges us to consider deeply “from what position do we speak and in the name of whom or what?”^{xxxxi}. Rancière glides from a total rejection of political philosophy³¹ to an elaborated politics of democratic emancipation³². He identifies concepts like the *police*, best understood as an “organizational system of coordinates that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions”^{xxxii}.and further distinguishes those who are included from ‘the part who have no part’.

²⁹ See Clifford Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures* 1973: 113 where he expands on classic functionalist ideas on ritual and religious symbolic systems; describing these systems as providing both a ‘model for’ and a ‘model of’ reality which ritual (or consecrated behaviour) brings together.

³⁰ In 1974, Rancière published *La Leçon d’Althusser* (The Lesson of Althusser), re-examining his hermeneutic structural Marxist epistemology concerning scientific theory and ideology.

³¹ Jacques Rancière in *La Maître Ignorant* (1987)

³² More recent publications on the politics of democratic emancipation include *Aux Bords du politique* (1990) and *La Mesentente* (1995).

It is the essence of the *demos* (people) that makes the *politic* visible by disrupting the system of common knowledge that determines social perception, activity and the senses as a collective experience. Borrowing from Jean-Francois Lyotard's idea about aesthetics as a privileged site for critical thought which culminates in mourning, Rancière makes a strong point of differentiating the politicisation of aesthetics from Walter Benjamin's 'aestheticisation of politics' in describing aesthetics as 1) a system of a priori forms that determine what presents itself to sense experience, 2) a delimitation of spaces and times of the visible and invisible and lastly 3) a politics which revolves around what is seen and said. Ranciere strongly argues that there exists an aesthetics which lies at the core of politics that has little correlation Benjamin's ideology of the 'aestheticisation of politics'. In the subsequent pages he dissects 3 ways in which the sensible is distributed and structures how the arts may be thought of as forms of art and as forms that also incite a sense of community. He briefly discusses the a) the surface of depicted signs b) the split reality of theatre and c) the rhythm of a dancing chorus as examples^{xxxiii}. To show how Benjamin's theory of aesthetics lacks a deeper core to politics, Rancière uses music, theatre, film, fine arts, photography, dance and a range of other forms to illustrate the ways in which art and aesthetics becomes politicised. For instance, Rancière cites Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and *Sentimental Education*³³ to elaborate how works of art and performance(s) are involved in politics. In three manoeuvres Rancière describes major regimes for identifying art as belonging to: the *ethical regime of images* whereby art becomes a question of images; the *poetic/*

³³ As cited in Ranciere, 2004: 14. A 1856 Realist novel by Gustav Flaubert later turned into a motion picture by Director Sophie Barthes (2014), *Madame Bovary* describes the life of lonely doctor's wife who lived beyond her means and engaged in adulterous affairs to escape the dull realities of an empty and loveless marriage. The novel was criticised for obscenity, sex and violence by public prosecutors in December 1856 and after Flaubert's acquittal, became a best-seller the very next year. Over a decade later Flaubert published another realist novel describing the struggles of white privilege a young and fairly handsome womaniser experienced throughout his romantic affairs during the French Revolution. *Sentimental Education* 1869 (L'Education sentimentale) came to be considered as being among the most influential novels of the 19th Century for reasons that lie beyond my amusement.

representative regime of (fine) arts wherein fine art belongs to ways of doing and ways of making, finally; the *aesthetic regime of art* identifies art in the singular, free form rule or subject matter^{xxxiv}. This research report only focuses on the ethical regime that questions status and significance, images of the divine and the right to produce such.

In a brief interview with Gabriel Rockhill, Rancière's avoids the ethical regime of the arts which suggests that images contain moral, religious and social dynamics. This regime, born out of Plato's epistemology critiques how images affect the demos' mode of being. Whereas Plato essentialised art as removed from politics to understand its singular mode of 'true arts'^{xxxv}, Rancière places art under the critique of politics where the ethical regime of art questions the status and significance of the aesthetic. In relation to this, the primary concern of this paper is the aesthetic advertising of bottled coconut water marketed as an object of the 'divine'. For Rancière then, aesthetics has a meta-politics of its own^{xxxvi} and the *aesthetic* mode of thought goes beyond just thinking about art but becomes an idea of thought itself; an idea of the distribution of the sensible. In one swing Slavoj Žižek's afterword describes the lesson of Rancière as one to be wary of "succumbing to condemning all collective artistic performances as inherently 'totalitarian'"^{xxxvii} and simultaneously promotes that "in our time of the disorientation of the Left, his writings offer one of the few consistent conceptualizations of *how we are to continue to resist*"^{xxxviii}.

Walter Benjamin once accused Fascism of aestheticising politics and its "deadly consummation of *l'art pour l'art*"^{xxxix}. The idea of *l'art pour l'art* differentiates a realm called art from "other human pursuits, cognitive, religious, ethical, economic" etc in such a way that the content of the realm itself becomes of primary importance to the artwork's claim to absolute

autonomous and autotelic self-referentiality^{xl}. In other words, art is understood and interpreted in Platonic terms as a singular and depoliticised phenomena free of worldly association. A stark example of this is poet Laurent Tailhade's response to the anarchist bombing of the French Chamber of Deputies in 1893 asking "What do the victims matter of the gesture is beautiful?" Concerning militarism, anarchism and misogyny F.T. Marinetti echoed the same sentiments as Tailhade in considering the event as "beautiful ideas which kil^{xli}"³⁴. Considering the aesthetic ideology's disinterestedness with the preservation of life, Benjamin observes that humankind's self-alienation has intensified to the point where "it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order"^{xlii}. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic^{xliii} (and) "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war"^{xliv}. While Benjamin "applauds the shattering of image in montage in order to call the (communist) masses to language", Russell Berman critiques this aestheticisation of politics for consequently suggesting "a civilisational regression to graven images of the deity, as in Riefenstahl's representation of Hitler's descent from the clouds in *Triumph of Will*"^{xlv} (*image below*)³⁵

³⁴ Italian (born in Egypt) symbolic futurist theorist and poet, Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti was the founder of the Futurist movement. Marinetti advocated violence as a necessary predicate for revolution and in *Manifesto de Futurismo* (1909) described art as inherently violent, cruel and unjust. The artistic philosophy of *Manifesto* celebrated machinery, industry and violence whilst rejecting the past. His futurism insisted that literature would absorb progress into its evolution as opposed to and being overtaken by it. War he defines as the point of departure for hygienically healing the human spirit, somewhat of a purification allowing an idealism to take form.

³⁵ Image of Hitler retrieved from: (<https://www.swordofelysium.wordpress.com/2015/01/26>) Accessed on 28 January 2018.



Moreover, if aesthetics is identified with the sensuous power of images then the pleasure principle undercuts rational deliberation in such a way that the aestheticisation of politics prioritises “victory of the spectacle over the public sphere” and leads to a politics reduced to “spellbinding spectacle and phantasmagoric illusion” which necessitates a saving from itself^{xlvi}. Paul de Man’s critique of aesthetic ideology mirrors that of Benjamin’s critical review of fascist tendencies which claims that “aesthetic is, by definition, a seductive notion that appeals to the pleasure principle, a eudamonic judgement that can displace and conceal values of truth and falsehood [that are] likely to be more resilient to desire than values of pleasure and pain”^{xlvii}. As opposed to critiquing aesthetics for being too far removed from the fundamentalism of humanity, de Man criticises it for being all-too-human.

In contrast to the interpretation of aesthetics as an absolute self-referentiality; a “perennial battle between the image and the word”^{xlviii}; or even a fascist tool of the pleasure principle used by the bourgeoisie, Terry Eagleton alludes to the significance of the body and

materiality that concerns an aesthetic ontology. Eagleton's de-transcendentalisation and demasculinisation of reason culminates in a dialectic interpretation of aesthetics as "not incipiently materialist" but that which also provides, at the very heart of Enlightenment, "the most powerful critique of bourgeois possessive individualism and appetitive egoism"^{xlix} and brings to the fore a utopian critique of the "bourgeois social order". In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton asserts that an aesthetic/ moral project envisions to create a "universal order of free, equal, autonomous human subjects, obeying no laws but those they give to themselves. This bourgeois public sphere breaks decisively with the privilege and particularism of the *ancien regime*, installing the middle class in image, if not in reality, as a universal subject [...] What is at stake here is nothing less than the production of an entirely new human subject - one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity"^l. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin linked a similar idea of aesthetics to onto-technology and materiality presupposing a "deduction of the aesthetic and political properties of a form of art from its technical properties"^{li}. In other words, Benjamin perceives technological reproduction as the shaper of aesthetic experiences thus the aesthetic is extracted from its technological/ scientific reproduction whereas for Rancière; mechanical arts must first be recognized as art before it can confer an aesthetic or visibility³⁶ on politics (*demos*). Benjamin mentioned this idea nonchalantly, dismissing the artistry of actors implying that it is the camera that makes the film/art and not the actors. For example, the technological reproduction of

³⁶ Rancière (2004) makes the perfect example using photography and film that become recognized as art through a process in which "they first need to be put into practice and recognized as something other than techniques of reproduction or transmission" (32).

Macbeth from its theatre play production would be described as a moment when “the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays”³⁷.

The subject of *aura* is the argument I wish to focus on in conversation with Rancière’s idea of aesthetics and politics. Benjamin describes *aura* as two referential axioms necessary for understanding authenticity in the presence of the original and technology reproduction i.e. *historicity* (the unique phenomenon of time) and *nature* (the unique phenomenon of distance). What is important to note is Benjamin’s belief that human subjects have the inherent desire to spatially and humanly bring things closer “which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction”^{lii}. Benjamin equates uniqueness with aura and opines that the work of art's aura is not entirely separate from its ritual. Dismissing Adorno's claim that no object has use value, Benjamin goes further in alluding us to the original *use value* of the “authentic” work of art as embedded within ritual. However remote the ritualistic basis, it remains “recognizable as secularised even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty”^{38,liii}. Mechanical reproduction became the phenomena that finally emancipated the work of art from its “parasitical dependence on ritual”^{liv}, quite similarly to the Renaissance of

³⁷ ““The film actor,” wrote Pirandello, “feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.” This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public.” (Benjamin, 1936. Translated by Harry Zohn, Transcribed by Andy Blunden 1998: 11).

³⁸ “The secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance and prevailing for three centuries, showed ritualistic basis in its decline and the first deep crisis which befell it. With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which became evident a century later. At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*, that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of “pure” art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter” (Benjamin, 1936: 301).

mid-Victorian England and the secular cult of beauty that outright rejected the rigidity and ritualistic nature of art and of being. This poses a serious challenge to interpreting the advertising of coconut water as a technological reproduction that transposes or altogether eliminates the aura of the object which its very profit and consumer loyalty relies on.

Fascism, Benjamin maintains, introduces aesthetics into politics, rendering politics aesthetic and communism responds by politicising art. The development of new technologies affects and frames new forms of political and cultural experience, or example photography and film create new forms of art/ perception (aesthetic) and the masses as new subjects or forms of life (politic). For Rancière however, it is the total opposite, instead of aesthetics and politics being interdependent and co-existing, they appear as dialectic in form. Benjamin deducts aesthetic & political properties from technological (re)production. Although Rancière and Benjamin at first appear to contradict and disagree with each other on the processes of the politicisation of aesthetics vs. the aestheticisation of politics their theses meet at various points: ‘the part that has no part’ precludes to the idea of communism; the distribution of the sensible and the police order can be understood as the tools of Fascism & capitalism; the ethical regime relates to Benjamin’s concept of ritual and aura. A significant meeting place between the two theorists separated by time and distance occurs at the emergence of Modernism. For both, modernism is not an artistic development but rather a radical reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible or ‘culture machine’ of Fascism. Although for Rancière aesthetic experience shapes science and for Benjamin science shapes aesthetic experience, what we can take away from both is that an aesthetic transformation requires not only a change of consciousness and perception but also a material social change that necessitates a socio-political aesthetic re-education. According to

Friedrich Schiller this is “ethically grounded in an assumedly Kantian notion of freedom”³⁹. It is this proposition of a material, social and conscientious change that I will discuss next.

The social life of the aesthetic

The general advertising of coconut water uses three specific images of the tropics: sun, sand, palm trees, sea/water and the coconut. There exists in health stores dozens of bottled coconut water varieties produced in a handful of island countries and the same aesthetic of advertising used throughout characterizes all of them as a geo-temporal macrocosm of exotic paradise destinations. Overlooking the microcosmic realities of these Orientalist representations, advertising becomes a vehicle of and for global conjunctures which link modes of production (global South) and consumption (global North) together through the demystification of coconut water’s origins. This section tackles various themes related to the aesthetic of advertising, firstly by introducing the idea of commodities or objects as having social lives that manoeuvre between singularity and commoditisation; secondly it links the distribution of Knowledge (read as the ‘sensible’) with a politics of exchange and value and lastly; I interpret and briefly analyse the main arguments in accordance with the research topic. The subsequent discussions I hope, will tease out the complexities that exist in the *aesthetic of advertising* and *the aura of ritual* which are the main themes presented in the findings of the subsequent ethnography. Through putting the theories of Rancière’s ‘aesthetic/politic’ and Benjamin’s ‘aura’ in dialogue with central arguments in cross-disciplinary literature, this review hopes to intelligibly challenge and stretch further some of the ideas put forward in the following critical review opening with the social life of persons and things.

³⁹ Schiller as cited in Jay 1992. “Aesthetic education by no means fails, it succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible” (75-76).

Arjun Appadurai makes a compelling and brief three-fold argument explaining the dynamic processes involved in the social life of ‘the thing itself’ and its ‘magic’ materiality. In dialogue with a much earlier and lengthier conversation, these dynamics were dissected throughout a collection of essays published in *The Social Life of Things*. Appadurai elaborates on the materiality and abstraction of things to figure out how these two processes relate to one another in Indian societies. In three short paragraphs, he argues dialectically that the *profusion* of art draws no sharp line between people and things in such a way that art objects become part of a continuum in the social systems of Indian materiality and the profusion of things in India fails to distinguish art from mundane objects⁴⁰. The veil of *abstraction* in governing the material life of certain societies exists in three dimensions: 1) abstraction = exchange value⁴¹ 2) abstraction is convertibility and no object is truly priceless^{lv} and lastly 3) as the tension that exists between the singular and the commodity. Appadurai makes an example of this using “the great anthropologist”⁴² Marcel Mauss’ theory on ‘the gift economy’ and Karl Marx’s theorisation of ‘commodity exchange’, asserting that “gifts and commodities don’t have an apples-and-oranges relationship. Rather, a gift and a commodity are often one and the same thing”⁴³ ^{lvi}. Appadurai refers to Marcel Mauss as the ‘great anthropologist’ directly in *The Thing Itself* and indirectly

⁴⁰ “And in this regard, India exemplifies the deepest insights of both Marcel Mauss and Karl Marx. In Mauss’s understanding, things in India never lose some of the magic of their human makers, owners, or handlers, and following Marx, both things and humans share the mystery of the commodity and the underlying metric of labor”. (Appadurai 2006:19)

⁴¹ That is to say “no object or thing in this type of society is fully enjoyed for its sheer materiality”

⁴³ Appadurai takes the argument even further suggesting that “it’s hard to think of any substance in the world that is singular — outside the commodity system — forever and ever. In the same way, a commodity can be many things, but it is not a singularity. One thing cannot be a commodity, for once it is a commodity, something is lost about its singularity. The minute you put a thing — be it a piece of clothing or food, a tool, a person anything — on the market, you have to believe there could be others of its kind” (2006: 20).

and on numerous occasions in *The Social Life of Things*. Appadurai reads Marx and Mauss together as a way of joining seemingly divergent and opposite ideas to create a new understanding of the materiality of objects/ things and the processes through which they continually move through and in between gift and commodity economies. He refers to Marx's "fetishism of commodities" as aligning itself with Mauss' argumentative theory against the "powerful contemporary tendency to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indirectly knowable only by persons and words"^{lvii}. The idea of the thing itself is meant to "capture the stubbornness of the materiality of things" however since India's "chaotic materiality" resists instruments of representation, and more importantly stands in strong opposition to abstraction i.e. commodification; there exists an inevitable tension between the "the rule of the commodity" and the "unruliness of the thing" that creates a possible space through and in which Indian art can only be redeemed (by its artists and critics) and where materiality remains the Lord⁴⁴ of abstraction as opposed to its Bondsman^{lviii}.

