



A History of Sāmoan Tattooing

Sean Mallon and Sébastien Galliot

with contributions from

Tusiata Avia

Ron Brownson

Adrienne Kaeppler

Takahiro Kitamura

Tupe Lualua

Tavita Maliko

Selina Tusitala Marsh

Le'ausālilō Lupematasila Fata 'Au'afa Sadat Muaiava

Leali'ifano Albert L Refiti

Benoît Robitaille

Nicholas Thomas

Nina Tonga

Maria Carolina Vesce

Maualaivao Albert Wendt

Sonya Withers

Rachel Yates

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Fig. 1
Autā (tattooing tools)
from the collection
of the Museum für
Völkerkunde, Berlin.



TATAU: ANCIENT TRACES

Fig. 3
Did the knowledge
and tools for Sāmoan
tattooing originate in Fiji?
A tattooed female figure
from Fiji (1800s).

Fig. 4
The decoration on ancient Lapita pottery relates to the designs found in contemporary tattooing, tapa (barkcloth) and textile decoration.



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.¹

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.² 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.³ Andy Mills makes a similar argument for Tongan tātatau, where tattooing motifs replicated abstract weaving motifs.⁴

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.⁵ Similarly, a small clay-modelled head with a facial tattoo has been reported from a Lapita site in Papua New Guinea.⁶ Although there are Lapita pottery-bearing sites in Sāmoa, no tattooing-related implements have

1. Patrick Vinton Kirch, *The Lapita Peoples: Ancestors of the Oceanic World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

2. RC Green, 'Early Lapita Art from Polynesia and Island Melanesia: Continuities in Ceramic, Barkcloth and Tattoo Decorations', in *Exploring the Visual Art of Oceania*, edited by S Mead (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1979); Patrick Vinton Kirch, *On the Road of the Winds: An Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands Before European Contact* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

3. W Ambrose, 'Oceanic Tattooing and the Implied Lapita Ceramic Connection', *Journal of Pacific Archaeology* vol. 3, no. 1 (2012): 1–21.

4. A Mills, 'Bodies Permeable and Divine: Tapu, Mana and the Embodiment of Hegemony in Pre-Christian Tonga', in *New Mana: Transformations of a Classic Concept in Pacific Languages and Cultures*, edited by M Tomlinson and TPK Tengan (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 91.

5. Green, 'Early Lapita Art', 16–17.

6. GR Summerhayes, 'The Face of Lapita Archaeology', *Oceania* 33 (1988): 100.

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 ‘tatau’ and the word ‘uhi’ – 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, Tilafaigā and Taemā, who were joined like Siamese twins, acquired the tools and the instructions on how to use them from the tattooists Filelei and Tufou 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.⁷

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 tatau are contested; there are various versions that emphasise 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 Tilafaigā are instructed to tattoo women and not men is particularly questioned: some people (including Fijians and Sāmoan tufuga tā tatau) say that women were not tattooed there.⁸ 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.⁹ Despite these historical details, Sāmoan tufuga 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 what was Fiji? One contemporary explanation suggests Fitiuta in Sāmoa’s eastern islands of Manu’a as an origin site;¹⁰ Fiti was possibly confused in the past with Fiji (Fiti in Sāmoan). Manu’a was once the political centre of Sāmoa so it is possible Fiti, Viti 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 Pratt¹¹ in Savai’i and Thomas Powell¹² in Manu’a somehow introduced the idea of the existence of two main versions of the doings of the conjoined twins. The twins, whose genealogy and birth names diverge according to these versions, ended up being called Taemā and Tilafaigā after some inadvertent 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 consequences of giving birth. Ultimately this can be read as a myth about the status of women.¹³ During their journey Taemā and Tilafaigā travel to many places and meet many people all over the archipelago and beyond (in Fiji and in Puluotu, the underworld). These primordial encounters gave birth to clan names and sacred places where 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 Tilafaigā imported the tools from Fiji. Only the version told by members of the clan Su’a in Lefaga (namely Su’a i Vaiaga) says that the twins made the first tattoo on Sina, daughter of Tagaloalagi the god creator of all things, in Fitiuta. According to this version they swam away from Fitiuta with the tools and reached Faleālupo on the land of chief Auvā’a; he wasn’t there to receive his visitors, but he eventually marked this unusual event by taking a new name, Muaifaiva (the first of the craft), associated with the name of a ceremonial ground (Mapuifagalele). It is precisely details about chiefs’ names and places of encounters, scattered in many versions of the story, that are crucial for the contemporary tufuga tā tatau. What seems to be at stake for the tufuga in the current context is to relink one’s own kin and place of origin with the territorial and clan foundation resulting from Taemā and Tilafaigā encounters.

