

**Painful Aesthetics:**  
**Embodiment, Appropriation, and Fame in the**  
**Production of a Global Tattoo Community**

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Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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February 2010

## Acknowledgements

This research has been funded partly by departmental bursary from the anthropology department at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and I am grateful for their financial contribution.

For their always astute comments, endless patience, and unwavering support I thank my two supervisors: Prof. Nicholas Thomas and Dr Roger Sansi-Roca.

To all my informants who generously engaged with my questions and queries through the years, you have all given a distinct perspective to my analysis and understanding of the global tattoo community. Special thanks to Chime, Roonui and Purutu on the island of Moorea who have, since the late 1980's, been kinsmen, friends and guides, similarly, to Al Te Wake and Steve in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and to Furry in Kiddlington, Markus (and all the crew at 'Kids Love Ink Deptford'), and Xed Le Head at Into You, London.

I am deeply indebted to my parents Danie and Rolls Siorat who have been inspirational and a crucial source of emotional support during my different projects and my return to education. Moreover, I may not have been able to complete this thesis without their financial support.

I must also acknowledge Dr Anna Cole for her support of this project in its early stage, her belief in my academic abilities, and for her encouragement during the emotionally complicated fieldwork period.

To all my fellow research students who contributed during my time at Goldsmiths College, I warmly thank you for all your comments and suggestions, as well as your support. Here, I am also personally grateful to Dr Emma-Jayne Abbots for her friendship, support, honesty, good humour and for sharing her love of cricket and good food.

I would also like to thank all the academic and clerical staff of the anthropology department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. This includes special acknowledgements to Brian Morris, Pat Caplan, Keith Hart, Victoria Goddard, Sophie Day, Emma Tarlo, Rebecca Cassidy, Chris Wright, Sari Wastell, Catherine Alexander, Nici Nelson, Stephen Nuggent, Frances Pine, Simon Cohn, Jean Besson, Alpa Shah, Mao Mollona, Hugh, Cauvery, Sam and John Hutnyk.

Finally, I would like to give a very special thank you to my partner and fiancée, Joanna Carter, for her understanding, tenderness, empathy and patience with me during these long and complicated years.

## Abstract

This study is concerned with the ways in which a number of individuals, from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, create and maintain a series of networks on a global stage based on the shared practice and business of tattooing. Tattoo artists and their fans are all involved in numerous interlinked movements during which they engage in a succession of exchange relationships with tattooees but also with other tattoo artists. The two main locations this research focuses on are the island of Moorea in French Polynesia and Northern Europe. The research considers the importance of events such as international tattoo conventions and festivals in the determination of status in the hierarchical structure of the global tattoo community on both the local but also global levels. Despite the creation of a global community, such cross-cultural interactions are not without raising issues regarding cultural appropriation and claims to a particular local authenticity. In that sense, the global tattoo community is involved in several tensions as well as numerous collaborative projects and business partnerships. It is through all these transactional processes that this community can take form for individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Tattoos enable individuals to act upon others' decision making, to entice them into an exchange relationship which will inevitably create some form of reciprocity, and a dialogical process of creation and maintenance of personal and collective valuation. This is because both parties become reciprocal agents of each other's value definition. Some chapters look at individuals and their actions on both the local and global stages, while others review the role of the tattoo media and of other publications related to the tattooing practice in this process of representation and creation of a global tattoo community.

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## Chapter One: Introduction.

### 1.1 Introduction

In 1988, my parents relocated to French Polynesia and I accompanied them there and stayed for a year on the island of Moorea, a few miles off the main island of Tahiti. During my time there, I became a close friend and assistant to a local Polynesian tattoo artist called Chime (see appendix T). There were only a handful of people tattooing at that time in Moorea. They mostly tattooed local people and a very small number of visiting tourists. None of them had a tattoo shop and all tattooed either by hand with clusters of sewing needles or with the needle attached to an electric razor adapted to be used as a tattoo machine. The ink used was writing ink; either China or Indian ink. Tattooing was still quite rare at that time and tattooed people were usually either cultural agents (mainly traditional dancers and craftsmen) or independentist political activists, or both. On my following visits to Moorea (1993, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2003), I witnessed tattooing become somewhat more pervasive in the local cultural landscape, the number of tattooees but also tattoo artists increased exponentially, and some individuals, like Chime, became worldwide famous tattoo artists who are flown to major cities around the world to participate in international events, such as tattoo conventions. In the case of Chime, he opened two tattoo shops on the Spanish island of Ibiza in the 1990's. He also became a central actor to the first international tattoo festival held in 2000 on the island of Raiatea which is perceived, in the tattoo community, as a seminal event (see chapter four). In sharp contrast to fifteen years earlier, on the island of Moorea in 2003, there were ninety registered tattoo artists and approximately a dozen professional tattoo shops. These changes which took place in French Polynesia over a twenty to thirty years period, are what has been coined a local cultural renewal (Pambrun 1997) (see chapter three and four). This is one of the key themes of this thesis and my witnessing of this process provided the original motivation for this research. My own experience, to a point, mimicked the movements and experiences of my Polynesian informants, as I became aware of the global tattoo community through my original personal involvement in the tattooing practice in French Polynesia since the late 1980's.

During my first time in Moorea, I was tattooed three times by Chime. Chime was in his late twenties then and was tattooing by hand. He used clusters of sewing needles which could be arranged to replicate the shape of traditional tattooing tools. At that time, there was only a couple of tattoo shops and most of the tattoo artists involved in the renewal were tattooing either 'on the road' or from home. I spent a few months as Chime's tattoo assistant and we lived together in different areas of Moorea. We would stay in the houses of families and friends, or in a rudimentary bush hut in one of the island's valleys, and Chime would tattoo tourists and local people alike for money or in exchange for goods such as rice, petrol lamp fuel, fish, or cooking oil. The first tattoo that Chime tattooed on me was on my right upper arm and represented what he called a *tiki* (an anthropomorphic god figure ubiquitous in French Polynesia) (see chapter three). Chime told me afterwards that the design he had tattooed included a *tiki* which represented a spiritual entity and would act as a form of personal protection. My third tattoo, on my right kneecap, is a fish face which represents the spirit of an ancestor, re-embodied as a fish, and acts as personal protection. It seems often that the idea of protection is associated with tattoos. This is itself reminiscent, to an extent, of the pre-contact function of tattoos regarding *tapu* protection (see chapter three). Yet, the contemporary sense of protection is not directly related to *tapu* or *mana* for most Polynesian individuals. Furthermore, such discourse about the protective function they assign to their tattoos is also often expressed by Euro-American tattooees (see chapters seven and eight). I left French Polynesia the week after receiving my third tattoo from Chime. I came back to Europe and settled in the city of London. It was only a decade later that I was tattooed again. This time was in South Africa by a South African tattoo artist based in Durban. We adapted Polynesian designs to have them tattooed on my skin. Later the same year, I was tattooed again by Chime on Moorea, and have been tattooed by many other artists since then. My main point, here, is that my positioning bares some similarities with some of my Polynesian informants. I came to tattooing through the renewal that was taking place in French Polynesia in the 1980's and only became aware of the global tattoo community years later, partly through the involvement of my Polynesian friends who had acquired status within it. Although somewhat problematic, my positioning has given me access to a specific perspective which was opportunistic in nature, however, it has also raised a number of methodological issues which I discuss more fully in chapter two.

This thesis is about individuals from different socio-cultural backgrounds engaging in exchange relationships on a global scale. All of these individuals share together an involvement in a particular activity and trade: tattooing. The thesis originates from my long involvement with Polynesian and European tattoo artists and from anthropological fieldwork carried out mainly between August 2003 and September 2004 in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the island of Moorea (French Polynesia) and in England. The impetus for this thesis came from the great changes the tattooing practice has gone through over the last twenty to thirty years globally but also in places such as French Polynesia. Over this time period, tattooing was re-introduced in French Polynesia and some of the actors of this renewal have moved from being local cultural agents to globally acclaimed tattoo artists. At the same time, in Europe and North America, tattooing has also moved from a marginal cultural position to a more mainstream one. Part of these changes have been a certain democratisation of the practice itself, with tattooing apparatus becoming available by mail order and the opening of the trade to practitioners who started tattooing at home rather than through the traditional long apprenticeship process (see chapters six and ten). Another process at play has been a certain increase of the practice of appropriation of tattoo designs from a different culture and time to one's own (see chapter eight). This has been salient to tattoo movement such as the European and American 'neo-tribal' and the Californian 'Modern Primitive' ones. Yet, it is also a process which has operated in places such as French Polynesia and Aotearoa/New Zealand as I will discuss.

## 1.2 Informants

During this research, I spoke to and interviewed many people involved in some way or other in the global tattoo community. However, some of my informants have been central and appear throughout the thesis. I would like now to present the main ones and shortly discuss their position within the story of the tattooing practice in the last thirty years or so. The three main informants from French Polynesia are Chime, Roonui, and Purutu. They were all born in the early 1960's and grew up mainly on the islands of Moorea and Tahiti. They have known each other since childhood and have been active as cultural agents during the cultural renewal which started in the late 1970's and learnt to tattoo under the supervision of pioneers such as Raymond Graffe and Tavana Salmon (see chapters three, four & five). The three of them were part of the second generation which worked towards the re-introduction of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia. They were the ones who came to Europe and

North America and worked in tattoo shops there. In the process they learnt new techniques and hygiene routines which they themselves introduced in the French Polynesian context. They also created partnerships with respected tattoo artists and worked in tattoo conventions. Through these, they became part of the global tattoo community and engaged in its business activity and gained status within its internal hierarchical structure. Therefore, they are important agents and witnesses of the changes which took place regarding the tattooing practice in French Polynesia over the last thirty years or so. They themselves, in this process, became world known tattoo artists in the global tattoo community and are rarely short of work wherever they be in Europe, North America or the South Pacific.

In the European part of the research, there are a number of informants which were interviewed to different degrees of formality. Therefore there are no specific and recurrent informants which I present in this introduction. However, mostly they are tattoo artists who have not yet gained a reputation beyond their local contexts. Some own their own shops, while others work from home, and others are employees at different tattoo shops mainly in the city of London and the South-East of England. Many of my European informants also only spoke to me informally during tattoo conventions or during their visits to tattoo shops as customers and friends of particular tattoo artists. In chapter nine, I discuss issues relating to New Zealand and there I mainly present two informants. The first one is called Steve while the other is Al Te Wake. Steve was the director of the Moko Museum, a space behind his tattoo shop dedicated to the tattooing practice. Al was a Maori wood carver who worked on different projects in the museum as a volunteer. I discuss how both of these men shared a past of criminal activity which had been replaced by their respective business and artistic commitments. Yet, the level to which each of them were integrated and engaged in the global tattoo community differed greatly and their experiences are therefore apt to contrast and compare the different strategies which some of my informants use to attain status and achieve success in this series of international social and business networks.

### 1.3 Tattoo Community

Most of my informants refer to ‘the tattoo community’. This entails a sense of connection between the different networks which are centred on each tattoo shop and around each tattoo artist. Through this so-called ‘community’, individuals are able to travel, exchange, create economic gains, and even relocate altogether from their original locations.

While observing the global tattoo community, one sometimes wonders how such an entity takes form. It is not that my informants do not refer to an idea of community of which they are a part, but that the global tattoo community seems to materialise itself in its clearest form when conceived as a series of movements, encounters and acts of exchange rather than as a geographically bounded and socio-culturally homogenous group. As DeMello (2000) points out, this community is not located in one particular geographical area, and does not include all individuals with a tattoo. In fact, it is the group which includes specifically ‘those who actively embrace the notion of community and who pursue community-orientated activities’ (*ibid*); the people who engage in the creation and the maintenance of the concept of, and the practices associated with, a tattoo community. The global tattoo community, however, is an imagined community to the point that any human grouping, from the smallest village to the largest nation state, is imagined. This is because, as Anderson explains (1991) individual members of these may not meet all the other members of their community, or even be aware of them, yet they all share an image of a shared communion, and therefore what should be distinguished is not their falsity/genuineness but the different ways and styles in which these are being imagined (*ibid*). Unlike nation states, which is Anderson’s focus, the global tattoo community is not limited nor is it sovereign. However, this thesis is not only concerned with how a global tattoo community is “imagined” and maintained. My main objective in this thesis is to show how this community is enacted in practice mainly through established exchange practices taking place in series of interconnected global networks. These are multi-cultural and mainly founded through friendship networks and/or business partnerships. And this is an important aspect of tattooing, it is a practice but it is also a lucrative business. Thus status may be achieved through technical and aesthetic mastery; it most often takes the form of financial success. This is because the financial gains come from the number of people a tattoo artist entices to be tattooed by him/her. There are two interrelated ways through which to increase the number of potential tattooees. The first one is through the artists’ mastery, the tattoos themselves entices others to be tattooed by the artist, something related to Gell’s (1992; 1998) theories regarding art and agency which I will discuss in this thesis. The second is the reputation of the artist which, I will argue, is reminiscent of the Melanesian concept of ‘*butu*’ or fame in the context of the *kula* ring, as presented by Nancy Munn (1986) (see chapter seven).

The global tattoo community is produced and reproduced by agents who feel they are part of it and engage in series of exchange relationships with each other. The tattoos are at the centre of these acts and become some form of objectification of these exchanges and indexes of the relationships these practices imply. Therefore, I discuss events such as tattoo conventions in Europe and French Polynesia, and how these are crucial to the creation of an inner hierarchy within the global tattoo community that is based on the fame attained and maintained by particular individuals. I also examine at how Polynesian tattoo artists have joined, and mostly prospered, in the global tattoo community. The main focus of the thesis is on the actors and the act of the practice of tattooing. Therefore, although inherently present, tattoos themselves are not central as objects but as the embodied product of a painful, personal and sensual encounter and act of exchange. Overall, in this thesis, I look at different aspects which taken together highlight the different ways in which the global tattoo community is formed and maintained. In this introduction, I provide some contextual background regarding the location of tattooing practice in Europe, in addition to looking at the historical backdrop regarding French Polynesia, as a substantial part of the thesis' narrative is based in this location. I then discuss literature related to the main theoretical concepts which are used throughout the thesis. Finally, I present a detailed structure of the overall thesis.

#### 1.4 Tattooing in Europe and North America

It seems important to succinctly discuss the place of tattooing in the West. This is because the popular, and at times academic (Tournier 1998, Turner 2000), perceptions of tattoos, and of the tattooing practice, have been associated with ideas of the exotic and of the geographically, culturally and morally remote Other (see chapter five). Yet, the practice had been used in Europe by a number of groups and movements; such as Roman legionnaires, early Christians, and diverse European tribal groupings up to the early middle-ages (Gustafson 2000, Jones 2000, McQuarrie 2000). Furthermore, the contemporary nature of the tattooing practice in Europe and North America has taken form within a cosmopolitan framework, based on series of cross-cultural encounters and exchange relationships. Tattooing in Europe seemed to have been used during the Iron Age and the practice seems to have virtually stopped by the early middle ages, although it was re-introduced mainly by sailors after their encounters with Polynesian tattooing mainly during the nineteenth century. The sailors who encountered Polynesian tattooing did not, for example, copy the Marquesan

tattoo designs they observed, but re-introduced the practice itself, and adopted the use of tattoos as personal and group indexicalities. It is unlikely that tattooing was not known to European and to settlers in North America. This is because the practice was still prevalent in many First Nation tribes in North America and in North Africa and many other areas Europeans were engaged in trade with, were in the process of colonising, or were able to observe in the cultures of the people they interacted with.

By the twentieth century, tattoos were associated with a very limited number of sub-cultures which were mainly sailors, criminals and soldiers. However, in the 1970's, a number of tattoo artists who had studied in art schools changed the way tattoos were designed, as they started to be designed specifically for the tattooee rather than picked from a generic series of available designs. These new types of artists thus brought a greater diversity and individualism to the styles of designs used by the practice. Among them, some became interested in traditional tattoo designs from around the world, and while some artists replicated these designs out of their original social and temporal contexts, others used the designs as inspiration and developed new styles; for example the neo-tribal one which is discussed at length in this thesis (see chapter eight). By the 1990's, some tattoo artists also started to travel to the places where the designs they were appropriating first emanated. They engaged, some more than others, with the local culture but mostly with the tattoo artists who operated there. These interactions were important to create new links between varied tattoo practitioners. As Benson (2000) explains, 'increasing international communication, technical innovation and the work of a number of key individuals, many from art school backgrounds, radically transformed the possibilities of the medium' (Benson 2000:240). The increased communication also meant that the work of key tattoo artists was seen more widely, and globally, in available tattoo media outlets, such as magazines, for example (see chapter four and six). This meant that some of their work was able to influence other tattoo artists globally giving rise to the neo tribal style of tattoos. Furthermore, tattoo conventions moved from sporadic and purely social gatherings to more commercially minded events, and their numbers also increased dramatically (see chapter six). These changes have brought tattoos increasingly into the mainstream European and North American cultural spheres. Tattoos are now used in advertising campaigns and worn by celebrities and sports personalities. Although this occurrence could be seen as just another trend, it is interesting to note that what seems to be happening is that particular styles come and go out of fashion. Moreover, the tattoo

removal industry has also expanded and developed. However, the direction of their technical development has been towards being able to remove tattoos in a way which would enable their patients to acquire new tattoos. In fact, an increasing number of tattoo shops offer tattoo removal services as well as their more usual tattooing and piercing services.

Since the 1990's, the number of publications concerning tattoos has increased exponentially. New forms of media, like the internet, have enabled individuals from around the world to see tattoo artists' works and to exchange in various discussion forums. Furthermore, television programs such as 'Miami Ink', for example, have greatly demystified the location of the tattoo shop, and this seems to have widened the range of socio-economic background of people who wish to acquire tattoos. This is also exemplified by occurrences such as the opening of a tattoo shop in the high street shop 'Miss Selfridges' on the popular Oxford Street of central London. These changes have also affected the tattoo trade itself. While, twenty years or so ago, the main and only way to become a tattoo artist was through a three year long apprenticeship with a tattoo artist usually owning a tattoo shop, it is now the case that a great number of newcomers have started to tattoo at home and find positions in professional tattoo shops once they have attained an adequate standard of tattooing skills. This was enabled by the decision of some of the manufacturers of tattooing paraphernalia to start to sell to non-professionals; a practice which only started around the late 1990's. Some of the manufacturers quickly adapted to also offer mail and internet orders. This had for effect to democratise the hierarchical structure of the tattooing practice to a great extent and to open new entry points for newcomers (see chapter six).

### 1.5 French Polynesia

I will review the place of tattooing in French Polynesia, pre and post contact, in chapters three, four and five. However, as a substantial part of the thesis is related to this location, I present a succinct overview of the historical and socio-economic background to this part of my research field now, in order for the following discussion to be placed in context. In the Eastern Pacific Ocean lie groups of small islands referred to as French Polynesia (see appendix A). These islands were, and in some cases still are, created by seismic and volcanic activity rising from the ocean floor. French Polynesia is situated in the eastern part of the South Pacific, and is an oceanic area roughly the size of Western Europe dotted by 118 islands, of which seventy six are inhabited. The islands are distributed in five

main archipelagos; Society, Tuamutu, Marquesan, Austral and Gambier, and Tahiti and Moorea are both part of the Society archipelago (see appendix B). These different archipelagos are, to an extent, separate cultural spheres of their own (Pambrun 1997). However, considering that the islands of Tahiti and Moorea harbour three quarters of the whole 180 000 population of the territory, there is a kind of play between homogeneity and difference of cultural forms that can be observed there (*ibid*). The area has been a French overseas territory since 1945 but became first a French protectorate in 1843. In 1977, it gained administrative autonomy, which was extended to internal autonomy in the framework of the French Republic in 1984, and once more extended to a further level of autonomy in 1996. The political debate, current and since the 1950's, is mainly based around a choice between further autonomy and full independence from the French authorities.

Although Tahiti is the biggest island of French Polynesia, it was not the most influential prior to European contact. Raiatea, an island situated one hundred and fifty miles from Tahiti, assumed a more powerful stance. This was due to the fact that the *Taputapuatea marae* was situated upon its shore. This *marae* (open air pre-Christian temple) is known all over the Polynesian triangle, including Aotearoa/New Zealand, as the mythical launching pad of the Polynesian colonisation of the Pacific (Kuwahara 2000). As such, it remains, for some of my informants, a mystical place in the formation of different Polynesian identities and the concept of pan-Polynesian identity in particular. Sustained European contact, mainly with the British and French navies, started in the final quarter of the eighteenth century (Bare 1987). The British protestant mission arrived in 1797 in Tahiti but there was no forced conversion as such (Saura 1996). Instead, particular important families converted to gain access to European technologies and the support of the European colonial powers which were, in turn, used to subdue other families and islands (Bare 1987). The family that emerged as the dominant one was the Pomare (*ibid*). Between 1815 and 1836, the Pomare dynasty, with the London Missionary Society asserting great influence behind the throne, controlled the Society Islands, Australs and most of the Tuamutu groups (*ibid*). The French military and the catholic mission had themselves asserted their influence over the Marquesas and the Gambiers islands (*ibid*).

However, it is important to set this story of conversion and colonisation in the context of the series of epidemics which affected this part of the South Pacific. Prior to European

contacts, Polynesian seemed to have been isolated from major epidemic and pandemic of deadly diseases (Margueron 1996). The most serious condition Polynesian people had to deal with was elephantiasis which deforms the body rather than kills the person. The main health problems were either injuries due to accidents or acquired during the regular warfare activities (*ibid*). The traditional healing caste (*Ta'hua*) access to human bodies ritually sacrificed enabled them to gather knowledge of human anatomy and surgical techniques equal, and sometimes, in the case of trepanation for example, superior to their European visitors (*ibid*). This knowledge was quickly lost as human sacrifice became forbidden and warfare lost its frequency. The series of epidemics, introduced by explorers and whalers, were catastrophic on the population numbers of these small islands. Cook's estimation of the population of Tahiti was one hundred thousand in 1769 and sixty thousand in 1794 (Bare 1987). Another estimation made in 1857 of the same island of Tahiti was six thousand inhabitants (Margueron 1996). A similar picture is repeated over the whole area. The Marquesas archipelago dropped from one hundred thousand inhabitants in 1774 to two and a half thousand by 1926 (*ibid*). Even if the possible inaccuracy of Cook's first estimate is taken into account, there is no doubt that the effects of this series of epidemics were major. Pre-Christian traditional Polynesian societies were highly stratified and their oral cultures were managed by memory and recitation castes (Segalen 1956). The disappearance of these keys cultural agents through the epidemics, the expanding pressures of the Protestant churches, and the French Republican colonisation agenda lead to a situation particular to this part of the South Pacific (Saura 1996). In that sense, as Saura explains, the particularity of Tahiti, and the other Society islands in general, is due to the "...extreme strength of the Christian acculturation which took place during the nineteenth century" (Saura 1996:42).

In the twentieth century, the French colonial apparatus developed an economy based of the export of local products such as vanilla, copra, mother of pearl and fruits. They also facilitated an important Chinese immigration process which resulted in different labour intensive forms of economic production. Many Polynesian men were involved in both World Wars, most of them volunteering, fighting in the French armed forces; and with the Free French during WWII. Through the 1960's, a succession of events shifted the local socio-economic and political circumstances. An important event was the decision by the General De Gaulle, the French president at the time, to move the nuclear testing program from the Algerian Sahara to two atolls in the Tuamutus. This was due to Algeria gaining its own

independence from France. This move created a massive development of the island of Tahiti. Papeete, the city and economic and political centre of French Polynesia, had its harbour and docks expanded and the Faaa international airport was built in an adjacent agglomeration. In the meantime, on the atolls of Mururoa and Fangataufa, massive infrastructures were built to accommodate the testing sites and the large military presence. All this building work was carried out by a Polynesian workforce; mainly from the Tuamutus. Most of them did not move back to their respective islands, once the work was finished, but stayed on Tahiti. The substantial increase in population and economic activities engendered by a larger military presence were accompanied with the development of a new industry: the tourist industry. Faaa airport enabled Tahiti to become less isolated, and the association of Hollywood stars such as Marlon Brando, who married a Polynesian woman and bought Tetiaroa Island (a small island a few miles off Tahiti) after filming 'The Mutiny of the Bounty', with the area increased its international profile. However, it should be pointed that no matter how booming the economy may have seemed, it has always been, to this day, mainly created and sustained by a yearly financial budget allocated by the French government. The economic and business assets are mainly all shared between French, Chinese and the *demi* or *afa* (people who are half Polynesian and half French/half Chinese). The population is comprised of 66% Polynesian, 17% *afa/demi*, 12% Europeans (mainly French), and 5% Chinese. *Afa/demi* are the group which, apart from French residents, have a higher level of education and status within Tahitian society. It is interesting to note that the main *Ma'ohi* protagonists in this thesis, who acted as key cultural agents during the local cultural revival and later on the global stage of the tattoo community in Europe and North America, are *afa*. Chime's father was German and Roonui's was from the Chinese community of French Polynesia. However, they do not emphasise this point publicly as part of their professional identity as Polynesian tattoo artists requires some play on the concept of a traditional practice and its authenticity (see chapters three, four, five and eight).

## 1.6 Identities in French Polynesia.

There are three main names and concepts that people use on the islands of Tahiti and Moorea to describe themselves. These are 'Polynesian', '*Ma'ohi*', and the name of the particular island, or group of islands, they feel that they, and their families, originate from. The term 'Polynesian' emanates from the European geographical and anthropological

classification agenda and was devised as a form of differentiation from other cultural concepts such as ‘Melanesian’ and ‘Micronesian’ (Kuwahara 2005). However, even as a creation, the term ‘Polynesian’ is often used, by people on Tahiti and Moorea, as revendication of pan-Polynesian solidarity and perceived shared cultural roots with other South Pacific nation states, and the term often implies, for many of my local informants, an identity which reinforces the links with other island communities and nation states across the rest of the Pacific Ocean. This identity is reified during regular festival of the Pacific arts held on Tahiti. In a way, it is an identity that transcends the colonial situation and history, while also placing it in contrast with other colonial contexts of perceived similar communities (*ibid*).

The term ‘*Ma’ohi*’, a vegetal metaphor of *ma*/pure and *ohi*/offshoot (*ibid*), is also used with a sense of shared identity with other Pacific nations. Yet, its focus is an indigenous identity which saliently highlights the difference to non-indigenous identity markers; in this case French/European and Chinese (*ibid*). ‘*Ma’ohi*’ seems to have acquired potency, as an identity marker, with the emergence of nationalist activism in the 1970’s and 80’s. This is why it is often perceived by my informants as implying a particular political statement related to the independentist cause and nationalism. However, the term seems to be also often used now beyond its political baggage and has become part of the local vocabulary. It seems to be mainly used in the local context, and beyond it I found, for example, that when I have used ‘*Ma’ohi*’ to describe people from French Polynesia to Maori, Samoan, Hawaiian and Tongan informants, none of them appeared to know the meaning of the term. They all referred to them as Polynesians, islanders, and Tahitians.

The name ‘Tahitian’ is used to describe people from, or living on, the island of Tahiti itself. However, it is also a generic term which contains an iconography which dates back to the first contacts accounts published in Europe and therefore is intrinsically linked to colonial and neo-colonial stereotypical images (*ibid*). It is through these images that ‘Tahitian’ things and people are commodified (Raapoto 1988). As Raapoto, a *Ma’ohi* linguist, states:

‘This denomination (Tahitian) has a essentially demagogic, touristic, snobbish and rubbish vocation. ‘Tahitian’ is the pareu shirt whose material is printed in Lyon or in Japan; it’s the Marquesan tiki called Tahitian as well as the tapa of Tonga, Uvea, or Samoa sold in Papeete under the Tahitian label, and which any foreigner is proud to exhibit in his apartment, somewhere in Europe, in the anonymity of a neighbourhood in France, Germany or elsewhere, to prove to whoever is willing to believe it that he’s

been to Tahiti. Tahiti is an exotic product made by the Western World for the consumption of their fellow-countrymen' (Raapoto 1988:3).

Yet, as I argue in chapters six and seven, the images conveyed by the term are also used strategically by local people involved in the tourist industry (see chapter five).

*Afa* or *Demi*, as a socio-economic group, are usually more educated and attain higher status than the rest of the local population (Pambrun 1997). Depending on the social context, they will either call themselves 'Polynesian/*Ma'ohi*/Tahitian', French, or *afa*/*Demi* (Kuwahara 2005). Some of my *afa* informants have created an identity in Europe as pure *Ma'ohi*/Polynesian, and this fact is only known by close friends and locally. This enables them, to an extent, to use the images of Tahiti to achieve a particular level of authenticity to their Euro-American partners and customers. This claim to authenticity is sometimes crucial to attain a status within the competitive global tattooing communities (see chapters five and eight). However, the idea of 'Tahiti' is often the only cultural reference available in the encounter between a European and a *Ma'ohi* person. There are many examples of *Ma'ohi* tattoo artists who have settled and opened a business in Europe and who have used the name as a commercial tactic. Chime calls himself a Marquesan or a *Ma'ohi* but has spent most of his life on Moorea. Yet his tattoo shop on Ibiza and his website are called 'Tahiti Tattoo'. Vatea, who calls himself a *Ma'ohi* from Moorea, has a tattoo shop in Nice, in the South of France, named '*Tahiti Tatau*'. The fact is that most European people do not know where the Marquesas Islands or Moorea are and what it means to be from these places, but most of them will share the cultural, and to a point commodified, references that 'Tahiti' evokes. This seems to show that the strategic use of identity is a dialogical process. The results of which are often the product of compromises brought upon by the limited cultural references shared in the encounter. As Jenkins (1997) noted, identity is not an individualistic creation but a dialogical process involving both internal and external definitions being acted out in diverse socio-cultural contexts negotiated through each encounter. As I will show in chapters three, five and seven, the strategic use of the 'Tahitian' identity marker is only another example of this process.

Tattooing on Tahiti and Moorea is also strategically instrumental to the construction of *Ma'ohi* or Polynesian identity. As the Japanese anthropologist Makiko Kuwahara states:

‘Tahitian tattooing is in the process of transformation through dislocation of people, object, knowledge and practice from one place to another. The particularity of Tahitian-ness is constantly redefined through this interconnection of places’ (Kuwahara 2005:21).

These interconnections take form during visits and migration between French Polynesia and Europe, the rest of the Pacific area, and North America. Although the renewal of Ma’ohi tattooing in the 1980’s was strongly linked to ideas of a positioning, and re-valorising, of indigenous culture vis-à-vis French colonial culture (*ibid*), it is now used in multiple ways on the global stage. It serves, at the same time, to affirm a distinctive identity and to create a series of interconnections which in turn reinforce the particularity of the stated identity. These links can range from purely commercial to friendship and partnership. Yet, on another level, the designs used and referred to as Tahitian are themselves mainly from the Marquesas; where tattooing was the most elaborate and comprehensive in pre-contact Eastern Polynesia. This seems to show how objects such as tattoos are both used and constructed tactically by the protagonists of a cross-cultural encounter in the creation of identities.

### 1.7 Theoretical Framework

The process of tattooing, the action to deposit some form of coloration within the shallow layers of human skin, seems to have been present in most cultures in some form or other at some point in their history. The modification of the body is inherent to the human condition even if one only considers hairstyles. However, the permanent modification of the body is perceived as more potent because of the usually painful process it entails (Gans 2000, LeBreton 2002). From scarification to teeth filing, via ear stretching, the human body has often been used as a particular form of expression and technology. In that sense, a Foucauldian reading of the process of tattooing, in the case of this thesis at least, is almost unavoidable, and for good reasons.

For Foucault, the body is not conceived as something natural but rather as experienced through a series of mediations grounded in different social constructions. It is the site of struggles and discursive conflicts; the body is a battlefield as the 1970-80’s feminist’s idiom and Kruger’s art proclaimed (Kruger 1989). The body, in a Foucauldian analysis, is where power is both enacted and resisted at the same time. In this Foucault follows Nietzsche’s vision of the body as being ‘the inscribed surface of events (traced by language

and dissolved by ideas)' (Foucault 1977:148). The body is, therefore, perceived as being changed both by events and political decisions, and alongside the specific social and cultural contexts and specific concurrent historical periods. The body, because it is always, and only, constructed through series of discursive mediations, is always changing.

The body is disciplined and moulded by society through institutions such as education and health. Tattooing, in a way, can be seen as a re-appropriation of individuals' bodies through a permanent modification which might express a particular personal or marginal indexicality; a form of resistance. Yet, resistance here is to be understood in a Foucauldian way. In this form, resistance is an integral part of power; as diffused and decentred as power itself. Moreover, the form of resistance is always inter-related to the society in which it emanates; resistance does not escape existing systems of meaning (Rosenblatt 1997). This re-appropriation of one's body through body modifications was, and still is to an extent, particularly relevant to prison and criminal tattoos. The point remains that for the contemporary more mainstream tattooees, and for most around the world, tattoos have to do with identity first and foremost (Kuwahara 2005, DeMello 2000). Tattoos are used to create group identity and an individual's association with, or membership to, the said group. Yet, tattoos are also highly potent personal objects which encompass biographical and inspirational indexes (see chapter seven); or in other terms, tattoos take part in the formation of persons.

This thesis is often concerned with actions which can be perceived as cross-cultural exchanges. In the anthropological debate regarding these types of interactions, there have been a number of points discussed. Salhins (1985) argued that, in the Pacific, cross-cultural exchanges have a reciprocal transformative effect for all parties involved. Yet, Strathern (1990) criticised him for assuming that both parties involved in the exchange would perceive the encounter similarly as a historical event. Thomas (1991), in turn, argued that Strathern's (1988) reading of the Papuan distinction between what was perceived as a gift and what was perceived as a commodity was, to a great extent, a-historical and had the effect to essentialise such categories of objects and the nature of the exchange. While Strathern perceived a great disparity between Melanesian's concept of partible personhood and European's individual possessiveness, Thomas discussed the process of appropriation as one which both parties to the exchange are deeply and unavoidably involved in. In the context of this research, exchange is perceived as an act which involves both parties into a cross-cultural encounter

which is, at the same time, creating common ground and exposing important differences in expectations and conceptualisation of the nature of the exchange taking place.

Although, tattoos are a special type of objects, due to their inherently embodied nature, they can be analysed through the anthropological discourse regarding commodity and consumption in contemporary settings. Miller (1987) has shown that individuals transform mass produced objects into subjectively meaningful things. These objects, in turn, become constitutive of the individuals' perceived selves and become entwined in the social relationships of their owners. In this thesis, tattoos are treated as objects which are related directly to the biographies of their wearers. Moreover, tattoos acquire, and accumulate, further meanings to their wearers along the creation of their biographical narratives (see chapter seven). To this perspective, the work of Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) is highly relevant. They argued that things have their own biographies and move through different phases, changing status through series of movements between owners and, at times, across cultures.

Strathern (1990), and others, have argued against the reductionist theories of material things which conceived of objects as encompassing the social, economic, and political contexts from which they were produced. This perspective, which re-centres attention upon the objects themselves, is related to idea of agency. Gell (1998) conceptualised objects as agents which, like people, have the capacity to affect, and act upon, the world and upon patients; the affected parties. Conceptualised in such way, Gell's reading of objects by-pass the Western distinction of person and object and presents a form of agency which does not automatically involve a directed will or intent to affect. Moreover, indexes are created by agents to convey their agentive agendas. Therefore, objects can be seen as material extensions of their producers and/or owners. In the case of tattoos, as I will discuss in this thesis, they are both communicating an indexicality related to their wearers and, at the same time, communicating the potency of the agency of their producers; the tattoo artists who created them. This concept bears some relation to Strathern's (1988) concept of 'partible persons' and to Wagner's (1991) 'fractal personhood' one, which both present the possibility that objects can be perceived as forms of extended personhood. Similarly, Pietz's (1985) reading of the idea of the fetish sees such objects as the objectification of an event through which they were themselves produced; bringing together different people, objects and deities.

Another of Gell's arguments is widely used in this thesis. I will throughout refer to the concept of 'Gellian trap', which is related to Gell's discussion of art as technology (1992) and also includes his reading of pre-contact Polynesian tattooing practices (Gell 1993). Artworks, according to Gell, have the capacity to enchant the people faced by them. Through their technical virtuosity, expressed by the production of particular Melanesian canoe prows, a group could entice *kula* exchange partners to give up some of their most prized objects with more value than they would otherwise have agreed. Similarly, Marquesan and Maori tattoos were intended to disorient the enemies they faced during warfare. The way I use the concept of 'Gellian trap' is to describe how tattoos seem, at times, to entice others to engage with their wearers, but also with their producers. This is because tattoo artists rely on their past work to attract prospective tattooees to have tattoos by them (see chapters four and eight).

Another aspect of the contemporary tattooing practice which needs to be addressed is the analytical value of looking at this act as a rite of passage and ritual. Turner (1969) explains how, in many different cultural contexts, it is during the liminal stage of rituals, such as rites of passage, that particular social groupings take form. These social groups, or *communitas* as Turner (ibid) named them, are created when individuals have the common experience of going through some form of a ritualistic ambiguous liminal state for a period of time. Usually, rites of passage have three different stages, as Van Gennep (1960) explained. These three stages are separation, liminality, and re-incorporation. During the liminal stage of these rituals, the individuals involved are neither what they were but yet to become what they will be. This ambiguity of being at the threshold, in the liminal state of being, from the Latin word *limen* meaning threshold (Turner 1969), is different from everyday life. It is a form of anti-thesis to the social structure because hierarchical and social statuses are void at that stage. For Turner (ibid), social life is created through a dialectical process between the different experiences of high and low, structure and anti-structure, everyday life and liminal states of being. Turner's (ibid) *communitas* take form through the shared empathic feelings of camaraderie, homogeneity, kinship, and equality within the group. Examples of *communitas* can be found in the different world religions and some social sub-cultures, which range from Ghandi's *harijans* to the 1960's hippie movement (Turner ibid). In chapter six of this thesis, I discuss the views that some of my informants have of the global tattoo community which could display aspects of Turner's *communitas*. However, as I will show, the global tattoo community is very hierarchical and structured rather than egalitarian and open.

In this thesis, I have not looked at the tattooing process as a ritual and a rite of passage per se. Although the process shows similarities with Van Gennep's (1960) three stages rites of passage, it is a process in which most people, in the contemporary Euro-American context, engage with willingly and by choice rather than an obligatory event to which individuals have to undergo. In that sense, tattooing today, in the locations studied in this thesis, are liminoid rather than liminal events. For Turner (1974), liminoid events are ones in which the partaking is optional; compared to liminal events which are culturally mandatory. Liminoid rituals are found in the West and have, Turner (ibid) argues, similar aspects to liminal ones yet usually do not involve some personal crisis resolution. Liminoid activities are always part of play (Turner ibid), and tattooing could easily be classified as such. Yet, tattooing seems often to be more than just about play. For example, as I will discuss throughout this thesis, tattoos are involved in group and individual processes of identity creation and maintenance (see chapters three, four, five, seven and eight), and as embodied memorial objects acting as a link between the living and the dead (see chapter seven) which would relate to their functionality dealing with life crises and their resolutions. Furthermore, the process of tattooing may be optional in contemporary Euro-America, but it can be argued that it is not optional for membership of specific groups which either see tattoos as an unavoidable and mandatory identity marker, as in the examples of biker gangs and other type of gangs, or because the group is centred around the process of tattooing and the appreciation of tattoos, like the neo-tribal tattoo networks discussed earlier in this chapter for example (see also chapter eight). In all these cases, tattoos are mandatory and sometimes may be a pre-requisite for a confirmed acceptance within these social groups to be achieved. Tattoos do involve a liminal stage undeniably, as the process of tattooing itself is one of becoming. Tattoos and their acquisition process, and stages, seems to be located between the liminal and the liminoid types of events. This is because tattooing, and tattoos, are, for the people who are involved in one way or another in the global tattoo community, more than just play and more somewhat existential in nature while remaining part of a sort of post-modern optional endeavour linked to individualistic identity production and lifestyle choices. Therefore, in this thesis the focus will be on the exchange relationships which occur during the tattooing process and not on an analysis of the experience as a ritual in the strict sense of the term.

In chapter seven, I discuss how tattoos and the motivation to acquire them are often related to the creation of memories and are used as forms of embodied memorials. I

differentiate between visitors to French Polynesia who come on a visit and decide to acquire a tattoo there as a memory of their usually short stay, and the visitors who come there specifically to be tattooed and experience their tattoo artists' local socio-cultural context for a few weeks. One I call the opportunists while the other is coined the enthusiasts. The question I ask is what are the different types of memories which are created by these individuals? One way to answer this question could be to divide memories, for example, between *mneme* and *memoria* types (Kuchler 2002). The difference between these two types of memories resides in the former being recalled almost involuntarily, in contrast to the latter which is remembered due to an ability to be recalled on demand often through its association with a material object. Therefore, it could be claimed that *memoria* objects are those which have the ability to elicit the recall of a specific memory. Their main memory which we have assigned to them is memorial through direct association of indexicality. The *mnemic* ones are those objects which will elicit memories often surprising the individual. The tattoos I discuss in this thesis are mostly *memoria* objects as they were produced with the function to remind its wearer of a specific person/s, period in time, or location to name but a few. However, as I will discuss in chapter seven, the personal indexicalities assigned to their tattoos by tattooees change with time and assume their own biographies as objects and inherently related to their owners' own biographical narratives. Through these changes, tattoos can sometimes become *mnemic* objects eliciting surprising memories.

Another example of objects which are involved in the creation and use of memory are *malanggan*. *Malanggan* are objects produced in Papua New Guinea and are used in funerary rites. Each represents an individual who died, but itself as an object, *malanggan* have a finite lifespan and will die after being left in the forest, or in some cases taken to Western institutions by ethnographic collectors and museum curators. The point is that for the people who produce these objects, remembering can only take place in close conjunction with the act of forgetting and within the context of absence (Kuchler 2002). Tattoos could, to a point, be analysed as somewhat the opposite to *malanggan* as it is intended for tattoos to become inalienable embodied objects which will permanently, or at least for the life of the tattooee, remind them of the specific indexicality they conferred to it. At the same time, the tattoos will often remind their wearers of the process of acquiring them as well as other meanings they will accumulate through time (see chapter seven).

Furthermore, the reactions that tattoos elicit in non-tattooed individuals, in Europe and North America, are varied and multi-dimensional. The associations made by non-tattooed individuals regarding tattoos, as well as about their producers and their wearers, are rooted in particular cultural perceptions of tattooing and the personal feelings they harbour towards the practice. Therefore, reactions can range from interest and curiosity to disgust and disapproval. The interesting point is that these assertions are not necessarily based on the personality or general appearance of the wearer, although these have their own cultural associations, but, in a sense, mainly based on the indexical agency of the tattoos displayed. To take for example the tattoo of a skull which places the individual who sees the tattoo automatically in a series of symbolic assertions but beyond what is implied about the wearer, the skull will symbolically represent death and remind the on-lookers of their own ephemeral existence and unavoidable mortality; it acts as a form of *memento mori*. It could be argued that this index could, to an extent, negatively taint the social situation and interactions involving the tattooed individual. In some other contexts, it may be that the skull gives the tattooee some form of advantage. However, it should also be pointed out that the reasons for an individual to have a skull tattooed on their body can be diverse and multi-dimensional. Nevertheless, the agency of the tattoo becomes independent from its wearer as it engages with the collective symbolic representations and goes beyond the purely personal objectifications. This is because:

‘The cultural environment through which the society is created is understood as a continual self-referential and complex whole,...[this perspective] emphasizes the multivalent character of symbol...this multivalency is not an element of difference, but something which binds culture together as a kind of fabric, establishing connections which reinforce pervasive cultural images ...’ (Miller 1987:59-60).

This could account for some of the popularity of the neo-tribal and neo-traditional styles in Euro-America since the late 1980’s, as their inherent abstract geometrical forms can be less easily (mis)read by the wider world than more figurative styles; like skulls for example (see chapter eight). In a way, the use of these styles was an attempt to shift, and sometimes to sever, the indexes associated with, and implied by, the sets of symbols mainly used, prior to the renewal, by under classes. By introducing these new aesthetic forms, these innovative tattoo artists were reaching for a source of more neutral indexical register which could be more adaptable to the new networks that were being created. However, these innovations were, as Gell points out regarding all artistic evolutions, ‘constrained within strict parameters of stylistic coherence’ (Gell 1998:158). This is to the extent that the designs were

not individualistic creations of Euro-American artists but, at the beginning at least, the recycling of collective creations both distant in space and time from their new creators and wearers. In other words, these designs were considered part of a sort of tattoo heritage of humankind; they were not new and unrelated to the 'parameters of stylistic coherence'. This implies a high degree of social efficacy regarding their original creators' agency, who after having themselves disappeared, still entice others to engage with them in a form of exchange beyond the grave. It could also express a kind of inalienable quality of the designs being tattooed from ideas of their original contexts. As Weiner argues 'the primary value of inalienability...is expressed through the power these objects have to define who one is in an historical sense. The object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into present' (Weiner 1985:210). In a way, these reconstructions of the past, created through contemporary perceptions of it, have a particular potency towards the fame of particular networks. These historical links are used and fostered, for example, by most Polynesian tattoo networks (see chapter five), and also by some European tattoo networks linked to neo-pagan groups.

In the 1970's, on the West coast of the United States of America, a network took form. Some people in this network referred to themselves as 'Modern Primitives'. A book of the same name was published in 1989. This network was involved in taking body modifications from around the world and recreating them within a different socio-cultural context (see chapter eight). The performances of body modifications, at events such as early forms of tattoo conventions, by 'modern primitives' were inherent to the development of practice such as piercing which are now somewhat mainstream in Europe and North America. The appropriation of tattoo designs from different cultural settings also developed through this network to become what is referred to now as the neo-tribal style which has influenced not only European and North American but also Polynesian tattoo artists (see chapters three, four and eight). Issues of appropriation and idealisation of euro-centric dichotomies, such as for example 'modern' and 'primitive', have been discussed by academics. Klesse (2000), for example, has argued that 'modern primitives' perpetuate classic primitivist assumptions and are a legacy of colonialism in late imperial culture (Klesse 2000). Furthermore, tattoos cannot escape commodification because they can be acquired with money and can only be understood 'in the context of an increasingly trendy aestheticization and commodification of ethnic difference' (Klesse 2000:21). Similarly, Turner (2000) argues that contemporary Western tattooing generates cold relationships while traditional tattooing forges hot

relationships between the protagonists involved. Although, there are some valid points in Klesse's (2000) analysis, it disregards the diversity of the type of people involved in these networks, their widely ranging socio-cultural personal backgrounds, and ends up being a rather reductionist perspective of the individuals who create and maintain these networks. In this thesis, I discuss the ways in which the practices that are perceived by some as authentic traditional tattooing are actually engaged in the same process of re-construction and re-interpretation of idealised versions of the past; images which are often themselves a legacy of colonialism. As I discuss in chapters five and eight, the stereotypical Eurocentric perception of Polynesian tattooing is sometimes co-created and used as a form of authenticity by local Ma'ohi tattoo artists. My main point here is that there seems to be a move away from the objectification of one group or another and from the claims of authenticity and inauthenticity, which prevails in some of the academic writing concerning contemporary tattooing practices and the increased adoption of these form of symbolic expressions. As Phillips and Steiner (1999) have suggested, authenticity may rather reside 'in the very process of collection, which inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associated with the object in both individual and collective memories' (Phillips and Steiner 1999:19). Such a conceptualisation of authenticity opens up the possibility of an analysis which takes into account the specific context and personal narrative attached to a tattoo. Moreover, it brings a somewhat more interesting question regarding authenticity which is: who is asking? In chapter five, I discuss how concepts such as authenticity have been used in the realm of cultural politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

LeBreton (2002) looked at two aspects of the tattoo community in France in his book '*Signes D'Identite*' (*ibid*). He explains that Western society has transformed the body, through processes such as individualism for example, from a given and a form of destiny, to a body which is manipulated by their owners in the creation of multi-dimensional ever changing identities (*ibid*). Human beings, in this context, LeBreton (*ibid*) argues,

'become craftsmen of the self, *bricoleurs* of their own physical appearance, and inventor of the forms which bring them to being into this world. The body is inscribed, therefore, in an anthropological structure which conceptualises the body as being the human condition itself' (LeBreton 2002:216).

