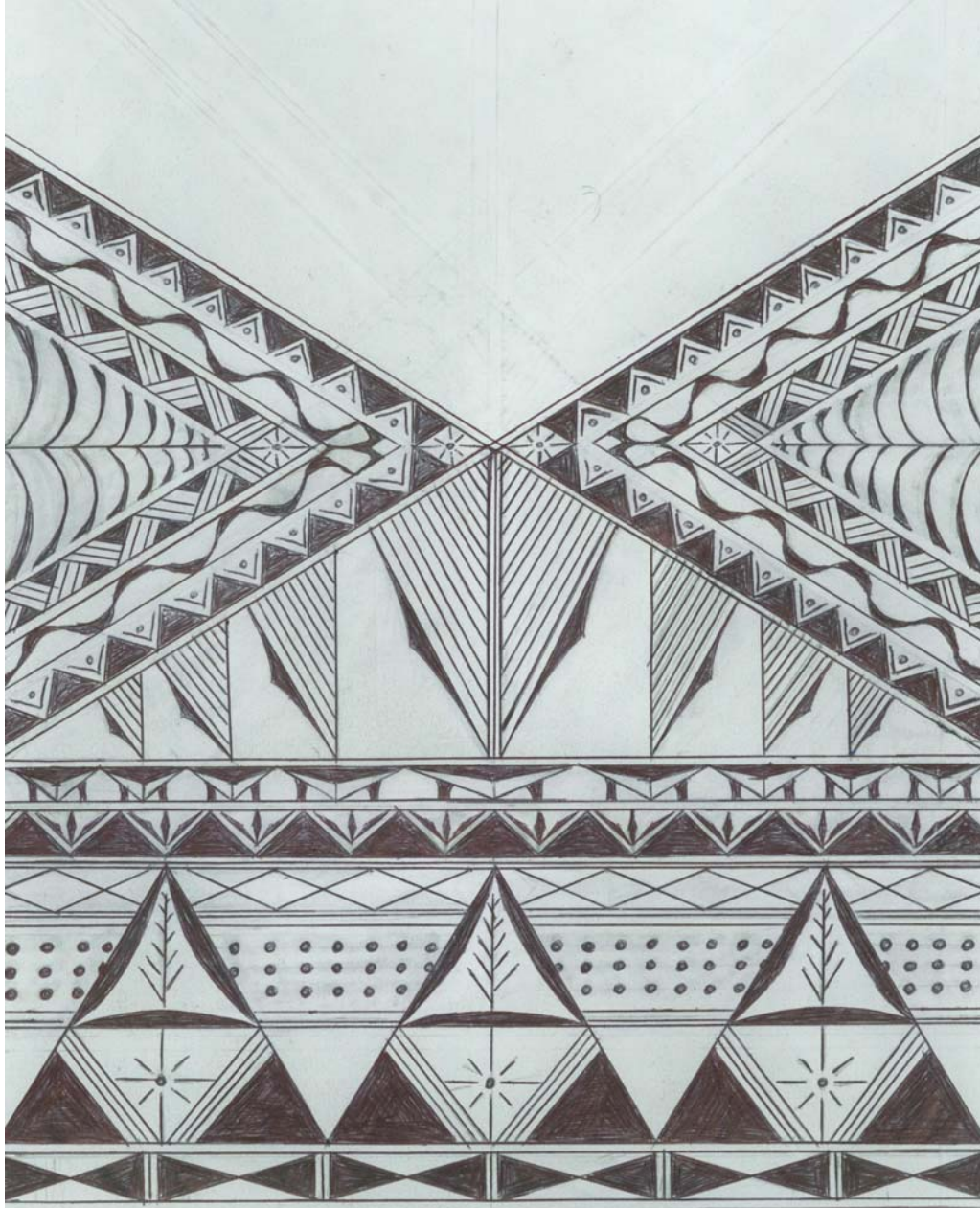


*In memory of our greatest king, Lavelua Tomasi Kulimoetoke  
He Aliko Hau To'a ne'e Atamai Masila pea mo Fakakaukau Gaholo*