The details of the voyage are too numerous and confusing to be discussed at length here.¹⁴ However, if one puts aside these details – especially the sequences that occur before the twins’ discovery of the tattooing tools, which are irrelevant to the topic of tattooing – a running theme can be reconstituted. 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 Falealupo in Savai’i, on the land of Auvā’a. Their next place of call is Safotu with chief Lavea or Seve (depending on the version). The story goes on with an episode in Salelāvalu with chief Mafua, 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 Salelāvalu, chief Su’a is also mentioned in connection with a talie tree under which the twins had a rest while waiting for him, and which became the dwelling place of Taemā’s spirit.¹⁵ This place was called Lalotalie and was known as the malaetā (a ceremonial site dedicated to the guardian deity of tattooing) of Su’a.

From Salelāvalu the twins pursued their journey to ‘Upolu in Lefaga, Safata and Sale’ilua, where they made contact and interacted with other characters of importance for the

11. J Abercromby, ‘Samoan Tales’, *Folklore*, no. 2 (1891): 455–67.

12. J Fraser, ‘Some Folk-songs and Myths from Samoa’, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, no. V (1896): 170–78.

13. We owe this interpretation to Serge Dunis and his great knowledge of Pacific mythology.

14. Sébastien Galliot has counted at least seven different versions of the origin myth.

15. While the idea that the Su’a clan of tufuga is historically rooted in ‘Upolu is widespread, the Tulou’ena clan has its ancestors in Savai’i, the episode involving the land of Su’a in Salelāvalu contradicts this popular assumption. The fa’alupega of Salelāvalu (traditional terms of address and polite greeting) acknowledges Su’a as a ma’upū of Nāfanua (the son of Nāfanua’s sister Taemā).

clan Su'a of tufuga. In Safata, their encounter with a chief called Tapu is said to have been at the origin of the creation of another malaetā called Fa'amafi. Whatever the details of the interactions, this oral tradition constitutes a corpus of reference from which the tattooers can 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 'āiga sā Tulou'ena and the 'āiga 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 tatau legitimise people's claims to matai (chiefly) titles and the right to practise these trades. Families manage 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, intermarriage and interactions 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 basalt adze 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 fau va'a (canoe builders) from Manono in Sāmoa: in the 1700s they resided with Ma'afutukui'aulahi, a prominent chief from Tongatapu,¹⁶ before settling in Lau in Fiji and establishing the mātaisau – a hereditary line of craftsmen influential throughout Lau and as far north as Taveuni.¹⁷

Tufuga tā tatau also travelled between the archipelagos. From at least the 1700s Tongan nobles were tattooed by Sāmoans who acted as matapule – 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 tapu) and prepare their bodies for burial'.¹⁸ 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 tattooists in Tonga doesn't mean all tattooists in Tonga were Sāmoan – just that the social elite could not be tattooed by Tongans.

16. AC Reid, 'The Fruit of the Rewa: Oral Traditions and the Growth of the Pre-Christian Lakeba State', *Journal of Pacific History* vol. 12, pt 1 (1977): 17.

17. MA Tuimaleali'ifano, *Samoans in Fiji: Migration, Identity and Communication* (Suva: USP, 1990), 35.

18. A Kaeppler, 'Exchange Patterns in Goods and Spouses: Fiji, Tonga and Samoa', *Mankind* 11, no. 3 (1978): 246–52; A Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 106–08.

The autā: Deeply Austronesian, uniquely Sāmoan

Benoît Robitaille

The Sāmoan tufuga tā tatau (tattooists) toolkit as it was observed, described and collected, starting in the nineteenth century, carries within itself the story of its origins and represents the culminating achievement of generations of craftspeople who strove to create what may be the most sophisticated expression of tattooing technology ever produced in the pre-electric era of tattooing history.

