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Le Auala Masani (2025): Mini-Documentary for Sāmoan Social Media Audiences

Video Essay and Digital Paper

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Abstract

This collaborative project brings together doctoral student Fritz Filisi, supervisor Teena Brown Pulu, video producer Nikolase Meredith, and independent camera operator Rewi Amoamo, all of whom trace their ancestry to Sāmoa. Together, they produced a Sāmoan language mini-documentary for social media audiences exploring the *auala* funerary tradition. This ancient custom, performed upon the death of a high chief, involves the gathering of *tulāfale* (orators) who recite genealogies that connect chiefly titles, kinship lines, customary lands, and *lagi* (heavens) of ancestral gods. Filmed in Siʻumu village, Sāmoa, the project delivered culture-specific educational content to

diasporic Sāmoan young adults, many of whom are unfamiliar with this ceremonial practice. This short article is a companion to *Le Auala Masani* (2025) that explains conceptual and practice-based considerations of connecting a mini-documentary made in Sāmoa to Sāmoans in the diasporas.

Keywords

digital paper – *Auala* funerary tradition – mini-documentary – culture-specific educational content – Sāmoan social media audiences



FEATURE This article is based on the mini-documentary *Le Auala Masani* (2025), which can be viewed [here](#).

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIKOLASE MEREDITH OF FRITZ FILISI (RIGHT) WITH HIS ĀIGA IN SI'UMU, SĀMOA

1 Introduction

Oi ai tatou – who are we? We are Fritz Filisi, a doctoral candidate; Teena Brown Pulu, Fritz's primary supervisor; Nikolase Meredith, a video producer; and Rewi Amoamo, an independent camera operator. We write as residents of Auckland

suburbs with long-established Pacific populations – Māngere, Manurewa, and Glen Innes – neighbourhoods shaped by international labour migration in the 1960s and 1970s. Three to four generations on, these communities have grown into areas with burgeoning youth populations.

We write as a group who trace our *tupuaga* (ancestry) to Sāmoa, each in a distinct way: Fritz is Sāmoan; Teena is Tongan, Māori, Sāmoan; Nikolase is Sāmoan, Tongan, Fijian; and Rewi is Māori, Tongan, Sāmoan. We write as Pacific and Māori peoples in New Zealand with family histories traced to the colonial era; descendants who can name nineteenth century European ancestors who settled in Sāmoa, Tonga, Fiji, and Aotearoa and the empires they emigrated from: German Empire, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, British Raj, Dutch Ceylon. Importantly, we write our story of collaborating on a Sāmoan language mini-documentary *Le Auala Masani* (2025) to make culture-specific educational content for Sāmoan social media audiences. Our discussion focuses on conceptual and practice-based considerations when endeavouring to connect Sāmoan young adults in the diasporas to digital content produced in a village setting in Sāmoa.

2 Conceptual Framework

This short article is intended as a companion to the mini-documentary *Le Auala Masani* (2025), offering insights into the conceptual and practice-based matters behind its production. In this case, the framing of culture-specific educational content synthesises concepts of digital society. Principally, we have taken the idea that society today is “characterised by information flowing through global networks at unprecedented speeds,” irrespective of whether one is a diasporan Sāmoan using a smartphone in Carson, Los Angeles, or a villager using an internet-connected device in Si’umu, Sāmoa (Redshaw, 2020, p. 425). However, picturing a digital society also prompts a consideration of digital inequality. For us, it meant being mindful that certain groups have less access to digital technology, along with the opportunities and benefits resulting from digital literacy. In this context, our people – Pacific peoples in New Zealand and Pacific Island countries – are counted as part of the digital divide (Elers, Dutta, and Elers, 2022; Hartnett, Butler, and Rawlins, 2022).

