



The Construction of Female Leadership Through Polynesian Cultural Values in Disney's *Moana*

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Abstract

Because more and more movies feature leaders from a variety of cultural backgrounds, leadership has emerged as one of the most popular subjects in literary and cultural studies. By incorporating indigenous Polynesian cultural values into the development of its female protagonist, Disney's *Moana* (2016) presents a unique example of leadership. This study focuses on how Polynesian cultural values construct female leadership, in contrast to earlier research that looked at cultural representation or female identity separately. The goal of this study is to examine how Polynesian cultural values are portrayed and elucidate how *Moana's* leadership is influenced by these values throughout the narrative. The *Moana* movie served as the main source of data for this study, which used a descriptive qualitative method. Through the use of documentation techniques, information about leadership and cultural values was gathered through the observation of conversations, visual images, character interactions, and narrative events. Northouse's leadership theory, Ka'iili's concept of Polynesian cultural values, and Barker's theory of cultural representation were used to analyze the data. The results show that respect for ancestors, traditional navigation, community responsibility, harmony with nature, and group decision-making are examples of Polynesian cultural values. These cultural values have a big impact on how *Moana* develops her leadership traits, which include bravery, empathy, accountability, teamwork, resilience, and dedication to the good of the community. The movie portrays leadership as a cultural practice based on service, accountability, and social harmony rather than as dominance or authority. As a result, *Moana* represents an alternative model of female leadership based on indigenous customs in addition to promoting Polynesian culture.

Keywords: Disney's *Moana*, Indigenous Values, Polynesian Culture, Female Leadership, And Cultural Representation

Abstrak

Karena film sering menampilkan sosok pemimpin dari berbagai latar belakang budaya, kepemimpinan menjadi salah satu topik yang banyak dipelajari dalam studi sastra dan budaya. Dengan mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai budaya Polinesia ke dalam perkembangan karakter utama perempuan dalam film animasi *Moana* (2016) produksi Disney, penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana nilai-nilai budaya Polinesia membentuk kepemimpinan perempuan. Ini berbeda dengan penelitian sebelumnya yang lebih banyak membahas representasi budaya atau identitas perempuan secara terpisah. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis representasi kepemimpinan perempuan melalui nilai-nilai budaya Polinesia. Film *Moana* berfungsi sebagai sumber data utama penelitian ini, dan metode deskriptif kualitatif digunakan. Proses dokumentasi digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data, yang melibatkan pengamatan interaksi antartokoh, representasi visual, dialog, dan peristiwa naratif yang berkaitan dengan nilai-nilai budaya dan kepemimpinan. Setelah itu, data dianalisis menggunakan teori representasi budaya Barker, konsep nilai-nilai budaya Polinesia dari Ka'iili, dan teori kepemimpinan Northouse. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penghormatan kepada leluhur, tradisi, dan nilai-nilai budaya Polinesia direpresentasikan. Kepemimpinan *Moana* dibentuk oleh nilai-nilai budaya, yang ditunjukkan dengan keberanian, empati, tanggung jawab, kemampuan bekerja sama, ketangguhan, dan komitmen terhadap kesejahteraan masyarakat. Film ini menggambarkan kepemimpinan sebagai praktik budaya yang didasarkan pada pengabdian, tanggung jawab, dan keharmonisan sosial daripada sebagai dominasi atau kekuasaan. Oleh karena itu, *Moana* tidak hanya membantu memperkenalkan budaya Polinesia ke masyarakat di seluruh dunia, tetapi juga menawarkan model kepemimpinan alternatif untuk perempuan yang berakar pada nilai-nilai budaya orang-orang yang tinggal di sana.

Kata Kunci: Budaya Polinesia, Representasi Budaya, Nilai-Nilai Budaya, dan Film *Moana*.

1. Introduction

One of the most significant types of popular media in contemporary society is film. Films convey social values, historical narratives, cultural customs, and ideological viewpoints to viewers from various nations and generations in addition to being entertaining. Films affect how audiences perceive reality and comprehend cultures other than their own through dialogue, characterization, visual representation, and storytelling. As a result, movies are now a significant subject of scholarly research in the fields of literature, media, and cultural studies.

