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Contemporary Art in Samoa: The Role of Personal Expression

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Contemporary Art in Samoa:

The Role of Personal Expression

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Advisor: Momoe Von Reiche
S.I.T. Samoa, Spring 2006

Abstract:

Contemporary art is a means of creating and recreating the self, a means of self reflection and defining ones identity. Conceptual art that expresses personal ideas and emotions plays a small role in the arts of Samoa, however it does exist in the minds and galleries of a few individuals. The intention of this study is to examine the role that personal expression plays in Samoan society and the artwork created here. The attitudes and approaches to contemporary art was explored, in addition to the underlying causes of those perceptions.

The foundation of this paper evolved out of statements from several artists and art educators in Samoa during personal interviews. Observations from two children's art classes in addition to consulting secondary resources complemented the information derived from the interviews.

Several obstacles were found to explain why the majority of the Samoan community does not feel comfortable with personal expression and why contemporary art is relatively limited. The identity of many Samoan people is founded in their role within their family rather than their individual personality, which is a primary factor contributing to the trends found in the way Samoans perceive and approach contemporary art. The exposure to new artistic styles through books, television, and periodicals is another factor which explains the current understanding of contemporary art in Samoa. The education system has begun to incorporate art classes into some of the schools, but most of them still lack diverse teaching methods and the resources to expose students to a variety of art forms. The need to generate a consistent salary to support one's family is

yet another reason for the current status of contemporary art in Samoa. There are several outstanding individuals with a more global outlook on art, such as artist and educator Momoe Von Reiche, who explains her understanding that "Art is encompassing, it comes from within, it is the appreciation of things around you" (Momoe Von Reiche. Interview. April 12, 2006). Individuals such as Momoe have been fortunate enough to have been exposed to a variety of cultural influences and been encouraged to explore their personal identity, moving contemporary art in Samoa forward through creating and teaching their perspectives to others.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my parents for giving me the opportunity to come to Samoa in the first place, and for their continual support and encouragement of my interest in art. I would also like to thank all the artists in Samoa who shared their time with me, offering their beliefs and experiences as artists and as people living in Samoa. I would especially like to thank Momoe Von Reiche for exposing me to her novel ideas of contemporary art and helping me understand some of the numerous perceptions people have towards contemporary art.

I also would like to thank Wendy and Steve Percival for their kindness and their encouragement during this project. I'd like to thank Penehuro Papalii for spending a good portion of his day talking to me and explaining his hopes, concerns, and personal goals as an artist. These people have served as an inspiration to me, creating art out of a personal need for individual expression, regardless of other peoples' opinions. They create art for themselves and their appreciation of beauty, neglecting the strong pull of the market. I feel so fortunate to have been exposed to their realities and to have been able to share time with such enlightened and motivated people. Finally I would like to thank all the artists who came before me for influencing the way I perceive the world around me and affect the art I create.

> How it happens now that the work of Vincent Van Gogh immediately seized me, with a spontaneity and intensity that surprised even myself – so that I am hardly able to clear the after images of his works from my mind, so that I see his colors in objects everywhere around me, so that I am surprisingly able to see beauty where I never saw beauty before – that I do not understand (Frederick Va Eden, 1890; 123).

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Introduction:

Samoan culture is multifaceted and diverse, I have only begun to scratch the surface of understanding the *fa'asamoa*, or the Samoan way of life, during my short stay here. However, I have found that the deep involvement and respect for one's *'aiga* is an important feature of the *fa'asamoa*. Most people who grow up in Samoa are raised with a strong sense of community and family. Samoans strong connection to their family and their identity as a Samoan can be seen through the impressively large amount of remittance money that is sent back to Samoa from family members living overseas.

As a child growing up in Samoa one is often surrounded by extended family and friends at almost all times of the day and night. Typically, a Samoan has very little time when he or she is completely alone, for example, it is common in many households to sleep with your family in the same room. Historically a strong connection to one's family and a sense of identity based on membership to the village community was very prevalent in Samoan society. Those communal values are still widespread today, functioning as an effective means of preserving traditional Samoan culture despite the increasingly globalized world. These communal values also correlate strongly to the role of personal expression within the context of the Samoan community because of the impact such values have on behavior and personal identity.

