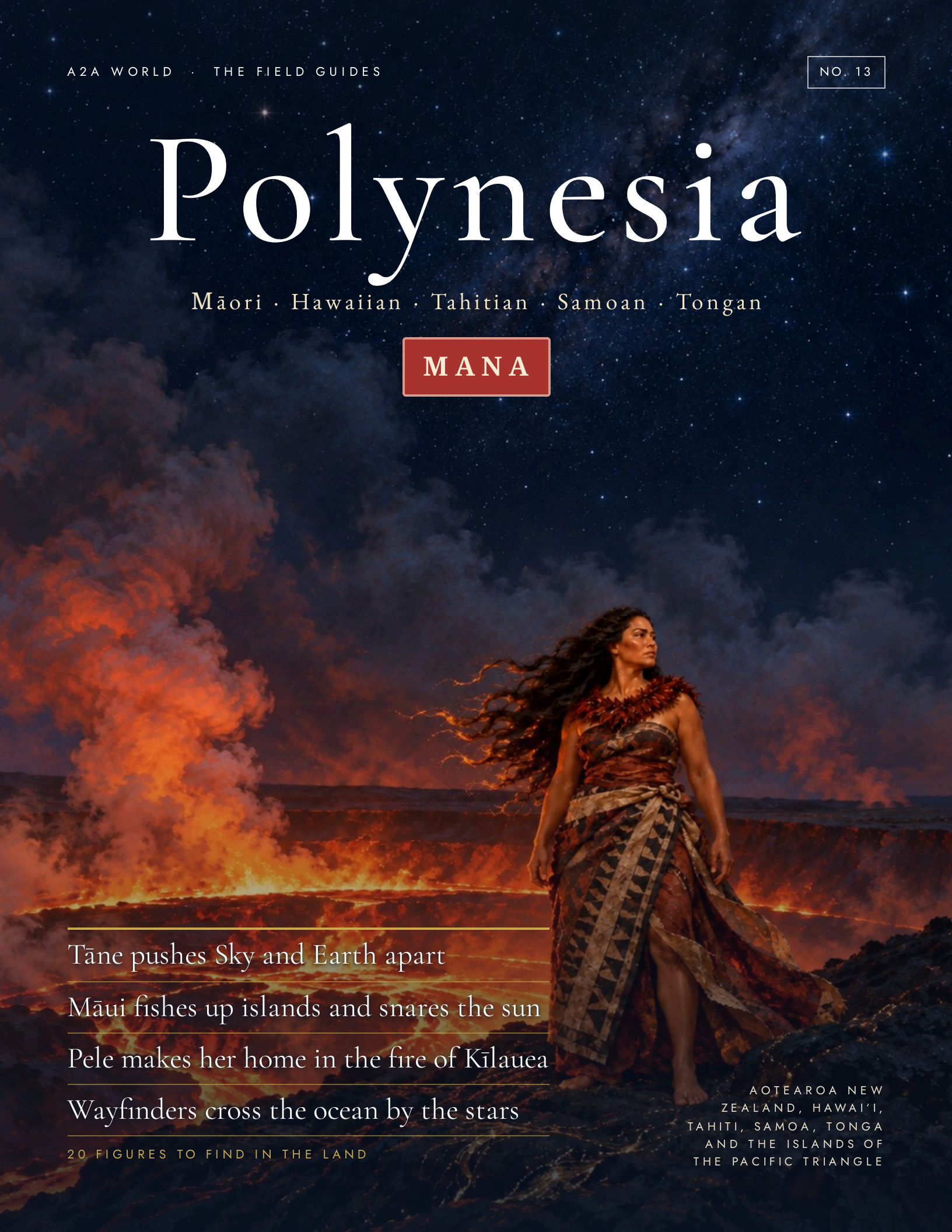
A2A WORLD · THE FIELD GUIDES

NO. 13

Polynesia

Māori · Hawaiian · Tahitian · Samoan · Tongan

MANA



Tāne pushes Sky and Earth apart

Māui fishes up islands and snares the sun

Pele makes her home in the fire of Kīlauea

Wayfinders cross the ocean by the stars

20 FIGURES TO FIND IN THE LAND

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND, HAWAI'I, TAHITI, SAMOA, TONGA AND THE ISLANDS OF THE PACIFIC TRIANGLE

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The Kumulipo: life rises out of the deep night, coral first

INTRODUCTION

Polynesian Mythology Field Guide

Polynesian voyagers settled the widest ocean on Earth, from Hawai‘i to Aotearoa New Zealand to Rapa Nui, navigating by stars, swells and birds. Their myths travelled with them and grew new branches on every island.