The change is therefore from an imposed identity enforced through the body in a constant process of identity production which is malleable and controlled by the individual. There is a sense that this process is not only restricted to Western individuals. I argue that it was

through tattoos and the renewed identity as *Ma'ohi*, which was originally associated with the reintroduction of traditional tattoo designs (see chapters three, four and five), that local people changed the local cultural and political landscape. Therefore, the main motivation for the local people who engage with the renewal of tattooing in French Polynesia is now related to issues of identity (Kuwahara 2005), rather than to the traditional meaning of wrapping and protecting individuals from *mana* contamination, as Gell (1993) presented (see chapter three). Yet, such an analytical perspective, which takes the body as the human condition itself, does lead, to a point, to what Benson (2000) called 'corporeal absolutism' (*ibid*). This is when people involved in body modification practices display a tendency to perceive their personal experiences solely valuable, and imbued with some form of inner truth and authenticity, if experienced through their bodies. At the same time, the importance of the body cannot be understated and most of us to apprehend the world partly through our bodies being in the world. This brings into the fore the inescapable fact that tattooing, and other body modifications, are inherently painful practices. As Gans (2000) points out: 'body modification initiates its adepts into a cruel ritual system incommensurable with mainstream religious practice' (Gans 2000:164). In that sense, these painful practices become indexes of the capacity of individuals to suffer (*ibid*) (see chapter seven).

The body is therefore involved in a series of struggles between social structures and the individual for its control while being a potent form of expression of symbolic creation of personal and group identities. As Sullivan (2001) concludes:

'bodily inscription is not so much a writing with or on the body (both of which assume a body-subject that pre-exists writing), but rather it is an infinite (re)-writing and (re)-reading of the body-subject in and through its relations with carnal sensuality of the Other and the world, and with culturally and historically specific social fictions' (Sullivan 2001:8).

This conceptualisation of the body and of tattoos does imply that instead of being perceived as static objects, tattoos evolve and acquire their own biographies inherently linked to their wearers (see chapter seven). Finally, part of this thesis' argument is that tattoo artists acquire and maintain their status within the global tattoo community in the similar way to *kula* exchange partner gain and accumulate '*butu*' as Munn presents in her study (1986). My point is not to equate one group to another, or to collapse culturally specific concepts, but rather to use some of similarities heuristically to show some commonalities of the processes at play in these different locations and also for analytical purpose.

## 1.8 Thesis Outline

In the following chapter, I discuss some of the methodological issues which arose regarding this thesis and the fieldwork period from which it took form. The main two are the multi-sited nature of the field and the diversity of my informants' socio-cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, I also look at my personal involvement in the global tattoo community prior to carrying out anthropological fieldwork within it, and argue that the global tattoo community is a good example of new types of networks which take form on both the global and local level and which involve a diversity of participants, and that my own personal experience has enabled me to follow some of my informants' careers over the last twenty years or so. Moreover, I discuss how both a reflexive positioning regarding the data collected, informed by my personal experience rather than about it, and an awareness of the need for an internal distance created to produce an anthropologically relevant analysis, as Gupta & Ferguson suggested (1997), have been taken into account in the production of this thesis. I also show how important to this research was embodied knowledge gained through the process of apprenticeship as a tattoo artist.

In the third chapter, I focus on conventions taking place in Europe; on their ethos and how they have changed over the last thirty years. I also discuss the concept of a global tattoo community and how there seems to be contradictory discourses held about it by some of its participants. On the one hand some seem to regard the tattoo community as a benevolent and egalitarian *communitas*, while on the other hand others of my informants perceive it as a competitive and hierarchical commercial entity. The chapter starts with comments of some of my informants regarding this perceived dichotomy, and I will argue that rather than a dichotomised and contradictory discourse, most of my informants hold both these views concurrently and in a non-contradictory fashion. I will then present ethnographic material describing the London and Derby tattoo conventions, and look at the nature of such events, assessing the usefulness of describing them either as modern day carnivals or as tournaments of value. I also review the way these events are reported in the tattoo media, as all the magazines discussed dedicate over half of each issue to the coverage of conventions. This shows how different conventions are perceived and the changing emphasis of these events over the last twenty years or so. Overall, in this chapter, I intend to show the importance of tattoo conventions to the creation and maintenance of the concept of the global tattoo community.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss the fact that many of my informants' tattoos are memorials to loved and/or respected late relations both real or imaginary, and many are also memorials to the living, for example to newborn babies and old aged family members. Other tattoos are also memorials regarding either a particular location or an activity their wearers were involved in. Using French Polynesia as an example, I present two types of memorial tattoos, the first being commemorative tattoos and the second are embodied. I explain how some tourists decide to acquire a tattoo during a stopover in French Polynesia to commemorate their stay, while other tourists come specifically to this location to engage with a Polynesian tattoo artist and with the local culture. This latter group of individuals have embodied memories of this experience; in other words, the meaning of their tattoos is created through the experience of gaining them, in contrast to commemorative ones when the meaning is already assigned by the prospective tattooee. In this chapter, I discuss the indexicality individuals attach to these embodied inscriptions, and also argue that tattoos have biographies of their own; that they can therefore be analysed as diachronic rather than synchronic entities. Moreover, there is a recurrent theme in some of my informants' discourse regarding ideas of sacrifice and enlightenment which are linked to their engagement with the pain involved in the acquisition of their tattoos. The tattooing practice, through its inescapable relationship with pain, also becomes a contemporary location for perceived personal metamorphosis. In that context, I look at the importance of the social role of tattoo artists in the lives of the people they tattoo. Finally, I argue that through memories, tattooees create particular types of relationships. These involve interwoven links between people, places, ideas, and moments in time, to name but a few. This is reminiscent of the idea of tattoos as fetish which I developed in chapter three.

In the fifth chapter, I look at the debate regarding ideas of appropriation of tattoos and their commoditisation. I discuss the tattooing of a mainstream celebrity by a Maori tattoo artist and the effect this act has on his own fame at tattoo conventions in Europe. This also raises issues regarding appropriation and the way this concept is used by different protagonists in the context of cross-cultural exchanges. Related to this, I look at the way ideas of 'primitivism' have been used within the body-modification community and how these have been questioned by some academics. I discuss the rise of a new style of tattoos which took its main inspiration from tattoo designs from 'traditional' settings; what is referred to as the neo-tribal style. Finally, I look at the relationship between tattoos and commodity, and

conclude that tattoos are ambiguous material objects which display some characteristics of commodities but are inherently not so. What seems therefore to be commoditised is the skill of the tattoo artists rather than their creations and end products. Therefore, it is the type of exchange which is important to the tattoo artists and the commodification process is, at times, a welcome one, as it does not automatically involve some form of reciprocity.

In the sixth chapter, I look at the role of the process of tattooing in Eastern Polynesia prior to the European contact, and its changes due to colonisation and conversion. The main shift seems to be from a technology to protect from a spiritual energy called *mana* and part of a structure of *tapu* restrictions, to a way to re-valorise and re-creating Polynesian identity and cultural markers. I also discuss the way in which the concept of the ancestral deity named '*tiki*' is being used in my informants' discourses, while being omnipresent in the local cultural landscape. The iconic image of *tiki* is used in the local artistic creation produced for both Polynesians and tourists; including those who acquire tattoos. However, different *tiki* have also a perceived effect on the lives of local people. This leads to a discussion regarding the status of tattoos of *tiki* and other mythological entities. Although local Christian groups perceive these as idols, there is a sense that they may be more akin to the idea of Pietz's (1985) fetish.

In the seventh chapter, I present the way the renewal of the tattooing practice, on the islands of Tahiti and Moorea, has enabled some local artists to acquire fame and status in the global tattoo community. I also look at the way different tattoo festivals and conventions held in French Polynesia, since 2000, have been instrumental in that process. I discuss the changes of the ethos, of these tattoo festivals and conventions, from non-competitive and non-commercial events to ones which are very much akin to European tattoo conventions. I argue that such personal reputation building processes are reminiscent of the *kula* ring exchange system and to the concept of *butu*; using these comparisons heuristically. I show how the concept of objectification and sublation are crucial to this process. Overall, in this chapter, I intend to present how the fame and status of local Polynesian tattoo artists is created and maintained through a series of movements and exchange relationships. Furthermore, I argue that, in this process, protagonists become reciprocal agents of each other's value definition.

In the eighth chapter, I discuss four publications relating to the tattooing renewal in French Polynesia. The first one is '*Tataou: Tatouage Polynésien*' (1992) which was published

locally and is perceived as the first expression of the cultural re-evaluation of the place of tattooing. The second one is 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) which was published internationally and is a collaboration between an Italian fashion photographer and the local elite of the tattoo renewal in French Polynesia. The third publication which I review in this chapter is an adaptation of an anthropological doctoral thesis of tattooing in the Marquesas Islands, titled '*Te Patu Tiki*' (1998). The fourth one is a booklet edited by the local tattoo community. Through these publications, I chart the way key local actors have been involved in the revalorisation and reintroduction of the practice in French Polynesia, but also in the reification of an exotic Western vision of Polynesian culture and bodies: a process related to reactive objectification (Thomas 1997). I also discuss the way these have been important in the creation of an authenticity for the contemporary practice which is paradoxically a re-interpretation of a lost custom.

In the ninth chapter, I look at the role played by tattoo museums; focusing mainly on 'The *Moko* Museum'; based in Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. This space is not an official museum. Its director is a local tattoo artist whose tattoo shop is adjacent to it. I discuss the way these museums are involved in a play between their roles in the creation of group identity and ideas of community and also how they become individual status symbols involved in the creation of global fame and status of some individuals. I look at the different exhibits in the *Moko* museum and argue that some are used in a creative strategy which is intended to act in a similar way to tattoos in European and North American tattoo conventions (see chapter three). Furthermore, I discuss the way the exhibits are presented and how a Maori wood carver's project at the museum was the focus of tensions and of acts of appropriation. I also discuss the way such entities as tattoo museums are related to Victorian private collections as well as sharing a similar educational agenda. They are important in the creation, maintenance, and re-invention of the global tattoo community. They enable key characters to present their visions of the place of tattooing in mainstream society and put forward social, cultural, and historical narratives.

In the final chapter, I show how each aspect discussed in each chapter of this thesis, reveals the diverse ways in which the global tattoo community is created and maintained by the individuals who partake in it. It is through the movements between Polynesia and Europe, for example, that tattoo artists develop their fame in the global tattoo community and establish a place within its hierarchy. Furthermore, the movements between Europe and

Polynesia can produce some form of cultural capital for the individuals who come to visit these islands and engage with the local tattoo practice. It is through the creation of exchange relationships spread on a global scale that individuals are able to give form to the community and through the participation to regular events such as tattoo conventions and festivals. At the same time, there are a series of tensions created through these cross-cultural exchanges which revolve, partly, around issues of appropriation and authenticity and are indicative of the tensions which exists along these series of international networks. Finally, I conclude that it is nonetheless through these series of transactional processes that individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds are able to create and maintain the global tattoo community.

## Chapter Two: Methodology.

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to discuss some of the methodological issues which are related to the diversity of my informants' socio-cultural backgrounds and the multi-sited nature of the field. Some of this methodological discussion also looks at my personal involvement with the global tattoo community prior to my anthropological fieldwork for this thesis. My main point is that, in a sense, to say that there are no bounded cultural groups and mono-dimensional, singular, societies is a given (Marcus 1995, Clifford 1997). Every fieldsite is, in some way, multi-sited. The main point is, therefore, the way in which the researcher constructs his/her own field (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). My field for this thesis has been spread over different geographical areas as far apart as Polynesia and Europe. Yet many of the same informants have been present in these different locations. The two main locations have been tattoo shops and tattoo conventions and festivals. Most of the data was collected through informal interviews and through observations. Some of these observations have become embodied, as part of my fieldwork was my apprenticeship as a tattoo artist; a process which many of my informants insisted I engage in. Although an insider, through my involvement in the tattoo community in both Polynesia and Europe since the late 1980's, I believe that I have been able to create the distance judged necessary for an objective research collection and analysis by creating distance within my inner analytical positioning which Gupta and Ferguson (*ibid*) advocate.

The thesis is also informed by my involvement in French Polynesia at the early stage of the tattooing renewal, and although these experiences cannot be taken in the same manner as the ethnographic data collected later, it nonetheless enabled me to personally appreciate the fast moving changes, both locally and globally, and some of my informants to locate me within their biographical narratives. The field studied was more complicated to apprehend than a relatively bounded, geographically and culturally, community. Each tattoo shop is its own small community based on the local level but also related to other tattoo shops and particular tattoo artists, mostly on a national level, but also very often internationally. This research is not meant to be either an ethnography of a specific tattoo shop, tattoo artist, or of their local and national networks. The main subject of inquiry of this research has rather been focused on the movements which create and produce a bounded community for some individuals which is neither based on geographical locations nor on cultural similarities, but through a shared professional occupation. These movements are founded on a series of

exchange relationships which often starts during events such as international tattoo conventions and festivals (see chapter four and six).

## 2.2 Multi-Sited Nature of the Field

My approach has some affinities with what Marcus (1995) referred to as multi-sited ethnography (*ibid*). However, it also differs in some parts with some of its directions. Marcus' (*ibid*) thesis has been that new forms of ethnographies bring a number of changes to the way anthropology could be produced. These ensuing new methodological perspectives are testing the limits of ethnography, attenuating the power of fieldwork, losing the perspective of the subaltern, and positioning the reflexive persona of the ethnographer as a 'circumstantial activist' (*ibid*). The main aspects of interest for my research are the reflexive positioning, the discontinuous and multi-sited nature of the field, and, to a point, the loss of the subaltern's perspective. However, this thesis is not multi-disciplinary and does not challenge anthropological research methods. After all, the emergence of somewhat more experimental and innovative ways to conceptualise the field, are not antithetical of more bounded traditional ethnographies. They are another possible vantage point and a way to deal with social networks which increasingly take form in global, and often virtual, realms. Furthermore, my research also involves the act of exchange that the tattooing practice inherently is together with its product, a tattoo. Therefore, tattoos as objects are part of the subjects of my study, however, these objects are slightly different to the usual ones produced by human as far as they are obligatorily embodied and the product of two, or more, individuals' creativity and indexical expression, communicating on both personal and social levels, while remaining framed within specific socio-historical contexts. In a sense, this thesis is part of what Latour (1993) called 'symmetrical anthropology' when the research field is apprehended in a similar fashion irrespective of the differences inherent to diverse contexts such as the ethnography of an island community, a specific tattoo shop, or a laboratory, present. The global tattoo community is a series of networks of actors, within which tattoos have some form of agency. However, I would not go as far as imputing direct and independent agency to these objects. Instead, the tattoo's agency resides firmly in the distributed agency of its producer and wearer. This relates directly to Gell (1998) and Strathern (1988) and their concepts of distributed agency and personhood. Therefore, my research methods and focus have always been on the tattoo artists and on their exchange

relationships with each other and with their tattooees, and less on the tattoo as an isolated object.

### 2.3 Personal Positioning

There is no doubt that my choice of subject of study for this doctoral thesis has been greatly influenced and informed by my own biographical journey. Since childhood, I have always been fascinated by tattoos. My earliest memories are of two family friends. One had a Capricorn zodiac sign tattooed on his left arm. He was quite ashamed of it, mainly because his own sign was Sagittarius. The other had acquired his tattoo after a year-long travelling journey through Central and South America. He chose a Mayan design to be tattooed on his right arm in a Parisian tattoo shop. As a teenager, I had a poster on my bedroom wall with a cartoon which depicted a dragon tattoo which was partly becoming real and biting its own wearer and drawing blood. However, I never made any enquiries to have a tattoo myself. In 1988 I relocated, with my parents, to the island of Moorea in French Polynesia. There, aged twenty, I became a close friend of Chime and other Ma'ohi individuals involved in the local tattooing and cultural renewal movements. Chime, at that time, was not a globally renowned tattoo artist but was nonetheless a reputed local agent. I received three tattoos from Chime during my first year long stay on Moorea. All three were performed by hand with sewing needles clustered together by threads and dipped in black China ink. After leaving French Polynesia, and settling in Britain, I did not acquire any more tattoos for eleven years and nor did I engage with the tattoo community. I regularly visited Moorea but did not meet Chime again until 1999, I did although hear from common acquaintances that he was tattooing in Europe and had a tattoo shop in one of the Balearic Islands.

My renewed engagement with tattooing and the global tattoo community happened in Durban, South Africa, while I was conducting six months ethnographic research as part of my undergraduate degree at Brunel University; Uxbridge Middlesex UK. I became friends with a South African tattoo artist and embarked on a series of tattooing sessions which resulted in seven new tattoos. It is only on my next visit to Moorea, less than three months after my return to London, that I finally renewed my friendship with Chime. He had returned to Moorea and planned to settle there once more, and had become involved in the organisation of the forthcoming Taputapuatea tattoo festival, held on the island of Raiatea (French Polynesia) in the spring of 2000. My next visit to Moorea, and meeting with Chime, was

when I attended the Taputapuatea tattoo festival itself. This event was the first time I became truly aware of the global tattoo community. I finished my undergraduate studies back in the UK and decided to further investigate the global tattoo community as well as spending a lengthy amount of time on Moorea; learning how to tattoo under the tutelage of Chime and Vatea. It was after eighteen months that I decided to conduct further anthropological study when an opportunity presented itself to carry my doctoral research under the supervision of Prof. Nicholas Thomas, and it is this process which led to the production of this ethnographic study and doctoral thesis.

This means that my position as an ethnographer, the nature of some of my data, and my personal standpoint are multi-dimensional, complex and raise some problematic issues. Some of what I present in this thesis is experiential in nature rather than methodologically driven. This is especially true regarding my contact with Chime and other cultural agents on Moorea in the late 1980's. However, when I became involved again with him and the global tattoo community, through my attendance at the Taputapuatea tattoo festival, I was finishing my degree and had been involved in two six months long research projects, including one in Durban, South Africa, working with Zulu ethno-medical practitioners as part of my course of study. I therefore understood my contacts with the tattoo world as participant observation because I was fully aware that I may, at some point in the future, carry out an anthropological study of this milieu. Therefore, although not part of a research structure, this data is not purely experiential but collected in an ethnographic manner. The final type of data which is presented was collected during a year-long fieldwork which took place in New Zealand/Aotearoa, Moorea, and England from August 2003 to September 2004. However, some data also came at later dates, during the writing-up period. These are either media publications or events, such as some conventions. Thus, although the fieldwork per se lasted just over a year, I have been collecting data since 1999 and been in contact with my field since 1988.

## 2.4 Participant Observation

Anthropological fieldwork and participant observation are more than mere methods to gather data and more of a professional identity marker grounded in the total embodied experience of the researcher. Fieldwork itself has, 'a deep metaphysical significance' (Lewis 1996:1). Going into the field to do participant observation is to anthropology 'what the blood of the martyrs is to the church' (Malinowski cited in Lewis 1996:1). 'Fieldwork thus is our utopia, our millennial dream' (Lewis 1996:1). It is somewhat surprising that the language to describe a mere research method is so emotive and dramatic. This could allude to the intense personal relationship between anthropological researchers and their objects/subjects of study. Therefore, an extended period of participant observation in a chosen field is a crucial defining marker of what makes a 'real' anthropologist (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Anthropology has always defined itself through its methodology, mainly pioneered by Malinowski (1922) and which demands of the researcher that they go for an extended period to an exotic faraway place, learn the local language, engage with local customs, come back to academia and produce an ethnographic monograph. This defining process has, however, given rise to a number of archetypes which still today seems to have some value within the hierarchical structure of the discipline of anthropology. The most salient of these archetypes include 'the fieldworker', 'the field', 'the Other', and 'home'. Traditionally, 'the field' has been away from 'home'. This distinction is important because the result of participant observation is an ethnographic monograph which is written away from 'the field', at 'home'. This movement between locations is integral to participant observation because of what is commonly referred to as culture shock; a position where the researcher is able to grasp clearly the different socio-cultural contexts. However, the distance between 'home' and 'the field' seems to have been predominantly understood to be a physical distance. In a sense, anthropology assumed a 'role of provider of cultural difference at a distance' (Fabian 1983:146). This, in turn, has led to a hierarchy of purity of field sites (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Therefore, the further away from 'home', the more 'fieldlike' a field location will be perceived within anthropology. Considering that the 'home' of most anthropologists has been, up to now, academic institutions in the first world, the furthest away has been the exotic and the strange (*ibid*). Similarly, the archetype of the fieldworker has remained, to a great extent, the Malinowskian one; lone, white, middle class male individual (*ibid*). The archetype of the 'Other', therefore, is in opposition to the 'fieldworker'. Such archetypes influence the perceived purity of the 'field', 'fieldworker' and 'Other'. It is the case that the choice of 'field' and of 'Other' is very important to one's career development; 'on such points are careers made and broken' (Gupta

& Ferguson 1997:27). The perception is still that the closer a fieldworker is to the archetypes of the 'Other' and of the 'field', the less his/her produced data will be considered as ethnographically valuable. This is because 'the distance between observer and observed is not considered sufficiently wide to generate those sparks of intercultural inspiration so essential to the anthropological imagination' (Lewis 1996:3).

## 2.5 Internal Analytical Distance

The other danger which ethnographic fieldworkers need to be aware of is going native. Even if s/he starts with the necessary distance required between 'field' and 'home', the fieldworker may participate too fully and therefore compromise his/her ability to observe from a critically analytical stands. However, this problem has been put in sharp focus with an increase of 'native' ethnographers doing research at home and by first world ethnographers focusing their attention on sub-cultures and networks within their own national borders. It seems natural that the anthropological archetypes are being regularly challenged by the changing multi-dimensional identities of the fieldworkers and the nature of the new conceptualisations of the fields which are being studied. Processes such as globalisation and the increased availability of new media, such as the internet, have enabled new types of relationships and networks. The global tattoo community is one of these interwoven series of networks which global nature has been achieved through a series of movements between geographical locations and alliances forged through the establishment of exchange relationships between individuals from a wide range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The question seems to be, therefore, whether anthropology can adapt to the emergence of new ways for human beings to relate to each other and exchange. These will almost always challenge concepts of cultures as bounded entities existing in remote places and only studied at the local level. What seems at stake here is the ability for anthropological research to successfully analytically study the relationship between the local and the global.

The global tattoo community is, in a sense, an apt group to study as the relationship from local to global is clear and, to a point, codified. The proposition to study the production of such a series of networks in different cultural contexts and their varied producers is not entirely foreign to the discipline of anthropology and its main method. There is a point when the discipline will have to transcend the paradox of the virtual anthropologist. This is when the native ethnographer's position becomes one of an untenable hybrid because their identity

challenges the subject/object distinction on which ethnographies are traditionally built (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). The virtual anthropologist, first described by Weston (*ibid*), 'must always be the one who lacks an authentic Other – unless [s/he] speaks as an authentic Other, in which case [s/he] ceases to be an authentic anthropologist' (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:33). To a point my position was of a native researcher, yet my involvement within the global tattoo community increased as I was conducting fieldwork within it. To a great extent, I was not integrated within the global tattoo community as I came to study it. On the contrary, the process of my integration was an integral part of the field experience. In a way, it was a dialogical relationship between my prior involvement and my present position as an anthropological researcher which made possible the particular perspective from which this thesis is written.

## 2.6 Dialogical Relationships

There is a sense that any ethnographers and social researchers working on the totality or particular networks of the global tattoo community becomes an active producer of the concept of community, the perceptions it has of itself, and influences the inner debates which take place at different levels of these groups. Many of the actors of these networks have had some form of higher education in either art or humanities and social sciences. This leads to any form of research in the tattoo community to be dialogical in some form; a dialogue between the researcher and his/her subjects of study. In this, I do not only include a process of interaction between a researcher and his/her informants, but also when a publication becomes the subject of discussion within the tattoo community itself. Some of these publications are read by non-tattoo related people and, as I will show in chapters five and eight, their effect can change, and at times reify, the perceptions of tattooing widely. In the case of my research, I have shared most of my analysis with my informants and have engaged in multiple discussions regarding their understandings of the data I collected during my fieldwork. This has led, at times, to changes in both some of my conclusions and the views of some of my informants. An example of the latter was when I talked to a young London based tattoo artist about the substantial number of tattooees whose main motivation for acquiring a tattoo was for it to act as a memorial of deceased loved ones (see chapter seven). His first answer was that most people used that reason as an excuse to get a tattoo rather than truly used the tattoo as a serious form of memorial. However, at our next meeting a few weeks later, he engaged with me about the same subject but felt that this memorial process was to be

taken seriously. This change was not only due to our dialogical interaction but also, and mainly in many ways, to the fact that one of his close friends had asked him to do him a tattoo as a memorial for another tattoo artist who had passed away and had mentored both of them at the beginning of their careers. This change of attitude in him was to consequently alter the type of data that he gave me, as his perceptions of tattooees' motivations and his comprehension of their discourse gained a new form of insight. Another example of this dialogical process which involves the same tattoo artist is that he refused to tattoo any Polynesian or Maori designs because, as he explained to me when I enquired about his decision, he had read some publications which discussed issues of appropriation. He would nonetheless have European tattoo artists tattooing these types of designs at his tattoo shop and he would himself tattoo Japanese style designs. This highlights that there are limitations to the dialogical process, but still shows how any type of research about the tattoo community is engaged in the creation, evolution and maintenance of the global tattoo community.

## 2.7 Embodied Knowledge

Another methodological aspect of this research is that one type of data which became available to me, as a researcher of the tattooing community, involved the analysis of the embodied knowledge which I gained through my fieldwork experience. This was, in a way, inevitable. Inevitable because, firstly, I had already experienced being tattooed before coming to anthropology and also because I was advised by Leo Zulueta and Chime in 2000 at the Taputapuatea tattoo festival (see chapter four) that I should learn to tattoo if I intended to study the global tattoo community and its neo-tribal networks. Secondly, anthropology, and its method of participant observation, is inherently rooted in embodied experience. The main difference between ethnographies seems to reside almost entirely on the choices made by the researcher in their analytical perspectives and the way they will present their data at the writing-up stage. Therefore, as anthropologists we all gain data through our embodied involvement with our field of study and our informants. Our lore is, to a great extent, grounded in phenomenological engagement even if our analysis detaches itself from this fact at a later stage. Jenkins (1994) explains how doing fieldwork is no different than the processes we might be faced with in everyday life. Therefore, the experience of the ethnographer must be included within the data collected. Yet, this does not mean that the research is automatically egocentric and narcissistic in nature. On the contrary, as Okely has stated, 'to argue that anthropology is informed by the anthropologist's self is not the same as

any suggestion that the discipline should be “about the anthropologist’s self” (Okely 1992:20). This type of knowledge is related to Mauss (1990) and Bourdieu (1977) concepts of ‘habitus’ and the way in which the body learns through action and experience rather than directly through language and conscious cerebrality. As Bourdieu (*ibid*) notes, the body can also be handled as a form of data and as a memory. The process of learning to become a tattoo artist under the guidance of a network of established professionals that I followed, prior and during my fieldwork period, was similar to the path taken by budding tattooists engaged in the same endeavour. Furthermore, the embodied knowledge also meant that I was placed in similar situation as my informants when dealing with tattooees and with other tattoo artists. Some of the choices that they have to make regarding the permanent marking of another human being cannot be fully understood as an observer. Neither can the personal issues which the tattooing process produces in prospective tattooees be anticipated as an outsider to the practice and to the particular type of exchange during which these arose. Embodied knowledge is multi-dimensional and far reaching, yet, it is also mundane; a consequence of being in the world and a fundamental aspect of the human condition.

Many tattoo artists have, at some point at the beginning of their careers, tattooed themselves. In fact, there seems to be an unwritten rule within most of the global tattoo community which states that established tattoo artists help budding tattooists only after they have started to tattoo themselves. There are many reasons for this. According to my informants, it is a way to control who enters the tattooing trade. At a time when an increasing number of people are trying to become tattooists, learning on oneself acts as a form of trial of commitment. It is also a way to be able to make mistakes on one’s skin rather than on another person. Furthermore, it is a way to show that the pain is not an issue for the prospective tattoo artist. As one of my informants told me:

‘some people cannot take it after a while and give up their apprenticeship, the pain when you are tattooing yourself is demanding, but it should help you to understand when you tattoo someone else, what the person is going through’(interviewed in February 2003).

A number of informants have also told me that they could feel the difference between someone who learnt on themselves and someone who did not and commented that: ‘they are less heavy handed if they have tattooed themselves than if they haven’t’ (collected in January 2003). In a way, the pain felt while tattooing oneself prepares the individual to be in a position of inflicting the pain upon his/her future ‘victims’ as Keone Nunes, a Hawaiian tattoo

master, humorously called them. I found, for example, when I first tattooed myself, that pain was also an important technical aspect of the learning process. As I was applying myself, the level of pain was not similar to the one I had experienced when tattooed by professional artists, and I therefore understood that I must have not been tattooing at the right depth or at the right angle. When tattooing, the ink must be deposited at a particular depth in the skin. If it is too shallow, the ink will not stay when the tattoo heals, and when it is too deep, the ink spreads and disperses in the fatty layer of the skin giving a cloudy effect to the edge of the tattoo which will make the tattoo age badly and become blurry after a while. As I reached deeper into the skin, I started to experience the feeling I was accustomed to from my prior experiences under the needles. I therefore understood, and felt, that I was going deep enough.

Another aspect of pain as a form of embodied knowledge which has implications on my methodology was that many, within the global tattoo community, find it easier to discuss some aspects of their practice and experiences with someone who they feel will display some form of tacit empathy due to their own experiences of being tattooed and tattooing others. In a sense, tattoos reflect to others in the global tattoo community an acquired embodied knowledge. My informants often relate the pain of the tattooing process as a type of self-discovery. As Xed, a London based tattoo artist, explained to me: ‘when you are faced with pain, you are faced with the real you, you can’t hide or lie to yourself at that point’ (collected in March 2001). Pain is perceived here as a tool of self-knowledge. This idea was also relayed to me by Sophia, a tattooee and sado-masochist practitioner, when she told me that ‘pain is like a box with a particular type of knowledge in it’ (collected in May 2000). It seems that many in the global tattoo community perceive that they gain a lot of self-knowledge through this process. As LeBreton (1995) states about painful rituals in general, pain can reveal hidden strengths or weaknesses to the person experiencing the feeling, and to an extent to the group witnessing the ritual. It can show who has the resolve to go through it and withstand the painful time. In other words, who can engage positively with their suffering. Tattoo artists themselves usually dismiss the pain in conversations with new people and with non-tattooees. Pain, therefore, becomes a form of personal price, an intimate sacrifice, to have the honour to wear a chosen tattoo. All my informants commented that: ‘if you can’t take the pain, don’t get the tattoo’. The idea of the process of tattooing as a form of sacrifice has sometimes been alluded by some of my informants. In the tattoo community, tattoos represent pain and are the source of a certain respect given to the wearer by his/her peers. As

Stephen, one of my informants told me one day: ‘we give respect to someone because we know what the person had to go through to have their tattoos; how many hours under the needles they spent’ (interviewed in July 2004). These perceptions which are held, for many, as a cornerstone of the practice of tattooing, enabled me to gain access to some data which my informants might have otherwise not presented to me if I had not been so willing to engage and participate in the same processes of which their daily lives are made of. I am not asserting here that my experience of learning to tattoo was identical to any other tattoo artist, but rather as an integrated practitioner, it is one amongst the diversity of experience this process entails. The fact that my training was supervised by both Polynesian and European established tattoo artists is itself different to many beginners’ experiences. Yet, it also highlights a number of similarities across contexts, and the incessant movements across the globe of tattoo artists are one example of these.

## 2.8 Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter, I have argued that although I have had some personal involvement within my field prior to conducting anthropological fieldwork, my position as a researcher has been reflexive. This thesis is not directly about my own experience and my biography, yet these inform the perspective from which it is written. Moreover, they have enabled a particular perspective which is unique to the extent that very few researchers had the chance to witness the early stage of the Polynesian tattooing renewal on the island of Moorea for example. The analytical distance necessary for a valuable analysis to the discipline of anthropology has obligatorily been internal, as Gupta & Ferguson (1997) considered, due to the multi-sited nature of the field and to part of it being located within the European context. Finally, I have highlighted how my apprenticeship as a tattoo artist enabled particular type of data to be collected and dialogical relationships to take form.

Chapter Three:  
Polynesian Tattoo History, *Tiki* and The Tattoo Fetish.

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the way tattoos have changed in French Polynesia between the pre-contact period and the early stages of the colonisation and Christian conversion process. I highlight the move of tattooing from a technology of the body to protect from a powerful energy called *mana*, to an activity involved in the re-valorisation of Polynesian identity and a political agenda of independence from the French *metropole*. I also look at the ubiquitous image of the Polynesian mythical entity called *Tiki* and its uses in the contemporary context; including its omnipresence in the local tattoo designs catering for both local residents and visiting tourists. Finally, I explore the usefulness of conceptualising tattoos as a form of fetish; using Pietz's (1985) discussion on the subject matter. Overall, in this chapter, I intend to review and discuss the cultural context in which the renewal of tattooing in French Polynesia took form over the last thirty years or so.

3.2 Tattooing in the Pre-Contact Period

The Eastern Polynesian pre-European contact tattooing process was, partly, a technology to manage sanctified states of being. The Polynesian cosmology was based on the relationship between two worlds; between *Ao*: the world of the living and of light, and *Po*: the world of darkness, ancestors, spirits and deities. Any energies, living matter and things that came from *Po* or had been in contact with *Po* were perceived as highly sanctified. This increased state of sanctity is referred to as *tapu*; while things related to the world of *Ao* would be in a sort of profane state called *noa*. *Tapu* was normally not desirable because it was very unpractical. It might compromise growth, hinder a successful enterprise, and threaten death (Thomas 1995). Furthermore, a feature of *tapu*, which made it problematic, was that it was

regarded as highly contagious. Therefore, tattoos acted as an artificial skin, an armour, and as a symbol of having been through certain de-sanctifying processes (Gell 1993). And so, an important role of the tattooing process was to protect one from external *tapu* contagion as well as to protect others from one's personal *tapu* (Gell 1993, Thomas 1995). Tattoos were considered to have an ambiguous nature. Although they sanctified the bearer, they corrupted the original sanctity of *Po*, and therefore needed to be removed upon death. Similarly chiefs who were deemed to be of direct lineage from a deity, and therefore assumed an innate high degree of sanctity, would not be tattooed partly because the shedding of their blood during the tattoo practice would be extremely *tapu* and therefore dangerous to their communities (Gell 1993, Thomas 1995).

A child was perceived to be *tapu* because s/he had come directly from the world of *Po* through the act of its birth. S/he therefore had to go through a series of 'removal' rites of passage which enabled her/him to enter and be involved in networks of relationships in the community (Gell 1993, Kuwahara 2005). However, *tapu* was also instrumental in the construction and maintenance of the highly stratified social structure of eighteenth century Society Islands (Kuwahara 2005). There were three main classes. The *Ari'i* were the ruling class considered to be descended directly from the Gods and therefore highly *tapu*. The highest rank of the ruling class was the *Ari'i Hau* who included individuals who governed groups of districts. Each district was ruled by a *Ari'i*. Below them were the *Ra'atira* who were landowners. They did not descend from a deity but were given authority to manage the land and the lowest class by the *Ari'i*. The lowest class were the *Manahune* who worked the land under the supervision of the *Ra'atira* (Kuwahara 2005). *Manahune* were considered the closest to a state of *noa* compared to the *Ari'i* due to their distant genealogical kin to the Gods. The *tapu* of the *Ari'i* was perceived as so powerful that they could not touch the ground and would be carried. They also were restricted in their eating habits and could not use their own fingers to eat for fear of their *tapu* to enter their bodies (Gell 1993). *Ari'i* women were given the title and the *tapu* of the position if they were first born but usually would be considered *noa* and at the same time *tapu* depending on their menstruation cycles and their position in the procreation process. The *tapu* system created and sustained the division of labour and delineated rules and attributions of ownerships (Kuwahara 2005). As Kuwahara notes:

‘The ownership of properties was clearly demarcated by *tapu* restrictions, as the property of the *tapu* person was not accessible to the *noa* persons. The potential inequality of *tapu* and *mana* possession constituted inequalities with regard to class, gender and age’ (2005:36).

*Mana* can be described as a force or a power which emanates from supernatural sources. It is closely linked to the state of *tapu* and the world of *Po*. An object or a person considered to have *mana* would also be classified as being *tapu*, while *tapu* people and objects were acknowledged as having *mana*. *Mana* was gained either through genealogy and kinship or through the acquisition of particular, usually ritualised, skills (Putigny 1993).

The unequal distribution of *mana* and *tapu* within the social structure of the communities, and the potential danger associated with possible *tapu* contagion, made tattoos an important technology enabling individuals to engage with each other in social interactions. In other words, tattooing was a technique used to manipulate the *tapu* restrictions that would have, otherwise, delineated and articulated the social relationships between individuals of the different classes (Kuwahara 2005). The tattooing process can be seen as a

‘transpositional form of socially patterned wrapping practice. In Tahitian society, the practice of wrapping or covering was replicated both in religious ceremonies and in everyday life. Wrapping and unwrapping occurred in both conceptual and empirical domains’ (Kuwahara 2005:39).

According to mythical narratives collected in the nineteenth century, the supreme god Ta’aroa was born out of a shell which then became the world; including all the living and unanimated things and beings (*ibid*). Human beings were also perceived as having been created out of the shell but moreover women, as mothers, were also thought as having been the shell of their children as the line of an old Tahitian chant states: ‘man’s shell is woman because it is by her that he comes into the world; and woman’s shell is woman because she is born of woman’ (Henry in Kuwahara 2005:40). Wrapping and unwrapping ritual occurrences involved, for example, wooden gods figures and human bodies. *Tapa* (bark cloth) was used as wrapping material. The bark was seen as the skin of the tree acting as another layer of skin (Koojiman 1972), and human skin, in a way, as the ‘bark’ of the body. Human skin was another form of wrapping of the body; akin to a wrapper, veil, or shell of the body (Kuwahara 2005). Tattooing, therefore, was a way to create a second layer of skin that would rewrap the body; isolating to a point the *tapu* and *mana* of the individual in question (Gell 1993, Kuwahara 2005). The importance of the concept of shell is also well exemplified by the

symbol of *Honu*, the sea turtle. The tattoo is a shell that enables safer interactions between *Ao* and *Po* energies and emanations, in a similar way to the sea-turtle who is amphibious and can therefore exist in both the marine and land worlds (Gell 1993, Thomas 1995). Tattoos were as well a way to convey maturity and availability for procreation (Kuwahara 2005).

The *Arioi* were a particular form of caste based around a religious cult and mainly found in the Society Islands but also in a similar form in the Marquesas. They were a group of individuals, both male and female, who were involved in inter-islands ceremonies centred on the worship of the god of war and power: *Oro*. Their spiritual base was on the island of Raiatea but they would move from islands to islands. Many *Arioi* were from the *Ari'i* ruling class, however this was not a pre-requisite of membership (Gell 1993). Amongst their ceremonial specialities were skills such as singing, dancing, performing plays, warfare, athletic games, fertility ceremonies, ritual feasting, sacrifices, and sexual ceremonies, to name but a few (Kuwahara 2005). They were the only part of pre-contact *Ma'ohi* society to be allowed to parody the *Ari'i* ruling caste. Although they were not directly involved in political decisions making, their influence was asserted through satirizing particular social issues (*ibid*). An important rule of the caste was that they were forbidden to have children which led to acts of infanticide. Gell (1993) argues that the *Arioi* institution was a way to restrict the numbers of *Ari'i*, while valorising a prestigious class of perpetual bachelors. Furthermore, their central role during human sacrifice seems to show a link with ideas of fertility in a competitive environmental context. As Kuwahara states:

‘the sterility of human beings and fertility of animals and vegetation did not contradict each other; rather these characteristics indicated the requirements of a region in which war was frequent, land was limited and climatic conditions were variable. The aim of the *Arioi* was to gain fertility and abundance even through sacrificing other lives, making war or killing offsprings’ (Kuwahara 2005:38).

The *Arioi* caste was perceived by the missionaries as a semi-criminal class. However, it is important to assert that they were an integral part of the Polynesian social structure of that time; not marginal (Gell 1993). They were, though, the most salient obstacle to the setting up of Christian behavioural values and colonial acculturation and were an active part of the violent resistance against the French during most of the nineteenth century (*ibid*). They disappeared from *Ma'ohi* societies by the end of 1880's. *Arioi* members were tattooed and some were also tattooing. The *Arioi* caste, even if it recruited from all classes, did have a very

hierarchical internal structure. Tattoos were instrumental in expressing the different ranks of the organisation. At the same time, tattoos acted as a way to contain *tapu*, to accumulate *mana* (Kuwahara 2005), and to be less *tapu*/sacred in order to safely perform secular practices (Gell 1993).

### 3.3 Tattooing After European Contact

Tattoos in the Society archipelago did change during the early period of European contact. For example, through acquisitions made during acts of exchange, certain things and animals started to appear as tattoo designs; muskets, pistols, swords, fleur de Lys, compasses, and goats (Kuwahara 2005). However, it seems that these were perceived as decorative tattoos and that cosmological tattoos did not change at first (*ibid*). Christian evangelisations were instrumental to the demise of the tattooing practice in Eastern Polynesia. The traditional indigenous religious beliefs were portrayed, by missionaries and converts, as a religion of darkness and evil. At the same time, the introduction of European clothing and fashion covered the areas of the body where decorative tattoos would have usually been in public view (*ibid*). Furthermore, for a while, the choice of clothing, between traditional and European, enabled people in the Society Islands to navigate in the two cosmological worlds. European clothing was perceived as wrapping the body to move into the Christian world which itself was defined by missionaries as being the world of *Ao*; while the body, especially the tattooed body, was seen as a thing of the world of *Po* (*ibid*). This is in contrast to the traditional belief of the practical reason of the tattooing process; to contain *mana* and protect from *tapu*. Later in the nineteenth century, European clothes became adopted as well as new forms of expressions of social status which was another use of tattoos in pre-contact *Ma'ohi* communities. However, tattooing was still, for a time, in use amongst believers of traditional religion even while most *marae* (open air temples), anthropomorphic gods' figures, and *tapu* objects were either being destroyed (*ibid*) or shipped to Europe (Thomas 1993).

'For most Tahitians, wrapping in cloth produced a means of membership in an evangelised and civilized society, which was the intentions of the missionaries, but beneath the coverings in the domain of *Po*, followers of Tahitian religion and nominal converts still preserved tattooed bodies and Tahitian religious beliefs' (Kuwahara 2005:53).

The *Ari'i* class and missionaries created a ruling alliance and a series of legal codes which acted as alternative to the traditional *tapu* system. The close association of tattoos with

the *tapu* system meant that they gained new significance and that the control of the practice became perceived as a way to control beliefs and behaviour of Ma'ohi individuals (*ibid*). Punishment for tattooing or being tattooed included having to assist in construction projects, or having the tattoo blackened. Tattoos also became objects used in the punishment of other crimes. For example, there were cases on the island of Bora-Bora, which is also part of the Society Archipelago, of a certain mark being tattooed on the forehead of women guilty of sexual infidelity (*ibid*). Another case was of a woman on Tahiti who had the word murderer tattooed reversed across her face instead of being the victim of capital punishment (D'Alleva 2005, Kuwahara 2005). Through the nineteenth century, some groups of *Ma'ohi* individuals moved to the mountains and valleys inland and tattooed themselves while living in the old ways of life. Yet,

‘tattooing...appears to have been associated with constructing indigenous identity against the missionaries and the government rather than affirming the wrapping functions of cosmological tattooing such as conserving *mana* and protecting themselves from other’s *tapu*’ (Kuwahara 2005:58).

This is an important functional shift which remains to present day tattooing practice in the region.

### 3.4 The Cultural Renewal of the Tattooing Practice

As I have discussed, the practice of tattooing in Polynesia was an important aspect of cultural ritual and identity prior to colonisation and Christian conversions. However, it almost disappeared under the multiple pressures from the Christian missions and colonial powers from the end of the nineteenth century. The only place which retained continuity in the practice was Western Samoa. In the 1960’s, a handful of Polynesian individuals started tattooing some designs inspired from traditional Marquesan tattoos collected in the book ‘*Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst*’ (1925) by the German Karl Von Den Steinen. By the 1970’s, people like Raymond Graffe, who was born on Tahiti in 1948 and went to France to study archaeology in Paris, returned in Tahiti and started some archaeological digs, and re-interpreted and re-introduced traditional rituals; like the ceremony of ‘the walk on fire’ for example. Tavana Salmon, who is half-Polynesian and half-Norwegian, was another of the

*Ma'ohi* cultural renewal important actor. He was instrumental in the recognition of traditional dance and tattooing as integral parts of local, and regional, *Ma'ohi* and Polynesian culture (Kuwahara 2005). Tavana Salmon and Raymond Graffe also invited Samoan tattoo masters to come to Tahiti, between 1982 and 1985 (*ibid*), to perform traditional tattooing techniques and teach them to others. It should be noted that, at that time, Samoan tattoo masters were already working in European tattoo conventions and were winning prizes (Mallon 2005); which is indicative of a level of recognition of Polynesian tattooing practices by the global tattoo community. An event which seems seminal to the rise in popularity of tattoos in French Polynesia is the tattooing of Teve. Teve, who originally came from the island of Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas, was a traditional dancer, in a popular dance troupe, who had been voted *Tane* Tahiti (Mr Tahiti) in the early 1980's. He wanted to have a full tattoo body suit with the same designs that were in use in the early nineteenth century. Teve and Tavana went to Western Samoa to have the tattoo done with traditional tools. This meant that the public image of Teve as the archetypal representation of the ideal *Ma'ohi* man, expressed through his lead dancing performances and his modelling (including a series of pictures produced for tourist postcards) made tattoos a very visible aspect of the cultural scenery of Tahiti. There is a sense that many local people went to be tattooed after seeing Teve perform. The most far-reaching consequence of this was that tattoos became a formative index of *Ma'ohi* identity (Kuwahara 2005). An important point is, therefore, that although the tattooing practice has re-appeared in the region, the reasons for engaging with it, and the meanings given to the tattoos themselves, are as different to the cosmological beliefs associated with pre-contact tattooing as are the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which they occurred. The contemporary popularity of tattoos in the Society Islands does not make them a cultural requirement, yet a majority of people have at least one tattoo and their position as identity markers is an accepted fact. Furthermore, the contemporary tattooing practice has become a part of the tourist economy. Many tourists have a tattoo done when they pass through Tahiti and the other islands. Tattoo designs have also become popular decoration of *pareu* (local clothing). The military personnel, both based temporarily on Tahiti and on transit there, are also a substantial pool of customers for the local tattoo artists. At the same time, professional tattooing on Tahiti seems to have developed in close relation to tourism (*ibid*). The role of tattoos as index of *Ma'ohi* identity has not only been used in a local context of revalorisation of a perceived cultural past, but also on the global stage. Tahitian tattoos have become a way

to present a particular image of indigenous authenticity to the wider world in general; and the global tattoo community in particular (see chapter five).

Most tattoo artists, in the Society Islands, start tattooing their friends and family members at home. They usually use a modified electric razor and tattoo in exchange for beers, tobacco or very little amount of money (*ibid*). The modified razor appeared as a tattooing tool in the 1980's. The razor is taken apart and only the motor and vibrating head remain. On top of the moving part, a sewing needle is attached and it can be used to tattoo. It was developed partly because traditional tools were forbidden by the authorities in the 1980's on health ground (*ibid*), but mainly due to the unavailability of professional electric tattoo machines and needles in French Polynesia. People who tattoo at home do not usually do it full time. They normally tattoo at the weekend and have other professional occupations at the same time (*ibid*). Due to the rising popularity of tattooing, some have opened tattoo shops. They are the tattoo artists who deal with tourists and have the opportunities to travel to the regular tattoo conventions held in Europe and North America. All of them have switched from modified razor to electric tattoo machines and use hygienic routines which are the norm in European tattoo shops. As I will show, in the next chapter of this thesis, these changes are the result of a series of movements and exchanges. Since the 1980's, gradually, not only have tattoos been adopted as a potent aspect of *Ma'ohi* identity but the practice of tattooing has become a viable opportunity, for some, to earn a living through their artistic skills while gaining status as a cultural actor. Furthermore, it also offers the possibility to enter, and therefore to travel, in global networks through the international tattoo community. That is the case of local tattoo artists such as Chime, Roonui and Purutu who I will now present in the next section.

### 3.5 From Local to Global Fame

Chime's mother was Polynesian (Moorea and the Marquesas) and his father was German. Chime, born in the early 1960's, spent most of his early childhood on the island of Moorea in French Polynesia. In his early teens, he ran away, with his friends Roonui and

Purutu, to the city of Papeete on the main island of Tahiti. There, they became street children based around the main market. They earned a living doing odd jobs in the market and tattooing with sewing needles and ink. In their late teens, they became involved with the local cultural 'renaissance' movement and various traditional dance troupes.

