



Figure 1: Moana, the protagonist of the eponymous movie (picture distorted not to get into conflict with copyright issues of the Disney company).

Moana made waves: Discussing the representation of Pacific Islanders in the Disney movie Moana

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Abstract: This paper sheds light on the debate the Disney movie Moana sparked on Pacific Islands by reviewing literature from indigenous Pacific anthropologists such as Vicente Diaz, Vilsoni Hereniko, Mārata Tamaira, and Dionne Fonoti. The author analyses the plot of Moana and the general representation of the Pacific Islands in Western movies. Various points of critique on the movie from indigenous Pacific anthropologists are discussed. Despite problems of cultural homogenization, stereotypical representation, and commodification, it is argued that it is short-sighted to view Moana as a mere object of cultural theft. In addressing these issues, the author wants to propose a platform for the plethora of Pacific opinions to discuss how Pacific Islanders are represented in the popular Disney movie Moana and how they may feel about this representation. Furthermore, this research note has the ambitious aim to motivate readers to a more critical and informed consumption of Disney movies.

Keywords: Disney, representation, stereotypes, indigenous stories, Pacific Islands

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Introduction

“Moana made waves across the Pacific” (Tamaira 2018a: 299), cites the Hawai’ian anthropologist Mārata Tamaira whilst discussing the debate the Walt Disney production Moana¹, an US-American computer-animated movie, sparked on Pacific Islands. Written by Jared Bush, the movie was

released in 2016 in cinemas world-wide. The story of Moana unfolds on the fictive Polynesian Island Motunui. The storyline revolves around Moana, a young Polynesian girl who is the hereditary successor to the Island chiefdom. Unlike the rest of her village, who have forgotten or repressed

their roots as navigators, Moana feels a strong connection to the ocean. To fulfil her grandmother’s last wish, Moana sails across the reef to search for the demigod Maui in order to save Motunui from an impending catastrophe (Clements & Musker 2016).

Indigenous Pacific anthropologists

such as Vicente Diaz, Vilsoni Hereniko, Mārata Tamaira, and Dionne Fonoti debated the advantages and disadvantages of such exposure, the representation of Pacific Islands in the movie, and the involvement of Pacific people in the “Oceanic Story Trust”², a group with various Pacific experts such as anthropologists, navigators, and artists, that was established by Disney for this production. In this research note, the ongoing discussion is considered with particular interest in the perspectives of indigenous Pacific anthropologists. The paper is based on literature review and on a brief movie discussion and results of a seminar paper at University of Zurich (Dittmer 2020).

White beaches and coconut bikinis: Paradisiac clichés in movies

Moana is not the only movie that is inspired by Pacific people and landscapes (De Largy Healy & Wittersheim 2019). With its variety of Islands, the Pacific has always fascinated people around the world. The region, which offers a unique backdrop for films, is very popular especially for European and North American movies and series. The paradisiac image with blue sparkling water, white beaches, and tropical landscapes is the main representation of Pacific Islands in these productions (Tamaira 2018a). In addition to films, books also draw from the perfect paradisiac scene for stories set in the “South Sea”. In a critical reflection of Balantyne’s novel “The Coral Island”, Wörner notes that indigenous peoples are only portrayed as Europe’s exotic Other and only exist in contrast with Western societies (Wörner 2021 in this volume).

Hau’ofa (2008) argues that the origins of these misrepresentations lie in the early contacts between Western conquerors and Pacific inhabitants. In particular, Christian missionaries on Pacific Islands propagated the image of Pacific cultures as savage, lascivious, barbaric, and simple (Tamaira 2018b). According to Hereniko (2018, cit. in Tamaira 2018b), such simplistic representations are problematic because they present indigenous people as simple, without agency and ambitions. As events in the colonial history have shown, such images con-

tributed to legitimise colonisation and land seizure of Pacific Islands and appropriation of Pacific property.

In the past, Disney has faced heavy criticism for cultural appropriation and the presentation of stereotypes in movies (Hereniko 1999). Confronted with this critique, it seemed that Disney had learned from the previous movie productions and tried to create a more realistic image of Pacific Islands with the help of the Oceanic Story Trust. However, not everybody, especially on the Islands, seems to be satisfied with the outcome, and the movie and its commercialization are criticised.

