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Fijian Culture on Display: Traditional Ecological Knowledge at the Arts Village Cultural Center

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Introduction

Fiji is frequently described as a land of breathtaking natural beauty and strong traditional culture. These representations portray the islands as the enduring archive of a glorious natural history, where man and nature have lived in harmony for thousands of years (White, 2007). The following paper examines how and why this association is promoted at one of Fiji’s largest cultural tourism destinations — the Arts Village Cultural Center (AVCC).

The AVCC is a popular tourism attraction situated in the heart of Pacific Harbor, halfway between the Coral Coast and the capital city of Suva, on the island of Viti Levu. According to the nation’s most recent tourism development plan, the region saw more than 12,000 tourists in 2005 (Fiji Ministry of Tourism, 2007). Today, the program at the AVCC caters primarily to foreign visitors and offers a full day of activities, including a firewalking show, temple visit, and island boat tour. In this study, I consider the presentation of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) on the AVCC’s island boat tour. Loosely defined, TEK is indigenous knowledge about the environment that has been passed down through the generations. TEK should be thought of as fluid and dynamic. However, cultural tourism representations of TEK tend to confer a sense of timelessness on a community’s relationship with the natural world. The following analysis shows that the AVCC’s display of gendered TEK links indigenous culture to the land in just this way, and creates a distinction between the tourist and the toured that validates the authenticity of the island boat tour experience.

Methods

The information presented in this paper was gathered during three months of ethnographic fieldwork during the summer of 2008. While in Fiji, I conducted interviews, engaged in participant observation, and performed archival research as I studied how tourists and tour operators perceive and present the relationship between nature and indigenous culture on the Fijian islands. As part of this larger project, I spent five weeks living in a hostel dormitory at the AVCC. During this time, I participated in the AVCC’s full day of shows and tours on fifteen separate occasions. On the tours and in the hostel, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty--
five English–speaking tourists and twelve employees. These interviews focused on the general attraction of the Fijian islands, the specific appeal of the AVCC, and the impressions and opinions of AVCC visitors and employees. Finally, I conducted interviews with the Fijian and Australian managers of the AVCC, gathering in–depth information about the history and administration of the site.

In the field, I found there was a certain amount of ambiguity “betwixt and between tourism and ethnography” (Bruner, 2005). In many ways, I was a tourist. I took photographs, asked questions, and visited my chosen sites with other sightseers. At the same time, the length of my stay and the frequency of my tours allowed me to become something of a temporary local to the staff members who saw me day in and day out. In effect, it was the duality of my position — tourist to some, quasi–local to others — that gave me the opportunity to build relationships with overseas visitors as well as Fijian performers and tour operators. In the sections below, I use this insight to describe the AVCC’s island boat tour from a tourist’s point of view, before reflecting on the experience from an ethnographic perspective.

**The Island Boat Tour**

At ten o’clock in the morning, tickets are purchased and the tour group is assembled. Once gathered, we are escorted down a path and into a modified drua, or double–hulled canoe, which can accommodate up to twenty–four passengers. After taking our seats, two male polers wearing grass skirts and coconut husk accessories board the boat. Positioned on either end of the canoe, the polers guide the drua around a large, manmade island at the center of the Arts Village complex. A third man in similar costume sits cross–legged at the front of the boat and introduces himself as our guide.

The physical setting of the boat tour is separate from the rest of Arts Village. As our canoe follows the river around the bend, the concrete complex of the Cultural Center falls out of sight and out of mind. Mimicking the boat’s apparent movement into the interior of Viti Levu, we are told by our guide that we are also drifting into the past. Traveling along the river, our boat follows the shoreline of the island and pushes through an overgrowth of reeds to reveal a collection of huts (bures) on the left, and a lush green landscape on the right.

During the hour–long boat tour, we — the tourists — are invited to observe and participate in two kinds of TEK. At four of the seven open–air bures, female actors in traditional attire describe how their ancestors made pottery, wove mats and fans, and created bark cloth known as masi. At these huts, our tour guide encourages interactive exhibition. Questions are welcome, and we are repeatedly invited to visit the island and have a go at handicraft production, joining the women as they weave coconut fronds into fans and print masi cloth with traditional dyes and patterns (Figure 1).

The second category of TEK on display is decidedly more masculine, focused on weaponry, fishing, and the construction of canoes. Voyeurism
is stressed over participation at these three bures. At the canoe building bure, for example, our guide explains how indigenous Fijians used fire to build seafaring druaas more than one hundred feet long. To bring this narration to life, the two polers enter the hut and attempt to start a fire by rubbing a small piece of wood into a larger, stationary log (Figure 2). Once the friction from the wood produces a sizeable pile of smoking cinders, the proto–fire is collected into a hollow, wooden container filled with coconut husks. The polers then blow gently into the container, willing the husks to ignite.