Chime and Purutu received tattoos and were taught the traditional techniques re-introduced via Western Samoa. In 1986, the French Health minister forbade the practice of tattooing with traditional tools. There is a sense, amongst most of my Polynesian informants, that the French authorities attempted to stop this 'renaissance' of the local tattooing practice. Many practitioners were arrested and imprisoned on charges sometimes related to tattooing, for example tattooing minors, while others had to serve sentences for other crimes. Chime and Roonui had to spend a number of years at the main prison of Nuutania; close to Papeete. While in jail, both tattooed many of the other inmates and worked on their techniques. They also passed on their techniques to other inmates, creating more practitioners to be released in the communities, which could be perceived as somehow ironically counter-productive to the French authorities first intent (for an astute and informative account and analysis of the situation of the tattooing practice in Nuutania prison in the late 1990's see Kuwahara 2005).

Chime was released in the late 1980's and went to the village of Afareitu on the eastern coast of Moorea. There, he settled with his uncle and father. In the 1980's, a French entrepreneur opened a Polynesian cultural centre called Tiki Village. He recreated a 'traditional' Polynesian village and invited different craft specialists, dancers, musicians, stone and wood carvers, and other artists to live and work at the Tiki Village. The place is situated by the beach, on the South coast of Moorea; close to the main tourist resort on the island. It is designed as a mini theme park organised around a circus stage opening onto the lagoon. While many young Polynesian cultural agents do work, at some point, at the Tiki Village, they normally do not stay long. The high rate of staff turn-over is mainly due to the rates and conditions under which they have to work. There is a sense, amongst former workers, that they were only permitted to present a version of Polynesian culture which was deemed suitable for a Euro-American tourist trade. Chime worked at the Tiki Village for approximately a year in the late 1980's. He sculpted and tattooed on site, as well as

participating in the shows as one of the main dancers. However, Chime moved his skills as a cultural agent to the village of Haapiti; where most of the tourists visiting Moorea reside. There, he started tattooing tourists on a regular basis and lived with a French artist friend who also worked as a barman in one of the resorts.

Later on, Roonui was released from prison. Chime went to tattoo in Europe about a year later. There are different reasons to Chime's departure. One of the main reason seems to have been economic. Prior to Roonui's release, Chime had been almost the sole tattoo artist on the island who dealt with tourists. With Roonui in business, Chime's trade had been reduced by half. He decided to move to Europe where he felt that he would make a more lucrative trade out of his tattooing skills than on Moorea. Another reason for Chime's move to Europe appears in various interviews he gave to the tattooing media (Tatouage Magazine France No9 06-07/1999 and Tattoo Planet 03-98). He talks about a worry that tattoo artists in Europe were using Polynesian designs without any knowledge of their cultural and spiritual meanings. It is important here to note that Chime did not go to stop designs being used but rather to educate about their cultural context; this, at a time, when he himself was a potent agent of their re-contextualisation in French Polynesia.

Chime stayed five years altogether in Europe, from 1993. During his time there, he learnt, from some of the best European tattoo artists, technical skills and techniques of machine work, various styles and to work with colours, as well as hygiene. He also introduced his own style of designs and practiced the traditional Polynesian tattooing technique. He worked in Belgium, France, Spain and The Netherlands and won prizes at numerous European tattoo conventions. Chime also opened the Tahiti Tattoo shop on Ibiza. He created strong relationships around the world and became a tattoo star with a worldwide reputation. He became involved in the neo-tribal movement and travelled with other tattoo artists to Indonesia to stay and exchange with the tattooing Dayak tribes, and worked in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A formative relationship Chime developed was with the late Samoan tattoo master Paulo Sulu'ape. He became his student, stayed with him in Samoa and Aotearoa/NZ. Chime learnt the Samoan traditional techniques, as well as receiving parts of the traditional Samoan *Pe'a* (male tattoo covering from the buttocks to the knees). In 1998,

he came back to settle on Moorea with a new girlfriend, Babs (who is half French and half Dutch) expecting their first child. He settled in a house in a picturesque but isolated area of Moorea, between the two bays, and set up his tattoo studio in an adjacent workshop area. Although based on Moorea, Chime carried on attending European tattoo conventions and Polynesian tattoo festivals.

Roonui also came to Europe and North America for a couple of years. He learnt a lot from, and forged strong relationships with, European and North American tattoo artists. However, his strongest relationships, in the global tattoo community, seem to be more located in North America than in Europe. He married a Canadian woman, Linda, and they also came back to Moorea to open a tattoo shop.

Purutu studied at the *Ecole des Metiers d'Art* of Tahiti and became a teacher there, for a time, after five years of studies. He did join Chime in Europe in 1998 for a few months and also won prizes at some European conventions in the late 1990's. However, he did not stay in Europe like the two others and it could be argued that he did not manage to forge the same level of integration within the global tattoo community. He opened his tattoo shop in the village of Maharepa on the North-West side of the island. I would like now to discuss a tattoo magazine article which was published in France, in 1999, regarding some of the individuals I have presented in this chapter and the local tattoo renewal in general.

### 3.6 French Media and the Tattoo Renewal

#### *Tatouage Magazine* No9 1999

The article which appears in this issue of '*Tatouage Magazine*' (1999) is thirty pages long. It is divided in four main parts. The first one is about the renewal of the tattooing practice in the Society Islands. It contains a number of small interviews with many of the

local tattooists with tattoo shops. The three others parts of the article are in depth portraits and interviews with Roonui, Purutu, and Chime; who the author calls ‘the three musketeers of tattooing’ (*Tatouage Magazine* No9 1999:53). The first part starts with a short historical introduction referring to the tattooing practice ceasing for more than a century in its traditional form. The author then cites the main actors of the renewal; including Raymond Graffe and Tavana Salmon. However, the main body of the article is exclusively focused on the younger generation of Polynesian tattoo artists. The author includes statements from a wide range of artists, and concludes that there is a tension between the ones who tattoo exact replicas of traditional designs and the ones who transform these through their personal, and respective, styles. The former group feels that there is an aesthetic and stylistic order in the traditional tattoo designs which should not be interfered with. While the latter one argues that each of their tattoos are specifically created for each prospective tattooee; that s/he be a local or a tourist. Another point that this group uses in their favour is that there are divergences, in the drawings of early explorers taken on different visits, in the style of local tattoo designs. However, the situation may be more subtle than the author seems to portray. When I asked one of my informants about his tattoo designs which do not clearly vary from the traditional ones, he explained that:

‘Every one of my tattoos is personal and unique. I might use the same designs in two different tattoos but they will be arranged in a different manner. What I care about is the way I link the different designs; to tell a different story every time. It is a bit like a language’ (K. Interviewed in December 2003).

This would lead me to believe that only a few individuals, both in Polynesia and in the global tattoo community as a whole, replicate the designs portrayed in the nineteenth century drawings.

The article follows on by introducing the three successful tattoo shops based in the centre of the city of Papeete; on the island of Tahiti. Two of these are run by Marquesan tattoo artists, who are brothers. This is somehow explained in a comment made by one of the local tattoo artist who explains why he has Marquesan designs when he is from the Society Islands: ‘The (Marquesan tattoo) style is magnificent! This is normal, because the Marquesan people are without a doubt the greatest artists of the whole of Polynesia. At art school they

are always gifted and finish first' (*Tatouage Magazine* No9 1999:47). This would seem to support my earlier point that there is a certain local cultural capital in being able to claim some form of genealogical link with the Marquesas Islands. The other tattoo shop in Papeete which, at that time, was sustainable had been the first official one and had been opened since the late 1950's. It had then moved in the hands of a new generation of local tattoo artists but still remained the first port of call for most military personnel and for many tourists. One of the Polynesian tattoo artists who has been working there for three years, after starting from a beer box in Papeete's street, states:

'Here, it is 80% military personnel and 10% of local people. However, since the end of the nuclear tests, we have fewer military type and we do a lot more smaller pieces. In a week, it is certain that we will tattoo ten turtles, five rays and two sharks. It is not our fault if we do not do many traditional designs. The clients do not want them, and the local people want the whole sleeve tattooed for 250 francs (250CFP is about £1.20)! Before, we had legionnaires, them, they always wanted large pieces' (*Tatouage Magazine* No9 1999:50).

The parts of the article which are solely dedicated to Roonui, Purutu and Chime all state that the three started tattooing together in the streets of the city of Papeete, before spending a number of years in the local prison. It is during their stay there that they developed their individual tattooing techniques. Within ten years of release, they had all gone and worked in Europe for differing amounts of time. All three had, at the time the article was written, opened their respective tattoo shops on the island of Moorea. Each of these parts start with a portrait photo of each of the three; as well as a photo of the three posing together. The setting of these is one of the white sandy beaches of Moorea with the blue lagoon in the background. Most of the other photos appearing in the portraits are of the tattoos the three have done, and of themselves in their tattoo shops both tattooing and simply posing.

As this article exemplifies, by the mid-1990's, the climate towards tattooing, and the wider cultural renaissance movement, changed. People such as Raymond Graffe gained some form of official recognition. He, for example, became the curator of the Museum of Tahiti and its Islands. Traditional tattooing, and tattooing in general, became a registered trade and had to submit to the standards sets by health officials. This does not mean that all tattoo

practitioners became registered but that the practice had some avenues to attain a level of acknowledgment and cultural integration. Yet, as I will discuss now, tattooing is still involved in discussion as part of the local cultural political context.

### 3.7 Idols: Religion or Culture?

Some of the powerful groups which became instrumental to the history of the end of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia were the different Christian church organisations which developed since the beginning of the colonisation process. They were the groups which were involved, to an extent, in the discontinuity of the tattooing practice in the nineteenth century and who became very vocal opponents to the renaissance of tattooing in the 1980's. An influential one became known as 'the *Ma'ohi* protestant church'. This particular church has aligned itself to the leadership of Oscar Temaru, president of the local assembly between 2003 and 2006 and leader of the independentist political party in French Polynesia. A paradox of the situation was that many prominent supporters of this independentist party in the 1980-90's were leading the renaissance of the tattooing practice and fervent opponents of the power of the Christian churches upon contemporary Polynesian society. As the party and the church allied themselves, there was an uneasy cohabitation of the renaissance movement actors with them. Although they supported the independentist cause, they often, in my presence, made fun of the party members for their attendance to the *Ma'ohi* church while having traditional tattoo designs on their skins. When Oscar Temaru and his party were voted into power of the local assembly, the *Ma'ohi* church became an influential voice in the policy making process. A salient example of this was when a small crucifix was installed in the room of the assembly which up to that time was perceived by the elected representatives as a secular space: in the French Republican secular tradition.

At the end of the summer of 2004, two events occurred. The first one was an official demand, from a majority of the members of the assembly, for the removal of the crucifix from this space. The second was a demand from the *Ma'ohi* church to remove many *tiki* (idols) from the public spaces. Therefore, in the same edition of '*La Depeche de Tahiti*' of Friday the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, one could find on page 33, a full page article titled: '*Hiro Tefaarere reclame le retrait de la croix*' (Hiro Tefaarere demands the removal of the cross), while on page 38, one could read another full page article entitled: '*Doit-on faire une croix*'

*sur les tiki?*' (Should we give up on the *tiki*?) (*Depeche de Tahiti*: 20/08/04). *Tiki* are, in this context, referring to the many anthropomorphic carvings of traditional Polynesian styles. *Tiki*, in the pan-Polynesian legends, refers to a particular entity associated to the first human being created by the gods who himself created the first humans to his image out of red clay. *Tiki* is usually related to ideas of sexual intercourse (Orbell 1995). However, in French Polynesia, the word has come to be representative of any traditional anthropomorphic form. *Tiki* appears on postage stamps, coins, in curios tourist boutiques, on tattoo designs, and, amongst other things, have been erected in public squares and spaces over the last decade or so. Taarii Maraea, one of the leaders of the *Ma'ohi* Protestant church, writes:

'People must think. They are not statues of Pouvanaa a Oopa (an emblematic independentist activist of the 1950's Tahiti) or of the Holy Virgin Mary, it is a multiplication of *tiki* in public spaces. It is as if we were giving life back to paganism. We feel it is excessive. Polynesian society has evolved. To a step back, allowed by political powers, we say No!' (*Depeche de Tahiti* 20/08/04).

In answer to this, the journalist writing the article, cites what a majority of people whom he interrogated, in the streets of the city of Papeete, said to him: that the *Ma'ohi* Protestant church must understand the difference between religion and culture.

In an interview, Raymond Graffe states that:

'if you are talking about the many *tiki* made in cement, I think they are horrid and should probably be removed. The ones who have been sculpted traditionally should remain. What about all the *tiki* sold in the curios, should they be removed? Today the evangelical church is against the *tiki*. What about tomorrow? Will they raise objections to the tattooing practice? Right now, I think that both the evangelical church and the cultural actors must sit around a table and discuss these issues; and the people of the territory should also have their opinion taken into account!' (*Depeche de Tahiti* 20/08/04).

It is interesting to note that, according to Thomas (1991), Polynesian idols, including *tiki*, from these islands,

'provided an extremely powerful mechanism through which the fact of conversion could be materially expressed and displayed. An indigenous object became an artefact of history for missionary discourse, an artefact made to speak at once of its original purpose and the transaction through which it had been detached from that purpose.' (Thomas 1991:156).

*Tiki*, in contemporary French Polynesia, have taken on many different meanings and seem to have become multidimensional, context dependent, artefacts. They are iconic cultural emblems as well as offering the opportunity for pagan worship, and therefore associated by some as a return to a perceived past. *Tiki* are also ubiquitous to the tattoo designs created now and this has also come under the scrutiny of the Christian churches. In one newspaper article, for example, a preacher of a Pentecostalist church stated that: ‘tattoo artists are not demons but they act for the devil by tattooing these idols on the skin of people’ (*Depeche de Tahiti* 10/02/07). These types of views sometimes have a direct effect on the personal life of local tattoo artists. Vatea for example, a local tattoo artist and renowned fire dancer, separated from his wife when she became a Jehovah Witness and demanded that he stopped tattooing. He has since opened a tattoo shop in the city of Nice, in Southern France.

### 3.8 *Tiki*

As I mentioned earlier, *tiki* is often considered to have been the first human being. Although in some places in Polynesia, *Tane* is the first human being who then creates *tiki*. However, my informants on the islands of Tahiti and Moorea see *tiki* as being created first by *Rangi* and *Papa*; the earth and the sky. As Chime once explained to me: ‘*Tiki* is not really human. He is not a god either. He is between the two: an extraordinary being, an ancestor of the human race, a human being in spirit form’ (Chime interviewed in 1989). *Tiki* is perceived to have modelled some red clay with some of his blood in his own image. He danced around it and breathed in it. This gave the figure life and the first man was created (Orbell 1995). *Tiki* is also associated with sexuality and chanel pleasure elicited by sexual activities, more than with the procreating act itself (*ibid*). In some areas of Polynesia, he is described as *Tane*’s penis (*ibid*). It seems that people coming back from warfare activities would pray and make offering to him as they had killed beings that *tiki* had created (*ibid*).

On the islands of Tahiti and Moorea in contemporary times, images of *tiki* are ubiquitous. As I stated earlier, they can be found in tourists’ curios shops, on postage stamps, on coins of French Pacific Francs, as designs decorating the fabric of *pareu* (a type of local garment not dissimilar to Indian Sarong), pieces of *tapa* (bark papyrus) sold in local shops, on the decorative entry of some bars and clubs, and in designs of local tattoos, to name but a few. It is also used in some newspaper by cartoonists to express some humorous comments

on the local society and political life. It should be noted that from the 1930's to the 1960's, in the USA, there was a 'tiki culture' which developed (Kirsten 2003). This started with the opening of a Polynesian theme style bar and restaurant called 'Don The Beachcomber' in Hollywood, in California (*ibid*). This seems to show that the concept of *tiki*, as a decorative aspect, has reached beyond the local area in discussion here. However, there seems to be a difference perceived by my informants between decorative and ancestral *tiki*, referred to by Raymond Graffe in the local newspaper cited earlier in this chapter. There is also a difference expressed by my informants and other local people between dead and alive figures of *tiki*. The types of *tiki* sold to tourists as curios and used in local advertising are perceived as dead, while other types, either ancestral or tattooed are seen as alive. This, however, is not a clear cut dichotomy. Some of my informants, for example, told me that a way to know if an effigy of *tiki* was alive or dead was to observe the behaviour of ants around it. If the ants avoided the sculpture, *tiki* was alive, if they did not and went on it, the *tiki* was to be considered as dead. According to them, a dead *tiki* could not have any effect on the life of the living but if it was alive, it could have some positive or negative effect on the lives of people interacting with it. The reason for a *tiki* to be alive seems to depend on a number of aspects. Two of the main ones are its provenance and its relation with its owners. A *tiki* perceived as having been placed by pre-Christian Polynesian people in a particular location could give it life and the prayers of contemporary people in a new sculpture would also bred some form of life into it.

In 1988, I had two experiences of the way that *tiki* were perceived. The first one was a story related to me by P., a *Ma'ohi* in his late forties.

'In my teens, one day, I was clearing some of the bush and dug holes to plant *Taro*. My spade at one point found a stone. When I had removed it, I realised it was a *tiki*. I cleaned it and brought it back to my house. A few days later, my nose started to be infected and the doctor could not help. It was only getting worse. One night, I had a dream and the *tiki* appeared to me in it. It said to me that he was responsible for my illness and that it was because I had removed it from the ground and that there was another *tiki* there. I had to put it back in the place where I had found it. When I woke up, I went there straight away and dug the hole again to place the *tiki* back there. A few days later, my infected nose healed. The funny thing was that I realised that my infected nose was the same shape as the nose of the *tiki* I had unearthed. This is why you shouldn't keep *tiki* at home.' (collected 10/88).

The other story happened to a friend of mine a few months later after I had heard P's story. V. was a French girl who worked as a barmaid in one of Moorea's tourist hotel. She

had bought a *tiki* from a *Ma'ohi* friend of hers who sculpted them. She kept it next to her bed in her room that was provided to her by the management of the hotel. At one point, she went to visit the doctor to treat a bad cold. The doctor gave her an injection of antibiotics in her bum cheek. Not unusually in a tropical climate, the injection's entry wound got infected and ulcerated. She became really upset as one night, as she was asleep, recovering from a bout of fever due to the infection, a *Ma'ohi* maid of the hotel came into her room and removed the *tiki* and burned it. When V. confronted her, the maid told her that the *tiki* had been responsible for her illness and needed to be destroyed as it was an evil influence on her life. The maid also told her that she could not understand because she was not *Ma'ohi* and she should go to church to ask for forgiveness from Jesus. In both cases, the images of *tiki* were regarded as powerful potent entities able to act upon the health of the people engaging with them.

These types of beliefs and stories are not rare on the islands of Tahiti and Moorea. For example, in the local newspaper '*La Depeche de Tahiti*' on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1975 the following piece was published, in both Tahitian language and in French:

'The people who took the *tiki* from Mr Brault in Paea are advised that these *tiki* belonging to the *marae* of Paehau, are evil and can give illnesses such as leprosy and fevers. You are therefore asked to bring them incognito at their exact original location' (in Putigny 1993:123).

Another example is the story associated to the building of the new hospital in Papeete in 1965. The story starts in 1933 on the island of Raevae of the Austral Archipelago; some way South West of Tahiti. Steven Higgins, a British businessman, saw two massive *tiki* which were on each side of a deep natural cave, above the ocean, on the land of a Polynesian called Terii Tane. He was happy to sell them to Higgins and he arranged for them to be moved to Papeete and placed at the entrance of the museum there. The two *tiki* were more than two metres tall and weighted more than three tonnes each. One was female and called Heiata while the other was male and was known under the name of Moana. When, by 1935, Higgins, Tane, and their respective wives died, there was a popular belief that the two *tiki* had been involved in an act of revenge (Putigny 1993). A few years later, the museum where the *tiki* were was moved a few miles and so were they. Shortly afterwards, the curator of the museum died and this added to the macabre story of the revenge of Heiata and Moana. This meant that when in 1965, the land of the museum was bought to become the location of the

new Papeete's hospital, the two *tiki* had to be moved again. However, the '*Journal de Tahiti*' wrote, no workers could be found willing to touch and move the two imposing statues: 'they remain master of the land because every time someone touched them, some dramatic event occurred' (*Journal de Tahiti* 04/06/1965). Finally, a group of Marquesan workers was found who did not fear the effect of the two *tiki*. One of them boasted that:

'in the Marquesas, we have so many of them (*tiki*) that we do not even pay any attention to them. The Marquesan people are not scared of tiki. Do people die due to stones?' (*Journal de Tahiti* 05/06/1965).

However on the edition of the newspaper of the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, the headline related to the fact that the two Marquesan workers who had touched Heiata and Moana had died in two separate accidents. The paper stated: 'that we believe or not in the life of the *tiki* and in their powers, the facts are here. Indisputable' (*Journal de Tahiti* 15/06/1965). There are many other stories which relate to the possible effect that some *tiki* can have upon people's lives. These includes a primary school which was moved in 1991 on the island of Moorea because, according to some of the teachers, an evil stone was buried under it which made them depressed and stopped the children from learning (*Depeche de Tahiti* 23/09/1991). Finally, in the mid 1990's, an informant, Pauline, attributed the death of her brother, a local Moorea politician, on someone burying an evil stone tiki in the driveway of his house (collected in 1995). However, the last example seems to be different from the others as the *tiki*, in this case, became an accessory in the local feud rather than acted because of people's actions towards it.

Nevertheless, all these examples show how some *tiki*, considered alive, are perceived as being able to have a potent effect on people's lives. This could explain the reaction to them by some of the local Christian churches and their demands that they not be produced as an ubiquitous index of Polynesian identity. Amongst my informants who are tattoo artists, *tiki* are not seen as obligatory negative entities. Most of them do feel that the *tiki* they tattoo are alive rather than dead. As P., a Moorea based one, stated to me:

'the tiki designs I tattoo are potent like all the designs based on Polynesian deities. I put some intent into them and they become mixed with the blood of the tattooee. That makes them alive and they can help and protect the person who wears them' (Interviewed in 2000).

I also witnessed many of these informants uttering a prayer aloud to the deity they were about to tattoo. However, I should point out that in some context, especially when they were tattooing tourists, they would often either not perform this act or enact a shorter version of it. In fact, this only happened when both parties were aware, and willing to acknowledge, the potency of the symbols which were about to be tattooed. The potency of tattoo designs is not only related to *tiki* and other deities, as I experienced myself. In both 2000 and 2001, while on Moorea, I twisted badly my left ankle while working in the bush. One day, one of my informants pointed out to me that:

‘you see, your right leg has some turtle shell and weaved bamboo designs tattooed on it and your left leg hasn’t. This is why you keep on hurting your left leg; it isn’t protected. You should get some protection tattooed on that left leg’ (collected in March 2001).

### 3.9 The Tattoo Fetish

There seems to be an important difference between the statue of *tiki* and the tattoo designs which incorporate the idea of *tiki* and of other local deities. This difference is tantamount to the difference found between the concepts of idol and fetish. Historically, this difference was due to the fact that the idol (or *idolo*) was understood to be a freestanding statue that elicited the worship of a false god or demonic spirit (Pietz 1985). The fetish (or *feitico*), on the other hand, was regarded as a fabricated object worn on the body with the specific aim to achieve particular tangible effect for their wearers; including healing (*ibid*). Considering the examples I cited regarding the perceived effects of *tiki* effigies on the life of people who moved them, and the consternations of some Christian churches in French Polynesia as to ubiquity of *tiki* statues in the contemporary local landscape, and therefore their availability for possible worship by local people, these do fit the historical definition of idols. Tattoo designs incorporating the concept of *tiki*, and other local deities, seem to be different even if some Christian preachers equate them to the same category. One of the obvious differences is that the *tiki* statues are perceived as reacting to the behaviour of people towards them, while the tattoos are wilfully tattooed to achieve specific aims. However, some of these can include the tattooee affirming his own belief in the power of the ancient deities and their ability to act upon their lives and the lives of others. This is probably why some Christians feel uneasy towards some strands of the local renewal of the tattooing practice. Yet, people who have tattoos of *tiki* do not worship their designs in the same way that they

would a freestanding statue. Their relationship to the tattoo is that, through the embodiment of the deity, by their materiality being inexorably linked to the blood and skin of their wearer, they are given life which is simultaneously linked to the personal sphere and to the expression of their social and cultural identity. The worship is therefore not enacted on a daily basis but implied in the act of acquisition itself. Furthermore, the effects of the deity are not perceived as negative, and potent, due to people's actions on their materiality, but positive because of the act of embodied creation which bestow them with a form of material existence. This creation process seems to be the main point which differentiates the *tiki* tattoo from being a fetish rather than an idol. Therefore, the contemporary use of tattoos of traditional Polynesian designs does not necessarily imply a return to pre-colonisation pagan religion; even when they are direct references to its deities. Furthermore, although many people might have similar *tiki* designs tattooed on their bodies, the tattoo remains inherently personal in meaning and purpose; even if the socio-cultural reason of having one do denote of a similar mythological worldview and some shared agenda of local identity politics.

Before discussing in more depth the possibility that tattoos share similar aspects with the concept of the fetish, I need to look at the concept of fetish itself. I will use for this purpose the argument developed by Pietz (1985). According to Pietz (*ibid*), the idea of the fetish is a problematic concept. It is rooted in cross-cultural encounters and exchanges between West African cultures and European explorers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as a series of, similarly cross-cultural, exchanges and discussions across different social sciences and their use of the term itself in the following centuries. From these, Pietz (*ibid*) argues, four main themes seem to appear recurrently. The first theme, regarded as 'essential to the notion of fetish is that of the fetish object's irreducible materiality' (Pietz 1985:7). The second theme is:

'the theme of singularity and repetition. The fetish has an ordering power derived from its status as the fixation or inscription of a unique originating event that has brought together previously heterogenous elements into a novel identity...a fetish is always a composite fabrication. But the heterogenous components appropriated into an identity by a fetish are not only material elements; desires and beliefs and narrative structures establishing a practice are also fixed (or fixated) by the fetish, whose power is precisely the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relations between certain otherwise heterogenous things' (Pietz 1985:7-8).

The third theme is concerned with social value and to the fact that the many different discourses involved in discussion about the concept of the fetish ‘constantly stress the idea of certain material objects as the loci of fixed structures of the inscription, displacement, reversal, and overestimation of value’ (Pietz 1985:9). The final and fourth theme is: ‘that of the subjection of the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments’ (Pietz 1985:10). With these four themes in mind, Pietz (*ibid*) synthesises a vision of the fetish as an object created through a singular moment, which become particular type of memories, that can be defined as a crisis (*ibid*). Using Leiris’ (1929) descriptions of his emotional reaction to a sculpture, Pietz (*ibid*) explains how these moments of crisis occur when the inside and the outside communicate; creating personal memories with peculiar emotional power (*ibid*). The fetish becomes a projection onto a material object of the love we have for ourselves (*ibid*). Something intensely personal which transcends our self-limited morphology as well as the one of the object, the fetish, that we both observe and create (*ibid*).

‘Each fetish is a singular articulated identification (an “Appropriation”...) unifying events, places, things, and people, and then returning them to their separate spheres (temporal occurrence, terrestrial space, social being, and personal existence). Certain structured relationships – some conscious, others unconscious – are established constituting the phenomenological fabric...of immediate prereflective experience...Fetishes exist in the world as material objects that “naturally” embody socially significant values that touch one or more individuals in an intensely personal way: a flag, monument, or landmark; a talisman, medicine-bundle, or sacramental object; an earring, a tattoo, or cockade...Each has that quality of synecdochic fragmentedness or “detotalised totality”...’ (Pietz 1985:13-14).

Therefore, a general theoretical definition of a tattoo as a fetish, valid and useful beyond the Polynesian context, could be expressed as follows: an inherently material object able to bring together heterogenous elements, which at the same time recall and stand for specific biographical locations, at play both in and beyond a constant flux of re-valorisation and de-valuation, that enables a simultaneous projection of the body into the object and internalisation of the object as a bodily organ. Tattoos differ, to an extent, from other types of material objects due to their inexorable embodied nature; yet, they are material object nonetheless due to the fact that they have to be acquired and created rather than are in themselves part of the body. Their main difference, and this is not a small difference, is that they cannot be physically alienated from their wearers; unless the body itself is alienated as a

corpse. Tattoos remain lodged a few millimetres under the skin's surface of the tattooee. At the same time, they exist as objects to the observers; as well as powerful indexical statements. The idea of the fetish, discussed above, is very adequate to their nature. It could be argued that, in fact, tattoos are the ultimate fetish. This is because while an amulet will never materially become a part of the body, even if it is conceptualised as such, a tattoo, in contrast, inherently is. Therefore, it could be argued that tattoos are the example of fetish objects par excellence.

All four themes, discussed by Pietz (*ibid*), resonate with the position of tattoos in contemporary French Polynesia but also beyond; with most of European, North American, and the general global tattoo culture encountered in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Tattoos are often created because, and through, moments of crisis, and always relate to some forms of emotions and memories. These moments of crisis do not only result in personal decisions to acquire tattoos. As it has been argued (Kuwahara 2005), the renewal movements, either in Polynesia or in Europe and North America, can be seen as stemming from societal identity crisis. That it be rooted in forms of primitivism, neo-paganism or neo-traditionalist agendas, all groups have adopted tattoos as links to perceived and constructed visions of the past, often referred to as traditions (Hobsbawn 1983). Furthermore, these moments of crisis result in the creation of a tattoo fetish which encapsulates heterogeneous elements, as Pietz (1985) argues. Firstly, it brings the ink and the body together in a single object through the healing process of the tattoo itself. There again the idea of a moment of crisis is recurrent as the process of acquisition goes through an injury and the following healing period of this injury which, after a week or so, reveals the tattoo as having merged in the skin layers. Secondly, it brings together a design, and its indexicality, with the individual whose body is inscribed with the tattoo. Thirdly, as Pietz (*ibid*) points out, the design merges emotions and desires of the individual inscribed together with the body and the tattoo; giving them a material form. Moreover, there are further levels of this process of encapsulation which take place which are beyond the purely personal dimension. The tattoo fetish also brings together the skill of the tattoo artist with the body of his customer, and the tattoo iconography expressed in a single tattoo make its individual wearer become, to varying degree of assimilation, part of the wider tattoo community and/or to the community which the design is an index; a *tiki* tattoo referring to an affinity to a particular political agenda or identity. All of these point to tattoos' ability to bring together many heterogeneous aspects over different

dimensions through the body of their wearers. In that sense, the tattoo fetish does not only refer to the personal individual life of the tattooee but also to wider networks and agenda.

### 3.10 Conclusion:

In this chapter, I have discussed the change of emphasis on the function of tattoos, in French Polynesia, from the pre-contact era and the renewal of the practice in this contemporary context. While tattoos were a technology to protect their wearers' *mana* in a cosmological complex system of *tapu* restrictions, they have become, in their contemporary incarnations, involved in the re-affirmation, and re-valorisation, of the local Polynesian identity and cultural markers. At the same time, they are objects which have enabled some of the local tattoo artists to join, and gain a form of status, in the global tattoo community and therefore access new opportunities, including economic ones. At the same time, the use of pre-conversion religious indexes in tattoos, mostly inspired from the tattoo designs used in the Marquesas Islands at the time of early contact, has initiated a number of discussion regarding the use of figures such as *tiki*. The symbolic potency of these designs and figures are used, for differing purposes, by both the Christian churches and the cultural renewal movement. However, the uses of pre-colonisation local deities are not a return to a form of Polynesian pagan religion, which evolved around a cosmological structure of meanings which has disappeared from contemporary French Polynesia. However, these are used in the creation of a cultural identity which attempts to by-pass, while at the same time locating itself in opposition to, both French colonisation and Christian conversion. Therefore, although impossible, the link to the pre-contact past becomes an important political statement and identity marker locally but also internationally. Finally, I have discussed, in this chapter, the form which tattoos of ancestral entities are taking for my local informants. It would seem that they do not perceive them as idols to be worshiped but rather as potent fetishes encompassing a number of desires and wishes as well as other elements involved in their personal biographies, such as protection and fertility. Overall, in this chapter, I have intended to show the changing role and location of tattoos and of the process of tattooing in French Polynesia. In the next chapter, I will review in more details, the creation of fame and status of local Polynesian tattoo artists in the global tattoo community.

## Chapter Four:

### The Taputapuatea Tattoo Festival and Polynesian Tattoo Conventions.

#### 4.1 Introduction

To explore the pivotal role of the fame of individual tattoo artists within the global tattoo community, I will present an account of the Taputapuatea tattoo festival held in French Polynesia in 2000, and partly organised by the local tattoo artist Chime (see chapter three). I discuss the diverse aspects of this event and look at the different ethos which was intended by the organisers to foster a spirit of exchange and communication rather than the competitive and commercial one found in tattoo conventions in Europe and North America (see chapter three). I present an article written by Leo Zulueta (see chapter eight) about this event and compare it with the other types of articles (see chapter six) relating to European tattoo conventions. I also discuss the changing nature of the subsequent tattoo events from festival to convention with a similar structure to the European and North American events. I explore the way in which these types of events are instrumental in relation to the creation and maintenance of status and fame in the internal hierarchy of the global tattoo community, as well as in their local context. I also look at concepts such as ‘agency’, and ‘objectification’ by looking at the work of Nancy Munn regarding the *kula* exchange system in Melanesia. I argue that tattoos have some similarities with the shells exchange between *kula* participants and that in both contexts, protagonists become the reciprocal agents of each other’s value definition. Overall, in this chapter, I intend to show how tattoos, tattoo conventions and festivals, and the tattooing process, are instrumental, not only to the creation of group identity, but also individual fame, prestige and status locally and globally. These creations are, in turn, important in the creation of personal wealth and enable local Polynesian tattoo artists to come to Europe and North America and become active participants in the global tattoo community.

## 4.2 The Taputapuatea Tattoo Festival

In April 2000, the Taputapuatea tattoo festival was held on the considered sacred site by some of the *Taputapuatea marae* on the island of Raiatea in French Polynesia. Although many local cultural agents and Polynesian tattoo artists were involved in the event, Chime seemed to be the figurehead. This was mainly due to the diverse and strong relationships he had formed during his time in Europe (see chapter three). This event was planned to be very different from European and North American tattoo conventions (see chapter six). Therefore, the organisers called it a festival rather than a convention. This was following another important tattoo festival held in Western Samoa in 1999, and organised by the tattoo master Paulo Sulu'ape. The Taputapuatea tattoo festival was to be a celebration of Polynesian culture and of the tattooing practice. At the same time, by holding the event on the mythical site of Polynesian colonisation of the Pacific, the festival was to act as an affirmation of a pan-Polynesian identity and political representation. The spiritual aspect of tattooing was to be celebrated and a number of rituals were scheduled to take place during the three days event. Chime had invited the biggest names in the global tattoo community and of the neo-tribal networks in particular. However, an important event did change somehow the overall sense of the tattoo festival. This was the tragic and untimely death of Paulo Sulu'ape. Due to the depth of his influence on many tattoo artists and tattoo fans who had planned to attend, including Chime, the festival was transformed into a celebration of his life and to show, and express, the respect of the global tattoo community. Another series of changes to the original ideas and ethos of the festival seemed to be that the festival was also to be promoted as a tourist experience. Some of my local informants were somewhat disappointed that this was the case. They, for example, noted to me that two cruise ships had included a visit to the festival into their tourist sightseeing schedules. However, the amount of local media coverage devoted to the event, and the high profile advertising campaigns and promotional events which were organised, in a way, confirmed the changing location of tattooing as a cultural marker, but also underlined the role of the practice in the local economy, as one of the components of the tourist trade. Furthermore, the way in which the foreign tattoo artists who attended were presented to the local media, gathered in a sponsored event in one of the

largest bar of Papeete's waterfront, highlighted the location of the local event, and therefore of the local practice and community, within a wider global framework.

The festival was attended by a great number of famous international tattoo artists in the global tattoo community. On the Thursday evening, the festival was opened by a ceremony of 'the walk on fire' organised by Raymond Graffe. Friday, Saturday and Sunday were tattooing days from nine in the morning to four in the afternoon. On Monday, the participants were all flown back to the island of Moorea where they would be entertained at the touristic thematic centre Tiki Village (see chapter three). Finally, they were flown back to Tahiti and caught their respective connecting flights back to their homes. Raiatea being less touristically developed than Tahiti and Moorea meant that there was not one resort or one area of the island where all the festival participants could be given accommodation. This meant that when the festival site was closed, the participants were clustered in different areas of the island. In a way, this meant that the main period of exchange was during the festival itself rather than during the evenings.

The festival site was situated next to the *Taputapuatea marae*; which is located on a beach besides the island of Raiatea's lagoon. The festival participants were organised on a series of six platforms which could host six tattooist booths. These were themselves divided by central wooden walls which meant that up to three artists worked next to each other on each side of the platforms. According to Chime, this open plan was designed to be conducive to a greater amount of communication between artists than at European and North American tattoo conventions, as well as allowing a full view for the visitors of the tattooing action. Around a third of the tattoo artists were from French Polynesia. The visitors were mainly Polynesian but a large contingent of Euro-American tattoo fans had made the journey. The global tattoo press was also present, as were the local media. Most Polynesian visitors were able to be tattooed for free by European artists, while most Polynesian artists who worked on European skins were paid for their work. However, it is inaccurate to describe the tattooing of Polynesian 'for free' by Euro-American tattoo artists. What I mean is that, although no money may have been exchanged, most Polynesian people who received these tattoos engaged in a form of exchange either of goods and/or of services but in general in a way

which implied that the tattoo was the first step in a series of reciprocal acts still to come, as a gift (see chapter eight). At the same time, Euro-American tattoo fans who were tattooed by local Polynesian tattoo artists perceived the exchange as more than just a discrete commodified encounter. Many voiced their intentions, to me, to return to French Polynesia and acquire more tattoos from the local artists they had met. They also intended to keep in touch with them and meet up when they came to work either as a guest tattoo artist in a European tattoo shop or attended a tattoo convention in Europe. There were no competitions and judging of tattoos during the festival. The organisers did not distribute prizes or *memorabilia* as it would usually be the case in European and North American tattoo conventions. The tattoo artists who tattooed using electric machines and those using traditional tools were not separated. Furthermore, there was no trading area of any sort except for a few catering local contractors. The only performances which took place during the festival were the different and regular ceremonies and rituals which were organised. Overall, the structure of the festival was designed in a way which differed in many ways from the usual tattoo conventions.

As Kuwahara (2005) states:

‘all the participants, tattooists, tattooed people, journalists, local visitors and tourists established a ‘universal tattoo family,’ which included all the people who were deeply involved in tattooing’ (Kuwahara 2005:147).

However, I would add to this that, as in all families, this one was not entirely an idyllic affair. I noted, for example, the great amount of criticism other Polynesians levelled at French Polynesians organising and participating to the ceremonies and rituals which were performed throughout the festival. Their main criticisms were that the ceremonies were too theatrical and they perceived them to be representations of an idea of a lost past. Some informants also felt and commented to me that some aspects of the rituals and ceremonies performed were appropriations of their own Polynesian cultures. In a way, these were perceived by some of the Polynesian participants as reactive objectification (Thomas 1997); as objectifications of their own past clouded by the colonial gaze (see chapter four). Nevertheless, there were also numerous events presented as rituals which were perceived in a positive manner by all participants. These were the rituals which were not only performances to an audience but which included the diversity of the participants and had interactive aspects to their structure.

Three of these seem to have been perceived by many in the tattoo community as encompassing the spirit of the event. All three events were involving most participants. The first one was the walk on fire. It was held close by to the main festival site and on the Thursday evening as an opening ceremony. The event was organised by Raymond Graffe and he officiated as master of the ceremony. At dusk, the short pathway of hot stones, which had been heated up for a number of hours, was open for the participants. Most of them, from around the world, took part and walked the few steps across the heated stones. Many of the non-Polynesian participants related to me how empowering the experience was to them and how honoured they felt to have been able to take part. The second one was the building of a special stone memorial to the late Paulo Sulu'ape. It was formed of stones brought by each of the festival's participants. The stones that people placed on the memorial were varied. Some were simple, others were sculpted. They varied in size and of their types. A small number were semi-precious stones. The third one involved the planting of ceremonial *Ti* plants around a symbolic stone representing the Pacific Ocean. Each plant stood for one island of the Pacific which had participated in the festival. They were planted by representatives of the respective islands. The standing stone at the centre had been sculpted for the duration of the festival by different stone carvers; lead by an experienced artist from Rapa Nui (Easter Island). There were also other exchanges that my informants felt made this event a particularly memorable one. For example, on one of the evenings, I observed discussion between the Samoan tattoo master Petelo Sulu'ape and the Danish tattoo artist Jurgen. They discussed at length the similarities between Norse and Polynesian mythologies and pantheons which are used in the designs they both tattoo. Many of my informants, who attended the Taputapuatea tattoo festival, related to me that the relationships that started at this event were perceived as much more personal than the ones that would normally occur at European and North American tattoo conventions.

#### 4.3 Zulueta on the Taputapuatea Festival

The article I would like to review now is from an American tattoo magazine and refers to the Taputapuatea tattoo festival. It is thirteen pages long and has fifty photos mainly of people set either in the local landscape or in the process of tattooing. The article's author is the world famous pioneer of neo-tribal tattooing Leo Zulueta (see chapter eight) and the

photos have been taken by the professional photographer specialising in tattoos, Dianne Mansfield, who is Leo's long-term partner. It is structured as a narrative of Leo Zulueta's week stay in Polynesia, rather than just the three days of the festival. The list of names he cites includes not only famous artists but also local Polynesian ones as well as some tattoo fans and other people he met during his time there. The overall style of the piece has a literary feel to it, more so for example than the articles discussed in chapter three which are shorter and less personal. A large part of the article is dedicated to the acts of remembrance for the late Paulo Sulu'ape. Zulueta writes:

'the European, American and Oceanic tattoo communities were bonded as we all focused on the memories we hold of Paulo. Both Petelo and Paulo had always shared so much of their *tatau* with us in the Western (non-traditional) tattoo world' (Zulueta in *Skin & Ink* 01/2001:30).

Zulueta's article is not all positive. He states that after the festival on Raiatea, the tattoo artists were moved to Moorea for a day for a visit to the Tiki Village (see chapter three). He comments:

'on Monday we visited Tiki Village. It was a shame to see the conditions there. We were asked if we would "volunteer" our services, without notice. Worst of all, we discovered that there is no sterilizer present and many were enraged, especially Felix Leu. We were not pleased by the whole day (Zulueta in *Skin & Ink* 01/2001:32).

According to some of my Polynesian informants, these criticisms were partly the reason why hygiene was a prominent subject of discussion in later tattoo related events held in French Polynesia, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Finally, he describes how, on their final day, Dianne Mansfield was tattooed by the entire Leu Family. He ends the article by wishing that 'hopefully for the next festival, those of us in the Western tattoo world can truly share our expertise regarding sterilization, equipment and overall tattoo awareness (Zulueta in *Skin & Ink* 01/2001:34). The photos included are, as I already stated, of people rather than tattoos. A few of them are in black and white but most are in colour. The importance of the photos, their subjects, and of the article as a whole was highlighted to me when one of my informants who is a British tattoo fan who attended the Taputapuatea tattoo festival told me that:

'I didn't know about the Zulueta article until a friend called me on the phone and told me about it. My mate was really excited because I was in one of the pictures and he said that I was also named by Leo as one of his friends. To tell you the truth I actually cried that day because it meant I was recognised as being part of the tattoo community' (interviewed in London in 2002).

As I will discuss later in this thesis (see chapters six and eight), events such as tattoo festivals and conventions are what Appadurai terms 'tournaments of value' (Appadurai 1986).

'Tournaments of value are complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them' (Appadurai 1986:21).

However, in the case of the Taputapuatea festival, the main act seemed to be a confirmation of status rather than a contest. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, it did play a part in the status contests taking place in the wider tattoo community. Tattoo conventions and festivals have two main functions. The first is to create a space where a dislocated community can gather at regular intervals and reify itself as a somewhat bonded community. The second function of these events is to reify the hierarchical structure of this community and to confirm status of artists and fans alike. In the context of conventions, this is established through series of competitions of best tattoo in different categories (see chapter six). There is a sense that these festivals break away from this particular ethos by refusing to hold competitive events. The aim of their organisers is to foster a sense of cooperation between practitioners. However, it is clear that attendance alone to an Oceanic festival holds, in Europe and North America, a great amount of status capital. In that sense, festivals are paradoxically contributing to the creation of status in the global tattoo community by the very fact that they reject, to an extent, such function.

#### 4.4 The Pitou Project

In 2001, Chime was working at Vatea's new tattoo shop situated close to the ferry docks of Vaiare on Moorea. The shop itself was clean and organised as one open plan room with two areas set up for tattooing and one for sterilising. Vatea is a Polynesian man born in the late 1960's on Moorea. He was a star fire dancer for traditional dance troupes in the 1980's. He started teaching it in the 1990's as well as being tattooed. By the late 1990's, he was also tattooing and joined Chime in Europe for a few months. Since 2005, he is based in the city of Nice, in the South of France, where he has his own tattoo shop. Most of his customers, while working at Vaiare, were tourists. The other third were local people, in that I include French people who are residents there as well as Polynesian, *afa*, and Chinese people. All of the tattoos produced at Vatea's shop were of Polynesian influence although many also incorporated other styles, including neo-tribal. During the Taputapuatea tattoo festival, Vatea and Chime had met a French piercer based in Brest, in the Brittany region of France, called Pitou. Born in 1968, in Normandy, he spent twelve years in the military. In his early thirties, a civilian, he became involved in the body-modification and fetish communities and became a piercer himself. As well as many unusual piercings, Pitou has many tattoos but as a disparate collections of different styles and designs. As he is a keen scuba diver, he decided to visit French Polynesia during the festival. Vatea and Pitou became friends and Pitou decided to visit again Vatea on Moorea at a later date. He came back for two weeks in 2001 and worked in Vatea's tattoo shop. He gave a piercing crash course to Vatea and many local people provided their flesh to learn on, in exchange for a free piercing. This created a strong bond between them. Before he left to return back to Brest, Vatea and Chime offered to tattoo him. As they were discussing and planning the tattoo they were going to do, they also started to plan a way to maximise this act. They decided that they would tattoo Pitou's front torso and shoulders. Vatea would tattoo the right side and Chime the left. This would produce an impressive piece of work which would be presented at European conventions. They would finish both sides at a convention and would therefore be able to enter it in the competition. It was in fact presented at two conventions, Paris 2001 and Madrid 2002, and won the best tribal prize at both. This tattoo was a good way for Chime to raise his profile in the European tattoo worlds after having spent two years back on Moorea. Vatea was able to break into the scene with this tattoo and the prizes won. The association with Chime was very valuable as it

enabled diverse connections within the international network. Pitou gained a lot of attention in the tattoo media outlets which raised his personal profile in the body-modification communities. Furthermore, in consequence of this successful exchange partnership, Vatea was able to go and stay in Brittany and tattoo in Pitou's piercing shop.

As I will discuss in chapter four, when one considers the rising number of tattoo artists working on Moorea and the fluctuating number of tourists available to be tattooed, the financial importance of European and North American tattoo conventions becomes clear. Even when one takes into account the travelling expense, it is not rare that a three months trip to Europe sustain tattoo artists for the rest of the year in French Polynesia where the trade is not so profitable. While some Polynesian artists do these trips regularly, some decide to stay in Europe and work there. However, the advantages of participation in Euro-American tattoo conventions reach beyond the purely financial. As the story of Pitou's chest tattoo showed, it enables the name of the artist to become, or remain, famous within the wider global tattoo community. In turn, this may also increase the number of tattoo enthusiasts who may come to visit them (see chapter seven).

#### 4.5 New Tattoo Conventions

A number tattoo related gatherings have been organised since the Taputapuatea Festival held on the island of Raiatea in 2000. Chime was one of the influential figures involved in the organisation of the event called 'The First Moorea Tattoo Festival', also referred to as '*Tattoonesia*', which took place in the autumn of 2005. However, he was not the main organiser. This was a very different event to the Taputapuatea festival of 2000. It was smaller and only a handful of Euro-American tattoo artists attended. The spiritual and religious aspects of tattooing were downplayed while a set of discussions about hygiene and perceived cultural appropriation by non-Polynesian tattoo artists were organised. There was also a series of musical performances, including a rock concert as well as traditional Polynesian music performances. Taking into account that a series of competitions were also taking place during this event, it is clear that the structure of it was very similar to what

would be conceived as a 'traditional' Euro-American tattoo convention. There were no rituals and no ceremonies akin to the numerous held in 2000. Another major difference was that the public attending the event had to pay an entry fee. However, the participating artists were also charged to have a tattooing booth in the enclosure. Following this festival, Chime stated in one of the local newspaper:

'tattoo conventions enable artists to be united in one place, to exchange technical information and news about new types of tattooing technology. It is also a place where you meet new people and create relationships. It is particularly beneficial for the young newcomers' (19.09.2004 *La Depeche de Tahiti*).

