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Tokelau Tā Tatau – Tokelau tattoo:

A reconnection to cultural identity

An exhibition report presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree Masters in
Māori Visual Arts
150825/150826

at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand

Jack Fati Kirifi: [redacted]

2024

Abstract

This exhibition report presents the art of Tokelau tā tatau or traditional Tokelau tattoo as a journey of reconnection to Tokelau cultural identity through contemporary Tokelau art. The loss of Tokelau tā tatau in the mid 1800's due to missionary influence disconnected the art and symbolism of tā tatau as an expression of Tokelau cultural identity. My framework traces a journey of reconnection, bridging the past to the present to confront and remove the cultural amnesia surrounding tā tatau, which was once central to Tokelau cultural identity. The historical series and tupuna portraits in this report reestablishes the significance of tā tatau and its relevance in the contemporary landscape of Tokelau cultural identity. Contemporary Tokelau art has influenced the re-emergence of Tokelau tā tatau motifs within Tokelau communities today. This report reflects my personal journey as a New Zealand born Tokelau artist reconnecting to Tokelau tā tatau through my art practice.

Acknowledgements:

Muamua oi hiki te fakafetai ki te tatou tamana i te lagi mo fakamanuiaga ma takitakiga mo ki tatou uma. E ko manatua ai foki o tatou tamana ma matua kua momoe atu, ma ki latou koi nonofo mai. Na ki latou tukua ia Tokelau ke tahē venei mo te hakiliga o ni tulaga lelei ma he lumanaki manuia mo augā tupulaga i na aho nei. E moli alofa atu ai la au ki te tatou kaiga Tokelau venā ma augā tupulaga e mulimuli mai, e ofo fakapitoa atu ai e au tenei galuega mo koutou uma.
He Hoa! He Hoa Lava!
Tokelau ke Ola.

Firstly, I give thanks to our heavenly father for his guidance and blessings. I want to acknowledge our fathers and mothers who have passed on and those still with us who left Tokelau to seek better opportunities to benefit our generation. Acknowledgements to our kāiga Tokelau and the generations that follow us. I dedicate this work to you all.
He Hoa! He Hoa Lava!
Tokelau ke Ola.

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Introduction

"Oku taina e, taofi tau aganuku, Oku taina e, taofi tau aganuku
Manatua na toeaina, i tǭ tatou mulivaka."

"My people, hold fast to your culture, remember the elders at the stern of the canoe."

This exhibition report is focused on my thesis exhibition *Tokelau Tā Tatau: A reconnection to cultural identity*, presented at Toi gallery, Pātaka art gallery and Museum, Porirua from 27th September to 10th November 2024.

The Tokelau song above acknowledges the cultural wisdom and experience of my elders who sit at the stern of the canoe to guide and steer our journey. This song is a reminder for the present and future generations to hold fast on to our culture. The culture, language, and values our elders entrusted to us are treasures we must hold dear to pass on to the next generations. Our elders and tupuna are always behind us guiding our journey. This song underscores my exhibition kaupapa as a journey of reconnection to cultural identity through the art of Tokelau tā tatau.

Chapter one begins with an overview of Tokelau followed by historical accounts of Tokelau tā tatau . The second part of this chapter compares the similarities of tatau across the Pacific with Tokelau tā tatau to highlight the ancient cultural connections that traverse modern national boundaries. This chapter concludes with brief observations in the resurgence of Pacific tatau at the recent festival of Pacific Arts held in Hawaii.

Chapter two is a literary review of several artists whose work have influenced my art journey and practice. The first part of this chapter looks at two pioneer contemporary Tokelau artists whose work reflects their memories and culture growing up in Tokelau. I will also discuss the work of fellow contemporary Tokelau artists born and raised in New Zealand to highlight the re-emergence of Tokelau tā tatau art in their work and Tokelau communities.
The second part of this chapter looks at two pioneers of contemporary art in New Zealand whose work resonated with me early in my art journey as a New Zealand born Pacific/Tokelau.

Being able to see myself and my cultural identity through these artists works have influenced the intent of my exhibition and kaupapa.

Chapter three discusses the process and methodology of my body of work. This chapter begins with the work I produced for my first year MMVA exhibition Te Matatau in 2022 as the starting point of my tupuna series. The second part of this chapter discusses the development of my concepts and process of my body of work for my final thesis exhibition in 2024.

Chapter four is a review of my final thesis exhibition at Pātaka's Toi gallery, highlighting the significance of Pātaka to my art journey and reconnection to my exhibition kaupapa. This chapter also looks at the development of my exhibition layout concept as a journey and reflects on the challenges and achievements of my final thesis exhibition. The catalogue of works is presented in the order each work is displayed in my final thesis exhibition and provides a detailed description of each work with references to historical sources. The appendices include the Toi gallery floor plan, the exhibition invitation poster, Pātaka's exhibition promotion invitation and a digital image of the exhibition signage.

Chapter One: Tokelau tā tatau & Identity

Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of Tokelau followed by historical accounts of Tokelau tā tatau. The second part of this chapter examines the similarities between Tokelau tā tatau and other tatau practices across the pacific, highlighting ancient cultural connections that transcend modern national boundaries. This chapter concludes with brief observations of the resurgence of Pacific tatau at the recent festival of Pacific Arts held in Hawaii 2024.

The practice of Tokelau tā tatau ceased in the mid-19th century, with only a few historical accounts recorded by visitors to Tokelau before it was abolished. Although these early accounts and images provide valuable insight to Tokelau tā tatau, little has been documented of the practice from a Tokelau perspective. This is my journey of reconnection to Tokelau cultural identity as well as a pathway for the Tokelau community to reconnect with the stories and knowledge of Tokelau tā tatau.

Tokelau

Tokelau is located 507 kilometres north of Samoa and is a self-governing territory of New Zealand made up of three coral atolls: Fakaofo, Nukunonu, and Atafu. A fourth atoll Olohega also known as Swains Island became a US territory administered through America Samoa, however, Olohega is culturally and historically part of Tokelau.

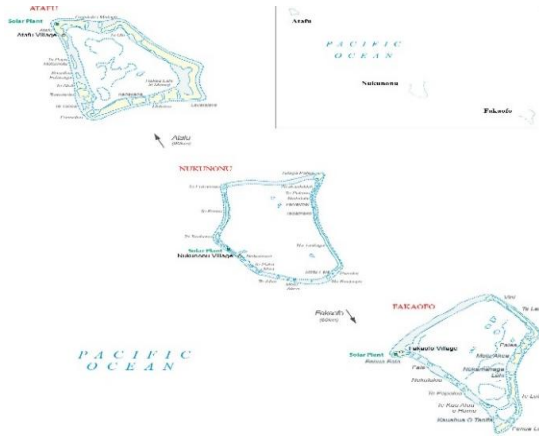


Figure 1 Map of Tokelau

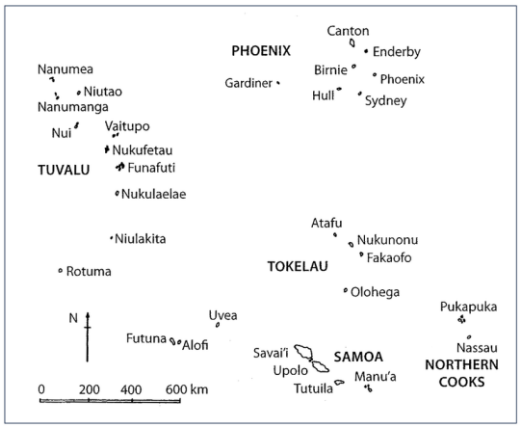


Figure 2 Tokelau location

Tokelau also shares historical and cultural ties with the islands of Luangiua, Sikaiana, Tikopia, Tuvalu, Uvea, Samoa, Tonga and the northern Cook Islands. These connections remind us that we are part of a broader Pacific family connected by our Moana.

The history of Tokelau is not without its challenges. In 1863, the population of Tokelau was devastated by the Peruvian slave trade, also known as "blackbirding". More than half of the population was either taken or perished from diseases introduced by foreign contact. Adding to this cultural disruption, Christian missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, arrived shortly before 1863, converting the remaining population to Christianity. This conversion led to the abandonment of traditional beliefs and practices, including the sacred art of tā tatau.

Today, Tokelau is a self-governing territory under New Zealand administration, and since the 1950s, many Tokelau families have migrated to New Zealand, Australia and Hawaii. In New Zealand the Tokelau diaspora has grown significantly, with communities now established in Auckland, Rotorua, Taupo, Manawatu, the Hutt Valley, Porirua, Christchurch and Dunedin. There are now more Tokelau people living outside of Tokelau than on the islands themselves. The largest Tokelau population in the world is found in the Wellington region, particularly in Porirua and the Hutt Valley.

Historical accounts of Tokelau tā tatau

The tradition of tattooing in Tokelau, known as tā tatau, is an underexplored aspect of Tokelau culture. Although limited written information exists, a few pivotal works provide valuable insights into this art form.

Gordon Macgregor's *Ethnology of Tokelau Islands* (1937) offers detailed accounts of Tokelau tattooing based on field observations by visitors to Tokelau in the 1840's. These early accounts capture the cultural practices of the Tokelau people before missionaries arrived to Tokelau. Macgregor (1937) citing Wilkins (1841) noted that the influence of missionaries led to the decline of tā tatau, and by 1870, the practice had largely disappeared. Tokelau tā tatau served as markers of identity and status for both men and women. For instance, women were tattooed around their lips with a design called *niho ika* (fish teeth), while a distinctive *lupe* design of two parallel lines

filled with cris crossed designs around the waist was often received after marriage (Macgregor ,1937).

Macgregor's work, enriched by earlier accounts from the U.S exploring expedition in the 1840s, documented the visual patterns and cultural significance of Tokelau tā tatau before the practice began to vanish under the pressures of colonisation and missionary influence.

Figure 4 Bowditch Islanders

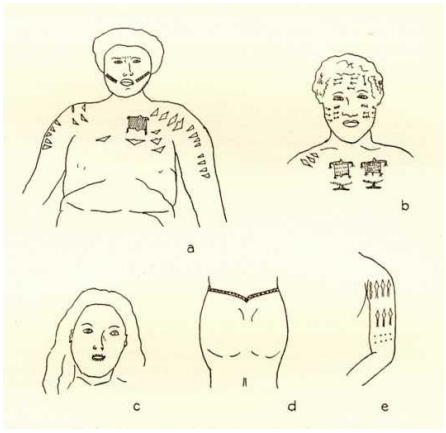


Figure 3 Tokelau tattoo

Anthropologist Tony Hooper's field work in Fakaofo, Tokelau in the 1970's recorded valuable Tokelau cultural and history given by Tokelau knowledge holders. In 1991 Hooper published *'Matagi Tokelau'.* This work provides a detailed collection of Tokelau culture and history. Citing both Macgregor (1937) and JJ Lister (1887) Hooper references Lister's historical photographs and accounts of Tokelau tā tatau. Lister (1887) photographed Tokelau people in the late 1800's. One of these photographs includes Tetaulu who was the aliki (King) of Fakaofo at the time. Lister also recorded a drawing showing Tetaulu's tā tatau across his chest and upper arms.

Figure 6 Tetaulu 1887

Figure 5 Sketch of Tetaulu

Building on Macgregor's work, Dr Sean Mallon, senior curator at Te Papa Museum, published *The History of Tokelau Tatau and Tattooing* in 2013. Mallon expands on Macgregor's research, placing it within a contemporary context that resonates with younger generations, especially those in the diaspora of Tokelau communities. Mallon's work highlights a cultural revival of tattooing, aided by online platforms that enable Tokelau communities to reconnect with their heritage. Mallon's focus on the resurgence of tā tatau reflects a broader movement to reclaim cultural identity, with tattoos once again becoming symbols of pride and connection for modern Tokelau.

