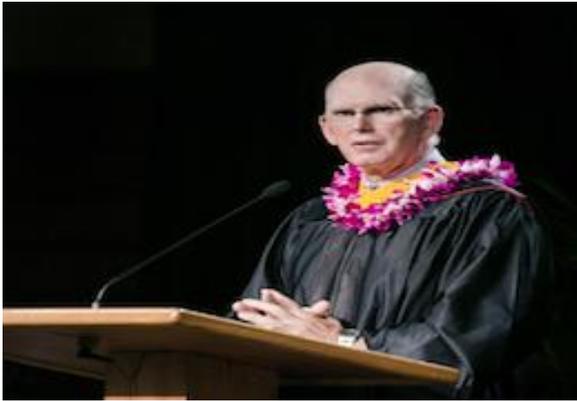


## Tourism, Culture, and Identity



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Aloha, brothers and sisters, and thank you for being here. It is truly an honor and a privilege to have been asked to speak to you today. In fact, I should take just a moment to tell you, having been here many years, that my job as a teacher here at BYU–Hawaii has been the greatest and most continuing blessing that God has bestowed upon me in this life. I mean that sincerely. I love this place and you all collectively.

Traditionally, convocation is an event at which entering freshman are welcomed and initiated into academic life. The tradition dictates that we dress up in medieval costumes that indicate the scholarly achievements of the wearers and that someone demonstrates what scholarship looks like so as to model what is to be expected of you as students at this institution. That's my role today.

Now, I should admit here that I am an odd choice to play this part. You'll notice for example that my medieval costume has no stripes. That means that I have not earned a doctorate. I have spent most of my adult life managing and building hotels – not running double blind lab trials. I came into academia late in life, and unlike some of my colleagues, my list of published work is not long. But I do and have always loved learning – and have never been intimidated by its demands. I'm going to tell you today about some research that I have done, hoping that the very fact that my academic credentials are modest will convince you that scholarship is not something just for Ph.D.'s and scientists. Except for age, I'm not much different than you. If I can do this stuff, you can too. All you need is curiosity and a few tools that allow you to think through a question in a logical way. It's a fascinating and fun process that never gets old.

As I tell you about my research, I should start by saying that my topic is controversial, and it is both political and emotional for many people. I am not an expert on the cultural traditions of any group of people. I'm just making observations as an outsider. I may inadvertently say something that offends someone here today. I ask forgiveness up front.

### Step 1: Curiosity

I came here in 1997 without any experience in Polynesia. I was entranced by the Polynesian Cultural Center – the people that work there, the cultures that are represented, and the business model. As a businessman, I thought it was remarkable that the PCC was so successful given the fact that it is located on a country path far

away from where the tourists are and that its brand name, the Polynesian Cultural Center, is not particularly enticing. But in spite of those drawbacks, close to a million people every year come out here to purchase this product. I was curious to find out what makes it tick – as a business. Why is it so successful? Could it be replicated someplace else?

If you want to know something – ask. Asking questions in a systematic way, then compiling and explaining the answers that you get, is what research is all about. It's not any more complicated than that. I interviewed PCC executives, customers and employees to get my answers. I found out, by the way, that what customers most enjoy about their visit to the PCC is their interaction with you – the enthusiastic student workers. You should ask for a raise.

I was busily engaged in this project and kind of immersed in the PCC when a guest lecturer visited one of my classes one day and told my students that the Samoan fire knife dance was not authentic but was in fact invented at the PCC as a showy way to attract tourists. He suggested that this was a bad thing and that commerce and capitalism was basically polluting indigenous Pacific culture. Again, I was curious. Could this be true? My PCC research took a new direction.

I rather naively set about asking questions about the fire knife dance. I asked employees in the Samoan village. I asked Samoan friends and neighbors and students. Some of them were a little offended – some of them were very offended - by the suggestion that the fire knife dance was not authentic. I decided to turn to the library as a safer way to get my answers.

Step 2: Find out what others have said

I found that there is a large body of published work about the impact of tourism on a destination. Frankly most writers have concluded that tourism generally has negative environmental, social, cultural, and even long-term economic impacts on the destination. We happen to live in one of the premier tourism destinations in the world. The PCC is the largest and most successful commercial attraction at that destination. To conclude based on the literature that the PCC is a bad thing for Hawaii did not agree with my observations or the feelings and judgments of the people I had interviewed.

