

1.1.3

# THE TOURIST INDUSTRY AND THE ARTS IN RAROTONGA

Ulli Beier

The island of Rarotonga has 10,000 inhabitants and a disproportionately large number of tourists. The "Rarotonga Resort Hotel" alone expects <sup>200 resident guests and up to 1000</sup> ~~one thousand~~ guests per ~~week~~ <sup>another 800 visitors per week.</sup>

In restaurants, coffee houses and shops the tourists predominate - not to speak of night clubs and "shows". At a typical show of Cook Island dancers in a resort hotel one is not likely to meet even a single Cook Islander in the audience.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the arts - once an integrated part of social and ritual life in the Cook Islands - have now become a "commodity". As the country has become part of the Western economy, and as job opportunities in the Cook Islands are limited, more and more people seek to make a living out of music, dancing, singing and carving. }

Since tourists have become the main "patrons" of the arts, they must necessarily exercise a powerful influence on the artists and their production.

## WOOD CARVING

Wood carvers worked <sup>mainly</sup> ~~almost exclusively~~ in a religious context before colonisation. <sup>(apart from canoes, weapons, carvings etc)</sup>  
This religious context no longer exists and the churches have made no efforts to stimulate a new Christian art, as they have done in Africa. The predominantly Protestant Churches discourage any kind of imagery in the churches. The Catholics have made an attempt to use local carvers to create an altar that incorporates a canoe in its structure, but the result is rather contrived.

Wood carving has become an industry, therefore. Most carvers work in factories, using modern power tools. They turn out Tikis of all sizes by the hundreds. Often photographs of objects from the British Museum and other collections are being copied.

Since it is relatively easy to get a modest income from this activity, there is no motivation to create something new. There is no contemporary Cook Islands carving that relates in any way to people's lives. The carving industry repeats endlessly the same icons from the past. It has got stuck in a groove.

### PAINTING

There is no tradition of painting in the Western sense in the Cook Islands and even today few Cook Islanders, even from the upper middle class, would frame a painting and hang it on the wall of their living room. Those who paint are therefore depending on the souvenir trade for their clients. In the tourist shops there are few paintings - compared to the mass of wood carvings and pearls and shells and mats that are offered for sale. The paintings fall into two categories: "scenes from Island life" - usually feeble imitations of Gauguin and "exotica". Among the artists there appear to be more expatriates than local painters.

I have not seen a single work of real interest - not even at the USP Centre, where I could look at the results of a recent workshop.

### SINGING

Cook Islanders are great singers! The churches have made good use of these natural talents. Ancient, pre-Christian songs have been incorporated into the service.

A visit to a Church service in Rarotonga - even for those of us who do not go to Church at home - is an exhilarating experience.

Singing is an unbroken tradition in the Cook Islands and it has a great future. The art form has found a new place in the religious life of the people and it does not depend on the tourist industry. It is, in fact, "not for sale".

### DRUMMING

Cook Islands Drumming is the best I have heard in the Pacific. Of four different groups I was able to hear during my brief stay, *KARIOI* was by far the best. Their rhythms are electric and full of energy. They create beautiful textures with a variety of slit gongs and a clever use of the European marching drum that supplies a bass.

It is unfortunate that drumming is used almost exclusively as an accompaniment to dancing - this limits the development of drumming as an independent art form in its own right.

I can see unlimited possibilities for this living art form.

### DANCING

Cook Islands are rightly acclaimed as the most professional in the whole Pacific. Even children are accomplished performers here! Unfortunately the circumstances under which these dance troops have to perform are not congenial to a development of the art form. I saw such a performance at the Club Raro. The Group, known as Orana, is considered one of the very best in Rarotonga.

There were no Cook Islanders in the audience. The show started embarrassingly with a compere whose manner was obsequious and who spent the best part of half an hour trying to flatter the audience. No wonder his mannerisms encouraged a drunken Englishman to join him on the stage and make a nuisance of himself.

What the compere was advertising was not an artistic performance but an entertainment - and that's what it was, in spite of the great skill of the dancers. The choreography was cheap and folkloristic - a form of tourist kitsch. The "exotic" costumes did not help: the men playing at being warriors or fishermen - the women

wearing bras from varnished coconut shells! Even in this setting one had to marvel at the professionalism of girls between 8 and 12 years. They performed with perfect skill, but also with a freshness and innocence that necessarily gets lost, as they get older. Comparing the youngsters with the older girls - perhaps in their late teens and early twenties - one had to ask oneself: what have they been doing during the last ten years? Because essentially they were performing the *same* dance.

