Nature According to Aloha Shirts

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Aloha shirts are a product of their time. Their time is the Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which humans are the dominant force on Earth and have thus pushed it into a state of climatic instability (Bonneuil & Fressoz 16). This paper will look at how the representation of nature on aloha shirts both reflects the mindset that led to the Anthropocene as well as how the aloha shirt further promotes climatic destruction. First, this paper will establish several definitions. Then, it will consider how the images of exotic nature on aloha shirts have contributed to Western imperialism and its resulting consumerism as well as tourism and its resulting biodiversity loss. Next, it will review how aloha shirts may help Hawai‘i residents identify with their local ecosystems. Finally, this paper concludes that, though aloha shirts worn by Hawai‘i residents can promote local environmentalism, the global promotion of aloha shirts has led to unnecessary stress on resources and native species.

Definitions

Aloha shirts are known globally as a symbol of Hawai‘i’s natural beauty (Arthur 10). These loose, collared, button-up, short-sleeved, colorful, patterned shirts depict images of exotic nature (Arthur 10). Nature will be used in this paper to describe “phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations” (“Nature: Definition of Nature by Lexico”). The word exotic is used because, though this nature is not foreign to a large portion of the world population, it is to those in the West. Because of global inequality, the West often dictates universal norms (Bonneuil & Fressoz 348).

Imperialism

Aloha shirts were born to imperialism. At the turn of the nineteenth century, European traders introduced loose frocks made of heavy cotton to Hawaiians (Arthur 14). By the end of that century, Hawai‘i’s burgeoning sugar cane industry attracted workers from China, Portugal, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines (Arthur 14-15). Sugar cane plantations were massive monocultures that were burned for harvest. This is a deadly combination for the environment due to its high greenhouse gas emissions (Bonneuil & Fressoz 217).

For work in the fields, the frocks were adapted to have buttons and collars and be worn untucked, like Filipino barong tagalog (Arthur 15). These frocks were made with fabric imported from Japan. This fabric featured patterned images of Japanese nature. During WWII, trade blockades and anti-Japanese sentiment led manufacturers in Hawai‘i to design their own fabric (Arthur 15). This fabric often featured exotic fish, flowers, and beaches (Arthur 21).

Due to Hawai‘i’s resources and strategic position in the Pacific, the US had a heavy military presence on the islands during WWII (Sasaki 652). On duty, these soldiers would use 228 times more energy than American soldiers from previous wars (Bonneuil & Fressoz 186). Considering the amount of resources going into these service members, the U.S. military considered their happiness vital to productivity (Sasaki 652). This included keeping the white men stationed on the islands out of racial conflict with Hawaiians and Asian locals. The U.S. military attempted to create the illusion of a vacation in exotic nature. This manifested in asking locals to act hospitably, hosting luaus, staging hula performances, and promoting aloha shirts (Sasaki 652 & 654-655). In fact, the military even made contracts with aloha shirt manufacturers. From this came the narrative that the military bases in Hawai‘i were not the product of imperialism, but of the island’s eagerness to share its culture (Sasaki 655). With its military men donning prints from cultures across the Asia-Pacific, the U.S. could further brand itself as a force for racial equality and democracy (Sasaki 644). This narrative emboldened U.S. imperialism and its devastating impacts on the climate (Bonneuil & Fressoz 294).

Aloha shirts were part of the campaign in the continental US for the adoption of Hawai‘i as a state. The goal of the media was to generate interest and positive associations with Hawai‘i’s exotic nature. Major public figures, including President Harry Truman, wore aloha shirts (Arthur 24). Movies set in Hawai‘i, with actors wearing aloha shirts, proliferated (Arthur 25). Aloha shirt sales tripled. This is not the first time Hollywood movies have been used deliberately by the U.S. to promote a way of
life that is conducive to consumerism (Bonneuil & Fressoz 216). California surfer culture further popularized the garment (Arthur 27). These efforts - among many others - culminated in statehood in 1959 (Arthur 27).

Aloha shirts also eased Hawai‘i into statehood and its higher ecological footprint. The U.S. has a huge impact on the environment (Bonneuil & Fressoz 154). Part of this is due to the American lifestyle. For instance, American individualism is suited to life in the suburbs that require intensive use of fossil fuels for transportation and electricity (Bonneuil & Fressoz 149). This consumerism reached new heights across the U.S. after WWII due to huge strides in manufacturing and the loosening of regulations after the war (Bonneuil & Fressoz 190). When the U.S. expanded its political influence in Hawai‘i, it also expanded its cultural influence. Plantation families were encouraged to move to the suburbs and get office jobs so they could participate in U.S. consumerism (Arthur 27). To ease this transition, aloha shirt manufacturers lobbied for Aloha Friday, in which locals, who used to save the shirts only for special occasions, could wear them weekly. This argument assumes that aloha shirts provided locals with a sense of autonomy that distracted them from the manipulation of business.

Tourism

Since the 1930s, the Hawai‘i Tourist Bureau has focused on branding Hawai‘i as a colorful natural paradise (Arthur 16-17). This shows in the vibrant nature featured in their advertising (Arthur 16). This nature is often paired with friendly young women in grass skirts, called the “little brown gal” stereotype (Desmond 86-87). The “little brown gal” can be seen as the embodiment of Hawai‘i: feminine, vibrant, welcoming, and natural. With only these qualifications to be considered Hawaiian by Western audiences, the nature depicted on aloha shirts often blend with the South Pacific and Polynesia (Desmond 87). International market research reveals that most people, independent of age or nationality, believe bright, floral aloha shirts represent Hawai‘i well Hyllegard 65). This renders Hawai‘i nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the tropics (Hyllegard 64).

Unfortunately, these vague expectations of Hawai‘i’s nature manifest in the flora and fauna people introduce to it. The tourism industry tries to meet visitor expectations by offering bright, colorful plants (Arthur 16-17). However, many of these plants are not native. Thus, large development projects opt to decorate the islands’ limited space with non-native species that are not adapted to supporting local ecosystems (Wong). Furthermore, some of these introduced species have become invasive (Webb). Both of these factors have contributed to the collapse of Hawai‘i’s native ecosystems and loss of biodiversity (Schuler). In fact, Hawai‘i is often called the “extinction capital of the world”.

Local Pride

Despite the consumerism and biodiversity loss perpetuated by aloha shirts, there is still a place for aloha shirts in the ecological movement. In the 1960s, Hawai‘i residents began to distinguish themselves from tourists by wearing more subtle prints (Arthur 27). Born of Hawai‘i’s cultural diversity, aloha shirts are considered by many locals as a symbol of a shared present despite different pasts (Arthur 27). Integrating this cultural identity with patterned images of native flora and fauna could better define Hawai‘i’s unique ecological identity and promote native species conservation. This is based on the assumption that we protect what we identify with.

Conclusion

Images that celebrated the beauty of nature led to its destruction in Hawai‘i and beyond. Aloha shirts have promising potential for environmentalism if designed with Hawaiian fauna and flora for Hawai‘i residents, but designs that feature exotic nature for Western audiences do more harm than good due to consumerism and biodiversity loss. Aloha shirts have popularized an unrealistic and harmful image of Hawai‘i. First, it prepared Hawai‘i for industrialism and consumerism by suppressing racial conflict. Secondly, it created an expectation of exotic nature that Hawaiian ecosystems simply could not meet without rendering them extremely vulnerable. Despite this, the cultural unity aloha shirts symbolize for locals could offer routes to grassroots conservation. Aloha shirts can heal the wounds they have caused if designed for Hawai‘i rather than imperialists and tourists.
Works Cited


