



The sea has (no) borders: ocean zoning in coastal Tonga

Teena Brown Pulu, Rewi Amoamo, Nikolase Meredith & Sylvester Tonga

To cite this article: Teena Brown Pulu, Rewi Amoamo, Nikolase Meredith & Sylvester Tonga (30 Apr 2026): The sea has (no) borders: ocean zoning in coastal Tonga, Visual Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1472586X.2026.2656690](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2026.2656690)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2026.2656690>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 30 Apr 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

VISUAL ESSAY

The sea has (no) borders: ocean zoning in coastal Tonga

TEENA BROWN PULU ^a, REWI AMOAMO^b, NIKOLASE MEREDITH^c AND SYLVESTER TONGA^d

^aTe Ara Poutama, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand; ^bIndependent Camera Operator, Auckland, New Zealand; ^cIndependent Documentary Filmmaker, Auckland, New Zealand; ^dIndependent Tongan Media Operator, Auckland, New Zealand

In response to the socio-economic pressures of climate change, seen locally in declining inshore fisheries and deteriorating coral reefs, forty-nine coastal villages across the small island nation of Tonga have established community-managed marine protected areas to regulate fishing and sustain marine life. This visual essay offers behind-the-scenes reflections on creating short documentaries with and for the coastal villages of Tefisi and Makave in the Vava'u Islands of northern Tonga. Told from the perspectives of New Zealand–Tongan production crew members Rewi Amoamo and Nikolase Meredith, with contributions from their interviewer, Sylvester Tonga, the essay shares their storytelling alongside photographs that show how they made sense of sea borders through their interactions and collaborations with these coastal communities. The pictorial work centres on marine zoning practices that divide village coastlines into restricted fishing areas and no-take zones, boundaries that, on the water, are invisible and marked only by the occasional buoy. Twelve photographs capture the embodied experience of filming with fishers and fisheries officers within their shifting seascapes, where the borders of the ocean are both real and imagined.

Tonga, interviewer and translator; and Teena Brown Pulu, executive producer and writer, who penned this article as part of an ongoing *talanoa* (conversation, exchange) with team members. Within a Tongan cultural framework, *talanoa* refers to an open, free-flowing exchange on a specific topic, a social interaction in which the conversation is grounded in relational connection (Koloamatangi 2021; Langima'a Services 2023; Pulu and Filisi 2026; Vaioleti 2016).

Our team relationships as *kāinga*, a Tongan term for kinfolk, which in our case refers to a shared connection to Vava'u, have shaped our community filming approach with the coastal villages of Tefisi and Makave in Vava'u and their community-managed marine protected areas (Filisi et al. 2025). It is not only collaborative work, but also a space for us to contribute our practice-based knowledge and skills as a form of community service; a way of giving back to our kinfolk, our people, our place of familial origin. However, our shared connection as *kāinga* descending from villages in the Vava'u Islands does not mean we share a homogenous cultural identity. We not only come from different generations but Teena, Rewi, and Nikolase trace their ancestry to multiple ethnic groups, while Sylvester is the only team member born and raised in these islands to Vava'u parents.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Māiō e lelei!

We are a documentary team of New Zealand Tongans based in Auckland, with ancestral ties to Vava'u, a northern island group in the Pacific nation of Tonga. Our key roles are Rewi Amoamo, cinematographer; Nikolase Meredith, producer and editor; Sylvester

To illustrate these identity dynamics, Teena and Sylvester are both in their mid-50s, the same age group, but Teena self-identifies as Tongan, New Zealand Māori, and Sāmoan, whereas Sylvester sees himself as a Vava'u Tongan and a migrant to New Zealand. Rewi and Nikolase are from the same age group, late 20s to early 30s, with Rewi self-identifying as New Zealand Māori and Tongan, and Nikolase describing himself as

Teena Brown Pulu is an anthropologist specialising in visual practices with Māori and Pacific communities.

Rewi Amoamo is an independent camera operator and photographer based in Auckland.

Nikolase Meredith is an independent filmmaker with NO SIX Ltd. in Auckland.

Sylvester Tonga is an independent Tongan media operator with VPON Media Ltd. in Auckland.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Sāmoan, Tongan, and Fijian. Rewi and Nikolase's personal bond is that they relate to one another as the grandchildren of migrant Tongans (though not of the same grandparents) – grandparents who raised their families in Auckland, where they later passed away and were buried. Adding another layer of connection, Rewi is Teena's eldest son, although their identity arrangements differ – Rewi emphasises that he is New Zealand Māori from the *iwi* (tribes) of Te Whānau-ā-Apanui and Te Whakatōhea, while acknowledging that his grandfather, Teena's late father, came from Tonga.

We share this background context about who we are, and how we locate ourselves in relation to our respective heritages, to show that Tongan identity continues to change and diversify across generations and geographies. Yet, maintaining connections to an ancestral place such as Vava'u can also nurture intergenerational visions. In our case, these connections shaped the purpose of our collaboration – to create documentaries with and for the benefit of coastal communities.

