Stories of Tufuga ta Tatau

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Stories of Tufuga ta Tatau

Drea Miesnieks

Advisor: Mata’afa Elia Autagavaia

Academic Director: Jackie Fa’asisila and Ronna Hadfield

SIT Samoa, Spring 2014
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Abstract: The art of tattooing holds immense cultural importance to Samoa and the tatau (traditional full body tattoo) is a significant mark of Samoan identity. While the date of origin is not recorded, traditional tattooing has been an instrumental aspect of Samoan society throughout history. Tattooing proved resilient in the face of missionary condemnation as it survived in Samoa, while diminished in much of Polynesia. Tattooing has often been studied from the perspective of recipients of tatau. This study documents the transformation of this cultural practice and focuses on the perspectives of the masters. It examines the stories, opinions, beliefs, and values of both traditional tufuga ta tatau and contemporary tattoo artists. Perspectives on meanings, the evolution, and commercialization of tattooing were collected and studied. A total of 17 interviews were conducted with traditional tattoo artists, contemporary artists, academics, and recipients of tatau. Findings show considerable changes have occurred in Samoan tattooing in terms of who gets the tatau, what it means, and the equipment used. The emergence of contemporary tattoo studios and changes in payment are a result of Samoa’s shift towards a cash economy. Though globalization has had profound impacts on the tatau, tattooing is still occurring today and growing in popularity because of its intrinsic cultural importance to Samoans.

Key Words: Tatau, Globalization, Development studies, Cash Economy, Commercialization.
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Introduction:

Traditional Samoan tattooing is a symbol of national identity that holds much cultural importance. The *tatau*, or *pe’a* (traditional male tattoo), extends from the lower back and sides of abdomen to the backs of the knees. The *malu* (traditional female tattoo) decorates the front and back of thighs, from just below the knees to the upper part of the thighs. The *tufuga ta tatau* (master of traditional tattooing) uses traditional tools known as the ‘*au*. A tattoo is only considered traditional if it is done with the traditional tools.

While the *tatau* is understood as essentially Samoan, the understood origins of it are from overseas. It is believed that two Siamese twins, Tilafaiga and Taema swam to Fiji and brought back with them the art of traditional tattooing and presented it to a man named Su’a. There are two traditional tattooing clans in Samoa, the Tulou’ena and the Su’a family. Unfortunately, information on how *tatau* was introduced to the Tulou’ena family was not discovered. The Su’a practice the art on Upolu while the Tulou’ena does so on Savai’i. The Sulu’ape family, under the Su’a name, are the most prevalent and popular *tufuga ta tatau* in all of Samoa.

Contemporary tattoo studios are a much more recent development in Samoa. Contemporary tattoos are tattoos that are not done with the ‘*au*, but are done by machine. They often use traditional patterns but are reorganized and confined to a particular area of the body, such as a sleeve or ankle tattoo. Contemporary tattoo artists call themselves *ta pe’a*.

*Tatau* is an art that is currently transitioning under the pressures of globalization. There are considerable changes in the meaning of both the *tatau* and *malu*, and people’s motivation for getting them. Globalization has impacted both the ‘*au*, the payment, and setting of the *tatau*. 
Traditional Samoan tattoos have often been studied from the perspective of recipients, rather than artists. This paper will focus on the masters themselves. Interviews with contemporary tattooists, recipients and academics provide comparisons between stories, opinions, values and practices and expose the evolution of *tatau* in Samoa.

**Methodology:**

Research was conducted for the three weeks in April 2014 and began with a literature review that highlighted various elements of tattooing and its importance in Samoa. The origins of *tatau* in Samoa, the first tattooists, traditional customs in the practice, traditional tools, procedures and meanings provided a background for further studies.

The opportunity to observe the Sulu'ape family work on three *tatau* and one *malu*, receiving a traditionally done *taulima* (ankle band tattoo), and sitting in on a tattoo at Big Boyz tattoo parlour helped with understanding the tools used, people involved, time spent, patterns, and overall environment. Observation helped form questions used in interviews. Interviews with both traditional *tufuga ta tatau* and contemporary artists provided context and deeper understanding of the tattooing process, and are the bulk of this research. 17 interviewees represented four different perspectives: *tufuga ta tatau*, contemporary tattoo artists, recipients of *pe’a* or *tatau*, and academics. The four groups were interviewed in order to examine the differences perspectives of various parties connected to *tatau*.

More interviews with traditional *tufuga ta tatau* would have enhanced this paper but time, distances, location of *tufuga ta tatau*, their schedules and language barriers were constraints. With more time, more aspects of traditional tattooing would have been examined.
Motivations and Paths to becoming a tufuga ta tatau:

The art of traditional tattooing is passed through families. The two tattooing families, the Tulou’ena in Savai‘i and the Su’a in Upolu are the practitioners of this art. According to Chris Solomana, “No matter how badly I want to become a traditional tattoo artist, I cannot do it because it is not in my family” (Personal Communication, 17/03/14). When looking for tufuga ta tatau for this research, all identified had the Su’a title, showing how protected this art is. Su’a Petelo Alaiva’a Suluape’s tells his story of becoming a tufuga ta tatau in these words:

“I grew up in a family of tattoo artists, but I never dreamed of becoming one. I was so fortunate to be the only one that could focus on continuing education. Everybody dropped out, except me. So I thought to myself, I’ll take education all the way. So then I decided to become a teacher. My brothers were still tattooing, and took it up from my father. Suddenly one day, I was helping them stretch and I just picked up the tool and started practicing on my legs and I felt the urge to practice, practice. I did my own practice on my legs. Then the chance came unexpected. In 74, my older brother left Samoa for New Zealand, but he left his tools here. He started work on a group of about 10 people including David Tua’s father, the boxer, and then he left for New Zealand and none of those people were finished. They were all about halfway through, had two or three more sessions. In 1976, one of those groups came to my father and asked him to finish it. But my father was too old, very old, and couldn’t do any more tattoos. So, my father, told my younger brother to go to another village where one of my cousins was working as a tattoo artist. He ordered him to go and come home and finish these people. I overheard the conversation and I told my brother, don’t go, don’t go. Tomorrow you prepare the ink and get everything prepared. I’ll go to school and afterwards I’ll come home and we’ll start doing the tattoo. It was like that. So the next day, I think my father went to a council meeting. He wasn’t at home when I came home. So I came home and everything was prepared and I told my brother, let’s do it. So he stretched, and I tattooed. I didn’t know how the tattoo was arranged, and my brother was already tattooed then, so I asked him to show me his tattoo and I copied everything. So we went line after line, design after design, and then in the evening, my dad came home and saw what was done. And then he turns to me and says, alright, you can do it! So we kept tattooing that man for about a week, until he was finished, and he went back home to his village and two more of the same group came and my practice was continuous. After those two more of the group came to be tattooed, including David Tua’s father. So that’s how I started. Practice is the only way to learn tattooing. When I started I was afraid to prick the skin, I was afraid to hit. But my father said, don’t be afraid, let it fall. Let the mallet fall. And then, that’s all I did. When I became a little bit better, then I was able to adjust the heaviness of the hit.” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14)

