



# From ritual efficacy to iconic efficiency: ritual encoding, surface/pattern and global perceptions of Pacific tattoo iconography

Sébastien Galliot

## ► To cite this version:

Sébastien Galliot. From ritual efficacy to iconic efficiency: ritual encoding, surface/pattern and global perceptions of Pacific tattoo iconography. *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, 2017, Surface /Pattern, 18, 10.24135/ijara.v0i0.6 . hal-02976166

**HAL Id: hal-02976166**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02976166>**

Submitted on 30 Oct 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

SÉBASTIEN GALLIOT

# From ritual efficacy to iconic efficiency: ritual encoding, surface/pattern and global perceptions of Pacific tattoo iconography

From product packaging to individual tattooing, ornamental motifs and images pulled from Pacific arts and crafts, like barkcloth, tattooing, carving or weaving, have become popular and efficient means by which to mark a wide range of carriers and media with a “nesian” identity. This appears to be the outcome of several decades of indigenous and exogenous appropriations, re-appropriations and revitalization enterprises occurring among Pacific and other cultures around the world (Kuwahara 2005, Awekotuku & Nikora 2007, Mangos & Utanga 2011, Salvador-Amores 2013, Krutak 2014). The transfer of images from one medium to another and their diffusion far beyond Pacific islands communities changes their mode of reception and the way they mediate social relationships. In this context, the question of iconic power also brings up a range of other controversial issues among tattoo practitioners and tattoo wearers. The most contentious one relates to the economy of images and the professional ethics ruling the circulation, appropriation, and copying of images.

Given the global proliferation and appropriation of Pacific tattoo imagery and hand tapping techniques, it is important to understand the effect of these processes on the meaning and agency of tattoo designs. What kind of social relation is mediated by Samoan tattoo iconography? What kind of sign predominates in Samoan tattooing? What does it stand for, and what kind of action and mental operation does it provoke?

This paper draws on my fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2013 in Samoa, New Zealand and Europe over a period of 28 months. Other sources of data are my curatorial activities involving Pacific and Samoan tattooing and my personal engagement as an assistant (*toso*) during several tattooing operations. Starting from previously published work on ritual efficacy (Galliot, 2015a) and ritual transmission (Galliot, 2015b), this paper aims to examine changes in the mode of reception of Samoan iconography by questioning the changing status of Pacific tattooed images. To this end, I will first give some contextual information about contemporary Pacific tattooing. Then I will clarify the theoretical framework I used to explore the way images work, before addressing in more detail what I have called the multimodal reading of Samoan tattoo iconography. I will highlight some key ethnographical insights about the ritual production of the images to show how the global (re)appropriation of Pacific designs has caused a change in its mode of reception.

## Pacific tattooing and the emergence of a *tattooscape*

The development of the Polynesian tattoo is closely linked to that of the Euro-American. Especially, “the mutual relationship between a changing market and innovation” (Sanders & Vail, 2008: 29) had tangible consequences on the 1980s Polynesian tattoo revival. One of the most striking patterns of change is probably the mutual borrowing between indigenous tattoo practitioners (Pacific, South East Asian and Japanese iconography) and western ones. The most significant of these exchanges for this paper are based on thirty years of friendship and mentoring relationships that were established and consolidated thanks to *tufuga tā tatau* (tattoo experts), like Sulu’ape Paulo II and his cousin, Tavui Pasina Iosefo in New Zealand. Other Samoan *tufuga* also frequently participated in Pacific cultural festivals and tattoo conventions in Europe and United States (Mallon, Brunt & Thomas, 2010). Since the 1980s, exchanges, contacts and patronages have contributed to a cross-fertilization of the art—so that, nowadays for example, Māori-Polynesian designs are included in western repertoires. On the other hand, Pacific tattooists who proclaim and emphasize the indigeneness of their work have adopted not only western standards of hygiene and technology, but also what one could consider as a western understanding and interpretation of tattooed images. For instance, a now widespread practice among tattooists using machine and hand-tapping tools involves creating Pacific design patterns by drawing from traditional iconographies and modes of assemblage and rearranging them to fit with the personal aims and biographies of their customers. This is similar to the earlier professionalisation of western tattooing, in which standardized popular imagery was adapted to the individual aims of a client.

In Samoa, the continuity of ritual tattooing and hand-tapped techniques throughout Christianization and colonisation, as well as its mediatization in the western world of tattooing during the 1980s, has propelled Samoan *tufuga tā tatau* forward onto the global scene as the main representatives of this knowledge. Consequently, *tufuga tā tatau* were considered as the custodians of pre-modern Polynesian tattooing and have acted as mentors and patrons for international newcomers to their craft, providing apprenticeships, bestowing titles, granting rights to perform ritual or ornamental custom creations (Mallon, 2005).