The documentary project began in November 2024 when Teena was awarded a community research grant from her faculty, Te Ara Poutama, which specialises in Māori and Indigenous development and media (Pulu 2025a, 2025b; Meredith 2025a, 2025b). The project proposal was developed in collaboration with the production crew: Sylvester, the interviewer, whose doctoral documentary Teena is supervising; Nikolase, the producer, who is preparing to enrol in a practice-based doctorate; and Rewi, Teena's son, who studies at another university and has worked with Nikolase on filming postgraduate projects for doctoral and master's students. From the outset, our intention was to keep the films community-centred and co-designed. We envisioned the village marine zone committees, whom we were in contact with, would self-select interview participants and be involved through feedback and collective decision-making at each stage of production and post-production (Elder 1995; Ginsburg 2011).

In preparation for Vava'u, Teena carried out background research and shared maps and briefs with the production crew. Diligently, Rewi and Nikolase studied the maps constructed by the Tonga Ministry of Fisheries using geographic information systems (GIS) technology, noting the size and spatial location of the village marine areas: Tefisi, 1.92 km² with a population of 508 residents; Makave, 1.69 km² with 369 residents (Tonga Ministry of Fisheries 2020, 54, 72). Together, we devised a plan to document village perspectives on how marine zoning has influenced social and economic life, and how these communities collectively interpret the links between



FIGURE 1. GIS map of the Makave Special Management Area (SMA) and Fish Habitat Reserve (FHR). The SMA is outlined in yellow, and the FHR is outlined in red (Tonga Ministry of Fisheries 2020, 54).

ocean conservation and climate action (Santha 2023, 15). Geographer Yvone Kunz (2025, 164) explained that 'those links are not clear.' She meant that simply claiming marine protected areas provide the solution to climate change must be questioned in terms of how – how enclosing parts of the ocean to protect what lies within truly prevents the threats that come from beyond (Kunz 2025, 164) (Figure 1).

Regarding our documentary sites in Vava'u, the *Tonga Fisheries Management Act 2020* allows designated coastal communities to establish community-managed marine protected areas, known as Special Management Areas (SMA) (Kingdom of Tonga 2020). These areas are co-governed by village marine zone committees, chaired by elected town officers, and work in partnership with the Tonga Ministry of Fisheries. Within each SMA, the main fishing zone is reserved exclusively for the village, alongside a smaller no-take zone where fishing is prohibited for everyone, both village residents and outsiders (Kingdom of Tonga 2020, 16–18; D'Andrea et al. 2024, 434–436; Singh, Linnér, and Singh 2025, 2–3; de Waegh, Wilson, and Watt 2024).

With this preparatory knowledge in hand, in July 2025 the production crew – Rewi, Nikolase, and Sylvester – travelled to Vava'u to film two short documentaries in collaboration with the marine zone committees of Tefisi and Makave (Brown Pulu 2025a, 2025b). Vava'u's coastal communities depend on inshore fisheries for seafood, edible seaweed, and their livelihoods. But what the crew learnt was a different lesson from what they had prepared for: that bordering the sea to limit or prohibit fishing and foraging within the marine protected area, and to keep people from other villages out, can not only provoke tensions between fishers and village marine zone committees but also highlights that, on the water, borderlines are neither seaable nor physically

perceptible. They are invisible and imagined into existence, but sea travellers nevertheless feel them, intuitively knowing when they are nearing these borderlines.

Rather than creating the storyline around the documentaries themselves, this visual essay takes an alternative route – exploring how sea borders are experienced in practice. By narrating the interactions and collaborations with coastal communities within their shifting seascapes, the visual narratives show how the borderlines are both real and imagined (Mills 2000). A theme is presented that the production crew, alongside Teena, felt was central to the project: what sits outside and what lies within the marine zones, where the *sove* (Tongan transliteration of *zone*) signifies to local Vava'u people what may enter and what must stay out.

A selection of twelve photographs by Rewi and Nikolase, with one image contributed by Sylvester, relate personal stories of their embodied experience filming with and for Tefisi and Makave coastal villages and their marine protected areas – redefined by marine management legislation into bordered zones that are invisible at sea, yet perceived and understood by local fishers (Merleau-Ponty 2002). With the exception of a chance buoy marking these zones, fishers and gleaners, who before the legislation could fish and forage anywhere, have since modified their behaviour, carefully navigating through and around boundaries and avoiding village fisheries officers patrolling the marine protected areas by boat.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

The co-creation of this visual essay followed a *talanoa* methodology, a Tongan approach to gathering and interpreting images, information, and ideas through open-ended, collective conversations that continue as needed. Over time, *talanoa* has been adopted and adapted by researchers from other Pacific ethnic groups, evolving into a pan-Pacific methodological framework, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand (Fa'avae, Jones, and Manu'atu 2016; 2022; Gremillion, Hallie, and Tominiko 2021, 43–45).

