

# PACIFIC VOICES: Screen Industries and Culture in the Pacific

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## Abstract

The verbal, visual and cultural landscape of the Pacific Ocean, its Islands and people are supremely rich, varied and complex, with a diversity of Polynesian and Melanesian traditions and art, mixed with European and Asian influences. There have been a number of undertakings and projects to conserve, appraise and build narratives around this cultural abundance and heritage. This paper addresses the question: 'What educational research, frameworks and learnings can best capture and enhance this landscape, its indigenous voices, story telling and cultural signatures through the agency of film and screen media in a Pacific community context? While not providing a defined framework for action, the paper brings into focus some factors for consideration in any future program of cooperation with the Pacific Islands to assist them in building screen industries, screen education and screen culture.

Keywords: Indigenous voices, Pacific Islands, film, cultural memory, traditional storytelling.

*"If your story's important you've got to tell it yourself"*  
Kevin Lucas (Producer) *One Night the Moon* (2001)  
Brisbane International Film Festival, 4 August 2001

## The Context

The verbal, visual and cultural landscape of the Pacific Ocean, its Islands and people are supremely rich, varied and complex, with a diversity of Polynesian and Melanesian traditions and art, mixed with European and Asian influences. There have been a number of undertakings and projects to conserve, appraise and build narratives around this cultural abundance and heritage. The following are examples.

The Third UNESCO World Heritage Global Strategy meeting held in Suva, Fiji recognized the inseparable connection between the outstanding seascapes and landscapes of the Pacific Islands region and the rich histories, oral and life traditions of the Pacific Island peoples. The meeting focused on five themes including: places of origin, mythological origin and navigation routes; cultural objects and artifacts, archaeological and historical sites of human settlements; places of traditional economic and ceremonial exchange and; from the past to present, continuity and change in the Pacific region.<sup>1</sup>

The *Pacific Island's Forum* is an association comprising sixteen countries with the collective goal to stimulate economic growth and enhance political governance and security in Oceania. In 2012, the Forum Secretariat held a workshop in Suva, Fiji as part of a broader project to develop cultural industries in the Pacific. The workshop recognised the value of cultural assets and looked at ways that these assets could be monetised for the economic development of the region.

The *Pacific Partnerships for Development* scheme, an *AusAid* program sponsored by the Australian Government is committed to an engagement with Pacific island partners to:

- improve economic structure and enhance local employment possibilities through infrastructure and broad-based economic growth;

- enhance private sector development, including better access to microfinance;
- achieve quality universal basic education;
- improve health outcomes through better access to basic health services;
- enhance governance, including the role of civil society, and the role of non-government organizations in basic service delivery.

The highly acclaimed *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT)* provides a three-yearly, up-to-date view of Pacific art and culture. APT is the only major exhibition series focused exclusively on the art of Asia, the Pacific and Australia. It embraces: 'A unique focus on the contemporary art...publications, academic papers and public programs [that] contribute to critical scholarship and research into art of the region',<sup>2</sup>

CILECT (Centre International De Liaison Des Ecoles De Cinema et De Television) is the association of the world's major film and television schools. Its goals are to provide a means for the exchange of ideas among member schools, and to help them understand the future of education for creative personnel in film, television, and related media. In November 2012, CAPA, the Asia-Pacific chapter of CILECT, held a conference in Brisbane, Australia that considered how CAPA could assist Pacific nations build education and training programs to enhance their capacity to develop screen culture, screen education and screen industries.

The prestigious, annual *Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSAs)* broadcast to more than 46 countries across the Asia Pacific on Sunday, January 6<sup>th</sup> 2013 promotes and acclaims cinematic excellence and the cultural diversity of the vast Asia-Pacific region. The APSA awards are an international initiative that bring together in a unique collaboration, UNESCO and the International Federation of Film Producers Associations.<sup>3</sup>

An event with a distinctive Oceanic note is the *Pacific International Documentary Film Festival*, an annual event held in Tahiti. The goals of this festival are to: bring together film and television professionals of the region; foster the development of joint projects; facilitate information exchange on current topics and; create a market between Pacific documentary producers and world documentary buyers.

