

Elaine Haldeman Davis

Building Bali Hai: Tourism and the (re)creation of place in Tahiti

Abstract

Thatched hut resorts today play a significant role in creating a sense of place within a given location. Thatched hut resorts are particularly ubiquitous in the South Pacific and, in particular in Tahiti where almost all resorts are comprised, at least partially, of these structures. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to examine how such resorts define place for tourists, construct myths of authenticity and simultaneously create the sense of familiarity and difference. The method employed to this end combines examination of resort design and analysis of promotional material. The paper starts by discussing perspectives in tourism and postcolonial theories, followed by an outline of the thatched hut typology in resort design and its relationship to the marketing, then moves to the Tahiti as a specific example. The analysis demonstrates how the resorts have become symbols of authenticity, or authenticity constructed as place. It is argued that the image of Tahiti as primitive, yet tamed paradise is perpetuated today by those in the tourism industry as well as by many of the theorist that critique the myths. But myths are not all-encompassing, nor do they necessarily mask an authentic truth.

Keywords:

resorts; authenticity; tourism; hut; Tahiti

Introduction

Gertrude Stein is known to have once commented on one American city, “The Trouble with Oakland is that once you get there, there isn’t any there there.” Stein’s famous remark may be mocking a particular place, but it seems appropriate for a discussion related to *placeness* as it is designed for the tourist. Place is given value to human beings through a belief in the existence and importance of a given location compared to another. It is also given significance based upon a set of assumptions as to what makes a *there* there and how it might be defined. Similar to notions of *self* and *other* in human terms utilized within the discourses of postcolonialism and tourism theory, sense of place exists against other places which are not one’s own. This is not a direct analogy since one can at times change place and define it as home, but people do not generally change ethnicity or gender (except in cases of sex change or “passing”).

Elaine Haldeman Davis, Ph.D. candidate, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA
E-mail: ehalde1@uic.edu

Still, many people define themselves by where they are from, or where their ancestors are from, and place is often intertwined with other notions of self (including race, ethnicity, or gender). Therefore, place becomes very central to self-definition.

In *Touring Cultures*, Urry and Rojek argue that “the real essence of tourism is related to what can be described as a ‘realist’ search undertaken by tourists themselves for evidence that they really were in some particular place” (Rojek & Urry, 1996). Rojek further states that the increased mobility of people and systems of understanding (signs) have blurred the understood binaries of “ordinary/extraordinary”, or “home/abroad” in relation to place in the contemporary world. “Authenticity” of place is no longer important as long as it is different from one’s own (Rojek, 1996). This differs from MacCannell’s position that “authenticity” is central to tourism as it allows the tourist to define her/himself against otherness. The search for authenticity is ironic according to MacCannell however, since tourist sites tend to be “stage sets” of authenticity, or authenticity constructed (MacCannell, 1976).

Resort hotels, although they have not received the attention from theorists as “sites” and theme parks, can play a significant, even central role in constructions of authenticity and “difference”. I argue that contemporary boutique resorts built using vernacular elements are designed to satisfy both escape fantasies and fantasies of authentic otherness that take one outside of one’s home “place”. The resorts themselves literally define “place” for the tourist using constructions related to the place’s past or the perceptions of the place that are part of the stories provided by past travelers.

It would be presumptuous to state that these environments satisfy the desires of all tourists, just as it would to speak for all hosts regarding their perceptions of tourism. Instead, I will analyze the resorts in terms of what is being given to the tourist through the design and marketing of tourist spaces. The significance of *placeness* varies by destination and resort. For this paper I am going to look at resorts on the Tahitian islands of Tahiti, Bora Bora, Moorea, and Raiatea. These are the main islands that support tourism in French Polynesia. I will examine how the resorts define *place* for the tourist and where and how the main theme, that of thatched hut bungalows (particularly the over-water bungalows) developed. The resorts and the marketing around them cater both to Rojek’s notion of getting away to anything different, and to myths of authenticity. I will look at the construction of these myths through the colonial discourse of European explorers and French control, Romanticism, and modern tourism.

