

Tatau: A History of Sāmoan Tattooing. Sean Mallon and Sebastian Galliot. Te Papa Press, 2018, Wellington. Hardback, illustrated, 320 pages. ISBN: 978-0-9941362-4-4.

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This beautifully presented book is the first history and social analysis of the Sāmoa *tatau*. Early accounts by foreign seafarers from 1722 onwards suggest that in the past all Sāmoan men were tattooed, as a rite of passage to manhood. The word ‘tattoo’ itself is probably derived from the Sāmoan word *tatau* or a cognate term in another Polynesian language, popularised by seafarers in the 18th and 19th century. Sāmoans refer to the masculine *tatau* as *pe’a* which, because it densely covers a man’s buttocks and thighs, was mistaken by some 17th century seafarers, peering through their spyglasses, as a pair of breeches or painting. The lighter, feminine version is termed ‘*malu*’ and covers a woman’s thigh and the back of her knee.

Tattooing was practiced throughout Polynesia in different forms and designs but appears to have had the strongest continuity in Sāmoa, despite the disapproval of Christian missionaries who regard the custom as ‘heathen’ and punished those who had themselves tattooed by, at least temporarily, expelling them from the church communion. It seems that Catholic missionaries were less united in their disapproval. When the writer of this review first came to Sāmoa in the early 1970s I know of only one well-known family of practitioners, the ‘*āiga* Sulu’ape of Matafa’a in Lefaga; they were Catholics and were kept busy by the relatively few men willing to brave both religious disapproval and the ordeal of the procedure, as well as Peace Corps volunteers and other *palagi*, like this writer, wanting *taulima* (tattooed wrist bands) as souvenirs of their time in Sāmoa. I recall a family member, before taking up a place he had won in theological college, had his *pe’a* in some secrecy. I myself was forbidden by my Sāmoan mother-in-law from having a *taulima* but had it anyway, while observing the *tufuga tā tatau* (expert *tatau* practitioner) Sulu’ape Paolo I at work on a group of men having *pe’a*.

Now the *tatau*, the *pe’a* and *malu* have made a mighty comeback in Sāmoa, among the Sāmoan diaspora and among tattoo aficionados around the world. Moreover, traditional *tatau* motifs are now applied to with modern tattooing needles in tattoos on shoulders and arms, and also appear on textiles and in a variety of graphic art. Is this appropriation or an admiring tribute to Sāmoan culture? Read this book for answers.

Chapter One, ‘Ancient Traces’, discusses the various versions of the legend of the origin of *tatau*. This tells of conjoined twin spirit-women, Taemā and Tilafaigā who carried the instruments for tattooing by swimming from ‘Fiti’ to Sāmoa, with the message that the *tatau* was intended for women. But, distracted, the ladies arrive in Sāmoa with the message that the *tatau* is for men. The chapter also suggests the practice of *tatau* came to Sāmoa 3000 years ago with the archaeologically defined ‘Lapita’ ancestors of the Polynesian peoples. It includes short essays by Benoit Robitaille on the Austronesian context, Adrienne Kaeppler on the connection to Tongan royalty, Nina Tonga on Tonga *tatau* practice and Sebastian Galliot’s interview on Sāmoan tattooing with Tui Ātua Tupua Tamasese Tā’isi.

Chapter Two provides an historical overview of foreign observations of *tatau* 1700–1900. It contains an extensive and very interesting selection of quotations from a wide range of 18th and 19th century sources. It includes short illustrated essays on the hidden history of tattooing by Sean Mallon, and three essays by Sebastian Galliot on Sāmoan songs of *tatau*, iconography of the *malu*, and on the disasters that befell Sāmoan warrior performers who toured Germany and America in 1889–91.

Chapter Three ‘Persistence and Change 1900–2000’ traces *tatau* practices in the colonial and post-colonial periods, representations in ethnography, film and photography, and examples of adaptations of design and practice, including the use of tattoo needles versus the traditional *autā* tools used by *tufuga tā tatau* (tattoo experts). It includes short essays by Maualaivao Albert Wendt on *tatau* and meanings, on tattooing tools by co-author Sebastian Galliot, interviews with *tufuga ta tatau* Su’a Sulu’ape Alaiva’a Petelo and Su’a Sulu’ape Paulo II by co-author Sean Mallon.

Chapter Four ‘Tatau as a ritual institution 2000–2010’ discusses knowledge rights, rites of practice, and the technology of *tatau*. Traditionally there were families specialising as *tufuga ta tatau* such as the ‘*āiga sa* Tulouēna and ‘*āiga sa* Su’ā who practiced and transmitted the art; today heirs of these families are still among the community of practice in Sāmoa and among the Sāmoan diaspora. This chapter includes a sympathetic essay by Maria Carolina Vesce on the controversy over whether *fa’afāfine* (transgendered men) should have a *malu*—which many Sāmoan believe is sacred to women. Sebastian Galliot contributes an interview with an apprentice *tufuga tā tatau*, with clergy who had *tatau*, and a discussion on the iconography of *tatau*. Le’ausalilo Lupematasila Fata ‘Au’afa Sadat Muaiava contributes his reflections’ on the connection of lineage and practice.

Chapter Five, ‘Tatau and its globalisations 2000–2017’, reviews contemporary practices, the community of practice, and references in film, art and literature. A case study on the bestowal of the Suluape title on non-Sāmoans relates associated conversations about indigenous rights and appropriations as *tatau*-based designs and allusions are applied in commercial tattoos, teeshirts, and graphics. The chapter includes short illustrated essays on *tatau* and health by Sean Mallon, on *malu* by Tupe Lualua, on *soga’imiti* (the tattooed man) and masculinity by Reverend Tavita Maliko, on choices to *tatau* or not in the Sāmoan diaspora by Selina Tusitala Marsh, *tatau* in popular culture by Rachel Yates, fashion, *tatau* and appropriation by Sonya Withers, tattoo in contemporary art by Nina Tonga, and on genealogical bodies and *tatau* by Leai’ifano Albert Refiti.

Chapters Two to Four are bracketed by three portfolios of stunning photographs by Mark Adams, Greg Semu, and John Aggcaoli. The book is a work of art in itself, beautifully illustrated and designed; the only criticism that could be made is that the readability of the written content and is at times sacrificed to art, with small fonts on large pages and almost illegible captions in red on the black photographic pages. But overall it is a treasure, a *measina* for the Sāmoan people and their culture.