

## **The Literacy of the Samoan Tatau - National Centre of Literacy & Numeracy for Adults Wangana/Fono 2014**

Firstly, what is the Samoan Tatau? The Samoan tatau is the ancient practice of body marking or tattooing using the 'au or traditional tools. The tatau is a body adornment given only to men and it covers roughly 60% of the body, starting from around the mid back area, down to just below the knees [ppt].

It is a tradition that has been practiced by Samoans for many centuries. Although it has been often referred to as an 'art form', it is actually a living being. It is living in the sense that the canvas on which the tatau is printed is living, it breathes, it moves, it feeds and more importantly, it speaks. It is often assumed that the tatau is simply a form of body adornment that other than its aesthetical value, serves no other purpose. In this paper, I endeavour to illustrate that literacy is largely connected to the tatau. I will explore this notion of the tatau being able to speak to people, and look at it from a number of generational perspectives.

There is an old Samoan saying [ppt], "E tā muamua le gutu, ona tā ai loa le tatau". "One must tattoo his mouth before he tattoos his body". What this saying implies is that one must first learn to speak before they get the traditional Samoan tatau or pe'a.

In the traditional Samoan context, "learning to speak" wasn't so much about learning the local vernacular, but more so the learning of the older, respectful more difficult language of the chiefs or the *gagana fa'a-matai*. This is often a difficult task as the chiefly or oratory Samoan language is one full of metaphors, analogies, idioms etc. For example, take a phrase commonly used by the orators and chiefs [ppt] "A pa'ū le poutū, e lē tali le poulalo" – "If the mid-pole of a house breaks, the lower poles of the house cannot support the house". What this saying is alluding to is the death of a chief or a great person. A chief is compared to the mid-pole and the people and family are the smaller side-poles. When the chief (mid-pole) dies, it will be hard for the family (side-poles) to cope because they have lost a great leader.

Now for a young man to wear the tatau, it was expected that he first learn the language of the chiefs before he undergoes the tattooing. It is commonly believed that the tatau was originally reserved only for men of chiefly status, however overtime, the belief changed and any man was allowed to get the tatau. In certain ceremonies involving chiefs, the wearer of the tatau is the only non-titled person allowed into the realm of the chiefs because it was their main duty to serve the chiefs especially during important ceremonies such as the ava or the kava ceremony. It was for this particular reason that they had to master the chiefly language for they would have had to use it to communicate with the chiefs in the exercising of their duties as the taule'ale'a or untitled young man. Some of the important duties often exercised by these tattooed young men are folafola sua (public acknowledgement of gifts)

and the tufa ava (distribution of the kava) – roles in which the young man is called upon to speak, therefore an ability to do so was very important. [vid], [vid], [vid]

So how does a young man learn to speak before he gets a tatau. Traditionally in Samoa, this was done through listening, observing and doing. There were no formal classes run to teach the intricacies of the Samoan language. Village life was the classroom and they learnt through engaging in everyday activities. Things were learnt first through memorising and were understood later. This applied to language. Language was taught through song and chant. At around the age of 15-16, one of the first phrases I learnt whilst “learning to speak” was an extension of the Samoan word for Hello – which is Talofa

[ppt] “Malo le soifua maua – ma le lagi mama” – at first all I knew was that these words said in this sequence was just a more formal way of saying hello in Samoan, and I learnt it as if I was learning a poem. [repeat the saying]. It wasn’t for a few years later that I actually knew what the words meant – [ppt] – “Well done for an abundant life, and for the clear blue skies”. To break this down, what the phrase is implying is that because of your health and well-being, as well as the good weather, it is great that we can meet today. So although I had learnt this phrase and was able to say it confidently, it actually took me a while to fully understand the deeper meaning of the phrase even though I knew from the beginning what its surface meaning was.

My five year old son is bilingual and learns the Samoan language in the exact same way. At three years old, I taught him to memorise the saying [ppt] “Daddy tali le telefoni” – “Daddy answer the phone”. My intentions were to use it as my ring tone for my phone. If you listen to the recording of my 3 year old son, you could hear that the words are not clear yet it was something that he memorised and had no idea of what it actually meant. Two years on and for the purpose of my paper, I asked him to translate in Samoan “Daddy answer your phone”, and this is what he said....[ppt]. As you can see, a couple of years on, his pronunciation has become much clearer, and he actually knows what the words mean.

Similarly the same can apply to the English language. For example, from a young age, I was often called upon to MC events at school etc. One of the phrases that I discovered that was often used by MC’s and TV presenters was [ppt] “Without further adieu...please welcome...”. And so for many years, this was one of those phrases that I would always keep in the back of my head for these MC-ing events etc. It wasn’t until many years later that I learnt that the correct phrase was [ppt] “without further ado....please welcome”, and ever since, I have said it correctly.

