

THE ROLE OF TOURISM
IN
TONGAN CULTURE CHANGE

by

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Although tourism is responsible for some of the most profound culture change in recent years, there has been little research on its influence in altering cultural patterns. This paper examines alterations in handicrafts and social values in the Polynesian Kingdom of Tonga, and is based on fieldwork conducted in Tonga from February to July of 1976.

Tongan Tourism

Tonga, the sole remaining Polynesian Kingdom, is located about 550 miles southwest of Samoa. Urbanowicz (1977) has traced the history of tourism in this area and thus only a brief review is needed here.

Prior to the late 1960's, few tourists came to Tonga. In 1967, the International Dateline Hotel was built primarily to accommodate officials or government travelers. However, in the last few years, a number of smaller hotels and guest houses have opened, and they are sufficient to meet the needs of air passengers (approximately 6,700 in 1976) who stay for a few days. The largest group of tourists continue to be the cruise ship passengers, who have increased from 25,000 in 1972 to 62,000 in 1975 (Tonga Visitors Bureau 1975), an increase of approximately 150% in only three years.

The attitude of the Tongan government to the rapid rise of tourism is ambivalent; it is open yet wary. Tongans realize that if things turn out poorly, the process will be irreversible; an attempt is being made especially to learn from the mistakes of two former Pacific monarchies, Hawaii

and Tahiti, who were overwhelmed in the past by other foreign influences. Though direct colonization is no longer a threat, Tongans are afraid of the neo-colonial kind of external control that can arise from foreign investments in the Kingdom. A report from the Tonga Visitors Bureau (T.V.B.) focuses on another issue, remarking that "the general impression as understood by the travel people is that Tonga is afraid of the moral and social effects of a visitor industry" (Wallis 1971:18). However, Crown Prince, H. R. H. Tupouto'a notes that "...if tourism means a better life, more jobs and opportunities, I can't see any harm in it. There are strict social conventions in Tongan society which regulate behavior" (Tonga Chronicle 3-25-76).

According to the Minister Responsible for Tourism, Hon. Baron Vaea (T. V. B. 1972), four factors make Tonga unique in its potential ability to absorb the impact of mass tourism: first, although a member of the British Commonwealth, Tonga has never been colonized or subjected to a foreign government, and has been able to maintain its freedom in determining local policies and future goals. Second, the Constitutional Monarchy has existed for over one hundred years, giving stability to all development. Third, missionaries have assumed an active part in Tonga's development. Religion is a major factor in everyday life, which adds stability to all growth and change. Finally, there is no freehold land in Tonga. No foreigners may own land and the government must approve all leases of land to overseas companies or persons as well as to Tongan nationals.

With due respect to Hon. Baron Vaea, I believe that the

key factors in the latent development of tourism in Tonga have been geographic isolation and lack of outside interest in the island rather than internal stability. Tonga's land tenure system, however, is an important issue. The Constitution of 1875 declares that it is illegal for anyone, including the King, "to sell one part of a foot of the ground of the Kingdom of Tonga, but only to lease it in accordance with this Constitution". Since no non-Tongan can own land, real estate speculation will never occur, with the accompanying temptation for an islander to sell his agricultural property for an immediate financial gain and a landless future. This has deterred growth. Foreign capital to date has been hesitant to invest on a lease basis, and the government is even more reserved towards their overtures. With the exception of the Port of Refuge Hotel on the remote Vava'u island group, only one foreign request for a lease to build a resort has been granted; significantly, the entrepreneur is a direct descendant of Tahitian royalty, an indication of Tonga's desire to "keep the business in the family".

Thus, while Tonga is unique in its land tenure system, in most other respects it is not. Tourism is growing, its impact is becoming more pronounced, and Tongans realize the necessity to develop policies that will encourage tourism's benefits and minimize its problems. Whether Tonga meets these issues in a unique fashion remains to be seen.

The Impact of Tourism on Handicrafts

Tongan handicrafts have always been an important part of Tongan culture, though in the past they were primarily utilized

for practical and ceremonial purposes and were not considered "art" as such. With the rapid development of the visitor industry cultural items have now taken on a new value - both in the eyes of the Tongans and of the tourists. It is the latter that tacitly decides what is aesthetically pleasing and/or unique (therefore, valuable) and this information is subtly transmitted through sales figures to those who make and sell the handicrafts. They, in turn, create more of the same (i.e., "what sells") and offer their products to a new wave of customers, who pick and choose and influence the direction of production once again. A cyclical pattern of supply and demand has emerged which, while not surprising from an economic standpoint, has had profound implications in terms of changes in traditional handicrafts. Alterations and innovations, if and when they occur, are most often manifestations of the buyers' preference, not the seller's. With this in mind, we will concentrate here on the alterations that have occurred in Tongan handicrafts, with particular emphasis on tapa, as an example of the major changes in Tongan plastic art forms induced by tourism.

Tapa is certainly the most popular and best known handicraft item in Tonga. It is handmade from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, according to a process that has not been altered significantly in hundreds of years. This production process is now becoming a tourist attraction in and of itself due to its appeal as a "native art" that has not yet been automated.