In the 2010s, the number of self-taught *tufuga tā tatau* and tattoo practitioners from diverse ethnic origins using a hand-tapping technique similar to the Samoan one continues to increase steadily. This includes Samoans operating in New Zealand and Australia, as well as westerners who learned the craft without the guidance of a *matua o faiva* (established elder) from one of the two main tattooing clans (Su’a and Tulou’ena). The emergence of these tattooists without the patronage of a *matua o faiva* causes not only debates about their legitimacy, but also concern regarding what appears as a global trend of (mis)appropriating indigenous heritage. In this context, newcomers and long-time established *tufuga* are urged to think about the ethics of their profession, particularly with regard to knowledge about the images, their diffusion and their copyright.

In the last decade or so, Pacific tattoo iconographies have participated in a global movement of traditional tattoo revival, in which practitioners of an ethnic ancestry perform ancient tattoo techniques to apply images that are considered part of their culture’s traditional repertoire.

At the same time, western tattoo practitioners have started to promote themselves as specialists in one or several of these ancient techniques and iconographies,

reproducing or creating new arrangements of ‘ancient designs’ for their customers and experimenting with non-electrical techniques such hand poking, hand tapping or skin stitching using reconstructed *ad hoc* tools.

While evolving into an entrepreneurial activity, Polynesian tattooing has also become a trade in images, and their semiotic status changed in due course. The most striking illustration of this fact is the frequency with which tattooed images are interpreted as pictograms today, or in the fashion of a visual language, for which every sign should be associated with a referent. In other words, for most wearers, tattoo designs must either contain a meaning, deliver a message, symbolize something, or they must match with their intention, their history, experiences, affects, etc. This also affects wearers of custom-made Samoan tattoo (the *taulima*, arm band, or *tauvae*, leg band, for example), so much so that parts of the indigenous iconography could be qualified as *floating signifiers*, i.e. signifiers that absorb rather than emit meanings (Levi-Strauss 1999 [1950], Falk 1995, Sweetman 1999).

Samoan tattooing technique and iconography are particularly affected by this global trend in the re-appropriation/re-interpretation of images and new process of learning. In today’s world, where migrations, media and mobilities tend to multiply models of action, consumption and identification, tattooing (and Pacific tattooing especially) requires us to consider global contemporary practices within what I would call a *tattooscape*. Inspired by Appadurai’s notion of *scapes* (1990), a *tattooscape* is best understood as a relatively unstable network of actors (practitioners, clientele, media, equipment manufacturers, promoters of events) whose mobilities and modes of association depend on their respective “historical, linguistic and political situatedness” (296).

So, addressing the case of Samoan tattooed images simultaneously opens a space of debate that also encompasses other Polynesian tattoo iconographies. I cannot address in detail the question of techniques here, but it goes without saying that questions concerning appropriation, transmission and circulation also apply to techniques and their transformative consequences. This is precisely the process I wish to investigate. What happens to ritual prototypical images (such as *pe’a* and *malu*) when they are broken down into smaller units of pattern? How does their circulation and relocation affect their iconic power (i.e., in this context, their evocative potentialities)?

### Meaningful or powerful images?

To tackle the question of the iconic power of these images, I follow the line of thought drawn by David Freedberg (1989) who claimed that to understand this power one has to abandon an art historical, Kantian orientation for a pragmatic approach to images. This implies exploring images within a field of practices, their context of production and reception, restoring anthropological thickness to the images. By this I mean that the image cannot be understood outside its practical and social context. Regarding the process of perception and its sociological components, Bourdieu and Delsaut (1975) have established that, for an image to be “read” efficiently, to be readable, its formal elements must meet the dispositions of the receptor. Thus, to understand how the rather enigmatic notion of iconic power actually works, one must investigate the conditions of production of the image (the formal, the technical), as well as the conditions of

the production of dispositions towards it (Bourdieu, 1979). Further, the referent and the distance between the image and the referent have been a central concept in art history and in the practice of art itself. I want to stress that this theme is also one of the crucial functional operators for Samoan tattooing.

To clarify the notion of iconic power, I return to Charles S. Peirce's three semiotic categories of signs: An *index* has a metonymical or a causal relationship with the object to which it refers. An *icon* has a relation of likeness, and a *symbol* has an arbitrary, conventional relation with the object it stands for (the meaning of a symbol relies on the knowledge of a code). Crucially, all categories involve an interpretant, an understanding of the sign/object relationship held by someone.

I will try to give some insight into the specific power of these images and into the changes of their semiotic status between a (reconstructed) pre-Christian understanding of tattooing and contemporary responses to tattooed images. In other words, I will try to show how the socio-historical context of the interpreters influences not only the image itself (which is, as we will see, a mimetic repetition of a prototype) but its semiotic status, its content and, finally, its agency and capacity of acting in the world.

