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# ***Pomalo* and *Fjaka* as the Island State of Mind. Cultural Anatomy of Time(lessness) on the Dalmatian Islands of Hvar and Dugi Otok**

## **ABSTRACT**

This presentation seeks to explore the connection between island space, body practices, and narrations in order to demystify often hermetic notion of “island time”. This generic notion is questioned through the cultural analysis focused on the concepts of “*pomalo*” and “*fjaka*”. In public discourse, *pomalo* and *fjaka* are perceived as typical island carefree mindset implying laziness, idleness, a sort of non-activity where one aspires for nothing. In some cases, it is even advertised as indigenous Dalmatian philosophy. Based on results from several years of ethnographic research conducted on the Dalmatian islands of Hvar and Dugi otok, the phenomenon of *pomalo* and *fjaka* are problematised from the perspectives of local islanders and foreigners who decided to settle on the islands. Their experience stir analytically intriguing questions that seek to explore not just the anatomy of time *per se*, but also point out to intertwinement of space, narration and body in production of island time.

## **KEYWORDS**

Island time, Dalmatian islands, *Pomalo*, *Fjaka*, Ethnographic approach

## ***Pomalo* et *Fjaka* sont un état d’esprit îlien. Anatomie culturelle des îles dalmates de Hvar et Dugi otok**

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Cette présentation vise à explorer le lien entre espace insulaire, pratiques corporelles et narrations afin de démystifier la notion souvent hermétique de « temps insulaire ». Cette notion générique est questionnée à travers une analyse culturelle des concepts de *pomalo* et *fjaka*. Dans le discours public et l’imaginaire populaire, *pomalo* et *fjaka* sont perçus comme un état d’esprit insouciant impliquant une certaine indolence, de l’oisiveté, une sorte de non-activité durant laquelle on n’aspire à rien. Dans certains cas, ils sont même revendiqués comme une philosophie indigène dalmate. Sur la base de résultats issus de plusieurs années de recherche ethnographique conduite dans les îles dalmates de Hvar et Dugi otok, les phénomènes de *pomalo* et *fjaka* sont problématisés à travers la perspective de locaux et d’étrangers ayant fait le choix de s’installer sur une de ces îles. Leur expérience révèle d’intrigantes questions qui conduisent à explorer, au-delà de l’anatomie du temps en elle-même, le point d’entrelacement du temps, de la narration et du corps dans la production du temps insulaire.

## **MOTS CLÉS**

temps insulaire, îles dalmates, *pomalo*, *fjaka*, approche ethnographique

## ***Pomalo* y *Fjaka* [fiáca] como estado mental isleño : anatomía cultural de la “atemporalidad” en las islas dálmatas de Hvar y Dugi otok**

Esta presentación busca explorar la conexión entre el espacio de la isla, prácticas corporales y narraciones para desmitificar la noción a menudo hermética del tiempo en la isla. Esta noción genérica del tiempo en la isla se cuestiona a través del análisis cultural centrado de los conceptos de *fjaka* [fiáca ] y *pomalo*. En el discurso público y el imaginario popular, *pomalo* y *fjaka* se percibe como una mentalidad despreocupada típica de la isla que implica pereza, ociosidad, una especie de no actividad donde uno no aspira a nada. En algunos casos, incluso se anuncia como auténtica filosofía dálmata. Basado en los resultados de varios años de investigación etnográfica realizada en las islas dálmatas de Hvar y Dugi otok, los fenómenos de *pomalo* y *fjaka* están problematizados desde la perspectiva de los locales y los extranjeros que decidieron

establecerse en las islas. Su experiencia suscita preguntas analíticamente intrigantes que buscan explorar no solo la anatomía del tiempo *per se*, sino que también señalan el entrelazamiento del espacio, la narración y el cuerpo en la producción del tiempo en la isla.