I will also examine a third element, *familiarity*, which is offered in the resort design simultaneously with *difference*, and I will consider how these three elements come together in the resort as constructed place. The thatched hut resort is designed to satisfy these various tourist desires simultaneously, placing the visitor both within, and removed from, the destination. My methodology consists of examining the resort designs themselves as well as marketing materials to show how the physical space of the resort is used to support notions of the authentic and the primitive found in historic literature/arts (particularly from the Romantic period) and later re-emphasized by the tourist industry. The resort designs themselves exhibit the contradictions inherent in the quest for authenticity elsewhere, since they also provide comforting amenities and technological devices familiar to the tourist.

Thatched
hut resorts:
History, theory,
and contemporary
examples in Tahiti

PERSPECTIVES IN TOURIST AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Perspectives on tourism theory are many and varied, and the subject of tourism has received increasing attention from academic and literary critics since the 1970's. Daniel Boorstin's chapter from *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* entitled, "From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel" (which pre-dates MacCannell's, 1976 book) is a discussion of tourism's packaging of travel, a development he believes has resulted in the loss of the ability of the traveler to grasp authenticity. Packaged tours, rapid modes of travel, and Americanized hotels have removed people from other cultures and placed them in "bubble".

He writes:

Travel adventure today thus inevitably acquires a factitious, make-believe, unreal quality. And only the dull travel experience seems genuine. Both for the few adventuring travelers who still exist and for the larger numbers of travelers-turned-tourists, voyaging becomes a pseudo-event (Boorstin, 1961, 1992).

Boorstin traces the development of tourism on a large scale, as do many other theorists, from the Grand Tour and the World's Fairs of the Nineteenth Century to the age of "mass tourism" beginning in the 1960's. Boorstin argues that the tourism boom since the Second World War has taken away the excitement of "travel" which is authentic, and replaced it with inauthentic tourism. He quotes Conrad Hilton, who expanded his hotel chain overseas in 1942, saying, "each of our hotels is a little America" (Boorstin). Boorstin associates modernity with the speed of travel and a Western culture which needs "instant gratification"; this culture is to blame for the loss of authentic experience. He feels nostalgia for "real" travel wherein authenticity is still possible and a sense of place is retained.

In contrast, Urry discusses Feifer's definition of the "Post Tourist", in his book, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. According to Feifer, the "Post Tourist" has no interest in authenticity, but instead revels in fantasy. In a postmodern world of virtual reality, constant simulation, and instant gratification, the "Post-Tourist" enjoys the constructed quality of tourism (Urry, 2002). One could argue however, the so-called postmodern penchant for constructed fantasy is not new, nor for that matter is Boorstin's nostalgia for "authenticity".

Within some postcolonial theory, mass tourism is a direct outgrowth of colonial oppression, and loss of authenticity is rooted not in recent inventions and travel products, but in colonial reconstructions in the Nineteenth Century. Jamaica Kincaid's, *A Small Place* is a diatribe against tourism in Antigua as a form of neocolonialism in the Caribbean. For Kincaid, colonialism and the slave enterprise which brought the descendants of most of the current inhabitants to the island has created a culture without place or time. She writes that the people do not know "why they are the way they are, why they do the things they do, why they live the way they live and in the place they live..." (Kincaid, 1998). This lack of sense of place (and time) allows the neocolonial imperialists, reinvigorated through tourism, to define the people of the Caribbean for the tourist, and therefore define the Caribbean for its people and as a place. Tourist marketing portrays Caribbean place as a beautiful, tranquil landscape with happy people ready to serve the affluent, generally white tourist. Ian Gregory Strachan builds upon this theme *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*. The tourist image of the Caribbean is a direct outgrowth of the colonial plantation economy, in which the image of paradise and largess masks the history of brutal slavery and the contemporary reality of racial and class inequities in the region (Strachan, 2002). Although both these books tend at times to offer somewhat reductive analyses of the

both the tourist and the host (tourist-shallow, oppressive; host-victim), what is relevant to my discussion is the significance of place, or lack of place, to the tourist enterprise. The creation of place for the Western tourist is related to the creation of place for the colonial-era European. The desire for the “authentic” (the native, the unspoiled beach, tropical nature) and the desire for escape (that which is not Western) already exist in constructed form prior to the Twentieth-Century era of the packaged tour. Inauthenticity, according to the postcolonial critic, did not come about because of speedy travel or packaged tours, but because people have been ripped from their place and brought to another in order to service expansion and capitalist enterprise. Over this, a myth of an “authentic”, unspoiled paradise has been woven, a place constructed for the imagination of the colonial and later the tourist.

