

Making a scene: tropical island weddings

Destination creation and the experience of place in the Cook Islands

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Abstract

This paper considers tropical island weddings as one example of how place is conceptualised and enacted in tourism to the Cook Islands. Representations of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination are examined, alongside the reported experiences of tourists whose prime reason for travelling there was to marry and/or honeymoon in the Cook Islands. An articulation of these representations and embodied experiences translates the sense of a non-specific tropical island destination into an exclusive and utopian sense of place. Even though Pacific islands are constructed through alluring visual representations as tropical island paradise destinations, their success relies as much on tourists' embodied experiences of them.

Keywords Cook Islands; narrative ethnography; place; representation of paradise; wedding tourism

Introduction

At least since the eighteenth century, tropical islands have been represented as alluring sights for Western eyes and sites for Western bodies. Pacific islands continue to be understood in contemporary popular culture as paradisaical and exotic places. Such images are crucial for the development of tourism (Harrison 2001), and while South Pacific tourism accounts for only 0.15 per cent of the world's international tourism arrivals, it is a vital component of the South Pacific region's economy and a major provider of employment (Milne 1992; Hall 1994). Tourism now represents an important development option for Pacific Island microstates faced with the problems of small size and isolation, because tourists travel to seek seemingly infinite resources of sun, sand and sea, which many of these islands possess in abundance (Britton 1987; Milne 1990). The South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO; prior to 2001 known as the Tourism Council of the South Pacific) suggests that 50–80 per cent of all tourists to the region regard the natural environment as one of the principal attractions of the host country (Kudu 1992). In short, the Pacific is popularly and primarily known to outsiders for its alluring 'nature' and the image of natural beauty saturates all islands within the Pacific, especially those with viable tourism industries.¹

Most Pacific island holiday destinations have been placed on the map partly through the machinations of metropolitan nation states, many of which have tropical provinces, namely the United States with Hawai'i, France with Tahiti and New Caledonia, and New Zealand with the Cook Islands. Former colonial powers, most notably Britain, Australia and Germany, have played a similar role.² As tropical islands became twentieth century tourist destinations, these metropolitan states were viewed as the main markets. Nor has this changed dramatically: Australia, the USA and New Zealand continue to provide the largest numbers of annual visitors to the thirteen member countries of the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO 2002: 2).

In this respect, the Cook Islands is fairly typical. Governed by New Zealand from the end of the nineteenth century until 1965,³ the nation is currently in 'free association' with New Zealand, which retains responsibility for its defence and provides development aid. The opening of the Cook Islands' international airport in 1974 marked the real beginning of its tourism industry, and since the late 1980s tourism-led economic development has

been an imperative for government and the private sector. Indeed, tourism has, in part, been responsible for what Sissons has described—less than warmly—as an ‘increasingly commodified, postmodern national space in which “modern” and “traditional” identities now rub shoulders’ (1994: 392).

At the time of writing, tourism is the predominant industry in the Cook Islands. Until 1992, New Zealanders comprised the majority of visitors, after which Europeans became dominant. By 1999, more than 55,000 tourists were visiting the Cook Islands annually, rising to nearly 75,000 in 2001 (SPTO 2002: 1).

Research focus and method: narrative ethnography

The material discussed in this paper derives from broader doctoral research on the performance of identity in the Cook Islands and its articulation with the tourism industry (Jamieson 2002). The thesis, influenced by the approaches employed by Rose (1990), Tsing (1993) and Visweswaran (1994), takes a narrative ethnographic approach and considers multifaceted stories as the means through which relationships are created and played out between tourists and local people. In this paper, the focus is specifically on tourists who visit the Cook Islands to have their wedding ceremony or honeymoon there. Using qualitative methods to explore the subjective reports of tourists provides important insights into their lived experiences, a focus often overlooked by studies that consider primarily the representations of the industry or investigate tourist experiences only through brief surveys generating quantitative data.

Research was conducted in the islands of Rarotonga, Aitutaki, Mangaia and Atiu in the Cook Islands, and in New Zealand, over a twelve-month period from January 1998 to February 1999. As in most anthropological research by fieldwork, participant observation was employed, necessitating close observation and recording, and participatory dialogue with research subjects. Extended participation in events, and recording of interviews and stories from tourists and Cook Islanders, afforded a close understanding of the subjectivities of tourists and Cook Islanders, and their interaction.

Most fieldwork was carried out on Rarotonga, the main island, and involved daily work in a small, locally-owned and locally-run cultural tour operation. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixty-five local people who worked directly and indirectly within the tourism

industry on the island—tour operators and workers, hotel managers, politicians, tour guides, and performers (dancers, choreographers and musicians). In addition, fifty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with tourists. These focused on their expectations and understanding of the landscape, culture and people of the Cook Islands prior to their holiday, and their experiences and reflections while on holiday.⁴ I complemented this research in the Cooks with archival and ethnographic work in New Zealand.

