

Dugongs, the Last Remaining Mermaids: Beast lore (Ecolore), Post-colonialism and Maritime Cultural Tourism in New Caledonia

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers the *'Dugongs, les dernières sirens'*, or, 'Dugongs: the last remaining mermaids' exhibition at Aquarium des Lagons in New Caledonia as a touristic commodification of the maritime beast lore of the dugong (or mermaid). In unpacking the exhibit several other themes emerge, such as the absence of Kanak perspectives and issues of colonization / de-colonization.

KEYWORDS: Mermaid; Dugong; Cultural Tourism; Eco-Tourism; New Caledonia; Kanak; Post-colonialism; Ecolore

Introduction

Popular stories of [the mermaid, a...] fabulous marine creature, half woman and half fish, allied to the Siren of classical mythology, probably arose from sailors' accounts of the dugong, a cetacean whose head has a rude approach to the human outline. The mother while suckling her young holds it to her breast with one flipper, as a woman holds her infant in her arms. If disturbed, she suddenly dives under water, and tosses up her fish-like tail. (Kirkpatrick 1992: 667)

Eurocentric human/ dugong interactions and understandings of classical mythology have forged significant links between Sirens and dugongs, transferring Siren-lore into not only to modern-day popular culture but also onto newly mythicized landscapes.¹ In 1998, this journal, *Australian Folklore*, published the article 'Dugongs and Mermaids, Selkies and Seals' (Jøn 1998). That article explored connections between the beast lore of dugongs, and transformed and modern mythicized understandings of mermaids. The discussion highlighted an evolutionary social process that has enabled mythic-transferences to occur within the public memory of selkies and mermaids, re-shaping public understandings

¹ Gibbs and Roe (2016) have provided an excellent discussion of the way that settlers embed new landscapes with familiar mythic elements.

of both the mermaid and the dugong as a result. That transformative process was amplified by cultural commodifications/ capitalizations and aggressively marketed popular culture texts, particularly Walt Disney's 1989 film, *The Little Mermaid*. The article also delved into the way that mythic beast-lore, such as that of the dugong/ mermaid and the seal/ selkie, sits within modern society's response to ecological concerns.

Since then, various articles in *Australian Folklore* have further explored the place of beast lore, or more broadly eco-lore (Jøn 2014; Jøn and Aich 2015; Waldron 2010; Hawkins 2008, 2006). The links between lore and nature were perhaps most fully unpacked in the journal by Julie Hawkins (2013).² Hawkins theorized that:

Ecolore ... traditions have preserved data, often in symbolic form, about past human interactions with nature. (Hawkins 2013: 174)

We can see an ongoing blending of human populations as well as a significant transference of their mythic lore, derived ultimately from a vast array of cultures, traditions, landscapes, philosophies and histories. By engaging with their ecological data we can locate a vast expanse of human tradition concerning interactions with the nonhuman world. An analysis of this material can suggest means for reengaging with the nonhuman world and for reconsidering how we relate to the world itself. (Hawkins 2013: 187)

Arguably, the forces that reshaped mermaid-lore (Jøn 1998) fit neatly within that paradigm of 'ongoing blending[s]' (Hawkins 2013: 187).

This paper unpacks a recent commodification of dugong beast lore, or mermaid ecolore, in a cultural, or eco-, tourism exhibit,³ *Dugongs, les dernières sirens*, which was presented by the Aquarium des Lagons in Nouméa (New Caledonia) during 2016. *Dugongs, les dernières sirens* is of interest for two chief reasons. Firstly, as an example of the touristic commodification of early settler-lore, that was transferred to new locations as new connections to landscapes were forged.⁴ Secondly, it also highlights the uneven power relationships between white settler and indigenous, or Kanak, lore in New Caledonia's blended and developing post-colonial mental climate.

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2 Notably, Hawkins has also addressed the social processes that often operate around intersections between traditional lore and popular culture texts in the pages of *Australian Folklore* (Hawkins 2001, 2007).

3 Garrod and Wilson (2004) have suggested that aquariums and museums can be classed as eco-tourism attractions, yet, especially with cases such as the currently discussed exhibit, they can equally be considered cultural memory institutions, and hence cultural tourism activities.

