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ARTICLE



Emergent film production in the Pacific: Oceanic strategies of connection and exchange

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ABSTRACT

Cultural policies that promote film production and exchange in small island states face numerous challenges (including training, funding, and infrastructure). Yet, in the Pacific, Indigenous film-making is a key strategy for redressing reductive framing of the region during the colonial period (which continues today), and the last 20 years has seen a growing movement towards greater Pacific Island film production. In addition, the creative industries (including film) are currently being explored as an alternative development pathway although this has met with mixed response from governments in the region. In this changing context, and recognising the political importance of Indigenous film production, this paper analyses the strategies of film-makers and other non-state actors in developing a regional film sector across Oceania – strategies of connection that potentially bring filmmakers and audiences together across the great ocean.

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Introduction

Despite technical innovations that have reduced the costs of film production, filmmaking in many small island states faces a number of challenges associated with training, infrastructure, resourcing, policy and distribution. While island states have frequently been used as locations for external productions (that often reproduce exoticised tropes (Douglas 1994)), those productions appear to have done little to build endogenous film production. Yet film-making can be a significant site of political agency, particularly in attempts to decolonise and diversify the screen sector, and express alternative cultural imaginaries (Pearson and Knabe 2015; Barclay 2015). More recently, various United Nations bodies have argued for fostering the creative industries (including film) in small island states as part of a strategy to diversify economies and create alternative development pathways (UNCTAD and UNDP 2008, 2010; UNESCO and UNDP 2013; UNESCO 2016). The UN Creative Economy Reports argue that the rise in global trade of cultural goods and services, and the relatively low capital investment needed for creative work, offers a promising alternative development pathway (UNCTAD 2008, 2010; UNDP and UNESCO, 2013). UNESCO's Action Plan for Small Island Developing States 2016–2021 (UNESCO 2016) promotes the cultural sector and the creative industries as key priorities for achieving sustainable development.

The United Nations' endorsement of the 'creative economy' as a development strategy has led many countries to consider market-driven support schemes in their cultural policies and strategies, often with the support of international organisations such as UNESCO, UNCTAD, WIPO and the British

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Council (Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright 2008; Stupples and Teaiwa 2017; De Beukelaer 2015). Since around 2010, regional Pacific organisations have been exploring the potential of the creative industries (including film) to generate employment and support cultural diversity (Teaiwa 2007; Throsby 2015; Teaiwa and Huffer 2017). In 2016, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community commissioned a report, *Cinema Pasifika* (Pasifika Collective 2016), on the possibilities of developing a sustainable narrative film and television sector in the region.

Such actions sit within a global policy context in which the 'cultural industries' have, since the late 1990s, morphed into the more economically oriented 'creative industries'. The seemingly innocuous shift in naming conceals a considerable shift in scope and politics: by including the (pre-dotcom bust) software industries, the sector could now claim a far greater size of economic turnover as well as growth rates (Garnham 2005; Tremblay 2011). It also signaled a shift from more critical and reflexive studies of these industries to more aspirational and some optimistic celebratory approaches (De Beukelaer and Spence 2019). While the roots of this shift lay in the UK Labour Party's aim to identify areas of growth in its post-industrial economy (Hesmondhalgh, Oakley, and Less 2015), the optimism of its early policies caused wide up-take of this 'versatile script' (Vlassis and De Beukelaer 2019). Researchers have, however, pointed out that the evidence that the 'creative industries' will drive economic development, particularly the equitable, inclusive and sustainable kind, is thin (Stupples 2014; Duxbury, Kangas, and De Beukelaer 2017). Despite this,¹ the narrative remains appealing, and is strategically resonant for the cultural sector that is typically sidelined in broader considerations of 'development'.

Given the current interest in Pacific film production, and its possibilities as a site of agency (politically, culturally, economically), this paper traces some of the strategies and challenges around contemporary film production in the Pacific region. We discuss the unevenness of film production, and particularly the challenges for those living in Pacific Island states to have ownership over the representation of stories filmed in or about them. We reflect on the political economy of film production in small island states and the impact of international donors and the development imaginary on framing screen content, and on accessing funding. However, we also emphasise the political importance of regional networks and Oceanic imaginaries in moving beyond development discourses, and enabling other forms of resource sharing. We discuss the different kinds of support for filmmaking that exist in the different (post)colonial constructions of the nation-state, and, in light of such differences, we focus on the role of non-state actors in supporting capacity-building. In particular, we look at new networks and collaborations – particularly Indigenous film networks – that support the telling of stories through films that are vital to Pacific identity but not necessarily commercial or focused on a 'development' or 'public good' agenda.

This research builds on the analysis of cultural policy documents and reports, pertaining to creative and film industries in the Pacific. In addition, it refers to observations made, and discussions held, at film festivals and industry events in the Pacific region between 2017 and 2019. The analysis takes place at the interdisciplinary intersection of research in cultural policy, Pacific studies, Indigenous media, and development studies.

Film in the Pacific: whose cinema?