The experience of Su’a Sulu’ape shows how traditional tattooists learn from observing their family working and from practice. Su’a passed the trade down to his two sons, Peter and
Junior. Peter began tattooing a few years before Junior, until a need for another tattooist was apparent. The following is Junior’s account of becoming *tufuga ta tatau*:

“I was born into a family of tattooists. My grandfather, my great grandfather were all *tufuga ta tatau*. It was through my father that I learned. When I was a kid, I was looking and learning. I saw that my Dad, the *tufuga*, he was the only one who could provide for our family. He was a father, teacher and part-time tattooist, and provided for our family. So, that’s how we were raised, seeing him work. Family is very connected to the *tufuga ta tatau*. *Tatau* in our family, it is something that we never want to lose. We will pass it down to our children, to our children’s children. It’s a thing that will never die. When I was 8 I was stretching for my Dad. When I went to college, that’s when I started using a tattooing machine. I bought a hand-made machine from my friend. I started practicing on my legs, on my other friends. Then my father saw me and said, stop doing that, because he knew it was a man-made machine, not the real ones, we used the same needles and that’s why he told me to stop. When we went to Hawaii they gave me the real machines with the chords, the needles, with everything. But in that time, I was really concentrated on using the machines, nothing traditional yet. But then when we opened the shop in *Matao*, the studio, there were a lot of times when my brother and my father went to do work overseas, and when they leave overseas, I was the only one here. But that’s why I learned. Straight away I just tried and had to learn. The first one, a *palagi* (non-Samoan) from New York, he came here to see my father for the *pe’a*. Then I said my Dad would be here on a particular date, but it was too late for him, so I told him that I’m still learning, but if you want me to tattoo you I can do it. He said yeah, yeah ok, no problem. So that was my first *tatau*. That was in 2010. He was a *palagi* named Mike from New York.” (Personal Communication, 30/04/14)

While traditional tattooing is customarily reserved for the two Samoan tattooing families in Samoa, contemporary tattooing is an art that is open for other Samoans to pursue.

**Paths and Motivations to Becoming a Contemporary Tattoo Artist:**

Most contemporary tattooists interviewed did not receive any formal training. Many began tattooing because of their deep passion for art. While some had apprenticeships, many just began practicing and eventually began working as independent or studio tattooists.

Michael Hickey, owner of Urban Village Tattoos in Apia explained that he “worked very closely with art for a long time” and that his passion was “with art more than tattooing originally, but then it sort of evolved into tattooing.” Hickey learned the art from Steve Ma Ching in New Zealand, who “made sleeves very popular when he did famous rugby player Sonny Bill Williams’ sleeve tattoo.” Hickey has been involved in the industry for the last 25
years. Hickey was the only tattooist interviewed who received formal training (Personal Communication, 25/04/2014).

Pese Patau, tattooist of Urban Village Tattoo decided to learn tattooing because of his original love of art. He explains that “all of my time in school, I wasn’t interested in contact sports, but I just love drawing, from copying comic books.” Patau follows the trend of most contemporary Samoan artists interviewed. He claims he “learned from tattoo magazines, just by watching the work, reading their stories” and that his “family was his guinea pigs” until he started working on friends and eventually began working at Urban Village Tattoo (Personal Communication, 25/04/2014).

Mike Fa’aasili, tattoo apprentice of Big Boyz tattoo began as a self-taught artist who learned from drawing pictures when he was very young, and from attending school in American Samoa where he developed his knowledge about art. He wanted to learn to tattoo because “It’s different from doing normal art. It’s something that I’m going to put on someone, and it’s going to be there forever.” (Personal Communication, 29/04/2014)

Lalovai Peseta, an artist from Savai’i is the only contemporary tattooist interviewed who works independently of a tattoo studio. Peseta attended Leulomoega Fou art school for three years where he learned “just the basics of arts and how to come up with ideas.” He often used tattooing patterns as a signature in his work, and “decided to give it a go, and it’s going strong now” after practicing on his own leg and then beginning to work on other people. (Personal Communication, 26/04/2014)

The final tattooist learned from being immersed in an environment where he was surrounded by the art. While in prison in Australia, he “had nothing better to do than draw and learn” from those around him who knew how to tattoo. He realized he had a passion and innate talent for tattooing and continued after his time in prison in his friends’ tattoo shop in
Australia because of his “love of art.” He “loved talking to people and learning about why
they wanted to get their tattoo, the real meaning behind it.” He chose to open a studio in
Samoa and continue practicing because he believes that “this is where tattoos started from”
(Personal Communication, 24/04/2014).

A love of art and a spirit of experimentation motivated most of these artists to pursue
traditional tattooing. Their paths are extremely different than the tufuga ta tatau interviewed.
The perceptions of the malu and tatau also differ from the views of the traditional artists.

**Meanings and Responsibilities of the Tatau**

Today, the tatau holds different meanings. For many it is a statement of Samoan
culture and identity, a right of passage, the right to serve, and some believe that it is for
vanity. Academics, traditional tattoo artists, contemporary tattooists, and recipients of the
tatau have differing perspectives on the meanings, motivations and responsibilities associated
with tatau.

Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape explains the tufuga perspective: “It is a mark of service.
Somebody that has served, or is ready to serve the elders, the community. We have an oath
that you take before you get the tatau in your heart: I am a Samoan, I will die for Samoa, the
people and the culture” (Personal communication, 01/05/14). The word tatau means must. A
documentary film Micah Van der Ryn, called “O Le Tatau, What One Must Do documents
Su’a Petelo and sees the tatau as “a civilizing act making one eligible for a chiefly title and
for tautua” (service). Su’a Junior Sulu’ape further explained the tatau is “the initiation from
childhood to adulthood. To have the courage to do everything and provide for your family.
They have the courage to go fishing, to provide food for the family, to go to the plantation. It
is the symbol of the real Samoan man” (Personal Communication, 30/04/14).
Mata’afa Elia Autuagavaia, cultural Language Specialist and relative of the Sulu’ape family provides an academic perspective of the *tatau* as ‘painful art to show to chiefs they are able to withstand the pain and service to high chief’s and to show the elders, “‘Here I am, and I can do the work of service’.”’ He further explains that in his village, without the *tatau*, you weren’t allowed to enter the chief’s house and you were without a “passport to knowledge” (Personal Communication, 18/03/14). Journalist and author Afamasaga Toleafoa explained “before you get your tattoo, you tattoo your mouth. It’s a cultural thing, and it means that you must learn the culture and language that goes with it” (Personal Communication, 05/05/14). He elaborates that in a country rich in oral tradition, to get tattooed you must be able to “be an orator, be a high chief, talk the correct language and give guidance.” Artist Vanya Taule’alo believes both the *malu* and *tatau* have many meanings.

“*You have to look at it as a historical thing, it had political significance, in terms of the social structures, it has personal significance in terms of that person’s deep connection to both sides of their family, and then you’ve got that religious, spiritual element to it, and you’ve got the right of passage aspect*” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14).

Toleafoa claims, “Certainly the *malu* and *pe’a* were marks of distinction only reserved for the high chiefs’ sons and daughters.”

Contemporary tattooists have very differing views on the meaning of the *pe’a*. Hickey believes traditional tattoos are a Samoan “right to passage, and your god-given culture”, while another contemporary tattooist believes it has “absolutely no meaning at all”, and that there’s “no need to do all of that” (Personal Communication, 24/04/14). Independent artist Lalovai explains,

“*Samoan society, there are matai, chiefs and there are their taulealea, which are their servants, in the village and family. And getting the pe’a is like a reward, you did great serving your chief. You are preparing yourself for becoming a chief. In other ways, it’s like a lavalava, the clothing Samoans wear*” (Personal Communication, 26/04/14).
Most contemporary artists did not provide much insight on the meaning and responsibilities of the *tatau*. The four different perspectives shed light on the various meanings and interpretations of the *tatau*. The *malu* also has very significant meaning in Samoan culture understood differently by a variety of sources.

**Meanings and Responsibilities of the *Malu***:

The *malu* is also a mark of Samoan identity that Samoans find to be extremely important. Many believe it is the true signifier of a Samoan lady. In getting the *malu*, young women traditionally gain a variety of responsibilities. The female tattoo was traditionally reserved for the high chiefs’ daughter, the *taupo*, who was responsible for dancing the *siva* (Samoan dance) and mixing ‘*ava* (drink ground from root vegetable) at special occasions.

Traditional tattoo artists believe the *malu* is an indicator of what is expected of the Samoan female. According to Junior Suluape it is the “symbol of the lady who has everything to take care of her family. She can protect and take care of them. There are designs in the *malu* that are similar to the four corners of the *fale*. They take care of the kids, and whenever there are guests.” Su’a Petelo Suluape explains that the “*malu* means shelter. Women in Samoan families are looked upon as shelters for the people, for the family” (Personal Communication 30/04/14 and 01/05/14). He explains,

> “The *malu* was supposed to be only for the daughters of chiefs, they were the *taupo*. The *taupo* serves a very high rank in society. A *taupo* with a *malu* has more importance. That’s why the *taupo* got the *malu*, to differentiate them from the ordinary girls” (Taule’alo, 1993, p.3).

Contemporary artist Lalovai sees the *malu* as “really important in the cultural and family life. It’s your big commitment to community, it’s huge, and it’s really important. It’s all part of *fa’anamoa*.” Other contemporary tattooists offered little insight on the original meanings and responsibilities of the *malu*. 
Vanya Taule’alo also views the *malu* also as a rite of passage ritual and believes the “*taupou* would get it done upon puberty.” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14). Toleafoa explains it as a “sign of a distinction in the leadership role when she would perform the *siva*. She would dress up with the *tuiga* and mix the *ava*. So it was part of their role as a *taupou*” (Personal Communication, 05/05/14). Micah Van der Ryn explains that the

“*Malu* is one of those Samoan terms with multiple meanings, which shade understandings of the significance of what the *malu* is, that is, the traditional Samoan female tattoo. The term in Samoan refers to "protection" or "to protect" or "shelter" and some women see the significance of receiving a *malu* is for a woman who "protects" their family, meaning their actions and behaviors support and protect the family, etc” (Personal Communication, 03/05/14).

In *Tattoo: Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, the *malu* is described as a symbol for “personal sacrifice and an outwards acknowledgment of how they feel about their *fa’asamo*a and cultural identity” (159).

While these perspectives differ from one another, the perspectives and motivations of recipients of the *malu* and *tatau* also differ significantly and can be compared to traditional meanings.

**Personal meanings and motivations for *tatau* and *malu*:**

The *tatau* and *malu* are sought after by many Samoans, both in Samoa and overseas. For every person, who has a different experience, the meaning and reason for being tattooed is usually different. For many, traditional tattooing has both a spiritual and cultural component.

Cecilia Amosa explained, “It was about time for me to be promoted to the front during our family gatherings. In order for you to be the *taupo* and mix the ‘*ava* drink, in special family ceremonies, you have to have the *malu* in order to do that.” She explains the meaning of her *malu*:
Pele Atif, a student at the University of the South Pacific in Alafua, claims that her *malu* came with responsibility and expectations. She explained: “It was my dad’s decision, not mine. My dad is the chief. He wanted me to get a *malu* so that whenever there is an ‘*ava* ceremony, I will be the one to do it, and do the Samoan dance for some special occasions.” In addition, she thinks it expresses “you are a true Samoan lady. The Samoan word *tautua*, it shows people you know how to *tautua* in your family and your village” (Personal Communication, 06/05/14). As previously mentioned, *tautua* is to serve.