Alexander and Bartmański have recently emphasised the dual nature of iconicity as an “interaction of surface and depth” (2012: 2). This remark is particularly relevant when applied to tattooed images, which make this interaction obvious. Whatever the function or intention related to the sporting of a tattoo, the mark inscribed on the skin does have an effect and often a (loose) meaning—located, as it were, beyond visual perception. Whether magical, eschatological, therapeutic or associated to one's sense of identity (collective or individual), the efficacy of tattooed images stems from a kind of experience called *iconic power* by Jeffrey Alexander, or *iconic difference* by Gottfried Boehm. That is to say, tattoos, as icons, are simultaneously meaningful and practical (in the material sense, perceptual and palpable): the recipients both experience the visual saliency and perceptual properties of the patterned skin surface *and* project meanings at the same time. As Alexander notes, “iconic power depends on the seamless intertwining of surface aesthetic and depth meaning at the same time.” (Alexander 2012: 32) Thus, Samoan tattooing epitomizes a process of change in iconicity and provides a relevant case to test the conception of iconic power.

Fig. 1 Su'a Loli Misitikeri (2007). *Pe'a* or male tattoo. [Photo: Sébastien Galliot]

Fig. 2 Su'a Loli Misitikeri (2007). *Malu* or female tattoo. [Photo: Sébastien Galliot]





## Production and reception of the ritual image

*Pe'a/tatau* (male tattoo, figure 1) and *malu* (female tattoo, figure 2) result from two standardized configurations of patterns. Each occurrence of these images reiterates an invariable model of zoning the body with specific *vāega* (zones, or groups of motifs). They are made by a *tufuga tā tatau*, an expert with the same ceremonial prerogatives and social status as *tufuga fau fale* (house builders) and *tufuga fai va'a* (boat builders). The tattoo experts' status derives from a genealogical link with the tutelary deities Taemā and Tilafaigā who, during a mythical voyage throughout the Samoan archipelago, met several individuals from different villages and granted them a basket of tools (*atoau*) and the ceremonial right to be served the first cup of kava during gatherings.

Samoa tattoos are the result of a ritual which is organized in the fashion of a three-step initiation as theorized by Van Gennep (1905), Turner (1969) and Bloch (1992), to name only a few. In Peircean terms, the full *pe'a* and *malu* can broadly be qualified as indexes of a completed ritual. In fact, in this regard and despite the complexity of the assemblage of patterns, the images' efficacy depends primarily on their completeness. I would even add that formal aesthetic judgments are secondary—these are not so much decorative surfaces than entities with their own agency. As Albert Wendt (1996) puts it: "The *tatau* and the *malu* are not just beautiful decoration, they are scripts/texts/testimonies to do with relationships, order, form and so on."<sup>3</sup> The ethnographic data I gathered on many occasions between 2001 and 2013 also point to an indexical priority of the tattooed mark over its iconic and its symbolic content. *Pe'a* and *malu* are, at first glance, indexes of a ritual that has been conducted well: a ritual where the two parties managed to maintain respectful and caring interactions throughout the process. Tattooed marks are primarily an index of good relations and the strength (both physical and psychological) of the wearer.

Of course, these tattooed images are now emblematic themselves, to the point of carrying ideas of cultural pride, sense of identity, distinctiveness of the Samoan bodies, and so on—but this is the result of historical change. In the first half of the nineteenth century, a tattooed mark covering the body from the loins to the knees was worn by most men in western Polynesia, precisely as an index of a successful ritual. Tongans used to travel to Samoa to undergo the same ritual, and people from Uvea and Futuna also wore the same kind of tattoo. In fact, throughout western Polynesia the *pe'a* was not the sign a specific ethnicity but rather instantiated a shared ancestry and a shared religiosity based on life cycle rituals.

Let us now have a closer look at the way in which smaller pattern units actually work as signs. In the men's tattoo, the *pute* (or blackened navel) has a metonymical relation with the tattoo as a whole, and so has the *pe'a* design (a small triangle in the middle of the back), to the extent that they indicate a completed tattooed image.<sup>4</sup> The diamond shape in a woman's popliteal area shares the same characteristics. Thus, any individual of a group can, at only a very brief glance, identify what can be called, in this case, an initiate. However, as a whole, these shapes are not designed to be deciphered. There is no esoteric grammar that would reveal deep meanings. Or, if this was once the case, today the symbolic interpretation of the images is excluded from the interactions during the ritual. Thus, in this cultural setting, images in the male and female tattoo are both indexical and, literally, transformative: by being inscribed through a very painful method, they

produce an effect on the recipient's response to bodily pain. As Gell noted, the images strengthen the integument and magically fortify young men (1993: 57). They also render visible moral disposition: mental and physical toughness. As I will stress below, completion or non-completion of the image stands as an index of the quality of the relations the wearer entertains with his social environment. Simultaneously, however, the adornment confers an aura, an attractiveness, a surplus of existence on the wearer (Simmel quoted in Wolf, 1950: 339). Translated into local terms, the tattoo visibly confers on the wearer a surplus of dignity, *mamalu*, as well as moral and social responsibilities.

