



**Universitat de les  
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Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

**Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau**

# “Consider the Coconut”: A Critical Analysis of the Tree of Life’s Fruit in Disney’s *Moana*

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Any acadèmic 2020-21

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Coconut, *Moana*, Polynesian Mythology, Cultural Appropriation, Neocolonialism



## **Abstract**

This paper aims at developing a critical analysis of the coconut's motif in *Moana* (2016) from a postcolonial perspective. Disney's representation of the fruit and its cultural significance does not accurately reflect its status in Pacific societies, where the coconut is levelled as a venerated item in economy, religion, gastronomy and cultural practices. In the first section, I analyse how the mythological origin of the coconut provided by Disney does not coincide with traditional Oceanic stories but rather provides a distorted and commodified vision of the sacred fruit's mythological tales. In the second section, I explore how Disney appropriates the coconut motif to perpetuate neocolonial visions of Polynesia, either as a tourist paradise or associating the fruit with negative perceptions of the Pacific region. The conclusion demonstrates that even though *Moana* inaugurated a new tendency regarding the depiction of Polynesia, the portrayal of aspects such as the coconut contributes to reinforcing neocolonial misrepresentations of the area.

**Keywords:** Coconut, *Moana*, Polynesian Mythology, Cultural Appropriation, Neocolonialism.

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## 1. Introduction

*Cocos nucifera* is the scientific name given to the coconut palm, claimed to be “the most useful tree in existence” (Thomas 2003, 6). Societies where the coconut is considered a daily life’s basis have externalised the palm’s relevance in the symbolic ideas associated with it. Receiving names such as ‘Kalpavriksha’ — “the tree that provides all the necessities of life” —, “Tree of life”, “Tree of abundance” or “the tree of a thousand usages” (Ahuja, Ahuja, and Ahuja 2014, 222), the coconut palm is doubtlessly an essential part of the Pacific diets and the cultures (Foale 2003, 13). In contrast to other similar trees, the coconut palm permits humans to take advantage of every single part it has. Approximately eighty-three functional usages are associated with its trunk, leaves, husk and nut — highlighting its usage as food or beverage and as a material to create different objects for daily-life activities (Watt quoted in Ahuja, Ahuja, and Ahuja 2014, 229). It was for its practicality that from the first time Europeans discovered the coconut until the present, “it has been the symbol of all that is and was desirable about the [Pacific] islands” (Thomas 2003, 6), especially in connection to economy and tourism. Economically, the coconut served to create one of the most lucrative businesses of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the copra trade. Regarding tourism, the palm has been used by the touristic “empire” to establish the concept of paradise, appropriating the fruit consequently as “the most evocative icon of all that the West desires of the Pacific Islands region” (Thomas 2003, 5), and consequently depicting an image of an exotic and remote island “suspended in time” (Fresno-Calleja 2013, 267).

Unsurprisingly, numerous European corporations have used the coconut motif — and the image of the Pacific in general — to obtain benefits. Therefore, as one of the most gainful conglomerates of the twenty-first century, Disney has stolen the image of the Pacific, its symbols, cultures and stories, to profit. This tendency to appropriate certain narratives to produce films was “marked by the climate of liberal social politics” (Byrne and McQuillan 1999, 100–101). New perceptions regarding external cultures — and very often non-white cultures — created interest in society towards previously silenced stories. Consequently, Disney “ostensibly responded to concerns regarding diversity and multiculturalism [by developing] a response seen particularly in efforts to relate narratives from other cultures” (Anjirbag 2018, 1). However, even though the inclusion of non-white stories into the film industry could be argued to be an advancement during that period, when analysing the representations of those cultures taking a “retrospective view”, it is made clear that Disney’s multiculturalism is not accurate but rather, influenced by its hegemonic characteristics: “American, Caucasian, cis-gendered, straight, Anglo [and] Christian” (Anjirbag 2018, 1). Founded upon those prototypical

western-white features, Disney has been accused of perpetuating, on the one hand, neocolonialism — any form of control that a county exerts to its “ex-colonies”, including political, economic, educational or cultural matters (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 177–180); and on the other hand, Pacificism. According to Lyons (2006), Pacificism is a subtype of Orientalism. It is a broad term used to define any imagination or representation of Oceania where the United States encounters Oceanic identity and knowledge and misappropriates them (34–39).