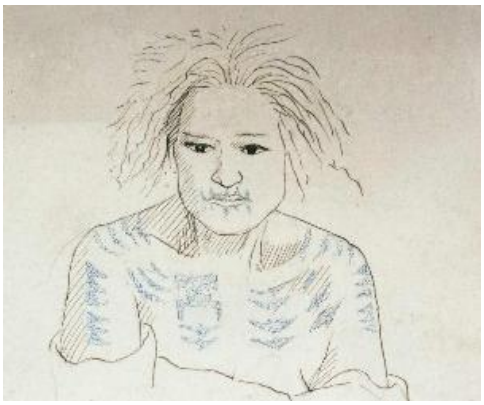


Figure 7 Tokelau women's tattoo

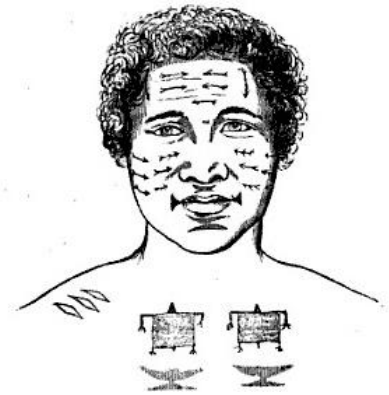


Figure 8 Tokelau men's tattoo

Tokelau Tā Tatau and Cultural Connections

From an indigenous Pacific perspective, the moana connected our islands and cultures. These connections transcend colonial and politically defined boundaries.

Epeli Hau'ofa(1993) mentions that as the largest body of water in the world, the Pacific Ocean was not viewed as a barrier that separated people and islands but instead embodies cultural and genealogical connections, relationships, trade and identity. Hau'ofa reclaims Pacific Indigenous people's deep relationship with the Moana (Ocean) as their home, which traverses beyond their coral reefs and colonial confinements of territorial boundaries. Hau'ofa (1993) pg15

Although there are distinct variations of artistic expression such as tatau motifs, the similarities reveal a cultural connection as mentioned by Hau'ofa (1993). The following highlight the cultural connections between Tokelau with other Pacific tā tatau motifs.

Tikopia is a Polynesian outlier in the Solomon Islands, Tikopia lies 2137km to the west of Tokelau. Despite their distance from each other, the cultural connection between both Tokelau and Tikopia is visible through tā tatau motifs. The image below is an example of Tikopia men's tatau that is similar to Tokelau men's tā tatau, however there are differences in cultural meanings. According to Pendergrast (2000) The Tikopia chest tatau are called fatafata which means chest. (Pendergrast, 2000, p 62). The Tokelau chest motif represented deceased relatives, Macgregor adds "*After the death of a member of the family, particularly a child, it was customary to have a picture of the dead person tattooed on the left side of the chest*", Macgregor (1937) in Mallon (2013, p. 5).

Figure 9 Tikopia tattoo

The Marquesas is part of French Polynesia and is situated 3591km due east of Tokelau. The image on the right shows Tokelau women's lip tatau motif called niho ika (fish teeth). On the left is Marquesas women's lip tatau called koniho (teeth). Both are variations of the same tatau concept of teeth tattooed around the lips.

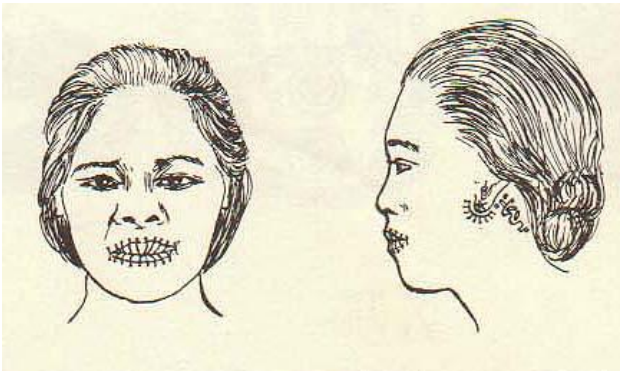


Figure 10 Marquesan koniho lip tattoo

Figure 11 Tokelau niho ika tattoo

Figure 12 Marshall Island women's tattoo

The Marshall islands lie 2612km northwest of Tokelau, however there are close resemblance between Marshallese womens upper chest tatau motifs with Tokelau womens chest tatau. The placement of the triangular motifs on the upper chest and shoulders resemble Tokelau womens chest tatau.

Figure 13 Marshallese at FestPac24

In June 2024, I had the opportunity to attend the Festival of Pacific Arts in Honolulu, Hawaii. I came across this Marshallese performer proudly wearing her cultural Marshallese tatau in downtown Honolulu. This young ladies tatau stood out amongst the crowd of tourists. Her tatau spoke volume of her authentic cultural identity as she wore the marks of her tupuna with pride.

Reclaiming tatau

The festival of Pacific arts also known as FestPac is the worlds largest gathering of Pacific artists, performers and knowlwdge holders. FestPac is a reassertion and celebration of Pacific culture, arts and identity of which tatau continues to play an important role today. It was encouraging to see the revival and rich cultural expression of Pacific tatau worn as a living art form on the streets of Honolulu. Their tatau were not displayed for the tourists as relics of the past but as living symbols of their cultural identity. This image captures contemporary Marquesan facial patutiki (tattoo) worn by a delegate member from the Marquesas.

Figure 14 Marquesan at FestPac 24

The image was captured by Toi Māori media at the opening ceremony of the waka festival held in Kualoa,Oahu. The waka festival embodied cultural revival of Pacific identity.

Tatau motifs from the four winds of the Pacific were on full display and worn with pride amongst waka crews, performers and spectators. Witnesing tatau displayed as a living artform reignited my hope to one day see Tokelau tā tatau revived and take its place in future FestPac gatherings.

Figure 15 Tufuga tatau at FestPac24

I had the privilege to share space with American Samoan tatau master Su'a Uilisone at the FestPac tatau village. I was observing from behind a barrier which separated the tatau master from the public. The tatau master noticed me trying to take a good photo so he invited me to sit on the fala mat to share this sacred space with him. I felt a cultural connection within this sacred space of tatau as we shared about our tatau journey. Su'a Uilisone understood my journey reconnecting to Tokelau tā tatau and he reminded me of the responsibility we have as artists to keep our cultural traditions alive. He added the importance to share our knowledge to maintain our traditions in the same way Samoan tatau has been shared to help revive other Pacific tatau traditions.

I believe these experiences of connections were tupuna driven rather than coincidences. As mentioned, our connections are beyond the limitations of our national borders which try to define who we are and limit our true understanding of our shared Pacific cultural connections.

Meeting with a cultural performer from Rennell Island was one of these encounters. Rennell Island is a Polynesian outlier in the Solomon Islands. We both communicated in our mother tongues where we could understand each other perfectly. We shared about our cultural connections, our language and reviving our tatau traditions.

Figure 16 Cultural connection FestPac24

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews several artists whose work have influenced my art journey and practice. The first part of this chapter looks at two pioneer contemporary Tokelau artists whose work reflects their memories and culture growing up in Tokelau. This chapter also discusses the work of fellow contemporary Tokelau artists born and raised in New Zealand to highlight the emergence of Tokelau tā tatau art in their work and Tokelau communities.

The second part of this chapter looks at two pioneers of contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand whose work resonated with me early in my art journey as a New Zealand born Pacific/Tokelau. Being able to see myself and my cultural identity through these artists works have influenced the intent of my exhibition and kaupapa.

Contemporary Tokelau Art

Little has been documented about contemporary Tokelau art and artists. This is partly due to our small population both in Tokelau and here in Aotearoa. The first part of this section discusses the influence of two pioneers of Tokelau contemporary art whose work have influenced my journey as an artist. The second part of this section presents the work of New Zealand born Tokelau contemporary artists who like myself were art students at Whitireia polytechnic in the early 1990's. The later highlights how Tokelau tā tatau motifs emerged as an expression of cultural identity as New Zealand born Tokelau artists.

Faraimo Paulo and Fuimanu Kirifi have both contributed to Tokelau contemporary art through their expressions of Tokelau culture and traditional stories.

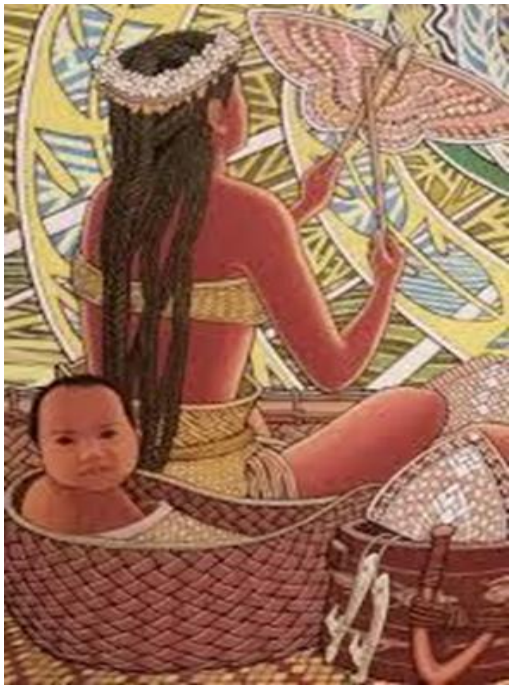


Figure 17 Creation of patterns

Faraimo Paulo was born in Tokelau and educated in Samoa. Fuimanu Kirifi also born and raised in Tokelau and later studied art at the Elim school of fine arts. Both artists are well known amongst Tokelau communities for their expressions of Tokelau culture.

Both artists paint in realism contemporary style that captures themes of Tokelau culture, stories and every day village life.

Having grown up in Tokelau, both Faraimo and Fuimanu create work with subject matter familiar to our Tokelau born community, reflecting the environment, colours, culture and stories of Tokelau.

Faraimo's paintings of Tokelau traditional stories transports the viewer into a magical world of Tokelau tala kakai (traditional folklore). His work titled '*Creation of Patterns'* references a Tokelau story about how creatures received their patterns from the folklore figure Hina who tattooed their distinctive markings. Faraimo is recognised as the pioneer of Tokelau contemporary art, who was soon followed by his prodigy and student Fuimanu.

Figure 18 Utuga tryptic

Fuimanu developed an expressionist style during his time at Elam School of Fine Arts.

His contemporaries at Elam included Lilly Laita, Filpe Tohi, John Pule and many others who were part of the first wave of Pacific contemporary art movement in Aotearoa. A recent example of Fuimanu's work is his tryptic oil painting titled *Te Utuga, The Gatherers*, Fuimanu portrays a

scene of gathering food in Tokelau, a snapshot of Tokelau way of life where ,everyone works together for the wellbeing of the community.

Figure 19 Utuga relief carving

This relief carving is an extension of Fuimanu's tryptic painting. The wooden piece is from a discarded traditional vaka (canoe) plank.
Both Faraimo and Fuimanu's work had an impact on me as a Tokelau growing up in New Zealand. Their work connected me to Tokelau culture and stories which influenced my journey to pursue art. They laid the foundation for the next wave of Tokelau contemporary artists whose work reflects their cultural identity as New Zealand born Tokelau.

Whitireia Tokelau artists

Under the leadership of the late Anne Philbin, Whitireia's art department in the early 1990's was ahead of its time, where culture was an integral part of the art departments kaupapa.

Whitireia was a multicultural hub of creativity reflected in the work that was being produced. Cultural expression was encouraged particularly for the annual end of year art exhibition 'Origins.'

Figure 20 Whitireia artists

Influential art students and tutors such as Wi Taepa, Tracey Morgan, Michel Tuffery, Owen Mapp and many others contributed to the environment of creativity and cultural expression Whitireia was known for. Within this mix of creatives was a group of Tokelau art student's, mostly New Zealand born and raised

in Porirua which is also home to the largest Tokelau community in the world. Tokelau art students included Ernest Sami, Moses Viliamu, the late Zac Mateo, Vaitoa Baker, Faiva Mikaio, Mahelino Patelesio, Ana Patelesio, Tana Baker, Devon Jansen and myself. It is important to mention other Porirua based Tokelau artists such as Sam Sakaria, Bobby Koro, and Lio Taupe who studied at other art institutions nevertheless were part of the emerging generation of New Zealand born Tokelau artists at this time.

Worth mentioning at this time Tokelau tā tatau art was not visible within our Tokelau communities. Tokelau tā tatau was a forgotten tradition which lay hidden within archives of historical records. Rediscovering Tokelau tā tatau as Tokelau art students at Whitireia was a reconnection to our cultural identity. In our own ways, we incorporated these motifs in our art as an expression of our identity as New Zealand born Tokelau. Over the years through our art and community projects, Tokelau tā tatau motifs have re-emerged as symbols of Tokelau culture and identity.

Figure 21 Tautai digital print

The following works are examples of some Tokelau contemporary artists who started their art journey at Whitireia. As the first wave of New Zealand born Tokelau artists, we influenced the revival of Tokelau tā tatau art within our Tokelau communities today.