Cultural representation is one of the most important topics of discussion in cultural studies. Barker (2018) argues that representation is more than just reflecting reality; it also involves creating meaning through language, symbols, and cultural practices. Every cultural component that appears in a movie is chosen, analyzed, and recreated to

convey specific meanings to viewers. As a result, movies actively contribute to the public's understanding of cultural identity rather than just showcasing culture.

Disney's *Moana* (2016) is a singular example of indigenous cultural representation among modern animated movies. *Moana* introduces viewers to Polynesian customs through mythology, navigation, ancestral beliefs, environmental ethics, and communal life, in contrast to many Disney productions that focus mostly on fantasy. The story emphasizes the value of honoring ancestors and protecting cultural heritage while depicting the interconnectedness of humans and nature. These cultural values emerge as key components that influence the plot and the protagonist's growth.

In addition to symbolizing indigenous culture, *Moana* presents a different viewpoint on female leadership. The movie creates leadership via accountability, empathy, bravery, and commitment to the well-being of the group, in contrast to conventional leadership narratives that link leadership with power or physical dominance. As *Moana* gains an understanding of the cultural values of her community and takes on the responsibility of reestablishing harmony between humans and nature, her leadership gradually grows. Her experience shows that effective leadership is based on cultural awareness and group responsibility in addition to individual aptitude.

Moana has been studied from various angles in a number of earlier studies. Studies on cultural representation have focused on how Disney's adaptation depicts Polynesian customs, mythology, and navigation. Some indigenous elements were simplified for international audiences, according to other studies that have examined cultural appropriation issues. In the meantime, gender-based research has emphasized *Moana* as a model of female autonomy and empowerment. These studies offer insightful information, but they typically address female leadership and cultural representation independently.

By investigating the connection between Polynesian cultural values and the development of female leadership, this study fills a vacuum in earlier research. This study examines how indigenous cultural principles serve as the cornerstone of leadership development rather than identifying identity formation as the main problem. This viewpoint provides a more comprehensive understanding of leadership as a cultural practice rather than just a personal trait.

Culture plays a central role in shaping human behavior, social interaction, and collective identity. According to Hall (1997), culture provides a framework through which individuals interpret meanings and understand their place within society. Through cultural practices, communities transmit values, beliefs, traditions, and knowledge from one generation to another. Therefore, cultural representation in media is essential because it influences how audiences perceive both their own identities and those of others.

Representation in film is not a neutral process. Filmmakers select particular symbols, narratives, and visual elements that contribute to the construction of cultural meaning. Stuart Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation functions through systems of signs and language that shape social understanding. Consequently, films become sites where cultural identities are negotiated, reinforced, or transformed. The representation of indigenous cultures in cinema is particularly important because it affects public awareness of communities that have historically been marginalized.

The increasing globalization of media has intensified discussions about cultural diversity in popular entertainment. Global audiences now consume films that originate from various cultural backgrounds, creating opportunities for intercultural understanding. However, globalization can also lead to cultural homogenization when local traditions are simplified to meet international market expectations. Therefore, analyzing cultural representation in globally distributed films remains a significant area of academic inquiry.

Indigenous cultures occupy a unique position within cultural studies because they often possess knowledge systems, traditions, and worldviews that differ from dominant societies. Scholars argue that indigenous communities maintain strong relationships with land, ancestry, and collective responsibility. These values are frequently expressed through oral traditions, rituals, and cultural practices that preserve communal identity across generations.

Polynesian culture represents one of the world's most remarkable indigenous traditions. The Polynesian people developed sophisticated navigation techniques that enabled long-distance ocean voyages long before modern technology existed. Their maritime knowledge reflects a deep understanding of environmental conditions, celestial navigation, and ecological balance. These cultural achievements form an important foundation for the narrative presented in *Moana*.

