Samoan tattoos leave indelible global imprint

Popularity threatens cultural heritage of ancient art

In the Polynesian archipelago of Samoa, ritual tattooing stands as a visible mark of cultural continuity and ethnic identity. A large number of Samoans living overseas remain attached to the practice and the growing demand for tattoos (tatau) tends to dynamize the practice by favouring the establishment of new practitioners. This in turn can disturb the balance that exists between traditional transmission, ceremonial rules and economic sustainability for tattooing experts (tufuga tā tatau).

For the majority of Samoans, tattooing is a central rite of passage that must be performed on young men and young women by an expert in this ritual. The tufuga tā tatau, assisted by members of his extended family, is vested with the power to transform the person both physically and mentally through people. These rites enact a change in the family, is vested with the power to transform tatau by an expert in this ritual. The rite performed on young men and young women is a central rite of passage that must be attended to by an expert in this ritual. The rite performed on young men and young women is a central rite of passage that must be attended to by an expert in this ritual.

The tradition of the tattooing “guild” through oral tradition attests the sacredness of the malu done, you must see how it links up to the values and cultural practices that we have.

The introduction of Christianity, colonisation and, to a certain extent westernisation, have had effects on the practice of tattooing, which has undergone significant changes since the period of the first encounters between Samoans and Europeans.

However, tattooing techniques, the ceremony and the designs live on and some of the most skilled experts are considered true artists, both by the Samoan community and the tattoo community worldwide. In SAMOA, tattooing has always been a family “business”. Most of the tattooing experts are related to one of the two ancestral lineages that confers them a right to work and use specific tools. A rich oral tradition attests the sacredness of the foundation the tattooing “guild” through mythical origin. According to this oral tradition, the art of tattooing was bestowed on several individuals by two deities during a mythical voyage throughout the archipelago. Moreover, a traditional tattooist gains access to the technical and ritual skills of his master through a long process of apprenticeship and service. This process of transmission embeds both oral and technical aspects and can normally only be granted after a very long period of training. Even though being a member of an ancestral lineage is considered a must to gain full access to authority and recognition. Elders of the craft such as Su’a Sulai’ape Alaiva’a understand that younger outsiders can be attracted by the profession of tufuga tā tatau. Thus, he is one of those who started to pass on the craft to several talented tattooists from Samoa, Polynesia, USA and Europe. This should be understood as a strong message in favour of an open attitude towards newcomers.

In 2010, UNESCO Apia took the initiative to focus on the practice of tattooing as a potential key element of intangible heritage in Samoa. During April-June last year, field research was conducted by an anthropologist on Samoan tattooing and Western Polynesia. Several issues related to Samoan tattooing were explored: Who are the practitioners? How is it transmitted? What are the aesthetic and economic features? How is it perceived and interpreted by the population? Does this practice need a protection plan?

The “Tattooing in Samoa: Custodianship, Intangible Cultural Heritage and Creative Industry” study gave a great insight into the history and the current situation of the craft, which was widespread in Oceania in the past. In Samoa, it is still conducted using traditional tools and techniques making it a living and meaningful practice that can be accessed by all generations, both local and diasporic. It was found that Samoan tattooing is a complex matter in the sense that, nowadays, it serves a wide range of purposes according to a person’s background. In areas where the involvement of youth in traditional leadership is a central aspect of village life, tattooing can have an institutional function: for example, performing customary duties such as preparation and service of food to the members of the village council. In a more urban context, it can be used to mark one’s own courage and attachment to custom even though one is not requested to perform customary actions on a regular basis. Among the diaspora, families and different groups (either related by a church affiliation or by membership of a cultural group) frequently seek the services of a tattoo expert. In such cases people are emphasizing their will to mark themselves...
as a “real Samoan” and therefore make a visible distinction between membership in the Samoan community and other ethnic groups present in the same area. This is particularly visible in the Auckland suburbs in New Zealand where many different Pacific islanders have settled.

The social use of Samoan tattooing is more difficult to interpret when it is worn by westerners and non-Samoans. In these cases, more individualistic motivations are mixed with the sentiment of a cultural exchange and a sort of ostensible display of proximity with a foreign indigenous culture.

