

LE MORNE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE.

Protecting intangible heritage

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Abstract. The Le Morne Brabant Peninsula in SW Mauritius is a natural landscape of unsurpassed beauty but also a contested cultural landscape. Diverse threats exist to the *Le Morne Cultural Landscape* that has recently been inscribed on the World Heritage List. The inscription is based on cultural heritage criteria, with much of the cultural assets being of an intangible nature. The Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the site is largely based on resistance to slavery, and a suite of intangible heritage that ranges from myths to colourful dances. This paper provides the context for the conservation of the cultural landscape, defines the key components of the intangible heritage, illustrates various examples of obstacles that would have posed negative and irreversible impacts on the intangible heritage, and provides detail re the approach, methodology and legal instruments that were used to successfully protect the intangible heritage of this unique and important place.

1 A context for conservation of the cultural landscape

The Nomination Dossier (MAC 2007a) for the *Le Morne Cultural Landscape* in the south west of Mauritius was lodged at the World Heritage Committee on 11 May 2007, and was Inscribed (Property Ref No.1259 ([whc.unesco.org /en/list/1259](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1259))) on 8 July at the 32nd Session in Quebec. While the Property was proposed under Cultural criterion (iv), with criteria (iii) and (vi) added in support (MAC 2007a: ix), it was inscribed on the World Heritage List based on Cultural criteria (iii) and (vi) only, both of which stress the intangible heritage component of ideas, cultural events and living tradition..

The *Le Morne Cultural Landscape* (hereafter referred to simply as ‘Le Morne’ or LMCL) is a majestic natural site with a colonial legacy. It contains a rich intangible dimension with universal value that is reflected in the spirit of place and an evolving system of ‘history, memory and identity’ that is sustained and perpetuated by a living community. The management of the spirit of place and the universal value of Le Morne is complex, in the sense that it is a contested site, with opposing value systems competing for the same space.



Figure 1. Le Morne Brabant peninsula showing the mountain and land bridge (LMHTF and MAC 2008, Front cover).

2 Key components of the intangible heritage

"Le Morne Cultural Landscape is an exceptional testimony to maroonage or resistance to slavery in terms of the mountain being used as a fortress to shelter escaped slaves, with physical and oral evidence to support that use. Le Morne represents maroonage and its impact, which existed in many places around the world, and was demonstrated so effectively on le Morne mountain. It is a symbol of slaves' fight for freedom, their suffering, and their sacrifice, all of which have relevance beyond its geographical location, to the countries from which the slaves came from - in particular the African mainland, Madagascar, India and South-east Asia - and represented by the Creole people of Mauritius and their shared memories and oral traditions." (Statement of Outstanding Value as accepted by UNESCO WH Committee at the 32nd Session in Quebec, 6 July 2008 (whc.unesco.org/en/list/1259)).

The above SOUV is the culmination of a long process of collaboration between various stakeholders in the nomination process. Since this session of the Scientific Symposium focuses on management of the spirit of place, the key components of the intangible heritage will be put very concisely (for a more elaborate exposition see Nomination Dossier (MAC 2007a) and sources therein). The key components of the intangible heritage of Le Morne revolve around the Property's qualities as a place, and the dialectic relationship between place and the practice and effects of slavery. The nature, extent and impact of and resistance to slavery in Mauritius, have received attention from eminent scholars from Mauritius as well as abroad – the central role of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean slave trade has been identified.

In essence, Le Morne is nominated for the continued existence of events, beliefs and traditions of “songs, music, dance, healing, religious rituals and customs linked to, or derived from the beliefs and traditions of the maroon ancestors, the much revered and truly universal resistance fighters to the global phenomenon of slavery that has spanned the ages, and these qualities bestow upon the mountain a significance that is beyond space and time” (MAC 2007a, 58).

In the strong, collective Mauritian remembrance of slavery and maroonage, Le Morne is a powerful symbol of freedom, autonomy and resistance to slavery. The central aspects of this symbolic and historical anchor of Creole identity is captured in a belief system focussed on Le Morne: “Heritage of the Mountain is communicated primarily through the transmission of the story of Le Morne, in which their ancestors, the maroons, refused to submit to those who might wish to subjugate them and in doing so took their destinies into their own hands.