Ernest Sami's digital media print titled *Tautai (The Fisherman),* created in 2018 depicts a fisherman guided by an ancestor. Ernest incorporates tatau motifs as a spiritual connection to tupuna. In this work Ernest reminds us that our tupuna are always with us and guiding us through life's journeys.

Artist Moses Viliamu's mixed media print titled '*350 Pacific Series #2'* is a part of a series of 10 prints. The works are Moses response to climate change and the effect of the rising level of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere causing rising sea level. Moses adds "*Low lying islands like Tokelau will disappear under water if the carbon dioxide levels continue to rise over 350"* (Viliamu, 2024). Moses uses Tokelau tā tatau motifs to symbolise Tokelau culture, he also

reinterprets tā tatau motifs in a modern context to express Tokelau cultural identity and what this means to him as a New Zealand born Tokelau.

Figure 23 350 Pacific series

Figure 22 Decoded Polynesia

In his digital media work '*Decoded Polynesia',* Moses looks at the lost meanings of Tokelau tā tatau where he uses the bar code as a concept of decoding meanings of tatau symbols.

Moses mentions "*The art of traditional tattooing was lost. When I asked elders...nobody remembered anything about it"* (Viliamu, 2018)

Figure 24 Zac Mateo, print

The late Zac Mateo was a prolific artist who produced a range of mixed media, drawings, paintings and woodcut prints. Zac also incorporated Tokelau tā tatau motifs in his work to express Tokelau culture, stories and identity. This woodcut print is based on a historical observation of Tokelau tā tatau recorded by the artist Alfred Agate who was part of the US exploring expedition that visited Tokelau in the 1840's.

Worth mentioning is that Zac was part of the Tokelau arts collective who included myself and Mose Viliamu. Zac created most of the digital illustrations for our art installation work *Cry of the Stolen People.*

Contemporary Tokelau tattoo artist Tana Baker represents the third generation of New Zealand born Tokelau who are reviving Tokelau culture. Raised within the Porirua Tokelau community, Tana studied art at Whitireia where he developed an interest in Tokelau tā tatau. His chosen path as a contemporary tattoo artist continues to evolve Tokelau tā tatau motifs and design in his work.

Figure 25 Contemporary Tokelau tattoo

Tana's tatau designs are distinctly reminiscent of traditional Tokelau tā tatau reinterpreted in contemporary form. In this piece Tana explains "*Basically means, growth leading to a resting place and using tuna as a symbol of migration as the wearer is a traveller"* (Tana, Personal Communication, 2024).

Today there is a growing interest in Tokelau tā tatau designs across the Tokelau diaspora, particularly amongst the younger generations born outside of Tokelau.

Tokelau tā tatau is reawakening cultural connection and identity that the younger generation of Tokelau are searching for. There is a sense of pride in wearing motifs that are deeply connected to tupuna as opposed to borrowed symbols from other cultures. Tokelau tā tatau motifs have reemerged as modern symbols of Tokelau cultural identity in Tokelau communities today.

Figure 26 Wellington Fakaofo community

Michel Tuffery and Fatu Feu'u

In the late 1980's, a wave of New Zealand based Pacific artists emerged to take their place in the national and international art scene. Artists such as Fatu Feu'u, Michel Tuffery and many others became the first wave of Pacific artists who established Pacific contemporary art in Aotearoa. Both Fatu Feu'u and Michel Tuffery inspired me in my early years as an art student in the 1990's. I resonated with the visual language of Pacific symbolism and admired how both artists expressed their cultural identity as New Zealand based artists.

Michel Tuffery

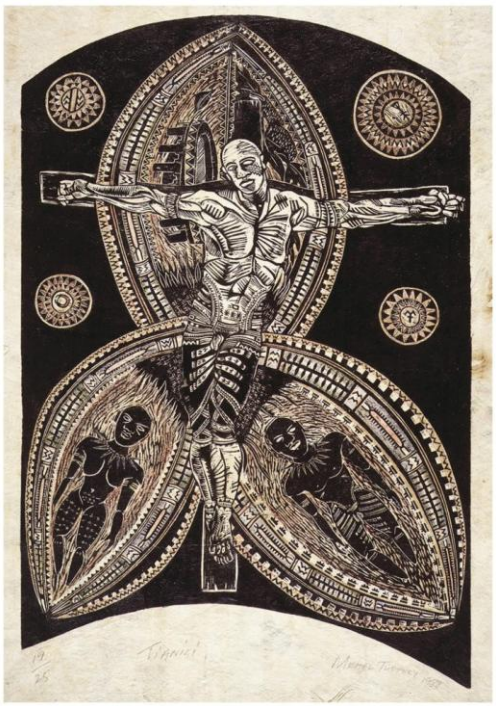


Figure 27 Tianigi woodcut print

Michel Tuffery was one of my tutor's when I first studied art at Whitireia Polytechnic. I was inspired by Michel's Samoa tatau motifs in his early woodcut prints. Born and raised in New Zealand of Samoan and Cook Island descent, Michel explored themes of cultural identity as a New Zealand born Pacific artist. Mallon & Pereira (1997, p. 120) mentions *"Tuffery has an inclusive view of art and identity in the Pacific. He believes everyone 'on these two islands' (i.e. New Zealand) has a legitimate contribution to make in the exploration and expression of the unique Pacific identity"*

'Tianigi' is an example of one of his earliest woodcut prints depicting the crucifix figure of Christ as a Samoan wearing a pe'a tatau. On each side are ancestral figures of pre-Christian Samoa framed with tatau motifs. This work was created from his research and spending time with tatau tufuga (tatau master) the late Su'a Sulauape Alaiva'a Petelo in Samoa.(MarinettePrints, n,d.)

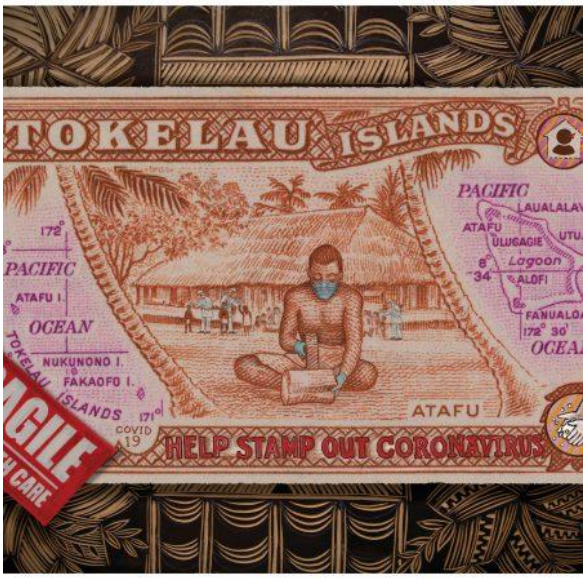


Figure 28 Handle with care series

Michel's '*Handle with care series'* digitally produced prints is a response to the covid pandemic, Michel reinterprets vintage Pacific stamps to convey the vulnerability of Pacific communities to the pandemic. In this example of a Tokelau stamp, Michel highlights the need to protect vulnerable and isolated Pacific communities like Tokelau. This resonates with the devastation of the Peruvian slave trade and the dysentery epidemic that crippled Tokelau's population and culture in 1863.

Fatu Feu'u

I first discovered Fatu Feu's work as an art student when I came across Fatu's work in an art magazine. I was drawn to the vibrant colours and Pacific motifs of tapa and tatau in Fatu's work. Fatu brought the richness of Samoan siapo and tatau motifs into mainstream contemporary art, while highlighting Pacific identity in New Zealand. Fatu adds "*Part of our survival is doing our art. If we don't then we are lost in another country without an identity".* (Pereira 2002, p10)

This painting titled '*Salamasina,'* Fatu uses Lapita inspired mask symbols with siapo and tatau motifs. Interesting to note the ancient art and culture of Lapita is the origin of Polynesian tatau. As people of the Pacific, we trace our gafa or whakapapa to Lapita through our art and genealogies. The art of tatau is part and parcel of the cultural connection conveyed in Fatu's work.

Figure 29 Salamasina

In his wood cut print titled *'Lapita- Green',* Fatu depicts Lapita mask as a central figure balanced by ika and siapo motifs. In contrast to the vibrant colours of his paintings, the monochromatic pallet

of his woodcut prints reveals clarity of dark and light reflections between past and present, the spiritual realm, and the world of the living.

Figure 30 Lapita green, woodcut print

Fatu and Michel's black and white woodcut prints inspired me to examine the relationship between dark and light, as well as the process of mark-making as an extension of tatau mark making on the skin. In woodcut printing, mark-making is both the carved woodblock and impression of the ink on the paper.

Similarly, tā tatau is the impression of the ink on skin, through the piercing of the pakiau (tatau blade). Interesting to mention the word tatau or tā means to strike and tatau is to connect. In the same way the connecting process of mark-making is applied to both woodcut printing and tā tatau.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses the process and methodology of my body of work. The chapter begins with the work I produced for my first year of MMVA exhibition Te Matatau in 2022 as the starting point of my tupuna series. The second part of this chapter looks at the development of my concepts and process for my final thesis exhibition in 2024.

The final section highlights the series of works that make up my body of work.

Te Matatau Exhibition, first year Master of Māori Visual Arts

I exhibited a large, loose canvas piece titled *Reconnection* for the Te Matatau exhibition in my first year of Master of Māori Visual Arts. Measuring 1.84m x 3m, the scale of this work required its own wall space to be properly displayed and viewed from a distance. *Reconnection* was positioned near the entrance and exit of the Te Matatau exhibition space. The idea of working on a large-scale canvas piece was inspired by Niue artist John Pule's hiapo canvas works. My initial concept was to create a white on black tapa piece incorporating Tokelau tā tatau motifs placed in a grid composition similar to John Pule's work. However, I had to rethink my concept as Tokelau had no tradition of tapa or siapo making. This led me to explore Tokelau weaving patterns such as the fetū (star) and the koluhe (cross) as the main composition.

I developed my concept into a transparent weaving pattern of tā tatau motifs looking into a view of Tokelau's landscape and sea environment. *Reconnection* is about the connection of Tokelau tā tatau to Tokelau's environment. The connection to the sea environment is an integral part of Tokelau culture and is reflected through Tokelau tā tatau art.

Figure 31 Reconnection

The diamond shaped weaving pattern represents the interwoven connections of

tā tatau to Tokelau culture, environment, genealogy and identity. The waves represent the arrival of the next Tokelau generations reconnecting to their Tokelau cultural identity.

I worked from dark to light starting from a black undercoat and gradually adding layers of lighter tones of colour to reveal the image. Working on a large-scale canvass was challenging in terms of limited studio space and being able to view the work from a distance.

Simultaneously working on other pieces compromised the process time and technical application of the work, however these were valuable learnings in my approach to the rest my body of work.

Tupuna Series

The following works are my tupuna portrait series for my final thesis exhibition at the Toi Gallery, Pātaka in 2024.

These paintings were inspired from historical images and accounts of Tokelau tā tatau in the 1800's. This portrait painting titled *Tetaulu* was inspired from a photograph by JJ Lister in 1887 of Tetaulu who was the Tupu (King) of Fakaofo, Tokelau at the time. Lister (1887) also recorded a sketch of Tetaulu's tā tatau motifs, though these were not visible in the original photograph of Tetaulu due to the quality of photography of the time. Worth mentioning is that Lister's sketch of Tetaulu's tā tatau is the only historical account of Tokelau tā tatau that records the name of the person associated with the tā tatau motifs. In this painting I wanted to portray Tetaulu with his tā tatau as he would have appeared based on Lister's photo and accounts. The contrast of light and dark in the historical photos of tupuna, highlighted their strong facial features and their mana.

