

Our Practices may Change, but the Values and Foundations of the Cultural Traditions Remain

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Abstract – Male and female Samoan tattooing has always signified one's perseverance and ability to withstand the pain of undergoing the ritual, as well as signified one's identity, readiness and capacity to be of service to one's extended family. What will be explored is the way in which this ritual has been embodied as a demonstration of reclaiming values of traditional practices thereby minimizing absolute extinction. Ways in which the tattoo ritual has evolved and changed over time, will be explored using the cultural lens of the Fonofale and Teu le Va models. This paper highlights the proposed research interest in utilizing Pacific methodologies to plan and undertake study of questions posed for more detailed exploration.

Keywords – Pacific methodologies, Samoan tattoo practices, Historical and Contemporary analyses.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, there has been a resurgence in the attainment of Samoan male and female tattoos by both Samoan and non-Samoan people at a global level. Whether one is entitled to both undergo the tattoo process as well as have the right to display it, this has been at times, a controversial issue to say the least [16, 5,14, 9]. In its pure form, the Samoan tattooing ritual undertaken by both men and women during ancient times, was always something valued and admired but accessible to only a few within the Samoan matai hierarchy [9]. What will be explored in this literature review are the research studies undertaken thus far in relation to the enquiry statement selected, which fundamentally looks at whether a change in the process of tattooing, changes the meaning or sacredness of this ritual. Research to date has outlined descriptions of the ritual, patterns and various changes from who is entitled or selected to receive a *malofie* (Samoan male tattoo) or *malu* (Samoan female tattoo), as well as forms of payment given to the tattooist [18, 14, 20, 23]. Moreover, how one displays or carries oneself as a person who has undergone the ritual and thereby has this 'garment,' is explored in relation to the expectations set, comparative to the significance and meanings derived from male and female tattoos [14, 12, 6].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Pacific Worldviews

The Pacific worldviews encompass epistemological and axiological perspectives outlining knowledge from all stakeholders (participants, researchers, paradigms) and what is of value (cultural competency, empowerment, maintenance of familial connections) to name a few. These include, but are not limited to integrating aspects of

'Pacific culture and history' such as reverence to God (sacred relationship), connections to the *fanua* (land) via customary tenure and maintaining 'communal rather than individual responsibilities' [10]. Many families and individuals (within Pacific communities) view the importance of incorporating spiritual, social, physical, economic and cultural - *matai* (chiefly) systemic values as the sum of integrated values where one cannot exist without the other. Within these communities are structured domains that outline gendered roles and expectations; behaviors that people are encouraged to adhere to for the general good of the family or 'family security' [10].

Whilst there are various frameworks like Postpositivist (seek to know), Interpretivism (seek to understand), Emancipationism (seeks to change), Deconstructivism (seeks to critique) available for researchers to utilise, it does not include the intricacies for deeper, meaningful relationships to be formed as does the Pacific methodologies reviewed [7]. However, if I were to choose, I would locate this research in the Interpretivist paradigm because I do seek to have an understanding of the knowledge experts that tattooists would share of the meanings/symbolism of the tatau ritual. There is a deconstructivist element to it whereby I seek to critique existing theories as I work to contrast various narratives from colonizer/decolonized perspectives. Since I am exploring the transformation/change of the tattooing practices over time (who receives or is bestowed access to having the Samoan traditional tattoos completed), I also want to document the narratives of various people who have undergone the ritual.

B. Tattooing: History and Relevance

The history of tattooing has been documented by explorers, missionaries, academics and writers over time as they explored the traditional ritual from the tattooist perspective, as well as from the perspective of those who had been tattooed. In Samoa, the *tatau* (tattoo) has always signified not only one's perseverance and ability to withstand the pain of undergoing the ritual, but also one's identity, and readiness and capacity to be of service to one's extended family [18]. The tattooing of both genders in Samoan culture has withstood the influence of missionaries who wished to ban such practices when they first arrived in Samoa during the 1800s [17]. In fact, the intent of missionaries to halt the practices only led Samoan people to travel to neighboring islands in Samoa, like Tutuila (American Samoa), to receive their tattoos. The Samoan traditional tattooists were well respected, and are still highly esteemed in Samoan culture, receiving hundreds of fine mats, plus plentiful food and material

goods for skillfully exercising their craft [15]. In an interview with the late Suluape Paulo, Mallon, Thomas and Adams [16] revealed payments have changed to reflect the economy whereby cash is exchanged for tattooist services. Furthermore, the tattooist either travelled to where the recipient resided (at times abroad), or the recipients travelled to a location designated by the tattooist.

As discussed in Wendt's paper [26], the tattoo represented the readiness for one to serve one's family and community. It was, and still is to some extent, symbolic of a man and woman's role in Samoan society irrespective of their country of residence. The value of the tattoo for men and women, as documented in historical accounts [14] remains today, as do, I believe, the symbolic meanings mentioned below by Wendt:

...tatauing is part of everything else that is the people, the *aiga*, the village, the community, the environment, the *atua*, the cosmos. It is a way of life that relates the *tufuga ta tatau* to the person being tataued and their community and history and beliefs relating to service, courage, masculinity, femininity, gender, identity, sexuality, beauty, symmetry, balance, aptness and other art forms and the future, because a *tatau* or a *malu* is for the rest of your life and when you die, your children will inherit its reputation and stories, your stories about you and your relationships. The *tatau* and *malu* are not just beautiful decoration, they are scripts-texts-testimonies to do with relationships, order, form, and so on [26].