4 On this process consider Honko's (1964) discussion of the development of folk memorates.

Methodology

The research process for this paper included a review of the developing scholarly debate around beast/ eco-lore and the place of folklore within Tourism in Folklore Studies. Key ‘themes’ (Ryan and Bernard 2003) were noted around the notions of power differences between the canons of indigenous and settler lore (Clarke 2007; Rose and Clarke 1997; Taylor 2014), and the place of post-colonialism. Readings were also completed regarding the place of the dugong within indigenous cultures, to unpack the plurality of possible interpretations.

During September 2016, a period of observing and interacting with touristic and cultural memory institution-based affirmations of maritime heritage and identity in New Caledonia’s Nouméa, and surrounding regions, was undertaken. That field work included visits to the *Dugongs, les dernières sirens* exhibit at Aquarium des Lagons. The following cultural memory institutions were also visited: the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, the Musée de la ville de Nouméa (the museum of Nouméa), the Musée Maritime de Nouvelle-Calédonie (maritime museum), and the Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie (the general museum). Field notes made about each cultural memory institution's exhibits, and those notes were then coded and analyzed. While in New Caledonia the more rural south-eastern and north-western coastlines were also visited (including some locations where dugongs can, at times, be sighted).

A series of unstructured interviews were also conducted, both rural locations and in Nouméa itself, also during September 2016. The interviews included participants from different genders, and social and ethnic backgrounds. This was deemed important so as to be inclusive of both Kanak and French-New Caledonian, and male and female, perspectives. Informants were asked about the place of the dugongs in local memory, and relationships between the dugong, the environment and local populations. Questions were also posed about informants’ knowledge of and experiences with localized mermaid and dugong lore. All participants were given aliases. Victor and Josephine were identified as 'key informants' (Bernard, Wutich, and Ryan 2017: 56-59).

Finally, while ‘building an inventory of concepts and links among concepts’ (Bernard 2006, 55) that were pertinent to the research, further readings were completed that helped unpack social forces within the New Caledonian experience. In turn, that process enabled better understandings how the *Dugongs, les dernières sirens* exhibit functioned within the social context of Nouméa.

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Post-colonialism, the De-colonization of Cultural Memory Institutions and New Caledonia

New Caledonia has a turbulent colonial past (Connell, 1987; Connell, 2016). The most heated period within that history, *Les Événements* (1984-1988), occurred within recent living memory. That period, *Les Événements*, has been linked to post-colonial efforts to re-negotiate New Caledonian identity. Due to the high level of tension that those identity re-negotiations caused, the period even included events of extreme violence. Some Kanak groups used a range of disruptive and threatening techniques, such as road blocks (Springhall 2001). In one Kanak raid, two New Caledonian police officers murdered, and a magistrate and several officers of the law were taken hostage by militant ‘Melanesian separatists’ (Greenhouse 1988). Guiart claims that during those events the Kanak operated ‘according to the rules of tribal warfare ... in order to increase their *mana*’ and affirm their place within New Caledonia (Guiart 1997: 85-87). Guiart also generalized that Kanak ‘actions against the white man have always been in the context of prestige competition’ (Guiart 1997: 88).

Les Événements saw settler communities perpetrate violence as well, and ‘New Caledonia experienced [such] serious unrest in 1984 [that it] was on the verge of civil war’ (Lacabanne 2017). ‘Unarmed Kanak political activists ... were gunned down by settlers in Hièngghène’ (LeFevre 2013: 88) and, in the period that followed those murders, public discourse revealed that some French-identifying New Caledonians thought of Kanaks as a sub-human form of ‘monkeys’ (Chanter 1996). Commentators have even suggested that for many ‘white’ New Caledonians, the risk of their ‘colonial adventure was to lose oneself, little by little in becoming “wild” or “encanaqué”’ (LeFevre 2013: 73; Merle 1995).

Reinforcing the still active ethnic and cultural separation in New Caledonian public memory, Kanak interpretations of the Eurocentric, and often not greatly de-colonized, Nouméa, is perhaps best illustrated by the commonly used phrase *la ville blanche* (the white city) in reference to the city.⁵ In contrast to *la ville blanche*, many Kanak choose to still live in *la brousse* (the bush), which is regarded their cultural space.

Because of the relative closeness of *Les Événements*, and the heat with which de-colonization and identity has been contested in New Caledonia, opposed identity narratives continue to hotly contend for dominance within the memory of landscapes as well as in other cultural expressions (Connell, 2016). Consequently, it follows that apparatus of identity narrative production, such as cultural memory institutions and touristic representations of the New Caledonian cultural landscape, are inherently

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of *Les Événements* and the tensions between Kanak and settler-society within New Caledonia, see Anderson and Anderson (2017).

politicized to a higher degree than what might be found in post-colonial nations that have enjoyed a more peaceful transitional period.