Krista Thompson explores the creation of place through landscape in the colonial and tourist imagination in her dissertation, *The Tropicalization of the Anglophone Caribbean: The Politics and Aesthetics of Space in Jamaica and the Bahamas*. In the section, “Picturing Nassau and Making Nassau Picturesque”, Thompson describes how the Royal Victoria Hotel and its grounds became seminal images of Nassau. Tropical nature was created in an orderly fashion that satisfied both desires of the exotic and natural, and the need for safety and comfort (the desires which Boorstin thinks distinguish tourist from traveler). Through images of “tropical nature” - some of it imported from other “tropical” locations - place is created and defined (Thompson, 2002). The black population in a service capacity also becomes the creation of place as well, their own importation as slaves masked by exoticism. In this place what is given to the tourist is a combination of perceived tourist desires: that which is different (Rojek, 1996), that which is authentic (MacCannell), and that which is safe (Boorstin, 1992).

Nineteenth Century Romanticism, itself intertwined with colonial expansion as well as reaction against the rapid mechanization of the West, is also significant to the defining of place for the tourist, through nostalgia and the assertion that authenticity has been lost in the West and in urban centers.

These various perspectives reflect how place has been constructed for the tourist and the timeframe wherein it is believed that place became defined or created for tourism. Tourism itself in some form has existed for centuries if one contends, as this author does, that all forms of willing travel are types of tourism. These include religious pilgrimage, conquest, trading, exploration, travel writing, sightseeing, and recreational travel. Various expectations of difference, authenticity, and safety/familiarity may be found depending on the travel experience.

Although the desires to escape, change environment, and locate the authentic are not new, and may not even be called Western, these desires were clearly articulated, at least in the Western imagination, in the Nineteenth Century. It is this period in the West when defining sense of place against the exotic other seems to become imperative, both in order to define the Western place as central in the midst of a vast and frightening periphery, and also to grasp the periphery as the last vestige of a disappearing sense of place and self. It is in this period that we can see the reasoning behind what will eventually become the marketing scheme of vernacular-style contemporary resorts which are often central to the creation of place for the tourist today. Before moving on to Tahiti as a specific example, I will first discuss the thatched hut typology in resort design and its relationship to the marketing of tourist desires.

THE THATCHED HUT RESORT

Thatched Hut resort hotels have become prevalent in the last thirty years. The thatched hut is a form that speaks of simplicity of life, “primitive” or pre-industrial society, and remote, exotic locations. The fact that some contemporary societies continue to live in thatched buildings and defy the stereotypes of primitivism and simplicity, has not stopped architects and developers from building resorts in this style, nor interfered with the symbolism of “escape” and otherness. The thatched hut resort today represents several contradictions that are inherent to tourism.

One is that tourist desires often include various levels of both fantasy and perceived authenticity depending on the resort. Another related contradiction is that the resort serves as a representation both for tourist desires for escape and difference as well as a place where familiar comforts may be found. This seemingly incompatible dual nature of the tourist space has also been mentioned in relation to the controlled tropicality of the Grand Victoria Hotel as described by Thompson. What is interesting is that in the more expensive hotels, both created authenticity *and* technological comforts tend to be heightened, as we will see in the case of the Hotel Bora Bora in French Polynesia.

The connection between the thatched hut typology and the primitive has a long history. In Western writings and philosophy the thatched hut has often been equated with the “primitive”. Vitruvius wrote of the “primitive hut” as the first dwelling. The notion of the simple thatched hut as the “primal” example of architecture continued to be popular in the writings of the Renaissance (McClung, 1983). The idea of the “primitive” hut and “primitive” life in general is addressed increasingly in the Eighteenth Century with the beginning of the industrial revolution and global expansion. Marc Antoine-Laugier, in his first *Essai sur l'Architecture*, equates the hut with the development of “primitive” man as well as the roots of architecture (quoted in Rykwert, 1981). In these writings, the hut represents a “primal” structure and the roots of “civilized” dwellings rather than a symbol of escape from civilization to the primitive world.