The concept of ancestry occupies a significant place in Polynesian cultural philosophy. Ancestors are not merely remembered as historical figures but are regarded as active sources of guidance and wisdom. This belief system encourages younger generations to respect cultural heritage while maintaining responsibility for preserving community values. In *Moana*, ancestral influence becomes a recurring theme that shapes the protagonist's decisions and personal growth.

Another important aspect of Polynesian culture is its emphasis on harmony between humans and nature. Indigenous worldviews frequently regard nature as a living entity rather than a resource to be exploited.

Environmental stewardship is therefore considered both a cultural and moral obligation. This perspective is reflected throughout *Moana*, where ecological balance becomes central to the restoration of social harmony.

The relationship between culture and leadership has attracted increasing attention in leadership studies. Researchers argue that leadership is not solely determined by individual characteristics but is also shaped by cultural values and social expectations. Different societies define effective leadership in different ways depending on their historical experiences, traditions, and collective priorities.

Traditional leadership theories often focus on authority, power, and organizational effectiveness. Contemporary approaches, however, emphasize ethical responsibility, collaboration, and service to the community. These perspectives align closely with many indigenous leadership traditions, where leaders are expected to prioritize collective welfare over personal interests.

Female leadership has become an important topic in contemporary social and cultural research. Historically, leadership roles in many societies were associated with masculine characteristics such as dominance and control. Recent scholarship challenges this assumption by demonstrating that leadership can also be expressed through empathy, communication, cooperation, and emotional intelligence. These qualities are frequently highlighted in narratives featuring female protagonists.

Animated films have increasingly contributed to changing perceptions of gender roles. Modern female characters are often portrayed as independent individuals capable of making strategic decisions and addressing complex social challenges. Such portrayals provide alternative models of leadership that challenge traditional stereotypes and expand public understanding of women's capabilities.

Moana represents a significant departure from earlier Disney princess narratives. Unlike many previous protagonists whose stories focused on romance, *Moana's* journey centers on community responsibility, cultural preservation, and personal growth. Her development as a leader emerges through service to others rather than through the pursuit of personal recognition or status.

Leadership in *Moana* is portrayed as a process of learning and self-discovery. The protagonist gradually develops confidence by engaging with cultural knowledge, listening to ancestral guidance, and confronting challenges that threaten her community. This portrayal suggests that leadership is cultivated through experience and cultural understanding rather than inherited authority alone.

The integration of indigenous cultural values into leadership development reflects broader discussions within cultural studies regarding identity formation. Cultural identity provides individuals with a sense of belonging and purpose, which in turn influences their leadership behavior. By connecting leadership to cultural heritage, *Moana* presents a model of leadership grounded in collective memory and shared responsibility.

For these reasons, examining the relationship between Polynesian cultural values and female leadership in *Moana* offers valuable insights into contemporary cultural representation. The film demonstrates how indigenous traditions can serve as sources of leadership principles that remain relevant in modern society. Through this perspective, *Moana* becomes more than an animated film; it serves as a cultural text that illustrates the enduring influence of indigenous knowledge on contemporary understandings of leadership.

This study is novel in that it explains how indigenous values influence leadership behavior in modern animated films by combining theories of cultural representation and leadership. By showing how local cultural traditions continue to impact contemporary depictions of leadership in international popular media, the study advances literary criticism, cultural studies, and leadership studies.

2. Research Method

In order to investigate how Polynesian cultural values shape female leadership in Disney's *Moana* (2016), this study used a descriptive qualitative research design. Because the research concentrated on interpreting cultural meanings, leadership values, and character development presented in the film rather than measuring numerical data, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. The principles of qualitative research state that social interactions, visual representations, and text interpretation all contribute to the creation of meaning. As a result, the film was examined as a cultural text that represents indigenous leadership styles and values.

Disney's animated film *Moana* (2016), which was made by Walt Disney Animation Studios, served as the main source of data for this study. Dialogues, scenes, character interactions, visual symbols, and narrative events pertaining to Polynesian cultural values and female leadership made up the data. In the meantime, secondary data was gathered from books, journal articles, and earlier research on Disney movies, leadership, indigenous culture, and cultural representation. The theoretical framework and the interpretation of the results were reinforced by these references.

