

Mutations in Moominvalley: Globalization, Capitalism and the Cultural Identity of Fiction

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Katakana World Tour

I was recently walking through a shopping mall in my home city of Johannesburg, when a shop sign caught my attention: *Otaku* – in katakana. Having just returned to Johannesburg after seven years in Japan, I unconsciously read and processed the word and only then it struck me – katakana? In Africa?

On a microscopic level this was a sign of anime's evolution as a force of globalization. The spread of Japan as a brand and with it the boom in anime, manga and computer games, is well documented. But this phase was preceded by anime's long history of circulation under the radar. Japanese pop culture has been traveling to Africa for a long time. The difference lies in the kind of cultural identity anime claimed for itself in the process. One could argue that anime's nature as an animated artifact is now part of its Japaneseness – to the extent that graphic designers and animators in many countries copy this style in order to signal a sense of Japaneseness. But in the past the animation nature of anime frequently fulfilled the opposite role – allowing it to hybridize with various local cultures in complicated ways. This capacity allowed anime to circulate globally at a time when the coupling of the words *Japan* and *cool* weren't nearly so obvious.

I want to look at a moment in this earlier history of anime's global circulation. By comparing the Japanese adaptation of the Finnish children's classic *Moomin* with the Afrikaans dub of the same series, I want to show how the series' nature as an animated artifact facilitated its global circulation. Instead of looking at the process of adapting the original novels to anime, I want to focus on the anime series as a locus of globalization itself. In other words, in the circulation of this series, the animation itself, more than the novels, set the parameters within which different troupes of voice artists created different narrative realities. I want to argue that these realities emerged out of a complicated hybridization of anime and different local languages. However, in this paper I want to make clear that this process of hybridization frequently uncovers ideological and historical fissures which direct audience engagement and understanding in unexpected ways. In the latter part of this paper I focus on one such fissure – the Moomin-world's complex nature and the way that it is simultaneously European and non-European. In analyzing the role this shimmering simultaneous adoption and repudiation of "European-ness" plays in its global consumption, I show that the appeal of "Europe" in its Moomin-form comes less from any real engagement of South Africans with Europe and more from the power of "Europe" as an imagined space – a power that is constituted and directed by capitalism. By analyzing how "Moomin-Europe" was consumed in Afrikaans via a Japanese cultural commodity, I want to describe one of the tactics Japanese anime used to enter a hostile global market. I also want to show how the analysis of transnational cultural consumption could be enriched by enquiries into the nature of capitalist everyday life.

Anime and Dubbing: Hybridization and Mutation

Finnish readers first entered Moominvalley in 1945, when Tove Jansson published *The Moomins and the Great Flood*. Eight further novels followed, with the last – *Moominvalley in November* – coming out in 1970. Jansson – a writer and an artist – also published Moomin stories in the form of comic strips in newspapers, and five Moomin graphic novels were published between 1952 and 1993.

Up to now, 16 different films and TV series have been based on Jansson's work. The earliest – the German series *Die Muminfamilie*, dates from 1959. The first Japanese anime adaptation aired in 1969. Produced by Tokyo Movie Shinsha, and later by Tezuka Osamu's Mushi Productions, *Muumin* was only loosely based on Jansson's novels.

In this paper I want to focus on a later, more faithful anime adaptation, which was broadcast in Japan as *Tanoshii Muumin Ikka* (The Delightful Moomin Family) in 1990 to 1991. The hybrid nature of this anime series becomes clear in its production details. It was primarily a co-production between Tokyo Terebi and Telecable Benelux B.V., but Marina Productions in France and TVE in Spain were also involved. That said, the series was made in Japan, by the production houses Telescreen Japan and Teleimage Japan, and was directed by Saito Hiroshi and Ojima Masayuki.

In South Africa, the series was dubbed into Afrikaans and broadcast by the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation as *Die Moemins* from 1992 to 1993. The history of dubbing in South Africa remains largely undocumented. From 1974 when the first test TV broadcasts started in South Africa until the late 1980s when the first independent cable TV company diversified the late-apartheid TV palette, South African television was wholly controlled by the state. The apartheid state saw itself as bilingual Afrikaans and English. Equal broadcast time was allocated to each language by law. While a certain amount of TV production happened in Afrikaans, the shortfall was made up by dubbing overseas programs into Afrikaans. This law coincided with Japanese anime's more concerted push into foreign markets during the 1970s and 80s and as I discuss in more detail below, this confluence meant that several anime series for children were dubbed into Afrikaans. Most dubbing of animated children's programs took place in-house at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), whose constant need for dubbed TV series supported a whole community of freelance writers, directors and voice actors.

