

The Oceanian Documentary Film: A New Form of Resistance

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Abstract The Oceania Documentary Film Festival has been held annually in Tahiti since 2004. Known as FIFO, it celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2023 and now has an established reputation. The festival's success is based on the development of Oceania documentary filmmaking, which has enabled filmmakers from Pacific communities to be proactive in building a shared identity. Environmental issues, the struggle for language preservation and gender issues are among the topics covered since the festival's inception. In two decades of evolution, these identity-related productions have become militant, using the globalisation of images to bring the voices of Pacific peoples.

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The Oceanian Documentary Film festival has been held annually in Tahiti since 2004. Known as FIFO, it celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2023, and now has a well-established reputation. The festival's success is based on the developing production of Oceanian documentary films, which has enabled directors from Pacific communities to be proactive in the construction of a shared identity. Environmental concerns, the fight to preserve languages, gender issues, are among the themes featured from the Festival's beginnings. Over twenty years of evolution, these identity-related productions have become militant, using the globalisation of images to carry the voices of Pacific peoples...

The International Festival of Oceanian Documentary Film (Festival International du Film Océanien, or FIFO) originated in Pape'ete, Tahiti, in 2004. It grew from a desire to hear the voices of Pacific peoples, by allowing them to tell their stories from their own perspectives. "To enable the audiences to hear and to see Oceania" (quoted by Chaumeau 2011),¹ according to Wallès Kotra, one of the festival's co-founders. To the great surprise of the organisers, the festival met with instant success, creating strong interest among the local population. This enthusiasm has become an indicator of a particular phenomenon: Polynesians are curious, greedy for images of the region and especially keen to discover how Pacific communities live.

The prime objective of the festival was to allow Oceanians to create their own audiovisual content and to show themselves, and especially to make themselves heard. "FIFO is a little voice rising up in the distant ocean to be listened to", explains Heremoana Maamaa-tuiaiautapu, a co-founder of the festival (Chaumeau 2011).² But as the years have passed, the festival has revealed another reality: the emergence of an Oceanian consciousness, of a growing sense of identity, a second phase of cultural renewal, that is no longer of interest only to intellectuals and artists, but to entire populations in their daily lives. In a very concrete way, this festival has allowed the creation of an Indigenous branch of audiovisual production, even if - as Tahitian writer Chantal Spitz has stressed (Spitz 2019) - there is still a great deal to be achieved. It has also enabled the showing in Tahiti, and throughout the region, of Pacific documentaries made by Pacific Islanders.

Often quoted at each year's festival, Epeli Hau'ofa's dictum transcends the event and feeds into a growing awareness: "We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom" (Hau'ofa 1994, 160). By circulating stories and tales of the whole

1 "Donner à entendre et à voir l'Océanie".

2 "Le Festival international du film océanien, c'est la petite voix qui s'élève loin là-bas dans l'Océan pour se faire entendre".

Pacific, FIFO is in fact extending to Polynesians the idea that we are not small isolated communities, but one people of the Pacific, with customs, ways of life, and above all ways of thinking that unite us. As Bruno Saura has pointed out, the name “Te moananui a Hiva” used in Tahiti, even if relatively recent, reflects a desire to cease using a Western term and to replace it with a conception of the world and of this space that connects with Polynesian tradition. Among other things, this allows the use of a name with shared origins: “Te moana nui a Kiwa” for Aotearoa-New Zealand, and “Te moana o Kiva” for Rarotonga (Saura 2022). This identifies Polynesian space as a whole, as the “sea of islands” dear to Epeli Hau’ofa, rather than as separate islands, cut off or even lost in the region named “the Pacific” by Westerners. This point is also featured and much more developed in Chantal Spitz’s consideration of representation in her “Essay. For the emergence of an Indigenous cinema in the Pacific”. The creation of an Indigenous network aims to liberate an Indigenous voice, and especially to set it free from the exotic set ideas and other tired clichés that still mark audiovisual productions concerning the region. Even though there is still a long way to go to create an audiovisual network, particularly in Tahiti, this gathering of local images gives an Oceanian perspective to the productions, and in particular to the problems featured and the solutions that are envisaged.

In fact, some of the recurrent themes of FIFO, such as rising sea levels, the proliferation of plastics in the ocean we rely on for sustenance, or the over-exploitation of natural resources, bring about heightened awareness that is sometimes a trigger for solutions that inspire local people and authorities. This is typically the case with environmental problems, which have global but also regional impacts: take, for example, the sad sight of the plastic-littered beaches of Hawai’i, but also Bora-Bora or Kiribati, shown in Craig Leeson’s *A Plastic Ocean* (2016), or Karina Holden’s *Blue* (2017). These are shocking images that lead to raised awareness: plastic bags have been outlawed in Tahiti since 2022, with local solutions promoted, such as bags made of recycled tarpaulins or, even better, locally-crafted pandanus bags.