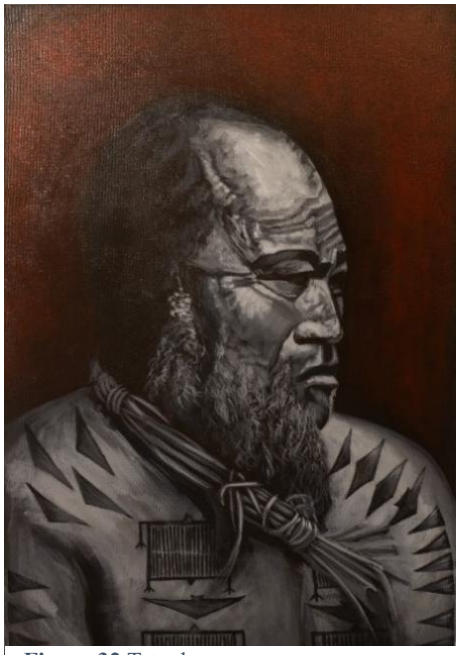


Figure 32 Tetaulu

This inspired me to work from dark to light building layers of tones from black to white to reveal the image of tupuna.

I used black or dark is a metaphor for the past as well as the space between where we connect to our tupuna. As a descendant of Tetaulu, this portrait is my connection through my maternal grandfather the late Fuli Fati's gafa (lineage). *Tetaulu* is also a reconnection to tā tatau motifs that are part of my cultural identity.

Figure 33 Fatupaepae

This work titled *Fatupaepae* is also from a portrait photo of a tupuna taken by JJ Lister in the late 1800's Fakaofo, Tokelau. Unfortunately, her name was not recorded, however Lister noted that she was the queen of Fakaofo. The Tupu of Fakaofo at the time was Tetaulu, making this tupuna his wife.

Fatupaepae literally means the foundation stones or stone platform that upholds the structure of a traditional Tokelau fale (house).

Fatupaepae is also a term or title given to the senior female figure of the kāiga (family). The role of the fatupaepae is to ensure resources are evenly distributed within the kāiga such as the harvest of fish. Fatupaepae upholds the wellbeing and mana of the kāiga in the same way the stone platform upholds a fale.

Lister's photo shows this tupuna clothed in a colonial mother hubbard dress, and at first, I saw no indication that she wore any facial tā tatau.

I painted this tupuna wearing a decorated tiputa (traditional poncho) over her colonial dress and added a pa kahoa (mother of pearl shell fishing lure) necklace.

Although Lister's photo provided no evidence of tā tatau, I felt compelled to include the niho ika (fish teeth) motif around her lips, as traditionally worn by Tokelau women. The addition of the niho ika completed her portrait, filling what I felt was missing. Interestingly after I had completed painting *Fatupaepae,* I was surprised to discover from the British Museum catalogue, Lister's original photograph of this tupuna. In this version, it appeared someone, possibly Lister himself had drawn the exact same niho ika tatau motif over her photo as if to highlight tatau marks that were not visible in the photo. This unexpected confirmation affirmed my decision to include the niho ika in her portrait was meant to be.

This work titled *Aho Anamua,* is from the Tokelau term ‘na aho anamua’ referring to the days of old or pre-colonial Tokelau. *Aho Anamua* is a mixed media reinterpretation of a black and white engraving by artist Alfred Thomas Agate who documented Tokelau tā tatau in the 1840’s. Agate was a member of the U.S. Exploring Expedition that visited Tokelau where they observed and recorded traditional and cultural practices such as tā tatau.

When I started this piece in my first year of MMVA, I was preparing woodcut blocks to carve out images for woodcut print. I worked on some experimental blocks to explore the relationship between processes of woodcutting and mark-making of tā tatau on the skin.

I liked the contrast and texture of the carved-out spaces against the black painted surface of the woodcut block. Experimenting with wood cut blocks informed my process to develop *Aho Anamua* as a mixed media piece. Once I completed carving the image on the wood block, I painted tones of blue and green on the black surface to add dimension in the back ground.

To complete the portrait, I added a pale laumaile (leaf head wreath) to adorn this tupuna as a symbol of respect and celebration.

Figure 34 Aho anamua

Replicating historical images

The previous tupuna portraits inspired me to continue to explore black and white images as well as the historical context when Tokelau tā tatau was practiced. Artist Alfred Agate captured rare insights of Tokelau traditional practices prior to the impact of missionaries. Agate's etching titled '*coconut grove and temple'* is a depiction of Fakaofo village in the 1840's featuring the god house and two stone pillars, the larger of the two represents Tui Tokelau the supreme god of Tokelau.

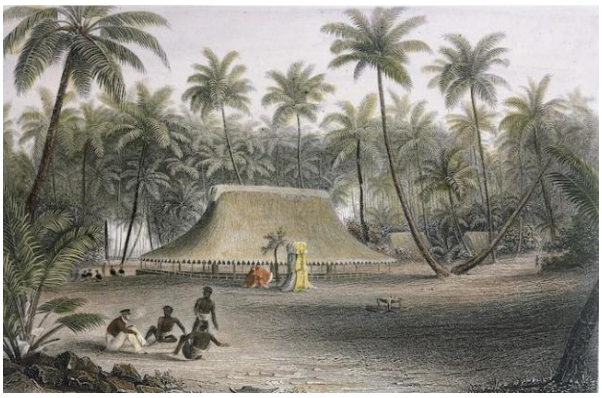


Figure 36 Coconut grove and temple, Fakaofo

Figure 35 Bowditch Islanders

Figure 38 Tā pahu i aho anamua 1

Figure 37 Tā tatau i aho anamua 1

Agate's engraving '*Bowditch Islanders'* depicts a group of Tokelau men wearing tā tatau performing a traditional chant. This image shows a person performing a traditional dance while the others appear to be chanting to the rhythm of a drummer beating on a papa (sounding board).

Agate's engravings inspired me to recreate the historical context of Tokelau tā tatau both as woodcut blocks and prints. The back ground scene of Fakaofo's god house and stone pillar of Tui Tokelau combines a reinterpretation of Agate's '*Bowditch Islanders'* in the foreground as a

tā tatau ceremony accompanied by a dancer and a pahu drummer. The pahu drum is a traditional shark skin drum which was referenced in Wilkes visit to Fakaofo, Tokelau (Macgregor 1937). Today, the only existing Tokelau pahu drum is housed in the British museum.

As reinterpretations of Agate's engravings, I created woodcut block carvings to reimagine from a Tokelau perspective the historical and cultural context when Tokelau tā tatau was practiced. The belief system at the time and the pahu ceremonial drum highlight 'na aho anamua' (days of old).

This period was also referred to as 'na aho pō̧uli' or days of darkness which was influenced by the missionary's perception of traditional practices as heathen practice. In contrast the arrival of Christianity is referred to as 'na aho o te mālama', days of the light. The perception of pō̧uli (darkness) associated with heathen practice and mālama (light) associated with the arrival of the 'good news' was indoctrinated by missionaries in Tokelau.

The problem with this perception is that it not only undervalues the creativity and knowledge of Tokelau traditional past, it also separates dark and light as opposing forces and where one is favoured over the other.

Dark to light

I perceive dark and light as equal forces that balance each other. As an artist who is partially colourblind, working from dark to light worked in my favour. In my final body of work, I used dark and light as a metaphor of balance. Pō̧uli (dark) represents the space and connection to the past, while mālama (light) reveals the forms of these connections.

This portrait titled ‘Hehe Afora’ is a continuation from my tupuna series, working from dark to light with a limited colour palette. The subtle use of colour in the back ground maintains the dark tone of the body of work while enhancing balance.

Restricting my colour pallet challenged my tendency to use bold colours. As someone who is partially colourblind, I typically use a bold colour pallet over a black undercoat to help me differentiate colour tones. To ensure consistency, I laid out all my art works side by side in the studio, to identify which works needed to be toned back to maintain uniformity. This helped inform my approach in developing the contemporary portraits and works that followed from this point.

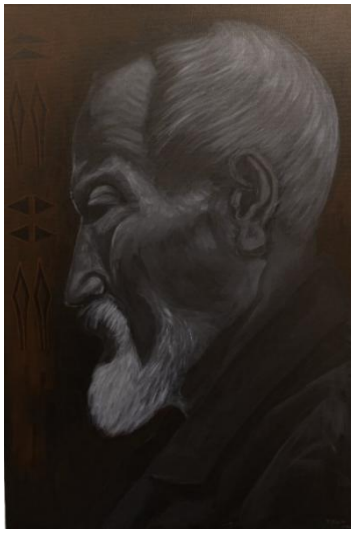


Figure 39 Hehe Afora

Figure 40 Whitireia art studio

Contemporary portraits

The contemporary portraits in my thesis exhibition were inspired by a photo my cousin sent me which had a striking resemblance to the tupuna portrait of 'Tetaulu' whom we are both connected through our gafa (genealogy).

I explored this concept of connection and the continuum of both genealogy and Tokelau tā tatau between tupuna with today's generation as contemporary portraits. My initial concept was to display the tupuna and contemporary portraits side by side shown in the example below of Tetaulu's and Ioane's portraits

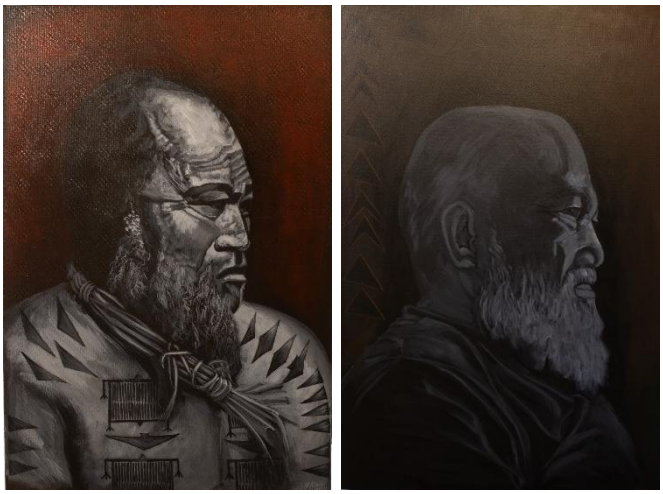


Figure 41 Tupuna and contemporary portraits

After some thought I decided it was best to display the contemporary portraits in their own space in the exhibition to show the journey of Tokelau tā tatau from historical to contemporary works. The models I chose for my contemporary portraits were four Tokelau cultural practitioners from my Tokelau community. Their cultural practices ranged from revival of traditional canoe building, weaving, Tokelau performing arts and contemporary tattoo.

I contacted each of these cultural practitioners and explained what my kaupapa was about and asked them for their permission to include their portrait as part of my exhibition. They all consented and provided me with portrait photos they were happy for me to work from.

My rationale to include contemporary portraits in my body of work was to make a statement of cultural survival and continuation. These portraits represent the second and third generations of Tokelau who have grown up in New Zealand. For each portrait I designed Tokelau tā tatau

motifs in the background that identifies their cultural practice. The motifs are subtly painted in hues of red, green and blue. These colours are significant to the nuku (atoll/villages) each person is connected to. The contemporary portraits also speak about the importance of Tokelau tā tatau motifs that reflect and evolve with the present and future generation's identity while maintaining cultural connection to the past.

Contemporary series

The piece on the left titled *Kakai o Tautai* (story of the fisherman) is inspired from a rare Tokelau relief carving at the base of a tuluma (fisherman's carved tackle box) and tatau motifs. The central figure represents the tautai surrounded by combined elements of the moana and tā tatau. The piece on the right titled *Lu* is about the Tokelau story of Lu who lifted the sky to its present height with the aid of the winds. Lu is presented as a silhouette tā tatau figure in the centre. The winds are represented as birds which are positioned according to traditional Tokelau wind directions.