This toolkit generally consists of four perpendicularly hafted composite tattooing points (au) of varying sizes, a sausau (mallet) used to strike the handle of these tools to drive in the tattooing points, a mortar and pestle to grind the candlenut soot pigment used to make the tattooing ink, a palette to hold the ink, a water bowl to rest the tools in when not in use during the operation, and towels of siapo barkcloth used to stretch the skin of the person being tattooed, to wipe off blood and excess ink and to wrap around the handle of the au to provide a steady grip. The tools are kept in a tunuma (container) made from a hollowed-out trunk of pandanus wood.

The particular manner in which the tufuga tā tatau wield their instruments, now commonly referred to as hand tapping, provides important clues as to the origins of Sāmoan tattooing and its family ties with tattoo traditions across Oceania, island Southeast Asia and in a few remote pockets of the Asian mainland. The perpendicular hafting of the tattooing points and the use of a mallet to drive them into the flesh to produce tattooed marks is a practice at once very widely and almost exclusively shared among peoples speaking languages belonging to the Austronesian family. The most likely explanation for such a coherent and well-defined distribution is that the practice of hand tapping tattoos and the ancestral Austronesian language designated by linguists as Proto-Austronesian share a unique point of origin and were then disseminated throughout their known range by the migrating ancestors of people speaking Austronesian languages. Many strands of linguistic and ethnographic evidence point to neolithic southern China or Taiwan as the birthplace of both Austronesian languages and hand-tapped tattooing. There is in fact no other element of material culture that can be

called 'typically Austronesian' apart from the perpendicularly hafted tattooing instrument. If some aspects of Sāmoan tattooing technology yield insights into its ancestry, others define its uniquely Sāmoan character. Indeed, the Sāmoan autā stands apart from even its closest Polynesian relatives within the wider Austronesian family of perpendicularly hafted tattooing instruments, by virtue of the distinctly complex assembly of its tattooing points. These points consist of comb-like quadrangular plates of ground boar's tusk (or possibly human pelvic bone in ancient times) attached with 'afa (sennit cord) to a connecting turtleshell (or, less frequently, bone) shank that is lashed to the tool's handle.

The narrowest tools in the tufuga's kit employ a single-toothed plate; the widest tools can feature up to ten such plates lashed together side by side and attached to the connecting shank. Different types of lateral composite assemblies featuring two or more comb-like plates are known to have been used in various Oceanic tattooing traditions, notably in the Society Islands, Hawai'i and possibly among Māori; but the added complexity of a superposed connecting shank is a unique feature of the Sāmoan tradition. The few reports of such tools having been used on Tonga most likely refer to instruments wielded by Sāmoan tufuga serving as attendants to the Tu'i Tonga (Tongan King).

The Sāmoan lateral superposed composite tattooing points are the crowning achievement of an extraordinarily dedicated drive by a specialised class of craftsmen towards technological sophistication: they represent the endpoint of a trend in tattoo instrument complexification in Polynesia since the time of Early Central Polynesian cultures. We can confidently proclaim that the autā is both deeply Austronesian and uniquely Sāmoan.



On Sāmoan tattooing

Sébastien Galliot

Tuaefu, Upolu, Sāmoa, 3 October 2005

Fig. 5
An ancient tool form
in contemporary
materials: 'au sogiaso
lapo'a (large wide
tattooing implement),
2012, Sāmoa, by Su'a
Sulu'ape Paulo III.

Born in 1937, His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi 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 him at his residence in Tuaefu. 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 respectable 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 ritual of the placenta and the umbilical cord and then you go through the celebration of what is known as nunu fanau, 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 (lama), and that too is a special ritual, as is crushing the lama. You abstain from food, prayers and meditation until you start making the lama 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 mana'ō le pe'a tali le tiga' – 'If you want to have a pe'a 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 (plover) to identify land. Populating with the people. So, you have as well the vaetuli. 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 funeral ritual is celebrating life and particularly sexuality. The message in these rituals is: as long as I have my sexuality, I can produce more people. So, the tattoo is not only about our concept of creation, it's also about life and our relationship to the gods. We don't see the gods as something awful, we see the gods as an extension of the family.

