

## TATTOOING - Tatau

### The origin of the name

Two Polynesian words have been adopted by many other languages: *tapu*, the origin of *tabou* in French and *taboo* in English and, of course, *tatau*. The words *tatouage* in French, and *tattoo* and *tattow* in Old English, are therefore derived from that Tahitian word used for the practice of inscribing indelible marks on the skin.

### Mythical origins

There are a multitude of legends concerning the origins of the *tatau*. They all have one point in common: they are always a gift from a god to Man. On the island of Tahiti, one of these legends tells how the first *tatau* were done on the sons of the god Ta'aroa, the supreme creator god of everything in the Polynesian firmament. The sons taught it to men, who, finding it extremely decorative, made extensive use of it. The two sons of Ta'aroa, Matamata and Tū Ra'i Pō, therefore became the patron divinities of tattooing.

### Historical origins

The origins of tattooing are quite vague, no doubt going back to the beginning of the *māori* civilization. Tattooing was probably already in existence among the successive waves of peoples who had migrated from South East Asia, first to the eastern Polynesian islands, then the western islands, beginning in the second century BC. The practice seems to have existed in all the islands known jointly as the "Polynesian triangle", an area bounded by today's French Polynesia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Samoa, Easter Island and the Cook Islands. Tattooing was widely practised and found in particular forms throughout French Polynesia, with the exception of the south of the archipelago of the Austral Islands and the east of the Tuamotu archipelago. It was in the Marquesas Islands that the art of tattooing reached its peak of development in terms of its great richness and the complexity of its motifs.

### Role in traditional society

In pre-European Polynesian society, tattooing constituted a valuable social marker. It could indicate one's exact place in a territory, tribe and family and one's level on the social scale. It could also mark the accomplishment of important social rituals such as the passage from childhood to puberty, marriage, etc. In addition it could represent remarkable events in the life of the person concerned: acts of bravery in war, prowess as a hunter or fisherman, etc. And it could be simply decorative. Its use was very widespread. "Tattooing is not compulsory, but it would not have been considered acceptable for a Tahitian to have no tattoos at all", explained anthropologist Anne Lavondes, writing about tattooing in the Society Islands.

### Different types of tattoo

One can distinguish three types of tattoo: those intended for gods, priests and *ari'i*, which are hereditary and therefore reserved for their descendants; those of the *hui ari'i* type, reserved for chiefs (men and women); those of the *hui to'a*, *hui ra'atira* and *'tato'ai*, *manahune* types, for war leaders, warriors, dancers, rowers, etc.

## Sacred

One of the fundamental aspects of tattooing was its sacred nature. Believed to be inherited from the gods, tattooing carried with it supernatural power. Certain motifs were considered to protect Man from the loss of his *mana*, the prestige and divine essence responsible for his health, or of his equilibrium and fertility and from harmful influences.

## And for the afterlife

Tattooing also went far beyond the life of this world. Being indelible, and therefore eternal, “this inalterable work inscribed on their skin would later bear witness to their origins, rank and heroism when they were called to appear before their ancestors: the gods of the mythical country of Hawaiki”, explained Karl Von Den Steinen, a German ethnologist who undertook a detailed analysis in 1897-8 of the various forms of artistic expression of the peoples of the Marquesas Islands, including tattooing.

## Specific to each archipelago

The different populations each developed their own specific designs and particular motifs. In the language of the Marquesas, tattooing is called *patu tiki*, which means “stamping with images”, a revealing expression. In this archipelago, the body could be entirely covered with tattoos, including the face. On the other hand, in the Leeward Islands the face was apparently never tattooed. Unfortunately, much of the meaning of the motifs and designs has been lost.

## The tools of traditional tattooing

The tools of traditional tattooing comprised a small serrated comb, made of bone, tortoiseshell or mother-of-pearl, fixed to a wooden handle. The teeth were soaked in ink based on charcoal from the *ti'a'iri*, or candlenut (*Aleurites Moluccana*), diluted in oil or water. The teeth were placed on the skin while the tattooist struck the handle with another piece of wood, causing the skin to break and the ink to penetrate. With these traditional tools, producing a tattoo could be extremely painful and took days, weeks, months or even years. This reinforced the role of the tattoo as a rite of passage.

## Tattoo “priests”

Being responsible for this delicate operation, the priest tattooist known as *tahu'a tatau*, in the Society Islands and *tuhuka patu tiki* in the Marquesas Islands, was paid handsomely and enjoyed great respect in traditional society. This status was often passed down from father to son.

## Prohibition

As soon as they settled permanently in the Polynesian Islands at the end of the eighteenth century, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries fought against the practice of tattooing. Pōmare II, the second “king” of the dynasty of the same name, converted to Catholicism in 1812 and in 1819 drew up a code of rules which including the banning of tattoos. It is described as a practice which must be “completely abolished” as it “belonged to ancient and bad customs”. Moreover, as Polynesians now had to be fully clothed in the newly Christianised society, the very *raison d'être* of tattooing was largely disappearing. Consequently, the great majority of motifs as well as the technique itself of tattooing were lost forever.

## **Renewal**

At the beginning of the eighties, the *tatau* once more occupied a major role in Polynesian society as this secular practice was re-appropriated and renewed. Of course, its sacred nature and role as a social marker, fundamental to traditional society, were considerably dimmed. Tattooing became the bearer of a determined reclaiming of the Polynesian identity, to which was obviously added an aesthetic dimension. Now many young Polynesians get themselves tattooed.

Having explored and researched to try to rediscover the original meaning of the motifs - a meaning which has been completely lost for many of them - the Polynesian tattooists are now developing their art in three main directions: the reproduction of traditional motifs, the creation of strictly decorative motifs (such as dolphins or manta rays) and recently some of them have been creating motifs which are completely new yet directly inspired from tradition.

## **International recognition**

Tattooists are now at work in nearly all the main inhabited islands of French Polynesia. Their reputation and the beauty of the Polynesian *tatau* are such that they attract visitors from elsewhere. Some Polynesian tattooists practise their art in many major cities of the world such as Paris, London or New York. Polynesian tattooing has gained an international reputation both because of its traditional roots and its very fashionable ethnic aesthetic.