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Shared Visions: A Cross-Generational Documentary Collaboration in Vava'u, Tonga

Visual Essay

Sylvester Tonga

VPON Media Limited, Auckland, New Zealand

sptonga@gmail.com

Teena Brown Pulu | ORCID: 0000-0003-3707-1569

Corresponding author

Te Ara Poutama, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland,
New Zealand

teena.brown.pulu@aut.ac.nz

Rewi Amoamo

Independent camera operator, Auckland, New Zealand

rewi.amoamo@gmail.com

Nikolase Meredith

No Six Limited, Auckland, New Zealand

banditosmeredith@gmail.com

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Abstract

The authors are collaborators on Sylvester Tonga's doctoral documentary, filmed with the weavers and farmers who sustain these agricultural traditions in Leimatu'a, his village of origin in the Vava'u Islands of Tonga. An archipelago of fifty-one atolls, Vava'u lies 300 kilometres north of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa. Using screengrabs and photographs made by the production crew with the Leimatu'a contributors, they consider how Sylvester's cultural identity shaped both the community filming process and the cross-generational collaboration between himself, a Tongan migrant to New Zealand, and the New Zealand-born Tongan producers, Rewi Amoamo and Nikolase Meredith.

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Here, they reflect on the conceptual and methodological intricacies that have emerged from this cross-generational teamwork between a migrant Tongan who has lived his adult life in Auckland and a New Zealand-born Tongan production crew.

Keywords

visual essay – migrant and New Zealand-born Tongans – Vava'u, Tonga – cultural identity – community filming – cross-generational documentary collaboration



FEATURE This visual essay is built around six digital images created by Auckland-based filmmakers Rewi Amoamo (right) and Nikolase Meredith (left), pictured here in a screengrab made by Sylvester Tonga in July 2025. A short video narrative produced by AUTV, featuring Sylvester's voiceover, can be viewed [here](#); in it, he explains the rationale behind making a doctoral documentary in Leimatua. Although this essay is not focused on analysing the video, the link is provided to offer readers background context on how Sylvester's cultural identity has informed the collaborative filmmaking and cross-generational relationships between the doctoral researcher and the production crew.

1 Introduction

Mālō e lelei! We are Teena Brown Pulu and Sylvester Tonga, thesis supervisor and practice-based doctoral student, working alongside documentary producers Rewi Amoamo and Nikolase Meredith. We live in Auckland, New Zealand, with ancestral ties to villages and islands across the Kingdom of Tonga. In particular, our *kāinga* (kinship groups) connect us to Vava'u, a group of fifty-one atolls more than 300 kilometres north of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa.

Guided by a selection of screengrabs and photographs created by the production crew while filming with contributors in Leimatu'a, Sylvester's village of origin in Vava'u, this visual essay traces the intertwined realities behind the images themselves. By this, it considers how Sylvester's cultural identity, and his position as an insider researcher who has lived most of his adult life away from his ancestral village, shaped the community filming process and the cross-generational collaboration with Rewi and Nikolase.

To explain this, Sylvester's documentary visually explores the ways in which the agricultural traditions of women weavers and farmers in Leimatu'a have endured and continue to shape collective identity, despite the outward migration of families to urban centres such as Auckland, New Zealand. Rather than focus solely on the documentary itself, we survey the interrelated ideas that surfaced during the production stage of hybrid filming, a process by which the camera operators switch back and forth between filming and photographing.

On reflection, we all feel (including Sylvester) that the doctoral filmmaker's positionality as a Vava'u-born Tongan migrant has shaped his understanding of Leimatu'a village life as a core component of cultural identity. A critical question, then, is how this understanding influences the filmmaking process – primarily with the village community in Vava'u, about whom the film was made, and, in a much smaller capacity, with village migrants in South Auckland who featured in a two-minute sequence.

Immersed in a social world where Tongan village life is shaped by an Indigenous language, kinship ties, and cultural practices that inform identity and belonging, Sylvester took part in a collaborative, community filmmaking project in Leimatu'a. Even so, he worked alongside a production crew whose own identity orientations differed from his. Rewi is a New Zealander of Māori, Tongan, and Sāmoan descent, while Nikolase, also a New Zealander, is of Sāmoan, Tongan, and Fijian descent. For both, self-identifying as New Zealand nationals, especially when travelling overseas, serves as a prominent marker of identity.