I should make clear that not all the recognised tattoo artists operating in French Polynesia are from a Polynesian background. For example, Gilles Lovisa is originally from France but has been a resident on the island of Moorea since 1993.

'It is here that I learnt how to tattoo. I was offered an apprenticeship in France however I refused because at the time I did not like tattooing. It is here that I started to like it mainly because I became a close friend of Chime and Roonui. They were very interested by my drawings. I had studied art at an interior designer school in France. I mainly started tattooing Polynesian traditional dancers who had a daily show in the hamlet of Papetoai on Moorea. Since 1997, I opened a shop at the Hotel Sofitel Ia Ora by the beach close to Moorea's harbour in Vaiare until it was closed for renovations. I tattooed mainly tourists but also many local people. I normally go to the Los Angeles' convention every year in California. They are good events to meet new people and exchange technical information' (19.09.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

The next year, in 2006, another tattoo convention was organised. The event was also called '*Tattoonesia*' but this time it was held in the city of Papeete on the island of Tahiti. It was the first time that such an event was organised on the main island as the others were held on the islands of Raiatea and Moorea respectively. This edition of '*Tattoonesia*' was an event marred with controversy from the beginning of its organisation. This was due to a number of reasons. One of them was that all the prior conventions and festivals had operated with the patronage of the most influential Polynesian tattoo artists. This '*Tattoonesia*', in contrast, was organised with a business ethos and with the support of artists based on Tahiti with less of a recognisable international reputation; like Chime for example. The public had to pay an

entrance fee and the artists had also to pay a substantial fee for the tattooing booths from where they could work.

In the run-up of the second outing of the '*Tattoonesia*' convention held in 2006 on the island of Tahiti, some tattoo artists were highly critical of the event from their experiences of the first one. Purutu said that he would not attend because: 'it costs me too much. You have travelling expenses and there are too many people. At the end of the day, I cannot make a profit out of it' (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*). Roonui states that:

'if they change direction, I will take part. If they do not, I wont. Anyway, I don't think that the convention will take place because it is held the same weekend as the festival of Maohi culture in Tahiti where many tattoo artists are planning to participate. You cannot be at two different places at the same time' (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

Chime says:

'I have not been invited so I was not aware that there was going to be one. If there is, I will go and meet with tattoo artists but I will probably not participate and tattoo there. I always attend tattoo conventions and I will carry on' (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

As well as clashing directly with the festival of *Ma'ohi* culture, an event organised in conjunction with Hawaiian cultural groups, '*Tattoonesia*' was also organised two weeks after the London International Tattoo Expo held in the British capital. In 2006, Chime and others were part of the program of this European event and his name was part of the convention's billboard and website. Chime commented that he would prefer to stay in Europe after that event to attend other conventions rather than to have to go back to Tahiti to participate in '*Tattoonesia*' after the mixed feelings he had regarding the general organisation of the 2005 edition. Chime's plans were to make a decision after the London Expo to whether he would go back straight away to French Polynesia or stay in Europe. However, he did not manage to attend the London event as he did not update his passport to include biometric data and therefore was turned back when in transit in the USA. In fact, out of eight Polynesian tattoo

artists advertised to attend, only Vatea was able to as he only came from the city of Nice, in Southern France, rather than from the South Pacific. Vatea had taken part in the first ‘*Tattoonesia*’ festival and did not plan to attend the second one.

‘I do not think many people will go to it after the way we were treated by the organiser. It felt like a con and afterwards we all thought that we, and our reputations, had been used to make it a bigger event than it was. On top of that, it cost me a lot of money and I did not make much out of three days of non-stop tattooing’ (interviewed in London in October 2006).

It seems clear that there has been a change of the nature of the events, in French Polynesia, organised around the tattooing practice. In contrast to the Taputapuatea tattoo festival on Raiatea held in 2000, later conventions, such as the first edition of ‘*Tattoonesia*’, show all the attributes of Euro-American ones. The increased focus, on all parts, to create a direct financial profit out of the event is diametrically different from the expectations participants had of the perceived outcomes emanating from the Taputapuatea festival, and to an extent from the Moorea convention. However, ‘*Tattoonesia*’ seems to be able to set itself as a regular event. This is mainly due to the fact that it is financially sustainable, to the organisers at least. Nevertheless, only the Taputapuatea festival has achieved a high degree of international recognition as a memorable event worldwide of which attendance to has itself created a high level of cultural capital within the global tattoo networks. Both the Moorea festival and the second edition of ‘*Tattoonesia*’ have been perceived as small local tattoo conventions in the global tattoo press, and they have received little coverage by English speaking tattoo journalists. This is in contrast to the amount of media cover that the *Taputapuatea* festival achieved.

#### 4.6 The Charter of Good Behaviour

Since 2000, there had been rumours and discussions, in French Polynesia, about the creation of an association of Polynesian tattoo artists and of a ‘*chartre de bonne conduite*’: a charter of good behaviour. Both were driven by the exponential rise of the number of tattoo artists operating mainly on the islands of Tahiti and Moorea. However the association was an

idea forwarded by key tattoo artists and the tourist board, while the '*chartre*' was mainly conceived by government health officials. The association aimed to give recognition to already established tattoo artists and represent their interest in official settings, while the charter was to universalise adequate hygiene routines used by the local tattoo artists. The association has not yet become official due mainly to a lack of consensus amongst the artists and a certain amount of power struggle between different local networks. The idea of the charter, although welcomed as a concept by most tattoo artists, was always perceived as a set of rules imposed by outsiders and therefore to be looked upon with a certain degree of menace. Both ideas had undercurrents of ascertaining a degree of control over the numerous tattoo artists operating mainly on Tahiti and Moorea. The question was who should be in charge of this control mechanism.

The Ministry of Health, the Direction of Health Services, and the Hygiene Services Bureau, all were the driving forces behind the charter. They visited and talked to tattoo artists during the first '*Tattoonesia*' tattoo convention held on the island of Tahiti in 2005 and the first draft of the charter was presented officially during the second outing of '*Tattoonesia*' in 2006. Between the two conventions, officials from the three offices organised prolonged visits to five tattoo artists on Moorea. These were Chime, Roonui, Purutu, James Samuela and Moise Tehuita. The visits were intended to be an opportunity to observe and give advice on hygiene routines. It was also a point of engagement with these artists to set up a starting reflection on how 'the art of tattooing could be unified under a set of strict rules to which each tattoo artist of French Polynesia would adhere to' (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*). As one of the official states:

'in this move, we felt that it was important to meet the tattoo artists so we can see how they work and how they sterilise their needles, machines and other apparatus. It is so that the charter will take into account local specificities. We intend to present a first draft at the '*Tattoonesia*' convention of 2006 and if the draft is acceptable and bring some consensus, we would like it to be validated by the government within the coming year. The five main points of the charter will be the health of the tattoo artist and the tattooee, the type of material used to tattoo, the hygienic conditions and the sterilisation routines, and the conduct of the artists towards their customers' (Rahiti Buchin 28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

The reactions of three tattoo artists presented in this thesis and involved in the initial round of official visits were as follow. Purutu:

‘For me, this idea of a charter is very important because it forces tattoo artists to become more responsible for their actions. Considering the fact that many of our customers are tourists, it is in our interest to maximise protection for them and for us’ (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

Chime:

‘I feel it is good that they come and talk to us. The project of a charter will be good because it will enable a control on the tattoo artists. This can only be good for the profession as a whole. I learnt hygiene routines while I was working in European tattoo shops. The charter will need to be enforced and involve regular visits to the local shops, and if possible without telling them before they come to inspect them’ (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

Roonui:

‘I feel the charter is an important move. However, they must not look somewhere else to impose routines. The first thing they must do is to talk to local tattoo artists. It is true that they are doing good things but it is only their job. Often they ask us to cooperate but this cooperation is not paid and therefore it will not take care of our bills. It must not be forgotten that everything we use we buy it ourselves from abroad. In short, I am happy to have a charter and that they come and talk to us first. There is a lot of work to be done regarding the behaviour of artists towards their customers’ (28.07.2006 *Depeche de Tahiti*).

The official recognition of the charter had not yet happened by the end of 2006 due to a change in government and a certain political instability. This meant that such a charter was not at the top of the local legislative agenda. It is of interest that out of five tattoo artists visited by the health officials, three are the ones with the most widely recognised international reputations and a great deal of influence on key local policy makers. They are also the ones who were behind the drive to create an association of local tattoo artists and were opposed by some of the younger generation of practitioners because they feared being controlled by the more internationally famous artists. Yet, this shows how fame and

international connections within the global tattoo community are reproducing a hierarchical structure locally and which is not dissimilar from the hierarchy found in European and North American parts of the networks (see chapter six).

#### 4.7 Fame, Agency and Objectification

In the earlier sections of the chapter, I have highlighted the ways in which tattoo artists have acquired fame in a global community formed of a series of networks. The main aspects of this acquisition have been a series of movements, the establishment of exchange relationships, and acts of exchange which often involve tattoos. Once perceived in such a way, the global tattoo community shows a number of similar processes to other communities involved in exchange relationships. One of them is the *kula* ring.

The *kula* ring is an area of exchange in Melanesia. It involves many islands and thousands of participants. Men travel great distances in canoes to engage in a series of delayed exchange of shell valuables between partners. One of the basic rule of *kula* is that necklaces (*veigun*) move clockwise, while arm-shells (*mwali*) travel in an anti-clockwise direction around the ring. Another rule is that the valuables must move on from partners to partners. The shells have different values and there is a competitive aspect to the *kula* as the names of the *kula* partners are linked to the shells they have and have had. Miller (1987) advances that similarly to Mauss, Munn demonstrates that people and valuables are 'reciprocally agents of each other's value definition' (Munn 1986:283). This is exemplified in the manner in which both men and valuables gradually attract fame and name through their activity in the *kula*, and their ability to persuade or 'move' the mind of other participants (Miller 1987). Similarly, tattoos, tattoo artists, and tattooees, are themselves 'reciprocal agents of each other's value definition' (Munn 1986:283). A tattoo artist's success is built on the many tattoos s/he has created and on the value these are given within the wider community. At the same time, a tattoo is perceived as more valuable if it is know that it was created by a big name of the tattooing milieu.

In the *kula* ring, 'fame...is created through the handling and passage of shells: It is a product of transactional processes' (Munn 1986:107). Similarly, transactional processes are fundamental to the maintenance and reification of the global tattoo community. However, there are a number of acts of exchange taking place during the practice of tattooing. One of them is that the time and skills of the tattoo artist are often commoditised (see chapter five). However, this is not automatically perceived as a negative aspect of the exchange by the practitioners themselves (see chapter eight). In fact, the tattoo artists choose, according to who is being tattooed, the type of exchange they will engage in. The choice is between a commodity exchange where both parties do not engage further than the act itself, gift exchange which implies that the rules of reciprocity will apply, or even what Firth refers to as 'exchange by private treaty, a situation in which something like price is arrived at by some negotiated process other than the impersonal forces of supply and demand' (Firth in Appadurai 1986:19). Considering the numbers of people a successful tattoo artist will engage in exchange with, it is clear to see the usefulness of such an array of possible degrees of reciprocity. As Thomas points out, exchange is firstly, and inexorably, a political process (Thomas 1991). Exchange relationships are always negotiated and expressed on the personal level, yet these encompass a set of wider relationships (ibid). With this diverse range of relationships available to them, tattoo artists are able to create, foster, and maintain particular networks of their choice to advance their advantage; to increase their fame. At the same time this political process is intrinsically entangled in the process of objectification. A process which, as Miller observes, 'is essential to the creation and reproduction of the group is shown to be always available for manipulation as ideology, so that the means by which the group creates its identity are used to serve particular interests' (Miller 1987:59).

Thus, another important sphere of exchange in the global tattoo community involves the tattoo artists themselves. As I have presented, earlier, an important aspect of the creation, and maintenance, of tattoo networks is the series of movements. These, in turn, establish a series of 'roads' of exchange between partners. This has been taking place mainly since the 1970's and the exponential growth of the number of conventions held globally. These established exchange 'roads' are reminiscent of, as Munn (1986) observes, 'the dynamic

nature of *kula* activity, in which the participants, in attempting to gain strategic control over the 'roads' by which the valuables pass around the *kula*, thereby construct their own place in this spatiotemporal order' (Miller 1987:63). Another consequence of these movements is that they enable the participants to become aware of the potential networks that they may want to become involved in and that they may not have been aware of prior to their exchange journeys. Moreover, the concept of 'butu reflects a man's capacity to 'move' his partners to accede to his own will and points to the potentiality for future transactions' (Munn 1986:107). Similarly, the fame of a tattoo artist can attract the attention of a particular network which might open new destination for him/her to go and work at. R., a Polynesian tattoo artist from Moorea, for example, started doing the European conventions but after a few years created stronger links with a Canadian tattoo network where he now operates. The feasibility for his work to be sought after in this network was partly due to the fame he accumulated on the European circuit.

The Taputapuatea tattoo festival, and other such events, including Euro-American conventions, also attempt to cast tattoo artists out into a larger world of exchange with distant places, as the *kula* does. In a way, this is a process which creates an awareness of being part of a wider community. Furthermore, beyond the agenda of creating a pan-Polynesian tattoo cultural network, a wider ring of exchange was perceived at the Taputapuatea festival. For many Polynesian tattoo artists, from Tahiti and Moorea, the idea of going to Europe or North America to tattoo can be daunting. However, through the Taputapuatea festival, they were able to meet and make an initial exchange with European and North American tattoo artists. The tattoos here act as Gellian traps in the sense that the social efficacy of their creators is often a factor in the choice of exchange partners. I should point out that the exchange might not include tattoos directly but rather a set of social interactions which can be reciprocated when the Polynesian artist come and work in Europe or North America. By not including tattoos directly, I mean that the protagonists may or may not tattoo each other. Nevertheless, the tattoos created on others will be included in the choice of exchange partners, often via the artist's book of photos. I should clarify what I understand by Gellian trap. I refer here to Gell's (1992) paper titled 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology' in which he argues that Trobriands' canoe prows are used to dazzle the exchange partner so that they enter in a trade beneficial to the visitors. The technical

virtuosity of the artists who carved the canoe prow has efficacy in influencing the observer. It could be seen as acting as a trap enticing others to engage in a particular way with the canoe's occupants. There is a similarity of intent, and effect, between this idea of 'trap' and the concept of '*butu*'. This is because both are perceived to affect potential exchange partners into agreeing to a trade which is not entirely beneficial to themselves because of either, or both, the technological virtuosity involved in the manufacture of an object or/and the fame and status in an exchange network that an individual has gradually attained. In the same way, the technical virtuosity and the status of a tattoo artist can influence some observer to engage with them, either by having a tattoo done by them or to invite them to work within other tattooing networks.

Miller points out that:

'as in the case of the kula this is most often not simply an expression of particular individuals so much as a collective construction which attempts to expand individuals largely by expanding the fame of the entity they most fully identify with' (Miller 2001:137-8).

This is also pertinent when looking at the different networks which form the global tattoo community. Most of these networks are based around particular 'styles', or types, of tattoo designs. Here, I use the concept of 'style' following Gell's point that 'it is much more appropriate to treat 'collectivities' rather than individuals as units of style' (Gell 1998:158). He argues that individual Maori tattoo artists' fame may have varied but that individual virtuosity could only be perceived as such within the parameters of Maori collective cannons of appreciation of the medium (*ibid*). So, in the contemporary global tattoo community, the tattoo does not only expand the individual fame of the artist but also the particular network of artists associated with the particular 'style' of tattoos. This can be on a sub-cultural level like with the neo-tribal networks in Europe and North America but also on a more general cultural dimension when it involves Polynesian designs, used as potent ethnic identity markers, vis-à-vis the global tattoo scene. However, it seems that sometimes the efficacy of tattoo design goes beyond the network which created them. This is when Polynesian designs are used in a Euro-American context by non-Polynesian tattoo artists. It could almost be said that they

become the victims of their own social efficacy, of their aesthetic virtuosity. Thus, the social efficacy of a design can give such a high degree of agency to a tattoo that it can trap, independently of its creator's original agency, individuals into an exchange relationship and therefore perpetuate itself through different networks. So when Chime and other Polynesian tattoo artists talk about coming to Europe to educate people about the spiritual meaning of Polynesian designs, they are, in a way, trying to re-establish a degree of agency upon their collective, and somehow perceived as 'ancestral', social efficacy. They are recreating the link between the Gellian traps sets by past networks and their own present networks. However, the main aspect of this move is not to remove the traps from the global sphere of commercial and social exchange, but to re-introduce the agency of contemporary Polynesian artists within that sphere.

The tattoos' efficacy also becomes clear when one looks at the tattoo artists' books. These books are presented to potential tattooees and can be found in the public area of tattoo shops or at the forefront of a stand in conventions and festivals. They are a collection of photos of tattoos done by the tattoo artist often taken just after the tattoos were finished. Most of the photos are of the tattoos themselves not of the tattooees. Although some photos are accompanied by the first names of the tattooees, the photos themselves rarely include their faces or their bodies as a whole. Thus, the tattoos become independent of their wearers and their agency becomes focused on enticing commercial and social interactions with the tattoo artists. It is often through these books that young aspiring tattoo artists are given work in established tattoo shops, and that unknown Polynesian artists engage initially with visiting Euro-American artists (see chapters six and eight).

However, the tattoos themselves and their wearers also act as agents of the fame of the tattoo artists who have created them. This has echoes with Munn's observations that:

'when a woman wears a man's necklace, she becomes the "decoration" of her kinsman...Women decorate necklaces...and become the fame of the men, just as a new canoe, decorated with kula shells by overseas kula men, become the fame of the builder. Although the women's beautification displays their male kinsmen's kula prowess, it should be kept in mind that it also decorates them, attaching the positive qualisigns of value to the women's own persons' (Munn 1986:112).

In that sense, tattoos are potent, yet removed, contributors in the creation of the fame of the artist, the network associated with them, and these reflect and therefore enhance the status of the tattooees. This was an important aspect of the relationship between Vatea, Pitou and Chime reviewed earlier. This is because Pitou gained the direct positive attributes of association with Chime and Vatea; and to a point concurrently was enhanced by their fame and technical efficacy and indirectly advertised the fame of these two tattoo artists. As Munn points out:

‘There are certain parallels between this process of verbal publication by the other, which characterises the essential structure of fame, and the material mode of self display by which the media of influence a man acquires are demonstrated on Gawa in his beautification of another person. When shells are lent out to be worn by someone else, the owner’s self-decoration is, in effect, detached from him and made public by another. The shell refers back to the owner, adorning him through his capacity to physically adorn another. In this respect, the wearer becomes the publicist of the donor’s influence, as if she or he were mentioning his name’ (Munn 1986:113).

However, most tattoos are created in collaboration between the artist and the tattooee. It could therefore be argued that the agency is a shared one. The tattooee’s social efficacy includes both his input in the design, the tattoo’s indexicality, and his choice of tattoo artist to transform his desire into a material, yet embodied, object. This choice itself can be perceived as another form of agency on the tattooee’s part. Tattoos act as Gellian traps in relation to the tattooee and the wider world. They draw other tattoo enthusiasts to engage socially with their wearers by a sense of shared interests, aesthetic appreciation and experience. It also draws non-tattooed individuals to make associations about the tattooed individual based on the efficacy of the tattoos they display. This is, in a way, very similar to some of the processes associated with the *kula*. According to Damon (1990), the Dikoyas community had to revive its *kula* fame in the fifties after its collapse due to the death of leaders and environmental pressures such as drought. There was a deliberate decisions made by the elders to regain *kula* fame by becoming successful in the exchanges involved. Once, this was achieved, the village became one of the most prosperous of their island (Damon 1990). Thus, the multiple relationships formed by Polynesian artists in Europe and North America, and their successful interactions in the global tattoo community, are increasing their own personal fame, but also

their community's, as well as positioning themselves within a spatiotemporal landscape. Furthermore,

‘as iconic and reflexive code, fame is the virtual form of influence. Without fame, a man's influence would, as it were, go nowhere; successful acts would in effect remain locked within themselves in given times and places of their occurrence or be limited to immediate transactors’ (Munn 1986:117).

Therefore, fame emphasises the triadic nature of exchange because: ‘Whereas an immediate transactor, or the particular event, starts one's fame, fame itself must be a process that goes beyond this relative immediacy’ (Munn 1986:117). Thus, a tattoo can only index the act of exchange and further the fame of their protagonists if it is seen. The winning of tattoo conventions prizes and the publishing of the tattoo in the press will maximise its intended agency (see chapter six).

As Miller (1987) points out: ‘what emerges from [Munn's work] is a sense of how the individual projects out in representation, but in so doing comes to understand personal experience in relation to a set of media’ (Miller 1987:56). In the case of the Australian Walbiri, it is the landscape and its features which are the privileged media (Munn 1973), I would propose that in the case of the global tattoo community, the body and tattoos become the set of media privileged in the process of objectification. Miller uses

‘the term objectification...to describe a dual process by means of which a subject externalises itself in a creative act of differentiation, and in turn reappropriates this externalisation through an act which Hegel terms sublation (*Aufhebung*). This act eliminates the separation of the subject from its creation but does not eliminate this creation itself; instead, the creation is used to enrich and develop the subject, which then transcends its earlier state’ (Miller 1987:28).

It could be that the tattooing process is, in a sense, an embodied form of the sublation process. By this, I mean that the subject may conceptualise particular values, genealogical or cultural links, association or tradition in a process of externalisation that s/he want to have tattooed upon his/her body. The separation between the externalisation and the subject

collapses as they are re-united through the act of tattooing which, as Miller notes similarly in the case of sublation, does not eliminate the externalised concept but develops the subject; in an act of transcendence. The tattoos become the signs that this transcendental metamorphosis has taken place while still displaying some form of expression of the externalisation implied in the particular design: its indexicality. Although most Euro-American cultures may not perceive the boundary of the body as expressing the genuine social character of the individual, Strathern shows that for the New Guinean highlanders the use of decorations and body modifications are socially valid expressions of their genuine identity (Strathern 1988). As Gell also notes, the reasoning behind these boundary-self concepts tends to give social relationships more emphasis than internal individual ones. It considers individuals as being ‘... the sum total of their relations with other people..’ (Gell 1993:24). Therefore the skin, residing on the outside and being the most public organ, becomes the paramount expression of the social self; ‘...the person is his/her skin.’ (ibid). I am not presenting this to argue that all people involved in the practice of tattooing express their ‘genuine self’, social or egotistical, on their skins. Instead, I want to allude to the possibility that objectifications can be expressed through the body, and play an integral part in the identification process. As Munn points out:

‘As a result of this projective process, the material world comes to provide the individual with images or ‘fragments’ of himself. In the normal personality these ‘images’ are recognised as being outside the person and separate from him, and yet are experienced as inextricably bound up with him’ (Munn 1971:158).

It would seem that this projective process is reminiscent of the ambiguous nature of tattoos and of the complex act of tattooing.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the way the global community somehow integrated the local French Polynesian context within the wider structure of the global tattoo community. I have presented how some Polynesian tattoo artists have engaged with these

global tattoo networks in a series of encounters, movements and acts of exchange. As I have discussed in this chapter, such processes were particularly salient during the Taputapuatea tattoo festival in 2000. Through those types of events, individuals have been able to heighten their own profile as tattoo artists and enabled them to come to Europe and North America to work and, in turn, increase their fame and status further. The gained fame and status by some local tattoo artists, locally and globally, have enabled them to attract other artists to engage with them in delayed exchange relationships which themselves are constitutive of their personal fame and status. Furthermore, their personal fame becomes indirectly the fame of their particular networks in the wider global tattoo community. Fame and agency are expressions of the social efficacy displayed by the different tattoo artists through the tattoos they create. In that sense, all participants in these types of exchange relationships become the reciprocal agents of each others' value definition. My overall aim, in this chapter, has been to highlight the similarities between this particular context and others. This is because, I feel that the encounters and exchanges, taking place in the global tattoo community, are subject to the same process of objectification taking place in all human groups. In the next chapter, I look at a number of publications about tattooing in French Polynesia and discuss how they reflect the change in the nature of the practice as well as the way they became instrumental in creating an image of authenticity of the local practice rooted in colonial objectifications of Tahitian people and culture.

## Chapter Five:

### The Uses and Consequences of Books on Polynesian Tattoos in the 1990's.

#### 5.1 Introduction

Through the 1990's, in French Polynesia and Europe, a series of books and booklets were published relating to the local tattooing renewal. I would like now to review and analyse four of these that are considered by my informants as important. Two were published on the island of Tahiti and two were published in Europe. Through these, I would like to show how the rapid change, and increased presence, of tattoos during that decade can be observed. They are, in a way, illustrations of the move of the practice, and of the individuals involved in it, from the local to the global stage; and chart their inclusion within a wider global tattoo community. As these publications have a different feel to them due to their differing sizes and types of layout, I will succinctly describe them and the number of photos and types of illustrations. This is so that an overall impression of these books can be perceived comprehensively. The first book I will look at was published locally in French Polynesia in the early 1990's and is considered, by my informants, as seminal as it was the first publication which looked at the contemporary tattoo renewal in this context. The second book was published globally in the late 1990's. It has texts from literary legends such as the French author Tournier as well as a text from one of the important actors of the tattoo renewal in French Polynesia: Raymond Graffe (see chapters three and four). However the book is mainly a series of photos by the Italian fashion photographer Barbieri. I argue that this book as a whole is enmeshed in acts of reification and reactive objectification regarding the image of Tahiti and of the contemporary tattoos found there. The third book I will look at is an academic research regarding tattooing in the Marquesas Islands and is used by many of my informants as a reference tool in their tattooing practice. Finally, the fourth book is a booklet published at the same time as the Taputapuatea tattoo festival was held. It was published

locally and is a series of interviews and short articles related to tattoo. I look in detail at an interview conducted of Raymond Graffe (see chapters three and four). I discuss the type of discourse he holds regarding issues of appropriation and authenticity (see also chapter eight). Overall, in this chapter, I intend to show how these different publications are representative, and to a point illustrations, of the changes of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia. I will discuss the way these books have influenced different people from around the globe and their understanding of the perceived meaning of these tattoos. Furthermore, I will also highlight the changes of Graffe's discourse regarding the representations of Polynesian contemporary culture.

## 5.2 *Tatau: Tatouage Polynésien 1992*

This book was published in 1992 by Tupuna Productions; a publisher based on Tahiti. It contains around eighty black and white photos and illustrations (see appendices C, D, E, F & G). The photos have been taken by Claude Coirault and Marie-Helene Villierme. There is also a short text, in French, at the beginning of the book authored by Dominique Morvan. All three are either *afa* (half French/half Polynesian) or long-term residents of French Polynesia from Europe. The book is twenty centimetres by twenty centimetres, two third of an A4 sheet of paper, and has eighty-four pages. It is considered an important book, by my informants in French Polynesia, because it was the first directly relating to the local tattoo renewal. As a whole, it seems to have the aim to celebrate the influence of Tavana Salmon in the cultural, but also political, landscape of French Polynesia. The photo on the cover of the book is a portrait of Salmon with tattoos on his upper torso and at the top of his forehead. The first part of the text is a short biography. According to it, Tavana Salmon was born from a Tahitian mother and a Norwegian father and left Tahiti as a small child. As an adult, he became a traditional Polynesian dance specialist in Hawaii. He produced a number of shows, including one which choreographed two hundred traditional dancers from around the Polynesian triangle. In 1980, he then came to Tahiti and created dance troupes as well as becoming a driving force of the tattoo renewal and in the re-creation of traditional rituals. The author describes how Salmon took three Tahitians to Western Samoa to be tattooed traditionally. One was Teve who was a lead dancer in Salmon's dance troupe. Originally from the

Marquesas Islands, Teve decided to have a full body suit tattooed with traditional Marquesan tattoo designs, thus becoming the first to have so in the modern era. These designs, as I have already explained in a previous chapter, can be found in the collection of illustrations by the German artist K Von Den Steinen (2005) who, in the nineteenth century, visited the area. Morvan states that it is the sight of the tattooed body of Teve, on display during dance festivals and when he won a string of the local ‘strong man’ competitions, which moved other Polynesian individuals to acquire tattoos of traditional designs. The short biography concludes that:

*‘Tavana a ouvert la voie, son histoire appartient a l’Histoire de cette decennie capitale pour le renouveau culturel polynesien’* ‘Tavana (Salmon) opened the way, his story belongs to the History of this pivotal decade to the Polynesian cultural renewal’ (Morvan 1992:9).

It is interesting that, in the narrative of the early part of the book, the author is giving Salmon the credit for being the singular influence in the re-introduction of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia. I do not want here to underplay his role during that pivotal time, yet my understanding of the situation, based on years of discussions with many informants, is that Salmon was one important actor but there was also many others, including Raymond Graffe. The omission of Graffe, in this book, is indicative of the complex local cultural politics scene. This will be further illustrated a bit later in this chapter, when I look at another Polynesian publication. Morvan’s remaining short text deals with the role of tattooing in pre-contact Polynesia, the techniques used at that time and today, and with the rising popularity of tattoos through the different archipelagos of French Polynesia. Although short, the text does give a number of accurate information about the history of the tattooing practice locally, and it stands as the first coherent publication on tattooing in French Polynesia. However, the text is only small part of the book, the photos are the main components of it.

The photos presented in *‘Tatau: Tatouage Polynesien’* were taken by Claude Coirault, a French photographer who published books on Australian aborigines and is a long-term resident in Tahiti. There is a page presenting his prior work and his approach to the tattooed body.

*'Avant toute chose, il a cherché à montrer la beauté graphique des motifs sur la beauté plastique des corps'* 'Firstly, he (Coirault) looked to show the graphic beauty of the designs on the plastic beauty of the bodies' (Morvan 1992:16). The main aim of the authors is to portray 'the integration of the tattoos in everyday life, and to unveil the movement of the tattooed body in its environment' *'l'intégration du tatouage dans le quotidien, ...révèle le mouvement du corps tatoué dans son environnement'* (Morvan 1992:16).

All the photos are black and white. They are mostly portraits of individuals, but some are focusing on the particular part of the body where the tattoos are. The photo that starts the series is of Chime's lower back and back of his legs, which are all tattooed. All the photos have the name and occupation of the subject. There is no obvious order in which the photos are presented. Nevertheless, there are a number of patterns. Around half of the photos, those placed first in the book, are of traditional dancers and local tattoo artists. The second part of the book has photos of individuals who are mainly manual workers and craftsmen, but also include business people, politicians, teachers, journalists, singers, civil servants, bakers, librarians, fashion models, sculptors and residents to the local prison. Between the two parts are two specific breaks which are dedicated to two individuals, Roonui and Teve. This is because, at that time, they were the only two Polynesians to have full body suits made of Marquesan tattoo designs. As Roonui advised me in 2003: 'if you want to make it fast in the tattoo world, get a full body suit, people notice you then' (interviewed in November 2003). Another aspect of the book which is of interest is the gender of the tattooed subjects who appear in the photos. While tattoos, in French Polynesia, have been strongly linked to masculine identity and concept of the warrior (Kuwahara 2005), it is surprising that a third of the individual portrayed are women. Morvan (1992) does comment on this when she writes that women took a while longer than man to become tattooed, and join this aspect of the Polynesian cultural renewal movement, mainly because they feared being judged negatively by the local mainstream society (*ibid*). However, she writes, in 1992, local tattoo artists are seeing an increase in the number of women who present themselves to them to be tattooed (*ibid*). The age of the subjects varies between late teens and late fifties. There is only one subject who is French, the rest are all *afa* or Polynesians. There are no photos of tourists. This is not surprising considering firstly the agenda of the authors, and secondly, the fact that at that time tattooing was not yet established as a part of the tourist trade. This happened in the

later part of the 1990's. Prior to this, tattoos were directly, and to an extent essentially, used in the local cultural renewal and in the political activism which is associated to it.

Many of the portraits are set in the workplaces of the subjects. Some stand in their workshop or in a building site. Others are simply sitting either in gardens, beaches, or, like the businessman, in a leather chair in his office. Another example is of a physical education teacher sitting on the floor of a gymnasium, dressed in aerobics exercise gear. Some photos were taken during dance festivals and the portraits are of subjects sitting in a crowd or performing in traditional Polynesian dance attire. Most of the individuals photographed look directly at the camera. All these aspects give a sense of routine, and everyday life, to the style of the portraits, as the author intended. There is a strong sense that the photos are not involved in an exoticism of the tattooed bodies they display. The tattoos themselves are not all large and imposing. Many are small and delicate. However, they are all Polynesian, especially Marquesan, in style and tattooed by local tattoo artists. It is somewhat surprising that the names of the tattoo artists are the only information omitted from the portraits. Morvan (*ibid*) does states that Salmon, and later Roonui, have tattooed hundreds of Polynesians, and that many new tattoo artists are operating in French Polynesia (*ibid*), she does not, however, comment on the specific tattoos appearing in the numerous photos of the book. I should point out, at this stage, that I do not want to give the impression that all of the subjects are somewhat from humble backgrounds in the local community. Almost a third of the photos are individuals who are also recognised agents in the cultural scene. People such as Bobby Holcomb and Angelo, for example, were regularly at the top of the local music charts during this period. There is a sense that the inclusion of such artists works on two levels. Firstly, it reciprocally confirms the cultural position of tattooing, both sang lyrics often referring to ancestral spirits and valorising Polynesian identity. Secondly, it places them at the centre of the movement by choosing their portraits to be in the book. Through this, there is a sense of a local community which is established by the confirmation of key participants in the network.

Overall, the book is meant to be a snapshot of the diversity of individuals who engage in tattooing in the specific cultural and political context of French Polynesia at the time. It is

regarded, by many of my Polynesian informants, as marking an important time in the local tattoo renewal. Some talk about the book as the first form of official acceptance of the acquisition of tattoos and a confirmation of the valorisation of the tattooing practice to the political environment. This is apparent in the identity of the editor of the book, Tea Hirshon, who is a local cultural agent and has strong ties to the independentist political movement. In a short introduction, she (Hirshon 1992) states that the three traditional roles of tattooing in Polynesia were aesthetic, social and magical. She argues that, when talking to the people involved in contemporary tattooing in French Polynesia, their testimonies reveal that the three traditional roles of tattooing are still present in their reasons to engage with the renewed practice (*ibid*). Hirshon (*ibid*) concludes by re-affirming the link to the past:

*‘depuis longtemps, dans le Po, la nuit originelle, Tohu dieu du Tatouage, createur des dessins et des couleurs des poisons, attendait en patience de reprendre son chant....quelquess hommes l’ont entendu; rendons-leur hommage’*: ‘Since a long time ago, in Po, the original night, Tohu god of tattooing, creator of the patterns and colours of fishes, was waiting patiently to take up his chant....a few men heard him: let us give them this homage’ (Hirshon 1992:7).

This reference to the Polynesian god *Tohu* is important within the political context of the time. Considering the power exerted by the many different churches and the de-valorisation of traditional beliefs, and of Polynesian identity markers in general, such direct link made between the tattoo renewal and the past traditional practice, via a deity unrelated to the Christian pantheon, is, I believe, an important and noticeable marker of socio-cultural political positioning in the local context. The main point seems to be that, although there are no overtly political statements in this book, the fact remains that it is inherently political, and therefore, places tattoos, and the practice, firmly in the local political sphere. This, as I have discussed in chapters six and seven of this thesis, has changed. The practice is now a lucrative way for local artists to gain fame and prestige locally and sometimes globally. Some of these changes are well illustrated in the changes in the types of publications published during that time, as I will now discuss.

### 5.3 Tahiti Tattoos 1998

The book 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) is very different from *Tataou: Tatouage Polynesien* (1992). It was published by Taschen internationally. It is on hard-back form and its dimensions are 34cm by 27cm, approximately two A4 sheets of paper. It is 128 pages long and is a mix of short texts in English and 125 photos and illustrations (see appendices H, I, J, K, L & M). The first text is an introduction by the respected French author Michel Tournier, from the prestigious French Academie Goncourt. It is interesting that one of Tournier's prize-winning books is '*Vendredi ou Les Limbes du Pacifique*' (Tournier 1967) where he re-visits Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe', and which is studied in secondary school throughout France. The second text is entitled 'The History of Tattooing in Polynesia' and is written by Raymond Graffe, who signs 'High Priest of Marae and Tattoo' (Graffe 1998:74). The third, and final, text of the book is a series of passages of Paul Gauguin's '*Noa Noa*'. All the photos were taken by the internationally acclaimed Italian fashion photographer Gian Paolo Barbieri; who the same year published another book of photos titled 'The Male Nude' (Taschen 1998).

Tournier's (1998) introduction is titled 'When Skin Speaks' (Tournier 1998:9). He writes:

'Nothing in a person goes deeper than the skin, said Paul Valery. No doubt because through skin we offer ourselves as objects one to another. First and foremost there is the colour of the skin. In many societies a fastidious hierarchy reigns, with black at its base and white at its summit.... Less than a century ago, this was true even of the 'whites' in Europe, for whom a tanned skin was the ignominious mark of the lowest class, that of the rural worker. Times have changed... City-dwellers expose themselves to the sun at great expense against the categorical advice of their doctors... At the same time, a rehabilitation of blackness has begun: black is beautiful. In this whole matter of skin, tattooing has an enigmatic and paradoxical place. And the distinction between Western and Polynesian tattooing is absolute and instructive' (Tournier 1998:9).

Tournier (*ibid*) then goes on to highlights the differences he perceives regarding the two practices. For him, 'Western' tattoos are secretive, hidden by clothing, and only revealed to others by 'stripping to the skin' (Tournier 1998:9). This, Tournier states, gives them an erotic aspect and refers to the private life of their wearers; to 'affairs, declarations of love or hate, vengeance sated or sought' (Tournier 1998:9). He argues that the origins of Western tattoos are shady and sordid; they evoke 'the branding of the convict' (Tournier 1998:9). He also

notes that tattoos are acquired through suffering and that they cannot be effaced. ‘These characteristics have a singular coherence. They can be expressed in a single sentence: the bodies of those who have suffered in an abject milieu shall forever bear the painful mark of it’ (Tournier 1998:10). In contrast, Tournier (*ibid*) argues, Polynesian tattoos are not secretive; they are there to be seen (*ibid*). They are the opposite of stigmatising. They ‘replace garments, to clothe the Polynesian body’ (Tournier 1998:10). He then points out that Western clothing has gone beyond its utilitarian function and has become a language (*ibid*). Similarly,

‘Polynesian tattoos are also a language, but primary, primordial, original language. Tattooed, the body becomes a body-sign. It is a book of spells scrawled on the skin, it is knowledge and initiation. And in this way suffering and indelibility take on a sense quite different from that which they assume in Western countries...In the Polynesian tattoo, suffering and indelibility entirely lack the sense of misery and filth implicit in the Western tattoo. They simply impart an incomparable gravity to the sign cut forever into the body of the initiate’ (Tournier 1998:11-12).

He then relates the tattoo markings to the markings of ageing upon the body, which elicit ideas such as decrepitude and are feared in the West (*ibid*). According to him,

‘this horror of ageing is unknown to the Polynesian, whose tattoos make of face and body – of what was, and in the Westerner remains, insignificant flesh – works of art apt to inspire love: jewelled body and diamantine face. The Polynesian tattoo is intended primarily as a declaration of love. But this sign is not devoid of meaning. The word it brings must be harmonious. It is a body-poem. And this word must also be veracity and fidelity: body-signature...they are word incarnate, the signature made flesh’ (Tournier 1998:12).

Here, he recalls the words of the French actor Michel Simon, who started his acting career in 1928 and worked with such directors as Renoir and Guitry in classics such as ‘*Boudu sauve des eaux*’ (1932) and ‘*L’atalante*’ (1934). When asked why he was tattooed, he replied: ‘My friends are tattooed, as I am. The tattooed never betray’ (in Tournier 1998:10). Tournier (*ibid*) concludes his introduction with an alternative reading of the Biblical story of the garden of Eden.

‘I imagined that, before original sin, Adam and Eve were not naked, but covered in signs, which were the word of God. They did not work, nor did they age, for their vocation was accomplished in this radiance of divine truth emanating from their skin, just as certain birds spontaneously hymn the glory of the Creator. Then came the Fall. Sin broke the divine pact. The cloak of words that covered Adam and Eve was torn from them. and they found themselves naked, ashamed of their white, insignificant skin. Their function changed. Where once they had proclaimed, in stillness and silence, the Word of God, they were now condemned to hard labour. On their bodies,

calluses and scars formed. In this sense, Polynesia is Paradise Regained' (Tournier 1998:13).

Tournier's introduction, although short, is important. It sets the tone for the rest of the book. The words of such an eminent literary personality also add a certain amount of cultural capital and notoriety to the publication. However, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed before I discuss the photos in more details, which are the main body of the book. Although Tournier's (*ibid*) introduction may have some literary value, it is, nevertheless, a blatant example of essentialisation and exoticisation of the Polynesian culture and people, and in a negative way of the individuals involved in the European tattoo community as well. To recapitulate his argument succinctly, there are some drastic differences between the use of tattoos in Europe and Polynesia. Yet, these differences go beyond the tattooing practices and reflect some deeper existentialist divergences between the two kinds of people. Due to the fact that Europeans wear clothes, their tattoos are personal, erotic and sordid. The suffering involved in their acquisitions is perceived as misery and their indelibility as filth. This, according to Tournier (*ibid*), is because European people fear ageing and therefore death. In contrast, Polynesian people do not wear clothes and this means that their tattoos are social and celebratory. The suffering and the indelibility are conceptualised as, respectively, knowledge and initiation. Rather than acting as a '*memento mori*', a tattoo, in Polynesia, is a way to use the human body as, and to a point transform it into, a sign, a signature, a declaration of love, a poem, and to express some form of the original, and sacred, Word. There is a sense that, for Tournier (*ibid*), the Polynesian use of tattoos represents that intimate relationship, lost in the West, between an individual and the word of god, a form of embodied spirituality. This bond with the sacred, negotiated through the body, makes tattoos, in Polynesia, indexes of veracity and fidelity. In the West, because this link is broken, tattoos evolve in the sphere of the profane and are a sordid, yet sensual, language expressed through the insignificant flesh. There is a sense that Tournier (*ibid*) has no real knowledge of the place of tattoos in the contemporary socio-cultural contexts of both Polynesia and Euro-America, nor of the history of tattooing in these locations. There is an evident paradox in his narrative when one considers that it is the arrival of the word of god, through the bible and the introduction of the written word, which was crucial to the traditional tattooing practice virtually stopping in French Polynesia for more than a century. It would seem that there is still, in some French literary circles, idealistic visions of an almost mythical other which are drenched in the traditions of romantic humanism. In other words, the search for the elusive

island of *Cythere*, started partly by Voltaire and Rousseau, is still going on for some contemporary authors.

The second text is in three parts placed at regular intervals in the book. It is written by Raymond Graffe. The first part is 'the history of tattooing in Polynesia'. According to Graffe (1998), tattooing has been present since the dawn of Polynesian civilization, was widespread and reached the greatest heights of artistic perfection (*ibid*). It, then, was actively discouraged by the religions which arrived from the Western world and the skill was forgotten (*ibid*). 'For that reason we had to turn to our neighbours in the Pacific, who had resisted the pressures of history, to relearn the lost art. The renaissance of tattooing took place in Tahiti, with the help of Samoan practitioners, at the *Tiurai* celebrations in 1982. It was an important occasion on which Tahitian culture rediscovered its roots and pledged itself to the conservation of Polynesian customs' (Graffe 1998:45). He then goes on describing one of the legends of the creation of tattoos. According to Graffe (*ibid*), it was two sons of the principal god *Ta'arua*; *Mata Mata Arahua* (He Who Makes Marks with Charcoal) and *Tu Ra'i Po* (He Who Lives in the Dark Sky). They invented the Polynesian practice of tattooing to seduce and woo *Hina Ere Ere Manua* (Hina of the Quick Temper). She was the daughter of *Ti'i* and *Hina*; the original man and woman. She was kept in isolation, and closely guarded by her mother, to preserve her virginity. *Mata Mata Arahua* and *Tu Ra'i Po* tattooed themselves and *Hina Ere Ere Manua* escaped to join them and be tattooed herself. Following this, human beings were taught the techniques by the gods and used it widely because they found tattoos attractive, and the two gods became the patron spirits of the art (*ibid*). Somehow surprisingly, Graffe concludes this part by stating that:

'this particular form of traditional culture has been passed down uncontaminated from one generation to the next on our islands for no outside influence has been able to alter the methods used or the way in which designs are applied to the skin (Graffe 1998:46).

There is an obvious tension at play in Graffe's text, which can also be felt in the general sphere of cultural politics in French Polynesia. It is a tension between the accurate acknowledgement of the break of the practice and the 'invention' of a tradition which draws its authenticity from its relationship to the past, the very past from which they are isolated. This partly explains the fact that different myths of the creation of tattooing in the Society Islands co-exist. For example, Hirshon (1992) and Tavana Salmon in the book *Tatau*, reviewed earlier in this chapter, attribute tattooing to the god *Tohu*, the god of the patterns

and colours of fishes (*ibid*). The point should be made here that all traditions are invented as Hobsbawm (1983) has shown. However, as Thomas (1997) points out, this fact does not inherently, and automatically, make them inauthentic, and meaningless to the people who invent them. Furthermore, there is a sense that every single ritual or practice, perceived to be traditional, is a re-interpretation of the last performance and, therefore, is essentially different. However, what is of interest, in this particular context, is that *Ma'ohi* individuals involved in the cultural renewal are aware of the importance of wearing a cloak of authenticity to gain cultural capital on the global stage. There is no doubt that Tournier's (1998) text is instrumental in the case of this book. This is because, for him, *Ma'ohi* people and their tattoos are inherently authentic and have some form of existential value which is culturally built-in; in comparison to Westerners' profane inauthenticity. It is with these issues in mind, that I would like now to look at the photos of the book.

There are 125 photos and illustrations in the book. All of them are black and white. Most of them are either full or double page format. There are 39 illustrations and old photographs relating to tattooing. These were all produced by Europeans individuals who travelled in the nineteenth century and encountered the practice of tattooing in Polynesia. There are also, included in these, some of the French painter Gauguin's drawings and paintings which he created during his stay there. Most of these illustrations and photos appear in the form of clusters of small pictures. Barbieri's photos number 91 and are all large. Although the photos are not presented in any particular order, they can be classified in different categories for the sake of analytical clarity. There are 18 photos which are of landscapes, mainly of the island of Moorea. Then, there are two types of photos that have tattooed people for subject. The first type has 41 photos and they are mainly portraits of individuals; taken in an indoor studio in front of a neutral background. The second type has 28 photos and these are set in scenic surroundings and somehow '*mise-en-scene*'. They include individual swimming and fishing in the clear waters of a lagoon, up-scaling coconut trees, throwing a fishing net, riding bareback on a white horse, blowing a conch shell, dancing in the shallow waters, and handling a sting ray. In all the pictures, the subjects are naked only for loin-clothes. This is somewhat consistent with Tournier's argument about the Polynesian body and tattoos. It also brings to the fore the fact that, of Barbieri's 80 subjects, only one is a woman, and she is not visibly tattooed. She appears in one of the portrait with her tattooed partner. There are also two photos of Roonui's daughter, at the time still a

toddler. In total, 77 photos are of naked, mostly young, men. Furthermore, many of my informants, both in Europe and Polynesia, have commented to me, when talking about this book, that there is a certain homoerotic flavour to many of the pictures. As I mentioned earlier, Barbieri's other publication that year was 'The Male Nude' (Barbieri 1998) and this could partly explain his choices of settings, and poses, for the photographs. Beyond this point, however, this gender gap is one of the significant differences with the *Tataou* (1992) book reviewed earlier. If *Tataou* (1992) tried to firmly locate tattoos in the everyday local context of their wearers and gave a representational choice of subjects both in age, body types, and gender groups, *Tahiti Tattoos* (1998) contrastingly appears to be embarked on the creation, and to a great extent the confirmation and reification, of a specific mythical vision of French Polynesia.

