

TAHITIAN CHOREO-MUSICAL PERFORMANCE ON CRUISE SHIPS

Staged authenticity and postmodern tourism

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Abstract

This paper investigates how identifiers of Tahitian culture are presented to cruise ship guests by means of choreo-musical performance. Three presentation methods are considered: dockside performance, the local show, and the Tahitian-themed production show. The processes of representation and performance to postmodern tourists, easily-assimilable surface representations rather than 'authentic' culture, is documented and discussed. This research concludes that such performances do create authentic signifiers of Tahitian culture despite the fact that they are created to be a touristic representation for cruise ship guests' consumption.

Keywords

Tahiti, music, dance, cruise ships, tourism

In 2008, Japanese company Pony Canyon released a Blu-Ray disk entitled 'Virtual Trip – Tahiti' (Pony Canyon, 2008), which showed tourist events: eating breakfast, checking into a hotel or visiting a beach. It allows a viewer to undertake a fake trip, with the cultural signifiers of a real one, without ever having to leave their armchair. Contemporary mass media, according to Urry, constructs and sustains the signifiers of culture. In what he calls the three-minute culture (Urry, 1990: 92), consumers gaze upon and collect the images of many cultures from mass media. These are the popular culture signs consumers expect when arriving at a destination, be it the pubs of 'jolly olde England', pizzas and leaning towers in 'la bella Italia', or the balmy ocean and deserted beaches of 'exotic Tahiti'.

Tourism is partly the process of consuming images nurtured and cultivated by media (Berger, 2011; Urry, 1990). The term 'Tahiti', for example, brings to mind pre-packaged and mediatised images such as beaches and warm ocean dips, cocktails under a palm tree, remote and blissful solitude and other exotic images. Such images, defining tourism destinations, are easily assimilable, non-threatening and attractive to postmodern tourists. Travel programs, advertising campaigns and popular media produce them to create a desire to consume such images (Urry, 1990) thereby helping to fuel the tourism industry.

However, the reality of tourists' experiences does not always match such perfect, pre-packaged images. The great advantage of the cruise product is that such images are controlled and implemented so that the reality of the tourist experience matches the brochure. Ships form a social, cultural, physical and above all safe cocoon for tourists. They pull into port and disperse often thousands of relatively wealthy tourists visiting Tahiti for only a few hours. In order to allow tourists to collect signs of local identity, shipping and tour companies and local governments present quickly and easily accessible signifiers of local identity. Ships achieve this outcome via a number of methods, including food – the ubiquitous Tahitian buffet night – the provision of cruise-line-sanctioned local tours, and by choreo-musical performance. This paper discusses implementation of choreo-musical performances aboard cruise ships and the process by which these performances generate images of local identity for guests' consumption. Performances of Tahitian music form the case study.

Cruise ships offer a hyperreal experience (Williams, 2002: 193-198). Instead of the classic signifier-signified semiotic model, many signs aboard a cruise indicate another sign. Choreo-musical performances by Tahitian performers presented for cruise ship guests do not signify Tahiti, but a sign for Tahiti – an artificial, sanitised and hyperreal construct that does not exist in reality. Baudrillard famously quotes Littré: “Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms” (Baudrillard, 1994: 3). A similar process occurs in attempts to represent local culture for the benefit of cruise ship guests. Such performances do produce real cultural signifiers in their simulations. However, these appear not because the performance accurately signifies a local culture, but despite the sanitised and false simulation of the performance.

The cruise industry has sustained the highest growth in the tourism market over the past few decades. In 2015, judging by standing orders for cruise ships, there will be more than 20 million berths annually aboard ships (Cruise Industry News, 2011), compared with 18 million in 2011, up from 500,000 in 1970 (Dickinson and Vladimir, 2008). Cruise ships transporting tourists in the tens of thousands visit former island paradises such as Barbados, Nassau and Tahiti. Of a \$26 billion annual turnover, Australia and the Pacific account for \$500 million, or about 1.8% of this market (Wahlstrom, 2009). Tahiti, as one among several destinations in the Pacific, forms only a small proportion of this. Because of the small number of residents, relatively small numbers of tourists have a great impact. Pape’ete, the capital of French Polynesia, had 26,100 residents in the 2007 census (INSEE, 2007). In 2010, up to 6,000 visitors per week, or 3.3% of the resident population, daily visited Pape’ete on the relatively small ships M.V. *Paul Gauguin*, *Pacific Princess*, *Star Flyer* and *Clipper Odyssey* (Tahiti Presse, 2010) – all of which carry less than 500 guests. When the R.M.S. *Queen Mary 2* makes her annual visit, the population increases by nearly 12%. Many of these guests are retirees (Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association, 2004; Tourism Queensland, 2004) who are travelling and having new experiences. Without a cruise and the associated performances, few cruise ship guests would have an opportunity for any sort of experience of an unfamiliar culture, mediated or unmediated.