For the purpose of our mini-documentary project, we adapted an aspect of Ellen Helsper’s theory that social and digital inequalities are entangled in a complex relationship; one in which “the social cannot be understood without the digital, and vice versa” (Helsper, 2021, p. 26). With this in mind, we set out to create a short ethnographic film couched in documentary realism and

designed to serve multiple purposes. Fritz Filisi, in collaboration with his primary supervisor Teena Brown Pulu and producers Nikolase Meredith and Rewi Amoamo, developed the project as a creative exploration. The primary goal was to enable Fritz to achieve a fundamental milestone of progressing from provisional enrolment to confirmed candidature in the three-year doctoral programme at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The mini-documentary therefore served as a test piece to screen at the confirmation of candidature seminar; a test film that showcased practical experimentation with key elements of the practice-led research – Sāmoan visual storytelling, sound design, and thematic resonance with niche audiences.

Relatedly, we aimed for *Le Auala Masani* (2025) to offer culturally rich content that would engage Sāmoan young adults in the diaspora – particularly those who connect with their heritage more through social media than by setting foot in their ancestral villages (Eglinton, Gubrium, & Wexler, 2017; Schleser & Firestone, 2018). In many ways, the kind of digital diaspora we sought to reach resonates with Sandra Ponzanesi’s notion of “migrant culture” – a culture in which “digital migrants” use social media to cultivate cultural hybridity and diversify diasporic connections (Ponzanesi, 2020, pp. 978–979). Within this framework, Ponzanesi conceptualises settings where digital migrants use social media as part of a hybrid diasporic culture: online spaces and groups that allow them to embody both “the Cosmopolitan self and the Encapsulated self” (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 980). Here, cosmopolitan refers to Sāmoan young adults forging new alliances with other identity groups in their urban centres who share similar community struggles and aspirations, while encapsulated denotes the strengthening of ties between the diaspora and their ethnic identity group in Sāmoa, or in other urban centres and Western countries (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 980).

While our target audience identify with their migrant parents’ grandparents’ or great-grandparents’ Sāmoan ethnicity, their beliefs and practices are largely regarded by Sāmoan migrants and *‘āiga* in Sāmoa as new identity formations. In this sense, they are seen to integrate the tastes and values of the countries where they live into their understanding of what might be described as, for example, a New Zealand Sāmoan culture (Anae, 2002). Centring the mini-documentary on a conversation between Fritz, the researcher and interviewer, and the *ali‘i* (high chief) Tofaeono about the *auala* funerary tradition, we intended the cinematic portrayal to hold cultural integrity and resonate deeply with Sāmoan audiences. By releasing the mini-documentary on producer Nikolase Meredith’s YouTube channel – knowing that his peers and relatives are Sāmoan and Pacific young adults born and raised in Aotearoa, Australia, and America – we sought to bridge both generational and geographical gaps.

Outside the scope of this companion piece is an inquiry into Pacific identity and wellbeing in relation to diasporic groups, where it is commonly felt that Pacific young people born and raised overseas “struggle to be accepted by their community due to many factors, including lack of cultural knowledge and language” (Enari and Vaka, 2024, p. 152; Manuela and Anae, 2017; Mila-Schaaf and Robinson, 2010). Although our article does not focus on this area, we acknowledge the work of Sāmoan and Tongan researchers such as Dion Enari and Sione Vaka, who express concern that Pacific youth “tend to assimilate the norms and values of the host country, New Zealand, with little knowledge of their country of origin, their values and norms” (Enari and Vaka 2024, p. 152).

3 Methodology

The methodology was transcultural in the sense that principles informing Native Canadian documentary practice were adapted and applied in making *Le Auala Masani* (2025) (MacDougall, 1999). Drawing from Dorothy Christian’s practice-led approach to community filming with and for her Coast Salish peoples of British Columbia, the mini-documentary related the ethics of “Indigenous visual storywork” to a Sāmoan village setting, particularly the notion of “visual sovereignty” (Christian, 2017, 2019). As Christian (2017, p. 28) explains, visual sovereignty embodies an Indigenous community’s “land, story, and cultural protocols and how they inform our place-based identities, which are grounded in our ancestral homelands.” This understanding accentuates that the Indigenous peoples contributing their voices and views to documentary projects are the “cultural producers” of visual storywork – stories created by them to represent them (Christian, 2017, p. 13). From this perspective, visual sovereignty speaks to self-representation and aesthetic control of images by Indigenous cultural producers. It therefore means that the Indigenous community being filmed have a say in how their images are assembled on-screen as a visual expression of themselves, their land, story, and ancestors.

