Tourism in New Caledonia: Social Construction and Marketing of Images

Kanika Gupta, University of Waikato in New Zealand

Tourism is an integral part of the world economy. The key to developing a successful tourism destination depends largely on the images used for tourism promotions. This paper highlights the underlying factors that govern tourism imagery, and how these are used in tourism marketing. The paper looks at the social construction of images for the purpose of consumption by different societies. Examples from New Caledonia reinforce how a destination creates, and uses existing imagery to promote the country internationally to its targeted markets.

Keywords: New Caledonia, social construction, images, tourism marketing.

Social construction of images is vital for the success of any destination. New Caledonia is an excellent example of how destinations adopt various means to market themselves to potential customers. The country has a relatively small land mass area, and this helped me to understand better how a country can collectively market itself on the international level. New Caledonia was an interesting destination to study because of its diverse cultural population, as it has a living Melanesian and French population and a sprinkle of other minorities.

Contrasting landscapes made the study even more interesting, since it was fascinating to see how the country used this to its advantage in tourism marketing. I have put forward the results of my research in the field and linked them with my understanding of theoretical concepts that deal with similar issues. Examples from New Caledonia’s market segmentation strategies will demonstrate that understanding and meeting the cultural expectations is very important for destinations. In addition, many underlying factors govern the representation of images released in various markets. This study offers only quantitative results, and not qualitative, because of time constraints on the duration of the fieldtrip.

Background/History of New Caledonia

New Caledonia is a country of varied landscapes. The west coast is mainly dry with bare brown mountains and red soil and only areas like Sarramea are lusciously green. In comparison, the east coast is beautiful, with breathtaking green mountains and cascades. It is more tropical with a healthy growth of vegetation like coconut trees, palms and mango trees. The waters are beautiful shades of blue and green, and the deserted islands on the distant horizon make the landscape even more appealing. Both coasts offer different activities for tourists.

New Caledonia is located in the southwest Pacific Ocean, just north of the tropic of Capricorn. The country is 18,580 sq. km, which makes it the fourth largest in the region after Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. New Caledonia is comprised of the main island, which includes the capital, Noumea and a cluster of smaller islands, which form the Loyalty Islands (Cole & Logan, 1997, p. 25). The majority of the population is Kanak, the indigenous Melanesian population (44.1%) followed by Europeans (34.3%), Wallisians 9%, Indonesians 2.5%, Tahitians 2.6%, Vietnamese, Arabs and the rest make up the remaining 6% (ibid, p. 39).
Historically, New Caledonia was annexed by the French in early the 1850’s and used as a penal colony until 1894. New Caledonia’s status was changed from a colony to an overseas territory after World War II. In this decade, the Kanak people started taking a more active part in the politics of the country. In 1953, the first partially Kanak constituted political party was formed (Aldrich, 1993). By 1988, the country was divided into three provinces, namely the Northern Province comprising of Noumea and rest of the main island, is dominated by European settlers. The third province is the Loyalty Islands comprising of the outer islands Marè, Lifou and Ouvèa. All three provinces have their own territorial government which represents their respective provinces at the national level. France still controls many main sectors like defense, secondary education, immigration, law and justice, currency, broadcasting and trade (Cole & Logan, 1997, p. 36).

Economically, nickel has been the main revenue generator. New Caledonia has an estimated 60 million tons reserves of the mineral compared to the 240 million tons reserves worldwide. During the 1950s the world demand for nickel was high particularly because of the Korean War. In the 1970s the decline in nickel mining demanded the development of economic alternatives to substitute for the revenue loss. Tourism was developed as a result of this and the construction of the international Tontouta airport helped the industry (Aldrich, 1993, pp. 99 – 105).