In documenting the meaning for women who are undergoing the ritual of receiving a *malu*, Wendt states:

The *malu* was essential wear for women before they married. Clothed not to cover your nakedness but to show you are ready for life, for adulthood and service to your community, that you have triumphed over physical pain and are now ready to face the demands of life, and ultimately to master the most demanding of activities: language and oratory (p. 400).

Wendt [26] describes various designs as 'basic motifs of the *tatau* and *malu* developed out of representations of *atua* or out of nature – plants, objects, and creatures' (p. 405). As the late tattooist Suluape Paulo II stated in an interview, it is up to the tattooist whom he wants to tattoo, as is the design that will be bestowed on the recipient [16]. The resurgence of Samoan females now receiving the female tattoo may be attributed in part to the empowering actions of strong female characters who underwent the ritual of being tattooed in recent novels by Sia Figiel *They Who Do Not Grieve* [23] and Lani Wendt-Young's *Telesa: The Covenant Keeper* [27]. The pride expressed in the completion of one's tattoo is not misplaced: it displays true courage and perseverance.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Pacific Methodologies

Fonofale [1] and *Teu Le Va* [2, 3] methodologies make links to how both could be used as a research strategy to

explore this study. In applying the *Teu Le Va* methodology through the lens of the enquiry statement introduced, many, if not all concepts can be used to design a culturally appropriate research approach. The most prevalent with this enquiry is beginning with the process of engaging with people of the Samoan community at first (to which the ancient practice of tattooing derives from), so knowing the relational space between leaders, the community in general and then specifically with individuals, is key.

In identifying how to connect with Pacific communities as researchers, the *fonofale* model [1] encourages an understanding of protocols to implement. Whilst through a Western model it may be common practice to gauge responses without issues, it is not so easily accessible in the private sphere of family connections and being on the receiving end of 'safe practices' [1]. For example, as the *fonofale* model consists of the structure of the *fale* (house) symbolizing avenues of support from a Samoan perspective, these meanings also relate to how research design includes similar concepts of practice to be mindful of when recruiting, gathering data and measuring outcomes.

As a researcher, exploration of the following questions relate to participant perceptions and narratives who undertook the tattooing journey. Not all participants recruited would necessarily be of Pacific ancestry, but have some connection to the ritual (through either friends, families or genuine interest). The questions proposed would be dependent also on what responses would be from possible participants of what they would gauge as important in this study. Hence, though the topic is subjective in some instances, participants would be co-authors in the research design (questions for surveys). These include but are not limited to:

- 1) Who can be tataued and why?
- 2) What values are associated with being tattooed?
- 3) What links are there to values and whose perspective validates these values?
- 4) What new directions (if any) are there for those who undergo the ancient ritual?
- 5) How has the ritual changed over time?

As a Pacific researcher, I acknowledge my position as someone who would have access to knowledge of cultural protocols that would enable confident communication both in the Samoan and English languages. How a researcher positions themselves in declaring their preconceived beliefs and expectations, influences how a research is designed, implemented and the way data is collated (what is included or excluded). As a female Samoan researcher, my status observed by and within the Samoan community, influences the way I approach leaders, groups or individuals in that realm. The specific leaders, type of organisation they belong to (religious or educational etc.) will also determine my approach to use according to the 'va (space) and va tapuia (sacred spaces of relational arrangements) or *teu le va* (to value, to nurture or tidy up the va)' [2, 3]. Hence, the way in which relationships or connections are made with Pacific people is crucial in order to build a trusting and lasting rapport.

Because I am interested in investigating peoples' perceptions of the changes of tatau practices from ancient times until now, including participants in the design process is an expectation so they are empowered and guide what knowledge is shared. Utilizing Teu Le Va and Fonofale strategies enables improved respectful and meaningful actions to be evident because a Pacific viewpoint is used as a guide. One needs to be aware of matai (chief) protocols as well as identifying who is who within the Samoan communities, so either a representative of that community can assist with knowing who to approach, at what time and how so as not to appear disrespectful. It is these concepts that are worth exploring in a more detailed study.

IV. CONCLUSION

Research thus far outlines the various expectations undertaken by Samoan tufuga ta tatau with those who choose to be tatau'd, to receive a malofie or malu. Not only have the tools and payment changed to reflect the contemporary materials of exchange (receiving cash for services), but mention has been made of designs changing as well as people having more access to the Samoan tatau. By researching experiences of people (recipients and tufuga) regarding the changes over time to gauge more recent perspectives, finding out whether responses to research questions posed earlier is the ultimate goal. Utilising Pacific methodologies to communicate with Pacific peoples would also be required so they are involved in the research process, in a respectful manner that includes their values and beliefs.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Vaoiva Ponton is a lecturer in the Faculty of Health and Environmental Science at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests include: Pacific epistemologies, exploring ancient Samoan tattoo practices and comparing contemporary changes. Dr. Ponton is interested in exploring journeys of tattooists and those who received tattoos in Pacific and non-Pacific spaces.