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The Pacific project Samoa

'We had no paper, but we had our bodies': the sacred and symbolic in Polynesian tattoos

Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson

The New Zealand foreign minister's *moko* has become international news, but beyond an identifier, our *tatau* are a link to ancestors, a vessel for our cultures' stories, and a tribute to those who have gone before



A man wears a traditional Samoan body tattoo Photograph: Design Pics Inc/Alamy

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Shortly before my interview with six Europeans at a roundtable in Germany, I gently covered my hand tattoo with a skin-toned foundation.

I knew that without the proper context, they would stereotype me in the western sense and presume me either a criminal or at least uneducated or unprofessional. A perception of tattooing common on that side of the world.

'This is who I am', says first female MP to wear Māori facial

But the tattoo or *tatau* (in Samoan) which they may have found offensive in their worldview, was treasured in mine,

tattoo in NZ parliament

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the Samoan culture.

Instead of signifying low social standing, the tattoo in Polynesia is a mark of respect, hierarchy and cultural integrity. Unlike the European tattoos that they know, my hand was inked by a *tufuga ta tatau* (master tattooist), a preordained artist and chief borne of the lineage of tattooist in the Samoan hierarchy of chiefs.

It wasn't a buzzing electric needle that broke my skin but rather a serrated bone comb made of a boar's tusk and hand tapped by the *tufuga* using burnt candlenut soot as ink.

I was eight years old. My interviewers might all have fainted had they known this.



A young Samoan woman is inked with a traditional tattoo Photograph: Dean Purcell/Getty Images

The pantsuit I chose that morning also conveniently covered the markings on my thighs, the female Samoan tattoo, the *malu*, the same markings carried by generations of Samoan women, a rite of passage, a sign of chiefly lineage and a “dress” of pride.

My *malu* was not simply a “tattoo”, it is a link to my ancestors, a duty to my culture and a tribute to my mother.

I have lost much of my childhood

Yet, when I set foot on a plane to leave Samoa, or enter the

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Māori – we must
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hallowed halls of the United Nations for meetings, I hide all my tattoos, because in those spaces, they won't understand.

It was therefore an absolute monumental event when Nanaia Mahuta, a Māori leader [was appointed foreign minister of New Zealand in November 2020](#).

Mahuta made international headlines, as the first Indigenous female foreign minister and first MP and minister with a *moko kauae* (traditional [Māori](#) lip and chin markings).

I read numerous international articles about Mahuta and the novelty of her appointment. But what westerners found intriguing, exotic and almost rebellious is the norm for Polynesians, passed through generations and etched into the fabric of diverse cultures of Oceania.



New Zealand's foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta Photograph: Kina Sai

Polynesian tattooing survived the missionaries' attempts to wipe it out in the 18th and 19th centuries across the South Pacific and continues to be an integral part of our living cultures.

When Moana the Disney movie came out, I found myself marvelling at the fact that her father, the chief, was accurately inked in the *soga'imiti* (traditional male tattoo), signalling the international acceptance of tribal tattoos and the accurate depiction of it in an international film.

Travelling through the US, UK and some parts of Europe over the years, I have found myself staring randomly at the arms of strangers, mainly men with tattooed sleeves depicting Polynesian motifs.

I saw the *ali'ao* (trochus shell) on the arm of a UPS driver in New York, the *ave'au* (starfish) on a young man in the tube in London and the *gogo* (seagull) on the neck of a young woman on the streets of Amsterdam.

Spotting the motifs on people without a connection to Samoa or Polynesia makes me smile, transporting me home as I recall the meaning of these treasured marks of nature on our skin and how it has transcended borders.

I have both humorous, painful and grieving memories of the *tatau* from my childhood on the island of Savai'i, and seeing these reminders in such a foreign context, brings back all those memories.

But I also cringe at the audacity of those who bore our markings without connection to our cultures and the sheer disregard for the sacredness of the motifs they casually displayed. These are sacred tribal markings, and are assigned through chiefly lineage and placement in a tribe, village or community.

Our cultural practice was passed down verbally, and according to the late Va'asili'ifiti Moelagi Jackson, high chief, orator and my mother, tattoos also played a part in this transfer of knowledge.

“We had no paper, we had no pens, but we had our bodies, traditional ink and tools to mark our skin. The body was used as a canvas, and that was one way for our ancestors to pass down knowledge. My *malu* therefore does not belong to me, but to my community,” she told me once.



Samoan dancers bearing traditional tattoos Photograph: Mark Kolbe/Getty Images

All across Oceania, different cultures have different age old symbols that celebrate our heritage.

Women historically play a significant role in the story of tattooing in the Pacific.

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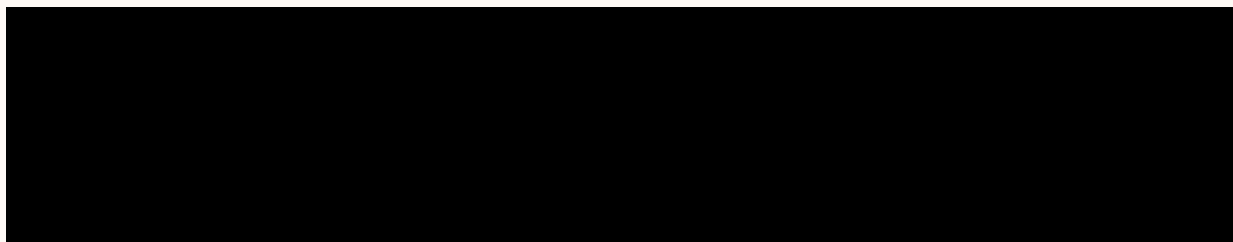
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For Samoa, the origin of the *malu* was brought by two women from [Fiji](#), there are songs dedicated to their journey and metaphors that capture what happened.

This was recently highlighted in the documentary Marks of Mana by Lisa Taouma, a [New Zealand](#) filmmaker of Samoan descent.

She captures the stories of women across Oceania and touches on the significance of the *moko kauae* of Maori, the Fijian *Veiqia*, the Papuan *tep tok* and the Samoan *malu*.

As she put it in a media interview: “These marks were hugely significant. It’s a very strong symbol of your role in the community and your role in protecting your family and service to your family.”





At some point, I hope that tribal tattoos of Polynesia on Polynesians, received by bare hand and nature's tools are viewed as a cultural norm to be embraced and not as a sign of rebellion or a history of narcotics.

But then again, if the chiefs and warriors before us managed to sustain the art of *tatau* despite great efforts by missionaries to wipe it out, then we certainly don't need international endorsement or Western understanding to give value to our cultural practice.

After all, the true value of the *tatau* lay in us: Samoans, Polynesians and those who inherited it. It is in the tapping by the *tufuga*, the legs of the 16-year-old daughter of the high chief who was blessed to receive it, the back of the untitled man who has pledged to serve his council of chiefs and on the hands of the 80-year-old whom to this day weaves the *finemat* to mark the milestones of her village.

Global endorsement does not really matter, because the true meaning of the *tatau* lies in the culture and the people who preserve it.

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