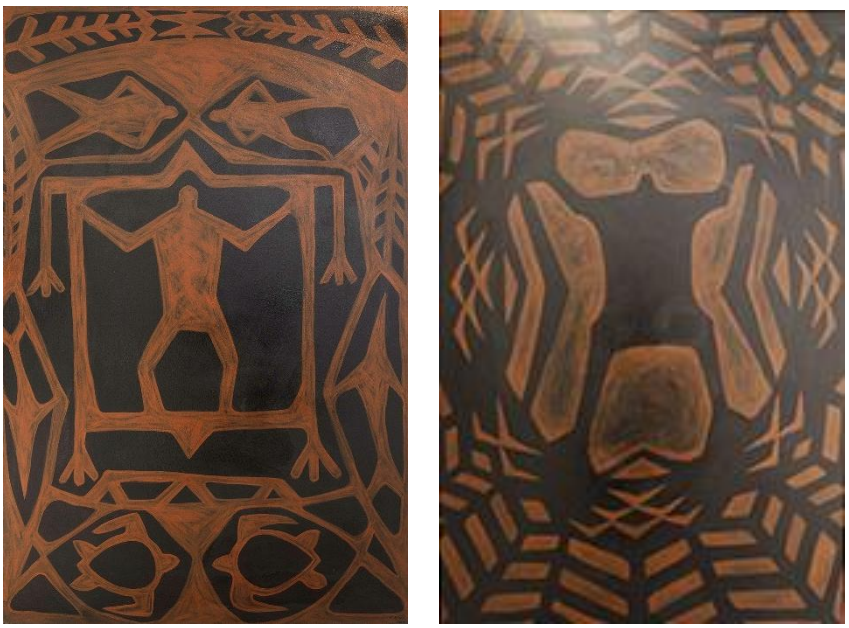


Figure 42 Contemporary series on canvass

Figure 44 Tuluma relief carving

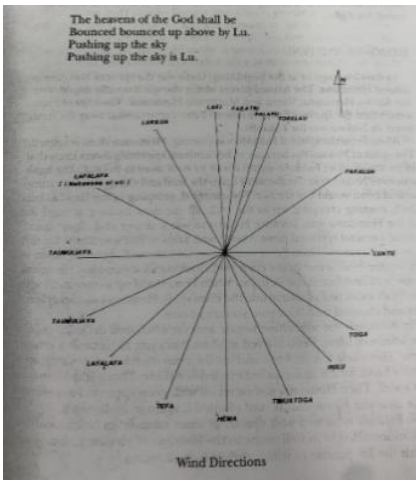


Figure 43 Tokelau wind compass

Kakai o Tautai and *Lu* are part of seven works of paintings, mixed media and woodcut prints that make up the contemporary series. Each work retells traditional Tokelau stories and concepts with a contemporary context. Underpinning these works is the continuum of Tokelau tā tatau motifs evolving in the contemporary landscape of Tokelau art and cultural identity.

Figure 45 Mamanu tū fā

Another example is this woodcut print titled *Mamanu Tū Fā* means "pattern of the standing four". This work speaks about the three atolls of Tokelau (Fakaofo, Nukunonu and Atafu) reclaiming the fourth atoll of Olohega which was politically claimed by the US as part of America Samoa.

The four tatau motifs in the centre represents the reunion of the four atolls connected through cultural, historical and genealogical ties. It is a reminder to younger generation and those to come not to forget Olohega as part of Tokelau.

Chapter Four: Tokelau Tā Tatau – A Reconnection to Cultural Identity

Introduction

This chapter reviews my final thesis exhibition at Pātaka's Toi gallery, highlighting the significance of Pātaka to my art journey and reconnection to my exhibition kaupapa. I will discuss the development of my exhibition layout concept as a journey and give a reflective analysis of my final thesis exhibition. The catalogue of works provides a detailed description of each work with references to historical sources. Each work is presented in the order they are displayed in my final thesis exhibition.

The appendices include the Toi gallery floor plan, the exhibition invitation poster, Pātaka's exhibition promotion invitation and a digital image of the exhibition signage.

Toi Gallery, Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua

Figure 46 Pātaka art gallery

Pātaka Art + Museum is located in central Porirua city and is known as the cultural centre of Porirua.

Pātaka holds a special place in my journey as an artist because this was where I exhibited for the very first time. In 1990 as part of the opening of Page 90 art gallery I exhibited alongside other Whitireia Polytechnic's art students in the inaugural exhibition called 'Origins'.

Origins was also the very first exhibition held at Page 90 art gallery later known as Pātaka Art + Museum. Throughout the years I've established a close connection with Pātaka, through numerous exhibitions, community events and art workshops I've been involved in.

My connection to Pātaka and its location in my hometown of Porirua where the world's largest Tokelau community lives confirmed Pātaka as the venue for my final thesis exhibition.

I started planning for my exhibition in March 2023 to secure an exhibition space at Pātaka for my exhibition in 2024. I wanted my exhibition to coincide with Tokelau language celebrations in late October so I aimed for late September to early November 2024 for my proposed exhibition dates.

To increase my chances of securing an exhibition space at Pātaka, I submitted two exhibition proposals, one for Pātaka's Bottle Creek gallery and the other for the Toi gallery as potential spaces for my final thesis exhibition.

My preference was the Bottle Creek gallery because of its prime location within Pātaka and visibility from Pātaka's atrium space. However, my proposal for the Toi gallery was successful.

The dimension and layout of Toi gallery is 3150mm x 14,000mm rectangular space. The main entry point is via Pātaka's atrium adjacent to the main reception and a second entry is a set of glass doors that is accessible from Pātaka's main gallery. Securing the Toi gallery a year ahead of my exhibition dates allowed me time to plan the layout of my body of work for the gallery space as well as the dimensions and number of works.

Tokelau Tā Tatau: A reconnection to cultural identity Exhibition

My intent was to tell a visual story of a journey of reconnection to Tokelau tā tatau and Tokelau culture with the past, present and future generations. This helped me to visualise and shape the concepts of my work, and the sequence of their placement within the gallery for my final exhibition.

My body of work is made up of four series of works, historical, tupuna portraits, contemporary portraits and contemporary expressions. It was important for me to work with the gallery curator to ensure the installation of my work was correctly placed. Using a journey as the concept for my exhibition layout I first placed the works around the gallery in an order that reflected a journey from the past to the present.

I chose the north end of the Toi gallery as the starting point of the exhibition journey of my kaupapa because this space was close to the door entrance from Pātaka's main gallery.

The journey concept begins with my artist statement as a brief introduction about my work, followed by six historical works that speak about Tokelau tā tatau and culture before missionary and colonial disruptions.

These works were installed from left to right across two walls which faced each other. The positioning of these works was so that the carved woodcut block pieces mirrored the woodcut prints on the opposite wall. Displayed alongside these works are mixed media historical portraits facing each other on the opposite walls. Both portraits are depictions of men and women's traditional tā tatau based on historical accounts.

This created a space of connection and reconnection between the works and if one enters from the glass doors they enter a space of historical connection. The journey concept begins with engaging the viewer with the connections and the context of Tokelau tā tatau from na aho anamua (days of old).

Figure 47 Toi gallery north entrance

Before I discuss the remaining exhibition layout, it is important to describe the gallery wall space beyond this point. The west wall pictured on the left becomes divided by an open side entrance from Pātaka's atrium. The east wall pictured on the right which is visible from the atrium, continues and connects with the south and west walls and back to the side entrance mentioned above.

I placed my exhibition signage on the east wall between the historical works and tupuna portraits for visibility and to draw in visitors from Pātaka's atrium space.

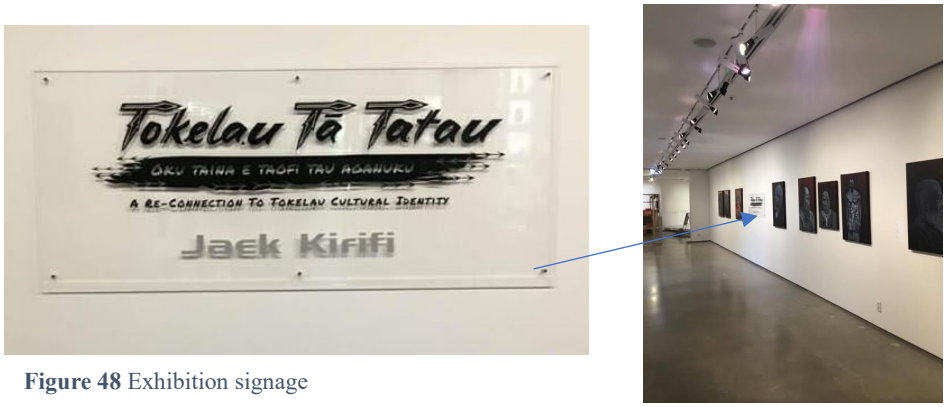


Figure 48 Exhibition signage

Figure 49 Toi gallery west and south wall

Continuing from the historical works and the signage the journey arrives with the tupuna portraits which represent Tokelau tā tatau and culture after the impact of missionary and colonial disruptions.

The first of these portraits is *Hehe Afora* who was one of the last known slave survivors taken from Tokelau by Peruvian slave ships in 1863. Hehe Afora's portrait gazes back to his memory of Tokelau, the culture and the way of life from na aho anamua.

Although this work is part of the tupuna series, it hangs in its own space with his profile facing towards the historical works lamenting of a loss of a generation and traditions.

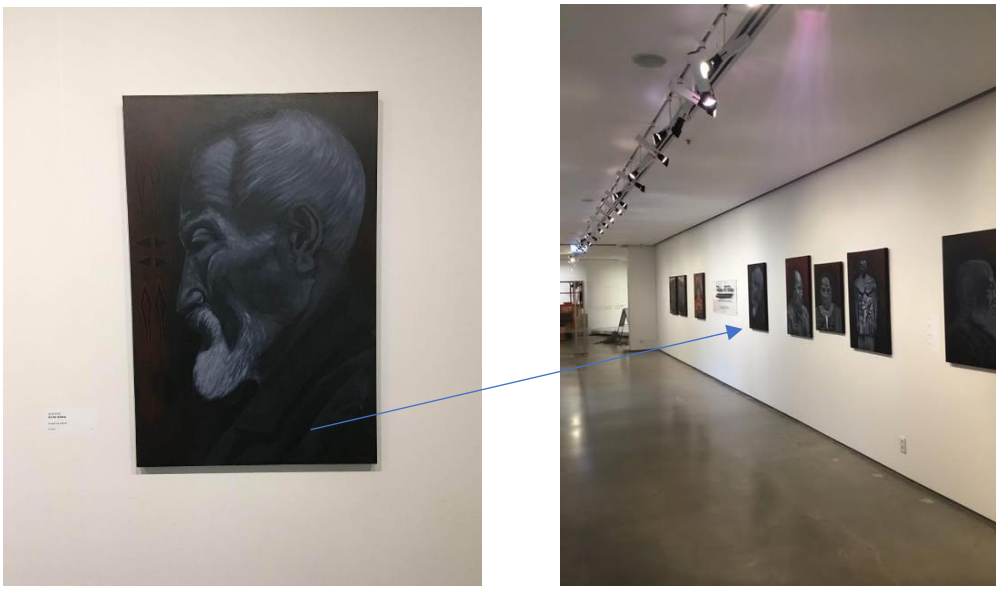


Figure 50 Tupuna series layout

The positioning of Hehe Afora's portrait also introduces the following tupuna portraits who represent the last generation of Tokelau who wore traditional Tokelau tā tatau. The tupuna portraits capture a changing world of Tokelau traditions in the face of colonial and religious pressures of the late 1800's. These works are prominently positioned in the exhibition as a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural and traditional knowledge and connections.

Figure 51 Tupuna series 2

These connections are preserved through the revival of cultural practices and a reassertion of cultural identity amongst today's generation. This brings us to the following series of contemporary portraits. These works are portraits of some of today's Tokelau generation who have grown up in New Zealand reviving Tokelau cultural practices.

The placement of these works after the tupuna portraits was to show the continuity from past to present, dark to light and connection of cultural identity through genealogy and cultural practice.

Figure 52 Contemporary portraits layout

In the back ground of each portrait are subtle contemporary Tokelau tā tatau motifs that are specific to their identity as Tokelau cultural practitioners in today's landscape. This gives Tokelau tā tatau new meaning of identity that is relevant for today's generation. This brings us to the final part of the exhibition journey of my contemporary series comprised of seven works of paintings, mixed media and

woodcut prints. Underpinning these works are evolving Tokelau tā tatau contemporary forms that convey traditional Tokelau stories and concepts.

Two large canvass paintings placed on the south end wall introduce the contemporary series. These works were placed on the end wall for their impact and visibility from glass doors that open to the main gallery. These paintings also face back towards the historical series as a reflection and reconnection to the past.