Appadurai addresses the "boring and incorrigibly mysterious"^{lix} historical study of exchange in a series of essays collected for earlier work published some 20 years prior to *The Thing Itself* (2006). His point of view, articulated prior by George Simmel (1957), Marcel Mauss (1976) and Karl Marx (1971), lies in the conditions under which economic objects circulate within various *regimes of value*. He cites Simmel's main premise that economic exchange creates value which is never inherent but rather a judgement conferred upon an object by the subject. Economic objects in this sense "exist in the space between pure *desire* and immediate enjoyment, with some distance between them and the person who desires them, which is a distance that can be

⁴⁴ 'Materiality as Lord and abstraction as bondsman' is an ode to G.W. Hegel's philosophical relationship between master (Lord) and slave (bondsman) in his dialectic analysis of Independence and Self-Consciousness. *The Philosophy of Spirit* (1807).

overcome” by economic exchange where object value is reciprocally determined^{lx}. Politics, he argues, is the mediating link between exchange and value. Appadurai cites three examples of the relationship between authenticity, taste and the politics of the consumer using: Walter Benjamin (1968) & Jean Baudrillard (1968, 1975, 1981)⁴⁵ theories to explain the aura of authentic work and its loss in the copy; William Reddy’s (1984) case study of France’s textile industry after the Revolution which witnessed the turn of ‘goods’ into ‘products’ and the shift in gaze from the traders and consumers to the producers and finally; Nelson. H. Graburn (1976) who suggested that tourism is a sacred journey and that tourist art represents the perfect example of “diversities in taste, understanding and use between producers and consumers” which creates special commodity traffic where group identity stands as a token for consumerist status politics^{lxi}. Benjamin and Baudrillard’s analyses both appear to fit in the category of what Rancière criticises as a Platonic conceptuality of art purity/classicism based on the reproduction of the singular losing its aura or authenticity. In response to the loss of aura/authenticity the West preserves “the function (of the object) by complicating [its] criteria of authenticity”^{lxii} (as evident in the marketing of coconut water as 'organic', 'pure' and a taste the tropics). Two important points Appadurai makes concerning Benjamin’s essay is that a) mechanical reproduction places consumers in dialogue with the original source^{lxiii} and through Brian Spooner’s case study of oriental rugs⁴⁶, Appadurai uses b) the idea of *distance* as making the acquisition of an object a

⁴⁵ Expanding Benjamin’s (1936; republished 1968) idea of the copy having a long history that does not seek to threaten the aura of the original but merely partake in it. I would go further as to suggest that the copy only seeks to partake in the aura in order to transform it according to and for the use of its own economic schedule. Nevertheless, Baudrillard supports Benjamin’s ideas stating that it was only “until the nineteenth century, the copy of an original work had its own value, it was a legitimate practice. In our own time the copy is illegitimate, inauthentic: it is no longer "art." Similarly, the concept of forgery has changed or rather, it suddenly appears with the advent of modernity” (Baudrillard 1981:103 as cited in Appadurai 1986: 45).

⁴⁶ See Chapter 7 on the international flow of “authentic” in Arjun Appadurai’s essay collection of *The Social Life of Things* (1986).

matter of exclusivity as opposed to authenticity. Appadurai uses distance and reproduction as exemplary links that explain how commodity knowledge is increasingly commoditised through its positionality as educator of modes of production (technical, social, aesthetic) and through its dissemination of appropriate modes of consumption which are both susceptible to mutual and dialectic interaction^{lxiv}. An increase in the travel distance (institutional, spatial, temporal) of the commodity results in the increase of partial, differentiated and often contradictory product Knowledge and such a differentiation, admits Appadurai, may in fact intensify demand.

Appadurai in conjunction with Igor Kopytoff, purport that objects have social lives and life histories which undermine and contradict the contemporary western canon that opposes ‘words’ and ‘things’ as having vitality. To my understanding, this is the same canon or ‘common knowledge shared’ that can be read in the Rancièrian sense as, a distribution of the sensible. However, Appadurai stresses that “problems involving knowledge, information, and ignorance are not restricted to the production and consumption poles in the flow of commodities, but characterize the process of circulation and exchange itself”^{lxv}. Towards the final pages of his introduction Appadurai opines that advertising in capitalist societies is the “best example of the relationship between knowledge and control”. He cites contemporary modes of representation in advertising as sharing a common strategy of making banal ‘products’ seemingly desirable-yet-reachable. I disagree with his interchangeable use of ‘goods’ with products’ when describing the former as existing in a pseudoenclaved zone where social images represent the illusion of exclusivity “*as if* they were not available to anyone who could pay the price”. He further describes this illusion as “the fetishism of the consumer rather than the commodity”, which I suggest is a simultaneous regarding bottled coconut water because not only do “images of sociality focus on the transformation of the consumer” but the commodity being sold (i.e.

coconut water) is *not* an “almost afterthought”^{lxvi} as Appadurai asserts but instead, is etched into the very fabric of social reality that allows for such a transformation to take place. One final challenge to Appadurai’s main premise concerning politics’ (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions and contests pertaining to power) meditation of exchange and value is that it is in fact visible although, he claims the opposite because in the every-day, small-scale exchange of things, “exchange has the routinised look of all customary behaviour”^{lxvii}. I argue that through advertising, the politics of authenticity and authentication; knowledge and ignorance, and demand are in fact visible in the banal practices and process of producing and consuming bottled coconut water. The idea of the coconut and coconut water moving in and out of commodity/gift status from spiritual ritual to advertising is what I will explore in the following sections beginning with the former.

Using the institution of slavery and slaves as an ontological launching point from which to understand the commoditisation and re-commoditisation of property/ things, Igor Kopytoff’s essay on *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as a Process* discusses the biography of things as being in a continual process of cultural transformation. He proposes that the cultural and social relations involved in the biography of a car in Africa is an “entirely different biography” than that of a “middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car”^{lxviii}. His use of an essentialist universalism is questionable and he does little to discern important semantics: is it a ‘car in Africa’ or ‘an African car’ like it is ‘a French peasant car’? Apart from that, Kopytoff makes an important point concerning objects which continuously move from singularisation to commoditisation (and vice versa); with “new exchange technologies” driving the latter and culture “which ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular”^{lxix} driving the former. Kopytoff’s argument is similar to Benjamin’s (1936) idea of ‘mechanical

reproduction’, but reads as “new technology advances” to suggest that the technology of exchange drives the process of commoditisation in large-scale, monetized societies but fails to commoditise the singular in small-scale un-commoditised societies that lack such advances^{lxx}. Furthermore, in the same tradition that people have “numerous but often conflicting” social identities, so does the biography of a thing⁴⁷ as it moves in and out of its own status and meaning(s) in the moral economies of in various societies. Considering this, coconut water manoeuvres in and out of commoditisation and singularisation through its *aura*. Coconut water carries a certain aura, later understood as a spiritual consciousness, that permeates the peripheries of objectivity and subjectivity, commoditisation and singularisation, advertising and ritual. The following draws our attention to the workings of advertising and ritual.

If by way of Appadurai, an increase in travel distance increases knowledge differentiation and results in increased demand then surely the further the distance, the greater a product’s demand. According to Jerry Kirkpatrick, advertising creates product differentiation (leading to brand loyalty)^{lxxi} which increases demand thus, advertising increases demand. Through *modus podens* we can presuppose that distance whether temporal, spatial or institutional, leads to demand and advertising increases it. Several chapters use scare quotes like “Subliminal” Advertising Allegedly Deceives and Manipulates’ and emotive marketing gimmicks like ‘Freud, Puffery, and the Federal Trade Commission’, to criticize advertising’s deceptive, manipulative and coercive powers. Using lengthy and defensive arguments Kikpatrick asserts that advertising is [just] salesmanship not art nor entertainment. His book victimises advertising and attempts to

⁴⁷ “In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context. As with persons, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and of identity” (Kopytoff as cited in Appadurai, 1986: 90)

illustrate that advertising is in fact a productive, moral, rational and benevolent institution of laissez-faire capitalism, moreover it is a conduit through which to seek *the good life*. Secondly, he dismisses the premise of advertising's philosophic and economic criticisms as nothing more than the doctrines of political elitism i.e. "the twentieth-century version of noblesse oblige". In four lines he refutes philology's equivalence of advertising to art, dismissing it as firstly, a philosophic doctrine that through using a mind/body dichotomy, "motivates critics to evaluate advertising as art"^{lxxii} and secondly, as the manifestation of pure envy of another's achievements⁴⁸. In this way, advertising is, at least for Kirkpatrick, what Benjamin referred to as *l'art pour l'art*.

In one swoop to redeem advertising's reputation in the humanities, Kirkpatrick asserts that an assault on advertising is an assault on human consciousness (reason)⁴⁹ to advertently push advertising's implicit agenda which aims to socially and materially transform, individualise, and particularise collective experience in the community. Capitalism, a "life-giving institution"^{lxxiii}, leads to economic progress and advertising ushers us towards reaping the fruits of our own labour. Advertising then, in Kirkpatrick's analysis, is the "beacon of the free society"^{lxxiv} but this free society often only includes those who are privileged enough seek let alone have access to the 'good life'. Two subsequent texts merge the institution of advertising with the realm of religion

⁴⁸ "Unfortunately, this is precisely why the critics hate advertising; namely, that it is how millions of self-interested individuals become aware of the self-interested, productive achievements of millions of other individuals" (Kirkpatrick, 1994: 186).

⁴⁹ Kirkpatrick mentions 3 attacks on advertising that constitute an attack on consciousness: 1) "attack attributes to advertising the coercive power to force consumers to buy products they do not need or want" 2) it "derides advertising for how offensive it allegedly is; ultimately, critics advocate regulation to control the allegedly offensive advertising" and 3) "contemporary economics, (that) views advertising as a tool of monopoly power." (Kirkpatrick, 1994: 23)

and expand Kirkpatrick's assertion that "if selfishness is the original sin of man, according to Judeo-Christian ethics, then surely advertising is the original sin of capitalism"⁵⁰.

Ideas concerning knowledge, authenticity, desire and value which we explored above are also well articulated in the body of critical theory that focuses on advertising and religion. In *Capitalism as Religion* (1921) Walter Benjamin briefly spreads the grasp of capitalism into the arena of religion suggesting that the ascendancy of capitalism is a system of conviction and ritual. Expanding on Sut Jhally's main argument in *Advertising as Religion* which suggests that in late capitalist societies advertising functions as a fetish religion^{lxxv}, Tracia Sheffield argues that advertising has a religious dimension which cuts across the theology of "materiality, representation, meaning-production, value, and the ritualized everyday"^{lxxvi}. Returning to Engelbrecht's (now a demented leper) account of the coconut's many uses in the opening introduction, it centres itself in the *spiritualisation* of an object. He describes the coconut as a mediator of inherent knowledge ("*After having adjudged all other foodstuffs unclean by process of elimination*"), authenticity ("*unique in desire*"), desire ("*No other possibility existed*") and value ("*Whosoever subsisted solely on it would become godly, would become immortal*").

According to Sheffield who superimposes her main argument on Emile Durkheim's^{lxxvii} meditation that religion is a social construct⁵¹, goes against Jhally's suggestion that advertising is a religion through asserting that advertising is a cultural force with religious dimensions that

⁵⁰ Kirkpatrick (1994:23) "...More accurately, advertising is the serpent that encourages man to pursue selfish gain and, in subtler form, to disobey authority. In contemporary economics, pure and perfect competition is the Garden of Eden in which the lion lies down beside the lamb and this "dirty, filthy" advertising is entirely absent—because consumers allegedly have perfect information. Small wonder that advertising does not have a good press."

⁵¹ "Religion is an eminently social thing. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of these groups."

encompass various dynamics. She names three such dimensions: 1) the ‘divine’ mediator of knowledge, aspiration, desire, consumption community 2) aura of sacramentality⁵² i.e. transubstantiation that transforms an object from product to a symbol illustrating the manner of participation in consumerist culture 3) ultimate concern which is communicated to us via advertising’s “divine mediation about the culture of the consumer”^{lxxviii}. Advertising uses these dimensions as real-time cultural institutions that disseminate and reflect the social productions of desire^{lxxix}. Sheffield makes a secondary argument pertaining to the space created by disruptive performative identities⁵³ upon which identity and subjectivity are constructed. Using critical Marxism, feminist theory in ecological economics, and materialism in sustainability, Sheffield proposes a succinct counter-narrative to unmasking the fiction of identities as constructed, and the ideology that “desires became needs and were coded as “God-given” (in industrial societies). This theorisation destabilises “advertising’s idea of bodies and seeks to create performative identities that valorize all industrial experience”^{lxxx}.

In contrast to Kirkpatrick’s attempt to philosophically redeem advertising from the pit of critical theory’s condemnation, Sheffield uses religion as merely one dimension of advertising where ‘totems’ (using Durkheim’s sociological description) use imagery (or *representation* to cite Ranciere) to transcend and (re-)create itself through collective, community interpretation and

⁵² “Advertising imbues an object with an aura of sacramentality by creating such an image in the actual advertisement ... Advertising mediates the image of the object to the individual, and then he or she has the ability to become a part of a “consumption community” marked by that object. The community then forms a clan (the Rolex clan) linked through the totem and the image given to it by the advertisement. The advertisement mediates the image to the clan, which gives advertising cultural power through its [the clan’s] collective understanding of the image. Advertising, then, as a “divine” mediator, is dependent upon the reflective and participatory nature of the collective. Through this relationship, one may discern that advertising creates culture and is also a part of culture” (Sheffield, 2006:2.)

⁵³ By this she means “disruptive performative identities that destabilize the entrenched identity binaries—male/female, black/white, rich/poor, gay/straight—which the culture of consumer capitalism maintains through the religious dimensions of advertising. Through specular discourse and female embodied materialism, disruptive performative identities become a location from which to construct an identity of subjectivity” (Sheffield, 2006: 9).

representation thereby making it (the totem/ object of desire) sacred. It is in this way that advertising cannot simply be considered as the *lassaize-faire* tool of capitalism or as a classic example of *l'art pour l'art* primarily because its imagery is profoundly entrenched in negotiations between performance, identity, materiality, meaning-production, value and mundane ritual. Sheffield suggests two important standpoints: firstly and in accordance with Jhally, Sheffield agrees that advertising empties the original meaning of objects “through the social transformation and mystification of exchange value”^{lxxxix}. Adorno & Horkheimer pose similar arguments to Sheffield on the loss of meaning in objects, suggesting that language and object alike “can only be a sign without meaning”^{lxxxii}. This point although, harmonising with Benjamin’s suggestion that the object once reproduced loses its aura, it stands in opposition to Ranciere’s assertion that through aesthetics and representation politics become visible.

Although she purports that “religious dimensions of advertising affect our cultural identity and influence our understanding of what being religious means in cultural consumer capitalism”^{lxxxiii}, Sheffield does not consider that our cultural identity not only shapes these religious dimensions but reinforces them in the production of a certain class of consumerist culture. A classic example of this is noticed in current trends in the organic health foods and *Superfood* industry where goods like goji berries, by-products of coconut and honey carry with them an aura of spirituality and an aesthetic of cultural identity as they travel from their country of production along the commodity chain and transform into products and representative regimes which manifest consumerist desires for and values of the ‘good, clean, and healthy’ life. The cultural identity and geo-temporal distance become the prerequisites that determine commodity flows and ultimately, monetary value. Because we live in a contemporary capitalist society, it is not only authenticity that ascertains price value but price itself determines and implies the authenticity of a product.

