

FOR THE ANCESTORS ONE WOMAN'S MALU

BY MADELEINE CHAPMAN

Growing up in Sāmoa, Matalena Leaupepe saw tatau everywhere. Men often had pe'a, the Samoan tattoo that covers the torso and thighs. Matalena's dad was the ali'i (high chief) of their village. He had a pe'a. Her grandmother and great aunts wore malu. As a young child, Matalena loved to sit and examine the stars inked around their knees.

FAR AWAY



When Matalena was ten, her family moved to Wellington, and she stopped seeing beautiful tatau everywhere. Why? Because it was often cold and windy. In Sāmoa, where it's always warm, it's common for men to wear only a lavalava, with no shirt. Their tatau can be seen all the time, but in New Zealand, "My dad wore pants and a shirt every day," Matalena says, "and my aunts and their malu were far away."

Matalena's memory of the tatau faded until they were almost forgotten. Then, when she was twenty-one, Matalena became a tāupou. This is a role in fa'aSāmoa that is about women fostering peace and harmony in family and village life. The role of tāupou was given to Matalena by her father. He also asked if she would consider getting a malu – an honour, but Matalena wasn't ready. "I was young, and I thought having dots and lines on my legs would look weird, especially to strangers in public."

Then Matalena's dad passed away. It would be two decades before she got her malu. Over the years, she sometimes regretted saying no. "I worried that I'd missed my chance," Matalena says.





STRONG

The word “malu” means to shelter or protect. Add two macrons and you get “mālū” and a different meaning: soft, tender, compassionate. To protect *and* be soft is what makes a Samoan woman strong.

Wearing a malu is a good way to show strength because getting one hurts. To share this pain, a person always has a partner called a soa. Matalena’s soa was a friend from work. The women got their malu together. Matalena went first while her soa sat with her, providing encouragement. Then they swapped places.

Supporters provide help in all kinds of ways. “They pray, cheer you on, sing, and offer words of encouragement,” Matalena says. Getting a malu is a very spiritual experience. “Sometimes people see or experience things they wouldn’t normally see or experience. Having lots of support makes you stronger. It helps you to focus and overcome challenges during the ritual.”

Matalena felt spirits while she was getting her malu. They were familiar spirits, people who had passed: her dad, her grandmother, a friend, her grandfather. Matalena never met her grandfather. She’d never seen a photograph of him, either. “Yet I felt strongly he was with me the whole time. I could see him vividly.”

