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**The Brazilian Hawaii: Surf Culture, Tourism, and the Construction of Place**

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## The Brazilian Hawaii: Surf Culture, Tourism, and the Construction of Place

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Christian Palmer

### ABSTRACT

This article describes how ideas of Hawaii were introduced and circulated in Brazil through surf culture, military travel and tourism, and the importance of these ideas in establishing a positive tropical identity in opposition to earlier cultural influences from Europe and North America. Based on ethnographic research in Itacaré, a small surf and tourist town in Northeastern Brazil, this article explores how Hawaii is used not only in surf and tourist marketing as the archetypical tropical tourist destination but also becomes a source of identity for local surfers and town residents.

**Keywords:** Brazil, tourism, surf culture, Hawaii, popular culture, identity

### Itacaré Tourism, and Surf Culture

When I first arrived in Itacaré, a small fishing town in Northeastern Brazil, I was struck by the numerous references to Hawaii in the names of stores, restaurants, fishing boats, pets, and even local kids. While these references are clearly connected to Itacaré's identity as a surf town, there are deeper cultural currents at play. Although Itacaré is known as the Brazilian Hawaii, it is not the only place in Brazil to claim this moniker. Throughout Brazil there are numerous cultural references to Hawaii, highlighting the cultural salience of Hawaii in Brazil.

This research is based upon a preliminary visit to Itacaré in the summer of 2010 and then a year of ethnographic

fieldwork from August of 2011 to August 2012. While in Itacaré I did participant observation with surfers, conducted life history interviews with many of the first generation of surfers, and explored the multiple ways that popular culture and history link Northeastern Brazil to Hawaii through tangled histories of military and tourist travels, surf media, and shared resistance to colonialism.

Why Hawaii? Hawaii is the archetypical tropical tourist destination: the sensuality of the hula, the warm sun, blue water, and white sand beaches. While alluring tales of tropical Pacific Islands have been around since they were first discovered, Hawaii was the first place to capitalize on these associations and develop a new kind of modern tourist industry that made the

tropics accessible through cheap air travel, mass media, and Hawaiian statehood, all connected in part to Hawaii's role in World War II (Lofgren 1999). Since then numerous other tropical and not so tropical tourist destinations have borrowed Hawaiian imagery, architecture, and themes to market themselves. Part of the allure of Hawaii is the commercialization of the primitive Other. The primitive/indigenous Other, by being outside of the alienation that is inherent in modern capitalist societies, is seen as embodying the authenticity that attracts modern tourists (MacCannell 1999 [1976]). The idealized primitive Other lives in the moment, is happy, hospitable, and naturally lives the relaxed hedonistic life the tourists are coming to experience. This paper examines how these ideas of Hawaii are reinterpreted in a Brazilian cultural context.

In the Itacaré a number of local businesses and restaurants appropriate Hawaiian words and place names such as the Mahalo Cafe, Hawaii Cyber Cafe, *Pousada Hanalei*, *Pousada Lanai*, and others. Within a business context, this is consistent with the larger Brazilian surf industry's use of Hawaiian words and with the marketability of Hawaii. For example, Mahalo and Hang Loose, two of the largest surf wear companies from Northeastern Brazil reference Hawaii. Beyond these commercial references, Brazilian surf magazines and surfers also regularly use Hawaiian words like aloha, mahalo, and haole. Many of these surfers were among the first outsiders to move to Itacaré in the 1980s and were instrumental in establishing tourism in the area so their use of Hawaiian business names is understandable.



One of the earliest surfers to arrive in Itacaré was João. He came from the capital in Salvador but had learned to surf while living in Peru where his family had lived when he was younger. João lived outside of town on a place called Aloha Ranch and both of his children had Hawaiian names. Like many other Brazilian surfers, João describes the importance of Hawaii for Brazilian surfers:

It is the dream of every surfer to go to Hawaii, it is the Mecca of surf. Because it was so hard for Brazilians to leave, principally to Hawaii that depends on a visa, we created our Hawaii, our idea of Hawaii. Connected to this, the surf community always had huge interest in Polynesia culture. It's an identity as well. We, as a group, like these vibrations of friendship, love of nature, love of waves. This reality is like a parameter or a paradigm that we wanted to follow. (interview, July 14, 2012)

Thus, Hawaii is seen as a sacred pilgrimage for surfers, a trip that has to be made once in a lifetime. Itacaré's identity was established as a Brazilian version of Hawaii. In this sense Northeastern Brazil stands in as a tropical, warm, friendly place for those escaping large cities or the colder south. Tracking the movement of ideas,

people, clothing, and images from and about Hawaii to Brazil provides insight into how places are created through traveling and movement (Clifford 1997).

