



KEEPING OUR STORIES ALIVE



by Lana Lopesi and
Grace Teuila Evelyn
Iwashita-Taylor



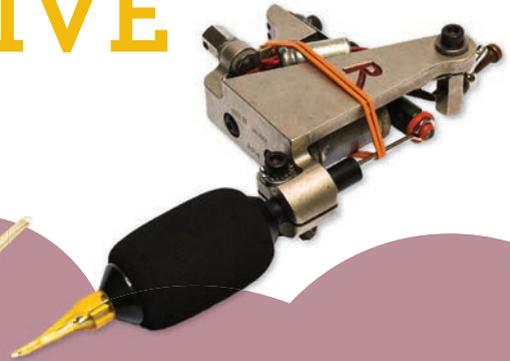
SCHOOL JOURNAL
STORY LIBRARY

School Journal Story Library is a targeted series that supplements other instructional series texts. It provides additional scaffolds and supports for teachers to use to accelerate students' literacy learning.

Keeping Our Stories Alive has been carefully levelled. While the contexts and concepts link to English and social sciences at level 3 of the curriculum, the text has a reading year level of year 4.

Teacher support material (available at www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz) contains key information to help teachers to provide the additional support and scaffolding that some students may need to meet the specific reading, writing, and curriculum demands of *Keeping Our Stories Alive*.

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adapted with alofa by
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Tyla Vaeau: STORYTELLER

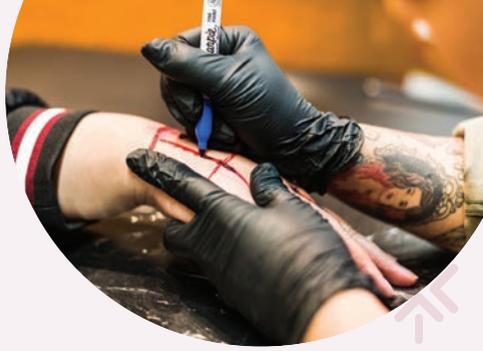
by Lana Lopesi

Tyla Vaeau is a **tufuga tā masini** of Samoan and Pākehā descent. As a tattooist, she creates original designs and then tattoos them onto people's bodies. Recently, she has also started practising traditional Samoan **tatau**. Tyla is one of the few Samoan women learning this precious craft. I visited her tattoo studio in Auckland to ask her about what she does and why she does it.

tufuga tā masini
electric tattoo artist

tatau
tattoo

LANA: *Tālofa, Tyla. How did you become a tufuga tā masini?*



TYLA: As a kid, I was always drawing. I would draw anything and everything. Then when I got to high school, I started designing Pacific tattoos for my family. It became really important for me to understand the patterns I was using, so I started researching Samoan tatau.

Learning about tatau helped me to learn more about my Samoan identity. People often tell me that I don't look Samoan. But I grew up performing in the Samoan group at school, and I have always been very proud of who I am. Tatau gave me a way to combine my love for art with my own cultural heritage.

Eventually, my family and community encouraged me to pick up the tattoo machine and start tattooing. Then my dad told me that I should tattoo my own designs. He became my guinea pig – I started practising on him.



LANA: *What do you use to tattoo?*

TYLA: I use a coil machine, which is one of the first tattoo machines invented. I love the sound that it makes. The sound tells you how the machine is running and if the ink is going into a person's skin properly. Sound is an important part of getting a traditional tatau as well. When people get a **pe'a** or **malu**, the **tufuga tā tatau** repeatedly taps the 'au into their skin. It creates a rhythmic, continuous sound that stays in your memory. It's all part of the tattoo experience.



Coil machine



Four 'au of different sizes

pe'a
male tattoo

malu
female tattoo

tufuga tā tatau
master tattooist

'au
tattooing tool made from wood,
pig tusks or pig bone, and turtle shell

LANA: *What is the process of giving a tattoo?*

TYLA: People usually have a rough idea of what they want and where. But before I start tattooing, I like to talk to them and get to know them. We might talk about their family, their background, or what they want their tattoo to represent. I then translate their story, culture, and values into symbols and patterns. Over ten years, I've built up a dictionary of Pacific motifs and patterns that I use.

LANA: *Do you have a favourite motif?*

TYLA: I love the diamond-shaped malu motif. It's little and used in small quantities, but it has many meanings. It's a powerful symbol for Samoan women.



LANA: *You're learning traditional tatau from Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a Petelo. How did that come about?*

TYLA: It's similar to how I started with the **masini**. I didn't plan to do traditional tatau, but my friends and family encouraged me to pick up the 'au. However, unlike the masini, you can't just teach yourself. I had to be taught by a master tattooist who belongs to one of the tatau families of Sāmoa. In 2011, I approached tufuga tā tatau Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a Petelo. He agreed to teach me and gifted me one of his tools.