I am a professor of Hospitality and Tourism management. I've spent pretty much my entire adult life working in the tourism industry in one capacity or another. I recognize that my views on the subject are biased. Wherever in the world I have worked, the local people have wanted tourists and more of them. The reason is simple: they want their money. But it's not all good. There's no doubt that tourists bring some negative baggage with them. You experience some of it every time you try to turn left on Kamehameha highway. Local people feel it deeply when they try to buy a home. An increase in crime always accompanies tourism. These are serious things. I don't discount them. But I wanted to focus my interest on how tourism affects the indigenous culture of the destination.

In the literature, the relationship between tourism and culture has been discussed primarily in terms of authenticity. Here are some typical conclusions: "Tourists are sold their own preconceived images of reality instead of reality itself in pseudo events in which (indigenous) people everywhere become dishonest mimics of themselves." Some writers talked about "staged authenticity" and "cultural commoditization" in which indigenous people assume a "mask of cynicism" and a "loss of meaning" in regards to their cultural traditions. It all sounds pretty grim.

One particular paper described the "grass skirt" that, for generations, was an icon of Hawaiian culture in the minds of foreigners. Apparently the grass skirt is not Hawaiian at all. It is Micronesian. Visitors to pre-European-contact Hawaii would not have seen women wearing grass skirts, but Hawaiians in the early 20th

century began wearing grass skirts in cultural shows and presentations because tourists thought they were sexy, and they wanted to see them. So, in this case, you could say that the literature is right. Some early 20th century Hawaiians were mimicking themselves by selling tourists their own preconceived (and false) ideas of traditional Hawaiian culture.

What about the fire knife dance? Is it an authentic relic of traditional Samoan culture – or was it invented at the PCC? In fact, it seems that the fire knife dance was invented by this guy in the 1940s and '50s in California and Hawaii. His name is Freddy Letuli. After WWII, he left his home in American Samoa to try to become a movie star in Hollywood. In fact, he took the name Freddy in honor of his idol – the American movie star Fred Astaire. He had some success in Hollywood and appeared in several movies. But like most people who have dreams of a career in show business, Freddy only worked intermittently, and he needed a way to make a living in between acting jobs. He became a cultural entertainer, performing Samoan dances at fairs and in night clubs in California. Freddy was Samoan – he was also an entrepreneur. He knew he would get more gigs and make more money if his shows were exciting, so he was not 100% faithful to “authentic,” traditional Samoan dance. He took liberties.

Once, when he was performing at a fair, he saw a Hindu sword swallower and fire-eater. The crowd loved it, so Freddy decided to add fire to his act to make it more exciting for the tourists. The fire knife dance was born. Over time, Freddy formed a troop of entertainers to put on shows not unlike what is done at the PCC every day. He taught several others to perform the fire knife dance, so it spread among expatriate Samoans. Ultimately, it was incorporated as the climax of the original PCC night show where it has been seen and admired by millions of people. Most or all of them probably assume that if they were to go back in time two or three hundred years, they would see the fire knife dance in Samoa. They wouldn't. Does that mean it is inauthentic? Does it mean that Samoan culture has been corrupted and defiled by tourism and commerce because of the fire knife dance?

If authenticity is defined as fidelity to a pre-European-contact cultural template as though that arbitrary point in time must be idealized, then we can truly conclude as many writers have, that tourism has a negative impact on cultural authenticity. Culture does change in response to tourism. The grass skirt and the fire knife dance are just two small examples, but we might ask ourselves if it is absolute fidelity to an ancient ideal that gives culture its meaning and value to indigenous people today. Or is culture and cultural preservation valuable to indigenous people for other reasons?

Let's consider the hula. Some time in 1997 or 1998 BYU–Hawaii hosted a conference entitled “Pioneers in the Pacific.” I particularly remember a panel discussion in which local kapuna told their experiences with the Hukilau – which we can think of as the mother of the Polynesian Cultural Center. You probably know the story of the Hukilau. I'll recount it briefly. In the 1940s, there was only one chapel in Laie. It caught fire and burned down. In those days, local congregations had to cover most of the cost of church buildings themselves. The Saints in Laie were required to raise many thousands of dollars to replace the chapel. They decided to put on a show – the Hukilau. Now consider: they hadn't put on a show to build the original chapel. They raised the money in other ways. What had changed? Hundreds of thousands of U.S. service men had spent time in Hawaii during the Second World War. When the war was over, they went home with stories of Hawaiian paradise. They got married and had families and brought them back to Hawaii. In short, Hawaii was at the beginning of a tourism boom. The Laie saints wanted the tourists' money. The Hukilau would never have happened if there was no tourism.

