A History of Sāmoan Tattooing
Sean Mallon and Sébastien Galliot

with contributions from
Tusita Aiva
Ron Brownson
Adrienne Kaepler
Takahito Kishima
Taviu Maliko
Selina Tuitia Mouh
Le‘aussilili Lopematsyla Fata ‘Aiafa Sudar Muaiva
Laelifano Albert L. Refiti
Remhi Roblinia
Nicholas Thomas
Nina Tonga
Maria Caroline Vesce
Maualaiva Albert Wende
Sonya Wöhren
Rachel Yates

Contents
Foreword: Sean Mallon ........................................................................... 10
Foreword: Sébastien Galliot ................................................................. 12
Introduction ........................................................................................... 14

Chapter 1:
TATAU: ANCIENT TRACES ............................................................... 19

Chapter 2:
TATAU: EUROPEAN ENCOUNTERS AND OBSERVATIONS, 1722–1900 ....... 33
MARK ADAMS PORTFOLIO ................................................................... 34

Chapter 3:
TATAU: PERSISTENCE AND CHANGE, 1900–2000 .......................... 97
GREG SEMU PORTFOLIO ...................................................................... 177

Chapter 4:
TATAU AS A RITUAL INSTITUTION, 2000–2010 .............................. 178
JOHN AGAOLII PORTFOLIO ................................................................. 225

Chapter 5:
TATAU AND ITS GLOBALISATION, 2000–2017 ......................... 241

Postscript ............................................................................................ 298
Acknowledgements ............................................................................ 302
Glossary ............................................................................................... 304
Bibliography ......................................................................................... 308
Image credits ......................................................................................... 319
About the contributors ......................................................................... 320
Index .................................................................................................... 322
Fig. 1
Aust (tattooing tools) from the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.
Fig. 2
Did the knowledge and tools for tāmati tānōi originate in Fiji? A tattooed female figure from Fiji (1400s).
The practice of tā tatau came to Sāmoa 3000 years ago. Archaeologists tell us that the first arrivals were descendants of seafarers entering Oceania from or through Taiwan. They originally explored eastwards into the Pacific, populating the Marianas and islands of the Bismarck Archipelago and the Solomon Islands, then they ventured to the southeast to the islands of Tikopia, Vanuatu and New Caledonia before populating the archipelagos that we now know as Sāmoa, Fiji and Tonga. They travelled in sailing canoes, taking with them their languages, cultures, animals and plants.

Archaeologists connect these groups of explorers and settlers to each other through a distinctive type of pottery that they made – they called the pottery Lapita ware, after a site in New Caledonia where they first discovered it, and they named the people who made the pottery the Lapita people, who are the ancestors of many distinct societies and cultural groups found in the Pacific today.

The analysis of Lapita pottery offers insight into how the practice of tattooing may have travelled with the people who settled Sāmoa and other Pacific islands. Archaeologists have argued that some of the designs and motifs found on this ancient pottery relate directly to those present in contemporary tattoo and tapa (barkcloth) decoration. However, a connection between tattooing and the dentate stamp-decoration techniques used to decorate Lapita pottery has been challenged by archaeologist Wal Ambrose, who argues for woven technologies of high-value plaited and ornamented textiles as an alternative model for Lapita ornamentation. Andy Mills makes a similar argument for Tongan tītataus, where tattooing motifs replicated abstract weaving motifs.

Further connections between Lapita people and tattooing are based on archaeological excavations of Lapita pottery-bearing sites where tattooing-related artefacts have been found. One of these sites is in Tongatapu in Tonga, where archaeologists have unearthed examples of tattooing blades. Another is in the Reef Island Lapita site in the Santa Cruz group of the Solomon Islands, where a small baked clay figurine’s buttocks bear images that may represent tattoo. Similarly, a small clay-modelled head with a facial tattoo has been reported from a Lapita site in Papua New Guinea. Although there are Lapita pottery-bearing sites in Sāmoa, no tattooing-related implements have
been found there. The turtleshell components and the wooden handles of Sāmoan tools do not stay preserved at archaeological sites, so only the bone points would survive — but none has been discovered to date. This material evidence is supported by the linguistic reconstruction of the word ‘tatu’ and the word ‘ūhi’ — the Eastern Polynesian term for a tattooing implement — which point to an origin for tattooing early in the human settlement of the Pacific.