There is growing interest in filmmaking in the Pacific region, with a number of films made in or about the Pacific featuring prominently in global circuits, and Pacific film-makers gaining increased recognition. In 2017, Samoan New Zealand director Tusi Tamasese followed *The Orator* (2011 Venice Film Festival) with a new feature *One Thousand Ropes* (2017 Berlin Film Festival). Two Indigenous Pacific filmmakers were the first recipients of the Merata Mita Fellowship² at Sundance: Ciara Leina'ala Lacy (Kanaka Maoli from O'ahu, Hawaii) in 2016, and Amie Batalibasi (Australian Solomon Islander, Feralimae/Kosi) in 2017. In 2019, the documentary *Merata: How Mum Decolonised the Screen*, about trailblazing Māori filmmaker Merata Mita (Ngāi Te Rangi/Ngāti Pikiao) screened at Sundance and at the Berlinale, and was picked up by Ava du Vernay's ARRAY for US distribution, and

by Netflix for UK distribution. In addition, feature films set in the Pacific, such as *Tanna* (2015 Venice Film Festival), directed by Australians Martin Butler and Bentley Dean, and Disney's *Moana* (surrounded by controversy about cultural appropriation, see Diaz 2016) have also drawn attention to film production in the region. In 2019, the Berlin Film Festival's 'NATIVE' programme, which celebrates Indigenous cinema, focused on film made in and about the Pacific region. The headline feature film for its programme was *Vai*, an innovative portmanteau feature directed by nine (mostly New Zealand-based) Indigenous Pacific women directors.

The film-makers associated with these high-profile projects, however, all live-in settler-colonial states (Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia or one of the US territories) with access to film schools, film funding and development opportunities. Thus, eligibility to be a part of projects, such as *Vai*, is contingent on geopolitical constructions such as citizenship or a relationship of free association with a settler-colonial state. It is much harder for filmmakers to produce work for the big screen in independent island states with fewer resources (although the Pacific has a thriving music video scene), and films like *Tanna* and *Moana* have been critiqued for failing to offer opportunities to develop capacity among local filmmakers (Ride 2016, 2017; Pasifika Collective 2016, 15). The possibilities to create and share stories through film are uneven across the region.

Yet, as theatre and television producer and director Justine Simeï-Barton has argued, film-making by Pacific peoples is a key strategy for redressing the 'powerful accumulation of images and attitudes about the Pacific that constitute one of the most enduring legacies of colonialism' (Simeï-Barton 1997, 73). In the Pacific Islands film has long been used to exoticise Pacific people and to objectify Pacific women as 'dusky maidens' (Taouma 1998; Sturma 2002; Pearson 2005, 2013; Smith 2008; Tamaira 2010), as well as to reify the colonial project – to stage and represent colonial mastery of places and peoples 'providing the proof of modernity's advancements by contrast with its exotic other' (Landman and Ballard 2010, 8),³ at the same time as rendering invisible its inherent violence.

In addition, a suite of *Survivor* reality television shows was filmed in various Pacific Island locations in ways that continue to exoticise. Anthropologist Lamont Lindstrom describes how 'those ni-Vanuatu hired to meet the incoming cast of *Survivor Vanuatu* were tarted up in face and body paint, leaves, feathers, and grass skirts. Unknown to most viewers, *Survivor Vanuatu's* tribal camps, on the beach south of Efate Island's Samoa Point, were located less than an hour's taxi ride away from several four-star tourist hotels in Port Vila' (2007, 163). Although such primitivist constructions are common to all *Survivor* iterations (not only those in the Pacific), in the Pacific this visual iconography reproduces film's colonial imaginary – its constructed 'difference' between the 'modern' and its 'other'.

Articulating the power of endogenous filmmaking in the Pacific

The late Epeli Hau'ofa, Tongan scholar, writer and founder of the Oceania Centre for the Arts at the University of the South Pacific articulated the importance of the creative arts as vital sites of autonomy and the expression of a regional oceanic imaginary. This regional imaginary, he argued, is essential to redress the belittling forms of representation of the islands that emanate from development and geopolitical frameworks that frame the islands as small, remote and dependent. Hau'ofa wrote (2008, 81):

It is essential therefore for us in Oceania that the creative arts and other forms of cultural production take up what our formal educational institutions have marginalised as nonessential in the world of the twenty-first century. For us they are necessary tools for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy within a homogenising global system. Our social, economic, and political institutions are woven into the larger world system; any free space within will have to be established through creative cultural production.

Here, Hau'ofa builds on the earlier work of Samoan writer Albert Wendt⁴ who argued for the power of 'the imagination in free flight' to articulate Oceania free of the reductive definitions of 'experts and consultants', and free of colonial fantasies that sought 'the Noble savage in a tropical Eden' (Wendt 1976, 49). Such fantasies are strongly evident in early film made in the Pacific (Douglas 1994, 5–7),

and persist in contemporary media discourse (Pearson 2013). Hau'ofa and Wendt's ideas of the political importance of creative expression in imagining an autonomous Pacific region lend resonance to the following arguments made about Pacific film-making.

