



SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TOURISTIC IMAGERY: CASE OF FIJI

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Abstract: This paper seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of the complex interplay between touristic representation and wider society. It traces the historical making of touristic imagery of Fiji, which centres on the amiability of indigenous Fijians, and provides a sociological analysis of the ways in which this process has been mediated by the broader patterns of social relations and conditions in colonial/post-colonial Fiji. In particular, the imagery is shown to be a simultaneously colonial, corporate and ethno-nationalist construct. The paper further explores how this imagery, although essentially dynamic, has in turn become reified and exerted considerable power over institutional arrangements and practices within and beyond the industry, most evidently in the allocation of specific touristic roles to indigenous Fijians. **Keywords:** touristic representation, images, Fiji, sociology. © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Images of destination peoples and societies have attracted much research attention over the past decades. Social scientific interest in this subject can be traced back to at least as early as the 1970s (see, e.g., Britton, 1979), and, as evidenced by Cohen's (1993) review, a substantial body of literature had emerged by the 1990s. To date, this literature has highlighted, amongst other things, the socio-cultural, politico-economic and ideological forces at play in touristic representation in diverse empirical contexts. Such analysis has been informed by a variety of theoretical perspectives, including semiotic and discourse analysis (Albers & James, 1988; Ateljevic & Doorne, 2002), postcolonialism (Palmer, 1994; Yan & Santos, 2009), feminism and gender studies (Aitchison, 2001; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000) and management and marketing (Prebensen, 2007).

Underpinning much of this literature is the overarching notion that touristic images cannot be studied narrowly in isolation from the wider social milieu; they are social phenomena intertwined with prevailing societal structures and arrangements. In particular, destination images

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have been found to be profoundly shaped by, and complicit in, colonial (and patriarchal) “othering” of peoples and communities. At the same time, many studies focus predominantly on contemporary images, and the actual historical process by which these images are constructed and re-constructed tends to be under-examined (Adams, 2004). The existing studies also often link touristic images almost exclusively with a particular (colonial, gender, etc.) power relationship, indicative of the need for an approach that is sensitive to a multiplicity of social relations that mediate on-going processes of touristic representation.

For instance, Silver’s (1993, pp. 309–310) analysis of the Orientalising effects of touristic images is amongst many postcolonial studies that examine tourism marketing/promotion as “one facet of... a complex asymmetrical relationship between Europe and the Other.” The impact of such images is similarly discussed by many, such as Yea (2002), who scrutinises the ways in which Western images determine the destination status of indigenous communities in Sarawak, Malaysia. The assumption of inherent authorship of touristic representation is particularly evident in Bandyopadhyay and Morais’s (2005) study, which contrasts “two representations” of India, one constructed and disseminated by American media (i.e. an embodiment of colonial discourse) and the other by the Indian government (i.e. a vehicle for anti-colonial resistance). These studies may be usefully complemented with a broader historical and analytical scope that explores the dynamism and multi-dimensionality of touristic images. This article hence seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of the complex and on-going interplay between tourism and wider society with a closer examination of the process of the social construction of touristic images, namely, those of Fiji.

Fiji is a Pacific island nation with a population of 837,271, 56.8% of which is indigenous Fijian, 37.5% Indo-Fijian (largely the descendants of colonial indentured labourers from India) and 5.7% other ethnic groups (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2011). A British colony from 1874 to 1970, it is a developing economy that has historically depended on sugar exports and tourism. Since 1989, tourism has been the country’s leading foreign exchange earner (Ministry of Transport and Tourism, Deloitte and Touche & Tourism Council of the South Pacific, 1997). Accordingly, tourism promotion occupies a prominent place in the economic and social life of the nation.

This industry has for decades relied upon a widely established notion of smiling and amiable (especially indigenous) populations as its primary marketing image. While the origins of this imagery predate modern tourism, its subsequent consolidation and popularisation owes much to the growth of mass tourism from the 1960s onwards. Along with the tropical climate and natural environment that provide an ideal setting for “sun, sand and sea” tourism, indigenous Fijians have taken centre stage in tourism promotion and advertising. They have been described as “the world’s friendliest people” (Fiji Visitors Bureau, 2003), and official tourism reports have identified the reputation of the

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