Shared figures — the sky father and earth mother, the ocean god Tangaroa, the demigod Māui — appear across the Pacific in local forms, tied closely to particular mountains, coasts and genealogies.

Their myths travelled with them and grew new branches on every island.

CONTEXT

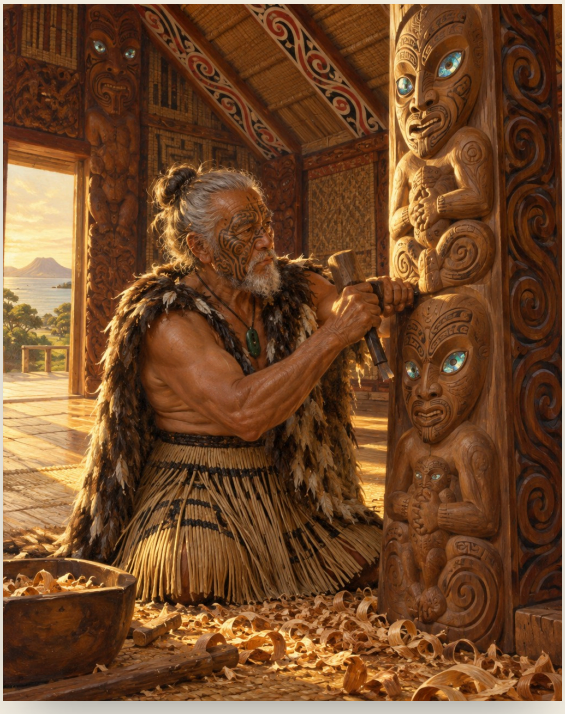
How Polynesia Holds Its Myths

Polynesian knowledge is held in genealogy (whakapapa in Māori), chant, song, dance and carving. Places carry names that recall the deeds of ancestors and gods, so the land itself is a record of the stories.

Places carry names that recall the deeds of ancestors and gods, so the land itself is a record of the stories.

SOURCES

The Kumulipo, the Hawaiian creation chant of over 2,000 lines. Māori traditions recorded by Māori scholars and in collections such as Sir George Grey's Ngā Mahi a ngā Tūpuna (1854). Tahitian traditions recorded in the 19th century. Living oral traditions, chant (oli, karakia) and hula.



A master carver gives an ancestral post its pāua-shell eyes

WAYFINDING

Polynesian navigators crossed thousands of miles of open ocean without instruments, reading star paths, ocean swells, clouds and seabirds. The voyage of the canoe Hōkūleʻa in 1976 renewed these skills in modern times.



Tāne pushes his father the Sky upward with his legs, and light enters the world

THE FEATURE

The Separation

Te Wehenga

Light enters the world.

Tāne lies on his back and pushes his father upward with his legs until Sky and Earth part. Rain is Rangi's tears, and morning mist rises as Papa's sighs.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A figure on its back pushing upward; rain; rising mist.

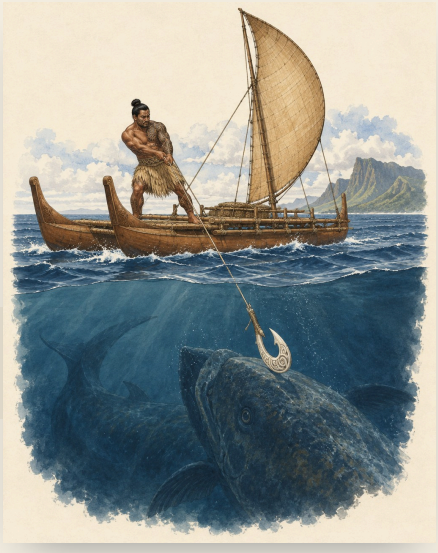
Māui Fishes Up Land Te Ika-a-Māui

A magic fishhook from his grandmother's jawbone.