Oral traditions recorded in the nineteenth century say that the knowledge and tools for tattooing came to Sāmoa from Fiji. In one of many versions of the story, Talifagia and Taemā, who were joined like joined tools and the instructions on how to use them to the tattooists FiliTeu and TuFei in Fiji. They were told to ‘tattoo the women and not the men’, and they sang this instruction over and over as they paddled their canoe to Sāmoa. On the way they saw a large and beautiful shell glistening in the waters below and they stopped singing their song to swim down and fetch it. On returning to the surface they tried to remember what they were singing and got the song mixed up. ‘Tattoo the men and not the women’, they sang, and this was the message they took on to Sāmoa.’

Oral traditions inevitably reflect the politics and historical circumstances of those telling the story, those recording the story and, later, those who use, reproduce and reference the story. The origin stories relating to tatu are contested; there are various versions that emphasize different people and events within the story. Among contemporary Sāmoans there has been some resistance to the idea of Fiji as the point of origin for Sāmoan tattooing. The part of the story where Taemā and Talifagia are instructed to tattoo women and not men is particularly questioned: some versions (including Fijians and Sāmoans tu仿佛 tatau) say that women were not tattooed there. However, tattooing was practised in Fiji on and by women up until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the twenty-first century it is undergoing a revival initiated by Fijian women living in New Zealand and Australia. Despite these historical details, Sāmoan tu仿佛 and some historians are looking closer to home for an origin of Sāmoan tattooing.

In the context of the origin story of tatau, where or when was Fiji? One contemporary explanation suggests Fitiuta in Sāmoa’s eastern islands of Mana’a as an origin site.” Fiti was possibly confused in the past with Fiji (Fiti in Sāmoa). Mana’a was once the political centre of Sāmoa so it is possible Fiti, Fiti or Fiji may have been a reference to Fitiuta. This apparent rethinking of the origin story reminds us that indigenous ideas relating to space and geography are often subject to change. The names of places can be abandoned, replaced, forgotten and confused or evolve over time. They can be influenced by the movement of people, by politics and conflict, and by processes of colonisation from within and outside the Pacific. Even natural disasters can influence how people think about, interact with and remember the environment and its histories. A detailed examination of the various versions of the origin stories allows us to solve this problem but, at the same time, it complicates another aspect of this mythology by introducing conflicting stories of the twins’ journey.

The myths collected in the second half of the 1800s by the missionaries George Pratt in Savaii and Thomas Powell in Manu’a somehow introduced the idea of the existence of two main versions of the doings of the joined twins. The twins, whose genealogy and birth names diverge according to these versions, ended up being called Taemā and Talifagia after some previous encounters with objects during their swimming journey. The episodes relating to the introduction of tattooing tools are in fact only a short sequence within a longer saga whose central premise deals not with tattooing but with the dreadful and uncertain encounters with objects during their swimming journey. The episodes relating to the introduction of tattooing tools are in fact only a short sequence within a longer saga whose central premise deals not with tattooing but with the dreadful and uncertain encounters with objects during their swimming journey. Ultimately this can be read as a myth about the status of women.” During their journey Taemā and Talifagia took on the role of meeting many ‘like Siamese twins’ and the like all over the archipelago and beyond in Fiji and in Polynesia (the underworld). These primordial encounters gave birth to clan names and sacred places which the link with these deities is remembered — and were still worshipped at the time of missionaries’ settlement in the early 1800s.

