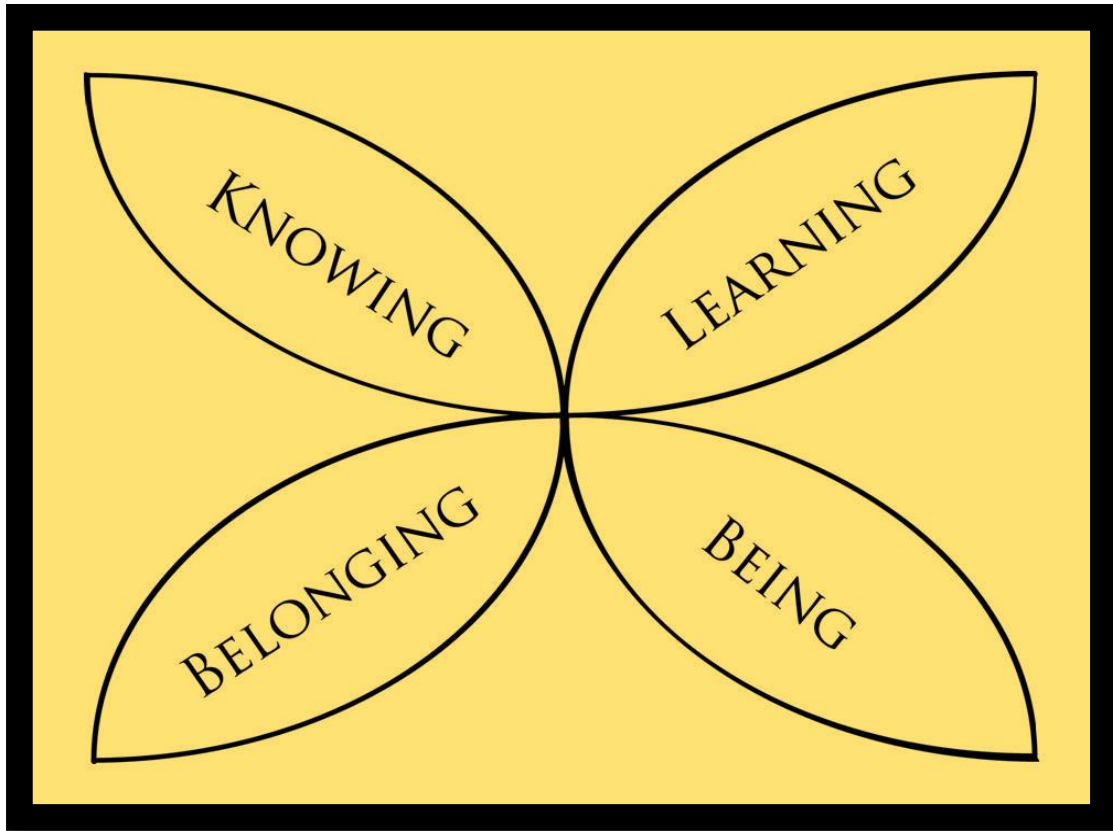


# TAPA MO TATAU

An exploration of Pacific conceptions of ESD through a study of  
Samoan and Tongan Heritage Arts



By

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## Abstract

The quality of education in the Pacific islands has been a longstanding concern. Since the endorsement of the Pacific Education for Sustainable Development framework (PESDF) in 2006, its Action Plan in 2008 and the Pacific Education and Development Framework also in 2008; the discussion has shifted to quality Education for *Sustainable* Pacific Societies. Despite the seven-year conversation, little discourse, research and writing on ESD has emerged. Similarly, little has been done to understand what sustainability means to Pacific peoples. The purpose of this research is to examine the Pacific heritage arts of tapa and tattoo in Samoa and Tonga to elicit indigenous ideas about sustainability, education and resilience – three concepts that are central to the discussion of sustainability in education.

The research applied bricolage methodologically and theoretically, bringing together Western and Indigenous theories of research and education within the broader line of inquiry. This qualitative study used a phenomenological-ethnographical framework to explore the views of heritage art practitioners, teachers, teacher educators, teacher trainees and members of the wider cultural community on the cultural memory and practice of the two select heritage art forms. A mixed-methods approach brought together a variety of data gathering instruments from mainstream academia and indigenous research approaches including document/policy analysis, Talanoa, Tālanga, visual ethnographies and field notes.