Māui hooks a giant fish from the ocean floor; in Māori tradition it becomes the North Island, Te Ika-a-Māui, and the South Island is his canoe. In Hawai'i he fishes up the islands.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A fish shape in a coastline; a great hook; a canoe-shaped island.



Māui's hook, made from his grandmother's jawbone, catches the great fish

WHAKAPAPA

In Māori thought everything has genealogy — people, mountains, rivers, fish and trees descend from the gods. To tell a myth is to recite a family tree that connects the listener to the land.



I · CREATION

I Sky, Earth and Their Children

The parting of the first parents.

Above: Sky lies pressed upon Earth, and their children wait in the darkness between

Ranginui and Papatūānuku

Rangi and Papa (Māori)

Sky Father and Earth Mother.

In the beginning Sky and Earth lay locked in an embrace, and their children lived cramped in darkness between them.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Two vast figures lying together; sky meeting land at a horizon.*



Tāne Mahuta, the forest god, in the form of a great kauri with its birds

Tāne Mahuta

Kāne (Hawaiian)

God of forests and birds.

After separating his parents Tāne clothes his mother in trees and forms the first woman, Hineahuone, from red earth at Kurawaka.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A great tree; birds; a figure formed of earth.*

Tāwhirimātea

God of winds and storms.

Angry at the separation, he goes up to live with his father and wages war on his brothers with winds, clouds and storms.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Storm clouds; bent trees; winds blowing from four quarters.*

The Kumulipo

Hawaiian

Creation chant from darkness.

Life emerges from the deep night (pō): first coral polyps, then shellfish, seaweed, fish, birds, plants and finally people, in a genealogy linking the ruling families to the origin of the world.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Coral and shells; life rising from dark water.*



II · MAUI

II The Deeds of Māui

The demigod trickster known across the Pacific.

Above: Māui and his brothers snare the racing sun from the crater of Haleakalā

Māui Slows the Sun

Ropes snare the sun.

The sun races across the sky too fast. Māui and his brothers snare it with ropes and beat it so it moves slowly, giving longer days. In Hawaiʻi this is done from Haleakalā, “house of the sun.”

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Ropes around a sun; a high crater; a figure holding lines.*



Mahuika gives up her fingernails of flame, and fire leaps into the trees

Māui Brings Fire

Fire from Mahuika.

Māui tricks the fire goddess Mahuika into giving up her fingernails of flame; she sets the world alight, and fire takes refuge in certain trees, from which people now make it by friction.

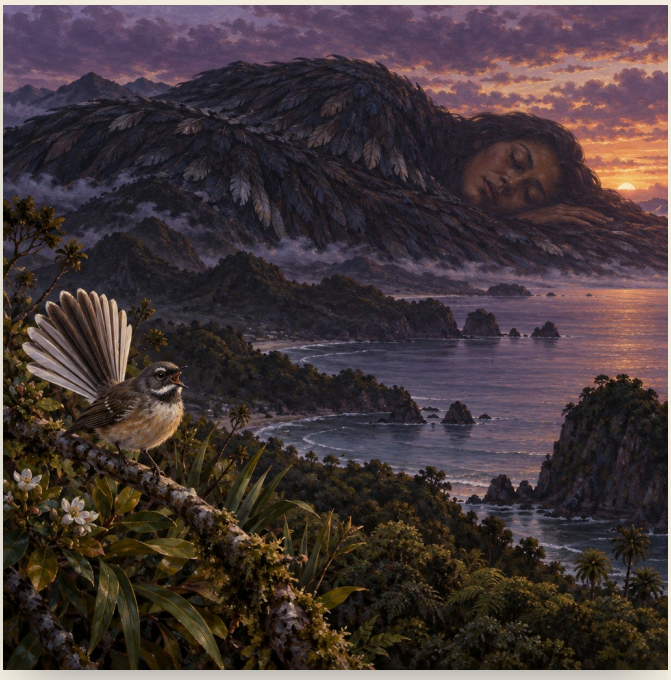
> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Flames at fingertips; a burning tree.*

Māui Lifts the Sky

Raising the heavens.