Documentation techniques were used to gather data. In order to fully comprehend the plot and find scenes pertinent to the research goals, the researcher watched the film several times. Key conversations, illustrations, and character behaviors related to leadership and Polynesian cultural values were meticulously documented and grouped into a number of themes. Respect for ancestors, harmony with nature, social responsibility, traditional navigation, bravery, empathy, and group decision-making were among these themes. The researcher was able to make sure that the chosen data appropriately reflected the cultural and leadership elements depicted in the movie through the process of repeated observation.

Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the gathered data. Only scenes and dialogue pertinent to the research questions were chosen during the first stage of data reduction. In the second step, the chosen data were categorized based on the themes of Polynesian cultural values and leadership traits. The third step was data interpretation, where the results were examined using Northouse's leadership theory (2022), Ka'ili's concept of Polynesian cultural values (2017), and Barker's theory of cultural representation (2018). Lastly, the researcher synthesized the relationship between cultural representation and the film's portrayal of female leadership to draw conclusions.

The researcher used theoretical triangulation, incorporating various theoretical viewpoints in the data interpretation process, to guarantee the validity of the results. In order to preserve consistency and reduce subjective interpretation, the analysis also included multiple comparisons between the gathered data and pertinent literature. By using these methods, the study offers a thorough explanation of how Polynesian cultural values influence Moana's leadership growth throughout the story.

3. Results and Discussion

The results show that by incorporating Polynesian cultural values, Disney's *Moana* (2016) exemplifies female leadership. The movie highlights leadership as a cultural duty passed down through customs, interpersonal connections, and harmony with nature rather than as a personal accomplishment or political power. The representation of Polynesian cultural values and the development of female leadership were the two main themes found in the analysis.

3.1. Representation of Polynesian Cultural Values

Polynesian cultural values are consistently portrayed throughout the film, according to the analysis. These ideals serve as the basis of the story and have an impact on the main character's actions in addition to being shown as visual components.

Respect for ancestors is one of the most important cultural values. Ancestors are presented as the source of knowledge, identity, and direction throughout the entire movie. Tala, Moana's grandmother, gives her guidance and support while continuously reminding her of their people's history as explorers. Ancestral spirits' appearance represents how cultural knowledge is passed down through the generations. This illustration shows that cultural learning, not just biological succession, is how leadership is passed down.

Traditional navigation is another significant cultural value. The movie depicts navigation as a crucial aspect of Polynesian culture. Sailing is a symbol of bravery, exploration, responsibility, and cultural preservation in addition to being a mode of transportation. The restoration of cultural identity, which had progressively vanished as a result of loneliness and fear, is reflected in the discovery of the secret traveling canoes. Moana shows her dedication to protecting her ancestors' legacy by deciding to carry on the traveling custom.

Throughout the film, the interaction between people and the natural world also takes center stage. The ocean is depicted as a living thing that protects, guides, and interacts with people. Te Fiti also represents the origin of life and the harmony of the environment.

Additionally, the film portrays collective responsibility as a fundamental cultural value. Every significant choice Moana makes is driven more by Motunui's well-being than by her own aspirations. Her top priority is still her people's survival, even in the face of uncertainty and peril. This viewpoint reflects Polynesian society's collectivist orientation, in which the welfare of the community is intimately linked to individual success.

The value of collaboration and support for one another is also emphasized in the movie. Moana does not complete her journey on her own. She works with Maui, gets advice from her grandmother, and eventually wins the community's trust. These exchanges imply that collaboration rather than individual dominance is how leadership is developed.

All things considered, Disney successfully integrates a variety of Polynesian cultural values into the plot. The movie portrays indigenous culture as a crucial basis for community development and leadership, despite adapting these customs for a global audience.

3.2. Construction of Female Leadership

The results show that rather than relying solely on inherited power, Moana's leadership is progressively developed through ongoing engagement with Polynesian cultural values. As she gains the ability to comprehend accountability, overcome obstacles, and put the needs of the group ahead of her own, her leadership skills grow.