Before we move onto discussing the aura of commodities and objects, let us briefly consider the culture industry in relationship with advertising. Theodore Adorno & Max Horkheimer's essay on the *Culture Industry* put forward three disputes: the technological rationale is the same as the rationale of domination via power over society⁵⁴; advertising is culture's elixir of life therefore they merge technically and economically and lastly; the notion of the individual is an illusion because the culture industry (entertainment business) standardises the means of production. Their viewpoints potentially favour and resemble Benjamin's positionality on reproduction and l'art pour l'art which Adorno & Horkheimer read as "advertising for its own sake; a representation of social power"^{lxxxiv}.

Iulia Grad in *Religion, Advertising and the Production of Meaning* refutes Adorno & Horkheimer's position whilst preserving Sheffield's main premise in arguing that, advertising is an important force that creates symbolic meaning, structures, systems within the culture industry through religious advertising. She furthers Adorno & Horkheimer's premise whilst reiterating that mass media is a key social construct of reality and media culture is simply "a manifestation of sacredness via a weak transcendence"^{lxxxv} She uses Clifford Geertz's distinctions of religion and culture alongside Sandu Frunzã's definition of 'a symbolic conscience of the world' wherein there exists "a kind of transcendence inherent in the majority of symbolic constructions achieved by the human being" which belongs to the human condition itself. An important argument in her

⁵⁴ "No mention is made of the fact that the basis upon which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself. Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together until their leveling element shows its strength in the very wrong which it furthered. It has made the technology of the culture industry no more than the achievement of standardization and mass production, sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system. This is the result not of a law of movement in technology as such but of its function in today's economy. The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness. The step from the telephone to the radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former still allowed the subscriber to play the role of subject, and was liberal" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1994: 1).

essay regards symbolic structures as reintegrated into contemporary culture through advertising. This statement is in line with this research report which regards the fact that advertising in capitalist societies feeds our own cultural knowledge back to us through new, partial, differentiated and perhaps contradictory systems of knowledge and knowing which influence our desire to buy into the 'good life'. Although not nearly as melodramatic as Kirkpatrick but sharing similar ideas about advertising as the intelligible conduit through which consumers seek the 'good life', Grad presupposes that the imperialist tendency to "remove religion from its phenomena and reproduce its structure outside of its beliefs and classic oppositions of religion-science or the Cartesian dualism of world structure"^{lxxxvi} seeks only to, according to Twitchell, "add religious value unto objects to give it the properties of living gods which then emphasises the product's religious dimension"^{lxxxvii}. In layman's terms, an object undergoes a spiritualisation transforming it into a consumer product/commodity where it acquires meaning. Like art and religion, advertising creates meaning⁵⁵ that transgresses the geo-temporal divide through 'advertising messianism'⁵⁶ which allows advertising archetypes such as air, water, fire and earth to influence collective consumption.

Instead of victimising advertising like Kirkpatrick, Adorno & Horkheimer appeal to the damsel-in-distress principle inherent in the consumer who "becomes the ideology of the pleasure industry, whose institutions he cannot escape" and it is because of this that they believe no object has use value for it is "valuable only to the extent that it can be exchanged"^{lxxxviii}. The idea that

⁵⁵ See Judith Williamson (1978) *Decoding Advertisements* on the relationship between advertising, meaning and signification.

⁵⁶ A term coined by Vasile Dâncu who notices that "the tendency of advertising is to represent a transgression of space, participation to the cosmic, to the Great whole which exists inside us and around us. Thus advertising tries to refine this perspective by reviewing the finiteness of the object through the celestial infinity, and the pragmatic banality through the cosmic mystery" (Dâncu as cited in Grad 2004: 145).

an object lacks inherent use value is challenged briefly through Harry Garuba's concept of an *animist materiality* which frames the subsequent theme of this review.

The Aura of Ritual

However inevitable one dare not discuss religion without addressing the theories of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) on the origin of religion. For pure historical significance, this section anticipates a Freudian response to collective and individual ritual together with Durkheim's explanation of the sacred/profane to help our understanding of Geertz's definition of religion and how that ties in with the idea of a 'New Age Spiritualism'. This section touches on Harry Garuba's 'animist materialist' alongside Jane Bennet's conceptualisation of 'vibrant matter' in tandem with Tsing's urge for contemporary critical thinkers to start thinking about multi-natural assemblages.

Using psychoanalysis Freud deduced that an unconscious force, outside of our awareness and consciousness, is the primary driver of all human behaviour. This force produces rational and irrational cognitive content which affect behaviour and contribute to humans developing impulses like religion which he contends is merely a product of individual neurosis caused by repressed emotions/ feelings/ thoughts. Noticing collective ritual behaviour as exhibiting the presence of similar irrational behaviour in his neurotic patients, Freud argued that these two psychoanalytic manifestations of "neurotic symptoms and cultural beliefs" were analogous in such a way that cultural behaviours were merely symptoms of a mentally ill person. Moreover "collective acts of repression led to the collective patterns of thought and behaviour known as religion"^{lxxxix}. Karl Marx fully agreed with Freud's reductionist viewpoint of religion as illusion insofar as believing that it was merely a tool of the dominant social order^{xc}. Although Durkheim

agrees with one half of Freud's theory that religion is a collective pattern of thought and behaviour, Durkheim splits with him on the individualistic perspective asserting that religion is a "social construction by which people constitute themselves into a moral community"⁵⁷. In the dense discussion of the relationship between totemic religion and sociology presented in Emile Durkheim's (1858-1917) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (translated, with introduction by Karen E. Fields, 1995), a few key concepts will be mentioned to facilitate the discussion about aura, ritual and spirituality.

Using Australian aborigines as representing the most basic form of elementary religion in cultural societies Durkheim's book, published five years before his death, did two things: established religion as a social construct that created social cohesion and not as something divinely supernatural and secondly; identified commonalities that exist across various religious beliefs which distinguish aspects of life, behaviour and physical/material things as belonging to either the *sacred* or *profane*. Religion was about separating those categories from each other to achieve social solidarity in the moral community. He referred to the sacred (social) as collective representations which transcend the monotony of mundane life whereas its opposite, the profane (individual) was preoccupied with precisely that; jobs, debt, money etc. The sacred and profane are interdependent for the survival of the social unit, in other words we cannot have one without knowing/ experiencing the other⁵⁸. The interests of the collective such as ritual behaviour not

⁵⁷ "Religion ceases to be an inexplicable hallucination of some sort and gains a foothold in reality. Indeed, we can say that the faithful are not mistaken when they believe in the existence of a moral power to which they are subject and from which they receive what is best in themselves. That power exists and it is society . . . That exaltation is real and really is the product of forces outside of and superior to the individual" (Durkheim, 1995: 226-227).

⁵⁸ "The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity. To be sure, this prohibition cannot go so far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible, for if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would be of no use" (Durkheim, 1995: 38).

only reaffirm the meaning of the sacred but are in fact embodied in totems. For Durkheim totems did not just represent a name, heirloom or a representation of clan/ community organisation but in addition, totems are a religious medium through which “things are classified as sacred and profane”^{xcii}.

One key argument from Durkheimian totemism is that it destabilises theories concerning animism and naturalism by arguing that it is the image of the totem, not the object that transcends itself and gains collective interpretation and representation. Fully aware of British anthropologists like Jack Goody who challenged and criticised the Eurocentric universality of Durkheim’s dichotomy as inapplicable to alternate cultures and religions who lack definitive meanings for sacred/ profane^{xciii}, Sheffield maintains (although claiming not to correlate her ideas to Durkheim’s) that in order to understand contemporary advertising and ‘religious beliefs’, totemism must be considered as “a body of ideas with explanatory possibilities”^{xciv}. Therefore, advertising’s power lies in its ability to target individual desires via commodity-totems and maintains the communal value of these objects^{xcv}.

As opposed to a social construct, for Clifford Geertz, religion is a cultural system classically defined as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic^{xcvi}.

Religion ultimately attempts to answer the meaning and ultimate purpose of life, occupying a “special status as a cultural system”^{xcvii}. Geertz claims that most contemporary work on the anthropological study of religion neglects the first operation of religious dimensions i.e. to

analyse the system of meaning within symbols. This paper, in seeking to open dialogue on a relatively un-investigated dimension of the aura of commodities provides an analytic account concerning “the notion that religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience”^{xcviii}. On the topic of symbols and objects, sacred symbols harness their power from identifying fact with value therefore they’re able to “synthesize a people’s ethos”^{xcix} and further persuade us into believing that there exists a direct link between our worldview (how the world is) and our ethos (how we ought to live). Geertz, in the same breath as Durkheim, also cautions us to be wary not to conflate symbols with objects and humans because the latter “are not in themselves symbols, however often they may function as such”^{60c}.

In a 1997 public lecture on the *Religion in the Media Age*, Colorado University Professor Stewart Hoover in his rejection of Cartesian Dualism and considering Durkheim’s theory mentioned that modes of religious behaviour have moved out of the institutions and into the symbolic marketplace in such a way that religion now exists in the media space. In other words, the sacred has manoeuvred itself into the realm of the profane where, in a relation to Geertz’s notion of worldview and ethos, current ideas around meaning are “achieved through acquisition and appropriation of symbols into a sense of the self”^{ci} to such a degree that this new religiosity

⁵⁹ In his use of ethos Geertz alerts us to “the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood - and their world view- the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. In religious belief and practice a group’s ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes, while the world view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life.” (Geertz, 1973: 89-90).

⁶⁰ He supports this claim asserting that, “No matter how deeply interfused the cultural, the social, and the psychological may be in the everyday life of houses, farms, poems, and marriages, it is useful to distinguish them in analysis, and, so doing; to isolate the generic traits of each against the normalized background of the other two” (Geertz, 1973: 92).

is no longer about belonging but ‘doing’. This so-called ‘transitional religion’ is about “the body and experience, about objects and about rituals, both traditional--but also to a greater extent--invented”^{cii} and it converges with media at the node of meaning where “boundaries between the "religious" and the "media"”^{ciii} begin to break down and the secular is sacred and the sacred is secular in the media age.

A profound example of the secular becoming sacred and the sacred secular is particularly characteristic of the ‘New Age Movement/Spiritualism’ defined by Bron Taylor as “an amorphous association of people who identify primarily as spiritual explorers ... seekers after what they believe to be truth and peace” who partake in a “religion of commodification”^{civ}. Attending a Mind-Body-Spirit festival in 2006, Anglican Chaplain to the Manchester Higher Education Community Terry Biddington observed that spirituality was about *lifestyle* with a strong emphasis on personal healing whereby consumers “value embodied need and experience, rather than intellectually formulated belief based largely on revelation alone”^{cv}. Biddington’s key argument was that religious institutions do not and have never offered to “nurture personal empowerment”⁶¹ which consumers in the new media age seek. The use of tarot card readings, charged crystals, DOOM to repel evil spirits, rat poison to test the might of God and one’s faith⁶², Chinese acupuncture, Bhakthi yoga, and Superfoods have become New Age motivations for spiritual actualisation and enlightenment. This new spiritualism takes into account a way of

⁶¹ Biddington adds that, “those who have given up, or who are giving up, on the Churches often do so because their experience has not been about nurture or flourishing, but rather about maintenance” (2007:122). In a time of techno-cultural advancement there exists a need to stay current with shifting trends in order to realise the *True Self* (reference to Hegel)

⁶² Prophet Lethebo Rabalago was photographed using Doom (insecticide) as a miracle cure for his congregants. After the pictures went viral a few later another prophet (www.sundayworld.co.za/2016/11/21), Rufus Phala of Limpopo made his members drink Dettol (disinfectant) claiming that he was instructed by God (www.ewn.co.za/2016/12/09). More recently (early February) Christian pastor Light Monyeke advised his members to drink rat poison ‘to show their faith’ (www.dailymail.co.uk/article-4211320).

thinking about one's existence (and impact) within the world and its natural order. We have entered the dawn of an age where it has become crucial to consider the relations that exist between human and non-human things and the capacity of the latter to act collaboratively in ensuring the survival of the former. These activities all form part of our daily rituals which we enact in search of something more than our physiological, material experiences and realities.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* Jane Bennet brings to light the material agency of non-human things which she dubs as having a *vital materiality*. Her philosophical project breaks with “the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute or inert” and uses Ranciere’s ‘partition of the sensible’⁶³ to describe modernity’s dichotomous grouping of matter (it, things) and vibrancy (us, beings)^{cv}. By things or objects having vitality/vibrancy Bennet implies that “the capacity of things - edibles, commodities, storms, metals - not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own”. Borrowing from Bruno Latour she uses the term ‘actant’ or sources of action that human and non-humans can do things, produce effects and “have sufficient coherence to make a difference and alter the course of events”^{cvii}. She links the ideology of animism to capitalist flows of commodities to encourage the reader to think more vibrantly about matter to create “more ecological and materially sustainable modes of production and consumption”^{cviii}. Regarding edible matter as embracing material agency she asserts that food acts inside and outside of our bodies, further describing it as “conative bodies vying

⁶³ Without implicitly alerting us to it when Adorno speaks of ‘thing-power’/ preponderance of the object, he refers to Ranciere’s distribution as the “bourgeois I” when he says; “Preponderance of the object is a thought of which any pretentious philosophy will be suspicious [Such] protestations . . . seek to drown out the festering suspicion that heteronomy might be mightier than the autonomy of which Kant . . . taught Such philosophical subjectivism is the ideological accompaniment of the . . . bourgeois I” (Adorno, 1973: 189).

alongside and within another complex body (a person's "own" body)"^{cxix}. These foods have the potential to influence our moods, dispositions, and decisions.

In the same way that humans have language, morality and intention so too does edible matter, according to Bennet who compares the network of non-/human relations in 'American consumption'^{cx} to obesity. Although she uses Darwin's worms study to conceptualise the contribution of their "life histories" to human history and culture; Adorno's acknowledgement of human experiences that encounter an "active, forceful and (quasi)independent ""out-side"^{cxii}; and Thoreau's ideology about eating as a series of mutual transformations^{cxiii}, Bennet mentions what we already know: food's gastronomic processes have a significant impact on our behaviour. However, Bennet does little to engage her readers on the vital phenomenology of food items. She uses theorists who have: downplayed spirituality/spiritualism; ostracised animism to the pits of backward civilisations; argued that objects have no use value⁶⁴. Following Freudian/Darwinian reductionist approaches these theorists have also asserted that religions were at "their most fundamental, systems of cruelty; a shield with which to protect oneself from the debilitating fear and anxiety of mortality, insignificance and confusion"⁶⁵. One vital error in Bennet's analysis is that it discusses key principles of animism without engaging the theory of animism itself.

*"Things have a life of their own," the gypsy proclaimed with a harsh accent. "It's simply a matter of waking up their souls."*⁶⁶

Harry Garuba in *Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society* (2003) took inspiration from Raymond Williams' concept of *cultural materialism* and merged it with Frederic Jameson's idea of the *political unconscious* to

⁶⁴ Theodore Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1994: 20), *The Culture Industry*.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals 1*. 2006: 24, 79 (Keith Ansell-Pearson ed.)

