

PHOTOESSAY

Gangsters in Paradise

The Deportees of Tonga

Abstract: This photoessay is based around photographs taken during the making of the documentary *Gangsters in Paradise: The Deportees of Tonga*. As a documentary photographer with a tendency to focus on social issues and subcultures, the author was interested in documenting the lives of deportees in Tonga. Through the film, he hoped to highlight the various complexities of identity, belonging and adaptation in relation to the deportee community of Tonga. More importantly, he wanted to start a conversation in Tonga itself regarding how this growing community can be better supported and understood by the wider Tongan public.

Keywords: deportees, documentary, photojournalism, prison, reintegration, Tonga

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I first became aware of Tonga's deportee community back in 2011 when I was visiting the islands with my Tongan wife and our one-year-old son. One morning, while at a café in central Nuku'alofa, the barista behind the coffee machine asked me in an American accent, 'where you from?' He had heard my own American accent and was curious as to why I was visiting Tonga. I could easily tell this guy was ethnically Tongan, but his thick West Coast accent, abundance of gang-style tattoos and American style of dress said otherwise. I told him I was originally from Pennsylvania; he introduced himself as 'Ila and told me he was from 'Salt Lake'. We had a quick chat in between his coffee orders and then made plans to meet up in town later.

I went out and eventually found 'Ila after sundown at one of Nuku'alofa's popular night spots that line the city's main street. It was a humid Friday evening and the nightclubs were loud and swollen with people. Over a couple of beers on the upstairs balcony of a bar 'Ila told me about how he was born in Tonga and relocated to Salt Lake City with his family as an infant, only to be deported to the islands as an adult. In the context of the vast United States, Salt Lake City, Utah and Oxford, Pennsylvania are worlds apart, but 'Ila and I formed a connection based on our shared American cultural heritage.

As a young ‘Ila grew up in Salt Lake City, any vague recollections of Tonga disappeared from his memory. ‘Ila and his family had been fully immersed in American society, but a variety of factors let him down and he eventually became involved in the criminal underbelly of Salt Lake City. It was only after he was convicted of a variety of violent crimes that ‘Ila learned of his non-citizen immigration status in the USA, which meant he faced permanent deportation to Tonga after serving his sentence. In his early 20s, ‘Ila found himself back in the now unfamiliar islands of his birth, unable to ever return to his fast-paced life in the United States.

On various other trips to Tonga over the years that followed my initial introduction to ‘Ila, I met several other members of Tonga’s 1000 strong deportee community and I was told some interesting stories of triumph and tragedy that were the results of deportation. For some returnees, Tonga represents a safe haven, a second chance and a lifestyle that would have never been attainable on the streets of Los Angeles, Auckland, or Sydney. For others, the stigma they face as deportees makes life in the islands nothing but an extension of an already-served prison sentence. Being a documentary photographer with a tendency to focus on social issues and subcultures, I was naturally interested in visually recording details of what life is like for deportees in Tonga from an insider’s perspective.

In 2016, I began shooting photos for *Vice New Zealand* on a freelance basis and, as my relationship with them strengthened, I started pitching ideas for stories and features. One of my proposals was to travel to Tonga with a *Vice* journalist to produce a photo essay and written piece about the deportee community for *Vice*’s online platform. Not long after making the initial proposal I received a phone call from Ursula Williams, *Vice*’s head of documentary films, asking if I would approve of my concept being used as the basis for the next *Zealandia* series film. I agreed, and before I knew it, we had secured a crew, equipment, NZ On Air funding, and plane tickets to Tonga. The project would be titled *Gangsters in Paradise—The Deportees of Tonga*.