These organizations and events have encouraged development in many aspects of Pacific Island culture. For example: UNESCO's Global Heritage strategy has encouraged nine Pacific Island States to submit lists of potential World Heritage properties that reflect the regional identity and local diversity of their communities. Meanwhile, the Seventh APT (2013) drew record attendance and participation. But, while some areas of Pacific culture are moving forward, the screen culture and the film and television industries of the region are lagging.

Some initiatives have occurred, however, such as training courses conducted in Fiji by Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology. In Australia, Pacific Islanders have begun to tell their story through film. *Story Weaver* program participants claim that "Pacific Islanders (PI) have been telling awesome, unique stories for as long as anyone can remember. Now we want to take more of our stories to the screen". *Story Weavers* is a hands-on filmmaking project for young Melbourne, Pacific Islanders exploring PI identity in urban Australia, while working with professional filmmakers to develop, shoot and screen short films.<sup>4</sup> In addition, a number of very interesting projects have been conducted in the Pacific region by the *Makassar SEAscreen Academy*, the *Faculty of Arts – University of Auckland* and New York Universities' *Tish Asia, Film School*. These projects are examined later in this paper.

## **The Screen Culture and Screen Industry in the Pacific**

The APSAs are an annual barometer of health for the Film and Television industries in the Asia-Pacific region. Over six years of these awards, there has been scant participation by Pacific nations, and a Pacific 'Island' nation (excluding Australia) has yet to win an APSA award. Regarding the 2012 APSA Festival, filmmaker and educator Vilsoni Hereniko noted:

“there wasn't a single film or filmmaker from the Pacific that was part of the proceedings”.<sup>5</sup>

At the recent CAPA conference (Brisbane, 2012), Dr Shushi Kathari noted that: “Apart from the Academy of Creative Media in University of Hawaii, there are no films schools in the Pacific Islands. There are also no dedicated screen production degrees, nor any structured courses that offer opportunities to learn film and video production. These are cultures rife with a long history of oral storytelling and performance, but their screen representation remains marginal”.<sup>6</sup>

Dr Kathari proposes that there is “minimal self representation and archiving by Pacifica people, in charge of their own 'voice' and in control of their own image”. A number of factors have caused this circumstance she proposes including:

- A lack of infrastructure, human and technical resources
- A lack of cultural imperative that deems such stories worthy of recording;
- A complacency (in some cases) as storytelling and traditions are passed down from one generation to another in traditional forms.

We believe that any discussion regarding the development of prospective training programs for existing and aspiring Pacific Island filmmakers should be preceded by an investigation into the nature of 'voice' within a Pacific Island context. Thus, and with Dr Kathari's thoughts in mind, this paper will consider the nature of 'Voice' in general, and the Pacifica 'Voice' in particular.

### **The Importance of a Film Voice**

Film has an important role to play as a cultural, industrial and political artifact. The visual language of cinema and the screen can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers through the medium of visual story and universal meanings. This idea is ably crystallized in the words of Phillip Cheah in *When Strangers Meet*, when he discusses the importance of both maintaining and translating the local and the global on the screen in an Indonesian context:

“But what is it like to be Indonesian?” He asked. ‘Trying to express identity in a country of so many islands, regions, languages and ethnic groups is difficult. Film can let us discover what it's really like. Listening to sobbing is being Indonesian. The human face is the face of our archipelago. See the face and you understand the family’.<sup>7</sup>

As filmmakers and film academics, we understand and study the power and ability of cinema to capture and project the 'universal' in the 'local'. We know that cinema can reach out to people across geographical, social, economic, gender, and ethnic boundaries to crystallize the essential meanings of life, the imperatives of global citizenship as well as the sovereignty of singularity.

