

Postcards from the Other Side: Pacific Islands as Living Museums?'

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Abstract

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Introduction

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) account for only 1.3 million (0.3%) of all international tourist trips but they make a substantial contribution to island economies. However, the attraction of islands to travellers is not new. The search for Eden dates back to classical Greece and Rome, even India, and tropical islands, in particular, have long been viewed by Europeans variously as idyllic scenes of pre-Fall paradise or as places almost beyond civilisation, inhabited by men (and sometimes women) displaying almost proto-human characteristics. Shakespeare graphically portrayed them in such plays as *The Tempest* and similar themes were later addressed by other writers, including Sir Thomas More, Defoe and Rousseau, and were popularised in books for children, e.g. by Ballantyne and Robert Louis Stevenson. More recently, William Golding wrote in this same tradition, but specifically contrasted his work to earlier, more optimistic depictions of human nature.

The competing stereotypes of Pacific islands continued with the establishment of colonialism in the second half of the nineteenth century and were reinforced by the emergence of the picture postcard as a popular and ubiquitous form of communication, the heyday of which was the 1890s-1930s.

Method

Through content analysis, an established sociological approach, a sample of postcards, mainly from the author's extensive collection is presented, with the aim of identifying the most common themes and situating them in their historical context. All are depictions of South Pacific Island societies, mostly of Fiji, and most date from the period 1900-1920, when Western colonialism was being established.

Discussion

During this period, visitors to the South Pacific habitually sent cards portraying natives and native scenes to their friends and relatives at home. The paper explores the relationship between images and tourism through such postcards, and suggests that the images on the cards, produced largely by people of European descent, reflect earlier racial stereotypes and mirror the heavily stratified structure of island societies. These perceptions, in turn, were transmitted to visitors' friends and relatives, who received (and often collected) the cards.

Several themes emerge from the content analysis: first, the *Picturesque*, or the aestheticisation of nature; secondly, *material culture and traditional housing*, depicting key features of the colonial economy; thirdly, *townscapes and buildings*, exemplifying colonial modernity (e.g. hospitals, libraries, churches and civic buildings) and, fourthly, *the social scene*, including everyday activities and special colonial occasions, where native people are but a token presence.

The fifth theme relates to the region's peoples, including the 'not-so-noble savage'. Men from 'Melanesia' are generally presented as more savage than noble, whereas those from 'Polynesia' are presented more sympathetically. Similarly, 'Melanesian' women, though presented as exotic, and often partly clothed, are usually portrayed at work, whereas 'Polynesian' women tend to be portrayed as more erotic. Very similar themes emerge in the portrayal of Pacific Island Countries at the many World Fairs popular in Europe at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

As in Bali, the portrayal of Pacific islands in the cards was very much as 'a living museum,' a way of life that was exotic, erotic and savage, and yet countered by the portrayal of the colonial influence as both modernising and civilising.

Conclusion

The presentation ends with a discussion on how far the themes described have continued into the promotion of Pacific island tourism destinations. Previous work in the region suggests that the primitive and exotic ('the other') continue to be portrayed in tourism-related images, albeit more playfully than in the past, and that the 'primitivism' of many Pacific islands continues as an underlying theme, though also to a lesser extent than in earlier periods.

Key References

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Social Science discipline

Content analysis is an established approach in sociology and social anthropology and the paper is heavily reliant on an historical approach, to understand the overall context in which the postcards were sent. It is also a contribution to postcolonial theory, in that it traces one way in which racial and social stereotypes of colonial people were transmitted.