The focus on wedding tourism arose out of a broader inquiry into tourism as a context for performance of identity, a perspective in accord with that of Graburn (1977, 1983, 1995) and Cohen (1979, 1985), who stress the transformative potential of holidays for tourists.⁵ It is argued here that tropical island weddings promise a special and specialised kind of tour experience, premised on an exclusive and utopian sense of place, and the setting for the wedding is crucial to the construction of this experience.

In considering the central narrative concerns of tourist weddings in the Cook Islands, alongside tourists' and travel agents' accounts (drawn from interviews), I include my own reflections and participation, primarily as a participant in the construction of a wedding scene.⁶ Through detailed narrative description, I seek to evoke a sensory appreciation of 'being there', and also draw attention to both the discursive framing of places and the embodied positions from which we view them. The use of the present tense is sometimes deployed to stress the researcher's subjective perspective of this place at the time of the fieldwork.

As indicated, until recently New Zealand supplied most tourists to the Cook Islands. As my research considered past as well as contemporary representations of this group of islands, I was especially interested in examining if, and how, the Cook Islands are situated in the consciousness of New Zealanders. With this in mind, representatives from fifteen prominent New Zealand travel agencies in three major North Island cities were interviewed about their notions of the islands they 'sold' to clients.⁷ Archival research was also conducted to examine how the tourism industry was created by the New Zealand and Cook Islands governments, and to chart earlier and later representations of the Cooks in travel writing and tourism literature, photography and film.

Back to the brochures

The images of paradise that saturate Rarotongan tourism brochures are framed by the early imaginings of an industry pervaded by an aesthetic of exoticism. They date back at least to the European Grand Tour of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Towner 1985; Adler 1989), though they later came to reflect the middle class work ethic and frown upon over-indulgence.⁸ However, during the latter part of the twentieth century there emerged a growing emphasis on the intrinsic pleasure of holidays, along with a glorification of the romanticised landscape of nature as an alternative to the mechanised regulation and alienation of an urban industrialism (Bandy 1996: 556).⁹ ‘Sightseeing’ became the central activity when touring, and the tourist gaze was pre-focused and framed through reading travel literature—travel and adventure monographs, guidebooks and promotional brochures. According to Weightman, ‘the tour brochure directs expectations, influences perceptions, and thereby provides a preconceived landscape for the tourist to “discover”’ (Weightman 1987: 230).

In the early years of last century, Beatrice Grimshaw provided such a preconceived landscape for potential tourists to the Cook Islands. Writing prolifically of ‘exotic’ life in the South Seas for intrigued audiences ‘back home’ in Europe and Australia,¹⁰ she specifically aimed her work at a tourist market. Her brochure, *Islands of the Blest*, published in 1911 by the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand, represented Rarotonga as a place possessing ‘every beauty of the larger and more famous Islands’ of Hawai‘i and Tahiti, beauties that Grimshaw asserted must indeed be *seen* to be known.

Her representation helped to construct images of these islands as exotic and paradisaical places just awaiting visitation.¹¹ She drew heavily on the rhetoric of *travelling* rather than *tourism*, enticing prospective voyagers to the Cook Islands with a vision of beauty and a promise of remoteness, untouched by the hordes of either tourists or settler colonists. Although no contemporary promotional literature can pretend that any place is untouched, or that travelling is not a mass industry, the myth of destinations as paradisaical places persists. Indeed, the mass marketing of commodities and services is founded on a global articulation of images of an anti-modern romanticism. Tourism constructs a lens for imaginary landscapes (Bandy 1996). It is the business of branding places as views.

Almost a century after the publication of Grimshaw's promotional text, the Lonely Planet's *Travel Survival Kit to Rarotonga and the Cook Islands* also claims a privileged view of the Cook Islands as a place for those seeking the 'untouched'. The text opens with a candid description of the islands as a packaged product awaiting consumption: 'The tiny and remote Cook Islands are Polynesia in a conveniently handy, though widely scattered, package. They offer something for nearly everyone (Keller & Wheeler 1994: 9).

The package is of course narrated as one of 'spectacular beauty'. Rarotonga is compared to Tahiti—albeit a Tahiti of twenty years previously, before the infliction of the unsightly scars of modernity. Echoing Grimshaw, the account rhapsodises the landscape endearingly adorned with paradisaical attributes by the unseen hand of a personified 'nature' who has *cloaked* the mountains, *protected* the shores and *filled* the lagoons for the fortunate viewing of the tourist/consumer (Keller & Wheeler 1994: 9).