The importance of Pacific screen sovereignty – of Pacific peoples telling their own stories through film – is strongly articulated by Pasifika filmmakers living in the diaspora, in settler-colonial states like Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia with the ongoing dominance of colonially imposed structures and cultures (Simeï-Barton 1997, 73). Indeed, much of the literature on Indigenous media comes out of and refers to the challenges of Indigenous representation in settler-colonial states (Pearson and Knabe 2015). The ground-breaking *Tala Pasifika* series of short films,⁵ made in New Zealand in the mid-1990s, drew inspiration from Māori film-makers' increasing control over the production of Māori images 'as an intrinsic part of their struggle to assert Māori sovereignty' (Simeï-Barton 1997, 73).⁶

The success and relative independence of Māori film today is built on the pioneering work of Māori film-makers in the 1970s-1990s, notably Barry Barclay (Ngāti Apa), Merata Mita (Ngāi te Rangi/ Ngāti Pīkiao), and Don Selwyn (Ngāti Kuri, Te Aupouri). Mita was the first Māori woman to direct a feature film and was a prolific documentary maker. She was highly influential in establishing the Sundance Institute's Native Lab. Barclay theorised Indigenous film as 'Fourth Cinema',⁷ and articulated key arguments for screen sovereignty in his seminal book, *Our Own Image: A Story of a Māori Filmmaker* (2015). Barclay argued for an Indigenous cinema that is made for Indigenous communities, by those communities, using and developing whatever technical and narrative forms of cinema are relevant for those communities. This articulation of screen sovereignty is echoed in arguments for stronger Pacific representation in film-making.

Pasifika film-makers in settler-colonial states like Aotearoa/New Zealand must engage with educational and funding opportunities still largely organised by the majority white-settler population. This has often meant applying for funds from largely white funding panels, with significant political implications. Writing about the making of *Tala Pasifika*, for example, Simeï-Barton discussed the number of script submissions that seemed to present 'an internalisation of the colonial image of the Pacific' (1997, 74) with scripts containing 'images and stereotypes that were identical to the images of Polynesia constructed by European culture' (1997, 74). In addition, she points out there appeared to be an appetite, among film industry personnel, for stories that corresponded to stereotypical images of violence and social dysfunction, and funders could 'become alarmed when the finished product [did] not support established European images of Pacific Island culture' (Simeï-Barton 1997, 74). Although there is now greater awareness about such marginalising processes (and the New Zealand Film Commission is currently developing a range of diversity policies⁸), struggles over screen sovereignty and decision-making continue. For Pacific film-makers, these struggles intersect with those earlier calls, from Wendt, Hau'ofa and others, for autonomous cultural expression that contributes to reimagining the region.

Support for film production in independent Pacific Island states

The intense debates over cultural appropriation in Disney's *Moana* signal the importance of screen sovereignty in the region (and of the relationship between Indigenous rights and intellectual property more broadly). In addition, while most independent Pacific countries do not have to contend with issues of sovereignty and agency against more dominant settler discourses and practices, they do experience structural marginalization with respect to belittling global narratives of the region and its peoples through popular culture and geopolitics (Hau'ofa 2008).

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on developing the creative industries, including film, in the Pacific Islands. Building on the global discourse exemplified in the UN Creative Economy Reports, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) supported a range of research efforts between 2009 and 2016 exploring the possibilities for the creative industries to diversify island economies and contribute to sustaining culture. Economist David Throsby has argued that the creative economy model could operate efficiently in the Pacific Islands because of the region's well-

established tourism market (now severely impacted by Covid-19); its large diaspora which provides a significant market for Pacific produced cultural goods; and a growing interest in Pasifika cultural events and festivals from audiences regionally and internationally (2015, 377).

SPC consolidated this discussion in major regional proposals for the systematic support of cultural industries through the *Regional Culture Strategy 2010–2020*, a report on *Development and marketing strategies for Pacific cultural industries*, and *The Pacific Culture and Education Strategy 2010–2015* (see Teaiwa and Huffer 2017). At the core of these cultural policy recommendations was the recognition that Pacific customs, practices, and values form the core of cultural industries rationales, support infrastructure, and content – rather than the strongly economic imperatives common to the creative economy discourse (also see Teaiwa 2007).

As part of these efforts, the case for developing a sustainable narrative film and television sector in the Pacific region was explored, and a 2016 report *Cinema Pasifika* was instigated by the SPC and financed by the EU and the Commonwealth Foundation.⁹ This report argued (2016, 5 and 12) that while some governments across the Pacific, like Fiji's, do offer incentives to attract external commercial film productions, and these have economic benefits in terms of the crew spending on location, and potential tourism spin-offs (Fiji offers a 75% tax rebate, recently raised from 47%), these productions have almost no impact in terms of local capacity-building. As Indo-Fijian independent filmmaker, Amol Lal said,

With a lot of these overseas productions, you don't see many locals being employed. They would be doing something like a runner or something but they don't have time to employ someone from Fiji and teach them how to do the job. They do pump in some money but they get 47 per cent back anyway (Pasifika Collective 2016, 12).

In terms of supporting screen sovereignty, therefore, the impact of external film productions would appear to be minimal, and may even support a continued colonisation of the screen.

Yet, the report describes an ambivalence on the part of national governments to invest in the development of a local film industry. The main advantage that governments can see in supporting the industry is the possibility to increase tourism (Douglas 1994, 4), with films seen as a way of advertising the region – with all the problematic cultural politics that entails¹⁰ (Pasifika Collective 2016). This is exemplified in Fiji, where local investment in film is encouraged through differential tax incentives that encourage tourist-friendly representation:

These incentives allow Fiji-based companies to invest in up to half a film's production budget. In return, they receive a tax write-off on company taxes of 150 per cent, or 125 per cent of the invested amount. The higher rate applies if the film shows 'Fiji for Fiji', performing a local cultural and tourism promotion role (Pasifika Collective 2016, 11).

