

Poi'i index theory

An argument for the usage of poi'i in traditional Marquesan tattoo

By Roland Pacheco

There is no question that there is a profound lack of information in regards to the representation and subsequent usage of the collective motifs specific to Polynesian tattoo. It is because of this that I took it upon myself to try and make sense of it, if that is at all possible.

For the sake of expediency I'll just say that whenever I refer to 'traditional Polynesian' tattoo, I mean the period prior to European contact. Also, it would be criminal not to mention that pretty much all of the documentation and writing on the subject of Polynesian tattoo was executed through the eyes of the European explorers, particularly, missionaries.

In this day and age, we have no idea of what life was like 1000 + years ago, on a jungle covered rock in the middle of the sea. We don't know what motivated the people of the time, to do anything other than try to survive, let alone, create art.

As a tattoo artist, it has always been important to me to understand as much as I can about Polynesian tattoo, what prompted the use of certain symbols and what those symbols represent. The reality is that, apart from the handful of symbols used today, there's not a very clear understanding of much of what those ancient designs were meant to convey or what prompted the designs in the first place. During European contact, the subsequent and very limited documentation did little to elaborate on either.

Because of this, I began doing my own research. Still, despite my efforts, there was a lingering ambiguity about the 'what' and the 'why' of many Polynesian symbols. My goal here to, is to explore the possibilities surrounding a given design and arrive at some conclusion, using facts and conjecture. I hope that this finds the interested parties and is enjoyed along the way.

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The poi'i is a very uncommon and seldom used traditional Polynesian tattoo motif. Its usage was not specific to any sex, and the design was often placed on the hands, wrists, knees legs and ankles of individuals.

However, W. Handy states that Grigory Langsdorff, Prussian aristocrat and naturalist, during the first Russian circumnavigation (1803-6, that stopped at one point in the Marquesas), and his subsequent documentation of the visit, in particular to the tattoo culture and practice, claims that what Langsdorff identifies to be the *mata komoe*, or death's head, was now referred to as the poi'i (W. Handy 1922, p. 16).

I have to disagree. Not only because there is scant evidence or documentation of the *mata komoe* being used, but the purpose of the *mata komoe* was to demarcate those warriors most distinguished in battle; a hero (W. Handy 1922, p.5).

To further cloud the issue, Handy goes on to state that the *mata komoe* was also used to mark the arms of women of high birth (chiefly status) and the feet of women in wedlock (W. Handy 1922, p.5).

However, her illustrations accompanying her claims in regard to the *mata komoe*, are contradicted by the one of the only renditions of the death's head on an individual, supplied by Langsdorff (1813-14), and clearly show what she herself later defines as the poi'i.

Confused?

Welcome to my world!

The facts remain, that W. Handy, G. Langsdorff and K. Von den Steinen, were a few of the only people to document, to a greater extent, any Marquesan tattoo imagery. They did not do this simultaneously, each respective expedition undertaken at different times throughout the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throw in the obvious European viewpoints and language differences and this makes for a very muddled account.

What remains does little to shed any light on the subject of the poi'i and its usage, not to mention what it actually represents. I will attempt then, to make my case for the poi'i and hopefully arrive at some sort of concise conclusion that will make sense, for no other reason than to hopefully add another facet to this curious image.

Below is a collection of all of the renditions of poi'i that I have accumulated to date. You can see a general theme and characteristic, to which I will elaborate further.



The poi'i has always struck me as an interesting symbol because of its ultimate simplicity, lending itself to being interpreted several different ways. The default interpretation of the poi'i would be the most aesthetically obvious: A happy face.

I personally do not think that it seems very likely the ancient Marquesans had the good humor enough to want to characterize a person smiling, or that they would venerate the act to the extent of tattooing it on someones skin. But then, that would be my own western bias. Maybe the Marquesans were indeed a happy-go-lucky bunch of folks? I don't know, and regardless of whether or not this was true, it can never be verified.

According to Gell (1993, p.196), poi'i were 'some kind of mollusc with a coiled shell'.

Handy's (1922, p.25) definition is similar and she defines the word as, 'a kind of coiled shellfish'.