Over the past 20 years, tourism studies have incorporated aspects of postmodernism. Researchers have examined tourism as more than a series of experiences; of doing one thing after another in a strange country. Tourism is seen as a series of direct and mediated relationships (Young, 2009) with, and in, the spaces of movement, destination, experience, memory, representation and virtual and imaginary space (Wearing, 2010). The cultural sanction of modern tourists was a ‘quest for authenticity’ (Boorstin, 1961; MacCannell, 1973). However, the cultural sanction of today’s postmodern tourist is that of the ‘playful search for enjoyment’ or the ‘aesthetic enjoyment of surfaces’ (Cohen, 1995: 16, 17, 21) – the opposite of a search for authenticity. Cruise ship guests fit this paradigm so well, that many guests leave the sanctuary of the cruise ship rarely, only encountering the local culture on mediated tours from the ship, or via performances provided by the onboard entertainment department. This control is one of the reasons some tourists do not like cruise ships. However, with cultures presented on a platter – quite literally in the case of the themed buffet – and with small amounts of time to absorb the cultural identifiers of such cultures, this control can also be a strong reason to like cruise ships.

The label ‘authentic’ creates value in tourism (Taylor, 2001), and is used to sell both objects (souvenirs, clothing, fabrics) and experiences (festivals, rituals and cruises). Authenticity has been central to studies of tourism over several decades¹. Culture subjected to the process of authentication is necessary to its promotion as a tourism product inevitably undergoes commodification with a dollar value set upon cultural objects and experiences, not necessarily previously for sale. Thus, cultural objects or experiences become marketable tourism products

(Xie and Wall, 2008). The boundaries between staged authenticity (the performance which is presented as the 'real' culture) and what is perceived as objective authenticity (the reality of the culture) are purposely blurred (Eco, 1990; Fjellman, 1992; Baudrillard, 1994) both to produce an 'authentic' experience and to allow commodification.

Several tourism business entities have an interest in presenting authentic performance. Xie and Wall's proposed conceptual model of performance authentication (2008: 139) includes contributions from four groups: governments, tourism businesses, visitors and local communities. In cruise ship terms, these groups are port regulatory authorities, cruise ship lines, guests and local tourism operators and performers. All of these have a part to play in the creation of staged cultural performance on ships.

Two types of cruise ships visit Tahiti: those visiting Tahiti among several different ports, and those that are resident there. The visitor ship will visit Tahiti as a part of a longer voyage, with visits to many other ports. These visits may last a few days in the case of a Pacific Island voyage, or several months in the case of a world cruise. For these tourists, Tahiti is one among several places they may visit. Therefore, it is essential that Tahitian culture be presented in an easily and quickly assimilable manner.

Three resident ships stay in Tahiti year round: the small cruise ship M.V. *Paul Gauguin*, the combined cruise-ship/cargo vessel M.V. *Aranui 3* and the 22 passenger M.V. *Haumana*. Princess Cruises often places a smaller ship, such as the 826 passenger M.V. *Ocean Princess* in Tahiti for the northern winter. These vessels attract guests interested in a longer and more thorough stay specifically in Tahiti and require a closer, though safe and 'edutaining', introduction to Tahitian culture.

There are three ways in which cruise ships present Tahitian culture to their guests: in dockside performances, local shows, or regular production shows. Different ships use these shows variously to cater to the perceived requirements of their consumers. Dockside performances involve groups of musicians and sometimes dancers performing on the docks of the restricted port areas as passengers embark and disembark. These performances commonly take place near the port entrance where guests can see them regardless of which ship they are on. Passengers will have a similar experience regardless of the type of cruising undertaken.