A further and no less significant question arises when considering the social dynamics and identity shifts between migrant and New Zealand-born Pacific groups. Within New Zealand social spaces, these shifts have been examined by

New Zealand-born Pacific scholars, in particular anthropologist Melani Anae (1997) and sociologist Karlo Mila (2013). Writing from their individual disciplines, they argue that second-generation Pacific peoples adapt their identities in response to their New Zealand upbringing. They must locate themselves within a new social matrix as New Zealanders of Pacific ethnicity and cultural heritage, rather than as people who come directly from Pacific Island nations (Anae 1997, p. 135).

Identity conflict often centres on social acceptance, specifically on not feeling fully accepted (Mila 2013, pp. 56–57). This pressure may come from migrant Pacific communities, who view New Zealand-born Pacific peoples as different or, more harshly, as deviating from island-village culture, and from non-Pacific New Zealanders, who expect them to conform more closely to migrant Pacific cultural norms (Mila 2013, p. 56). In Sylvester's doctoral documentary, this question of social acceptance becomes central to the practice-based approach that informs both the community filmmaking and the writing of this visual essay: what conceptual and methodological complexities arise from these cross-generational relationships with Rewi and Nikolase within their collaborative work?

While framed within a conventional essay structure, the writing on community film practice does not seek to offer tidy, generalised conclusions about intergenerational film crews working in small island states of the Pacific. Instead, the images drive ideas and conversations about cultural identity, the quiet yet powerful force shaping every stage of community filmmaking, and give readers a sense of the work itself.

At the same time, we emphasise that the practice-based methodology developed for Sylvester's documentary is not presented as a model to be replicated across all Indigenous Pacific cultural and language groups. Replicability was never the goal. Rather, our shared aim was to contribute interviewing and filmmaking knowledge and skills to fulfil the roles within the production team: community liaison, interviewer, translator (Sylvester); cinematographer, co-director (Rewi); producer, co-director (Nikolase); project supervisor, screenwriter (Teena). In doing so, we sought to create a community film that reflects how Leimatu'a weavers and farmers see themselves and their work in relation to maintaining their village's cultural identity (Christian 2019, p. 49).

2 Conceptual Framework

To understand the conceptual foundations of this practice-based research, it is important to recognise that producing a documentary as a doctoral artefact –

and writing about a key aspect of that process, namely the cross-generational teamwork involved in film recording and digital photography – brings its own challenges. Community filmmaking is inherently collaborative, and in Tonga's outer islands the intensity of kin-based relationships and communitarian values heightens the depth of engagement and the level of interest in the film. In this context, production depends on a team – community liaison, interviewer, translator, and camera crew – who can perform their roles with competence, cultural awareness, and respect for boundaries. Successful filmmaking also requires assembling a team whose skills and sensibilities align closely with the film's subject.

For Sylvester's doctoral project, this meant engaging camera operators who could self-direct their work within the village environment of Leimatu'a without interrupting the everyday rhythms of community life, whether in weaving shelters or plantation fields (Stanton, Hall, & Ricciardelli 2016). Given the project's aims and the social subtleties and nuances of filming in a kin-based village setting, it was understandable that Sylvester sought the involvement of Rewi and Nikolase. He valued not only their filming experience but also their ancestral ties to Vava'u through their migrant Tongan grandparents. His reasoning was culturally informed: he believed that this connection would encourage them to "work hard for Vava'u," demonstrating commitment to the people they were filming with and for (Koostachin 2021).

Although such expectations about identity and motivation can be critiqued as cultural essentialism, a belief that individuals from the same cultural group inherently share particular traits, scholars note that essentialist thinking is a widespread human tendency (Bradley 2018, p. 5; Kumaravadivelu 2008, p. 50). In this case, the essentialism directed at Rewi and Nikolase was not experienced as a challenge to their New Zealand-born Tongan identities. Instead, it functioned as a gesture of inclusion and affirmation.

Theoretically, Sylvester envisioned his documentary as an introspective work, one that, following Ngāti Apa filmmaker Barry Barclay, points the lens inward to create *Our Own Image* (2015, pp. 74–80). He anticipated that this collective self-representation would emerge through the perspectives of the weavers and farmers of Leimatu'a. Accordingly, he sought a crew who were comfortable and competent in recording him as he engaged in Tongan-language conversations with his own people—"talking in," as Barclay framed it (2015, p. 76).