In other words: these gifted young artists are trapped in a situation that prevents any development of the art form. We must admire them, if in spite of all this, they have not settled into a cynical routine.

### TIVAEVAE

The art of quilting and applique was introduced to the Cook Islands by missionaries at least 150 years ago.

The women have adopted this art form and have fully integrated it into their lives. They have, in many ways, perfected the craft they have been taught and they have developed a very distinctive style of their own. Tivaevae making is an important social activity. The women work in groups that meet regularly once or twice a week. Tivaevae are made primarily as gifts for marriage and other family feasts and they are handed down from generation to generation.

The women have, in recent years, begun to sell Tivaevae. There is a limited tourist market and there is also an overseas market, because Tivaevae are being exhibited in Auckland, Sydney and even in the United States. Surprisingly - and sadly - Tivaevae have not been incorporated into public life: they are not on display in public buildings, like the library, the House of Assembly, or government offices. Only the Catholic Church has commissioned two Tivaevae.

### FASHION

Older women in the Cook Islands are conservative in their dress: there is a Victorian look about them. Only in the white hats, that are woven from very young palm leaves

(mainly in the Northern Atolls), do these ladies express their fashion consciousness. The hats with their various lace-work patterns are extremely inventive. They incorporate mother of pearl shells and brightly coloured crochet-work ribbons into the overall design. A popular art form in its own right!

There is also a fashion industry: tie-dye and screen printed textiles abound in all the tourist shops. These textiles and manufactured clothes are aimed at the tourists and their holiday mood. But the rainbow coloured tie-dyes and the screen prints which are mostly based vaguely on traditional Pacific designs also have an appeal to younger Cook Island women and men. The clothes are attractive, but the industry could do with a lot of new ideas.

## CAN A TOURIST RESORT HOTEL BE A PATRON OF THE ARTS?

Or is this a contradiction in terms?

The manager of a tourist hotel is being employed to make money - not to promote the arts. There is a widespread notion in the industry, however, that a hotel ought to have a "local flavour" - provided this does not interfere with the tourists demand for comfort and as long as it does not interfere with the "international flavour" which the tourist also demands. He wants to be able to eat the same food and drink the same drinks that he is used to from London, New York, Sydney or Auckland.

The local "culture", which the average hotel provides for its customers, must therefore correspond to the tourist's cliché image - often derived from Hollywood films - of the South Pacific.

The tourist trade *can* have a disastrous effect, because it forces people to define themselves through the preconceptions and prejudices of others.

On the other hand a higher level of cultural presentation, a more serious attempt to confront the visitor with a true image of what the country he is visiting is all about, is not necessarily bad for business. It might even turn out to be more lucrative. Generally the tourist industry probably underestimates the intelligence and the openmindedness of its clients.

The success of such a more adventurous policy depends on two things: the managers sensitivity towards the arts and his courage to take the risk. The new policy of the Rarotongan Tourist Resort demonstrates both these qualities. It is therefore an experiment of great importance and it might, hopefully, reform the whole tourist industry in the Cook Islands if the plan proves to be successful.

It was with great interest and with great hopes that I learned what is being planned in the Rarotongan Tourist Resort.

Here are my comments on the overall concept, which I promised to put down in writing. My comments are necessarily based on a limited understanding of the Hotel's overall plan, because I only spent one morning on the premises learning about it. I hope that my comments will have some relevance even beyond the immediate concerns of the "Rarotongan".

## SOME COMMENTS ON THE RENOVATION PLANS OF THE RAROTONGAN

### OVERALL IMPRESSION

I was impressed by the verve and enthusiasm and energy with which the conversion and renovation of the "Rarotongan" is being attacked. There are a lot of ideas; many good ideas, but perhaps too many. There is a danger that the hotel will be overloaded with artefacts and art works; that the visitor will be bombarded with "culture" and "local colour". The effect could be counter productive.

There is a large staff working on the overall design. Again, one wonders: are too many people involved? Is there a danger that with so many advisers and designers pushing and pulling in different directions, the overall concept will be lost? Will the hotel in the end fail to develop a *style*? Will it end up as a bewildering conglomerate?