Disney cannot deny the political and social influence whose movies generate (Johnson 2019, 6). According to Johnson (2019), they condition the lives and brains of millions of people worldwide — especially children —, through incorporations of conventional roles and stereotypes regarding gender, class, love and race (2–4). Nevertheless, she states that what is most problematic about Disney is not the fact that “it offers a lens through which children view much of the world” (6), but instead that it focuses on “those parts of the world that they have little or no direct experience with” (6). Consequently, their preliminary ideas about certain aspects will be influenced by those representations. Conscious of these dangerous associations, present-day society has started to demand accuracy in representation. For this reason, some years ago, Disney started a new tendency respecting animated films.

*Moana* (2016), directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, is an example. The film portrays the story of Moana, a Polynesian sixteen-year-old female who dreams about sailing and voyaging across the ocean to experience what her people call *wayfinding*. Despite the profound connection that she has with the ocean, she is not allowed to pursue her dream because the fictional island where she lives, Motunui, is suffering the consequences of a tremendous selfish act. Thousands of years ago, the Polynesian trickster and demigod Māui stole a precious green stone known as “The Heart of Te Fiti”. After its robbery, the world started to suffer the consequences of the sacred stone’s corruption. Islands began to die; crops were rotten and unusable, and the ocean transformed into a deadly and dangerous space. Being aware of the inevitable long-term consequences of this natural disaster, Moana decides to cross the safe reef of her island to find Māui and convince him of restoring the Heart of Te Fiti to re-establish order and calm.

To guarantee a distinction between *Moana* and previous non-white representations, Disney created the Oceanic Story Trust, a team of experts who participated during the filming process and gave feedback and cultural knowledge to produce an adequate Polynesian film (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 312). The group was composed of “artists, cultural practitioners, academics, and community leaders, all of whom possessed expertise in various parts of Pacific

Islander culture, history, and language” (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 312). Even though the Oceanic Story Trust did an excellent job re-fixing various cultural misrepresentations in the film, it did not succeed in correcting others. A strongly criticised aspect of *Moana* is the representation of Polynesia as “islands in a far sea” — small and isolated islands located far from the powerful centres; rather than as “a sea of islands” — hundreds of civilisations cooperating and moving through the sea freely and independently for different purposes (Hau’ofa 1994, 152–155). Similarly, other critical approaches have focused on music (Armstrong 2018), race (Anjirbag 2018), feminism (Wijayati 2020), and postcolonialism from a general perspective (Hosp 2019). Nonetheless, few studies have focused on the symbology present in the film, and no attention has been paid to the coconut motif.

Does Disney achieve a truthful representation of the coconut in *Moana*, or otherwise, it falls into stereotypes and provides a romanticised vision of Polynesia and its traditions as previously happened in earlier films? This paper aims at introspecting Disney’s representation of the coconut motif in *Moana* from a postcolonial perspective. Specifically, it seeks to demonstrate the existence of a contrast between Disney’s representation of the coconut and the authentic role and significance that the fruit has in the Pacific. Thus, this project aims to contrast both representations of the coconut and to discern whether Disney’s one is accurate or perpetuates neocolonialist tendencies and Pacificism, intending to maintain ideological and cultural control over the Pacific. Through the analysis of the fruit, I will try to demonstrate the contrast between the traditional status given to the fruit of the “Tree of Life” in the Pacific and those stereotypically perceived by Disney as relevant for representation. For this aim, two main sections will be discussed. In the first section of this paper, I will focus on the mythological origin of the coconut by comparing traditions in the Pacific and the legend explained in the film. In the second section, I will analyse how Disney appropriates the coconut by comparing the usages given to the fruit in the Pacific and those chosen for representation. Moreover, I will also discuss the appropriation of the coconut to create various characters in *Moana*.

## **2. The Coconut in Pacific Mythology**

According to Hall (1997), representation is a process whereby meaning and language are connected, allowing people to use images and language to produce meaning that is shared by societies (15). Consequently, its role is simultaneously crucial and dangerous, as it conditions how ideas are established in the individual’s mindsets. According to Tamaira (2018, 319), “during an era when minority peoples — especially Pacific Islanders — continue to struggle to

find representation in mainstream film and media, *Moana* . . . deserves to be celebrated as a success . . . [for] bringing the Pacific from the margins into the frame”. Nonetheless, allowing Disney to represent non-white cultures very often contributes to the perpetuation of neocolonialism (Johnson 2019, 3), due to its western-centred perception of reality. Bearing in mind how Disney is responsible for representing the Pacific — an enormous and varied region — its particular perception of the physical space and the cultural practices of the area is relevant to understand why a representation is chosen to the detriment of the other.

