TONGAN TA TATAU: Awakening a sleeping giant!

An interview with Su'a Sulu'ape Aisea Toetuu.

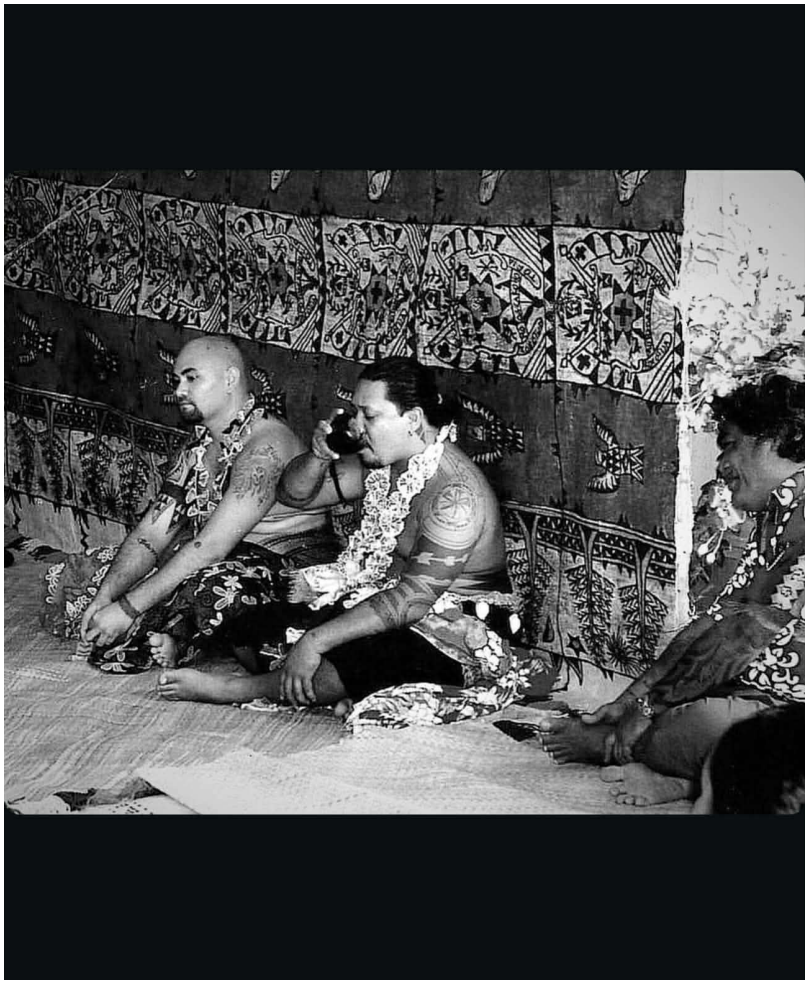
In the 1990s, different styles of tattooing began to emerge on the international stage. One of those was the ancient Samoan art of *tatau*, brought from the Pacific islands by a man named Su'a

Sulu'ape Paulo. Westerners were mesmerised by his mastery of hand tools, the way in which the wooden sticks seemed to beat to a drum of their own in the hands of this man who created stunning pieces of solid black designs with a carved piece of bone attached to a wooden *'au'* (handle.) Then we called it 'tribal' although this is not culturally correct as there are no tribes in that part of the Pacific. The art style took off, feeding Western fascination, driven by tattoo artists like Leo Zulueta in the States and Eus in Holland who created and sold commercial tribal tattoo flash. This has caused some conflict over the years as the Polynesian cultures strive to maintain control of their ancestral designs for their own people, heading to the development of culturally appropriate styles specifically for foreigners, like 'kirituhi'.

It is not encouraged to copy tatau designs directly without any knowledge of their origin or meaning as this is disrespectful to the artists who work hard to maintain their cultural identity.

The Polynesian *tatau* culture was experiencing a revival of its own in the Pacific during the 1990s. Tricia Allen, anthropologist and tattoo artist, was connecting the documentation of tattoo designs by the European voyagers with aspiring tattoo artists in their island homes. This history was not available outside of museum basements but described island life before the influences of European contact and gave insights about tattooing and its application before missionaries banned it. One of these tattooers was Aisea Toetuu, a Tongan based in Honolulu, who had a burning desire to rekindle the lost art of Tongan *ta tatau* and bring it back to his people. In the mid-1990s, Tricia connected him with the Samoan master Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a Petelo, brother of Paulo, and Aisea began his journey to become a *tufunga ta tatau*, master of Tongan tattoo. He

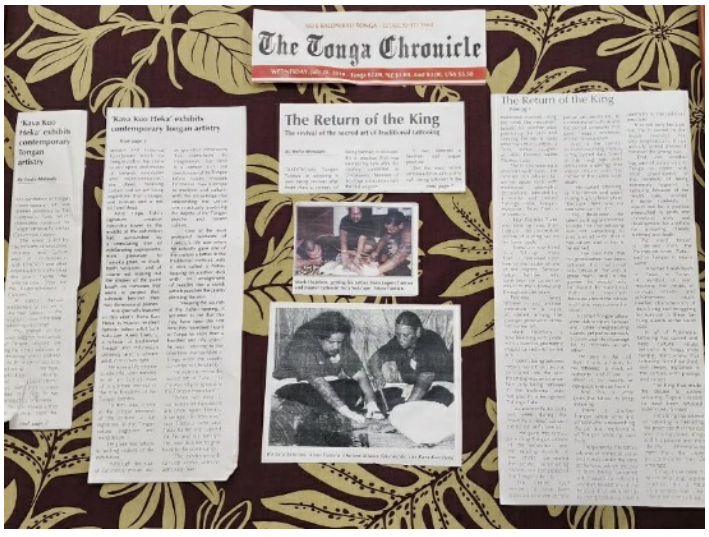
describes it as a grass roots endeavor, working among the people of Tonga in diaspora and on the islands, researching and learning the protocols of a master hand tapper or *tufunga*.



Aisea's title of Sulu'ape was bestowed in 2004 and then Su'a (master) in 2009. Samoan titles put Toetuu in a position of high regard in Samoan tattooing, but his mission was always to revitalize Tongan *ta tatau*, banned in 1836 in Tonga by the missionaries and the King.