Timote Vaoleti (2006), a Tongan educationist and foundational theorist of *talanoa* – *tala* meaning 'to converse' and *noa* indicating a space for experiential exchange – argued that it is a research methodology that extends beyond traditional data collection tools. He described *talanoa* as the 'synergy' that arises from social exchanges between the researcher and their community, enabling deeper understanding of experiential ways of knowing (Vaoleti 2006, 24). Vaoleti framed *talanoa* as a

conversation-based process where the interweaving of 'emotions, knowing, and experiences' allows 'new knowing' to emerge, insights that may be overlooked by other research systems (Vaoleti 2006, 24).

Our process began with selecting images that showed what lay beyond the sea border and within the restricted fishing and no-take zones, captured through Rewi's and Nikolase's lenses as the camera crew, and through Sylvester's perspective as the interviewer. Teena then engaged Rewi, Nikolase, and Sylvester in a series of *talanoa*, both individual and group discussions, that continued throughout the writing process. Early conversations focused on recalling memories and stories behind the images, where they were taken, who was present, what was happening, and what each image revealed from their respective understandings. As the writing and revising evolved, the ongoing *talanoa* centred on reviewing and ensuring that Teena's written narrative reflected what the production crew intended to convey.

These visual narratives are carefully crafted stories drawn from Niko's and Rewi's recollections of interacting and collaborating with fishers and village fisheries officers while hybrid filming along the sea borders of Vava'u, that is, shifting between filming and photography (Marks 2000). The stories are written in a passive voice rather than the first person, mainly because Teena was writing and weaving the pieces based on conversations with them, during which they provided the ethnographic details and narrative contexts. Their memoirs emphasise being present on the water and along the foreshore with local Vava'u people, and on figuring out their surroundings, spatially and socially, through interactions with their collaborators. While interpreting Tefisi and Makave relationships with the sea, they captured what they saw and sensed, and what they gathered from their social exchanges, aware that their photographs would later be shared with audiences.

The persisting theme is the interplay between the outside and inside of fluid, constantly shifting watery lines meant to mark out, contain, and ultimately protect the marine ecosystems belonging to the villages. Yet the idea that the sea has no borders remains central, because out on the ocean the lines drawn on maps cannot be seen. This does not mean that fishers and families travelling between islands are unaware of where the boundaries lie; rather, they remain conscious of being near the marine protected areas, stay vigilant when they are close to or crossing the line, and know when to steer clear of village fisheries officers patrolling their sea territories.

We open with Rewi's memoirs of travelling *Outside the Zone* with a local diver Siaki, his boat driver, Sylvester the interviewer, and Sylvester's cousin Sanitesi, who was the production crew's community liaison in Vava'u. The stories are woven around six images of the photographer's impressions of being perched on the boundary line, and marking the position of the diver, the boat, and its passengers around a single red buoy. In those moments, the diver's activities within the aquamarine seascape, the hum of conversation between the men on board, and the heightened awareness of borderlines and ocean depths – its danger and its bounty as a source of survival – resulted in a rare experience that Rewi had not anticipated before arriving in Vava'u.

The visual essay then moves into stories of six images about Tefisi and Makave, which look inside the bordered marine areas of these villages across two zones: the no-take zones and the restricted fishing areas. Within the no-take zones, Rewi remembers the multisensory environment in which he was filming and photographing. Adapting to this context, he glided seamlessly between observing the fisheries officers describe the zones in Tongan, listening to Sylvester's on-the-spot English translations, and pointing and shooting where he perceived the prohibited fishing zone's boundaries to lie.

Nikolase adds a layer of depth and perspective by sharing his impressions of photographing inside the no-take zones: the soft natural light; the skyline and clouds as the backdrop; green-covered islets and landscapes; and iridescent waters reflecting light and changing colours with the temperature, all experienced from aboard the boats. We close with Nikolase's account of finding his bearings at sea, within the Tefisi and Makave restricted fishing areas, by focusing on Mt Talau in the background, an iconic landmark regarded by Vava'u communities as an ancestor. Situated within this relational ontology of how Vava'u people understand their ancestral landscape, the presence of Mt Talau defines the mountain's history and theirs as relatives, a kin-based ecology. Here, Nikolase reflects on the manner in which the mountain acted as a visual guide, giving him a sense of where he was in relation to the villages he had become familiar with in a short time.

OUTSIDE THE ZONE

Rewi and Sylvester were in Vava'u for seventeen days, arriving more than a week before Nikolase landed to carry out principal photography, the core filming of interviews. As the production crew's cinematographer working on second-unit photography, it was Rewi's job

to get on the ground earlier than Nikolase to record supplementary footage supporting the main storyline. Importantly, he was tasked with visually surveying key filming sites – villages, foreshores, seascapes – which would dictate the visual language of the films. He spent long hours from sun-up to sun-down capturing villagers' foreshore activities and following the sunlight as it moved across the bays.