This being said, in each of these early collected versions of the story, Taemā and Talifagia imported the tools from Fijian. Only the version told by members of the clan Sufa in Lefaga (namely Sufa’s Vaialaga) says that the twins made the first tattoo on Sina’s daughter of Tagalogai the god creator of all things, in Fitiuta. According to this version, she swam away from Fitiuta with the tools and reached Falealupu on the land of chief Avaullu’s; he was there to receive her in any case, but he eventually marked this unusual event by taking a new name, Maualua (the first of the craft), associated with the name of a ceremonial ground (Mapualua). It is precisely details about chiefs’ names and places of encounters, scattered in many versions of the story, that are crucial for the contemporary tu仿佛 tatau. What seems to be at stake for the tu仿佛 in the current context is to re-link one’s own kin and place of origin with the territorial and clan foundation resulting from Taemā and Talifagia encounters.

The details of the voyage are too numerous and confusing to be discussed at length here.” However, if one puts aside these details — especially the sequences that occur before the twins’ encounter with the tattooing tools, which are irrelevant to the topic of tattooing — a running theme can be reconstructed. The sequence involving the tools starts in Fiji, then follows a series of calls in several locations where the twins attempt to present the tools in recognition of the welcome accorded to them by the local ruler. The first place they reach is Falealupu in Savaii’s, on the land of chief Avaullu’s. Their next place of call is Safotu with chief Lavea or Seve (depending on the version). The story goes on with an episode in Salelavalu with chief Matafu, who is said to have accepted the tools but infringed on the rules attached to the craft — namely the acceptance of the first kava cup. In Salelavalu, chief Su’a is also mentioned in connection with a taite tree under which the twins had a rest while waiting for him, and which became the dwelling place of ‘Taemā’s spirit.’ This place was called Lolotaile and was known as the malates (a ceremonial site dedicated to the guardian deity of tattooing) of Su’a.

From Salelavalu the twins pursued their journey to Upolu in Lefaga, Safata and Sale Hitia, where they made contact and interacted with other characters of importance for the
clan Su’a of tufuga. In Safata, their encounter with a chief called Tagu is said to have been at the origin of the creation of another malaetá called Fa’amanu. Whatever the details of the interactions, this oral tradition constitutes a corpus of reference from which the tattooers draw clues of legitimacy and clan membership, especially in the contemporary context of the emergence of Sāmoan practitioners whose apprenticeship occurred outside the archipelago, and for whom traditional affiliation is more blurred.

For at least 200 years, members of two ‘aiga (extended families) – the ‘aiga Sā Tulo’a’ena and the ‘aiga Sā Su’a – have been the custodians of Sāmoan tattooing. However, the claims of these ‘aiga are contested by other families in Sāmoa who have their own accounts of Sāmoan tattooing and its history. Today, Sāmoans contest and lay claim to origin stories of tatau, and the historical figures who participated in the events they describe, because the genealogical connections are considered true and meaningful to them. The origin stories that relate to specialist trades such as fale building, va’a building and tā tatu (tattoo) legitimise people’s claims to matala (chiefly) titles and the right to practise these trades. Family manages these rights carefully because they carry social and cultural prestige in wider society; they also depend on them for their economic security.

The origin stories for tatau demonstrate how the development of Sāmoan society and culture was connected to the nearby archipelago of Fiji. However, a wider network of trade, interaction and exchanges also connected Sāmoa to Tonga, ‘Uvea (part of Wallis and Futuna), the Cook Islands and Solomon Islands. Between Fiji, Tonga and Sāmoa there was trade in a number of material products including red feathers, hardwood timbers from Fiji, ‘ie tōga (sāmoan fine mats) and buri or abaca, blades from Sāmoa, and kie hingoa (fine mats) and sperm-whale teeth from Tonga. There was also movement of expert tradesmen and their knowledge that included tufuga fua va’a (canoe builders) from Manono in Sāmoa: in the 1700s they resided both in Ma’afutau’a’a’ai, a prominent chief from Tongatapu, before settling in Lau in Fiji and establishing the ma’aita – a hereditary line of craftsmen influential throughout Lau and as far north as Taveuni."