As the port authority organises such performances, these are examples of government-sponsored authenticity – of how the government would like tourists to see Tahiti. Visual and musical signifiers delineate Tahitian culture. Costumes are simple, but colourful. Instrumentation usually consists of Tahitian drums (such as the *tō'ere*, *pahu tupa'i rima* or *tari'parau*), guitars and – the ubiquitous symbol of Polynesian music – the ukulele, known as the *uturere* in Tahiti. Organisers do not design these performances as formal concerts – indeed, many tourists may feel uncomfortable stopping and observing the performance. Rather, they are designed to provide an aural and visual signifier of Tahiti and Tahitian culture, welcoming the visitor to a constructed and packaged Tahiti. While this is a formal, organised performance, dockside performances have many of the trappings of informal performance (e.g., lacking a formal venue such as a theatre, stage lighting, seats etc.). Performances take place in the port area, a multi-purpose environment used for both shipping business and, in this case, performance. They usually occur when guests are leaving the ship (the first few hours the ship is in port) and returning (the last few hours before departure), though such performances may consist of several groups performing one after the other with breaks. The port area – a restricted government space where locals are not usually permitted to venture – is considered by guests to be a 'safe' place; an extension of the safe cocoon of the ship.

Most cruise ship guests have an opportunity to experience the local show, a choreo-musical

performance performed on the cruise ship by local musicians and dancers. Nearly every visiting cruise ship books such a show. If the ship sails in the evening, the local show will occur just before sailing when most guests have returned to the ship (Logan, 2011). If the ship is overnighing (which is rare, as this practice is expensive for the cruise line), the performance may take the place of the evening cabaret show. Linnekin refers to similar shows in Tahitian hotels as the "Reader's Digest approach" (1997: 232), but acknowledges their sufficiency for the desires of most tourists. These performances are more commodified and controlled than dockside performances. In the below-cited photographs, for example, musicians wear Hawaiian-style shirts and hats. Dancers, however, are dressed in traditional grass leg skirts or in skirts and bikini tops, playing to the exotic, sensual and primitivist expectations of cruise ship guests (Figure 1, Figure 2). Cruise Director Jamie Logan writes of guests saying that a successful Tahitian performance was "classy and colourful" (Logan, 2011). Classy and colourful, rather than authentic is the prerequisite of the successful Tahitian cruise ship local show.



Figure 1. Photo by Jamie Logan, 31 January 2011, http://www.sameshipdifferentday.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/IMG_0818.jpg



Figure 2. Photo by Jamie Logan, 31 January 2011, http://www.sameshipdifferentday.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/IMG_0830.jpg

The local show is a liaison between local tourism operators and cruise ships, performed in restricted cruise ship space where only guests and crew are usually permitted. The stage area, even more restricted, is reserved for entertainment staff only. However, in the local show, the ship temporarily lays aside the boundary between restricted and unrestricted space to allow local performers onto the stage. The performance space is modelled on a Western theatre, and therefore contrasts with locations where such performances would normally take place. It is rare for performers to provide stage dressing. Much of the control of the show is by the ship. The cruise director, for example, books the show and sets the time and physical location of the performance. The local tourism operator controls the actual performance, music, choreography and costume, but at the behest of the cruise line. Popular signifiers of local culture, including costume, dance and song are expected and required.

Production shows aboard cruise ships may be related to ports visited and tourism activities, but are more commonly Vegas-style 'flesh-and-feathers' type shows with an easily assimilable theme and title, such as *Motor City* (Motown music), *Piano Man* (piano-based rock) or *Cinematastic* (music and dance from film). In-house or externally contracted entertainment production companies create these to be tightly controlled. Music is arranged for the showband, backing tracks – known as 'sweeteners' – are recorded for instruments and voices not included on the ship, and singers and dancers carefully rehearsed on land before going to the ship. The cruise line sanitises and directly controls the content, including music, dance, costuming, staging and dialogue, specifically designing the shows to be safe and free of anything that may offend guests. Scheduling is at the behest of the cruise director and all performers are direct employees of the company. The performance space, the main theatre, is aboard the safe and cocoon-like cruise ship. There is nothing to threaten or intimidate the guests.