The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, which opened in 1998, has begun to address the need for post-colonial Kanak perspectives within the touristic apparatus of identity production. The portrayal of Kanak culture within other key memory institutions, however, continues to operate with colonizing museological practices. The Musée Maritime de Nouvelle-Calédonie (maritime museum) presents a largely French-focused perspective, and Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie (the general museum) still selects and orders indigenous objects based on form and aesthetics—without injecting the voice of the maker and an understanding of how those objects contribute to a cultural whole. In that way, Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie still presents the Kanak as a cultural ‘other’ rather than an integral element of New Caledonian society. Through coming to understand some of the tensions that still exist around the display and affirmation of Kanak identity within broader New Caledonian society, a question developed regarding just how significant the dugong was to the region’s indigenous population.

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Dugongs and New Caledonia and the Pacific

Estimations of New Caledonia’s dugong population, developed using an aerial survey methodology, have shown that the island nation possesses ‘the largest concentration of dugongs in Melanesia and one of the largest populations in the world, outside Australia and the Arabian region’ (Garrigue, Patenaude, and Marsh 2008: 81). Several New Caledonian informants expressed a belief, during fieldwork, that dugong populations had been driven further north over time, away from *la ville blanche* and other more densely populated southern regions. The informants expressed the idea that the human built environment had altered the scope of the zones habitable by dugongs. In turn, most informants also freely commented that New Caledonian human activity was now also being shaped, at a grass-roots level, by the presence of the dugong and a growing desire to save their remaining habitats.

Victor, one of our informants, identifies as a French New Caledonian, and is a middle aged professional male who lives in a beach-side suburb of Nouméa. He suggested that the re-shaping of human activity around the dugong was associated with the perceived high value of that animal as an element of the region’s natural heritage. Victor likened dugongs to sea turtles in that way, but explained that he believed that the sea turtle was perhaps slightly more vulnerable. He explained that some people had begun to adapt their use of waterways, to minimize chances of disrupting

dugongs. This aligns neatly with global political shifts, as 'conservation, animal welfare, ecological management, and, environmental sustainability; are becoming phrases with a greater political weight' (Jøn and Aich 2015: 184) across the globe. New Caledonia's developing dugong conservation effort have also been noted in the critical literature (Sibelet 2007; Cleguer 2015; Cornier and Leblic 2016). However, the combination of adapted uses of waterways and reduced boat traffic also have the potential to enable increases in illegal dugong poaching (Marsh 2002: 93), as those adapted behaviors make greater seclusion available to poachers.

Our informant Josephine, who is also middle aged, is, by contrast with Victor, a female Kanak from *la brousse* (the bush). Josephine spoke about the importance of the dugong to the Kanak people. She recounted stories that included significant dugong hunts and feasts, that she had been told by her grandfather, and that he had heard as a boy. Josephine's testimony, of the dugong as an almost sacred element of Kanak foodways, conformed scholarly understandings that 'dugongs hold an important place in Kanak culture and are still taken for customary purposes (mainly weddings, funerals and traditional yam feasts)' (Marsh 2002: 93). Further, Josephine's stories also presented links between the concepts of the landscape, the dugong population, and the island's indigenous people. Through those connections Josephine's stories provided an equally valid ecological data set for the ecolore of the dugong to that of mermaid lore. Hawkins has explained that:

As we look into the past, we can see in the context of older tales, myths and legends, that while they demonstrate how our species has lived in contact with the land, the land has not always functioned only as a background and support for the human story as it seems to do today. (Hawkins 2013: 175)

Josephine's story-based links between caring for nature and following traditional lifeways, the abundance of dugong, and the strength of the *tribu* (tribe), bring the landscape to the fore as an actor within the story of her tribe.

That close connection to dugongs is typical not just in New Caledonia, but also across the adjoining seascapes, where indigenous populations have had contact with the marine mammals. It is well established that dugong products have been

diperdagangkan di daerah Kudat Sabah bagi tujuan perubatan dan kepercayaan bagi etnik Ubian dan Bajau. (Zubaidah, Norsuhana, and Hamamah 2012: 54)

traded in Kudat Sabah for the purpose of traditional medicine and spiritual beliefs by the Ubian and Bajau ethnic groups.