Barclay wrote, "I have come to believe that we need to be talking to our own people first – to be 'talking in'" (2015, p. 76). Sylvester interpreted "talking in" as purposeful, inward-focused dialogue conducted in the Tongan language, reflecting on how the Leimatu'a *kāinga* sustain their collective identity

through land, agriculture, and kinship. He also considered Barclay's observation that some may perceive "talking in" as exclusionary; Barclay noted that *Pākehā* (European) New Zealanders – the "majority culture" – might interpret this approach as a visual practice closed to those outside Māori communities (2015, p. 76).

Sylvester and Teena spoke at length about what Barry Barclay might have meant when he suggested that the "majority culture" felt excluded from using "talking in" as a documentary practice because they were non-Māori (2015, p. 76). Teena then advised her doctoral student that his emerging concepts leaned toward strategic essentialism, first introduced by Gayatri Spivak (1987): a process by which marginalised groups deliberately adopt essentialist identities to achieve social and political goals, such as recognition and rights (Mir 2018).

This prompted him to reflect on how Leimatu'a culture and identity are viewed within Tongan society, often as a village-oriented identity positioned as secondary, subordinate, or even divergent from the broader national Tongan identity. In a short AUTV video produced at Auckland University of Technology, he explained his purpose in creating a doctoral documentary with and for his village. In the voiceover, spoken in Tongan with English translation, he stated:

By making a PhD documentary film, I am appealing to people to view Leimatu'a in a new light. I want others who are not from my village to see that small villages have their own greatness, which originates from the trusting relationships of warm-hearted people.

TONGA, as cited in YETTON, 2025

What, then, instigated his call for Tongans to see the Leimatu'a *kāinga* "in a new light"? More specifically, what was the prevailing public perception of his village? Anthropologist Mike Poltorak (2007) offers important insight into how Leimatu'a people have been socially constructed within Tongan cultural identity politics. Writing about Vava'u ethnographies of "mental illness," Poltorak observed:

People often speak about Leimatu'a as the village in Vava'u where *māfana* is most celebrated. People from Leimatu'a have a reputation for being uniquely eccentric and for doing everything to extremes.

POLTORAK 2007, p. 24

He defined *māfana* as "an emotion of communitarian enthusiasm" (Poltorak 2007, p. 24) and illustrated this through an incident involving a Leimatu'a

contestant at the Miss Vava'u competition more than two decades ago. During the question-and-answer segment, the event host asked her about her village's intense expressions of *māfana*. Interpreting the question as a subtle insult, she pushed back:

Leimatu'a people are people who live freely, yet people call them fakasesele or vale. We are not fakasesele or vale. We live happily and we do not focus on ourselves and we are especially free.

POLTORAK 2007, p. 25

The terms *fakasesele* and *vale* are context-dependent, shifting in meaning according to how they are used to describe a situation or a person. In Poltorak's account, the Miss Vava'u contestant used these words to suggest that outsiders claim Leimatu'a villagers "act in a silly or eccentric manner" when expressing *māfana* (Poltorak 2007, p. 22; Churchward 1959, p. 97). Her response was that it is inappropriate to describe Leimatu'a "communitarian enthusiasm," their lifestyles, and collective happiness as ridiculous, because this is not how Leimatu'a people understand themselves or their village identity.

Poltorak's ethnographic story has been used here to show how, within the Tongan social landscape, relationships between people and their village communities are formed by familial and communal duties. In Sylvester's case, he employs a form of strategic essentialism to position the documentary artefact, and his rationale for making a community film, as a focused exploration of Leimatu'a collective identity through the combined work of weavers and farmers (Varriale 2025). His intention is to reveal what lies beneath public perception: how Leimatu'a kinship groups make collective sense of their village identity through the everyday agricultural traditions of weaving and farming that they themselves regard as the foundation of who they are.

To convey the project's conceptual intricacy, Sylvester envisioned his audience as Tongan nationals, both those living in Tonga and those in the diaspora, who were first-language speakers of Tongan. He assumed this homeland-and-diasporic community would immediately recognise the social hierarchies embedded within Tonga's socialscape, especially when interpreting the reference to '*anga fakaleimatu'a*, the Leimatu'a way or Leimatu'a culture.