Tuilagi Seiuli Alan Alo Va’ai received his *tatau* in 2000 after his father asked him to do it. Alo’s motivations for receiving the *tatau*, and what it means to him is very distinct from the other perspectives examined and from other *sog’aimiti*. Alo explains that his father wanted him to get his *tatau* to challenge him. He explains:

> “I’m very effeminate, and I think it was one of his ways to try and make me into a masculine person. The *pe’a* itself was a halfway reconciliation between me and my father because we never really used to talk to each other. Until the *pe’a*. It opened a pathway for communication. It was like he then started to respect me and started to appreciate the fact that I could do it” (Personal Communication, 02/05/14).

He believes that the *tatau* is a marking of your transition into manhood where one is supposed to be responsible to your family “In terms of nurturing, providing food, protecting and guiding your younger generations” and also explained a spiritual connection as “it means
more intrinsically and psychologically, it taps and reminds me that my body is sacred in a way” (Personal Communication, 02/05/14).

Filifilia Iosefa has also had a very different experience with his tatau. Iosefa had his tatau done twice, first in 2000 and then 13 years later. Iosefa got his tatau redone because he wanted it had begun to fade and wanted sharper, more defined patterns. Iosefa originally decided to get his tatau based on a challenge from his friend. In debates with his friend, his friend would insist that Iosefa, unlike him, couldn’t win because he didn’t have the tatau. His friend and his friends’ father challenged him, and he decided that he “wanted to get his Samoan uniform.” He explains the tatau is a “service to my family, my village, my country, society, workplace and it manifests itself in many ways.” He states that he got it done because “I believe in it and I believe in our culture” and finds that it’s just “another added value quality to your character. I think it shows status as a Samoan and differs us from the untattooed” (Personal Communication, 03/05/14).

Traditional tattooing was an art form originally reserved for Samoans. All of the recipients interviewed were Samoan. However, with increased contact with the rapidly globalizing world, the question of who should get the tatau is debated.

**Who should receive the Tatau/Malu?**

While the Tatau is often considered an essentially Samoan entity, more palagi are beginning to be tattooed today. The question of who should be tattooed with Samoa’s traditional mark is very controversial today.

Both traditional tufuga believe that the tattoo should be available for anyone who wants to receive it. When asked who should receive the tatau, Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape explained that “traditionally, the case was only Samoans” (Personal Communication, 30/04/14).
Suluape believes that all Samoan men should have the *tatau*. He shared the saying, “when a male is born, it’s a duty of the parents to start preparing the ink, the lama.” However, he thinks that today it should not be limited to only Samoans, as “we would be very selfish if we didn’t tattoo the *palagi* that want it. I believe that to go through the pain to get it, that is from the heart. If you want it and you want to take the pain, why not?” Su’a went on to explain that when asked this question from the media, “it’s extremely painful. I don’t know why they want to know that and argue about that. They don’t have tattoos, so why should they argue about it?” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14).

The academic sources interviewed agree with the view of the masters. Vanya Taule’alo believes that it should be “limited to people who have a connection to Samoa, [including] Samoans themselves and people like myself who have lived here for a long time” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14). Micah van der Ryn agrees with this view though predicts “when people who don’t know that much about it, do engage, it is going to change the meanings and significance of it.” Micah believes that those who are tattooed should “also care enough to learn what it traditionally signifies and means, and then add on the modern meanings and significance on to the traditional, and not engage it something without knowledge and background” (Personal Communication, 05/05/14). Afamasaga Toleafa believes that for non-samoans, “there’s nothing to stop them from doing it if they genuinely become part of that system, they feel culturally attuned to it, an affinity with it.” As previously mentioned, Toleafa believes one must “tattoo their mouth” before their body (Personal Communication, 06/05/14).

Pele, a *malu* recipient, believes, “the Samoan girls who know how to serve *mea’ai* (food), how to do *fe’au* (chores), how to do work at home, how to serve their village, they are the one who should get the *malu*” and is ok with outsiders receiving the traditional tattoo because it “showcases and spreads Samoan culture” (Personal Communication, 06/05/14).
Tuilagi Seiuli Alan Alo Va’ai firmly believes that *tatau* is for “any Samoan. And when I say anybody Samoan, it’s not just the Samoan born people. Anybody who has done things for Samoa, whether you’re *palagi* or Indian” (Personal Communication, 02/05/14). Filifilia feels that “It is part of our culture, but if any outsider wants to really do it, then why not. Culture is supposed to be shared. As long as they put value in the culture.” Filifilia also asked his *tufuga* “what he thought, and he said the art of tattooing didn’t originally come from us. It came from Fiji, and so why are we not allowing other people outside of ourselves to get it?” (Personal Communication, 03/05/14).

Two contemporary artists and one woman with the *malu* disagree that the *tatau* should be shared with *palagi*. Michael Hickey believes, “It belonged to the Samoans, and should stay with the Samoans” and that the *tatau* came from “the beginning of the Samoan race, their culture. It is something that is so sacred and has so much meaning behind it. Something I feel that should stay within the culture” (Personal Communication, 25/04/14). Cecilia Amosa, recipient of the *malu* believes only “Samoans should get the *malu* because they have the full understanding and knowledge of what Samoan culture is, the responsibilities that come with it, and how to partake in community gatherings and ceremonies” (Personal Communication, 02/05/14).

As the people receiving traditional tattoos changes, the adaptation of tools and payment of *tatau* is simultaneously occurring.

**Hygiene and changes in Tools**

While many aspects of the *tatau* have remained consistent and resistant from change, the evolution of tools in response to health concerns has been considerable. The ‘*au* originally consisted of three combs and one mallet: *ausogi ‘aso* for making thin lines, *aufa ‘aila* for small dots and decorations, *autapulu/autafa* for large black areas, and the
sausau (mallet) to tap the teeth of the comb into the skin. The tools were originally made of a wooden handle, a flat pate made of turtle shell, and a comb made of boar’s tusk. The pieces were tied together with sennit (coconut fiber) (Samoan National Museum).