Major findings of this research were that tapa and tattoo are important epistemological sites where knowing and learning occurs through the reinforcement of beliefs about identity (being) and community membership (belonging). The decline in Siapo production and use in Samoa has resulted in some cultural memory loss although participants still believe it to be an important cultural aspect. In Tonga, while Ngatu is still widely produced, there are major changes to the production process. Participants at both cultural sites believe that tapa is a means by which women demonstrate their contribution to the cultural community by the production and presentation of this item of traditional wealth. It is also seen as a means by which to nurture relational spaces and to maintain and sustain relationships.

Traditional Tattoo practice thrives in Samoa as an important identity marker and indicator of male cultural commitment to service and of the sacred, protected status of women. In Tonga, the 1839 Vavau code banned the practice of traditional tattooing. Consequently, many participants were of the view that tattooing was never a part of Tongan culture. Over the last ten years however, a tattoo renaissance has taken place on the island kingdom. Participants suggest the incorporation of traditional ngatu kupesi designs in tattoos means that tattoo may be an important symbol of identity for young Tongans today. Both tapa and tattoo are seen as significant cultural markers denoting active human agency; reaffirming, negotiating and repositioning of self within multiple relationships in the wider cultural community.

Results indicate that as important epistemological sites, they contain cultural indigenous knowledge about life philosophies, history, spirituality, status, genealogies, and relationships. As such these sites are reference points for the teaching, learning and reinforcing of indigenous epistemologies.

The study shows that sustainability was/is a way of life in the Samoan/Tongan culture guided by the life-philosophy of Vā; relational space with self, within community, environment and the cosmos. Related processes of nurturing, maintaining and reaffirming relationships emerged as the active means by which this life-philosophy is enacted. These are emphasized by a number of guiding values and principles embedded within the broader philosophy of Vā. Participants believe sustainability is about well-being – individual and community – and is premised on ten basic principles. These are cultural continuity, resilience, spirituality, agency, commitment and participation, life-long learning/education, indigenous pedagogies, decolonization of IKS and IE, self-determination and knowledge of socio-cultural/historical histories.

Developing on these, a new concept of *resilience literacies* is introduced as a set of attributes and competencies that enable an individual/community's well-being. Additionally, a socio-cultural theory of learning, *Tuli*, is presented as a pedagogical tool developed on the four main components of knowing, learning, being and belonging. It is informed by the tā-vā time-space theory of reality and Delor's pillars of learning. Conceptually the theory is presented as a visual map fashioned on a shared design element of Siapo and Ngatu. The symbolism of the *Tuli* is drawn from Samoan and Tongan cosmology featuring the golden plover which is responsible for the creation of humans from grubs. This symbolism is found in tapa designs *fa'avae tuli* (Siapo Samoa) and *ve'etuli* (Ngatu Tonga). In the case of the latter, the use of *Tuli* rather than the *kiu* (Tongan for Plover) strengthens the argument of shared cultural knowledge and practice of these art forms.

The dissertation further reconceptualizes tā-vā, as *fanua/founa- tā-vā* as a triadic, holistic Samoan/Tongan ontological understanding of reality. This new place-time-space theory contextualizes socio-cultural/historical experiences positing that time (tā) situates, place (fonua/fanua) contextualizes and space (vā) positions/relates. As a pedagogical framework, *Tuli*, has curriculum and pedagogical implications for the Pacific classroom. It argues that decolonization of education must take into account time-specific realities of globalization in the Pacific today and presents the view that synergies may be found between mainstream paradigms of thinking about education, sustainability and ESD and PIKS/IE. It is these synergies that may enable self-determination and resilience required for conscientization and critical mass to bring about political will for relevant locally-driven educational efforts towards sustainability for the future in the islands.

## Acknowledgement

Like thousands of other Pacific islanders, my educational experience was fraught with the tension of trying to find synergy between what was learnt in the home and what was ingrained in the school. This work is a testimony to my family past, present and future. The ancestors of the sacred trees provided inspiration and wisdom and my deepest respect and love goes to my parents Charlie Hussein Koya and Regina Jane (Polly) Lockington whose struggles and values demonstrated resilience and commitment. I am grateful to my father who taught me to look beyond the value of a piece of paper and to stare instead into the intentions of the soul. My mother taught me the value of both Western education and indigenous knowledge and even in death reminded me that learning is a life-long journey. I honor also my grandmother, Taula'ai Leafine Ali'i I Sisilia Luatua for instilling in me the love for story-telling and genealogies and my dearest Aunt Laisa, who was always there for me

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And finally to all my teachers, those who inspired me and those who were unable to do so: I am committed to envisioning a better education for the future because of you.