Regarding the gender issue, it is clear to any visitors to Tahiti, that many Polynesian women are tattooed. This fact is well illustrated by the change in the rules of admission to the 'Miss France' competition for representative from French Polynesia. This organisation has strict rules about the behaviour and body-appearance of their contestants. One is stating that tattoos are forbidden. Yet, in 2007, an amendment was made for the contestants from French Polynesia, so that they could be tattooed. However, the competition's organisers will only accept no more than one tattoo and it must be small in size (*Depeche de Tahiti* 20/05/07). It is, nonetheless, telling that such a rigid and intransigent organisation, (who tried to remove the 2007 title from a girl from the sub-tropical island of the Reunion, in the Indian Ocean, because she did a series of semi-nude pictures on a beach a few years back) is making an exception regarding tattoos for the girls from French Polynesia. The other six representations of Polynesia women, in *Tahiti Tattoos* (1998), are three female subjects painted by Paul Gauguin, and the three others are photos taken in the early twentieth century. The absence of female bodies is somewhat strange in a reification that includes European mythical South Seas islands imageries. This could be read as an attempt, by the local tattoo elite, to firmly assert the control of the practice in male hands. This is a fact that it is very much so already. All the female tattoo artists I have either met, or heard of, working in French Polynesia were Europeans. Some had learnt in Europe, or North America, and had settled in the Society Islands. Others were the partners of local tattoo artists and learnt to tattoo with them. However, the fact remains that many Polynesian women, and girls, are getting tattooed. Taking into account that not all the subjects in the book are tattoo artists, but simply

tattooees, the absence of female subject seems to go beyond a local agenda connected to gender politics. There is also an issue regarding the types of tattoos appearing in this book. For example, out of sixty-nine tattooed subjects, seventeen are not really tattooed but the designs are drawn upon their skin. This is the case mainly on the 'scenic' series. The subjects in question do not appear to have any real tattoos apart from the false ones. They are all in their late teens and with muscular bodies and long hair. I should point out that, although only drawn, the designs are quite realistic and are consistent in style, and in their aesthetic value, with the tattooed designs.

This issue, regarding the choice and nature of the tattoos and of the bodies shown in 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998), again contrasts it with the earlier '*Tatau*' (1992) book. While in the latter, the tattoos ranged from full body-suits to small sized, in the former, all the tattoos are large and imposing. There are 69 photos that include tattooed subjects taken by Barbieri (1998). Some of them appear also in '*Tatau*' (1992) like Tavana Salmon, Teve, Roonui, Chime and Purutu. 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) has also other subjects. For example, Raymond Graffe is prominent in a series of portraits. However, it should be noted that nowhere, in this book, is there any references either to the names of the tattooees themselves or to the tattoo artists who produced their tattoos. Even Graffe's portrait series is not related to the text he authored. And, somehow uncannily, the portrait appearing opposite to the beginning of Graffe's text is one of Tavana Salmon, who is not named either. This anonymity of the subjects is somehow surprising but seems to serve a particular purpose. From Tournier's (1998) introduction to the composition of the photos, via the inclusion of Gauguin's excerpts, the book conveys, and reifies, a mythical, and to a great extent mystical, image of Polynesian tattoos, male bodies, and landscape. Even the beautiful photos of the island of Moorea are all devoid of any signs of modernity, or for that matter, of human occupancy. There is a sense of an untouched location with anonymous naked, archetypal in Michelangelo's David sense, man expressing their ancestral relationships with their gods with tattoos inscribed in their bodies. The omnipresence of water in many of the photos reflects accurately life on a Polynesian island but, nonetheless, increases the sensual nature of the bodies displayed. As is also Barbieri's (1998) choice of having the photos in black and white. This, moreover, gives a sense of timelessness to this publication. Consequently, there is, to an extent, a blurring of the timeline and it presents a version of history which seems to erase the process of colonisation

and of religious conversion, both crucial elements to the tattooing practice ceasing. This can be perceived as a celebration of the re-introduction of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia as a potent identity marker. Furthermore, the book is an important marker in the process of revalorisation, through the re-establishment of an authenticity to a global audience, of Polynesian tattoos. This re-connection to a lost past is interpreted by an Italian fashion photographer in collaboration with the local elite of the tattooing renewal. Therefore, it seems that, overall, 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) is an example of the process of 'reactive objectification' (Thomas 1997) (see chapters five and seven). This is because the local tattoo elite is implicitly involved in the reification of an image of themselves drenched in colonial history, and yet, paradoxically, this collaboration is used by them as a way to attempt to erase this traumatic process. Through this, they also want to challenge, and replace, a version of history, imposed by the French colonial apparatus and Protestant perspective, with a direct link through time to a past, which is itself reconstructed through the accounts of early contacts written by European explorers. However, these issues should not cloud the global reach, and the generally enthusiastic reception, that this publication achieved and received.

My first encounter with the 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) book was in 1999 in South Africa. I had taken the book '*Tatau*' (1992) to the South African tattoo artist called Big Dave in his tattoo shop, 'Body Art', in Durban, to show him a particular design. After looking through the book, he reached under the counter and showed me the 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) book. It was clear, by the way he commented on the photos, that this book had a great effect on him and had awoken in him an interest for Polynesian designs and culture. After reading it, he started offering designs of a neo-tribal style in his shop. He also was saving money to come to a convention in Europe to be tattooed by a Samoan tattoo master. Since then, I have seen this book on the bookshelves of most tattoo shops, from Deptford in London to Moorea itself. Big Dave once commented to me that 'for you (assuming that I was Polynesian), tattooing means a totally different things than for us' (Big Dave, Durban 06/1999). This is a good example of the impact that the range of imagery deployed in this book has on people with very little prior knowledge of Polynesian cultures and historical contexts. To that extent, 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) has been successful in establishing the practice as authentic to a global audience; who mostly would consider any Polynesian tattoo as authentic anyhow

because of the popular belief that tattooing originated from Polynesia and of many people ignorance of the century long break in the use of the practice there.

#### 5.4 *Te Patu Tiki; Le Tatouage aux Iles Marquises* 1998

In the same year as ‘Tahiti Tattoos’ (1998) was published, another book appeared. It is titled ‘*Te Patu Tiki; Le Tatouage aux Iles Marquises*’ (1998) (Tattooing in the Marquesan Islands). This book is written in French and differs in many points with the two prior publications reviewed in this chapter so far. It is mainly authored by two French anthropologists; Pierre and Marie-Noelle Ottino-Garanger. The book is roughly the same size than ‘Tahiti Tattoos’ (1998), but has more pages. The text is, for the main part, Marie-Noelle Ottino-Garanger’s doctoral thesis changed for publication. The text in ‘*Te Patu Tiki*’ (1998) is extensive and presented in an informative and structured way. The book is richly illustrated with hundreds of drawings, paintings, photos of related artefacts, and of a few local people tattooed. Some of the photographs were taken by Claude Coirault who was the main photographer in the ‘*Tatau*’ (1992) book which started this chapter. The book is split in two parts. The first one, which covers about two third of the whole publication, deals with the different aspects of tattooing in the Marquesas Islands; from the historical context to the cultural meanings of the practice. It also looks at the contemporary renewal. The second part, and last third, is printed on a different kind of paper and includes an extensive explanation of each Marquesan tattoo designs. Overall, the book is a learned in-depth study of the subject matter and in a particular cultural context. Rather than focus on the book itself, I would like to look at the way it is perceived and used in the global tattoo community in comparison to ‘Tahiti Tattoos’ (1998).

There is no doubt that ‘*Te Patu Tiki*’ (1998) had less of a wider impact on the majority of the global tattoo community, and the general public, than ‘Tahiti Tattoos’ (1998). I generally found it in tattoo shops of either Marquesan tattoo artists in France and on Tahiti, or in the bookshelves of tattoo shop in Europe who have either direct links with Polynesian tattoo artists or have a sustained interest in this style of designs and of the culture where they

were, and are again, used. It should be noted, at this point, that what is referred to as Polynesian tattoo style, in French Polynesia now, is mostly directly inspired from what was the Marquesan style. It is a fact that, prior to European contact, tattooing was, in the Marquesas Islands, the most elaborate and extensive in the group of archipelagos contemporarily referred to as French Polynesia. Amongst my Polynesian informants, there also seems to be a certain cultural capital gained by being able to claim some genealogical link with the Marquesas rather than, for example, with the Tuamutu and Society archipelagos. Many Marquesan tattoo artists, who are based in the Society Islands and in Europe, spent very little if no time in the Marquesas Islands. I have also met some who have never been there at all, while a great number never go back after leaving there during their childhood. For many, *'Te Patu Tiki'* (1998) is perceived as an invaluable source of references for designs and a rich resource for their meanings. Furthermore, most of my informants who use this book comment that it is also very useful in the process of creating designs in collaboration with prospective tattooees.

The prominence of the text, in *'Te Patu Tiki'* (1998), compared to the focus on photographs, in both *'Tatau'* (1992) and *'Tahiti Tattoos'* (1998), is one of the main differences. However, it could be argued that, apart from *'Tatau'* (1992), the two remaining books are somehow involved in a similar creation of a link with a severed past; through their treatment of the local tattooing practice. They do so in very different ways. If *'Tahiti Tattoos'* (1998) is involved in the creative process of reactive reification, *'Te Patu Tiki'* (1998) is concerned with academic research and the process of classification.

### 5.5 *Tatu Art No2* 2000

The fourth publication, I would like to discuss here, is not really a book but rather a booklet. *'Tatu Art No2'* (2000) is part of a series of two booklets both published in 2000 (see appendices N, O, P, Q, R & S). These were, and are still today, sold in most of the main newsagents of Tahiti and Moorea rather than in bookshops per se. The main contributor is a French artist named Gotz who is a long-term resident of the islands of Tahiti and Moorea.

Gotz is a painter and an illustrator. Most of his paintings have, since the late 1990's, a tattoo theme and he has illustrated another booklet in 1999, which is titled '*Tatouages d'hier a aujourd'hui*' (1999). He presented an exhibition of his work during the Taputapuatea Tattoo Festival held in 2000 on the island of Raiatea, which I have discussed in chapter seven. Gotz has also worked on tattoo related projects with Chime and other local artists. The '*Tatu Art*' (2000) booklets were published either side of this event and have a number of characteristics which seem to make them specifically appealing and interesting to the individuals involved in the global tattoo community, and to the neo-tribal movement in particular. The booklets are half the size of an A4 sheet of paper. Both have a focus on particular local figures of the tattooing community. The first one features an interview with Chime, while the second presents one with Raymond Graffe. I will now focus mainly on the second edition of the '*Tatu Art*' (2000) booklet.

It has sixty-eight pages and has a balance between photos, texts and illustrations. All of the photographs are in black and white but most have had a blue or brown colour filter applied to them. It has four main parts and five shorter pieces. The four main parts are an interview with Raymond Graffe conducted by Gotz, with version both in French and English, a series of Chime's tattoo designs, an article on female Maori *Moko* (facial tattoos), and a series of pictures of a Samoan individual with a full body suit named Watti. The shorter pieces are an editorial note by Gotz, an advert for Gotz earlier book on tattooing, a short article about the Taputapuatea Tattoo Festival 2000, an homage for the late Samoan tattoo master Sulu'ape Paulo, and a series of advices to prospective tattooees and for tattoo artists; both of the last two are written in both French and English. In this booklet, there is also five of Gotz paintings, a subscription form for '*Tatu Art*', and a one page advert for the local mobile telephone company.

The interview with Raymond Graffe is eighteen pages long. It is first in French and is then repeated in English. There are a number of photos of Graffe's tattoos, as well as small designs which are referred to during the interview. There is a short preamble by Gotz which states:

'a biker in the morning, as he ride his Harley-Davidson, his beard flying in the wind, with a broad smile. An archaeologist at noon, when he conducts some excavating in valleys or dissects files at the Museum of Tahiti and its Islands. The high priest at night who calls for the good spirits to accompany him during a fire-walking ceremony...Raymond Teriirouterai Arioi Graffe is an emblematic figure in Tahiti. The experienced man grants us this interview and through TatuArt, assuages his passion: to pass on his knowledge on' (Gotz 2000:16).

The interview starts with a short biography of Graffe. He was born on the island of Tahiti and worked as a teacher for seven years before deciding to go to France to study archaeology. From his return in French Polynesia to the present day, Graffe has been working in different excavations and was an important actor in recreating the fire-walking ceremonies. Their discussion moves on to the role of tattoos in the pre-contact period, to their general and genealogical meanings, and to the relationship between of particular cultural traditional roles and specific tattoo designs and their placement on the body. Gotz then ask Graffe if not knowing one's lineage should forbid one gaining tattoos. Graffe's response is that, in the case individuals cannot trace their genealogical line, they should create their own designs. Gotz's next question is:

G: What do you think of me being European and however wearing tattoos of Marquesan inspiration?

RG: (Keep silent)

G: Are you shocked?

RG: I think some evolution is necessary in tattooing, dancing...in any traditional art in general! But provided it is done the right way. Today a majority of tattooists do make true replicas of the patterns indexed in the Marquesas Islands by the ethnologist Karl Von Den Steinen late in the nineteenth century. As far as I am concerned, I have always denied the right to tattoo such motifs. My response has always been the same: "This motif does not belong to you!". In these patterns are some restrictions and taboos...they may have very ill consequences for the one who appropriates them. I have warned such people more than once: "These motifs are going to make you ill"...and it has occurred! Whereas if you compose your own pattern, you do not break any tabu and your tattoo is nevertheless a nice one' (Graffe in Gotz 2000:18).

The interview carries on with Graffe discussing his experience with tattooing, stating that Purutu and Chime finished his tattoos when the Samoan tattoo master who started them went back to New Zealand. He then goes on to talk about the specific meanings of some of the tattoo designs he has on his body, including many which are related to the *Arioi* caste (see chapters one and three). Finally, the discussion concludes on issues of identity:

‘RG: When the quest for cultural identity started in the 70’s in Tahiti, a number of persons, each in their speciality, have brought something more to the culture...I have worked myself on the rediscovery of that extraordinary ceremony known as firewalk ceremony and of course I dedicated much of my time on advanced research about tattoo art. I wouldn’t say like Gauguin: “Who are we? Where are we from?” I know who I am: I am Polynesian.

G: How would you describe yourself?

RG: (keep silent...) The Ancestor...Even though I am not so old indeed! The one who passes on...Look! In the early 80’s, it was something of a desert here. Tattooing had been prohibited and there was no remain of it. Today, there are over three hundred tattooists scattered among all the archipelagos in Polynesia...I am glad and proud to have been at the origin of the revival of this art.

G: Have you got anything to tell the tattooists from here or anywhere in the world?

RG: As to the tattooists from Polynesia, I would enjoy them to be considering first the motifs they will tattoo. I’d like them to respect the ancestral drawings. I’d like them to encourage people rather to imagine and create their own motifs even if they just adapt and customize yet existing motifs. As to the others, when they tattoo, I wish them to do it with all their heart and all their soul...’ (Graffe in Gotz 2000:22).

There are a number of points which comes out of the discursive narrative of the interview. One is how Graffe re-asserts the authenticity of the local contemporary practice to his engagement with European academic institutions; which ironically are drenched in colonial indexicalities. Another point is related to the issue (see chapters three and eight) that what seems important to most individuals, involved in the renewal of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia, is issues of alienation rather than appropriation of Polynesian tattoo designs. In this interview, Graffe even warns against the embodied consequences of the alienation of particular tattoo designs, but advises on the adequate, and safest for the health of the prospective tattooee, way to appropriate these same designs. Furthermore, Graffe’s last

comments are directly addressed to the global tattoo community. On the opposite page to the end of the interview, there is an appeal from Gotz:

‘If you share our passion, if you have already lived an experience, an adventure you would like others to be sharing, or if you are a tattooist, if you are covered with tattoos (big tattoos exclusively), write to us, send us photos. We will select the best texts and the most beautiful motifs and we will publish them with your agreement in our next issues’ (Gotz 2000:23).

This, and the constantly bilingual layout of the texts, seems to strongly imply that the booklet is targeted at an audience primarily outside of French Polynesia itself. I should point that, at the time of my latest fieldwork, in 2003, no new issues of ‘*Tatu Art*’ had been published other than the first two discussed here. The structure of the booklet is somehow reminiscent of the European and North American tattoo magazines, and its appeal for readers’ contributions can be read as a way to move further into the magazine stage of the publication. It seems clear that the launch of ‘*Tatu Art*’ coincided with the Taputapuata tattoo festival and that the authors hoped to gain a readership from the hundreds of European and North American committed tattoo enthusiasts and practitioners who descended on the Society Islands for ten days or so in April 2000.

‘*Tatu Art No2*’ (2000) seems to also attempt to firmly place the tattooing practice in Tahiti within the realm of pan-Polynesian culture. This is achieved through the article about Maori female tattooing, the introduction of the Samoan Wattī, and the homage to the late Samoan tattoo master Sulu’ape Paulo. It is also expressed through one of Graffe’s comment during the interview when he explains that some of his tattoos are from Pascuan origins (from *Rapa Nui*/Easter Island) and that he has them as a commemoration of the Pascuan group who inhabited one of Tahiti’s valley prior to European contact (Graffe in Gotz 2000). There is sense that these links made, through ‘*Tatu Art No2*’ (2000), with both the global tattoo community and the rest of the Polynesian triangle, have different aims. Firstly, this positioning is useful to Polynesian tattoo artists who work outside of Polynesia. Secondly, it can also be read as a form of political statement, as it attempts to by-pass the usually obligatory French connection, an unavoidable consequence of the colonisation process and the following relationship between these archipelagos and the French *metropole*. Tattooing,

therefore can be perceived as, not only a politically loaded embodied tool to re-affirm Polynesian identity, but also as a way to position the people involved in the local practice in a network which goes beyond the national boundaries and language restrictions. It is interesting, for example, that when Chime came to Europe, in the mid-1990's, he did not settle and open his tattoo shop in France but in Spain. The shop was situated on the island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean Balearic group of islands. Ibiza itself was, and still is to an extent, a global destination for European and other youths and holiday makers. It is a partying 'Mecca' of global reputation. Moreover, Chime flanked by Raymond Graffe, Roonui and Purutu, first appeared, in the European tattoo media, as a feature in a Spanish tattoo magazine in early 1998. The French tattoo press' first prominent feature was made once Chime, Roonui, and Purutu had come back to the island of Moorea in the late 1990's (see chapter three). However, and somehow paradoxically, *'Tatu Art No2'* (2000) is also blurring the cultural differences between the different archipelagos referred to as French Polynesia. Nevertheless, this could also reflect the contemporary situation in both the Marquesan design style being used as tattoos throughout, and beyond, the archipelagos, and of the mixed heritage that many contemporary Polynesian individuals experience.

## 5.6 Conclusion

My choice to look at these four publications is due to the evidences that they reflect aptly the rapid changes taking place in French Polynesia regarding the place and role of the renewed tattooing practice. It would seem that the decade of the 1990's has seen what could be called an explosion of the number of local people who have been tattooed. That time has also heralded the arrival, recognition, and influence of the new generation of tattoo artists locally, but somehow more importantly globally. It is also possible to see the changes in the size, type and style of tattoos produced by Polynesian tattoo artists, as well as the main protagonists' bodies gaining new tattoos and grow older. Some of the changes are evident. If one considers the differences from *'Tatau'* (1992) published when the practice was just taking its place in the local community, to the *'Tatouage Magazine'* (1999) article, and the *'Tatu Art'* booklets (2000), which show the international relationships of the practitioners.

There are a number of issues which seems to run through the four publications I have reviewed in this chapter. One of these is the way to re-establish a link with the past. It is an attempt to build a bridge over the break between the pre-contact traditional tattooing practice and the contemporary renewed one. In a way, it is also aiming to by-pass over a century of colonisation process and religious conversions. At one level, this is directly linked to perceptions of authenticity, both in the global and local contexts. However, this authenticity's price seems to be, in the case of 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) at least, to reify Euro-American objectifications of Polynesian bodies, tattoos, and culture in general. All the other publications do not appear to be involved in the same exoticist agenda. The three other publications present their subject in a way which is based on the local contemporary context. A number of individuals are in all four books. These are Graffe, Salmon, Chime, Purutu, Roonui, Teve, and Vatea to name the main ones who have been discussed in this thesis. There is no doubt that to be in these publications has a great deal of cultural capital and is important in the creation and maintenance of status locally. Furthermore, it has also been used, by some of them, in starting relationships with some of the elite of global tattooing and to integrate within the interconnected networks that form the global tattoo community. Finally, through these publications, the local tattoo community has been able to create a narrative of the renewal which unfolded over the last thirty years or so. In this process, a hierarchical status structure is established and the fame of specific individuals is, at the same time, increased and confirmed.

## Chapter Six: European Tattoo Conventions, Community and Monkey Business.

### 6.1 Introduction

The global tattoo community is created and maintained through a series of movements, encounters and exchanges. In this chapter, I intend to discuss the role played by tattoo conventions in England in this process, and look at the way these have changed from episodic small social gatherings during bikers' festivals, with little tattooing occurring or taking place, to highly lucrative events held regularly in most major cities around Britain and the world. I also discuss the apparently contradictory ethos at play in the global tattoo community which is apparent during these events. On the one hand, there is the idea of a benevolent *communitas*, and on the other hand, of a commercial and competitive market of tattooing. I argue that rather than to see this as a conflicting dichotomised discourse of my informants, it seems more accurate to conceive it as a non-contradictory and concurrently held set of perceptions of the community discussed. I then describe the overall structure of tattoo conventions, the performances, and the competitions, which take place during these events, and assess two theoretical perspectives to analyse tattoo conventions, either as modern day carnival or as tournaments of value. I argue that instead of events which inverse social structures, tattoo conventions can be seen as the location in which hierarchy and status are reinforced and confirmed, and where the sense of a tattoo community is created and maintained. Finally, I review the way these events are reported in the global tattoo media, and through this I show how important such outlets are in the creating perceptions of a bounded community and confirming its own internal hierarchy. Overall, in this chapter, I intend to demonstrate the extent to which tattoo conventions are crucial to the creation and maintenance of status and fame in the global tattoo community.

### 6.2 Community, Change and Tattoo Conventions

Tattoo conventions in North America started in the 1950's. At first, these events were sideshows to bikers' festivals with a handful of tattoo artists tattooing at bikers' events. This

is not surprising when considering that bikers were one of the main groups who were using tattoos extensively as forms of symbolic expression prior to the 'renaissance' in the 1970's (see chapters one and eight). It should be noted that bikers' groups are still involved in the organisation of tattoo conventions but in partnership with other actors in the global tattoo network. It took another decade for tattoo conventions to appear in Europe, with the first ones being held in the UK and Germany. Since the 1970's, tattoo conventions have become events in their own right. These first events were, however, not open to the public but restricted to tattoo artists and not a great deal of tattooing was taking place during the events themselves (DeMello 2000). Over the last twenty years or so, tattoo conventions in North America and Europe have gone through a series of changes, as the popularity and the number of tattoo artists grew to a previously unanticipated rate and level. In the UK, in the 1970's, there were very few tattoo conventions but since the mid-1990's, their number has risen dramatically. In the 1980's, there were only around four conventions in England a year, while in 2005 there was more than forty. However, the changes of these conventions go further than just an increase in size or frequency. The nature of these events has moved from gatherings of professionals to highly commercial ones.

DeMello (*ibid*) argues that tattoo conventions in the USA are good locations to see the dualistic nature of the tattoo community and the contradictory ethos at play within it. In her study of North American tattoo conventions, and the wider community attached to them in the USA (*ibid*), she presents two informants' discourses about these events. The first one regards conventions as events where he can experience a spirit of goodwill and fellowship based around the experience of getting tattooed (*ibid*). Her second informant describes tattoo conventions as:

'Monkey Business. It's a commercial enterprise. People don't come here just to exchange ideas and meet other tattoo artists...They see an opportunity to make a buck and they're gonna take advantage of it. They come to...see their old friends and tell some jokes, or whatever. As far as it being a great meeting of minds or something, you're not going to find a lot of it here (Paul in DeMello 2000:26).

Amongst my own informants' discourses, who are tattoo artists, I find both viewpoints often expressed concurrently. However, most of my informants talk about the early conventions with a great deal of nostalgia. Furry, for example, a tattoo artist based in Oxfordshire explained that:

‘before you went to a couple of conventions a year. Each one was an occasion to catch up with friends and see what new work they had done. It felt like there was only a few of us, so they were real fun. Now, there are so many of them. You can’t go to all of them and everyone is working hard these days. The tattoo booth price for the convention has gone up so you can’t look at it as just an opportunity to have some fun time with friends. You have to make money. And you don’t recognise people anymore. There are some small conventions that still have a bit of a feel of the old events but even at these, people have little time to enjoy themselves and socialise.’ (interviewed in Oxford in June 2005).

Nevertheless, I should point out that when I was with Furry at a couple of conventions, we stopped regularly to talk to people who he had first met at tattoo conventions he attended in the late 1980’s. This shows that the relationships he entered into, during the early type of tattoo conventions, are continuing in the present and they still meet even if the events have changed in their nature as more commercial affairs. Therefore, as I will discuss through this chapter, the discourse of my informants, regarding European tattoo conventions, seems more complex than just a dichotomised either as a naive idea of a benevolent tattoo community or as ‘monkey business’. There are two main narratives developing. The first one is that tattoo conventions changed over time, and the second is that both a spirit of *communitas* and a commercial ethos are at play in a non-contradictory way. Regarding the change, as I have discussed in chapter four of this thesis, how, in French Polynesia, this shift occurred within five years of the first event organised on Raiatea in 2000 which was trying to focus on the idea of *communitas* and less on the commercial and competitive aspects of the Euro-American tattoo conventions. In Europe, this transformative process of these events slowly happened over a period of thirty-five years or so.

### 6.3 The Social and Financial Aspects of Tattoo Conventions

At this point, I would like to present what some of my informants, who do not attend tattoo conventions, say about them. I will use three informants whose discourses are somewhat representative of the wider community. The first one is Stephane who is a French tattoo artist with a small tattoo shop in a small village in rural France. He learnt tattooing on his own and has few links to the global tattoo community. He says:

‘I don’t participate to tattoo conventions because I don’t really know enough people and nobody knows me there so I would probably not make any money. I feel a bit apprehensive of the way people would react to me because I didn’t do an apprenticeship and I am not part of any networks, but I never really went to them

before I tattooed so it's just the way it is. I am happy here on my own. I don't bother anyone and nobody bothers me.' (interviewed in December 2000).

Stephane does not want to be part of the global tattoo community because he fears attracting attention. There are many stories in the tattoo community about tattoo shops being either closed down, taken over, or made to pay some form of protection money by unsavoury branches of the tattooing world. As Stephane told me: 'it is often the small and isolated tattoo shops that suffer because they're not part of a network that can protect them' (collected in December 2000). In a way, he is locked in a situation where he keeps his independence from any networks which could offer some degree of protection from unwanted attention. Yet, Stephane is not totally outside of the tattoo community. He has been going to Moorea regularly since 1999 for a series of three weeks periods. He is good friend with one of the tattoo artists working at the tourist centre there, called the Tiki Village. Every time he goes back, he brings electric tattoo machines and other tattooing utensils difficult to obtain in French Polynesia. In exchange for these he gets tattooed and stays with the tattoo artists' families. During his stay on Moorea in 2000, he also tattooed for free for three days at Vatea's tattoo shop (see chapter four), and through this he gained a reputation on the island for his human skull tattoos. In a way, Stephane is, therefore, part of some tattooing networks on a global scale, yet he remains isolated in his local tattoo community partly because of his non-attendance to the regular tattoo conventions. It could be that, in time, he will be introduced to his local tattoo community through his relationships based on Moorea, and his fame gained there rather than in the local context where his tattoo shop is actually located.

My second informant is Mike; a young tattoo artist who owns a small tattoo shop in London. Although Mike learnt to tattoo on his own too, he has worked in three renowned tattoo shops in London. His main reason for not attending tattoo conventions is that:

'they are a big financial risk for me. I am the only tattoo artist in my shop, so if I am working at the convention, I have to close the shop. And the booths are expensive so you have to be sure that you'll be tattooing enough to make a profit worth closing the shop for three days. I'll go in the evening to some conventions to see my friends but I am not big enough to start doing the circuit. And to tell you the truth, I don't like tattooing people in the convention environment, with all the people coming and going, crammed in a small booth, I don't feel it's ideal to work well. At the same time, loads of people don't mind and do really good work there, and it gives an opportunity to be tattooed by people from abroad but not to have to go there. The main thing is that I don't think it would be financially viable with a small tattoo shop like mine' (interviewed in September 2006).

The third informant is Y; a well respected London based tattoo artists in his mid-forties. He works at a big tattoo shop which employs six tattoo artists. The tattoo shop itself usually has a triple booth at the main tattoo conventions in Britain, Europe and sometimes North America. Y told me that he did not really attend tattoo conventions.

'I actually go to the convention itself. I go there but I stay in my hotel room. I can't be bothered with the whole thing, the crowd, the competition and so many egos in one place. There are so many more people I don't want to see than I want to so it's easier to see the ones I want to see in the evenings after the convention. I do some tattooing in the hotel room and have a good time seeing friends without having to deal with the event and having to enter competitions and have to talk to people I don't like' (interviewed in March 2002).

Stephane's reservations concerning his attendance to tattoo conventions are based upon his perceptions and personal uncertainties about his position within the tattoo community, and also has financial undertones as his isolation means that he may not make a profit from tattooing in conventions. In the case of both Mike and Y, they are both active in the global tattoo community and use these events as social events rather than engaging directly with the commercial aspects of them. Y is the only one, out of the three informants presented here, who is not financially bounded to the shop in which he works. Firstly, he is not the owner of the tattoo shop at which he works, and secondly, he is very successful and has an international reputation, and there are usually a couple of months waiting time for potential clients to see him. All three informants perceive that conventions are places where a spirit of *communitas* can take form while at the same time acknowledging the commercial dimension of the event.

#### 6.4 Idealised *Communitas* and Monkey Business

I should clarify what is meant by *communitas* in this particular context. The concept is from Turner's (1969) definition as a form of relationship shared among a group of individuals either in the margins of society or involved in a communal process of transition (*ibid*). His concept of *communitas* also includes ideas of an unstructured and non-hierarchical grouping of people around a perceived communal and shared experience (*ibid*). This perception of shared experience, in turn, fosters deep feelings of camaraderie, kinship, homogeneity, and equality within the group (*ibid*). Turner describes multiple examples of *communitas* in the

different world religions and social sub-cultures, ranging from Gandhi's harijans to the 1960's hippie movement (*ibid*).

Such ideas about the tattoo community are expressed by some of my informants, which I would classify in two categories. In the first one are newcomers, who are usually in their teens and have some tattoos. They attend the conventions as tattoo fans, and feel that through the experience of being tattooed they enter a group that respect them for who they are. Josh, a nineteen year old teenager from the North of England with three tattoos, told me at a convention that:

'it's great to be tattooed, you are part of this world with loads of cool people, and you can go and talk to them about tattoos, it's great, people are nice and approachable, we're all on the level' (interviewed in June 2004).

The second category includes some tattoo artists, experienced tattooees and, as DeMello (2000) also notes, tattoo conventions organisers and editors of tattoo magazines. Yet, both categories of my informants' discourse should not be taken at face value. The main difference between the two categories is that the newcomers believe, somewhat naively, in the idea of a tattoo *communitas*, while the others are very much aware of the true nature of the community in which they themselves are active participants and agents of its maintenance. However, even Josh expressed to me his reverence towards some famous tattoo artists and would not go and talk to them, alluding to a sense of the tattoo community's hierarchy. He also referred to some other tattoo artists in an insulting way because they had not engaged with him or had rebuffed him in some interactions; a far cry from Turner's (1969) profound spirit of communal camaraderie and togetherness. This seems to show that the newcomers are living very much within the relational reality of the tattoo world. Therefore, it would seem that it is more a case of them harbouring an aspirational belief in the idea of a tattoo *communitas* rather than experiencing it in reality at all times.

The informants of the second category, in this case, are too conscious of the competitive and commercial reality that rules the tattoo community to perceive it as a benevolent and egalitarian grouping. Their discourses do not usually deny either the hierarchy or the structure of the global tattoo community. In a way, what seems relevant in Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*, to the people involved in tattooing is the idea of a shared transitional experience which opens up new forms of interactions between individuals.

There is no doubt that tattoo conventions are locations where strangers engage with each other because of their tattoos. After all, it gives people a topic of conversation in which to engage. People ask about each others' tattoos, talk about their own, enquire about the artists who did them, discuss the meanings attached as well as comment on their techniques. These short interactions can not only open other subjects of discussion but also quickly ascertain whether there are any pre-existing connections between each others' personal networks within the global tattoo community. As such, tattoo conventions can be seen as very similar to many other types of events, like trade fairs for example (DeMello 2000). Yet, three dimensions specific to tattoo conventions make them particular. The first is that tattoos involve the body, the second that tattoos are acquired through a process which is obligatory painful, and the third is that tattooing is a processual technology of metamorphosis and transition (see chapter four). My point here is that the concept of *communitas* is not entirely adequate to describe the tattoo, and later in this chapter I suggest that Appadurai's (1986) concept of tournaments of value is more relevant to describe tattoo conventions. Furthermore, as one of DeMello's informant points out:

'Tattooists are little islands, with little groups of friends or cliques that are very limited, and we're wandering along this path with very little communication or connection to other groups. [The] point of [early tattoo conventions] was [to get] back to community, not competition' (DeMello 2000:32).

This way of conceptualising tattooists and tattoo shops as islands is an apt one and fits well with my discussion in chapter seven of this thesis which looks at some of the similarities between tattoo conventions and the Melanesian *kula* exchange system. I will now look in more detail at the events themselves.

### 6.5 The Tattoo Convention's Entry

Tattoo conventions in Europe are usually organised by one or a group of renowned tattoo artists whose reputations, within the tattoo community, have the potential to attract the involvement of other well-known artists in the event. Most tattoo conventions charge an entry fee of approximately £15 a day or £30 for the whole event. They normally open on a Friday and finish on a Sunday night. When going to a tattoo convention, there is always a time when you realise that you must be getting closer, for this is when you start noticing an increasing number of people with tattoos and body-modifications. This was even more noticeable at the

London convention in 2005. This convention was held for the first time at the 'Truman Brewery' in Brick Lane, a venue which is at the centre of a well-established Muslim Bangladeshi community. The opening time of this convention coincided with the end of Friday prayer at the local mosques, and resulted in both groups moving through the streets in a surreal moment of shared space. In Derby, in 2003, the convention was held in a concert hall in the middle of the city centre. Although the difference was not as salient as in the Brick Lane context, there was a certain amusement of the young drinking crowds who stood in the main streets of Derby. Some of them showed a tattoo they had on their bodies and would give friendly waves to some of the heavily tattooed people who were coming in and out of the convention. This prompted a heavily tattooed and pierced biker in his mid-forties to comment to me: 'they get one tattoo and they think that they're somewhat like you. They're too busy getting pissed to come to their local tattoo convention!' (collected in July 2004). There is a sense, that the idea of community is itself reinforced through a perception of body-modifiers vis-à-vis mainstream society. In the last example, the act of getting a tattoo but not engaging in the convention was perceived as not being part of a shared communion, while he could turn to a body-modifier who was also a stranger to him (myself) and express his annoyance regarding these types of interactions. I should say that most of the other convention's attendees seemed to be indifferent to this. I noted that people would generally act in a more relaxed manner and would be more open to enter in a discussion once they were in the convention itself. Outside of it, people seemed to give an acknowledgement if they already had an interaction inside first. This alludes to the convention space as being a particular area where behaviour does change from the mundane day-to-day reality. Another example of this perceived feeling of a form of communal group is how, at the London 2005 convention, tattooed people who could not find the venue were joining and interacting jovially with the other tattooed people they could meet in the streets around the venue, a form of camaraderie with strangers in the middle of the busy London streets. These examples show how the arrival and entrance to conventions is an event which can be formative in the creation of a group identity and contribute to the ideal image of some form of *communitas*. It is also in this context of a public street that body modifiers' alterity becomes more salient and visible.

It was a puzzling fact, to many of my informants, that, until 2005, London had not had its own tattoo convention. All other European capital cities had conventions which were established and which reputations attracted the attendance of tattoo artists and fans from

around the world. The puzzlement of many of my informants about this situation was that London is the home of many world renowned tattoo shops and artists. Furthermore, it is considered, by some, as the place where the first tattoo shop was opened in the late nineteenth century (Bradley 2000). One of the London based tattoo artists whose reputation could have enabled him to be the focal point for the organisation of a London convention explained to me that:

‘I think it is because there are too many people who could organise them but no-one wants to antagonise the others and we’re not into organising it together either. We’re just too busy and involved in our own shops. There are plenty in England already anyway’ (interviewed in October 2003).

It is interesting that the London convention has been organised by a group of individuals from Germany and Italy. They are a mix of tattoo magazines publishers, tattoo artists, and bikers’ club networks. This shows aptly the global and cosmopolitan nature of the tattoo community, and the financial potential involved in the organisation of such an event. I should point out that the main London tattoo shops were invited, and attended, the event. In a way, it would seem that London needed someone from the outside of the local tattoo scene to initiate its own convention.

## 6.6 The Tattooing Areas

Tattoo conventions are usually divided in three main areas. There is a tattooing area where established tattoo shops have booths in which they tattoo in front of the visitors, and there are two trading areas. The tattooing area is open to the public and contains tattooing booths which are next to each other. These vary in size but are rarely bigger than six square metres, and most are decorated in some ways, often including the name of the tattoo shop or artists operating there. The types of decoration usually fit the style of tattoos an artist will prefer and/or as a reputation to be a master at delivering. The front of an average booth has a table on which the tattoo books of the artists are displayed, and these include series of drawings to be tattooed and/or be inspired by. There are also photos of tattoos already

finished by the artist, and piles of leaflets and introductory cards which refer to the tattoo shop where the tattoo artist is based when they are not working at the different tattoo conventions. Behind the table is a corner where the artist and the tattooee can sit and where all the tattooing apparatus is installed. Tattoo artists do not normally come to conventions on their own, and most booths have either more than one artist working there or will have an assistant who can deal with inquiries when the artist is working. The process of getting a tattoo at a convention is somehow a quicker process than in a tattoo shop. This is because the tattoo artists are usually very busy and if a tattooee wants something done on their bodies they have to agree the design and make the decision within the three days of convention, unless they decide to go and visit this particular tattoo artist in the future at his tattoo shop or at a subsequent convention. For artists, this means more pressure in the sense that they have to find the right design quickly and tattoo it surrounded by a crowd, a gaze which includes not only tattoo fans but also their peers. Some famous tattoo artists, in contrast, have their tattooing time already booked up before they arrive at the convention. This process has become more prevalent due to the increased access to websites managed by particular tattoo shops and artists which enable fans to know in advance of foreign artists' appearances at the different conventions. As one of my informants noted to me:

'I am booked in with Paul Booth in a couple of hours (a famous American tattoo artist) later this afternoon. I've been waiting for six months for that tattoo, but personally, I prefer to pay a bit more money for a tattoo by Booth than to have to spend the money on plane fares to New York and on accommodation and stuff, and end up with a smaller tattoo' (interviewed in October 2005).

The sterilisation of needles and tubes is operated and managed by the convention's organisation and takes place in a room out of the way and solely dedicated to this purpose. It should also be noted that among the many tattoo artists who work in these events are a few professional piercers too, and this shows that the direct links between the different body modification practices. Another type of booth found in the area of the tattoo convention open to the public are designers of flash sheets, which are templates of potential tattoos that can be bought and presented to prospective tattooees. Some flash designers are graphic artists who do not tattoo themselves but express their art using tattoo iconography. However, flash sheets offered by renowned tattoo artists, like Leo Zulueta and Chime for example, are sold at often higher prices than the non-tattooing artists' ones.

Another tattooing area which can be found in some tattoo conventions is where artists perform tattooing by hand. These are located on a small stage or in an area which is separate and yet in public view. The floors have either mats or carpets laid on them, and everyone who enters these spaces has to take their shoes off. Hand tattooing is done on the floor in contrast to tattooing with electric machines which is done either sitting on chairs or lying on an elevated bed. This means that most interactions between tattoo artists and tattooees, in the hand tattooing area, occur at the floor level. These areas are also usually quieter than the rest of the convention. Firstly, electric tattoo machines emit a peculiar loud buzzing noise which is not present in hand tattooing areas, and secondly, these areas have less of the public crowd because only the people who are being tattooed or who are making serious inquiries are present there. The viewing public are kept on the edges of the stage. The types of tattoo artists who tattoo by hand are varied. In Derby in 2003, although a stage had been set aside for the Borneo based tattoo shop 'The Head Hunters' it stayed empty as they cancelled and no other hand tattoo artists were scheduled to attend. There was however two Maori tattoo artists there but because they tattooed with electric machines they were given a booth in the main tattooing area of the convention. In London in 2005, there was one hand tattooing area which opened onto a long row of glass panels which enabled the public to have a close look at the tattooing going on while being physically separated. This also meant that the noise of the watching crowd did not reach the tattoo artists working there. The artists there were the Dayak 'Head Hunters' tattoo shop with three people working, a Japanese tattoo artist with his assistant, and Mo'o who is a French artist working with traditional Polynesian tools, who was one of Chime's apprentice in the 1990's on the island of Ibiza and also trained with the late Samoan tattoo master Sulu'ape Paulo. He was assisted by his partner who helped during the stretching process involved in this type of tattooing. In the London convention held in 2006, there were two areas of hand tattooing. This was because there were a greater number of hand tattoo artists interested in attending. These included a world famous Danish hand tattoo artist, two Japanese artists, and a number of Polynesian artists from Moorea and Tahiti were also scheduled to attend; although many had to cancel due to travel complications.

## 6.7 The Trading Areas

There are two different trading areas in all tattoo conventions. The first is open to the public and sells a range of alternative clothing, books, and body-modification jewellery, and the second is a professional trading area that is often restricted to registered tattoo artists and other body-modifiers. The items traded in this area range from customised tattoo machines, needles, bio-medical sterilisation apparatus, and inks to name but a few. Over the last five years, the control and restriction of access to this area to bona fide tattoo artists has changed. The move is that the area has been open to the public but numerous signs warn that a registration number is required to engage in trade. Obviously, this is disregarded and the professional traders will engage with anybody who wishes to buy their products. This is indicative of a general change of attitude towards what could be called the 'democratisation' of the practice.

The increasing number of people who want to enter the profession has increased greatly over the last decade, and this has changed the way in which tattoo artists are trained. Previously, a budding tattoo artist would have to do a three years apprenticeship in an established tattoo shop, while now, many people start on their own, at home, tattooing friends. If their work is of good quality, they can be given a chance to start working in a shop. The control of access to professional tattoo material was very strongly enforced until recently, yet, this was challenged in Europe by a few manufacturers, mainly in the UK and France, in the late 1990's. They broke the unwritten rules by, for example, advertising to sell tattooing starter packs by post in tattoo magazines. The way in which people learnt how to tattoo is a formative aspect of the place they will assume in the stratified tattoo community. This is not only because of the difference in the quality of tattooing techniques which many informants note, generally those who have been apprentices themselves, but also because the apprenticeship is a way to be integrated to a particular network. In a way, one could create kinship charts related to the series of apprenticeship relationships. These are important in the creation of inter-related network links which as a whole form the global tattoo community.

## 6.8 Performances in Tattoo Conventions

Most tattoo conventions hold a number of performances. There are always a couple of rock bands playing in the evenings, and music is also played on a music system during the day. A relatively new type of event that I witnessed at recent tattoo conventions has been the live art fusion performances, which entail around five tattoo artists with five different canvasses. The event is managed by a compere who times the artists and makes them shift canvases every three minutes or so, with each session lasting approximately half an hour. Another similar type of event is murals created by two tattoo artists and tag artists. What struck me, after watching four or five of the live art fusion performances, was that no matter the identities, and respective styles, of the tattoo artists taking part, the final art works always seems to have recurrent themes. The end products would usually include a skull, a Japanese carp fish and waves, a dragon, a pin-up character, some bio-mechanical creature, and a Buddha. There is also always a neo-tribal background included in at least a couple of the images. These recurring themes seem to represent, as some well-respected tattoo artists commented to me, a certain limitation of the tattoo iconography which can be found in the global tattoo community. This is somehow contradictory to the endless creativity that many tattoo artists refer to when talking about the medium. However, this limited iconography of tattoo designs, which expressed itself through a recurrence of particular themes and symbols, should be understood in the context that recurrent designs are specific in style and differ between tattoo artists. This specificity, and the innovation often associated with it, is one of the important aspects formative in the status attained by individual tattoo artists.

Another type of performance that occurs, during tattoo conventions, is related to the fact that all tattooing is done in front of the public attending the event. In the context of tattoo shops, the act itself is usually performed away from people who are not directly involved in the act. Thus, during conventions, the tattoo artists working are observed not only by prospective tattooees, but also by their peers. Furthermore, the tattooees themselves who are being tattooed have to perform, for it is perceived as unacceptable for them to react to the pain vocally and with much more than a frown. For this reason, some tattooees cover their faces with pieces of cloths so as to be able to freely express their suffering, although even this can be seen as somewhat undesirable. This type of performance is also not only witnessed but

is also often recorded by people taking photos and filming. This happens even more when the tattoo artists are well-known ones as their booths are surrounded by thick crowds of onlookers. As I mentioned earlier, this aspect of tattooing in the context of conventions acts upon the decision of some artist to attend and work at these events. At the same time, this seems to be perceived, by some in the tattoo community, as a form of baptism of fire and an important aspect of the creation of individuals' status and fame.

## 6.9 Tattoo Competitions

Every tattoo convention holds series of competitions that rewards the quality of tattoos and the skills of the tattoo artists. The winners are awarded prizes in the forms of trophies that they usually display in their respective tattoo shops. Each competition is divided in different sub-classes, and varying according to style, placement on the body of the tattooee, the gender of the tattooee, and an overall prize for 'best in show'. The panel of judges is usually a mix of tattoo artists, convention organisers and tattooed celebrities. At the London convention of 2005, for example, one of the jury was the lead singer of the death metal group 'Anthrax', who had a booth to sign autographs with his wife who is a famous American porn actress. It seems customary for prizes to be given to the famous tattoo artists who attended the convention, even if they have not entered a tattoo in the competitions. The trophies become ways to communicate a sense of acceptance to new tattoo artists as well as acting to confirm the status of already established practitioners. They are also a form of *memorabilia* regarding the attendance to the events themselves. This point being ironically made, in the Amsterdam tattoo convention in 2003, where all the trophies had the phrase 'I survived Amsterdam 03' engraved upon them. However, competitions and prizes also affect the tattooees themselves. The tattoos that win the prizes will appear in the tattoo media and the tattooee will therefore gain some exposure in the global tattoo community. Nonetheless, most often it is the case that the tattoos, and the artists, become more famous than the tattooees themselves.

The tattoo conventions' prizes are divided in two main sub-categories. The first is related to the style of the tattoo, while the second depends on the part of the body tattooed.

Prizes judged according to style are sub-divided into a number of categories which can change from one convention to another, and with time. The main ones, at the time of my fieldwork, were 'black and grey', 'colour', 'tribal', 'portrait', 'Japanese', and 'most unusual'. In a way, the prizes' categories are an indicator of the popular trends within the tattoo trade. It is the case, for example, that in the late 1990's one could have seen a category entitled 'Celtic' as Celtic knot work designs were often chosen by tattooees to be inked upon their bodies. This style however, has now been almost abandoned by many and very few people have these tattooed. It could be argued that it has been replaced by new strands of neo-tribal designs which are inspired by Iron Age art found on North European artefacts and Stone Age petroglyphs. In some conventions, the category 'tribal' includes both neo-tribal designs as well as neo-traditional ones. In other conventions, further categories have been added to cater for this amalgamation, and some of my informants, from both the neo-tribal and neo-traditional networks of the global tattoo community, oppose. This move is because both groups express a difference and feel that one category does not reflect the width of styles within, in addition to recognising that it also diminishes their opportunity to win prizes. Some of my informants do argue for separate categories on grounds of authenticity, mainly those belonging to neo-traditional networks (see chapter eight). Regarding the 'Japanese' category, I should clarify that both Japanese tattoo artists and European ones who tattoo Japanese designs are included within it. However, it should also be pointed out that some Japanese tattoo artists do tattoo, and present to competitions, artwork which is in the Euro-American styles. Nevertheless, a Japanese style tattoo from a Japanese artist is usually seen as more valuable, and the source of higher status for the tattooee, than those performed by European or North American artists; unless the latter have themselves followed the traditional apprenticeship process in Japan.

The other main category of tattoo competitions' prizes are those specifically related to the body parts covered by the tattoos presented. The specific style of the tattoo designs becomes secondary in this case. However, in all categories, what is judged is the quality of skill of the tattoo artist rather than solely the design, originality or style. The 'body' categories include 'sleeve' which refers to a tattoo covering from the shoulder to the wrist, 'bodysuit' that is usually from the neckline to the wrists and ankles, 'back', 'chest', and 'leg'. These categories are also usually sub-divided according to gender. This means that, for example, there are different prizes for best 'male leg' and 'female leg'. This sub-division is,

however, only concerned with the gender of the tattooee rather than the gender of the tattoo artist who created the tattoo entered in the competition.

During the competition, tattooees pass in front of the panel of judges. Each tattooee will have filled a form stating their name, the name of the tattoo artist, the position of their tattoo to be judged, and sometimes a short description of it. Some people just show the tattoos that are to be judged, while others show their whole bodies. They will be in swimwear or, sometimes, will have a type of sarong around their waists. These enable the judges, and the audience, to see most of their skin and all the tattoos they have had done on themselves over the years. The tattooees will usually pass on a stage one by one or sometimes in small groups. The information they entered on their forms will normally be read aloud into a microphone by one of the organisers of the tattoo convention. It is the case that some tattoo conventions do charge a small fee for entering the competition, however, this is still unusual in British conventions and has been commented upon by some of my informants as 'a bit of a rip off'.