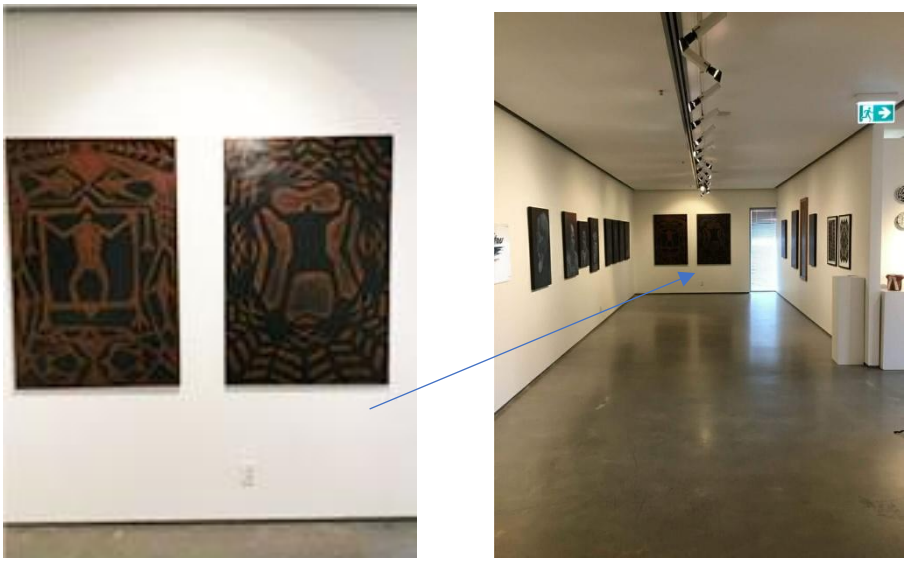


Figure 53 Contemporary series layout

The remaining contemporary series are placed on the west wall concluding the journey with contemporary woodcut prints which leads to the open space of the main entrance to the gallery. The open entry space is the reference point between the beginning and end of the journey concept for my exhibition layout. The lighting in the gallery and the wall space highlighted the works as well as the contrast of dark and light that I envisaged for my exhibition.

Figure 54 Toi gallery west wall

I added an audio of Tokelau music which played softly on loop in the gallery space. The final installation of my exhibition including labels, signage, sound and lighting was managed and installed by the gallery curator and staff.

The opening of the exhibition was held on Saturday 28th September 2024 in Pātaka's atrium space. It was a full house

attended by my Tokelau community, family and friends. The programme started with an opening prayer and blessing by the reverend So'osemea Fa'atui minister of P.I.C church, followed by guest speakers Dr Sean Mallon, Jean Mitaera and Hemi Macgregor. It was a poignant moment during Dr Sean Mallon's speech when he gifted me his tattoo machine set as an encouragement to continue Tokelau tā tatau.

Figure 56 Koha from Dr Mallon

Figure 55 Fātele performance

Following the guest speakers, I concluded with my speech of acknowledgements highlighting those who paved the path before us. This was an emotional moment reflecting on our loved ones who had passed on and my responsibility as a Tokelau artist to continue and share our culture for the next generations. At the end of my speech my family joined me to perform a fātele or Tokelau dance. We performed a song in honour of the legacy of our elders whose wisdom continues to guide our cultural journey.

Reflection of Tokelau Tā Tatau Exhibition

The title for my exhibition *Tokelau Tā Tatau: A reconnection to cultural identity* is from my thesis topic. I chose this as my exhibition title because it underpins the concept of my body of work as well as my art journey of reconnection to Tokelau tā tatau. Tā tatau means to tattoo, the word tā means to strike or mark and the word tatau means to connect or to do something well with intent.

The purpose of my exhibition concept was firstly to reconnect my Tokelau community with our tā tatau heritage. Secondly was to present a visual journey that connects the past and present through Tokelau tā tatau.

The exhibition was well received from my Tokelau community at the exhibition opening and during Tokelau language week celebrations. It was important for me to see my Tokelau community connect and see themselves through my work.

Feedback from the wider community was positive and many were surprised to learn tā tatau was practiced in Tokelau particularly the young generation of Tokelau. Engaging with visitors in my exhibition provided valuable opportunities of sharing about Tokelau tā tatau and my body of work. Presenting exhibition floor talks with local school groups was a highlight of sharing my culture through my work with the wider community.

As a reflective critique of my body of work in the exhibition, the contemporary portraits didn't have the same intensity of dark and light as the tupuna series due to the different periods both series were produced. The visual language in my body of work shifted with the contemporary series intended as the conclusion of the journey concept.

A less busy approach to the visual language in the contemporary pieces would have worked better to conclude the journey concept.

Although the concept of a journey for the exhibition layout provided a context for visitors to understand the connections between each work. In hindsight the placement of the exhibition signage interrupted the flow between the historical and tupuna series. At the time the signage was positioned for visibility however I could have placed this above the works to allow the works to flow uninterrupted.

Overall, my final thesis exhibition achieved my objectives of reconnecting my Tokelau community to Tokelau tā tatau as a step towards reclaiming its place in today's cultural landscape and identity. Working from dark to light achieved the balance of dark tones in my body of work to contrast against the gallery space. As my first solo exhibition my final thesis exhibition provided valuable learnings and opportunity to give back to my community to continue telling our own stories of Tokelau tā tatau.

Figure 58 Exhibition opening 2

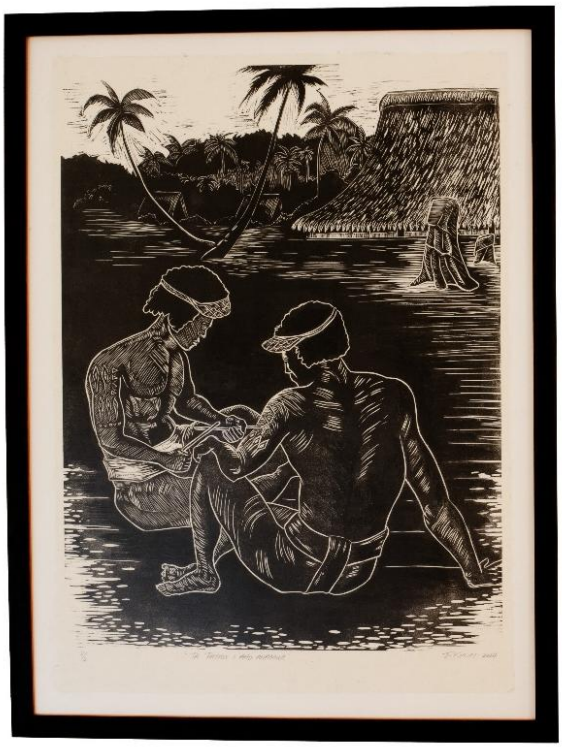
Figure 57 Exhibition opening

Catalogue of works

Title: ***Aho Anamua***
Year: 2022
Medium: mixed media on hardboard
Dimension: 625mm x 645mm

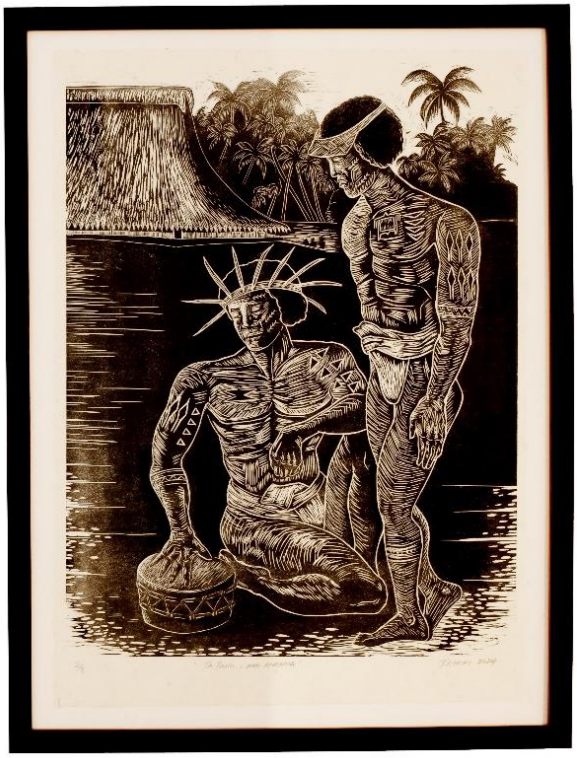
Aho Anamua, means "days of old," is a mixed media piece that explores traditional men's facial and body tā tatau of Tokelau. Inspired by an engraving from Alfred Thomas Agate, who documented these cultural practices during his visit with the U.S. Exploring Expedition in the 1800s, this artwork delves into the historical significance of Tokelau tā tatau, drawing on Agate's observations.

This piece reimagines men's tā tatau as they might have appeared in the old days of Tokelau, depicting specific patterns and motifs that carried deep personal and cultural meanings. The designs on the upper chest, for instance, were said to represent the deceased relatives of the individual, serving as a way to honour family and ancestry through permanent markings on the skin. The facial and body tattoos depicted in *Aho Anamua* reflect this connection to the past, illustrating how tā tatau was more than just a form of adornment, it was a visual language of identity, lineage, and spirituality. In the background, contemporary representations of traditional tā tatau patterns echo the motifs found on the face and body of the central figure, creating a bridge between the ancient and the modern.



Title: ***Tā tatau i Aho Anamua 2***
Year: 2024
Medium: Woodcut print on rice paper
Dimension: 650mm x 960mm

Tā Tatau i Aho Anamua 2 is a work that draws inspiration from the art of American artist Alfred Thomas Agate. Agate was a member of the United States Exploring Expedition that visited Tokelau in the 1840s, where he documented Tokelau culture, including tā tatau, through his sketches and etchings. These records provide valuable glimpses into the visual and cultural heritage of Tokelau before many of these practices began to fade under colonial influence. *Tā Tatau i Aho Anamua 2* translates to "tattooing in the days of old." This piece seeks to capture the essence of tā tatau as it was practiced in Tokelau in the past. By evoking this historical context, I aim to connect viewers with the ancestral significance of tā tatau, a tradition deeply intertwined with Tokelau identity and spirituality. In this work, the background features the god house and the coral pillar of Tui Tokelau, the ancient god of Tokelau, symbolizing the spiritual beliefs that once permeated all aspects of Tokelau life, including tattooing.



Title: ***Tā pahu i Aho Anamua 2***
Year: 2024
Medium: Woodcut print on rice paper
Dimension: 650mm x 960mm

Tā Pahu i Aho Anamua 2 is part of a series of prints and woodcut blocks inspired by the work of American artist Alfred Thomas Agate. As a member of the U.S. Exploring Expedition in the 1800s, Agate documented the people and cultural practices of Tokelau through his sketches and etchings, providing a rare glimpse into the world of Tokelau tā tatau and other traditions before they were altered or lost under the influence of colonialism.

The title *Tā Pahu i Aho Anamua* translates to "to strike the pahu drum in the days of old." This piece seeks to recreate a historical scene, providing a window into the past when both tā tatau and the pahu drum were integral aspects of Tokelau cultural practice. The pahu, or sharkskin drum, once played a significant role in Tokelau rituals and ceremonies but has since disappeared from cultural use. Today, the only known Tokelau pahu drum is in the British Museum.

Title: ***Tā pahu i Aho Anamua 1***
Year: 2024
Medium: woodcut on hard board
Dimension: 620mm x 820mm

Tā Pahu i Aho Anamua 1 is a woodcut block art piece that draws inspiration from Alfred Thomas Agate's work. The title *Tā Pahu i Aho Anamua* translates to "to strike the pahu drum in the days of old." This piece seeks to recreate a historical scene, providing a window into the past when both tā tatau and the pahu drum were integral aspects of Tokelau cultural practice. This woodcut block was used to print the previous work *Tā Pahu i Aho Anamua 2*

Title: ***Tā tatau i Aho Anamua 1***
Year: 2024
Medium: woodcut on hard board
Dimension: 620mm x 820mm

Tā Tatau i Aho Anamua 1, is a woodcut block art piece that draws inspiration from Alfred Thomas Agate's work.