Although the island is portrayed as a very sensual world—sounds, tastes and smells are all harnessed by the tourism industry in its brochures of romance—it is the *view* that presides in image creation and most persuades the *viewer* that she must partake in the seeing of this place for herself. A wedding in this place offers not just a view but a scene: an opportunity to see and be seen, to place oneself *within* the picture, and to construct a paradoxical permanence in an ephemerally experienced place.

Wedding tourism in the Cook Islands

Tourism Cook Islands, the Cook Islands tourism authority, seeks to make the Cook Islands the preferred destination in the South Pacific for short breaks, marketing it as 'a special place, a special people, a special magic'. Chris Wong, CEO for Tourism Cook Islands, suggests that what differentiates the Cook Islands from other Pacific island destinations, making it appear more friendly to tourists, is a certain lack of development:

We try to position ourselves in terms of being not as developed as Fiji is. For example—the numbers of visitors that actually go there—we have 50,000 visitors a year coming here and that is well below the numbers that go to Fiji, or Tahiti, so what we promote here—that you probably will not find in many other island destinations—is the ability for the visitor to actually assimilate into your host community by virtue

of the way development has taken place here where you've got resorts and tourist facilities within community settlements . . . You will not get that in any of the other islands. In most cases they are almost enclaves. (Interview, 25.2.1999)

When questioned, though, both tourists and travel agents emphasised an aesthetic of place infused with sun, the beach and friendly faces—*without* history or culture. Such an image is often presented to potential tourists wanting a quiet holiday. Travel agents compared the Cook Islands to such Pacific destinations as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, places people visited if they 'wanted culture'. The Cook Islands are represented as tranquil and safe, in contrast to these other Pacific destinations, where local people are portrayed more as exotic, colourful additions alongside the scenic features. In the marketing of these Melanesian island states, 'discovery' of and participation in ancient cultural practices are emphasised alongside the unspoiled beach view.

Wedding tourists are, in some respects, a sub-category of international traveller, and may indeed participate in similar activities to other tourists. Many enjoy snorkelling in the lagoon, sunbathing, riding scooters around the island, visiting such sites as ceremonial grounds, taking tours and going shopping. However, compared to other visitors, they arrive with an intensely personal agenda. As was the case for nineteenth century honeymooners before them (Jasen 1991: 283–313; Bulcroft, Bulcroft & Cranange 1997: 467), the places they visit must be imbued—by them and others—with values and elements associated with romantic love. As a consequence, their personal experience of the place as an island paradise is intensified when it is promoted as being *made* for them, and their expectations are more than fulfilled by their lived experience of it as an extension of themselves in a state of sensual indulgence.

Wedding tourists are a small but rapidly increasing proportion of the total annual number of visitors to the Cook Islands.¹² Tour operators and hoteliers have sold tropical island wedding packages from the 1980s, but it was not until the mid-1990s that weddings themselves became significantly associated with the Cook Islands as a destination. In 1995, 282 foreign visitors were married there, but by 1998 this increased to 366 and by 2000 to 1,142 (Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages 2001).

Local businesses selling wedding packages on Rarotonga offer variations on the theme of 'a marriage licence in paradise'. To be married in the Cook Islands one needs only a passport, a birth certificate, three working days prior to the wedding to obtain the marriage licence, and four days' residence in the country prior to the wedding day.

Travel agents refer to Rarotonga, and to a greater extent now Aitutaki, as honeymoon destinations. They present their clients a place imbued with qualities associated with weddings and honeymoons—a 'place for couples and people over thirty' 'to get away from it all', for it is 'quiet', 'relaxing', 'romantic', 'leisurely' and well worth 'a six to ten day stay'. As one agent from the Atlantic and Pacific Holiday Shoppe summed up Rarotonga: 'It is golden sands and palm trees—the ideal Pacific island' (Interview, 26.11.1997).

The New Zealand travel agents interviewed asserted that the beach was the country's most important selling point. One travel agent warned clients that they should be prepared to occupy themselves in some way, because if the sun was not shining or they tired of 'hanging out' on the beach, they would be 'in for serious boredom'.

Travel agents' sales pitches concentrated almost exclusively on elements of physical nature. They reported that people wanted to know about the beaches and the sort of accommodation available, and required assurance of consistently good weather. Most agents commented that people became interested in the culture of the Cook Islands only *after* they arrived, if indeed they did at all. As a Wellington-based agent stated: 'I am relieved that people don't ask us questions about the culture and the history, as this would be just another thing to have to do and we don't have time to research this' (Interview, 4.12.1997). Another, in Palmerston North, reflected: 'Generally, the Pacific Islands are for holidays not history' (Interview, 12.12.1997).