One presenter at the Pioneers of the Pacific conference said that he was a little boy at the time. His mother or auntie or someone told him that he was going to learn to dance for the Hukilau. He didn't want to do it. In those days boys in Hawaii didn't dance. He said that he replied, “No, dancing is for girls,” but his mother or auntie insisted, and he and all of his equally resistant friends got rounded up and trained to do hula. He said that he

grew to love the attention and applause of the tourists. Ultimately, he began to love hula. Others at the conference contended that because of Laie and the Hukilau, men's hula was reborn. It had died out by the 1940s but was reborn because the Saints in Laie wanted to attract tourists to earn money to build a chapel, so they forced their little boys to dance – and in the process saved a piece of indigenous Hawaiian culture.

Was the reborn or re-invented male hula authentic? Was it the same as the dance performed by Hawaiians of old? Did it have the same meaning to those performing it? I have no idea. I'd be willing to bet that the Hukilau show wasn't completely authentic, but I think that it was undeniably a good thing for Hawaiians and for Hawaiian culture.

### Step 3: Create a hypothesis

I was curious about something: is tourism good or bad for indigenous culture? I studied what others had said about the subject: the consensus was that tourism is harmful to indigenous cultural authenticity. I compared this to my own observations and experiences, and then I created a hypothesis that I could test. My hypothesis is that tourism enhances the cultural identity of indigenous people. I theorized that it is cultural identity, not authenticity, that guides and gives meaning to life – and that connects young people to their elders and their ancestors. Does the fire knife dance add or detract from the essence of Samoan identity? Does men's hula add or subtract from the essence being Hawaiian. I think it adds.

### Step 4: Test the hypothesis

Having created my hypothesis, I set about to test it. Given the proximity of the PCC, the nature of the subject, and my own limitations, I decided to test the hypothesis using the case study method, with the PCC as the subject case. Over a period of eight years, I collected data from graduating BYU–Hawaii Polynesian students who had also worked at the PCC. I collected the data via focus groups, surveys and individual interviews. I have data from over 300 students and alumni including one-on-one interviews with 162 of them. I asked them about changes in their attitudes regarding their ethnicity and cultural background after having worked for the PCC for a period of time. This is what they said:

Typical are the reflections of Meli, a graduating senior from Fiji who worked as a cultural performer in the Fijian village for four years and also danced in the canoe pageant. He grew up in suburban Suva, Fiji and noted that prior to his employment at the PCC, he felt that “culture was for old women. My friends and I were embarrassed by Fijians clinging to old ways. We all wanted to get to America or Australia or New Zealand – modern countries with the good life. But now after seeing how much my Fijian culture is appreciated by Americans and by Japanese, and after learning so much more about it myself, it makes me proud to be Fijian. I've taken a second look at my culture. [The manager of the Fijian village] has taught me a lot and has tried to shame me into acting more Fijian. When I came, my mother told me to marry an American and find a good job in America, but I want to go back to Fiji. I am Fijian. That's where I should be.”

Melinda, a Tongan student said, “I feel so blessed that I was able to work at the PCC. At first, I just thought of my job as a way to get through school, but it became so much more to me. I found out that we islanders are few but special. People admire what we have to offer. I became much more proud of my heritage.”

A pan-Polynesian identity is evident at the PCC and many of the student-workers refer fondly to the bonds of brotherhood that they forged with fellow employees from other island nations. Bil, a native Hawaiian noted, “We all dance for every culture [in the night show]. Some cultural purists don’t like this, but it would be impossibly expensive to only have Hawaiians do Hawaii, only Tongans do Tonga, and only Tahitians do Tahiti. Besides, we are all Polynesians. We’re all brothers. We all came from the same place. We learn to appreciate each other more that way. Let’s face it – there aren’t that many of us in the world. We should stick together.”

An analysis of surveys over a period of eight years indicates that virtually 100% of student-workers say that appreciation for and identification with their culture has increased or greatly increased during their employment. The only significant variation among groups in response to this question relates to student-workers from Hawaii and New Zealand. Employees from those areas are significantly more likely to say that their appreciation has increased rather than greatly increased.

Why might Hawaiians and Maoris be less-affected than Samoans, Tongans, Tahitians, Fijians, Cook Islanders, and Marquesans? Naomi, a Maori girl from Rotorua, New Zealand offered one explanation: “In Tonga, everyone is Tongan. We [Maoris] are a minority in our own country. We can’t take our culture for granted. We all know the difference between Pakeha [white] and Maori culture. We need to appreciate it and protect it or it will disappear. I learned more about my culture at the PCC, but I had a real appreciation for it before I came here.” Hawaiians and Maoris are both indigenous minority groups within a larger settler culture and are likely, therefore, to be more aware of what makes their cultures unique and desirable. It should also be noted, however, that Hawaii and New Zealand have stronger tourism industries than do the other Polynesian countries represented at the PCC. Naomi’s mother and grandmother are both cultural performers in the tourism industry in Rotorua, so tourism had already played a role in strengthening their cultural identity.