Tufuga tā tatau also travelled between the archipelagos. From at least the 1700s Tongan nobles were tattooed by Sāmoans who acted as matala – an intermediate class of ceremonial attendants who played important roles in Tongan society. Tongan commoners were forbidden to touch the Tongan elite, so Sāmoans were brought to Tonga to attend to their needs. As outsiders, they ‘could tattoo Tongan chiefs with immunity, cut their hair (the head of a Tongan chief is extremely tupa) and prepare their bodies for burial’. Tongan male tatau was similar in appearance to Sāmoan male tatau: it covered the body from the lower torso to the knees. The presence of Sāmoan tattoos in Tonga didn’t mean all tattoos in Tonga were Sāmoan – just that the social elite could not be tattooed by Tongans.
On Sāmoan tattooing

Sébastien Galliot
Tasiilaq, Upolu, Sāmoa, 3 October 2005

Born in 1937, His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Tuisia is a Sāmoan political leader and a scholar. The Prime Minister of Sāmoa from 1976 to 1982, he subsequently held several academic positions in New Zealand before his election as Sāmoa’s Head of State in 2007, a role he held until 2017. Throughout his life, Tupua Tamasese has studied Sāmoan indigenous knowledge and religion and has published numerous papers on these subjects. In 2005 this writer interviewed Tupua Tamasese at his residence in Tasiilaq. I had arrived in a decrepit car and without an appointment. With great courtesy he allowed me to ask him many questions about tattooing. The interview lasted longer than expected, and when I noticed that several respectably matai were waiting in the next room for an audience with him, I thought it was time to let him deal with more urgent matters.

TA: Tattooing was more than just tattoo. It is ritual that is not only physical but basically spiritual that celebrates the movement from puberty to manhood. So, when a boy is born you go through the rite of the placenta and the umbilical cord and then you go through the celebration of what is known as numa fauna, the celebration of the birth. And one of the significant rituals which follows is the preparation for the tattoo. They go through preparing the pigment (samas), and that too is a special ritual, as is crushing the limestone, the abstinence from food, prayers and meditation until you start making the limestone and then when it’s ready you put it into a coconut container and hang it up in the house.

The central message is that you cannot find yourself without pain and suffering. This is quite an essential agreement that the body develops from boyhood to manhood, which is why you have the saying “Ae manu le tere, tere le tiga” – “If you want to have a pet, you have to accept the pain.”

Tattooing is about the thesis of creation. It’s the link with the god Tagaloa and the tenth heaven sending out the tuli (power) to identify land. Populating with the people. So, you have to call the va’a. And the va’a, the boat that symbolises the journey – that life is a journey that you are travelling to the underworld. Funeral ritual is mainly about celebrating this journey. It’s normally aboard a boat heading towards its destination. The tattoo is meant to be displayed. It wasn’t meant to be hidden. On a man’s tattoo the focus is the penis. So in a way it’s not only a celebration of the physical beauty. It’s also sex. A lot of men’s ritual is celebrating life and particular sexuality. The message in these rituals is as long as I have my sexuality, I can produce more pigs. So the tattoo is not only about our concept of reputation. It’s also about life and our relationship to the gods. We don’t see the gods as something away, because the gods as an extension of the family.

SG: So, can you tell me a little bit about the social implications of tattooing?

TA: People want to find their place in the contemporary society. For a lot of them, you find that place by first finding out about yourself, your reference, where you come from. Therefore, the philosophy, the theology, the social system, the rituals, the legends, the conventions, the protocols – all of these establish not only a pattern but an identification. So, even though there really is ignorance about why we tattoo in a religious or a spiritual sense, people sense intuitively or instinctively that they will establish themselves as a people with a distinctive culture by undertaking those rituals and even the physical exhibition and the physical pain that accompany the ritual.

And if it is a reason, the reason why people are taking on the task, even though they might not understand the fundamentals in the spiritual or the fact that they are suntan, by consciousness, tradition and our common experience, a lot of religions, particularly Christianity, there was a prohibition against tattoo. The thing is, it’s not only against that religion. It’s also against all other religions that are being practiced because when you finish [wearing a fa’afafine] you’re supposed to have a sexual experience – not necessarily with your wife or inside the marriage but, you know. This was a condemnation that was not acceptable to the Christian practice.