Tourism in the World and New Calidonia

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and in New Caledonia. In 1999, tourism generated $3.6 trillion and provided 231 million jobs worldwide (McCartney, 1999). In New Caledonia, tourism is the second largest economic generator, but it is still a small player contributing approximately 2.5% of the local GNP in 1998 [Consultants, 2000]. The total revenue linked to tourist activities increased to more than 25,444 million New Caledonian Francs in 1998. The tourism industry then employed 3,100 people, which are approximately 6% of the entire work force. Tourism is a vital part of the economy because new jobs need to be created which mining cannot provide. The tourism industry has room to grow and to become of great importance for New Caledonia. Great care is taken to promote the ‘right’ image of New Caledonia as ‘the tourism destination’ in order to maintain a steady tourist inflow. Most of the tourists in the Northern province are domestic. Both domestic and international tourism has great potential because of unique attributes. New Caledonia has an exceptionally rich natural environment that can be explored for ecotourism as it has the largest lagoon in the world, second largest barrier reef, 18 marine reserves and 25 land reserves (Consultants, 2000).
Culturally the country is very rich as it has a multitude of cultures living side by side, Melanesian, European, Polynesian, Vietnamese and Arab. New Caledonia has the distinct advantage of having a French flavour because of its history as a colony of France. Association with France helps to shield New Caledonia from multi national tourism developers that may exploit the country. Some multi national developers tend to target vulnerable countries that desperately need the gains from tourism, and these countries may accept some undesirable development projects. France protects New Caledonia’s interest, as the French government provides funds for some development. As a result, the island country does not depend on tourism like some of the other Pacific Island countries. This gives them the freedom to analyze a project before accepting it.

However, the country faces a number of disadvantages such as an insufficient number of weekly air flights between Noumea and major markets. The services and accommodations usually do not meet the standards for the price they charge. The lack of activities for tourists in the evening, especially in the northern province, is a matter of concern. New Caledonia is disadvantaged because of its location and distance from Europe and other big markets. The country is also relatively unknown in most of the wealthiest outbound markets. New Caledonia in the past was a penal colony, however, this is not emphasized in any promotional or marketing mediums. Domestically, the three provinces market themselves individually with unique activities based on the resources available for tourists. However, internationally, New Caledonia has to pool itself as one destination. Most of the tourists are concentrated in Noumea therefore the ratio of tourists between Noumea and the rest of New Caledonia is highly unbalanced. New Caledonia is marketed as a Mini France in the pacific region as the French influence makes the country a unique destination in the Pacific. Recently there have been moves to promote more tourism in the Northern and Loyalty provinces.

Social Construction of Images for Tourism Promotion

G.I.E – Nouvelle Caledonie Tourism is the agency responsible for promoting the three provinces internationally. It has been, since March 2001 officially funded only by the Southern Province but other provinces can finance their share of promotion in the markets of their choice. As international promotion is expensive, the G.I.E has to identify selective markets. The agency has offices in all of its major markets, and representatives from these markets suggest the images that would attract the visitors there. Power relations are at work because the tourists via their travel agents dictate their preferences. The Kanak people cannot represent themselves, rather they are represented by people who have an ethnocentric view.

It would be only natural for tourism promoters and developers to use this beautiful landscape to their maximum advantage to promote tourism in the desired markets. Images can be constructed in a variety of ways. It is important to realize that image presentation of a tourism destination is not a simple process and these images can make or break a destination. In tourism, they are constructed via travel brochures, postcards, pictures taken by tourists with their personal cameras, travel literature, and sometimes novels romanticizing about an area (Goss, 1993). New Caledonia is promoted to Japan as the ‘Island Closest to Paradise’. The concept was taken from a book with that title written by Mrs. Moire Muar. This book made New Caledonia famous in Japan, which is the main market for this destination. In 2000 alone, 33,000 Japanese tourists visited New Caledonia (Key Informant A., personal communication, 2001). Traditionally, the visitors from Japan were rich people within the age groups 40-60 years but nowadays it is more families that come here. With the development of more travel packages, people with lower budgets can travel to New Caledonia too. The Japanese tourists usually stay at Club Med or Le
Meridian because they prefer large rooms. As a result, hotels like newly renovated Novotel in Noumea do not get their targeted number of guests. Honeymooners and weddings are also courted because it is cheaper to get married in New Caledonia. Marriages in Japan are very expensive to organize because of the exorbitant gift giving and lavish celebrations that make up a traditional Japanese wedding. This results in some people inclined to spend money on the ‘holiday of their lifetime’ rather than on a traditional wedding.

Destination imagery is very significant in tourism promotion as images are very concrete and vivid, and all things have an image attached to them. For instance, coconut trees and beaches signify a tropical environment, even if this image is not especially linked with tourism brochures. The following postcard indicates New Caledonia as a land of beautiful seashells and tropical fruits. There is no mention of the Melanesian culture or the French presence in the image. This is a very stereotypical representation of a tropical country but very effective because people instantly identify the message behind it ‘a beautiful tropical island with coconut and palm trees, sandy beaches, blue waters, picturesque lagoons—a perfect place to visit’.