Further, traditionally,

The Chinese in Kudat have been known to fashion dugong tusks into pipes for smoking, claiming that the fumes emitted during smoking have medicinal and therapeutic values. ...]The dugong's tears are also reputed to be used as a love potion, especially when a man or woman wants to win the heart of a beloved. (Rajamani, Cabanban, and Rahman 2006: 267)

That place of great cultural significance, held by dugong, within the sacred foodways, spiritual beliefs and traditional medicine of different indigenous cultures, and the stories recounted to Josephine by her grandfather, fit neatly with Hawkins description of the place of mythicized beasts within ecolore.

The physical realms of land, vegetation, animals and humans are intertwined with the invisible realms of 'nature spirits' in the motifs and archetypes we find in traditional stories. (Hawkins 2013: 174)

Josephine's dugong-hunt/ feast stories illustrated archetypal ideas about gender roles, the transition of a young hunter into a seasoned hunter, and connected dugong with the landscape in a spiritual way. Yet these complex relationships often remain ignored within the commodified and capitalized, 'bite-sized' representations of human experience that touristic exhibits provide. Victor, while laughing, suggested that it would be challenging to 'sell' tourists on the need to hand over money towards dugong conservation while simultaneously depicting their place within the Kanak's sometimes still practiced sacred foodways.

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The Last Remaining Mermaids

Aquaria, like all other heritage/ memory institutions, are touristic products, and 'tourism is essentially an experiential industry, [... through which] people are consciously seeking to purchase particular ephemeral or intangible experiences' (Cooper and Hall 2013: 2). In the case of folklore and identity linked tourism products, a consumer's conscious purchases are often of what is believed to be authentic cultural experiences that align with the traditions of a particular landscape (Davey 1992: 6-7). That generally held belief, among visitors, empowers the cultural positioning and narratives of exhibits within aquaria (as it does in all cultural memory

institutions). This can have a catalyzing affect in two ways, it reinforces the position of cultural narratives and voices that are included in exhibits, strongly linking them to notions of a regions authorized and ‘correct’ heritage, and it equally diminishes, and perhaps even silences, voices that are excluded from exhibits in their efforts to gain inclusion within the parameters of an authorized heritage status (Smith 2006; Smith and Waterton 2012).

The *Dugongs, les dernières sirens* exhibit entrance was marked with an interpretation panel that been shaped to resemble a giant book. The main feature of the panel was a stylized title for the exhibit and both dugong and mermaid images. The aesthetic of that marker was suggestive of great antiquity, which might in turn be tied to notions of the exhibit’s lore being more authentic. Notably, the panel also drew on Eurocentric maritime symbols, such as a tall ship, yet omitted any clearly Kanak-aligned imagery.



Figure 1. Photograph of an interpretation panel from the *Dugongs, les dernières sirens* exhibit.

Other interpretation panels (see Figure 1), visually presented the beast lore of the dugong through antique and quasi-scientific-looking tomes. One such panel even noting similarities in shape between a breasted mermaid and the upper portions of a dugong by linking the two with circles drawn over the illustrations to highlight those areas. Following the above provided description of mermaids, from *Brewer’s Concise Dictionary of*

Phrase and Fable (Kirkpatrick 1992: 667), the visuals of that panel also focused upon similarities between a mermaid mother holding her child and the way that a female dugong suckles her young. The Eurocentric positioning of that panel (Figure 1) could be noted from a cursory glance, without need to read the included text. The key point here is the lack of Kanak voices. The exhibit's interpretation panels presented a closed story line of New Caledonia's cultural landscape through including only a single line of interpretation.

Lit display cases (see Figure 2), remnant of glass-fronted book cases filled with pseudo-scientific paraphernalia that have often been linked with portrayals of nineteenth-century antiquarian curiosity cupboards, also featured strongly in the exhibit. Arguably, through borrowing that symbolism the exhibit builds upon notions that an established tradition was being presented to viewers. The cabinet of curiosities does make sense, in terms of design, as it speaks to the nineteenth century, which is a strong design theme across exhibit. However, in selecting that content for display, Aquarium des Lagons simultaneously reinforces

images used to promote New Caledonia on international markets [that] continue to be a political statement that constructs the territory as a French enclave in the Pacific not shared with Kanak people and several [other] minorities. (d'Hautesserre 2011: 380)

Through these design strategies the exhibit focused tightly on Eurocentric mythic and antiquarian symbolism, while excluding Kanak interpretations of the nation's wildlife and landscape/ seascape. This can silence Kanak perspectives within the understanding of New Caledonia's maritime cultural landscape among visitors to the exhibition.