On day seven, just as he was finding his rhythm and feeling immersed in the daily pulse of coastal community life, Sylvester said they would be heading out to sea to film and photograph Siaki, a local diver. Siaki, a Tongan transliteration of Jack, had turned up at the hotel where Rewi and Sylvester were staying in Neiafu a couple of days earlier. Through word of mouth, he had learnt they were in town to film documentaries with the villages about their marine zones. He wanted Sylvester to bring Rewi to film him spearfishing beyond the zones, so people could see how the marine protected areas affected ordinary fishers now expected to travel farther for their daily survival and, if they had excess catch, to sell fish at the local market. Some fishers were unable to afford the fuel for their outboard motorboats to travel the required distance and had lost their primary source of household income, which heightened tensions between marine conservationists and the fishing community.

The day brought perfect fishing weather: the sun was out, and the sea was calm with a slight breeze, which meant the small boat with a 15 horsepower outboard motor was not having to slog against the natural elements to transport five men. Making clips and pictures in the hard light, the midday sun blew up the flip-out screen into explosive blue-green hues with darker patches of coral exposed by the sunrays. Rewi opted for the viewfinder the entire four hours at sea – less glare and less stress adjusting his eyes under direct sunlight.

'Look, look, look,' exclaimed Sylvester. Sitting at the rear of the boat, behind Rewi and Sanitesi in the middle, he was pointing to a single red buoy – 'Ko e sone!' (the zone). Listening to the conversation around him, Rewi learnt that *sone*, the Tongan transliteration of zone, was the everyday term covering everything from marine protected area and restricted fishing area to no-take zone. On seeing the buoy, the exchange between the four men he travelled with rested firmly on the *sone* – 'Alu ki tu'a 'i he sone!' (go past the zone). *Sone* was also a proxy term for sea border, boundary line, and limit. Put simply, *sone* meant keep out (Figure 2).

Pulling up a few metres from the border's outskirts, the boat driver cut the motor and waited for the diver to



FIGURE 2. "Ko e sone!" (the zone), July 2025.

disembark and begin spearfishing. Conversation on board resumed as everyone kept watch for the diver's location and safety. Rewi observed both Siaki in the water and his driver in the boat carefully navigate around the buoy that marked the boundary – firsthand insight into how local fishers adapt to and operate within a fluid yet legislatively defined seascape.

From the boat's position, he wanted to put the scene in a frame – driver, boat, a single buoy in the near distance, and further afield the dark green outline of a *motu* (small island). Connecting the land, sky, and people was the sea, glistening under harsh sunlight. The yellow and grey boat had been purpose-built and hand-painted by a local craftsman to serve the needs of Vava'u fishers using outboard motors no bigger than 60 horsepower and carrying no more than four to five passengers. The driver rarely moved, which Rewi first thought was to stay close to the tiller in case he needed to shift the vessel. Watching more closely, he noticed that the driver would lean back slightly to even the boat's weight distribution and keep her steady while parked and bobbing on the water (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. Carefully navigate around the buoy, July 2025.

Surveying the ocean and clusters of *motu* dotted across the seascape, the sea had no borders – both materially and perceptually – to the human eye. Apart from the single buoy sighting, which prompted an impulsive reaction from Sylvester, followed by excitable chatter to get past the marker, the environmental atmosphere and the crew's interactions were relaxed, almost mirroring each other's calmness and serenity. The blue-green sea turned bright turquoise when Rewi stared too long without blinking, wondering what the ocean depth was – 30–50 feet, perhaps – almost wishing he could have spotted for the freediver as his assistant and safety backup. But then he thought of Siaki spearfishing to feed his family and that, given the circumstances, such as limited time, fuel, and the additional hours needed to bring the catch back onshore to scale, gut, clean, and prepare for the evening meal, it was best to give him space to get the work done (Figure 4).

There was one exception to the tranquil setting. In those four hours spent scanning the sea for ideal fishing spots and monitoring the diver, Sanitesi and the boat driver remained vigilant. They tracked Siaki's position to ensure he stayed outside the buoy – the *sone* signpost – while also watching for when he needed to be picked up with fish in hand and for a rest. Perched as a pair at the end of the boat, Rewi felt their figures against the aquamarine backdrop contained the local fishers' story, which is never about how depleted inshore fisheries and climate change affect the individual, but rather, how entire fishing communities have to migrate to deeper waters for their daily survival.

During his breaks, Siaki scouted for schools of fish. He had an intuitive connection with the ocean – his open-air workspace – and instinctively sensed where fish might be. With intense concentration on every movement in the water, he was always anticipating his next catch (Figure 5).



FIGURE 4. Sanitesi and the boat driver did remain vigilant, July 2025.



FIGURE 5. Siaki scouted for schools of fish, July 2025.