A documentary methodology from the Pacific region that intersects with Dorothy Christian’s (2017, 2019) concept of visual sovereignty among Native Canadian peoples is Wensislaus Fatubun’s approach to decolonising screen production through “Indigenous mapping and visualities,” specifically developed for filming with his West Papuan communities (Fatubun, 2023). Fatubun’s aim was to address the historical power imbalance between “outsiders” – non-West Papuan documentary filmmakers – and West Papuan communities, who traditionally had little or no influence over how their lives and homelands were represented on-screen for public audiences. As Fatubun (2023, p. 10) explains, “The

primary goal of my West Papuan Indigenous mapping and visualities approach therefore seeks to challenge outsiders' media coverage or filmmaking 'about' Indigenous peoples in West Papua 'without' us." In practice, Fatubun sought to transfer filmmaking knowledge and skills to community members themselves, enabling them to produce their own social-media documentaries that represent West Papuans on their own terms.

Taking this into account, the ethical principle of visual sovereignty was central to the Sāmoan-centred creative methods used for making *Le Auala Masani* (2025), a mini-documentary grounded in the lived realities of the Si'umu community (Brown Pulu and Filisi, 2024; Filisi, 2023; Filisi, Tonga, and Mukhtar, 2024). This approach was expressed through four key elements. First, the concept of *fa'atasi*, a deeply held value of working together, shaped the collaborative ethos of the project. The researcher/interviewer Fritz Filisi served as an intermediary, fostering dialogue between the production team and village participants to ensure the documentary was created not just about, but *with* and *for* the community. Second, *gagana Sāmoa*, the Sāmoan language, was intentionally used as the primary medium of communication, enabling the mini-documentary to convey an Indigenous knowledge system and social world grounded in Sāmoan cultural and linguistic contexts, and resonant with wider Pacific and Indigenous audiences.

Third, the project's depth of knowledge was anchored in Fritz's genealogical ties where ancestral connections to the *ali'i* Tofaeono and the *'āiga* (clans, families) of Si'umu affirmed his place within the community. These familial ties were not symbolic but foundational, allowing for collective sensemaking of the *auala* funerary tradition from within the community; sensemaking that is grounded in trust, kinship, and shared cultural responsibility. Fourth, the project allowed for *fa'amatalanga*, a feedback process where Tofaeono, on behalf of his people, reviewed and consented to the rough cut and final cut of the mini-documentary prior to its public release on social media.

It is here we recognize trans-indigeneity as a specialist branch of Indigenous studies. This field examines Indigenous peoples on regional and global scales, often through close readings of literary and historical texts that reveal how identity groups have resisted colonial power structures, while maintaining their cultural beliefs and practices. Emerging from the research principles and methods developed in Chadwick Allen's *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (2012) and *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in Indian and Māori Literary and Activist Texts* (2002), trans-indigeneity – Indigenous identity understood within regional and global contexts – has largely been advanced by Native American and American Pacific scholars.

In the South Pacific region, including Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, there are notable exceptions. Sam Iti Prendergast has adapted trans-indigeneity

to explore ways of understanding Pacific peoples – Māori included – their migrations overseas, and the cross-cultural ethics and accountabilities of living on other Indigenous peoples' lands. These are lands that, in the case of New Zealand and Australia, have been colonised through settler processes, resulting in dispossession of territories, waterways, languages, and cultures (Prendergast, 2023, p. 58). Drawing on the research ethics of Vicente M. Diaz (2019), an American Micronesian scholar, Prendergast cautions Māori and Pacific researchers: "If we celebrate our movements but forget whose land we stand on, we celebrate our success but forget the routes, the connections, the dispossessions and the sovereignties that forged Pacific pasts and shape Pacific futures" (Prendergast, 2023, p. 68).