### 'O vāega ma 'ava'ega ma mamanu o le mālōfie: zoning, putting up and the patterns of the tattoo

What kind of iconic experience does Samoan tattooing offer viewers and wearers? If we examine how the image is composed, we can formulate further statements regarding the iconic power of the Samoan tattoo.

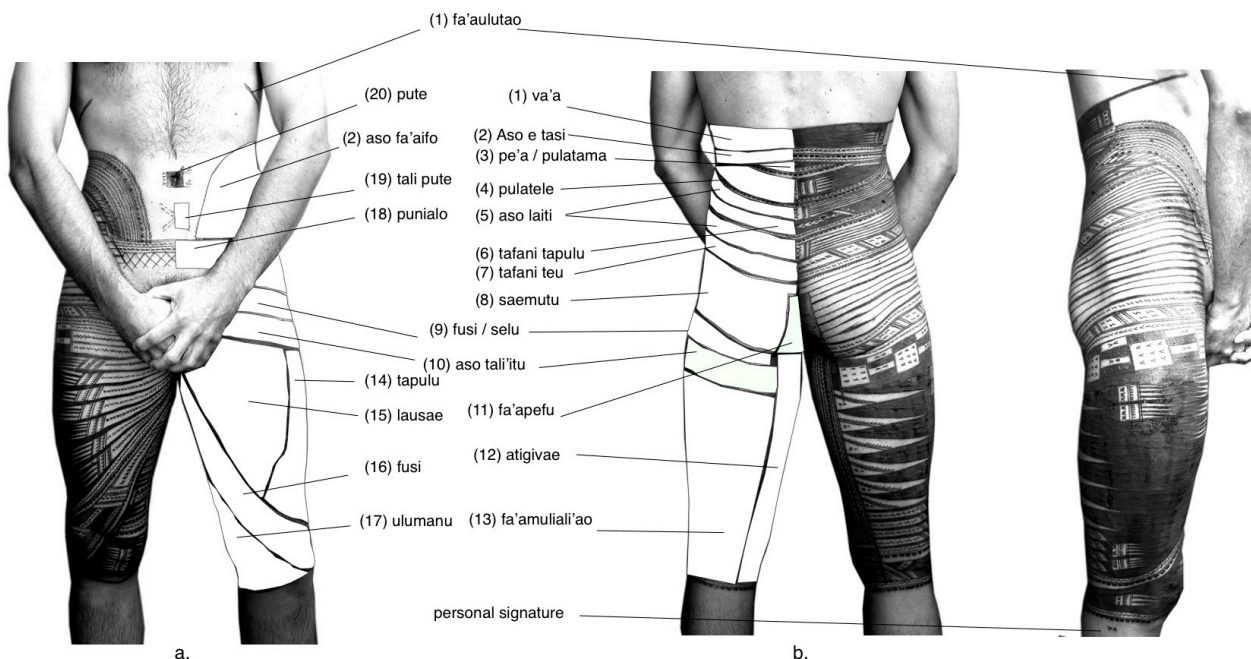


Fig. 3 Su'a Loli Misitikeri (2005). *Pe'a* or male tattoo. [Photo: Sébastien Galliot]

Figure 3 shows the construction, or *'ava'ega*, of a male tattoo, which follows a very rigid plan prescribed by tradition, and within which the expert has a little freedom to introduce ornamental variations. The *'ava'ega* usually starts with the *va'a* motif on the back and it ends with the *pute* on the navel. In between these motifs, the *tufuga* is expected to perform a succession of *vāega* (sections or portions, the sequence is indicated by the numbers) over a period of five to ten days, depending on the expert's timetable and the tolerance of the *ta'oto* (the one laid down).

The construction of a female *malu* is quicker and prone to more variations. However, it also proceeds through a standardized construction and can be conceived as a horizontal or vertical arrangement of *mamanu* (pattern motifs), most of which are extracted from a female iconography (however, some *mamanu* are common to men and women). The popliteal area, at the back of knees, is always marked with a *malu*, the lozenge-shaped design which (just like the black triangle in the middle of men's back called *pe'a*) entertains a metonymical relationship

with the *malu* as full tattoo. Local informants have various interpretations for it, but the most common one relates to the indigenous division of space in a *fale samoa* (Samoan house), which is composed of two *tala* (the rounded end sections of a *fale*), and two *itu* (two middle sections of a *fale*).