*For inspiring and encouraging my educational journey, I am grateful.*

## Personal Statement

Three generations of strong Samoan women have brought me to this space in which I feel a responsibility to reconnect with the traditional art forms of Tapa and Tattoo.

To begin, let me first pay my respects to my father Charlie and his people; his mother Kaliani (Zuleika) and her mother Manicum who journeyed to Fiji from Carella, India in 1916; and, his father, Sheikh Ahmed Issac, of whom, very little is known except for his Arab roots and who also found his way to Fiji in the early 1900s. I give thanks for the gift of a generous father whom I knew for only a short time until his untimely death in 1983 when I was ten years old. In as much as I would love to know and hold their stories to me, I was raised by my mother and my grandmother and through no fault of their own, my upbringing therefore was very Samoan. It is for this reason that my passion for culture and spirituality is tied to Samoa.

My great grandmother Leafine Ali'i Fa'amalepe Tanuvasa was a remarkable woman who was the only daughter of Tanuvasa Moseniolo and Tufou Tuigamala. At a young age, she took on the role of village Taupou in Nofuoli'i as 'meauli' (the black) and was married three times in traditional strengthening of family ties through arranged marriages. Her first marriage was to the governor and high chief of Pago pago, Le'iato when she was only nineteen years old. It is from her second marriage to Luatua Moe, a high orator chief of Saleimoa that my family line emerges. My grandmother and my mother often shared stories of their life in Samoa and just as my mother had learnt many lessons from the past through story telling from her grandmother, I too learnt these lessons from my grandmother and mother.

My grandmother often retold the story of Taema and Tilafainga when remembering her own tattoo (malu) experience. She sang the tātatau chant and recalled that she had been a teenager at the time of tattooing. As the eldest living child of two strong family lines, her tattoo had been specially designed to incorporate both spiritual and genealogical references. As a sign of spiritual conversion to Christianity however, she refused to accept the gift of fa'a taulai'tu (spiritual healer) from her mother Fa'amalepe. Despite this, she continued to assist in spirit possessions particularly in the case of Saumaiafe<sup>1</sup>. Even while residing in Fiji, she often spoke of premonition dreams and visitations by both Saumaiafe and her messenger – the frigate bird. The gift of premonition is still widely experienced by current generations who residing in Fiji, New

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<sup>1</sup> An ancestor spirit from Saleimoa of a lower ranking chief Sami. It is said that this relationship allowed my grandmother to appease Saumaiafe and tend to her concerns when she possessed a villager.

Caledonia and New Zealand. It is this personal connection to a deep spiritual and yet, simultaneously, Christian upbringing that has inspired my own interest in Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems.

During my first visit to Samoa in 1993, I expressed an interest in obtaining a malu as my grandmother had done when she was also nineteen. I was abruptly told that if I were to obtain the tattoo, that I should not come back to Fiji and should instead remain in Samoa. Taken a back I demanded more information and was quietly told that when I returned to Fiji, all would be explained. It is in looking back that I respect their decision, in that I was not spiritually attuned to the significance of tātatau, nor was I open to the possibility of channeling spiritual energy at that immature period of my life.

My mother was a wonderful creative spirit and just as she had learnt to wake at dawn to strip the bark from mulberry, soak, beat and paint Siapo, she continued to experiment with newer forms of art utilizing those traditional motifs that her grandmother had taught her. Even though, we lived in Fiji, she showed me how to make the starch base used to hold the tapa cloth in place on the elei boards and how to mix and add over coats of color.

In identifying a research-worthy topic in education, it was a natural progression to link Tapa and Tattoo with my own learning experience and the inherent spirituality that these possess. The personal affiliation I felt to the topic was further strengthened by my twin daughters for two reasons. Firstly, twins are sacred in Samoan cosmogony stories and secondly, that multiple births (twins, triplets and quadruplets) are specific to our Samoa blood lines. This personal significance in addition to my own passion for teaching and learning has given life to this project. It is my gift to the next generation of strong Pacific women - my daughters, and grand-niece – I hope that this will in some way inspire a reverence for the gift of the ancestors.

It is in honor of these three strong women of the past and three strong women of the future that I write and recall these stories with much alofa.

## **Dedication**

*For Katherine, Regina & Zariah  
Always remember where you come from  
And be blessed to speak with the spirits.*

*&*

*For the children of Samoa and Tonga,  
This is your heritage and knowledge.*

*With much love.*



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