Ships resident in Tahiti are small. The largest, M.V. *Paul Gauguin*, is 19,200 gross register tonnage (GRT) and carries 547 passengers. In contrast, the largest ships in the world are a quarter of a million GRT and carry nearly 7000 passengers. On the smallest Tahitian resident ships, the accommodation needs of chefs, room stewards, waiters, seamen and so forth, often

preclude even a cocktail pianist. The *Paul Gauguin*, however, employs a troupe of female Polynesian staff called *Les Gauguines*, who work as social hosts as well as performers². In a ten-night cruise, *Les Gauguines* perform three times, including two production shows similar to the standard model, but with a surface of Tahitian authenticity, including costume and dance (Berkowitz, pers. comm., 2011). While such performances may contain some signifiers of Tahitian exoticism, the Filipino resident band provides music using Westernised instruments.

Polynesian influenced shows are not the only ones performed on board the ships. An itinerary for the *Paul Gauguin* contains a variety of shows including cabaret shows performed by the ship's pianist one night and the cruise director on another, as well as standard cruise ship fare such as Liar's Club and the Crew Talent Night, which appear on many cruise ships. Larger visitor ships, of course, mount more general entertainment, providing assurances to guests that even though they may be in distant and exotic locations, they are still safe, surrounded by familiar signifiers for Westernised entertainment. In a way, guests have never left home.

Whether cruise ships have a positive or negative impact upon local culture is uncertain. There is substantial difference between local culture and staged authentic performances as presented for the benefit of tourists (Hoffstaedter, 2008). Cruise ship tourism may ossify a performance culture, or reduce it to a single tourist-supported form. It may also supply impetus for the development and preservation of dance forms (Daniel, 1994; Franklin, 2003). Whether performance for cruise tourists results in the stagnation or invigoration of Indigenous dance and music in Tahiti is a question for future research.

The three discussed categories of Tahitian music and dance performances for cruise ship guests, dockside performance, local show and Tahitian-influenced production show, are all highly commodified. Despite being created for different purposes and with different audiences in mind, each variant is designed to provide tourists with the requisite signifiers for exoticism – a staged authenticity. This confirms that cruise ship guests have indeed had an exotic South Seas voyage, and a brush with local culture at a safe arms length distance. Furthermore, such performances are presented in areas designated as 'safe', with signifiers for Western culture mixed up with those for 'exotic' Tahitian culture. Tourists are encouraged to feel secure in Westernised areas, while local performers create staged presentations of Tahitian culture.

Cruise ships present local culture to their guests via the medium of choreo-musical performance to give them the impression of having visited exotic cultures, such as Tahiti. These performances occur in safe and familiar surroundings, insulated from the reality of Tahiti. Cruise lines and local tourism operators necessarily commodify and simplify these performances for three reasons. Firstly, these performances are what the cruise ships promise in the glossy brochures enticing tourists to take a cruise to Tahiti. Secondly, to make such presentations within the severely limited timeframe of a cruise ship visit, such performances must be accessible and simplistic. Such performances are presented with the authority of the cruise line as 'authentic', though in reality colour and entertainment value are more highly prized. Thirdly, such performances introduce guests to Tahitian culture in an entertaining and accessible manner. This allows guests, postmodern tourists, to enjoy this surface presentation without the requirement and effort required to become more familiar with Tahiti. On many ships, a few days later, they are in another culture and will need an introduction to that.

Local performances form a small yet important portion of the entertainment offered onboard cruise ships. Presented alongside cabaret performers, traditional production shows, karaoke and bingo, such performances provide guests with the opportunity to encounter local culture in an easily produced and digested manner. Some guests, falling into the category of cultural tourists, desire such relationships. Cruise lines, as good hosts, oblige such requests. Thus, such entertainment, while comparatively rare, forms a significant part of the cruise ship entertainment package.

Such choreo-musical performances are an effective and financially profitable relationship between postmodern tourists and residents, mediated by cruise lines. Despite their intent as surface introductions, such performances do contain elements of Tahitian culture that, while gratifying the need of tourists to collect musical and visual images and memories of their exotic trip to Tahiti, also provides a highly mediated brush with a local culture while their cultural cocoon is located in the culture's place of origin. Whether or not one believes this to be a positive or negative outcome, it is certainly a successful one that will continue to remain a part of many cruises in the future.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Boorstin's work on "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1961; MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988), Urry's work on the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990), Wang's "existential authenticity" (Wang, 1999), and recently, the work on "performative authenticity" presented by the Scandinavian Network on Emotional Geography (Knudsen and Waade, 2010).
2. Williamson (1986) has described how women and island paradise are linked in media images.

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