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COMMENTARY

TATAU

If you don't have one, shut up!

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Fa'amatalaga | Abstract

Sāmoan cultural motifs are more visible than ever. These motifs carry stories of our ancestors as they navigated the vast moana in search of new lands. Those same ancestors created the tatau to store valuable information of our people. Now, Sāmoan people and culture are internationally visible throughout popular culture, from Hollywood superstars such as The Rock Dwayne Johnson to NFL legends Troy Polamalu and the movie *Moana*. As a result, debates have increased on who should be allowed and not allowed to wear the tatau. Interestingly, much of the tatau discourse is led by non-Sāmoan academics or Sāmoans who do not wear the tatau. As Sāmoan researchers who bear these markings, we share our in-depth insights in this commentary. Through our lived experiences we decipher tatau myths and share our stories.

Keywords

Indigenous tattoo, Samoan motif, Tatau, Tattoo

Folasaga | Introduction

Sāmoan people and culture have long been visible internationally. They have been and are present throughout popular culture, sports fields, film screens and the music industry (Enari & Taula, 2022; Tuia, 2019). As a result, we have seen Sāmoan cultural motifs in various spaces such as museums, media, performing arts, advertisements, business logos and sporting events. Indigenous global movements and colonial resistance have meant that debates of Sāmoan cultural appropriation have started to enter the public discourse. Globalisation, capitalism and migration have raised questions on ownership of cultural knowledge and motifs (Forsyth, 2016).

Simultaneously, there are also debates among Sāmoan people as to who should wear the tatau and about its symbolism. The Sāmoan proverb "La

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ta muamua Ie gutu ae le‘i to le tino” (“Tattoo your mouth before you tattoo your body”) speaks to the significance of the tatau/malu and the integral requirement that those who want the honour of wearing the tatau/malu on their body should first fully commit to its symbolism.

Interestingly, these discussions have been led by either non-Sāmoan anthropologists, sociologists and historians or Sāmoan researchers and public figures who do not bear these markings. Their viewpoint is problematic in this debate because they have entered into the tatau space without being marked by the ‘au (Sāmoan traditional tattooing tool). Despite this, their knowledge of the Sāmoan tatau has been heavily quoted in academia, and among those who are interested in the Sāmoan tatau. Being Indigenous Sāmoan researchers who also wear the tatau has given us deeper insight into what tatau is, beyond the commentary of non-Sāmoan researchers and non-marked Sāmoans. Through Indigenous epistemologies our personal narratives as Sāmoan researchers who are marked and honoured to bear the markings of tatau/malu, our relevant distinctive contribution is essential to include in this evolving subject.

Talaaga o le tatau | Story of the tatau

From a Sāmoan standpoint, tatau arrived in Sāmoa from the deities Taema and Tilafaiga (Natanielu, 2020). Where the Sāmoan tatau practice originated from is still a matter of debate among Sāmoans. Some believe it originated from Fiji and was taken first to Fitiuta in Tutuila (colonially known as American Samoa) then to Sāmoa. Others believe it originated from Fitiuta and was then gifted to the Su‘a and Tulouena families, two prominent lines of Sāmoan tatau artists.

Carl Marquardt (1984) was the first foreign anthropologist to visit Sāmoa and capture tatau markings and events. He was also able to document designs of both the pe‘a and the malu. Traditionally, in Sāmoan society, only men with the pe‘a were permitted to serve in the house of a chief; those without the tatau were seen as minors (Maliko, 2012; Tavale, 1999). The introduction of Christianity to Sāmoa saw a decline in those receiving the tatau, as different denominations either discouraged or banned it. However, with the increase in global Indigenous cultural reclamation, decolonisation and indigenisation, tatau has experienced a revival in the islands and throughout the diaspora. As Rev. Tavita Maliko (2012) observes, “An increasing number of young Sāmoans who were born and live outside Sāmoa in countries like America, Australia and New Zealand, have taken up the *tatau* as an inscription of identity on their bodies” (p. vi). Others see tatau as a cultural tool and a part of our living, bridging past, present and future (Wertsch et al., 1995). Scholarship on tatau includes photos of the different motifs (Mallon et al., 2023), interpretations of what they mean and using the tatau as a metaphor for educational frameworks (Wendt, 1996).

Ponton (2015) used the motifs of the malu to analyse her research data in the context of educational practice. Aia-Fa‘aleava (2024) took this further and created a framework using motifs of the malu to explain their meanings through the stories she collected for her exegesis and documentary, which looked at fa‘afafine and non-Sāmoan women with the malu. For the purposes of this commentary, we will use fa‘agogo, which is a Sāmoan storytelling method and is also the word for a frigatebird, the symbol of navigation, guidance and hope (Mittermeier & Rylands, 2008).