According to Su’a Peter Sulu’ape, when the first concerns of AIDS in the Pacific came in 1986, it was time to change the tools. At a tattoo convention in Long Beach, the doctor told him that he could not use boar’s tusk because of health concerns. That instance prompted him to begin looking for a safer, improved ‘au:

“The first needles were done by an artist from San Diego, but it just didn’t sound right. There was a metal handle with metal needles and a metal mallet. Ting! Ting! The spirit was wrong, the mana around all of it was just wrong. So I said no and I came to Hawaii to ask more friends. They gave me a metal needle against a metal plate with a wooden handle. I said, eh. We used it, but the metal was too thin, that it bent when it hit the skin. So, I said no, it’s wrong. Then, we made the comb with titanium needles and tied them to a flat piece of plastic and tied that all to the wooden mallet. That’s how we did it” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14)

After examining the tools, it’s apparent that all of these changes have been made. According to Junior Sulu’ape, the sausau is the only tool that has not changed, as it is still made from the olosina tree. Boar tusk has switched to titanium, sennit has changed to fishing line, and the ink has also modernized. The ink used was originally made of candlenut, but that resource was used up. Then, they switched to a filtered kerosene, which according to Filifilia, who received his tatau twice, was extremely painful: “The traditional ink, after doing it, the pain was even worse. The ink really burns. You can feel it inside really burning. But the second time with the newer ink was much less painful” (Personal Communication, 03/05/14). Now, the ink the Sulu’ape family uses is imported from Intenze Ink, a tattoo ink company in Newark, NJ. The ink no longer sits in a coconut shell, but on a piece of saran wrap tied around a glass.
Hygiene has been a huge consideration in the Samoan tattooing, both traditional and contemporary. As previously mentioned in Junior Sulu’ape’s story in becoming a tufuga, his father forced him to stop using the manmade machine, knowing that it wasn’t hygienic. One contemporary artist interviewed believes people choose to go the contemporary route because “it’s more hygienic” and he personally doesn’t think “they know the danger of it, they don’t know how long a drop of blood can last” to contaminate the tools (Personal Communication, 24/04/14). Sulu’ape also has severe concerns about the hygiene of contemporary studios in Apia as he has “already talked to the health department, the prime minister, and all of these people to look into that.” He claims to “know a place where people get tattooed with needles that were used last year.” He worries about the potential of disease because “if something happens, even traditional tattooing will be gone” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14).

Just as Sulu’ape’s travelling abroad influenced the evolution of tools, other aspects of a globalizing world are impacting tattooing. Many believe and are worried about the commercialization of tattooing as Samoa is becoming more of a cash economy. The changes in tools are a testament to globalization and commercialization.

**Globalization, Commercialization and the Future of Tattooing:**

As more Samoans move overseas, there is more of a need for tufuga ta tatau to travel abroad. The influences of the Western world have impacted Samoan tattooing since the arrival of missionaries in 1830, and continue to do so in a variety of ways. Just the presence of contemporary studios with modern machines is a testament to globalization’s impacts. Though tufuga ta tatau have changed some of their practices, many are attempting to preserve traditional and cultural elements of it.
Christianity’s influence:

As missionaries arrived in the region and attempted to Christianize the Pacific, they were successful in suppressing tattooing in many areas though it proved resilient in Samoa. The Bible reads: “Ye shall not make any cutting in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:28). The tatau was never officially banned as “Samoan men persisted in seeking opportunities to acquire the tatau in spite of local and foreign imposed prohibitions, so it was not actually abolished across the archipelago as a whole at any one time” (Thomas, 2005, p. 150).

According to Vanya Taule’alo, the tatau was a “massive visualization of the qualities that [missionaries] think are appalling. So, of course they tried to come over and change it, but they didn’t, it just went underground, and then revived” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14). Junior Sulu’ape explains that “when the missionaries came to Samoa and tried to stop the tatau, it didn’t work because our ancestors told them not to stop because it’s the core of our country. So it still carried on” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14).

Still, many Samoans do not get the tatau because of religious beliefs, though there is a reconciliation process for those who are tattooed to be reinstated in the church. Pele, who has the malu, explains she is the “only one on my mom’s side having a malu because they don’t really like it. They stick to the Christian belief that having a malu is just wasting your blood. They think that having a malu is a waste of time” (Personal Communication, 06/05/14). Afamasaga Toleafoa explained that his opinions of the tatau are:

“A little bit colored by [his] Christian views. Basically, the body is a work of creation, if you believe in the Bible, it’s an image of God. God made it, it was perfect. It doesn’t require any more embellishment. They said it’s the temple of the spirit, and you look after that spirit. It’s not something you desecrate” (Personal Communication, 05/05/14).
As Europeans came to Samoa and altered the future of tattooing, those Samoans who left and moved overseas also contribute to the changes.

**Globalization of Tattooing**

With the diaspora of Samoans, more Samoans now live abroad than in their native country. Many Samoans living abroad desire the *tatau* in order to stay in touch with their culture and identity.

According to Junior Sulu’ape, his family travels abroad to New Zealand often in order to tattoo Samoans. He stated that he only does “*tatau* for Samoans when I’m abroad” (Personal Communication, 30/04/14). In a preliminary interview, Su’a Peter Sulu’ape II explained that he travels abroad so much because “he has to go where the work is” (Personal Communication, 20/03/14). Toleafoa believes that “Any Samoan who truly wants to do the tattoo for the right reasons need to come to Samoa” (Personal communication, 05/05/14).

Pele thinks that the *tufuga ta tatau* should travel abroad because “Some people overseas, they can’t travel here, but in order to have the *malu* and *pe’a*, the tattooist should travel overseas to tattoo them. Everything is so expensive these days, all about money. In order to save their money, they should stay there and the tattooists should travel to them” (Personal Communication 06/05/14). Taule’alo believes “the Samoan populations have dispersed so drastically, that it’s the only way that they can meet the demands and needs of the people” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14). Michael Hickey feels that “it really helped them to keep it alive and really promote Samoa at the same time. But that’s where they have got to make a decision as a family as to, do we keep following the money?” (Personal Communication, 25/04/14). Micah Van der Ryn explains “the reason for doing this [tattooing abroad] would be that it may be more convenient or cheaper for the overseas Samoan tattooee to get their *tatau/malu* this way, than to travel to Samoa. It also benefits the *tufuga* financially” (Personal Communication, 05/05/14).
Many argue that going overseas to tattoo leads to the commercialization of tattooing, but the Sulu’ape family and other interviewees believe they are doing so for the Samoan people as opposed to only cash. The commercialization of tattooing is also occurring right in Samoa.