At the AVCC, feminine TEK is focused on experience and masculine TEK is focused on exhibition. Our tour group is invited to exit the boat and learn about Fijian TEK through hands–on participation at most of the women’s huts. However, at the men’s bures, members of our group are invited to “take in the show” where fire is created, weapons are displayed, and fishing techniques are described in great detail. I examine the implications of this division in the following section.

Discussion

According to Charles Menzies and Caroline Butler, “Traditional ecological knowledge is the term used to describe the knowledge and beliefs that Indigenous peoples hold of their environments that is handed down through the generations” (Menzies and Butler, 2006). With this definition in mind, how and why is TEK employed by Fiji’s cultural tourism industry? The island boat tour’s presentation of TEK provides valuable insight about the kinds of narratives that can be constructed at cultural tourism destinations.

On the one hand, the tour’s display of TEK links Fijian culture to the natural environment. On the other, it also encourages the creation of a distinction between the tourist and the toured. The combined effect of these two narratives produces a timeless version of indigenous culture that links all Fijians, past and present, and places them in opposition to modern, Western tourists. This kind of manipulated narrative is common in Fijian tourism. As Carmen White points out, “Tourism discourse in Fiji began with advertisements by foreign enterprises, including offshore businesses and airlines, which immediately incorporated western constructions of the carefree, dutiful ‘island native’ living in balance with nature” (White, 2007).

Today, the AVCC is one of many tourism destinations that continues to make use of the popular narrative linking nature and culture. On the island boat tour, material goods produced by TEK are used to enforce this essentialized version of Fijian heritage. Our guide notes that the handicrafts made by the women were and are made from natural materials like local palm fronds, native trees, and Fijian clays. The same kind of construction is also emphasized at the masculine bures, where weaponry, fishing nets, and even fire are all created from local, natural materials. Through the heavy promotion of their “natural” construction, mats, masi, and fire become powerful symbols of the Fijian peoples’ connection to their land.

The narrative that links Fijian nature and culture extends beyond physical objects, however. On the island boat tour, the presentation of knowledge is just as important as the presentation of physical goods. As noted above, the tour divides the exhibition of indigenous knowledge into two distinct categories — the masculine and the feminine. Though both categories use the display of material objects to emphasize the supposed relationship between nature and culture, they do so by employing different styles of presentation; feminine TEK focuses on participation and masculine TEK invites voyeurism from afar.

Despite a fundamental difference in presentation, involvement and observation both encourage a narrative that distinguishes Fijian culture from the (presumably) Western cultures of the tourists on the boat. In the feminine bures, it is the close proximity between inexperienced students and native teachers that highlights cultural difference. In the masculine bures, it is the distance between those who perform and those who observe that emphasizes the intended distinction. According to White, tourists respond to both styles because “Fiji tourism promotion...caters to tourists’ presumed quest for authenticity through othering mechanisms that hinge on differentiation” (White, 2007).

Discussing gendered categorization and othering in the South Pacific, Shirley Lindenbaum writes: “The stereotype of the noble savage had always contained within it its mirror opposite, the ignoble savage...the dualism became gendered in the form of the beautiful, enticing siren and the malicious, bestial cannibal, a distinction that, as colonial intentions became more focused, would be extended to civilized, white Polynesians and savage, black
Melanesians” (Lindenbaum, 2004). In Western eyes, Polynesia represents the feminine, noble savage and Melanesia is equated with the masculine, ignoble savage.

White expands on this distinction when she notes that Fiji spans Polynesia and Melanesia both physically and ideologically; thus, “Fiji is uniquely positioned in discursive practices that contrast Polynesian and Melanesian ‘primitivity.’ As Fiji straddles Polynesia and Melanesia geographically, a stipulated admixture of Polynesian and Melanesian influences has driven a thematic dichotomy on the primitive other in Fiji tourism” (White, 2007). Fiji’s tourism industry, then, “manages to harness Polynesian signifiers” while marketing “opportunities for a tantalizing gaze upon vestiges of ignoble savagery” (White, 2007). The industry’s ability to draw on symbols of the feminine Polynesian and the masculine Melanesian allows for the creation of distinct tourism narrative, as evidenced by the gendered duality on display at the AVCC. The island boat tour’s two forms of presentation — participation and voyeurism — validate the authenticity of the experience by enforcing separate yet related distinctions between Western tourists and Fijian locals.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the Arts Village Cultural Center’s island boat tour uses TEK to connect the displayed activities of indigenous actors to the imagined activities of their ancestors. Tour operators use physical objects and traditional knowledge to build on existing preconceptions and draw attention to the supposed connection between Fijian culture and the land. Displaying masculine and feminine categories of TEK side by side, the island boat tour portrays Fijian culture as a combination of Polynesian and Melanesian, noble and ignoble, and feminine and masculine. The success of this mixture relies on a romanticized association between nature and culture that is promoted by the AVCC and by the wider Fijian tourism industry.

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