Tapa has always figured prominently in all ceremonial occasions in Tonga - given at births, weddings, funerals, and

other significant events, it symbolizes wealth. This exchange still reaffirms and strengthens social bonds and status relationships. It functions as a focal point of civility (Urbanowicz 1976), with all the attendant implications for social behavior that such a relationship implies. Tapa also serves in a purely functional capacity and is particularly useful as bedding and as a room divider. Once worn as clothing, its beauty is still very much appreciated by Tongans.

To satisfy the demands of an expanding tourist trade the commercial production of tapa is increasing as more women participate in this cottage industry. Simultaneously, fewer women are producing tapa for ceremonial purposes or home-use. Although virtually all women know how to make tapa, and will make it if the need seriously arises, a growing number of them (especially younger women) view the process as a time-consuming task which does not warrant the effort except for the tourist dollar. The proportion of those producing for domestic (as opposed to commercial) purposes is thus dropping, though as the population increases the actual number is probably growing. Many of the women who live near Nuku'alofa now buy the paper mulberry bark in the market already stripped and cleaned, and some are even purchasing pounded out pieces which only have to be glued and decorated. Although tapa has always been "borrowed" from kin to meet ceremonial responsibilities, it may not be too long before Tongans are selling it to each other - an unpleasant thought for many in the culture, since the exchange is ideally performed out of love and respect. Some of the older women believed even until recently that it was wrong to sell tapa to

papalangis (foreigners), preferring to give it as a gift. Under the pressure of increased tourism, this notion was quickly dropped.

Several changes have come about in the tapa currently sold in Tonga, and all can be directly traced to the rise of tourism in the Kingdom. Economic factors have caused a bending of traditional styles to conform to foreign taste and convenience. The most evident change here is in the size of the pieces of tapa that are sold. They are now much smaller, averaging around one meter in width and two to three meters in length, due to the bulkiness of larger pieces, with the problems of air transport and "finding a place to hang it". Traditional designs are large and fairly spread out - the new smaller pieces have forced the women to condense and consolidate patterns, sometime rearranging them. Although indigenous designs are still used, their spacial relationships have become distorted. This has resulted in pieces being produced in a much neater fashion; partly in response to Western notions of artistic "order", and partly due to the demands of a smaller space that is viewed more closely. (An informant described a piece she made for sale to the tourists for which she felt she would get a good price because of its straight lines, neat edges, and lack of stains. Her mother disdained the carefully-made piece as "not Tongan!". In addition, more women are beginning to produce tapa pieces with contemporary decorations; such as the Royal coat of arms, maps of the Kingdom, and scenes of supposed tourist interest.

Similar changes have occurred in other handicraft items. Woven handbags are now offered that incorporate color into the weave, have shells on the outside and/or plastic lining on the inside, or have "TONGA" woven onto the side. Many wooden carvings

bear a striking resemblance to tiki gods, and circular (and even occasionally oval) mats are sold. In addition, a whole range of handicrafts are now produced that have appeared in the last decade, including sandals, serving trays, ukuleles, and woven stuffed donkeys (currently the best selling item). Most schools in the Kingdom began to teach handicraft production as part of their regular curriculum several years ago when there was a fear that these skills would be lost if the younger generation did not use them. There is a strong emphasis on quality in the student work, though not on innovation.

In a weekly broadcast on Radio Tonga, the Tonga Visitors Bureau encourages those who make handicrafts to do their best and to make what the tourists like. There is an appeal to national pride as well, with a reminder that Tonga will be judged by what is produced, and will attract more visitors if the handicrafts are of a superior quality. There are no laws to regulate standards of production other than the informal laws of peer-group opinion, which are perhaps more effective in maintaining high quality than any set guidelines. The T. V. B. also sponsors a contest every year to determine the best new handicraft idea.

By contrast, tourists tend to be indiscriminate about the authenticity of what they are buying, since few seem to have a specific notion as to what to expect. Many leave clutching their "real" Tongan placemats, laundry baskets, and "hula" skirts with a happy smile. These are objects which certainly are not indigenous to the culture, yet they are made in Tonga by Tongans with local materials. The issue of "when is a handicraft made in Tonga not a Tongan handicraft" is not considered here but is important to the interaction between Tongan hosts and foreign guests

and the consequences for alterations in traditional handicrafts. It should be noted, however, that at this time neither side bemoans these alterations as a "sellout", and that the line between true-traditional and pseudo-traditional handicrafts (in any culture) is blurred and has yet to be drawn clearly. Whether the increase in handicraft production for tourists has heightened Tongan appreciation of indigenous art forms is also unclear.

The Impact of Tourism on Social Values

Tonga is traditionally a stratified ranked society in which lineages are extremely important. Families are patriarchal and in the majority of the households today the husband provides the sole source of income from farming. His role as provider is important in his own eyes, and no man would think of marrying without having some land that he at least had access to.