SG: Can you talk 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 references, 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 sadly 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 unique culture by undertaking these rituals and even the physical exhibition and the physical pain that accompany the ritual.

And I tend to think this is the reason why people are taking on the tattoo even though they might not understand the fundamentals in the spiritual or the fact that by feeling, by consciousness, we realise that this is one way of becoming ourselves. I mean, for a lot of religions, particularly Protestantism, there was a prohibition against tattoo. The thing is, it's not only against that religion, it's also against all the other things that are implied because when you finish [receiving a pe'a] you're supposed to have a sexual experience – not necessarily with your wife or inside the marriage but, you know. This was a connotation 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 wrote against the pōula [the night dance] because the highlight of the pōula 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.

SG: What is your understanding of the samāga [the anointing ceremony]?

TA: Sama [mix of turmeric and coconut oil] is something that comes straight through the gods. Sigano [pandanus flower] makes the sama 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 by now you have the medicinal. You do the sama with u'u, fa'au'ua and lulu'uga 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 the u'u is a special u'u, a holy u'u – for a special purpose like reburial you use holy oil. When someone dies you oil with sacred oil. And equally when you have these rituals you use sacred oil. There is a massage oil but it's always sacred oil which is kept apart. But it's also the responsibility of people like Petelo [Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a] 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.



Fig. 6
An 'ie toga/kie (fine mat);
Sāmoa/Tonga. Fine mats
are highly valued textiles
worn as garments and/or
exchanged in ceremonies.

Sāmoan tatau, fine mats and Tongan royalty

Adrienne Kaeppler

Two kie hingoa (fine mats) said to have come directly from Samoa with the Tu'i Tonga (Tongan King) are 'Valatau-oe-Tuimanu'a' (war garment of the Tui Manu'a) and 'Vā-'o-Ofu-mo-Olosega' (the gulf between the islands of Ofu and Olosega in Sāmoa). These kie hingoa are said to have been acquired by the Tu'i Tonga Fatafehi during his tattooing in Sāmoa.

Tongans considered the Tu'i Tonga's person sacred and dangerous to touch; it was necessary to recruit outsiders for certain tasks such as hair cutting (the head of a Tu'i Tonga is particularly taboo and cannot be touched), preparing the body for burial, and tattooing. The falefā ceremonial attendants, who descended from the sky with the first Tu'i Tonga, did many of these tasks for the Tu'i Tonga, but Tu'i Tonga were usually not tattooed. Fatafehi, however, wished to be tattooed, and as no Tongan could do the work, Fatafehi made two trips to Samoa for this purpose. His first trip was to Manono Island, where the first part of his tattoo was done; and his second trip was to Manu'a, where the rest was completed. Fatafehi's nickname was Fakauakimanuka (twice, or second time, to Manu'a) to commemorate his tattooing trips to Samoa. On both occasions the tattooer's body is said to have swelled up and they ultimately died from 'wounding' the Tu'i Tonga's sacred body. The kie hingoa associated with Fatafehi's tattooing trips to Samoa are 'Valatauotui-manu'a' ['Vala-tau-oe-Tuimanu'a'] and 'Vaofumoolosega' ['Vā-'o-Ofu-ma-Olosega']. As noted above, it is a Samoan custom for a fine mat to be given to the tattooer; here it appears that Samoans gave fine mats to the Tu'i Tonga, perhaps to commemorate the event.

Halaevalu Maile [Mataele] (1899–1989), with whom I resided in 1964, was a granddaughter of Fakauakimanuka II, a son of the last Tu'i Tonga, Laufilitonga. She believed that the first Fakauakimanuka may have brought Sāmoan women with him to Tonga, although he was already properly married to the mohefo. Halaevalu felt that the Tu'i Tonga, one or more Samoan women and the kie hingoa are all associated with each other, and that a metaphor for a high-ranking Samoan woman was a kie hingoa because this was the most important part of her dowry.