This research paper is focused on contemporary art and the role that personal expression plays in Samoan society. Contemporary art refers to "artworks in non-traditional media, new or recent art forms which have made a break from tradition in style, media, and technique. Such art forms explore new areas of creativity and personal

expression" (Lal & Fortune 2000: 538). While the majority of artwork found in Samoa does not fall into this category various forms of creativity are abundant. This paper examines the function of both traditional and contemporary art in addition to how people perceive artistic expression and why.

The approach Samoan children have towards personal expression in an encouraging setting, such as an art class, is one of the basic elements used in this paper to assess local perceptions and understanding of art. After interviewing numerous art teachers a trend in the students approach emerged. It was repeatedly explained that students almost always began their art education feeling timid about creating a piece that is different from other students, and are often initially uncomfortable with visually expressing their emotions. It was also reiterated that the solution was time, time and training is all that is needed to break Samoan art students out of the traditional mold and allow them to feel comfortable with personal expression.

There are many strong links between this initial uneasiness with personal expression and the traditional communal values ingrained in most Samoan residents. The strong concept of family undoubtedly shapes the personal identity of each individual who grows up within such a family structure. The prevalence of the concept of the '*aiga*, which is the Samoan word for family, and being part of the village community also plays a significant role in the way in which Samoan children approach art. The amount of exposure to artistic styles other than the traditional model also greatly affects their approach.

Methodology:

The majority of the information collected for this paper was obtained through talking with various artists in Samoa. Conversations with professional artists and students, both young and old, provided a rounded understanding of the different conceptions of contemporary art that people hold and how the general public responds to contemporary art. Observations were made during two art classes comprised of children of various ages and backgrounds at the Tiapapata Art Center, which provided more information and supported statements made by contemporary Samoan artists concerning Samoan children's approach to art. It was particularly valuable to this research to observe Samoan children create artwork in an open, responsive setting. The observations from those art classes allowed for a comparison of children raised in traditional Samoan homes to children, such as Ben Percival, who was raised in a more Western influenced and artistically encouraging family. That first-hand research was supplemented with secondary sources recommended by local artists and articles available on the internet and at the libraries in Apia and on the University of the South Pacific campus.

This paper's foundation lies in the basic understanding of both a local and global conceptions of contemporary art. This paper begins with background information on the traditional art forms in Samoa because they play a significant role in many contemporary artists' work. The primary focus of the paper, however, is on conceptual art and the recent development of personal expression through visual means.

Traditional Art and its Influences:

The majority of artwork displayed in Samoa is been based on traditional art forms, such as *tatau, siapo, lavalava* and weaving. *Tatau* is the Samoan word for tattoo, which was derived from the tapping sound made during the process of receiving a traditional Samoan tattoo. *Siapo* is the Samoan term for barkcloth, and a *lavalava* refers to a common article of clothing in Samoa, a printed piece of fabric usually tied around the waist. All of these art forms are characterized by symmetry and are often linear in form. Traditional artwork uses a series of patterned images that are repeated, the patterns are often representations of the surrounding environment, but generally lacking the unique aspect of personal expression. It is important to address traditional art when examining contemporary art because it is the origin of Samoan art and continues to influence contemporary artists here today both consciously and subconsciously.

Artists and educator Vanya Taule'alo explains that "The transfer of traditional forms and how they are utilized, re-produced, and manipulated to create a visual language that expresses the individual's political and social concerns is central to my work and other Samoan artists" (Taule'alo 2006). While in many ways contemporary art is moving away from the traditional Samoan style it is still important to address in this paper. Traditional art represents the traditional values and traditional habits, which shape the identity of each individual living in Western Samoa, and therefore play an important role in the artwork people create.

The Function of Art:

The resourcefulness of many of the Samoan people is impressive and initially quite striking. Such resourcefulness carries through society and is apparent in the art in Samoa. Most of the traditional art forms are not only beautiful but also functional. There is a clear distinction between the Western conception of art as an object that should be put up on a pedestal and never touched and the Samoan art forms which have specific purposes.