Making a wedding scene

Once the couple has arrived in the Cook Islands, the romantic setting must be provided for them, especially that for the actual wedding ceremony. It does not happen by chance. During fieldwork in Rarotonga in 1998, I recorded at length the preparations for a wedding organised by one inbound tour.¹³

Teina and Ngamata are working close to the beach in the early afternoon. They struggle to erect a bamboo arch, which is bending dramatically with the strong on-shore breeze whipping across the lagoon between Motu Koromiri and the mainland of Rarotonga. I pick my way toward them through clusters of prone bodies on the marble-like coral sand in front of the hotel. My purple and white *pareu* dress, sandals and backpack out of place in the midst of these variously shaded pink limbs and midriffs exposed in this early April sun.

‘Eh, here she is. *Kia orana!* We wondered if you’d be able to find us and I should have told you we’d be on the villa side of the resort.’

‘That’s OK, I found you’, I reply.

Ngamata, who is in the advanced stages of her pregnancy, is wearing a purple *pareu* dress and flat white shoes. She directs the placing of *rauti* branches (a shrub often used on ceremonial occasions for adornment of the body) into the sand at the sides of the bamboo arch with an air of authority complemented by her dark sunglasses.

‘I like to use all natural materials,’ she asserts.

Teina wears shorts and a T-shirt. Her young son is with her, passing the *matipi* (bush knife) and running to the car to fetch things for the two women. Keen to include me in the construction of this central feature of the wedding décor, Teina instructs me to put a *rauti* in. I tuck my backpack near to a little gold spray-painted round table—one of those metal fold-up types—and two green plastic chairs at the side of the arch and pick up a *rauti*. The sand is hard. Even when I dig with the knife I can’t get the *rauti* in very far before it falls over. Eventually it stands. Finally, pieces of bougainvillea and *tipani* flowers are threaded through the bamboo, completing Ngamata’s vision for the ‘natural’ archway. The wind is blowing the arch towards us now and Teina and Ngamata look at it quietly.

‘Maybe the wind will die down,’ offers Teina.

We all stand and look at the arch bending towards us, and Ngamata comments decisively, ‘It might fall down when they walk through.’

'Could we tie some guy ropes to it?' I offer.

'You'll be able to see them, and that is not good.'

Eventually, it is decided that green ribbon guy ropes might act as an anchor and Ngamata sends Teina's son to the car for the ribbon.

'*Oro, oro, oro!*' she calls out as he lopes off through the hotel grounds.

He returns with the ribbon and Ngamata stands back and watches while Teina and I tie it to the arch and secure each piece by wrapping it around a short stick of bamboo pushed down into the sand. We place rocks on the bamboo sticks to hold the ribbon guy ropes in place. The bathers begin to drift back to their hotel rooms from the beach as the wind picks up and clouds obscure the sun. The wedding scene is set. (excerpt from researcher's fieldnotes, 24.5.98)

Romancing nature: experiencing the physical environment

Clearly, much local effort is essential for the creation of a wedding scene. But what about tourists who choose to be married in the Cook Islands? How do they interpret and act upon what is said to them about the Cook Islands prior to their visit? An examination of their experiences suggests how they not only view but embody the place they occupy for this short but intense time. Their reflections on their experiences of nature, time and individualism transform a generic tropical island destination into a deeply personal place.

For instance, Catherine, a 36-year-old secretary from Dublin, and her partner, Michael, were part of the way through their five-week world trip—en route to Tahiti and the US. They had been to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand when they arrived in the Cook Islands to get married in April 1998. Theirs was one of the tropical island weddings I attended. Catherine explained why they had chosen the Cook Islands:

We're here all up for nine days, it's our first time to a Pacific island. We chose to come here because of what we'd heard from travel agents and the Lonely Planet guidebook and also the Internet—you know, the people, the beauty of the island, and also one other important aspect—that we only had to be resident here for four days before we could get married. I knew enough before we came to make me want to visit it and ultimately to decide that it was to be the venue for our wedding. (Interview, 20.4.1998)

She went on to emphasise the simplicity of the wedding compared to the ‘fuss’ of back home and the special and relaxed atmosphere.

The simplicity of place, articulated by many tourists in harmony with industry discourse, was partly created by their self-imposed solitude. Place became simple because they lived it that way. For many wedding couples this involved being away from family and friends in an effort to avoid a perceived fuss of organisation and expense back home. Escape from social and financial obligations translated into a transformation of the self in this new place. Michelle, an Australian who went to Aitutaki to get married, explained she had not wanted to get married ‘at home’: *‘Like this you avoid the distractions of home and it solves the problems of who you invite and who you don’t invite’* (Interview, 23.8.98). She stressed the personal significance of her wedding with only immediate family members, and in having a complete break, ‘not taking any work’ for ten days.

