

19th and early 20th century trade cards about Oceania as tools of information, education and propaganda for European colonial powers

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Abstract: From the mid-19th century on, trade cards became a significant medium not only for advertising consumer products, but also for promoting and distributing political messages such as the idea of colonization. With regard to the Pacific Islands, the article highlights the role of trade cards as a channel to create a specific image of the Pacific Islands as a region worthy to be colonized, missionized and exploited. A core symbol of this idea figured in the South Seas stereotype which was widely used to merge visions of unspoiled, peaceful island societies and dreams of a paradise on earth, with goals of establishing political control over the islands in the context of the race for colonies of the Western powers in the age of imperialism.

Keywords: trade cards, stereotypes, education, propaganda, history of colonialism, visual culture, visual anthropology

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The message of the "South Seas"-trade cards

Trade cards with explicitly South Sea motifs appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Britain, France and – with some delay – Germany, started to divide the South Pacific among themselves into spheres of influence, step by step with establishing protectorates to incorporating islands as colonies. The British and the French had already acquired colonies around 1850 (Britain: Pitcairn 1838, New Zealand 1840, Fiji 1874; France: Tahiti 1842, New Caledonia 1853), and after 1885 when Germany appeared on the scene and established protectorates over parts of New Guinea, Micronesia and later in Samoa, a partition of almost all Pacific territories (except Tonga) took place during a short period of time. Since that time, motifs from the region increasingly emerged on trade cards.

Comparing trade cards from Britain and the United States with those from France and Germany of the period 1860-1900, the printing quality of the latter is by far better. The chromolithography used there offered an intensity of colourfulness and brightness unknown to other forms of print mass media of those times. The

technology was far more developed on continental Europe, especially in Germany, compared with Britain and the USA (apparent in the two cards showing the hoisting of the flag). Formats and sizes were also different in various countries. The French and German trade cards, issued from 1853 on, were often bigger in size (11 x 7 cm), the typical "Sammelbilder" or "carte commercial." The prototype of this type of trade card is the so-called "Liebig-Kaufmannsbild," named after the famous Liebig Company, the producer of a meat extract, a process invented by the German chemist Justus von Liebig, which could concentrate and preserve the essential nutrients and flavours of beef in the form of paste or bouillon cubes. The British tended to a smaller format (7 x 3,5 cm), referred to as "cigarette cards". In Britain in 1887, the tobacco importer W.D. & H.O. Wills was one of the first companies to include advertising cards with their cigarettes, but it was John Player & Sons in 1893 that produced one of the first general interest sets. Often these cards were produced and issued in series of four, six (see figure 1), or even more cards, which formed a set relevant to one subject. The trade cards depicting Oceania can be

divided into four sub-categories: 1.) those which provide ethnographic information about people and cultures of the Pacific islands (see figures 1, 2, 3, 7b-d, 12), 2.) those which underlined the colonial claim over the particular islands (see figures 10, 11), 3.) those which transport(ed) stereotypical South Sea images and clichés (see figure 5), and 4.) those images which show animals, plants, and topographic features (see figures 2, 7a). Sometimes two or more aspects are merged in one image.

To the first group of images belong those which allow assumptions about native decoration, tattoos, indigenous forms of architecture, boat-building and art, as well as those which provide information about spiritual features and ritual characteristics of a native tribe. Especially tribes in island Melanesia as well as the highlands of New Guinea showed such a variety of distinct cultural expressions, which were often seized for picturesque motifs. Do trade cards contain accurate or veridical information? Not necessarily. A Liebig-card series about Samoa shows tree houses in the Samoan islands which never ever existed there. Only in New Guinea such tree houses could be found, and then only in



Source of all photos: private collection Mückler

Figure 1: A series of six trade cards showing traditional appearance and rituals of Pacific Islanders.