## PALABRAS CLAVES

tiempo en la isla, islas dálmatas, *fjaka*, *pomalo*, enfoque etnográfico

### 1. INTRODUCTION... OR TAKING TIME INTO CONSIDERATION

In the history of anthropology, islands have often figured as ideal research destinations. Whether one refers to doyens of modern 20th century anthropology like Bronislaw Malinowski and his ground-breaking research on the Trobriand islands (1978), or famous Margaret Mead and her research on Samoa (1928), island communities in the eyes of anthropologists often were perceived as worlds where physical detachment from the mainland implied not only spatial isolation but also temporal disfiguration. However, popular perception of the island as an anomaly had its social and cultural implications in the representations of island cultures often depicted through the metaphors of estrangement and alienation. Despite cultural relativism anthropologists advocated for, early 20th century ethnographies often disregarded *islomania*, which John Gillis defines as a specific mainland perspective in considering the island concept, sort of *long durée* of the Western imagination, which combines the ideas of isolation, connectivity, separation, the past and the future (2004). Thus, discourses about islands often evoked assumptions of isolated spaces “stuck” in the past, premodern and in time of their own, while island research inspired by the notion of “islands as laboratories of cultures” perpetuated even more this wide spread assumption. This “denial of coevalness” or “schizogenic use of time”, that Johannes Fabian recognised as the blind spot of ethnography (1983: 1-35), enabled anthropologists to tame the cultures they so desperately wanted to understand without prejudices.

This presentation goes beyond these popular misconceptions and tries to understand island time and island communities in their own terms (Baldacchino, 2008: 39). It does so by questioning practices and narrations of islanders on two Dalmatian islands: the island of Dugi otok and the island of Hvar. These islands differ in their size, population as well as historical legacy. Even though they belong to the same region of Dalmatia in the Adriatic part of Croatia, their history, social life, cultural heritage and spatial characteristic do not share much. The relationship between urban and rural settlements is just one example.

The island of Hvar was settled already in the Antique period by the Greek colonisers. In the Medieval period and especially between the 15th and the 18th century when most of the Adriatic was under Venetian political and cultural influence, the dichotomy between the coastal urban and the inland rural areas took its cultural form that even today haunts the relationship between islanders. This spatial rural and urban anatomy reflects today in unwritten rules of (self)perception and the cultural values attributed to islanders based on their place of origin. Those living in urban settlements of Hvar highlight their urban identity perceived as part of elitist “high” culture inspired by the Venetian cultural influence. On the other hand, those living in rural areas are often perceived as peasants and non-skilled agricultural workers whose culture is mocked and ridiculed by those living on the coast.

Internal social stratification and cultural codes on the island of Dugi otok took other forms based on different historical and social developments. For most of its history, Dugi otok was not permanently inhabited and was private property of Venetian nobility living on the mainland. High cliffs on the western part of the island conditioned the distribution of the settlements mostly in the east overlooking mainland and neighbouring islands of Iž, Pašman and Ugljan. The specific geographic configuration of Dugi otok (over 40 km long) and poor connection between the northern and the southern parts of the island compel islanders in agriculture (olive grow, viticulture) and fishing.

Differences between Hvar and Dugi otok are noticeable in their dialects, island economy and in recent years their (in)visibility in the public space. For instance, the island of Hvar due to its urban heritage, music festivals and natural beaches stands as tourist mecca and vibrant hotspot during summer months. On the opposite, Dugi otok due to its poor infrastructure, lack of urban heritage and small number of inhabitants is not a tourist destination like Hvar. Predominantly rural landscape and poor ferry connection with the mainland makes it hard for its islanders to accommodate the same number of tourists as Hvar. However, in the broadest sense, despite their differences, the two islands belong to the same region of Dalmatia. Furthermore, islanders on both islands share similar sense of humour as well as the resourceful and thrifty labels commonly attributed to islanders. Among these common attributes that they impose on themselves and that are proverbially attributed to them by mainlanders, they share a similar view on the notion of time.

This presentation seeks to understand the performative aspect of time that is popularly signified as the island time. To be more precise it focuses on the notions of *fjaka* and *pomalo* as specific cultural forms of island time. The anatomy of the island time (lessness) so well embodied in these phenomena stir analytically intriguing questions. First of all, the questions of cultural and social aspects of (time)lessness especially in regards to the discourses associated with the concept of imaginative geography proposed by Edward Said: Temporal othering besides textual representation figures as important trope in the imagining and portraying spaces other than our own (1979: 49-72). Having in mind that discourses about islands often embark on path of their physical and temporal otherness, as well as the fact that in this case they are often impinged within cultural framework of Balkanist discourses and its rhetoric of delayed modernity make the discussion on island time entangled by a double otherness: in the sense of space and time. Secondly, this presentation questions what makes *fjaka* and *pomalo* by analysing the intertwinement of space, narrations and body. At last, it questions the normativity of time and the possibility of co-existence of different time frames that defy and overlap. In order to answer these questions, the cultural analysis will focus on interviews with islanders and lifestyle migrants that settled on the islands taking into account their perspectives and lived experience. What are *fjaka* and *pomalo* for them and how the sense of island (time)lessness is performed and created by their experience of living on the island? Based on the results of several years of research on the islands of Hvar and Dugi otok, this presentation will explore the anatomy of the island time or the entanglements of diverse temporal frameworks that goes beyond deterministic the-cause-precedes-the-effect linear conception of time.