Tā Tatau i Aho Anamua translates to "tattooing in the days of old." This piece seeks to capture the essence of tā tatau as it was practiced in Tokelau in the past. By evoking this historical context, I aim to connect viewers with the ancestral significance of tā tatau, a tradition deeply intertwined with Tokelau identity and spirituality. In this work, the background features the god house and the coral pillar of Tui Tokelau, the ancient god of Tokelau, symbolizing the spiritual beliefs that once permeated all aspects of Tokelau life, including tattooing. This woodcut block was used to print the work *Tā Tatau i Aho Anamua 2.*

Title: ***Tā tatau o fafine***

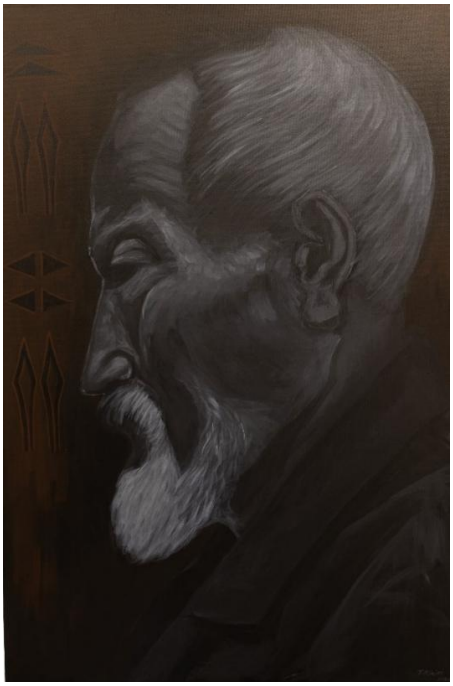
Year: 2024

Medium: mixed media on hardboard

Dimension: 570mm x 820mm

Tā tatau o fafine, highlights both the elegance of Tokelau women's tā tatau and the broader connections to other Pacific cultures. The patterns and motifs depicted in this piece are rooted in Tokelau traditions, while also reflecting the shared threads that connect various Pacific Island cultures. For instance, the Tokelau women's tā tatau shown here resonates with the lip tattoos of Nukuhiva women in the Marquesas and the shoulder tattoos of Marshallese women. These parallels across the Pacific speak to a shared visual language and cultural heritage that extends beyond individual islands, encompassing the broader Moana.

Through this work, I hope to convey the significance of women's tā tatau in Tokelau as an expression of identity, beauty, and cultural pride. The motifs and placement of these tattoos were traditionally more than decorative—they held specific meanings related to status, spirituality, and community ties. By connecting these Tokelau patterns to other Pacific tatau practices, I aim to celebrate the diverse yet interconnected heritage of the Pacific Islands. *Tā tatau o fafine* is both a tribute to Tokelau women and a reflection on the shared cultural legacy of Pacific tā tatau.



Title: ***Hehe Afora***

Year: 2024

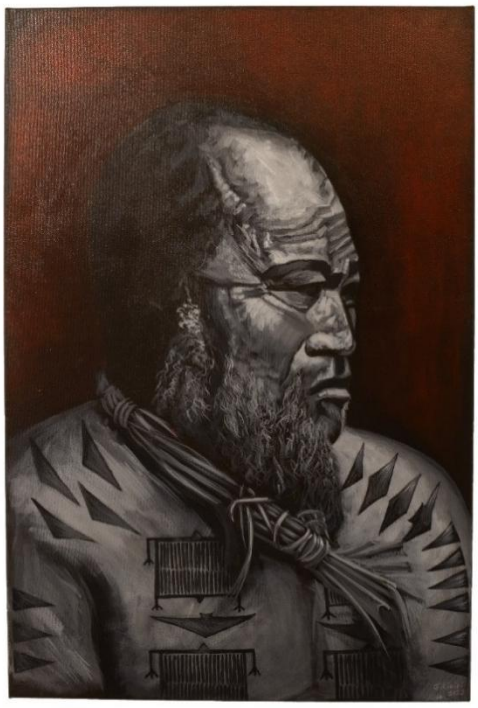
Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 915mm

Hehe Afora represents the lamenting of a generation of Tokelau people who never returned to Tokelau, taken at a time when old traditions were still practiced such as tā tatau. Hehe Afora laments of the memories of his island home of Fakaofo, his kāiga (family) his people and the old traditions.

Hehe Afora is a tribute to one of the last known survivors of the Peruvian slave trade that devastated Tokelau in the early 1860s. This painting draws inspiration from a photograph taken of Hehe Afora, who was repatriated from Peru and ultimately settled on the island of Rapa in French Polynesia. Through this work, I seek to honour Hehe Afora's life and the generations of Tokelau who were forcibly taken, many of whom never returned to their homeland.

Hehe Afora symbolises the collective loss and longing of an entire generation, torn from Tokelau during a time when old traditions, such as tā tatau, were still practiced. His story reflects the grief of those who were separated from their roots and the memories of their island homes.



Title: ***Tetaulu***

Year: 2022

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 920mm

Tetaulu, is a portrait of Tetaulu, one of the last known *Tupu* (King) of Fakaofo, Tokelau. This painting is inspired by a photograph of Tetaulu taken in the late 1800s, complemented by a sketch of his tā tatau recorded by J.J. Lister, a British naturalist and explorer. Although the original photograph does not show the tā tatau designs, Lister's sketches provide valuable insight into Tetaulu's tattoos, allowing for a fuller depiction of this important figure.

Through this work, I aim to bring Tetaulu's portrait to life, with his tā tatau featured prominently. The designs reflect Tokelau patterns that once signified identity, status, and spiritual connection within the community. Tā tatau on figures like Tetaulu held particular cultural significance, as they marked his role not only as a leader but also as a custodian of Tokelau heritage and traditions.

Title: ***Fatupaepae***

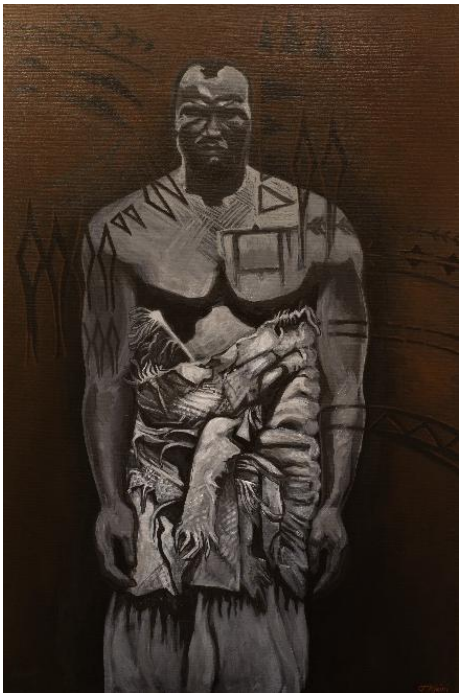
Year: 2022

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 555mm x 710mm

Fatupaepae is a tribute to a senior woman of Fakaofo, inspired by a photograph from the late 1800s that depicted a woman referred to as "the queen of Fakaofo." While her name was not recorded, her presence in this historical image resonates deeply, embodying strength, dignity, and the essential role of Tokelau women in maintaining the community. I chose to title this work *Fatupaepae*, a term used for a senior female member of the extended family who upholds the well-being of the *kāiga* (family) and ensures the fair distribution of resources.

In Tokelau culture, the *fatupaepae* holds a position of significant influence and responsibility. She is a guiding force within the family, often entrusted with the stewardship of knowledge, cultural practices, and the welfare of family members. This painting aims to capture the essence of the *fatupaepae*, a figure who not only leads but also nurtures, safeguarding both the physical and cultural resources of her people. The woman portrayed in *Fatupaepae* symbolises the quiet strength and resilience of Tokelau women. Her expression reflects the central role of the *fatupaepae*, who serves as a pillar of support within the community, ensuring the unity and welfare of the *kāiga*.



Title: ***Tupuna***

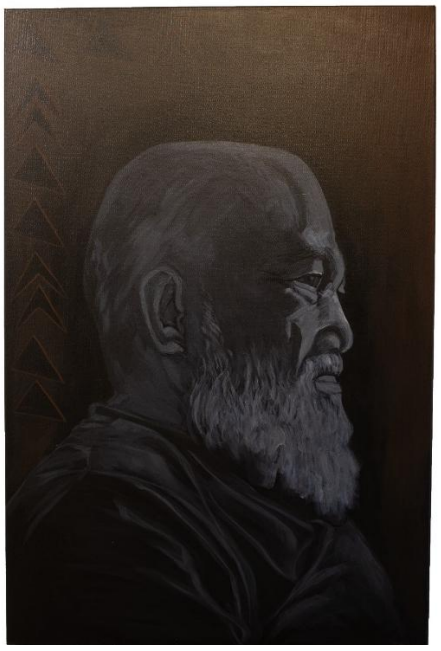
Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 910mm

Tupuna draws inspiration from a photograph taken in Fakaofo, Tokelau, during the late 1800s. This painting seeks to capture the essence of a *tupuna* an ancestor of Tokelau belonging to the last generation who practiced the old ways amid a time of significant social and cultural change. In this work, I aim to reflect the tension between tradition and transformation, as Tokelau faced the encroachment of Christianity and the disruptions brought by colonial influence.

The *tā tatau* motifs adorning the *tupuna* in this piece represent the traditional tattoos once worn with pride as marks of identity and belonging. These designs were more than decorative, they symbolised one's connection to their *kāiga* (extended family), their role in the community, and their spiritual beliefs. However, as Christianity spread across the islands, tā tatau became less prevalent, gradually disappearing from Tokelau society as traditional practices were discouraged or abandoned under colonial and missionary pressures. In *Tupuna*, I sought to honour the enduring spirit of those who held fast to their heritage, even as their world was changing around them.



Title: ***Ioane***

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 915mm

This work is part of a series of portrait paintings of contemporary Tokelau cultural practitioner's reviving Tokelau culture through their respective practices. These black and white portraits reflect the black white portraits of our ancestors. Traditional tā tatau were marks of identity and roles. In these portraits I re-created contemporary Tokelau motifs as symbols of their practices.

This particular portrait features Ioane, also known as John Misky, a Porirua-based carver who is revitalising the ancient art of canoe building and traditional navigation. John has been involved in Pacific navigation and voyaged across the Pacific Ocean on double-hulled canoes, just as our ancestors did. His accomplishments included building two Samoan *va'a* (canoes), and hopes to work alongside Tokelau elders and knowledge holders of traditional Tokelau vaka (canoe).

Title: *Emma*

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 915mm

Emma is a portrait celebrating Emma Ariu, a Tokelau weaver based in Porirua who is dedicated to reviving Tokelau lālaga (weaving) Emma explores both Tokelau lālaga and Māori rāranga to revive and evolve Tokelau lālaga using the natural resources that are available in Aotearoa. Emma's work reflects a harmonious blend of Tokelau and Māori weaving traditions, embracing both lālaga and rāranga techniques to explore the possibilities of traditional weaving within a contemporary context.

By using the natural resources available in Aotearoa, Emma brings new life to Tokelau weaving, adapting the practice to the environment while staying rooted in cultural heritage. This portrait captures Emma's role as a bridge between past and present, between Tokelau and Māori cultures, and between tradition and innovation. The motifs and patterns depicted in the painting are inspired by both lālaga and rāranga, symbolising the fusion of techniques that characterizes Emma's work. *Emma* stands as a tribute to her dedication to cultural revival.

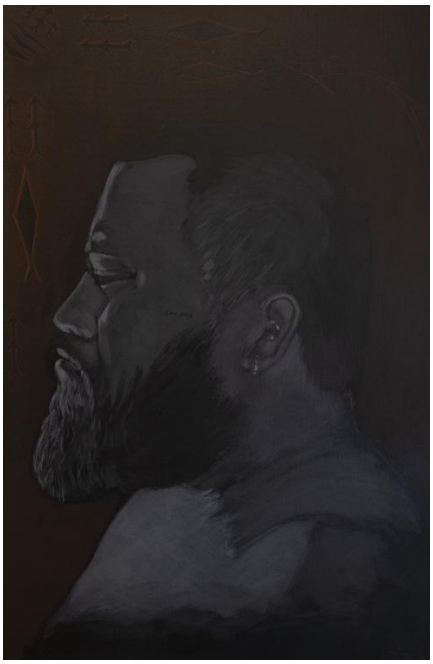
Title: ***Selina***

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 915mm

Selina captures the spirit of Selina Alesana Alefosio, a Tokelau performing artist and tutor based in Petone. Selina co-directs *Kupega Affect*, a contemporary Tokelau performing arts group dedicated to preserving and evolving Tokelau performing arts traditions. Both Selina and her husband Sale are passionate advocates for the continued relevance of Tokelau performing arts, blending traditional and contemporary styles to keep the cultural expressions of Tokelau alive for future generations. The motifs within the painting are inspired by both traditional and contemporary Tokelau designs, representing the fusion that defines her work. *Selina* stands as a tribute to Selina's dedication to her craft and her role in revitalising Tokelau cultural identity through the performing arts.