Film Fiji, the nation's film commission, does support capacity building among youth, through the high school Kula Awards, supported by the Ministry of Education, but these have had mixed results. In addition to dance and the visual arts, students can select film as their participation stream, with Film Fiji providing training and support for their projects. The awards and resulting short films are shared through a national social media strategy primarily via Facebook. While this exposure is excellent and connects budding filmmakers directly with audiences, it has not translated into the development of a local film industry with real possibilities for creatives to find and build careers. Neither have local television organisations, like Fiji One, used their positions to provide support to emerging film-makers or local non-commercial production.

The Cinema Pasifika report identified a range of strategies, including national quotas for local content, seed funds and concept development labs, and a regional association to advocate for the audio-visual industry. These are largely envisaged at the level of the nation-state and the report makes the important point that all film industries are subsidized to some extent by national governments (2016, 14). Growth of the industry, beyond tourism promotion, would require effective regulation and financial investment, something that governments appeared reluctant to support: 'In most Pacific Island countries, it was difficult to identify any government representative who

genuinely believes that any significant economic, social or cultural benefits can be provided by supporting the development of the local film and television sector' (10).

The Cinema Pasifika report advocates for a regional film commission that could partially manage regulation, provide seed funding and foster development opportunities. The multi-lateral Arctic Indigenous Film Fund, launched in April 2018¹¹, demonstrates the potential for regional cooperation to support film production, particularly, in this case, of Indigenous communities in a region where access to resources is also very unequal. However, a regional film commission would require financial investment and political will, and Douglas (1994, 18) has pointed to the highly diversified production across the region, cautioning that it cannot be said to constitute a 'regional cinema'. Despite this, Pacific Islanders in Communications (PIC), based in Hawaii, does fund a wide range of film and media production in the region. Its stated aim in its online mission statement is to 'support, advance, and develop Pacific Island media content and talent that results in a deeper understanding of Pacific Island history, culture, and contemporary challenges'.¹² However, its regional reach is limited, contributing to the uneven access to film funding in the region: to qualify for support, one key creative must be from one of the US territories, thus privileging those with US connections and networks to accessing the fund.

In addition, the absence of strong institutions and structures in the audiovisual sector across most Pacific Islands has limited access to external funding and opportunities. A key example is *ACP Cultures +*, a fund administered by ACP, the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States. This fund disburses financial support for cultural production provided by the European Union, as a means of cooperation for development. While this fund was meant to support audiovisual production across the three regions, it has been largely ineffective in the Pacific, apparently due to the limits of regional film infrastructure.

The same Cinema Pasifika report also acknowledged other challenges in terms of a general lack of funding for narrative film and television organisations like PIC; a need to develop commercially viable proposals and access specialist training in production, direction, editing and post-production; no supportive film policy for the development of local content; and uneven educational opportunities (Pasifika Collective 2016). These challenges are echoed by Throsby (2015), who, focusing on commercial viability, points to a lack of resources to support travel to conferences, festivals or events, and a lack of vocational training as additional challenges for developing export-oriented cultural industries. Others have cautioned that these commercial imperatives must be balanced with other considerations concerning heritage and cultural safeguarding, as well as the need for integrating cultural values and epistemologies into any creative developments (Teaiwa 2007).

The role of non-state actors as enablers of film production

In light of the apparent ambivalence of national governments of independent island states towards supporting the film sector, external donors and civil society organisations remain the primary source of support (in terms of both funding and training) for filmmakers in small island states in the Pacific region. Civil society organisations are well understood (within the development literature) to offer flexibility, independence from the state and, sometimes, genuine forms of solidarity and connection, but also to raise questions about accountability and decision-making. In a sense, the support of donors and NGOs for filmmaking in the Pacific generates a *de facto* cultural policy, one that operates from a range of motives and is not formally democratic or accountable, but which provides important opportunities. Below we discuss the motivations and impacts of key non-state actors on film-making in independent island states in the Pacific, while also pointing to ongoing issues of power, agency and accountability.

NGOs, educational institutions and development donors

Development donors play a significant role in supporting film and television production in the Pacific, and their financial support intersects with the work of other NGOs and educational organisations. Often those with media-making skills (like the independent Vanuatu NGO Further Arts/Nesar

Studio) work primarily to produce material for NGOs. The influence of the development imaginary is evident in the wide range of documentaries and educational material produced in the region. In some cases, development organisations (supported by external donors) offer very important sites of capacity-building in film and media, but the content of their work sits, almost exclusively, within a development framework focused on social or environmental issues.