⁶⁶ This excerpt appears in García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* about the gypsy artist Melquiades who went to Macondo to perform "magical" feats with two "magnetized ingots" As cited in Garuba: 2003:271-272)

explain what he believed to be the reification of abstract African thought into the domain of the physical world i.e. *animist materialism*. Garuba describes this process of reification as a ‘continual re-enchantment’ - animist thought that spiritualises the object world⁶⁷ in the aim of ‘re-traditionalising Africa’⁶⁸. Nigerian writer and activist Wole Soyinka alluded to Garuba’s idea of a continual re-enchantment as a manifestation of religious doctrine and also “an attitude of philosophical accommodation” emerging from “the code on which this world-view is based”^{cxiii}. In his later works *On Animism, Modernity Colonialism*, and *The African Order of Knowledge: Provisional Reflections*, Garuba’s postcolonial mediations considered animism and animist thought as the “spectral Other” that exists outside of materialist readings of modernity and which “simultaneously constitutes and haunts the modern”^{cxiv}. It is important to note here that animist materialism was not only about religious piety but also socio-cultural meaning(s) that broke away from religious practice. Carefully analysing Soyinka’s plays on the mythological Ogun God of Iron and War, and the poetry of Marxist socialist Niyi Osundare among other Global South writers on magical & animist realism⁶⁹; Garuba draws guidance from predominantly African, Indian and Latin American writers like Ben Okri, Dipesh Chakrabarty and García Márquez, to suggest that animist thought is characteristic of material and economic activities which reproduce themselves in culture and social life. This thought also acts as a driving force of collective subjectivity wherein the animist unconscious emerges to “structure being and consciousness in predominantly animist societies and cultures”^{cxv}. For Garuba then, the basic creed of animist belief concerns two tenets: things possess a life of their own and secondly,

⁶⁷ Garuba, 2012: 7

⁶⁸ Garuba 2003: 264

⁶⁹ According to Brenda Cooper, “African writers very often adhere to this animism, incorporate spirits, ancestors and talking animals, in stories, both adapted folktales and newly invented yarns, in order to express their passions, their aesthetics and their politics” (Brenda Cooper, as cited in Garuba 2003: 272).

“when their souls are awakened their breath is freed and may migrate into other objects”^{cxvi}. He expands Soyinka’s description of animist spirituality as a non-doctrinaire constant awareness, further adding that it is “imprinted with an irreducible sociality and historicity”^{cxvii}. Although evidence of the “pre-modern within the sphere of modern capitalist modes of production”^{cxviii} is not the primary intention of Garuba’s essay, it formulates a large part of this research report’s argument that considers the pre-modern as the point of departure for capitalist production and consumption of popular and trendy health foods.

There is an uncanny familiarity with the idea that the social world undergoes a continual re-enchantment through the pervasiveness of an animist unconscious that peeks through the corners of Bennet’s ‘vibrant matter’. An animist world-view in the social world of human interaction mediates meaning as the currency of social exchange which seeks to serve the elite few. A similar analogy is found in the recently published *The Mushroom at the End of the World* where Matsutake mushrooms set centre stage for global multispecies encounters. Without directly calling it animism there exists a dimension to Matsutake that, through human disturbances like Hiroshima, permeates and mediates economic and politic activity between Lao & Cambodian foragers/ producers and Japanese consumers. Afforded similar qualities as humans like that of language⁷⁰, agency and vibrancy, Anna Louwenhaupt Tsing’s sensuous account of these unique mushrooms embodies an animist unconscious that weaves in an out of capitalist flows. Matsutake reclaims the Marxian idea of commodities having a mystical character^{cxix} and

⁷⁰ For Durkheim and Max Muller, language forms part of the outward clothing of thought in as much as thought’s internal skeleton. In relation to the physical world Durkheim purports, “thus upon the physical world, as it is revealed to or senses, language superimposed a new world, a world comprising only spiritual beings that it had created out of nothing and that were from then on regarded as determining the causes of physical phenomena” (Durkheim, 1995: 75).

Tsing critiques the political & ecological economy of mushrooms through a material and mystical observatory lens.

Tsing, using Bennet's *assemblages*, illustrates the relationship between multispecies worlds with open-ended networks which; "allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them" and "show us potential histories in the making"^{cxx}. Even in capitalist ruins where landscapes are the products of unintentional denial and intentional destruction exist and even thrive - the creatures that inhabit such landscapes are to be, according to Bennet and Tsing, treated as non-inert, knowing objects. Thus, in a non-anthropocentric way, Tsing advises that we appeal to a "new anthropology of always-in-process collaboration"^{cxxi} towards understanding economic & political ecology as multi-natural and multi-cultural forms of collaborative existence and survival. Tsing's theory of assemblages differs from Bennet's because it considers mobile things/objects as exchanging with other assets, as opposed to using these objects as part of a life world. Tsing asserts, it is through alienation that "people and things become mobile assets: they can be removed from their life worlds in distance -defying transport to be exchanged with other assets from other life worlds, elsewhere ... The timber has been cut; the oil has run out; the plantation soil no longer supports crops. The search for assets resumes elsewhere. Thus, simplification for alienation produces ruins, spaces of abandonment for asset production. Global landscapes today are strewn with this kind of ruin ... abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life. In a global state of precarity, we don't have choices other than looking for life in this ruin".^{cxxii}

Tsing's expression of multi-naturalism leans close to the phenomenon of Naturism (as concerned with the 'great civilisation of Europe and Asia'^{cxxiii}) which Durkheim contends religious thought

emerged from the reflections of man's "interest in knowing the world around him"^{cxxiv}. He dismisses Max Müller's exposition of Naturism stating that it does not explain the division of things as sacred/profane and secondly; if religion is an expression of natural forces⁷¹ then it could not have survived the test of time. On the other end of the spectrum Animism - a culmination of anthropological work on the "crudest (religions) that humanity has practised"^{cxxv} - like Naturism, is renounced to the hallucinatory theatrics of religion. Durkheim holds that Tylor and Spencer were the pioneers of Animist theory that proposed a transformation of the soul from animating the human body to becoming a spirit - good or evil but, because the primitive societies these theorists studied had the cognitive capacity of children as they were "inclined to endow things, even inanimate things, with a nature similar to his own"^{72,cxxvi}. Animism thus followed three theses: (1) genesis of the idea of soul; (2) formation of the idea of spirit; (3) transformation of the cult of spirits into the cult of nature^{cxxvii}. Durkheim goes against these theses using three critiques: firstly that dreams do not account for the idea of soul^{cxxviii}; secondly, death fails to explain soul-spirit transformation^{cxxix} and thirdly; there are obvious differences between the soul and the spirit of nature wherein religious anthropomorphism is not a primitive origin^{cxix}. For Durkheim then totemism became the exception to the rule because it appeared to be the simplest, most elementary form of religious life whose fundamental category of thought has its origin in religion and consequentially in society. The objective here is not to refute the arguments set forth by Durkheim primarily because they emerged from an epoch of Enlightenment that posited Judeo-Christianity at the apex of human evolutionary thought and consciousness. For the purposes of a

⁷¹ In expressing that religion manifests experiential realities, Müller adds, "To hold its proper as a legitimate element of our consciousness, religion must begin, as does all our knowledge, with sense experience" (Müller, *Natural Religion*, as cited in Durkheim 1995: 70).

⁷² He goes on, "... once he (primitive man) has arrived at the idea that man is a body that spirit animates, then he must of necessity impute to natural bodies that same sort of duality; plus souls like his own" (Durkheim 1995: 50)

literary scope, Durkheim's hypothesis has been included to mention, ever so briefly, the limitations and restrictions of historical accounts that consider animist theory as primitive.

METHODOLOGY

Aims/ Objectives

The preliminary aim of this project aimed to investigate the cultural and material markers that determine consumerist behaviour and choices towards the preferred brand and packaging of coconut water. I had intended to analyse the commodity flow of coconuts in Mauritius' sole commercial coconut processing company Coco Up which primarily produces coconut water and coconut sorbet for export and national retail. The main focal point would have been in tracing the social life of coconut water from palm tree to Tetra pak, from production to consumption. However, given that I was denied access and entry into Coco Up by the managers upon my arrival in Mauritius, my objectives became focused on the influence of Hindu spirituality in the advertising and aesthetics images of international branded bottled coconut water. I wanted to know where the idea of advertising bottled coconut water as "pure" and "divine" came from and what that meant for local and global consumers of beverages such as Zico and Vita Coco. Another aim of this research was to investigate what coconut palm trees symbolised for Indo-Mauritians and whether they were capitalised on the trees that grew in their backyards.

Research Method

To do this I conducted semi-structured interviews with two families at two separate family events and rituals. There were 20 Indo-Mauritian research participants interviewed, 10 from each family whose ages ranged from 21-32 and 32-50. The first family interviewed was my host family who are based in Quartre-Borne and the other is based in Curepipe - both towns have a significant Indian population. Participant observation was the key methodology used at family rituals and gatherings and this was where most of the data was extracted. Semi-structured interviews with two plantation workers in Savanne were conducted to assess the economic and material value of coconut palm trees. Unstructured open-ended interviews were also conducted with merchants of fresh coconuts in Moka and Flic-en-Flac markets. Two structured interviews with the President and the Deputy President from FAREI (Food and Agricultural Research Extension Institute) were conducted and there was also an informal interview with President's assistant. One structured interview with the General Manager of the OI DC (Outer Island Development Corporation) was conducted but due to confidential and sensitive government information I was not permitted to record the conversation nor use my own pen to script the interview. I also interviewed one fruit vendor informally as well as an Australian couple were on holiday. One life history with the patron of my host family was conducted and there were numerous informal conversations with waitrons, informal traders, hotel managers, fishermen, and gym members. In Johannesburg, I interviewed one informal coconut vendor on the streets of Newtown and one formal trader at the upmarket 'Neighbourgoods' in Braamfontein. There was also a semi-structured interview with two brand promoters of Vita Coco from HDI Youth Marketers in downtown Cape Town.

My position in this ethnographic project was one of researcher and I made this known throughout every engagement I had with the research participants. Thus, the methods I used participant observation and observation techniques, IDI's (in-depth interviews), structured, semi-structured and informal interviews, and life histories. For the semiotic analysis, I looked at 12 various international and Mauritian coconut water beverages, noting the use of imagery, colour, slogan, short bio's, RDA (recommended daily allowance) and source country. I contacted companies like Coco Up, Zico and Vita Coco for a response/ comment to no avail.

Project Timeline

The timeline for the first phase of this Master's project spanned from February 2016 and was completed in February 2017. This project aims to follow-through until PhD level where it would hopefully have gained enough traction to contribute engaging in a global discussion around aesthetics and aura as used in the advertising of FMCG products like coconut water and oil.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

With regards to ethical considerations, participants were given a participant information sheet stating that they had been invited to participate in the research study. It explicitly mentioned the voluntary nature of the study in question, their involvement and any benefits/ risks they might encounter such as probing into their consumer behaviour or sacrificing their labour/ leisure time to participate. The information sheet explicitly mentioned that the research study was 100% voluntary and unpaid and that they had the right to retain confidentiality and anonymity or pull-out at any time throughout the study. Chosen participants were thereafter

given an informed consent form requesting their permission to be involved and have any audio-visual data of them used in the final edits. This study is strictly anonymous unless stated otherwise for purposes of presenting empirical evidence, and the well-being and safety of the participants remains a high-level priority. Pseudonyms marked by an asterisk (*) have been used to protect the confidentiality of family members. This study promises to maintain the dignity, respect and civil rights of all participants who were involved and upholds the ethical practices of the researcher in question.

Chapter One

*“Blood always blood,
Stranger remain stranger”*

We stood on the balcony that overlooked a vacant and wildly overgrown plot opposite the house whispering and sharing family secrets. I would never have taken *Neela for a smoker and yet, here we stood something past midnight gazing past the stars, ribbons of smoke cutting through the midnight air. A still night, without a breath of wind no shiver of cold. She put out the last cigarette and we both felt a little sad, wishing we had a few more so our conversation wouldn't end.

--Wait, I think Privan has some cigarettes somewhere. Are you hungry?

I was quite hungry and the taste of mother's chicken egg Chow Mein still lingered - lingered on my mind and tongue. Neela offered to serve me a plate.

-- Just a little bit please Neela, not too much okay? Just a little please. No need to warm it.

I knew that father and Vindash wake early and eat leftovers from the night before for breakfast so I really didn't want to eat too much seeing as though I was already a guest in their home and

had no desire to leave behind a bad impression on my last night at their place. I asked her not to warm it up - I dreaded the thought of waking the dormant with the sounds of my greedy.

*beep*beep*beep*

Cringing.

But to my surprise and quite honestly my pleasure, Neela brought out two plates with strands of noodles free falling from the edge of the plate - a 'special occasion' black plate had been brought out just for me. Zig-zagging back towards me, I remembered she had helped herself to quite a fair share of the sweet strawberry punch I had made earlier. I brought out two Castle Lagers I'd been hoarding in the cupboard after finding them at Cascavelle Mall with utmost excitement three weeks prior. She arranged the food on the balcony table where we sat and conversed about everything. Either the conversation was much needed or we were just really hungry after drinking but Neela went back downstairs and served us a second plate. After a second mouthful of Chinese egg noodles Neela confessed what sounded like it had been maturing, collecting dust in her heart;

--Is not easy marrying Indian. The woman, she leave her family, her brothers, sisters, mother, father to live wit' husband. I cannot call my mother because Vindash don't allow me a cellphone - even to wish her happy birthday I have to ask for his phone. When I go visit her, I have to visit with Vindash and cannot always sleep over because I'm married now and must sleep home. You enter man's family and become not only wife but daughter, mother, sister. You enter alone, you leave your family and enter stranger family. You can try and try to be good, to be uhm, respectful but is still lonely. At least now I*

have Vally but is not - same ...is not the same. Blood remain blood but stranger, always stranger.*

We cleaned up our plates and drank our beer, yearning to digest with a cancer stick. Neela sent me to look for Privan* who most likely had cigarettes stashed somewhere. Out from the balcony and passing through the corridor of the second floor and that large creepy teddy who surveyed my movements from the corner of Neela's couch, past Sherry whose desires I teased with with my emerald ring, and tiptoeing past the mother's bedroom and into the lounge - still no sign of Privan. It occurred to me that I hadn't checked the upstairs bathroom. The light was on, not odd at all - they always kept the bathroom light on - but the door was slightly open. I knocked three times no one answered, until eventually I opened it and found Privan, pants down, passed out on the toilet seat. I couldn't help but look down dying of laughter and humiliation on his behalf. It was such a deep slumber that he only woke after he nearly fell off the seat from my pushing him. I rejoined Neela outside and eventually, Privan came through clutching 3 cigarettes in hand - I hoped he'd washed them - and handed us two. As Neela exhaled into the dead the night, the smoke seemed to echo her train of thought, deep reflections of her past experiences and her current life. We spoke of many things, about love and children, dreams and individual sleep-rooms, and the challenges of 'living' in her own home built right above her in-laws'. Standing on the balcony, recollecting past events and the culmination of a three-week journey across the island, I was reminded of the sheer generosity and hospitality shown by Mimi's extended family, the rituals they had and the culture they were a part of.

Sporting a thick, checked Pierre Cardin coat, burgundy scarf and track pants I arrived on the island a little after midnight and was greeted by Mimi, her cousin Ramir and his wife, who although I'd never met before, embraced me like a sister whom had returned after months of travel abroad. Feeling rather out of place with my Jo'burg winter attire, Ramir teased me about it attempting to break the ice and awkward silence in the car. He played a few songs and dedicated a popular island hit 'Amarula' to me seeing as though that's one of the things South Africa is most commonly known for. I came to know of Ramir through my mother. They worked for the same company although they had never met before since Ramir worked online and from home. It was a humid 30-minute drive from the airport to Quartre Bornes although it might have been shorter seeing that speed is a favourite Mauritian past-time. Finally, we arrived at Mimi's mother's house where the family had stayed up to welcome me. Mimi had been murmuring something or another on our way there but I was far too exhausted and jet-lagged to pay attention. I handed her mother and father their gifts as well as a special item Ramir had requested - of course I had to bring it with along no matter the cost, he had been so kind as to organise accommodation for me at his aunt's and uncle's. We bid him and Jay* farewell and Mimi two years my junior showed me to my room, a large bedroom that overlooked the mountain and the neighbours vegetable patch. I realised then that I was in a place so foreign that I might have been a little out of my depths.