Although the absence of unwanted guests was welcomed, Cook Islanders themselves were sometimes seen as part of the attraction of the place, and Catherine often spoke of how people and nature were integral to this tropical place:

When we spent the first night at the airport waiting for the next flight to Aitutaki, I noticed the warm wind blowing, the smell of flowers in the air, the locals greeting each other with tiare, the musician who greeted and bade farewell to everybody who passed through the airport . . . [and] . . . also the warm friendly faces of the local people . . . The other evening we came across a rugby team finishing their practice, and we noticed the gentle and relaxed manner in which they drove off in their cars and on their motorbikes . . . (Interview, 20.4.1998)

Warm air and warm faces infuse an atmosphere of greeting, making a place in Catherine’s imagination where a newcomer can be made to feel perpetually special and welcome. Her description of the way local people smiled and moved, the peace and relaxation so strongly emphasised by travel agents in their accounts of the aesthetics of the Cook Islands, reiterated the romanticised values she had been led to expect. She had brought with her a knowledge of these narratives. It was what she sought, and she ‘discovered’ it immediately.

Couples not only observe but also embody the romance associated with

the destination. Many tropical island wedding tourists articulate an interest in local people, which they enact through a desire to imbue their weddings with (what they understand as) 'island culture'. Michelle, for instance, decided with her partner to be married in a church, '*because religion is such a big part of the Cook Islands . . . I thought it would be nice*'. She recounted that she had worn a hat '*because all the women wear them to church*'. She also made it clear she would not have chosen the manner of another couple's wedding. They had '*flaming torches and natives rowing them in a canoe*'.

Although wedding tourists have an aesthetic appreciation of their new context, they may remain strangers to local practices, far more so than other tourists. Beaches, palm trees, water, sunsets and mountains are there not only to be viewed, but *also* to be part of. Jolly (1997: 113) notes a similar aesthetic created in the film *South Pacific*, where indigenous Pacific peoples become a beautiful backdrop, part of the lush scenery, while the narrative revolves around characters who are foreign to the place. Island wedding tourists embody this momentary aesthetic of a foreign presence enhanced by bountiful beauty.

The following excerpt on island weddings from a magazine targeting tourists in the Cook Islands typifies a representation of place as *abundant* with nature.

A magnificent island of high mountains clothed in lush green rainforest and encircled by a strikingly lovely lagoon of endless turquoise, Rarotonga is truly one of the last remaining paradises . . . Swaying palm trees, turquoise sea lapping the pale sandy shore, the setting sun turning the whole scene golden as another day at the edge of time draws to a close. (Raizis 1998–1999: 7)

The text tries to create a sense of total immersion in this tropical ambience. However, the tourist was never intended to surrender *completely* to nature, or 'go native' like those anthropologists and travellers, traders and beachcombers who never 'came home'. In most promotional literature, the sense of being consumed by the beauty of the elements is tempered by a sense of finitude, and the 'magnificent mountains', 'lush rainforest', and 'endless turquoise lagoon' are tinged by a 'setting sun' on 'another day at the edge of time'. Nature is thus revealed as both abundant and finite in this '*last remaining paradise*'.

Romancing time: the experience of time

The island paradise of the brochures is positioned at the *edge* of time. In these texts, 'nature' is not just a generic term for plants, animals and landscape; it also implies authenticity and ephemerality. This is 'real nature', and—by implication—what is 'back home' is no longer nature. *Real* nature is situated by the tourism industry in *another time* to be experienced only for a short period. The image of islands 'poised on the brink' in both spatial and temporal senses represents islands as doubly marginal. A stress on horizons evokes spatial and temporal marginality; the edge of time is the edge of land and sea—the island beach itself.

Time as concept and practice in tourism industry discourse and tourist activity has become crucial in the accounts of some anthropologists and sociologists of tourism. Graburn, for example, asserts that touristic time is 'non-ordinary' and similar to sacred time in religious settings; tourism time interrupts the flow of profane time (1977, 1983). He considers touring as the epitome of *freedom* and personal choice, characteristic of Western individualism.¹⁴ Studies using this approach emphasise the antithesis between the touristic moment and ordinary life. In the former, normality is suspended and the individual is temporarily freed from his or her ordinary preoccupations. Life is experienced as somehow 'out of time and place'.

The construction of 'now' and 'then' is also related to the sense of 'here' and 'there'. Bruner (1996: 161) can thus note the Western tourists' categorisation of racialisation 'at home' and primitivisation 'over there'. Some tourists construct separate geographies, the first of which is 'home', where the 'Other' is unwelcome, and is associated with such problems as crime, poverty and violence. The second is 'over there', at the destination, where Western elites pay to photograph and view the Other, whom they regard as quite distinct from those who threaten in the home context. Most tourists, Bruner reminds us, do not travel to experience the new postcolonial subject, the emerging nation in a process of economic development; rather, they yearn for an image of a precolonial *past*.

