

# *LAEI O SAMOA*

Research Paper

by

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## Introduction

There are basically three types of traditional trades (*faatufunaga*) in Samoan culture: house-building, boat-building, and tattooing (*taga tatau*). This paper is focuses on *taga tatau* (*tatau*-making) and its significance in Samoan culture, with particular emphasis on utilizing this art in developing a curriculum in mathematics.



*Taga tatau* (*tatau*-making) is over 2000 years old. It has various stories as to its origin in our culture but I will focus on the most commonly told story. The story begins with two ladies, named Tilafaiga and Taema, who were in Fiji and swam to Samoa with their basket of *au* (*ato au*). The basket of *au* is the basket of tools use for applying the *tatau*. As they swam over to Samoa, they sang a song that says that women are to be tattooed and not men. When they arrived in the village of Falealupo on Upolu, they saw a big oyster in the deep ocean and they dove down to get it because they were hungry. In the process of obtaining this oyster, they reversed the song and said that men are to be tattooed and not women. Although the art of tattoo is for men, women do receive tattoos from their thighs down to their knees. Their tattoo is refered to as *malu*. The two ladies visited a few villages and when they were welcomed, they would leave with the villagers the knowledge and skill of tattooing. One of these families were the Su'a clan from the village of Safotu. The art of tattoo was born here and spread out to the rest of the Samoan Islands.

*Tatau* was and still is based on the concept of service. Service in the Samoan culture is very important. Every member of the family from the oldest to the youngest has duties and responsibilities to perform as his or her service to the family. The Matai system, which Samoa is famous for, relies heavily on the service provided by the individual to the family as an important factor in considering someone for a matai title.

When a High Chief decides to have a *tatau*, he will ask his talking chief to prepare the family for the official ceremony of asking the *tufuga* (tattoo artist) for his service (*amiga o le tufuga*). The High Chief and his family will visit the family of the artist, bringing gifts of food and fine mats, and among these fine mats is the one chosen specifically for the occasion (*i'e o le amiga*). If the *tufuga* gives the okay, they will set a date for the *tufuga* to visit the High Chief's family and start the work. In preparation, the High Chief's family—or for that matter the village—will welcome the *tufuga* with an *ava* ceremony. In addition to the *ava* ceremony, the family will prepare clothes (*faalavalava*) and shelter (*apisa*) for the *tufuga*. The *tufuga* will be assisted by one or sometimes two individuals who each perform a specific task during the process. One of which is called the “*solo*”, whose task is to wipe the ink and blood off while the *tufuga* performs the actual tattoo. The second one is called the “*toso*”, whose task is to pull the skin tight as the *tufuga* applies the tattoo.

As with many Samoan culture practices, there are strict rules (*tapu*) that come with having a *tatau*. In regards to the *apisa* of the *tufuga*, no married woman can enter except for the single ladies. In reference to the *tufuga* himself, no one should sit behind the *tufuga* while he is performing the art. There should be absolutely no complaints against the *tufuga* during the entire process. There should be no standing inside or outside of the house where the *tatau* is done except from at least 50 feet away. The person that is having the *tatau* cannot sleep with his wife

until the *tatau* is finished. Although it is not in practice nowadays, the *tatau* bearer should test his strength in bed with a different woman before going back to his wife after the *tatau* is done. The *tufuga* will determine the duration of the *tatau* process in consultation with the person that is having the *tatau*. The average duration of a *tatau* is about 14 days.

The *tufuga* has basically 4 tools in his possession to do the work. These tools are called “*au*”. There is the “*au tapulu*”, use to make thick lines that can cover a wide area like the upper thigh. The other *au* is the “*au tapis*”, used to make thin lines. The “*au mono*”, which is the most useful *au* is used to make small designs in-between lines. The tips of the various *au* were originally made out of human bones obtained from enemies killed during warfare between villages. Human bones were replaced with boar teeth, which are widely use nowadays. The boar teeth must be removed for this purpose before the animal is cooked in the traditional ground oven (*umu*). The fourth and last instrument is the *au ta*. This piece of stick is the tapping stick use by the *tufuga* to tap the *au* dipped into the ink onto the skin of the tattoo bearer.