His titles meaningless in Tonga, Aisea is a master of the art of *ta tatau faka tonga* and has been reconnecting it to its ancestral land through Ta Vaka, the name he has given to the men's *tatau* reaching from below the knee to above the waist, similar to the Samoan *'pe'a'*, a name Westerners know well as the great warrior tattoo of days gone by.

San Francisco 2007, Ata Atanofo received the first Tongan *ta vaka* to be performed in California. His family was overjoyed to receive services from a Tongan *tufunga ta tatau* but this work would be falsely credited to Su'a Alaiva'a in the book Tatau: A history of Samoan tattooing. Aisea stopped posting his work to avoid future similar issues as this caused such great disappointment to Ata's family and also to stop random copying of his designs under the flag of Tongan tattooing.



Undeterred, the sounds of the *ta tatau* rang out across Tongatapu for the first time in over 100 years in 2010 at the Kava Kuo Heka festival in Fa'onuela as Aisea brought his hand-tapping skills back to his homeland. It reached the ears of the people and began the path of gaining recognition from the community, the government of Tonga and the Royal family.

The Kings son, HRH Prince Ata received a full *ta vaka* in 2017 in Honolulu.

The Ta Vaka Toetuu Tattoo Society, was founded in 2023 to help support young men interested in going through the process of gaining a *tatau faka tonga.*

In 2024, Aisea was invited by the Tongan delegation to participate as their *tufunga ta tatau* in the Festival of Pacific Arts in Honolulu, a celebration held every four years to preserve traditional arts, culture and language of indigenous Pacific Islanders. The 2024 Festival was named Ho'oulu Lahui: Regenerating Oceania and focused on cultural heritage and its growth.

2026 saw a meeting with HRH Princess Latufuipeka Tuku'aho of Tonga to discuss the cultural significance of modern

tatau faka tonga; she was surprised at the emphasis underlined by Aisea to re-embody cultural protocols within the Tongan *ta tatau*.

The re-awakening of a banned cultural art is solidly continuing under the banner of Ta Vaka Toetuu; Aisea's family name means to rise again or resurrect. The word *ta vaka* literally means canoe, but in this instance can be translated as vessel or embodiment, carrying the work forward.

I interviewed Su'a Aisea in early 2026 in Honolulu to give us a better understanding of the Polynesian cultural *tatau* and the fundamental inter-connectedness of the island traditions. It's a complex and fascinating story.

Pym: What is the difference between the Samoan and the Tongan *ta tatau*?

Aisea Toetuu: I think they are similar because Samoa and Tonga set a close tie in their empires; Tongan men were marrying Samoan women, for example, so this created a central Pacific Empire. We shared cultures. We shared craftsmanship. Samoa had ties with Tongan tattooing,

going back and forth and exchanging. You also had the levels of tattooing where there was lower and middle class and then the ones who could afford the highest of the *tufunga* (masters) tattooing. And that *tatau* was more elaborate and showed more status.

Tufunga is like saying, I got the greatest recipe from father to son, and we never share that secret. (The Polynesian word *tufunga* describes a specialist or a master practitioner of their particular craft.)

When Tonga was colonized by the Europeans and missionaries came in the 1830's, they banned a lot of the old practices in the Vava'u Code, but certain *tufunga* in the Pacific held tight to the traditions because that was their livelihood. Samoa never stopped tattooing after the ban.

Pym: So, there's a strong class structure in these societies and also a strict hierarchy with the *tufunga* and people below them? And the Kings are higher than everybody in Tonga.

Aisea Toetuu: They're descendants from *Tangaloa Tufunga*, an ancient line of royals. They're almost treated as pharaohs, descendants from a sky god and earthly mother. Those lines will stay always in power; this happens in a lot of cultures. The *mana* (spiritual power) of an *ali'i* or King or *Tui* will always be passed on through a blood line. But *tufunga* have different *mana*. There are levels of *mana*, and then you have *mana* that's bestowed, like when you fight a warrior and earn his *mana*.

I think *tufunga ta tatau* lived as a secret society and I have always thought that of all the craftsmanship, tattooing was the most highly elite. It was the highest of all *tufunga* besides the priests. They were a threat to the new society coming from the old civilization. First, they were

dealing with blood, the *mana* of a person. Second, it was 50-50 whether you lived through the *tatau* or not, so they had a lot of responsibilities to protect the people who got tattooed.

The cultures of Samoan tattooing, Tongan tattooing, all these old forms of tattooing are not the same anymore, they have moved with modern time, moved with the people. The ink changed, needles changed, the practice changed. Once you start changing the tools, the culture starts to evolve faster. We are adapting and replacing now. Designs and patterns are more decorative than they were back then. I like the older ones because they're real simplicity, bold design. Look at the way Japanese had to look back in the fifties and sixties. Super clean, bold. The illustrations were good, solid colors, but now you got the newer ones, almost too busy for the body, but the new generation likes to see that.


Machine work.

Pym: A lot of modern *tatau* seems to be a show.

Aisea Toetuu: This is something we do as Polynesians that people don't realize; you have the *hula* shows, and then you have the sacred ceremonies that are the real deal but some of the islanders always want to make it a show, they feel that's the way you have to perform. We come from this tourist industry where we got to have a grand finale. Samoans and *ali'i* finish the *tatau* and they dance, make a noise, celebrate the new energy and the new prosperity comes in. You're right, sometimes people get confused with stage performance versus the ceremony. As far as the Tongan tattoo completion ceremony, I did not want a dance. I want to finish up in the *kava* circle, which is the installation of the *kava* circle into this ceremony because Tongan men don't get titled like the Samoan men do and when my job as *tufunga* is done, I have to lift off the taboos that were on them during the process. They drink the cup as an oath to the *ta vaka ta tatau* process and the tattoo is sealed with the oils. Now perform. The performance is your life. Live long to uplift it, right?

Pym: *You did a lot of work for modern standards of hygiene for the Sulu'ape family so that you could work at tattoo conventions worldwide: exchangeable needles, no more bone, all that stuff, right?*

Aisea Toetuu: Needle making was a challenge because the health department was asking all kinds of things about the materials I was using. Was it FDA approved? I'm not going to email the FDA to ask them if they can approve the tool. But it was just back and forth, these nonsense emails about the handles. I told them, the only thing that's going in the skin is the needle, not the handle. The handle can be wrapped; artists wear gloves, pillows are bagged, diapers laid down on the mats, ink bowls are single use. I had a set of tools made from plastic, because they wanted

to autoclave the tool. We do need to focus on the hygiene of *tatau* now, because it's becoming popular and there will be lot of home tattooers picking up needles.