'Anga fakatonga, the Tongan way or Tongan culture, is commonly understood as the standard set of cultural values that Tongans born and raised in Tonga are socialised into: *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *tauhi vā* (nurturing relationships), *lototō* (humility), and *mamahi'ime'a* (loyalty) (Tonga 2020, pp. 85–98). In contrast, '*anga fakaleimatu'a* can be invoked in two distinct ways. Outsiders may use it mockingly to suggest that Leimatu'a culture is different, eccentric, or

excessive. But for people of Leimatu'a, the term affirms that while they uphold core Tongan values, they also possess their own unique way of expressing them (Tonga 2020, pp. 98–102).

This brings us to a brief explanation of the conditions and contexts affecting how identities are constructed among migrant and New Zealand-born Tongans in Aotearoa, compared with village identities within Tonga's own social landscape. Identity formation functions differently across the societies and geographies of New Zealand and Tonga. In Auckland, home to the largest Tongan population outside Tonga, identity shifts and tensions tend to be cross-generational, emerging between migrants and their New Zealand-born descendants. In Tonga, however, identity diversity is more commonly expressed between villages, districts, and island groups. Villages such as Leimatu'a in Vava'u, for example, are often characterised as distinct from a national Tongan identity grounded in the values of *faka'apa'apa*, *tauhi vā*, *lototō*, and *mamahi'ime'a*. These values and their related practices are widely discussed by Tongan scholars, including Tēvita Ka'ili (2005, 2017), 'Okusitino Māhina (2008, 2010), and Linitā Manu'atu (2000a, 2000b).

Interestingly, Sylvester and Teena felt that Rewi and Nikolase's New Zealand-born Tongan identity worked in their favour while filming in Leimatu'a. Because they lived outside Tonga's internal cultural politics, such as village diversity and competing ideas about the ideal Tongan citizen, they simply were not interested in getting involved. Rigid definitions of who people should be did not apply to them and had little relevance to their daily lives as Auckland filmmakers. For them, the trip to Vava'u was a work assignment, and they approached the film production as professionals in the digital media industry. At the same time, they remained mindful of cultural sensitivities, behaved respectfully, and took every opportunity to connect with the *kāinga* they encountered, honouring the memory of their late grandparents – each paying tribute to their own respective family lines.

3 Methodology and Process

We discuss here the distinct yet interconnected approaches involved in this project: first, the community filmmaking methodology used during production – the filming and photographing undertaken in Leimatu'a and in South Auckland. Alongside this, we outline the process Teena used, in collaboration with the three filmmakers, to write their stories and sensemaking about cultural identity and cross-generational documentary practice, and to integrate their feedback into the development of this visual essay.

The methodology followed a community filmmaking approach, tailored to a Tongan language film on one village in Vava'u (Christian 2019; Benson & Al Namara 2022; Waititi 2007, 2008). It evolved across three stages of production: the first with Leimatu'a weavers in November 2024; the second in April 2025 with Leimatu'a migrants in a South Auckland *kava* club; and finally with Leimatu'a farmers in July 2025. Over the nine-month production period, the camera crew shifted roles. Rewi led principal photography during the initial Leimatu'a shoot, with Sylvester's doctoral colleague, Asim Mukhtar, serving as assistant camera. For the remaining two shoots in South Auckland and Vava'u, Nikolase stepped into the principal photographer role, while Rewi continued in cinematography and second-unit photography.

From the first shoot onward, Rewi's cinematography with the women weavers of Leimatu'a established the visual language for the entire film. A crucial technical and creative challenge was maintaining consistency across time and place, particularly in interviewing, hybrid filming, and sustaining relationships between the production team and the Leimatu'a contributors in Vava'u especially. Achieving this consistency required substantial time and planning to account for the many variables involved in filming a remote village: the availability of contributors; weather and the quality of natural light for exterior shots; managing outdoor sound; and adapting to heat, humidity, and dengue-carrying mosquitoes. The working conditions in Vava'u differed so markedly from those in South Auckland that the two locations offered virtually no basis for comparison.

