

The Meaning of Ta Tau

Samoan Tattooing

The word Tatau (tattoo) in Samoan means appropriate, balanced and fitting.

Male and female tattoos have different titles in Samoan. Each tattoo is completely unique, but specific elements of the designs recur.

The male tattoo is known as the Pe'a (flying fox) and refers to the dark charcoal colour of the tattoo. The Pe'a covers the area from the knee to the waist. The order in which the tattoo is applied is always the same - the lumbar region (the small of the back where the Samoan mythical figures Taema and Tilafaiga were joined) is always tattooed first and the navel is always last. The navel design is very important and is called the Pute. Without the Pute, the tattoo is unfinished and the wearer carries with him a sense of shame because he was not able to complete the ceremony.

The female tattoo is known as the Malu, which means to be protected and sheltered. Most of the elements in the Malu are purely ornamental and do not follow any specific pattern. However, the diamond shaped design on the back of the knee, which is also called a Malu, is always present. The Taupou (village maiden), has an important ceremonial role in the community and is always tattooed from her knee to the top of her leg, and sometimes on her hands.

Both male and female tattoos show that you are ready for life, for adulthood and to be of service to your community.