#### 6.10 Tattoo Convention: Modern Day Carnival or Tournament of Value?

DeMello argues, in her book 'Bodies of Inscription' (2000), that tattoo conventions can be equated to the modern day carnivals. She uses two perspectives on the subject. The first one is relating to Bakhtin's (1984) reading of the work of the French sixteenth century writer Rabelais, and who sees carnivals as a way for the lower classes of a society to, for the time of the carnival, invert social values and debase cultural markers associated with the higher classes of that society. She also states that this is often expressed through 'material bodily form...sexuality, birth, feasts, slaughter, cursing, violence, and defecation' (DeMello 2000:30). The second perspective is associated with Douglas (1966) and Turner (1969) who argue that events such as carnivals help to reinforce, rather than challenge, the hierarchical structure of the society in which they take place (DeMello 2000). DeMello concludes that:

'the tattoo convention is both radical and conservative...it challenges and subverts middle-class notions of propriety and taste through its radical display of the grotesque body, yet, it also reinforces mainstream society's class-based, and gender-based, divisions' (DeMello 2000:30).

DeMello argues that, in the late 1990's United States context, tattoo artists based in working class rural areas are rarely given prizes in convention's competitions, in contrast to middle

class artists based in the major urban centres (*ibid*). She also states that the presence of female tattooees at these events is not necessarily a sign of a disruption of ‘conventional notions of the gendered body’ (DeMello 2000:31). On the contrary, DeMello feels that the bodies, and physical appearances, of tattooed women are perceived as a judging criteria in the context of tattoo conventions’ competitions (*ibid*). Furthermore, she argues that tattoos put the female body in display, transforming it into an ‘object of voyeuristic looking...an excuse for men to gaze at, and photograph, women’s scantily clad bodies’ (DeMello 2000:31).

However, my own experience of tattoo conventions in Britain over the last seven years or so, is slightly different to DeMello’s North American one. There are no doubts that bodies are on display during conventions. The embodied nature of tattoos could hardly make it any other way. Yet, although there is a blatant amount of voyeurism, there is an equal element of exhibitionism. As B, one of my female informants with extensive tattoos put it to me once: ‘to be into tattoos, you have to be a bit of an exhibitionist’ (interviewed in September 2006). Furthermore, it did not seem that physical appearance was an essential part of what the judges looked at when distributing prizes during these tattoo conventions’ competitions I attended. The wide range of body types and age range of individuals who I have witnessed being attributed prizes contribute to my analysis. In Britain, these competitions do not attract large audiences and the atmosphere could be described as respectful towards the contestants on stage in front of the judges, and most of the time it is quite subdued. From time to time there may be some jarring from the audience but it is more due to either interactions initiated by the contestant on stage or to the fact that their friends encourage them. I have never witnessed, for example, in Britain, as DeMello in North America has, men in the audience asking female contestants to ‘show us your hooters!’ (DeMello 2000:30). Another point is that many more male bodies are presented in competitions than female ones.

In the arena of the tattoo convention itself, bodies are also very present. Each tattoo booth has, at least, one body being worked on. People in the alleys of the event either pull their clothes to show others their tattooed bodies or wear cloths which reveal their tattoos and display generous amount of skin. I was myself asked by strangers, at a convention, ‘to show more skin’; to remove my shirt and remain in my tank top, so that all could look at the tattoos on my shoulders. According to some of my informants, tattoos allow a celebration of the

body and of the sensuality of the human condition. P., an English female tattoo artist, stated that:

‘I never felt very confident about my body. As a teenager, I would hate going to the beach or the swimming pool because I felt everyone was judging my imperfections, but that started to change when I got tattoos. I wanted to show my tattoos to the world and I became more at ease with my physical appearance. It was a liberating experience, although becoming older might have had something to do with it too’ (interviewed in April 2001).

As I already mentioned, the London tattoo convention was held at the Truman Brewery in Brick Lane. My own experience of this venue, prior to attending the convention, had been when I came there to see the exhibition ‘Body Worlds’ organised by the Austrian Professor Gunther Von Hagens shown in the same venue in 2004. This exhibition featured one hundred and seventy-five human body parts and twenty-five whole bodies which have been put through a process of ‘plastination’. This process is attained by draining fluids in the body and exchanging them with a type of plastic, giving the bodies a high degree of rigidity which means they can be displayed in life-like poses. Parts of the exhibition included a pregnant woman with her womb exposed to reveal a seven-month old foetus and a man who has been entirely skinned, with his skull cut away to reveal his brain, leaning forward over a chessboard. It also displays a body with a tattoo. A number of people, most of them not related to the tattoo world, commented to me that the tattoo was an interesting part of the exhibit to them because it acted as a reminder that the bodies had had a social life and that prior to seeing it, they were able to distance themselves from the fact that the exhibits had been real people. It is somewhat ironic that a year later, the London tattoo convention, a location where other types of human bodies are on display, was held there.

Many of my informants who participate in tattoo conventions are also involved in, or attend, the regular fetish events held in London and other cities in Britain. Some go to the conventions as extensively tattooed individuals while their tattoos are part of their identities as fetish events performers or simple attendees. At neither of these types of events are the bodies been ever described to me as ‘grotesque’ (DeMello 2000:30), although some have been referred to, by informants, as ‘challenging’. My point here is not to argue that there is an unproblematic equality of the gendered bodies in display. However, the skin observed seems to be perceived more as a sensual than a sexual display. Many of my informants express pride in the way in which they have developed a different attitude to the chanel dimension of their

condition. As A., a Brighton based tattoo artist, explained to me: ‘the body is often seen as a sinful object but here [in tattoo conventions] it is celebrated and admired as a beautiful thing’ (interviewed in May 2005). Furthermore, as many informants comment: ‘you’re never really naked when you are covered with tattoos’. This, in turn, alludes to the transformative dimension of tattoos regarding the body, and personhood.

There are other issues to be raised in regards to the interpretation of tattoo conventions as modern day carnivals (DeMello 2000). Although, looked at from an outsider’s perspective, they divert from the mainstream society’s perceptions and behaviour regarding the display of bodies, from an insider’s perspective, they also reinforce the rules and values associated with the global tattoo community. These values, to an extent, are not only experienced by the protagonists during the tattoo conventions themselves but also in their daily lives and in the location of the tattoo shop, yet it still does not mean that the tattoo community can be regarded simply as a ‘subaltern’ subculture, which would invert the dominant values during conventions. In fact, the individuals that form this community are from all social and economic strata of their respective societies and from very diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

It has always been the case that individuals from the highest stratum of society have engaged in body-modifications, including tattoos and piercings (Bradley 2000). Tattoos and piercings seem to have been used as status symbols in many historical contexts, as well as having religious and aesthetic functions. The ‘Prince Albert’ piercing is one example of this point. Prince Albert was the consort of Queen Victoria in the last part of the nineteenth century in the United Kingdom and he had a genital piercing which has been referred to, since then, as a ‘Prince Albert’. Furthermore, as Bradley (*ibid*) explains there has been a use of tattoos, in Britain and since the nineteenth century at least, among the upper classes of society. Similarly, the contemporary global tattoo community is made of many class groups. DeMello (2000) argues that the tattooing trade has moved from a typically working class activity to a middle class one and that the latter group is now controlling the media and conventions which create a sense of what the tattoo community is (*ibid*). Yet, it would seem that another issue is that these events are important locations for the creation of an idea of community, and carnivals are not, most of the time, events which fulfil this purpose clearly

and efficiently. I would argue that another way to look at tattoo conventions may be as Appadurai's 'tournaments of value' (Appadurai 1986).

Events such as tattoo festivals and conventions are what Appadurai terms 'tournaments of value' (*ibid*).

'Tournaments of value are complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them' (Appadurai 1986:21).

Appadurai also states that one example of a tournaments of value is the Melanesian *kula* ring. Others have noted that these types of events are akin to Euro-American art auctions (Baudrillard 1981) and to the Art world market in general (Leach & Leach 1983). Conceptualised as such, tattoo conventions retain the ability to create, and maintain, the idea of a community. However, it is not an idea of an unstructured and egalitarian *communitas* but rather it is through engaging and finding their positions within the structure and hierarchy of the perceived community that new tattoo artists gain membership.

As I have shown in chapter four, in the case of the Taputapuatea festival, held on the island of Raiatea in 2000, the main function of the event seemed to be a confirmation of status through exchange rather than through a series of contests and competitions. Nevertheless, as I have discussed, it did play a part in the status contests taking place in the global tattoo community, and the neo-tribal network in particular. This is because attendance alone, to such a rare and remote event, compared to conventions held in Europe and North America, automatically add some status capital to an individual within the global tattoo community, that they be either a tattoo fan or a tattooist.

#### 6.11 Tattoo Conventions in Tattoo Magazines

An important and formative way that contributes to tattoo conventions being events that create and maintain the idea of a global tattoo community is their reporting in the tattoo magazines. Most tattoo magazines are divided in series of feature, which include different articles as well as a healthy amount of commercial adverts. The amount of articles allocated to the coverage of tattoo conventions vary between a fifth and a third of each magazine issue, with each article being usually three to ten pages long. They include many pictures and some text, and the pictures are a mixture of tattoos and of people either tattooing or posing. The individuals in the photos are usually tattoo artists but sometimes also tattoo fans, and most of those appearing are named.

The tattoo convention reports of the one held in Derby, England, for the years 2004 and 2006 are good examples of most of these types of articles. The 2004 issue of the article, relating to the Derby tattoo convention held in the same year, is five pages long, and has twelve photos and a page of text. The photos include tens of tattoos themselves, one portrait of a female tattoo fan with both her sleeves tattooed, and one small photo of the tattooing area of the convention. Each photo includes the names of the tattoo wearer, the tattoo artist and of the tattoo shop where they work. The tattoos represented are varied: they include the heads of Buddha, a female Viking, two different demonic faces, the devil in a top hat, the portrait of the 1970's Hammer horror actor Vincent Price as Count Dracula, one sleeve in bio-mechanical style and a sleeve of a multitude of colourful flowers, and a full back inspired by Maori style. There is also a depiction of an individual in a straight jacket. The text refers to the dates when the convention took place and the weather; 'uncharacteristically, the English weather provided a truly summery climate and the city of Derby...was bathed in warm sunshine the whole weekend' (Total Tattoo Magazine 01:23). It follows with a description of the location of the convention, a leisure centre in the city centre, and follows with some advice regarding the area: 'Derby is located in the centre of England, surrounded by the beautiful Peak District. Visitors who don't know the area would do well to add a few days onto their convention trip to drink in the lovely local landscape' (Total Tattoo Magazine 01:23). Part of the article also includes a list of the prizes ascribed during the convention's competition. These are best 'large tribal', 'small tribal', 'large black and grey', 'small black and grey', 'large colour', 'small colour', 'best body suit', 'most unusual concept', 'best hand work', 'best of the day' for both Saturday and Sunday, and 'best tattoo of the convention'

(Total Tattoo Magazine 01:26). The article's author praises the organisation of the convention and the quality of the tattoo artists who attended, commenting that

‘the talent was plain for anyone to see by the quality of the work they were producing during the weekend. Testament to this was the fact that all the artists were kept busy working for seemingly the entire time – one of the signs of a successful convention’ (Total Tattoo Magazine 01:23).

The article describes the other areas of the conventions, commenting on the different types of stalls, bars, and musical bands. It also notes that ‘the Tattoo Museum from Oxford also provided a fascinating display of historic tattoo implements, flash, books and business cards’ (Total Tattoo Magazine 01:23) (see chapter nine). The author concludes that:

‘all in all, the 2004 State of the Art convention passed successfully. However, many visitors I spoke to seemed to think it lacked a certain ‘*je ne sais quoi*’ this year. Convention goes and artists are a tough crowd to please and lots of them go to, and work at, many conventions throughout the year. Comparisons get made, inevitably, from show to show and from year to year. I don’t envy the organisers who really have to keep on their toes to maintain the reputation of their shows year after year’ (Total Tattoo Magazine 01:23).

It is interesting to note that when I attended the Derby convention, the year before this report, many of my informants made the same types of comments regarding the event; for example: ‘it is not one of the best convention around’ and ‘it has lost a lot of its appeal since the first edition that was considered a ‘must go’ convention’. The article also noted the absence of hand tattoo artists that I have noted earlier in this chapter.

The second article relates to the Derby convention held in 2006. It is published in the same magazine but in their twenty sixth edition. There are a number of differences compared to the first article. For example, the article is slightly bigger with six pages, and there are also more photos than before. These include more photos of the convention space itself, as well as depicting tattoo artists at work. The text of the article is more focused on the event itself rather than a commentary of the picturesque setting of the Derbyshire landscape. The photos of tattoos seem to be more focused on the winners of the different categories of the

convention's competition. For example, the photos of the tattoos of a female tattoo fan are also shown on their own in a subsequent page because they were given two prizes during the convention's competition, one for 'best sleeve' and one for 'most unusual'. Another difference is that the competition's categories have been divided between tattoos 'seen' at the event and tattoos 'done' during the convention, a sub-division not often made at other tattoo conventions in Britain and Europe. Overall, the article is more positive about the event and is full of praise. Some of my informants did say to me that the Derby convention did change for the better, but also commented to me that the difference in the article might have also been due to the fact that the magazine had become an integral part of the event and had gained some commercial advantages through this affiliation. For example, free copies of the magazine were given for free at the entrance of the convention, an activity which has become quite common at big conventions such as the London one where free copies of another magazine were offered to all who entered. However, it should be noted that most articles about tattoo conventions are always focusing on the positive aspects of the event and rarely denigrate them.

The third article I would like to review is from a French tattoo magazine and relates to the first London tattoo convention held in 2005. The article is eleven pages long and has fifty-three photos. These are a mixture of tattoos, tattoo artists, tattoo fans, and also of the attending crowd. It has a small picture of the display of the Tattoo Museum of Great Britain from Oxford (see chapter nine). The article states that there had not been a tattoo convention held in Britain 'worth being called that for a long time' (Tatouage Magazine 47:78) and that the best way to do that was to have one in London. Organising such an event was a way to reinvigorate and 'put on the international tattoo map' (Tatouage Magazine 47:78) the British tattoo scene. The article's authors states that the event was one of the largest in Europe with approximately hundred and fifty tattoo artists working there and accommodating thirteen thousand visitors over the three days. They comment that some people had to wait up to three hours to be admitted and that it was lucky that the weather was hot and sunny. The main body of the article is a list of the many famous names of tattoo artists who attended. The author explains that most artists did not have to pay for their booths and this meant that there was a high attendance of North American tattoo artists at the event. According to some of my informants, this fact was relevant only for some artists who were specifically invited by the

organisers, and it was not repeated the following year. Some particularly well-known artists names are always preceded by very evocative adjectives and/or adverbs such as ‘the amazing’, ‘the pioneer’, ‘the magician’, ‘the veteran’ and so on. Finally, the article comments on the presence of Japanese tattoo artists and that the organisers were planning to have another edition of the event the following year.

The three articles I reviewed here are very typical of the types found in worldwide tattoo magazines. They contribute to the creation of status within the global tattoo community. The three articles focus on the attendance of well-known artists and the fans whose tattoos are either deemed to be worth including by the journalists or have won prizes in the convention’s competition. It would seem that the length of the articles also varies according to how important, and to the size and the calibre of the tattoo artists attending, the convention is perceived in the wider tattoo community. This seems to show the crucial role the tattoo media outlets play in the creation of status and fame of individuals and the level of their integration within the wider tattoo world, a fact I have discussed also in chapters four and five.

## 6.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the role tattoo conventions play in the creation and maintenance of community, fame, identity and status in the global tattoo networks. I have shown how two different ethos are at play during tattoo conventions and although could be perceived as contradictory, are not so. I have argued that the actors who attend these events are using them both as social gatherings in which they can catch up with friends and also as commercial outlets in which they can make a profit. The changes over the last thirty years or so do mean that tattoo conventions have become undeniably more commercially focused. Yet, they also remain the location where a socio-culturally diverse and geographically spread series of networks take form as a community and where such an idea is maintained. Furthermore, through the different activities organised during the conventions themselves, such as competitions for example, and the way they are reported in the global tattoo media, tattoo conventions are also important in creating and maintaining the status and fame of

individuals and to place them in the hierarchical structure of the global community. This process is especially salient during the series of competitions held during the conventions and their extensive coverage in the various tattoo magazines. Finally I have argued that tattoo conventions should be seen as Appadurai's 'tournaments of value', rather than as some form of modern day carnival where the power structure is, in some way, inverted for a time. On the contrary, tattoo conventions are the location where personal status is gained, assigned, maintained and confirmed within the internal hierarchy of the global tattoo community. Overall, in this chapter, I have shown how important and fundamental tattoo conventions are to the maintenance of the global tattoo community and to the many people involved in the practice as social as well as commercial events.

## Chapter Seven:

### Memorial Tattoos and the Social Role of Tattoo Artists

#### 7.1 Introduction

A great number of tattoos acquired by my informants seem to have a recurrent theme of memorial, with tattoos being dedicated to either a particular person or place. These types of tattoos are often desired in order to create a bond between a dead person and a living individual. In this chapter, I look at the discourse of some of my informants regarding their memorial tattoos, and then present the differing meaning of these types of tattoos between tourists with different motivations to acquire tattoos during their visits to French Polynesia, thereby arguing that there are different types of memorial tattoos. In this chapter, I discuss two kinds: commemorative and embodied memorial tattoos. The commemorative memorial tattoos are produced through the annexation of emotional indexicality to a design. Embodied memorial tattoos gain their indexicality from the context of the acquisition of the tattoo itself. This is, for example, when a prospective tattooee travels to Tahiti specifically to have a traditional Polynesian design tattooed by a particular Polynesian tattoo artist. Furthermore, in this chapter, I discuss informants' discourse regarding the concepts of sacrifice and enlightenment which they associate with the tattooing process, in addition to highlighting some gender differences regarding the perceptions of these concepts. In the later part of the chapter, I also look at the role of tattoos in the biographical narratives of informants and the way in which tattoos themselves gain new indexicalities, and change, with time. I argue that rather than to analyse tattoos as synchronic objects, it may be more pertinent to look at them as diachronic ones. Finally, I discuss the social role of tattoo artists as facilitators of tattooees' specific desires. Overall, this chapter is focused on tattooees' perceptions of the process of tattooing and on the role that tattoo artists play in their lives.

#### 7.2 Commemorative Tattoos: Death in the Skin

It would seem that a great number of tattooees who acquire their 'ink' are motivated predominantly by a sense of loss and a need to commemorate their relationships with people

with whom they feel they have an emotional bond. Many of these commemorative tattoos are related to the death of individuals emotionally linked to the tattooee. I will now present a series of ethnographic examples of such occurrences:

Fiona is a 31 year old Scottish lawyer working in a London firm. She has one small child and was recently widowed when her husband died in a road accident. She has two small tattoos; a fairy on one of her bum cheeks and some flowers blossoming around her upper right arm. Both of these were acquired in her early twenties. Three months after the death of her husband, she decided to get tattooed again. Fiona chose to have a design of the initials of her late husband worked in a circular Celtic knot pattern tattooed on her left shoulder. She commented just before the beginning of the tattooing session:

‘I want to commemorate our time and link together. Of course, our son is a material proof of this, but I want something really personal; a mark that will stay with me forever. Whatever happens in the rest of my life, his memory will always be cherished and this tattoo will be a mark of it. It will be part of me as we were part of each other. The pain is not that important, after the depth of emotional pain I have experienced over the last few months, I don’t think a little bit of physical pain will be an issue. On the contrary, it might be cathartic... in a weird way’ (interviewed in June 2002).

Stephen is a 28 year old man who organises music festivals in England in the summer. He grew up in the Midlands but is half Welsh and half French. When he was sixteen his mother, who was French, died of cancer. When he was twenty five, he decided to have a neo-tribal design tattooed around his right ankle. The tattoo is a weaved pattern which represents the bond that cannot be broken and is a design which can be found as decoration on both Lapita potteries and pre-Christian European objects, and is used in both contemporary neo-traditional Polynesian and neo-tribal Euro-American tattoo designs. He says:

‘I always liked tattoos but never had one until then. It is when I became friend with K. (the tattoo artist who did his tattoo) that I decided to have one. K knows me very well and it made sense to have a tattoo by him that symbolised my relationship with my mother and her loss. We decided on that pattern, well, I had seen it and liked it before but I never knew what it represented or what it meant, so I was happy when K suggested it and explained its meaning. For me, it says that even death cannot break the bond between my mum and me, and I feel it is also marking the time when I have come to term with her loss as an adult (interviewed in May 2002).

Mary is a 49 year old woman originally from Leicester but who has been living in Brighton for the last twenty years. She is a pub landlady and an amateur singer. She lost both

of her parents in the last five years and decided to have a tattoo to commemorate their relationship. She comments:

‘I had this oak tree branch with a robin and some ivy around it last year. The oak is my dad who was solid and majestic, my mum is the robin because she sang all the time and always wore a red scarf, and the ivy is my granny Ivy who lived with us for most of my childhood. The three are represented now on my back. They have passed away but they are always with me; the tattoo represents this’ (Brighton 2004).

Richard is a 40 year old man from Exeter. He has a coat of arms tattooed on his left arm and says:

‘This design is the coat of arms of my county. It says where I am from but I had it done after my grand-father died of a stroke and my best friend killed himself within a month of each other. For me, both represent being from this place, and that is important. My grand-dad took me fishing, to watch the county cricket team, and taught me the local legends, and my friend grew up with me in these parts. It is like they are linked to the land. This tattoo is a commemoration of them and of the moments we shared in places around here’ (interviewed in February 1998).

One of my own tattoos, which I acquired in 2007, has also a similar narrative to many memorial tattoos. I have a skull and cross bones tattooed on the inside of my right wrist. I decided to have it done to represent living in Deptford, in London, for four years. It is because I reside, still at this time, just behind St Nicholas church which has a long history as a place of worship. It has also a very old graveyard, with a plague pit, which is now well attended by local amateur gardeners and produces a wide range of flowers creating a colourful display. It is also in this graveyard that the English playwright Christopher Marlow (1564-1593) was murdered and is buried. The Western entrance gate to the church and its green has two pillars flanking it. On the top of each of them are two weathered sculptures of skull and cross bones. It is a local knowledge that these were the inspirations for the first pirates to choose this symbol as their flags. The first person who told me this was a fellow anthropology research student from Goldsmith College called Paul Hendrich. It happened that Paul died in a tragic road accident a few months after I had this tattoo done. I would say that since, the tattoo has gained further indexical properties as it is now also a memorial tattoo to him and our short friendship.

John is a 37 year old English man from London. He is a building site and project manager. He had a boxer dog for fifteen years who died. He decided to have a tattoo of a picture of his dog called Pixie. John says:

‘That dog was a very important part of me. I had her when she was a puppy and she became a part of the family. She had a great character and my two kids loved her. I have a lot of tattoos. I had the portraits of my two daughters done a couple of years ago and it is my eldest one who suggested that I get Pixie tattooed next to their tattoos, and I thought why not’ (interviewed April 2004).

There are many other ethnographic examples which I have collected over the years regarding memorial tattoos. It would seem that it represents a great proportion of the narratives which are attached to tattoos and act as reasons, and primary motivation, to acquire them. This is not new either. The relationship between tattoos, designs and people is something which has been present since the beginning of the practice and across the different historical contexts in which it has, and still is, evolving. In the early twentieth century (Pierrat 2003), some criminal tattoos were crudely expressing this by a tomb and cross with the name of the person who passed away and the acronym ‘R.I.P.’ (Rest In Peace) tattooed next to it. Out of the same socio-historical context, a dagger tattooed would usually represent the commitment to a planned act of vengeful retribution to be served upon another person (*ibid*). It could be argued that, even when ancestral tattoos, in Polynesia for example, were relating to spiritual entities and to gods and goddesses, they were still affirming a particular relationship with them. To an extent, this is somewhat reminiscent of contemporary tattoos that celebrate celebrities and spiritual images; such as Buddha, Ganesh or the Baphomet to name but a few. I will discuss these issues a bit further in this chapter but I would like for now to focus on a couple of recurring themes in the narratives of death memorial tattoos.

There are two issues which seem to repetitively appear in the narratives of my informants when they talk about their memorial tattoos. The first is the commemoration of past relationships, and the second is a play between the ideas of gain and loss. The commemorative tattoo is setting and re-asserting relationships beyond death. This is done through a scar made on a living, bleeding, body. This scar is designed according to the specific indexicalities of individuals. The main aspect of this process is that, through it, they are able to create a link between the dead and themselves. It is, to an extent, a form of embodied memory: a living snapshot. As Jonny, a former paratrooper in the British army turned anarchist activist in the 1990’s once explained to me:

‘My tattoos are like photos for me. When you live the type of life I’ve had, you can’t have photos. I had some but they all were lost or destroyed in time. Tattoos can’t be damaged or lost. They stay with you all the time. Each one of my tattoos reminds me of people I have lost over the years’ (interviewed in July 2001).

Yet, these types of tattoos differ from photos in many other points than just their more resilient nature. Many are not replicas of photos but just names or indexical representations relating to the lost loved one. Even the ones which resemble the closest to a photographic print are more akin to painted portraits. They are, therefore, reminiscent of these little pendants which had a small painted portrait, sometimes accompanied by a lock of hair, which were used in Europe prior the invention, and the popular use, of photography. Another, inexorable, and more fundamental, difference between tattoos and photographs is the embodied nature of the former. This relates directly to the process by which these memorials are embedded within the body, and to the pain inherently associated with the process of tattooing.

### 7.3 Gain and Loss

The second issue which seems to repetitively occur in the discourse about, and through the process of, tattooing, is the play between the ideas of loss and gain. Memorial tattoos which relate to a dead relative, and/or loved one, are acquired due to a sense of loss. Yet the process of their acquisition is creating a sense of gain. Clearly, it is not a sense of gain equivalent to the sense of loss or which would, or could, replace the person. Nevertheless, it is gaining a new object which becomes embedded, through its embodied nature, below the skin. At this point, it is apt to recall the saying, and popular lyrics sang by, amongst others, Frank Sinatra, about having someone 'under one's skin'. Although the saying, and the song, relate to a living individual with which one is in love, the reference made relating to a person which one has loved but who has passed away is similarly apt, and many informants have used it in this context when talking, somewhat humorously, about their memorial tattoos to me. Furthermore, there is another aspect of this play on individuals' loss and gain regarding memorial tattoos. This is that it entails a relationship between the emotional and the physiological spheres of sensations. If we accept that pain is physiological while suffering is emotional, cultural and social, the following relationship takes place. Emotional suffering due to a loss leads some prospective tattooees to engage with physical pain, which is inherent to the tattooing process. In turn, physical pain is turned into an emotional gain by the acquisition of an embodied, and therefore unavoidably physical, personal index, in this case, a tattoo.

The gain associated with a memorial tattoo is two folded. What is gained is a physical, if embodied, object of which indexicality brings some form of emotional gain through the personal remembrance attached to them. Moreover, it is also the case that, during the tattooing process, the individual being tattooed is confronted by physical pain and therefore momentarily loses his/her well-being. In the spring of 2002, I was having a discussion with a female American Buddhist devotee at a social function, and during this exchange, the topic turned to tattoos and tattooing. She did not have any but commented that:

‘I have a lot of respect for people who have tattoos. I feel that, in a way, they search for a similar thing as Buddhists do. The human reflex is to move away from pain and suffering, but they (the tattooees) go against this and will keep immobile while they are in pain. It is as if they accepted suffering and that is an important aim of Buddhist meditation’ (collected in April 2002).

This anecdotal comment is relevant to my last point that the way to transform emotional suffering into some form of physical gain is, somewhat paradoxically, to engage with, and accept, momentarily physical pain. This is often expressed, in many of my informants’ discourse, as a personal form of sacrifice and/or enlightenment. Phillip, for example, who has many large Japanese style tattoos and is an Afro-Caribbean British brick-layer and Aikido (a Japanese martial art) Sensei (Master), commented to me:

‘you have to let the pain wash over you. You have to give up something to gain something else. When you accept the pain, it doesn’t become a feeling you shy away from anymore. You face up to suffering with courage and determination, and this changes how you deal with life in general. It changes who you are. You become more assertive, and you gain a better understanding and knowledge of yourself in the process.’ (interviewed in May 2001).

There again the ideas of gain and loss are present. The European perceptions of sacrifice seem to involve an act when one gives up something either valued or cherished to gain something which in some way is often more immaterial and yet more difficult to attain. Enlightenment also includes a sense of loss and gain. It is often perceived by many of my informants that the loss of a particular innocence is required to bring about the acquisition of an enlightened perspective, in the same way that people in Plato’s cave are liberated from their chains and come out to see the shadows for what they were. However, both concepts of sacrifice and enlightenment have opposing emphasis on the process they entail. Sacrifice highlights the loss, even if the gain is implied, and similarly, enlightenment ascertain the gain, even if the loss is an unspoken given.

Among my informants both concepts are used according to the context of the discussion in which they are engaged. Yet, there is a form of gender difference which is somewhat intriguing. It would seem that, in many of their discourses regarding their tattoos, men seem to focus on the sacrifice, and therefore the loss, while women use a narrative which entails enlightenment and what they gained through the process. At this point, I need to make clear that this gendered dichotomy is not clearly demarcated, and also that the sense of loss expressed by male informants is not negative in outlook, but is often celebratory. What I mean is that men often talk, with enthusiasm and pride, about the physiological pain they had to endure during their different tattoo sessions. In a way, they celebrate the momentary loss of their personal well being. Female informants, contrastingly, talk about the way in which physiological pain has brought them a different perspective on certain issues and how their experiences have been, somewhat, cathartic. However, as I have stated already, this is not a simple gendered dichotomy of discourses, but rather an emphasis stated in casual conversations. What I often found was that both gender discourses use both ideas of sacrifice and enlightenment when engaged in more sustained exchanges and when talking with acquaintances rather than strangers. There are also differences in the emphasis used when one gender talks to another about their tattoos, and also when one interlocutor has tattoos and the other has not. This further indicates that, for many of my informants, through the tattooing process, they sacrifice something to gain some form of personal enlightenment. As Jurgen, a Danish tattoo artist in his fifties based in Copenhagen but who often tattoos in a London shop, explained to me:

‘From the pagan god Odin to the story of Christ, sacrifice to gain something very valuable and unreachable is a very present idea. Odin gave up an eye to gain the ability to read runes and Christ gave up his life to be able to offer the possibility of salvation and redemption to the human race. I am not a Christian myself but I can understand the power of the concept. In fact, in pagan Scandinavia, sacrifice was the basis of much of the beliefs and of their relationships with the gods and goddesses. Tattooing today is used by many people with the same ideas in mind. You can have a drawing on the skin, or have some henna done, but they will be only temporarily marks. To have a permanent one, you need to sacrifice some blood, endure pain, and shed some sweat and tears. No pain, no gain!’ (interviewed in April 2000).

As I have shown, commemorative tattoos are often used to create a link between an individual and their late relation(s) through an embodied object acquired by a painful process evoking ideas of loss and gain, and of personal sacrifice and enlightenment. However, it

would also seem that these issues and processes are at play in many other tattoos that can be classified as memorial tattoos. By this, I mean that the subjects of the act of memorial cannot only be late relations, but also historical, political, and/or popular figures. Furthermore, the subjects can be even more ethereal, as some are imaginary characters, divinities and, sometimes, just ideas, concepts or causes. The point seems to be that tattooees use tattoos as a way to create a particular type of relationship with someone, or something, else. This relationship is two-fold. Firstly, it is personal and it establishes a link through the act of being tattooed and what this entails. The main components are a sacrificial act, which denotes a certain amount of commitment to what is tattooed, and a willingness to change one's body for ever: to be permanently marked. Secondly, these types of relationships are also expressed on a social level and are, therefore, outward looking. The indexicality of a tattoo design is offered to others to interpret. The number and types of people who are allowed, by a tattooed individual, to see this personal index depend on the size and placement of the tattoo on the body. Furthermore, there may also be a tension between the indexicality intended by the tattooee and the indexicality interpreted by the observer. Moreover, as I will discuss later in this chapter, tattoos are not mono-dimensional indexes and most acquire further indexicalities in symbiosis with their wearers' ever changing biographical narratives.

#### 7.4 Memorial Tattoos in French Polynesia and The Touristic Memory of Moorea

Overall, the process involved with the way memorial tattoos are used by diverse protagonists shares some aspects for it is also often a cross-cultural one. One example of this is the way tattooing has been used in French Polynesia over the last thirty years. As I have shown in chapters three and four of this thesis, the re-introduction of the tattooing practice in French Polynesia from the 1980's onwards has been closely associated with an agenda of re-establishing a value to Polynesian identity and past history and practices, which can be seen as a reaction to almost a hundred and fifty years of French colonisation. An important aspect of tattooing, in this context, has been that the practice was in use prior to European contact and that it is through the process of colonisation and Christian conversion that tattooing ceased to be used for more than a century. This fact is of paradoxical, and therefore problematic, value to the local cultural renewal movement (see chapters three, four and five). On the one hand, it is a strong index of resistance as it associates the tattooee automatically with the idea of a pre-colonisation time and to its people's customs and practices. On the

other hand, due to more than a hundred years of absence, the tattooing practice is intrinsically different from the one operating prior to European contact. Although, the tattooing techniques can be re-learned, the reasons to have tattoos, and their uses, have been transformed so as to be meaningful and relevant to the changed socio-cultural, and historical, context in which the tattoos are acquired. In a way, this is also the case for re-introduced ceremonies such as the walk on fire. One of the contemporary uses of tattoos in French Polynesia is, I contend, similar to European memorial tattoos. This is two folded. Firstly, some tattoos, on Tahiti and Moorea today are perceived, by some of my informants, as relating directly to their genealogical lines and heritage. Secondly, Polynesian tattoos are always indexical of a pre-colonial time. Moreover, these indexicalities are more precisely, and to an extent inherently, linked to the bodies of pre-contact ancestral wearers of similar designs. The reasons to acquire the tattoos may have changed but the embodied, and aesthetic, nature of these signs is consistent through different times, socio-cultural contexts, and historical periods. This is simply because the human body has not changed to the extent that the culture has. Therefore, contemporary Polynesian tattoos are memorials to a lost, and mostly disconnected, past, and thus indexes of resistance and political activism. This was particularly potent in the earlier period of cultural renewal (from the 1980's to the mid 1990's) but is still the underlying indexicality which is expressed in the later part of the history of the practice, even if the reasons and indexicalities they express about them are often different.

Furthermore, tourists who acquire Polynesian tattoos during their stay on Moorea seem to be involved in the same memorial process, albeit if indirectly and somehow unconsciously. Most tourists come to French Polynesia for no longer than three weeks, usually staying for only a few days as part of a longer trip around the world. The island of Moorea is a popular destination for a day or two, and this is because it is very close (fifteen kilometres and half an hour to an hour boat trip) to the main island of Tahiti where the only international airport is situated. It is also small (seventy kilometres round) which means that many tourists rent mopeds, scooters or other forms of open air personal transport, to circumvent, on the only asphalted road, the island of Moorea in a day. A number of them will stop at one of the tattoo shops dotted around the island. At this point, I would like to clarify that there are two types of tourists who get tattooed. Firstly, there is one group which I define as the 'opportunists'. These are people who come to French Polynesia and decide on the spot to get a tattoo, generally small, in a local, and usually strategically situated, tattoo shop.

Secondly, there is a category of individuals, who I will refer to as tattoo 'enthusiasts', who organise a holiday in French Polynesia specifically to acquire a tattoo from a specific local tattoo artist that they either have met or seen at a European convention, or have read about in the global and their national tattoo medias. This type of tourists is less numerous than the opportunists. The main point I want to make here is that this difference, between the tattoo opportunist and the tattoo enthusiast categories of tourists, is more than a differing intent but influences the way memories are used in the process of tattooing. However, I am not making a value judgement here regarding the opportunist but rather I want to describe a group of people whose engagement with tattooing is of a casual and/or occasional nature.

In early 2001, I spent three months working as an apprentice in Vatea's tattoo shop where Chime was also working. This shop was newly opened and situated in the bay of Vaiare, where the ferry service to and from Tahiti docks. This meant that, depending on the choice of the opportunists to go around the island either clockwise or anticlockwise, Vatea's tattoo shop would be either the first or the last one they encountered on their journeys. At any rate, it was the last opportunity to get a tattoo on Moorea as they came back to the ferry dock to return to the island of Tahiti. Other internationally reputed tattoo artists based on Moorea have their shops in the two main commercial areas of the island which is also where most of the large hotels are located; Purutu is in Maharepa by the island's main post office and Roonui is in Haapiti by the Club Med compound. Roonui's shop has always been perceived, by my informants, since its opening in the late 1990's as the best strategically situated shop on the island, because Haapiti is the site of the biggest cluster of major hotels, including the compound of the Club Med. The tattoo opportunists' market is an important aspect of the possible income of the local tattoo artists. Yet, it is also perceived in a somewhat ambivalent manner for some. Purutu, for example, rarely opens his shop to wait for opportunists to drop by. Most of the time, he is present because of an appointment which has been made at least a few hours in advance, usually by telephone. This means that he does not deal with the day tripper opportunists. Chime, apart from his short spell working in Vatea's tattoo shop, usually sets up his tattoo shop in an adjacent part of his residence. This means that it is often not placed strategically.

In this context, another aspect which is relevant to Roonui's success in tattooing a great number of tattoo opportunists is the way he has designed his shop. The shop is very

similar to a European or North American tattoo shop layout. Moreover, his wife who is Canadian and is bilingual in French and English manages the front of house and facilitates the first contact with opportunists who do not usually have much experience of dealing with the tattoo milieu. Vatea's shop was similarly designed in a European way with a concern for promoting the hygienic nature of the process taking place within. Therefore, the position on the island of a tattoo shop and its presentation to prospective tattoo opportunists are crucial to gain a substantial share of this particular market. Other set-ups are also in play, some less internationally well known local tattoo artists open their shop on the grounds of hotel complexes. Others work at the Tiki Village which is advertised as a reconstruction of a traditional Polynesian village and presents a range of local craftsmen and women, including a few tattoo artists. Chime in 2005/06 had also customised a small van into a mobile tattoo shop so that he could place himself strategically on the island and adapt to local events, in addition to being able to go to the prospective tattooees' place of residence, whether this is a tourist's hotel or a local resident's home. The main consequence of the tattoo opportunists' market is that artists, who are least involved in it, have either to accept a reduced income from their practice or have to attend more European and North American tattoo conventions. This is not only to supplement their income but also to ascertain and maintain their fame which may increase the number of enthusiasts who will come to visit them once they are back in their tattoo shops on the island of Moorea.

Both tattoo opportunists and enthusiasts use memory in their personal relationships with the tattoos they acquire during their short stay in French Polynesia. The way the opportunists talk about their tattoos refers to the act of travelling and of being there. Many feel that it is more meaningful than buying an object, and more beautiful, but they do not see tourists objects and tattoos as two diametrically different entities. They get tattooed because it reminds them of their short stay on Moorea but also of the whole journey they have, and are going at the time, through. Many are in the middle of a round the world trip and this whole process is encompassed in the small Polynesian designs they have tattooed on their 'Tahitian' stop over. The tattoo enthusiasts, in contrast, often save specifically to pay for their trip to Moorea and for the price of the tattoo they have done there. They will rarely go to another destination and will spend as much time in Polynesia as they can. This is because the process, in which they are involved, is directly linked to the acquisition of a tattoo rather than having, in the case of the opportunists, a tattoo which represents a stopover in a longer journey. Most

enthusiasts could have either the same tattoo by the same tattoo artist done in Europe during a tattoo convention, or a similar design done by another Polynesian artist working in a tattoo shop there. Yet, they appear to want to create a more personal relationship, not only with their chosen local tattoo artist, but also with the local environment and contemporary Polynesian culture. The perceived value of a Polynesian tattoo acquired during a stay there, in the global tattoo community and amongst tattoo enthusiasts, is higher than one acquired in other contexts and by non-Polynesian tattoo artists. Enthusiasts' informants link their tattoos with ideas of place but in a different way to the opportunists. They, in a way like most of Polynesian tattooees, express their awareness of the ancestral nature of the design and the practice. The political agenda associated with it is implied but not always overtly indexed. The important aspect for them is to share the same environment from which the tattoo they will display has emanated, prior to colonisation and from its contemporary context. This time line is often somehow vague for many of these informants. Therefore, their tattoos are referring to both the location and context of their acquisitions, experienced and imagined. Their experiences create memories which are encompassed in the tattoo they acquire. These tattoos are a form of embodied memories created during the time spent there and through the tattooing experience itself, and they become objects that they personally value and which have increased socio-cultural value within the wider global tattoo community.

The types of tattoos that the enthusiasts have are, in a sense, particular because their indexicalities are references to their time and personal involvement with Polynesian culture, past and present/real and imagined, rather than about an indexicality which derives primarily from meaning transferred to it by the tattooees themselves, like the opportunists. There is a difference between going to a tattoo shop with an idea of a design which already has meaning, and going to a distant location to gain a tattoo which meaning is mainly acquired through the experience of its acquisition itself. This is often accompanied by another difference which is, that most of the time, Polynesian tattoo artists' designs are tattooed without prior knowledge of the prospective tattooees. By this I mean that the tattoo artist will decide what s/he will tattoo with the consent from the prospective tattooee. Opportunists will often look through the artist's tattoo books and choose something which will be tattooed. However, most of the time the design will be slightly changed and personalised so that it is unique, which is one of its selling points.

Gell (1993) presents tattoos and the process of tattooing in three main stages. The first one is the tattooing process itself, the second is the healing process, and the third stage is the finished tattoo. He argues (*ibid*) that, in pre-contact Polynesia, the stages which were perceived as the most important were the first and second because the process was intended for protection from other people's *mana* and containment of one's own. The tattoos themselves were therefore seen as visual confirmation that an individual has gone through the appropriate processes and is safe to deal with. Gell (*ibid*) continues to argue that, in contrast, contemporary Euro-American individuals involved in tattoos place their focus on the third stage of the process: on having a tattoo. The main function of the two first stages, here, is to acquire a tattoo. Although useful, this differentiation seems to omit some of the intricacies, and the wide range, of personal motivations and experiences of contemporary tattooees and tattoo artists, both from Euro-America and elsewhere. For example, the European tattoo enthusiasts who organise a month long stay on the island of Moorea to have a design that they have not chosen themselves tattooed in their skins experience the two first stages of the process as highly important in the production of indexicalities of their tattoos, and to their personal narratives. There is a difference in the function of tattoos between pre-contact and contemporary Euro-American contexts, but the tattoos in the latter one are also a form of visual confirmation of a process and an experience which has taken place. These tattoos' primary meaning are created in that time and is recognised as such within the wider global tattoo community, through their increased cultural capital and social value located in an internal hierarchy of authenticity (see chapter eight). Furthermore, the function of tattoos, today, may be somehow more wilfully potent than just the aesthetic role which Gell (*ibid*) seems to focus us on. There is a constitutive aspect of tattoos which makes them forms of embodied, embedded, memories. This is because tattoos seem to entwine memories at every stage of their production. It could be argued that even pre-contact Polynesian tattoos were themselves embodied memories of the process associated to their primary 'wrapping' functions.

The two main groups of memorial tattoos seem to be commemorative tattoos on the one hand and embodied memories on the other. The main point is that all tattoos seem to involve the tattooee's memories. Although different, it is clear that all types of tattoos are commemorative and embodied. The difference I am making is not entirely clear cut. By this I mean that, even the tattoo opportunists, who mainly impart to their tattoos the indexicality of

a journey, will remember their stop on the island of Moorea as a particular experience. This makes their tattoos embodied memories as well as commemorative ones, because they encompass inexorably the experience of being tattooed in that context. Furthermore, this short encounter can develop the interests of the tattooee in Polynesian tattoos. Many tattoo enthusiasts were opportunists to start with.

Another point I need to make clear is that the difference between opportunists and enthusiasts categories of tattooees is also valid in the clientele of Euro-American tattoo shops. It is because, in this context as well, there is a difference between the approaches of the wide range of customers. This is related to the discussion on the range of encounters and exchange relationships which come into play during the tattooing process. It could be argued that, generally, tattoo opportunists are involved in commodity exchange relationships, while the enthusiasts are either engaged in gift exchange ones or in exchanges by private treaty (see chapter eight). This is because enthusiasts are usually going through a sustained tattooing process which may involve multiple sessions. They are also often friends with the tattoo artists. Another case is when a client comes with a tattoo project that a tattoo artist is particularly interested in completing, in which case the price may change because of the perceived more personal relationship due to a shared interest and aesthetic, and artistic, appreciation. It is also the case that many enthusiasts started their relationships with their tattoo artists as opportunists themselves. However, the difference in the use of memory, either as commemoration or embodiment, is not as salient as in the Polynesian context. Nevertheless, many of my informants commented to me that being tattooed by a friend has greater personal implication than being tattooed by a stranger. It is also the case that many enthusiasts give more artistic license to their tattoo artists than do opportunists. This is, in a way, similar to Polynesian tattoo artists whose tattoo designs are unknown to their clients. However, this happens in a minority of tattooing encounters. Most prospective tattooees will have a more or less clear idea of a design relating to a personal indexicality, often contributing to a biographical narrative. I will now discuss the role played by tattoos, as material, yet embodied, objects in this process.

## 7.5 Biographical Tattoos and the Biographies of Tattoos

Tel is an English man from North-East London born in the late 1960's. He left school at sixteen and worked in the building trade. In his late twenties he went to Malawi and managed a back-packers' hotel. In the late 1990's, he came back to the UK, did an access course and took a degree in anthropology at UCL, University of London. After graduating, he worked on a documentary about the Kum Mella Hindu festival and spent time in Goa, India. On his return, in 2001, he worked in music festivals and community projects in East London. While drunk, in his late teens, he and a friend went to a London tattoo shop and were tattooed. Tel had a soaring eagle clutching a name tag spelling: 'Terry' on his right forearm. He did not get tattooed further after this as he disliked his tattoo soon after acquiring it. In his early thirties, Tel became friend with a tattoo artist. He decided that he would get a cover-up of his tattoo. He commented:

'I hate this tattoo. I was drunk when I got it and it was a mistake. At the time, it felt clever but I regretted it pretty quickly. The eagle represented freedom and my name was something to do with identity, I guess. I got it when I left school and earned my first wage. Now, I am thinking, if I'm going to have a tattoo there, I should get something I like and I am proud to show.' (interviewed in March 2001).

However, over the next three months as he and the tattoo artist were designing and planning his new tattoo, Tel started to have second thoughts about the process. He told me:

'I'm not going to get the cover-up after all. I have decided to get a new tattoo on my leg. The thing is, the closer I got to having it covered, the more I realised that I liked it in a weird way. It reminds me of that time in my life and it is a good warning; it reminds me of how stupid I can be and of all the bad decisions I made. And as much as I don't like it, it is a part of me and I can't deny it. So I'll get a new tattoo and keep that one. The other thing is that it is quite old now, so it is not so bright and well defined. If I got a new one it would be very visible and flash. I might feel more self conscious about having a tattoo like I did when I just got it. I'd rather enjoy having one that I can make public or not' (interviewed in January 2002).

Therefore, Tel was a tattoo opportunist who acquired a commemorative tattoo relating to a form of coming of age, mainly due to his newly found economic independence. It became, with time, an embodied memory representing a whole timeline of his biography as well as a reminder of many of the life choices he made in the past.

There are a number of issues which are instigated by Tel's narrative. The two main ones which I want to discuss here are, firstly, the biographical indexicality which he attaches to his tattoo and how this has changed over time, and secondly, the physical changes that the tattoo itself goes through. The main point I want to make is that, tattoos are not static neither in their meanings, personal and social, nor in their physical materiality. To a great extent,

tattoos have always been studied, and analysed, by social researchers as synchronic entities. By this I mean that, tattoos have seemed to be regarded as having one meaning which the tattooee gives to the researcher. The tattoo is also perceived as set, permanent, and unchanged, not only in its meaning but also in its physicality. Yet, tattoos could, and should, be looked at as diachronic entities. This would mean that much more than a time constrained given meaning would be considered. The aspects which should be taken into account include the reason of getting the tattoo, the context in which the tattoo is acquired (including the relationship with the tattoo artist), the original meaning and indexicality given to the tattoo, as well as the further indexicalities which become attached to it. When all these facts are gathered, a tattoo becomes an object which has its own biography. It is, of course, inherently related to, and integrated with, the tattooee's own biography. There are similarities, here, with Appadurai's (1984) and Miller's (1987) arguments that objects, and material culture, should be looked upon as having their own biographies and that, for example, the commodified phase of an object's biography is only that: a phase and a stage in its state of becoming. However, there is an important difference between objects and tattoos, which is that tattoos are involved in only one exchange which is also the act of their creation as material objects. Furthermore, tattoos exist in the material world only through their embodied nature. This sets them apart from many other types of objects. Although involved in only one act of exchange, acquiring a tattoo is an intense and personal encounter with a tattoo artist. Nevertheless, it can be argued that objects themselves acquire indexicalities through their relationships with the biographies of their owners (Appadurai 1984). Another related ethereal object which can elicit the creation of emotional indexicalities between individuals and themselves are songs and music pieces. A song, like a tattoo, is often associated with personal and biographical memories. They are used as commemorations and celebrations, for example during weddings, funerals and other social events. They are therefore potent on a personal and social level.