Methodologically, the filmmaking approach integrated co-design principles across the entire documentary workflow – from preparation to production and dissemination (Elder 1995; Ginsburg 2011). Partnering with Leimatu'a contributors meant involving them at every stage: co-developing storylines and deciding what they wanted to discuss; selecting filming locations, including where they wished to be filmed and who should be present; producing the film while ensuring they had access to their footage and rough cuts for review; incorporating their feedback into the final edit; and finally, planning ahead for sharing the completed documentary with them and the *kāinga* through community screenings in Leimatu'a and South Auckland.

Central to the writing process were six images that Rewi and Nikolase made by hybrid filming across the three sites: two in Leimatu'a, Vava'u, and one in Māngere, South Auckland. We emphasise that the production crew *made* (not took) these images to highlight that they were engaged in filmmaking. In practice, they were consciously making film and photographs according to the storyboard, shot lists, and sound notes we had prepared as a team before they entered the field to carry out production.

We have arranged the images in pairs, with the camera crew selecting stills that highlight the Leimatu'a identity work of weavers, *kalapū* (*kava* clubs), and farmers, all engaged in producing or consuming agricultural-based products such as *fala* (mats), *kava*, and root crops. Teena led group conversations with the production team to gather their ideas and stories, exploring how the screengrabs and photographs expressed the village's cultural identity and how they signified, for the interviewer and crew, their cross-generational documentary collaboration. The team reviewed revised versions that incorporated their comments, and their insights are presented as individual yet interconnected stories accompanying the pictures.

The photography also guides readers who have never been to Tonga's Vava'u Islands or seen inside a *kalapū* by offering them a glimpse into what filming with the Leimatu'a *kāinga* in the village and migrants in South Auckland looks like through Rewi and Nikolase's camera lenses. Tongan readers, or more broadly, Pacific readers familiar with the outer islands, might see some images as snapshots of everyday life. However, our point is, the camera lens is never neutral: photographers, present in the moment, frame their subjects to communicate meaning, and audiences, whether intended or not, interpret those images in their own ways, even without prior knowledge of the people or place (Sinanan & Pink 2025, p. 2).

4 Discussion and Reflection

4.1 Weavers



FIGURE 1 *Huihui* weavers group, November 2024

PHOTOGRAPH BY REWI AMOAMO



FIGURE 2 Lavinia 'Afu, November 2024
PHOTOGRAPH BY REWI AMOAMO

Sylvester wanted to begin film production with the *Huihui* weavers, a family group of women from Leimatu'a whose crafting collective is named after the parcel of land where their weaving shed stands. Led by Lavinia 'Afu, a mother and school teacher, the group comprised her mother and aunts, the generation from whom she learned to weave during her teenage years. Sylvester's mother and grandmother had also been weavers, each leading their own collective when they were alive. From childhood, he understood the value of handwoven mats – not only as material culture and heritage art passed from mother to daughter, but also as a vital source of supplementary income that helped pay for school uniforms, fees, and supplies in subsistence farming households.

Rewi, the principal photographer, spent a full day from morning to late afternoon capturing the women as they moved through each phase of weaving. He followed the outdoor preparation of cutting, rolling, and boiling pandanus leaves for drying, then moved inside the hut with the three older women who wove individual mats for orders from local and overseas Tongans. Two photographs from the morning were selected. The first is an exterior shot of Lavinia's aunts rolling freshly cut pandanus into tightly bound coils, ready for her to boil in a large metal pot over an open fire fuelled by dried coconut husk. The second shows Lavinia herself, a machete in one hand and a roll of pandanus in the other, as she fills the pot of boiling water.

The first hour of the morning was spent getting used to one another: Rewi hybrid-filming the women at work, zooming in on close-ups of their hands; the three aunties rolling leaves, giggling, and bursting into fits of laughter at the simple fact that the camera was pointed at them, even though they had been told not to look at it. "*Ou 'oua ke sio ki he kamera, tau fai pē ke anga mālie,*"

Sylvester reminded them (“Don’t look at the camera, let’s just act natural”). His instructions only triggered more laughter, a natural response to the unfamiliar scene of cameras planted around their outdoor workspace, recording a sequence of women’s work usually free of male observers: Rewi, Sylvester, and Sylvester’s friend Asim. Rewi’s snapshot memory of the scene captured the essence of intergenerational documentary making: the aunties led the way, their warmth and social inclusiveness allowing the team to film the intimacy and intricacy of their relationships to land, people, and heritage crafting.