Although the application of pattern intensified during the twentieth century, the overall structure of the image has remained the same since the first detailed descriptions made by German ethnographers (Luschan 1897, Marquardt 1899) and by the following generation of anthropologists (Handy & Handy 1928, Hiroa 1930). The nomenclature of *mamanu* and *vāega* is known by most experts. However, their meaning and possible symbolic content is neither subjected to an elaborate exegesis nor transmitted during the ritual. The ritual, rather, proceeds by a succession of technical actions and physical perception, silent worshipping (*tāpua'i*), and very few speech acts. As far as design meaning is concerned, the participants are kept in the dark. This situation is quite striking, given the remarkable potentiality of the Samoan language and the skill of orators in the fields of metaphor, allegory and esoteric speech. Regarding the degrees of iconicity (i.e., likeness between the sign and the object) of *vāega* and *mamanu*, Samoan tattooing is very suitable for the elaboration of a poetic or allegoric discourse by the ritual expert. However, this does not happen. In order to understand this rather paradoxical fact, one has to remember that *pe'a* and *malu* are not only made for the sake of beautification or cultural pride, but are first and foremost the outcome of a painful ritual that is oriented towards the transformation of the person.

This leads me to the question of ritual encoding. Discussing formality in human rituals, Roy Rappaport distinguishes canonical messages, which belong to an invariant, eternal body of information that is not encoded by the participants but already encoded in the "liturgy", from self-referential messages, which relate to the current physical, psychic or social state of the participants (1999: 52–53). The Samoan ritual of tattooing is a very silent form of ritual (even though the high volume of a stereo during a tattoo session may suggest the contrary). Images are not explained, no secrets are revealed to the initiates, but both actions and images are strikingly stable and unchanging. This is what can be called the liturgy. By comparison, what the participants understand and interpret for themselves about these immutable components can vary indefinitely, according to their aspiration, background, memories, knowledge, etc.

In this particular ritual context, as they are applied to the body surface, *pe'a* and *malu* allow attention to be applied to different levels of the image. Tattooing and healing processes directly point at the person undertaking the "journey". The resulting image eventually delivers cues about the value of the wearer, but it also acts, physically and psychologically, on him or her. For example, the completed image reinforces the tattooee's self-confidence and disposition to serve his or her family, or to get involved in customary tasks, or to display his or her changed physical appearance publicly on some specific occasions. In this respect, the tattooed image represents an index for self-referential messages. On the other hand, by repetitively displaying a complex image, which does not depict anything recognizable in the phenomenal world, *pe'a* and *malu* are the central element of a non-verbal, aniconic ritual, but still they are conventional signs representing canonical, prototypical and, dare we say, transcendental images.



I would like to add a few words about this statement. A *tatau* or a *malu*, as a whole, does not refer to anything outside itself. Rather, it is the outcome of the repetition of a prototype which is stored as a mental image in the *tufuga*'s mind (his *māfaufau*) and exists temporarily on a body surface. Thus, *tatau* and *malu* belong to a category of images for which there are no referents. Local discourse can sometimes associate the shapes broadly to a flying fox (Wendt, 1996) or the sections of a Samoan house. There is clearly no unified cultural perspective, though, on the resemblance between the tattooed image *pe'a* and the animal species flying fox, or between the *malu* and an actual Samoan house. However, a closer look at the smaller units that constitute the overall images seems to increase their degree of iconicity.

The *mamanu* do have names and shapes that suggest a closer likeness with the material and natural environment. In Figure 3, *va'a* (1), *pe'a* (3) and *ulumanu* (animal's head, 17), as well as *fa'amuliali'ao* (end of a Trochus shell, figure 4), *gogo* (frigate bird, figure 5), *alu alu* (jellyfish, figure 6), *atualoa* (centipede, figure 7) and *anufe* (caterpillar, figure 8) do have an existence outside the tattooed image, and their shapes as tattoo motifs recall the shapes of the natural objects they stand for.

Exploring an image in detail, one notes that, even in the same context of reception, it can display a different semiotic status at different levels: the status of index (of a prototype, of a successful ritual, of good relationship between the ritual participants, of the morality of the wearer), as well as the status of icon (by virtue of the likeness of its patterns with Samoan material culture, fauna and flora).

Although obviously different in their visual properties and thematic orientation, male and female iconographies seem to be guided by a similar figurative technique. While the male tattoo presents itself as a combination of artefacts, animals and plants, the female one is more oriented towards celestial bodies (stars) and animals (caterpillar, jellyfish, frigate bird). However, they both visually restore a large amount of what makes up the environment, without grammar but with the idea of using the surface of the human body to make visible a dense network of entities. The quasi-systematic repetition of patterns produces a dynamic effect in the way different items are ordered. This, in turns, leads the anthropological analysis of this visual strategy towards what Philippe Descola has called