The material nature of tattoos is not static, and neither is their perceived aesthetic worth. As it ages, a tattoo's ink will spread from its original placement. How widely and quickly this spreading occurs often depends on the depth at which the ink was inserted into the skin during the tattooing process. When the ink is too deep, it will spread almost instantaneously after the healing stage; firstly giving a blue halo to the lines of the tattoo. When the ink is not deep enough into the skin, the tattoo will appear fainter within a few years as the ink will be replaced by new skin. However, even when the ink is at the correct

depth, the ink will spread after some time. The lines will become blurry, the colours will fade, and the ink will become bluer. This is often a reason given by some people as why they do not want tattoos. They argue that they do not want to grow old with old tattoos which are indecipherable. The question which is, often sardonically asked is how the tattooee will feel about having tattoos when they are in their seventies. As in Tel's example, many tattooees consider having an old tattoo covered by a new one. In French Polynesia, many of my informants involved in the tattooing renewal there, have covered Western style tattoos with neo-traditional designs. Some have just blackened the whole area of their bodies where the tattoos were located.

Among my informants, there are discussions about the way tattoos age differently depending on the technique used during the tattooing process. This is not the same as the technical skill of the tattoo artist, and does not relate to the depth where the ink is deposited, rather, it concerns the method used, as there are a number of ways to get the ink where it should be. The main discussion in the global tattoo community regards the difference between the electric machine and traditional Polynesian techniques. Chime explained to me that:

'A tattoo done with a tattoo gun (electric machine) is at its best when it is just finished. Even when it has just healed, it will have lost some of its sharpness and brightness. With the Polynesian tattooing hoe, each stroke is disjoined from the next. With time, the spreading of the ink will make the tattoo become more unified. So a tattoo done with traditional tools gets better with time and one done with an electric machine gets worse with time.' (interviewed in February 2001).

Other informants go further and argue that neo-traditional and neo-tribal designs are, in some way, engineered to grow old gracefully. Most informants, who only use electric machines, do not usually argue about this point. However, many comment that a tattoo does not deteriorate over a few months but over a couple of decades, and that a tattoo can be restored by tattooing over the lines and adding new colours if the tattooee decides, or have a cover-up with an altogether new design. Some tattoo artists have built part of their reputation on the quality of their cover-up. As Furry once pointed out to me:

'To do a good cover-up job does not mean that you are just tattooing over the old tattoo. A good one uses the features of the old tattoo into the new design so that you do not see the old design because the new one is transforming it and not just covering it up.' (interviewed in August 2006).

The point is that the changes in the materiality of a tattoo are the subject of discussion for both tattoo enthusiasts and tattoo practitioners, and to an extent, for non-tattooees.

## 7.6 The Social Role of Tattoo Artists

Throughout this chapter I have looked at the way tattooees create emotional links and indexicalities involving memory with their tattoos. These memorial tattoos, either commemorative or embodied or both, cannot become what they are without a direct, personal, and intense encounter with tattoo artists. As discussed in chapters five, six and seven of this thesis, the agency of tattoo artists is crucial and undeniable in the creation of tattoos. Furthermore, this agency is attached to the tattoo, and inherently to the body of the tattooee, which implies that a tattoo is never really alienated from its producer. However short this encounter may be, tattooees always refer to it, and to the tattoo artist involved, as a particular, and specifically different, type of encounter and relationship. There are a number of reasons which seem to account for these perceptions. The obvious one is that tattoo artists are the producers of the tattoos, and are therefore perceived as the facilitators in the act of creation of the embodied memorials. In the case of commemorative tattoos, they are the individuals who enable the perceived link to be established between the living and the dead through the tattoo. However, there are other examples.

Paul is an English man in his late twenties from Deptford in London. He is a car mechanic and a fervent supporter of Millwall Football Club, one of the local football teams. At the end of the 2006/7 football season, his beloved club was relegated to the third tier of the English football league structure. At the beginning of the new season, Paul decided to have the Millwall club crest tattooed. He said:

‘I couldn’t believe it when we got relegated again, so I decided to get tattooed. Last time we were relegated, in 2000/01, I got a Millwall tattoo and we were back up in the next season. It worked that time so hopefully it will work this time too and we’ll be back in the Championship next season.’ (interviewed in October 2007).

I should point out that, unfortunately for Paul, Millwall did not manage to gain promotion the following season. However, this should not distract from the fact that he used tattoos and tattooing in a wilful manner. He projected his desire through the painful acquisition of a tattoo which indexicality is directly, and to an extent solely, connected to the subject of his

wish. This is reminiscent of Gell's (1992) reading of the idea of magic, in which he argues that there is a consistent thread of praxis between different contextual uses of magic. This means that, from the Trobriand Islanders to Euro-American advertising executives, the common feature is the material projection of a wish. This wish is that events unfold in a manner which is fortuitous to the wisher. This includes that the Yam garden be protected from vermin and that the yams grow, that a hunt be successful, or that a commodity be associated with the possibility of improving one's fulfilment and enrich social and cultural life just through its acquisition. The material projection can take many forms, from oral incantation to written spells, embodied ritual and performance, and audiovisual messages. I would argue that Paul, and the process of tattooing in general, is involved in the same process of magic of which Gell (*ibid*) writes. Paul's Millwall tattoo is a material projection of his wish for his team promotion. The magic is perceived by him as possible because there is a sense of sacrifice and, beyond the pain, it is a very special and potent type of sacrifice, a blood sacrifice. This is not only in Paul's conceptualisation of his act but also, and importantly, in the reality of the process of tattooing. This is because the tattoo artist breaks the skin, and draws blood, while depositing the ink within it. The main point, in the context of this chapter, is that the person who enables, and facilitates, the magical act through the creation of a material projection of a wish in exchange for blood and suffering, and often money is the tattoo artist.

The emotional potency of the personal indexicality of a tattoo, for prospective tattooees, should not be underestimated. It is relatively common that tattooees will feel light headed within the first quarter of an hour of the tattooing session. The physiology of this occurrence is linked to the level of adrenaline rising and the blood sugar level dropping sharply. The way this is dealt with, in all contexts I have witnessed, is to make the tattooee lie down and give them some form of sugar-based beverage. In most cases, the session resumes ten minutes later and the tattooee does not feel as bad for the remainder of the tattooing session. From talking to many people who have experienced this feeling, and having been in the situation myself a couple of times, it would seem that this happens when the tattooee associates the design being tattooed with a intensely emotionally charged and personally meaningful indexicality. It does not seem to be only the pain felt, as many who experience this feeling have already engaged with tattooing prior to this. The rising adrenaline levels therefore seem to be triggered by an emotional response to the process of acquiring an

embodied object which represents something particularly meaningful. Informants comment that this relates to a series of contributing factors coming together. These are the emotionally charged personal meaning of the tattoo, the pain, some first-timers cite the idea of permanence, and a form of realisation of a particular situation or fact related to the meaning of their tattoos. Tattoo artists are themselves located at the centre of this process and agents of some of these factors.

Stephen told me that:

‘I feel a lot more alive after each tattoo session. It is almost like a doctor, but not to make you better but to make you feel alive. This is why I get tattooed more and more. It is the sensation of pinching yourself to know if you are awake.’ (interviewed in June 2003).

This comment points to another important aspect of the perceived role of tattoo artists by tattooees. The intensity, and specificity, of the encounter between them stems from the inevitable pain which is involved in the tattooing process. In Euro-American societies, there are very few people who are allowed to inflict pain and to draw blood. The majority of these roles are within the bio-medical professional sphere. They include doctors, nurses, dentists, surgeons, to name the main ones. Apart from them, the only other people we invite to inflict pain on us and draw blood are body-modifiers; mainly tattoo artists and piercers. I will look in more depth to this relationship between the bio-medical and the body-modification worlds, and the moral undertones associated to it, in the final chapter of the thesis. For now, I would like to focus on the very specific location tattoo artists find themselves in. Their role has a particular social dimension. Their agency is intertwined with the personal lives, biographies, narratives, and wishes of the people they tattoo. They facilitate the commemoration of emotional links between the living and the dead, as well as the celebration of the procreative process. Tattoo artists also are agents, and mediators, for the material magical projections of some people they tattoo. They are, and are perceived as, central to personal acts of sacrifice and purveyors of a form of path to personal enlightenment. The fact is that, from their socio-cultural location, tattoo artists hear the biographical narratives of tattooees. They become involved in the desires, sorrows, and moments of happiness of their clients. They physically touch them, hurt and mark them at their invitation.

## 7.7 The Value of Pain and Suffering.

As I have shown, a tattoo is not simply an embodied mark imbued of personal and social meaning. The experience of acquiring it, which includes the painful process of tattooing and the somewhat sensual encounter with a tattoo artist, assumes not only great importance for individuals being tattooed, but also within the wider tattoo community. In this sense, the meaning, or value, of the tattoo is not just in what the design represents, and symbolises, but it is also as a memento, an index, of the painful experience of being tattooed. This is often highlighted by the inevitable question which is asked to tattooees: 'did it hurt?'. This seems to point to the power that the act of tattooing carries beyond not only its occurrence but also beyond the global tattoo community itself, as this question is most often asked by non-tattooees.

Tattoos are made to be remembered. They act as memorial objects which meanings are attributed by the personal biographies of tattooees. Yet, they are also, more directly, a memorial of the event of their acquisition, including the personal meaning which was the prime motivation of acquiring them in the first place. They are fetish objects, in Pietz's (1985) (see chapter three) sense of the term, because they become the material objectification of the event, of the tattooing process itself. The event is perceived, by my informants, as a form of commitment as well as a process of self-discovery and metamorphosis. This act, which merges ideas, ink and body into a tattoo, is inescapably painful. It is the case that pain is important to the creation of group identity markers within the global tattoo community. As S, the manager of a London tattoo shop commented to me: 'We give respect to someone because we know what the person had to go through to have their tattoos: how many hours under the needles they have spent.' (interviewed in July 2004). The size and placement of the tattoo are significant to this attitude and these contribute to a form of hierarchy of body parts. This is because the pain experienced is more or less intense depending on the different areas of the human body which are being tattooed. Similarly, the size of a tattoo is important here because the bigger the tattoo, the longer the tattooee has had to spend under the needles. Tattooed individuals are therefore classified by their peers according to the areas of their bodies which have been tattooed. The areas which are placed at the top of this hierarchy are the ones which are the most painful during the tattooing process. These are the inner arms, armpits, collar bones, knees, feet, genitals, and buttocks. Another class are areas which are

public, even when the individual is fully clothed. They are the face, skull, ears, neck, and hands. At the bottom of the hierarchy of body parts are usually areas which are the least painful to be tattooed. The main ones are the bicep, the outer forearm, and above the shoulder blades. This type of hierarchy is not only relevant to the Euro-American contexts, but also to the French Polynesian and New Zealand ones. The fact that an individual has been tattooed in a reputed painful area of the body does give him, or her, a certain form of capital in the global tattoo community. This perceived respect does not, however, go further than an initial acknowledgment, and an opportunity to make contact, as opposed to a deep rooted concept of respect gained over years of interactions. This perception goes beyond the style of designs. It occurs between individuals who have tattoos in totally differing styles and which are part of unrelated social networks. However, a perceived sense of community is not based on a shared experience of pain, but rather pain assumes a form of value in the tattoo community and the experience of being tattooed is, in some cases, essential to the value of the tattoo.

There is another aspect of tattooing directly related to pain. Many informants talk of the transformative agency of pain and suffering to their own ability to endure pain, and to a point, emotional hardship. Many informants have described to me how their perceptions of pain and suffering have changed through their increasingly sustained involvement with the tattooing process. The general idea, here, is well encapsulated within the old adage which states that: 'pain is unavoidable, suffering is optional'. The tattoo shop, and consequently the tattoo artists operating there, is perceived as a safe place to engage positively with one's own suffering. As M., a tattooee with extensively tattooed skin from the North of England, explained to me:

'In a tattoo shop, you consciously decide to be in pain. It is your decision, your choice of place and time, and after all the pain you end-up with a beautiful tattoo, so pain becomes something positive and almost welcomed' (interviewed in May 2002).

Others informants state that tattoo shops are locations where they can engage with personal transformation. This transformation, however, is taking place on both the material body and on what informants refer to as their characters, and this seems to be expressed by both men and women. They all talk about their ability to engage with the physiological pain without perceiving the associated suffering as an unbearable, and debilitating, sensation or feeling.

Informants often describe the change within them as an ability to let the pain pass, or wash, over the self. They state that it is through accepting the inevitability of pain that they can accept the ensuing suffering. Furthermore, as K, a Danish body modifier based in London and involved in tattooing, piercing and suspensions, told me:

‘For me, and many of my friends, I find that because you deal with the pain of body modifications, you start to be able to deal with a lot of other types of pain and the harshness of life in general’ (interviewed in May 2004).

There is a sense, in many of my informants’ discourses, that tattooing, and other forms of body modification, is perceived as a way, consciously or unconsciously, to come to terms with emotional trauma. Such practices become sets of embodied technologies used as tools to deal with suffering which is not rooted in physiological pain. Emotional suffering is somewhat more intangible and uncontrollable than the suffering which is caused by a breach of the skin and its penetration. This is probably why tattooing is perceived as it is, because of the amount of control on the decision to be in pain and also the ultimate goal, having a tattoo. Pain and suffering become meaningful and the individual feels that they are facing their fears. Suffering, both physiological and emotional, is an integral part of the human condition, as artists, philosophers, and religious figures have timelessly articulated. In a way it could be argued that, as the French anthropologist David LeBreton (1995) states, during painful rituals, participants control the violence they experience, and sculpt it ‘with devotion at the heart of the self, they subordinate their condition rather than submit to it’ (LeBreton 1995:218). The main point is that, through tattooing, my informants perceive that they have somehow empowered themselves. Many say that they feel that they have gone beyond a particular pain threshold which they thought was set, and this makes them think of themselves in a different light. As X, a British tattoo artists explained to me: ‘When you are faced with pain, you are faced with the real you, you can’t hide or lie to yourself at that point’ (interviewed in June 2001). Pain can reveal hidden strengths and weaknesses (LeBreton 1995). This is an intrinsic value of the pain associated with the process of tattooing which my informants perceive and have expressed to me throughout my fieldwork period.

## 7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how every tattoo involves inescapably some form of memory. This can take the form of commemorative tattoos which are perceived as recreating

a link between the dead and the living through the latter's bodies. It can also be the memory involved in acquiring tattoos in a particular place and from a specific artist, as I have discussed in the case of tattoo enthusiasts and opportunists in the context of French Polynesia. Memory is also a crucial component to the creation of personal identity and biographical narrative. Tattoos are used by tattooees in this process but they also, as embodied objects, gain some form of parallel biographical narratives which change according to the shifting perceptions of their wearers. Finally, I have discussed the social role which tattoo artists play in the life of the people they tattoo. They become agents for the desires, achievements, sorrows and joys of the tattooees, enabling them to gain a permanent embodied object imbued of potent indexicalities which can be personal, public, or both at the same time. I also looked at the way in which the inevitable and inherent pain associated with the tattooing practice is valued within the global tattoo community. Overall, in this chapter, I have shown how tattoos, as embodied objects, are used by tattooees, via tattoo artists, to enable particular indexicalities to be permanently inscribed. The painful process acts, sometimes, as a cathartic event which enables the feelings of suffering and loss to be transformed as some form of gain and enlightenment.

## Chapter Eight:

### Appropriation and Objectification: The Commodification of Neo-Tribal Tattoos.

#### 8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I mainly look at the concepts of appropriation and authenticity, and their perceptions related to tattooing and body-modifications in the diverse, cross-cultural and global tattoo community. Over the last few decades, a new tattoo design style referred to as 'neo-tribal' has developed. This style drew inspiration from tattoo designs used in a non-Western context; Polynesian, Maori, Indonesian Dayak, Melanesian and Phillipino to name but a few. Such stylistic movements have been accused of appropriation and of being rooted in naive primitivist ideas. However, although this may be partially the case, I argue that the global tattoo community is too diverse, and that the individuals involved often have too complex cross-cultural personal narratives to be reduced to facile objectification. I further discuss these issues in relation to the British pop star Robbie Williams, and his Maori tattoo. I show how appropriation is mostly used in the sphere of cultural politics of representation, and conclude that, for many of my Polynesian informants, the perceived problems is more strongly related to alienation of these tattoo designs rather than their appropriations (see chapter three and five). Finally, I examine the process of the commodification of tattoos, which is also directly linked to perceived ideas of authenticity, and show that what seems to be commodified is not the tattoo per se but rather the time and skill of the tattoo artists. This means that practitioners can choose the type of exchange relationship they want to engage in, depending on the customers and friends they tattoo. This can range from a discrete commodity exchange to a long lasting gift exchange which implies a sense of reciprocity and of personal involvement. Nevertheless, as I argue, even in the shortest exchange involving the tattooing process, both tattoo artist and tattooee are reciprocal agents of each other's value definition (see chapter four), in addition I link the idea of commodity with issues of

authenticity and argue that, for many Polynesian tattoo artists, authenticity is related not only to identity, but also to some form of economic advantage in the competitive world of tattooing. Overall, in this chapter, I highlight some of the complexities which arise during the cross-cultural exchanges related to tattooing practice in its global dimension.

## 8.2 Appropriation

As I will discuss in chapter seven, the process of objectification is central to human consciousness, and so, it seems, is the process of appropriation. Appropriation is defined as an act of ‘incorporation by joining or uniting; a process of annexation’ (Oxford Dictionary 2003). It entails assimilation (Thomas 1997) of something perceived as other, and this is, to a point, related to the process of sublation (see chapter seven). This is when what is perceived as other is assimilated and incorporated within what is perceived as not other. Yet, this union does not necessary entail that what was perceived as other is suddenly taken as one’s own. In many cases, it seems to remain, or retain the attributes of, otherness but now classified within a worldview of what is other; presented as ‘primitive’ or ‘white’ for example. As Schneider, citing Kubler, states ‘a recognition of otherness lies at the bottom of any appropriation’ (Schneider 2006:48). Acts such as appreciation and imitation are tantamount to appropriation (Thomas 1997). Appreciation may only involve the gaze, which is one of the significant senses used in the process of objectification and appreciation of material culture. Imitation and copying are themselves crucial behaviours in human developmental processes as Vygotsky’s Zones of Proximal Development (Wertsch 1988) show. This points to the importance of observation and imitation in learning processes of children.

However, appropriation is also defined as ‘a deliberate act of acquisition’ (Oxford Dictionary 2003). This type of appropriation follows the same process as objectification, yet it also includes a certain ‘will to own’. There is a threatening implication expressed through it, this acquiring act does not necessarily include a ‘willingness to give’ on the part of the exchange partner. In fact, appropriation might be more acutely perceived as a negative process similar to theft by the appropriated side rather than the appropriator, a case of

inappropriate appropriation, and this is particularly salient in the case of cross-cultural encounters. Yet, even when there is an imbalance of power in the act of appropriation, the act itself still involves both parties and is therefore a two-sided event (Schneider 2005). Thomas argues that appropriation is always 'entangled' in a form of 'unstable duality' (Thomas 1991) which makes each party waver between acceptance and rejection of what is available for appropriation (*ibid*). Schneider conceives appropriation as a form of dialectical event involving attempts at understanding and dialogue with the other (Schneider 2005). Nevertheless, as all forms of events involving forms of communication, they are open to misunderstandings and ambiguities as equally as offering opportunities to foster various relationships and facilitate cultural changes.

It would seem that appropriation manifests itself in three forms. The first is a form of objectification inherent to the embodied nature of the human condition, while the second occurs during social interactions within cultures, and cross-cultural or sub-cultural, encounters. The third form of appropriation is when the concept is used as a tool of resistance against globalisation and 'a strategy to construct new identities' (Schneider 2005:48). Identity itself is involved in an act of appropriation. There is a sense that identity is not only formed through an internal, egotistical, self-image but through the multiple reflections given of oneself by the other's gaze, as well as being socially and culturally constructed, constrained, and developed (Jenkins 1997). In fact, identities should always be understood as constructed, multiple and multi-dimensional. Furthermore, identities are only meaningful within particular contexts and therefore adapt to their changing historical environment. This shift of identity according to historical context is, in a way, an adaptive strategy of resistance. This is, firstly, because accusations of appropriation are always claims to a particular political agenda, and secondly, because group identity is constructed according to similarities but also in oppositions. Levi-Strauss states that:

'there are simultaneously at work, in human societies, forces which work in opposite directions: some tending to maintain and even to accentuate particularisms; while others act towards convergence and affinity' (Levi-Strauss 1952:15).

Thomas develops the concept of 'reactive objectification' (Thomas 1997) which is relevant to the present discussion. Reactive objectification entails a 'diacritical and indeed oppositional process: a variety of dominant and dominated groups reify the attributes both of others and themselves in a self-fashioning process' (Thomas 1997:189). In other words, the reification of a particular set of meanings, apparent behaviours, and social attributes as a tradition, a custom, or a bounded culture can be perceived, and acted upon, in many different potential ways and fashion (*ibid*). Even prior the rise of the neo-tribal, neo-traditional and modern primitive movements in the tattoo communities of Europe and North America, images of the other were very pervasive. Designs of dancing Polynesian women, and usually accompanied by coconut trees and sandy beaches for example, were very popular among sailors in the early to mid twentieth century. It is interesting that such designs have re-appeared in the contemporary tattoo style referred as '*old skool*', a style where the tattoo designs of the early twentieth Euro-American tattoos are re-interpreted. However, informants who chose these talked more about an affinity with the idea of the sailor which led them to their choice rather than any reference to Polynesia. In a sense, Polynesia here becomes an index of this particular group, the sailors, rather than a representation, however skewed, of itself. In fact, two of my informants wearing the design did not make a direct link between the two and referred to the design as 'an exotic lady' and 'a dancing Indian'. Therefore the objectifications made by sailors in the twentieth century of Polynesian women becomes the very way in which they themselves become reified by Euro-American non-sailing twenty-first century tattooees.

### 8.3 Appropriation and Primitivism

Another example of the objectification process is the concept of 'primitive' and the following engagement of art worlds, including the tattoo world, in different strands of inspiration coined 'primitivism'. There has been a multi-layered, formative, and to an extent sustained, relationship between art worlds and the idea of the primitive. The concept of the 'primitive' itself is a Euro-American construct that was created in opposition to ideas of civilization (Kuper 1988). It served at the same time to reify the coloniser and denied, to a point, 'the reciprocity of mutual recognition' (Koselleck in Thomas 1997). Yet, the term has

also been seized upon and inverted by both, the groups who were reified, and parts of the groups who were reifying them. However, the movements that hold most interest for this discussion are the neo-tribal and modern primitive movements in Europe and North America. For the purposes of my analysis, it is important not to amalgamate the two, even if there is some apparent overlapping.

The 'modern primitive' movement appeared in California in the 1970's when an individual called Fakir Musafar gave a performance of body-piercing in a tattoo convention in San Francisco, USA. Fakir Musafar was born in 1930 in the US and is from a white middle class family background. Until the San Francisco performance, he had experimented in secret with body modification practices, such as piercings, suspensions, and corsets to name but a few. He talks about feeling an urge to modify his body as well as the shame this created in him, and it was through personal research that he found some form of sanction to his behaviour. This research engaged with different cultures' body-modification rituals, and his rationale was that if such rituals were considered acceptable, or even desirable, in other cultures, his urge might be also acceptable and desirable. Only in Euro-American cultures was that not the case. It should be pointed out, that his reasoning was not flawed. Talad Asad (1997) has shown that parts of the Humanist's agenda that drove colonisation did have a problem with the 'positive engagement with suffering' (Asad 1997) which it deemed morally gratuitous. Many painful rituals thus came under pressure of the various colonial authorities and Christian missions. Fakir Musafar was re-creating these rituals out of their original contexts, and in that sense he can be understood as a 'primitivist', and as Schneider (2005) states, 'for artists the primitive has offered the possibility of new 'ways of seeing' and for some it provided an idealized vision of a cohesive totality (Schneider 2005:32). Moreover, Miller has argued that where it proposes models of transcending the fragmented nature of modern existence, all art is reliant on a primitivist model (Miller 1987). Indeed, it was the imagined holism of primitive culture enabled some individuals to perceive their own modern culture as fragmented in the first place (Schneider 2005). It should also be noted that anthropology itself is no stranger to this form of intellectual reactive objectification.

Fakir Musafar, and the modern primitive movement, did use the idea of the primitive as a critical stance vis-à-vis modern Euro-American society. As Rosenblatt (1997) argues, in this particular movement, references to the primitive refer to a perceived lost social sense of the self rather than with affiliation with the cultures from which they appropriate the painful rituals they become engaged in (*ibid*). At times, some modern primitivists seem to reify some popular Euro-American ideas of the primitive which have emanated from colonial discourse and gaze (Klesse 2000). Yet, there is a sense that there the process is more complex than just a simplistic process of reification, and Musafar and the modern primitive movement's actions can be perceived as some form of resistance. Rosenblatt (1997) argues that this particular movement positions itself in a conflictual opposition to capitalist consumption and Christianity while, at the same time, displaying ideas, rooted in Christianity, regarding the relationship of the individual self to society (*ibid*). This is because acts of resistance do not 'escape existing systems of meaning' (*ibid*). However, resistance can also be seen as not only conflictual, and the binary opposite to dominance. As Foucault explains, power can be conceptualised as dispersed, multiple and relational, and therefore, resistance can also be diffused, decentred and an integral part of power rather than its opposite. Considering Musafar's own research which aimed to move his urges to modify his body from personal shame and isolation to public sanction and performance, the movement's resistance can also be viewed as an act, although somehow rebellious, of personal acceptance of one own alterity, and therefore a demand for this alterity to be included within mainstream society.

After the first San Francisco performance in the 1970's, held during an early tattoo convention, Fakir Musafar became recognised as a pioneer of contemporary body-modification practices and is referred to as 'the father of modern primitivism', and the book 'Modern Primitive' was published by Re-Search (1989). This comprised a compilation of interviews with, and articles by, different actors, most of them North American, who were involved in the early body-modification community. I contend that it is important to take into account the large dose of irony that is involved in the book and the movement itself. Yet, the 'modern primitive' movement did not spread significantly outside of California, although the practice they pioneered did. The mainstream place assumed by body piercings in contemporary Euro-American societies is witness to that for example. In a way, there was a second wave of appropriation which came after the first appropriation enacted by Fakir

Musafar. He created his own rituals and performed them in front of the attentive audiences of particular events, for example, visitors of tattoo conventions. This second wave of appropriation removed the ritualistic nature of modern primitive body-modifications and developed the techniques and possibilities of the practice within a more mainstream environment, thereby giving rise to the piercings and tattoos found in popular culture of the early twenty first century.

Schneider presents Krauss' (Schneider 2005) analytical divide which can be of use as a 'preliminary guideline for building a typology of appropriations' (Schneider 2005:39). Primitivists are divided in two sorts: 'soft' and 'hard'. Soft primitivists use, and are inspired by, the 'visual appearance' of indigenous cultures and have little interest in the cultural context from which it took form. Hard primitivists, on the other hand, engage with the cultural context on a personal level. Although useful, such divide is not, as Schneider notes, without limitations. According to it, Polynesian tattoo artists involved in the revival of the interrupted practice, for more than a century in French Polynesia for example, would themselves be classified as 'hard primitivists'. This is not analytically problematic in itself. However, the term primitivist is already so loaded with negative connotations, and 'inevitably implies an exoticist attitude by the artist' (Schneider 2005:36). Therefore, what should become important is what happens during the process of appropriation. This makes even more sense if it is accepted that appropriation itself is a process inherent to social interactions and can also be perceived as a creative process (*ibid*). Another possibility to use this analytical dichotomy would be to replace 'primitivist' with 'appropriator'.

The neo-tribal movement does not refer to anything tribal. It is grouped around a particular style of tattoo designs which are mainly inspired by cultures that have used, or are still using tattooing as a cultural practice. The person coined the father of the 'neo-tribal' style is also a contributor to the 'Modern Primitive' book. He is called Leo Zulueta and was born in the early 1950's in California and is half Polynesian and half Filipino. Leo was one of the first among tattoo artists in the 1970's/80's to research traditional tattoo designs and travel to the places from where they originated. It is important to note that his personal research was more to do with an enquiry regarding his cultural background than with a search

for an idealised primitive perspective of seeing the world. In a way, Leo Zulueta is both a soft and hard appropriator. On the one hand, he lifted designs from their original cultural context to be used in another and developed them into a new style of his own. On the other hand, he engaged in a personal research which included prolonged visits to the cultural context from which the designs arose, thereby re-discovering his family background in the process. Zulueta's agenda does entail some form of conservation of tattoo designs, and he argues that, as some of the designs' wearers die, he 'feels strongly about preserving those ancient designs' (Zulueta 1989:99). However, his actions are not akin to a butterfly collector, but rather involve the conservation of the tattoo designs through a continuity of use, embedded within the human skin, even if there is a break from the context from which they were first used. He himself states that no one can truly know the original meanings of most of these designs, as the tattooing practice has been interrupted in many places where the designs were created. Nonetheless, he believes that a particular type of latent knowledge is embedded and, to an extent, inherent to the aesthetic forms he uses (*ibid*). Another important point regarding Leo Zulueta is that his travels to places with a tattoo heritage have become a formative act for many tattoo artists aiming to gain status within the neo-tribal movement. Moreover, his journey highlights that, to a great extent, the inner motivations of body modifiers, and other individuals involved in networks such as the neo-tribal one, are complex, varied, and often entrenched in personal cross-cultural biographies rather than just mono-dimensional ones immersed in simplistic, and problematic, reifications of concepts such as 'primitive'. I would like now to discuss a specific example which relate to the concepts such as appropriation and to claims of authenticity.

#### 8.4 Fame and Appropriation in the Context of Tattoo Conventions

The British pop star Robbie Williams was tattooed by Te Rangitu Netana, a Maori tattoo artist who attends European tattoo conventions regularly, although Williams acquired his tattoo while touring New Zealand in 2000. The tattoo is a neo-traditional Maori design that covers his left shoulder and upper arm, but before I look in more detail at the ramifications of this exchange, such as issues of appropriation, I will discuss a few points

which this encounter raised, regarding ideas of fame, and their effects on Te Rangitu Netana during events such as tattoo conventions.

‘Robbie Williams had his left arm tattooed in New-Zealand by Te Rangitu Netana - a famous Maori tattooist.’

This is the text which accompanies a picture of Williams on a website promoting Polynesian tattoo artists. The statement that Te Rangitu Netana is a famous Maori tattooist firstly underlies the fact that his fame must be expressed rather than just be a given. Secondly, it sets his level of fame in contrast with, and yet linked to, that of Williams, whose fame does not need to be presented. The tattooing of celebrities is a particular type of exchange compared to tattooing within the community itself, and I contend that this is mainly due to the exposure of celebrities in the global mainstream media.

The first time I met Te Rangitu Netana was in London in May 2002 when we both attended a workshop organised by Goldsmiths College, in conjunction with the exhibition ‘Skin Deep’ at the Royal Maritime Museum. His tattoo artist book of pictures and designs started with a full-page photo of the session during which he tattooed Williams. Photos of the tattoo itself are displayed in the subsequent pages but the primary focus is on the act of exchange. The image of Te Rangitu Netana’s back bent over Robbie Williams’ left side, guiding the needles through his skin, is a potent one. It serves as a powerful introduction to prospective European customers. The statement is deemed so powerful, by the protagonists involved, that it also appears at the start of Te Rangitu Netana’s cousin’s tattoo book. This practice is not uncommon, in Eastern Polynesia for example, Jeremie who tattooed the French designer Jean-Paul Gautier, displayed the photo of the session at the beginning of his own book.

At the Derby tattoo convention in 2004, I spent an afternoon at the tattoo booth of Te Rangitu Netana. I observed many people looking at him tattooing and only making the connection with Williams when they went through the book and saw the first photo. This seems to show that his fame at a convention was not greatly affected, as he is not famous in Europe because he tattooed Williams. However, the fact that he tattooed Williams acts as a Gellian trap, and can be seen to be enticing people to engage with him in the same act they

witness in the photo. It shows his skill to attract a famous person to engage with him in an act of embodied exchange, and his work has already been seen in the media also acts as an index of its agency. It promises an exchange with Te Rangitu Netana which indirectly includes the Williams exchange, and the tattooee can refer to his tattoo as done by the tattoo artist who tattooed Williams. Depending on context, it is a complex play involving a series of appropriations. Williams appropriated Maori designs, while Te Rangitu appropriated parts of Williams' body and fame. Furthermore, as I have shown in chapter four, people and valuables involved in the *kula* ring are 'reciprocally agents of each other's value definition' (Munn 1986:283). This is exemplified in the manner in which both men and valuables gradually attract fame and name through their activity in the *kula*, and their ability to persuade or 'move' the mind of other participants' (Miller 1987:63). Similarly, tattoos, tattoo artists, and to an extent tattooees, are themselves 'reciprocal agents of each other's value definition'. A tattoo artist success is built on the many tattoos s/he has created and on the value these are given within the wider community. At the same time, a tattoo is perceived as more valuable if it is known that it was created by a 'big name' of the tattooing milieu.

I would argue that fame shares many similarities with the Eastern Polynesian concept of Mana, as described by Gell (1993) (see chapter three). *Mana* was perceived as a form of powerful energy which was inherent to human beings, and some objects, and came from the world of *Po*: the plane of existence of spirits and darkness. For this reason, *mana* was to be contained and protected against while in the world of *Ao*: the world of life and light. The practice of tattooing was, partly, a technology to stop one's *mana* contaminating others, or hinder growth for example, while at the same time, protecting against contamination from others' *mana*. One of the similarities between 'fame' and '*mana*', for example, is that they can have positive and negative effects concurrently potent. There is also a paradoxical similarity of the role of tattoos between the two concepts. While tattoos used to be concerned with a containment of, and protection from, *mana*, they are now used to advertise and propagate the fame of the tattoo artist. It is very common for Polynesian informants to refer to the *mana* of an artist. For them, fame is not *mana* per se, but a definite component of it. The rationale is that a famous person has *mana* because if did not have any, s/he would not have been able to become famous in the first place.

## 8.5 Williams' Maori Tattoo and Appropriation

In an interview Robbie Williams explains:

*Williams:* Oh, I got a tattoo! I've got one on my left arm, which is a Maori prayer from New Zealand that protects me from myself, and I went to Sunset Strip opposite the Viper Room last night and got a lion tattooed on my arm.

*Interviewer:* Why a lion?

*W:* Protection. And I've got a Celtic cross on my leg as well, and that's protection.

*I:* Why do you need to be protected?

*W:* Because I've got the devil in me.

*I:* Why are you afraid of yourself?

*W:* I don't know if it's abnormal, or if it's just what twenty-five-year-olds feel right now, but I can't trust myself.'

(<http://www.robcity.de/inhalt/interviews/1999/4.pdf>)

There is a sense that this interview could be an excerpt of a psychotherapy session when after hearing of Williams' demoniac possession, the interviewer rationalises it into a conception of the self. Yet, a protection from spirit possession is the main reason given for his tattoos, and the Maori design becomes a Maori prayer and a protective artefact from which the producer is removed as an individual and yet his creative production becomes representative of his whole culture. However, Williams' fans' comments on an internet notice board add some form of complexity:

'The tattoo on his left arm is Maori as in Maori tradition it tells the story of his life --- *- bexster over ere*. The Maori tattoo on his left arm is about his life and was done by and designed by traditional Maori. I've heard he was very conscious not to offend the culture so got it all done properly when he was in New Zealand on tour a couple of years ago. *Tasha London - formallyNZ*. The Maori tattoo on his left arm is made by Henk Schiffmacher, a famous Tattoo artist in the Netherlands. So he didn't go anywhere else for that. *Martin, Netherlands*'  
([http://www.bbc.co.uk/stoke/have\\_your\\_say/rob\\_qs\\_tattoos.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/stoke/have_your_say/rob_qs_tattoos.shtml))

On this fans' board, not only is the individual identity of the tattoo artist disappearing to be replaced by the concept of 'traditional Maori', but the identity of the producer of the tattoo itself is contested and attributed, erroneously, to a named individual European tattoo artist. Williams' choice of a 'traditional Maori' to do and design his tattoo is also of interest. Te Rangitu Netana is a young Maori tattoo artist who has developed his style directly from

traditional designs. He is a regular participant at numerous tattoo conventions in Europe and tattoos his designs on all skins, including non-Maori ones. Williams' choice of tattoo artists, motivated by an alleged consciousness not to offend the culture and 'getting it all done properly', backfired to some extent as the following newspaper article notes:

'Wellington, New Zealand (AP) -- Former world heavyweight champion boxer Mike Tyson didn't like the way his face looked before he got his new tattoo. In New Zealand, an expert on indigenous Maori facial tattoos doesn't like the way Tyson looks now. Pita Sharples, a Maori expert on his people's culture -- particularly their facial tattoos known as moko -- said he didn't like seeing a similar design on Tyson, a convicted rapist. The tattoo was "definitely Maori, but stylized," Sharples told The Associated Press. "I just wish it was on somebody else." Sharples said he was more disturbed by British rock star Robbie Williams' arm tattoo "because there are definitely Maori characters of moko on his." Maori warriors' traditional full-face moko has a set format with specific designs for the forehead, cheek, lips and mouth, Sharples said. Tyson's tattoo -- a swirling design around his left eye -- was the centre of attention at a press conference in Mississippi on Thursday ahead of his planned weekend bout with Clifford Etienne. The American boxer said he got the tattoo last week, and there would be more to come. "This isn't even halfway done," he said. "I just wanted to put something on my face," Tyson added. "I didn't like the way my face was looking.' (<http://www.jess3.com/blog/2003/06/tyson-says-he-didnt-like-way-my-face.html>)

As I will show, Pita Sharples critiques of these tattoos are somehow contradictory and this is indicative of a wider cultural political debate particular to Aotearoa/NZ. It should be clarified that Tyson's tattoo was done in Las Vegas by a North American tattoo artist who, according to one of my informants who worked in that tattoo shop at the time, told him that it was Maori moko while tattooing him with a neo-tribal design, rather than with a neo-traditional Maori one. Tyson's relationship with Maori culture is therefore only illusionary nominal. Williams', on the other hand, received a neo-traditional tattoo which included elements of Maori mythology related to some of his life achievements, life-changing events, and a sense of protection. Te Rangitu Netana also told me that:

'tattooing Robbie Williams was fun. I explained to him about the different pieces of the design and what they are meant to represent and he was very happy with it. Of course, I gained a lot of business after doing him. That tattoo has been shown around the world and on television, in magazines, on the web so it has been great exposure for my work, and it serves as an introduction when I come to tattoo in Europe.' (interviewed in June 2004)

The fact that there are differences between what Williams was given and what he feels he received raises issues not unrelated to those found in cross-cultural exchanges in the Pacific

in the nineteenth century (Thomas 1991). Sharples' objections to Williams' tattoo are therefore due of the former's encounter with Maori contemporary culture rather than a kind of distance and commoditisation of the design, which would have occurred if he had it tattooed by a Dutch artist. It is also indirectly an objection to the behaviour of Te Rangitu Netana as a tattoo artist. However, it is interesting to note that, to my knowledge, Sharples has not objected to Ben Harper's Maori tattoo. Ben Harper is a Black North American singer/songwriter and political activist who has a large neo-traditional Maori tattoo done by a Maori artist while he was staying in Aotearoa/NZ. His tattoo is very similar in size and style to Williams'. When I asked some of my Maori informants about this difference, I was told that Harper's political activism and his credential as an artist warranted him a stronger identification with the Maori cultural realm. As Al Te Wake, a Maori woodcarver (see chapter nine), told me:

'Ben Harper spent three months on Aotearoa to learn about the Maori culture, and many Maori political activists listen to his music and he's black, not a white middle-class English pop star' (interviewed in October 2003).

In other media outlets such as for example on the New Zealand Government website ([http://www.newzealand.com/travel/media/features/maoriculture/maori\\_tamoko\\_storyangle.cfm](http://www.newzealand.com/travel/media/features/maoriculture/maori_tamoko_storyangle.cfm)), Sharples has also alleged that he objected to Williams' tattoo because it uses particular designs directly linked to his *iwi* (tribe). This is reminiscent of Bourdieu's 'economic world reversed' (Bourdieu 1993) when the cultural capital some artists acquire is not related to an increase of their economic capital but rather the opposite. In this case, for example, tattooing Williams is perceived as economic capital, while tattooing Harper is producing cultural capital. The indirect criticisms made by Sharples of Te Rangitu Netana, for tattooing Williams, are of having sold out his own cultural capital for a claim to fame and economic gains; as well as opening a gateway to tattoo in Europe. Sharples' cries of appropriation could therefore be classified as a form of appropriation which acts as a strategy of resistance (Schneider 2005).

Another example of the use of this form of appropriation can be found in a discussion I had with T., a Polynesian tattoo artist, on the island of Tahiti in 1996. I was commenting to him on the exponential presence of tattoo artists on Tahiti and Moorea compared to the situation in 1988. T. commented on the rising popularity of tattoos amongst Polynesian people but then noted:

T.: 'but they tattoo a lot of white people now days'.

C.: 'they always have. Look at me for example.'

T.: 'you don't understand. Some people are white but after being tattooed here, they become *Ma'ohi* (Polynesian). Others don't, they stay white! They are tourists in a hotel for a week. What would they know about *Tahiti Nui? Hinano?* (a humorous reference to both a woman's first name and the popular local brand of beer)' (collected in August 1996).

This shows how appropriation can be called upon from two different directions. The first direction is that tourists appropriate local tattoo designs. The second is that the tattoo designs appropriate the cultural background, and to an extent the bodies, of some of the tattooees. So it would seem that, for some hard appropriators, the tables are turned and they become themselves appropriated through the designs they initially desired. The tattoo designs become, to a point, Gellian traps enticing individuals to engage with more than the 'visual appearance' of the aesthetic form.

## 8.6 Tattoos and Commodity

As tattoos, especially those designs which are inspired from traditional sources and which take the form of neo-tribal style, became more popular and entered mainstream culture, there have been a number of discussions which have emerged in academic circles about their commodification. There seems to be two main sides to the argument. The first argues that tattoos are commodities because 'they can be purchased for money like other commodities' (Klesse 2000:21) and that they should 'be interpreted in the context of an increasingly trendy aestheticization and commodification of ethnic difference' (Klesse 2000:21). They argue that it is possible for anyone to go to a tattoo shop in Europe, or North America, and choose, for example, a Polynesian design displayed on the wall of the shop, pay a price and have it tattooed on their skin. In this case, the socio-cultural and historical context from which the design first originated, and within which it was used, becomes irrelevant to the buyer and the seller, the tattooee and the tattoo artist. In other words, the tattoo is perceived as having become a commodified product which is alienated from its original source. The second side of the argument refutes this by emphasising the permanent nature of the body-modification, the necessary physicality of their production (Sweetman 2000:62), and the pain which is inherent to the process of their acquisition (Benson 2000:240). Tattoos

are therefore seen as potent anti-commodity indexes because of their non-exchangeability, their permanence and their personal nature. Although these two sides diverge from each other, there is a sense that they do not entirely contradict each other in their overall apprehension of the nature of a commodity. This seems to stem from a popular dichotomy, prevalent in the West, which regards things being either commodities or singular entities. On the one hand objects evolve in the natural universe of commodities, and on the other, people are seen as representing the natural universe of individuation and singularization (Appadurai 1986). Yet, this dichotomy is not entirely accurate in the way that commodities and singular things, and bodies, are evolving in the human realm of exchanges. The respective works of Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), and Thomas (1991) give a more wholesome perspective that explains how commodities move and exist in human societies.

One of the main points is that things go through different phases during their existences as objects, and that they have biographies (Appadurai 1986). One or more of these phases include periods, when things become commodities for a time, and others, when they are singular objects. One example could be that of a hat which is bought as a commodity but once owned becomes a singular hat which belongs to an individual and is not considered a commodity anymore by him/her. This same hat may at some point become a commodity once more if it is sold on, or a gift if it is given away. The key here seems to be the context attached to the object rather than the object itself. A commodity can, therefore, be described as a thing which in a particular context and phase in its biography meets the historical and social requirements of exchangeability, its commodity candidacy (Appadurai 1986). This means that anything, and anyone, can be a commodity at some point in specific contexts. In another context, the same thing becomes a singular object and enters another, different, phase of its status. Thomas (1991) stresses the importance of alienation to the status of an object, person, or elements of a person as a commodity (*ibid*). He argues that:

‘the alienation of a thing is its dissociation from producers, former users, or prior context. The alienation of things or persons is crucial to their status as commodities. If such dissociation cannot be attained, objects may become ‘artefacts which tell a story’ (Thomas 1991:240).

The final point to be made regarding the commodity status of a thing is concerned with the discrete nature of the exchange through which it moves from a person to another. The main goal of this type of exchange is to obtain the counterpart value (Kopytoff 1986) and not to foster further relationships, in contrast to gift exchange.

There are, therefore, three main aspects to the object as a commodity. These are, firstly, its candidacy which is the socio-cultural context in which it is exchanged. Secondly, it is the object's availability to be alienated, with alienation seeming to be a crucial aspect of the commodity status of a thing or person. Thirdly, it is the nature of the types of relationships that are implied in the act of exchange between the interested parties. These three main aspects are relevant to a discussion in the context of contemporary tattoos.

### 8.7 Alienability

For a tattoo to be conceived as a commodity, it would need to be either an alienable object or an alienable design. As an object, a tattoo cannot be alienated due to its embodied nature, however, tattoos could be classified as single use or terminal commodities but these are mostly commodities that are consumed, for example foodstuffs. The difference with these is that tattoos remain often beyond the death of the wearers themselves. Therefore, tattoos cannot really be classified as 'single use', or terminal, commodities but rather as non-transferable embodied objects involved in a single act of exchange. At this point, I should clarify that, although tattoos remain beyond the death of their wearers, their embodied state of being can become more complex at this material stage. This is because, the body itself, or parts of it, also, in some circumstances, has some form of life as an object. This can be in the form of tattooed mummified bodies, but the example to which I am referring here, are the tattooed skins of Japanese *yakuza* gangsters that have been treated for their conservation and are kept in the vaults of a Japanese hospital. These body parts are not, at present, involved in the sphere of exchange, as their candidacy is not acceptable in the contemporary context. However, over the years I have spent in the tattoo community, I heard many of my tattooed informants making the humorous comment that they would like their skin to be kept and

displayed after their death. Some even have commented to me, and playfully speculated, on the pecuniary exchange value of their skin. Historically, there have been some examples of tattooed parts of bodies becoming commodities. In the late nineteenth century, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there was a short form of craze, amongst Europeans travellers, for tattooed Maori heads. These heads, with Maori Moko tattoos, were revered by the Maori tribes that kept them and were of great warriors and/or chiefs. When it became clear that these could be exchanged, some Maori tribes started to tattoo the Moko on the faces of slaves, cut their heads, and exchanged them with Europeans collecting for museums' and private collections. The practice was stopped by the colonial authorities by the early twentieth century, and most heads which formed parts of museums' collections have now been returned to Aotearoa/New Zealand. These examples seem to show that the tattooed body can enter, as an object, the sphere of commodity exchange. The fact remains that while the body is animated by consciousness such occurrences are unlikely. This is highlighted in the German film 'Tattoo' (2005). During this police thriller, a man kills people and cut off their tattoos, which he deems valuable pieces of art work, to add to his macabre art collection. This points to the fact that the only way to enter an embodied tattoo into further exchange is a violent act which can involve homicide, even if, theoretically, a large piece of tattooed skin could be removed surgically from an individual without the procedure necessarily leading to their death.