4.2 *Kava Club*



FIGURE 3 Leimatu’a migrants in the *kava* club, April 2025
SCREENGRAAB FROM FOOTAGE BY NIKOLASE MEREDITH



FIGURE 4 Inside *Kalapū Silakivai Aotearoa*, April 2025
SCREENGRAAB FROM FOOTAGE BY NIKOLASE MEREDITH

Seeing his cultural identity shown in the *Kalapū Silakivai* images, Sylvester connected how cross-border relationships are sustained through the cultivation of kava in the village and its consumption as processed powder by Leimatu'a migrants in South Auckland *kava* clubs. Auckland, home to the largest concentration of migrant and New Zealand-born Tongans outside Tonga, is the primary overseas market for powdered *kava* exported by village farmers. Within these cultural spaces, *kava* anchors Leimatu'a identity as migrants gather to drink, sing songs of home, and strengthen social ties. Importantly, the Auckland *kalapū* support the village economy in Vava'u by purchasing *kava* and also through fundraising cash remittances, which finance community infrastructure, such as school buses and water-pump systems that improve household access to clean water. By drawing on his lived experience and research interests, he read into the story behind the images – the *kava* trade. In Vava'u, an outer island region of Tonga reliant on small-scale farming and diasporic export markets, *kava* is central to keeping family households functioning as the basic social-economic units of village life.

Sylvester had been present during filming, and his commentary drifted between what the camera captured, what he remembered of the evening, and the identity story he wanted to tell. Cross-generational collaboration in these *kava* club scenes emerged through his recollections of where Rewi and Nikolase had been positioned that night: Rewi moving between indoors and outdoors with the GoPro; Nikolase behind the still cameras, managing sound to secure clean recordings of the singing; and Sylvester himself seated by the door, making sure there was enough space for them to manoeuvre their gear, livestreaming on Facebook, and cracking jokes to get everyone laughing, relaxing, and behaving naturally.

Nikolase framed the images from another angle: as the principal photographer, the shots came from his camera. By design, the screengrabs highlight the *kalapū* members of Leimatu'a migrants, while deliberately omitting the *kūmete*, the *kava* bowl placed in the centre of the room. Two smaller circles of singers, guitarists, and ukulele players gathered on either side of the *kūmete*, taking turns initiating familiar tunes, some being Vava'u songs and others popular Tongan ballads by well-known composers such as Tuimala Kaho (YouTube n.d.).

The set-up inside the *kava* club produced acoustics reminiscent of a recording studio, with sound reverberating off the walls of a compact enclosure. Mostly men, along with some women, sat in close proximity, meticulously positioned yet still respectful of personal space. Nikolase served as the location sound recordist for this assignment: capturing a two-minute reel of the *kalapū* singing to be used in the documentary as a non-narrative break between

interviews. The senses were fully attuned to the music, and the resulting shots mirror where his focus rested that evening. His producer's wisdom also spoke volumes, highlighting the cross-generational documentary collaboration within the *kava* club's confines: the space was small, but the crew's commitment to doing the job well for the community carried them late into the night.

4.3 *Farmers*



FIGURE 5 'Inoke Liutolo, July 2025
SCRENGRAB FROM FOOTAGE BY REWI AMOAMO



FIGURE 6 Leimatu'a farm workers, July 2025
SCRENGRAB FROM FOOTAGE BY REWI AMOAMO

Sylvester remembered fondly the final shoot in Leimatu'a with 'Inoke Liutolo, standing among his plantation and the farm workers. When Sylvester's father was alive, he spent his days teaching and his evenings tending a subsistence farm to help feed the family. He taught his five sons – Sylvester the eldest – how to plant, cultivate, and harvest root crops like yam, tapioca, and taro, as well as seasonal fruits such as pineapple, watermelon, and mango. For Leimatu'a farmers, *kava* was the true income earner, its dried and ground roots sold locally and abroad. Sylvester believed this strongly, and he was eager to talk with 'Inoke about the opportunities and challenges of building reliable export markets with diasporic Tongans, especially in Auckland.