Cinema can also bring about enlightenment and changes in knowledge about, attitudes to, and behaviors towards our neighbors near and far. We know that

cinema can play a vital role in showcasing cultural diversity, forging links across national borders and providing a working arena for filmmakers. Film enables peoples to speak across cultures. “Visual images, in their transcultural properties, may have a particular capacity to represent continuities across apparently radically dissimilar global settings”.<sup>8</sup>

But, as filmmakers and teachers, what do we know about the concept of ‘voice’ itself and its authenticity to the person doing the speaking? — What do we know about how Pacific filmmakers have done, or will tell their stories, and how will answers to these questions enable us to assist Pacific Island nations share their stories with the rest of the world?

### **Telling Stories My Uncles and Aunties Would be Proud Of**

For us, a most important issue for consideration when discussing the potential training of future Pacific Island filmmakers is the concept of authorial ‘voice’. ‘Voice’ can be conceptualised in a number of ways including the idea that the ‘voice’ is a genuine and authentic expression of the storyteller of a particular country or culture; and the idea that ‘voice’ is a cultural memory, like the spoken or unspoken ideas and thoughts of a culture enshrined in the stories and artistic traditions of that culture or that voice.

The concept of voice as the genuine or authentic ‘voice’ of particular national storyteller was discussed at the 2012 Brisbane Writers Festival when two international authors - Joanne Harris, the English author of the novel, *Chocolat* set in France and Witi Ihimaera the Maori author of New Zealand novel, *The Whale Rider*, when they spoke of the process of seeing their successful novels adapted for film — for a worldwide audience in a medium that has the potential to translate or change the essence of the story through cinematic adaptation.

Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider* recounts the story of a eight-year old girl who wants to become a whale rider against the patriarchal traditions of her tribe. In the adaptation of his book Witi was concerned that the film would lose its “Maoiriness”. His solution was to become the Executive Producer of his film and maintain control of all aspects of the story, in his own words, so that he could make a film “that he could show his uncles and aunties”, a film that they would be proud of.<sup>9</sup>

At the other end of the scale is the tale of the adaptation for screen of Joanne Harris’s *Chocolat*. In essence, Harris acknowledged that even though she was happy with how the film turned out and had signed away her rights to creative control of the story, the film at its heart did not convey the vision of community she wished to create. She said that she still went to the unnamed French provincial town, which inspired her novel and saw nuns riding their bicycles home from church with their fresh baguettes in the bicycle basket, an authentic world which she inferred was not captured in the Hollywood film of her novel.<sup>10</sup>

A second concept of ‘voice’ is the idea of voice of cultural memory. At the 2012 CAPA conference, in the paper, “Asia Pacific Film.com marries Alexander Street Press” Vilsoni Hereniko discussed the challenge of distributing low budget and culturally significant films from the Asia Pacific — for him with the underlying intention of “Making silent voices heard”. Hereniko underlined particular challenges in marketing and distributing Pacific films: “Films that are culturally and historically important, but not necessarily of interest to commercial distributors. When they do reach a global audience, they promote better cultural understanding and a form of cultural diplomacy among all peoples in all countries all over the world”.

In addition, Hereniko discussed the importance of film as a medium for recording and sharing the “voice” of his people. He also discussed his own childhood and how

the, “myths and stories of my own people transformed my own life and made me who I am today”. Hereniko suggested that it was imperative to know more about the wisdom, sensibilities, values and aesthetics that are embedded in original and oral stories of Oceania. He noted that this is a huge untapped resource, “an archive of knowledge and wisdom that would be worth exploring”, particularly in the context of the young who are generally only watching Hollywood movies.<sup>11</sup>

We believe that any research regarding the future training of filmmakers from the Pacific must honour these concepts of ‘voice’. For us, it is essential that these filmmakers maintain their ‘voice’ and speak from the heart about and of their culture, and most importantly that they tell their stories themselves.