In non-occidental territories, being Polynesia no exception, mythology is essential. An uncountable amount of myths and folklore narratives exist to transmit traditions and identity; explain the origin of life and those elements that help to sustain it; and contribute to establish diversity, what most characterises the Pacific.

Aware of its relevance, Disney tried to incorporate mythology in *Moana*. Examples can be found in characters such as Māui, “one of the most popular demigods in all of Polynesia” (Craig 2004, 167), a “demigod of the wind and sea . . . A warrior. A trickster. A shapeshifter who could change form with the power of his magical fishhook” (Clements and Musker 2016, 1:40); Te Kā, known as Pele in Hawai’ian Mythology, “the volcano goddess . . . the most popular goddess in all of Hawai’i” (Craig 2004, 197) and in cultural beliefs mentioned in the movie such as reincarnation. However, introducing mythological elements in *Moana* did not generate the effect of truthfulness and respect that Disney tried to assure by incorporating the Oceanic Story Trust in the film’s production. Instead, it perpetuated neocolonialism and misrepresentations (Ching and Pataray-Ching quoted in Anjirbag 2018, 12). By creating an unreal and commodified space — Motunui — Disney disregards the diversity and magnitude of the Pacific as a physical entity. Furthermore, this imaginary island is assigned a fictional culture, resulting from the combination of different Pacific cultural traditions attempting to create a single and simplified version of the territory, suppressing the region’s specificity. Some authors have criticised mythology in *Moana*, focusing on Māui’s representation as “an obese, arrogant buffoon” (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 298) and the (mis)representation of Te Kā as a “demon of earth and fire” (Clements and Musker 2016, 02:50). However, less leading aspects, such as the connection between the coconut and mythology, have been undiscussed.

Being considered the fruit of The Tree of Life, the coconut — which was and still is the pillar of countless cultures and economies in the Pacific — has always been connected to mythology. Every civilisation where the fruit is central has its own story to explain its origins. Disney awareness of the coconut’s relevance in Polynesian cultures cannot be denied. The coconut motif is included in numerous aligid sequences throughout the film, which are not to be



considered irrelevant. Scenes such as the performance of the “Where You Are” song, where the coconut, its usages and its possibilities are praised, give the audience a hint about its relevance for Motunui’s society. This same idea is reinforced afterwards when Māui explains to Moana how he gave humans “anything they could ever want” (Clements and Musker 2016, 1:09:47), and he mentions the coconut. However, even though the coconut is claimed to be all that Motunui citizens need to survive, the explanation about its origins is practically non-existent in the film. Per contra, other mythological stories, such as Te Fiti’s one, are explained in detail (00:57).

To highlight the role of the fruit, Disney explains the origin of the coconut in *Moana*. However, there is only a single mention about this topic, and it can be argued that this reference is comical on the one hand and simplified and distorted on the other. In connection to the comic take, the narrator of the coconut’s story in *Moana*, — Māui — contributes to reinforcing this comical vision of the coconut motif. Pacific scholars have criticised Disney’s Māui for being a “hulking [and] clownish” representation of the Polynesian demigod (Hyland 2020, 12). His only role in the film is to accompany Moana and to give humour to the plot. Therefore, connecting the coconut to Māui while bearing in mind Disney’s intention for his incorporation as a character reinforces the misrepresentation of the fruit.

For Polynesian cultures, mythology involves wisdom, and very often, it is connected to knowledgeable people in villages. As Craig (2004, 220) explains, “priests were usually the designated cultural bearers of this sacred knowledge”, and they were the ones in charge of transmitting cultural knowledge from generation to generation (220). Considering this, the audience would expect to find an earnest character in charge of transmitting the coconut’s myth. However, although *Moana* presents various characters who could provide a more accountable representation of how mythology is transmitted in Polynesian societies, and who indeed know and leverage the coconut — such as Tala and Chief Tui —, they select Māui as the spokesperson.

Furthermore, humour and Māui are not just connected because he is responsible for telling the story. Instead, the connection is further enlarged when the context in which the story is told is analysed. The origin of the coconut is detailed in Māui’s unique solo song in *Moana*: “You’re Welcome”. The song can be considered humorous and reinforces the idea of Māui as an arrogant character. Hence, choosing this particular song to explain the origin of the coconut portrays the audience with a comical story that seems to diminish seriousness and modify the coconut’s cultural meaning in Polynesia; contributing to misrepresentations and clichés about the region.