Nikolase's principal photography setup was wrapped in lush green: coconut fronds arcing overhead, and taro, banana, pineapple, and *kava* leaves glistening from a fresh tropical downpour. But it was Rewi's moving shots of tracking the farmer and his workers as they cut and hoe weeds between rows of pineapple and taro that gave the scene its striking cinematic quality. The first image captures 'Inoke, a seasoned farmer in his sixties who still carries the workload of men far younger, slicing back weeds with precisely timed, one-handed swings of his machete. The second shows his nephews, the farm workers, moving in careful unison as they hoe around the taro and pineapple.

Rewi felt that filming within the plantation, the rich tropical flora of Vava'u, its diverse Pacific plants, and the sultry air carrying a blend of flowers, *fonua* (land), and *moana* (ocean), created a sensory experience that made the documentary feel like an extension of the community itself, serving the aspirations of the villagers. In contrast to Rewi's focus on environmental ambience as a catalyst for intergenerational collaboration, Nikolase emphasised the clarity of communication among the interviewer, the farmer and his workers, and the camera crew. He felt that Sylvester's transparent, well-organised coordination allowed the farmers' shoot to run smoothly, even after earlier cancellations due to rain and the pressure of tight timeframes.

Sylvester's view of cross-generational collaboration in documentary making differed again from that of the camera crew. He regarded them as exceptionally professional, people who treated filmmaking as a community-driven craft. Despite strict luggage limits on the domestic flight, they were committed to capturing the highest-quality images and sound with minimal gear. Working with a production team so skilled, so adaptable to Vava'u filming locations, and so calm under tight timelines made Sylvester's job easier. With the crew handling their side effortlessly, he could focus fully on coordinating contributors and conducting interviews.

5 Conclusion

In closing, we offer an explanation of this visual essay's title, *Shared Visions: A Cross-Generational Documentary Collaboration in Vava'u, Tonga*, and its significance to the key areas discussed. The production team, including Teena, agreed that woven throughout the scenes and sequences recorded for Sylvester's doctoral documentary, filmed with weavers and farmers in Leimatu'a, his home village in Vava'u, Tonga, and with Leimatu'a migrants in a South Auckland kava club, was Sylvester himself: his cultural identity as a Leimatu'a villager who, despite migrating to New Zealand, continued to locate himself in the world through his village origins and sense of collective belonging.

Sylvester's close and enduring relationships with the village and diasporic *kāinga* of the Leimatu'a film contributors shaped not only the community filmmaking approach, but also the documentary style and visual outcomes expressed through the filming and photography. In one sense, it is accurate to say that the camera operators, Rewi and Nikolase, craft and convey the meaning behind the digital images assembled on screen through "the specificity of the moment in which the photograph [or film] was taken" (Sinanan and Pink 2025, p. 2). Yet, within the broader context of the people who were themselves the subjects of the film, together with their identity-defining spaces of weaving, farming, and *kalapū* work, Sylvester's vision for the documentary was shared with the production crew and ultimately became a collective one, grounded in their mutual commitment to creating a film *with* and *for* the villagers of Leimatu'a.

The practice of cross-generational documentary collaboration among Sylvester, Rewi, and Nikolase, especially during filming in Leimatu'a, which constituted the bulk of the documentary, can be understood simply as the way their teamwork naturally operated. The interviewer and camera crew contributed different skills, knowledge, and strengths, filling key roles in a collaborative filmmaking process that was also context-specific: a practice-based doctorate that aimed to accommodate the cultural protocols and customs of the community within the documentary practice. Their distinct identity positions in relation to their Vava'u connections were regarded by the team as a source of strength. This was largely because each member remained focused on performing their respective roles, maintaining respectful boundaries between their work and the community, while also supporting one another to complete the filming to the best of their collective abilities.

In the end, the shared visions that emerged through this documentary collaboration became a lived lesson in what Melani Anae and Ingrid Peterson describe as "disrupting existing [deficit] thinking about Pacific students and

what and who they represent” (2020, p. 47) within New Zealand’s social and educational settings. Beyond the scope of this visual essay lies a wider field of critical inquiry into the contexts and conditions that facilitate intergenerational creative projects capable of generating crossings and connections between migrant and New Zealand-born Pacific peoples. Our experience suggests that such projects have the potential to advance community-based aspirations for stories to be owned and told by Pacific peoples themselves – in their own languages, and on their own cultural turfs and terms.

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Ethical Approval

Research ethics approval for Sylvester Tonga’s doctoral filming was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 November 2023 (Ethics Application: 23/240). This approval covers publications arising from the documentary project.

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