Although the short documentary *Le Auala Masani* (2025) is not, by our estimation, trans-indigenous in its origin or design, but rather a local, village-centred narrative conveyed solely by the *ali'i* Tofaeono of Si'umu, Sāmoa, the ethical principle put forward by Diaz (2019) and Prendergast – of acknowledging "whose land we stand on" – resonates deeply with us (Prendergast, 2023, p. 68). This alignment becomes clearer when considering the collaborative work of doctoral filmmakers Fritz Filisi, Sylvester Tonga, and Asim Mukhtar, who, with the guidance of their primary supervisor Teena, co-authored the article *Creating nonfiction film in our mother tongue: Sāmoan, Tongan, Punjabi* (Filisi, Tonga, and Mukhtar, 2024). In this paper, they emphasised their shared ethics as colleagues creating nonfiction films in their respective Indigenous languages – a practice that included appropriately acknowledging *ngā iwi Māori o Aotearoa* as the Indigenous tribes whose land they live and work on, and upon whose land they are, as migrant filmmakers, claiming a sense of indigeneity.

The key message Fritz, Sylvester, and Asim sought to convey to New Zealand-based Sāmoan and Tongan researchers was that the term *Indigenous* must be problematised and carefully contextualised. Standing on Māori tribal lands while claiming to speak from the positionality of an Indigenous scholar requires a conscious awareness of place and history. Without public recognition that Māori tribes are the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, such claims risk disacknowledging – and being complicit in – the historical and ongoing injustices enacted upon, and the intergenerational struggles endured by, *tāngata whenua* (Indigenous peoples of the land).

We believe that the very term *Indigenous* demands thoughtful contextualisation from Sāmoan and Tongan researchers (Brown Pulu and Filisi, 2024). Naming oneself and one's people as Indigenous calls for a clear explanation of what diasporic communities outside Sāmoa and Tonga mean by this, particularly when residing on Māori tribal lands. Terms

such as “Pacific Indigenous” and “Indigenous Ocean” are bold identity statements appearing in recent research (Enari et al., 2024; Salesa, 2023). Yet, without first acknowledging that these Indigenous agendas are unfolding on land to which one’s people are not Indigenous, the integrity of such claims comes into question.

FILISI, TONGA, and MUKHTAR, 2024, p. 4

4 Discussion

At the heart of this work lies the intersection of culture, education, and digital storytelling. To meaningfully create and share culture-specific content for Sāmoan social media audiences, requires an appreciation of dynamic conversations that shape this space. Informing this project is the intergenerational collaboration between doctoral researcher Fritz Filisi and producers Nikolase Meredith and Rewi Amoamo, who represent the same New Zealand-born Pacific generation as Fritz’s young adult daughters, nieces, and nephews (Hausknecht, 2021). Their exchange of ideas brought to light a cultural truth: the sustainability of heritage depends on mutually respectful, ongoing dialogue between migrant communities and their overseas-born descendants. The lesson learnt was a living, symbiotic relationship between generations of Sāmoan migrants and Sāmoans born and raised in cities of western countries can ensure that culture not only survives in the diasporas, but thrives online in the digital world – the social space of everyday life for young adults.

During the planning stage for Nikolase’s two-day solo shoot in Si’umu, Sāmoa, Rewi, serving as creative and technical advisor, pushed for a strong opening sequence to *Le Auala Masani* (2025). He was adamant that the entry should synchronise perfectly with *Screems from da old plantation*, a popular hip-hop track by King Kapisi, to set the tone (King Kapisi, 2000). The aim was to craft a visual message highlighting that young people and children are vital to the heartbeat of village life. Rewi’s strategy was grounded in social media tastes of the target audience: that is, to grab the attention of young Sāmoan viewers by merging an iconic hip-hop anthem from the diaspora with a montage of three-second cuts, mimicking a music video.