Moana made waves: A debate on Pacific Islands

In the wake of Moana, indigenous Pacific anthropologists embraced opportunities to critically reflect on the film and production process. One example of such engagement can be seen on the Facebook page “Mana Moana: I am Moana, I am Maui”, analysed by Tamaira (2018a). The Facebook page has more than 4,000 followers and it aims to offer “a place for critical thought about Disney and the Pacific” (Mana Moana: I am Moana, I am Maui 2020). On this webpage, many Pacific scholars and artists (e.g. Vicente Diaz and Tēvita O. Ka’ili) participate in an active discussion about the movie. Referring to Tamaira (2018a), the main focus of the page members’ critique is not to reflect the story of the film but to criticize the Walt Disney company and the commodification of indigenous knowledge (Tamaira 2018a). In reviewing the debate, Tamaira (2018a) criticises the closed nature of the Facebook page, noting that while there initially seemed to be room for every opinion, it quickly became a site of rejection for alternative and positive thoughts about the movie. For example, Pacific experts from the Oceanic Story Trust, that had an active part in the production of the movie, such as Dionne Fonoti, were verbally attacked and accused of selling Pacific culture (Tamaira 2018a). The Facebook debate was fittingly described by Tamaira as “looks like there’s trouble in Paradise” (Tamaira 2018a: 299). Such debates show that indigenous opinions about the representation of Pacific Islands are far from homogenous.

From best intentions to money spinner and clichés

Attempting to respectfully produce the film, Disney established the Oceanic Story Trust and cast almost all roles with actors from the Pacific. Despite Disney’s probably best intentions and efforts to include local people in the making of the movie, the production led to various points of critique. In Hereniko’s opinion (2019) the filmmaker’s efforts to produce a culturally accurate film were overshadowed by the pressure to produce a blockbuster film. By continuing to employ paradisiac clichés, Disney’s efforts to involve local people were minimized.

The commodification of indigenous knowledge and Pacific lifestyles created criticism. In the case of Moana, the process of commodification included merchandise products³, like Moana plastic dolls and a brown, tattooed Maui costume with a curly wig. The latter was swiftly removed due to strong critiques. These products are not only mainly made of plastic that could wash up on Pacific shores, but the Maui costume echoes the practice of brown facing (Diaz 2017; Tamaira 2018a). Beyond the problem of racist stereotypes that resonate in these merchandise products, the commodification of indigenous knowledge seems like a profitable sell-out for Disney with Pacific Islands not profiting at all. Although Disney earns much money with selling movie tickets, the revenues from selling merchandise products should not be underestimated. From this point of view, the movie seems to become a big advertisement for merchandise products and Disney holiday resorts such as the “Aulani Resort” in Honolulu (Diaz 2017; Ngata 2017). Keeping in mind that Pacific Islands do not profit from those revenues, the question arises: who is in the position to present and capitalize on indigenous Pacific knowledge, if not Pacific Islanders themselves (Diaz 2017)?

Arguably the most severe critique that Disney faced was about the clichés and stereotypes that seemed to draw a nostalgic picture of the colonial past (Diaz 2017; Tamaira 2018a), as already mentioned before. Without addressing the exact era in which the story takes place, the film depicts an old, imagined idea of Polynesia, where time stands still and everything fits perfectly into the fantasies of the “South



Figure 2: Drawing inspired by the movie „Moana“ : Moana (l.) & Maui (r.)

Sea” (Tamaira 2018a) as a paradise with happiness and simplicity. This can already be seen at the beginning of the film with children walking in loincloths, all men dressed exclusively in skirts and clamshell necklaces, and diets comprising of bananas, coconut, fish, and pork (Clements & Musker 2016). In picturing the protagonists as innocents happily living in a pristine Island with nothing to do but laugh, sing, and dance all day, the movie supports the stereotypical idea of Islanders as primitive and savage (Diaz 2017; Clements & Musker 2016). Additionally, the fact that the protagonists are in no way portrayed as sexual beings is problematic. Disney avoided the pattern of movies set in the “South Sea” that frequently imply sexuality through exotic stereotypes of beautiful women in coconut bikinis. While this might look like an exemplary decision, scholars such as Hereniko (2018, cit. in Tamaira 2018b) have noted that Pacific Islanders seem to be less human due to the absence of this important biological components.