Wan Smolbag, for example, is a large, Vanuatu-based NGO (with over 100 employees) almost entirely funded by donor organisations such as Australian Aid, the New Zealand Aid Programme, and the Asian Development Bank. Wan Smolbag works across a range of development issues and uses a wide range of approaches, but it is particularly known for its high-quality work in theatre and film. In particular, it is behind the hugely popular television series *Love Patrol* (which ran for eight seasons). *Love Patrol* is a soap opera edutainment that deals with issues of sexual and reproductive health, notably HIV-AIDS, and other issues such as youth unemployment, and police brutality. The series is written and directed by ex-pat British dramatists Jo Dorras and Peter Walker who live and work in Vanuatu, but there is a strong focus on capacity development, with most actors also taking roles in sound, lighting, music, costume and other areas of production. In addition to *Love Patrol*, Wan Smolbag has made a number of feature films, all of them as edutainment, focusing on social messages but with strong scripts and high production values. As such, Wan Smolbag plays a significant role in education and training for those working in audio-visual media, but with a somewhat restricted content.

Also drawing on donor support for development-focused media production is the Centre for Social and Creative Media (CSCM) at the University of Goroka, in Papua New Guinea. The CSCM focuses its work 'around the use and application of media and communication for individuals and communities', and aims to [give] a voice to the community through the use of media and developing local research and development approaches'.¹³ CSCM has worked concertedly over the last decade to build capacity in film and media, particularly that of women filmmakers. Short films are often taken into communities to generate dialogue about social issues such as gender-based violence, but films have also travelled within the regional film festival circuit, being shown at festivals in Hawaii, New Caledonia and New Zealand; and some have been shown on the Australia Plus television network. The Centre has developed a number of film projects, significant because of their scope (with multiple short films being made and a feature film), and because of its support of female filmmakers.¹⁴ The films are all based around social issues and have been supported by development organisations like UNDP and Australian Aid, and also, sometimes, by local authorities.

The Centre for Social and Creative Media (CSCM) and Wan Smolbag are important sites of capacity development and opportunity for audio-visual media in the region. Their reputation and longevity and their institutional structures enable them to secure donor funds for film projects and to develop film-making capacity over time. They are also notable for their reliance on donor support for media productions. While this in itself is not problematic, if development donor support is the *only* source of funding available for film production in the Pacific, and the only films getting funded are based on social issues, then this runs the risk of producing a reductive filmic imaginary and reproducing aspect of film's colonial history in the Pacific. It also, inadvertently, inhibits the development of an understanding of the commercial realities of film production and financing (Pasifika Collective 2016, 16) as all productions are fully funded with no expectation of financial return.

By far the largest volume of film produced in the Pacific is documentary.¹⁵ This was also the case during the colonial era, where film was associated with shooting 'authentic live action footage shot in exotic locations' (Barsam, cited in Landman and Ballard 2010, 12), while merging 'the real' with the desire to portray 'the exotic'. Filmmaker and media scholar Sarina Pearson has considered the influence of those practices on contemporary Pacific filmmakers, drawn to documentary to 'set the record straight' (cited in Landman and Ballard 2010, 13) and as an appropriate mode for political practices and 'the advocacy of minority rights' (Landman and Ballard 2010, 13). Pearson notes the problematization of this in a 'documentary' field already saturated with colonised images and the 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols 1992) in relation to documentaries, that is, their implicit assumption of instrumental

power, and their role in discourses of ‘social and national improvement’ (Landman and Ballard 2010, 14).

Not all development organisations require a social engagement focused on their support of media production in the region. In 2017, Commonwealth Writers (the cultural arm of the Commonwealth Foundation) supported the production of six short films in Papua New Guinea and Tonga. Commonwealth Writers also supported the drafting of the *Cinema Pasifika* report in 2016, and, based on that report, it noted ‘the richness of the Pacific Island region’s unique stories, its storytelling tradition and the raw talent for film making’ but also ‘a lack of investment and support to transform the stories and talent into commercially viable film and television products’. As a result, (and with advocacy from the SPC), the organization funded the *Pacific Voices* project,¹⁶ to produce six short films albeit with small budgets and narrow time-frames.

The films produced dealt with a range of personal experiences, and enabled filmmakers to plan and develop a larger scale production than they had previously, and to learn from working with a professional (New Zealand) crew. The use of a professional crew enabled *Pacific Voices* films to be developed and shot in a tight time-frame but with high production values. This has no doubt contributed to their circulation through regional film festivals,¹⁷ which may instigate new opportunities for the filmmakers involved. Indeed, one of the filmmakers from *Pacific Voices*, ‘Ofa-ki-Levuka Guttenbeil Likiliki, went on to participate as a director in the montage feature film *Vai*, supported by the New Zealand Film Commission.¹⁸ However, the short time-frame, the use of an external crew, and the one-off nature of the project seems to limit the extent of capacity-building beyond the length of the project, or beyond the writer/director involved.

Culture-based NGOs, cottage industries and emerging training schemes

Outside these more dominant platforms, a small range of innovative, independent initiatives do exist that suggest alternative production possibilities. In the Marshall Islands, filmmakers Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaru run Microwave Films, a small production company that produces dramatic features on a low budget (around USD1000 per film) with a lot of volunteer assistance. The films are sold cheaply, locally, on DVDs, and they are hugely popular, not only in the Marshall Islands but also across Micronesia (Pasifika Collective 2016, 39–40). One of their features *The Sound of Crickets at Night* (2012), screened at a number of international film festivals. Sukwadi Media, based in the Solomon Islands, is an independent production house focusing on documentaries.