It was decided to take the tools I created for the family and manufacture them. If suppliers are manufacturing and mass-producing, they want to sell them, but who is regulating who you are selling to?

Some of us Su'as came up tattooing with bone. We know how difficult it is to work with the bone and the precautions it takes. You can't move fast, you have to take your time, the bone breaks into the skin, you can't find it, infection starts. Cleaning it, handling it, even when you scrape it, you got to be very gentle. It's like delicate, you know? And the tool took hours to make; from 10 to 20 hours, depending on the size. You have to shave it, cut it.

The process of a tufunga has always been hard working, keeping the process, giving control to who deserves it.

But once you go to manufacture, it's no longer controlled. It has become an industry. I mean, it used to take years for people to make ink. Su'a Alaiva'a said he had to mix that batch with this batch and that batch to make sure there's consistency, imagine all that hard work. We can

modernize some of it, update it, and still keep some of that craftsmanship in there, but that really depends on the industry to make it happen.

Pym: How did you meet Su’a Sulu’ape Alaiva’a Petelo?

Aisea Toetuu: Tricia Allen was an important key. I met her when I was a teenager. She took me to my first convention in 1997, Northern Ink Exposure in Toronto. I looked her up because I was already involved in Tongan tattoo research. My journey brought me to many people that are important to where I am today and I hold them dear to my heart.

Tricia called me when Su’a was in Hawaii in 1999. Sulu’ape Paulo died earlier in that year and his brother, Alaiva’a, took the title and had to finish some of his work. I already started my tattooing in 1994, and I had a whole leg piece of Tongan tattooing that I did myself. I caught the attention of Su’a Alaiva’a when Tricia put out an article that a young Tongan in Hawaii was working with a tattoo machine on himself. That blew up. They're like, what the hell? Who is he? We tattooed in her house, on my leg. She took pictures and posted them. The Sulu’ape family thought this guy's crazy. They said they almost felt sorry for me. They're gods in Samoa, you know? They have the kids running around, they already know their clan, who can take the tools, a pedigree of tattoo masters. But this man took the heart when he came to Hawaii to seek me out. I had heard of them in books, but I never thought that I would ever have the privilege to be in their presence. Su’a was tattooing like 18, 20 people, *pe’a* and *malu*, and he was here for a while, but he kept thinking I need to see this Tongan kid. Throughout the years, I asked him, why did you, and he told me the reason I seek you out was to find out what are you doing because my

grandfather and fathers talked about Tongan *ali'i* being tattooed in Samoa, and I wanted to reconnect that line again.

When I went to meet him, I came in and just sat there, and I had my leg done by myself with a *tapa* design. He asked, hey, you're Aisea, I heard you started your Tongan tattooing yourself? And I was kind of embarrassed because I was a kid, and I showed my leg and he saw my tattoo and here are men with *pe'a* you know, and he looked at me and he just shook his head like, and you're going to do this with machine?

He was quite quiet, but he just looked at me like, you're crazy.

When he got through that morning, I sat down a little while, hung out with him, and sat in the hut talking to Uili, his skin stretcher. Uili was very hospitable, loving, talked a lot, and explained about the code of conduct and stuff. And he asked me, what are you doing tomorrow? Be here eight o'clock in the morning. I got there, I thought they were gonna do work on me, but basically what I did was I stretched skin. Didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know if it was an apprenticeship. I really was working, helping with cleaning, stretching skin. But when I got to Su'a Alaiva'a, the whole thing was just a different ball game, the way he moved the bone and the way he saw the tools. I kept coming every day while he was here, we finished about two or three guys, and I witnessed a *sama* (Samoan *tatau* ceremony) with him. I think it was about a month I was with him, every day I would stretch in the morning and leave and go tattoo at night. I had a good boss, the boss said, do it. Every time Su'a came to

Hawaii for the next four years, I kept stretching for him and then before he left, he worked on a session on me.

He actually fixed some of the tattoos I had. I wasn't complete, but he finished up my sides that other people did. Keone Nunes had done some work. Trisha did some black, I think, and Po'oino. I had lot of different artists help me build the Tongan tattoo. Then when Alaiva'a came, he knew the construction.

The patterns of Samoa are not the same, but he knew the structure, he understood the engineering of the tattoo.

Pym: So where did you find information about the structure of Tongan *ta tatau*?

Aisea Toetuu: The Tongan tattoo, we just went off a design in historical papers. And then there was one book, the History of Mankind, recording rituals and stuff around the world in the 1800s. You couldn't borrow them. I went to the library and found this black book, and it showed all the different *tatau*, even Papua New Guinea scarification. You got to read it, run a copy. It talked about Tongan tattoo design.

A lot of parallelograms, a lot of heavy black, certain designs were not related to *ngatu (tapa)* but similar. It was solid enough to tell me that Tongan tattooing existed. At first, I hadn't believed my grandma's stories that Tongan tattooing existed because my dad didn't talk about it, my uncles didn't talk about it. Samoans had it but it was rare to see a Samoan with a *tatau* in those days where now you see them all over, but when you did see it, you felt this power just kind of like, wow, you must be somebody, what you went through and the power of commitment and the time and effort you gave. My interest and my imagination and my curiosity kept me going and kept pushing and I just kept doing more research than I actually did the work.

Pym: What about your machine work?

Aisea Toetuu: In 1997, I got a machine from Joe Kaplan, who was selling in the magazines. I had started with a homemade machine and that was hell. Joe Kaplan's machine was aluminum, super loud. Single tube, and it was a number five needle. Or actually it was a three, and that thing was painful. I actually filled in with five rounds, they didn't have mags. It was all flats. Some of these OGs I met in Tahiti said they're still doing it, the five round. They're nuts! And I remember Tricia saying that when these Tahitians were tattooing with the Walkman motor and the electric

shavers, they were using single needles to color black designs, a lot of heavy black. My meeting with Su'a changed the pressure of what tattooing was about, I didn't get it until I started working with him and watched him. I stayed at his house. I think he really kept me close to him because he knew that he needed to teach the strong boy. He knew it would connect to complete his journey of the circles that he taught.

Pym: You were saying he made you be a skin stretcher. Is that part of the apprenticeship to have someone stretch for you, to really see what is being done?