Storytelling becomes the way to add essential critical reflection and analysis to challenge dominant data and add meaning that stems from lived experience. Informed by professional knowledge and personal experience, our insight creates validity and expertise. In this commentary, we share our personal experience of our tatau, as factual knowledge of knowing and being as Indigenous Sāmoans. Our fa‘agogo are a window into our personal lives, and our journey of the tatau.

O maua fa‘agogo | Our stories

Most of the current knowledge pertaining to tatau in the academic space can only go so far, as most authors are either not genealogically connected to the tatau or Sāmoans who have not personally gone through the journey of receiving the tatau. When looking at tatau, it is important to privilege and amplify the voices of those who wear these markings and have Sāmoan ancestry. For we are the ones who have the blood of Taema and Tilafaiga running through our veins. For we are the only ones who know what it feels like to receive these marks, gain wisdom from them and wear them from now until death. These are our fa‘agogo.

Fa‘agogo muamua | First story: Lefaoali‘i Dion Enari

I had wanted a tatau my whole life. As a kid I would draw tatau patterns on my legs and dream of my completion ceremony many times over.

Everyone's timing and reasons for getting one are different.

For me, I chose to get it upon the completion of my PhD, which was in fa'a Sāmoa, and to mark myself as a life servant to my family, villages and nation. After finally getting the okay from my parents, we were good to go. The week leading up to it was one of the scariest times of my life. I didn't want to embarrass myself or bring shame to my family for not finishing. To calm my fear and nerves I told myself, "You will leave this journey in one of two ways. Either in a body bag or with a finished tatau."

The weeks leading up to it, I prayed and meditated over and over again. I had spoken to so many people with the tatau for advice. However, the words spoken by co-author Agapetos Aia-Fa'aleava stuck with me, and would be constantly repeated in my head: "Do not let the au defeat you. The first tap is Taema and Tilafaiga and the rest are our ancestors who paved the way for us." These words highlighted two things for me. One, that this will be the fight of my life, and two, even though it will be hard, my ancestors will guide the process.

As I woke up for my first session, I had mixed emotions. One side of me was excited. I had waited for this day my whole life. However, the other side of me was full of fear, as I knew this would be the biggest test of my manhood. As I laid in front of the tufuga ready to receive my first hit, I thanked Taema, Tilafaiga and my ancestors, and pleaded to God for his mercy over me, as I surrendered my body to be repeatedly beaten by the au.

So, what did the pain feel like? In a nutshell, it was invasive, humiliating and brutal abuse. It was the most torturous pain I had ever felt. They go from hitting your rib bones to opening your butt and shading it black. As Sonny Natanielu told me, "A man's life has not prepared him for this kind of pain and for this long." Constantly feeling the wrath of the au felt like death by a thousand cuts.

The pain journey took me to many places I had never been. I had confronting flashbacks of the past and encounters of the potential future. I saw family members that had passed on and was able to talk to them. The harder and longer the tufuga hit me, the more pain I felt, and the more these visions became real. I was torn, I wanted the pain to stop because it was unbearable, but I also wanted it to continue, so I could stay in the spiritual realm.

It took me three weeks to complete my tatau, and to call it a rollercoaster ride would be an understatement. From struggling to breathe when bloating my stomach out while they hit my belly button to feeling the love of my family and friends through song, prayer and kind words—it was a journey I will never forget, and one which has changed me forever, not only physically (with my tatau) but mentally too.

Now, I am forever connected to anyone else who has the tatau, whether I know them or not. It is a sacred bond I cannot explain, but one I will cherish forever and ever.

Fa'agogo lona lua | Second story: Agapetos Aia-Fa'aleava

I remember travelling to Sāmoa in 1996 for our family fa'amalologa from six years of ministry service. I was excited to go home, to my childhood, where I got to play freely with my cousins. As a young child, I was easily swayed by gossip and stories. I remember one of my cousins telling me that a 10-year-old just finished getting her malu. I could not believe it, and I wanted one straight away. I had three radical reasons why I wanted the malu. First, I wanted it because my heart was like, "I can handle this." Second, my ego kind of wanted to show off to my family that I am brave. Finally, tatau at the time was against our church by-laws, so I wanted to rebel against that. The idea of a malu was cemented in my head, and it trickled its way into my heart and solidified itself in my blood streams.

I mentioned this idea casually to my parents and my dad replied, "Alu e kā, siga kama'i pe'a i lou kigo pe mafai, oga kā lea o lau malu" ("Go and get a small tattoo on your body before you get your malu"). The next day, my aunty took me, my younger sister and my cousin to Apia. We somehow ended up in a tattoo parlour and I got myself a tattoo on my ankle. It has my initials "A.F." with a heart around them and "'96", the year I received my tattoo. Yes, I am that person who will *never* inscribe someone else's name on my body!