Do the results have anything to say about the importance of cultural authenticity? Logo, a Samoan who was formerly a student worker and who is now a full-time executive employee for the PCC, said that “the PCC is an important cultural resource throughout the Pacific. About 30% of all tourists that visit Oahu will visit the PCC. But 100% of all Polynesian tourists who visit Oahu will come to the PCC. They want to see how they are represented, and they are very vocal when they see something they don’t like. They say ‘This is not the way it was done,’ and we look into it to try to make sure that everything is very authentic. But that’s not so easy. There are a lot of different ideas about what is authentic. There’s no absolute authority you can turn to. A lot of these people have an agendas, so we have to choose a version, but we are very serious about it. I am Polynesian too. We want to do it right.”

#### Step 5: Analysis of the results

My research indicates, overwhelmingly, that working at the Polynesian Cultural Center, seeking to explain their culture to tourists and entertain them, enhances the cultural identity of the student workers and greatly strengthens their felt attachment to the traditions and values of their parents, their grandparents, and their more distant ancestors. It makes Hawaiians feel more Hawaiian, Samoans feel more Samoan, Tongans feel more Tongan, Tahitians feel more Tahitian, and so forth – all through the instrument of tourism. Is the culture that they learn and that they present to the tourists purely authentic in the anthropological, museum sense of the word? Who knows? I think the PCC makes a good-faith attempt. To me the question is does it really matter?

Let’s go back to the fire knife dance. Is it authentic? All of the Samoans I talked to, without exception, felt real affection and pride in the fire knife dance. They vehemently assert that it is authentic because it was invented by a Samoan, the knife itself is based on a traditional Samoan battle weapon, and it is Samoans that continue to change and refine both the knife and the dance. It is authentic Samoan culture because Samoans say it is. They recognize, as we should, that cultures change over time with or without tourism. My research convinces me that

tourism, rather than exploiting indigenous people, actually empowers them to negotiate and define their own culture and how it is presented and understood by themselves and the world. The fact that tourism allows indigenous people to portray themselves positively to outsiders, and that tourism dollars strengthen the larger economy and are always heavily taxed by the state, also gives indigenous people greater political power to guide and shape their homelands.

#### Step 6: Can the results be replicated or generalized

Maybe the PCC is utterly unique in the world. Maybe in other places, touristic displays of indigenous culture are exploitative and harmful. Maybe other indigenous peoples feel used and resentful about how their cultures are portrayed to tourists. The next step of my research was to see if the results would hold true in other places. I had the opportunity to interview workers at two other cultural attractions similar in many respects to the Polynesian Cultural Center.

In 2005, I spent some time in Shenzhen China interviewing employees of the China folk villages within the Splendid China theme park. The China folk villages were explicitly modeled on the PCC. Each village represents an ethnic minority population from different areas of China. Like the PCC, each village puts on a show several times during the day. Then, there is a “night show” extravaganza in the evening. Compared to the PCC, Splendid China is huge, the employees are all full-time professionals rather than students, and the production values are glitzier and showier. You get the feeling that they are a little more interested in the business aspect and maybe a little less interested in cultural authenticity.

However, here too, the cultural performers that I interviewed claimed that their appreciation of their own culture increased dramatically with their employment at Splendid China. This is a picture of the Wa Village. The Wa people live in southwest Yunnan province along the border with Burma. I was drawn to them specifically because their dancing reminded me of the dancing of some Native American people. They were very outgoing and friendly, and one of them spoke English, and he was anxious to talk. So with him as interpreter, I interviewed several of the Wa people. In imperial China, the Wa were called the “wild Wa,” and they were considered uncivilized savages. They had no written language. They were warlike. Headhunting and wife stealing were traditional cultural practices of the Wa. Many of them were enslaved during the imperial era to work in the mines of Yunnan province. The official story is that the Wa were liberated by the Communists in 1949, but while the Communists did not enslave the Wa, they did set about to civilize them – in the process discouraging much of the traditional culture.