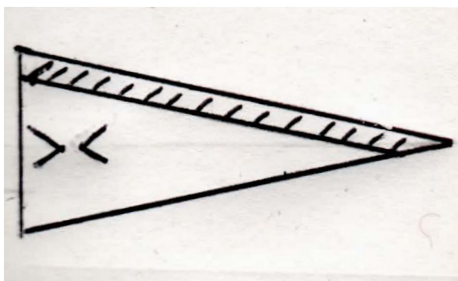


Fig. 4 Fa'amuliali'ao

Fig. 5 Gogo

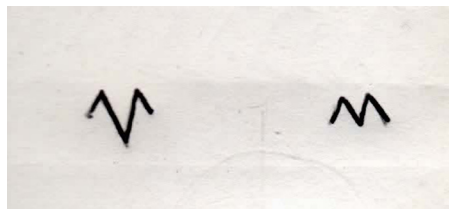


Fig. 6 Alualu

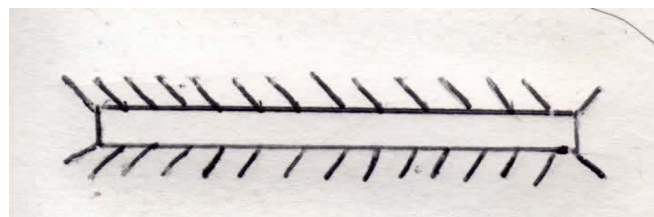
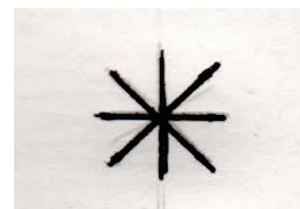


Fig. 7 Atualoa

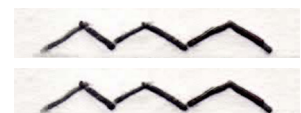


Fig. 8 Anufe

an analogical figuration. An analogical figuration contrasts with animist, totemic and naturalist ontologies insofar as each entity in an analogical regime (visible or invisible) is conceived as singular and separated. In this ontology, the goal would be to “make present an encompassing relation that condenses disparate relations” (Descola, 2009: 10). In other words, the visual strategy that presides over the construction of a tattoo is directed toward the restoration of relations between things that are traditionally thought as separate entities endowed with a certain kind of *amio* (behaviour) and agency. If one tries to relink this theoretical proposition with Samoan pre-Christian religiosity, the Samoan male and female tattoo seem to encode an iconic repertoire, i.e. pictograms that have a likeness with their referents, in order to express the invisible “correspondence between human qualities and cosmos properties” (2009: 11), or the broad idea of an inter-specific generative relationship.

### The ritual mode of action and the relational background of the image

The Samoan tattooing ritual proceeds by a combined presence of distinct modes of participation or a dual mode of action (agent/patient), where the poles of agency are distributed as follows: the *tufuga* and his assistants occupy the pole of *fai* (making), and the supporters occupy the pole of *tapua'i* (silent prayer). (The recipient is the only participant with no specific task, which is why one can call him a patient. An indigenous justification of that term is the frequent acknowledgement of his patience through the phrase, *Malo le onos'ai!*). My own participation in several tattooing rituals in Samoa and in New Zealand involved both positions. What struck me about this ritual was the contrast between the apparent routinization of the expert's actions and the constant care expressed concerning the well-being of the expert by the patient's family. The goal here is to provide the *tufuga* with respectful attention and gifts until he finishes the work, in order to maintain his motivation and express the family's ability to end the ritual with a great retribution. I cannot enter into a more detailed discussion here, but suffice it to say that the Samoan tattooing ritual seems to be more focused on the relations between the two parties and on the technical process of marking the body than on the actual artefact—its shape is known in detail by heart, but its implementation has to be carried to the end and heal properly.

The maintenance of good relationships is more important to the ritual than the visual quality of the finished work. In this sense, every finished *pe'a* or *malu*, whatever the intricateness of its design, or its symmetry, is actually *mānaia* (attractive and beautiful). However, in the current context of the appropriation of Samoan iconography by tattooers and tattooees of multiple origins, and its recombination for customized body projects in a very competitive globalised market, virtuosity and hygienic conditions have come to occupy an increasingly important place in the evaluation of finished work. While they have been applied more or less rigourously, these norms have been imported by the *tufuga* within their activities as ritual specialists. This had, in turn, the effect of neutralizing the risk and the ritual power of the image, to the advantage of a more imagistic one, which I now call iconic efficiency, and this applies to the tattooing ritual itself in Samoa, in the diaspora or to the tattooing of German or a French tourist in Apia.

In an interview conducted in Apia, August 2013, practitioner Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a described the changes resulting from the replacement of materials for

more hygienic ones—i.e. the replacement of boars' tusks by steel needles and traditional candlenut soot by sterile tattooing ink—as follows.

Sébastien Galliot: Does the use of *aunila* (Samoan tools made out of steel needles) affect in anyway the power of the ritual ?

Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a: It does, it does. But we can't do anything about it. It is time that we [...] make a change: an appropriate change that will benefit everybody. But I know deep in my heart that the mana is still in the *nifo pua'a* [boar's tusk], and even the traditional ink. So I still keep those things and I told my sons and my family: "Keep the plant alive! Plant more *lama* [candlenut trees]!"