I was the type of person who spent a lot of time in my room, reading and minding my own business. I love being in my own company because it means I don't need to deal with humans. I had a facade of being social in public spaces, but when I got home, I was exhausted!

Fast-forward to 2001, and I wanted a major statement for my 21st. The age of big celebrations with friends, family, enemies and frenemies. I did not want a big celebration, because I did not want money spent on temporary events. Besides, if I invited one person, I had to invite their whole family, a decision I did not have the brain capacity to deal with at the time.

I remember I was at work, and my mother called to say that I was getting my malu done that weekend. I did not believe my mother, so I waited till I got home. We chatted but excitement did not hit me in the fatu. I told my parents that I wanted a full male peʻa, and I was told it was not respectful for a woman to get the male peʻa. Respecting my parents' advice, I did not go that far with that idea. Besides, the malu will look nice on my thick, muscly legs. I played a lot of sports in school, clubs (rugby union and basketball) and church, so I was sort of fit!

The rest was a blur. I remember, walking in with my sister. We sat down with Alaʻivaʻa, the tufuga, and chatted about life, school and whether I was ready for the malu. In my heart, I have wanted this since 1996.

I was on the mat waiting patiently for the tufuga to start his work. I asked if they would let me know when they started. I felt my first pinch, and I flinched. I looked over my shoulder and saw that the back of my calve muscles was all done and they were up to the back on my knees. I did not feel pain throughout the first part of my session. My first leg was done within an hour and a half. We rested, and the second was completed the same day within the same time.

I felt complete, excited and unable to believe I got my malu done. First in my family, first in my church and first among my first cousins on both my mother's and father's sides. I spent more time outside my room, wore shorts and wore two-piece bikinis to the beach. I was reckless, but I did not care because my strength was imprinted on my thighs.

Fast-forward to today, and I am wearing my malu with pride. I am a PhD graduate, and I wear my research on my skin. My PhD has allowed me to be more open in showing off my malu. I understand in depth the meaning of the malu and the reasons why we need to show it off all the time. Most days, even in Queensland's scorching weather, I wear whatever I feel like wearing.

I understand the cultural significance of the malu, and why our Sāmoan people (tatau-ed, and non-tatau-ed) are fiercely protecting our measina. However, as a malu wearer, I believe the malu is a tool that we can use to gain a better understanding of where it has travelled and the bodies it now occupies.

The malu has entered spaces and conversations that manifested organically. I also understand that only those with the tatau (Sāmoans and non-Sāmoans with the tatau) can discuss the stories of the malu among themselves. Those who do not have a tatau have no right to share their opinion because they are naked, unmarked or too cowardly to get their tatau. This makes the tatau discussions exclusive, and I am proud to be part of the "Dirty Knees" club.

I believe the first tap of the au is a call to our ancestors, Taema and Tilafaiga. The first tap is to inform them that the receiver has accepted their legacy; that they are willing to serve, and that their lives are given and dedicated to the au, to their family, village, community and country. Their legacy lives through the receiver. The second tap of the au is for my ancestors who have paved the way for me. I carry that pain with me. The completion of my malu is my commitment to my aganuʻu. To tautua in any shape or form and to be the leader within my own chosen field. I live to serve, and I carry our Taema and Tilafaiga on my skin. I am their living legacy, their descendant, and I am their embodiment. My malu is the story of my Sāmoa and her tatau.

Aga'i i luma | Moving forward

Now we have shared our tatau journeys, it is our hope that many more Sāmoans who bear these markings also tell their stories and commit and honour the symbolism and meaning to the culture. We believe better understanding will be achieved if those with these markings are platformed to speak on them. To maintain cultural origins and value, the source of knowledge and expertise comes directly from Sāmoans who bear the tautau/malu—as opposed to those who have not gone through this journey but commentate from a Eurocentric anthropologic view, or as Sāmoans who do not have the tatau. Our parting words to our beloved Sāmoan people are that every person who gets the tatau is another chance tatau has of surviving. Not through the photos and the paintings, but through the bodies and the skin it is etched in, will tatau truly survive.

Ia manuia.

Glossary

aganuʻu	culture
ʻau	tattooing instrument
faʻafafine	natal males who align with a third gender or feminine gender role in Sāmoa
faʻagogo	storytelling method; frigatebird
faʻamalologa	long service leave
faʻa Sāmoa	Samoan way

fatu	heart
malu	female-specific tattoo that covers the legs from just below the knees to the upper thighs
measina	cultural treasures
moana	ocean
pe‘a	male-specific tattoo that covers the body from the waist to the knees
Taema, Tilafaiga	twin-sister deities who brought the art of tatau to Samoa from Fiji
tatau	tattoo
tufuga	tattooist

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