A strange feeling befell me, for the first time I was homesick, missing my family and my own my bed - I hadn't slept well the first night but I was ready for the day ahead. Too anxious to go downstairs and greet my new family, I stayed in bed for at least an hour before I mustered up the courage to explore my new home for the next three weeks. It was a large house - three beds and a bath upstairs with an entire living room adjacent the open floor kitchen - quite odd.

Tiptoeing down the stairs I was greeted by a “squawk” and the hunger cry of 6 cross-bred puppies. Mimi came up to me and gave me a warm hug, introducing me to the rest of the family while her two young nephews stared at me in bewilderment.

--So Rita, today, how did you sleep? Was everything fine? Are you hungry? What do you eat? Can I make it for you? Tell me what you like.

Bombarded by a million question, I lied and told her I had slept well. I appreciated Mimi’s kindness and her mother’s curiosity and yet asked for something simple - sunny side up eggs. Whilst eating my rather oil-soaked egg and French bread I looked at around my new home. The décor was rather emblematic of the average homestead. Idols of Buddha and Shiva adorned the TV, graduation pictures hung up above the glass cabinet, colourful mats that complimented the brown the leather couch and--

--Rita! Rita! Regarde, Sherry! Alo!?

Pravish* (9) and Davish* (8) unannounced, Mimi’s nephews placed Sherry on my shoulders. Her dark grey claws sunked themselves into my bare shoulders as she manoeuvred herself to my left side attempting to steal a crumb of bread.

--Non Pravish! Allevé Sherry!

Mimi scolded Pravish, Neela’s eldest son, for being so forward and shocking me with the parrot.

-- So tomorrow, we go to Ramir father birthday okay? He turning 60 and it’s a big party. You go with me okay?

Well I wasn't exactly given a choice in the matter, I thought to myself. In preparation for the next day's event I spent most of the day gathering not just my strength but my extroverted personality - I would be meeting the entire family for the first time, I had to make a good impression.

Mimi woke me early that morning with the brightest smile in anticipation of the day's events. After breakfast, I decided to take a short walk around Palma. The small suburb is guarded by an arc-like granite mountain that stretches towards the bluest heavens and fortifies the protection of those that live at the foot of its grassy plains. A mesmerising assortment of pamplemousse trees, and guava, tear-drop papayas and amber coconuts, green banana trees and ripened pomegranates line the narrow pathways of almost every street in Palma - each residence home to at least two fruit-bearing trees. The tranquillity of Flic-en-Flac's beach-side further south, seeps into the culture of the small town where delicatessens close early for lunch and swaying coconut palms forebode light winter rains. Almost every house along running along and through the main roads of Palma hoards Niu Vai coconut palm trees, some young, and many long dried out. I noticed that although every other residence has a coconut tree in their yard, the coconuts seemed untouched, wilting from neglect and disinterest, shrivelling into themselves before free-falling from the weakest node. I often wondered why that was so. Why weren't these people harvesting them? I walked back to the house feeling rather perplexed and retreated to my room, noting everything I saw. Neela later came in and asked if I had a sari or anything festive to wear, I hadn't even thought of that whilst packing my luggage before leaving Johannesburg.

--Hmm, okay. I come back huh?

Neela came back with two different kameez's and a pair of white stockings. Not quite a fan of pink, I chose the blue/ green combination to which Neela brought out her entire jewellery and bindi box set and a cashmere scarf that matched the oversized stockings. Before we knew it, the afternoon sun was setting and it was time to head out to Floréal, Curepipe - apparently one of the coldest and wettest areas in all of Mauritius. But coming from Johannesburg where our weather changes in a matter of hours I thought - how could cold could it possibly get?

We were among the first to arrive at Ramir's home after an odd 40-minute ride through the narrowest residential roads I had ever seen. Cars on our right had to wait for the ones on the left to pass before they could go through and there happened to be no robots, stop signs or traffic circles on our way to Curepipe until we reached Quartier Militaire. Having prematurely left Palma and its rays of sunshine behind, we jumped over puddles as we stepped down from Mimi's brother's car and proceeded towards the entrance of Ramir's parent's home. Upon entering we were greeted with messages of peace by Ramir's mother who looked like a deer caught in headlights upon laying her eyes on me. Having heard about me months prior, I was warmly embraced as if I were one of her daughters and requested to take a seat and make myself at home. She confessed that her English wasn't very good but judging by her gestures she wanted me to be as comfortable as possible. Ramir introduced me to the rest of his family - his older brother Raeez* and pregnant wife Visha* and a few of his cousins who had just arrived. Mimi left me to my cup of tea and disappeared somewhere past the living the room, chatting and giggling with her cousins. I had a chance to observe my new surroundings.

Ramir joined me later saying;

--You know, um, Rita? This is where you would've stayed instead of Quartre Bornes. It's just that the upstairs is still being renovated and so there wasn't really space for you. But are you happy with aunty? Is everything okay?

Yes, of course! She's always so kind. Always asking if I've had something to eat, or if I'm full enough. She made sure I slept well last night. You have such a kind and generous family Ramir, thank you!

--Well you know, uh, Rita, that's how we are in Mauritius - we're a friendly people and we Hindu's like to make sure we take care of our guests.

His mother swiftly walked in and having heard us, said;

--We believe, in our culture huh, a guest is like a God in our home. He can be in the form of a God so we must make him comfortable and offer him whatever he wants because visitors is very important, very, very important.

I looked around the beautifully decorated home and complimented Ramir's mother on the décor. Portraits of plastic flowers and image illusions adorned the wall alongside those gold Chinese cats with the waving right paw which sat atop a huge Samsung flat screen. Ramir was raising two turtles whose growth had been stunted in their small bowl of water, no bigger than a 3Lt ice-cream tub - two others had died as a result. Miniature versions of Indian gods Shiva, Ganesh, Lakshmi and Buddha were placed all around the living room, as though protecting the space from harm and blessing whomever dwelled within. I noticed immediately that Ramir was a quite a fan of Japanese inventions.

--Rita - you like my TV huh? Guess how much it costs?

Uhm, how much - like 100,000 Rupees?

--No! [laughs] In the shop it's selling for half a million Rupees. I bought it for Rs350,000. I like everything Samsung. Samsung phone, TV, even my fridge is Samsung. They're really the best brand to buy. All my technology is Samsung, I don't trust any other brand. Ask my father and brother, I spend a lot of money on gadgets - I love gadgets, I always make sure I get the latest ones.

Like a 3-year-old in a South Korean version of Willy Wonka's factory, Ramir described how much the gadgets in his house cost, where he bought them, how durable they were and how much he loved them. I wondered why. Whether he was just proud of the fruits of his hard work or maybe he was just a materialist at heart who found pleasure in showing off new and expensive things. Whatever the case, I appreciated not having to sit alone, staring down at the carpet or out through the window whilst sipping my tea. More guests began to arrive and I felt rather grateful that we arrived early because I had the best seat in the living room. The centre table had been taken away to make more room in the middle, I later understood why the living room space felt a little empty - although not for long.

Finally, I met Ramir's father. A stern looking man with a friendly smile, if ever you caught it. Dressed in a white shirt, khakhis and shoeless our cheeks kissed twice, he asked me to sit down and said:

--Today I'm retiring from my job. I'm 60 years today and I worked in my company for over 40 years.

He showed a picture of him and his boss,

--My boss is a good man you know? I work in his Supermarket a long time and he treat me well. I'm sad to go but I still have few months left to work before I retire. Just to make sure everything is OK before I go.

He was a modest man with a big heart and strong work ethic for it showed in the manner which he spoke about his position at the supermarket and his experiences there - even showing me his long service award that he had won in 2015.

Finally, the priest arrived when the house was already packed with relatives sandwiched inside and outside Ramir's lounge, corridor and kitchen. It was a colourful affair - women were dressed in delicate saris, bright coloured salwar kameez's and lehengas, barely feeling the gush of wet wind that almost blew their umbrellas down the hill and into the river. The pujari/ priest also arrived and made his way to the centre of the room where sat cross-legged and barefooted. As the relatives began to settle down, Ramir and his family surrounded the priest. His father sat to the right of the pujari, followed by the eldest son Raaez, Ramir and his wife Jay* while Ramir's mother sat on the right side of the priest followed by Raaez's wife - all of them were seated in a semi-circle encroaching the centre piece in the middle. A red plastic cloth had been placed where the rug once was and adorned with kaleidoscopic flower petals. The pujari sang a hymn indicating that the ceremony was about to begin.

There were at least 30 people who attended the ceremony, some sitting outside on the veranda, others stood in the living room and surrounds. An assortment of fruits, milk and ghee in fancy steel bowls, purple, red, and orange powders, ground tumeric, sacred white and red threads, palm leaves and flowers formed the centrepiece of the half crescent arrangement of bodies. Ramir's mother darted back-and-forth bringing the pujari whatever he needed which wasn't

placed in the sacred space already. He recited a few more hymns and the relatives repeated after him. Holy milk in an elongated brass chalice (*kalasam*) was adorned with four mango leaves and the pujari placed a mature coconut on top of it. He removed the fibrous coir from the eyes to fully reveal God and rubbed the top of the coconut's head with the powders, one after another and later, dipped the sacred threads in ghee and placed them around the coconut. Unfortunately I couldn't understand what he was saying but at some point of the ceremony he paused to ask what the father's name was and continued to hymn. I thought the family pujari would've known their names by now but I heard later that he had performed 3 other ceremonies that very day, it's possible he might have just forgotten. He chanted things in what I believed sounded like an Ayurvedic recital to the gods for blessings and prosperity. Ramir's mother was ordered to fetch a bowl from the kitchen wherein the pujari mixed the ground tumeric with ghee and a little milk to make a thick paste with which he rubbed the frontal lobes of every immediate family member. The audience joined him in the chants as Ramir's family were adorned with blessings. Raez fetched large chunks of firewood and placed them in a steel rubbish bin. The pujari continued chanting, first blotting the offering of fruits with the holy milk from the chalice using one of the palm leaves and later blotting the immediate family with the same leaf, dipping it into the milk as required. He got up, struggled to light the firewood for a few minutes and suddenly the room was up in thick, black smoke. My eyes watered and my nose burned, everyone else seemed to be having a good time so I played along too. The fire charred the steel cannister and moments later, Ramir removed the burning flames from the room and disposed of it outside - it was still raining.



Image 2: Kalasam with a coconut on top and mango leaves. The kalsam is always to the left of the Pallaiyar

One final chant was sung and the priest got up to bless the father, his accomplishments and wished him well on his journey to retirement. Raez's pregnant wife together with Jay took the coconut offering and disposed of it in a nearby river I unfortunately did not get the chance to visit. Ramir's little cousins passed around laddu, sweet coconut treats, and strangely looked at me when I made a funny gesture trying to imitate what everyone else was doing before taking a treat. I made sure to perfectly imitate the washing-the-face-with-air gesture before taking a laddu the second time it came around.

The crowd began to disperse and I felt rather out of place, not knowing what to do next. Sensing this, Jay escorted me outside where dinner cooked by their neighbour Ravi was served. Fairy lights adorned the table and the elders were already seated. A long-time friend of the family, Ravi took it upon himself to cook a rather tasty meal of vegetarian biriyani, cucumber salad, chutini, boiled potatoes and a myriad of other interesting foods I had never had before, all served on a palm leaf-shaped paper plate. I complimented him on his amazing skills and told him I had never eaten such a simply made biriyani before the ones I had in South Africa always had a myriad of spices like cardamom, cloves and aniseed. He then explained to me the difference in method between North and South Indian biriyanis, claiming that the southern way was the simplest and tastiest - it needn't added extras like heaps of tumeric or cloves. I sat next to one of Mimi's uncles who recited his life story and promised to take me on a tour of a coconut plantation he had been working on and thereafter asked if I had a husband and would be willing to marry into an Indian family. I giggled coyly, politely ignoring his question and trying to revert the conversation back to his experience on the coconut plantation and when he would take me to see it. To my dismay, Mimi whispered;

--Rita, don't take him too seriously. He likes to say things just to get women's attention. I don't trust him a lot sometimes, always makes promises and never delivers.

Unfortunately for me, I was only to learn that fact later.

Stuffed, sleepy and rather cold, Ramir invited me to the grown-ups table - a neighbour's kitchen/living room downstairs of a house adjoined to Ramir's where I found him drinking with his aunts and uncles. They poured a stiff concoction of something warm and questioned me on what it was like living in Africa and the crime in Johannesburg, to which I answered as honestly as I could

without putting them off the idea of visiting me one day. Moments later, Ravi handed out small yoghurt treats for dessert and asked if I had well and sufficiently eaten - fully aware of my lactose intolerance, I gratefully accepted the dessert and placed it in my bag where I knew it would fester before I mustered up the courage to taste some of it. With Mimi's father and brother slightly intoxicated but sober enough to drive, we said our goodbyes and moved towards the car when it began to rain again. Everything they said about Curepipe's weather was right - I'm glad I brought a cardigan as instructed, I thought to myself.

The drive back home was silent and sombre, no one spoke apart from Mimi who asked if I had had a great time.

--It was really interesting Mimi and the food was amazing.

Yes! Ravi is a good cook! He likes cooking and meeting new people. He is the best friend of my uncle, and he is their neighbour for many years since I was small.

--Ahh! Okay, I see. He sounds like a well-travelled and educated guy.

Of course! He has travelled many countries and is very smart, so smart.

We arrived home, I bid my new family goodnight as I retreated to my bedroom, keen to explore other parts of the island. I didn't expect to make friends nor to be accepted in the house of strangers as a new member of their family. My objective was to interview the workers and owners of Coco Up and hopefully visit Agalega island – Mauritius' only commercial coconut palm tree plantation. Little did I know the opposite direction my research would take. After speaking with the father who told me I should have done my research in Seychelles instead, I realised then that although coconuts didn't have much economic value in Mauritius, they held a

significant place in the cultural and religious rituals and festivals of Mauritius. Before I arrived and questioned whether the coconut had any economic value in Maritius, the family had always taken coconuts for granted - as just another item in the practice of daily ritual.

Chapter Two

“A Gift of Nature”

A blanket of sparkles covered the coastline of Flic-en-Flac beach where crystalline waters were net with white corals that painfully pierced into your Achilles and massaged your pressure points at the same time. Endless rows of coconut palm trees lining the coastal waves of tanzanite blue seas give you that ‘tropical feel’ at day time while fancy mixed cuisine restaurants and exclusive nightclubs own the quiet streets of 4-star bungalows and apartments that overlook a paradise far removed from the everyday lived experience of precarity.

The bus ride to Flic-en-Flac from Palma is a half hour scenic route past the rustling fields of sugar cane that give way to the surrounding mountains. Passing the Rivière Noire district with makeshift Creole houses and quincailleries on the edge of ravines, the bus ride slowly transitions the scene from one of abject poverty to luxury as it passes through the fields of Cascavelle Mall where one finds local South African amenities like Woolworths and Spur. The bus, headed for Beaux Songes dropped us near a commercial area and we walked the rest of the way. Mimi was kind enough to escort me to Flac a few days after the family’s puja and, my God was it as breathtaking as Mimi said it would be. The sight filled one with a calmness inexplicable to someone who had never visited the island before.