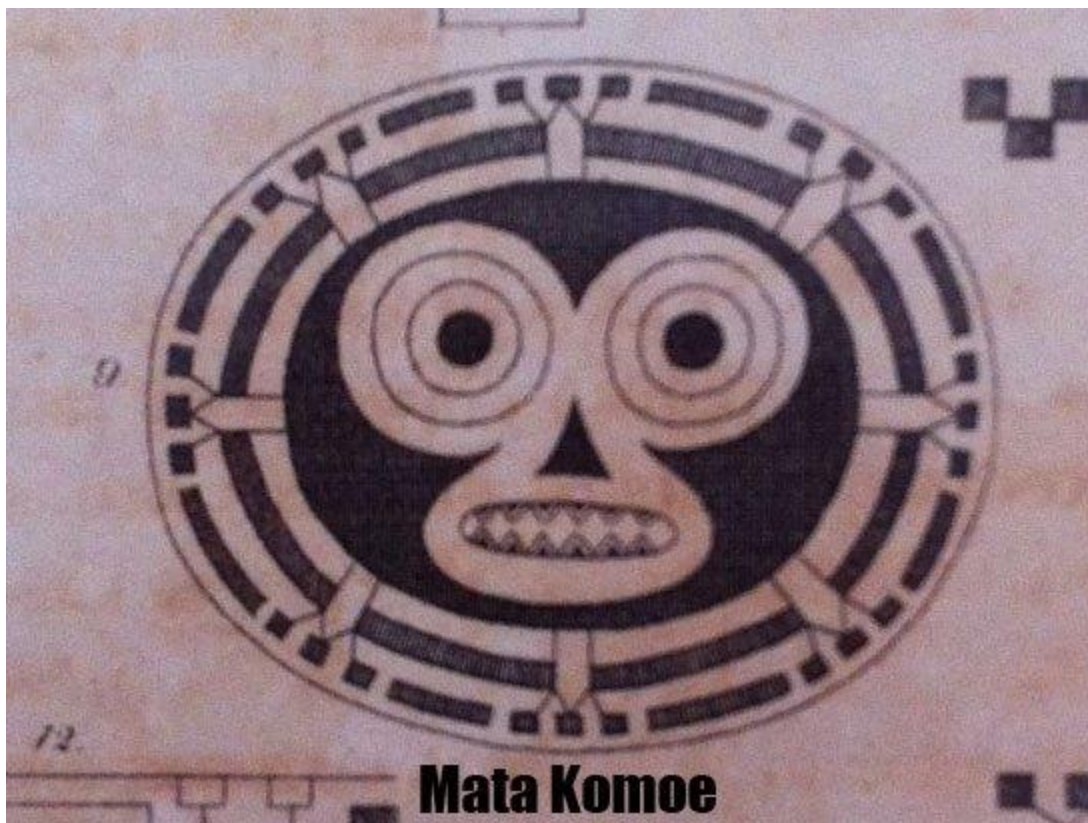
This contradicts, to me at least, the usage of the poi'i as a symbol to venerate a warrior or hero, or that it is in fact, an evolution of the *mata komoe*.

Primarily, because the act of fishing, especially if undertaken from the shore (specifically the gathering of shellfish) was considered a lowly act and the least desirable harvest one could make from the sea (Thomas 1990, p.55). It is pretty much agreed upon, that fishing in ancient Polynesia was considered an endeavor of the lower classes (the primary food source being cultivated starches, which were lorded over by the upper classes, and often doled out, in exchange for seafood).

The secondary reason that I believe that the *mata kotome* did not evolve into the poi'i (the

argument, which I somewhat agree with, is that much of the Marquesan tattoo motifs consist of evolutions of 'base' symbols, slightly modified, and having their own unique definitions apart from their original source), is that I tend to agree with Gell (1993) that the descendant of the *mata komoe*, was in fact the *mata hoata*, or brilliant eyes. The sole depiction of the *mata komoe*, and the subsequent documentation of the placement and usage of the *mata hoata*, points to a synonymy of the two symbols that cannot be denied. That being said, the only similarity between the *mata komoe* and poi'i are general shape and superficial, face-like characteristics. Death's head, by its name alone, suggests a humanoid face at the very least, and the depiction clearly reflects this (a pair of eyes, set over a rudimentary nose and mouth). On the other hand, the poi'i is regarded as being 'face-like' only because of its shape (round) and details, which could be seen a pair of eyes and rudimentary mouth. That is where I believe that the misunderstanding of the symbol occurred, especially when viewed from a westernized perspective.

This also furthers the argument that *mata komoe* to poi'i evolution was incorrect because of the use of the symbol on women, who for the most part, were not engaged in warrior activities to the extent that the men were.



What intrigued me about the poi'i was not only Handy's definition, but the fact that in modern day Polynesia we still consume specific shellfish, and some, if not all, are considered a delicacy.