A well-known Vava'u personality and comedic social influencer to Tongans on Facebook, Siaki's online persona, showing his everyday life, preparing fish and root crops on an open fire in the backyard, and strolling through the bustling night market of street stalls in Neiafu, contrasted with his composure at sea. His stillness was statue-like in Rewi's mind, quietly poised, shading his eyes from the sun's glare while the shadow of his fingers marked his face. From the 153 still frames he took of Siaki alone, this was the one that spoke loudest, ironically, when the diver was at his quietest. He looked as though he had been painted on the water, not as a foreign body that did not belong to the ecosystem, but as if he were a natural part of this ocean world.

The boat moved slowly to the vicinity where Siaki wanted to dive, believing fish were there. This cycle of shifting the boat around a circumference of fishing spots close to the sea border continued from mid-morning to early afternoon, with the diver sporadically skirting back and forth across the line if he thought he saw fish. Each time he returned to the boat, Sylvester, Sanitesi, and the driver eagerly chatted about what the catch might bring. Occasionally, Siaki came back empty-handed, blowing seawater from his snorkel in quiet frustration (Figure 6).



FIGURE 6. Siaki's fishing spots were around patches of coral, July 2025.



FIGURE 7. Raw fish and hopa (cooked green bananas), July 2025.

Siaki's fishing spots, Rewi noticed, were around patches of coral revealing themselves through the translucent water, which looked almost see-through. In deep sea, away from the restricted fishing areas, the coral appeared dark in colour from the boat, whether up close or from a distance. Rewi was uncertain whether the lack of sunlight reaching the ocean depths made the coral seem dark in colour, or whether the coral was dead and covered in algae.

Sylvester asked about the coral colours in Vava'u, and the diver explained the common varieties are *lanu mata* (green) and *lanu koko* (brown), and that coral always looks dark from above the water, even the yellow, blue, and red kinds. He added that the larger fish he dives for prey on smaller fish and shellfish that live around the coral (Figure 7).

When Siaki was successful, he generously shared raw fish and hopa (cooked green bananas) with the crew, who had waited patiently at sea to taste the day's haul. Sanitesi was a fisher himself and was the first to cut the catch into pieces, saving the internal organs – roe, liver, and heart – as a delicacy eaten separately with freshly squeezed lemon or lime. Sitting in the yellow boat's centre, with his black tee-shirt contrasting against the bursts of marine colours and the skyline, he relished the meal, eating slowly and exchanging fishing talk with Siaki and the driver.

Located a few kilometres from one of the small *motu*, with no other local boats in sight, Rewi reflected on the marine life outside the invisible border. Four hours of intensive spearfishing had hauled in a catch including mahimahi and ruby snapper that could feed a family of six for a week. But the cost of purchasing a small boat, and petrol and diesel priced at almost four pa'anga (Tongan dollars) a litre, meant semi-subsistence households accustomed to inshore fishing were excluded from reaching their fundamental source of dietary protein that lay across the boundary line.

TEFISI AND MAKAVE

Nikolase arrived on day eleven, giving the production crew six working days for principal photography and for finishing the supplementary footage filmed inside the marine protected areas – the two zones of no-take and restricted fishing areas. The schedule was tight. Interviews in Tefisi and Makave had to be recorded over two days, leaving only three to four days at most to get out on the water with the fisheries officers and film the zones.

At the first team brief to finalise the filming schedule, Rewi brought Nikolase up to speed on filming and photographing Siaki and his boat driver outside the zone. The team needed a decision at the production table about what to do with the extra data. The Siaki shoot had been unexpected and never part of the plan, yet the photographs were striking. Reluctant to see the images archived and forgotten, Rewi hoped they could be published, even if they could not be released alongside the Tefisi and Makave images.

Sylvester called Teena in Auckland for guidance, and she offered a solution for the crew to consider. He had been uploading daily reels from the Vava'u film trip to his Facebook page. Siaki's footage – recorded on Sylvester's phone – could also be posted as a reel, provided the diver had the opportunity to review and approve the content (Tonga 2025). As for the photographs taken by Rewi, a curated selection of six frames could be published alongside the Tefisi and Makave images, as long as the accompanying stories were crafted thoughtfully so as not to exacerbate the existing tensions between fishers and fisheries officers, who had, for the most part, taken opposing sides in the border disputes.

At the Tefisi foreshore, while waiting to board the marine committee boat, Sanitesi, the crew's community liaison, confided in Sylvester and Nikolase: he was amazed at how fast Rewi had picked up Tongan. He had arrived in Vava'u with only basic conversational skills, but after two weeks of hearing Tongan spoken in every interaction, his confidence had grown.

On the boat, Nikolase thought about this while watching Rewi scope the boundaries of the no-take zone with a GoPro camera in a waterproof casing, mounted on an extension pole. His workflow looked like multitasking while code-switching in his head – listening to the Tefisi fisheries officer explain in Tongan where fishing was prohibited within the broader restricted area; hearing Sylvester's impromptu English translation drift back into Tongan; and aiming the camera toward the locations as they described them (Figure 8).