Image 3: Flic-en-Flac Beach on a quiet Thursday afternoon

We needn't have walked far before we met Patrick, a fresh juices and coconut water vendor in his blue and white caravan. Mimi ordered her favourite - Tamarine - a rather unusual and sour fruit drink, while I opted for a young coconut fruit. Patrick had been selling coconut water to locals and tourists at this beach for over 10 years and claimed that there were more locals than foreigners who bought from his cart. I sipped my fresh coconut water that tasted less sweet than I thought it would and yet I couldn't stop sipping its translucent waters while Patrick told me more about his vending business. Upon my first visit he mentioned that he got his coconuts from Cascavelle following subsequent visits he maintained that he sourced his coconuts from Savanne, a small town in the south-western district of the island and makes a living from selling fresh fruit and juices like pineapples, mandarin and coconuts. Varying from Rs35-Rs60

depending on size, Patrick appeared to be making a pretty good living from setting up shop amidst the background of one of Mauritius' most beautiful and clean beaches.



Image 4: Patrick's Fresh Juice 'bar' setup on the beachside (Flic-en-Flac)

As I was in the middle of scooping the soft jelly-like flesh that lined the hard shell, Mimi and I met an Australian couple from Perth who bought a couple coconuts on their way to the beach. The husband appeared relatively knowledgeable about Polynesian seafarers and settlers who brought coconuts, yams and bananas to Hawaii. He spoke at lengths about the Coco Island (Deus de Deux Coco), often mistake its geographic local for Mauritius.

--Well back home, my wife and I drink a lot of coconut water. We drink it because we believe it's really good for our health but of course, back home we don't have coconut trees growin in our backyards so we have to buy the store-kind.

His wife joined him, supporting that;

--We buy coconut water from the wax bottles which are similar to these milk cartons they use. Really what we go for is taste and quality for the price. We tried many brands of coconut water but the ones like Zico and those from Brazil taste the best. But there's nothing better than having the real thing in your hands.

They scooped out the flesh with their coconut spoon and the husband mentioned that that was his favourite part of the coconut - the sweet, slippery fresh meat of young coconuts which he mentioned, revitalised the skin and cleansed the bowels. When I asked him why so many foreigners liked fresh coconut water Mimi abruptly jumped in mentioning that:

--Mostly, it's the Mauritians that buy the coconuts, the tourists they don't know is as immature like this they only know the dark one with the brown hair.

To my surprise, the Aussie couple agreed, stating that many locals they knew only used the mature nut but that there existed a growing number of health-conscious Aussie's who opted for fresh bottled coconut water instead. Not wanting to take up too much of their time, we parted ways and met with a Mauritian family of 5 who bought coconut water and drank it out of the shell, discarding the flesh once the water had been drunk.

Patrick invited me to observe the daily running of his family business however upon my second visit he appeared standoffish and disinterested in my presence. I soon took heed of his

subtle gestures, realising that I needed to find a new site of enquiry and thus I arranged to meet with a representative of the Outer Islands Development Corporation (OIDC), an institution responsible for the management and development of outlying and remote islands such as Agaléga and St. Brandon.

After having my person searched by the secretary and being barred from using my own pen, cellphone and recording equipment, I finally met Mr Norungee the General Manager of the OIDC to discuss the value of coconuts and coconut water for Mauritians. Lying about 1,000km north of the mainland Agaléga island is roughly a 70km² stretch of two islands joined together by a strip of land that makes walking across the island possible only in low tide. Currently sitting at 800ha the coconut plantation in the North and South of the atoll are, according to Mr Norungee largely abandoned, overrun by weeds and contaminated by pests. However, it is has been over year since the island implemented a coconut rehabilitation program where the “Virgin Island” is no longer overrun by mosquitoes and weeds but instead is undergoing major reformation. Coconut by-products such as copra and coconut oil are the island’s main sources of income. Mr Norungee explained that although locals don’t see the oil production value of coconuts it is proving to be an increasingly lucrative financial venture especially because more research is being done regarding coconut-producing bio-diesel. Apart from producing copra, bio-diesel and oil, Norungee assured me that every single part of the coconut can be used from the fibres of its hairs to produce coir to its shell for coco peat (organic fertiliser) because it is a “gift of nature”. Much of the produce from Agaléga is destined for international export while the mainland imports at least 500,000 mature coconuts per year from Indonesia, Malaysia and South Africa to suit religious ritual needs. As opposed to harvesting nuts from their backyards or importing from the surrounding atolls, Mr Norungee believes that the total amount of coconuts produced from

Mauritius and its atolls cannot sufficiently supply the demand for mature coconut fruits for events such as the pilgrimage to Grand Bassin and Maha Shivaratri. Mr Norungee asserted that there currently exists no commercialised industry of coconut production due to a lack in infrastructure, transportation, labour and storage.



Image 5: Fruit offering for Maha Shivaratri pilgrimage to Grand Bassin, Mauritius⁷³

Home to less than 300 inhabitants the Agaléga islands similar to many rural areas in South Africa, witness a decrease in population as many youths refuse to return from densely populated urban areas to develop the villages they once came from. In light of this, Mr Norungee assured me that in the years to come the atolls will undergo major economic, social, and industrial changes such as eco-tourism in the north, an added airstrip, frequent barge trips, the

⁷³ Retrieved from (<https://mauritiusinsideout.com/mauritius-maha-shivaratri.html>) Accessed on 28 January 2017

introduction of higher learning to include form 6 and 7 and the commencement of various agricultural projects in the south that will bring the mainland of Mauritius closer to Agaléga via foreign investors and Indian experts.

“Mauritians”, said Mr Norungee are “far to imagine coconut oil production”⁷⁴ because there yet exists no commercial industry however, the potential to develop a coconut water producing plant is open to foreign investors including South Africans. When asked about the value of coconuts in Mauritius, Mr Norungee claimed that the population doesn’t value the fruit because they’re “hard to harvest”. On the other hand, Mr Rajcumer of the Food and Agricultural Research Extension and Training Institute (FAREI) believes that the Mauritians do not value the coconut the coconut economically for two reasons 1) the question of available land and 2) the high cost of production. Land in Mauritius is divided between private individual interests (mainly Francophone whites and foreign investors), the national State (long-term leases) and the local government state (limited access and non-arable land).

In line with Mr Norungee, he agrees that the harvesting process is a difficult one and asserted that there are no industries or companies that deal with coconut water production exclusively - he seemed to have not been aware of small-scale, family-run businesses like Coco Up and Coco Akvo of which I was denied access to the former and could not locate the latter at its supposed offices in Port Louis.

Unintentionally bad-mouthing the upkeep of the Agaléga’s plantations, Mr Rajcumer showed me various pictures of the abandoned fields and sick palm trees that had stunted from a lack of maintenance, development and disease on the island stating that the only way to develop

⁷⁴ Oral communication, 20 June 2016

the atolls' plantations was through an export economy. "Export is key" said Mr Rajcumer, as he turned over the pages of a recent report on the island's economy. At a loss of words for the coconut's economic value, Mr Rajcumer proceeded to describe the coconut's two main uses on the island: religion and chutney. Satini coco, a recipe for chutney made of dessicated coconut passed down from Northern India (Uttarpradesh) into the kitchens of Indo-Mauritians where it's served as an accompaniment to adapted biriyani and curry cuisines. During the observance of religious rituals like the night festival of Shivaratri, Rajcumer affirmed that the dried copra used in this ritual is imported from India and Sri Lanka moreover, Indo-Mauritians use nearly 70% of all imported coconuts for pilgrimage to the sacred lake of Grand Bassin and various surrounding temples. Agaléga unfortunately cannot meet this demand due to its remoteness and the cost of air freight transportation.

Away from the central business district of Port Louis and further inland towards the upper-market suburbs of Moka, FAREI's extension and training offices are located in St. Pierre behind a two storey marketplace that houses FAREI farmers on the bottom floor and independent textile and Chinese merchandisers on the top floor. The marketplace, adjacent to an already bustling bus terminal was abuzz with activity, older women and their sons sold a variety of vegetables from coriander to prickly cucumbers, curry powders and fresh fish. What struck me immediately was the group of 3-4 men situated at the foot of the entrance. One man passed one coconut from a large pile to another with a large machete who struck the tip open and passed it onto the third man who poured the translucent water into a 2Lt jug, throwing the empty shell onto a heaped pile on the floor beside him. A woman, nearest to the group of males, took the jug as soon as it had been filled and poured the contents into various shapes of 500ml and 1Lt plastic bottles which were sold for Rs25 and Rs50 respectively. I noticed, all around me were empty

shells of coconuts that hoarded flies, human excretions and rotten vegetables. I remembered at once, what Mr Norungee and Rajcumer had said a few days prior about the lack of education and knowledge regarding the many uses of coconuts and how wasteful many Mauritians were. For a multi-purpose plant to be discarded in such a way after being emptied of its contents indeed felt not only like an economic waste but an environmental one as well. Apart from the environmental waste at St.Pierre market, I noticed that quite a few locals were buying the plain bottles of coconut water and the production process from palm tree to bottle was obvious, there was no processing involved, no stabilising the contents from direct sunlight or branding to make the bottle the stand-out. It was simply coconut water straight from the shell and into the plastic carton. I was told later that because the produce was so fresh, it could only stay in the fridge for 2 days and had to be consumed immediately - that was the novelty of drinking coconut water, its freshness. On the latest bus back to Quartre Bornes, I began to think about the simplicity of coconut water and its clear plastic packaging. I thought about other brands like Vita Coco and Pure Raw Brazilian who relied on advertising gimmicks to make their products stand out in the organic juices aisle.

Gaining increasing popularity as something that is *unique in nature*, coconut water became the new Vitamin Water© overnight same way that collard greens became the ‘New Kale’⁷⁵ Every element from its husk fibres to the translucent water is cultivated, sourced, and packaged, specifically from South Sea countries like Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and

Vietnam thereafter destined for export to the U.S., Europe and throughout some parts of the African continent. Vita Coco, one of three giant manufacturers of coconut water recently rolled out a new edition to their beverages - Vita Coco Café; a new experiment of coffee-blended coconut water that's "brewed on the beach"⁷⁶ and destined to take over the high-energy beverage sector. Most if not all brands of coconut water rely on competitive advertising to meet their profit margin granted that they all sell the same thing - only difference being the amount the natural coconut water distinguishable from the added extras like mango and peach flavourants and 'real' coconut pulp. Coconut water is the clear endosperm juice of 5-7 month old coconuts that are lined with a sweet jelly kernel.

Image 6: The latest offering from the Vita Coco range includes a Caffe Latte flavour



There are two varieties of branded coconut water the pure coconut water and mixed coconut water essence that form the top 5 leading brands: Vita Coco, ZICO (Coca-Cola), O.N.E.

⁷⁶ Image retrieved from (<https://www.vitacoco.com.au/#/home>) Accessed on 28 January 2017.

(Pepsico), Naked Juice (Pepsico), and Maverick Brands according to the ‘Global Coconut Water Market 2017’⁷⁷ study. Bottled in Tetra-Pak cartons or aluminium cans, commercial coconut water brands pride themselves on packaging only the freshest, healthiest product protected from negative exposure to sunlight and air - unlike the St. Pierre variety which although bottled on the spot, is exposed to light, air and several carcinogens from the exhausts of nearby buses. Chi 100%, Harmless Harvest, and Edward & Sons distinguish themselves from others through marketing their product as 100% raw or organic therefore counteracting the negative effects of added sugar, pasteurisation, and preservatives found in other brands like Naked Juice who faced a class action law suit regarding the use of GMO’s in its “all-natural” products.⁷⁸

Many of these consumer brands founded in the U.S., Europe and Australia all source their young coconuts from south sea countries: Brazil, Indonesia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka etc. and in the same move, attempt to sell their own produce back to the source as is the case with Coca-Cola. Having acquired ZICO in 2013 to combat a decline in sales due to the war on sugar (sugar tax) Coca-Cola, a large supporter of GMO’s, will attempt to launch ZICO coconut water in India⁷⁹ which already has its own abundant supply of fresh coconut water. These brands, driven by end-user evaluation and consumer trends source banal objects like coconuts from developing countries, repackage and re-brand them as ‘exotic’ gifts of nature and sell them back to the

⁷⁷ Retrieved from www.dailyhover.com/global-coconut-water-market-2017-2/ Accessed: 10 March 2017

⁷⁸ In a class action lawsuit against Naked Juice, a coconut water producing company based in XXX, they were accused of using synthetic GMO products when they claimed that their coconut water was “GMO-free”. Their alleged misuse of health phrases lead to a \$9 million settlement by Pepsico (owner of Naked Juice) for customers between September 2007 and August 2013. They continue to stand by their “all natural” claim but have chosen not to use it in their packaging (Retrieved from <https://www.m.huffpost.com/us/entry/3830437>. See other stories on Pepsico being sued over Naked Juice’s marketing of juices as healthier than they really are: <https://www.google.co.za/amp/s/amp.businessinsider.com/pepsico-sued-for-naked-juice-marketing-2016-10>

⁷⁹ Retrieved from www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/0/10/coca-cola-may-soon-launch-packaged-coconut-water-in-an-attempt-t/ Accessed: 10 March 2017

source country at nearly 90% mark-up. Interesting enough there actually exists a market for these exotic gifts in the upper class areas of Mauritius like Bagatelle and Cascavelle where Food Lover's Market and Woolworths supermarket chains are located. Most brands like Vita Coco, Cocomax and Pure Lite rely on the standardised aesthetic of sun, sand and sea imagery to depict palm trees and coconut water as emblematic of an exotic paradise far removed from the daily realities of work and stress. William Hodges *Tahiti Revisited* is the best way to describe the appearance of a search for happiness and health that aesthetic advertising uses in the simplest illustration of a palm tree gentled inclined on a tropical ocean breeze⁸⁰.



⁸⁰ See Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel* 2002: 9. See appendix a figure 4.

*Image 7: Tahiti Revisited (1776) by William Hodges*⁸¹

These artistic imaginations remove the consumer from the boredom of precarious labour and the lived politics of islanders and “directs our attention to critical moments”⁸² crystallized as and place holders for an everyday paradise. The image of photographed crystalline azure beaches, blue skies, palm trees and coconuts bridge the geo-temporal spatial divide between countries and social situations, arresting the flow of life and island experience, transposing it to post-workout regimes and Bhakthi yoga essentials. Quite similar to a tourist, the consumer tries all the brands, searching for the authentic and non-ordinary, longing to experience the past. In as much as the image or aesthetics of the coconut is taken into consideration when a new product is launched on the commercial market, the contents of the object itself is placed under malicious scrutiny in the beverage industry.

A number of premium coconut water brands have been sued for false advertising and product information leading to an increase in the regulated control of additives, flavourants and preservatives by competitors such as Obrigado and Pure Raw C Coconut Water whose products offer higher quality with a matching price Brands like XXX boast about sourcing their coconuts for all their products from one source or use their ‘organic’ certification as validation for its fetching price and degree of purity. Whether Eastern Highands includes ‘real’ pulp in their glass bottles compared to Harmless Harvest whose pink variety tastes closer to the real thing than all

⁸¹ Image Retrieved from www.tout-sur-google-earth.com/t12847p15-a-la-decouverte-des-iles-de-la-polynesie-francaise-avec-google-earth-les-marquises Accessed on 10 March 2017

⁸² Botton 2002: 15

the rest⁸³ one thing remains sure, coconut water is commercially marketed for its health and healing properties. Ranked by David Wolfe founder of the Superfoods Movement, as one of the top 10 superfoods for its medicinal properties, coconut oil and water are regarded as supplying the human body with next to all the essential nutrients and minerals it needs to survive and thrive in the adverse conditions. There have been various studies on coconut water and oil used in contemporary medical procedures involving intravenous fluid, rehydration, and diet supplementation⁸⁴. David Wolfe's findings, similar to that of various medical case studies all point to the coconut's ability to improve digestion and increase the thyroid system's speed; restore natural saturated fats and utilise blood sugar better and support cardiovascular health⁸⁵. Coconut oil is nature's source for ailing the body from the inside out; enhancing the immune system with its Medium-Chain Fatty Acids (MCFAs) while preventing skin eruptions and healing wounds. On the other hand, coconut water is specifically renowned for its numerous electrolytes and amino acids, concentrated levels of potassium, magnesium and essential for low blood pressure, hydration and weight loss. Not to be taken as an alternative to water but a coconut water diet supplementation naturally rehydrates and detoxifies the body, supplying it with an extra boost of the compounds it already produces.