**Commercialization of the Tatau:**

The prices of receiving a *tatau* have increased considerably in the last decade. Payments have changed considerably and moved from the traditional forms to monetary compensation. Much of this can be attributed to the impacts of globalization.

Filifilia, who has received his *pe’a* two times from traditional artists, was able to illustrate the changes in payment he has noticed, just over a period of 13 years:

> “Back in the olden days, when we didn’t have the cash economy, it was a lot more affordable. They just gave food items and some Samoan fine mats. Now it is more geared for the money because we are more of a cash economy now. Because of that I think the cost of having a tattoo has definitely gone up. I think in the next 3-5 years it may go up again I spent $1500-2000 *tala* the first time. The tools evolved and they changed from the traditional tools to the more modern ones with the new ink, that all costs money. So that has to be factored into the cost of having the tattoo. Now the *tufuga* wants $5000 *tala*” (Personal Communication, 03/05/14).

When asking Junior if he had ever refused to tattoo somebody, he raised the issue of payments. Junior explained that he would only refuse someone “if they have no payments. In older days, our father told us that the *tufuga* would be paid with fine mats, in the traditional Samoan way. But today, it’s all cash, because that’s the system we all live in” (Personal Communication, 30/04/14). Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape told a story of being paid only 100 *tala* for a *tatau*, when the agreement was 3000. He said that his “stretchers were so mad that they wanted to beat me. I said calm down, we lose here, but we will gain somewhere else. That’s the only way to look at it” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14).
The Sulu’ape family now uses the Samoan Tourist Authority (STA) fale as their base for work. Each Tuesday and Thursday, tourists visit the cultural village and are able to view traditional tattooing. Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape explains that he decided to work at the cultural village because it is a good way to “save time from one tatau to another” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14).

Many people feel that the STA cultural village is a good way to share the culture, while some see it as a degradation of the practice. Tuilagi Seiuli Alan Alo Va’ai believes that “sharing that part of the culture with [tourists] is quite significant” and “it’s alive. It’s good that it’s alive because it means that it’s breathing” but “on the downside, culture is slowly degrading and losing its value.” He thinks it’s beneficial as “it’s contributing to the life of the economy” (Personal Communication, 02/05/14). Contemporary tattooist Michael Hickey thinks “it’s awesome for tourists to come and see that it’s part of the culture” (Personal Communication, 25/04/14). Lalovai Petelo believes that “it showcases Samoan art, so it’s a good thing” (Personal Communication, 26/04/14). Cecilia Amosa thinks that the cultural village “is a good way for the government to generate money to attract tourists to Samoa, but then slowly, it will lose that cultural sense.” She believes the mindset of Samoan people “has changed because of the influences of the outside world and cultures. She doesn’t think “it’s the proper way, to sell the traditional of tattooing” (Personal Communication, 02/05/14).

Globalization and commercialization is impacting Samoa greatly, and the tatau is a microcosm for that process. Moving to a cash economy helps explain the emergence of tattoo studios. Though their practices are different, contemporary tattoo studios are heavily influenced by the traditional tatau.
Tufuga Perspective on Contemporary Tattoo Studios

Contemporary studios claim to be participating in a different practice than the traditional, and much overlap and tension is apparent between the *tufuga ta tatau* and contemporary tattoo artists.

When asked what types of tattoos their studios do, most contemporary studios had similar answers. Michael Hickey explains the “motifs are traditional, and stay the same, but it’s the layout that we put those motifs within. That’s where it gives it a more contemporary setting” (Personal Communication, 25/04/14). Mike Fa’asili gave a brief explanation of some of the patterns he uses such as “spearheads, Samoans back in the day use them for hunting, to protect their people, back then. Bird stands for freedom. Fishes stand for wisdom” (Personal Communication, 29/04/14). The contemporary artists interviewed attribute their patterns to the *malu* and *pe’a*. Lalovai explains that with his patterns, “it’s always traditional. But I take it and twist it to make it my own art” (Personal Communication, 26/04/14).

The Sulu’ape family had a tattoo studio but as Junior learned *tatau*, they closed down the shop so they could all focus on the traditional. As Junior worked with the machine he didn’t use traditional patterns. Junior Sulu’ape does not agree with contemporary studios’ use of traditional patterns:

> “The big boat in the back, called tha *va’a*, this was done by our ancestors on this part, and it should be here (points to back), not here (points to shoulder) But most contemporary artists, they take a piece from the *tatau* and put it on the arm. In my opinion, that’s not right. Every pattern is owned by the *tufuga* families” (Personal Communication, 30/04/14).

Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape also shares these sentiments and feels this “misuse” of patterns “has to stop” as they are “selling all of those tattoos because of those designs. You take away those designs, you won’t have anything.” Sulu’ape explains that he is working on a copyright, and
then the contemporary studios will “have to go back and learn how to draw pictures. The machine was made for those things. They have their own work, their own pictures to draw. Leave the tattooing designs to the traditional” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14). In addition to the patterns being used in contemporary studios, another source of tension is studios who will tattoo the malu or pe’a with a machine. Though Michael Hickey explains that many girls ask about the malu, he refuses to tattoo it because “for us to go and do that would be a disgrace. For somebody to even want to get it done that way is even worse” (Personal Communication, 25/04/14). One tattoo studio interviewed said that they do tattoo some malu because they believe “you don’t need to go through the traditional procedure. It’s just the looks they are going for” and in traditional, “you’re not just paying for the tat, you’re paying for the culture, the fa’asamo” (Personal Communication, 24/04/14). Junior Sulu’ape feels this practice:

Traditional tufuga ta tatau disagree with most of the practices employed by contemporary tattoo studios in Samoa because as Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape believes, “everything tells a story, everything has its meaning and should not be changed” (Personal Communication, 01/05/14).