In Hawaiian and Samoan tellings the sky lies so low people must crawl. Māui pushes it up to its present height.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A figure with arms raised against the sky.*



The fantail laughs, and Hine-nui-te-pō wakes

Māui and Hine-nui-te-pō

The quest to defeat death.

Māui tries to win immortality by passing through the body of the goddess of death while she sleeps; a fantail laughs, she wakes, and Māui dies. Since then all people must die.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A small bird with fanned tail; a sleeping giantess.*



III · GODS OF SEA & FIRE

III Ocean, Volcano and Moon

Powers of the island world.

Above: Tangaroa rises from the waves among the creatures of the sea

Tangaroa

Kanaloa, Taʻaroa

God of the sea and its creatures.

Ruler of the ocean and father of fish and reptiles. In Tahitian tradition Taʻaroa is the creator who emerges from a shell and makes the world from his own body.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Waves; a great fish; an opened shell.*

Pele

Hawaiian

Goddess of the volcano and fire.

Pele journeys from Kahiki, digging fire-pits along the island chain, until she makes her home in Halemaʻumaʻu crater at Kīlauea. Her quarrels with her sister Nāmaka, of the sea, shape the islands.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Lava flows; a crater glow; a woman's face in fire; strands of volcanic glass called Pele's hair.*

Hiʻiaka

Pele's youngest sister; healer.

Hiʻiaka travels the islands on a long quest for Pele, defeating monsters and reviving the dead. She is associated with the forest, the lehua blossom and hula.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Ferns and red blossoms on new lava; a traveller.*



Hina beats bark cloth beside her banyan tree in the moon

Hina

Sina

Goddess of the moon; maker of bark cloth.

Weary of work and her family, Hina climbs to the moon, where she can still be seen beating bark cloth beside a banyan tree.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A woman in the moon; a tree; a mallet.*

Rongo

Lono (Hawaiian)

God of cultivation and peace.

Patron of cultivated food, especially the kūmara (sweet potato). In Hawaiʻi, Lono is honoured in the Makahiki season of harvest and peace.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Cultivated mounds; sweet potatoes; a staff with white cloth.*



IV · VOYAGING & PLACE

IV Homelands, Canoes and Stars

Where the stories meet the ocean and the sky.

Above: A voyaging canoe holds its course by the stars and the swells

Hawaiki

Havaiʻi, Savaiʻi

The ancestral homeland.

The place from which the ancestors set out and to which spirits return after death, departing in Aotearoa from Cape Rēinga at the northern tip.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A distant island; a headland with a single tree above the sea.*



Kupe battles the giant octopus on the open ocean

Kupe

Navigator; discoverer of Aotearoa.

Chasing a giant octopus across the ocean, Kupe reaches Aotearoa, names many places along its coasts and returns to Hawaiki with directions for the voyages that follow.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *An octopus; a canoe on open sea.*

The Great Canoes

Waka

Ancestral voyaging canoes.

Māori tribes trace descent from the crews of named canoes such as Tainui, Te Arawa and Aotea, each landing at a remembered place.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A double-hulled canoe; a carved prow.*

Matariki

Makaliʻi (Hawaiian)

The Pleiades; the new year.

The rising of Matariki before dawn in midwinter marks the Māori new year, a time to remember the dead and plan for the season ahead. It became a public holiday in New Zealand in 2022.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A tight cluster of stars; a mother with children.*

Taniwha

Guardian beings of water.

Powerful beings who dwell in rivers, lakes and the sea; they can be protectors of a tribe or dangers to be respected. Many are tied to specific places.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A great creature in a river bend; a dark pool; a reptile or shark form.*

A NOTE ON RESPECT

Polynesian traditions belong to living peoples with deep ties to these places. Names follow standard Māori and Hawaiian spelling with macrons and ʻokina. Many versions exist across islands and tribes; note the source a telling follows.

The plates in this issue are interpretive illustrations, not historical artefacts.

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