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The Friendly Islands? Tonga's Ambivalent Relationship with Tourism

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The Tongan woman sitting behind the counter in the Tongan Visitors Bureau didn't look up as I entered the dimly lit building and perused the display of tattered brochures and fading maps pinned to noticeboards on rickety stands. I was the only visitor but she continued to focus on her mobile phone as I wandered around then headed back along the path to Vuna Road, one of the main streets of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa. Her lack of interest didn't surprise me; I already knew tourists in Tonga are often regarded as vaguely annoying intrusions rather than enthusiastically welcomed visitors. For many years there have been attempts by the Tongan Government and budding entrepreneurs to boost tourism, supported by sporadic injections of large amounts of foreign aid for tourism projects. Despite these efforts, most Tongans have never really embraced tourism as a source of revenue and have long viewed tourists with ambivalence.

In 1980, when I was living in Tonga and teaching at Queen Sālote College, a girls' high school, I would occasionally wander down to the waterfront when a cruise ship was docked and watch as it disgorged its passengers onto the dusty streets of Nuku'alofa. Where the Visitors Bureau now stands was a park in which Tongans would set up stalls

to sell handicrafts to tourists and I would sit with women I knew and observe their encounters with foreigners. Ignoring the cultural briefings provided on board ship before disembarking, these *pālangi* (the common term for white foreigners) offended Tongans' cultural sensibilities in many ways. They often wore skimpy, immodest clothing and couples were openly affectionate, which clashed with Tongan morality. For Tongans these behaviours were even harder to bear than relatively wealthy tourists haggling for ridiculously low prices. The Tongan women did a great job of meeting the tourists' expectations of Friendly Islanders; little did the foreigners know the comments the Tongan women made to each other with shrieks of laughter were always at their expense. In town, some of the shopkeepers were not as willing to encounter these offensive tourists and simply shut up shop when the cruise ships came to town.

By 2013, when I wandered into the Visitors Bureau, there had been a steady increase in foreign visitors to Tonga but only a fraction of the number heading to Pacific nations like Fiji and the Cook Islands, for which tourism is a significant source of revenue. For a long time cruise ships stopped visiting Tonga, but the recent construction of Vuna Wharf aimed to attract the international cruise liners, whose passengers will disembark 'to stroll through the new city and its modern and traditional delights in sidewalk stalls selling handicrafts and local produce, retail shopping, cafes, restaurants and eateries offering island-style cuisine'.¹ Instead, I was told by frustrated cafe owners, the few cruise ships that now dock in Nuku'alofa are met at the wharf by buses that take the passengers on a quick tour of the island then return them to the ship; they often don't have time to go into town or even stop to look at any stalls set up on the wharf.

The handicraft market moved years ago to a small section of the Talamahu market in the centre of town, which sells mainly produce to locals. Other markets are full of second-hand clothes and household goods sent by the container-load by Tongans living overseas and are by no means intended to be tourist attractions. The majority of visitors to the country are now diasporic Tongans who are 'VFR tourists'

1 Teen Brown Pulu, 2011, *Shoot the Messenger: The Report on the Nuku'alofa Reconstruction Project and why the Government of Tonga Dumped it*, Nuku'alofa: Taimi Publishers, p. 136.

(visiting friends and relatives).² In 2011, for example, 43 per cent of arrivals by air were VFR tourists, compared to 39 per cent arriving for a vacation, and by November 2012 these figures were 56.3 per cent compared to 30.8 per cent.³ Tongan visitors make up much of the clientele of the cafes and restaurants of the main towns and are the main buyers of Tongan handicrafts, particularly the decorated tapa cloth (*ngatu*) and finely woven pandanus mats (*kie*) that are still gifted in Tonga and throughout the diaspora at important events. Many of the visiting Tongans stay in hotels and guest houses to avoid the constant demands of relatives and to have some of the comforts to which they've become accustomed.

As for foreign tourists, the Tongans remaining in Tonga have grown used to them ignoring their preference for modest clothing and behaviour and, besides, some younger Tongans now dress and behave much like *pālangi* youth, especially those visiting from the diaspora. Yet the ambivalence remains and a Lonely Planet guide observes: 'You may get the impression that most Tongans would prefer visitors to donate their dollars and not leave the airport; expats seem determined to build a tourist industry, but most of the locals just don't seem to care.'⁴

Tongatapu, where about 80 per cent of Tongans remaining in the Kingdom now live, is littered with the remnants of attempts to cater for tourists by both locals and foreign investors. The Tongan Cultural Centre on the outskirts of Nuku'alofa had a brief existence as a tourist attraction with a museum display and Tongans demonstrating various crafts and activities like coconut-husking and mat-weaving but it quickly fell into disrepair. The once popular beachside hotel and restaurant, The Good Samaritan, lies derelict and abandoned and even Nuku'alofa's International Dateline Hotel, once a hub of

2 On VFR tourism in the Caribbean, see David Timothy Duval Duval, 2003, 'When hosts become guests: Return visits and diasporic identities in a Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean community', *Current Issues in Tourism* 6(4): 267–307; David Timothy Duval, 2004, 'Linking return visits and return migration among Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean migrants in Toronto', *Global Networks* 4(1): 51–67.