The dubbing of *Tanoshii Moomin Ikka* into Afrikaans took place at the SABC's dubbing facilities in Cape Town from 1991 to 1992. I base my subsequent account on a series of interviews with dubbing professionals who worked for the corporation during that era. Particularly important sources were Kobus Geldenhuys – a translator of many children's series, who wrote the Afrikaans text of *Die Moemins*; Ronel Geldenhuys, who directed and was also a voice actor on the series and Margo Luyt, who was the dubbing director of *Die Moemins*.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation usually acquired anime already dubbed into French or German from European film markets. However, *Tanoshii Muumin Ikka* came with its original Japanese soundtrack and only a rudimentary skeleton of a script in English. South Africans fluent in German or French were relatively common, but no one could translate from Japanese to Afrikaans. This meant that the Afrikaans translators made up their own names for the characters and improvised new dialogue to match mouth movements that had been animated to fit typically Japanese phrases like *tadaima*, *okaeri*, *itadakimasu* and so on.

One could say that the process of dubbing is always a process of hybridization, but in this case it was almost a form of mutation, with the insertion of the Afrikaans text producing a new product that became a reflection of South African realities despite its Finnish and Japanese origins. A basic example is the names of the characters. Unlike in Japan, Tove Jansson's *Moomin* novels and comic strips are not well known in South Africa. In fact, they are only now being translated into Afrikaans. The translators told me they didn't refer to Jansson's novels at all. So Muuminpapa and Muuminmama became Moepappa and Moemamma. Muumin Dani became Moevallei, Floren became Moemei.

Kobus Geldenhuys, the writer who coined these names told me that his then wife Ronel (who was working on the production as a director and voice actor) was pregnant while they were working on the dub and Boeboe was their nickname for their unborn son. This name found its way into the production as the new name for Snufkin. So the Afrikaans dub became a coded snapshot of the context within which it was created.

The mutation of anime into a product reflecting South African realities of the time continued into characterization. Margo Luyt, the director of the dub, told me she felt that the translators' duty and her own job as a director was to interpret and enrich the anime. In fact, she instructed the voice actors and translators to refrain from reading the novels because she wanted them to solely focus on the anime. As she put it, the animation created the world these characters moved in and for that reason the animation had to serve as the sole reference for the

narrative reality. Within the parameters set by the animation, the creators of the Afrikaans dub had the freedom to imagine the characters as they wanted and to communicate those character traits colloquially. One example is Fillyjonk, the Moomins' neighbour. In the Japanese version, her rigidity, hyper-correctness and snobbery is communicated by making her speak keigo, the highly polite register that governs formal interactions in Japanese. The effect is to make her seem conservative, brittle and nervous. In the Afrikaans version, she is much more clearly a snob, and that is communicated by making her speak an affected Afrikaans with an English accent. While other anime series have characters speaking Japanese with English accents their accents usually denote a super-rich background with much time spent overseas. The kind of inferiority complex that would make a fake English accent a sign of bourgeois snobbery is much more specifically Afrikaans and grew out of Afrikaans-English rivalry that stretches back to the Anglo-Boer War. Afrikaners' resentment of other Afrikaners pretending to be English was effortlessly evoked through voice acting and operated as shorthand for snobbery. In the process, the narration came to be recast in South African terms, reflecting South African (particularly Afrikaans) anxieties.

The Complications of *Moomin-kaans*

Margo Luyt, the dubbing director, told me that there had been disagreements among translators about whether they should include specifically South African references and regional Afrikaans accents into the dub. She said she resisted any specific geographic references, slang or regional accents as too regionally specific and incongruent with the anime.

However, bigger issues were involved. Ronel Geldenhuys, the director, said that the choice to keep the accents and choice of words self-consciously neutral also came out of a fear of a racist backlash against the series. In Afrikaans regional accents are also racially coded and reflect divisions between black and white speakers of Afrikaans, divisions that were at their most inflamed right at the moment when the dub was being prepared. The series aired in 1992 and 1993, which was the period of negotiations leading up to South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. The years from 1990, when the liberation movements were unbanned, to 1994 when they won the election and became the first post-apartheid government, were one of the most volatile periods in the country's history, with several regions teetering on the brink of open civil war. This reality seems to have filtered down even to Moominvalley and was reflected in the attempt to use a kind of Afrikaans that revealed as little group allegiance as possible.

Ironically, this has allowed the Afrikaans version of the series to age very well. It has since been rebroadcast several times on KykNet, an Afrikaans cable TV channel, which has bought the rights to several dubbed anime series from the eighties. The channel sells a brand of not-so-disguised nostalgia for an era of Afrikaans cultural productivity, which was of course the apartheid era. The development of the dubbing industry itself was the result of apartheid-era local content laws dictating that equal TV time should be given to English and Afrikaans. This development coincided with anime production houses' push into world markets with their adaptations of mostly European children's classics. (Yamaguchi, 204, 107).