“All Pacific Islanders are not Hawaiian”, with this quote Lisa Hall (2015:

727) addresses the issues of cultural homogenization and polycentrism, which have also been brought up in relation to Moana. According to Vicente Diaz, an anthropology professor from Guam, Moana presents one picture of Pacific Islands that is dominated by Polynesia (Diaz 2017). Lyons and Tengan (2015) discuss these issues in relation to a variety of Hollywood movies that show Pacific Islands as homogenous and mainly cast people from Polynesia to represent “the Pacific”. They problematise that such homogenous representations draw a simplistic picture of Pacific Islands⁴ focused on Polynesia. Diaz illustrates this problem in Moana by paying attention to the figure of demigod Maui, who claims at the beginning of the movie: “I am the most important Demi god in whole Oceania” (Clements & Musker 2016). In this case, Disney both simplifies and homogenizes Pacific belief systems, as Maui⁵ does not play such an important role as demigod on each of the Islands. This example of cultural homogenization is only one of many present in the film. Personally, the author of

this paper was quite confused by the excessive amalgamation of cultural elements. While she expected a story that plays in a more or less “Polynesian world”, she was swamped by borrowed features, such as navigating from Micronesia, Fijian boats and the mythological creatures “Kakamora” from the Solomon Islands. The insertion of culturally distinct features into the Polynesian landscape leads to the assumption that such elements are of Polynesian origin and/or can be found everywhere in the Pacific.

Furthermore, Diaz worries that the presented standard of “the Pacific Islander” in the movie might cause an identity crisis. Diaz describes that “if you don’t look like that [people presented on the screen] you must not be a Pacific Islander” (Diaz 2017). He claims that the homogenization of the Pacific in Moana is far away from the image of a diverse Pacific as a sea of Islands in the sense of Epeli Hau’ofa.

After discussing several problems identified in the movie by Pacific Islanders, Moana could be easily labelled as a failed cinematic experiment. In the following section, additional arguments that paint a slightly different representation of Moana and its impact on the Pacific are considered.

“The people on the screen actually look like us”

There is a common tendency to see *Moana* as an instance of cultural theft, where indigenous knowledge is taken away from Pacific people and is transferred into money for the Disney Company (e.g. Ngata 2017; Diaz 2017). While this perspective, which draws on troubling aspects of the film, certainly makes a good point, the author thinks it is short-sighted to only focus on this argument. Tamaira (2018a) argues that this perspective pushes Pacific Islanders into a passive, defenceless role where there is only one correct way to represent Pacific ways of life. Epeli Hau’ofa (2001: 3) opposes putting culture in cages and advocates for liberating traditions: “They’re not just things of the past; they’re part of our world now”. A similar issue is addressed in the paper of Kiss (2021 in this volume) analysing the “Tapati Festival” in Rapa Nui. Kiss argues that the changing festival structure and content shows that traditions should not

be perceived as static but rather as an ongoing negotiation process and as a reappraisal of history and identity (Kiss 2021 in this volume).

A second way in which the aforementioned critique falls short is the refusal to acknowledge existing perspectives that are supportive of the film. Despite the critique, Tamaira (2018a) notes that *Moana* still offers a platform to show Pacific needs and problems and strengthen Pacific self-confidence. New Zealand journalist Vaimoana Tapaleao agrees, stating that “the people on the screen actually look like us” (Tamaira 2018a: 302). Like Tapaleao, the characters in the movie have Polynesian tattoos, Polynesian noses and wide feet. Additionally, the stories told by Moana’s family are stories that Tamaira and Tapaleao grew up with. In times where minorities are underrepresented in popular culture media, the appearance of a “Polynesian Disney princess” can fill people with pride and propel the Pacific into the spotlight (Tamaira 2018). The presence of such strong Polynesian characters on screen may give Pacific youth and children the opportunity to identify with relatable role models who evoke feelings of pride in their cultural identity.