Nonetheless, what is most important about the coconut and mythology is not that Māui's coconut reference is comical but rather that it is simplified and modified. This distortion contributes to perpetuating Disney's main intention in the film: the creation of a fictional space where they can modify any aspect to provide the audience with a unique and rigorous vision of Polynesia. In the now-iconic song "You're Welcome", Māui explains all the feats he has done as a demigod to help humans, all of them connected to the real mythological character. When Māui starts to delve into the origins of "every natural phenomenon" (Clements and Musker 2016, 40:01), he mentions superficially "the tide", "the grass", and "the ground" (40:03) before moving to the coconut. Māui's explanation is summarised in a sentence: "I killed an eel, I buried its guts, sprouted a tree now you got coconuts" (40:06). Through these fifteen words, Māui condenses one of the most well-known mythological tales of the coconut's origin: the story of the eel.

There are different tales connected to the coconut's origin. Even though some of them do not include Māui, such as tales from Trobriand Islands, Papatatava, North-eastern Guadalcanal and the Burmese, within others (Roosman 1970, 221–223); most of them mention him as a Polynesian demigod "associated with the origin of staple foods" (Roosman 1970, 220) and, more relevantly, as "the hero of the myth of the origin of the coconut" (Kirtley quoted in Roosman 1970, 220). Nevertheless, most of those myths also mention another crucial character of Polynesian mythology when explaining the coconut's story: Hina.

The Tahitian coconut legend tells the story of a beautiful princess, Hina, whose marriage has been arranged by the Gods. On the day of the wedding, she realises that she will have to marry a hideous eel, and trying to escape her destiny, she seeks help in Māui's house. Feeling pity for the princess, the demigod decides to help her, and using his magical hook, he cuts the eel into pieces and covers them in tapa cloths. Māui asks Hina to take the eel and warns her not to lay the monster on the floor. However, Hina forgets Māui's warning and decides to take a bath, leaving the body of the dead eel on the ground. Almost immediately, roots start to sprout from the eel's body, and a coconut tree appears for the first time on earth (Craig 2004, 89–90). Stories in eastern Polynesia and Hawai'i repeat the plot changing the fact that Hina was Māui's wife. Anyhow, the coconut tree resulted from the head of the dead eel, killed by Māui (Best 1982, 367). Even though these stories may be superficially connected to Māui's version in "You're Welcome", Disney distorts the reality of the Tahitian, the Hawai'ian and the eastern Polynesian myths by omitting Hina as a crucial character in the origin of the coconut.

Furthermore, her lack of protagonism in connection to the coconut reinforces the story's distortion when analysing different mythological traditions. In Samoan mythology, she is the

main responsible for the creation of the coconut — not Māui, who is unnamed in the story. Known as Sina — the moon-goddess — she kept an eel inside a jar until it grew so much that she had to let it free. One day, while she was swimming, an eel — which turned out to be Tuna, a fish God — attacked her. Scared, Sina asked for help, and Upolu’s citizens sentenced the eel to death. Before dying, the eel asked Sina to bury its head in the seashore, and from it, as a gift from the Gods, the first coconut palm sprouted (Knappert 1995, 265–66). Other versions from Samoan and Fijian mythologies explain similar stories changing details. The eel seems to be King Tuifiti — a man who fell in love with Sina and transformed into an eel to be with her. As previously, he also died and required Sina to bury his head, sprouting from it the first coconut palm. The coconuts produced would represent the eyes and mouth of the eel — allowing Sina to kiss the King every time she drank from the water inside the coconut (TheCoconutTV 2018, 00:35). In Maori mythology, Sina was deeply in love with the Eel-God. Following his wishes — which aimed at helping humans — she killed him and buried his head. A coconut palm sprouted, and Sina considered it a gift from her lover (Clark 1896, 68–75).

Different Pacific stories associate the origin of the coconut with Hina, suppressing Māui, but in *Moana*, Hina is never directly named. Aside from being omitted in Māui’s coconut narrative, Hina is hidden during the film. Disney names “Sina” a relevant character in the film: Moana’s mother. However, her name is never mentioned in the film, and only appears in the final credits (James 2018). What is more relevant is that Moana’s mother, Sina, is responsible for explaining to Moana the usages and relevance of coconuts in the opening song (James 2018). Nonetheless, Disney does not attribute Sina any protagonism, neither as Moana’s mother nor as a goddess responsible for the origin of the coconut. Incorporating Hina into the coconut’s narrative would have supposed a strong female who would have modified *Moana*’s entire plot by shadowing the role of Māui as the prototypical male companion of the protagonist princess. This supports the theory that the mythological origin of the coconut is simplified, distorted and modified in *Moana* to create a story that would contribute to Disney’s specific representation of Polynesia.