some distinct places. Also, music instruments such as the arched harp, that originates in East Africa, can be seen on one of those cards despite being an instrument that was never used in the context of traditional Samoan culture (see figure 8). Sometimes the mixture of different features together in one card creates strange images: while it is true that surfing was a tradition on the Hawaiian islands, crocodiles were not a threat (see figure 5). Some of these mistakes occurred because the person who made the original (stone-) engraving often had to rely on photographs and personal comments from travellers to the Pacific but was not in the position to verify or falsify ethnographic details. On the other hand, drawings (or bet-

ter printed engravings) about traditional tattoos are often very accurate and provide indeed useful information about native decoration styles, as they were usually based on already published material from Western explorers, early travellers, and anthropologists (see figures 3, 4). Nevertheless, the use of trade cards for contemporary educational purposes was guaranteed only to some extent, as the element of subliminal or frank propaganda about the colonized people was an integral part of most of the images. To target children as collectors and consumers, subtextual messages were included to spark interest in those whose generation would potentially populate and govern the colonized territories. Today, each of

the trade cards has to be analyzed separately in its contemporary time frame and context, regarding its political and economic intentions and the needs of various involved protagonists. Thus the value of trade cards for contemporary enterprises and governments was based much more on the second categories aspects: to provide contemporary information about the potentials of the recently acquired colonies. Flag-hoisting scenes legitimated the colonial authority over the islands and their peoples (see figures 10, British flag hoisting in British Papua, figure 11, German flag hoisting in Samoa). The depiction of modern infrastructure, such as post offices, (see figure 6) intend to encourage settlers from the mother country



Figure 2: Maps on the cards often underline colonial authority over the islands.



Figure 3: Traditional full-body tattoo from Nukuhiva, Polynesia.

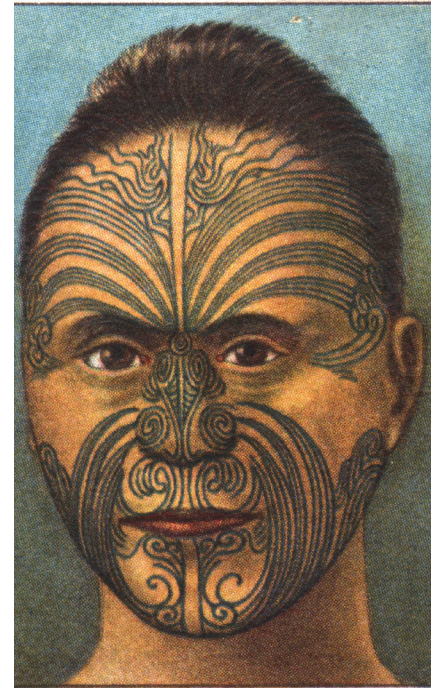


Figure 4: Traditional face tattoo "moko" of the New Zealand Maori.

to move to the French, and to some extent in the German South Sea colonies for economic engagement and permanent settlement. The intention was to convey the impression that potential settlers would not lament the absence of Western conveniences. Warships and soldiers often symbolized the presence of state authority and transported the idea of security for those who wanted to move to the South Sea colonies.



Figure 5: Hawaiian Islands with hula-dance, surfing and a crocodile.

The question if and how state authorities were involved in the creation and selection of motifs for trade cards cannot be easily answered as there exists no serious scientific investigation to date. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the trade cards acted as a means to justify and even glorify colonialism. Directives usually came from the companies themselves, which allowed cards to be produced in independent studios. Their objective was to raise the appeal of the cards for the increase of the visibility of the advertised products and thus for the sales figures. This could be best obtained with motifs that depicted South Sea stereotypes already diffused in the tar-

geted population. Motifs with abundant lush vegetation and willing beautiful young maidens are among those clichés, which were used repeatedly to create a (sub-) tropic atmosphere of relaxation and satisfaction for those representatives of white western civilization, who had to travel to and live on these islands (see Sturma, 2002; O'Brien, 2006). Although not immediately detectable, often attributed prejudices were underlying these "easygoing" surface-elements, such as idleness, naivety, and backwardness, and thus create an ambivalent atmosphere. Such trade card motifs satisfied the expected exotic element of overseas territories and invited the collec-