Aga'i Fenua  
Vaimu'a MULIAVA June 8 2006  
HAWAII

## *Aga`i Fenua*

Vaimu`a Muliava

There are three kingdoms in `Uvea mo Futuna, one in `Uvea and two in Futuna. These Polynesian kingdoms are now incorporated into the French Republic. Queen Amelia Tokagahahau Alike Lavelua, acting in the name of the three kingdoms, signed a protectorate treaty with France, which was ratified in 1887. `Uvea mo Futuna was used by the United States as a military base during the Second World War. Under the leadership of Tomasi Kulimoetoke, who was elected king in 1959, `Uvea mo Futuna chose by referendum to become a French overseas territory, effective 1967. Because these kingdoms are small, with few natural resources, economic development is a challenge. Consequently, only about 10 percent of the population have regular jobs, and most people work for the government, the local television station, public offices, and schools. Many live in a traditional fashion, planting yams and taro, fishing, and working in the local arts.

This tattoo design is dedicated to our *aga`i fenua*, the traditional `Uvea mo Futuna political system, without which our identity as Uveans and Futunans would have disappeared a long time ago. Similarly, Uvean and Futunan people living on the islands who don't have regular paid work would not have survived in this "modern" world without their cultural foundation. Throughout this dedication, I pay tribute to our king, Lavelua Tomasi Kulimoetoke (1918–2007), who passed away on 7 May 2007 after a forty-eight year reign full of wisdom and dedication to his people; and to the two kings of Futuna, Tu`i Sigave and Tu`i Agaifo, the sacred keepers and living symbols on earth of our *aga`i fenua*.

### THE DESIGN CONCEPT

In this design I wanted to personify and materialize a more fluid understanding of the term *aga`i fenua* or "tradition." From that perspective, I decided to take inspiration from the different linguistic patterns observed between Polynesian languages and, as a free

artist, to push the limits of the Uvean language currently circumscribed by linguistic science.

According to linguists, there are two ways of translating a native term. The first one corresponds to the literal meaning. The second one corresponds to the proper meaning or how the term is used.

*aga`i fenua*

- first meaning: the manner of or in land

*aga* = manner or soul

*fenua* = land

- second meaning: the soul of the land

Linguists mark the difference between the term *aga* (soul or manner) and the term *`aga*, which means shark.<sup>1</sup> According to them, the difference resides in the initial glottal stop (‘), which differentiates the pronunciation of the word.

Ed Burrows, during his journey in `Uvea, noticed that the glottal stop could be a litigious point in the study of the native language. For example, with the term *malae* or *marae*, Uveans insert a glottal stop and say *mala`e*. “It is even possible that the stop may have been inserted in *malae* between the time Bataillon wrote it in his dictionary and the time I heard it.”<sup>2</sup> He added, “Sometimes I suspected that informants speaking to me in Uvean inserted glottal stops because they were speaking slowly and clearly for my benefit” (Burrows 1937, 17). I noticed that myself, when I heard my grandparents telling stories. The employment of the glottal stop is not systematic; some Uveans say *aga`i fenua*, while others say *agai fenua*.

This is the danger of linguistic science: while it certainly helps to conserve a native language, at the same time it coagulates it, killing certain internal linguistic variants. For example, in the standard written Hawaiian language there is no longer a “t,” whereas before transcription, the use of the “t” sound was common.

Standardizing language is often linked to nation-making and the marking of cultural specificities and differences. This can lead to ignorance of the common cultural traits one people share with another. Many Uveans and Futunans, for example, have

connections with Tonga, Ha`amoia (Sāmoa), Tokelau, Lotuma (Rotuma), Fisi (Fiji), and Niue, and it is likely that pre- and post-European connections made the Uvean language into the form in which it is transmitted today. But linguistic standardization may hide pre-European links between `Uvea and other islands.

I do understand that linguistic observations are based on a rigorous study of the way Uveans practice their language. But, with all the due respect I have for all my elders who informed and still inform the science and for the work done by all the linguists, I believe the glottal stop is not a generality, and while it may be assigned, it should not be considered as a determining factor for understanding. What makes the meaning of a term is not the presence or absence of a glottal stop but the way the term is used in a sentence.