In the concluding comments of his book *Wrapping in Images. Tattooing in Polynesia* (1993), Alfred Gell made a fruitful distinction between three kinds of technical schemata of tattooing which give rise to divergent symbolic practices ultimately related to social configurations. In the universal process involved in the acquisition of tattoo marks, (1) wounding, 2) scab formation/healing, 3) permanent mark, Gell tends to attribute more importance to phase (2) when it comes to Samoan ritual. Since "Samoan tattoo is more traumatic and places a greater emphasis on the qualities of heroism and endurance" than, for example, that in the Society islands, "the key to this ritual would be the notion of sealing the person of the young warrior, who was subjected to an assault from which he emerged stronger than before, i.e. healed in a marked way" (1993: 308). On the other hand, by virtue of its material form, tattooing contributes to the production of political, and social subjection—to what Gell called "passive heroism" (53–8). In this way, the complex structure of the image acts as the index of a strengthened integument, which reflects a male preoccupation. One could add that local interpretations of several contemporary cases of infections and flesh eating bacteria, attributed as they were to the behaviour and the supposed moral (and/or sexual) conduct of the wearer, also lead to an understanding of the tattooed image as communicating something else than the patterns inscribed on the surface of the skin. Here, the *pe'a* is similar to a revelatory device pointing to the internal component of the social person (his *amio* or behaviour and his *aga* or disposition), iconic in Bartmański and Alexander's sense, but indexical in Peirce's.

In the context of a growing popularity of indigenous tattoo design at a global level, we need to consider how such iconography, naturalized as it is in its primal inscription on the skin surface, has become a valued transcultural body ornament—while still keeping its efficiency to epitomize cultural value and localness *and* remaining ritually efficacious. How does this very cultural mark gain prestige outside its community of origin, still maintaining its ability to carry a sense of ethnic pride and identity? Might there be a conflict in the mode of interpretation and use of this iconography? My hypothesis, which is linked to my earlier remark about the change in semiotic status, is that the growing popularity of Samoan tattooing outside a strictly ritual context has lead Samoans themselves, and especially those experiencing life in the diaspora, to reconsider the meaning of being tattooed. In this, they may apply a somewhat westernized gaze, which automatically regards tattooed images as symbols of identity. Thus, the interpretation of Samoan iconography has not simply been westernized but has, rather, become multimodal and context dependent, delivering various layers of information depending on the context of production and recipient's knowledge.

## Conclusion: Contemporary global applications

I will conclude with a few words about semiotic status by complementing my earlier questions by the following: what happens to the semiotic status of tattoo iconography when it is recombined for other media, such as advertising?

A large part of this paper dealt with the explanation of what we might consider the performative role of the image, that is, the way it participates in affective and ritual efficacy. Now, I will briefly comment on a few cases of its contemporary mobilizations. First, these images, together with a limited number of artefacts—such as *fale tele* (ceremonial house), *va'a, fue* (orator fly whisk), *to'oto'o* (orator wooden staff), *tanoa* (kava bowl)—have become 'iconic' insofar as they were repeated as a common visual repertoire in various media. In that way, they ended up representing ancient Samoan traditions, epitomizing Samoan-ness and (at least to those who know about Samoa) a commitment to a shared body of values that are summed up by the term *fa'asāmoa* (the Samoan way).

Samoan tattoo designs, but also Marquesan and Māori designs, are nowadays used in marketing strategies for a great variety of products (beer bottles, clothing, and even on the engines of aircrafts) in order to enhance their attractiveness, as well as for the marking of territorial origin.

Although arranged in a new shape, or even fragmented as in the *Taula* beer bottle, the tattoo motifs keep their iconic evocative power though they remain beyond readability. If several commercial items, such as fabrics, Tatau brand, Vailima pure and the Taula beer, or even the Virgin Samoa engines, are decorated with tattoo designs, this is certainly so because the iconography is mobilized for its ability to effect cultural anchoring in a very direct way. Without precise meaning, the images nonetheless contain an iconic power, or iconic efficiency. In Roland Barthes terms, and in opposition to his understanding of the term *denotation* (which refers to the external objects represented by signs), these fragmentary tattoo designs have a *connotation* which refers to all the surplus values carried by the signs. They rely on an affective language, and they fall within the scope of an aesthetic appreciation in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's sense: the message is both perceptual and cultural. The perceptual properties affect the viewer according to their visual arrangements. The connoted cultural message conveys the idea of authenticity. This is a wide spread but unreflected notion in marketing strategies; it also implies the disturbing idea of ethnic purity. The same applies to Māori, Marquesan or Kalinga tattoo iconography and, more generally, to other forms of indigenous heritage.

Of course, to understand how these images have reached such iconic efficiency (i.e., such ability to be received and processed as epitomizing cultural value or ethnic origin), one has to consider how they have circulated, through which interactional configurations and social contexts. The polysemous nature of iconic signs precisely calls for anthropological insights about the interactional context of their production and display. The issue of tattooed images, if scrutinized within the field of visual studies and with a close attention to its anthropological implications, can be complementary to semantic approaches which are often too much founded on the presupposition that each sign must have meaning, either esoteric or exoteric.