Analysis:

The motivations and paths for traditional tattoo artists and contemporary tattooists proved to be very different. The tufuga interviewed were passed an art that has been in their family for generations. Both Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape and his son, Su’a Junior Sulu’ape learned to tattoo out of a need and chance opportunity for it. Both tufuga ta tatau stepped into the position because someone else was no longer there. The talent was within their family, and they had both observed and stretched for their fathers before they actually tattooed. These paths show the instrumental role that family plays in traditional tattooing.
Most contemporary artists did not receive formal training, but were self-taught. Michael Hickey received formal training, though it was from abroad. This shows that formal training for tattooing would have to occur abroad, because the traditional has been prevalent and is much more established. No contemporary artists interviewed learned from an older parent or brother, as the practice is very new in Samoa.

These findings of family’s significance in tatau are significant because of family’s important role in Samoa. It is understandable that a practice that has been so engrained in Samoan life for so long has the key value of family in it. As contemporary tattoo studios are a newer development, it makes sense that family does not factor into the equation.

The discrepancies between why people get tattooed and the meanings that tufuga ta tatau ascribe to tatau show the changes occurring in Samoa. As more people move abroad, the tatau has turned into a cultural identifier, as opposed to a right of passage or service to your family. The two soga’imi interviewed had non-traditional reasons and/or understandings of the tatau. The man who had his tatau redone wanted more defined lines, patterns and a different mastery, while the other man’s tatau served as reconciliation within his family.

The shift from only the sons and daughters of high chief’s receiving the tatau and malu to anyone who wants it, Samoan or palagi, raises a few concerns. Many more men and women are receiving the malu and tatau today, though many do not understand the meanings, which alludes to the fact that Samoa is becoming more modernized and is losing some of its traditional practices. Traditional tattooists don’t believe that this changes the meaning of the malu and pe’a and believe that this aspect of culture should be shared. The fact that more Samoans are choosing to get their tatau and malu shows their commitment to traditional
culture. Most people share this view, but those who are against this trend feel strongly that it’s a degradation of culture.

The decision of tufuga ta tatau to tattoo palagi may cause people to think that they are commercializing the practice as prices for tatau have risen and forms of payment have changed. The change in forms of payment reinforces the fact that Samoa has shifted from subsistence to a cash economy. Also, the decision to travel abroad to tattoo to more work may be evidence of commercialization, but this can also be seen as serving the needs of the disasporic Samoan community. The latter seems more likely as when they do go abroad, their primary focus is Samoans, not palagi. The Samoan’s overwhelming sentiment that the malu and tatau be only tattooed with the ‘au by tufuga ta tatau shows their resistance in letting the art be handed over and commercialized by contemporary tattoo studios.

The changes in tools and hygiene show the impacts of globalization on Samoa. The first case of AIDS in the pacific in addition to Sulu’ape’s trip to a California tattoo convention shows how outside influences have impacted and are continuing to shape traditional tattooing. The concern of hygiene also gave rise to the popularity of contemporary tattoo studios in Samoa.

Though contemporary tattoo studios are becoming popular among the public, tufuga ta tatau are concerned with their practices. Their use of traditional patterns in contemporary tattoos done with the needles is changing the meaning of them as they are being used outside of their original context. The tufuga ta tatau don’t want the patterns to change, and feel that they own the patterns and are trying to obtain a copyright for them. Obtaining a copyright seems to lend itself to the idea that commercialization is present in tattooing. However, the Samoan’s overwhelming sentiment that the malu and tatau be reserved for the ‘au shows
their resistance in letting the art be handed over and commercialized by contemporary tattoo studios.

The interviews conducted with a wide array of answers prove that traditional tattooing, like Samoa as a whole, is in a period of intense transition. The *tufuga ta tatau* and many Samoans are attempting to preserve it, but forces of globalization are very impactful. Findings prove that there are discrepancies in the understandings, motivations, and perspectives of tattoos between academics, *tufuga ta tatau*, contemporary artists, and recipients, but show that the art of traditional tattooing holds immense personal, cultural, and historical significance to Samoan.

**Conclusion:**

Perspectives of the *tatau* and *malu* are vastly different depending on whether the source is an academic, a traditional tattoo artist, a contemporary artist, or recipient. Nevertheless, common themes of cultural significance arise in all fields. Whether the *tatau* is a cultural identifier, a mark of service, coming of age, a distinguishing mark, or a visually appealing extremity, the wearer’s reason is extremely significant to them.

Looking at different perspectives for tattooing is essential because it is such a transforming art. While it is traditional, and is trying to preserve, it is just as subject to the forces of globalization as any other aspect of culture. Though *tatau* is undergoing immense changes, it will persist in the future. The *tatau* and *malu* mean too much to Samoans for them to allow them to disappear. Tattooing survived missionary suppression in the 19th century, and will continue to prove resilient to outside forces such as globalization. Though aspects of the tattoo are changing, the *tatau* will remain present and significant in Samoa based on this research. Everyone’s passion in speaking about the subject showed how significant the art is.
Samoa is a society in transition. No cultures are static. All societies and cultures are breathing, living entities that will grow and change. The *tatau* is a microcosm the transitions Samoa is experiencing. In the face of changes, Samoa has often absorbed the qualities that fit into its cultures and rejected those that do not. Tattooing is similar as it has changed in order to fit the needs of the Samoan people, but has remained constant and firm in ways that keep it true to its essence. Tools have changed in order to meet health standards and keep Samoans safe, *tufuga ta tatau* have begun travelling in order to serve Samoans overseas, and more people are getting the *malu* and *tatau* for a myriad of reasons. However, patterns have stayed the same, traditional tattooing remains within the tattooing families, and *tufuga ta tatau* are doing everything in their power to protect traditional tattoo practices from being introduced into a contemporary tattoo setting, where they would completely lose their importance. While contemporary tattooing will continue to exist, and globalization will continue to impact traditional tattooing practices, I believe Samoans will protect and maintain the *malu* and *tatau*.
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Glossary