And again: will the team of designers and graphic artists and planners "redesign" Cook Islands culture? How much real input will the artists and dancers and musicians have?

Or will they merely be roped in to serve the commercial interests of the hotel?

These are the type of pitfalls, that any planning body has to be aware of.

### THE HOTEL ENTRANCE

A grand concept has been developed for this: three very large Tiki figures greet the visitor from afar. Pillars and cross beams of the hotel entrance will be carved.

The plan will have some beneficial effect on the carving industry: carvers will be given an opportunity to work on a large scale (rather than turning out souvenir Tikis by the dozen). They will also be given an opportunity to relate and adapt their work to architecture - nowadays a rare challenge for them.

My worry here is that the designs of the carvings have already been prescribed by the hotel management: the planning room has drawn up designs based on artefacts in museums. I hope that these drawings will be used as mere, non-binding, suggestions to the artists. Because otherwise the artist becomes the servant and executor of the designer.

If the hotel wants to see itself as a patron of the arts, perhaps replacing the chiefs and priests of several generations ago, it should give the artists the utmost freedom.

### TIVAEVAE IN THE ENTRANCE HALL

Tivaevae are an effective way of decorating a foyer. The designs are bold and simple. I very much like the idea that in one case the Tivaevae will have to be adapted to the proportions of the architecture: instead of a square, the designs will have to be redrawn to fit into a very long panel. Any commission that poses a challenge and jerks people out of their routine is likely to provide some new impetus and inspiration to an art form. On the other hand: if the Tivaevae designs are being produced by graphic designers on the computer, then the initiative is taken out of the hands of the artists. The Tivaevae makers are then reduced from artists/craftswomen to mere seamstresses.

If the Tivaevae motifs are being used for bed sheets, which will be *printed* rather than sewn, then I believe that the women (rather than the computer wizards) should be

given the chance to design the bedsheets and they should get some kind of royalty for the repeated use of the design.

I hope that some serious consideration will be given to this issue. Because if the initiative is taken out of the women's hands, then the smart hotel development - however pleasing to the visitors and however successful as a feature of "local character" - could do more harm than good to the traditional Tivaevae makers.

#### LARGE MURALS ON THE END WALLS OF BUILDINGS

There was an idea of commissioning an artist, or artists, to paint large murals depicting scenes from the history of the Cook Islands. I would strongly dissuade from this idea because I can't think of any artist in the Cook Islands who is interesting enough to carry out such a task, and because: realistic paintings on such a scale would be really oppressive in such an environment. The visitor or resident in the hotel just could not escape the paintings. I think they would become very oppressive, would clutter up the open spaces and they would almost certainly clash with the beauty of the garden.

#### PAINTINGS ON PARTITION WALLS, BETWEEN THE VERENDAHS OF RESIDENTS

This is a possibility, provided that the painting would limit themselves to rather calm abstract designs. I believe, however, that the design should be painted directly onto the wall, and it should cover the whole wall. To fix a painted panel onto the partition would turn it into a "picture" rather than an architectural feature. The total effect would be restless and the design would be given a false value.

### INTERIOR DECORATION OF ROOMS

There is a distinct danger here of overloading the rooms with artifacts and creating the effect of a shop.

Printed bed covers and curtains with dressing gowns to match, woven waste paper baskets, shells as ash trays, shell arrangements as wall decorations, carved reliefs on the door, carvings on the walls, painting of Oceanic village scenes etc etc - it's all rather too much.

As far as paintings are concerned, I don't know what to say. Painting, as a bourgeois European tradition, simply has not taken roots in the Pacific, and there is no reason why it should.

The artist who seems to be preferred by the Hotel (I believe her name is de Jong) is not a Pacific Islander at all, but Australian. Her paintings are illustrations of Pacific life, reasonably competent, with a weak touch of Gauguin. Better than most, but not really exciting enough. I would prefer not to have any paintings on the walls. Or perhaps one should hope for a new USP workshop to come up with something really unique and original.

The rooms should have a clean design concept, with an overall style and they should not be overloaded with Pacific "knick-knacks".