Anyway, as an artist free of any kind of circumscription, scientific or “traditional” (as defined today), I have decided that *aga`i fenua* could have a:

- first meaning: the shark in the land
- second meaning: the soul of the land

From this perspective, I found that the character that best personifies tradition is the shark. In `Uvea, the king is the living symbol of the tradition, so in reference to the title *Tu`i*, which designates the representative of the gods on earth, I made the parallel between the *aga`i fenua* and the title *Tu`i* (*Tu`i`Uvea*, *Tu`i`Agaifo*, *Tu`i`Sigave*, *Tu`i`Manu`a*, and the most reputed, *Tu`i`Tonga*).

*Tu`i`Uvea*

- First meaning: to stand in `Uvea
- Second meaning: the representative of the gods on earth; the ruler of `Uvea

I did not use here the *faka`uvea* translation of the term *tu*, “to shake,” but the *faga ouvea* one, “to stand.” This is from one of the two languages, the Iaai and the Faga Ouvea, practiced on the Loyalty Island of `Uvea Lalo (written Ouvea Lalo) in New Caledonia. During pre-European history, Uvean people led by the Aliko Kaukelo migrated to this Melanesian island and called it `Uvea Lalo in reference to their island home.

In the way the Hawaiian ancestors personified the god Kū in their artwork, I wanted my design invoking the Tu`i titles to be a coherent personification of the *aga`i fenua* by using the literal meaning of the native term to guide my concept. In Hawai`i, Kū (or Tū) is known among other things as a war god. All the wooden images of Tū represent a man standing proudly and firmly anchored in the ground. The arms are condensed, close to the body and directed toward the ground. The impression that emanates from these wooden images is a feeling of strength and tension applied by the body on the ground.

#### THE ELABORATION OF THE DESIGN

Following my understanding of the term *aga`i fenua* as “the shark-in-the-land,” the first step was to define a frame that illustrates a shark. So I decided to draw a monster with two eyes and a mouth. The second step was to fill the frame and to cut the space in a decorative band. The last step was to fill the decorative band with all the elements of the tradition that have allowed the expansion of Polynesian culture and the survival of our traditional political system.

#### *The Shark Is the Frame*

In my way of thinking, the shark is the ruler of tradition in the way that Tū is the ruler of the land. Consequently, when the Tu`i Tonga in the old time wanted to extend his empire, the *aga`i fenua* wanted to spread and to extend its political system over all the islands of the Pacific. To this effect, patterns related to navigation had to be present in the design. A feeling of conquest, then, must emanate from the design. The position of the patterns had to translate the following sentence: “The shark eats the ocean and spreads his culture over the land.” The triangular spaces on each side symbolize the eyes, and the mouth is symbolized here by the teeth.

#### *The Patterns*

- The elements of navigation and the elements necessary to the functioning of the *aga`i fenua*

The wind, the stars, and the sun are figured on the upper part of the head of the *aga*, whereas the nautical currents are figured on the lower part.

- The eyes

The first decorative band presents triangles and one point above a V figure pattern. In my scheme, triangles symbolize islands, the points, the stars indicating the position of the island, and the V, the figure of the bird leading the navigator throughout the coral fencing of the island. The second band starts with two birds on each side symbolizing the *gogo* (frigate bird) and the *katafa* (albatross), leading birds of the open sea. The third band presents a *lau fala* (pandanus leaf) pattern symbolizing a sail.

At the junction point of these decorative bands is figured an astral pattern that represents the sun and the moon. The triangular space on each side presents a Tongan *kupesi* (stencil) pattern. I cut the pattern in the middle and joined the two fragments by their extremities to figure the pupil of the eyes. In my scheme, this *kupesi* pattern symbolizes the nautical winds. The meaning is inspired by the Tongan *kupesi* pattern called Tokelaufeletoa. This pattern belongs to Hulita Tu`ifua from the village of Feletoa on the island of Vava`u. I chose this pattern to pay special tribute to Tu`i Tonga, who spread out the *aga`i fenua* (our political system) to `Uvea mo Futuna.

- The mouth

The mouth here is symbolized by the shark teeth. The upper band of teeth also represents the sails of a canoe. In the center are a *kalia* or *la lua* (double canoe with two sails), then some *vaka tafa`aga* (canoes with a beam and one sail), and finally *paopao* (simple canoe without sail).