The subsequent postcard of New Caledonia projects a very beautiful tropical image. The selections of images depict the beautiful sunsets over breathtaking landscapes. A kind of a yearning to be there is created in the minds and hearts of those receiving such postcards. However, these postcards do not show the sunsets over mined mountains, or sunsets on gray rainy days when the horizon over the sea is not even visible.
In addition, images are representations of socially constructed realities, as they exist in the minds of the viewers. Images never fully represent reality rather they are selective and simplified views of the big complex picture and tend to be biased and ethnocentric. The brochure for Japan depicts a clean deserted white sandy beach, with beautiful blue waters and palm trees. The brochure does not indicate any thing about the Melanesian culture or its people. No people are present on the brochure. Only some small yachts and a cruise ship in the distant horizon indicating that cruise ships are welcomed in New Caledonia. The brochure indicates that the tourists here would be away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and there would be no one to disturb their peace and tranquility projecting it as the island closest to paradise. Honeymooners are also made to believe that they can get the privacy they cherish. The brochure is designed to play on people’s emotions and by visually describing the island closest to paradise they tempt the viewers to indulge in that fantasy.

Brochure for Japan

As a result, some images develop a stereotype meaning. For instance, Club Med has developed the image of being a sun and sex destination, an image mainly promoted by the Americans. Club Med in Hienghene is built on tribal land, which has been leased to them for 25 years. The club has to return the entire resort to the local tribe after 25 years. At that point, the management of the land will also be taken over by the tribe. The landscape is very tropical and they promote the Kanak culture by using Gite kind of sleeping accommodations. They market the image of Club Med through a brochure and package deals. The main image, which they are trying to construct, is that there are no barriers between the employees and the guests and all interact and socialize together. Club Med is a family resort and it is trying to promote that image and to thus discourage the stereotype image of sun- sex- sand they had acquired from the American tourists. The biggest market is local but they do get visitors from New Zealand, Australia and France. They offer incentives like half price stays to encourage visitation by the locals during the off-season.
Finally, images can be created in the minds of the viewers through careful planning (Wong, 2000, p. 159). France is the second largest market in New Caledonia. In 2000, the number of people who visited the country was around 30,000. Many people who work in the administration departments are from France. As a result, many tourists come to visit friends and family (VFR) here. The image and slogan used for this market is ‘The Land of origin’ because of the distance between the two countries, and the relatively unspoiled natural environment. Since it is very expensive to travel to New Caledonia, the agency targets only certain groups. Scuba divers are the first group because they travel to ‘discover unique places’. The other group is ecotourists, because New Caledonia boasts of a very rich ecosystem, and since it is a French territory, it would be safer for French citizens to travel here. The familiar language and signs in French would help them feel comfortable in an unfamiliar environment.

Politics play an important part in image creations. In many ways, power relations structure the social construction of images. Tourism is seen as another way for powerful nations to perceive themselves as superior to the rest of the world. The concept of ‘us’ representing ‘them’ is highly significant in this industry (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998, pp. 163 –166). People in influential positions in tourism often compare cultures in binary terms. ‘Us’ is superior to ‘them’ therefore most representations tend to prove the other cultures to be primitive, exotic, timeless, enchanting and hence inferior to ‘our’ own culture. Visitors are projected as being superior to the locals; for instance, brochure for a resort may show local people serving drinks to the guests. While this is true in many cases, I could not find examples for this type of representation in New Caledonia. It could be because of New Caledonia past exploitation of the Melanesians. It would be politically too risky to antagonize the indigenous population.

Photographic images have the ability to ‘seemingly objectively represent reality’. It may seem like images represent the true picture, but in reality, they partially represent selected truth (Edwards, 1996, p. 171). However, the process of picture taking involves choosing sites that would appeal to the people back home. The brochure for New Zealand visitors shows a dark coloured man and a white woman in traditional clothes on a Polynesian canoe. The main message here is that mixed couples and people of all ethnic groups are welcomed in New Caledonia. The people are invited to enjoy the French cuisine, explore culture, shop for French brands and enjoy a relaxed French atmosphere. More importantly, the main statement of the brochure is to encourage people to stay in Noumea for the duration of their stay. The brochure alienates the other two provinces by not projecting them. Negative aspects are avoided as tourists constantly seek the spot for the ‘Kodak moment’ picture. Pictures are an authority on the destination, and images are far more effective in attracting audiences than written words because it is accepted as proof of reality.