Today a lot of these things that are part of the protocols and conventions are no longer taken on board. But as I said before, the tattoo was meant to be displayed. I can remember as a young man people coming into the bath – they were naked but by our cultural standard they were dressed because they had tattoos. A lot of missions write against the polu (the night stand) because the highlight of the polu was when you threw off your clothes, exhibited your body. Because the whole purpose of the tattoo is to celebrate the physical beauty of the body.

5G: What is your understanding of the samoaga (the anointing ceremony)?

TA: Sama [mix of turmeric and coconut oil] is something that comes straight through the gods. Siganu [pandanus flower] makes the same yellow. Sama is medicinal for sores but it’s supposed to be a special gift from the gods. When you are preparing sama, you’re supposed to go through certain religious rituals that people don’t go through anymore so that now you have the medicinal. You do the same with u’u, fraxinus and kalalufi and the hair so that when you go out you are supposed to be somebody who’s gone through a special religious ritual and you declare it with the u’u and the sama. But again this u’u is a special u’u, a holy u’u – it’s a special purpose like rebirth, you use holy oil. When someone dies you use oil with sacred oil. And equally when you have these rituals you use sacred oil. There is a message oil but it’s always sacred oil which is kept apart. But it’s also the responsibility of people like Petelo [Sir’s Su’ape Akiva] to protect their own distinctive unique culture or the culture of their guild. Because each one had their own practices and their own gods.

The author would like to thank His Highness for his availability and the kindness of his welcome.
Sāmoan tatau, fine mats and Tongan royalty

Adrienne Kaeppeler

Two 'kie hingoa (fine mats) said to have come directly from Sāmoa with the Tu'i Tonga (Tongan King) are 'Vaiata-o-eu-Tuimanua' (war garment of the Tu'i Manua) and 'Vai-o-Oulu-o-Olosenga' (the gulf between the islands of Oulu and Olosega in Sāmoa). These 'kie hingoa are said to have been acquired by the Tu'i Tonga Fatafai during his tattooing in Sāmoa.

Tongans considered the Tu'i Tonga's person sacred and dangerous to touch. It was necessary for great outsiders for certain tasks such as her cutting (the head of a Tu'i Tonga is particularly taboo and cannot be touched), preparing the body for burial, and tattooing. The fa'afisi ceremonial attendants, who descended from the sky with the first Tu'i Tonga, did many of these tasks for the Tu'i Tonga, but the Tu'i Tonga were usually not tattooed.

Fatafai, however, wished to be tattooed, and as no Tongan could do the work, Fatafai made two trips to Sāmoa for this purpose. His first trip was to Menono Island, where the first part of his tattoo was done; and his second trip was to Manua, where the rest was completed. Fatafai's nickname was Fakaauaukimanua (tupe or second time, to Manua) to commemorate his tattooing trips to Sāmoa. On both occasions the tattooer's body was soiled to have swelled up and they ultimately died from wounding the Tu'i Tonga's sacred body. The kie hingoa associated with Fatafai's tattooing trips to Sāmoa are 'Vaiata-o-eu-Tuimanua' and 'Vai-o-Oulu-o-Olosenga'. As noted above, it is a Sāmoan custom for a fine mat to be given to the tattooer; here it appears that Sāmoans gave fine mats to the Tu'i Tonga, perhaps to commemorate the event.

Halevalu Makua (Mataele) (1890–1989), with whom I resided in 1964, was a granddaughter of Fakauaukimanua II, a son of the last Tu'i Tonga, Lautihoarga. She believed that the first Fakaauaukimanua may have brought Sāmoan woman with him to Tonga, although he was already properly married to the moheko. Halevalu felt that the Tu'i Tonga, one-on-one Sāmoan women and the kie hingoa are all associated with each other, and that a metaphor for a high-ranking Sāmoan woman was a kie hingoa because this was the most important part of her dowry.
Tongan tātatau and the Sāmoan connection