⁸³ According to the author of New York Times Best-Seller *The Food Lab*, a James Beard Award-nominated column, J. Kenji Lopez-Alt believes that Harmless Harvest is the best brand of coconut water currently on the market. Although pink from the high levels of antioxidants, Lopez-Alt describes as "one coconut water to rule them all" (retrieved from www.serious-eats.com/2015/03/taste-test-the-best-coconut-water-harmless-harvest.html accessed 12 September 2016).

⁸⁴ Campbell-Falck D, Thomas T, Falck TM, Tutuo N, Clem K. (2000) conducted a successful study on use of coconut water as a short-term intravenous hydration fluid for a Solomon Island patient. See Saat M, Singh R, Sirisinghe RG, & Nawawi M (2002) 'Rehydration after exercise with fresh young coconut water; a study by Idusogie EO (1970) on the role of coconut protein in human nutrition, 'The effect of daily consumption of coconut fat and soya-bean fat on plasma lipids and lipoproteins of young normolipidaemic men' by Mendis S & Kumarasunderam R (1990) and; 'Young coconut water for home rehydration in children with mild gastroenteritis' by Adams W, Bratt DE (1992).

⁸⁵ David Wolfe, *Superfoods*, 133.

From an anthropomorphic lens advertising uses the imagery of pristine sun, sand and sea tropical locations quite similar to Flic-en-Flac as tools through which to solidify brand loyalty and validate the product as “organic/authentic”, “natural”, “pure” and “raw”. Although Mauritius may not appear to be a grand player in the coconut industry as such, there exist modes of capitalism that operate both inside and outside the greater global economic enclaves, specifically regarding the informal sale of coconut water at beach fronts and local markets as well as commercial sale at the level of small-scale businesses. What is important to note is the double use of coconuts both for religious and health purposes which in some ways can be interpreted as a single purpose - that which is used for healing (physically and spiritually). Local sale of coconut water needn't rely on advertising gimmicks nor complex packaging processes to sell what is trendingly considered as natural, raw organic coconut water from clear plastic bottles. Commercial products on the other hand heavily rely on the aesthetic of island life, like that in Flic-en-Flac, making the source of their coconuts visible in an arena they wouldn't easily be found thus demystifying the origins of production and instead exoticising it as a site of paradise stuck-in-ancient-time. The aesthetic of island life and the image of the aesthetic of island life become convoluted in a web of entanglements between the original/reproduced; natural/synthetic and man/nature. The ties between the spiritual realm and the idea of an advertising aesthetic become clearer when we begin to question how powerhouse brands like Coca-Cola or Pepsico masquerading as “healthy alternatives” under smaller brands like ZICO or Naked Juice are able to sell the same product simply repackaged and re-branded back to the source country and the world over. There is more than meets the eye behind the sudden popularity and spurge of economic interest in the commercialisation of coconut water that Mauritius is yet to acknowledge and exploit for itself.

It became evident that the aura of island life, its serenity and tranquillity formed the basis of the imagery used in advertising commercial coconut water. The striking beauty of the ocean, the tranquillity of swaying palm trees, the warm rays of sun and the purity of a fresh green coconut as experienced on the island were all present in the aesthetics of Tetra pak and plastic coconut water containers. I realised that the experience of drinking bottled coconut water wasn't only about an 'authentic' taste of the translucent water but it also encompassed a visual experience that allowed the consumer to feel as though they were sipping a fresh, green coconut on the beach. The out-of-body experience that I felt when surrounded by Mimi's family or when visiting the pristine beaches seemed to be precisely the aim of advertising – to make the consumer feel as though they were in a place far removed from their current situation.

Chapter Three

“Om tryambakam yajaamahe sugandhim

pushtivarddhanam

Urvaarukamiva bandhanaan mrityor mukshiya

maamritaata.”⁸⁶

I had on my thick navy blue pilot’s blazer and beige Pierre Cardin shoes that gave the illusion that I was slightly taller than I was. Mimi’s father rented a 10-seater van for the family that even because no one wanted to drive so far up north to Triolet and still drive back to Palma especially after a few drinks. We had received an invite from Mimi’s sister’s husband Privan to his mother’s 60th birthday celebration and puja - quite like Ramir’s father’s celebration. We left Palma, travelling through the Pamplemousses district and on to a newly constructed freeway that cut through two large mountains eventually leading us past even plains. At the foot of the right side of this mountain lay a small shrine of the Virgin Mary, with three candles flickering in daylight. We drove past many Hindu temples, some Chinese ones too - I must have laid eyes on the tallest temple I’d ever seen. Nearing Triolet Shival Maheshwarnath region stood a kaleidoscope of pastel colours that covered the perfectly rounded contours of Lord Shiva in blue dust, embellishing its body with golden cloth. Wrapped around it were blankets of soft greens, pinks, and purple temples and a chromatic yellow crown adorned its head. The temple seemed to have been made up of the smaller temples guarded by other gods one on top of the other - a

⁸⁶ **Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra** (Prayer Book, p. 145). Direct translation: (We worship the Three-eyed One (Lord Siva), who is fragrant and nourishes well all beings. May He liberate us from death and grant us immortality, even as the cucumber is severed from its bondage to the creeper)!Excerpt taken from Naidoo 2004: 107.

tower of temples that peaked through the opening of a cloudless sky. However long and winding the journey was, I somehow knew we were protected by the right hand of Shiva that ushered us through every district. The farther we drove northeast of the island the thicker the vegetation was and finally, having only seen three recognizably black people since I got to the island, I noticed that there were predominantly more people who looked like me on this side of the country. Rows and rows of palm trees, house after house, flashed past like a cyclonic breeze as the driver whizzed past makeshift houses, deli's and bakeries, only then realising how late we were to the party. Eventually we arrived, dad complimented me on how suave I looked and I returned the flatter. Again, still feeling quite out of place at a table nearest the door in a room full of strangers, this event carried a different aura from the last. Everyone was curious to know who I was and what it was like where I came from. We arrived just after the pujari had discarded the canister of burning wood and were ushered to our designated seats decorated with paper plates and cups, fancy serviettes and birthday whistles, snacks and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red as the centrepiece. I was told by Neela that most Hindu/ Telugu puja's in their family almost always followed the same process; the gifting of fruits, flower arrangements, the coconut centrepiece, blessings chanted by the puja and extended family, burning fire and the sharing of food afterwards, it only varied with age, cultural denomination and financial ability.

The living room was half as large as a standard teaching classroom, a soccer match on a large screen television watching the gentlemen's table towards the far end of the dining room lounge - the table with all the bottles of liquor on it. 6 other tables of 6-8 seats oddly all scattered around the room with the three-tier birthday cake standing on its own pedestal overlooking its

guests' behaviour and how many samoosas they ate for starters. Of which I had plenty. Not knowing that the ladle-full helpings of deer curry, cucumbers, curry greens & potatoes, biriyani, samoosas & springrolls, tuna salad, chicken, grilled fish, noodles and French bread had nothing to do with the activities of the main course, I ate as though Vāsanā was nothing compared to the limits my stomach could stretch. Privan's walks into the room, grabbing the microphone and thanking everyone for coming then proceeded to make a short speech about how wonderfully amazing his mother is. The lady of the hour took centre stage, draped in a royal purple sari adorned by crystals she also thanked everyone for coming - one by one family members got up to give her a gift - silly of me to not have brought anything this time, I thought... The main course was brought out; a variety of curries and biriyani, salads and meats were prepared for the occasion, the options were endless. Conversations among family flowed as freely as the wine, bottles of Jack were exchanged for half litre Martini's and the elders were feeling the midnight groove.

After dinner, most of us retreated outside, I joined dad in the large circle of friends, listening to them drink and laugh about the political situation in Mauritius and the unfortunate death of a distant cousin and her child on-board a boat to Ile Aux Cerfs⁸⁷. The garage was big enough to fit another dance-floor as opposed to the living room, now stuffy and congested with panting from failed attempts to emulate Michael Jackson dance moves to Justin Bieber music. Sharing jokes, political criticisms of our presidents and refills of Martini, Pravin's mother made

⁸⁷ This untimely incident occurred a mere week before my arrival to the island, however this did not affect the relationship I created with the family members I stayed with. Although in mourning, they were still very welcoming of my presence in their house and on the island. However they did warn me several times to keep from harm's reach of Ile Aux Cerfs and the southeastern beaches as they were known to have rough and dangerous waves in the winter. More can be read about the untimely death of their cousin and her colleagues here: <https://www.babahealth.info/2016/06/09/drama-at-grse-the-body-of-police-officer-ritesh-mungur/> (accessed 15 June 2016)

it a point that I ought to visit them again in the months to come for someone's wedding somewhere. Only half listening to her invitation because everyone in the circle spoke to me at the same time, I gladly accepted to whatever she offered - mistakenly with my glass in hand - half-heartedly knowing this could possibly be the last time I would share a meal with them all. A little after the wee hours of Sunday morning the party died down and the dad signalled that it was time for the rest of us to make our way back home. Upon entering the van, and the hour-long drive home I realised then why dad and Vindash were so adamant on hiring a van that evening - the van was the real after party - endless giggles, 3 pee breaks, two demands to stop at a nearby boutique to buy more liquor and we were finally home. It was the first time I had seen Neela having open and honest fun with other sisters-in-law, her laugh was louder, her smile was brighter and for those brief hours she had forgotten about her position as an outsider. She told me stories of when she was younger and her mother boiled the young roots of the palm tree for her to drink whenever she felt ill. She recalled certain Cavadee (fasting) rituals where the Madras used young immature shoots yet to blossom in their festivals and the boat floats made of palm leaves and flowers, carrying heaps of mature coconuts for holy festivals and pilgrimage.

--You see, Rita. I told you that if Vindash says we must go to the shops - if he asks if you want anything just say 'no'. My father don't like it when he drink too much. He drink too much and not sleeping the whooole night. If he ask you, just say no OKAY?

Mimi had warned me about Vindash's advances, and as advised I declined anything he had to offer. I had had far too much of everything to drink already and wished I had a coconut stashed away in my cupboard for the hangover that would meet my demise the next morning. We all awoke the next morning feeling vulnerable and sluggish. Everything about that afternoon

seemed to drag and I missed my rendezvous with Ramir - the remainder of the day was spent in the living room recalling events from the night before and discussing future family trips to Johannesburg over a few glasses of Seven Seas and Coke⁸⁸ accompanied a plate of gajack⁸⁹, with Vindash and his father that evening as we had done many evenings prior.

--So... today Rita, we're goin' on a joyride. We're gonna show you a little bit of what and who we call 'Mauritius'. Maybe stop somewhere and have lunch - OK?

Yeah sure.

A few more reschedules and postponements later, I finally met up with Ramir and Jay who picked me up from Mimi's house. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little miffed that it required a number of broken promises for them to finally accompany me to Savanne (Rivière Noire) where the only known commercial coconut plantation south of the mainland was located.

We first stopped at Ramir's mother's house. I had picked up a few varieties of chocolate croissants and cheesecakes for Sunday tea - Ramir's mother was terrible at hiding her emotions and so embraced me when I presented her with her favourite treat - coconut cakes (pink lamingtons). Not knowing they were Ramir's parent's favourite, neither knowledgeable of the possibility that they were soon to be mine too, I bought it because they looked good and it's customary to bring over a gift when you're invited to someone's house in my belief. Sipping our tea and eating the chocolate coconut cake she cut in half for us, Ramir's mother, in the best and most formidable English she could conjure up, said;

⁸⁹ Neela taught me about 'gajacks' - plates of snacks or light foods that normally accompany drinks. These include anything from tomato salsa to morsels of chicken. It remains to this day, an inside joke intimately shared between myself and Neela.

--Yu know Rita, ehm, in our culture the coconut is very important. It is sacred. It is sacred becuz' its natural and ehm, pure. But we also like to cook with it - in cakes, like this coconut cakes, curry - you know curry?

Yes, yes aunty I know...

---Yes, in curry, lamb chicken -fish. Any all curry. But the water, even the water is good yu see. If you have ehm (points to abdomen) pain (speaks Kreol with Ramir)

--Ramir: Diarrhoea, if you have diarrhoea.

Ahh! Oh okay, I understand. Good for diarrhoea, gastro? -I said.

--Oui, oui. Gastro. Al' type sickness, coconut water is good. But many people here, is only for prayer, ritual, cooking. Drinking- no, not many people. Seychelles yes but not so much here. Is sacred, very important. Many Mauritian use coconut oil for the hair and the face, cream, milk and coconut powder.

Mimi stayed behind with one of her cousins as we got ready leave the Meetun residence. Jay, Ramir and I got into the car, Mrs Meetun also wanted to tag along to see what all this fuss about coconuts was about. Passing miles and miles of cane fields and Omnicane, Savannah's largest sugar-cane factory, we pit stopped at Jay's old homestead in the farmer's village of L Escalier to meet her mother and sisters. Treated to more biscuits and a tall Americano her giggling shy sisters asked what I was doing there and what my research was about.

--It's about coconuts. I want to know you know - if Mauritians are buying bottled coconut water from the supermarket instead of those guys at the beach who sell the fresh one. Do you

guys value the coconut, is there money in it? Or is it more for religion - you know, stuff like that...

Ahh okay!

-Replied one of the younger sisters.

We understand. I don't know, do you?

-turning and asking the older one.

--I don't know. I know it's important for ritual but...

I interrupted,

--but why? Why is it important?

--Well because it's all natural. The water inside is pure, no one has touched it, it's very pure.

No one could get at the heart of the questions I asked, I thought to myself. It was as though Mr Rajcumer was right, coconuts bore no value in Mauritius given that it was relatively cheaper to buy imported coconut by-products than a fresh nut retailed at Rs50-70 each. Maybe Mimi's father was right too when he pitifully remarked that I should've done my research on the Seychelles islands instead since "Mauritians don't know the value of coconuts" he said repeatedly, over a tumbler of cane liquor and coke on my second night on the island. In consolation, he said I ought to buy my own tree and plant it in South Africa. Taking pictures with her relatives in front of the waterfall that ran so fast it splashed light cooling mist across your face, we made our way back to the car, travelling further south past Ominicane Thermal Energy Operations, a sugar-cane distillery an into Souillac. This being our second visit to the plantation, we had a chance to speak with the grounds-keeper - Ramir's interpretive skills came in hand here as the groundkeeper spoke no English nor French. He explained to us that apart from the few merchants that climb up the trees and pick as many coconuts as they can carry for Rs200-300,

the majority of palm trees are grown for local hotels and luxury resorts. A few others are destined for export overseas. He expressed that there wasn't a need nor a market for them to sell coconuts and as a result many of the fruits simply rotted away. Given that only 10-15ha of the land that belonged to Savanne Plantation was dedicated tall variety coconut palm trees, there appeared to be much disinterest in their commercialisation and more emphasis on growing and selling endemic plants. He took us on a tour of the plantation, towards the back where several palm tree varieties were located, some niu kafa and others niu vai. One of the workers was kind enough to chop off a 12-nut branch for me to take home and although the tree was fairly short, it took two workers to get it down. We gave our thanks and proceeded to the entrance of the parking whose driveway was pathed with tall, sick and dried coconut palm trees on either side.