### COVERED WALK WAY

An existing feature of the hotel is a long covered walk way, that allows the tourists to reach their rooms protected from midday sun or rain. It's an ugly feature that cuts up the landscape, but it's also necessary. It was suggested that a pattern be painted onto the roof, so that it would offer a more pleasant view from the balconies and corridors of the apartments. Perhaps this effort is not justified and I prefer two other suggestions that were made to break up the ugly monotony of the structure: first, where two walkways cross, the intersection could be widened out into a circle, the roof could become a little spire and the circle could become a seating area. Secondly:

the supporting pillars and the roof could be overgrown with creepers, perhaps Bougainvillea, and the walkways could thus blend into the garden.

### DANCERS

The dancers are the biggest tourist attraction in the Cook Islands: they portray the romantic and the sentimental Western image of the South Pacific. Something lush; some sexy notion of "Paradise". The presentation of these dances plays up to that image: exotic pseudo-traditional costumes, often in bad taste (coconut shell bras), usually very bad choreography. The deployment of dancers, as planned in the "Rarotongan" is also rather dubious. As the tourists arrive from the airport in buses (usually at midnight) they will meet dancing girls performing near the entrance, while they are unloading their suit cases. As they walk towards the reception desk, they will stop for a few seconds to gaze at the erotic presentation.

It is the equivalent of visitors to the Dorchester Hotel in London being met at the Hotel entrance by the Covent Garden Ballet Company. No ballet dancer would be prepared to perform under such circumstances and not even the most philistine businessmen would attempt it: there would be a public outcry.

Where is the difference? Is it because one is a high art form and the other is folklore? I don't think so. I think it is because one society allots a high prestige position to its traditional arts, while the other merely exploits its artists and therefore reduces their permanence to commercialised folklore.

I believe that Cook Island Dancers, who are great artists, deserve better than to entertain complacent tourist during their dinner by the pool side. The standard of their performances cannot be raised, unless they are given the opportunity to perform in theatres with proper staging and choreography and with proper remuneration, rather than being reduced to become a cheap entertainment.

Whether such a concept is compatible with the aims of a resort hotel, I cannot judge. But I do know that within the present infrastructure this major art form of the Cook Islands has no where to go.

### MUSIC

What is true of dancing is true of music. The tourist associates Pacific music with Hawaiian type string bands, whereas the real strength lies in its percussion music. Percussion music, however is on the whole, only tolerated as an accompaniment to dancing.

Both music and dancing have no serious outlets in the Cook Islands - except on rare occasions during an arts or music festival. Neither dancers nor musicians get sufficient exposure to other artists from outside the Pacific. Their art is in danger of stagnating.

### THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF TOURIST HOTELS IN PROMOTING THE ARTS

Tourist hotels cannot be expected to organise concert tours or promote art workshops. But they can lend their premises as venues and they can give serious promoters support by supplying free accommodation and food to travelling artists.

Indian Hotels can here be studied as an example.

The Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay, for example, is running a respected art gallery on its premises. It is not a "tourist shop" selling paintings instead of jewellery or textiles. It is a serious gallery and most of its clients are Indians!

The intention of the "Rarotongan" to act as a gallery for Tivaevae is to be welcomed. It will expose this art form to a thousand visitors a week, while one hopes that it will likewise attract the local population. In fact its positive impact on the development of the art will depend on the hotel's success in popularising the art form among a younger generation of Cook Islanders. The hotel is also in a position to be generous with the artists. A gallery that has to cover its overheads from the sale of art works, is

forced to charge something like a 50% commission on the selling price. An Hotel, which makes its profits on other things, can afford to pass on the money to the artist without deductions. It can thus offer the works at a more affordable price to the public.

In India the German Cultural Institute has sponsored several tours of multicultural music groups - but they could only afford to do this, because Hotels in Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore and Madras have housed and fed the bands for free. In return the music groups would perform one gig in the hotel itself.

If a sponsor, perhaps USP through its Oceania Centre or its Institute of Pacific Studies, promoted a tour of one or two musicians, who would travel round the island states, meet local musicians, form new groups and develop new music - then the support of hotels like the "Rarotongan" might be a prerequisite for the project, because without such assistance the costs would become phenomenal.

Those commercial enterprises, who make the biggest profits in the Pacific - like Hotels and Airlines - might plow a little percentage back into the cultural life of the region. In Europe such sponsorship is common and it is encouraged by governments through tax write-offs.

The Rarotongan could play a trail blazing role, in showing other hotels all over the region, that a more serious attitude to local arts can be compatible with the hotels commercial interests and that they could play a leading role in the development of the arts, instead of impeding their development.