The weaving of fine mats, known as *'ie toga*, is an example of the Samoan use of their artwork. Traditionally *'ie toga* functioned as clothing and today are valued as a form of currency. The fine mats are created by weaving fine, dried fibers of the pandanus palm (*pandanus tectorius*). The pandanus is also a common symbol used in both *siapo* and *tatau.* The mats are traditionally a family's most valuable possession, rarely used and kept for generations. *'Ie toga* are usually given as gifts for special occasions such as a wedding or funeral. The quantity and quality of the fine mats a family possesses indicates their status in society within the *matai* system in a comparable way to money in Western society (Lal & Fortune 1999: 549).

Tapa is another well-known form of traditional art still popular in Samoa and many other Polynesian Islands. *Tapa* is made from the inner bark of the *u'a* or paper mulberry tree (*broussonetia papyrifera*) which is cultivated for the specific purpose of making barkcloth. *Tapa* was also historically used as clothing, bedding, and for ceremonial purposes. The inner bark is separated from the outer, coarser bark and then soaked in water. The bark is then stretched thin by beating it with a wooden mallet. Once the bark dries it is decorated with dyes typically made from local flowers and bark.

Another traditional art form commonly sold in the Samoan market is the kava bowl, called *tanoa ‘ava*. Kava bowls are carved out of wood and usually ornately decorated with traditional symbols. They serve as a source of income to many vendors because they are a popular purchase among tourists. They are also found displayed in many Samoan homes because of the craftsmanship involved in creating the bowls and its representation of Samoan myth and heritage. Unlike most tourists who purchase kava bowls, however, the Samoans who own *tanoa ‘ava* display them only when they are not being used for the ceremonial drinking of kava. The drink is made by pounding a pepper root (*piper methysticum*) and then steeping the powdered root in water. The resulting liquid has a mildly sedative effect and is consumed at many formal gatherings because it represents the honored link Samoans have with their ancestors who also consumed kava, or ‘*ava*, as it is called in Samoa. The kava bowl is another example of how much of the traditional art in Samoa is both beautiful and functional.

Art supplies for Samoan artists to work with are limited, so the traditional and contemporary arts have adapted to that. The resources that are available are utilized to their fullest potential. For example, the *tatau* is created using available materials, originally charcoal was mixed with water to make the ink and a sharpened piece of bone used to apply the pattern. The *tatau* is permanent, wearable art that ornaments the body in a similar way to clothing or jewelry. A person’s *tatau* can also reflect their social, political, and economic status, serving as a statement of identity. Enduring the pain of receiving a *pe’a*, or male full body *tatau*, also functions as a right of passage into manhood. Most *tatau* are done around the age of puberty and some consider the pain of

receiving the *pe'a* to mirror the pain a woman endures during childhood, representing the two different forms of initiation into adulthood (Lal & Fortune 1999: 491).

Siva, or Samoan dance, is another common form of traditional art that represents practicality in that it can be performed anywhere, requiring no materials except for the human body. S*iva* was traditionally performed as a means of showing respect to the village *matai* and high chief. Additionally, the dancing distinguishes specific parts for men and women, representing the separate gender roles they hold within society. Traditional art has evolved out of a rich culture of people who have utilized the resources available to create a range of art that has both practical and aesthetic functions.

Exposure:

One of the primary reasons Samoan artists remain within the boundaries of the traditional design style is simply the lack of exposure to different styles of artwork. Both Vanya and Penehuro told me that for many people in Samoa "contemporary art simply doesn't exist" because people have never heard of it or seen it. There are very few books, magazines, or television shows available to people that expose them to other cultures and other styles of visual representation, which hinders artists' ability to think in new and creative ways. The lack of variety and quantity of books affects people's ability to know what exists outside of this country and impedes their ability to understand the context of conceptual, abstract art in the first place. In order for contemporary art to continue developing in Samoa, artists need to be exposed to more artistic styles and cultures, such as art from overseas. Penehuro acknowledged this in a straightforward manner by stating

"influences from overseas help improve art here" (Penehuro. Interview. April 24, 2006). His point was also reiterated by three other Samoan artists.

As Samoa continues to develop and the urban center of Apia expands, a distinction between the exposures of those raised in urban areas versus those raised in village settings begins to emerge. There is greater exposure to the media and material possessions in the more urban areas. There is also a wider range of exposure to art in its more contemporary forms and the materials needed to create such art are more available. *The Pacific Encyclopedia* discusses the development of contemporary art in general, not just in Samoa, by stating that "These types of art productions [conceptual art] are found in the urban centres because people living there have greater access to contemporary art of all kinds as well as access to instruction, necessary materials and systems of marketing and promotion" (Lal & Fortune, 2000: 538). This quote accentuates the universal role that access to a variety of influences and materials plays in the progression of art.