While attending the exhibit several family-based groups of tourists were heard discussing the displayed objects and interpretation panels amongst themselves. In each case, their discussions echoed the closed cultural narrative presented by the exhibit. Aquarium des Lagons' failure to prominently present Kanak voices, the sacred foodways of the dugong, and the plurality of New Caledonian dugong experiences, may have contributed to the exclusion of Kanak identity narratives from those discussions. Undertaking a visitor study, in a scholarly sense, to get a better feel for how visitors were thinking about the exhibit - and certainly a focus group - would have allowed more precise generalizations to be made about the impact of this exhibit on visitor responses.



Figure 2. A glass fronted book cases filled with pseudo-scientific paraphernalia from the Dugongs, les dernières sirens exhibit.

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Some Analysis

Generally, it is understood that through folklore:

we trace the early formation of nations, their identity and analogy, their changes, as well as the inner texture and national character, more deeply than [in] any other circumstances, even in language itself. (Georges and Jones 1995: 160)

Likewise, the analysis of regional, or organizational engagement with particular folkloric elements, and the omission of others, can reveal much about the mindset of those organizations or regions. Selective engagement with lore elements reveals power relationships between the advocates of contending lore hoards, and localized understandings of how particular elements of lore relate to senses of place and self. Within societies that are

undergoing de-colonization processes, such as New Caledonia, exhibitions that relegate or excluding significant bodies of indigenous lore, while highlighting colonial interpretations of the landscape and fauna, can highlight the ‘inner texture’ (Georges and Jones 1995: 160) of struggles between contending identity narratives for active readers. For passive readers, however, it echoes and reinforces the colonizing identity narratives often associated with the ‘formation of [settler] nations’ (Georges and Jones 1995: 160) and, in the Pacific context, may serve to reinforce longstanding Eurocentric notions of the Romantic Pacific (Hall 2009).

Post-colonial thinking reinforces the need to include substantive indigenous voice within the representations of place, identity and culture. Key lore elements, such as the mythicization and sacred interpretation of significant fauna, contribute keenly to understandings of place, identity and culture in societies across the globe (Jøn 2014).

Decolonization is ... that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference (Chilisa 2011: 14).

Human frames of reference, objectively, include notions such as the interpretation of place, identity and culture. The social importance of those frames of reference, to the Kanak people, was demonstrated by efforts to build the prestige of Kanak-identity during *Les Événements* (Guiart 1997: 88). While some cultural events have taken steps to address these issues of decolonization, such as the *Melanesia 2000* festival—which arguably even ‘saved some aspects of Kanak culture from oblivion’ (Lacabanne 2017), other exhibitions and events in New Caledonia, such as *Dugongs, les dernières sirens*, have continued to relegate or even silence indigenous perspectives decades later.

The exact reason that Kanak perspectives remain marginalized within many exhibits, or relegated to presentation through the aesthetics of the ‘other’ (such as in the displays of the Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie), remains uncertain. However, the perception that it would be negative to merge European cultural elements with Kanak ones (LeFevre 2013, 73), held by some residents of Nouméa, suggests that underlying political forces support exhibits such as *Dugongs, les dernières sirens* presenting mono-cultural viewpoints.

Folklorists have noted the severe historical revisionism that can take place within the identity negotiations of settler-societies as they enter a process of post-colonial redefinition (Blanch 2009). Such a process could present challenges for Nouméa and her surrounds, as the already well-developed tourism industry would need to transition as well, and redefine

itself in keeping with a potentially shifting regional and national identity. Such a change process would also allow the further decolonization of New Caledonia, and a shift to no longer position the Kanak as an 'other'. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued so eloquently, once the 'hegemonic discourse' is repositioned in such a way as to 'occupy the position of the other', a major transformation takes place and it becomes decolonized (Spivak 1990: 121). However, so long as the socially dominant lore-commodifications of Nouméa remain Eurocentric, and exclude detailed presentations of Kanak voices, Nouméa will likely remain *la ville blanche* (the white city), and many visitors may miss out on the opportunity to develop a fuller understanding of the plurality of New Caledonia. In addition, the ongoing denial or diminishment of Kanak lore in the heritage institutions of Nouméa only continues to add to the long-standing frustrations that Kanaks have had with respect to the capacity to control and portray their identity.

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