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Commodifying Tattoo

Samoan tattooing is a cultural practice that encompasses complicated facets of social development, colonization, and artistic exchange. In modern settings, it can serve as a visible and ineffable reminder of ethnic heritage and social standing, but it has also been commodified as artistic labor for consumption by tourists. As visual culture and globalization increased the exchange of ideas between *tufuga* and non-Samoan tattooists, issues developed around ownership and license to the motifs, rituals, and tools associated with the practice.

The Samoan tattooing process is called *tatatau*, from *ta* ('to strike') and *tatau* (images drawn on the body)[1]. Specifically, Samoan men receive *tatau* in the form of long, parallel lines, dark shading, and detailed geometric shapes that extend from their hips to their knees; this general patterning is called *pe'a*[2], and men often complete their *tatau* over many sessions throughout their life. The time, expense, and pain it takes to complete a *pe'a* serves both the practical reason of needing to let the skin fully heal between sessions, and as a cultural marker to represent growth, coming of age, and maturity.

Tatau are created by a *tufuga tatatau*, a skilled practitioner who is often associated with a traditional guild or family where the techniques, tools, and specific motifs are passed down through generations. Traditional tools are made from a variety of small bone combs that produce

[1]Mallon, p. 145

[2]ibid.

different types of lines, which are attached to a shell plate that binds it to a wooden handle. This handle is then struck repeatedly with a rod to drive the fine teeth of the bone comb into the surface of the skin, which deposits the pigment into place. Each *tufuga* has the license to create a *tatau* with variation in specific lines and motifs, depending on the shape of the body and other imagery appropriate for a particular person; still, the overall appearance and style maintains a persistent, identifiable look, which gives the impression of a longstanding ancient practice. Contemporary practitioners, both of Samoan and non-Samoan origin, are known to incorporate *tatau* imagery in their work, but largely do so with modern electric machines [3].

Traditionally, a *tufuga* would accept customary Samoan exchange goods such as *'ie toga* (fine mats), *siapo* (bark cloth), and pigs; in a modern setting, in which access to such goods has decreased (especially in the diaspora of Samoans living outside of Samoa), cash payments starting around $1800 have been accepted substitutions [4]. However, the introduction of cash into the *tatatau* process inevitably raises questions of commercialization, especially as it coincides with the rise of tourism and commodification of indigenous art.

One of the earliest Samoan *tufuga* to practice prominently outside of Samoa was Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo II, who worked in New Zealand after 1972, along with his brothers, who also worked in the United States and Europe. In addition to bringing the *pe'a* to the Samoan diaspora, Sulu'ape Paolo also traveled to tattoo conventions abroad and tattooed non-Samoans, including the highly publicized process of tattooing the artist Tony Fomison [5]. Non-Samoans were known to receive traditional Samoan *tatau*; European explorers and traders sometimes collected *pe'a* on their travels through the 1800s, and Tongan elites have traveled to Samoa specifically to receive

[3] ibid., p 146

[4] ibid., p. 159

[5] ibid., p. 157

tattoos [6]; however, the level of exchange in which Sulu'ape Paulo engaged with outsiders was a controversial topic for more traditional Samoans. Sean Mallon explains that "[when] non-Samoans are tattooed, a custom Samoans feel they have some authority over slips beyond their influence and control." [7]

This controversy seems to reflect on a larger cultural response to the appropriations that Nicholas Thomas describes; he mentions "[museums] crammed with indigenous artifacts" [8] as collections that represent the European collector's "curiosity" in these items. This curiosity stood as a precursor to colonialism, as it was often a response to practices deemed primitive or barbaric, and a euphemism that avoided "passing an aesthetic judgment" [9]. By collecting these artifacts for display in natural history museums, those items lost the meanings of their original contexts, and ultimately supported European attitudes towards colonizing and civilizing people perceived to be inferior.

The collecting and commodification of *tatau* is more complicated; creating one involves a tedious and painful process, which results in a design that exists on a human body. The very fact that the images are embedded in living flesh is how Sulu'ape Paolo justifies allowing non-Samoans to receive his work; Mallon reports that "[he] considered the *tatau* something the wearer could not exchange or sell"[10], which effectively renders the tattoo longer a commodity in and of itself. One cannot simply remove a tattoo from someone's body for display in the sort of museums that Thomas described, which protects it from that specific method of decontextualization.

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[6] ibid., 149

[7] ibid., p. 158

[8] Thomas, p. 125

[9] ibid., pp. 129–130

[10] Mallon, p. 158

However, the completed *tatau* itself is not necessarily what has become commodified, so much as the labor of the *tufuga* and access to the visual motifs. In the documentary *Cannibal Tours*, we can clearly see tourists traveling to foreign, "primitive" places specifically for the purpose of acquiring souvenirs, which included photographs of themselves with indigenous people receiving traditional face paint. That the natives of those areas express frustration and confusion at this behavior shows that they feel something is being taken from them, even if the loss is not tangible; it's the idea of having visited that place, made connections, and acquired proof that motivates tourists to collect experiences of other cultures. Mallon notices this trend in the form of postcards, pamphlets, and Internet forums featuring tattooed Samoans, which generate outsider interest in Samoan *tatau*.

A consequence of visual accessibility to the *pe'a* is that a non-Samoan with tattooing equipment could reproduce those motifs without having any association with the traditional practice. A tattooist in Pittsburgh who worked on one of my tattoos said he often works with unfamiliar designs that his clients bring in themselves, and generally doesn't ask about their origins because he believed it was the clients' responsibility to approve or reject what imagery they wanted to wear. Meanwhile, a friend of mine who works in Denver withholds her labor from client inquiries that she deems as cultural appropriation (to which she includes mimicry of indigenous styles) because she does not want to knowingly contribute to the commodification of other cultures. The prevalence of popular "tribal" style tattoos on Westerners, as well as the range of ethical decisions made by modern tattooists, indicate ongoing issues surrounding the rights to motifs in indigenous designs.

The work of both traditional *tufuga* and modern tattooists can perpetuate the appropriation of Samoan *tatau* motifs, regardless of restrictions upheld by certain parts of the culture. However,

tatau does not exist as a static, ancient practice; its usage has evolved continuously as a response to encounters between Samoans and non-Samoans. The exchange of imagery, economics, and nationalities inevitably changes the context of a practice that is central to a cultural identity.

References

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