The lower band of teeth (three large triangles) represents the three kingdoms of `Uvea, and Sigave and Alo in Futuna. Inside these larger triangles I inserted an astral sign, and above it, on top of the triangle, a *lau niu* (coconut leaf) pattern. The *lau niu* is there to show the importance of the coconut for the survival of our islands. I was also inspired by an old, recurrent Uvean and Futunan proverb: “Laga te lau niu o `Uvea mo Futuna ki oluga,” which means “Raise the coconut branch of `Uvea mo Futuna higher.” This proverb is generally used when someone is about to compete, to wake up the pride of Uvean and Futunan people.

- Inside the mouth

The *tanoa* (kava bowl) symbolizes the kava ceremony, which punctuates all the agreements of our traditional society and all the important moments of life. This ritual ceremony is generally followed by a *katoaga*, presenting offerings such as the meat cooked in the *umu* (earth oven), yams, taro, mats, and *ngatu* or *siapo* (*tapu*, bark cloth).

I placed the *tanoa* as decorative band in the middle of the mouth, to show the central place of this ritual ceremony. The *tanoa* in the center corresponding to the *la lua* symbolizes the royal kava ceremony, and the others on the sides represent the *aliki* (chiefly) kava ceremonies.

The two last *tanoa* on each extremity have two meanings. These represent the regular *fai kava* (kava drinking), which Futunans call *tauasu*, and they also represent the *kumete*, the large cooking receptacle. I wanted to pay special tribute to the ancestors who braved the ocean in spite of the *tapu* (prohibition) established by the Catholic missionaries in `Uvea mo Futuna concerning indigenous navigation skills and practices. This is like winking an eye to a pre-European tradition called *Ta Vaka* in my islands. This tradition arose in response to the call of the open sea, and to perpetuate the heroic tradition of navigation. These large cooking receptacles are there in my design to symbolize the courage of Futunan people who decided to transgress the religious *tapu* and to jump on board such *kumete* to sail to the Fiji islands in the late nineteenth century. Uvean people also practiced this tradition, but traveled aboard real canoes, which allowed them to settle in Fisi, Ha`amoia, Tonga, Ouvea Lalo in New Caledonia, Lotuma, Anuta, and Tikopia. The *Ta Vaka* tradition was perpetuated until between 1920 and 1930.

- Agriculture

A decorative band reveals triangles inked with vegetal patterns symbolizing agriculture: *talo* (taro), *ufi* (yam), *mei* (breadfruit), *kumala* (sweet potato). Agriculture is essential for our survival and also important for the practice of our *aga`i fenua*. I placed this pattern here because it is linked to the practice of the *katoaga*.

- The nautical currents

This decorative band presenting two fish bones facing each other is a Samoan pattern. Here I wanted to pay special tribute to Paulo Sulu`ape and to the strength of the

resistance of the Samoan culture regarding the traditional tattoo art. Every tattoo artist from the west to the east and from the north to the south of the Pacific knows the essential contribution of Paulo Sulu`ape to the survival and the revival of the traditional tattoo art over all the Pacific Islands. In my scheme, these fishes symbolize the nautical currents.

- My lineage as a tattooist

Below these two bands, I decided to place a band of three points. My grandmother Sialetaginoa Elisapeta Galu`Ola wore this decorative band on her shoulder. When I saw my grandma's tattoo, I decided to wear the same and started to have an interest in the art of tattoo. She told me that these points represent the stars in the night. Here I wanted to pay special tribute to my *kui fafine*. In my scheme, this band represents my lineage, which starts from my grandmother. I will tattoo and transmit it to all my descendents in loving memory of Sialetaginoa Elisapeta Galu`Ola.

#### MY INTEREST IN TATTOOING

With the exception of (Western) Sāmoa, tattoo art has disappeared on many islands. Sāmoa is the only place where the practice and the meaning of the traditional *tatau*/tattoo art form have never suffered a cultural break. In `Uvea mo Futuna, this ancient art is not generally practiced. Tattoo art lost its function in the applied mechanism of our *aga`i fenua* once the Catholic missionaries put their feet on our lands. Consequently, the *tufuga fai ta tatau* (tattoo experts) disappeared progressively from our society, since they had no more utility for the well-being of the community. However, I don't think that the practice of this craft was as politicized and generalized as it was in Sāmoa; I think that the stature of tattoo art in `Uvea and Futuna was similar to that on Tikopia. However, old people still wear old patterns mixed with new ones featuring things such as Latin letters and the Christian cross.