In the last two decades, there has been a Wa cultural renaissance precipitated, the Wa themselves believe, by increasing touristic interest in them and their culture. Culture tours to southwest Yunnan province are very popular with domestic Chinese tourists and increasingly with international tourists as well. Tourism has given the Wa people the opportunity to define themselves to the outside world in their own terms and in ways that benefit themselves. Is the culture that they present “authentic”? It is definitely a sanitized version of authentic. One of the Wa that I interviewed (who calls himself Peter) said that his father’s generation is ashamed of being Wa and afraid to display or talk about Wa traditions. He still thinks nothing good can come of it, but for Peter, his Wa identity is at the very center of his life, and he never tires of talking about his people and their resurgence. It seems to me, as an outsider, that for Peter to have this positive view of his cultural identity is a good thing both for himself and for his people. As the majority population of China come in contact with the Wa through tourism, they develop positive feelings about the people and the culture. The Wa are no longer at the mercy of Chinese or British outsiders to describe them and to explain them. Tourism gives them the power to define themselves to the outside world.

In 2007, I spent some time at the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park in far north Queensland, Australia. Tjapukai was not patterned on the PCC, but there are definitely similarities in structure and purpose. The park was

created and is owned by two aboriginal tribes whose names I cannot begin to pronounce. It was originally funded with government grants and is administered by a hired management company. They are probably a little less profit focused than the PCC or Splendid China. The aboriginal people at Tjapukai are noticeably more overt about explaining their historical grievances and educating visitors about their culture and history, but still there is a big show-business element and lots of enthusiasm among the performers to show aboriginal culture in a positive way. Like the Wa people, they are determined to define themselves to outsiders. Employees that I spoke with were not shy in sharing their conviction that Tjapukai gives their people political power by giving them a forum to state their case. They talked to me about how aboriginal people often feel invisible within larger Australian society and how Tjapukai gives them a forum to overcome that.

So although the Polynesian Cultural Center, Splendid China, and Tjapukai are very different from each other in some significant ways, all three were created to attract tourists. All three serve up not-entirely-authentic versions of traditional indigenous culture to outsiders, and in the process, all three strengthen the cultural identity and pride of the people who work there.

#### Step 7: Conclusion / Explanation

Having gone through all of these steps based on my curiosity about the PCC and the fire knife dance, I created an explanatory model that I think describes this process of how tourism affects the cultural identity of indigenous people. This is it.

The right half of the model represents the experience of the tourist who arrives at the destination with a preconception of the local culture that has been created through the influences of modern mass media, personal experience, and the testimony of trusted friends and relatives. The left half of the model represents the experience of the indigenous local, the cultural portion whose identity is also created through a myriad of influences. One of these is exposure to the same mass media representations of his culture that helped create the preconceptions of the tourist. To these are added the assertions of local ethnic politics, reports from expatriate friends and family, and traditions received from family and the indigenous community.

Using the Polynesian Cultural Center as an example, this is how it works: Tourists form an image of “authentic” Polynesia before their arrival in Hawaii. Their preconceived image of authenticity is created by movies they may have seen such as *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Paradise Hawaiian Style*, *50 First Dates* or *Blue Crush*. It may be influenced by the music of Israel Kamakawiwo’ole or even Don Ho. They may have retained images from the pages of *National Geographic* magazine that they vaguely connect with Polynesia. Family and friends who have visited Polynesia are also an influence. In addition, they may well have had personal contact and experience with some expatriate participant in the significant Polynesian diaspora. All of these influences and more result in a preconceived image of authenticity that tourists bring with them to the PCC.

At the PCC, they come in contact with student workers – totally modern indigenous people from throughout Polynesia whose identity contains a cultural component formed to some degree by the same media influences experienced by the tourist. In addition, these workers are influenced to a varying extent by an image formed by local ethnic politics. They are also influenced by the experiences of their friends and relatives who live or have lived or studied abroad. Finally, their cultural identity is influenced by traditions received from parents, grandparents and community leaders. When, at the PCC, the preconceived image of authenticity held by tourists confronts the felt cultural identity of the indigenous student worker, both are modified. In tourism’s commercial context, an image is negotiated that both satisfies the tourist’s expectations and enhances the student-worker’s appreciation of his culture’s positive dissimilarity from the global culture of modernity.

The tourist returns home with his modified image of authenticity. Ultimately, the modifications become a part of the media representations. They are passed on to influence the expectations of friends and family. Just so, the

student-worker goes home with his modified identity. Ultimately, the modifications inform and influence ethnic politics and even tradition as in the case of the fire knife dance. Tourists feel and perceive an authenticity that is at no point referenced to some historically documented era of cultural purity. Indigenous people likewise feel and perceive their cultural identity only vaguely in reference to historical facts. They assert rather than receive their identity in relation to the global culture.

If anthropological cultural authenticity is the primary concern, indigenous people are the victims of tourism. If the concern is rather identity, tourism empowers indigenous people.