The name of the second kie hingoa associated with Fakauakimanuka's tattooing in Samoa, 'Vā-'o-Ofu-mo-Olosega', refers to two islands in the Manu'a group, Ofu and Olosega. Today this name is used as a metaphor for good relations between the traditionally warring Samoa and Tonga resulting from intermarriages and their offspring. The metaphor was used by Queen Sālote (1900–1965) in her lament for the last 'Ulukālala Ha'amea, who died in 1960. She notes:

Pea tala ki he Tu'i Manu'a
And tell to the Tu'i Manu'a
Kaufaki atu ai ki 'Uta
Brought by sea to the land
He Va-'o-Ofu-mo-Olosega
The Vā-'o-Ofu-mo-Olosega
Manono e mo 'Apolima
Manono and 'Apolima (Samoan islands)
To'o e kakapu 'o e Mo'unga
Take away the mist/fog of the mountain
Fili ai hano ta'ovala
Sorted out from his waist garment
Kia Tungī mo Tu'ifaleua
To Tungī (now Tupou IV) and
Tu'ifaleua (Tu'i Pelehake)
Ko e fua 'o e kie hingoa
The fruit of the kie hingoa
(i.e., Vā-'o-Ofu-mo-Olosega)

Queen Sālote presented Vā-'o-Ofu-mo-Olosega to the funeral of the late 'Ulukālala.

Extract from 'Kie hingoa: Mats of power, rank, prestige and history', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol. 108, no. 2, (1999), pages 178–79.



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 Niuaus – 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 *Astrolabe*, d’Urville spent three months in Aotearoa then sailed to Tongatapu where he spent a month from 20 April to 21 May 1827. Here he and his crew recorded their observations in illustrations and journals.² Louis Auguste de Sainson, official draughtsman on the voyage, produced a number of drawings in Tonga including views of chiefs’ tombs, architectural structures and cultural material. His portrayal of Tongan peoples paid careful attention to distinctive details such as whaletooth necklaces, hairstyles and the pattern of ngatu (decorated barkcloth) worn around the waist. He also included a drawing of the tattooed thigh of an unnamed Tongan man.

As with his illustration of puhoro (Māori thigh tattoo), de Sainson 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 folds of ngatu that appear to have been purposely lifted to reveal the full length of the tātatau. The Tongan tātatau has a striking resemblance to the Sāmoan pe’a in terms of structure and position, but with a bold point of difference in the intensity of tattooed bands that adorn the thigh. De Sainson’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 Sainson’s drawing is often heralded as the only known image of Tongan tātatau. As noted by anthropologist Fanny Wonu Veys, 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 Gilsemans.³ In *Clothing of Tongans in*

Nomuka (c1643), Gilsemans takes care to delineate objects such as a flywhisk and tattoo markings that adorn the chest and arm of two of his subjects. More than a century later Tongan tātatau appears in the portraits of Juan Ravenet, an Italian painter who accompanied Spanish explorer Alessandro Malaspina’s voyage of the Pacific 1789–1794. Like de Sainson, Ravenet benefited from having a good rapport with his subjects.⁴ In his portrait *Latu* (1783), the young man holds his waist garment open, exposing his tattoo in full to the viewer. There are elements such as the motif that stretches across the lumbar area that are recognisable from de Sainson’s earlier drawing.

Like many expeditions in the Pacific, the linguistic and cultural connections between islands were often observed and recorded, but cultural practices were largely framed as existing in seemingly discrete islands. Unbeknown to de Sainson, his image captures a moment in time where the art of Tongan tātatau existed within a constant flow of peoples between Sāmoa and Tonga. Accounts from various explorers note the fluid movement of objects, cultural material and languages between the two archipelagos.

We know that the Tu’i Tonga travelled to Sāmoa to be tattooed, as his body was tapu for Tongans to touch. It was well known that this established passageway provided a route for Tongans during the implementation of the 1839 Vava’u Code introduced by King George Tupou I that outlawed the practice of tātatau.⁵ Despite the restrictions put in place, tātatau persisted and was literally 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 Sainson’s drawing.