In addition to the tools for the trade, the ink (*lama*) must be prepared ahead of time for use. Traditionally when a boy is born to a family, the father has the responsibility of preparing the *lama* for his son if he decides to have a *tatau* later on in life. The father will move in to a small house (*fale mou*) outside to collect the *lama* for 3 nights. The burning of the *lama* must be done in secrecy or the *lama* will not be of used for the *tatau* (*lama ave*).

### **Methodology**

This research paper is mainly the product of interviews and Internet searches. I interviewed a *tatau* bearer (*soga’imiti*) and a *tatau* artist (*tufuga*). There was a brief explanation of the rationale behind this research in connection to the objectives of project Macimise prior to the actual interview. The following questions were used to interview the *soga’imiti*:

- 1) Explain your knowledge in the history of the *tatau* Samoa.
- 2) Why is the *tatau* so significant in the Samoan culture?
- 3) Explain the process on how to get a *tatau*.
- 4) Could you express how it feels to have a *tatau*?
- 5) As a teacher by profession, explain how would you use the *tatau* in teaching.

The following questions were used to interview the *tufuga*:

- 1) Explain your knowledge in the history of the *tatau* Samoa.
- 2) Why is the *tatau* so significant in the Samoan culture?
- 3) What sort of skills that a person must have to successfully become a *tufuga*?
- 4) Explain the process the *tufuga* takes in consideration before, during, and after the *tatau*.
- 5) As an advocate of the *tatau*, what role do you foresee the art of *tatau* have in educating our children?

One of the most difficult aspects of interviews is finding the right person to interview. In this case, finding a *tufuga* was almost impossible on my island. Upon interviewing of the *soga'imiti*, I was told that there are only two *tufugas* on island. I intended to interview both but one of the *tufuga* has left the island to perform *tatau* in the state of Hawaii.

In addition to interviews, there are quite a handful of sites on the web that reference the *tatau*. One of these sites is [www.dreadloki.com](http://www.dreadloki.com). It begins with the history of the *tatau* and includes the actual *tatau*-making and some details of the structure and tools used in the art. It also provided me with some actual video recording of *tatau*-making, something I wish I had a chance to record for this research. The video is recorded while the song explaining the history of the *tatau* is played and sang by the members of the family (*tapuaiga*). As with interviews, the

web has its difficulties as well. One of these difficulties is the accuracy of the information provided.

I truly believe that there is more to learn about the mathematical applications behind the *tatau*. This was due to the fact that I interviewed only one *tufuga* and one *soga'imiti*. It was during the interview of the *tufuga* that he revealed what I must take into consideration before any documentation is done. He expressed his reluctance to give out some of the secrets of the trade because professional tattoo artists with access to various media could duplicate the art of the *tatau* of Samoa without the knowledge of the culture. I have made known to the *tufuga* my intention in conjunction with project Macimise, which is to make use of cultural practices to develop mathematical curricula for local use.

I would recommend more interviews of *soga'imiti*, *tufuga*, and elders in the community at large. One problem that I foresee in utilizing such practice as the *tatau* is the acceptance by the community. The fact that our people have various interpretations of culture practices and their significance, we need to get a large pool of people contributing in the development of the project to gain support.

The most successful component of this research was the interviews. The interview of the *soga'imiti* was very informative. The individual that I interviewed for the *soga'imiti* is a colleague and a long-time friend who also happens to be a teacher. It was easy to interview him and communicate with him mainly because we are both matai title-holders. His matai title is from one of the clans that the blessing of *tatau*-making was bestowed on to. He had interviewed more people and participated in many *tatau*-making ceremonies in which he gained vast knowledge of *tatau* in Samoa.

## Description

The privilege of having a *tatau* in Samoa was given to the chiefs (*tamalii*). When a boy is born to a family, the father at some stage of this child's life has the responsibility of preparing the *tatau*-making for his son. He has to prepare the *lama* (ink) for the son's *tatau* by performing a ritual. The father has to build a small hut (*fale mo'u*) for the collection of the *lama* for the *tatau*. The *lama* is that black powder-like substance you get from burning wood. The father has to stay in the *fale mo'u* for 3 nights to collect enough *lama* for the occasion. When the father enters the *fale mo'u*, the entrance will be closed so that no evil spirits can enter and take the *lama*. The *lama* will be stored in coconut shells, until the *tatau*-making starts.