Moana is presented at the start of the narrative as a young woman who is unsure of her future as Motunui's next chief. Despite having the title of future leader, she initially lacks confidence when it comes to making crucial decisions. This circumstance illustrates that developing oneself and gaining real-world experience are necessary for acquiring leadership rather than social standing.

As the story goes on, Moana starts to exhibit bravery, which is a crucial quality of good leadership. Despite her father's disapproval and her doubts about the journey ahead, she chooses to leave the security of her island. Her bravery is driven by her duty to preserve the environment and safeguard her community rather than by a desire for personal adventure. This illustrates the strong correlation between leadership bravery and dedication to the welfare of the group.

The analysis also found responsibility as a leadership trait. Moana continuously puts her people's needs ahead of her own throughout her journey. She persists in her mission despite numerous setbacks because she understands that Motunui's future depends on her willpower.

Additionally, the film emphasizes the value of empathy in female leadership. Moana decides to comprehend the root of the conflict rather than using violence to defeat Te Kā. She realizes that Te Kā is actually Te Fiti, whose heart was taken. Moana uses empathy and understanding to end the conflict by mending the heart rather than eliminating the adversary. This scene demonstrates how emotional intelligence and the capacity to identify others' needs are essential components of leadership.

Moana also exhibits excellent decision-making abilities. She faces many challenges along the way, such as hazardous storms, self-doubt, and arguments with Maui. However, she carefully considers every circumstance and makes her own decisions based on accountability rather than emotion. Despite her youth, this skill demonstrates mature leadership.

Additionally, the results show that Moana engages in collaborative leadership. She promotes teamwork to accomplish common objectives rather than pursuing attention for herself. Her collaboration with Maui serves as an example of how mutual respect, trust, and communication are essential for effective leadership. The collectivist ideals ingrained in Polynesian society are consistent with this cooperative strategy.

The analysis leads to the conclusion that, in contrast to traditional heroic narratives, Moana represents a modern model of female leadership. Her authority is based on cultural knowledge, empathy, accountability, bravery, and commitment to the well-being of the community rather than physical prowess or political dominance. As a result, rather than relying solely on personal strength, leadership is presented in the film as a social and cultural practice based on indigenous values.

3.3. Discussion

The results of this study show that rather than using personal authority or political power, Disney's Moana creates female leadership through the incorporation of Polynesian cultural values. Barker's (2018) theory of cultural representation, which contends that media actively create meaning through language, symbols, narratives, and visual representations rather than merely reflecting reality, is supported by this finding. Polynesian culture is portrayed in Moana as more than just a background or aesthetic component. Rather, it serves as the ideological cornerstone that molds the protagonist's beliefs, choices, and methods of leadership throughout the story.

One important discovery is that the main source of leadership development is ancestral wisdom. When Moana rediscovers her ancestors' journeying past, her metamorphosis starts. She gains legitimacy by comprehending and upholding the cultural values that have been passed down by earlier generations, as opposed to merely inheriting leadership through family lineage. This result validates the claim made by Ka'ili (2017) that collective responsibility, cultural memory, and ancestry are closely related to leadership in Polynesian societies. Therefore, rather than using power over others, leadership is viewed as a moral duty to maintain cultural continuity.

The connection between culture and leadership is further reinforced by the depiction of environmental harmony. Rather than being an object to be controlled, nature is portrayed throughout the movie as an active participant in human life. Te Fiti represents the harmony of life and the sustainability of the environment, while the ocean leads Moana. Te Fiti's heart's restoration serves as a metaphor for how effective leadership necessitates reestablishing peace rather than vanquishing adversaries. This ecological viewpoint is very different from many Western leadership narratives that often place an emphasis on rivalry, conquest, and individual success. Rather, Moana portrays leadership as stewardship, in which leaders are in charge of safeguarding both people and the environment.

The representation of female leadership is another significant finding. According to the analysis, Moana's leadership traits closely align with Northouse's (2022) notion of transformational leadership. Effective leaders, according to Northouse, inspire others, promote teamwork, exhibit moral responsibility, and inspire communities toward common objectives. Throughout the movie, Moana continuously exhibits these traits. She inspires her community to rediscover the voyaging tradition, encourages Maui to carry out their mission in spite of repeated setbacks, and stays dedicated to the welfare of the group despite personal uncertainty.