Aisea Toetuu: In the beginning when I sat down and stretched for him, I was just following the guy next to me, showing me this and that. And I think, yes, that's where you begin. I didn't grow up with Su'a, but I know he had his children do certain things like helping make tools, handles, and stuff like that. I think the way I look at it now, at that time I didn't understand it, was that this is the inner circle. The outer circle is the community, the inside circle is the family that supports, and the inner circle is where the work is done. Entering that circle, I already felt the *mana*. It's like you're zoning into the person; you see the pain, you see the work happening, and we're all working in harmony. You can't delay on wiping the skin. You got to wipe fast because when the Su'a taps, you want to make sure you're not slowing him down. The way Alaiva'a works, the patterns are here and he's like in the zone. He's not even here, he's a vessel that just pow, pow, pow, pow, and then we got to be there to assist him by correcting that line, the skin and make sure that we know where he's going to be next.

I just couldn't believe the work that was done with this *pe'a*. First, I analyzed it and tried to learn. I was actually just watching, just absorbing the atmosphere, the *mana* happening because at this

point, I was just like, what is going on? You know, am I really here? And when he did that work and he made those lines with bone, my God, man, it was amazingly clean. I could not believe it. They're masters of what they do.

Pym: I watched Purotu in Tahiti tapping, and you of course; it's impressive to watch how you just zone and track. And then the skin stretcher has to make sure that everything's done properly. The intensity of it, the focus.

Aisea Toetuu: Alaiva'a is an intense *tufuga*. He works; he's focused, but he'll joke. They were smoking then and you had one guy assisting with the ashtray, one assisting with the fan. Everybody catered to the *tufuga's* work. He was always brought water, drinks, whatever he needed. And he was the focus of that circle. He was the conductor of the symphony with his sticks. I was just mesmerized by some of the work he was doing. After that, we'd sit down and talk. I didn't talk much because I didn't know how to approach someone like that. A young guy, and I'd talk gibberish stuff. I think when he got into his mid-40s, that's when I actually got my Sulu'ape title, it was 2004. At that time when I was stretching for him, he was working on me for two and a half to three years. In between sessions he'd do a piece on me to finish my *ta vaka*/ *pe'a*. We look at him as the star, you know, but he also had responsibilities that we don't get to see. He had community to tend to, people in Samoa, families, sick ones, all that was in his hands.

And I told myself how amazing that such a man would put his hands to take care of the people. That's *mana*. The hand was gifted from God and then to take care of a village. That's when I knew that *ta tatau* is powerful. That's when I realized that it's heavy.

Pym: It feels powerful, something much more than just a picture.

Aisea Toetuu: *My grandma had told me stories about her grandfather being heavily tattooed and the way she made him out was a man with mana. I started to realize that this tattoo is not just a decoration. It has weight and it has a lot of responsibilities and duties*. *That's why I made Ta Vaka a cultural process because we wanted to instill this mana that I learned about for many years through stories of great men who wore great tattoos and carried them very well. They were like the embodiment of it. And they were the vessel of this craft.*

Pym: Do you have any feelings about the modern tattoo crowd and the Polynesian fusion styles? What do you think about all of that coming from a stable of pure *mana.*

Aisea Toetuu: This was something that started way back. I think it was the fusion between Asian and Polynesian tattooing. There was this book that came out called New Tribalism that had a bit of a stake in that. Interesting too, because an amazing artist that actually started dabbling with machines and doing kind of a new fusion was actually Sulu'ape Paulo. There's a lot of talent in Samoa and the Pacific. Good illustrators. The problem is that our culture doesn't support art in that way, yet we are artists ourselves, carvers, tapa makers; we come up with bloodlines of craftsmanship, it's all around us. In that scene how it was back then, drawing and fusion became more creative because of tapa print, lava lavas, making shirts and stuff like that.

I think that started creating the new fusion and when I was working with Po'oino, we also had to develop some new forms of Polynesian tattooing. Throughout the years, we gained more respect for the art, we understand it and the patterns and their meanings. We had to separate some of these patterns and keep something more communicative to the outsiders that wanted Polynesian tattoos. I feel that some of the contemporary work actually helped us build the old work because we got to express our feelings with art, but when we go to traditional *tatau* there's no expression, it's a duty.

Pym: You have a foot in both worlds, right? So, you have really structured and then you have, I can be loose and do whatever.

Aisea Toetuu: *The future is there and the past is our ancestor, and we need to do contemporary or make it interesting so we can grab the old and keep it close*.

That's my work. I tell people here, you can have this, but you can't have this. You can take a little souvenir. This was when the Sulu'ape family started doing armbands. How it got popular was

that a lot of the Peace Corps guys were in Samoa and when they left, instead of getting the whole full *pe'a*, they wanted little tattoos and the tattooists had to contemporize some of their artwork just to give them trinkets. When it came to the States, all these armbands became the era of armbands. They ended up in every tattoo studio.

Pym: I remember that. I was doing them in Europe too!

Aisea Toetuu: Even China Sea Tattoo had flash of Hawaiian arm bands. Leo Zulueta started the trend, and it was popular at the time. We Pacific Islanders had no access then to any information about our traditional designs. Basically, islanders were gravitating to gang tattoos, getting familiar with that whole gang name, cholo mentality, culture. I was part of doing that too at that time.

What you put carries weight, so make sure you mark the right people in the right ways.

I always tell my artists be mindful what you put. I also emphasize study a pattern a day, it's like a chapter a day so you have a better understanding of what you're using and have a better respect for it.

I always shut out my machine work when I work on the *pe'a* or *ta vaka,* that's a whole different world, the whole setup, the rituals,

everything, even the protocols. I don't even allow people to see it. We have to separate as much as possible, and I always tell them no media and showing pictures.

Pym: On the actual being in Hawaii and creating a Tongan revival. Do you spend time in Tonga? Do you go there?

Aisea Toetuu: Yes. I was raised in Tonga for a while, so I'm real connected with Tongan family. Hawaii is interesting, because it is a Tongan country out of Tonga. A lot of our people that are on Tongatapu looked for work here, came to settle so a lot of our Tongan practices in Hawaii are just as close as in Tonga. The way we do our rituals and traditions and customs are very close to back home. My dad was a very strong tradition man, traditional family; people go to church, when you talk, you speak the language. So, I learned my foreign language from home, and I grew up with the Tongan culture and its protocols and code of conduct.