### **Looking at National Cinemas through the Lens of Theory**

There is a long and deep tradition of research into the cinemas of the Nation States and Countries of the world. Consideration of what have been variously termed — National Cinemas, World Cinemas or Transnational Cinemas provides a rich and diverse body of academic research, viewed through the lens of theories including:

- The discourse of Orientalism that focuses on the study of the exotic “other”
- The critical/historical context of Post-Colonialism and the legacy of the colonization as it has impacted on the culture of the colonized and cultural diasporas
- The auteur model of Second Cinema
- The revolutionary voice and aesthetics of Third Cinema
- The emerging field of Trans-culturalism

Many of these models/methodologies, however have focused on National Cinemas in the context of a global market dominated by Hollywood, or indeed other National Cinemas that have established successful industries both at home and internationally. For example, on the one hand, well established European Cinemas such as France and Spain have been discussed via the auteur model of Second Cinema where the work of the great auteurs of the French New Wave or contemporary Spanish auteurs like Almodovar are conceptualised by their unique auteurist traits and concerns.

On the other hand, Latin American cinemas like Cuba and South America have been considered through the theoretic lens of Third Cinema. This posits cinema as a revolutionary tool — an art form based on a cultural rather than industrial model — the aesthetics of hunger or tears, revered by Third Cinema theorist and filmmaker, Glauba Rocha who turned the Jean Luc Godard attributed phrase “a camera in your hand and an idea in your head” into a revolutionary slogan.<sup>12</sup>

But these paradigms are unfailingly steeped in a Western perspective, which has viewed Asia and Pacific cinema as a cultural object, to be discussed through a Western paradigm. “Asian cinematic forms are approached, in strikingly similar ways ... as specific negotiations between local/national/regional traditions and Western film conventions and aesthetics”.<sup>13</sup>

While it is acknowledge that theoretical paradigms are in flux, scholarly writing regarding Asian and Pacific National Cinemas has generally approached this discussion in terms of concepts involving a critical mass on a particular national cinema, for example, China, Hong Kong, Japan and India; or genre as an example of a popular national and international National product, for example Hong Kong and martial arts films and India and Bollywood melodrama.<sup>14</sup>

In order to move forward and in the light of the above discussion, this paper

proposes three areas for study:

- Research focusing on the nature of Pacific Island Cinemas;
- Research regarding the study of these Cinemas in the context of Industrial, Cultural and Transnational Film Theories;
- Research regarding the capturing of Pacific Voices.

In particular, we propose that the gap in research into Asian Cinema identified by Ma Ning (*Cinemaya*) when suggesting that: “Questions such as how Asian filmmakers drew upon their *traditional art forms* in creating their national cinemas and whether there are any common patterns to be found in this process are yet to be answered”, is equally germane in a Pacific Island context.<sup>15</sup>

### **Three Models Tried and Lessons Learned**

*Example 1. The Cultural Model - The Importance of Story - Myth and Community (A Case Study from Indonesia).*

At the CAPA 2012 Conference, Indonesian filmmaker and educator Riri Riza discussed the concept behind and experience of the Makassar SEAscreen Academy initiative, particularly in relation to the current growth and the associated challenges of and for Indonesian Cinema.<sup>16</sup>

Among the key issues considered in the framing of the Academy is the fact that Indonesian Cinema is the voice of the politically and economically powerful in Java.

Of upmost pertinence to this paper is the fact that the Academy was also designed to inform a well-designed and sustainable plan for an actual nuts and bolts film school. The aims of the SEAscreen academy were to:

- i. Provide a well and sustainable platform of knowledge exchange among filmmakers who live in the East Indonesian region and;
- ii. Introduce a fresh approach in film productions, focusing on local initiatives by facilitating the emerging filmmakers to conceptualise their very own ideas whilst receiving professional assistance from established and prominent filmmakers in the region.

Fifty potential filmmakers aged 17-30 from all over Indonesia - Sulawesi, Lombok, Sumbawa and Papua applied for the 5-day SEAscreen Academy workshop and 20 were chosen to participate. Six experienced filmmakers from the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia mentored the students who attended seminars, watched films, went on field trips around Makassar to gather story ideas and worked with their teachers to produce a short film.

