

Walt Disney In Heated Debate Over “Hakuna Matata” Trademark

An online petition requesting that Walt Disney rescinds a trademark decision on the words “Hakuna Matata” as popularized in the globally acclaimed “Lion King” production, has attracted thousands of signatures and sparked a furious debate on cultural appropriation of the Swahili language.

In the wake of a highly anticipated live-action remake of The Lion King in 2019, Disney has faced backlash and an intensified debate over the trademark of these words. The phrase, “Hakuna Matata” is a common expression in Swahili, a language spoken widely across parts of East Africa, which means “no worries”. It gained global popularity, following the release of “The Lion King” in 1994.

The online petition calls for the removal of the trademark and has already collected close to 200,000 signatures.

Zimbabwean activist, Shelton Mpala, who started the online petition says, “While we respect Disney as an entertainment institution responsible for creating many of our childhood memories, the decision to trademark ‘Hakuna Matata’ is predicated purely on greed and is an insult not only to the Swahili people but to Africa as a whole.”

In the midst of the backlash, trademark experts rationalize the intellectual property rights for Disney, explaining what the trademark entails. According to experts, the “Hakuna Matata” trademark does not mean ownership of the phrase. It had instead, been filed, following the release of the original movie for branded apparel that Walt Disney sells in the U.S. in order to protect itself from exploitation on its merchandise.

A press representative of the company says “Trademarks have been registered for popular phrases such as ‘Merry Christmas’ and ‘Seasons Greetings’ without impeding the use of these phrases and words in a cultural way and will not prevent individuals from using the phrase.”

The California-based entertainment company’s initial application for the phrase trademark was in 1994. It was approved by the United States patent and Trademark office (USPTO) in 2001 for use on clothing.

Since its 1994 debut, The Lion King has been a sensational venture for Disney. The production includes a musical production, games, toys and clothing and several spin-offs.

The highly anticipated remake is directed by Jon Favreau and boasts a star-studded cast that includes Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Seth Rogen, Chiwetel Ejiofor and James Earl Jones.

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