Pym: And so, you have a responsibility to the community as a *tufunga ta tatau*?

Aisea Toetuu: I was talking about, how Sua's hands took care of this community and I took this role and with my skills of the Tongan community, knowing how to do my *fatongia*, my responsibility, I use it to take care of a lot of my people, not just my family.

I actually opened a Tongan language and

culture school for kids called Kaliloa, connecting to the island roots at the same time as understanding Western heritage. You don't have to choose one or other.

Pym: So, can we talk a little bit about how you had to work to get the acceptance of the King, the kingdom, the government of Tonga?

Aisea Toetuu: One is timing. Tattooing is political, so whoever was the king at that time may not accept it. And also, now I'm an older man. In Tonga, age is a factor. You know, they look at someone, a middle-aged man, and take him seriously versus the man who's 20 or 30, you know.

After my grandma's funeral, that's when I had the chance to tattoo the King's son, Prince Ata. To me, this was a revival of my own and I have my pictures.

Pym: So how did that come about that you tattooed him? Did he reach out to you?

Aisea Toetuu: My audience always been Tongans. So, I built myself as a Tongan tattooist and then became a *tufunga* and did a lot of community work. As a Tongan, you have to take care of the village to get their attention. You just can't be promoting yourself and expect them to believe you. You have to be involved with them and help them with their needs as well. A lot of my *tatau* money went towards programs. Kava circles, they needed help; we helped them. People who needed some medical bills be paid, we donated. Creating the Ta Vaka Society was kind of our own welfare for people, we could not take care of all of them but help them because you have to. That built a different look on a tattoo *tufunga*. Now, this was very important because you have to make sure that there's a good face behind a tattoo *tufunga* and not what they say, that we're all

sorts of bad people and this and that. I didn't want that to tarnish the name of Tongan tattooing. So, I started getting out and people started seeing my work. In 2010, I went to Tonga with the tools and introduced it into the kingdom as a demonstration.

The people were happy to see the work that had been gone for 100 years; 100 years later the sticks were actually echoing in the islands of Tonga!

We went back in 2012 and did a sterilization class because Tonga had a high 18 % to 20 % of hepatitis. They don't oversee tattooing because tattooing is not an issue there; it's forbidden, they don't know that they're practicing at home.

Pym: So, there is actually tattooing going on in Tonga; is that like American style?

Aisea Toetuu: It was a lot of like prison style, and there's some guys that went back home and actually have professional shops. But as to traditional work, no, I was the one who brought the tools back and did it.

So, I was already tattooing a lot of the prince's family members from the palace in Tonga. After my grandma passed away one of my old rugby coaches reached out to me. He told me there's a man here in Honolulu that is visiting and has some tattoos that he is interested in. It was the prince. I got all nervous, like, holy shit, the prince is here. It's the same way I felt when I first saw Su'a, very rare in life, it's not like every day you get starstruck, right? I sat there and the prince was across from me and I guess my *tatau* was sticking out. I was trying to hide it out of respect, but I had on short pants, just came from the gym. And you don't talk directly to a royal, you talk to the talking chief, that's how sacred they are. I asked him, so what does he want? He saw my knee and he just went like this to me, and I had to lift up my pant leg. He said, I want

that. And I just thought to myself; I want to have a stroke right now. This was the turning point again in my life, my grandma had just passed and it's like grandma whispered to him come to my grandson. He will take care of you. So yeah, I had this moment in my head. Some talking chiefs came to do a whole different protocol for his tapping. We had to have a secret warehouse where we did his work because it was not publicized. I have those pictures; they're in the safe.

I marked him up, so he's wearing a tattoo that's designed by me according to his genealogy and who he is. And not a *pe'a*, so we don't call it a *pe'a*, he had his own Tongan *ta tatau*, like his own *ta vaka* according to his genealogy of his clan from Tangaloa coming down. A King's designs will always be different. That's how it's done. So that whole ritual was different too, the thing for me was to balance the control of what's happening here with tattooing the Royal. I am a *tufunga*, Su'a. Su'a is in charge but then tattooing the Royal. So, it gets really...

Su'a Alaiva'a was my God, you are doing it. He was so happy, was proud because the prince's ancestors stopped it, they placed the ban and the great-great-grandson comes in and goes, I want it. The revival already started.

Being that I was a Su'a, carrying a Samoan title, being half Tongan, it was okay that we did the work on foreign land, not in Tonga. It was okay to bleed the royal (royal blood may not be shed on Tongan lands). I asked Alaiva'a, is there any protocols when you guys tattoo *ali'i* in Samoa? He goes, yeah, there is, but you know what you got to do? Focus. And that's all I needed him to say. You are in control. You are serving during the *tatau* and when you're done, he goes back to his status, but he came for his service, you give it your all.

It was good to have Su'a to guide me and then I flew him down to do the blessing of the tattoo as head of the Sa Su'a clan. He sealed the prince's *tatau* and went back to Samoa with a picture of him and Prince Ata. He put it on the wall in Samoa, and all Samoans went, that's the prince of Tonga? Yup, my son did that!

So, Prince Ata was blessed by the clan of Sa Su'a but I did not work on him as if I was under the clan. It really connected us Samoans and Tongans. This is history, you know, this is connection. And this is not on videos, not recorded. And it's crazy because he's actually from a royal family who are still in power of their lands, who's got a full body tattoo. That's amazing. I wonder if any other King out there has got a full body suit, might be interesting. Especially in Polynesia.

Pym: Yeah, I don't know. I was just trying to think. I have no idea if there's other areas of the world where there's a similar structure of power like that with a royal family in that similar type of vein where they are demi-gods.

Aisea Toetuu: I have these photos I share with some of the Tongans and they look like, you did it! After the Prince was done, I made a book for him about the process he went through, and he took the book home. Rumors went out in Tonga that he got tattooed in Hawaii and it created this whole community media.