3 Government of Tonga, 2012, *International Arrivals, Departures and Migration*, Statistical Bulletin Series No: SDT:38.13, Statistics Department, Nuku'alofa; Government of Tonga, 2013, *Migration Monthly Bulletin November 2012*, Series No: SDT: 38–M06, Statistics Department, Nuku'alofa.

4 Craig McLachlan, Brett Atkinson and Celeste Brash, 2012, *Lonely Planet: Rarotonga, Samoa and Tonga*, Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, p. 53.

activity for tourists, expats and Tongans alike, had trouble filling its rooms for many years. In 2012, I walked through its empty foyer, past a termite-eaten column, unusable pool and dark, empty restaurant and was shown into a poorly constructed new wing with water damaged ceilings and no guests. Having changed ownership several times, it was taken over in early 2015 by the Tanoa Hotel Group from Fiji and won't reopen until mid-2017. One of the newest hotels in Tonga, the Scenic Hotel, was originally planned as a casino by Sam Wong, a shady Hong Kong Chinese businessman who at one time also had plans to build a shopping plaza complete with extravagant fountain in Nuku'alofa. After sitting half-built for many years the hotel has been completed, but with its 76 rooms and pristine swimming pool it sits alone in the fields opposite the entrance to the airport, far from town and largely deserted apart from its bored staff.

Any foreign visitor to Tonga could not help but notice that very little has been done to accommodate them beyond the few hotels and guest houses. Sites that might attract tourists, like the viewing area for the dramatic blowholes in the rocks along part of the southwest coast, are badly neglected. Many of the roads are similarly neglected, including the road along that coast, which is the route to the best beaches. Apart from the beaches in front of the few 'resorts' sprinkled along that coast, most are near impossible for tourists to find as they are hidden down unmarked, narrow tracks that run through plantations. Those tracks are even more potholed than the 'main' road and at intervals along them people have dumped piles of rubbish on either side. Public events like the Heilala Festival that runs for a week in July every year are very much for Tongans, not tourists; information about upcoming events is difficult to find and usually gives scant details of locations and schedules. Those events run on 'Tongan time' anyway, leaving the few tourists who find out about them waiting hours for them to begin. After all, under the heading 'True Culture' the Kingdom of Tonga's tourism website has the opening line: 'Welcome to life in the slow lane.'⁵

Having observed tourism in Tonga struggling along for so many years, I can't help but wonder if many Tongans would really prefer not to have tourists at all, at least not in their towns and villages where

5 Tonga Tourism Authority, 2014, 'Kingdom of Tonga: True culture'.

Tongans are getting on with their daily lives. Tongans are intensely proud that their islands were never formally colonised, that they have a Constitution that prevents Tonga's land from being purchased and that until a recent influx of Chinese immigrants the country has remained largely monocultural. This history may hold the key to Tonga's very different engagements with tourism than those of its close neighbour, Fiji, or other popular Pacific tourist destinations such as the Cook Islands, Tahiti and Hawai'i. Fiji, for example, had a difficult colonial history that profoundly reshaped its society, but it has chosen to embrace tourism. The constant enthusiastic cries of 'Bula!' you encounter as a visitor in tourist areas mask any traces of post-colonial resentment and in the towns you simply blend into the multicultural population. Even in New Zealand, many Maori help support the thriving tourism industry, pragmatically accepting the presence of foreign visitors in order to reap the financial rewards of tourism. Yet Tonga has remained aloof, struggling along on the verge of economic collapse but refusing to pander to foreign tourists in order to survive.

A comparison between Fiji and Tonga was made by Iliesa Tora, the Fijian editor of *Koe Ita*, a Tongan newspaper published in 2012 by the Ita Media Network in Nuku'alofa. In his editorial 'Marketing Tonga to the World', he blames the lack of tourism in Tonga on the 'lazy population' who rely on their relatives for money.⁶ He compares Tonga to Fiji where 'there are happy faces greeting you almost everywhere'. In the same issue of *Koe Ita*, Cook Islander Hakaoro Hakaoro, married to a Tongan woman and living in New Zealand, complains that visitors are not made welcome in Tonga, in contrast to the Cook Islands.⁷ Many Tongans do rely on the remittances their relatives send from overseas—due to lack of employment opportunities rather than laziness—and it's certainly true that some visitors may feel they are not welcome. However, it is simplistic to argue that if Tongans just put in the hard work, and put on the friendly faces, tourism will flourish and save the economy. A complete overhaul of Tonga's infrastructure would be required to support more tourism than already exists and the ecological implications are frightening for a country already struggling with

6 Iliesa Tora, 2012, 'Marketing Tonga to the world', *Koe Ita*, 28 November, p. 6.

7 See Hakaoro Hakaoro, 2012, 'A challenge for church leaders in Tonga', *Koe Ita*, 28 November p. 6; cf. Kalissa Alexeyeff, 2008, 'Are you being served? Sex, humour and globalisation in the Cook Islands', *Anthropological Forum* 18(3): 287–93.

multiple environmental problems. Even if these practical problems somehow could be overcome, Tongans are understandably wary about the social and cultural impact of large numbers of foreign visitors.