Brochure for New Zealand:
Similarly, tourists take pictures of places they visit as an evidence of their being there (ibid, p. 173). Encouraging tourists to take photographs as souvenirs is a way of standardizing cultural expectations about travel photographs. They also prove that one has had the requisite travel experience (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998, 214).

Postcards of everyday life appeal to the tourists seeking an authentic experience, therefore images of local market places, and smiling, indigenous populations sitting around are designed to entice the tourists to the destination. Western tourists have this notion of experiencing the culture before it is too late. Most postcards that indicate the Kanak people and culture depict only the traditional handicrafts and form of life. It gives a sense of a traditionally preserved culture, when in reality cultures are never static. They are always changing with time and influence. Kanak people drive modern cars and look like modern people but such images can prove distressing for tourists looking for a ‘primitive cultural experience’ these modern changes are carefully concealed from the images marketed.

Authenticity is seen in the traditional unchanging past, which is technology shy and timeless. The French brochure shows a (possibly) French Woman with two Melanesian children representing the culture. The landscape is beautiful and unspoiled indicating the origin of land. The pine trees are native and found only in New Caledonia, therefore ecotourists can enjoy such different, ‘pristine’ nature here. The two children are wearing traditional clothes, which represent the notion of a timeless culture and its authenticity.

*Brochure for France:*
The demand to gain such an experience provides tourism developers and promoters with an incentive to project the indigenous populations in the ways that are acceptable to the selective tourists markets. Postcards and brochures also indicate the safeness of a destination, as happy smiling people would impose no threat to the tourist compared to the image of a well-built man working with machinery.

For instance, the postcard showing a happy smiling group of young Kanak people welcoming a cruise ship is more reassuring than unwelcoming locals.

Generally, native women are used in brochures to seduce the predominantly male viewers. In some cases tourists wish to interact freely with the locals therefore, brochures made available to them indicate a tourist dressed as a local or participating in the local lifestyles (ibid, pp. 75-78). On the other hand, some postcards are particularly developed to reassure women tourists traveling alone to a destination. Women may find that the picture of a Melanesian man with the baby is a less threatening image than one depicting a group of Melanesian men working on a construction site.
In order to maintain the uniqueness of a destination, brochures portray natives in various forms depending upon the consumer expectations. For instance, to add local color to the brochure, native people may be shown in national/traditional costumes. The brochure for the Australian market depicts French cheese and bread with a sign saying ‘road to Paris’. This is indicative of the French influence in New Caledonia. The viewers are invited to experience France closer to home. But the brochure also signifies the ‘traditional’ Melanesian culture of a smiling man with a traditional face design is shown along with the Tjibaou cultural center in Noumea. These pictures are put in for the people seeking an authentic cultural experience because the cultural center in Noumea houses the entire history of the Kanak and New Caledonia cultures. The pine trees in the brochure are native to the land and exemplify the diversity of flora found in New Caledonia. The fish and corals represent the marine diversity of the country. The entire brochure tempts the tourists to explore this country of extreme diversity.

Brochure for Australia

People shown in the brochure represent the preferences of the potential tourist. For instance, no people on the brochure indicate that the tourist groups targeted do not wish to interact with locals, as it often is the case in brochures for enclavic destinations. Instead, people of the same or similar ethnic groups are shown interacting together in a happy environment. They want to ‘get away from it all’ because their present circumstances are unsatisfactory to them (Dann, 1996, pp. 68-69).

Malabou beach resort’s entire landscape is artificially constructed. The landscape on the outside is very different from the landscape inside the resort. The brochure distributed by the resort does not give any indication about the local people or their culture. The only reference was to the local food and meal called the bougna. This resort describes an ‘enclavic’ tourism destination. Enclavistic destinations are developed to give their guests a feeling of familiarity in a foreign environment. The tourists in these cases do not want much interaction with the local people or people of some other ethnic groups. The tourists and the local people are essentially kept separate. The resort organizes numerous activities and day trips to the mines in the region but no cultural tours or activities are offered.

View inside the resort
The resort has a private airstrip, which enables private jets to land directly at the resort. Some of their guests arrive directly, others are picked up from the Kone airport which gets direct flights from Noumea. Air New Caledonia picks up passengers from the resort every Sunday night.

Malabou resort’s main markets are Japan, France, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Most of their tourists are business people because they are paid quite well to come and work in the mines hence they can afford to stay at resort. Marketing strategies include advertising through travel agents in their main markets – the brochure included is the one distributed to all travel agents. For Japan, a contract had recently been signed with Mitsubishi, who will be responsible for future promotion. Images thus play an important part.