I've been using the 'au on others for over a year now. I started practising on myself last September. Since then, I've been doing small, modern designs and **tuālima**. It's a completely different process to using the masini. The tools are different, and you need a team of people to help. Two or three **toso** must stretch the person's skin so that the ink goes in properly.



Tyla practising traditional tatau



masini
machine

tuālima
hand tattoo

toso
skin stretcher (assistant)



LANA: *Why is it important to have female tufuga tā masini?*

TYLA: Currently, most tattoo artists are men. It's the same for tatau. There are a growing number of female tattoo artists and female moko artists. But there aren't many Pacific female tattooists and even fewer who are Samoan. Some people, especially other women, feel more comfortable receiving their tatau from a woman. I feel very privileged to be able to provide that option.



LANA: *You are creating a new path for Samoan women who want to practise tatau. What's your favourite thing about this kind of work?*

TYLA: My favourite thing is being able to serve people through Samoan art and culture. Tatau is a visual language that keeps our stories alive. For people who have a tatau, it's a reminder that they are from a long line of ancestors who have lived with these patterns, too. I think art plays a big part in connecting us to our identities. This is especially true in Aotearoa, where the Pacific Islands can seem very far away. I feel really honoured that people trust me with their stories and with their bodies.



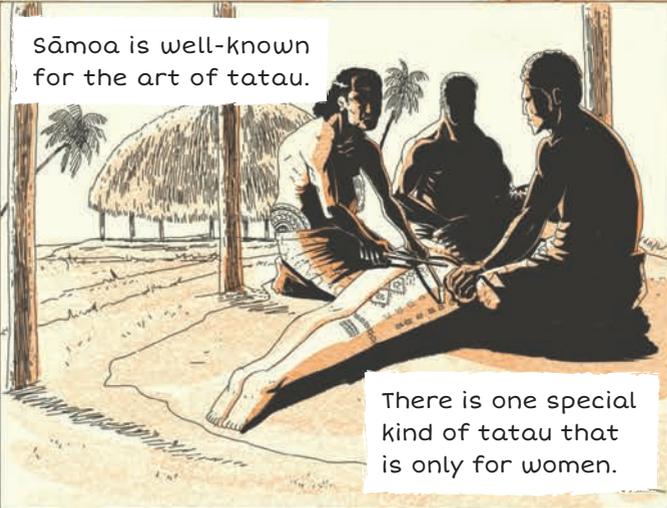
HOW TATAU CAME TO SĀMOA

adapted with alofa by

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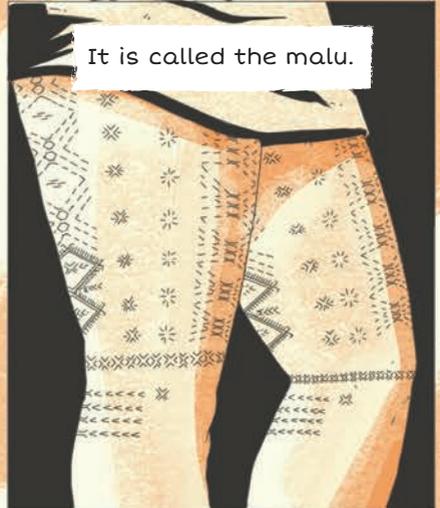


Sāmoa is well-known
for the art of tatau.

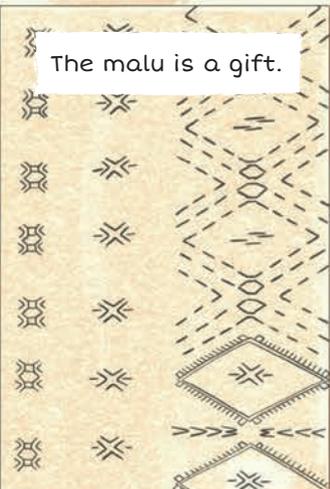


There is one special
kind of tatau that
is only for women.

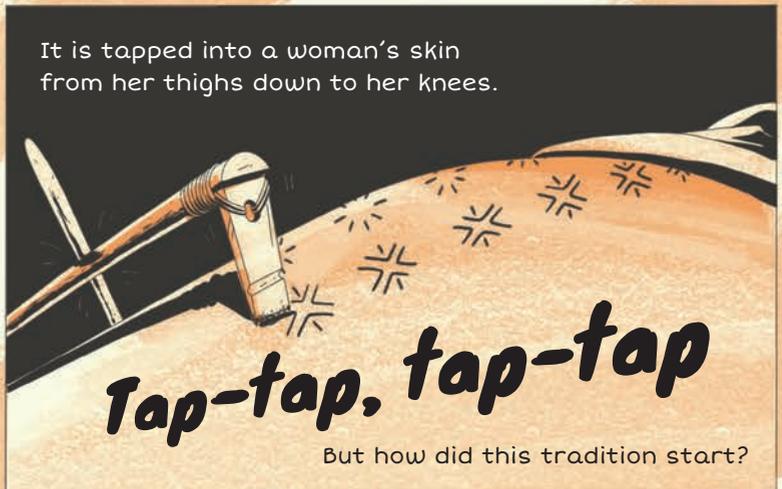
It is called the malu.