In Kiribati, for over 20 years until the passing of filmmaker John Anderson in 2016, the Nei Tabera ni Kai Kiribati video unit was run by Anderson and his partner Linda Uan. It produced edutainment, documentaries and recordings for government, NGOs and a wide variety of development, human rights and creative projects. With the support of several national and international sponsors, including AusAID, the UK, Australian and New Zealand High Commissions and UNESCO, they also produced a feature film with a strong educational and moral lesson for the many I-Kiribati men working as seamen on international vessels titled *Ana Reta Te Kaimoa* (1998).

In Guåhan/Guam, an ‘unincorporated US-territory’ on which the USA maintains a massive military base, the Indigenous production house Nih! produces culture-based children’s programming (online and on television) that seeks to affirm Indigenous Chamorro identity, and to foster connections between culture, identity, land and ocean (see <https://www.nihiguam.org/mission>). Nih! is run as a non-profit and works with educators, and conservation organisations to develop high-quality children’s programming.

While residents of Guåhan/Guam can train in film or media at US institutions, Chamorro filmmakers Kel and Don Muña have also developed a number of courses at the University of Guam to enable greater on-island training (see <https://www.munabros.com/>). The brothers also established the Guam International Film Festival in 2011 to both showcase local production and build the Guam film community, and its international connections.

Diversifying film production through Indigenous Oceanic networks

In this context, with little to no government support for filmmaking in most Pacific Island states, and with the clear influence of development frameworks in existing capacity-building spaces, a key challenge is how to support filmmakers across the region in ways that help to really diversify film production and to counter existing inequalities in training, resourcing and opportunity. While the independent organisations mentioned in the previous section offer possibilities, here we focus on the emergence of Indigenous Oceanic networks that connect filmmakers in the islands with resources and opportunities in settler-colonial states. While power dynamics still exist in such relationships, an ethic of mutual support and exchange in service of Indigenous storytelling across the ocean is also evident. These networks operate largely outside the state cultural policy apparatus although they do strategically draw on state funding when it is both available and appropriate.

The Māoriland Film Festival (MFF)¹⁹ is a notable example here. The largest Indigenous film festival in the Southern Hemisphere the MFF runs every March out of Ōtaki, Aotearoa/New Zealand. It screens films made by Indigenous peoples from Aotearoa and around the world, and includes important networking and development opportunities. It shares connections with other Indigenous film organisations, such as Canada's ImaginNATIVE Festival and the International Sámi Film Institute. In 2019, it offered its first Indigenous filmmaker's residency.

The MFF runs a training and networking programme called *Through Our Lens* in which young Māori film-makers travel to run filmmaking workshops with other young Indigenous film-makers globally. In 2017, they travelled to Samoa, Hawaii', Rarotonga and Tahiti, and returned to Rarotonga in 2018, and made several collaborative short films which were then screened to communities. This was described on the MFF website not only as a development opportunity for young filmmakers but also for them to gain awareness of their place within the Pacific, within Te Moananui a Kiwa: 'to create new connections that would bind our upcoming filmmakers across our great ocean. And as a consequence, to better understand for themselves how we Māori are connected with the other peoples of the Pacific'.²⁰

This project (initiated by Indigenous filmmakers in a settler-colonial state) is, therefore, partly motivated by kinship connections shaped by shared histories and cultures (Teaiwa and Mallon 2006, 437). It aimed to work both horizontally, across the Pacific, demonstrating whanaungatanga (mutually enriching relationships based on kinship and reciprocity) informed by recognition of Kiwa as a common ancestor, and intergenerationally, strengthening the capacities of the younger generation to make films; and aiming to develop rangatiratanga (leadership) for young Māori as filmmakers in the region. *Through Our Lens* aims to build relationships and develop skills, rather than create films with high production values. As such, its films are unlikely to travel beyond communities although they are screened each year at the Māoriland Film Festival. However, the relationships built have the potential to evolve and strengthen and to generate further opportunities for those involved.

In addition to this programme, the networking opportunities for filmmakers screening their films at the Māoriland Film Festival can be considerable. In 2019, Papua New Guinean filmmaker Diane Anton showed her feature film (*Aliko and Ambai*) at MFF, and it was subsequently taken up and screened on Māori Television (Indigenous public television channel in NZ) and Anton was interviewed for Radio New Zealand²¹. In addition, following their attendance at MFF in 2019, Solomon Island filmmakers Regina and Georgianna (Jojo) Lepping were invited to the 4th World Indigenous Media Lab at Montana's Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in 2020, providing further capacity-building and networking opportunities. The Cinema Pasifika report underlines the importance of international festivals (2016, 29–31) for getting one's work known, making connections and finding further opportunities. Festivals are also sites where less commercial work can find an audience and, as in the case of Māoriland, where films with lower production values can be screened, shared and enjoyed.

The practices of intra-regional connection across the ocean, enacted in the *Through Our Lens* project and, in the broader connections available through the festival itself, defy the regional contours of nation-states established through colonisation and enact an expansive Oceanic imaginary of circulation and exchange that resonates with Hau'ofa and Wendt's calls for redefining the region through

creative practice. It is also significant that solidarity in film-making is articulated through connections between Indigenous nations, not between states. The 2021 promotional material for the Māoriland Film Festival, for example, celebrates '120 films from 80 indigenous nations'.²² As media scholar Jo Smith writes in relation to Oceania, such sites and cultural products can be seen as 'communication landscapes that offer the materials to build community and affiliation across differences and distances that have been relentlessly (repetitively, obsessively) inscribed as the norm' (2011, 129).