Oppositely, there are also mythological stories that consider Māui, — without Hina — as the central conductor for the coconut’s origin. In *Moana*, Māui clearly states that he is responsible for the sprouting of the coconut palm, explaining that he was who “buried [the eel’s] guts” (Clements and Musker 2016, 40:07). In another version<sup>1</sup>, the origin of the coconut is still connected to Tuna. Represented as an eel, Tuna tried to seduce different women, within

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<sup>1</sup> Knappert does not mention the name of the region.

which was Māui's wife, Raukura (Knappert 1995, 308–309). As Knappert (1995, 308–309) explains, “Maui was so incensed that he slew Tuna, and hacked him to pieces. Again, out of Tuna's head grew the coconut palm”. New Zealand's mythology also portrays Māui killing an eel as the originator of the coconut to explain the fruit's presence in an area that lacks the appropriate climatic conditions (Kirtley quoted in Roosman 1970, 225).

Considering all those myths, it can be affirmed that Disney does not select a single myth to explain the origin of the coconut in *Moana*. What it does is to create a combination of different mythological tales, modifying a considerable amount of traditional Polynesian stories to create a version that fits the narrative structure of the typical Disney plot. All in all, Māui's reference to the myth in the film can be affirmed to be comical and distorted.

Regarding humour, associating mythology — a serious and knowledgeable practice in the Pacific, to Māui on the one hand — a character criticised for being humoristic — and to a sarcastic and non-serious song on the other, supports the idea of Disney representing the coconut comically. Concerning distortion, Disney firstly suppresses crucial characters such as Hina or Raukura; giving Māui all the merits for the creation of the coconut even though most stories present him accompanied by someone else, and a large amount of them do never mention his name but rather associate the coconut to the character of Hina alone. Secondly, Disney avoids giving context to the burial of the eel. The reasons why the eel was buried are not mentioned in *Moana*, even though they seem to be a relevant aspect of the story. Finally, comparing various myths, it can be concluded that Disney adds an entirely new element to Māui's tale. Regardless of the differences, most narratives agree that the coconut originates from the head of an eel. However, Māui does not mention the head at any time. According to his story, the guts were responsible for the coconut's origin.

Thus, Disney's version seems not to be based directly on any particular tale but rather to be founded upon a combination of well-known versions and an original Disney trait. Hence, the coconut motif is modified and disneyfied to perpetuate a restricted and simplified vision of the Pacific, ignoring the diversity of the territory. The fruit serves as an example to prove a mismatch between representation and reality, resulting in what Yoshinaga (2019, 190) has called “a glittery corporate distraction”. *Moana* is a product that generates an unrealistic Polynesian representation that suppresses specificity and depicts a commodified Polynesian description in line with the touristic, ideological and economic interests of Disney in the area.

### 3. Appropriating, Romanticising and Degrading the Coconut

An Arab proverb states that “if humans were to appear on the Earth with no more than a coconut palm, they could live quite happily and contented for all eternity” (Ahuja, Ahuja, and Ahuja 2014, 243). The coconut palm has been demonstrated to be “one of the ten most useful trees in the world” (Ahuja, Ahuja, and Ahuja 2014, 229) because all its parts serve a purpose; being considered unusable less than an inch of the entire tree (221). According to Foale (2003), the nut is the part that offers more possibilities. The kernel is typically consumed as food, either solid or shredded (88), and the water located inside — known as coconut water or coconut juice — is generally consumed as “a thirst-quencher and moderate stimulant” (85). Moreover, resulting from the combination of kernel and water, coconut cream and coconut milk emerge (87). From the kernel — often dried and known as copra — coconut oil is extracted and used in cuisine, the beauty industry, and medicine (89). The husk and its fibres are used to fabricate ropes, bags, mats and tapestries (90) and the shell is used as fuel, a toolmaking material and for ornamentation (91–93). Furthermore, the palm is also valued. The sap — or toddy — produces sugar or a beverage that can be either a sweet and refreshable drink or an alcoholic one after fermentation (95). The frond is used in religion, decoration and headwear (96); the flowers, stems and sheaths are typically utilised as fuels (96–97), and the wood is used for construction and ornamentation (97–98).