Another striking example, Briar March and Lyn Collie’s film *There Once was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho* (2008), had a strong impact on viewers: these Kiribati islands sinking under the sea could be any of the Pacific’s communities. In 2023, this documentary was part of the retrospective selection marking the festival’s 20th anniversary, and was presented as one of the strongest in its history. Faced with the climate emergency, images of Oceania in a state of environmental distress are rolled out every year in Tahiti, highlighting concerns, but also sometimes inspiring local solutions.

While environmental themes are very much to the fore in Oceanian documentaries, they also deal frequently with social and cultural

issues, notably questions of gender, that are more specific to the region. In 2004, the jury's Grand Prize went to the film *Mahu, the Effeminate* (Corillion 2001) which invites the audience to listen to "those people who are called Mahu, following them in their everyday lives, something which has allowed the producers to create nuanced and sincere portraits of a few individuals who are normally seen through their quiriness and their mannerisms, forgetting that behind the surface image there are genuine personalities living singular lives".³

In 2015, Joey Wilson and Dean Hamer's Hawai'ian film *Kumu Hina* took out the audience prize and the jury Grand Prize, an exceptional double... "The film tells the story of Colin Wong's transformation, from shy schoolboy to married woman and cultural adviser for a school living in Honolulu".⁴ Beyond the gender issues and the difficulties Hina encounters, this documentary also deals with her recognition as a cultural leader and her fight in defence of Hawai'ian specificities.

In 2018, another film by Wilson and Hamer, *Joey and the Leitis*, was awarded a special prize by the jury. This film deals with the more complex situation of transgender people in the kingdom of Sāmoa and tells the story of Joey Joleen Siosaia Winston Churchill Mataaele, who is confronted by the prejudices and strong convictions of religious believers.

In 2019, two films on gender issues featured. The first, from New Zealand director Mitchell Hawkes, *Born This Way: Awa's Story*, tells the story of young Awa, who wants to "inspire people, to push them to be themselves, and I want to change the way transgender people are seen".⁵ The second film, *Les Étoiles me suffisent* (The Stars Will Do), gives transgender Tahitians the opportunity to talk about their daily lives "from the inside". Director Éliane Koller gave her three Tahitian protagonists cameras to film themselves over a two-year period, something that gives us a sensitive view of their daily lives.

Year after year, this subject is presented from different angles, and in particular from within different communities, which allows us to understand the specificities of each country. The situation in Sāmoa seems far more complex than it is in Tahiti, for example, where the

³ "[C]eux que l'on désigne Mahu, en les suivant dans leur vie quotidienne, que l'équipe de réalisation a pu dégager un portrait tout en nuances et conforme de quelques personnages dont on a l'habitude de repérer les frasques ou les 'manières', en oubliant que derrière l'image offerte, il y a une véritable personnalité au vécu singulier". Cf. http://www.film-documentaire.fr/4DACTION/w_fiche_film/45432_1.

⁴ "Le film raconte la transformation de Colin Wong, lycéen timide, devenu Hina, femme mariée et 'Kumu' à Honolulu".

⁵ "[I]nspirer les gens, les pousser à être eux-mêmes, et je veux changer la vision des gens sur les personnes transgenres". Cf. <https://www.maisondelaculture.pf/fifo-2019-born-this-way-awas-story/>.

churches are far more tolerant. This does not of course mean that the situation of *mahu* does not have its own challenges in Tahiti. But it is clear that the showing of these films, generally accompanied by debates and meetings with the protagonists, facilitates a call for greater tolerance. One interesting fact to note, in 2023, for the first time, a ministerial portfolio for gender issues was established, and for Pride Month, special events took place in French Polynesia, proof of a progressive evolution in attitudes toward these questions.

And so over the festival's twenty years, certain tendencies can be seen emerging from the main recurring themes of Oceanian documentaries, notably societal and environmental concerns, but equally in young directors' increasing commitment year by year to audiovisual productions. It is essential that these young people take up the role of speaking on behalf of their communities, like the young Marquesan Heretu Tetahiotupa whose audiovisual projects work to promote recognition of the culture of *Henua Enata*, and especially of its language. There is here another massive task, happily, at the heart of Oceanian directors' documentaries: the use of Indigenous languages. *Patutiki*, by Heretu Tetahiotupa and Christophe Cordier is entirely in Marquesan... a deeply symbolic and inspiring choice for this film about tattooing. This is one of the distinctive traits of Oceanian productions over the last ten years: an increasing impulsion to use local languages, a growing demand, a crying out against the generalised acceptance of globalisation. This is in fact how Wallès Kotra defines the festival: "FIFO is a crying out" (Triay 2012). It is also "an atoll of remission in the face of intractable globalisation, a new kind of navigational pathway over our sea of islands" for Heremoana Maamaatuaiahutapu (Rabréaud 2021).⁶