These projects are articulated within a network of Indigenous solidarity and are industry-based rather than 'development'-based, with a consequent investment in the craft of filmmaking, in celebrating a range of diverse stories and voices, and in global networking with other film communities. They operate from a sense of reciprocity and mutual benefit in the fostering of Pacific filmmaking. In this sense, they seem to offer possibilities for longer-term engagement, capacity-development and productive relationships among Pacific filmmakers. However, they remain dependent on the availability of funding in settler-colonial states, and on the ongoing commitment of Indigenous filmmakers with greater access to resources. A significant imbalance in power remains, despite intentions towards horizontality. While MFF and related programs such as *Through Our Lens* build and strengthen kinships that reflect shared histories and cultures, that they emanate from Aotearoa/New Zealand mirrors, in turn, wider power relations with Pacific islands and nations.

These practices of mentoring and exchange, informed by a relational and decolonising politics of engagement, may not serve as an official 'cultural policy'. Neither are these networks formally accountable, and power inequalities inevitably exist although accountability exists within the act of relationship itself. However, they demonstrate some factors that could productively contribute to any Oceanic cultural policy to support film production. These include an ethic of horizontality; strategies of mutual sharing, exchange, and mentorship; and a recognition of the historical and contemporary politics of colonisation in the region and its ongoing effects on cultural producers. These factors connect with a conceptualisation of Oceania as 'an intellectual and imaginary space, inspired by "the real" and embedded in specific locations, a concept that stresses connectedness across space and time, and a concept that draws one into a relationship with others, without privileging a single view point' (Smith 2011, 121).

Such connectivity and mutual support could be enhanced by a regional Indigenous film fund that provides seed grants and development-lab support. Although it would be preferable to run such a programme face-to-face, the improvisations necessitated by Covid-19 have demonstrated the possibility for online mentoring. In addition, a network of existing film festivals such as Māoriland and Wairoa (in Aotearoa), Pasifika Film Festival (Australia), FIFO (Tahiti), and the Hawaii' and Guam International Film Festivals could support emerging festivals like Native Lens (Solomon Islands) and Te Kūki 'Āirani (Cook Islands). Horizontal exchange importantly implies opportunities for filmmakers in island states to travel so that networking opportunities do not only accrue to those with greater access to resources. This includes travel for training opportunities, and this is where individual governments need to expand their tertiary education scholarship provisions to include education in the creative industries.

Conclusion

Filmmaking in the Pacific is dynamic and changing. The articulation of film's efficacy and power differs across the region, but film is an increasingly important medium for fostering diverse imaginaries, and for countering both the historical colonial filmic imaginary, as well as contemporary forms of reductive representation, stereotyping, and exoticism. However, the resources and opportunities to tell and share stories from the Pacific through film are uneven, and are far greater in settler-colonial states. Films in the Pacific are made mostly by Pasifika filmmakers based in the diaspora or by foreign filmmakers who may reinforce reductive tropes and to which Indigenous Pacific Island filmmakers currently have a limited right of reply.

Despite arguments for the strengthening of the creative industries in small island states, national governments across much of the Pacific region show little interest in investing in the film industry unless for clear commercial gain – despite policy articulations that recommend a more culturally embedded approach – and there is currently no regional film association to regulate or develop an industry.

In this context, non-state actors take on an increased importance in supporting capacity-building and brokering opportunities, enacting a de facto cultural policy. Their approach tends to take two forms: supporting media training for development (capacity-building in filmmaking for projects that promote communication about issues of human rights, health, education, or environment), and a platform driven more by solidarity and the desire to promote Indigenous film production locally, regionally and globally.

Educational institutions and NGOs (such as Wan Smolbag and CSCM) have a significant role in developing capacity in filmmaking in the region, and they demonstrate the capacity of film to build engagement around key social issues, but the predominance of donor funding limits the possibilities for a more diversified film production in those sites. In addition, the donor-funded models may inhibit the emergence of more commercially focused production or the generation of other kinds of financing and networking (Pasifika Collective 2016).

While we do not contest the enormous value of using film as a communicative development tool, networks and structures aligned with Indigenous filmmaking seem to offer an inspiring platform for the creation of independent film that moves towards a political horizon of screen sovereignty. We recognize that power dynamics will inevitably be part of such Indigenous platforms also, and questions of power and accountability remain, but they may offer more horizontal possibilities for exchange.

Regional Indigenous networks, which move beyond state-oriented South-South connections to focus specifically on Indigenous connections, unsettle North/South, centre/periphery dynamics, and seem to propose a horizontal praxis based on whanaungatanga, where relationships and mutual support of Indigenous filmmakers in the region are central. Indigenous film industry connections and a sense of a shared filmmaking agenda – whether that be articulated as regional visibility or Indigenous kinship, support the development of film production in the region. These platforms are still incipient, but seem to suggest that non-state actors, using the resources of the state, but identifying more with Indigenous ‘nations’ and with the region, may offer important possibilities for developing a diversified film production in the Pacific. In addition, they articulate forms of relationality and reciprocity that should be brought into formal policy structures developed by industry networks and/or state actors.