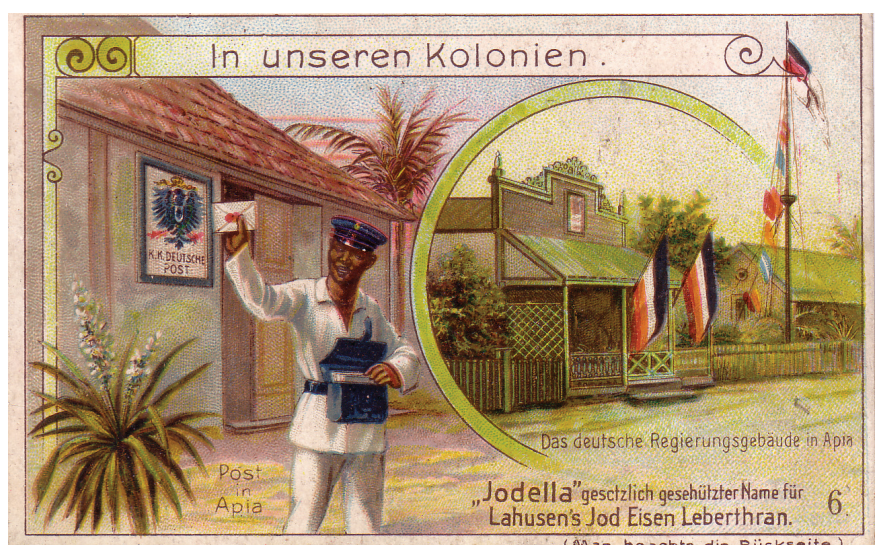


Figure 6: German Post officer in Apia, Upolu, Samoa.



Figure 7: Four cigarette cards from different British companies.

tors of such cards to dream about the South Sea as a peaceful and promising place. The last and fourth category underscored such intentions of “exotism” with colourful illustrations of birds of paradise, landscapes of atoll islands and lush flowering island vegetation.

Often it was stated that trade cards were produced especially for children. Although true in general, we have to take into account that the products, to which the trade cards were attributed, were comparatively expensive. Chocolate, cacao, meat extract, tobacco, coffee, tea, and chemical products like floor polish, were expensive products in the late nineteenth century and by tendency affordable rather for middle-class families, not for the working class. Thus the collection of trade cards was a hobby of a relatively wealthy minority, as the middleclass was indeed emerging rapidly at those times, but not fully established as the main social class in European and US societies. This partially limited the scope for the companies that issued trade cards and lead gradually to cheaper production modes. On the other hand, trade cards and the products that they advertised were increasingly far apart, as the trade cards were sought after and collected as an end in itself. The series produced numbered into the thousands and the scrapbooks where the cards were carefully preserved required a steady flow of new series with a wide range of motifs. The advertised product thus became of subsequent importance for the buyers. Trade cards were often collected in albums that acted – in our case – as textbooks to describe the colonies and their indigenous popula-

tions to a broad general audience.

The trade cards shown in this article are extracted from the author’s collection which contains photographs, postcards, engravings, maps, posters, ephemera, and collectibles of popular culture exclusively engaging with the Pacific Islands and their particular traditions and cultures. Among these items are about 2,000 trade cards with “South Sea”-representations that are suitable for analysis and can be interpreted as a mirror of Western perception of Oceania. So far only one book in the German language deals explicitly with the aspect of colonialism in relation to the trade card (Zeller 2008), and another book contextualizes trade cards in their capacity to create time frames for the addressed time periods (Weyers/Köck 1992). The trade cards depicting the Pacific Islanders and

their cultures provide details about Oceania and its cultural diversity, but it tells even more about Western perception, thinking and acting towards the Pacific Islanders in the age of imperialism.

Trade cards as an advertising medium

Trade cards were produced in great quantity and variety during the last third of the nineteenth century and constituted a new and significant marketing strategy in advertising. A trade card is usually defined as a single piece of medium weight paper slightly smaller than a post card, printed with decorative images that directly or indirectly promote a commercial product, service, or event. Trade cards were thus a cross between modern-day business cards and advertising flyers. The typi-



Figure 8: Liebig-card showing a Samoan dancer. There is no arch harp in Samoa!



Figure 9: French trade card showing Marist/Picpus missionaries preaching to Melanesians.

cal card showed a picture (usually in colour) on one side and a paragraph or two on the reverse to describe the product or service. Many years before popular magazines began to produce any substantial visual advertising in either black and white or colour, trade cards proliferated in Europe and the USA into even the most remote areas by means of free distribution, directly from retailers and wholesalers to their customers. Trade cards were the first widely used form of colour advertisement. Other names for trade cards are: collector cards, advertising cards, *Sammelbilder*, *Kaufmannsbilder*, card commerciale, to mention only a few. The format was popularized alongside of the development of lithography, and more importantly, chromolithography in the mid-nineteenth century. Trade cards as advertising ephemera offer today many directions of research. Important for providing information on products, prices, and distribution networks, they also originally offered insights into everyday life through images of store displays, street scenes, and domestic interiors. Later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, they broadened their message-portfolio in covering almost all aspects of daily life, including the presentation of overseas territories and colonies and their native populations as well as the illustration of colonial achievements by the respective European powers. Consequently, the backside of the trade cards not only advertised products but also provided more detailed explanatory information about the motif on the front side (see figure 13). Thus the trade cards gradually turned into an informing and even educational instrument, which could properly be used

as a tool for propaganda.