## 2. POMALO AND FJAKA. THE ANATOMY OF ISLAND TIME

From the mainland perspective, the notion of time on the islands of Dugi otok and Hvar seems to defy normative classification set by a clock. For a newcomer, setting on the island implies entering into a realm with its own temporal rhythm set by internal social rules. Reading days old newspapers, chilling in the shade in the middle of the day or taking a nap after lunch contribute to this widespread popular notion of "island time". Furthermore, this experience of "time at a slower pace" often reminds island visitors of their own personal past: childhood memories when time was "slower" or romanticised historical periods when time seemed different than today. As one of Hvar newcomers concluded: "Like some dogs here run free. I remember being a kid in Scotland the dogs used to run free. Thirty years ago. But they don't run anymore". However, the "present perfect" perception of time that newcomers seem to enjoy during summer months represents only one side of the coin. As for islanders, this time is not exotic or unusual. Traditionally, islanders set the course of their daily rhythm according to the seasonally conditioned work obligations. Jobs in agriculture and fishery force them to follow an annual rhythm, whereas renting business during tourist season as additional economic resource sets a pace for a different timeframe. This means they wake up early to work in the fields, while several hours between noon and early afternoon are reserved for the rest. Due to high temperatures during summer months, taking a nap, relaxing in the local bar or taking a swim on the nearby beaches sets the tone for an experience of time that seems to go slower.

The research conducted between 2015 and 2017 in the central part of Hvar shows that island newcomers or lifestyle migrants found this specific island time very attractive and perceive it as an island brand. Interviews conducted with those that settled on the island show that daily siestas were one of the major arguments when describing the positive sides of life on the islands. Interlocutors that came from Belgium, Scotland, Japan, Slovakia, and Norway at first described cultural obstacles that they encountered when confronted with this island daily rhythm. Even though all island newcomers that I had a chance to conduct interview with came from different cultural backgrounds, their experiences share some similarities. Before their arrival, their experience of time was usually associated with the urban lifestyle: Time seems to be slipping away like sand through the hour glass or is "chased" and there never seems to be enough. Non-island time was associated with their careers, stressful periods and social estrangement due to culturally encouraged individualism.

On the other hand, island time was experienced as slower and for most newcomers it took a while to adjust to the new temporal coordinates of the island. Furthermore, the island time was structured by the unwritten rules that never neglected individualistic exploration of "free time". Whether it is about waiting for a plumber to fix broken pipes in the house, or a mechanic that promised to meet at certain time but was over an-hour late, the island time was conditioned by the social rules approximated by the individual assessment. Even the ferry departure time was roughly estimated through the lens of the socially preferable accounts of the island time: Those that were late for the ferry blamed the captain for leaving before time, even though the ferry left the island on designed time of departure. The distance between the islands or to the next big city on the mainland (Split) was measured not in nautical miles but in hours spent on the ferry. After a certain period of adjustment, most Hvar newcomers learned to enjoy their spare time distancing themselves from

their past experiences of time that they associated with their land of origin. The prerequisite was to interact with others and respect socially favourable experiences of island-time and the community unwritten rules that structured its own daily rhythm. Consequentially, most newcomers noticed that the time was binding not only to the social rules but also to the annual rhythms of the island. While long days and high temperature during summer seem to make an impression of never-ending day, in reality time seems to be slipping away due to the intensity of social life on the island. Winter months on the other hand with cold winds and images of seemingly deserted island enabled individualistic “me time”; making islanders much more contemplative and reflexive about the world around them.