Whilst Diaz addresses a homogenization problem in the movie, Hereniko praises the presentation of various Pacific elements in the movie. In his opinion, the presence of multi-perspective elements forms an image of the Pacific as a “sea of Islands”, or as one ocean that connects all the Islands (Hereniko 2018).

The theme of representation goes hand in hand with the presentation of Pacific landscapes. Although the author felt that the pictured Pacific environment with coconut palm trees, white beaches, and sparkling sea was very stereotypical and kitschy, Tapaleao (2018, cit. in Tamaira 2018a: 302) describes that these presented images are an exact copy of her neighbourhood:

“The Polynesia depicted in the film is an animated yet mirror image of our backyard. The glittering see-through ocean looks like the one the village kids splash in behind my mum’s family fale [house] in Savaii... The way the lava meets the sea [...] yeah, it is magical, but it is also our reality.”

Besides these landscape images that some Pacific Islanders experienced as realistic and well implemented, the

dualism of paradise and anti-paradise also plays an important educational role in *Moana*. Whilst projecting a perfect paradise, the movie shows what could happen if people, or even a demigod, do not care for their environment. This is illustrated by the act of stealing the heart of the goddess Te Fiti in the movie (Tamaira 2018a). The movie highlights the actual impacts of global warming and environmental pollution, reminding that *Moana* and her village are not the only ones dealing with rotting coconuts and declining fish stocks. In times where the whole world faces the consequences of climate change and environmental pollution, the movie could play an important role as an educational tool in the combat against global warming.

When it comes to important educational work that Disney could achieve with its movies, the role of *Moana* as a young, strong and self-confident Polynesian Disney princess must be emphasized. According to Tagi Qolouvaki, (from Hawai’i Community College), the movie shows “girl power pasifika style” by challenging patriarchal patterns and hegemony with the young female heroine *Moana*. In addition, the movie exposes the combat against patriarchal taboos, represented by *Moana*’s struggle to be a good daughter and successor to the chief, but also, against her father’s will, follow her own desire to be a navigator (Qolouvaki 2018b).

Conclusion

Moana has evoked different reactions, from euphoria about “girl power Pasifika style” to worries and anger that indigenous lifestyles are being commodified by Disney. Mirroring Pacific Islands, the debate is inhomogeneous, it is manifold, diverse and changing. The fact that a private company like Disney narrates indigenous stories has been criticized. And it has been Disney which has brought such stories into the cinemas. This leads to the question of obstacles that Pacific Islanders face when accessing or creating their own cinematic platform and how it can be ensured that Pacific cultures are represented respectfully in non-Pacific movie productions. This apprehension also raises questions about why Pacific Islanders seem to have less possibilities to tell indigenous stories by themselves and whether it should really be Disney putting these stories and histories on

screen. Moreover, it is important to ask how film productions can give sufficient space to local people to tell their stories and perspectives. The debate clearly shows that traditions and stories can not be trapped in a cage, as they are steadily changing and willing to be told in a new way, as Hau’ofa (2001: 23) declares:

“And now we work to release, to free our traditions, and they invite them to come to our world and teach us, tell us their Oceania. [...] They’re not just things of the past, they’re part of our world now.”