At the proper time, which is when the son is around 16 to 18 years old, the family will prepare to ask the *tufuga* for his assistance in performing the ceremony which is known in our culture as the "*amiga o le tufuga*" (Ausage, 2010). The family has to prepare food, gift presentations and a big fine mat for this ritual. The mother of the boy and his aunties are responsible for the weaving of this single fine mat for the *tufuga*. On this day, the family will travel if necessary to the village of the *tufuga* to make a presentation. The family will take with them a talking chief (*tulafale*) to speak on their behalf. The talking chief will give a lengthy speech first, which is a critical part of the entire presentation. The food presentation follows with taro, cooked pig, and coconut. The last part is the presentation of the big fine mat (*ie tele*). When the family is done with the presentations, they will wait for the *tufuga*'s answer to their request. The *tufuga* by way of his talking chief will answer appropriately and set the day to start the ceremony.

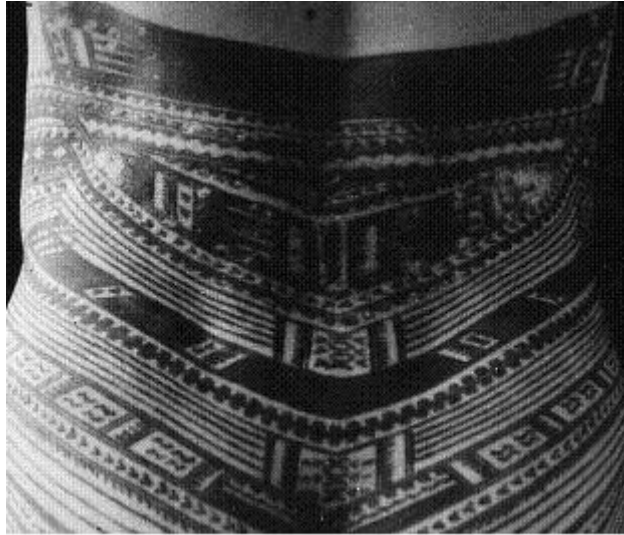


A separate ceremony will take place upon the arrival of the *tufuga*. The host family will prepare an *ava* (kava) ceremony to welcome the *tufuga*. Upon the completion of the *ava* ceremony, the family will offer clothes and a shelter for the *tufuga* while he is away from his family. The offering of clothes is called the “*faalavalava*” and the shelter is called the “*apisa*”. The *tufuga* usually brings his helper with him, usually an apprentice that performs the task of “*toso*”, pulling of the skin, or “*solo*”, wiping the ink and blood from the skin. These helpers live in a separate house from the *tufuga*.

It is a tradition for the *soga’imiti* to wrap around his waist a fine mat (*fusi ta*) every time he is to be tattooed. This fine mat will be given for the *tufuga* as he will be naked during the process. The *tufuga* before starting will do some visual inspection of the *soga’imiti*’s body. In the process of inspecting and feeling of the bones, the *tufuga* makes some dots here and there on the body. He is taking some measurements and marking guide-points so that the lines can be created in a linear manner.

The cost of having a *tatau* is something that the entire clan or family has to bear. Traditionally there is no money involved; instead, there is gift offering to the *tufuga* from the family of the chief. Since the availability of money, it has played a major role in the process. In the present, the cost of getting a *tatau* ranges from \$200 to \$500 per person (Ausage, 2010).

