At a crossroads of tradition and modernity, Samoa provides a unique model for the study of authenticity in handicraft consumption. Prior to the introduction of commercialization, Samoan artisans produced handicrafts for communal utilitarian use. An evolving social and market system has since forced these crafts to undergo significant modification. Through ethnographic and qualitative research, vendor and consumer perceptions of authenticity and involvement in the conceptualization of Samoan handicraft products are gauged. Analysis advances previously established frameworks for perceived authenticity by addressing the incorporation of innovative materials into traditional Samoan handicrafts and the reclamation of “tourist products” for “authentic” use by Samoans.

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The Commodification of Culture: An Analysis of the Samoan Handicrafts Market
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At a crossroads of tradition and modernity, Samoa provides a unique model for the study of authenticity in handicraft consumption. Prior to the introduction of commercialization, Samoan artisans produced handicrafts for communal utilitarian use. An evolving social and market system has since forced these crafts to undergo significant modification. Through ethnographic and qualitative research, vendor and consumer perceptions of authenticity and involvement in the conceptualization of Samoan handicraft products are gauged. Analysis advances previously established frameworks for perceived authenticity by addressing the incorporation of innovative materials into traditional Samoan handicrafts and the reclamation of “tourist products” for “authentic” use by Samoans.

Background

Marx’s idea of “primitive communities,” where the concepts of private property and commodity exchange were non-existent, accurately describes Samoa’s history. As Marx suggested, without market exchange, material objects were fully utilized by producers for a fixed purpose. While the original source of commoditization in Samoa can be linked to the commercial pursuits of missionaries and traders in the 1850’s, the influences of the tourism industry and growing Samoan expatriate community as contemporary sources of commercial motivation are undeniable.

The introduction of industrial goods and tourist consumer preferences forced a change in the traditional arts of Samoa. In a process similar to that described by Cohen (1988), an attempt to revive these arts was made through the process of commercialization; modifications in the type and design of handicrafts were completed to match tourist consumer desires. However, unlike the commercialization of ethnic crafts in other areas, Samoan handicrafts are not created solely to please the tourist aesthetic. Neither the Samoan consumer nor the traditional utilitarian spirit of the arts is forgotten in contemporary product realizations. Producers employ traditional weaving methods and natural Samoan materials, along with imported materials (plastics, paints, and other goods) to create innovative products. According to a producer informant, these products are created to capitalize on local consumer demands for utility and tourist consumer demands for “island style”.

The dual influences of tourists and local consumers are highly evident in the manufacture of Samoan handicraft products. If, as in Samoa, both local and tourist consumer desires shape the market for handicrafts, who, then determines the authenticity and type or design of products? The purpose of this study was two-fold: to investigate authenticity in relation to Samoan handicrafts as perceived by consumers; and to analyze perceptions of consumer involvement in the conceptualization of handicraft products.

Methodology

Initial contact and introduction in Samoa were established in March 2008. Preliminary screening interviews to understand the history and structure of the market, as well as the groups influencing craft production, were conducted in the markets at Fugalei and Savalalo at this time. The target population was identified using information obtained during observations and interviews in the markets and stores selling handicrafts in Apia, Samoa. The sample was defined to include consumers who consider authenticity in the purchase of Samoan handicrafts. A purposive sample was used because of the necessity of unique knowledge held by the population concerning the consumption of Samoan handicrafts. A nonprobability sampling method was selected so that data consistent with research objectives could be collected from as many members of the target population as possible.

Intensive fieldwork was conducted for 8 weeks from April to May 2008 including market observations; home and village observations; in-depth interviews; and surveying of consumers and vendors to obtain information about the perceptions of authenticity of Samoan handicrafts. The survey and interview questions focused on perceptions of authenticity related to content categories for the analysis of authenticity of crafts previously defined by Littrell, Anderson, and Brown (1993). The perceived importance of handicraft uniqueness and originality, workmanship, use and function, cultural or historical significance, craftsperson identity, and materials were gauged (from not important to very important on a five-point Likert-type scale).

Interviews were conducted in both English and Samoan; surveys were bilingual, and respondents were urged to answer in the language in which they felt most competent. Although the interviews were informal in nature, common questions were asked in the course of the conversations. The open-ended format of the interviews allowed informants to more fully discuss aspects of authenticity which they deemed important. This format, combined with the closed questions of the survey instrument, allowed for the collection of parallel sets of data from all respondents. At the conclusion of the fieldwork, responses were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive statistics.

Findings

Preliminary analysis advances Grayson and Martinez’s (2004) framework for indexical and iconic measures of authenticity. While originally developed to describe a tourist population, this framework can also be applied to local consumers of culture. When determining the authenticity of Samoan handicrafts, the overall target population placed highest importance on indexical sources of authenticity (having physical ties to local producers and local materials). They perceived highest importance in the indexical categories of manufacturer (“made by someone living in Samoa”) and materials (“constructed of materials from Samoa”). Compared to the tourist consumer sample, the local Samoan sample perceived higher importance in iconic categories of authenticity (having perceived ties to pre-established conceptions of a culture). For local consumer informants, goods displaying iconic authenticity allow for the assertion of “Samoan identity”. According to a local informant “buying Samoan handicrafts supports [Samoan producers], who keep the traditional culture and preserve fa’aSamoa”.

Along these lines, a significant phenomenon is presented where “tourist products” are reclaimed by local consumers and Samoan expatriates. These items, such as miniature kava bowls and small accessories (earrings, bracelets), are preferred by tourists because, according to a vendor informant, “they are easy to transport” and fulfill consumer desires for indexical authenticity. “Tourist products” are beginning to breach the dual market system (where non-Samoans demand mainly “tourist products” and Samoans demand mainly “traditional products” with little crossover) as locals purchase them for utilitarian purposes and Samoan expatriates demand easily transportable identity merchandise.

Analysis of the perceptions of consumer involvement in the conceptualization of handicraft products was conducted on two key concepts: who most strongly determines authenticity;
and who determines the type and design of Samoan handicrafts. Respondents primarily identified producers as the party most strongly influencing overall authenticity of Samoan handicrafts. They named themselves as the key determinants of the type and design of Samoan handicrafts, but recognized that availability of market offerings is determined by vendors, who relate consumer preferences to producers. These perceptions help to explain how Samoan handicrafts have developed from purely non-commoditized artisinal products to commercial consumer objects. The research supports a model for product commodification and innovation primarily as a result of Samoan expatriates, who have the ability to move between and influence both the traditional and tourist goods markets.

Works Cited