Contemplating everything that the coconut offers, the fruit is considered essential in thousands of Pacific cultures, highlighting Polynesian islands. Connections have been established between the coconut and life. The fruit can be considered a natural metaphor for human existence. Studies have proved that non-mature coconut water has an anatomical structure surprisingly close to human blood. Consequently, it was commonly used as a substitute for blood plasma during World War II (Mittre quoted in Ahuja, Ahuja, and Ahuja 2014, 233). The growth of the coconut itself also resembles the development of human life. A coconut embryo growing in a dehusked environment develops the *haustorium* — a cushioned organ that expands into the cavity of the nut, filling it for approximately four months. During those months, the *haustorium* works as a conduit that supplies the coconut nut with all the nutrients it needs to grow until it is strong enough to detach and grow independently (Foale 2003, 45). As Foale (2003, 45) explains, “a parallel can be drawn between the function of the *haustorium* and that of the placenta of mammals, including humans”. The nut would be the human embryo; the *haustorium*, the placenta; and the mass of kernel, the mother (45).

The coconut's relevance has not gone unnoticed for Western territories and institutions with political, economic or cultural interests in Polynesia. Consequently, many have tried to appropriate its image. In postcolonial studies, appropriation is defined as an "act of usurpation in various cultural domains" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 19) where the "dominant imperial power incorporates as its own the territory or culture that it surveys and invades" (Spurr quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 19). Hence, when the cultural symbols or practices are what the imperialist power steals from the dominated culture, the process is called cultural appropriation. In most cases, it supposes a threat to the invaded culture and profits for the coloniser. Thus, being an economically-based conglomerate, does Disney opt for a precise and truthful depiction of the coconut in *Moana* to let the audience know more about the Tree of Life's fruit; or does it appropriate its significance to perpetuate neocolonial tendencies and provide a modified and unrealistic vision of the fruit to obtain benefits?

Even though *Moana* includes some references to practices associated with the coconut that can contribute to a veridical representation of the fruit's role in Polynesia, the coconut motif is appropriated by Disney. The fruit's depiction in the film reinforces the image of Polynesia as a realm of calmness and peace to create a commodified and desired image for the touristic "empire". Consequently, the gap between the representation of the coconut's role and usages in Disney and the reality in Polynesian islands is widened.

Five minutes after the beginning of the film, the "Where You Are" song is performed. Its lines describe the relevance of nature, resources and the self-sustainability of Motunui. The same idea is repeated throughout the song: "The village of Motunui is / All you need" (Clements and Musker 2016, 08:02). When delving into the physical resources of the island, the coconut is mentioned: "Consider the coconut (the what?) / consider its tree" (08:47). The choir singing is praising the coconut as one of the most valuable resources of Motunui. To manifest its relevance, the song strengthens the idea of the coconut as a pillar in Motunui by declaring that "each part of the coconut" (08:51) is used, being consequently "all [Motunui's citizens] need" to survive (08:53). The song moves progressively into the usages for which the fruit is praised. Sina — Moana's mother — is responsible for explaining to Moana the different applications of the coconut. The first element that she discusses are the coconut fibres. She explains how "[they] make [their] nets from the fibers" (08:55) of the husk. As Foale (2003, 90) explains, coconut fibre "does not stretch or shrink in water, unlike many synthetic fibre ropes", and for this reason, it has been commonly used in maritime practices, within which fishing is found (90). The second mentioned element is "the water [which] is sweet inside" (08:57). The usage of coconut water as a refreshing sweet beverage is typical worldwide. Nonetheless, this second

reference starts to exemplify cultural appropriation. Even though coconut water has been proved to be “especially beneficial to sick people” (Ahuja, Ahuja, and Ahuja 2014, 240) and is commonly used in coconut-based cultures as medicine (232–233), Disney does not make any reference to its less-known application and describes it as a drink because it is what the touristic “empire” promotes and the audience expects to see. Following, the leaves are mentioned, according to Sina, used “to build fire” (09:00). Again, even though it is true that leaves can be used as fuel (Foale 2003, 95–96), their cultural relevance in society is not associated with fire, but with practices such as the creation of baskets, the confection of traditional dance costumes, or the extraction of palm sugar from the steams (95–96); practices which Sina does not mention. Finally, she explains how they “cook up the meat inside” (09:02), which refers to consuming the kernel as food. Nonetheless, no reference is made in the film regarding copra — the dried kernel — even though it was and still is the economic basis of hundreds of coconut-based cultures (Bennett 2018, 365–368). Hence, even though the song mentions relevant coconut usages in Polynesia, those chosen for representation are more closely associated with the touristic image of the area. Disney appropriates the coconut and presents it in a way that would look familiar to the western audience, regardless of the final unrealistic representation of Polynesian culture.