In Hawai'i, the 'opihi (limpet, *patellogastropoda*) is the most commonly sourced shellfish. At first I thought that the poi'i might have been a species of 'opihi, but because the 'opihi is not coiled, I began to look elsewhere. It is important to note that because of this mistaken perception on my part, of the two being related, that I arrived at the basis for my argument. I decided to research the more prevalent species of shellfish occurring in both western and eastern Polynesia. After quickly exhausting my options, and getting nowhere fast, I decided to concentrate on the element of the poi'i that I had purposefully overlooked: the fact that it

was ‘coiled’.

Looking at the above depictions of the poi’i it isn’t difficult to see that the images represented, reflect in no distinguishable way, an object that is coiled. In fact, the symmetry of the symbol leaves no room for any interpretation of an asymmetrical coil. That element was what I had been hung up on, which was causing me to concentrate on limpet types of shells, since limpets are round (oval) when viewed from the top or bottom, and the poi’i symbols is round (more or less).

I stumbled upon some information regarding a type of shellfish that was not only harvested and consumed, but once the snail inside the shell was done away with, the shell itself was polished and often used as crude currency as well as decoration, because it contained mother-of-pearl. This animal is called, *Trochus Niloticus*.

What excited me most about discovering *trochus n.* was its abundance (at one time) across a broad region, from Indonesia, across Polynesia, to the western coast of South America, and the fact that it was indeed a coiled shellfish. The immediate downside to discovering *trochus n.* was that it did not resemble the poi’i symbol from any angle no matter how far stretched the imagination.

Still, I chose to press on. Something about *trochus n.* just seemed right.

Below are some pictures of polished shells and as you can plainly see, they do not resemble the poi’i at all.



As I continued my research, I kept referring to the ‘opihi for the simple fact, that like the poi’i, both were gastropods, a source of food, and to some degree, used as ornamentation. The similarities of customs and parallels of language and society throughout Polynesia are difficult to dismiss as mere coincidence and I figured that what could happen here in Hawai’i could have certainly happened in other parts of Polynesia.

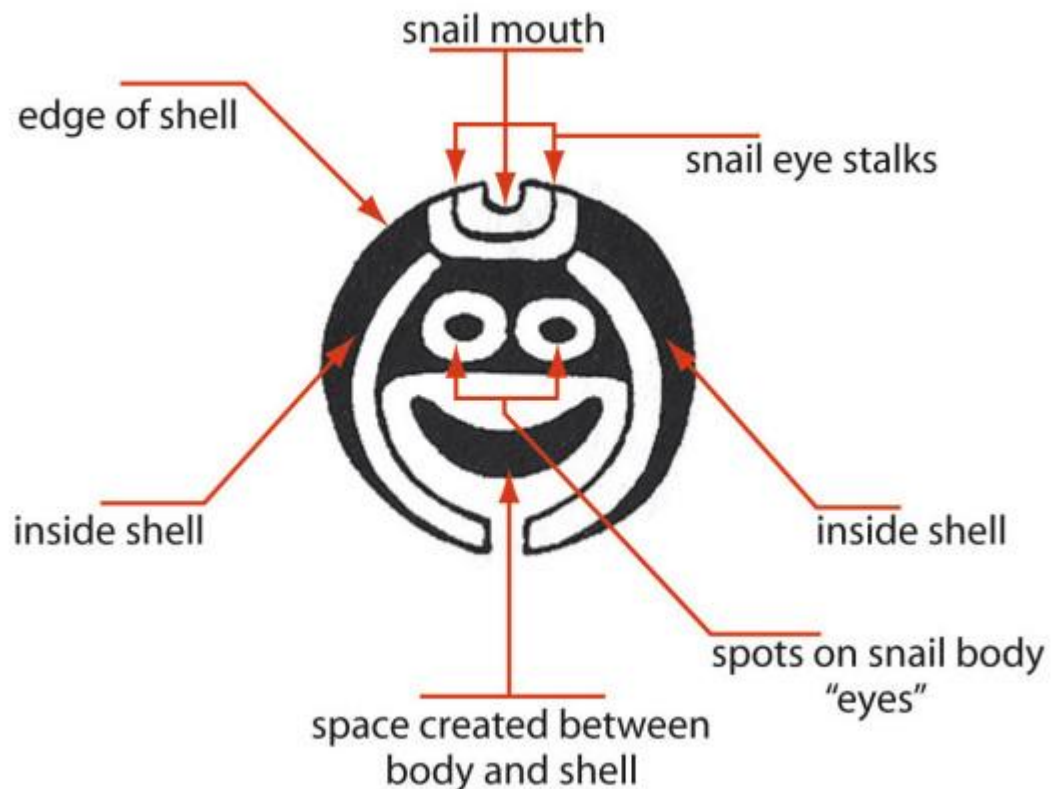
I poured over information on *trochus n.* and found the missing element that had been eluding me: A picture of the snail itself. When I stumbled onto that image, it was immediately clear to me that the poi’i was none other than the topshell, *trochus n.*

Similar to the ‘opihi snail in form alone, the *trochus n.* snail has the characteristics of a typical gastropod— eyes at the end of long stalks, a thin mouth, the rest of the body, essentially an enormous foot—with the added element of colored spots on the top of its body. These colored spots, side by side, appear as eyes.