Le Morne sustains its captivating power in part due to encounters and beliefs, rooted in the Maroon story that generates in Le Morne a gateway between the physical and spiritual worlds. This is a gateway that continually reminds onlookers of the fortitude of the maroons and of the resistance that they exercised at this site. The continued narration of the story of Le Morne not only conveys awe and respect for the agency of the ancestors and the value of liberty, for which they were willing to die; It is also a contemporary expression of esteem for the promise of freedom today” (MAC 2007b, 5). The belief in the myth of Le Morne has been transferred to be a belief in Le Morne as the origin of Creoles, a place of rebirth, and a source of power that sustains the Creole community and heals the wounds of slavery over the generations (Bablee, in MAC 2007a, 65).

It is clear that at Le Morne, the conservation of the spirit of the place must revolve around sheltering the special qualities of the place, the continued belief system around Le Morne and the intertwined relationship between place and symbolism.

3 Examples of obstacles to conservation of the intangible heritage and successful interventions

3.1 Threats by physical intrusions on the site and some interventions

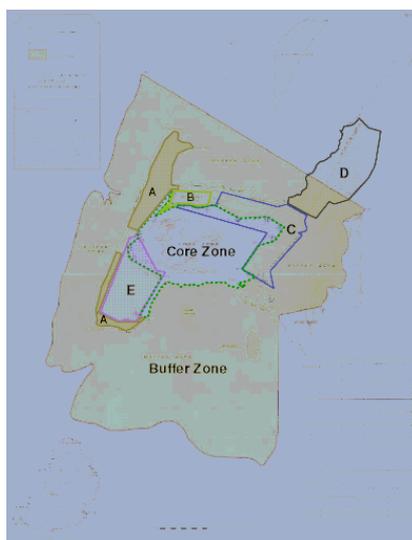


Figure 2. Existing IRS development (A), existing township (B) and proposed IRS development applications (C –E), before mitigation and control (Overlay on WH Property map (MAC 2007a, Map 2) by authors).

Physical intrusions can seriously undermine intangible heritage (even if done with the best intentions) or can be diametrically opposed to what the site stands for. Management of negative impacts by three large Integrated Resort Developments (IRS) will be discussed:

(i) The EIA by PBA International, for the application by Le Morne Brabant IRS Co Ltd, was brought before the Department of Environment (DoE) in 2005 (See site 'C' on Fig.2), at a time when the Nomination Dossier (MAC 2007a) was being drafted, but before any development guidelines were drafted. The magnitude of the impact would have rendered the conservation, interpretation and presentation of the OUV of Le Morne, inclusive of the intangible component, impossible - interventions were made by the Government on various fronts.

The development consisting of villas, a golf based country club and a lagoon club on key localities of a large portion of the peninsula, obliterated significant views of the mountain, intruded in the defined Core Zone as well as on a large archaeological site of the old (freed slave) village of Macaque, slave graves, as well as the larger maroon landscape and 'land bridge' connecting Le Morne with other important maroon sites such as the Black River Gorge and a 'slave trail' on the Petit Morne mountain range. The project transferred major negative impacts on the existing spirit of place and irreversibly altered the existing and historic visual qualities of the site. Due to historic events involving the previous family of landowners of this property the project initiated intense emotions in Creole communities, descendant of slaves and maroons. The EIA was incomplete, neglected slave history, did not identify major impacts and only recommended minor mitigation.

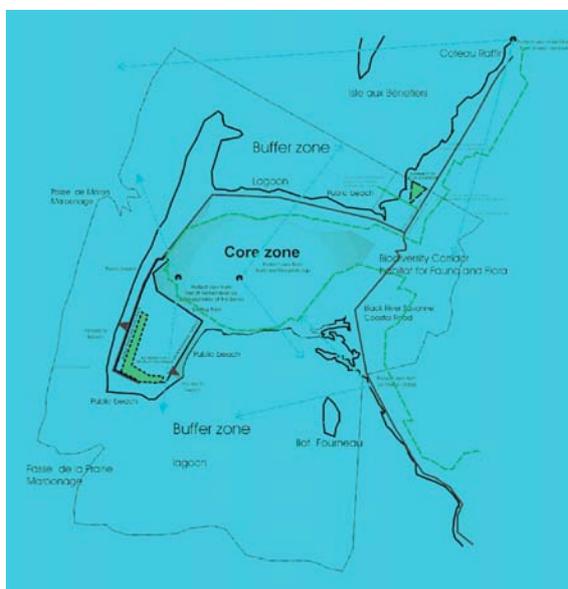


Figure 3. Selected mechanisms controlling physical development in the Le Morne Cultural Landscape emanating from the Management Plan (2008) and PPG2 guidelines (Bakker, in MHL 2007).