Once the *Vice* team arrived in Tonga, we began by filming ‘Ila, who opened up with some very confronting and personal elements of his past life in the United States as well as his current life in Tonga since deportation. We also filmed Sione Ngaue—an older, smooth-talking American returnee who resides on the west side of Tongatapu. Both of the Americans were comfortably outspoken and confident in front of the cameras and crew, but filming the Kiwi deportees proved to be a different experience altogether. Talia’uli Prescott was visibly nervous during his first time in front of the cameras and he made some statements that the crew felt did not reflect his true character. The following night I invited Talia’uli to a kava session where he and I had a casual conversation with no cameras present. Through kava we formed a close connection that allowed him to be more at ease the next time we filmed, and he went on to make a great contribution to the

documentary. Sione Moli, who was also deported from New Zealand six years ago had a similar natural tendency to show restraint during our initial filming sessions. However, as he grew more comfortable with our crew, it became apparent that he is a deep thinker who spoke on his personal experiences in a way that was almost poetic.¹

The men that were featured in the film are all Tongan citizens, but their behaviours and worldviews have been strongly moulded by the countries from which they were deported. The Americans are clearly more outgoing, while the New Zealanders often display reservation, which is reflective of the general cultural values in those respective countries. Most returnees that I have met over the years cite their primary source of identity as coming from the culture of the host country they were expelled from, but they now have no choice but to adapt to a life in Tonga—a place that is supposed to be home. Some boldly accept their circumstances, while others seem to hold on to an impossible dream of one day getting out.

Through this film, I hoped to highlight the various complexities of identity, belonging, and adaptation in relation to the deportee community of Tonga. More importantly, I wanted to start a conversation in Tonga itself regarding how this growing community could be better supported and understood by the wider Tongan public. Tongan citizens who have lived abroad for many years continue to be deported back into Tonga all the time and unless they are supported properly there will continue to be difficulties, along with the potential for them to turn to crime out of desperation or necessity.

There have been calls in Tonga for the establishment of a deportee reintegration programme to help assist new arrivals in learning the Tongan language, culture, and other intricacies of life in the islands. Many returnees speak fluent English and possess advanced skills in various trades that could help improve economic prosperity in the country, but they must first be fully accepted back into the community as equals. Comprehensive social support and public acceptance will be beneficial not only for those who were deported back to Tonga, but for all of Tongan society.

Note

1. All of the photos and portraits submitted with this article were shot on location during filming for the *Deportees of Tonga: Gangsters in Paradise* film in October 2018. Since its release, the film has been watched by more than five million people on YouTube. It is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72u5q-0R48A>

References

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Todd Henry is a documentary photographer, photojournalist and visual storyteller. He is interested in capturing visual content that examines various aspects of society often taken for granted. In his approach to photography, Henry has a strong focus on the accuracy of the visual representations he creates of individuals, communities, and places. He aims to convey his perspective of the world and appreciation of culture through the lens of his camera and on to those who view his photographs. Henry would like to thank the entire Vice New Zealand crew, NZ On Air and Anau Mesui-Henry.

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Figure 1. Alimoni, deported from San Francisco, USA. Now living in Nukunuku, Tongatapu.



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Figure 2. Reverend Fili Lilo, Secretary of the National Forum of Church Leaders. While Tonga lacks a comprehensive deportee re-integration and education programme, Reverend Lilo's organisation has been delegated by the Tongan government to provide support for newly arrived returnees.

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Figure 3. Sione Falemanu, ex-commissioner of Tonga Prisons. In the film he says he wants western countries to take more responsibility for the people they deport and stop treating Tonga—and Samoa and Fiji—as dumping grounds for people they regard as rubbish. They are, he reminds us, human beings.



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Figure 4. Sione Moli, deported from Christchurch, New Zealand to Tonga in 2013. He now resides in Nukunuku, Tongatapu.

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Figure 5. Sione Ngaue, deported from Texas, USA, to Tonga more than a decade ago. He now resides on family land in the village of Nukunuku, Tongatapu.



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Figure 6. Tony, deported back to Tonga from San Francisco USA. He now lives in central Nuku'alofa.



Figure 7. 'Ila Mo'unga. He was deported from Salt Lake City for violent crimes related to gang activities.



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Figure 8. 'Ila takes a break from tending his garden outside of his home in Kolonga, Tongatapu



Figure 9. Talia'uli Prescott takes a moment to reflect on time he spent in New Zealand's prison system at his makeshift home in Ma'ufanga, Tongatapu.



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Figure 10. 'Aisi', a methamphetamine dealer in Tonga, showcases what he considers to be a high-grade form of methamphetamine that is popular in Tonga. Aisi claims that he can make TP\$5000 selling meth to approximately 200 users on any given Sunday.