In contemporary times, his drawing offers new opportunities for reinterpretation and reuse. In 2002 Su’a Sulu’ape Alaiva’a Petelo revived the Tongan tātatau, supposedly 150 years after the last known recipient.⁶ Among his reference materials was de Sainson’s drawing as well as images of incised clubs and kupesi (pattern design boards). Using this material and his extensive knowledge of Sāmoan tātatau, Su’a tattooed Ata’ata Fineanganofu of San Francisco. As part of the process Petelo also trained Hawaiian-based Tongan tattooist ‘Aisea Toetu’u, who later received the Su’a title. This contemporary collaboration saw the revival of tātatau, and the revitalisation of an indigenous network that once sustained the practice in Tonga.

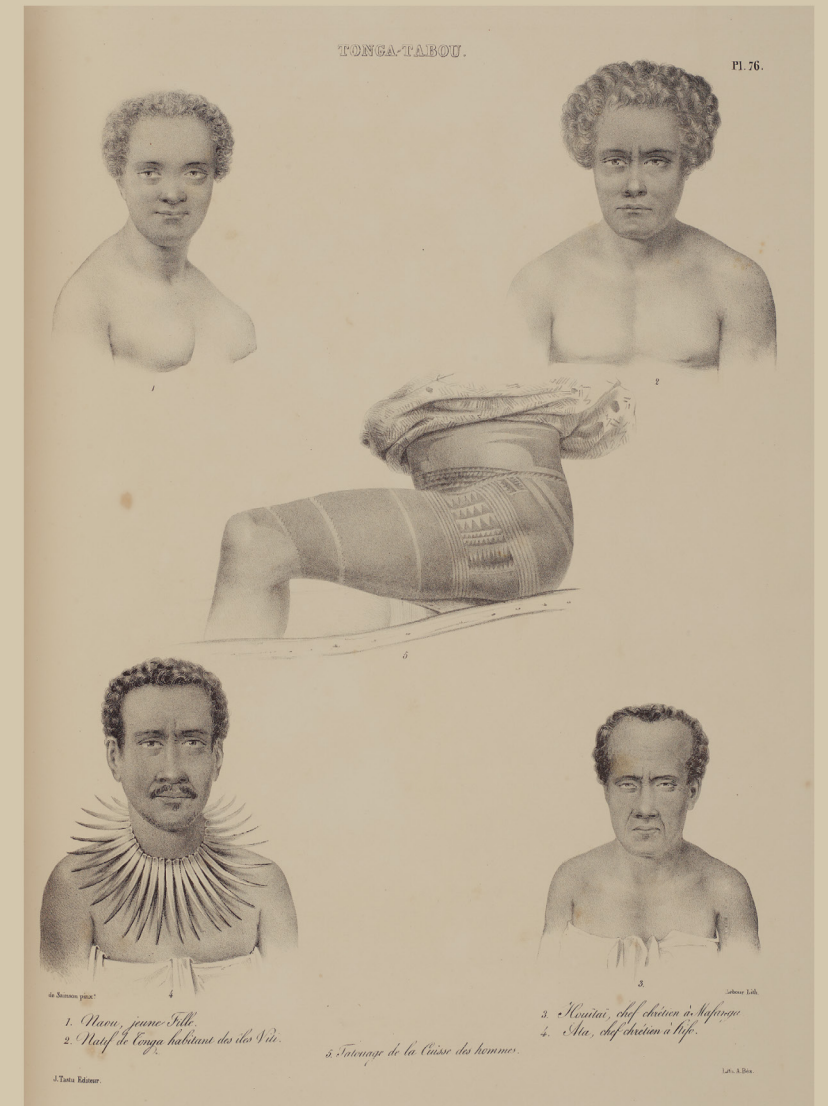


Fig. 7
A rare drawing of Tongan tātatau by Louis Auguste de Sainson, official draughtsman of the voyage of Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d’Urville 1826–1829 on the corvette *Astrolabe*.
1. Naou jeune fille 2. Natif de Tonga habitant des îles Viti 3. Houitai chef chrétien à Mafanga 4. Ata chef chrétien à Hifo 5. Tatouage de la cuisse des hommes.
Pl. no. 76 of: *Voyage de la Corvette l’Astrolabe. Atlas Historique.*