FIGURE 8. Multitasking while code-switching in his head, July 2025.

Rewi's recollection differed: the work environment was multisensory, which meant he had to rely on listening, seeing, sensing, and physically shifting his position around the boat's small cockpit carrying five passengers – just to get the shot. The clouds curled upward as the morning mist that had blanketed Tefisi foreshore lifted, revealing a partial view of the iconic landmark, Mt. Talau, in the background. At this exact point of filming hours of supplementary footage in the *sona*, Nikolase decided that the mountain would be his guide for getting his bearings and a sense of direction, such as estimating the distance between the mount, the boat, and the village.

Filming from inside the Makave no-take zone the following day brought the same weather pattern as Tefisi: mist shrouding the bay in the morning and lifting by mid-morning. But this time, the thickened clouds turned the sky greyish, streaked with raincloud. The humidity was turned up high, and the production crew were wearing padded yellow life jackets. Nikolase, used to how the jacket limited his range of motion, sat himself by the side of the boat and worked his camera with steady, economical movements. Rewi did not seem bothered by the jacket while filming,



FIGURE 9. Rewi did not seem bothered by the jacket, July 2025.

moving as though it made no difference to him, but Sylvester felt as if the heat had doubled around him (Figure 9).

With care, the fisheries officer piloted the boat close to the forested coastline so that Rewi could film the coral beds underwater. Sylvester remembered that when he was making this photograph, the fisheries officer and Sanitesi watched the GoPro camera sink into the water toward the coral. They talked about the possibility of sea cucumbers and small fish species rejuvenating, provided the villagers and outsiders respected the marine committee's rules to stay out of the zone. Pondering Sylvester's photograph, Rewi recalled that along the Makave coastline, close to where the boat was positioned, the coral resembled the plush Vava'u landscape of green and brown gentle slopes – unlike across the sea border, where multicoloured patches of flatter coral lay between stretches of sandy bottom.

On board, Nikolase worked with the soft natural light. He wanted to compare photographs he made from different boats within the no-take zones – Tefisi and Makave. The images were timed before mid-morning on different days, while the boats were stationed at similar distances from the coastlines outlining the marine protected areas. Weather conditions on both days were similar: for the entire week he was on the ground, cloud-covered skies and intermittent rain intensified the humidity, making the air sultry and harder, heavier to work in. Sylvester had organised the fisheries officers to be ready at their village foreshores for filming at 8am, hoping they could beat the rain and sweltering heat if Nikolase and Rewi finished before noon (Figure 10).

By 9am, the Tefisi *sone* appeared to the human eye and senses like seascape art – a realism watercolour painting. The warm light spread through the billowing clouds with splashes of blue, casting landscape shadows on the water. Ahead was a tiny islet and to its side a fisher had laid out



FIGURE 10. Tefisi, like seascape art – a realism watercolour painting, July 2025.

a gillnet – like a floating wall, its float-line of small buoys standing out. The stillness and silence were only broken by the outboard motor's chugging and the sound of water moving around the boat (Figure 11).

One day later in the Makave *sone*, the overcast sky blended with the landscape, creating a subdued, contemplative atmosphere over the shadowy water. On the horizon, the line between skyline and shoreline blurred, and the sea reflected the green canopy of the dense tropical forest. Nikolase noticed that the crew's mood mirrored the environment's ambience – everyone, even Rewi, the most physically active camera operator, who was usually in motion, seemed to savour the stillness.

Travelling through the zones, the points where one ended and another began were virtually imperceptible from behind the camera and even when viewing the images on screen, Nikolase thought. The frame revealed the interconnectedness, rather than the separation, of the land, the sea, and the people. In the areas where fishing was reserved exclusively for the villages of Tefisi and Makave, he applied the same technique of comparing images, this time using Mt. Talau as the central landmark from which he could determine the direction



FIGURE 11. One day later in the Makave *sone*, July 2025.



FIGURE 12. Vava'u people once regarded Talau as an ancestor, July 2025.

of the villages and estimate the distance between the mountain, the vessel, and the communities.

Before arriving in Vava'u, Teena had explained that Talau is remembered in local stories either as the creation of Sāmoan spirits who transformed themselves into an oddly shaped mountain, or as a disfigured peak whose head was severed by tricky Sāmoan spirits. In their attempt to fly the mountain top back to Sāmoa, they dropped it into the ocean. Nikolase, who is Sāmoan on his paternal side, interpreted these stories differently from the standard view that they symbolised Sāmoan and Tongan enmities and rivalries in pre-modern times. Like other Indigenous Pacific groups, Nikolase believed the Vava'u people once regarded Talau as an ancestor. This landmark, therefore, belonged to a relational ontology in which humans were part of intricately woven natural and spiritual worlds, one where people and non-humans were kin (Figure 12).