The landscape inside the resort was made to be tropical with tall coconut trees, bungalow style cottages, and beautiful colors of the water. The resort works very hard to maintain this ideal tropical image, but in reality the resort is surrounded with sore sights. Within the resort itself, many environmental problems are quite visible. For instance, as a result of the artificially constructed sea wall, recommended at the time by scientists, there is beach erosion on the left side. The area is quite prone to cyclones. Outside the resort, the landscape consists of burnt trees, reddish brown mountains and random garbage dumps. At the time of building the resort underwent an environmental impact assessment but now many problems are occurring and a million dollars will have to be invested to rectify them, to maintain the image of ‘pristine topics’.

*Landscape outside the resort*
Marketing for Domestic Tourism

The Northern Province:

The province is trying to market itself domestically as a separate destination. Activities like horse riding and kayaking are promoted. One way of attracting the domestic market is with billboards. The billboard picture is an example of how tourists are being made aware of the nearby activities. It is a cheap form of advertisement but highly effective especially since it attracts motorist passing through. This particular billboard is aimed at domestic tourists and the French visitors because it is in French. It says – La Foa tourism, slide, live fully, discover, jubilate, dive, feel the excitement, breathe, be daring, play, live to the limits, laze, savour. All these indicate the vibrant nature of the tourism activities available in La Foa. The choice of words is meant to catch the attention of the tourists and to signal the excitement awaiting them. Billboard – La Foa

View of the open cast mine on the East Coast

Visitors are encouraged to stay in Gites (tribal houses) so that the local tribes can also benefit from tourism. The northern province is not set up to deal with a large numbers of international tourists because the facilities provided do not match the prices charged for them. The landscape promoted on the east coast is beautiful green mountains, cascades and white sandy beaches. Opencast mines that have left the mountains bare and brown however, surround these mountains, and the runoff from the mines is the cause of pollution in the lagoons.
The roads are muddy and there are no signs indicating directions. In order to construct an image, some standards have to be maintained. Overall, the Northern province has to develop many facilities before it can compete with the Southern province. One of the reasons for such disparities between the provinces is that the Southern province, having predominantly Europeans population, has benefited from the financial aid it received from investors and the French government.

The Loyalty Islands

Development of tourism in the Loyalty Islands started ten years ago. The territorial government manages tourism and there is little co-ordination between the various departments. Therefore, no proper regulations have been laid down yet. The tourism office in Loyalty Islands is trying to develop a local product through which the local people can get involved in tourism too. There are two main things they want to develop and promote. First, the standardization of the local product and services to ensure that a certain degree of cleanliness, comfort, security and other services is maintained. Second, they want to promote tourists stays on the farms owned by Melanesian people. Part of their visits would involve learning about the indigenous farming methods and plants (Key Informant C). The main idea is to promote the close relationship the Melanesian people have with their environment. The images they prefer not to promote are the random garbage landfills found on the Loyalty Islands. Local people do not understand that images have to be maintained to ensure tourism development. Another problem is the lack of signs on the Islands as in many places, people have removed these signs and without them, tourists can be lost quite easily in unfamiliar surroundings.

Conclusion

Destination imagery is an integral part of any tourism development. Tangible process of social construction of imagery for tourism marketing is evident in New Caledonia. The promoters are aware of the importance of projecting the ‘right’ image to their potential customers. Each of New Caledonia’s main markets has different expectations; hence a different mix of images must be developed to gratify their individual requirements.

The creation of images is a highly complex process as they are socially constructed to represent realities in ways that may be acceptable to the targeted audiences. Many underlying factors govern the images chosen and used for tourism promotion. In many cases, images are chosen to highlight certain features of a destination, in other instances, they are used to hide negative features that may affect tourists’ decision to visit.

In the end, tourism in New Caledonia is still a relatively new phenomenon therefore; the images constructed are based on lines of the actual product. Only negative aspects are concealed, however images are not constructed to deceive the tourists. Tourism has miles to go before it can be satisfactorily developed. Tourism promotion and marketing strategies will be constantly challenged to maintain a certain image of New Caledonia on the international market. As for New Caledonia – the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step called foresight.
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Kanika Gupta is presently undertaking a BsocSc (Hons) degree, majoring in Tourism Studies at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. She is working on another project that looks at how films influence people to travel to destinations.