Artists serve as models and inspiration to one-another. They are constantly interacting and building off of each other both directly and indirectly through sharing resources. In a *Teacher's Guide to Visual Arts* written by artists and art educators Vanya Taule'alo and Momoe Von Reiche, students are asked to first examine works by mostly overseas artists, but also some Samoan artists, and then create their own pieces in response. This method of exposure has proven to work well to quickly diversify and free art students' style of representation. Such teaching methods exemplify the important role that exposure to other art forms plays in fostering artistic creativity.

Arts within the Education System:

Most schools in Samoa do not have a music or art program in their curriculum because they do not have the resources to supply the instruments and art materials for such classes. However, a few private schools, such as the Robert Louis Stevenson Secondary School and the Samoan Primary School do have the means to provide art as an aspect of the education system. Tertiary schools such as the National University of Samoa offer art classes as well, but majoring in art is not yet an option. The Leulomoega School of Fine Arts and Beautiful Expressions of Nature (BEN) are two schools that are solely dedicated to the development of artistic skills. However, many contemporary artists and art teachers in Samoa complain that these schools are not forward thinking enough, not innovative enough (Taule'alo. Interview. April 27, 2006). The problem with these schools lies in the teaching approach to art itself. The students are trained to create art according to a certain method, they are all taught the same designs and patterns and told to carve them. They are instructed to paint using a certain styles and taught how to create mosaics in the same way. Regardless of this, the establishment of these schools in the first place is a step towards expanding the arts in Samoa because they have introduced art education where it did not previously exist.

The methods used to teach art in Samoan school generally do not encourage individual digression, but rather encourage the concept of a communal identity within the traditional artistic style. Students are not encouraged to develop their own personal style or create a painting that is asymmetrical or different from the rest of the class. Many students from those schools become art teachers themselves, and they perpetuate the perception of art within a limited spectrum. According to Vanya Taue'alo at least half of

the art teachers in Samoa are trained at the Leulumoega School for Fine Arts, and therefore all have the same approach to teaching and encourage the same artistic style. The lack of diversely educated teachers directly and severely impacts the students' ability to begin to develop their own personal style, but the recent creation of these schools is a step forward nonetheless.

Furthermore, the way in which children are disciplined, both in school and at home, plays a role in children's tendency to shy away from creating unique pieces of artwork. In most schools, when a child gives the wrong answer they are slapped or scolded for the mistake. This form of discipline understandably creates a mentality which discourages children from being wrong or separating themselves from the group. This mentality is further exposed when observing Samoan children draw or paint; they don't want to be wrong, so they don't create a unique or shocking piece of art.

The Tiapapata Art Center, which is owned by Wendy and Steve Percival, offer several art classes to children and adults. Their son Ben and three other Samoan students who lived in the neighborhood and are members of the Baha'i community attended a class on April 28, 2006. A story that exemplified a Baha'i value was read aloud and the children were then asked to visually represent the story, painting how the story made them feel. All of the students used a ruler right away to help them draw a literal representation of the story. The three Samoan children were constantly looking at each others paintings to see what the others were doing, and not surprisingly the resulting paintings were three different versions of the same objects. The children all drew the same images, and used rulers to do so, which may express their fear of drawing "the wrong thing" and uncomfortable feelings associated with being different or separated

from the group. Also, all three of the Samoan students began painting with black, not color. The children were encouraged to draw different images and use color, but it takes time and exposure to new ideas for children to build up the confidence for self-expression.

Money Motivates Me:

As the Samoan people slowly shift away from reliance on subsistence agriculture the need to earn money within the cash economy becomes increasingly important. This shift towards a cash economy affects all aspects of society, including the arts. The routine of daily life changes because the requirements for survival are changing. In many cases parents do not encourage their children to pursuit their artistic talents because they feel that it is not a field in which they will make money to support themselves and their family. Instead, children are encouraged to hold positions that offer more reliable salaries. The lack of a dependable, comfortable income is a timeless obstacle for most artists, and that obstacle is seen in Samoa as well.