For Fritz, a Sāmoan migrant in his 60s living in New Zealand, Sāmoan hip-hop was unfamiliar territory. But his curiosity sparked a moment of connection with his eldest daughter Glorielle Filisi, an undergraduate studying law. When Fritz asked Glorielle what stood out in the mini-documentary, her answer was clear-cut: the music and shots of the village. Her feedback confirmed what Rewi already knew: Sāmoan hip-hop anthems created a language young

Sāmoans in Auckland understood and loved. If they stayed for the music and the one-minute-plus entry sequence, then it was likely they would stay for the storytelling of the *ali'i* Tofaeono, regardless of having to read the English subtitles if they were not fluent in Sāmoan (Barrett and Cocq, 2019; Keely, 2016).

Glorielle was so moved by the mini-documentary, she made two short cuts of *Le Auala Masani* (2025), which she shared on her TikTok account (Filisi, 2025a, 2025b). The response was overwhelmingly positive with peers and relatives of her age group echoing the sentiments found in comments on Nikolase Meredith’s YouTube channel (Meredith, 2025): those sentiments being enthusiasm, approval, and respect for the work.

The themes we took from social media comments – enthusiasm, approval, respect – can be contextualised by distinct and interlinked meanings in light that the commenters in this small sample are Sāmoan by ethnic and cultural identity, and young adults living in Aotearoa and America. First, enthusiasm indicates commenters are expressing an impassioned response to viewing the mini-documentary. Second, approval suggests commenters have a personal interest in the content and are endorsing its online release. Third, respect implies commenters have taken an identity position on why the content is meaningful to them. Interconnecting these themes is the belief that Sāmoa and Sāmoan culture plays a significant role in group identity, irrespective of where young people are located geographically.

In hindsight, we reflect here on Ellen Helsper’s assertion that in today’s world “the social cannot be understood without the digital, and vice versa” (Helsper, 2021, p. 26). With respect to digital inequality, Fritz intends to screen *Le Auala Masani* (2025) in the *fale fono* (meeting house) of Si’umu village when

TABLE 1 Social media comments on *Le Auala Masani* (2025)

Theme 1: Enthusiasm YouTube: Niko Meredith	Theme 2: Approval TikTok: glo.rielle	Theme 3: Respect TikTok: glo.rielle
<i>This is dope, tuning in from Puyallup, Washington.</i>	<i>Wow! First time I’ve seen my grandfather’s village!</i>	<i>Strongest culture in the Pacific, forever sacred, unlike everyone else losing their culture.</i>
<i>Sovereign. Fai gisi ou PhD, makua magaia ou video. (Translation: PhD makes me cry, love your video.)</i>	<i>Yes, putting more Islander content out there.</i>	<i>So important.</i>

he visits during the summer break. He felt that this would give the *‘āiga* an opportunity to view the mini-documentary and *talanoa* (talk) among themselves about how the *auala* story was depicted to the outside world, especially young Sāmoans living overseas. However, with regard to digital storytelling being a means to transmit Indigenous knowledge systems from one generation to another through the Sāmoan language, there is, we believe, a genuine need for culture-informed content tailored for Sāmoan young adults in the diasporas.

As we embark on the next stage of the journey, collaborating on Fritz Filisi’s doctoral film, an in-depth ethnographic exploration of the *auala* funerary tradition in Si’umu, Sāmoa, we feel humbled and grateful. The doctoral film looks closely at ceremonial protocols of this treasured custom, and how they have evolved over time. The kind spiritedness of the Si’umu people who have welcomed Fritz, a son of Si’umu, and his production team, Nikolase and Rewi, to capture their story with care and respect is humbling. Equally, we are grateful to the young Sāmoans who have engaged with *Le Auala Masani* (2025). Their reflections on the mini-documentary have highlighted why this work matters, motivating us to keep creating quality content that not only educates but honours our ancestral origins in village communities.

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