In the last few decades, a revival of the tattoo arts began in many Pacific Islands, but for a long time `Uvea mo Futuna stayed away from this movement. However, the success of the Tahitian tattoo revival seduces western people, and unfortunately many Pacific Islanders as well, including Uveans and Futunans. When, during my university



education in Paris, I first saw my people there wearing Marquesan patterns on their skin, I decided to tattoo. I told my people in Paris: I am a tattooist and I only tattoo Uvean and Futunan patterns. Then they bought me a tattoo machine. That is how I started my practice.

My interest in the art of tattoo is not to revive it in my islands, because this art form has already lost its function in our *aga`i fenua*. But the expansion and the success of the revival movement in tattoo arts are so strong that it is impossible to swim endlessly against the current. From a Pacific Islander point of view, and conscious that I belong to peoples who originally had the same roots, I think it is insane and disrespectful to the Henua`Enana ancestors to tattoo their Marquesan patterns and to claim to everybody, Pacific Islanders and western people alike, that they are traditional Tahitian tattoo art. I don't want my people to take part in this collective cultural burglary. So I decided to create an Uvean and Futunan style, in the hope that my people would be proud to wear or tattoo our own patterns.

Personally, I don't want to look for something already lost. I prefer living my culture as my ancestors transmitted it to me. I am more interested in the present and in thinking about how I can use what I have today and how I can transmit it. We have to admit the past, not just as tradition but also as history. As long as we consider the past as tradition, we will never walk ahead.

The Uvean or Futunan word for "forward" is *mu`a*, but this term is also used to refer to the past. It has a double meaning: forward, and past or origin. The result is that the past is not behind us but in front of us. In this way, tradition can be present with modernity. The western concept of time does not exist in our communities. The past, the present, and the future are necessarily connected, because real cultural heritage is not something tangible but intangible. It is a way of life.

From that perspective, the question is: What do I have at my disposal? My inspiration, my source, is the *aga`i fenua*, the old tales, the living art of *tapa* and mats, the proverbs, and our Oceanic culture.

As my father Polikalepo Tupalelagi Muliava (a traditional chief and political leader for the Uvean and Futunan communities living in New Caledonia) used to say: "Kote Aga`i Fenua e mole feala ia ke toe laga`i mai te taimi mu`a kā `e faka kaukau`i mo

tufuga`i ia i te `aho fuli pea mo faka tuha kite`u hoha mo amanaki a te kaiga,” which means, “Tradition is not something that we should reconstruct but something to build day after day, following the needs of our communities.” This is the only way to keep culture alive, authentic, and away from any kind of “folklorism,” which is the danger of any sort of traditional revival.

VAIMU`A MULIAVA is a French Pacific Islander, born and raised in New Caledonia. He keeps deep and strong links with `Uvea and Futuna Islands (most well known as Wallis and Futuna). He graduated in 2006 from the University of Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, with a master’s degree in conservation studies in marine archaeology and ethnographic fields. His thesis was entitled, “La Conservation entre ‘Etic’ et ‘Emic.’” That same year he finished an internship at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

### *Notes*

1. *Aga* is pronounced “anga.” For example, we write “Toga,” but we pronounce it “Tonga.” Uveans don’t write the sound “ng” because the missionaries didn’t write it, but Uveans do pronounce it. It is good to know that the native language has not been modified by the European writing. We could make the parallel with the glottal stop: if I had learned my language at school and not in my family home, I would take this glottal stop as a determining factor for the understanding and practicing of my language.
2. Monsignor Pierre Bataillon, the first Catholic missionary on the island, had an important influence in the conservation of the native tradition by editing in 1870 a code mixing traditional law and religious precepts. He also edited the first Uvean dictionary.

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*The ancestors’ visionaries: The king Niuliki and his warrior Musumususu who killed the first Catholic missionary of Futuna, Father Pierre Chanel. Since then, every year our communities commemorate Saint Pierre Chanel, the first Catholic martyr of Oceania, and the king and his warrior are considered murderers and devils.*

*The defenders of our traditions who passed away: Polikalepo Nau, Lafaele Malau,*

*Kalala Kulimoetoke, Malekalita Tokaga, Petelo Folitu`u, Polikalepo Tupalelagi Muliava*

*The “living libraries”: Selelino Lie, Kimi Seo, Malino Nau . . .*