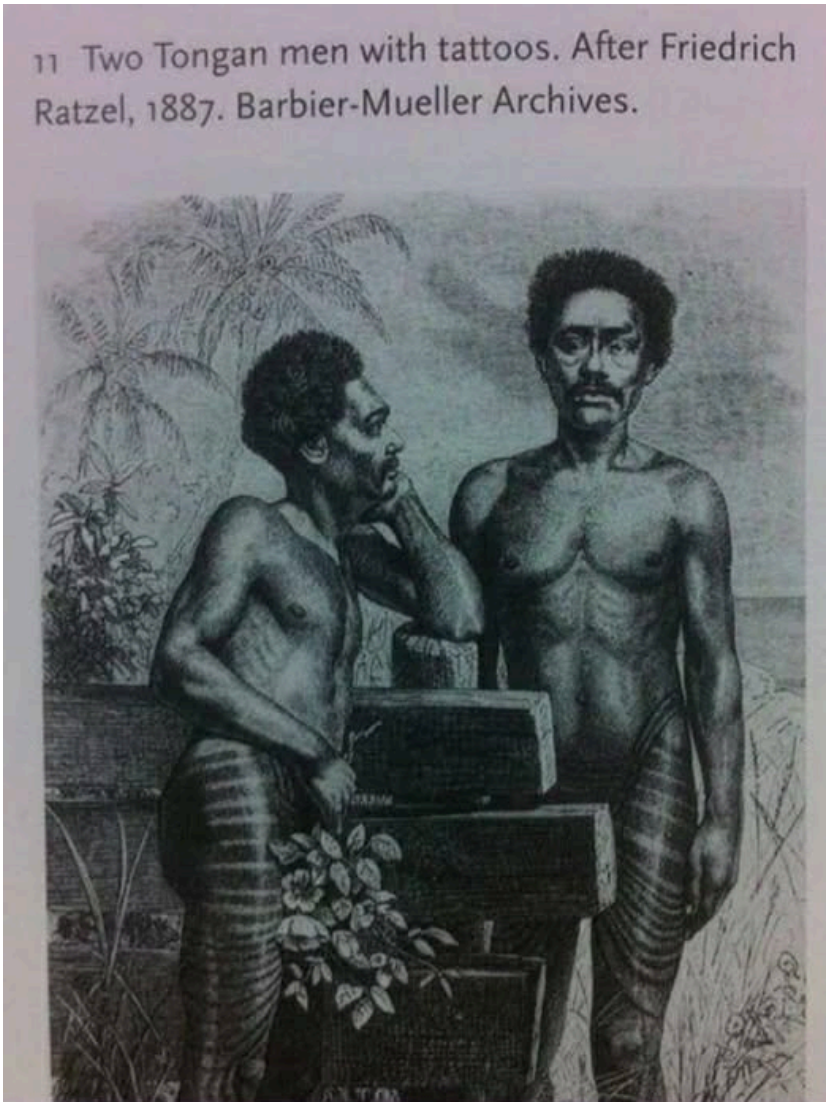
Aisea tattooed Prince Ata, gave the whole traditional tattoo, not machine, traditional! And they said, wow, that really worked. That gained so much attention from Tonga being that Tongan tattooing, yeah, we exist. They actually started to believe now, and it caught a lot of attention from cultural leaders, it caught a lot of attention also from scholars and people who were researching about Tongan tattooing.

Pym: Why did they ban it in the first place?

Aisea Toetuu: I had this talk with one of the professors and I think that all islands were impacted by the missionaries, of course, but Tonga's tattooing wasn't like where an elite family would have it. It was actually every male after circumcision would perform the art of *tatau*. They said that by the age of 15, he was tattooed from hips to knee. I read this several times in very versed books and they were saying every male. That's interesting because that's a lot, you know? And you see pictures and then you have this group of people now who say it didn't exist back in the day which is crazy. Even Captain Cook wrote about it! It had a political tie to certain warrior status that supports certain kings.

A chief who wants to be King of Tonga and demoralize the mana of the warriors takes the tattoo away, being that tattoo was a way to earn their boar tusks and make them look like warriors: if you take their boar tusks away, they're no longer anybody.

The King made it *tapu* (forbidden). It was a way to demoralize the warrior status, keep them down because the tattoo is power. It was a sort of a marker when people saw a man get his tattoo that he was ready for the challenges of life. He is showing he is born naked and with his tattoos is reborn again into the culture.



Pym: Well, that's how I understood the *pe'a* from Paulo back in the day, you know, that that's what that meant, that the man who got the *pe'a* was a warrior, he transformed himself.

Aisea Toetuu: Yeah. Also, he had to learn to master the land, the ocean and the people and when these men could master these traits of taking care, they earned the tattoo and the marks.

Pym: So that's what you're bringing through with the Ta Vaka foundation, your own line of it, which is curious to me because at the same time as you're recreating something that already was, you're also kind of in a position to make something new, right? To rebuild and restructure the *ta tatau* essentially as you want it because you are the *tufunga*.

Aisea Toetuu: The whole concept with Tongan Ta Vaka Society is to rekindle the boy's connection to his family. People from Tonga are all raised traditionally. There's something classic, but there is a disconnection sometimes in there. We were talking about AI, that my AI is

Ancestral Intelligence. Cell phones are in Tonga now. A father can tell a kid, go plant that taro because you got to eat in the next year or two. The father and mother prepare for the *inasi* (harvest) because they know there's an event coming. They're already kind of forecasting, like a navigator. But if the kid doesn't plant it now or later, we will never get that harvest. It gets harder to get their attention because more technology, more distraction.

So I realised that I needed to jump on this other canoe, media, as another vessel to get that message out and do a logo, a name, and put a face behind it, because someone that knew me, who knew my research, plagiarized the idea of *ta vaka*, put their own pattern, their own creative design of Tongan tattooing, and called it *ta vaka*. Call it whatever Tongan and *tatau* inspired by, or whatever, fine. But do not tie it to Ta Vaka because I have a process for these men. They have to earn each design through the process as an initiation. The template I created was inspired by other *tufunga*. It was not just me.

I worked with a canoe builder named Tuione. He inspired me. I have years of working under him and building boats. I also had the chance to work with Filipe Tohi, a Tongan artist, and he was very inspiring to me, helped me understand lines and structure. Also, he used Tongan Celestial navigation. Tevita Fale, a traditional astronomer, I had a chance to meet him. He actually came to the school and taught stars to the kids, the Kaliloa children. My wives stood by me and my grandma who was the most influential in my life, was also a medicine lady and a witch doctor; she could do spells to get rid of bad energy and she was my biggest inspiration. And then my two fathers, my uncle and my dad, and of course, the one who guided a lot of this is Su’a Alaiva'a.