Although some coconut usages are mentioned, Disney’s representation can be affirmed to be stereotypical. The coconut is appropriated, disneyfied and romanticised, generating a misrepresentation of the fruit and its social and cultural relevance. *Moana* displays some coconut applications which do not seem to correspond to the reality of the fruit in coconut-based societies, and consequently contribute to a dangerous process of cultural appropriation where the signification of the fruit is commodified. Examples can be found in scenes where the biological reality of the palm is modified to present a story that lacks scientific coherence. For example, Moana decides to cut the sick trees to plant new ones and obtain fruit again when the island is struggling to survive (Clements and Musker 2016, 13:26), which is not realistic as a new palm “will start to produce fruit when it is five years old” (Laurence 2019, 128). Realism seems to be eliminated too when Disney appropriates both the palm and the fruit and mocks their relevance when Moana uses it to slide from a mountain to the shore as if it was a toboggan (17:57), when children use the coconut to play as if it was a ball (07:49) or when Moana and Māui use the palm as their means of transport (40:38). By modifying the palm’s significance and applications through unrealistic sequences and untruthful practices, Disney is putting commerciality before accuracy for the sake of animation.

Additionally, the entire coconut palm is intensely romanticised in *Moana*. Disney appropriates the palm through the touristic “empire” eyes to present a western perception of Polynesia as a paradise. The Polynesian paradise cannot be imagined without the coconut palms, which are “essential to complete the picture of Paradise — a tropical world of pleasure and personal happiness” (Hereniko quoted in Thomas 2003, 6). Whenever the idea of paradise is directly or implicitly mentioned, the coconut palm appears in connection with it. When describing the island, Chief Tui claims: “Motunui is paradise, who would want to go anywhere else?” (Clements and Musker 2016, 04:35). Immediately after, a general view of the island is offered: crystal-clear water, flowers, the sun, a light breeze and undoubtedly, coconut palms. When at the end of the film Moana restores the Heart of Te Fiti, calmness is re-established. The paradisiac island revives, and even before fresh water, coconut trees reappear (1:30:33), reinforcing the connection between paradise and the coconut palm.

Nonetheless, the coconut is not only appropriated in *Moana* to represent paradise. The fruit is also appropriated from a negative perspective perpetuating damaging representations of Polynesia. The coconut motif is appropriated in the film in connection to evil by creating two new characters: Tamatoa and the Kakamora. At the beginning of the film, Aunt Tala explains how Te Fiti’s Heart was stolen, and she mentions that some “demons of the deep” (Clements and Musker 2016, 3:22) wanted to possess it, regardless of the effects on humans. Those demons included Māui, Tamatoa and the Kakamora, three characters defined as monstrous and connected to the coconut motif. Māui’s case can be argued to be more superficial — as Māui’s only connection to the coconut is as the narrator of the coconut’s origin myth. However, Tamatoa and the Kakamora exemplify how Disney appropriates the fruit to create a new narrative where the coconut is degraded and removed from its original cultural status in Polynesia through associations with the malign.

Tamatoa is an original Disney creation. Even though the noun can be argued to come from the combination of the Tahitian words *tama* ‘child’ and *toa* ‘warrior’, or to be a derivative of the Chamoru concept Taotao Mo’na (Sabrina quoted in Varner 2016; SuperCarlinBrothers 2016, 4:15), the villain in *Moana* does not correspond to any real Polynesian character. However, it is directly connected to a Polynesian motif: the coconut. He is represented as a coconut crab whose central role is to behave as an antagonist and generate a scene where Moana and Māui’s voyage to restore the Heart of Te Fiti is interrupted. Tamatoa uses his solo song — “Shiny” — to boast about his cruel intentions and to hurt Moana and Māui both emotionally and physically, as he directly tells Māui that he would “die, die, die” (Clements and Musker 2016, 1:03:41) in his hands. Polynesian Islanders have expressed their disappointment in the



representation of Tamatoa, claiming that they would have expected a “fierce and manly [character] because of the nature of that name” (Sabrina quoted in Varner 2016). In Tahitian cultures, Tamatoa “is a name of legends and represents tough heroes” (Sabrina quoted in Varner 2016). Nevertheless, Disney represents it as a cruel coconut crab that has neither heroic nor good intentions. The coconut crab symbol is not a random choice. Soker (1972, 153) explains in his Chamoru stories of Guam that Taotao Mo’nas are “ancestors of the modern Chamorros” who generally “appear in different forms” (162), and within which we find that of a coconut crab (162). He also explains how Taotao Mo’nas are not connected to evil on most occasions, but that in particular instances, this connection has been established (156). Having different perceptions of the concept, Disney decides to use the least leading one and associates the name with an evil character. Creating a new character represented as a coconut crab and making him the antagonist reinforces the idea that Disney is not respectful with the fruit and the original stories. The motif of the coconut is modified and misrepresented constantly during the film, widening the gap between reality and representation and contributing to the cultural appropriation of the coconut.