Moana's story emphasizes accountability, service, and social contribution, in contrast to traditional Disney princesses whose stories frequently center on romance or rescue. The idea that female characters can become key

agents of social change without relying on male protagonists is strengthened by the lack of a romantic subplot. This portrayal is in line with the larger trend of more varied and autonomous depictions of women in modern animated movies. As a result, by portraying leadership as a collection of skills and principles rather than as traits based on gender, Moana helps to dispel traditional gender stereotypes.

The results also go beyond earlier research that mainly examined female empowerment and cultural representation independently. Previous studies typically focused on Moana's role as a self-reliant female character or the authenticity of Polynesian cultural representation. This study, however, shows that these two factors are interdependent. Polynesian cultural values serve as both the story's cultural backdrop and the means by which leadership is cultivated. Because they are firmly ingrained in the indigenous worldview that is portrayed throughout the story, courage, empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and resilience emerge.

The movie demonstrates how leadership identity is socially and culturally constructed from a literary standpoint. Moana's exceptional abilities from birth prevent her from becoming a successful leader. Rather, her leadership develops as a result of ongoing engagement with cultural customs, social norms, and individual experiences. The idea that leadership should be viewed as a dynamic cultural process rather than a fixed personal trait is supported by this finding.

Additionally, the study shows how Disney effectively promotes universal leadership values while introducing indigenous cultural values to a global audience. The central values of respect, responsibility, environmental awareness, and collective welfare are evident throughout the story, despite the simplification of certain cultural aspects for commercial gain. As a result, Moana promotes intercultural understanding and an appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems in addition to being an entertainment product.

Overall, the results show that cultural representation and leadership ideals interact to create female leadership in Moana. Moana's character development is shaped by the ethical framework provided by Polynesian cultural traditions, and her leadership shows that effective leaders are characterized by service, empathy, cultural wisdom, and dedication to the common good rather than dominance or authority. The main contribution of the current study to literary criticism, cultural studies, and leadership research is this integrated viewpoint.

4. Conclusion

This study looked at how female leadership in Disney's Moana (2016) is shaped by Polynesian cultural values. The results show that respect for ancestors, traditional navigation, community responsibility, environmental harmony, and group decision-making are all ways that the movie continuously embodies indigenous cultural values. These ideals serve as more than just cultural icons; they are crucial components that mold the story and impact the protagonist's growth.

The analysis also shows that Moana's leadership is shaped by social responsibility, personal experience, and cultural learning. Her leadership is marked by bravery, empathy, resilience, cooperation, moral decision-making, and dedication to the welfare of the community rather than by power or physical dominance. These leadership attributes show how cultural values that prioritize service and group well-being give rise to effective leadership. By combining the viewpoints of leadership studies and cultural representation, the study also adds to earlier research. This study shows that indigenous cultural values are the basis for the development of female leadership, whereas previous research mainly addressed Polynesian culture or female empowerment separately. As a result, Moana offers a different approach to leadership that dispels preconceived notions and emphasizes the value of cultural knowledge in producing responsible leaders.

In conclusion, Disney's Moana serves as a cultural text that encourages indigenous knowledge, environmental responsibility, and inclusive leadership values in addition to being an entertaining animated movie. In order to further investigate the connection between cultural representation and leadership from comparative or interdisciplinary viewpoints, future research is encouraged to look at additional animated films that depict indigenous cultures.

Dalam kesimpulan tidak boleh ada referensi. Kesimpulan berisi fakta yang didapatkan, cukup menjawab permasalahan atau tujuan penelitian (jangan merupakan pembahasan lagi); Nyatakan kemungkinan aplikasi, implikasi dan spekulasi yang sesuai. Jika diperlukan, berikan saran untuk penelitian selanjutnya. Nyatakan simpulan secara terukur dan dalam kalimat berbentuk paragraf, bukan dalam bentuk *numbering/item-list*.

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