The items range in date from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, displaying a range of printing techniques and advertising strategies, and represent the shift from hand-crafted to machine-made products. Industrialization, urbanization, and commercial expansion in Europe and the USA had altered in the nineteenth century the social and economic landscape and contributed to the rapid development of new consumer markets. Manufacturers began to vie aggressively for consumer spending. It was the advertising trade card that met the need for an effective mass advertising medium, heralding the arrival of an extraordinary variety of manufactured goods newly available to the Westerners public. With the invention of chromolithography they became even more popular and made printing items cheaper. The size became more standardized to better fit into small product packages as an extra reminder to consumers to continue buying. Trade cards (and labels) have been collectible throughout their history; early ones as engraved prints, later ones as material for scrapbooks. Dave Cheadle, expert on Victorian trade cards once stated: “a historian would have to be blind to miss the power that trade cards have in telling their own stories, and a writer would have to be pure mercenary to catalogue cards and assign prices without at least occasionally noting the historical significance of some of these cards” (Cheadle 1996). The use of trade cards declined only in the twentieth century as magazine advertising became more popular. Today trade cards as an advertising medium are no longer in use.

There are differences in the quality of the trade cards. The invention of the “Steindruck” by Alois Senefelder in 1796 marked the beginning of this technique. Printing was from a lithographic limestone with a smooth surface. A new process developed by the Frenchman Godefroy Engelmann in 1837, known as chromolithography, introduced multi-colour printing. A separate stone was used for each colour, and a print went through the press separately for each stone. The main challenge was to keep the images aligned. Thus the so-called twelve-colour chromolithography was the peak of this meticulous technology, which guaranteed colourful images – the trade cards thus often called “chromos” – at times where almost all printing output was in black and white (see Mielke, 1982; Ciolina/Ciolina, 1985).

One of the many functions of this type of early print mass media, aside from informing, entertaining, or persuading various segments of society, is cultural transmission. Whether the various forms of mass media intend to or not, they reflect and uphold the culture that they serve – the trade cards are no different. Embedded within advertising are usually the blueprints for the dominant cultural ideology, as James Chan (2015) once underlined. The advertising media, like all other media, have a target audience, and for the historical trade cards, which are thematised here, it were the populations in the mother countries of European overseas colonialism. Hence, advertising in the respective countries has always mirrored white superior male cultural values as well as attitudes toward other cultures. As Chan noted: “If one can



Figure 10: British flag hoisting in Port Moresby, New Guinea, in 1884.

understand the cultural attitudes of a society through its advertising, then one can also understand past cultural attitudes by analyzing advertising from a society's past". At the height of their popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth century, trade cards mirrored the social, cultural, and political attitudes of European societies of that era. In the so-called era of imperialism, the "race for colonies" and the idea of "civilizing heathen peoples," trade cards not only transported stereotypes – in our case about the South Sea Islands – but also justified colonial actions to conquer, exploit and control foreign countries and peoples.

The South Sea cliché and its instrumentalization

A cliché or stereotype is usually a "loaded image," or, in other words, an image that is associated with a set of meanings and generalities which occurs through repetition. Regarding the Pacific Islands, the role of trade cards was to act as a "channel" to create a specific image of the Pacific Islands as a region worth to be colonized, missionized and exploited – remote but rich in resources. A core symbol of this idea figured in the "South Seas"-cliché which was widely used to merge visions of unspoiled,



Figure 11: German flag hoisting in Apia, Upolu, Samoa Islands, in 1900.

peaceful island societies and dreams of a paradise on earth, with goals of establishing political control over the islands in the context of the "race for colonies" of the Western powers in the age of imperialism. The South Sea stereotype emanated from the contact of Westerners with Pacific Islands populations, especially in Polynesia. As the main European voyages of discovery into the Pacific took place in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the ideas of the enlightenment and the

search for new and different political and social models around the world dominated the approach to and the interpretation of the Pacific Islands cultures. Such potential models were projected to act as positive alternatives to existing European modes of social organization. Louis Antoine de Bougainville and Samuel Wallis, James Cook and Georg Forster, La Perouse and Dumont D'Urville – all famous for their discoveries in the Pacific – were among the ones whose published records sparked amazement



Figure 12: British cigarette card depicting a Maori chief.