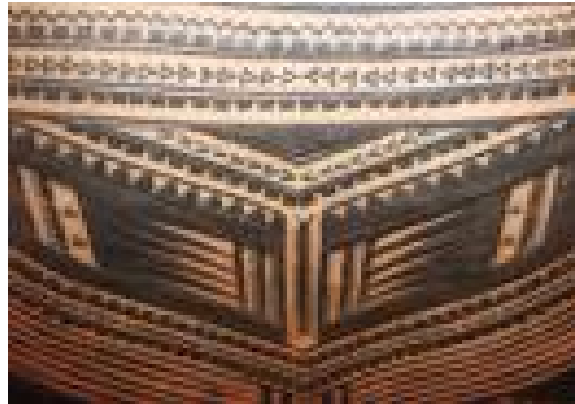




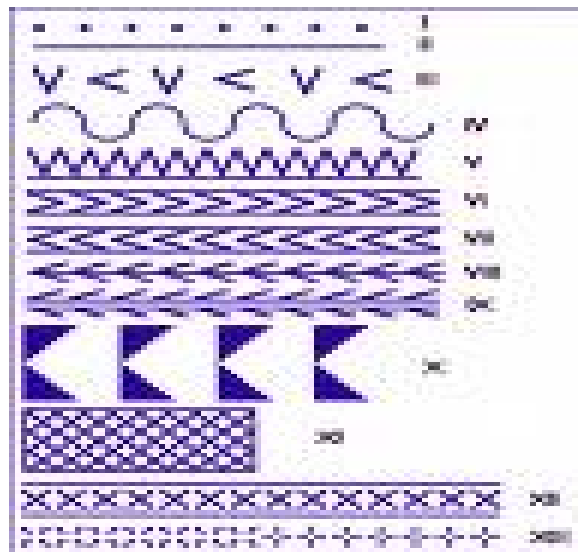
According to Mr. Su'a Wilson Fitiao, the first stage of the *tatau* is drawing the boat that is sitting at the top of the *tatau*. It is this shape that requires careful measurement because the rest of the *tatau* will fall in place when this shape is set correctly. The top edges of the boat on both ends must point toward the nipples of the *soga'imiti*. The lines are tattooed with the *au* (tattooing tool). The *au tapulu* is the widest *au* with the most teeth. This *au* is specifically for tattooing large areas of the body like the boat shape and the designs on the thighs. The *aso au* or medium-sized *au* is used for producing straight lines. The *au mogo* or small-sized *au* is used for tattooing traditional Samoan motifs between lines.

The entire *tatau* has 12 stages and therefore should take around 12 days or so to complete. Although that is the normal time frame, there are individuals who took fewer days to complete their *tatau*. This indicates the strong feeling of braveness and strength among the males who choose to have a *tatau*. One the general rule of having a *tatau* is that it must be done in pairs. Anyone who wants to have a *tatau* must find someone who will pair up with him for the task. The rationale behind this belief is that if it is too hard for one person to bear the pain, then your partner will take over while you take a break. The fact of the matter is that there are people

who decided not to finish the *tatau* due to the pain and agony associated with the process. In Samoa these individuals are referred to as “*pula u*” or “*pea mutu*”. These individuals will live their lives with marks of shame on their bodies in the form of their unfinished *tatau*. They are not well received by the community and the family does take heat from the village if they have a *pea mutu* in their family.



The patterns on a *tatau* are very distinctive. These patterns are committed to memory by the *tufuga* as he proceeds in *tatau*-making. There is no drawing to follow or manual to read from, only the brain power of the *tufuga*. After years of apprenticeship and learning from the master *tufuga*, the art of *tatau* has been kept safely within the families or clans whom the art was bestowed with.



The various designs between lines derive from our natural environment. There are symbols of birds (*gogo*), and the feet of bird (*vae tuli*), which is created with two lines that meet at one point and form an angle. There are straight lines (*aso*), which are created by marking dots on the body and then connecting these dots to make a line. There is wavy line (*faaanufe*) or a worm-like line. There is the symbol of the repeating triangles sharing a vertex (*faalaupaoga*) or like the leaves of the pandanus tree. This is the fishing net-like symbol (*faaupega*), which indicates the service of providing food for the family through fishing. The starfish (*aveau*) symbol is created by two lines crossing each other at their midpoints. There are many symbols use by the *tufuga* in decorating the *tatau*, and all these symbols are somehow connected to the theme of service (Teleiai, 2010).

### References

1. Ausage, Teleiai Christian (*Soga'imiti*)
2. Fitiao, Su'a Wilson (*Tufuga*)
3. [www.dreadloki.com](http://www.dreadloki.com), accessed 3/11/2010

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