So having these great *tufunga* influencing me in the Pacific was a lot. The Tongan tattoo cannot be Googled. A lot of these tattoo artists are touching it and using Google from when Su'a and I were collaborating. They're going off that, especially saying that this is it. How is it tied to our cultural duties and responsibility? They do not know. So that's why I had to create a kind of tattoo society where work on one or two at a time, keeping it more intimate. That's where we want to go with the Tongan Tattoo. It's not about fancy designs.

I got kind of disappointed that some people were taking tattooing and selling revival. Revival's not for sale.

I asked this guy who took my name, Ta Vaka, and named his tattoos that he created, what does it all mean? And he couldn't answer. So, you just created a bunch of whimsical designs and then call it a *ta vaka*? Ta Vaka is the name of the process; it's not just the name of the tattoo. It's what one must go through to gain this tattoo. I asked him carefully, why would a person muck around on something sacred, which is actually forbidden by a king and play around with it and not give respect. I honor it and I don't mess around with it.

Pym: A lot of people can look at it and not honor it. I mean, it's just such a striking image. makes you just go, wow.

Aisea Toetuu: And that's the same emotion and feeling that I want when I see a Tonga tattoo. Same thing that they think, wow, this is Tongan tattoo. And they can say, *malo fatongia*, and the men can be proud because now the people of Tonga recognize the process they went through. The community is there. By putting my face out there, the pretenders kind of backed off already because they see, there is a *tufunga*, he came out. Before I didn't post, I was undercover because I

didn't think I needed it because I was already recognized by the Sulu'ape family as the only Tongan *tufunga*. Tattooing is about working. It's a certain tattoo. It's not, I want to study to be a tattooist, but I'll see. No! Do the tattoo or don't! You can apprentice and then apply. But you don't sit there and then apprentice forever and keep doing research and research, because at the end, someone's got to mark the body and keep going. It's work, yeah, it's work. So work in service, we'll get there. And for these people up in the academic world, constantly keep thinking that it's going to be more research; yeah, find the stories, it's fine. Tell the stories about which king, who got tattooed and what was forbidden. We need those stories, I know my stories as well, but at the same time, let's work towards a common goal.

So I talked about the process. Each individual has a personal consultation. It's not like you line them up, send money, I'll do you. I sit down with each one and I'm very selective about who I do. This is actually what Su'a taught me. At one point, they used be selective on who would get a *pe'a* because if you're a bad guy, you've got to change. I remember he tattooed this young kid and he told him, I heard you're robbing stores, taking cars, and you're going to wear this marking? You're not going to represent us like this. So yes, it is a big thing. We need to make sure these guys wear the tattoo and walk the right path, because when you wear this tattoo, not only are you going to go through a physical transformation but also a mental spiritual transformation. Don't just wear it out of being; realize that through the years, as you sit there with your tattoo, you have to look down at your legs and remember, I went through the process of life. It's a reminder.

Pym: It's a lot of that, you know, if you do it right. I mean, there's a lot of people that get tattoos just for the sake of having them. And then there's the people that they really truly mean something to; you build the picture, you build the story, you give them something that they can then grow through because they want to.

Aisea Toetuu: I think that's where that can connect to Ta Vaka because a lot of these Tongans that come to America go through not only Tongan drama, they also go through the Western drama. And if we can use some of that for them to tie back to roots, that's the idea; healing, reconnection, rebirth, that whole idea of what *ta vaka* is, coming from here, going through a lot of shit, and then be reborn, shed the old skin. And I like that. I think you become the urban shaman.

Pym: It is a shamanic endeavor,

Aisea Toetuu: And that's it.

I do see a parallel with tattooing in Western culture and the reshaping world. They still need us, a marking to give them some inspiration, hope in life to continue on. I find that spiritual.

Pym: And it's a completely different type of tattooing, the Polynesian *tatau*, because it's so culturally bound and rooted.

So that brings me to the question of women hand tapping. Is that ever going to be a thing, like as far as for your culture?

Aisea Toetuu: You know, I know some people disagree, but I hope so in the future. I think what we need to understand is that when a king abolishes Tongan tattooing, whatever rituals there was in the past dies with him.

If we can reintroduce it again, what rules do we have to follow? We're the new generation trying to bring it back and bring in the next wave but take some of the old ways that were there to pay homage to the respect of the protocols, bring it to now.

A lot of women in Tonga went to chiefly role because there were no sons and they had to carry on the bloodline. Now, with the work, why not? I mean, now we see more female tiki carvers. A girl who's taught by her father and all that. I find it remarkable. And she carries the same *mana*. Remember, we're just a vessel.

Pym: Yeah, but if anybody's going to break down the taboo, it'll be you.

Aisea Toetuu: Yeah and do it in the most respectful way we can. If the female tattoo artists come, I would love that for the Tongan *tatau* because they get to connect with the women. The Tongan culture is still men and women separated. It's not the same. Tapa making and weaving is still done by women. Men do carving, canoe, fishing, house building, farming, masonry work. So there are two different roles. Women design the *tapa*, men do not help draw the designs. What if tattooing was like that? If the tattoos can represent their role in this, I think it'd be amazing.

Pym: Do you do *malu* for women?

Aisea Toetuu: Yes, I do Samoan tatau. You have the *faka Tonga* and *fa'a Samoa*. With the Samoan *tatau*, everything is based on the *fa'a Samoa* system, the position in their families. With

Tongan *ta tatau*, it does the *faka Tonga*, their own structure. That's why I think the two don't mix and why I had to create two separate ones. I was very fortunate to work under and understand *fa'a Samoa* because I'm with the Sulu'ape family for 20-some years. I never thought in my life that I'd be blessed by an amazing man who believed in me and who taught me the skills of his family and his talent. I hold it really dear to me that he blessed the first Tongan *tufunga* in hundreds of years to perform the art just because I didn't pose, I kept working to bring the finest of Tongan.

I want to make sure everybody knows that Su'a Alaiva'a did not teach me Tongan tattooing. He taught me his family craft. We built a good relationship, I was traveling for years with him, working with him, stretching, setting up the needles. We are hand-tapping into a new era of tattooing now.