It had been such a long day that I could not wait to get back to Ramir's and write down everything I heard and saw: about the lack of interest in coconut plantations, the need for an entire plantation to complete the aesthetics of 'resort living' and the nonchalant gift of 12 bright auburn coconuts almost as if relieved to unburden the plantation of its dying coconuts. To my surprise, Jay and Ramir added one more stop not far from the Savanne where Raez's in-laws lived.

--Rita! You gonna love this house! It's really exotic - these guys are super exotic, you'll see!
-said Ramir.

It neared supper time and to my relief we asked to stay and share a meal of fresh crab curry and biriyani - Raez's mother-in-law mentioned that I ate crab curry better than Jay did, as I took another bite to open one leg. Everyone I came across throughout different parts of the

island had their own style of cooking using the same condiments for the very same meal. Biryani tasted different on every occasion.

After supper, Razez's father-in-law gave us a short tour of the produce from that morning's harvest. Bags of avocados, cucumbers, chillies, yams, potatoes and other vegetables I had never seen were still in the van ready to be sorted for the next day's market. Jay ushered me outside and across the street where her in-laws grew their own condiments (parsley, mint, dhal etc.) to use and sell to neighbours.

--You see here in Mauritius, we grow everything Rita. We grow our own vegetables, we kill our animals and sell the next day at the market. There's no need to buy anything at the shops if you can grow it at home.

We retreated to the main house where the father-in-law prompted me to follow him to the back of the house. I thought I knew then what Ramir meant by exotic. Their back garden was well manicured, the grass had that Evergreen aesthetic with flowers that looked too perfect to be real. A small temple was located a few steps from the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. The father-in-law asked that I remove my shoes and ushered me into the sacred temple/ prayer room. It was unimaginably bright and luxurious, expensive cloths of white, pinks, oranges, and reds were draped all around. Several red velvet cushions were laid out on the floor and standing in front of me was a large statue idol of Lord Shiva with smaller versions Buddha and Lord Ganesha on either side. Numerous idols, ceramic, plastic, and glass were displayed on the worship table, similar paintings and corresponding symbols were placed all around the room. Candles of ghee on the sacred table were lit, exuding a divine aura within the space. I felt almost

unworthy and frankly relieved to step out. I didn't quite know how to feel or how to behave in the space, 40 seconds felt like I had escaped for a lifetime. I put my shoes back on and walked to the main house in silence. Moments later, another cousin of Ramir and Raez walked in from work and greeted us. Excited to talk English for the first time in a long time, Kavi revealed everything I needed to know and all the questions I never knew I had about coconuts;

--Oh! It's so nice to finally meet you Rita! Ramir told me a lot about you, you're from Johannesburg yes - I worked in Durban for a few months but I never went to Johannesburg.

Oh really! How did you Durban? Your English is really good hey?

--Ah,no! Long time since I never spoke English with anybody because the people here don't speak it that much ... So you're here to learn about coconuts? Mauritians love coconuts!

Do they? I don't know hey, I've had a lot of people tell me that Mauritians don't value coconuts or drink much coconut water.

--Well! Sometimes true sometimes not. The real value of coconut is in the purity. See the water inside represents the ego or the mind and emotion. The hard outside is our body or physical world and the three eyes on top makes it look like a human.

Ahh! I see, I never knew that.

--Yes! Which is why when we have birthdays or like me, I'm Telugu - so when we have weddings we use coconuts a lot. Even when you buy a house or a new car, you must bless the coconut first and then break it next to the house or new car to ask for blessings. The water is pure and untouched so it represents the purity of the ego, so that when you break the ego you

breaking away the selfish or bad part of yourself and making yourself pure again -you understand?

Yes, yes I think I understand. So the water inside is pure and natural so it's used for blessings.

--Ya, ya but not only that. Not only good things huh? There's also stories of witchcraft where wizards use the coconut for evil and voodoo - it can be good or it can be evil it all depends on the user.

No one told me that! So there's a lot of Voodoo in Mauritius?

--Yes and no, there are many people who do it but I've only heard I don't know anyone like that.

(vaguely disappointed I replied) Oh okay I understand.

Kavi retreated upstairs to change from her work clothes and signalled for Ramir, Jay and I to meet her up there. Up the winding wooden stairs we entered an upstairs loft that was significantly more eccentric than the parent's living quarters down stairs. Kavi showed me virtually every room in her upstairs home where she stayed with her children and husband, Raeez's brother-in-law. Walls were plastered with dried bamboo, and the cosy sitting room was cornered by three 2m high dividers made of palm leaves. Kavi pointed to various artefacts like the pair ostrich eggs shells she bought in Durban, lamp covers made of coconut coir, the table made from the wood of a palm tree. Ushering us towards the balcony which was transformed into an angular slice of the Congo jungle complete with its own ceramic elephant head and cheetah-striped rug. Exotic indeed.

With a hot cup of tea waiting for us back at the sitting are, whose natural-light bulbs teased the strange and twisting shapes of the coconut lamps and the zigzag of the palm leaf walls, Kavi recollected stories of her own experiences with coconut rituals for her marriage and ‘the man’ in Centre de Flacq who made the papers one year for getting his children through tertiary school using the profits he acquired from selling little monkeys, cutlery, bags and other souvenirs made out of coconut shells and coir.

--You know what? There is lots of value in coconuts Rita. Much, much value. It's just that the people don't know or are too lazy to find out. You can make anything and everything from the coconut and the tree. Just use your creativity. Many years before, when our mothers still had those red/black floors? They used to make us scrub it with an open coconut, one that was already matured. The floor became so shiny! At least for a few days - no polish. There are too many uses! Too many!

We spoke a little longer and the temperature began to change. Jay dropped off the package she had brought and received another full of biriyani and fresh vegetables. As we exited the kitchen, Kavi proudly showed me an opened mature coconut which had fallen from a nearby tree a few days prior. “I’m eating it slowly, slowly”, she said. We said our goodbyes and speeded back to Floreàl, back to the wettest and coldest hilltops of Curepipe. As soon as we got in Mrs Meetun got her machete out from the kitchen cabinet and effortlessly sliced open one of the coconuts we had received earlier. Ravi later came by and gave me his personal copy of *The Secret*, a book I had been longing to read nevertheless already knowledgeable of its lessons, and Corson’s (Est. 1886) *Vanilla Tea* advising me to seek him out whenever I came back to the

island and stay at their place for at least a week. The last night was spent as the French would say *en famille*, sharing a meal and toasting to good health with a UEFA soccer match in the cameo.

What struck me the most about my intimate albeit brief visit to the small island of Mauritius was the sense of aura that followed the island's aesthetics, the islanders and their rituals. The idea of a place being far removed yet fixed in an epoch teases an outsider's sense of belonging and alienation and mystifies the modes of production behind this idea or conflicting thought. Mauritius is both a paradise and slavers island and at the same time, an economic hub of diasporic opportunities. Agaléga not only holds the master key for serious socioeconomic change on the atolls but in agreement with Mr Norungee has the potential to be a strong contributor to the economy of Mauritius. However, Mauritius is far from taking back its independence from foreign import policies and establishing an industrialised coconut palm tree manufacturing institution. Instead, the coconut remains a humble spiritual servant of Hindu deities, representing purity, divinity, ego/ soul and the essence of nature. It is given human qualities; the ability to be good or evil, ego and consciousness, hair, eyes and mouth. Honoured with the healing powers of divinity coconuts replenish our souls, reboot our immune systems and refresh our outlook on spirituality and our positionality within its structures, rituals and beliefs. Thus, it is this the object (its content) and the image of the object (its composition) that carry an aura which disturbs the common knowledge held about objects or things being lifeless and inanimate.

Advertising uses the spiritual aura of island life as a powerful tool of and for brand loyalty in such a way that allows New Age movements like 'Superfoods Raw Foods' a branch of the Organic Food Movement and affiliate of the Slow Food Movement to reify their position in the FMCG industry as one with superior religious dynamics and ancient spiritual beliefs.

In the spirit of Rancière the advertising or aesthetics of commercialised coconut water disturbs the distribution of common knowledge held that regards banal household objects as without vitality or in the ontology of Harry Garuba's philosophy as lacking an animist unconscious which is in fact, as I hope this paper has begun to uncover, rooted in daily economic activities concerning Superfoods. However, it is only through the aura of spirituality that coconut water (and coconuts) is able to flip the dominant hermeneutic narrative on its head - and this aura strongly resides in the daily practices, gatherings and spaces among and between Hindu Indo-Mauritian kinship systems. Unlike the loss of aura that Walter Benjamin insists occurs in the mass reproduction of art - in this case aesthetic advertising - a new aura of individual spirituality and self-determined divinity based on the foundation of an "ancient" aura of collective spiritual ambition is brought to the surface by the bourgeois whom have the means to mass produce and re-sell a unique experience that's virtually inaccessible without a plane ticket. In this sense commercial coconut water advertising bridges the geo-temporal divide between urban/rural; North/ South; producer/consumer through the aura of spiritual that is captured in the physiological and physical properties of the coconut. Catchy phrases like "Enjoy this refreshing water drink picked, cracked and packaged at source"⁹⁰ bring together the physiological benefits of consuming coconut water, Flic-en-Flac's island aesthetic and, the visibility of colonial plantation islands or forgotten Dutch East Indies trade routes like Mauritius or Indonesia. A macrocosm of previous colonies like India, Sri Lanka and Brazil are not only unearthed as producers and sources of the 'divine' and 'pure' but by virtue of this fact are also canonised as pristine sites of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation. It is this fact that advertising uses in the

⁹⁰ Description of a 33ml Tetra Pak carton of Vita Coco Coconut Water from Woolworths online, currently retailing at R21,95. Retrieved from (https://www.woolworths.co.za/store/prod/Food/Food/Beverages-Juices/Speciality/Vita-Coco-Coconut-Water-330ml/_/A-898999000022) Accessed on 10 March 2017

microcosmic collection of symbols and words that entice consumer sales and enforce brand loyalty. Advertising in its illustration of the clean, unblotched and perfect island life aesthetic creates economic value for everyday objects like coconut water using Maslow's basic human need for belonging, for a spirituality sought after in the marketplace⁹¹ lifestyles of Neighbourgoods⁹² (JHB CBD) and Banting Food (Bryanston), in order to reach some sort of self-actualisation through healthier alternatives.

⁹¹ For more on spiritualism in the marketplace, see Terr Biddington (2007:122) (Literature Review, Endotes: 87)

⁹² These coconuts are of the niu kafa type, Mozambique provides the best growing conditions for these young green coconuts that are less sweet than the orange variety. Although sourced from Mozambique, some of the coconuts are clearly seen sporting Proudly South African toothpick flags.

CONCLUSION

The advertising of bottled coconut water uses an aesthetic based on an “exotic tropical island life” to globally mass reproduce an authentic experience in order to achieve brand loyalty and trust. A strategy this cunning results in three moments 1) it bridges the geo-temporal distance between exotic island living and everyday reality 2) makes visible previous colonial plantations as significant sites and producers of ‘the spiritual’ but simultaneously 3) reifies and reinforces Orientalist representations of these sites as merely sun, sand, spirituality and sea destinations. More specifically the aesthetic advertising of coconut water is built on the foundation of aura that is deeply embedded in the animist materiality of the coconut in Hindu spirituality. The coconut’s animist unconscious enables it, through the predicate of its divinity, to heal/harm, protect and bless the lives of those it encounters. With this animist materiality aesthetic advertising influence and change the narrative that regards banal objects and things as inanimate, rather exposing them as active subjects of agency involved in the assemblages between human and non-human relations. The story of Albert Engelbrecht allows us to draw simple connections between aura, spirituality, advertising and the Superfood movement in such a way that questions the vital materiality of banal foods that we often overlook and take for granted.

Through discussing the relationship between aesthetics and aura in the commercial advertising of coconut water, this research paper has attempted to analyse the way in which banal everyday objects like coconuts are turned into exotic products that come to stand as a macrocosm of collective island experience. This paper has looked at family gatherings, Hindu rituals and coconut plantations across the island of Mauritius and has merged the commercial advertising of coconut water together with the aesthetics of island culture. The aura of the ‘pure’ and ‘divine’

allows coconut water to resurface as an ancient and exotic gift of nature that can be massively reproduced without losing its aura but adapted for a contemporary and 'enlightened' consumer whose ambition to self-actualise is partly rooted in finding spiritual awakening/enlightenment.

Through unintended engagements with my host family and their relatives, I was able to ethnographically delve into a field of study that was unfamiliar and which steered my objectives into a direction that involved the study of philosophy and religion. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, I could only scratch the surface of what Harry Garuba refers to as animist unconscious, which deserves further investigation. I discovered that coconut water carries an anthropomorphic aura in its physical composition and physiological content that; allows it to travel across space and time; endows it with a divinity which validates its economic exploit and Orientalist representation; and comes to stand as a macrocosmic emblem for the microcosmic realities, intimacies, social relations and lived experiences of everyday life on a 'paradise' island. What I believe is a promising and unique field of study certainly deserves more qualitative and quantitative study in order to scratch below the superficiality of advertising and aesthetics so as to unveil the politics of food and eating in Mauritius.

ENDNOTES

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- iv Wolfe, 2009: 217. The validity of this fact is unproven however for the purposes of this research it is worth mentioning.
- v Ibid: 8-9
- vi Gunn, et. al Independent Origins of Cultivated Coconut (*Cocos nucifera L.*). p.1
- vii Siddharth Ahuja, and Uma Ahuja, *Coconut – History, Uses, and Folklore*, 2014:222
- viii Ahuja & Ahuja, 2014: 221
- ix See (http://www.sanskritimagazine.com/rituals_and_practices/importance-and-significance-of-coconut/); (<http://hindumythologyforgennext.blogspot.co.za/2012/04/sage-vishwamitra-part-1.html>) and (<http://hindutva.info/the-spiritual-story-behind-the-birth-of-coconut-2/>) for more information about Sage Vishwamitra.
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APPENDIX A

Figure 1: Last known image of August Engelhardt sitting in front of n aborigine taken several years before his death.



Figure 2: images of Rihanna and Madonna, who both endorse the benefits of Vita Coco:

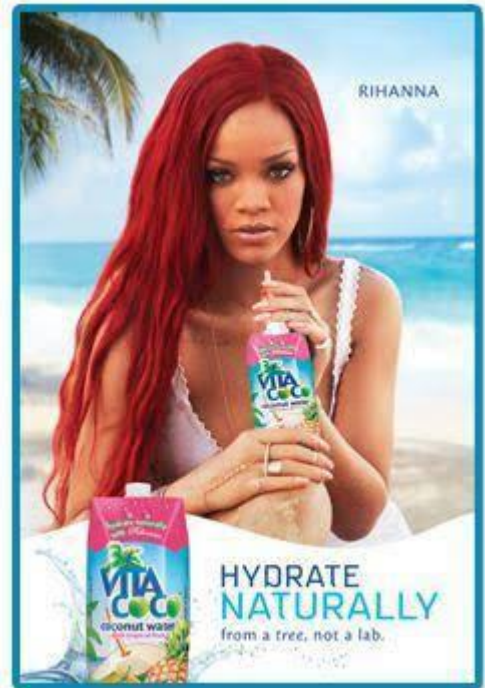


Figure 3: Store promotions at Checker's Hyper (Mall of the South, Johannesburg) and Health Warehouse (bottom)





Figure 4: One of Facebook’s most memorable and strikingly relevant memes

frizzy hair? coconut oil.
shaving cream? coconut oil.
dry skin? coconut oil.
bad credit? coconut oil.
bf acting up? coconut oil.



Figure 4: Campbell-Falck, Thomas, Falck, Tuto and Clem (2000) conducted a successful study on use of coconut water as a short-term intravenous hydration fluid for a Solomon Island patient. Pg 109