The Romantic Movement, itself deeply intertwined with the colonial enterprise is responsible for the connection between the primitive and escape in Western thought. The Romantics reacted against the rapid mechanization and urbanization of Europe and the progressive philosophy of the Enlightenment thinkers. Some Romantics urged a retreat to a more organic existence which they equated with nature and non-Western societies. One example of this desire to escape may be found in German romantic Friedrich Leopold Stolsberg's *Die Insel*. On *The Island*, a new society is born in a primitive Eden. Those who have escaped civilization to live there in simple huts are in touch with nature and live in harmony with one another (Runge, 1972).

Romantic painting in the Nineteenth Century reflects the fascination with the primitive and other places conquered by colonial powers. Paul Gauguin's famous paintings of his own colonial-era fantasy of escape to “primitive” society in the Polynesian islands represent a fantasy central to the tourist culture in contemporary society. Interestingly, most Tahitian hut resorts are designed more to cater to reliving Gauguin's vision of authenticity through colonial eyes, rather than emphasizing an untouched Eden prior to colonial interference.

Considering the association of romantic notions of escape to primitivism and the association of the “primitive” life with the thatched hut, one can see why this typology has been appropriated as a typology of escape, primitivism, and otherness for Western tourists and eventually urban non-Western tourists as well. The thatched hut style in resort design has become ubiquitous all over the world, but the first of these resorts

built for foreign tourists were located in the Pacific. The Aggie Grey's Hotel on Samoa featured a resort-type complex originally built in 1942 and probably hosted military officers. In 1961, the Hotel Bora Bora was built in French Polynesia on the island that supposedly inspired James Michener's "Bali Hai". This was followed by the first of the Bali Hai resort hotels on Moorea (Official Hotel Guide, 1997, Wong & Brown interviews, 2003). Thatched hut resort hotels became the main hotel typology on many Pacific islands, and in Tahiti almost all resorts are designed at least partially in this style up to today. Before discussing in detail the thatched hut typology and its relationship to the creation of tourist place in French Polynesia, I will examine briefly the history of the main islands in relationship to the development of tourism.

BUILDING BALI HAI

At some point, probably between 400ce and 800ce, people of mixed Malay descent migrated from the Marquesas (where, in turn, they had migrated from Fiji and Samoa) to the islands later named the Society Islands, which today make up the most densely populated islands of French Polynesia (Campbell, 1989). At the time of first contact, Polynesian society on these islands was dictated by complex relationships between chiefs and priests which followed systems based upon *mana* (political control) and *tapu* (laws regarding sacred or forbidden acts) (Campbell, 1989). Through the waging of war and through the consolidating of chiefdoms by marriage, various chiefs struggled for control over land and people. The Europeans, themselves competing for the right to "claim" the Pacific, arrived with increasing frequency in the 18th century. In 1767, British commander Wallis, with Cook serving on his ship, arrived at the island of Tahiti. He claimed it for England and left after a few ill-fated contacts with Tahitians in which more than a few were killed by his sailors. Wallis was followed by French explorer Bougainville in 1768 who claimed the same island for France and traded with the Tahitians although once again, violence occurred and at least 4 islanders were killed. In spite of this, Bougainville romantically christened the island New Cythera. He was followed by Cook's arrival in 1769 on the *Endeavor* and later on the *Resolution* (Henry, 1928). As Bernard Smith has pointed out, artists on Cook's voyages did much to help Europeans "Imagine the Pacific". Cook himself described the Tahitians in terms of simplicity and beauty, arguing that they are "far happier than we Europeans" (quoted in Smith, 1992). After becoming increasingly involved in trade and with the arrival of the first missionaries in 1801, European control and influence slowly dismantled the power of the Tahitian rulers. In 1840, Tahiti was officially annexed by the French and has remained an "Overseas Territory" up to this day.

Gauguin's paintings of the people of French Polynesia and later, the publication of *Noa Noa: A Tahitian Journal*, his account of living in a Tahitian village, sealed the image of Tahiti as an Eden that must be saved from the threat of Western hegemony which could destroy the unspoiled "primitive" culture. In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin leaves the overly Europeanized capital of Papeete in search of the "real" Tahiti, in the form of a "primitive" village.

There he writes:

My neighbors have become my friends. I dress like them, and partake of the same food as they. When I am not working, I share in their life of indolence and joy, across which sometimes pass sudden moments of gravity (Gauguin, 1920).