Surfing narratives celebrate travel, portrayed as a pilgrimage or escape from modern society. The earliest surf magazines and films depict the surfing life as a journey in search of perfect waves (Brown 1966; Ormrod 2005). Both traveling and surfing develop from cultural shifts associated with the Beat generation in the 1950s and counter culture movement in the 1960s and 1970s, which valued experiences, hedonism, and mobility over stability and tradition (Ormrod 2007). The young Brazilian surfers who first arrived in Itacaré were creating Brazilian versions of these narratives, discovering their own primitive paradise.

Scholarly work has often understood tourism in terms of larger capitalist projects of commodification, colonialism, and neoliberalism (Hall & Page 1999; Shaw and Williams 2004; Urry and Larsen 2011). Within this literature, tourism is described as one of the world's biggest industries; commoditizing local cultures, promoting unequal development, and perpetuating neocolonial relationships (Crick 1989; Hall & Tucker 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Chambers 2010). However, some scholars question these critiques of tourism, focusing on how the social interactions between tourists and locals can give value to local cultural practices while selectively modifying them (Tilley 1997; Kramer 2006; Buntin 2008). By looking at how surf culture is used to shape local identity connected to an imagined Hawaiian tropical paradise, this research complicates how we think about impact of tourism on local culture.

## Hawaii in Brazilian Popular Culture

Beyond the surf community, the idea of Hawaii resurfaces again and again in Brazilian popular culture in ways that suggest that the idealization of the tropics is not simply an invention of the tourist industry. Several examples illustrate this point. One of the most visible symbols of Hawaii in Brazil are *Havaianas* (Hawaiians), a brand of colorful flip-flops that have come to symbolize Brazilian culture both within Brazil and abroad. Many pairs of Havaianas feature a small Brazilian flag and have come to be a visual marker of Brazilian national



Figure 2: Colorful Havaianas for sale (photo by C. Palmer)

identity. Because of this, tourists buy Havaianas as souvenirs to claim a connection to Brazil. Havaianas work as a symbol for Brazil because consumers perceive the tropical, colorful, and laid back identity associated with the brand as capturing something meaningful about Brazilian national character through

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identification with Hawaii. Ironically, two Argentinian brothers created a California-based brand of flip-flops called Reef Brazil that uses highly sexualized images of exotic women to cater to Americans' day dreams about tropical foreign others, illustrating how ideas of place circulate in consumer and national cultures.

Another important reference to an idyllic Hawaii can be seen in popular Brazilian musician Caetano Veloso's song, "Menino do Rio," in which he describes a young surfer/beach boy from Rio (1979). The song was the inspiration for a feature length motion picture of the same name that illustrates the cultural significance of the theme (Calmon 1982). The lyrics contain tropical images that connect Brazil to an imagined Hawaii:

Menino do Rio  
Calor que provoca arrepio  
Drag ão tatuado no braço  
Calção corpo aberto no espaço  
Coração, de eterno flerte  
Adoro ver-te...  
Menino vadio  
Tens ão flutuante do Rio  
Eu canto pra Deus  
Proteger-te...  
O Hawa í seja aqui  
Tudo o que sonhares  
Todos os lugares  
As ondas dos mares  
Pois quando eu te vejo  
Eu desejo o teu desejo...

**English translation:**

Boy from Rio  
Heat that excites you  
Dragon tattooed on his arm  
Swim trunks, body open in space  
Heart of the eternal flirt

I love to see you  
Vagrant youth  
Floating tension (sexual) of Rio  
I sing to God  
to protect you  
Let Hawaii be here  
All that you dream of  
All of the places  
The waves of the sea  
Because when I see you  
I want what you want

Here the tropical heat produces romantic and sexual tension. Images of the tattooed, tanned, shirtless young man, living hedonistically in the moment during the summers of Rio is simultaneously romanticized and made vulnerable. The singer prays to God to protect the youth, who is at danger from the violent social realities of Rio de Janeiro or perhaps simply the requirements of adult life. He asks that Hawaii—the waves, the dreams, romance, and tranquility that the young man longs for—be found in Brazil. Hawaii is set up as a positive tropical ideal, a dream, which Brazil should try to emulate.