Additionally, Tamatoa is not the only malignant character in the film associated with coconuts. Defined as “murdering little pirates” (Clements and Musker 2016, 44:56), the Kakamora are represented as coconuts in *Moana*. Problematically, these pirates, per contra to Tamatoa, are based on real characters, either mythological “shape-shifters” (Scott 2016, 482) or real “small human-like creatures” from the Solomon Islands (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 315). Consequently, their association with the coconut can be claimed to be an example of cultural appropriation as an authentic Polynesian tradition is modified and transformed by Disney, resulting in an unrealistic and harmful representation of a whole culture. Hosp (2019) has understood the Kakamora as an example of the “ignoble savage” stereotype (74). For him, the Kakamora perpetuate this deleterious stereotype in Western representations of the Pacific (74), reinforcing the western “fantasies about violent and dangerous natives” (75). The Kakamora are dangerous “Others” who have malignant intentions towards Moana and Māui (76). They are threatening and bellicose pirates, and for a non-apparent reason, they are dressed in coconut armour. By incorporating the coconut, Disney could have tried to avoid criticism for connecting a real mythological story with a character, which could have been interpreted as offensive by Solomon Islanders. However, the association with the coconut is no less harmful. Through appropriation, Disney perpetuates two dangerous ideas. Firstly, the belief that Polynesian culture is not relevant enough to be represented truthfully, and secondly, the idea that any motif in Polynesia can be appropriated to represent a specific part of the culture.

Considering the relevance that the coconut has in Polynesia, its association with evil is damaging, as it is a venerated item in the Pacific modified and used to symbolise negative ideas. According to Bush (2018), Disney's creation of Tamatoa and the Kakamora definitely "detracts from Disney's expressed desire to tell a story that is culturally authentic for Polynesia" (219). Their role in the film and their association with the sacred Pacific coconut represents an example of cultural appropriation. It proves how Disney is disloyal to the reality of the territory, portraying an inaccurate vision of the coconut and appropriating its meaning to generate a neocolonialist description of Polynesia.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present paper has analysed the representation of the coconut motif in Disney's *Moana* (2016) as an example to explore how Walt Disney portrays specific Pacific motifs through a western perspective, generating misrepresentations frequently. The results obtained contribute to proving the initial postulated thesis, which affirmed the existence of a contrast between the coconut's signification in coconut-based societies and Disney's perception and subsequent accuracy of representation. The analysis suggests that Disney's coconut representation in *Moana* is not accurate to the reality of Oceanic cultures and contributes to the perpetuation of neocolonialism and Pacificism, supposing consequently a process of cultural appropriation.

In the first section, different mythological stories regarding the coconut's origin have been compared, confirming a mismatch between representation and reality. In this part, I have analysed Māui's mythological story for the coconut's origin in *Moana* compared to different Polynesian traditions. First, I have demonstrated how *Moana*'s version can be considered comical due to its association with Māui and a humoristic song. Subsequently, I have discussed how *Moana*'s coconut tale can also be considered distorted and simplified in comparison to different Pacific mythologies because of the omission of characters such as Hina or Raukura; the simultaneous omission of context; and the addition of certain Disney original traits that contribute to a conscious misrepresentation of Polynesia. Furthermore, Disney's meaningful association between Moana's mother and the mythological goddess Sina has been mentioned as a relevant element connected to the coconut's origin tale. However, this is a superficially investigated topic that requires further analysis.

In the second section, I have compared Disney's representation of the coconut's usages and relevance with those in coconut-based societies, proving the selection of particular elements to perpetuate a westernised representation of Polynesia. Secondly, I have analysed the coconut

as a culturally appropriated motif to create two specific characters in *Moana* associated with the malign: the Tamatoa coconut crab and the coconut Kakamora pirates. Those examples illustrate Disney using a venerated Pacific element with negative connotations to generate neocolonial and “pacificised” representations of the area. Hence, although Disney gives the coconut a relevant status in *Moana*, its portrayal is not accurate to the different Pacific realities and falls into harmful stereotypical representations of the fruit, contributing to constant commodification and Polynesian misrepresentations. Consequently, an urgent change in Western Pacific representations is needed to destroy previously negative associations and give Pacific inhabitants an accurate image to see themselves reflected.

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