The malu is a gift.



It is tapped into a woman's skin
from her thighs down to her knees.



But how did this tradition start?

The story of how tatau came to Sāmoa has been passed down through many generations.

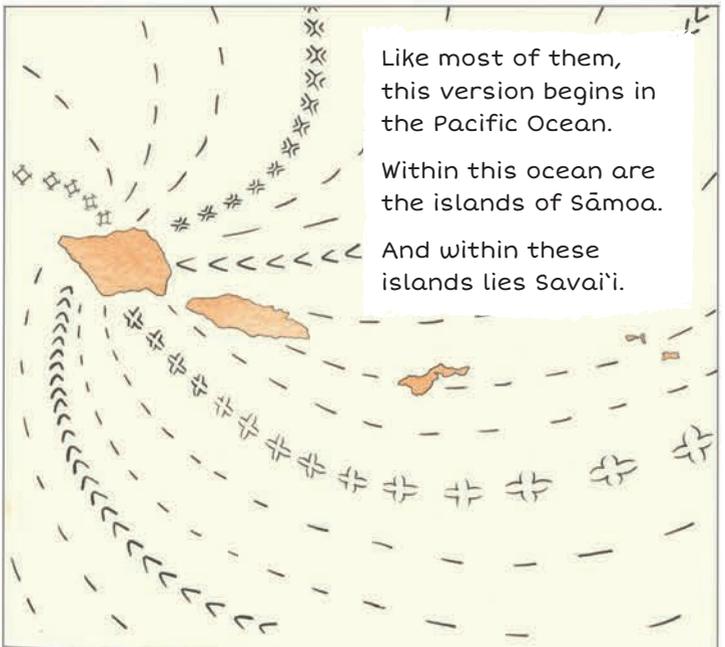


Storytellers can be playful with the details, so there are many versions.

Like most of them, this version begins in the Pacific Ocean.

Within this ocean are the islands of Sāmoa.

And within these islands lies Savai'i.



There were once two sisters – conjoined twins, in fact.



Tilafaigā was the goddess of canoeing, and Taemā was the goddess of swimming.

One day, they swam from Savai'i to visit relatives in Fiji.



The twins were masters at navigating the ocean. They quickly reached their destination.



While in Fiji, they learnt the art of tattooing.



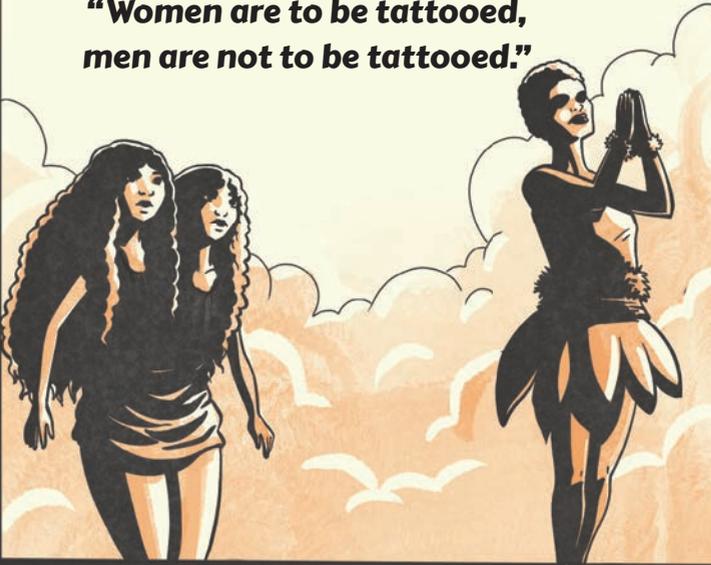
They were given tools and instructions about who should be tattooed.



The instructions were told to them in a song.

**“Fai mai e tata o fafine
ae le tata o tane.”**

**“Women are to be tattooed,
men are not to be tattooed.”**



Soon it was time to leave Fiji. They had to cross the ocean again and return to their village in Savai'i.

But on their way back, they spotted a beautiful sparkling clam beneath them.



They wanted to see it. Touch it.



They dived down.

Down,
down,

way down in the big blue ocean they went ... swirling around in an underwater whirlpool.



But as they swam back up to the surface, they felt seasick and confused.

They forgot the words of the song.

When they arrived home in Savai'i, they sang the song but mixed up the words.



"Tattoo the men and not the women."

For many years, only men were tattooed. However, over time, the malu resurfaced.

Now, many Samoan women proudly receive the tatau.

It's tapped into their skin from their thighs down to their knees.

Tap-tap.
tap-tap

Acknowledgments

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