As tourism increases more wives are becoming involved in cottage industries, making a wide variety of handicrafts. The work itself can be accomplished at home sandwiched between daily activities or in the evenings - very few women let this work interfere with their domestic duties. Since the raw materials utilized are indigenous and the production takes place at home, the payment a woman receives from a handicraft sale is entirely profit. Though cruise ships average only three a month, an industrious woman can make considerably more money than her husband, contributing up to 70% of the family's income (Havea, personal communication). This economic shift is responsible for a growing number of domestic problems, as male pride in his role as breadwinner and the ideal of male authority is eroded, and the wife brings home her earnings and demands control over how it is spent. Some men respond by

working more on their cash crops, but most merely resent their wives' invasion in what the men conceive to be their sphere of influence. Although separation and divorce are still rare in the Kingdom, conflict on this issue is not.

Another significant feature of Tongan family life is a strong brother-sister taboo (which extends to first cousins, either parallel or cross). Neither should be in the same room, except for meals, or even occupy the same house once they reach puberty. A girl should not cook her brother's food, wash his clothes, or care for him during illness. It is especially taboo to mention anything of a personal nature to a sibling, so communication is limited. Even worse is to be in a sibling's presence when another individual says or does something indiscreet; therefore, most will avoid a group if their sister or brother is there.

Partly because of this taboo, and partly because of a deep sense of modesty, Tongans are profoundly embarrassed by a wide spectrum of tourist activity. There is a concern that brothers and sisters may be near each other and both see, for example, female tourists in bikinis or scant clothing. A bill was recently introduced in the Legislative Assembly to regulate dress of this type, but was defeated. A law does exist, however, which requires all males over the age of sixteen to wear a shirt in public, a law which all Tongans observe and which tourists frequently violate. No formal charges have been brought against any visitors, partly because of a reluctance to create an unpleasant experience for them during their stay. Still, ill feelings exist among Tongans because most all of the tourists who go without shirts are aware of the law and choose to disregard it, an act which indicates a

lack of real concern for their hosts. The concept of respect is all-important in Tongan society; its violation in this manner is particularly resented.

Similar areas of conflict center around tourists' public behavior, especially behavior involving men and women together. Open expression of affection, even between married couples, is frowned upon, but this attitude is seldom explained to visitors. A local tour agent will inform a tourist that he should not remove his shirt, but may be constrained to tell him that he should not kiss his wife. This more subtle problem is a source of much misunderstanding, especially as more young people emulate Western models and consider adopting their behavior patterns based on different social values. As one female informant put it, speaking of public displays of affection among Tongans:

This is the influence of the tourists, because Tongans, like myself, would think, 'why should I be ashamed? They are human, I'm human, why couldn't I kiss my girlfriend or boyfriend on the road?' So they go ahead and do this, and when they do it, they find out then, what is there to be ashamed of? Nothing --

While the number of young people who would agree with this statement is certainly rising, it is one thing to agree, and quite another to act upon the belief. The weight of public opinion weighs heavily on most, both young and old. At this point, the appearance of amorous couples on the street is most likely to occur when there is a cruise ship in the harbor.

In any case, the objection to this kind of behavior by Tongans is threefold: It offends the moral values of the community, it causes embarrassment among family members, and it indicates a lack of respect for others. Many Tongan and Western social values are inconsistent with each other and tourism has

therefore exposed these points of stress. Compromises are essential if this interaction is to continue - the questions then become where, and how much?

In every society there exists a continuum of social values, ranging from those that are highly adaptable to those that cannot be altered without threatening social institutions and hence, social structure. Values of this latter type tend to become formalized, and an example in Tonga is the Sabbath Law, which states:

The Sabbath Day shall be sacred in Tonga forever and it shall not be lawful to work, or artifice, or play games, or trade on the Sabbath. And any agreement made or document witnessed on this day shall be counted void, and will not be protected by the Government.

This law is strictly enforced throughout the Kingdom, for Tongans and foreigners alike. The implications for tourism are enormous, for no planes are scheduled, no taxis are rented, no tours are given, no handicrafts are sold. Though cruise ships' passengers are not affected (vessels never call on Sunday which is a scheduling problem for the carriers) a "lost" day can be traumatic for air passengers on a tight schedule. The general tourist reaction is negative, for while they might have been aware of the law before they arrived, most were not aware that it is so severe. The Tongan police want an even more explicit wording, claiming that they are not sure whether to arrest Sunday picknickers or not!

All efforts on the part of tourism personnel to change the Sabbath Law have failed, and several tours have been cancelled, as well as cruise ships that could not alter their schedules. The loss in tourism revenues is impossible to calculate - all

agree it is considerable - yet the government, with apparent support of the Tongan people, refuses to even consider any alternatives. Some individuals feel that if the Sabbath Law is compromised, other more detrimental changes will follow; others oppose a change on purely religious grounds. But for whatever reasons that individuals are taking a stand here, it is clear the social value that the law reflects is deemed by all to be more important than the advantages gained by giving it up. Tonga wants tourism but, at least for the present, there are some prices too high to pay.

In summary, wherever it develops, tourism is only one of several factors that may alter individual and collective attitudes and behavior patterns. By isolating it as a separate variable for study we come to a more complete understanding of the dynamics involved in culture change.

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