As initial intervention, an independent EIA review was requested - the reviewer's (Bakker 2007) report advised the DoE not to provide an EIA licence. The developers strongly resisted suggestions that their project may not go ahead, on the basis of the Letter of Intent by the Board of Investors (BOI) that was interpreted by them as permission to continue their project without change due to an EIA process. The final intervention was to appropriate privately owned sections of the land located in the Core Zone, while the rest of the land falling in the Buffer Zone was put under strong control mechanisms contained in the Planning Policy Guideline 2 (PPG2) by the Ministry of Land and Housing (MLH 2007), which by that time had been completed (See Fig.3), effectively prohibiting any form of private development on the land in question.

(ii) The EIA by Arup Sigma Ltd, for the *Corniche Bay* Integrated Resort Scheme application by Tatorio Holdings (Mauritius) Ltd, was brought before the DoE in 2007 (See site 'D' on Fig.2). The development comprised a hotel, wellness centre, villas and another golf related country club with a signature course. The EIA in no way reflected the requirements of the UNESCO WH Operational Guidelines or the Draft Management Plan - by this time however, ICOMOS had already retained the Nomination Dossier, completed the ICOMOS Site Evaluation Mission and provided feedback to the State Party. Fortunately the PPG2 (MLH 2007) had just been accepted by Cabinet, so providing a planning environment which was conducive to strongly direct the development.

Resistance by the developer followed a similar pattern than experienced previously – there was a demand for an EIA Licence for the full suite of development rights mentioned in the LOI, or else the development would be abandoned. The first intervention focussed on getting buy-in from the developer to accept the ramifications forthcoming from the SOUV, and also to become a partner in sustaining and supporting heritage through revising the design - this required reducing the scale and footprint of the design, removing the golf course and as much of the development as possible from the Buffer Zone, controlling and guiding the overlap of the development with the Buffer Zone boundary, the biodiversity corridor, the visual experience along the National Coastal Road, as well as critical views to and from Le Morne. The second intervention revolved around ensuring that the development timeline would be increased for proper investigation of the archaeological heritage as well as oral history, in order that the results of those studies would still be allowed to direct or alter the design where required (See Fig.4).

contained in the LMCL Management Plan (2008, 20-2), management principles and guidelines that focus explicitly on managing aspects of intangible heritage remain inadequate.

(iii) *Intrusion of viewlines and loss of critical views*: During the ICOMOS evaluation it was highlighted that the spatial and visual qualities of the property, critical to understanding its meaning, may not be adequately protected. This was thoroughly addressed in the final Management Plan (Odendaal, Bakker and Janoo 2008, Annexure 1) through the plotting of critical viewpoints and description of viewlines/cones. The State party took the crucial step of adding more area to the Buffer Zone in which specific control of built form and viewsapes could occur in future.

(iv) *Loss of spirit of place*: Sense of place can be destroyed by inappropriate developments outside of what the development policy intended – intervention includes that proponents of developments be guided by the LMTF and the DoE to understand the policies and guidelines of the LMCL before putting in any application, and that the PPG2 (MLH 2007) inform decision-making in for any EIA Licence applications or those needing a cultural impact statement, with added recommendations of the CVA.

(v) *Insensitive commercialisation of cultural assets* ('dances at the hotels for a penny (rupee)'): Cultural assets are often misused, with hotel owners placing demands on performances while getting the benefits, and with cultural performers being powerless or unprotected in terms of *how* they wish to present culture. Interventions include capacity building of performing arts groups, supporting them to form associations and regulating the use of cultural assets (without omitting the freedom of the proprietors) to prevent or minimise exploitation (in the same way that parks protect biodiversity).

