

Polynesian Beliefs

Origin of Tattoo

Polynesia is one of the three major ethnographic (with Melanesia and Micronesia) divisions of Oceania. It encompasses a huge triangle of islands in the east-central and southern Pacific Ocean.

An early illustration showing the tattoo face of a Maori

The Tattoo (Ta Moko)

The word "tattoo" comes from the Tahitian word "tatau". Captain James Cook used the word "tattow" when he witnessed tattooing for the first time in Tahiti, in 1769.

According to Maori mythology, tattooing commenced with a love affair between a young man by the name of Mataora (which means "Face of Vitality") and a young princess of the underworld by the name of Niwareka.



One day however, Mataora beat Niwareka, and she left Mataroa, running back to her father's realm which was named "Uetonga".

Mataora, filled with guilt and heartbreak followed after his princess Niwareka. After many trials, and after overcoming numerous obstacles, Mataora eventually arrived at the realm of "Uetonga", but with his face paint messed and dirty after his voyage. Niwareka's family taunted and mocked Mataora for his bedraggled appearance. In his very humbled state, Mataora begged Niwareka for forgiveness, which she eventually accepted. Niwareka's father then offered to teach Mataora the art of tattooing, and at the same time Mataora also learnt the art of Taniko - the plaiting of cloak borders in many colours.

Mataora and Niwareka thus returned together to the human world, bringing with them the arts of ta moko and taniko.

Common Elements

In Samoa, Aotearoa/Te Waipounamu, and Hawai'i, there were many shared elements, both traditional and contemporary. The status of the master, the general motifs used, and the methods of application were common elements to all of the cultures of Polynesia.

The roles, techniques and motifs of the arts of tatau, moko, and uhi have continued to exist for over 2,000 years.

The master: Within Polynesian societies, the masters of various arts and skills were held in high esteem by the general population, including the sacred chiefs (*ali'i/ariki*) who ruled the society. These masters were known as *tufuga* in Samoa, *tohunga* in Aotearoa/Te Waipounamu, and *kahuna* in Hawai'i.

The master of tattooing was a highly trained individual, usually male, who was knowledgeable of both literal and figurative meanings of motifs, placement, and associated responsibilities or consequences. In most cases, it was the master who determined not only what designs were appropriate, but also who could be tattooed and when. The master might also instruct the subject on what protocols and prohibitions needed to be observed before proceeding. Some of these requirements were fasting or a special diet or refraining from certain activities that might "taint" the person spiritually.

The master was well compensated for his efforts. Because most of the tattooing tended to be done on those of the higher social strata, the master was often fed and housed during the duration of the tattooing session. In addition, the master was often given various cultural treasures such as fine mats in Samoa or wood or jade (*pounamu*/greenstone) carvings and weapons in Aotearoa/Te Waipounamu.

With great gifts come great sacrifices and the master often had to give up having a family or other permanent relationships for their craft. The master's lifestyle was also restricted to avoid tainting themselves or their work. There were spiritual responsibilities as well. It was often a patron god who was credited for giving the master the necessary skills. The master always had to take care not to offend their gods lest their gift of tattooing others be taken away.

Common Motifs: Some design elements that were common throughout Polynesia were linear geometric motifs, petroglyphs, and very basic pictographic representations of men, animals, birds or other man-made objects. Each of the geometric designs, including lines; triangles; circles and other polygonal symbols had multiple meanings based on placement on the body, incorporation with other designs, and the person being tattooed. It was usually up to the master to determine what was appropriate for each person and to then explain the story to that person.



Linear geometric motifs are common throughout Polynesian tattoo.

The role of the master in the contemporary revival has been greatly affected by the wealth of information on tattooing and general culture that is available to any that are willing to look for it. The days of apprenticeships and the preservation of privileged or sacred knowledge are nearly gone from the mainstream tattoo industry and may also be a thing of the past for indigenous practices.

Techniques: With the exception of the Maori *moko*, the process of tattooing in Polynesia has not changed much. First, the design was marked and major sections were outlined on the skin, usually with charcoal or colored earth. Then, the master began work with the needles, which were often made of bird bone, turtle shell, bamboo, and occasionally shark teeth. The tattooing itself was a process of multiple taps. The implement used to cut the skin and inject the ink was similar in form to an adze, with the needles mounted on the end of a wooden haft. The soot from the burned candlenut (*Aleurites moluccana*) was collected and mixed with a variety of liquids including candlenut oil, sugar cane juice, coconut milk/water, other plant-based liquids or water to produce the ink. In Hawai'i, there was occasionally a fourth step in the process between the inking and the healing. After the ink was inserted the first time, the *uhi* was sometimes darkened with the juices or saps of other plants, most notably the *'ilie'e* (*Plumbago zeylanica*).

Aside from continued rinsing with seawater, there are no specific details given in most written sources regarding the healing processes used in Polynesia, but it can be assumed that the vast pharmacological knowledge of the master would have been applied to assist in the healing.

Lesa Moli Li'o

Lesa Moli is a Samoan farmer and tattoo artist. He learned to make the tools of the trade from his father, who was also a tattoo artist. These tools are made from sharpened boar's teeth fastened together with a piece of turtle shell, tied together with Mautofu wood. The dye he uses is created from gasoline because it is readily available and burns easily.



Lesa Moli Li'o

feels only Samoans should receive Samoan tattoos. In his opinion, people should not receive tattoos from cultures that are not their own.

From his father, Moli received instruction on mentally designing tattoos and envisioning on what parts of the body they would look best. He would then go around his village, Siumu, to look for men to practice on.

In Samoan tradition, a person needs to complete his cultural body tattoo in order to fulfill his traditional duties. According to Moli, in order to do this one must visit the Matai's gathering abode to be taught the traditional ways of conduct and service that is synonymous with completing his new tattoo attire. He is then ordained to enter the realm of the Alii's for his final approval. If he is unable to complete his tattoo, he is branded a coward and shames his family and his children.

Samoans keep their traditional values sacred, and Moli

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Tattoo History Questions

1. According to mythology, how did tattooing start?
2. Who brought the art of tattooing to the human world?
3. How old is the art of tattooing?
4. What must a master tattoo artist know?
5. What does the master tattoo artist sacrifice?
6. What shapes and pictographs are drawn on body?
7. Briefly explain the technique of tattooing.
8. What is Lesa Moli two jobs?
9. What are Moli's tools made of?
10. Why do men of Samoa want to get a tattoo?