Now learning to speak in Samoan follows a similar pattern. As children, we mimic what we think we hear, just as my son did when he was 3 years old. As we get older and we begin to understand more, we have the ability to adjust and make the necessary changes. Its like

listening to a song and singing what you think you hear, and then when you actually read the lyrics, you discover that it was a completely different word, for example, there is a famous joke about a Samoan guy looking for a song called “king justice”. Asked by the music shop owner to sing the song, the Samoan man replied...”King Justice.....”. He was actually looking for the MC Hammer song – You cant touch this. And so the moral of the story is that the Samoan man then knew what the real words were.

So back to the tatau. So when young Samoan boys wanted to get their tatau done, the tradition was for them to learn the language and culture first, and then one would be worthy to wear the tatau. The tatau became the mark or the symbol of one’s ability to speak and to act in a way befitting a good Samoan man. As an analogy, the tatau was the diploma or the degree that a young man received after completing his schooling in the Samoan language and customs at the village University of Life.

However times have changed. Although the ideal of getting one’s mouth tattooed before getting his body tattooed still remains an important ideal, the reality in this day and age is that this is not happening. For some, the ideal of language and tatau being linked has been lost. Sadly some see it as simply a form of wearable art. If the ideal of learning to speak first was enforced in this day and age, the chances are not many men would have the opportunity to wear the tatau. Movement away from the Samoan homeland has not only resulted in the loss of the Samoan language, but also the relaxing of customs such as the learning to speak before one gets tattooed. More and more Samoan and non-Samoan men outside of the Samoan homeland are getting tatau done without necessarily knowing how to speak Samoan, even at the very basic levels.

Would it be fair then to assume that the modern practice of tatau has lost its connection with the Samoan language and custom? Has it become simply a fashion statement? Well my answer is No. On the surface, it seems that language and custom has been lost as part of the tatau journey, however what Ive observed recently is that the connection between the tatau and the Samoan language and custom has in most cases become much much closer. The change that is commonly happening is that rather than traditionally embracing the language and culture in order to get a tatau, the present generation of young men living away from Samoa, seem to be embracing the tatau as a means to then learn the language and customs of Samoa. Speaking to some guys, prior to getting their tatau, they didn’t see a need for them to learn to speak Samoan even at the basic level. It wasn’t until they had finished their tatau, that all of a sudden, there was a feeling that the journey is not complete unless they learn their language. It is as if even amongst the younger NZ born generation, there is still a feeling that the tatau and the language and custom go hand in hand even though they are doing it in a different order. It is encouraging to see that the tatau is still empowering the young men to learn.

If we were to look back at the tradition of learning to speak before getting a tattoo, we see that it is not too different from how the transition from secondary to tertiary education works today. In theory, for one to attend a tertiary institution, one should prepare themselves in the secondary schooling years to achieve a literacy and numeracy level that would then make them ready for the tertiary level. The reality we find is that a lot of our young people are getting into the tertiary courses, and although on paper they have met the literacy and numeracy requirements, in reality, their actual ability don't match the level of literacy and numeracy they are expected to be at.

This is in a way similar to the non-Samoan speaking young man getting a tatau even though he doesn't quite know the language or the customs. How then do you teach the young man to speak Samoan? Similarly, how do you help the young student enrolled in a course improve their literacy and numeracy abilities? My advice is the same way that I grew up learning the language, and that is to let them live it. The advice I give to a young person serious about wanting to learn his Samoan language is to go back to Samoa and live the Samoan way of life. In working and living, the language comes easier. Even in the NZ contexts, there are groups of people teaching the language through actions and activities. Rather than talking about ava ceremonies, they are acting out ava ceremonies and allowing the learners to engage and immerse themselves in it.

I feel the same can be done with courses and programs. Take for instance the trades programs where many of our Pacific young people are getting in to and not necessarily having the literacy and numeracy skills to cope. From the outskirts, lecturers and tutors should be engaging in the language of the particular discipline and encouraging the students from day one to use it. The language must be taught alongside the practical component of the trade, just as the Samoan language is taught alongside the customary practices. Memorising is still the most common way of learning. Like the Samoan language, they may not know what the terms mean initially, but through repetitive use and exposure, the meanings will eventually become clear. For the student, their trade is their tatau. Just as the tatau connects with the Samoan language, their trades also have a connection with a special vocabulary that is unique to their trade. One technique that I find very useful and this applies right across the disciplines, is having word lists of important terms and phrases that are important in order for a student to manage in a course. Like the way I learnt Samoan, it starts with words, and these build into sentences, which build into phrases and so forth.

Lastly, the best advice I can give to a teacher is to encourage their students. Sadly I have seen some lecturers who don't have the patience or the energy to help their students. The worst thing you can do to a New Zealand born Samoan trying to learn his parent's mother tongue is to laugh at him and put him down every time he makes a mistake. You will quickly find that they will lose confidence and eventually give up. The same applies to a student

struggling in a program. If you encourage them and show them you support, you will find that it empowers them, and increases their will to learn [ppt]