Narratives of *home* and *away* thus rely on imaginings of difference from the self in time as well as space. For many tourists from European 'homes', the Cook Islands constituted a place in a far-away ocean that for them became a once-in-a-life-time experience. One respondent, a thirty-year-old German woman, spoke passionately of having literally '*dreamed of this place, and*

so I am now living my dream [in the place]'. She described images of the Cook Islands seen at a travel show in Berlin and marvelled at how they were 'just the same as the real thing'.

For many North American and European tourists, the sense of 'another time' was strongly marked. This place was so unconnected to their ordinary lives back home that many chose to view the destination as an idyllic *disconnection*. By contrast, New Zealanders and Australians on holiday in the Cook Islands were less likely to embrace such contrived naivety, although some of those interviewed knew surprisingly little about the islands or Cook Islanders. Some middle-aged people remembered when 'New Zealand was quiet and friendly like this', and others referred to 'the Cook Island bloke' they recalled working with back in the 1960s or 1970s. Another couple returned every few years to 'recharge their batteries', and had been doing so for ten years. For many Australians and New Zealanders who identified themselves as tourists, the Cook Islands represented a break with the present—a return to some nostalgic past.¹⁵

Most recreational holidaymakers, who speak in terms of 'having time out', 'taking a break' and needing to 'wind down', desire suspension of a sense of ordinary time, as well as construction of a sense of an extraordinary place. This is what the industry proclaims, and it is what the tourists want and seek and consciously play out on the beach. To accept this at face value, however, is to assume that places *are* somehow disconnected and that time *is* fragmentary. But islands are not untouched in oceans on the edge of time. They are constantly shaped by a discourse bent on proving their stasis. Beaches become stretches of unmarked sand fringing island oases in the midst of blue nothingness, and tourists—honeymooners and wedding couples, living out the ideals of Western, middle class, heterosexual and commercialised romantic love—themselves create and enact these places to reflect their own agendas.

Romancing the individual: 'solitude' and 'possession'

In opting for a tropical island wedding destination, tourists do not simply assert their right to *be* there but, in a sense, claim *ownership* of the place for the duration of their stay. Such concepts of 'being there' and 'being alone' tap into the romanticised tropes of island castaways (with which children's literature is replete) for whom perpetual freedom from social obligations is

prominent, and perhaps also into those of the exotic allure of a Pacific where—as propagated by some eighteenth century explorers—both life and love are free.

The case of Aitutaki (the second most populated island in the Cooks), which is becoming popular as a honeymoon island, illustrates this tendency. One of its numerous *motu* (small lagoon islands) is even referred to by tour guides and travel agents as ‘honeymoon island’, as couples can be transported and left there alone for a day as part of a lagoon cruise tour. Several travel agents spoke of Aitutaki as a good place to go for a day two, to enjoy that ‘away from it all’ experience. The following excerpt from a Travel Arrangements Internet advertisement evokes this sense of abandonment and possession of place:

Choices for honeymooners are quite extensive, most popular [*sic*] is heading off for a few days on Aitutaki, the jewel in the crown of the Cook Islands’ romantic outer islands. Crystal clear turquoise waters will stun you and several of the small resorts offer Private Picnics on deserted islands, spending the entire day to yourselves, rejoicing in the freedom and warmth of your very own island. All cares and worries are forgotten as you begin life together in your very own piece of paradise. (Travel Arrangements, Internet advertisement, 15.2.2000)

Of course, these apparently ‘free’ images come with a price. To marry in paradise is to *buy* a wedding in paradise. But in consuming a wedding or honeymoon package, the event and *place* of the wedding or honeymoon become a lasting product. The act of consumption reaffirms the values associated with weddings. The island values portrayed in tourism industry discourse—beauty, freedom, luxury, the erotic and the exotic—are retranslated as values of the conjugal couple and their destiny in married life.

As Massey emphasises (1994), social interrelations ‘make’ places, and this is so for the tropical island wedding. The honeymoon/wedding destination is a uniquely personalised place, and the couple’s romantic relationship—its focal position in the landscape, the local people, daily events and all ‘back home’—is central to the re-creation of self in place.

Bulcroft, Bulcroft and Cranange (1997) point to an apparently increasing need for couples to identify as honeymooners in their destination. This suggestion, that they need recognition to enact their elaborate narratives, is

reinforced through resorts and destinations catering specifically to honeymooners and wedding couples. In interviews, couples recollected that everything that happened seemed to be *for them*: the type of cake the caterers had served or the decoration of tables with flowers. Rachel and Simon from New Zealand, for example, recalled the string band that had '*played all night for us*' at their resort (Interview, 2.7.98).