# REFERENCES

Alexander, J. (2012). Iconic power and performance. The role of the critic. In J. Alexander, D. Bartmański and B. Giesen. (Eds.), *Iconic power. Materiality and meaning in social life* (pp. 25–37). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alexander, J. & Bartmański, D. (2012). Introduction. In J. Alexander, D. Bartmański and B. Giesen. (Eds.), *Iconic power. Materiality and meaning in social life* (pp. 1–13). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Appadurai, A. (1990) Disjuncture and Difference in a Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 7, 295–310.

Atkin, A. (2013). Peirce's theory of signs. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/peirce-semiotics/>

Awekotuku, N. & L. W. Nikora (2007). *Mau moko. The world of Maori tattooing*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Bloch, M. (1992). *Prey into Hunter. The politics of religious experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Descola, P. (2009). L'Envers du visible : ontologie et iconologie [Online], Consulted 19 June 2017. URL: <http://actesbranly.revues.org/181>

Falk, P. (1995). Written in flesh. *Body and Society*, 1, 95–105.

Freedberg, D. (1989). *The Power of images*. Studies in the history and theory of response. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press.

Galliot, S. (2015a) Ritual efficacy in the making, *Journal of Material Culture*, 20 (2), 101–125.

Galliot, S. (2015b) Le tatouage Samoan et ses agents. Images, mémoire et action rituelles. *Gradhiva* 21, 156–181.

Gell, A. (1993). *Wrapping in images. Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Gell, A. (1998). *Art and agency*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Hīroa, Te Rangi. (1930). *Samoan material culture*. Honolulu, HI:

The Museum (Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 75).

Handy, C.E.S. & Handy, W.C. (1924) *Samoan house building, cooking, and tattooing*. Honolulu, HI: The Museum (Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 15).

Krutak, L. (2014) *Tattoo traditions of Native North America. Ancient and contemporary expressions of identity*. Arnhem, NL: Stichting LM Publishers.

Kuwahara, M. (2005) *Tattoo. An anthropology*. New York, NY: Berg.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1999 [1950]). Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss. *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris, FR: PUF.

Luschan, F. von (1897). Beitrag zur Kenntniss der Tätowierung in Samoa, *Sonderabdruck aus den Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, 21, 551–561.

Marquardt, C. (1984 [1899]). *The Tattooing of both sexes in Samoa*, Papakura, NZ: Macmillan.

Mallon, S. (2005). Samoan tatau as global practice. In Thomas, N., A. Cole and B. Douglas (Eds.), *Tattoo. Bodies, art, and exchange in the Pacific and the West*. Durham, UK: Duke University Press.

Mallon, S., P. Brunt & N. Thomas (Eds.) (2010) *Tatau*. Wellington, NZ: Te Papa Press.

Mangos, T. & J. Utanga (2011) *Patterns of the past. Tattoo revival in the Cook Islands*. Auckland, NZ: Punarua Productions.

McGavin, K. (2014) Being "Nesian": Pacific Islander identity in Australia, *The Contemporary Pacific* 26 (1): 126–154.

Rappaport, R. (1999). *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Salvador-Amores, A. V. (2013). *Tapping ink, tattooing identities. Tradition and modernity in contemporary Kalinga Society North Luzon, Philippines*. Quezon, PH: The University of Philippines Press.

Sweetman, P. (1999). Anchoring the (postmodern) self? Body modification, fashion and identity. *Body & Society*, 5, 2–3, 51–76.

Sander, C. & Vail, A. (2008) *Customizing the body. The art and culture of tattooing. (Expanded and revised edition)*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process*. Chicago, IL: Aldine

Van Gennep, A. (1905). *Rites of Passage*. Chicago, IL: Phoenix Books.

Wendt, A. (1996) Tatauing the post-colonial body, *Span*, 42–43: 15–29.

Wolff, K. H. (1950), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> McGavin has coined this term to signify pan-Pacific Islander ethnicity (2014 : 127).

<sup>2</sup> This status is usually determined by whether or not they were recorded or collected during a remote period by early ethnographers or explorers.

<sup>3</sup> As Peirce began to suspect in his 1903 Harvard lectures, icons and indices are always partly symbolic or conventional and the icon/index/symbol trichotomy is an abstraction. He realised that any sign may have a combination of iconic, indexical and symbolic characteristics (Atkin, 2013). In the present case, indexical or iconic aspects dominate, depending on the contextual relationships between sign, object and interpretant.

<sup>4</sup> This is a generalised statement. In fact, many *pula'ū* (un-tattooed men) often have their navel blackened for the sake of experimenting the pain of the ritual as well as covering this anatomical part which grown men usually avoid displaying.