Notes

1. The major issue with the *Creative Economy Reports*’ claim that ‘developing’ countries’ share in the global economy is growing is that this is misleading: the vast majority of that growth is caused by China, the biggest exporter of creative goods in the world, while ‘least-developing countries’ and ‘small island developing states’ see very little growth in creative industry exports (De Beukelaer 2014).
2. The Merata Mita Fellowship, launched in 2016, is named after the late Māori film-maker Merata Mita, who served as an advisor and artistic director of the Sundance Institute NativeLab from 2000 to 2009. Fellows receive a monetary grant and a year of support, which includes a trip to the Sundance Film Festival, mentorship, and access to various services offered by the Sundance Institute. See: <https://www.sundance.org/programs/indigenous-program>.
3. Although Landman and Ballard also note that attention to the contexts of reception helps to reveal ways in which interpretation and audience engagement may have contested or disrupted a straight narrative of domination and control, with film possibly becoming a ‘middle ground’ between cultures (2010, 10).
4. Two of Wendt’s fictional works were made into feature films in Aotearoa/New Zealand: his novel *Sons for the Return Home*, and stories from *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree: And Other Stories*.
5. The series can be viewed here: <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/tala-pasifika-1995/series>.
6. That struggle continues to be articulated through the national Māori Television network and through two prominent Indigenous film festivals (Māoriland and Wairoa) held annually in Aotearoa/New Zealand which emphasise the distinctiveness of Indigenous film, and build networks of solidarity with Indigenous communities. In 2018, the New Zealand Film Commission launched its first official strategy for collaborating with, and supporting, Māori film-makers ‘Te Ruataki 2018–2021’.

7. Although debate about the term Fourth Cinema continues (Pearson and Knabe 2015), it is taken to refer to a 'cinema that seeks to establish the pre-eminence of the voice of the indigenous' (Milligan 2015, 351).
8. In 2019, NZFC launched He Ara Development Fund that supports established filmmakers to tell Māori and Pacific Island stories on screen. New Zealand teams or companies who apply must have a history, which shows that they are 'established', and they must also meet certain representation requirements (for either Māori or Pacific Island stories).
9. The report is based on interviews with 90 different stakeholders in seven PI countries: Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, PNG, and the Marshall Islands.
10. One of the arguments made for investment into the cultural industries in the Pacific is that 'most of [tourism's] promotion has been done on the back of cultural industries, with no direct economic returns to cultural producers' but it is also recognised that 'tourism provides the main income source for most cultural producers' (George and Mitchell 2012, 22). Given the significance of the Pacific tourism industry to island economies, and the interdependence of these sectors, ensuring that the industry grows in ways that are culturally sustainable is important to avoid cultural commodification.
11. International partners in Canada (Nunavut Film Development Corporation; Canada Media Fund), Greenland (Greenland Film Makers), Sápmi (International Sámi Film Institute) and Russia (Archy Film, Yakutia) have joined to create the fund, which will support the development and production of indigenous film projects in the Arctic region, as well as support co-productions and build capacity through collaborations with film institutions, companies, producers and universities. See <http://aiff.no>.
12. See: <https://www.piccom.org/pages/history-mission>.
13. See: <http://www.unigoroka.ac.pg/research/cscm.html>.
14. These include the *Pawa Meri* documentary series (six documentaries by six female directors, showcasing six inspiring women, role models in their respective communities); the *Yumi Kirapim Senis* (six short films highlighting stories of gender-based violence and other social issues, and the successes of work being done by individuals and organisations to combat those issues); and the development of a full-length narrative feature film, *Aliko & Ambai*, part of a gender-based violence project but which also trained students in every phase of feature film production. The latter aimed to encourage the ongoing production of low-budget feature films in PNG.
15. Within Indigenous cinema globally, short films, experimental films, and documentaries tend to dominate, but there are far fewer feature-length dramatic productions due to issues of resourcing and training although this is beginning to change (Pearson and Knabe 2015, 8–10).
16. See <http://www.commonwealthwriters.org/our-projects/pacific-voices>.
17. Four of the films were selected to screen at the Hawaii International Film Festival, and all six screened at the Māoriland Film Festival in Aotearoa.
18. *Vai* (Whippy, Whippy and Guttenbeil-Likiliki et al. 2019) is a portmanteau feature film with 8 vignettes directed by 9 Pacific women, who live in, or are citizens of, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and hence eligible for NZFC funding. See: <https://www.nzfilm.co.nz/films/vai>.
19. The Māoriland Film Festival has a vision, to 'celebrate[s] Indigenous voices and storytelling in film'. It brings together filmmakers and industry professionals from Indigenous communities around the world for a programme of screenings, workshops and special events, and has strong links with Indigenous film-makers in settler-colonial states: in Australia, the USA, Canada and in the Nordic states.
20. See: <http://maorilandfilm.co.nz/views-from-te-moananui-a-kiwa>.
21. See: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/386753/png-film-challenges-repression-of-women>.
22. See: <https://maorilandfilm.co.nz>.

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