

Can Disney Trademark ‘Hakuna Matata’, the African Heritage?

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In 2003, Disney applied to register the term ‘Hakuna Matata’ as a Trademark for Class 25 covering the items footwear, clothing, and headgear. ‘Hakuna Matata’ is a Swahili phrase which means no worries or no problem.

‘Hakuna Matata’ featured heavily in Disney's 1994 film “The Lion King”. Additionally, Disney owns numerous t-shirts bearing the term. However, Shelton Mpala, a Zimbabwean-Canadian activist opposed the registration of the said mark. This controversy initiated just before the release of the animated version of “The Lion King” in July 2019.

Shelton Mpala opposed the registration of the mark stating that Disney did not invent the mark. He started a petition named “Change.org” against the registration of the Trademark. He accused Disney of exploiting the rich cultural heritage of Africa for their financial gain. Furthermore, he requested Disney to drop the Trademark as it is getting huge attention in the digital world.

The activist stated that he started this petition to get the attention of people towards protecting African heritage. He wanted people to know about the richness of African heritage and culture.

Furthermore, he stated that he wanted to explain the importance of protecting the culture, heritage, and identity. Moreover, he stated that he wanted to prevent large media houses to exploit this heritage for their financial gain.

The activist further stated that Disney did not invent anything new, the term was in use for years, even before the release of the film and emphasised on the exploitation of the rich natural heritage

of Africa by Disney for financial gain. That is why Disney cannot be allowed to register the mark. It will also allow other businesses to do the same. At the time of publication, nearly 50,000 people signed the petition.

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