In many instances people use traditional art to create merchandise such as *siapo* and carvings to sell to tourists or customers overseas for high prices. People are aware that a specific traditional style of artwork sells to the tourist market, and therefore they have no reason to change and develop the art they are creating. Most people that make *siapo* or other traditional artwork have little choice in which occupation they hold, working simply towards the goal of receiving a salary. The concept of valuing the community over the individual is obvious even within the art market in that many people

remain within traditional context of art because that is what supports their families. Artistic talent is certainly not lacking in Samoa, but rather there is a lack of time to explore such talents because the need to make money is constantly nagging. Artist and teacher, Penehuro Papalii, claims that during his seven years of instructing the art school at B.E.N. only about one percent of his students continue studying with him for the sake of creating art, neglecting the market and the pursuit of making money, because few are in the economic position to do so (Penehuro. Interview. April 24, 2006). Most students come to learn the basics so that they can make money printing T-shirts or *lavalava* because that is what they need to do to support their families.

The media also has a role in shaping the attitude Samoan's hold towards art, both contemporary and traditional, within the growing cash economy. Penehuro commented that many of his students come to his school expecting to make a lot of money fast because they see a few prominent artists in the newspaper or on television selling their work for high prices. Penehuro serves as a model for his students, exemplifying an artist who is able to make a considerable amount of money selling a single sculpture. It must be remembered, however, that such sales are rare because the market for such work is relatively small.

Penehuro attempts to balance his commissioned work, which he does to generate the revenue that keeps his studio and school operating, with his personal interest in conceptual art. The need for money can't be denied. Several artists recognize that but maintain that "Money is a factor that keeps you going, but beauty is what makes you satisfied" (Penehuro. Interview. April 24, 2006). As the media develops in Samoa its citizens will be exposed to a greater variety of artistic styles and mediums, which will

gradually change the public's perceptions of conceptual art. As perceptions change with greater exposure to outside influences, the market will simultaneously expand to include more diverse art forms and hopefully also open opportunities for new artists to pursuit new avenues in creative expression.

The Individual Meets the Community:

Traditionally the Samoan people were not focused on the material realm as much as the social realm of their daily life. Barrow explains that "traditional energies went towards the sponsorship of representative chiefly orators and sacred virgins. They seem to have had little time for the embellishment of material culture" (Barrow 1984: 76). Although this is changing, remnants of those values are still prominent in daily life, which carries through to trends in Samoan citizen's approach self-expression.

Constantly being around other people influences a person to develop in certain ways that distinguish them from individuals who grow up with more time by themselves. Penehuro acknowledged this effect, explaining that when he goes to visit his family in the village he naturally tends to focus less on his personal thoughts. He rarely creates art in the village not only because it is not encouraged, but also because he simply feels himself distracted by the social atmosphere. Penehuro admits he attempts to isolate himself in order to develop personal ideas and foster his emotional growth as an individual, separate from society. He hopes to one day own a gallery in Samoa that focuses on conceptual art that has moved away from the traditional Samoan style. Nevertheless, he admits that his work is strongly influenced by the culture that surrounds him.

While an artist who strives for personal expression must have time to develop their personal voice, an artist can not continue to create in isolation. An artist is extremely responsive to his or her environment. An artist craves to be influenced, which is part of the reason so many artists in Samoa praise the benefits of being exposed to overseas artwork. Viewing work from artists overseas serves as a new and different influence on their perceptions which is reflected in their artwork. Artist Momoe Von Reiche spoke of the value of her interactions with people, especially other artists; she, like many other artists, considers such interactions as the very material that fuels her work. She believes that art can't be created in a box, and praises the botanical and social environment in Samoa as the inspiration behind her artwork.

Analysis:

Numerous aspects of Samoan society do not lend itself to the creation of individualistic art. Many of these aspects arrived with the missionary boats in 1830 and are relatively new to Samoan society, but are now considered traditional. Before Samoa had contact with outside influences, the education system was less rigid than it is currently, and individuality was more encouraged. Unique, even risqué, musicians and dancers were more prevalent in pre-contact times. The arrival of the Christian missionaries brought new values and new ideas about education, which changed Samoan society. They altered the learning process and created a more formal and according to them a "more proper and civilized" society. The Christian values the missionaries

brought were widely accepted in Samoa for almost two centuries and the two value systems are now deeply entrenched within each other.