In the village, Gauguin takes a thirteen year-old "wife" and remains for two years until "imperative family affairs" impel him to return to France, writing nostalgically, "[I am] more *barbarian* than when I left, but much *wiser*" (Gauguin).

Gauguin's paintings, writings, and the myth of the artist in nature are the filter through which Tahiti as place is designed for the foreigner. As Michael Sturma states in his essay, "Packaging Polynesia's Image", Romanticism and colonialism serve to articulate a place that is both timeless and historic in nature.

He notes that the writers who romanticized the South Pacific were aware of, and building upon, the myths created by the earlier writers. These include Pierre Loti, Somerset Maugham, and James Michener, who's World War II-era "Tales of the South Pacific" both romanticized and mocked the mythical pacific island of Bali Hai (Sturma, 1999). In turn, these writers had been influenced by Gauguin, whom today is the single most important figure in the marketing of Tahitian tourism. He has his own museum, he appears on brochures and is quoted in advertisements, and he even has a cruise ship named after him. It is Gauguin's Nineteenth Century vision of the "real" Tahiti, rapidly disappearing in the face of European hegemony, which defines Tahiti as tourist place.

In her article "Tahiti Intertwined: Ancestral Land, Tourist Postcard, Nuclear Test Site", Miriam Kahn explores the contrast between Tahiti's benign tourist image and the tumultuous recent history of the islands since the 1960's, when the French began nuclear testing in the Tuomotu islands. Tahitians resisted the testing, and demonstrations fueled organization of the independence movement, which was in turn blamed for the reduction of tourism (rather than the testing itself) by the French government, who wanted to maintain Tahiti's sunny tourist image. Interestingly, although Kahn critiques the romanticizing of Tahiti, she herself follows in Gauguin's footsteps, moving to villages away from Europeanized urban centers, presenting a sort of anti-utopia of authentic people threatened by Western technology and tourist marketing. She lives amongst the villagers and distances herself from tourism, scornfully describing the "air-conditioned van of tourists" that arrives "like clockwork" to the village to feed the eels and then speeds off (Kahn, 2000). Even visitors who would seek to critique the image of Tahiti as tourist place seem unable to escape the Gauguin's Romantic vision of authentic culture struggling to resist Western hegemony. It is also one of many strange contradictions in Tahiti's tourism that the tourist image of Tahiti is filtered through the vision of a European who, however exploitive he was of the local population (particularly the women), raged against the European interference in Tahitian culture and life. In terms of resorts, the thatched hut hotels on the Tahitian islands represent the contradictions of having an outsider, Gauguin, as the individual defining a place's image. They appear vernacular, yet the vernacular has been manipulated and appropriated in order to represent *difference*, *authenticity*, and *familiarity* through the vision of the colonial-era Romantic. As we will see, the thatched hut resort embodies the contradictions and confusions existing in a society where tourist place and non-tourist place seem to converge.

THE HOTEL BORA BORA, THE OVER-WATER BUNGALOW, AND OTHER TAHITIAN HUTS

The Tahitian word for house is *fare*, and this is the same term used to describe the huts that house tourists in the thatched resorts. Traditional Tahitian fares were made of wood and bamboo, sometimes placed on a stone foundation, and had thatched roofs of woven leaves of the pandanus or coconut palm trees.

Tahitian fares tended to be divided by function: with separate structures for sleeping, cooking, social functions, and storage of canoes. They also had various shapes, some small and rectangular, others oblong and quite large (Orliac, 2000). Villages, which also had ceremonial centers made up of large boulders and stone figures known as *marae*

were most prevalent in areas along rivers or inlet bays in the valleys of the more mountainous islands, rather than on beaches. Illustrations by European artists such as Webber and Parkinson who traveled with Cook, depict the various types of fares in these settings (Orliac, 2000).