‘Au: Traditional tools for tatau
Ausogi’as, Aufa’ailo, Autapulu/autafa: Traditional tools used for tatau
‘Ava: Drink mixed from a root, served at special occasions
Lega: Pollen from tree bark used in ceremony after tatau
Fa’asamoa: Samoan way of life
Fale: Traditional Samoan home
Fe’au: Chores
Malu: Traditional female tattoo.
Matai: Samoan chief
Mea’ai: Food
Palagi: Non-Samoan
Pe’a: Other word used for traditional male tattoo, also means flying fox.
Sausau: Mallet (part of traditional tools)
Siva: Dance
Sogamiiti: Man with traditional tattoo
Ta Pe’a: Contemporary tattooist
Tala: Currency in Samoa
Tatau: Traditional Samoan male tattoo, or traditional tattoo in general
Taulealea: Chief’s helpers/servants/ untattooed young man
Taulima: Ankle band tattoo
Taupou: Virgin daughter of high chief, one who mixes ‘ava and performs the Samoan dance
Tautua: Service
Tufuga ta tatau: Traditional Samoan tattooist
Va’a: boat, also part of the tatau
Appendix 1: Significant Quotes

“If global trends go as they are, it’s going to keep on growing, whether it diminishes the mana of it, I’m not sure. I mean we see it all over our bodies, in clothes, the tattooing.” Vanya Taule’alo, 29/04/14

“No society is static and I mean, culture has to change, it has to adapt. You can’t pull the plug on it and you can’t put it back in the box. It’s bubbling over.” Vanya Taule’alo, 29/04/14

On the origins of tatau: “The myth is related to the goddesses Taima and Tilafaiga who were demonic, sort of deities. Originally they were Siamese twins and they lived in American Samoa and they did a whole lot of bad things and they finally fled to Teuilia and went to Fiji. While they were swimming they were split apart by the bow of a cone. They went to Fiji and they were taught tattooing by two men, as the legend goes. And the men wanted to marry them but they didn’t want to marry the men so they came back to Samoa with the tattooing tools in their canoe. There’s a strange sort of reference to a song in the legend where they went under the sea and they were reafhing for a clam and they changed the words of the son which is why only the men tattooed, but I’ve never really quite understood that because women have always been tattooed as well. But this is the mythological bennings of tattooing in Samoa.” Vanya Taule’alo 29/04/14

“On the future of tattooing: “I think it will live on, and it may re-establish some of its authenticity. I think it’s possible. It doesn’t mean that a lot of young men will do it, but I think those that do it, I believe it will live on. It’s possible that there will be a big clash and then a realignment as people come to realize what’s happening, and come to realize that what’s new is not always best, and see what’s coming, I think they may rethink the value of local life.” Afamasaga Toleafoa, 06/05/14

“The tattooing, there’s an awful amount of vanity attached to it, as if it’s a huge achievement meant to be shown off.” Afamasaga Toleafoa, 06/05/14

“I answer the questions from the perspective of being a long term observer research in Samoa, whose been following this topic with documentary films, etc, that I’m not ethnically Samoan, and I’m an anthropologist, so I refrain from asserting opinions about what should or should not be from that framework, but I’ll answer using my own framework.” Micah Van der Ryn, 05/05/14

“It is economic, social and cultural. Most Samoans like seeing its continuation as an identity and signifier of something distinctive to Samoa that is being perpetuated in a culturally Western dominated or “made in China” world. Some people do not like Samoans to think that having a tatau automatically makes you “Samoan” if you don’t speak the language, and don’t behave and value Samoan ways. In other words there should be some match but personalities and knowledge between any two individuals will also be different.” Micah Van der Ryn, 05/05/14

“I wanted to focus on the tapping because when it happens, you just focus on the tapping because it actually allows you to breathe. As soon as the short taps happened, I would breathe in and then exhale slowly as he did the next part, so that you’re realizing and still breathing and circulating your blood.” Tuilagi Seiuli Alan Alo Va’ai, 02/05/14
On Contemporary tattoos with traditional patterns:

“I think it’s nice that they’re incorporating motifs of the pe’a in that because some people can’t afford the full pe’a but want to carry some motif of their culture. It’s a marker of their pride in their culture. It’s nice that they want to incorporate traditional motifs into their arm, sleeve or shoulder. I would encourage that. At least having a bit of your culture with you is nicer than having something like a snake or dragon.” Tuilagi Seiuli Alan Alo Va’ai, 02/05/14

“Be proud to be a Samoan and respect your own culture and arts. If you see someone doing it [the traditional tattoo] the wrong way, it really hurts.” Lalovai Peseta, 26/04/14

“90% of our clientele are all overseas people. Including Samoans that live abroad and some here for holidays. A very small10% would be the locals. And again that’s really based on money. Our Samoan tala is very weak. So their dollar coming overseas is quite strong, so they can really afford the process that we charge.” Michael Hickey, 25/04/14

“The traditional hand tattoo, or glove, use to be part of the malu. The malu used to have more of the glove and even the navel. But with missionary arrival, that had to stop.” Junior Sulu’ape, 30/04/14

“Today, as a tufuga, everyday is booked. There are more and more customers. Every day is non-stop work. This year we are fully booked.” Junior Sulu’ape, 30/04/14

“It’s a gift from god to our ancestors.” Junior Sulu’ape, 30/04/14

I like talking about tattooing like this. There were 3 new questions that asked today that made me rethink and refocus some things. They were things that should have been asked a long time ago.” Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape, 01/05/14

I was invited to a tattoo convention in Rome, back in 1985. The first Samoan tufuga to be invited to a tattoo convention. Back then I was already a vice principal of Chanell college. When i asked my principal about this invitation he told me, don’t miss the chance. This is a golden chance for you. You go. So I went. But before I went, all o fthe palagi priests up at Chanel, they told me to be careful. Be careful of those places. There are things that you have never seen in your life. So I took that chance, came back and started my association team for the tattoo. The Malofie association. Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape, 01/05/14
Appendix 2: Images of Malu and Tatau and Contemporary Tattoo

Tatau

Source: Wikipedia commons

Malu

Source: Wikipedia commons

Photograph taken 24/04/14, Contemporary Tattoo
Appendix 3: Images from Traditional Observation

Sanitizing ‘au

Su’a Petelo Sulu’ape working on malu

Su’a Peter Sulu’ape and soga’imiti

Su’a Peter Sulu’ape working on tatau