Talau was a striking presence in the Tefisi waters. No matter which way people travelled, the mountain stood like a centrepiece, guiding them toward their destination – a welcoming and familiar sight (and site) that helped voyagers like Nikolase understand how the islands, sea channels, and villages of *kāinga* (kinfolk) were connected. From the Tefisi shoot, his preferred image showed the warm, soft light forming long shadows that stretched across the water before him; iridescent waters shimmering, refracting light, and shifting in colour with the atmosphere and heat.

By comparison, the Makave images also fogged the zone boundaries, ocean borders dissolving into a glimmering mass of saltwater fluid, always in motion and making colours glisten on the surface. To Nikolase's senses, the luminous sea had no borders, although the conversations of their travelling companions, fishers and fisheries officers, were anchored in borders, boundaries, restrictions, and



FIGURE 13. The Makave images also fogged the *sone* boundaries, July 2025.

prohibitions enacted through the zone, the practice of marine zoning.

The final photograph (Figure 13) from Nikolase's collection is an ode to Mt Talau. Once a male ancestor and now an iconic guide to sea travellers, the mountain's silhouetted stature, seen from Makave's marine protected area on the far side of the island 'Utu Vava'u, is a testament that fishers and fisheries officers share common connections, despite the watery borders that divide or perplex them.

LASTING REFLECTION

The lasting reflection of our collaboration returns us to the title of this pictorial work, *The sea has (no) borders*. Through reflection, and through their reflexive understanding of how ancestral ties to Vava'u shape their filmmaking and photography, Rewi and Nikolase described an immersive experience that deepened their appreciation of the marine zones, not just as mapped territories, but as living spaces shaped by ancestral stories, community relationships, and daily fishing practices (de Waegh, Wilson, and Watt 2024, 566–567). Their time on the water, listening to local voices and witnessing the environment firsthand, transformed the abstract knowledge they had gathered before production in Tefisi and Makave into lived understanding, grounded in embodied experience and strengthened kinship ties. They both came away feeling, intuitively and through what they had seen and photographed, that the sea has no borders.

Yet we can also say that borders have been drawn on Vava'u's seascapes. We have seen them marked on the Tonga Fisheries Ministry GIS maps of the Tefisi and Makave Special Management Areas (SMA), with smaller zones designated as Fish Habitat Reserves (FHR). At the same time, we have had to reconcile that the sea is borderless in physical terms, a constantly shifting saltwater mass, and simultaneously bordered in the

social imagination of local conservationists, who recognise that protecting inshore fisheries and marine ecosystems for customary village use requires them to rethink their relationships with the ocean. How this reshapes their relationships with fisher communities remains an ongoing process (Mills 2000, 5–7).

Reading these tides of change in this way, we close by saying that the ocean is not only charted through official boundaries but also navigated through memory, kinship, and the collective responsibility of coastal communities working to sustain their ocean worlds for future generations. Complementing this relational view of an ancestral seascape, both bordered for ecosystem protection and borderless in physical reality, is *talanoa*. As a Tongan culture-centred approach to free-flowing exchange, whether with fishers or fisheries officers in Vava'u or reflecting among ourselves back in Auckland, the power of *talanoa* lies in connecting through shared experiences of an ocean of islands to which we trace our common origins (Hau'ofa 1994).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the funding support provided by Te Ara Poutama Faculty, AUT, which made this collaborative project possible. Our heartfelt thanks to the coastal communities of Tefisi and Makave in the Vava'u Islands of Tonga for their warm hospitality and for generously sharing their local knowledge, which was vital to making the short documentaries.

FUNDING

This project was funded by a community research grant from Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Development at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The grant supported the production of two short documentaries, Tefisi and Makave, released in 2025. This visual essay grew out of that documentary project.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ETHICS

This research project received ethics approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 13 May 2025 (Ethics Application: 25/97) and research approval from the Government of Tonga

on 10 June 2025 (Ref: ORG 1/8 v.25). All participants provided informed, written consent prior to their involvement in this research project and any subsequent publications derived from it. The consent process complied with institutional ethics guidelines and was approved by the relevant ethics committee.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

This visual essay has incorporated the use of Microsoft 365 Copilot and ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with refining written language. Generative AI was used to check grammatical accuracy and enhance sentence clarity.