It is only in the early Twentieth Century that photographs begin to show thatched structures semi-over water supported by stilts on one side. Some descriptions of villages from the 1930's to the 1960's describe houses with structures jutting out into the water, including adjacent outhouses. There are some arguments that European contact led to less warfare between the islands, and therefore strategic locations away from the water were no longer necessary. Other reasons for these structures and the movement to coastal locations could be related to trade with European ships entering the bays, the conservation of land for plantation farming, or even better air circulation. Stilt houses are part of the indigenous traditions of other Pacific cultures, but although Tahiti had contact with other cultures prior to European contact, this form never became part of Tahitian vernacular until the late Nineteenth or early Twentieth Centuries. European-style houses called "Vanilla Houses" from the 1910's and '20's, were lifted off the ground slightly on poles, and these also could have influenced the idea of houses on stilts (Levy, 1973; Oliver, 1981). In a 2003 interview with Dr. Yosi Sinoto, a well-known anthropologist who worked Pacific cultures specialist Kenneth Emory, an expert on Pacific cultures, claims that Emory believed a Nineteenth Century French governor brought the idea of over-water stilted structures back from Melanesia. He hoped they would create better sanitation as toilet facilities could be built out over the water.

Increasingly, with pressure from missionaries and other European interests, fares became more enclosed, divided into rooms, and eventually were comprised of fewer indigenous materials. In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, wood and bamboo were replaced by stucco and concrete, and roofs of corrugated metal replaced thatch. Initially, only the wealthy Tahitian could afford these materials, and they became symbolic of status. Over time, hybrid houses, stucco with thatched roofs, etc., became more common (Orliac, 2000; Oliver, 1981). Today, few inhabitants of the main Leeward Islands live in houses built in traditional style. The typical house is a one-story concrete or stucco structure on a cement foundation with a metal or tile roof (Figure 1).

Figure 1
HOUSE ON MOOREA



It has now become too expensive and time consuming to build most houses in the traditional way on the islands where newer materials are available. Bamboo and wood are expensive, and thatch is difficult to maintain (it must be replaced every 6 to 8 years), attracts insects that live in the thatch, and is not compatible with air-conditioning because there is too much ventilation through the roof.

Just as the traditional Tahitian fare was disappearing from the domestic landscape, it was about to be appropriated for the tourist landscape. In the 1950's, a few hotels existed for colonial officials, businessmen, military officials, and the occasional American tourist. Of these, some were small thatched bungalows, usually built with wood planks. In 1959, a site was considered for a tourist hotel on Bora Bora by some French and American investors. Bora Bora had an airstrip remaining from the American military presence in World War II. Also because of that presence, the island had been idealized as an unspoiled paradise by G.I.'s returning home and immortalized as Michener's "Bali Hai" (interview with Monty Brown, former Manager of the Hotel Bora Bora, 2003).

Although it is a French colony, Americans were the catalyst for Tahiti's tourist economy in the early years. Three Americans, Muk McCallum, Jay Carlisle, and Hugh Kelley, later christened the "Bali Hai Boys", came looking for opportunity in Tahiti in the early 1960's. After an initial venture owning a vanilla plantation went bust, the three invested in building their first hotel on Moorea in 1962.

This was followed by the Bali Hai Raiatea in 1966. The Bali Hai Moorea was the second major thatched hut resort hotel built in the islands (the Hotel Bora Bora was the first), and after a write-up in *Life Magazine*, the resort began to attract American business (Burdick, 1962). Hugh Kelley, one of the Bali Hai boys and the main property developer, is credited with designing the first over-water fare structure in a resort, and starting a trend that has become ubiquitous all over Tahiti, the Pacific, and elsewhere (interview with fellow "Bali Hai Boy", developer Muk McCallum, April 19, 2003).

The over-water fare exists at every major resort in the Society Islands, and appears constantly in postcards and tourism posters (Figure 2). The thatched hut resorts with over-water bungalows have become common to the point of banality, and from a distance, one cannot be discerned from another. Since the resorts themselves form enclaves along their private bays, the resort hotel becomes a sort of self-contained village, defining place for the tourist. It is ironic that the structure which has become an image of Tahiti as place is exactly the opposite of what is presented. The fare, particularly the over-water fare, indicates a commercial/tourist structure. For anyone who lives on the islands or spends more than a few days there, the cluster of thatched bungalows is immediately recognizable as a resort, not a village, since few on the main islands live in thatched houses, and people no longer live over water. Therefore, the hut has come to symbolize exactly what is *not* a house. This inverted symbolism also expands into other structures such as stores, signs, or visitor's centers (Figure 3). On the most populous islands, if the structure is thatched, it is generally not domestic.

