

MAKING the MODERN PRIMITIVE

Cultural Tourism in the Trobriand Islands



Michelle MacCarthy

Making the Modern Primitive: Cultural Tourism in the Trobriand Islands

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Making the Modern Primitive provides an anthropological analysis of the encounter between local residents and tourists in the Trobriand Islands, a place renowned in anthropology and represented in various media as "culturally authentic." In such a place, how are ideas about authenticity implicated in creating and representing the self and cultural Others in the context of cultural tourism? Michelle MacCarthy addresses this question by examining four arenas of interaction between Trobriand Islanders and tourists: formal performances, informal village visits, souvenir shopping, and tourist photography. Drawing on both symbolic/interpretive approaches and concepts drawn from economic anthropology, she examines the relationship of tourism to the commoditization of culture, the ways in which local residents actively represent and enact "Trobriandness," and the ways tourists interpret and narrate their experience. MacCarthy offers an anthropological critique of concepts of authenticity, tradition, and cultural commodification, based on long-term fieldwork among Trobriand Islanders and tourists.

These notions, which have particular meanings as analytical concepts in anthropology, are also used and strategically deployed in the discourses of both Trobriand Islanders and tourists. Ideas about primitivity and cultural essentialism, while critiqued by anthropologists, are nonetheless used by both parties in tourism interactions to conceptualize and contextualize difference. MacCarthy demonstrates how such tropes are employed in ways that fit with prevailing metanarratives that each side holds about the other, and how these tropes are reproduced both in individual narratives of both tourists' and Trobrianders' experiences and in their interpretations (often misconstrued) of the lives of cultural Others with whom they interact. She examines the social dimensions of cross-cultural exchange in these four arenas (performance, village life, souvenirs, photography) to argue that cultural commodities are conceived of as singularities, a special category whose commodity status is downplayed in order to generate an increased sense of authenticity and to perpetuate the myth of a "primitive" economy and way of life more generally. In touristic encounters, experience itself is a sort of commodity, but relationships (real or imagined) are central to investing these experiences with meaning and value. This analysis contributes new understandings of the role and significance of authenticity in the anthropology of tourism, and its relationship to exchange; that is, how meaning and value are ascribed to the cultural products produced and consumed in the cultural tourism encounter with reference to ideas about what is and isn't authentic.

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Review

MacCarthy's work adds a fascinating new chapter to the important place of the Trobriand Islands in anthropological thought about exchange and in the history of fieldwork methodology. A great strength of the book is MacCarthy's balanced and unusually sensitive documentation of the perspectives of both foreign tourists and their Trobriander hosts. In the best anthropological tradition, she weaves extensive verbatim quotations from her fieldwork interlocutors directly into the subtle theoretical conversation that she stages in her own original voice. (Rupert Stasch, University of Cambridge)

About the Author

Michelle MacCarthy is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, Norway.