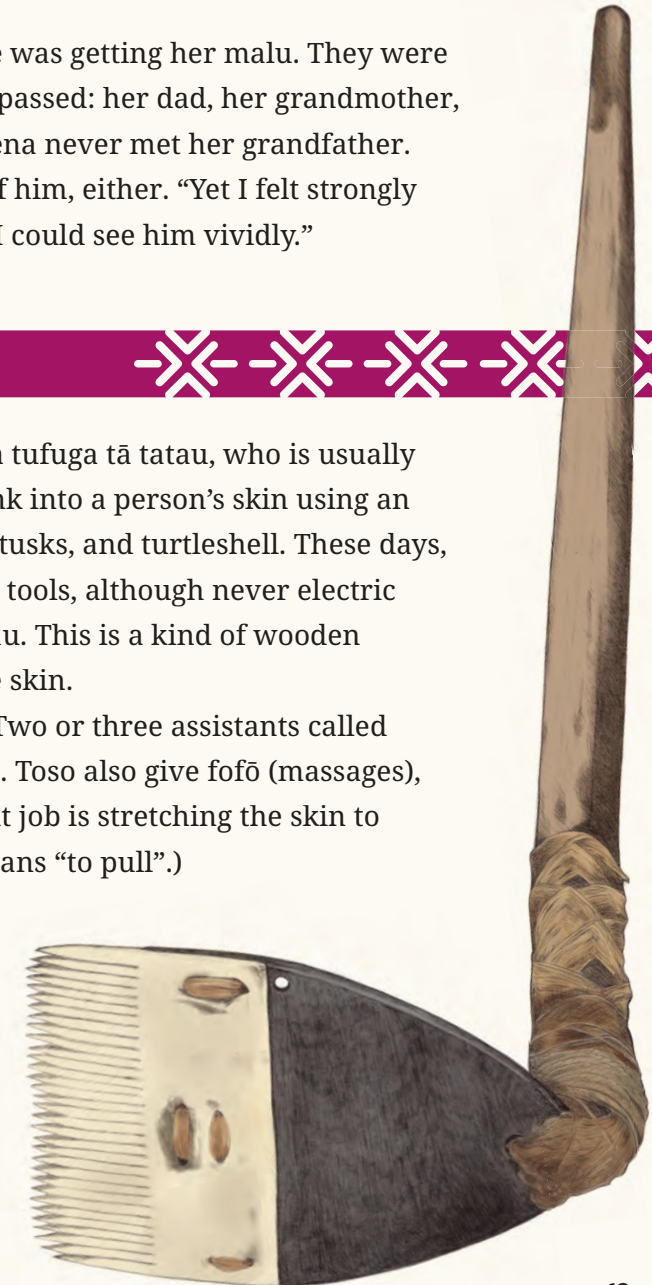
INK

Malu are designed and done by a tufuga tā tatau, who is usually male. Traditional tufuga insert ink into a person’s skin using an au – a tool made from wood, pig tusks, and turtleshell. These days, many tufuga use plastic or metal tools, although never electric ones. The tufuga also has a sausau. This is a kind of wooden mallet used to tap the au into the skin.

A tufuga doesn’t work alone. Two or three assistants called toso help prepare the equipment. Toso also give fofō (massages), but perhaps their most important job is stretching the skin to present to the tufuga. (“Toso” means “to pull”.)

Matalena clearly remembers the sound of the tufuga’s work. “His tapping was a continuous drone,” she says, “wood on wood as his sausau hit the au like a hammer to a nail.”

PAIN



PAIN



For Matalena, the pain felt exactly like someone *was* tapping nails into her skin. And not small nails, either. “It felt like big nails were being hammered into my legs over and over again.” She especially remembers the feel of the *au* around her knees, where the bone is close to the skin.

The pain is part of the process. Matalena says it shouldn’t be fought. “There’s no way that battle can be won. Even the strongest woman will be humbled by the experience.” Being humble and accepting the pain is partly how a *malu* or *pe’a* is earned. “And going through that experience with someone else,” Matalena says, “bonds you to that person for the rest of your life.”

So there was a lot of pain. But there was also joy – and grief because of those no longer here. A sense of celebration too. Matalena felt all kinds of emotions during the ceremony.



HONOUR



People often get a tattoo because they want a pretty picture on their skin. But having a *malu* or *pe’a* isn’t about this. Matalena wasn’t worried about how her *tatau* would turn out. “I wanted a *malu* so I could honour my ancestors and culture,” she says. “That’s all that mattered. I trusted I’d receive the right design.” Before he began, Matalena’s *tufuga* asked questions about her village and family. He used her answers to plan what he would do.

Women don’t have *malu*, they *wear* *malu* – and they wear them with pride because having one comes with responsibility. Matalena knew this; it’s mostly why she waited. “I wanted to be older,” she says, “and better able to fulfil my responsibilities.”

Matalena had been hesitant to get her *malu* for another reason: she wasn’t sure if she’d earned one. Had she done enough for her people to wear her culture on her legs every day? “In *fa’aSāmoa*, we have a saying,” she explains. “*O le ala i le pule o le tautua*. The way to leadership is through service.” Slowly, Matalena came to understand what this meant and the ways she was serving her people already. “Service is a big part of life,” she says. “*Samoan* women serve in their families and in their jobs. It’s the way we live.”



JOURNEY



Matalena believes life is a journey. For her, getting a malu was another step on that journey. “I wanted to challenge myself,” she says, “so I could keep growing.” Now that she has a malu, it’s important to Matalena that other people understand what it means. “People get a malu or tatau for all kinds of reasons,” she says. “For young Samoans born here, it’s often a way to express identity, both as a Samoan and as a New Zealander.” Matalena relates to this. Her malu is a way to honour who she is.

One day soon, Matalena hopes New Zealand will be more like Sāmoa and she’ll see tatau everywhere. “And I hope people will appreciate their beauty and understand their significance.”



THE LEGEND OF TILAFaIGĀ AND TAEMĀ



Tilafaigā and Taemā were co-joined twins who brought the knowledge and tools of tatau from Fiji to Sāmoa. Before they left Fiji, they were told by tattooists to “tattoo the women and not the men”. As the twins paddled their canoe across the ocean, they made sure to repeat the instruction over and over. “Tattoo the women and not the men. Tattoo the women and not the men.”

There are different explanations about what happened next. Some versions of the legend say the twins were distracted by a beautiful shell, deep in the water, and forgot the instruction. Others say they were bewitched by those who didn’t want the tradition shared. But all the stories end the same. By the time they reached Sāmoa, the twins passed on a different instruction. “Tattoo the men and not the women.”

It was once rare for Samoan women to be inked, and only high-ranking women ever wore malu. By the late twentieth century, this had changed, and it was common to see women with tattoos.



For the Ancestors: One Woman's Malu

by Madeleine Chapman

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