ORCID

Teena Brown Pulu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3707-1569>

REFERENCES

- D'Andrea, Ariella, Margaret Von Rotz, Solène Devez, Brandon D. Hupka, Mele Ikatonga Tauati, and Siola'a Malimali. 2024. "Tonga: Enabling Coastal Communities to Protect Marine Resources and Secure the Livelihoods of Small-Scale Fishers." In *Implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines*, edited by Jessica Nakamura, Ratana Chuenpagdee, and Svein Jentoft, 299–314. MARE Publication Series, vol. 28. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56716-2_20
- de Waegh, Roxanne, Nathaniel Wilson, and Lucas Watt. 2024. "Marine Spatial Planning and the Loss of Traditional Power in Fiji and the Cook Islands." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 45:563–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12564>
- Elder, Sarah. 1995. "Collaborative Filmmaking: An Open Space for Making Meaning, A Moral Ground for Ethnographic Film." *Visual Anthropology Review* 11 (2): 94–101. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1995.11.2.94>
- Fa'avae, David, Rith Faleolo, Elisapesi Havea, Dion Enari, Tepora Wright, and Alvin Chand. 2022. "E-Talanoa as an Online Research Method: Extending Vā-Relations across Spaces." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18 (3): 391–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801221118609>
- Fa'avae, David, Alison Jones, and Linitā Manu'atu. 2016. "Talanoa'i 'a e Talanoa – Talking about Talanoa: Some Dilemmas of a Novice Researcher." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 12 (2): 138–150. <https://doi.org/10.20507/AlterNative.2016.12.2.3>
- Filisi, F., Teena Brown Pulu, Nikolase Meredith, and Rewi Amoamo. 2025. "Le Auala Masani (2025): Mini-Documentary for Sāmoan Social Media Audiences." *Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 10 (1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1163/23644583-bja10066>

- Ginsburg, Faye. 2011. "Native Intelligence: A Short History of Debates on Indigenous Media and Ethnographic Film." In *In Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, edited by Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby, 211–30. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gremillion, Helen, Jason Hallie, and Falaniko Tominiko. 2021. "The Scope of Talanoa Research Methodology: The Place of Research Methods That Are Not Rooted in Pasifika Traditions." In *In Unitec Research Symposium Proceedings 2020*, edited by E. Papoutsaki and M. Shannon, 39–53. Auckland: ePress, Unitec New Zealand.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. 1994. "Our Sea of Islands." *The Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1): 148–161.
- Kingdom of Tonga. 2020. *Tonga Fisheries Management Act, 2020 Revised Edition*. Nuku'alofa: Government of Tonga.
- Koloamatangi, Terje. 2021. "Talanoa Tātatau Part One: Kuonga Mu'a – Kuo Hili – The Past." YouTube video, April 9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgt45xLKe80>.
- Kunz, Yvone. 2025. "Can Borders in the Ocean Respond to Climate Change?" In *Ocean Governance (Beyond) Borders*, edited by Kimberley Peters and Jennifer Turner, 147–171. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Langima'a Services. 2023. *Talanoa Kaungafononga*. YouTube playlist. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLNkoQ905-F6_LEC6pUqIPTva4tYfcqDI.
- Marks, Laura U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Meredith, Nikolase. 2025a. *Rugby, Culture, and Connection | Tefisi, Makave, and Leimatu'a 2025*. Short documentary reel. Produced by Nikolase Meredith. Cinematography by Rewi Amoamo. Uploaded to YouTube by Teena Brown Pulu on July 29, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXpgKg9umjo>. Accessed August 11, 2025.
- Meredith, Nikolase. 2025b. *Vava'u: Closing the Loop*. Short documentary Reel. Produced by Nikolase Meredith. Cinematography by Rewi Amoamo. Uploaded to YouTube by Teena Brown Pulu on January 2, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETXtLDxPips>. Accessed January 24, 2026.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2002. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge.
- Mills, Charles Wright. 2000. *The Sociological Imagination*. Reprinted edition. Afterword by Todd Gitlin. London: Oxford University Press.
- Pulu, Teena Brown. 2025a. *Tefisi*. Short Documentary. Produced by Nikolase Meredith. Cinematography by Rewi Amoamo. Interviewer Sylvester Tonga. NO SIX and VPON Media.
- Pulu, Teena Brown. 2025b. *Makave*. Short Documentary. Produced by Nikolase Meredith. Cinematography by Rewi Amoamo. Interviewer Sylvester Tonga. NO SIX and VPON Media.
- Pulu, Teena Brown, and Fritz Toeata Filisi. 2026. "Filmed Talanoa: Synthesizing an Indigenous Knowledge Tradition and Visual Ethnography." In *Sage Research Methods: Diversifying and Decolonizing Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Santha, Sunil. 2023. *Climate Change, Small-Scale Fisheries, and Blue Justice: Fishscapes and Alternative Worldviews*. 1st ed. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003375333>
- Singh, Priyatma, Björn-Ola Linnér, and Ashneel Ajay Singh. 2025, June. "Marine Spatial Planning and Ocean Governance in Small Island Developing States." *Regional Environmental Change* 25 (91): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-025-02412-x>.
- Tonga, Sylvester. 2025. "Day #10 in Vava'u." Facebook Reel. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1468172574610866>.
- Tonga Ministry of Fisheries. 2020. *Kingdom of Tonga: Special Management Area Report 2020*. Nuku'alofa: Government of Tonga.
- Vaiioleti, Timote. 2006. "Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research." *Waikato Journal of Education* 12:21–34.
- Vaiioleti, Timote. 2016. "Talanoa: A Tongan Research Methodology and Method." In *In Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, edited by Michael Peters, 1–9. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_15-1