This interesting inversion may or may not be evident to the tourist, considering that their hut is called a "house" and the fares are marketed as being authentic. Although the tourist knows it isn't anyone else's house, the fares are presented as houses built in traditional vernacular style, giving an impression of the domestic as well as travel in time *and* space to another culture. The hut structure evokes the primitive, and the use of the Tahitian word "fare" links it to Tahitian tradition.

Figure 2
HOTEL BALI HAI RAIATEA
(later renamed the Hotel Hawaiki Nui; currently managed by Pearl Beach Resorts)



Figure 3
VISITOR'S CENTER, COOK'S BAY, MOOREA



The resort fares exhibit difference and otherness in the tradition of Romantic colonial-era fantasies. Although the vision of the primitive is filtered through a Nineteenth-Century colonial vision, there are few colonial-style hotel buildings. Gauguin escaped from the colonial to the “primitive”, and it is the reliving of this experience that is central to the resort design. In this way, the resort setting caters to fantasies of escape, difference, and authenticity.

The level of perceived authenticity in terms of traditional materials and building techniques increases with price. At the Hotel Bora Bora, which is currently owned by the elite chain of Amanresorts, manager Lionel Alvarez emphasized how the thatch had been *tied* to the roof in traditional Tahitian tradition. He also noted the complex tying techniques used by local builders to attach beams and other wooden structures.

This painstaking process of hand tying is shown in detail at the Musee de Tahiti et des Iles on Tahiti, and looks very similar to what was done at the resort. Even this supposed nod to authenticity is complicated however, when one examines it more closely. Monty Brown, former manager of the Hotel Bora Bora, informed me that the traditional material of senate rope used for tying beams had to be substituted by nylon outdoors because the senate rope rots too quickly (Figure 4). Also, the natural-wood beams are almost all ironwood, a non-indigenous wood substituted for the rare tou and miro woods originally used in building.

Figure 4
OUTSIDE BEAMS TIED WITH NYLON, HOTEL BORA BORA



Inside the bungalows, natural wood, rattan, and bamboo give the room a rustic feel and a colonial ambience. The claw-footed tub and traditional sink also imply colonial-era luxury. The colonial element added to the “primitive” structure of the fare allows the resort to evoke difference without sacrificing familiar comforts. One can live like a colonial official amongst the “natives”, which make up 95% of the hotel staff. Modern structures that don’t fit in with the colonial model, such as the air-conditioning units outside the bungalows or water systems are hidden or disguised (Figure 5).

Figure 5
FACILITIES STORAGE HOTEL BORA BORA



Brown also pointed out that a false thatched ceiling was added to the bungalows during renovations underneath the thatched roof in order to keep all the cool air from leaking out through the roof when the air-conditioning is on.

The luxury and the “authentic” details at the Hotel Bora Bora may be found to lesser degrees at less luxurious resorts. The former Bali-Hai hotel on Raiatea (the original one on Moorea has been torn down) features thatched huts but the beams are nailed and the walls are plywood. The Hotel Kaveka, a locally-owned small hotel on Moorea, has only some thatched structures on the property. Today, it is too expensive to build and maintain thatched structures, so a less expensive hotel will limit thatched roof buildings (Figure 6).

Figure 6
HOTEL KAVEKA, MOOREA



Conclusion

Thatched hut resorts today are designed to satisfy at various levels the desires for authenticity, difference, and familiarity, involving luxury and fantasy to varying degrees. They create place by appealing to myths of primitivism and otherness, as well as romantic fantasies of a benign colonial relationship with non-Western peoples. The resort is the location of dreams, designed to cater to perceived tourist expectations rooted in the myths of difference, exoticism, and wonder. Resorts with Tahitian themes are found outside the islands themselves. When they exist in a removed location, they often offer an experience emphasizing “kitsch” rather than authenticity, as in the original Club Med resorts, and may portray a culturally vaguer “Polynesian” theme, as in the Disney Polynesian Resort in Orlando and the Kona Village Resort on Hawaii. The Kona Village is of course located on a Polynesian Island, but the resort features building “styles” from Melanesian and Micronesian cultures as well as Tahitian and Hawaiian bungalows. The atmosphere and activities offer an old-fashioned family campsite atmosphere rather than one of cultural education.