The entanglement of nature and society in experiencing island time also reflects in the language. Even the word “vrijeme” in Croatian means both “time” and “weather”. Therefore, island landscape and seasons play an important role in experiencing and conceptualising island time. Time was experienced and oriented through the sounds of nature, seasonal winds like local *bura*, the sound of church bells and ferries honing their arrival or departure from the island. Most interlocutors concluded that time does not stand still, but rather bends to the rules of island community and yearly seasonal rhythm, slowing down and accelerating at different pace. After spending some time on the island, newcomers managed to understand the local saying *pomalo* that everybody mentioned in the beginning: *Pomalo* is a favourite local proverb that usually ends conversations and is used instead of “Goodbye”. It literally means “take your time”, or “maybe now, maybe later”, “from time to time”, “take it easy”. It is far from signifying some generic cognitive perspective, despite its ambivalent nature of representing the sense of “being in time” and “being late”. It is used as cultural code, as a sort of social warning and personal consolation in situations when life becomes too hectic, the experience of time unbearable or time seems to be out of control. Although *pomalo* is used as a sort of proverbial and nonchalant attempt of resistance to the non-islanders experiences of time, another culturally related phenomenon points to further understand island time: The concept of *fjaka* represents both the state of mind and the embodied lived experience in relation to time. Even though it does not exclusively represent island time and can be experienced on the mainland, its lived experience on the islands of Hvar and Dugi otok was something that most interlocutors highlighted as a unique island phenomenon. In popular perception, *fjaka* is praised as local philosophy, as a worldview that embodies the sense of indifference as well as curiosity that makes one think about the world in general. *Fjaka* as a phenomenon is difficult to describe: It usually represents a sense of corporal indifference and at the same time a heightened awareness about everything that usually goes unnoticed. As such, *fjaka* is sometimes associated with laziness, and for outsiders it can very well fit within stereotypes about southerners and their lifestyle. However, *fjaka* points out to the local experience of the time –one that is both narrated and performed, adjusted to cultural and social coordinates of island experience while pretending to be both timeless and dynamic. It represents the glitch in time when thinking about everything and thinking about nothing comes together, when hyper sensed (non)activity indefinitely postpones problems by culturally encouraged indifference and there-is-nothing-one-can-do attitude.

Research conducted on the island of Dugi otok shows that *fjaka* earned a special place in the island community of Sali. In this port, the biggest settlement on Dugi otok, the meeting spot for those eager to enjoy their

Figure 1. *Linčarnica* in the port of Sali, a narrow part of the street used as a place to rest and decorated to highlight its purpose



spare time was named *linčarnica* (fig. 1), which literally means “a place for being lazy”. According to interviews conducted within this community, it represents a living monument to *fjaka*. *Linčarnica* refers to a triangular slope part of the promenade painted and decorated by local enthusiasts. Its position and visual vividness make it hard not to notice or to bypass in getting from one part of Sali to another. It is perceived as an *homage* to *fjaka* and the Mediterranean spirit of islanders. It is a place where one can “dangubiti” (literally “waste one’s time”) without being judged. Also, it is a place where one can sit or lay down reflecting on the world, start a conversation or take time to rest. As a living monument where rest is perceived as worthy to commemorate, it points out the experiences of island time that cannot deny the tourism influenced reality. The chance to memorialise time for being lazy shows that the philosophical reflections and critical thoughts so often evoked by the islanders when describing *linčarnica* and its Mediterraneanness reflect more on the time gone by than the contemporary moment. However, spatialisation and memorialisation of specific experiences of island time show that space is not just an empty canvas where one can inscribe the temporal dimension, but rather an important element in experiencing time. Places like *linčarnica* stir specific body practices and social gatherings where islanders interact and share their stories, but also where they can relax from their daily obligations in tourism and where they can experience island time.

### 3. MAKING TIME... CONCLUDING REMARKS

The notion of island time problematised through these two case studies shows that time is not only a cognitive category, determined by causality, displayed by clocks or represented by calendars, stretched between the past, the present and the future. The phenomena of *pomalo* and *fjaka* show that the notion of island time, often perceived as an exotic and represented as part of the island physical anomalousness, is entangled between diverse factors that articulate the rhythm of island time and its pace. As social and cultural constructs, *pomalo* and *fjaka* are experienced and performed taking into account the island spatial characteristics, annual seasonal cycles and embodied socio-cultural practices of making time. The research of these time-related concepts on both islands shows that island time exists as an ambivalent category that is constantly being renegotiated. On the one hand, the cultural phenomena of *pomalo* and *fjaka* as reflections of island time are generated by the specific historical, social and economic contexts. On the other hand, tourism, migration and globalisation affect the way islanders experience their traditional usage of time. *Fjaka* is the most prominent phenomenon of island time, a sort of agitated stagnancy stretched between the past and the future. As ambivalent phenomenon, it encapsulates both the necessity of slowing down and taking time, making island time seems timeless as it is often stereotypically portrayed and perceived, but taking into account different temporal frames that enable it to appear as the blitz moment of wit remarks and critical reflections. It is the point where individual and collective notions of time meet and renegotiate through bodily experiences and socially preferable discourses.

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