During the brief period of the honeymoon, the interrelations of the 'honeymoon couple' with everyone else—travel agents, tourism industry workers, and family and friends back home—centre on them, *their* narrative, *their* special place: *their* tropical island. Paradoxically, this period has a vital sense of *endurance*, which is strongly connected to the transformation of self in this place. It is the making of an ideal marriage: a lasting, binding institution.

While many tourists purchased cheap souvenirs, jewellery and clothing, honeymoon and wedding tourists commonly preferred to spend on accommodation, meals and flights to outer islands. Thus they chose products that contributed to their experience of being alone in their destination, their realm, rather than fussing over gifts or souvenirs for others. All tourists interviewed, though, were making a record of their holidays in some way, through video, camera or journals. Michelle, for instance, described her wedding and listed all the places where she and her husband had taken photographs: '*outside the church*', '*then at the beach*', '*then at the resort*'. The day after the wedding, they were taken round the island on the back of a truck, '*and got all of it on video*'.

Sightseeing enables places to be consumed. Couples can process and frame their experience for subsequent viewing by others at home. And as tourists consume places as holiday destinations, they infuse the sites with their own values. This place becomes *our* place, in that this is where the moment and the money were spent.

The process of commoditisation is not news to anthropologists of tourism. Greenwood raised it some time ago, when noting the changing state of the Alarde, a Basque ritual he then considered was being sold as 'culture by the pound' to tourists (1977). Later, Selwyn identified one of tourism's dominant themes as 'commoditisation, the gathering of everything, from sites to emotions to persons, into the cash nexus' (1993: 127). In the brochure representation of destinations, boundaries between types of

information are removed. Places become lists of features, equally important or irrelevant, conveying to the reader that islands are products and can be reduced to their cash components (Selwyn 1993: 128).

For Michael, who came to the Cook Islands to get married in 1998, the destination clearly had commodity value and features that were worth experiencing on honeymoon.

You want to know about the climate and the geography and accommodation and prices and the culture and that sort of thing . . . We didn't know much about this place other than it's a kind of tropical island and that I thought it would be good to get married on it. It seems to have a good reputation with travel agents. They said it was a beautiful island and not a rip off like French Polynesia . . . and that the people were nice. (Interview, 21.4.98)

This commodity value rests on an association of wedding/honeymoon places with comfort and luxury, a combination that thus characterises the tropical island destination. While Pacific island holidays still represent a break with conventional industrial life, the natural features—palm trees and beaches—have also come to represent an exotic freedom embodied in Western experiences of the tropical as a *luxury product* for the *self*.

Couples on such holidays described their day-to-day activities at the destination as 'luxuriating'. On Rarotonga, they typically stayed at one of three resort-style hotels, rarely leaving its perimeter. While this lingering in luxurious places depends partly on the type of activity followed, landscape, people, products and the atmosphere must all reiterate this lavish, luxuriant quality.

*Articulating place: reviewing the Cook Islands
as a tropical island wedding destination*

This consideration of the Cook Islands as a venue for tourist weddings provides more than a snapshot of one type of tourism on a Pacific Island microstate. It also allows for a broader conceptualisation of destination creation, tourists' experiences and their ensuing representations of their holidays. Emphasis has been on the dynamic connection between representation and experience of island weddings. Tourists having weddings and honeymoons in the Cook Islands actively participate in constructing the destination as *their* place.

In this respect, destinations are constructed *places*, and experiencing place derives as much from this moving (touring) sense as from a dwelling sense. A tension between staying and going informs any discourse of place—of home and away, of theirs and ours, of familiar and strange. Tourism is about making places seem accessible to people who have no prior lived experience in them or lasting connection to them. It assures a right to commune with a place that is based not on routine dwelling but on movement. But in moving, an elevated sense of self in a unique time/space is created.

Casey argues against an Enlightenment assumption of space as precursor of place, an empty canvas on to which place is mapped (1993, 1996). He asserts that place is a *fusion* of self, space and time. It is the most fundamental form of embodied experience. Consequently, we know place as this fusion of self/space/time, rather than a mapped site set in vacuous space, along a linear continuum of time. Place is thus more an *unfolding* process than a pre-existing thing.¹⁶ As he puts it, ‘places not only are, they happen’ (1996: 27).

In like vein, Massey asserts that the politics of characterising places lies not just in the specific features assigned to places, but in *how* the image of place is constructed (1994: 114). Further,

a proportion of those interrelations will stretch beyond that ‘place’ itself. In that sense if social space is conceived of as constructed out of the vast, intricate complexity of social processes and social interactions at all scales from the local to the global, then ‘a place’ is best thought of as a particular part of, a particular moment in, the global network of those social networks and understandings. (Massey 1994: 115)

Offering a perspective that informs the analysis in this paper, she goes on to suggest that place is dynamic and interactive, not enclosed and inert. Places are plastic entities: they *become* what they are represented to be. Places are not just there, they are made to seem ‘as if’.