Despite the drastic impact of the missionaries, Samoa's contact with other nations is still relatively limited. The lack of exposure to a variety of art forms and the general lack of cultural influences from overseas has had a profound effect on the way most people in Samoa perceive and create art. The struggle to make a living is another primary factor explaining why avante'garde art is not prevalent in the Samoan community. The market does not encourage the production of contemporary art and thus it is rarely produced. The basic needs of a person and their family must be met before someone follows the path of artistic self-expression. In Samoa, family values are especially strong, making the leap towards individualistic art all the more daunting.

Traditional Samoan society places the emphasis on the group rather than the individual, and this has a profound effect on the way that people approach artwork. The majority of the artwork created in Samoa is a manifestation of traditional communal values. People are shaped by their surroundings, but children are especially impressionable. The Samoan youth, therefore, must be encouraged to create unique art and express themselves; otherwise it is unlikely that they will do so on their own. Artist and author John Mathew articulates this point well by stating that "Genetic predispositions have strong effects but the environment, and especially the people in it, also contributes to either stunt drawing or help it flourish" (Mathew 1994: 123). It is important for parents to raise their children in a way that encourages them to express their emotions and feel comfortable making a mistake. The way a child is raised within the

context of the greater Samoan community plays a prominent role in shaping their ability to freely express themselves later in life.

Personal expression is slowly developing through the decisions and actions of a few individuals. The progression of Samoan art would increase with the establishment of scholarship programs to send art students for training overseas, so they can diversify their personal style as well as the teaching methods in Samoa. Expanding the public and school libraries would also offer greater exposure to different forms of expression. The role of personal expression in Samoa is moving forward, and with improvements in the education and government funding it will begin to play an increasingly important role in Samoan society.

Conclusion:

Reconciling one's identity as an individual and as a member of the larger community is one barrier Samoans face when attempting to create contemporary art. Individualism contrasts with the traditional community-oriented values ingrained within Samoan society. However, personal expression also complements the communal values because a group is composed of numerous smaller components (the individuals) that are unique and should be valued as such in order to strengthen the whole. Furthermore, the motivation to make money hinders people from pursuing art throughout the world. This motivation plays a particularly significant role in a developing country such as Samoa, which is in the process of moving towards a more cash-dominated economy.

The amount of exposure people have to art and the degree to which individuality is encouraged differs from person to person. Such fluctuations depend especially upon where the person grew up and how much they have been exposed to other cultures and ways of thinking. The development of art within Samoa depends upon several factors, but primarily lies in the hands of parents who can offer their children cultural influences from overseas and encourage their personal identity to develop in the comfort of their home with supporting faces nearby.

Another portion of responsibility for the development of the arts in Samoa lies in the artists themselves. Many Samoans agree that:

> The society needs to allow greater individual freedom of expression as it moves into the next century. However, it is important to mediate tradition into modernity…Artists form a vital role in this debate as they provide the vehicle for the expression of cultural values and feeling (Taule'alo 2000).

Contemporary artists are responsible for the development of Samoan art that represents the progress and growth of their culture itself. Contemporary art in Samoa has struggled for recognition and acceptance here, similarly to the way it is still struggling throughout the world. It is important to look at the development of art in Samoa as a few brave and motivated people help it move forward to include a colorful range of personal expression.

Glossary of Terms:

‘Aiga: family

‘Ava: kava drink

Baha’i: a religion based on the unity of humankind and all religions

Fa’asamoa: the Samoan way

Fale: traditional Samoan house, typically without walls

Lavalava: common Samoan clothing, 2 yards of patterned fabric usually tied around the waist

‘Ie toga: fine mat made from the pandanus palm

Matai: Samoan chief, the head of the family

Pe’a: traditional full body tattoo for males only, the ink covering the body from the waist to knees

Siapo: the Samoan word for *tapa*, or bark cloth, which is made from dried and layered bark of the mulberry tree decorated with geometric designs

Tanoa ‘ava: kava bowl

Tatau: Samoan word for tattoo, derived from the tapping sound made by the mallet while making a tattoo

U’a: paper mulberry tree

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