Speaking out against large-scale tourism more than 20 years ago, Tongan academic Konai Helu-Thaman warned that tourism is 'a major contributor to, as well as manifestation of, a process of cultural invasion' from colonisation and the impact of missionaries to 'the universalization of Western ... culture'.⁸ Like the articles in *Koe Ita*, she also compared Tonga and Fiji, but points out that since tourism began in Fiji in the colonial era it has been dominated by foreign business. In comparison, tourism only began in Tonga with the opening of the International Dateline Hotel in 1966. At that time the Dateline was government-owned and was built to provide accommodation for visitors to the coronation of King Taufa'ahou Tupou V. The 'gradual but cautious growth of tourism over the years',⁹ Helu-Thaman describes for Tonga, has continued but with many setbacks including destructive hurricanes and the riots of 2006, during which more than half of central Nuku'alofa burnt to the ground. Unless they have yachts, many tourists don't make it beyond Tongatapu and a few small islands nearby with accommodation. There have been many attempts to run domestic airlines, usually with problems of erratic flight times and cancellations that leave tourists stranded. In 2013, New Zealand had suspended NZ\$10.5 million in tourism development aid to Tonga because of its concerns about the safety of the Chinese-made MA60 plane donated by China for the newly established Real Tonga domestic airline.¹⁰ Tonga has played the trump card of sovereignty, refusing to comply with New Zealand's demand that the aircraft meet international safety standards and certifying the aircraft under Tongan laws. It has remained grounded ever since, although in August 2015 a tender process for operating the aircraft commenced.

This issue of sovereignty and Tongans' pride in their independence may make it impossible for Tonga ever to build the kind of tourist industry seen in Pacific countries like Fiji. Most Tongans simply don't want to be subservient to tourists; in fact, they often seem

8 See Konai Helu-Thaman, 1993, 'Beyond hula, hotels, and handicrafts: A Pacific Islander's perspective on tourism development', *The Contemporary Pacific* 5(1): 104–11, p. 104.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

10 Pesi Fonua, 2013, 'Sovereignty not a bargaining chip', *Matangi Tonga Online*, 15 July. Online matangitonga.to/2013/07/15/sovereignty-not-bargaining-chip (accessed 3 March 2016).

uncomfortable working for *pālangi* bosses in any context. When I've discussed tourism with Tongans they also frequently mention the risk of 'losing our culture'. Since the rule of the revered Queen Sālote, Tongans have paid heed to her constant encouragement to maintain their traditions and their 'authenticity' is another source of pride. Of course Tongan culture has changed in many ways already; the country is firmly embedded in the world economy and Tongans are exposed to global popular culture. Yet driving from the airport into town in mid-2015, Tonga looked much the same as when I first travelled that road in 1979. The same sleepy villages dotted with churches, with skinny dogs and huge black pigs wandering across the road, bored young men hanging around and school children in their variously coloured uniforms trudging home. The little village shops (*fale koloa*) may be painted bright red now with advertising for the Digicel mobile phone company, but behind their counters are still stacks of tinned fish, two-minute noodles, bags of sugar and assorted other basic goods. On Sundays the country still slows down even further, with laws preventing commercial trade and families spending the day going to church, feasting and resting. Of course, for tourists, it comes as a shock to find central Nuku'alofa completely deserted on Sundays and I've often observed backpackers and family groups hovering uncertainly outside closed cafes and staring in bewilderment at the empty streets.

Tonga's first TV tourism campaign was held in 2013, developed by an advertising agency in New Zealand and using the slogan the 'True South Pacific'. The Prime Minister in 2013, Lord Tu'ivakano, said of the campaign: 'Tonga is less developed when compared to some other South Pacific countries and offers visitors a truly authentic South Pacific experience.'¹¹ Whether this brings a flood of tourists seeking authenticity rather than luxury remains to be seen, but I know many Tongans who remain unconvinced this is the way to solve their economic woes. In any case, the YouTube channel set up for the campaign has not been updated since 2013 and generated no public comments at all on the site. As long as Tongans overseas continue to support the economy with remittances and their visits home, the stranded MA60 aircraft will symbolise Tongans' approach to tourism. It has to happen on their own terms, or not at all.

11 Steven Raeburn, 2013, 'New Zealand agency designs Tonga's first TV campaign', *The Drum*, 15 May; Travel Monitor, 2013, 'New Tonga tourism campaign – 'True South Pacific'', 16 May.

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