This paper has considered one tourism destination in terms of this theory of place. It has suggested that while the tourism industry envisions place, tourists themselves both envision and enact it. Approaching place in Casey’s sense as a fusion of space and time and self, I have explored how tourists transform space/time and self in the temporality of their tour.

An analysis of tourism industry representation of the Cook Islands, and of wedding tourists' experience at this destination, reveals that this interaction of representation and experience—of vision with embodiment—transforms the tropical island destination into a specific kind of place for these tourists. For them, at this particular time in their experience, the meaning of place that they construct is a product of the combination of their social relations with the agents of the tourism industry (travel agents, brochures, guide books), with each other and with local people.

Conclusion

This view of the Cook Islands as one destination within a sea of possible 'tropical island paradises' is based on a specificity grounded not so much in cultural or historical trajectories as on a sense of what has *not yet* developed. Compared to the surrounding sea of perceived change, the Cook Islands are isolated as jewels in the crown, as pearls in the ocean, as heirlooms of yesteryear. It is largely this representation of having been 'bypassed' that makes Rarotonga and the Cook Islands as a whole a special destination on the tourist map.

The tropical island wedding in paradise reifies place as an individuated personal memory space. The possession of place for purposes of fantasy and memory creation owes less to an enduring relationship in a lived place than to nostalgia for a particular moment. The tropical island wedding incorporates an exclusive notion of place, which is bound to a date, a photo album and a video—a recollection *of* rather than reconnection *to* a place. For couples enacting tropical island weddings, such a place is imbued with qualities articulated in travel literature but re-articulated by their own subjective and embodied experience of nature, 'island' time, and a celebration of solitude and possession of individualism in this place.

Notes

1 This is not to deny that the effect of this meta-image of natural beauty for tourism in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands is threatened by political instability and violence.

2 For an in-depth discussion of the colonial history of Pacific tourism see Jamieson (2002).

3 Niue, Tokelau and the Cook Islands, administered by the New Zealand government through the Department of Island Territories, were collectively referred to in government discourse as New Zealand's 'tropical provinces'.

4 Of this interview cohort, 16 people were visiting the Cook Islands to get married or have a honeymoon.

5 Graburn's work on tourists at play suggests that tourists—on tour—experiment with their identity while away from their usual places of abode (1977, 1983, 1995), a view that is borne out by the work of Cohen (1979, 1985), Gottlieb (1982), Lett (1983), Moore (1980), Riley (1988) and Wagner (1977).

6 See Crick (1985, 1995) and Bruner (1995, 1996) for discussions of the overlapping identities of 'anthropologist' and 'tourist'.

7 Europe and North America now form the main tourist market for the Cook Islands. Unfortunately, financial constraints did not permit similar research inquiry with travel agents in these places as part of my doctoral project.

8 The initial Thomas Cook excursions in England and the French paid vacation were early forms of more accessible tourism (Nash 1996: 1–2).

9 Such scenic tourism has been linked to the contemporary environmentalist movements and to styles of tourism referred to by the industry as 'eco-', 'nature' (and associated with this, 'heritage'), 'cultural' and 'ethnic' (Bandy 1996: 556).

10 Beatrice Grimshaw's accounts of life in the 'strange South Seas' were originally serialised as articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She resided in Australia and Papua New Guinea for many years.

11 Jamieson (2002) provides a close examination of colonial representations of the Cook Islands and the relationship of contemporary tourism to this.

12 In 1999, wedding tourists to the Cook Islands formed approximately 1% of the total visitor market (SPTO 2000 25; Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages 2001).

13 In this paper, as in my doctoral thesis, pseudonyms have been used, except for those people who publicly represent a government or organisation viewpoint.

14 Other studies of tourism with consideration to play, ritual and liminality include Wagner's (1977) research on Swedish tourists at a Gambian beach resort, Moore's (1980) work on Walt Disney World in Florida, Lett's (1983) research on yacht tourism in the Caribbean, Passariello's (1983) study of Mexican vacationers and Gottlieb's (1982) work on Americans' vacation practices.

15 This is not necessarily the experience of New Zealand Cook Islanders who return in large numbers to visit family over the summer. Many of these people reported feeling that they 'didn't fit in' to life in the Cook Islands, having lived overseas, but family connections and obligations (and connection to land) sustained a sense of belonging to this place.

16 Casey's assertion is in tension with the work of Harvey (1989, 1993) who characterises place, after Heidegger, as Being; and implicitly *not* Becoming. Harvey's conceptualisation rather cements place and, as Doreen Massey (1993, 1994) argues, uses place as a source of stability and unproblematic identity.

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