Authentic Kitsch? Donn, Vic and the Emergence of the Tiki Bar Social Category

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Authentic Kitsch?

1. Motivation for Study and Method
2. Social History of Tiki Bars
3. Theoretical Reconciliation
4. Conclusion
Motivation

- Authenticity: an attribution regarding something as being “real”
- Typical study: Choose something commonly regarded as authentic and analyze it
- Why not study from opposite view, something commonly regarded as inauthentic? (Cf. Anthony & Joshi 2016)
- Kitsch: unoriginal, cheap, mass-produced, sentimental. Dutton: insists on being taken seriously without a hint of irony
Research Questions

• Was the tiki bar originally regarded as something authentic?

• Did the tiki bar evolve from what had been originally seen as an earnest representation of Polynesia to its current, almost joke-like status?

• How do the facts of the tiki bar’s social history square with relevant social science theory of culture, consumption and organizations?
Method

- Use various available historical sources (newspapers, artifacts etc.)
- Rely on compilations and artifacts (photographs, postcards, menus, paraphernalia) by hobbyists that seem credible (online websites)
- Craft a narrative that does not contradict any credible facts. Flag contentious claims. “Social History”
Philosophy of Science

Observe phenomenon

Scrutinize observations

Summarize data

Inductive inference of plausible hypotheses

Systematic Testing

Retroduction
Origins: Donn & Vic & Their Places

• 1934: Ernest Beaumont-Gantt changed his name to Donn Beach and opened “Don the Beachcomber” in Hollywood

• Seven Seas in 1935

• Vic Bergeron visited both places and remade his own place in Oakland as “Trader Vic’s”

• Both places quickly became social scenes for affluent and cosmopolitan people

• Gossip column mentions

• Popular drink and cookbooks
Both places featured rum drinks and both claimed to be the origin of the Mai-Tai. Trader Vic’s was more food oriented.
Early Trader Vic’s

- Rum is not found indigenous to Polynesia
- Bergeron never visited Polynesia in early days
- Pumped up theme in Oakland
- “Exotic Cantonese and Polynesian dishes”
- “Heat and woodsmoke in the ancient Chinese method”
- Not primitive foods from Tahiti and similar places (“unacceptable”)
- His interpretations of original recipes of “present-day Hawaiian and Tahitian dishes”
- “Radical influence” of French in Tahiti
- Garlic was “unacceptable”
Tiki Diffuses (1960s-1970s)

- Don the Beachcomber and Trader Vic establish chains of restaurant-bars
- Numerous imitators followed, often using the “Trader” name
- High-brow and low-brow places
- Chain hotels: Hilton, Marriott, Sheraton
- Tiki style influences architecture & design
- People set up tiki bars by their pool or in their basements
- Tiki parties become popular
- Tiki places show pride in original ethnic art and artifacts sourced from Polynesia
Widely known physical elements of a tiki bar

- Tiki god masks and carvings
- Grasscloth
- Tapa cloth and tropical fabrics
- Torches
- Woven fish traps
- Ukele music
- Glass floats
- Bamboo
- Plants
- Lava stone
- Hula girls
- Palm tree motifs
- Tropical murals
- South Pacific decorations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Don the Beachcomber opens his bar in Hollywood</td>
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<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Trader Vic remakes his bar-restaurant in Oakland</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Trader Vic’s opens in San Francisco</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Tiki themed bars, properties and materials diffuse broadly</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Over 200 tiki bars in the US (only 20 five years earlier)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Tiki themed bars, properties and materials diffuse broadly</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Tiki themed bars, properties and materials decline in prominence</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Revival in popularity of tiki bars</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Retro tiki parties and places</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>Cocktail craze bartenders recognize tiki origin</td>
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### What is Authentic?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominal Authenticity</th>
<th>“The correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named” Denis Dutton</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socially Constructed Authenticity</td>
<td>The authenticity of a cultural entity depends on a subjective assessment of its degree of fit with an institutionalized set of expectations (form or category)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type Authenticity</td>
<td>Signifies that a cultural object (or its associated organization) clearly fits some particular institutionalized classification or social category to which it has been assigned or which someone has claimed for it</td>
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Evaluating Authenticity

Tiki bar-restaurant

**Nominal**
Tiki bars hinted at Polynesian origins but never made strong claims and never measured up on any dimension of nominal authenticity. No one goes there for this reason.

**Socially constructed**
Tiki bars never existed in indigenous Polynesia or Hawaii. They were invented in California and diffused. The elements evolved over time.

**Type**
Many Americans today can instantly recognize a tiki bar and describe what it takes to be so recognized. Many have personal experiences in them.
Tiki Bar-Restaurant

Social history

Induced Hypotheses

Not indigenous anywhere

Draws from many mixed origins

Becomes cultural form

Path to form unusual
Path to Form (Category) Status

- Ground up (entrepreneurs & consumers)
- No certifying body
- No rational myth of efficiency

Cultural Form (Category)

Episodic diffusion
Why did it so evolve?

Status appeal: initially elitist and then populist

Was never denigrated by intermediaries (cf. Anthony & Joshi on Thomas Kincaide)
+ Weak intermediaries
+ Never too serious (lacked pretension)
+ Initial high status audience
Questions?