For these Oceanians, the documentary film becomes an act of revendication, of militantism, of resistance. Images create awareness, words sensitise. Much more than 'telling our stories', Oceanian directors are using the genre to carry a message, a sense of urgency, of combat. Oceanian documentaries have been waging an impact campaign over a number of years... since 2018 various initiatives have been featured there, such as the "Good Pitch". Conferences and workshops linked to the multi-platform impact campaigns are also organised. One such conference was held in 2020, on the theme of *The Impact Documentary: A Tool for Change*. Directors from Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, Rapa Nui and Tahiti attended. The objective of this new generation was clearly evident: to highlight a change and to be the tool for that change. The documentary film provides a means to create awareness, and to then bring pressure to bear and

⁶ "[U]n atoll de rémission dans la mondialisation intractable, une route de navigation d'un nouveau genre sur notre océan d'îles".

to educate people... and audiences are called upon to work toward concrete change. In 2004, FIFO was the answer to a need, the need to allow Oceanians to occupy the audiovisual space and to direct and produce their own films. Twenty years later, the network is opening up a new dimension, clearly using images as a means of militating for the recognition or preservation of Indigenous cultures. But it must be recognised that these ambitions are often held back by the economic reality of documentary production, which is still strongly dependent on television and by the norms that medium imposes. While images travel freely, producing them is very costly, even more so in this 'sea of islands' where time is essential to free expression.

What is required in the audiovisual field goes beyond the simple economic framework needed to develop a network, beyond artistic considerations. The Oceanian documentary film is increasingly anchored in a societal and committed, even philosophical dynamic. Whereas in 2004 globalisation and the fear of becoming invisible were the principal basis for developing FIFO, in 2023 that same globalisation is, on the contrary, becoming a positive factor for Oceanian documentaries. Images are nowadays distributed worldwide, and much more readily thanks to the development of various platforms. Images from Tahiti travel from Paris to Auckland, creating a network of international connections transmitting Oceanian works. Rather than merely making the multitudes of islands visible, this transmission of images is allowing the emergence of an Oceanian consciousness, and reconnecting communities that through their history and colonisation have lost the links that united them prior to the arrival of Europeans and their languages. As Michel Perez points out,

it is the major colonial languages that have been the most completely imposed: French (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and, partly, Vanuatu), English everywhere else. These are the languages of school, of administration, and of the media. Even if few Oceanians speak them fluently, they know they are an indispensable tool for social advancement. They are thus a serious threat to Oceanian languages: young people are turning away from them and those that are lesser spoken are in danger of total extinction. (Perez 2013, 96)⁷

7 "[C]e sont les grandes langues coloniales qui se sont le plus complètement imposées: français (Nouvelle-Calédonie, Wallis-et-Futuna, Polynésie française et partiellement Vanuatu), anglais partout ailleurs. Ces langues sont celles de l'école et de l'administration, on les retrouve dans les médias, et même si peu d'Océaniens les parlent couramment, ils savent qu'elles sont l'outil indispensable à toute promotion sociale. Elles constituent de ce fait une grave menace pour les langues océaniques: la jeunesse les délaisse et les moins parlées sont en danger d'extinction totale". Transl. by the Author.

While the daily use of English and French has brought about a real division between Oceanian peoples, renewed appreciation of Indigenous languages, particularly Polynesian languages, is allowing Pacific communities to reconnect, notably through documentary films.

In addition to the fact that Tahitians, Hawai'ians and Māori can understand one another and recognise shared words when they speak together in their Indigenous languages, this exchange allows them to discover their strong cultural and ideological connections. Their world view, their relationship to Nature, are the same. And it is highly likely that this is what has made for the immense success of FIFO. Polynesian audiences love FIFO because they are curious to see how their Pacific cousins live. The festival gives them the opportunity to become aware of their belonging within a vast community, even more vast than they imagined. "Oceania is us, it exists when Oceanians come together", as co-founder Wallès Kotra repeats each year.⁸

The full meaning of the legacy of Māori film-maker Merata Mita is revealing itself. It is undeniable that in having to swim against the current, Oceanians have grown in strength. They are now entering a phase of resistance, using images to speak out and defend their identity. Even if there is still much to do to move beyond the legacy of colonial history, the emergence of a shared consciousness is the beginning of a renaissance that will be accompanied by documentary as well as artistic and literary films.

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⁸ "L'Océanie n'existe pas. Elle existe lorsque les Océaniens se rencontrent", cf. <https://www.fifotahiti.com/fifo-2020-un-festival-engage-a-porter-la-voix-des-oceaniens/>.

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