(vi) *Poverty, powerlessness and unbalanced development in favour of 'those who have already'*: Slave descendants and those who were displaced from Trou Chenille and Maqaque are generally poor is obvious to any visitor to La Gaulette or Le Morne Village, adjacent to the LMCL. Their cultural assets can be trivialised or become a drawing card for large developments, who often view locals (predominantly slave and maroon descendants) as a cheap domestic labour supply, a modern day vestige of slavery (at least in the symbolic sense and in fact viewed as such by many local people). It is common knowledge that some developers tried to 'bribe' local people with material goods, promises of 'development', or even money, to obtain consent for their specific development proposal. Interventions include a good LED plan (following up from the policy statements and guidelines contained in the LMCL Management Plan (2008) that is fully cognisant of the heritage and that includes developing an enabling physical environment, especially in Le Morne Village.

(vii) *Erosion of cultural assets, collective memory and oral history through time*: Although oral history is kept in the national Archives, more has been recorded (MAC 2007b) for the formulation of the Nomination Dossier (MAC 2007a), and other projects have been completed (eg recording of the memories of Mme A Ramalingum, supported by the oral history collected by the Maroon Slave Archaeological Investigation Project 2002-3 as conducted by the University of Mauritius; Goupauloo 2005; Bablee for LMHF 2007; unpublished visual recordings by Lamarque, *s.a.*; and oral history as added to the document of Lamarque and Smitsman (2007), the significance of oral history in understanding the SOUV more fully, with subsequent formulation of more specific heritage management, cannot be overstressed. Intervention can be well planned

interpretation centres, cultural programmes, further recording of oral history and its dissemination back to the collective consciousness in a variety of forms and using a variety of techniques (booklets, schoolbooks, interpretation centres and active cultural tourism programmes).

(viii) *Disunity in Creole society*: Creole society is not monolithic – while cultural diversity in this grouping is natural and even commendable, it can give rise to real or even perceived stumbling blocks to gaining a shared focus regarding what is important about the heritage property. Interventions include targeting the heritage property as a site for multi-vocal expression and debate, while facilitating co-construction of viewpoints that converge on the essence of managing intangible heritage. Such use of the heritage property can start at the next Day of Freedom celebrations held each February 1, making full use of the celebrations on the public beach and at Trou Chenille.

(x) *Placing international recognition over local preservation and development of cultural assets*. Now that Le Morne is a WHS many expressed concern that the carriers of the heritage will be neglected. Yet it is the ground level preservation and intergeneration propagation of the heritage that is the most important; without that the site will lose its SOUV in any case. Intervention is through recognition and representativity (Also see Bakker and Odendaal (2008)).

(xi) *Lack of skills and knowledge of protecting managing intangible heritage*: While the management team have acquired valuable skill and knowledge in this field, further skills transfer is envisaged.

(ix) *Lack of recognition of difficult histories and conflict in presentation of the heritage site*: Intervention includes enlarging knowledge of the history of the site and by embedding the ICOMOS (2007) *Draft Charter on Interpretation and Presentation of Heritage Sites* in future interpretation and presentation policy and guidelines.

(x) *Lack of transparency and access to information*: While it is conceded that a certain measure of secrecy may have been necessary during the nomination process, considering the sensitive nature and the opposing parties contesting their rights on the mountain, it has now become essential that the Dossier, just like the Management Plan, should be in the open domain. The dossier addresses many issues that are of specific relevance to Creoles as well as the national population of Mauritius, and all parties have the right to see exactly on what grounds the inscription was proposed, and how the nomination was presented. Since much more information have been gathered and new perspectives have arisen since the Dossier was retained, it ought to be accessible to the public and available in the National Archives at least - only then can key role-players ascertain that they had been correctly and adequately presented.

4 Conclusions

The LMCL has achieved a very high rating in the international area, and a major milestone has been achieved. However, without the interventions, all can still be lost. The WHS status is a stamp of approval, and a signal that the international community recognises the stature and universal value of Le Morne. This in itself however, does not develop the heritage which is conveyed from generation to generation and exists largely as a suite of fragile intangible heritage, and certainly does not guarantee its preservation. Inscription is not the end of the road, it is only the beginning.

5 References

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