Looking at the snail's head, you see straight away, the eyestalks, the shape of which correspond to the notched shape at the top of the poi'i. Some of the poi'i images are slightly different than others and I attribute this to artistic ability and interpretation, but the similarities between the *trochus n.* and the poi'i are clear. Looking at the differences, it is obvious that the one element that is not consistent is the face, in particular, the 'eyes'. Round, squared off, *mata hoata*, a pair of opposing etua—the 'eyes' are the one characteristic that expresses individuality. It is because of this, that I believe the poi'i could be mistaken for a smiling face, or for that matter, the next evolution of *mata komoe*.

What I had discovered so far, was the poi'i symbol represented *trochus n.*, turned upside down, with the snail twisted around so that its foot faced the inside of the shell, lined up perfectly so that the snail's eyes met with the edge of its shell. The 'eyes' were the two, larger colored spots on the snail's back, the third, smaller spot, could in fact be seen as a 'nose' and the 'smile', was the gap created when the snail twists itself over in that way. The dark edges of the design are the underside of the shell that is exposed.

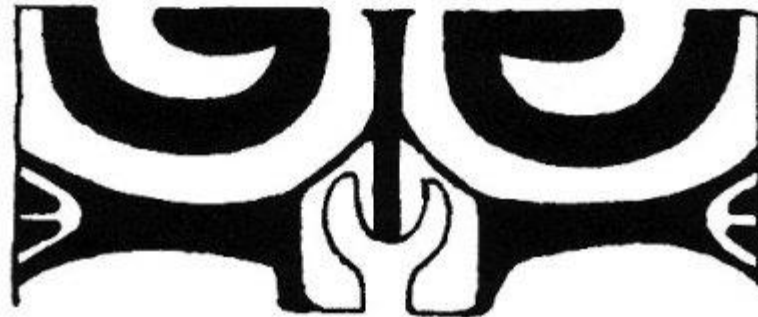


It makes perfect sense, from both an artistic perspective and a cultural one. The poi'i was a food source and possibly used as a form of primitive currency (mainly social). It nourished and in a sense, symbolized prosperity. Add to that, the fact that the shell was made of mother-of-pearl and you have an oyster and pearl analogy, which could also signal a mother/daughter relationship, but that would be an interpretation invented by myself and in no way do I think that the Marquesan's used the poi'i to symbolize this whatsoever.

It was often tattooed on the wrists, hands, knees and feet. It would seem fitting that a person whose function it was to harvest poi'i—bending down, on their hands and knees, especially if they excelled at finding the little critters—might be inclined to having that symbol tattooed onto themselves, in those places of the body that either came into contact with, or facilitated the process of, harvesting the poi'i. Perhaps that was one 'why', reason for the poi'i?

Getting back to Handy's claim that the poi'i was an evolution of the *mata komoe*, (she then further clouds the issue by stating that its usage was reserved for women of higher status, remember) it could be, that what she observed, was indeed women of higher status with tattoo of the poi'i, not so much as a symbol of their ability to harvest the snail, but reflecting either that the woman had been promised in marriage or, to represent the sealing of an alliance (www.summ.org/nj/nc-report/index.htm), something that Handy had alluded to in her assessment (W. Handy 1922, p.5). Regardless of usage pertaining to women of higher status, only those with enough resources (assets were not monetary based, but depended upon possession of food sources, land and textiles, etc.) could afford tattoo work of the caliber that Handy describes and documents. Gell (1993) asserts that much of Polynesian tattoo is closely allied to violence and warfare, and to the demonstration of wealth and prestige. It is certainly

conceivable then, that the poi'i could have been a symbol of 'upper status' distinction, as it was placed prominently on both men and women.



2 examples of mata hoata (Brilliant eyes)



In conclusion, the poi'i was not simply a coiled shellfish motif, but a symbol that accurately (yet stylistically) represents a living creature, *trochus niloticus*. The shell itself, consisting of mother-of-pearl, could have been regarded as a status symbol for that very reason. Whatever the case may be, I hope to have added some new dimension to the poi'i; a symbol of prominence, distinction and life.

Aloha and peace!