The selection committee chose participants based not only for their talent, but also their community involvement. These criteria may have been influential in the production of the final stories as what emerged were stories strongly grounded in community and local myths.<sup>17</sup> Stories it would seem that reflect the “voice” and cultural memories of the peoples of Indonesia.

*Example 2. An Industrial Model - A Proposal for Making It -The Digital Storytelling Model*

In her paper, ‘Digital Storytelling for Pan Pacific Conversations’ (CAPA 2012 Conference) Associate Professor Shuchi Kothari proposed an initiative for the telling of Pan Pacific Stories using Berkley University’s Centre of Digital Storytelling, Digital Storytelling model.<sup>18</sup> At Berkley the age-old concept of oral storytelling has been successfully transplanted into the digital domain to help over 10,000 people create

and share their stories.

The model itself as proposed by Kothari is not complex and can be run over a three-day workshop. However like all good films, central to the success of the outcomes is the story itself - it has to be real and it has to have something compelling to say. But the story happens easily over a period of three days. In this model minimal technological infrastructure is required but the result is guaranteed - people become digital storytellers.

### *Example 3. The Challenge - What language do we use to speak?*

It must be noted that the development of training scenarios for enabling filmmakers of the Pacific is not without its challenges. We have highlighted the fact that the region is rich with filmic stories waiting to be told and that digital technologies can provide cost effective and accessible models to tell these stories. However there are a number of issues that need to be addressed and researched in the creation of these filmmaking scenarios.

In 'Asia Tell Us Your Stories. Rice: The ASEAN Story Lab' Gabrielle Kelly highlights some of the very real issues that must be dealt with when developing films across cultures and therefore across languages. The ASEAN Lab was a one month long story telling lab initiative conducted by ASEAN and Republic of Korea to bring a writer, director and cinematographer together to tell ten minute films around the theme of "Rice" which resulted in the creation of a feature length Omnibus film from filmmakers across nine of the ASEAN countries involved in the lab.

Kelly notes in this paper a number of research areas which will need further investigation if we are to enable filmmaking in the Pacific. These include at script development stage: the problem of teaching and learning in a common language, the difficulty of accessing Final Draft Scriptwriting software in required languages and the availability of sample short film scripts from the region. Kelly also noted the need to develop a cinematic model that enabled or questioned the relevance to storytelling using the Western paradigms of film language and for example, the ideas of dramatic conflict, the paradigms of character in action and the unfolding of story via the conventions of shot composition and editing.<sup>19</sup>

These problems were addressed in the Lab through an unfolding model (which warrants further research) by breaking down the barriers and developing an organic and communal approach to storytelling with the traditional key creatives - the writer, the director and the cinematographer having input to the story. The resultant stories were inspired by the model of an Icelandic film, *The Last Farm* (2010) which features little dialogue and features the landscape playing a key role in the final story.

### **Conclusion**

The potential for post-graduate research that we are flagging presupposes that there is an urge for the peoples of the Pacific to make and share their own films, and in addition, for the world to want to, and be able to see these films. This challenge has been met to some extent by [asiapacificfilms.com](http://asiapacificfilms.com) <[asiapacificfilms.com](http://asiapacificfilms.com)> a company set up to stream independent films to libraries, colleges, universities and the general public in partnership with Alexander Street Press, one of the largest distribution companies of digital education materials in the US.

In discussing the creation of [asiapacificfilms.com](http://asiapacificfilms.com) at the 2012 CAPA conference, Hereniko observed "we could see that the potential for us to help the filmmakers of the Pacific to tell their stories on film exists. We could see that there is an abundance of important stories waiting to be told and that there are ways and means that we

can use to help these filmmakers make and distribute their stories”.<sup>20</sup>

The evidence shows that Pacific Island peoples are beginning to tell their stories through film and cinema. But what we don't know is how best to go about supporting their efforts. That is why we propose this research - so that “The future of the world can be influenced by films that young people see and study”.<sup>21</sup>

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