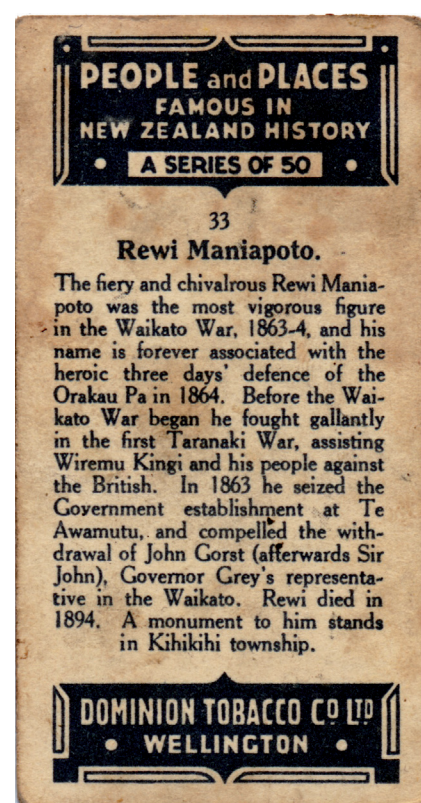


Figure 13: Backside of the cigarette card with the Maori chief.



Figure 14: An example of a “humorous” card, showing a Hawaiian lady in derogatory manner.

and attracted attention. There exists a multiplicity of possible stereotypes about the Pacific Islands, their peoples and cultures, some of them most frequently evoked by writers and artists captivating the European imagination. Such stereotypes included, among others, exotic femininity, which was stressed with the stereotype about primitive female sexuality which held that young girls were sexually mature. Other stereotypes featured the innocence of the indigenous people.

Initially the South Seas were often approached with an attitude not so much of superiority as of envy. It was the “the noble savage” (“Le bon sauvage,” “der edle Wilde”) that triggered discourses in the European academic circles about the importance of the study of foreign societies and their rules of social organization. The bright skinned Tahitian became a symbol of pureness in the wake of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s romantic philosophical enlightenment ideas, although Rousseau never employed the phrase “noble savage” himself. The “noble savage” as a literary stock character embodied

the concept of an idealized indigene, an outsider, or “other” who has not been influenced and thus corrupted by civilization, and therefore symbolized humanity’s innate goodness. With the continuing exploration in Oceania in the nineteenth century and especially the acquaintance of the dark-skinned Melanesians, this image turned gradually into the “wild savage,” the “cannibal,” the “canaque,” who has to be forcibly civilized, missionized (“from heathen to heaven”) and to be endowed with the benefits of Western civilization. These clichés, often reiterated by the protagonists who pushed for colonization in those times, was often supplemented by the paternalistic argument that the Pacific Islanders are like children (see figure 14) of which you have the responsibility to take care for their own sake. Colonial administrators (see figure 11), often closely cooperating with missionaries in the field (see figure 9), repeatedly brought forward the argument that their mission was for the benefit of the islanders (see Landsdown 2006). Thus politicians in Western countries that exercised overseas colonialism willingly accepted and created such images which also helped to justify financial investment into remote regions of the world, as the Pacific Islands region is one of them. Trade cards were perfectly suited as the contemporary mass media to transport and diffuse such messages into almost all spheres of society, as the means to obtain active and passive support for the goal of achieving colonies (see Mückler 2004 and 2009). The paternalistic approach as well as those concepts of characterizing the Pacific Islands peoples as the “noble savage” and the “wild cannibal” mentioned above can be found in romanticised or realistic forms in early trade cards. Contrary to historical stereotypical portrayal, Oceania was and is far from simple dichotomies and offered, especially in the nineteenth century, a broad variety and diversity of particular cultures and cultural practices that attracted generations of anthropologists. But assimilation and usurpation by Westerners created

a narrowed image of the South Seas. As the famous Samoan author Albert Wendt once stated, the South Seas were transformed by Western stereotypes into a “gold-mine for romantic novelists and film-makers” (cf Huggan 2008: 99, see also Brawley/Dixon 2015), but, as we can see here, also for advertising companies and their specific product, the trade card, to support selling efforts of various European and American companies.

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