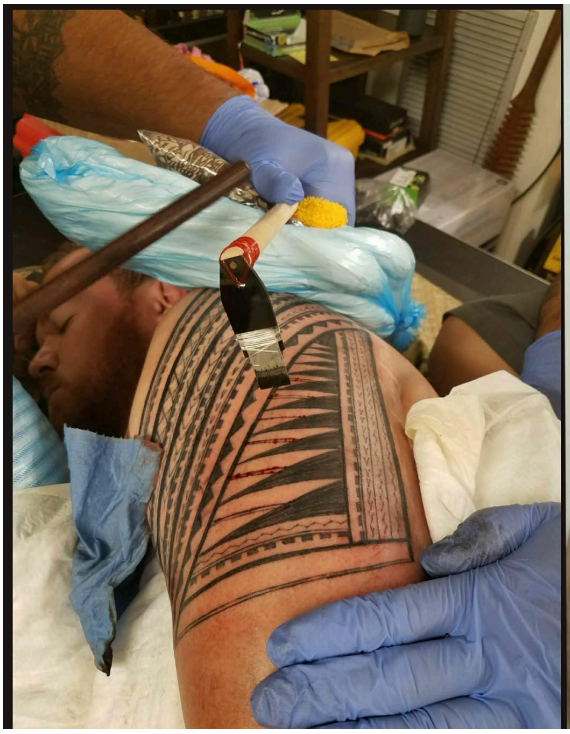
So with the Tongan tattoo, I wish people had some idea what the Tongan culture is all about before they jump and whimsically use the designs and make creative patterns. I appreciate the attempt, but don't call it revival, just call it a creative expression of, I guess, patterns on a person's leg. Talking revival starts with the people, acceptance.

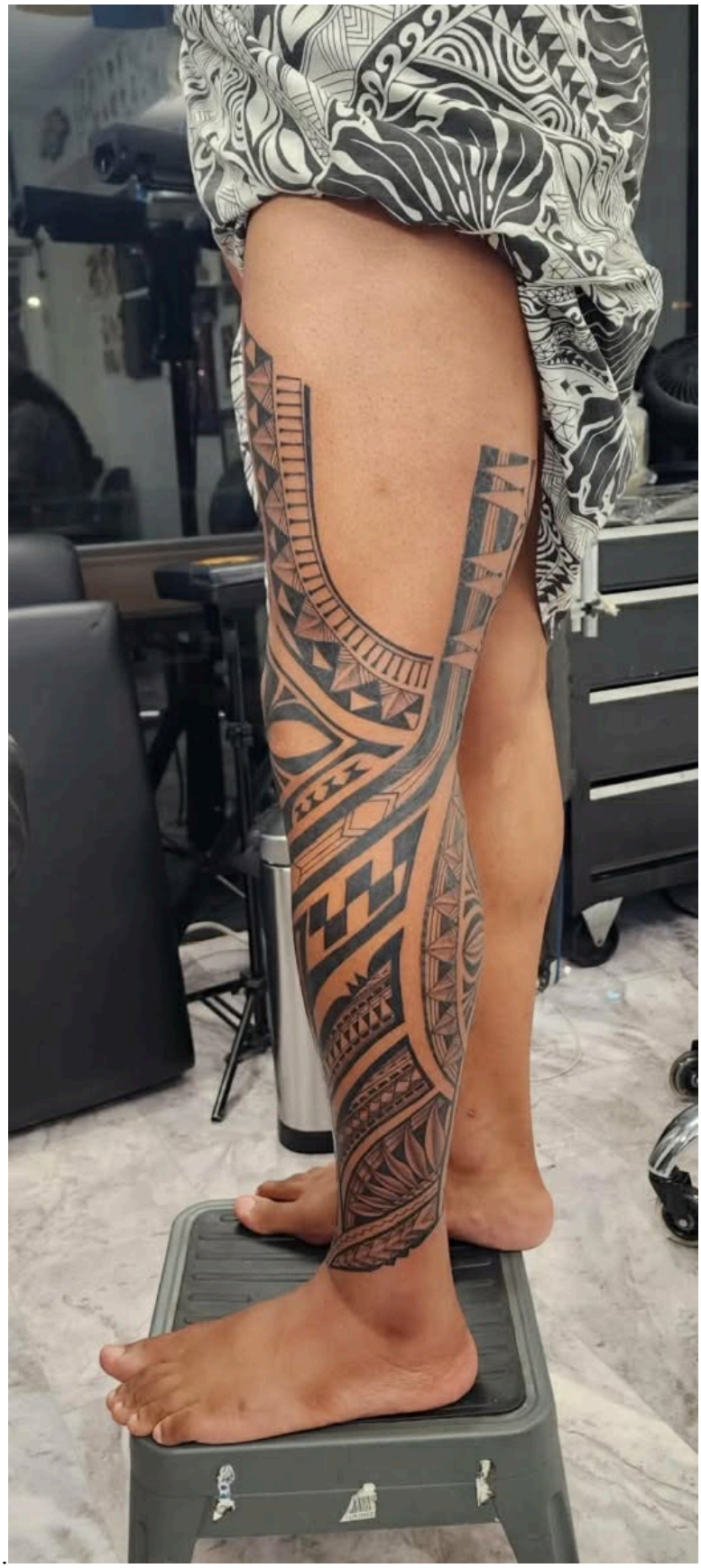
This is why I created Ta Vaka outside of Tonga. If I did Tonga tattoo revival in Tonga, it would not take off. No. You beat the pressure, you beat the outrage, you'll be the rebel in the kingdom. So I come under Ta Vaka flag and say *ta vaka*, a traditional tattoo that was banned, left the shores of Tonga, had to get its recognition of popularity overseas to be reintroduced back into the country. I've tattooed a couple people that work for the government and tourism, we are talking about hygiene standards and they're actually waiting for me to come back so hopefully I can work with something with them and come with the most humility into the kingdom and not on a high horse, to want to return our ancient tattoo heritage back to the islands and teach it in the proper way. Being that it gains popularity in Hawaii and times are changing, this will get attention from more people.

The thing is that if you're not using the tools, if you're not Tongan, don't call yourself tufunga. You can't be using a tattoo machine and call yourself a tufunga.

Hand tapped


Hand tapped.




.  Machine work.


Machine work.

1

Machine work, cover up/ rework.


Machine work.


Machine work.

Ata Atanofo,

San Francisco 2007.

First Tongan *ta tatau* performed in California.

This image has been published many times and also copied into other tattoos. Aisea does not post pictures of full *ta vaka* or *pe'a* anymore to protect the authenticity of the tattoo for its bearer.