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Rites of Passage in Samoa

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Within the world of professional tattooing, Samoans are famous for the continuity of their practice despite missionaries' efforts to ban it. A detailed study of the archives of the Marist's fathers and the London Missionary Society revealed that in the western island of Savai'i, some districts and their *ali'i* (high ranking chiefs) where defying the church by organizing tattooing initiation rituals during the second half of the nineteenth century. This in turn, incited the Marist Fathers to ask for official permission from headquarters in Rome to let them practice tattooing.

The strong attachment to this over a hundred year practice extends to today with the Samoan diaspora and beyond (Mallon and Galliot 2019).

Tatau, as it is called, is performed by a *tufuga tā pe'a* (a tattoo specialist) who is both an expert in tool and ink making, and in puncturing the skin with a very specific method found only among Austronesian speakers (Robitaille 2007). It was and still is performed ritually with the presence and support of the recipient's extended family, which sponsor the social and economic costs associated with the ritual.

Ranging between five to ten consecutive tattooing sessions, the male and female tattoos consist of a standardized combination of designs called *pe'a* for the men and *malu* for the women. Each recipient is marked with the same complex design, but the *tufuga* authorizes himself slight variations from one person to another. The ritual is accompanied by a formal establishment of relationships among the tattoo expert and his helper (*autufuga*) and the group of supporters, the *'autāpua'i* (family and friends of the patient). Silence and repeated formula of encouragement are the main interactions between the two parties during the tattooing session.

The most important dimension of the ritual is the great concern for maintaining good relationships between these two parties. Failures in taboo observance, proper verbal interactions, or appropriate care for the *tufuga* usually resurface or reflect on the tattooed patient both through a curse that will affect the tattooing itself, result in unusually large wounds, or will cause the temporary abandonment of the work in progress, which is a real disgrace for the patient and his clan.

This ritual work consists in building a stereotyped sequence of designs. In the Samoan context, this appears to be homologous with the ritual work of the house builders (*tufuga fau fale*). Originating from different ancestral lineages, they, however, enjoy a very similar status, and those who are called to service do not do so without the luxury of precautions and without the guarantee of being sufficiently endowed to reward them with the appropriate ceremony. Indeed, after the tattooing is completed, a closing ceremony takes part in two steps.

First, the *tufuga* releases the patient from the *fa'asā* (interdictions) that weigh on him by applying an egg on the top of his head (or in olden times by sprinkling green coconut water) and neutralize the nefarious actions of the ink and the punctures by rubbing his or her body with *sama* (a mixture of turmeric and coconut oil).

Then, the recipient's family proceed to the *umusāga* (literally the "sacraliation of the earth oven"), which in this particular case consists of a formal sequence of gift giving conducted by a title holder who knows all the specific terms of address that apply to the status of the *tufuga*.

While political and religious changes precipitated by Christians missions and colonial powers led to abandoning tattooing rituals in Polynesia, Samoans kept passing on expert technical skills and ritual knowledge until today. Thus, in the early 1980s when cultural revival movements in the Pacific and western tattooists started to take interest in tattooing heritage, they turned to Samoans, the only custodians still possessing the knowledge of the entire sequence from tool building to ritual procedure.

Those who migrated to New Zealand like Sulu'ape Paulo II and his cousin Pasina Sefo were represented mentors for a multicultural group of apprentices. Then, in the following decades, Sulu'ape Alaiva'a (Paulo's brother) and his sons focused on the extra territorial transmission of the craft on practitioners of Polynesian and Samoan descent.

This unique context resulted in preserving and spreading of Samoan tattooing rituals to the very margin of the community in Australia, New Zealand, USA, and Europe, rendering at the same time UN policies in the preservation of intangible heritage somehow ineffective, insofar as the task of protecting, transmitting, and promoting to generate income had already been undertaken in a very Samoan way, which considers service to and involvement on family obligations as cardinal cultural values. ■



Back of man's *pe'a* in the making, Vaipu'a, 2005 © Sébastien Galliot

Tattooing operation, Point Chevalier, New Zealand, 2007 © Sébastien Galliot