Nina Tonga

The first contact with Europeans in Tonga took place in 1616, when Dutch navigators Willem Schouten and Jacques Le Maire visited the Niua – the northernmost island group – and fired on a canoe. This violent altercation also marked the first exchange of European ‘trinkets’ such as linen, nails, hatchets and beads, given as a form of reparation. News of the newcomers and their goods soon spread through the Tonga-Fiji-Sāmoa region.\(^1\)

French explorer Jules Dumont d’Urville was the first to make an extended stay in Tongatapu. On his 1826–1829 voyage in the corvette Astralabe, d’Urville spent three months in Aitutaki then sailed to Tongatapu where he spent a month from 23 April to 21 May 1827. Here he and his crew recorded their observations in Illustrations and Journals. Louis Auguste de Saismon, official draughtsman on the voyage, produced a number of drawings in Tonga including views of chiefs’ homes, architectural structures and cultural material. His portrayal of Tongan peoples paid careful attention to distinctive details such as whaikōkōs, necklaces, hairstyles and the pattern of niuāt (decorated barkcloth) worn around the waist. He also included a drawing of the tattooed thigh of an unnamed Tongan man.

As with his illustrations of pohut (Māori thighs), de Saismon depicts the tātatau as a disembodied thigh that starts at the top of the waist and truncates just below the knee. Gathered around the waist are fields of niuāt that appear to have been purposely tilted to reveal the full length of the tātatau. The Tongan tātatau has a striking resemblance to the Sāmoan po'a in terms of structure and position, but with a bold point difference in the intensity of tattooed bands that adorn the thigh. De Saismon’s composition gives only a partial view of the tātatau – a profile of the outermost side – leaving the viewer to ponder what may be on the other side.

De Saismon’s drawing is often heralded as the only known image of Tongan tātatau. As noted by anthropologist Fanny Wone Vea, this is not entirely accurate, however; Tātatau appeared in accounts from Abel Tasman in 1643, and in one of four drawings from his voyage by the official artist Isaac Glaënsian. In Clothing of Tongans in Nukumak (1646), Glaënsian takes care to delineate objects such as a pāpakē and tātatau markings that adorn the chest and arm of two of his subjects. More than a century later Tātatau tātatau appears in the portraits of Juan Ravenet, an Italian painter who accompanied Spanish explorer Alejandro Malaspina’s voyage of the Pacific 1786–1790.

Like de Saismon, Ravenet benefited from having a good rapport with his subjects. In his portrait Latu (1785), the young man holds his waist garment open, exposing his tattoo in full to the viewer. There are elements such as the vines that stretches across the kumara and the recogisibility from de Saismon’s earlier drawings.

Like many expeditions in the Pacific, the social and cultural connections between islands were often observed and recorded, but cultural processes were largely framed as static. In seemingly discrete islands, images of de Saismon, his image captures a moment in time here the art of Tātatau does exist but remains a constant flaw of people between Sāmoa and Tonga. Accounts from various expeditions note the fluid movement of objects, cultural materials and languages between the two archipelagoes.

We know that the Tuʻi Tonga travelled to Sāmoa to be tattied, as his body was tapa for Tongans to touch. It was well known that this established passageway provided a route for Tongans during the implementation of the 1809 Vavau Code introduced by King George Tupou I that outlawed the practice of tātatau. Despite the restrictions put in place, tātatau persisted and was briefly inscribed into the memories and onto the bodies of Tongans well into the twentieth century. Given this, it is possible to query the cultural specificity of de Saismon’s drawing.

In contemporary times, tattooing offers new opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-cultural contact. From 2002 onwards, Sua Suka Tupou and Ato Tolo reviving the Tongan tātatau, searching for the last known tattoo artists among his relevant matua (Sāmoa’s Kings) and others of the Pacific. At present Petelo also trained Macon-based Tongan tattooist Akose Tutoa, who later revealed the Suka tātatau. This contemporary collaboration saw the revival of tātatau, and the revitalisation of an indigenous network that once sustained the practice in Tonga.

---

3. Ibid.