Afrikaans children in the 1980s watched one dubbed anime series after another, including such anime classics as *Akage no Annu* (Anne of Green Gables) and *Furandaazu no Inu* (The Dog of Flanders.) The last of these dubbed anime hits was the Afrikaans dub of *Tanoshii Muumin Ikka*. After this series, everything changed. South Africa went from being a bilingual apartheid state to a new democracy with eleven official languages and English as a lingua franca. In the process, dubbing had come to be tainted as an apartheid-era practice and the dubbing industry declined. At the same time, anime itself was changing. A few short years later, *Pokemon* was released and Japaneseness became a brand in and of itself.

Mutating Identities

How did one series stand in conversation with both Japanese and South African realities? It seems to me that Margo Luyt, the director of the Afrikaans dub, has a point when she says that cultural expression in the soundtrack was constrained by the parameters of the anime itself. Because the cultural identity of this anime is complex to start with and becomes more complex when it's dubbed, the only stable basis for analysis is the animated artifact itself. Yet even the animation does not reveal its cultural identity so easily. For example, at first glance it seems to be set in rural Europe filled with vaguely 19th century houses and the furniture. Jean Baudrillard (2005, 79) has argued that the difference between old furniture and antiques is that the latter has given up its practical function in favor of signifying the suppression of the reality of the passing of time.

As it appears in this series, “Europe” represents a certain sense of lost-ness or past-ness that resonates all the stronger with non-Europeans who have never experienced real European landscapes and objects but only consume them in anime form. This is a form of what Arjun Appadurai (1996, 78) has called ‘nostalgia without memory’ – an emotion that only makes sense within capitalism’s abundance of images.

On the other hand, one has to question the assumption of “European-ness.” What the series presents is actually an oscillation between references to Europe and Moomin-centric specificity. What we can see in the series is only to a certain extent European culture and for the rest it creates a specific fictional world – a Moomin-reality, which calls into question our assumptions about the European identity of the image. The Moomin world is less specifically Europe than a kind of Northern Hemisphere nowhere-everywhere complete with dark forests, lakes and snow. The complicated relationship between Moominvalley and Europe is made clear in one scene. Moomin and Floren go for a stroll in the mountains after she spent a whole day reading fairy tales. They see small white flowers growing on a rocky landing. “Oh,” says Floren, “are those Edelweiss?” “No,” says Moomin, “they don’t grow here.” In the Afrikaans dub this sentence suddenly reflects something of Afrikaners’ relationship with Europe – one of always being mentally bound to Europe but physically evaded by it.

However, as any honest non-European who pines for Florentine palazzos and Parisian brasseries has to admit, this longed-for Europe is less a place than a marketing mirage. It is an artifact of capitalism designed to activate longing because it always evades the here and now. In this way the Euro/Moomin hybridity presented by the series makes it a perfect capitalist pop culture artifact, because while it evokes a kind of inchoate longing, a kind of nostalgia without memory, its idiosyncratic specificity also makes it copyrightable and mass-produceable.

Moomin Capitalism

This mix of non-specific nostalgia and the narrative world’s powerful internal logic helps the series to withstand having its original soundtrack stripped and completely new dialogue added. It is this toughness as a narrative mechanism that allowed anime to circulate globally in a racist world long before Japan became cool.

Yet, it is exactly this powerful nostalgia without memory and the commodity nature of anime worlds that dictate that our everyday experience of capitalism could present a powerful template to understand the global circulation of anime. Rather than searching for which particular nation state culture best unlocks the secrets of Moominvalley, it could be useful to look at it as a mass-produced artifact that makes sense within the context of transnational capitalism itself.

In this context, it becomes interesting how the series fetishizes free time. There are signs that Moominvalley is not untouched by trade. There is money, for example and certain traded commodities like coffee and diamonds retain their value in Moominvalley. What is almost entirely lacking though, is work. The work that exists is highly gendered – particularly Moominmama doing housework. Yet, we see no organized labor for money in this series.

Paying for a DVD to watch cute merchandize-able characters lying around dozing under trees, strikes me as a highly capitalist act. In a way *Moomin* is the fantasy of not only having no work and endless free time, but also not being bothered by that freedom. It is a fantasy not only of a world without work, but the world without careers, without the need for achievement, that is, without the sense of calling, which Max Weber (1974) argued lies at the basis of capitalism. In a way, this is the really unattainable fantasy in capitalist life – not a world without work but a world without the meaning of work. To create a commodity fulfilling this fantasy seems peculiarly capitalist.

In this paper I have concentrated on the way the Japanese version of a Finnish children’s classic mutated into a reflection of Afrikaans class divisions and cultural anxieties through the process of being dubbed into Afrikaans. This was the result of a particular confluence of factors in the television sectors in both Japan and South Africa at that historical moment.

However, these moments of mutation happen frequently, as a cultural product created in one context is refashioned to fit another. I would like to argue that our understanding of these moments of mutation will be enriched by an enquiry into the experience of capitalist everyday life itself.

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