Due to their remoteness from the Islands, the Samoan population based in the USA is even more alien to the idea of being tattooed to show one’s ethnic origin. Instead, the practices of tattooing are interpreted as confrontational or stand as a marker for gang affiliation. At the same time, famous tattoo artists from Samoa are invited to attend international tattoo conventions to represent their country and show their rare skills.

Given the general commoditization and mainstreaming of tattooing, Samoan experts are very sought after and receive substantial payment for their work. That in turn influences young Samoans and machine tattooists to experiment without the links to traditional systems and processes relevant to practices which are customarily restricted to, and by members of tattooing families in Samoa.

The ritual of tattooing is still very frequently performed within the Samoan community but other more fashionable kinds of tattoos influenced by Samoan iconography represents nowadays a considerable amount of the tufuga activity. In this context, they adapt their skills to the new clientele. They also start to work with tattoo guns which is a sign of their competitiveness towards “machine tattooists” who operate in Apia, the capital city.

The growing number of Samoans and non-Samoans who adopt the Samoan technique and designs as an income generating activity contributes to the dynamism of the craft and brings creativity, but at the same time, it leads the traditional guild of tufuga to face new challenges. In the past the tufuga overcame bans enforced by missionaries and the changing needs of the Samoan population, and managed to adapt to new clientele in new contexts (diaspora, urbanisation of Apia, tourism). Today, the consequences of globalization, i.e. health issues, copyright and the question of transmission of heritage are new challenges for local practitioners.

The question of transmission of heritage is a real dilemma for local practitioners. On one hand they can neither ignore nor forbid the new generation of tattooists who operate without having family ties and the credentials to be a recognized and a titled member of the traditional tattooing guild. On the other hand, as elders and custodians they must find a way to control the craft and preserve the dignity of the ritual and the proper use of traditional designs.

As the actual Head of State Tupua Tamasese summed up very clearly during an interview given in 2005: “The tufuga has to follow traditional rules or taboo, he has to honour the ancient goddesses of the craft and is not supposed to share his knowledge with outsiders. But since the coming of Christianity in Samoa, those rules went through several changes in order to protect the essence of the craft and to guarantee the sustainability of this profession.”

Today the practice is at another stage of its evolution. And having a report done on the subject might help find a common ground for UNESCO and the body of practitioners to work together on a protection plan.

Although the continuity of this ancestral custom doesn’t seem at risk, the report by UNESCO Apia recommends that those issues should be addressed to enable the practitioners to protect and set boundaries on their craft.

One of the main recommendations in the report is to create a consensus among the body of traditional tattooists on some basic central points such as health, hygiene, importance of the ritual, oral tradition and traditional technique in order to let them perceive the importance of a worldwide recognition of their heritage.

When asked about his concern on health issues and copyright of the craft, the tufuga tā tatau Sulu’ape Alaiva’a (a very famous member of the Su’a tattooing traditional lineage who has been working around the world since the 1980s) answered that he would like to be able to gather his colleagues and create a national tattooing consortium in order to establish hygiene standards and protect this special form of heritage from infringement of traditional rules.

The main barrier to reach that goal is the inherent competition between the tattooing families and the relative absence of control over tattooists operating overseas. This issue is still at a preliminary stage and would probably require a juridical consultancy. However, given the increasing number of self-taught tufuga ta tatau, his idea of creating a federation or a national consortium seems an important choice for future protection of the practice of Samoan tattooing.

There are still a number of sensitive issues to overcome such as the inherent competition and in some cases defiance between the tattooists. The UNESCO report on Samoan tattooing gives some suggestions to approaching these questions of transmission of heritage together with promotion of tattooing as a sustainable activity. The report emphasizes how important the consultation of all custodians is in order to create and strengthen the ancestral link that unites all tufuga tā tatau.

Another key point that has been raised is the necessity for UNESCO to communicate on cultural heritage policies with traditional tattooists in order to inform them about the possibility and benefits that it offers.