Caetano Veloso, along with Rita Lee, Gilberto Gil, Torquato Neto, os Mutantes, Gal Costa, and Tom Zé were all part of a musical movement in the sixties known as *Tropicalismo*. Drawing on Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropofagic Manifesto*, they ironically drew upon the imagined tradition of cannibalism to eat or absorb other musical influences and combine them with traditional Brazilian sounds to produce a new musical genre (de Andrade 1928). *Tropicalismo* appropriated and subverted the negative colonial description of tropical primitivism and then used this to develop an eclectic, cosmopolitan sound that celebrated Brazilian syncretism. In this case, their efforts to celebrate a tropical identity within

the colonized south cannot be simply dismissed as catering to neo-colonial tourism marketing strategies but rather were part of global counter-cultural resistance and anti-colonial struggles of the 1960s. In Brazil, this counter-culture specifically rejected the social control and morality imposed by the military dictatorship. It was also during the sixties that Hawaii began to appear as a theme in Brazilian carnival parades, another site to challenge the status quo and assert the cultural salience of Hawaii (Dias 2008).



Figure 3: Statue of Jorge Amado and museum exhibit in Ilheus featuring his Hawaiian shirts (photo by C. Palmer)

In the Northeast, these references to Hawaii are even more developed. While meandering through several different museum exhibits of Jorge Amado, a famed Brazilian author from Bahia whose writings popularized the region, I was struck by how each exhibit contained several of Amado's vintage Hawaiian shirts framed in glass cases. Jorge Amado, an iconic representation of the Brazilian Northeast, was most often pictured wearing colorful Hawaiian shirts. These shirts, called *slackies* in Brazil, were introduced by US service men stationed in Northeastern Brazil during the Second World War and soon became widely popular. The military presence in Hawaii during the same time also led to an increase in air travel to Hawaii, to its growing popularization as a tourist

destination, and its portrayal in the growing Hollywood film industry. Thus, we see how military and leisure travel weave together in the production of Hawaii as a tourist destination and the Brazilian consumption of these ideas.

Jorge Amado's use of Hawaiian shirts is particularly significant because of his essential role in establishing and then exporting a distinct, tropical cultural identity for Bahia and Northeastern Brazil. This is a significant shift from earlier Brazilian literature that emphasized its Iberian cultural roots and rejected Brazil's African and indigenous heritage. Amado's portrayal of Bahia is one of voluptuous, dark skinned women, decadent tropical desserts, and exuberant nature. His novels celebrate the sensuous warmth of Bahia while critiquing the violence and social inequality. His work has had a significant cultural impact in both Brazil and abroad as his novels have been adapted to multiple soap operas and feature length films, and have been translated into scores of languages. Within Brazil, Amado's work is essential in changing the image of the Northeast from earlier depictions of drought and poverty to emphasize the cultural heritage and richness. The Northeast in Brazil, like the tropics in general, were seen as dangerous, unproductive, and unhealthy. In many ways, Amado's writings, especially for foreign audiences, do not just represent Bahia or the Northeast but all of Brazil. His readers come to Bahia to visit the real Brazil Amado describes, placing Bahia at the center of a tropical Brazilian identity.

Since Amado's work has gained popularity and with the growth of a Brazilian middle class in the colder industrialized Southeast of the country, Bahia has been marketed as a tourist destination by its natural friendliness,



warmth, and tropical beauty. Many of Jorge Amado's female characters are portrayed as dark skinned, passionate, and sexually uninhibited. In both Bahia and Hawaii, tourist representations of place are racialized and gendered, with dark skinned men being emasculated and ignored while dark skinned women are portrayed as welcoming and sexually available (Piscitelli 2007; Walker 2008). Travel to warmer countries as an escape from Northern European sexual norms has a long history that has been traced through the Grand Tour and Gauguin's travels to the South Pacific. This history emphasizes connections between tropical heat, nudity, and sexuality (Littlewood 2001). The sexualization of Brazilian women, especially darker skinned *mulattas* and *morenas*, and the sexual interactions between European men and indigenous and African women is part of Gilberto Freyre's foundational story of Brazilian nationhood (Freyre 1946). Amado's work simultaneously celebrates a tropical identity that was previously marginalized but also participates in gendering and racializing the tropics in ways that later became appropriated by tourism marketers. But that is not the end of the story.