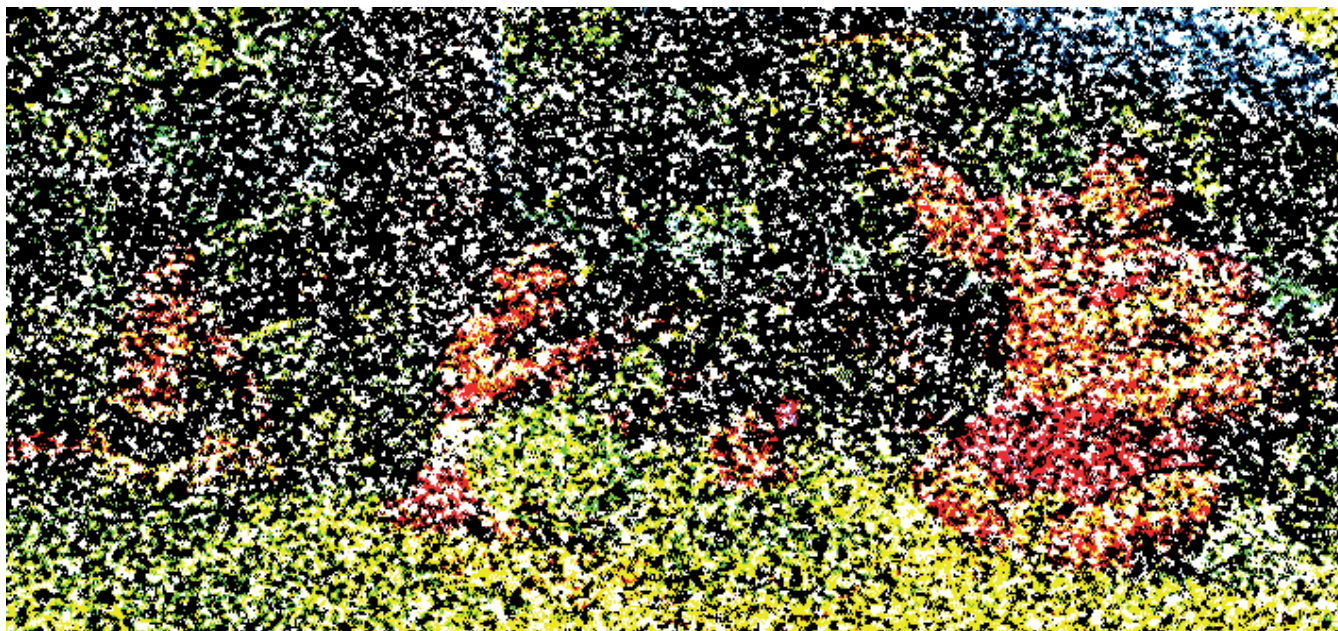
Referring to Tamaira (2018a), the question is not only which story is told and what elements are presented correctly, but rather about how the story is told and how the movie is produced. In this regard, it seems that Disney has taken a first step in the right direction and shared its self-imposed duty of storytelling with indigenous peoples. However, the people from Pacific Islands represented in movies such as *Moana* should be able to decide who has access to their stories and how the stories should be communicated. In the future, we will see whether film producers are willing to take further steps towards the narrators of these indigenous Pacific stories. Alternatively, these stories can be produced without global players like Disney, enabling Pacific Islanders to tell their own stories.

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Endnotes

¹ The movie is in most English- and German speaking countries known as “*Vaiana*” or as “*Oceania*” in Italy, but since the title *Moana* is mainly used on Pacific Islands I’ve decided to use the latter in this paper.



Source of original graph: © Disney company.

Figure 3: Moana and her family are weaving baskets on a fictive Island (picture distorted not to get into conflict with copyright issues of the Disney company).

²The “Oceanic Story Trust” is a group of Pacific experts consisting of artists, scientists, musicians, tattoo-artists, filmmakers,... that were hired by Disney and advised the movie producers. The Pacific members of the group include Tautala Asaua, Dionne Fonoti, Layne Hannemann, Tiana Nonosina Liufau, Su’a Sulu’ape Peter, Yves “Papa Mape” Tehiotaata, Hinano and Frank Murphy, Jiujiu “Angel” Bera, Vilsoni Hereniko and Kalikolehua Hurley (Fonoti 2018a).

³For more info on Moana merchandise products visit following website Moana (Character) shop Disney: <https://www.shopdisney.com/characters/disney/moana/>

⁴This problem becomes apparent when keeping in mind that most of the so-called blockbuster movies that were located in the Pacific focussed solely on Polynesian Islands such as “couples retreat” (2009, in Bora Bora), “Lilo and Stitch” (2002, in Hawai’i), “Hawaii five-0” (2010, in Hawai’i) or “forgetting Sarah Marshall” (2008, in Hawai’i).

⁵Maui is a shape-shifting trickster god who plays an important role in ancestral stories and genealogies mainly across the Polynesian region. He is gifted with accomplishing various superhuman feats such as slowing down the sun or hauling up Islands with a magical fishhook (Tamaira 2018a).

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