If the thatched hut resort in Tahiti, the history leading to its use, and the marketing of colonial culture have defined place for the tourist, how might place be defined for the Tahitian? This is too complex a question for the author of this paper (a foreigner and a tourist) to address thoroughly, and would surely elicit many different responses from members of the population. Certainly the colonial past (along with the colonial present)

are part of place for the Tahitian. Tourist structures and tourist marketing are also part of place, but often, although not always, viewed from a different perspective. Pre-contact culture has mixed with that of the colonizer and these have further been altered by the culture of migrant workers from Asia and the Pacific. Tahitian sense of place may also be modified by tourism to other places, just as other places have served to define home place for the tourist who visits French Polynesia. Although many Tahitian tourists have historically visited New Zealand or Australia, increasing numbers are heading to Los Angeles and Las Vegas for a different kind experience, that taste of “authentic” Americana (According to the World Tourism Organization [WTO], in 1995 almost all Tahitian tourists were visiting destinations in East Asia and the Pacific, particularly New Zealand and Australia. From 1999 onward, the number of tourists heading for the Americas has grown significantly making them the second largest foreign market for Tahitians. Africa, Europe, and South Asia host significantly smaller numbers). Defining place is like peeling the layers off an onion. Even tourist places, so derided as shallow and simplistic, reveal much about histories, perceptions, and power. There are many myths created by tourism, but the biggest myth perpetuated by theory is that tourism masks a simple truth, or an authentic place.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ms. Sherry Belcher, librarian at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu and Dr. Yosi Sinoto for their assistance with my research on traditional dwellings in Tahiti.

References

- Boorstin, D. (1992). *The image: a guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Burdick, E. (1962). Ideal for a few, maybe not for you. *Life Magazine*, 53(25), 172-173.
- Campbell, I. C. (1989). *A history of the pacific islands*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gauguin, P. (1985). *Noa Noa: a Tahitian journal*. Trans. O.F. Theis. Toronto: Dover. orig. published (1920) New York: N. L. Brown.
- Henry, T. (1928). *Ancient Tahiti*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum.
- Kahn, M. (2000). Tahiti intertwined: ancestral land, tourist postcard, and nucleartest site. *American Anthropologist*, 102(1), 7-20.
- Kincaid, J. (1998). *A small place*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Levy, R. (1973). *Tahitians: mind and experience in the Society Islands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- An enchanted island. (1962). Photographs by Carl Mydans. *Life Magazine*, 53(25), 168-171, 173-174.
- MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist: a new theory of the leisure class*. New York: Schocken Books.
- McClung, W. (1983). *Architecture of paradise: survivals of Eden and Jerusalem*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Official Hotel Guide* (1997). vol's 1, 2, and 3. Seacaucus: Reed Travel Group.
- Oliver, D. (1981). *Two Tahitian villages: a study in comparison*. Laie, Hawaii: The Institute of Polynesian Studies, BYU.
- Orliac, C. (2000). *Fare Tahiti*. Marseille: Editions Parentheses.
- Rojek, C. (1996). Indexing, dragging and the social construction of tourist sights. In C. Rojek & J. Urry (Eds.), *Touring cultures: transformations of travel and theory* (pp. 52-74). London, New York: Routledge.
- Rojek, C. & Urry, J. (1996). Transformations of travel and theory. In C. Rojek & J. Urry (Eds), *Touring cultures: transformations of travel and theory* (pp. 1-19). London, New York: Routledge.
- Runge, E. A. (1972). *Primitivism and related ideas in sturm and drung literature*. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Rykwert, J. (1981). *On Adam's house in paradise: the idea of the primitive hut in architectural history* (2nd ed). Cambridge: MIT Press.

- Smith, B. (1992). *Imagining the pacific: in the wake of the Cook voyages*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Strachan, I. G. (2002). *Paradise and plantation: tourism and culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Sturma, M. (1999). Packaging Polynesia's image. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(3), 712-715.
- Thompson, K. (2002). Picturing Nassau and making Nassau picturesque. In *The tropicalization of the Anglophone Caribbean: The politics and aesthetics of space in Jamaica and the Bahamas* (pp. 1-44) Dissertation. Emory University.
- Urry, J. (2002). *The tourist gaze* (2nd ed.). London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- World Tourism Organization (WTO) statistics on outbound tourism in Tahiti 1985-1999. Madrid, Spain.

Submitted: 10/04/2006

Accepted: 01/20/2007