### **Hawaiian and Bahian Post-Colonial Identities**

Bahian surfer's affinity to Hawaii is more than simply the passive consumption of tourist marketing narratives. My first indication of this was the number of people with Hawaiian names, an indication that this was more than just marketing for local tourism businesses. The connection to Hawaii is seen as a cultural connection as well, a shared emphasis on human relationships, nature, and waves. Surfers in

Itacaré saw Hawaii and surfing as part of an alternative to modern, capitalistic cultures of dominant society. The Northeast, already positioned outside of the developed Southeastern Brazil, adopts Hawaiian culture as a positive position outside of the developed center, perhaps in the same way that Brazilians in general connect to Hawaii as a positive identity in relation to Europe and North America.

Many Bahians, when talking about their connection to Hawaii, made the connection between the Hawaiian spirit of Aloha and the Bahian hospitality. João was particularly articulate about this spiritual and cultural affinity:

There is a spiritual identity. I would suggest that it is a spiritual question about these peoples. I think it would be easy for a Bahian to live in Hawaii and a Hawaiian to live in Bahia. I don't think it would be that hard; they would adapt easily. The real Hawaiians, the natives, they have a culture of sharing, of receiving people, the Aloha spirit. (interview, July 14, 2012)

Here, João describes how native Hawaiians share an innate spiritual and cultural essence with Bahians. He sees both groups as hospitable and warm, which he characterizes as the Aloha Spirit. While this innate hospitality and cultural friendliness is created in part by tourism advertisement campaigns, locals accept and use these ideals to develop a positive identity and relationship with place.

While it is tempting to dismiss these narratives as local consumption of commercialized representations of themselves, Arturo's romantic descriptions

of the origins of surfing in Hawaii indicate ways in which the connection to Hawaii could also indicate shared struggles against colonialism:

[When Native Hawaiians] made a surfboard they planted 10 trees around the one they took out. This idea of protecting nature was brought [here] by surfing. Surfing arrived in Brazil with reference of Hawaii. We respect all of our [Hawaiian] idols. We start with the idea that Hawaii is our home, the home of surfing. Duke Kahanamoku was the guy that revived surfing in Hawaii. Because after the Americans arrived in Hawaii in the 1700s they brought a wave of racism against the black, the natives. They destroyed everything and formed a new culture. When they arrived in the 1700s they destroyed the surf champions, decimated the villages, all the kings who owned everything. (Arturo, interview, April 6, 2012)

In this description Arturo conflates native Hawaiians and all surfers, as natural defenders of the environment who both share a homeland in Hawaii. While most accounts blame religion and colonialism for the destruction of surfing and Hawaiian culture, Arturo insightfully includes racism. Later on in his description, Arturo interprets Duke Kahanamoku's Olympic swimming medals as racial victories of a black athlete over white ones. Thus, Hawaiian racial categories are interpreted within a Brazilian racial framework and native Hawaiian victories are reinterpreted as universal ones.

Writing about surfing and the Hawaiian

Renaissance, Walker describes how surfing became a site for resistance to the emasculating colonial narratives and the re-establishment of a strong Native Hawaiian masculinity connected to the Hawaiian nationalism and cultural activism in the seventies (Walker 2008; see also McGloin 2005). Similarly, Bahians feel connected to Hawaii because of a sense of shared colonial histories. Hawaiians are natives who were celebrated and admired, a positive racialized tropical Other who established themselves in opposition to industrial and colonial powers.

Several people even mentioned that the localism and nativism movement in Itacaré can be connected to the ideas of localism that began in Hawaii. The surf media extensively discusses Hawaiian localism and how surfers in Hawaii fought back against the Australians and Americans who came to the islands and did not show proper respect (Gosch 2009). In a sense, the native resistance by Hawaiians through surfing has resonated in other places of the world. While localism in surfing can be found in California, Australia, and almost everywhere there are surfers, the connections between Bahia and Hawaii imagine a shared resistance to colonialism and racism through local identities. Tourism, by bringing in outsiders, could be seen as a similar catalyst in the formation and articulation of these local place-based identities.

From this description of ideas about Hawaii in Brazil and the Northeast particularly, we can see how places and identities form through transnational flows of people and things; like surf magazines, military families stationed abroad, or tourists coming to Itacaré Surfing also serves as an important medium to connect different people and concepts across oceans,



creating identities connected to travel, environmentalism, and local places. The surfers who arrived in Itacaré in the seventies and eighties were influential in shaping the trajectory of the region through their participation in social movements, environmental activism, and the growing tourist economy. But beyond these specific interventions, surfing was part of a global cultural shift that helped, in a small way, put out-of-the-way places like Itacaré on the map. Surfing, as one piece of a larger global movement that began in the sixties, is part of the imaginative and physical migration from the cold industrial north to the warm tropical south.



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