

DOCUMENTARIES

WAWATA TOPU—Mermaids of Timor-Leste (English: 33mins)

A film by David Palazón & Enrique Alonso

This review is by **Nilanjana Biswas** (nilanjanaabiswas@yahoo.com), Independent Researcher

The film begins with stunning underwater visuals: shoals of fish darting in and out of coral reefs, as if dancing to the haunting chant-like singing that forms the film's opening score while clownfish squirm amidst fingers of swaying white anemone. And then, suddenly and breathtakingly, there are women there, surrounded by fish and swinging webs of light, holding what appear to be long sticks in their hands and dance-walking through the blue waters.

The *wawata topu*, described as the 'mermaids' of Timor-Leste in the film's title, are the women divers of Adara in West Atauro in Timor-Leste. As the film follows some of the women divers, such as 18-year old Sara or 15-year old Angelita while they go about their daily work, we learn that the community survives on fishing and subsistence farming. Corn is the staple, which the women hand-pound into meal in large wooden mortars. Vegetables and fruit are grown, and pigs and chickens reared in the backyard while the forest is a perennial source of sustenance, providing villagers with edible leaves and other foods. The other vital source of sustenance is the sea.

Both the men and the women of the community go fishing in small, artisanal boats, casting nets and spearing fish. The long sticks of the opening shots turn out to be spear guns used in the course of daily fishing and by divers who walk the seafloor and swim the reefs, spear gun in hand, eyes covered by goggles, looking for fish and octopi. Men, women and children all go diving, learning the skill as a part of growing up, almost just like they learnt to walk.

The old order is however changing. Ageing couples eagerly looking to their children to relieve them from the rigours of hard labour

find themselves facing a harsh reality. Their children, unlike themselves, have been schooled, and the school certificate is, more often than not, a one-way ticket to jobs and opportunities in far away cities. Other contradictory discourses shape the lives of the *wawata topu*. The expectations around the custom of *barlake*, a form of bride-price, are in a state of flux. Neither wanting to lose a pair of precious labouring hands, the bride's family and the groom's, each expects the newlyweds to move in with them after the *barlake* settlement. The power relation between men and women is also changing under the pressure of modernity. The men, unhampered by domestic duties, are able to catch the larger, more expensive varieties of fish leaving a diminished catch for the women to sell in far-off markets.

As the filmmakers describe it, the film is an ethnographic portrait that makes visible the critical contribution of women to the household economies and the fishing community at large. The film's strength is that without relying on voiceover or commentary, through the use of only interviews and extremely well-shot visuals, it manages to convey the very real sense of a community caught in the cusp of change. It may be set in a remote equatorial island village but the film speaks of the universal dilemmas that accompany the condition of modernity, and raises questions about the survival and future of small-scale fishing communities everywhere.

For details, visit: <https://www.facebook.com/wawatatopu>



PUBLISHED BY
Chandrika Sharma for
International Collective
in Support of Fishworkers
27 College Road
Chennai 600 006
India
Tel: (91) 44 2827 5303
Fax: (91) 44 2825 4457
E-mail: icsf@icsf.net
Web site: www.icsf.net

EDITED BY
Nilanjana Biswas
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Sandesh
(sandeshcartoonist@gmail.com)
DESIGNED BY
P. Sivasakthivel
PRINTED AT
L.S. Graphic Prints
Chennai 600 002

Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women

and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer. Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.