Title: ***Tana***

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 915mm

Tana portrays young Tokelau tattoo artist Tana Baker whose work represents a fusion of contemporary realism and traditional Tokelau tā tatau motifs. Now based in Brisbane, Tana was raised in Porirua as a third-generation New Zealand-born Tokelau and studied art at Whitireia. His tattoos reflect a deep connection to his heritage, reinterpreting traditional designs within a modern framework that appeals to a new generation of Tokelau.

In this portrait, Tana wears a tā tatau motif on his cheek, symbolizing the start of his journey to revive and normalise the practice of Tokelau facial tattoos. This personal adornment is not only a statement of identity but also an act of cultural reclamation, signifying his commitment to honouring his roots and making Tokelau tā tatau visible in contemporary settings. Through his art, Tana explores the intersections between his Tokelau heritage and his experiences as part of the diaspora, creating work that resonates with the complexities of cultural identity in a modern world.

Title: ***Kakai o Tautai***

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 910mm x 1.37M

Kakai o Tautai, meaning "stories of the master fisherman," is a work that pays homage to the *tautai*, or master fishermen of Tokelau, and the profound connection they share with the moana. At the centre of the composition is the *tautai* himself, positioned within a traditional Tokelau tā tatau motif that symbolises loved ones who have passed on, linking the present to the ancestral and spiritual realms.

The two figures at the top of the painting represent tupuna embodying the tautai's deep connection to his heritage and to the spiritual world that guides his journey on the moana. Surrounding the central figure are fish and turtle motifs, which signify the tautai's intimate knowledge of the ocean and his role as a steward of its resources. These elements are not merely symbolic; they represent the skills and wisdom passed down through generations, which are crucial for the survival and prosperity of Tokelau communities.

Title*:* ***Lu***

Year: 2024

Medium: *Acrylics on Canvas*

Dimension: 910mm x 1.37M

Lu brings to life a tale from Tokelau *tala kakai* (folklore) that tells of the time when the sky was much closer to the earth, leaving the islands in perpetual dimness. According to this story, the first couple in Tokelau, Tikitiki and Talaga, had a son named Lu, who grew larger and stronger with each passing day. As he matured, Lu realised that he needed to push the sky higher to allow more light to shine upon the world. With determination, Lu began to push the sky upward, calling on the names of the Tokelau winds to lend him strength. Together, Lu and the winds raised the sky to its present height, transforming the world by separating the light from the darkness. In this painting, Lu is depicted at the centre, straining upward as he lifts the sky. He is surrounded by *manu* (birds), which represent the winds that assist him in his task. These birds serve as a visual representation of the Tokelau winds, encircling Lu as he calls upon their power. The dark spaces in the composition are inspired by traditional *tā tatau* motifs, symbolising the darkness that once covered the land. These motifs are intricately interwoven with the light, capturing the moment when the sky was finally pushed to its current height.

Title: ***Lupe***

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 915mm

Lupe pays homage to the lupe tā tatau motif, a traditional Tokelau tattoo once worn by women around the hips after marriage. While the lupe tā tatau has largely faded from practice, it has evolved into a woven belt adorned with mother of pearl or coconut shells, which is presented to women on their wedding day as a continuation of this cultural tradition.

Lupe depicts a woman wearing both the traditional lupe tā tatau and the contemporary *lupe* belt, symbolising the connection between past and present. The lupe which also means dove in Tokelau is a recurring symbol in Tokelau song and poetry, where it often represents loved ones. This layered symbolism enriches the *lupe* as both a cultural emblem and a spiritual connection to loved ones. The composition unfolds as the lupe tā tatau gradually transforms into the image of a dove, which then takes flight and finally morphs into tā tatau motifs. This transformation embodies the enduring legacy of the *lupe*, showing how traditional forms of expression evolve while retaining their core significance.

Title: **Mauimua, Mauiloto, Mauimuli**

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 610mm x 1.22M

Mauimua, Mauiloto, Mauimuli draws inspiration from Tokelau *kakai* (traditional stories) that tell of how the atolls of Tokelau were fished up from the depths of the ocean by three brothers from Tonga. These legendary figures, named Maui mua (Maui the first), Maui loto (Maui the middle), and Maui muli (Maui the last), each played a role in shaping the land and connecting the people of Tokelau to their kin across the Pacific. In this work, each Maui brother is represented through tā tatau motifs, symbolising the ancient figure of Maui as both a creator and a cultural icon. By incorporating tā tatau patterns, I aim to convey the enduring influence of these mythical ancestors, whose legacy is woven into the fabric of Tokelau identity. The figures are infused with undertones of red, green, and blue, representing each of the three atolls Fakaofo, Nukunonu, and Atafu that Maui and his brothers brought forth from the sea. The colour brown connects the Maui brothers to each other, symbolising the kinship ties that bind them and resonate throughout Tokelau's genealogical heritage.

Title: ***Mamanu ika***

Year: 2024

Medium: mixed media on hardboard

Dimension: 535mm x1495mm

'Mamanu ika' means fish pattern referencing to both traditional Tokelau fish motifs as well as contemporary interpretation of the ika transforming from the moana to the tā tatau motifs on the skin. The motif is very similar to tā tatau motifs from the Solomon Islands, Sikaiana and Tikopia, these similarities of tā tatau reveal our cultural connections through shared history and connection to our moana. This piece also delves into the transformation of the *ika* motif as it transitions from the ocean into tā tatau, where it becomes a permanent testament to one's identity, heritage, and place within the Pacific.

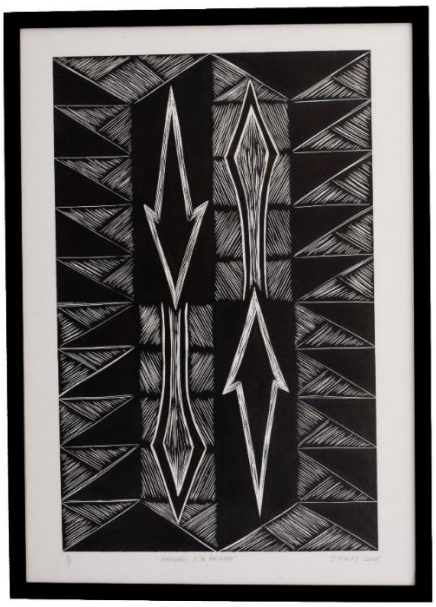
Title: ***Mamanu foe-ika***

Year: 2024

Medium: Acrylics on canvas

Dimension: 455mm x 915mm

Mamanu Foe-Ika, which translates to "paddle-fish pattern," delves into the traditional Tokelau tā tatau motifs of fish and paddles that were tattooed on men's shoulders. The original meanings and names of these ancient *tā tatau* motifs have unfortunately been lost over time, as they were not documented before the decline of traditional tattooing practices. Through *Mamanu Foe-Ika*, I aim to breathe new life into these patterns by exploring their evolution and creating new meanings that resonate with contemporary Tokelau. The motif of the paddle symbolises navigation and journeying, while the fish represents sustenance and the connection to the sea, two themes deeply woven into the cultural fabric of Tokelau.



Title: ***Mamanu o te fale pa***

Year: 2024

Medium: Woodcut print on paper

Dimension: 500mm x 710mm

Mamanu o te Fale Pa reflects on the historical significance of the fale pa, or men's houses in Tokelau. In the past, fale pa served various roles within the village, from guard posts in times of war to centres of learning and skill-building. These structures were essential to Tokelau society, where men would gather to practice carving, navigate the seas, engage in fishing, and prepare for their role as warriors when necessary.

In this woodcut print, the central shape represents a bird's eye view of a fale pa, adorned with tā tatau motifs of fish and spears that signify its dual function as both a guardian of the village and a place where knowledge of the moana was passed down. The fish motifs embody the community's deep connection to the sea, while the spears evoke the protective and warrior role of the fale pa. Together, these elements illustrate how the fale pa was not just a physical structure but a vital part of the village's social and cultural fabric, preserving and transmitting skills and traditions essential to Tokelau identity.

Title: ***Mamanu Tū Fā***

Year: 2024

Medium: Woodcut print on paper

Dimension: 500mm x 700mm

Mamanu Tū Fa, meaning "pattern of the four standing," represents the four atolls that make up Tokelau of old: Olohega, Fakaofo, Nukunonu, and Atafu. While Olohega is politically part of the United States territory of American Samoa, it is historically and culturally recognised as an integral part of Tokelau. This piece seeks to honour the unity and shared heritage of these atolls, despite the geographical and political boundaries that separate them.

In *Mamanu Tū Fa,* the four atolls are symbolised through individual tā tatau motifs, arranged within a weaving pattern that underscores the close cultural and historical ties binding Tokelau together. The interconnectedness of these patterns speaks to the strength of Tokelau identity, which transcends borders and reflects a collective heritage rooted in the land and the sea.

Conclusion

Tokelau tā tatau is relevant to the expression of Tokelau cultural identity in today's diaspora of Tokelau communities. Reconnecting to a cultural heritage that was largely forgotten, removes the veil of cultural amnesia that was imposed upon my tupuna by missionaries.

In this exhibition report I have attempted to present a journey of Tokelau tā tatau connection to cultural identity from the past to the present to demonstrate how art reestablishes these connections.

Tokelau Tā Tatau: A reconnection to cultural identity also represents my personal reconnection to Tokelau tā tatau. It honours not only artistic expression but also the history, identity, and cultural stories embedded within the traditional practices of my tupuna.

In this work, I feel I have come full circle, reconnecting to Tokelau tā tatau in a way that brings meaning not only to me but to my Tokelau community around me.

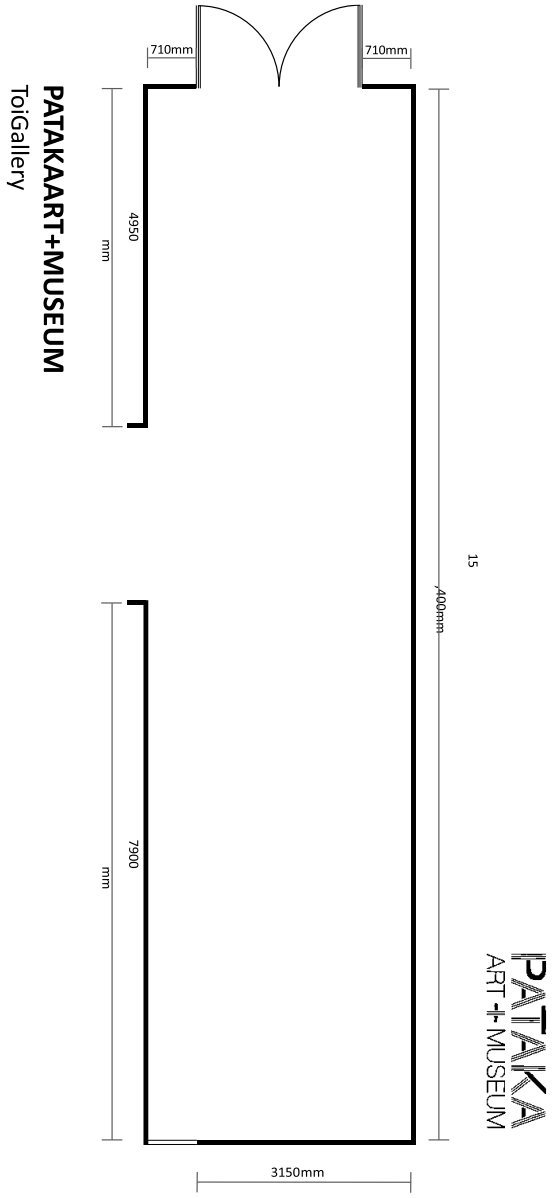
The reactions I received from visitors to my exhibition were incredibly encouraging. Some shared their pride in seeing themselves and their cultural identity represented in the artwork. One visitor remarked on how the exhibition demonstrates the connection between our Moana cultures through tatau, emphasising the importance of our art in telling our stories.

The resurgence of interest in Tokelau tā tatau among younger generations underscores the importance of this work. I believe there are still many untold stories waiting to be uncovered, both in archives and within our communities and I am committed to continue this work, not only as an artist but as someone who believes in the power of cultural preservation.

"Oku taina e, taofi tau aganuku"

"My people hold fast to your culture"

Appendices



Appendix 1 Toi Gallery floor, plan

Appendix 2 Exhibition invite digital poster

Appendix 3 Pātaka art gallery website Exhibition promotion and invitation

Appendix 4 Graphic for Exhibition signage

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