The other problem with the idea of the embodied tattoo object as a commodity is related to its production process. Usually, an individual who wants a tattoo will come to see a tattoo artist either with a design or a general idea of a design. The artist may, or may not, alter it through a discussion with the prospective tattooee. S/he will then come up with a price that is primarily calculated according to the approximate time it will take to tattoo the design. Although this is the specific moment when the tattoo can be truly perceived as a commodity, an object about to be exchanged, the fact of the matter is that the tattoo does not yet exist in a material form. It exists as a design on paper, an idea in the minds of both the tattoo artist and his/her client. In a way, at this stage, the tattoo is akin to a Platonic form; it is an ideal and perfect ethereal state of being, which Belting (2005) refers to as a mental image (Belting 2005). Once the ink sets into the skin, and gives a material form to the mental image, the tattoo has entered the singular sphere of exchange and therefore exited its candidacy from

being a commodity as an object. The obligatory embodied nature of the materiality of a tattoo creates this paradox by which it is only a commodity when it does not exist as a material image yet, but only as a mental image, and it is in this process of becoming that an object seizes to assume such an identity. This is why, I believe, that it is more accurate to look at the time and skill of the artist, and to the tattoo designs, rather than at the tattoo themselves as embodied objects, when investigating the alienation and commodification of tattoos. This is not to say that some tattooees do not refer to their tattoos using references normally linked to commodities. Some informants have referred to the price they paid for their tattoos by famous tattoo artists. However, it should be noted that a tattoo acquired as a gift by a similarly famous artist does convey much more cultural capital, within the global tattoo community, than any references to the money exchanged during the tattooing session. In a sense, a gift-tattoo is perceived as an index of the increased personal involvement between the tattoo artist and a particular tattooee, in comparison to a commodity-tattoo type of relationship. The distributed agency of the tattoo artist is, however, not only occurring in the case of the gift-tattoo. After all, the reciprocity here does not automatically involve the recipient tattooing the giver, unless they are both tattoo artists, in which case it is a common practice. Yet, these cases are a minority of the gift-tattoos which are exchanged. Furthermore, even if an individual receives a commodity-tattoo from an artist, the exchange will still be a meaningful one involving the painful modification of their bodies, and therefore beyond just an exchange of alienable objects.

I would like now to focus further on the alienation of tattoo as designs. As a design, a tattoo's alienability is another complex issue. A design is deemed alienated when it is perceived as being used outside of the cultural context from which it was originally created and used, and this is related to the idea of appropriation discussed earlier in this chapter. It should be noted, at this point, that such perceived alienation and accusations of appropriation have been levelled not only at the contemporary use of Polynesian designs, but also include designs used by the criminal fraternities at the beginning of the twentieth century (see earlier in this chapter). Underlying these are a number of apprehensions of the tattoo community in Europe and North America, and there is a sense that tattoos have an authenticity when used by a perceived other, whether they are geographically located somewhere else or located in the perceived lost past.

I am not saying here that, for example, Polynesian tattoo artists do not question the appropriation of the designs originating from Polynesia. Yet, I have witnessed most of them changing their views as they have engaged with the global tattoo community. V., for example, is a tattoo artist from the island of Moorea who was, in 1988, very active in putting forward the idea that only Polynesian people should wear Polynesian designs as tattoos. Today, twenty years later, he has a tattoo shop in the South of France and tattoo customers from a wide range of backgrounds. Furthermore, as I already mentioned in a previous chapter, Chime did come to Europe with a sense that he should re-contextualise Polynesian tattoo designs. However, his intended action was aimed at the tattoo designs' meanings rather than on their use by European tattoo artists. In this case, the main issue for many people seems to be the alienation of the design rather than its appropriation per se. Chime, and others, do not oppose European tattoo artists using Polynesian tattoos, after all he himself had many European individuals as apprentices over the last fifteen years. Furthermore, as Kuwahara (2005) has shown, Polynesian tattoo artists have been using designs which are associated with the European and North American tattoo styles. Some have also incorporated neo-tribal stylistic influences into their designs, a process which is somewhat paradoxical as the neo-tribal tattoo movement, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, has often been accused of using styles from different cultures in their designs. These examples highlight the complexity of the views and designs' uses found in the global tattoo community, and this seems to confirm the idea that the main issue that elicits the most disquiet among my informants is the alienation of a design rather than its appropriation, this point is well illustrated by the comment made by Raymond Graffe in his interview reviewed in chapter five of this thesis.

However, it is also clear that most of my informants perceive the alienation of a design as an act of appropriation. Yet, they do not seem to be concerned about the alienation which is attached to the designs as commodities that they tattoo in the bodies of visiting tourists. In a sense, it is because the onus of the act of alienation, and therefore appropriation, seems to reside almost fully in the tattoo artist's camp. Most of the time, my *Ma'ohi* informants do not express any objections to the fact that a tourist with a tattoo of the lunar

goddess *Hina* have very little, or no, knowledge of her specific cultural indexical meanings, they do, however, feel offended if a tattoo artist tattooing that design does not. At the same time, as I highlighted earlier in this chapter, the question of the approval by Polynesian artists of who tattoos and gets tattooed Polynesian designs in Europe and North America is often influenced by already established relationships, membership to particular social networks, and the cultural capital associated with particular individuals. In the case of tourism, it is undeniable that the local economic gains from tattooing visiting tourists cannot be underestimated in the perceptions of possible alienation and appropriation of the cultural identity associated with the specific style found in contemporary French Polynesia.

This could also be due to another factor. It is often believed that a commodity has to be alienated in order to be such. Yet as Thomas (1991), for example, has shown, this is not always the case. He explains that, in New Georgia, there are cases when ritual knowledge and practice is exchanged as a form of commodity, but argues that:

‘the practice of ritual may often have involved reference to the source of knowledge, to the empowering authority,...in such contexts the allusion to the name figures as authentication and validation, rather than as the expression of long-term indebtedness’ (Thomas 1991:103).

This, I believe, is highly relevant to the way in which both parties involved in the relationships created by the tattooing process perceive their encounter. It is also very similar to the way tattooees engage with issues of the authenticity of their tattoos. The name of the tattoo artist, and the context in which the tattoo was acquired, are both important to the narratives about tattoos, but they do not automatically imply a relationship which went beyond the time spent during the tattooing process. At the same time, the relationship with a tattoo artist is particular and somewhat intimate. What I want to highlight here is that, however short, a tattooing session is different from other face-to-face encounters between a service provider and its client. Due to this inexorably implied, yet not obligatory ongoing, relationship between a tattooee and the tattoo artist, the tattoo is, in a way, never alienated from its moment of production and from the agency of its producer. Therefore a tattoo is always an artefact; ‘an object that tells a story’ (*ibid*). This is because, between tattooees

within the global tattoo community, there is almost a ritualised process during their first encounter. Each will show to the other the tattoos s/he has and the name of the artist will be announced. This process has two main functions. The first is to state the tattoo's authenticity and value, and the second is to place oneself within the network and internal hierarchy of the global tattoo community. Most of my informants have short narratives about their encounter with their tattoo artist. These will usually make clear, to other tattooees, the type of relationships they have engaged with them. This relates to issues I have indicated in previous chapters regarding the fame and the agency of tattoo artists. However, tattoos are associated with more than these narratives about authenticity, value and the nature of the exchange relationship. The tattooees also have the personal narratives which initiated the decision to acquire the tattoo in the first place (see chapter seven).

If tattoos are never really alienated from their producers and cannot be exchanged once they are created as embodied material images, it remains to ascertain that this fact makes them inexorably inalienable objects. Weiner (1985), argues that the concept of reciprocity should be moved away from long established Western capitalist political and economic models and theories and rather looked upon as part of a paradoxical exchange which she coins as 'keeping while giving' (*ibid*). In this perspective, the main motivation of reciprocity is not the forthcoming exchange relationship which this act elicits but rather the ability to retain inalienable objects which are crucial and strategic in the construction, and validation, of one's hierarchical position (*ibid*). This process, she notes, is a tactic which is used not only to further and confirm individuals' status but also active on a whole group's status and identity as inalienable objects can endure beyond their individual owners' lifespan (*ibid*). In this light, when Polynesian people, such as Graffe, ask for the old tattoo designs not to be copied, and therefore alienated, but rather that they be used as source of inspiration and be modified for contemporary and cross-cultural use, and therefore adequately and acceptably appropriated (see chapter five), it could be seen as a form of 'keeping while giving'. This is because these particular designs are perceived as containing a different *mana* directly associated to a lost, and disconnected, past, and are paramount to the renewal and revalorisation of Polynesian identity and culture which has taken place since the 1970's.

These designs are also used as a form of status of authenticity in relation to the neo-tribal designs used in Euro-America. However, in a cross-cultural context, tattoos are always inalienable objects which stem from an act of exchange which varies in degrees of perceived, and expected, reciprocity. It is difficult to see gift-tattoos as strategies to keep other objects from the sphere of exchange. In this case, it is the tattoo-commodity which would seem to be more akin to this strategy while gift-tattoo are therefore perceived as valuable objects to be kept within a close network or group, and which enable the differentiation between the personal friend and the general customer of a tattoo artist. Such tattoos are involved in the creation and maintenance of hierarchal structures. It remains that beyond this point, as the majority of tattoos are commodity-tattoos, the fame of a tattoo artist is established through these rather than through the perceived more valuable gift-tattoos. It could therefore be argued that, while gift-tattoos validate a form of internal group hierarchy of a specific network, commodity-tattoos are crucial to the establishment of an external status within the wider hierarchy of the global tattoo community. Through this discussion on alienation and the tattoo as a commodity, I hope I have shown that it is futile to focus on tattoos themselves. A more interesting aspect of tattoos, when the process of commodification come into play, is the act of exchange itself, the process of tattooing.

## 8.8 Authenticity

As I have shown, the encounter between a tattoo artist and his/her client is, to an extent, commodified, and this process occurs when the relationship is limited to the tattooing process. The name of the artist will then be used only as a form of authentication and a way to assign value to the tattoo. However, most tattoo artists do not only get paid at the rate of the tattoo shop in which they work, but some of their tattoos will be gifts and others will be produced for a price in which value will be assigned according to a wide range of parameters, which is akin to Firth's (Firth 1983) 'exchange by private treaty' (ibid). This is a situation when the exchange value of something is negotiated independently from the impersonal forces of supply and demand. Therefore there is a wide range of types of relationships, and ways to set the exchange value of a tattoo, which are open to tattoo artists during each encounter. Considering the large number of prospective tattooees they will be dealing with

during their careers, this choice of possible relationships is crucial, and the commodification of some of these encounters perceived as necessary. The variation of the nature of the exchange is mainly affected according to the identities of the individuals about to be tattooed, and their previous relationships they have had with the artist. When the tattooing process is perceived, by both parties, as a gift, there is an implied relationship that goes beyond the brief, if meaningful, moment of exchange associated with the commodification of the process. At the same time, some tattooees do refer to the financial cost of their tattoos as they talk about them to others. When they do this, these individuals, unwittingly, assign, to the singular objects that their tattoos are, one of the defining indexes of commodities, price/exchange value, which is a primary symbol of a discrete transaction. This type of behaviour is a way to express some claim to the exclusivity of their tattoos, itself often indexed by some form of financial restriction.

These claims to exclusivity are directly related to issues of authenticity. This is because tattoos can be perceived as a form of luxury. Following Sombart's definition, as cited in Appadurai (1986), luxuries are not the opposite of necessities but rather 'goods whose principal use is rhetorical and social, goods that are simply incarnated signs' (Appadurai 1986:38). Luxuries evolve in a different register of consumption rather than a special class of things (*ibid*). There are five attributes which define incarnated signs. These are restriction and complexity of acquisition, semiotic virtuosity, regulation by fashion, and a strong link between objects and body, person and personality (*ibid*). When the restriction of acquisition becomes eroded through the production of these particular luxurious objects at a lower price which make them accessible by the mainstream, there is a shift which seems to take place from exclusivity to authenticity (*ibid*). Similarly with tattoos as they became used by mainstream society, people involved in the global tattoo community have moved towards two different avenues. The first one has been a shift from small tattoos to more substantial pieces of work and the covering of larger parts of the body, and has included an increase in the number of people having whole body suits tattooed. The second shift has been the move towards a perceived authenticity. This is partly why European and American individuals went to Polynesia, for example, to encounter a perceived authentic tattooing culture and acquire tattoos that were once again restricted to a form of elite which would have the financial means and/or the commitment to visit and engage with the local tattoo scenes. Therefore, the

size and the context in which the tattoo was acquired are formative aspects of its perceived authenticity within the global tattoo community.

This is another aspect related directly to the acquisition process is the fame of the tattoo artist who produced the tattoo. Due to the fact that one cannot receive a tattoo as a second hand object, it is always an index of a personal, and sensual, encounter with the tattoo artist. The artist's distributed agency is therefore always implied within the tattoo itself. This is also part of the perceived authenticity of a tattoo. The agency of an artist encompassed in the embodied object embedded in another person's body remains potent even beyond the artist's death itself. In fact, the value of the tattoo is increased as is its authenticity. This is because it is a form of ultimate restriction of acquisition, as there are only a finite number of his/her work, and embodied distributed agency, in the world. This is clearly exemplified by the tattoos done by the late Samoan tattoo artist Sulu'ape Paulo who tattooed many European and American individuals from the 1980's until his murder in 2000. His tattoos retain a high degree of authenticity and value in the global tattoo community and the tattooees are often perceived as having been touched by a certain aura of implicit knowledge which he passed on through the tattooing process and their interactions, however short they may have been.

Therefore, the value of a tattoo, such as a neo-traditional one in this particular case, is perceived to emanate from an encounter with a particular tattoo artist, even if the financial aspect is often implicit. This highlights the importance of creating and maintaining such a valuable status to the cultural agents and Polynesian tattoo artists in French Polynesia, as I have shown in chapters three, four and five of this thesis. The perceived authenticity of the tattoos they produce has enabled them to gain a value which gives them a particular edge in the competitive economic global market of tattooing. At the same time, within the global tattoo community, the least money has been exchanged in the acquisition of a tattoo, the more valuable it is perceived to be. This is because, as I have already discussed, a gift implies a more sustained and personal relationship between the tattoo artist and the tattooee. Authenticity works on both the personal and the collective realms. Phillips and Steiner (1999) have argued that it is in the act of collecting,

‘in the very process of collection, which inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associated with the object in both the individual and collective memories’ (Phillips & Steiner 1999:19).

Contemporary tattoos are no exception to this process. It seems that tattoos’ authenticities reside also in the very moment of their acquisition, when painfully inscribed in human bodies, they acquire the character and qualities of both individual and collective perceptions of the context within which they were created. Authenticity is, therefore, a perception which will be assigned in some networks a form of value while, at the same time, remain inherently context dependent.

## 8.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the issues raised by ideas, and perceived acts, of appropriation related to tattoo designs which origins differed from the contexts in which they are being used contemporarily. There is little doubt that such networks as the Californian based ‘modern primitives’ had a great deal of influence in the rise of neo-tribal tattooing and body-modification globally, as have the visits of, and interactions with, Samoan tattoo masters from the 1980’s onwards in Europe, North America and New Zealand (see chapters three, four and five). Although naive primitivist assertions are undeniably at play in such networks, it is important to point out to the diverse nature of the global tattoo community and the complex cross-cultural personal biographical narratives of many of the individuals who are involved in its creation and maintenance. The example of Robbie Williams and his Maori tattoo is indicative of the cultural politics in which such an embodied acquisition can be enmeshed. It also shows that appropriation is mostly used instrumentally in the sphere of cultural representation. Furthermore, I have indicated that the issue that seems to be most problematic for many of my Polynesian informants, is the alienation of tattoo designs, rather than their appropriation *per se*.

These entwined global networks and acts of exchange directly relate to the issues of the commodification of tattoos and to their perceived authenticity. As I have discussed, what seems to be commodified is the time and skill of the tattoo artist rather than the tattoos themselves. Tattoo practitioners are therefore free to choose from an array of types of exchange relationship with the diverse customers and friends they tattoo. These can range from a commodified short interaction to a gift which implies a longer lasting relationship, almost always based on some form of reciprocity. However, even in the shortest exchange which involves the process of tattooing, both tattoo artist and tattooee are the reciprocal agents of each other's value definition (see chapter four). This, in turn, relates to the creation and maintenance of personal status and fame within the internal hierarchy of the global tattoo community.

## Chapter Nine: Tattoo Museums

### 9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to look at tattoo museums, including a detailed discussion of the *Moko* museum, based in Wellington in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I start with a description of the museum itself and of the adjacent tattoo shop whose owner is also the director of the museum. I introduce two main protagonists in this chapter. The first one is Steve who is the director and creator of the *Moko* museum. The second one is Al Te Wake who is a Maori carver who was working at the museum during my fieldwork there. I then discuss the various projects that were being worked on in the autumn of 2003. These include a series of historical boards, the organisation of a conference of tattoo museums' directors, and the production of a series of carved wooden pillars. I discuss how the *Moko* museum is an imaginative strategy for its director to gain some form of status in the global tattoo community, and how the museum's collection of photos contributes to the creation of the concept of a global tattoo community. I also look at the tension between a need to transform the museum into an educational centre and the importance of the involvement of Maori cultural agents. Finally, I discuss the concept of museum in relation to Victorian collections of 'curios'. Overall, in this chapter, I argue that the *Moko* museum is involved in similar processes as museums such as the Horniman Museum in London was at its start. This museum started as a private collection and moved towards a more institutional status and the Moko museum is thriving for such official recognition in the future.

## 9.2 Tattoo Museums

There are many tattoo museums around the world. None of these are official institutions. Most of them are usually a successful tattoo artist who dedicates space in his/her tattoo shop to be a museum and displays a collection more or less impressive and of interest to the public. In the early 00's, a number of these museums seems to have been considered by my informants as having gained some form of global reputation. Two of these were in Europe. One was a display box which is, still today, presented during British tattoo conventions, and the other was situated in Amsterdam's red light district and closed in 2000. The third one is the *Moko* museum, based in Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand, which is a large space with a few objects and a collection of photos of tattooees and tattoo artists, which I will discuss in detail in this chapter.

The 'Tattoo Museum of Great Britain', based in Oxford, is the personal collection of tattoo related objects belonging to a reputed British tattoo artist. It participated to the 'Skin Deep' exhibition held at the National Maritime Museum, with the collaboration of Goldsmith College, University of London, in May 2001. This museum has no dedicated space where its objects can be displayed on a permanent basis: as his director humorously told me when I visited him in Oxford: 'the museum is a load of cardboard boxes'. The director, Lionel, takes some of the exhibits to most of the British tattoo conventions which he usually attends himself as a trader and manufacturer of tattooing apparatus. He is also the owner of one of the most successful tattoo shop based in Oxford and enjoys a nationwide reputation. However, he does not tattoo anymore and focuses on the manufacturing of tattoo machines and other related products. He is still the manager of the shop where two tattoo artists work. One is his son who is a talented young tattoo artist. The other is a very well known English tattoo artist, called Curly, who has gained his reputation for being one of the pioneers of neo-tribal tattoo designs in Britain. The museum exhibit, which Lionel takes to all the tattoo conventions he attends as a trader, is a large self-enclosed wooden box. Each side measures about two metres. Some of the sides' panels have large glass bays allowing the public to look at the objects while not being able to touch them. The exhibit as a whole is Lionel's perceived reproduction of what a European tattoo shop of early twentieth century would have looked like. This includes a male dummy with a Dali's style moustache with a bare chest showing a number of tattoo designs drawn on its body. The walls are covered with example of 'old school' tattoo designs which were used as templates before the changes in the tattooing practice since the 1970's (see chapter eight). These include anchors, sailing ships, swallows, pin-up, daggers and broken hearts to name but a few. There are also a number of early electric tattoo machines on display. There are also a number of references to Polynesian and Indonesian tattooing practices as well as a Polynesian traditional tattooing tool on display. Lionel commented to me that to have it contained in a box makes it easier to travel and to manage, as he does not need someone to look after the objects part of his collection. I should point out that there is no mention either on or in the display box of Lionel's name nor of his tattoo shop and tattoo machine manufacturing business. It is clear that most people who are part of British networks of the tattoo community, and to a great extent at a global level too, do know of Lionel's reputation and that the museum box that they see at various tattoo conventions is part of his personal collection of tattoo related objects.

The 'Tattoo Museum of Amsterdam', is the other museum which had attained a global reputation. It held a varied collections which included many hand tattooing tools from Polynesia, Japan and Indonesia as well as other tattoo related objects. It also had a comprehensive collection of designs from around the world and some of this collection has been published in books which many tattoo artists interested in neo-tribal style have used for inspiration. The museum itself was situated in Amsterdam's red light district and was visited by thousands of individuals every year, including many who had no personal interest in tattooing per se, before it was closed in 2000. The museum's director, and owner of the collection presented there, is a very famous tattoo artist, called Hanky Panky, with a global reputation as one of the early pioneer of the European neo-tribal movement.

I will now look in more detail at another tattoo museum, the Moko museum, based in Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. The main differences between the other well-known tattoo museums compared to the Moko museum is that none of these two had, as their main exhibits, displays of amateur photos of tattooees and tattoo artists, but were collections of objects relating to a perceived history of the practice. Furthermore, Lionel's box, in a way, came to its visitors by being set up in the middle of busy events such as tattoo conventions, while the Amsterdam's museum was located in one of the busiest area of this touristic city. The *Moko* museum, as I will discuss now, was an operation with less of a global reputation as the other two had attained over the years.

### 9.3 The Moko Museum

'The National Tattoo Museum of New Zealand', also known as the '*Moko* Museum', is based in Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is housed in a building which is situated on the edge of Wellington's city centre, less than a ten minutes walk from the main commercial area of the capital of Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is a large warehouse with a basic metal shutter door at the main front entrance. This means that the museum is, literally, either opened or closed and that on windy days, which are not unusual in Wellington, the museum fills with drafts and cold air. Outside, on each side of the main entrance, are two imposing

sculptures, each around ten feet tall. One is a *Rapa Nui Moai*, an iconic Easter Island statue, while the other is a figure of a traditional Maori style representation of the mythical *Tiki*, adorning a full face Maori style *moko*: the Maori traditional face tattoo. The figure of *Tiki* holds Polynesian traditional tattooing tools in one of his hands. Over the entrance are also two medium size sculptures, around three feet long each, of Chinese style dragons painted in bright red and yellow. All of these figures are in fact sculpted in polyester. The *Moai* is painted as to mimic stone and the representation of *Tiki* to display a wooden effect.

After entering the museum, the visitor is faced with a desk decorated with a neo-tribal design at the front. Fred, a white New-Zealander from Wellington in his late twenties, greets and takes the entrance fees from the visitors. He does not have tattoos or any body-modifications and wears a casual suit without a tie. The space available for viewing to the visiting public is around three hundred square metres. At the centre of the room, there is a twenty-five square metres stage which is reserved for the practice of hand-tattooing techniques. It is raised by half a metre from the floor. On it are a series of dummies' busts which have been painted with different tattoo designs. These include Polynesian traditional ones as well as contemporary neo-tribal designs.

The walls of the museum are mainly covered by photos of various sizes of tattooed individuals. I will discuss these in more detail later in this chapter. There are also six large oil paintings positioned around the building. They are all reproductions of nineteenth and twentieth century paintings of tattooed Maori people by the New Zealand painter Charles Goldie (1870-1947). They are the creation of Ymre, an artist originally from Hungary in his late forties who resides and has his studio on the site of the museum. His Studio is mainly a small room in one corner of the complex. Some of Ymre's paintings are reproduction of Goldie's originals, but others are not. In the reproductions, he uses the stands assumed by Goldie's original models and their attires but the people portrayed in Ymre's work are themselves contemporary Maori individuals who have acquired facial *moko* tattoos. Goldie, who was born in Auckland but studied art in Paris, rejected the art modernist agenda, such as impressionism. The bulk of his work is a series of portraits of old Maori people with facial *moko* tattoos. He perceived his own work as a way to record a disappearing culture. This has

been questioned by some Maori activists who argue that his work is a European artistic construction of his subjects rather than conveying an accurate experience of Maori individuals themselves (Bell 1995). However, for some Maori people, his paintings are considered to be representing important ancestral images. This explains why Ymre, and the museum director, chose them as subjects for a series of paintings to be permanent exhibits in the museum. It should also be noted that two of the subjects of the paintings by Ymre can be found in different photos displayed on the walls of the museum. These are two young Maori men who have facial Maori *moko* tattoos. At the back of the museum, opposite to the door leading to Ymre's studio, there is a medium size glass cabinet with a few tattoo related objects displayed. These include different electric tattoo machines, ink cups, and some traditional Polynesian tattooing tools. There are neither explanatory notes nor accompanying contextualisation of the objects. There is also a series of posters displayed of tattoo designs which have been used in human history and by different cultures. These include Scythian's ice mummies tattoos and Indonesian Dayak ones too. The museum is presented as a community centre ran by volunteers. Their stated aim is to create a place that does not only reflect the Maori cultural history of tattooing but also the wider world of tattooing. The museum had been established since 2001 and was involved in different low-key cultural events.

#### 9.4 Underground Arts

Adjacent to the warehouse that holds the museum, there is another, bigger, warehouse which is called 'Underground Arts'. The two are linked by a set of double doors. Through them the visitor enters a large long white room which is an art gallery. It holds six paintings and two sculptures by contemporary local artists. From the art gallery, the visitor can carry on and enter a shop that specialises in selling a variety of fantasy artefacts mainly acquired from the closing sets of the television series 'Xena, Warrior-Princess' and of the film trilogy of 'The Lord Of The Rings'; both filmed in Aotearoa/New Zealand. These are mainly replicas of fantasy and medieval armours and weapons. On each sides of the gallery are two areas that are closed to the public. On the left, there is a concert venue which is mainly used as a rehearsal space by music bands three times a week. On the right is a large workshop area

used for wood carving, sculpting, painting and generally messy artistic projects. The next part of the warehouse is a tattoo shop. It holds four tattoo rooms, a lobby and an office. At the time of my stay, three tattoo artists were working there, who were Steve, Lucilla, and Mikel. Lucilla is a local tattoo artist who apprenticed in another of Wellington's tattoo shop but was offered a position at Underground Arts. Mikel is a Slovakian tattoo artist who is doing his apprenticeship with Steve. Steve is the owner of Underground Arts and the director of the museum. There is a small entrance to the shop and concert venue which comes out in a back street. This is at the opposite side of the building and to the entrance of the museum that is situated on a main road.

### 9.5 Steve

Steve is the director of the museum and the owner of 'Underground Arts'. He was born in the late 1960's from a Maori father and a white New Zealander mother. In his youth, Steve had been associated with criminal gangs which seem to have been somewhat subservient to more powerful white supremacist gangs operating in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia. Steve is perceived, and presents himself, as a reformed character now actively involved in promoting positive Maori cultural identity and who supports local artists. Steve is a stocky individual around one metre sixty tall. He has a full tattooed skull (hairline) with many worm type creatures swirling over each others. I had seen a photo of him, before we first met, in an article, of a tattoo magazine reporting on the first anniversary of the museum in 2002. Steve came to learn tattooing while in jail. After his release, he lived in squats and was tattooing mainly with black ink rather than with colours. He gains some recognition locally for some of his work; for example the iconic logo of the heavy metal music band 'Motor Head'. An established local tattoo artist took him as an apprentice and taught him to tattoo colours, about hygiene routine, and other various skills relating to the practice of tattooing. As his skills improved, Steve started tattooing a wide range of designs, and gained a reputation for his Chinese and Japanese styles dragons. He dealt with issues relating to drug and alcohol addictions and became, in his words, 'a reformed character'. According to some of my informants, rather than work his way to his own tattoo shop while still working for his tattoo master, Steve loaned money from his friends and, with it, opened the 'Underground

Arts' tattoo shop in 2000. A year later, he opened the *Moko* Museum, in 2001, in the adjacent warehouse to his tattoo shop. In the space of three years, he had transformed these two dirty warehouses into an artistic, commercial, educational and exhibition complex. His decision to by-pass the traditional route to ownership of his own tattoo shop and to open it with independent finances may to an extent have affected his access to the global tattoo networks which his employer was part of (see chapter six).

## 9.6 The Moko Museum's Photos Collection

Most of the walls of the museum were covered with photos of tattooed individuals. There was no obvious order or form of classification in the presentation of the pictures. The models were of different ethnic backgrounds, gender, and age. The styles of the tattoos in the photographs were also very varied. The photos themselves were of different sizes, but more than two thirds are of the usual size of personal pictures. Although the photos were displayed randomly, there were three main categories in which they can be classified. The first category of photo was of local tattooed people, the second was of tattoo personalities who have visited, while the third one was of pictures of international tattoo fans whose pictures was taken on site during their touristic visits. All the categories are directly involved in the creation of status in the tattoo community. However, the display of the photos of local tattooed people is more potent within the local community while the photos of outsiders are mainly active in the global one. In the first case, the individuals displayed are gaining status by being on the walls forming a map of the community. A bigger photo or having more than one photo displayed may denote a higher status of an individual within the local tattoo community. In the case of tattoo personalities, they do not gain status by having their tattoos displayed on the walls of the museum. It is their 'fame' which affect positively the status of the museum and of its director. These photos themselves are slightly different from those of local people. The latter usually focus mainly on the tattoos but in the former, the individuals have to be recognised and therefore they are often striking a humorous pose or standing next to the museum's director. It is the case that, when the photos are of global tattoo fans visiting the museum as tourists, the tattoos themselves are more prominent than the individual subject, which is reminiscent of the photos of local fans. Global tattoo fans help the museum to affirm itself as

a place on the global map of the tattoo community. At the same time, it enables the museum to create contacts with a wide range of tattoo enthusiasts. This is because the pictures are taken during their visit there by one of the museum's staff. I observed that not all visitors with tattoos were asked to pose for the museum collection. One of the criteria seems to be the size of the tattoos a person had and the originality of the artwork and/or placement of the tattoo design. Steve would usually decide on which photos should go on the walls displays. In the cases when he was on site, he would sometimes decide which visitors would be photographed and which would not. At the time of my fieldwork there, there was enough free space for every chosen photo to be displayed. I asked Steve what he would do when one day there would be not enough space to display new photos. His answer was that he would have to make some decisions to which ones may be removed and which ones would be replacing them. He also talked about starting an archive of the photos which could be accessed by the public during their visit at the museum. Steve commented on the photo displays:

‘the photos are important because they reflect the state of tattooing today here in New Zealand and around the world if you consider all the photos of foreign visitors that we display. It shows the diversity of the designs that tattoo artists use. I think it is the right thing to show in a museum like this one. What else but people with tattoos should be in the museum? It represents all the tattooed people who have been here at one point or another. It is like a map of the tattoo community.’ (interviewed in October 2003).

This collection of photos is reminiscent of an event which took place at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London in the Spring of 2000. The organisers invited tattooed people to present themselves and have their pictures taken and added to the museum's collection, creating a record of the diversity of tattoos worn on the streets of Britain at that particular time. It was held at the same time as the Taputapuatea Tattoo Festival on Raiatea which I have discussed in a previous chapter. Yet, many people attending the festival were talking about the London based event and some told me they would have liked to be able to attend and participate in it if they had been in Europe at the time.

## 9.7 The Historical Boards Project

Another project which some of the museum's volunteers were involved in was to produce a permanent exhibition of decorated wooden boards illustrating the different tattooing traditions known through time and space. These were being organised and created during my fieldwork there and once finished would become a permanent feature of the museum. This project was designed to give a form of historical context to the tattooing practice and to act as an important educational aspect of the museum. Prior to this project, the only items which referred to a historical dimension were a few posters displayed in one corner of the museum, next to a medium size glass cabinet containing tattooing paraphernalia. Each of the wooden board was around forty centimetres on each side and each tattooing culture was to be represented by two of these boards. One would have a recognisable and iconic design and the second would have some explanatory written text. The texts included references to the particular geographical location of the discussed culture and of the main known significance and uses of tattoos for each one of the groups. Such a project was driven by a consciousness of the staff that the museum needed to include a series of display which could be useful during the increasing number of school trips that the museum catered for. This was therefore a step to increase the educational dimension of the location. This was also an important developmental aspect of the museum as such educational displays were perceived by its staff as a crucial step to gain access to a more recognised status as a museum and therefore to access some public funds. Steve often referred to some of his ideas being directly inspired from established events and institutions. He told me, for example, that he decided to create the museum after a visit to the 'Te Papa' museum and that one of his aspiration was that one day the *Moko* museum may be affiliated with this prestigious national institution.

A number of these historical boards had been produced by the time I left the field. These included two series dedicated to Scythian and early Iron Age cultures which were mainly based on the ice mummies found in the 1990's, respectively in Eastern Siberia and Northern Alpine Italy. The discoveries of these mummies have been important, to the global tattoo community, in the creation of a long lasting use of tattoos. In particular, they are perceived as proofs that tattooing was present in Europe prior to the establishment of Christian cultural hegemony which was an important aspect of the disappearance of the tattooing practice in Europe. They have, to an extent, inflamed the imagination of many

tattoo enthusiasts and practitioners. Due to this, they have been referred to in many tattoo magazines and books. Other boards' subjects were the Indonesian Dayak, which style has been influential in the creation of the Euro-American neo-tribal style from the 1980's onwards. There were also series of boards representing the Maori and other Polynesian tattooing traditions: Tongan, Marquesan, Hawaiian, Samoan and Tahitian. The explanatory texts were quite short and the amount of information conveyed through them was usually basic but presented in a clear manner.

However, there were also some of the historical boards which had a different agenda than purely fact based educational tools. For example, one of the boards represented French tattooing and the design which was displayed was a 'Fleur de Lys'. There are no specific French tattooing tradition other than the one related to the global Euro-American history of the practice, over the last hundred and twenty years or so. Moreover, the 'fleur de Lys' symbol is mainly associated in France as a symbol of the French monarchy and also of the Canadian province of Quebec. Yet Steve noted to me that he was very keen to include such a board because, for him, the boards should be a way to represent as many as possible of the potential museum visitors' nationalities. This seems to show that, for Steve at least, the 'historical' boards were also a way to appeal to the museum visitors' individual national and cultural identities, rather than purely educational in nature. However, his point was that the boards should reflect the diversity and the global nature of the tattooing practice while also showing that it was not a new phenomenon to human history.

Steve and the museum staff were also involved in other projects such as the development of computer software for the positioning of tattoo designs and the organisation of an international conference of tattoo museum's directors. This particular event was scheduled to be held at the end of November 2003. The conference was planned to coincide with the second anniversary of the museum. The event would last three days of which two would be opened to the public while the last one would be a private affair for the directors and their staff. However, by September 2003 most of the directors had not answered yet to the invitation to come and take part in the event. This was mainly due to the fact that most of the museums' directors are also tattoo shop owner and tattoo artists. They usually attend

some of the tattoo conventions but may not have been able to attend also due to the lateness of the invitations. Steve had decided on this conference only three months before it was intended to take place. However, Steve related to me that:

‘an event like this can put the museum on the map, not only here in New Zealand but around the world. If it doesn’t happen this time, we’ll organise another one with a bit more advanced warnings, but I also hope that it could lead to other tattoo museums wanting to share exhibits with us and that maybe one day, we can even organise a conference like this one every year and have it in a different country each time’ (interviewed in September 2003).

This planned event alludes to Steve’s strong desire to be recognised, not only locally as an artist, but also globally. These are important to show how he tried to increase his position in the global tattoo world through many different projects other than through the exchange relationships forged during international tattoo conventions that I discussed in earlier chapters. Due to his past, Steve has not been able to have visas to attend tattoo conventions outside of Aotearoa/New Zealand. He, nonetheless, attends the ones organised nationally. However, these are not enough to forge the strong relationships with the networks that form the global tattoo community. One important aspects of this exchange is the movement from one place to another. Therefore, partly due to his inability to travel abroad, Steve is attempting to organise events which will foster other types of opportunities to create new exchange relationships with an international dimension.

## 9.8 Al Te Wake

Another key individual working at the Moko museum, during the time of my fieldwork there, was a Maori wood carver working on a specific museum project. Al Te Wake was born in the early 1960’s in the Northern part of the North island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. He was a Maori in his early forties, six feet tall, with long black hair, a frank gaze and an inviting smile. He had a great sense of humour, good empathic skills, and a wide general knowledge about life used to best effect by quick wit. Al was doing volunteer work

for the museum as the main wood carver and was in charge of a woodcarving project to create a number of wooden pillars which would surround the main stage at the centre of the museum which was used for traditional Polynesian and Maori tattooing and also for hand tattooing.

Al was part of the *Nga Puhi* Maori tribe. He never knew his father and was raised by his mother, a step father, and his maternal grand-mother. Al's relationship with his mother and step father were difficult. His step father beat him up severely and regularly. When he was nine his grand-mother convinced his mother to send him to the South island of Aotearoa/new Zealand. There, he joined a Maori boarding school where he learnt Maori language and culture. He came back to his mother's house when he was twelve. His relationship with his step father did not improve and one day he was beaten up so severely that he ended up in hospital. Al had enough and asked his mother to choose between her son and her partner. She chose to turn her back on her son and accused him of being difficult and of deserving to be disciplined. Al ran away South to the city of Auckland. He did not have any more contacts with his mother for the rest of his life. In his mid-teens, sleeping rough on the streets of Auckland, Al adapted quickly to his new environment in order to survive. Al was never part of a gang, however he had affiliations with some of them. His position enabled him to engage in activities which gang members were not able to partake in. It also meant that he was used by gangs to run operations which were not to be associated directly with a particular gang. He would, for example, target particular gang runners and rob them. He would then disappear to another part of the country, and would leave a trail of interrogations about his culpability. Aged twenty-two, Al had moved to bank robbery. It is while Al and his two accomplices were about to get out of their car to enter a bank, that their vehicle was surrounded by police officers. Al ended up in jail serving an eight years sentence. Two main events are worth noting regarding this period of Al's life. The first one gave him a life lasting protection from gang harm by the biggest and most powerful gang of Aotearoa/new Zealand, called the Mongrel Mob. The head of this gang was in the same jail, at the same time, as Al. This powerful character, for some reason or other, shot dead another inmate. The responsibility of disposing of the smoking gun fell on Al. The second event was that Al decided to use this time to study. Not only was he successful in his chosen subjects but he was also part of an inmates' pressure group which, in time, led to some reforms in the living conditions in

Aotearoa/New Zealand's prisons. When he came out, he felt that he was reformed and intended to earn a living by other means than criminal ones. Al had tried his hand at tattooing, like many, while he was in prison. However, he did not feel comfortable with the practice and took up woodcarving. His main reason for this choice was that:

‘with tattooing you always have to talk for hours with the people. And they are never happy, and they move and complain about the pain. With wood, at least, it is there when you want to work on it and it doesn't move, moan or complain.’ (interviewed in September 2003)

While carving, Al was also doing security work in pubs and clubs of Auckland and the Bay of Plenty, further South-East on the North Island. When he was thirty-five, Al decided to come to Europe. He first landed in London but settled in Leeds for three years. While there, Al contacted many of the famous European tattoo artists and sold them his woodcarvings. Through this and his party antics, he forged himself a reputation in the European body modification communities. He was invited to come and carve in Germany, the Netherlands and France. He also participated in many European tattoo conventions. He then decided to go back to Aotearoa/New Zealand and spent time in his tribal area. He lived with his grandmother until her death when he was forty. He moved back to Auckland, and earned a living through corporate contracts for his carvings. He was also very close to some of the tattoo artists in Auckland and remained in contact with his European friends. When we met, Al was 42 and in the middle of setting up a new project. His idea was to set up a tourist tour company that would cater only for foreign tattoo artists wanting to experience Aotearoa/New Zealand. He was therefore setting up, in particular spots of the islands, points of interest to the tattoo inclined visitor. When he arrived in Wellington, in July 2003, he went to visit the museum as a possible point of interest. He was offered by Steve to carve a series of wooden pillars to go around the hand tattooing stage which was in the centre of the museum in exchange for free food and a bed in the office above the stage. Al decided to take up the offer and work there. This way he would be able to help to create a space worth visiting on his project of a tattoo tourist tour. This came at a good time, also, as he had also been evicted from his flat in Auckland, recovered from prostate cancer, and wanted to spend some time in a new environment. Unfortunately, Al fell ill in October 2003 and died in the spring of 2004 in Auckland.

## 9.9 The Wooden Pillars Project

As I already mentioned earlier, Al's main project at the museum was to carve a series of wooden pillars which would be placed around the traditional and hand tattooing stage. It was meant to be a series of six eight feet wooden carvings. The wood had been given to Steve by one of his contacts in the building trade. They were in fact six large planks of wood that had been used as part of scaffoldings for the last ten years or so. Yet, the quality of the wood was good and Al was happy with it.

At the time of my fieldwork, Al was working on three of them. The first and second pillars were representations of the mythical Maori, but also found in much of Polynesia, figure of *Maui*: the trickster hero. This choice is of interest due to the story and place of *Maui* in the cultural landscape in relation to the context of the museum. *Maui* is not a god per se but rather a human being with extraordinary powers. He is described, by many of my informants, as one of the first human being. *Maui's* mythical stories are not tales of glorious deeds and prestigious behaviour. On the contrary, he is more often concerned with practical and domestic matters. Furthermore, the way he attains his goals is most of the time a consequence of his willingness to break *tapu* restrictions (Orbell 1995). A number of actions are attributed to this mythical figure. These include stealing fire from a goddess and giving it to human beings, lengthening the day by slowing down the course of the sun, fishing out from the sea the land that forms Aotearoa, and to make human beings mortal and subject to death (McLintock 1966, Orbell 1995). Al's wooden pillars were to represent two of these events: how *Maui* fished the land and how he brought death upon human kind. Versions of the two legends often go as follow, although local variations can be found throughout Polynesia and on Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Maui* went fishing with his brothers after his wife demands that he engaged in the activity. He went in a cave and took a jawbone of one of his powerful ancestor to make his fishing hook, an act that would only be practiced upon the remains of an enemy therefore breaking a *tapu* restriction. He persuaded his brothers to take him in their boat. Although they did not want to, fearing *Maui's* trickeries, they accepted. However, they refused to give him any of their baits to fish. This led him to punch his own nose and cover

the jawbone fishing hook with the blood from the wound. After a while, he pulled an enormous and strong fish upon which their canoe rested. Aware that such a fish had some mythical status, *Maui* decided to go and appease the gods and told his brothers not to touch the fish until he had done this. However, they argued amongst themselves in his absence and started to cut the fish which itself was not dead and therefore started to move around. The fish became the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand and *Maui's* brothers cuts, and the fish's convulsions, are the mountains and valleys which are the landscape features found in the area (McLintock 1966, Orbell 1995). Other objects of the myth became part of the land and so the South Island is often referred to as the canoe from which *Maui* fished the North Island, and smaller islands are perceived as representing the fishing hook and the canoe's anchor.

The other legend tells of the desire of *Maui* to destroy the goddess responsible to collect the dead. Death seems to have been, in this mythical time, only an event that occurred through killing and accidents, not due to the decay of the human body. *Maui* wanted to destroy death itself and tried to conjure his biggest trick of them all (Orbell 1995). Although warned of the impossibility of his desire, he nonetheless went ahead with his plans. He surrounded himself with his friends the birds and while the goddess was asleep, he tried to enter her body through her vagina; while having warned his companions not to make a noise as to not waken her up. However, when he had engaged his whole head in the goddess' vagina, one of the birds could not stop himself from laughing in merriment at his plan. This awoke the goddess and she crushed *Maui's* body with her legs, killing him. His last defeat is considered as the reason why human beings die now (McLintock 1966, Orbell 1995).

The first pillar was representing *Maui* in the canoe pulling the mythical fish out of the sea. The second one was *Maui* entering the goddess of death's vagina with birds surrounding them, and the third pillar did not relate to any particular Maori myth but represented the body of an ancestral women holding on her shoulder a child who played a Maori nasal flute. The first two were to be placed at the corners of the museum's hand tattooing stage while the third one was going to be on one of the sides. Al worked at great speed partly because he mainly used electrical tools to do most of the wood carving rather than hand tools. However, he performed the sanding process by hand. His use of electric tools had been criticised, in the

past, by some Maori artists as not being traditional enough. However, he dismissed these comments by arguing that if traditional wood carver had had access to such tools they would have used them. In support of this argument, he cited the example of the introduction of metal tools in the practice of *Ta Moko* after European contacts with the Maori tribes.

Over the month of October, the relationship between Steve and Al deteriorated greatly. The arrangement they had struck was initially that Al would carve the six pillars and teach Steve the skills to work with wood. Until then Steve had never carved wood. However, it is important to note that wood seems to be regarded as the superior material when it comes to carving in Aotearoa/NZ, especially compared to Steve customary use of polyester. Steve started carving under the supervision of Al, and worked on a pillar but there seems to be a clash of character between them. After one heated argument, Al decided to end his collaboration with Steve and the museum. Al commented to me that he felt he was the token Maori in the Moko museum, who brought woodcarvings and cultural credentials. It was a fact that the other main Maori links which Steve could rely on was based on his friendship with a group of local Maori youths. Some of them had *moko* tattooed on their faces; the traditional Maori face tattoo. However, some of my informants told me that the elders of their tribe did not allow for them to have the designs tattooed. The fact they had gone through with it despite the elders' decision made them somewhat in the margins of their own community. This could highlight why Al perceived that he was an asset for Steve and the Moko museum, as he was more respectable than the local youths and brought with him more active connections within the different Maori communities. Al had also established strong relationships within the global tattoo community and felt he could potentially offer a way in for Steve in this series of global interconnected networks. Furthermore, Al's main project for the museum was to create a series of wooden pillars that, once finished, would be placed around the hand tattooing stage at the centre of the museum. This area had not been used many times since its opening and not in the last year. According to some of my informants, there had been some argument between a Samoan tattoo artist and Steve during the last, and first, anniversary of the museum. The problem seemed to have arisen due to a perceived lack of respect shown by Steve to the artist's *mana* when he was using traditional Samoan tattooing tools on a tattooee on the stage. Lisa, one of the museum's staff, reported to me that the Samoan tattoo artist had accused Steve of compromising his *mana* and therefore the

quality of his work. Al's wooden pillars were meant to restore a certain level of *mana* to the tattooing area, as well as showing Steve' renewed understanding and respect for the sacredness of the practice.

Two of the pillars were almost finished, this was the *Maui* figure entering the goddess of death's vagina and the flute playing one. He decided that he would move everything to his girlfriend's house to finish them and would then attempt to sell them to a Wellington's art gallery specialising in Maori art. He explained to me that he felt that Steve did not deserve to profit from the *mana* that the pillars would bring to him through the museum. However, Steve saw it in a different way. He argued that the wood that Al carved did not belong to him but to the museum and therefore so did the carvings. There was a clear distinction of ownership from both sides. One saw the materiality of the wood as being a proof of tangible ownership while the other felt that the transformation of the wood into a carving, through his skill and *mana*, transferred the ownership to him. In a way, Steve perceived the wood has being key while Al focused on the *mana* his skills represented. Steve and some of the museum's staff requested many times from Al that he gives the pillars back to the museum, but every time Al refused. However, before he could finish the pillars, Al became gravely ill and decided to destroy them rather than to have to hand the carvings back.

#### 9.10 Recognition Issues

The museum was engaged in a series of programs which were directed towards attaining some form of official recognition. For example, more than twenty people convicted of minor crimes were registered to work a number of hours a week of community work as their sentences at the museum. This, in a way, located the museum in the social policy landscape of Wellington. This, in turn, gave it a certain amount of recognised officialdom. Furthermore, as I already discussed in this chapter, there were steps taken to give the museum an educational content which would entice more schools to visit it as a cultural outing. The museum was also supported, and advised, by a group of Maori lawyers and accountants who offer their expertise to Maori cultural projects in applying to grants and various state funding

schemes. The museum staff and this group had monthly meetings. The main aim of these meetings was to have the museum recognised as such officially and open up opportunities to access more public funds. This recognition was very important to Steve and the museum's staff and volunteers. He felt that this would lead him to gain social recognition, and respect, as an artist and as the director of the museum locally but also internationally. Another reason to attain some form of official recognition was financial. Steve commented to me that the tattoo shop's earnings were mainly used to run the museum and he hoped that public funding could help keep the museum open and develop it further as an educational location in Wellington, New Zealand and maybe internationally. Although, he had never visited the Amsterdam tattoo museum, Steve aimed to attain a similar level of exposure within the global tattoo community. In a way, Steve represents the 'old tattoo world' attempting some kind of legitimisation in a specific context. This legitimisation takes two main forms. The first is the link with indigenous culture through AI and his carvings. The second is a reframing of the tattooing practice within a community context and through the notion of heritage, hence the idea of a museum. To a point, it exemplifies adequately the shifting social locations and values of tattooing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, these movements are neither new nor independent from the socio-cultural history of museums, the act of collection and displays, and their links to colonialism and the birth of anthropology as an academic discipline, as I will now discuss.

### 9.11 Collection, Curiosity and Museums

The concept of the museum as an institution has developed over the last two hundred years or so. There is a strong relationship between the development of museums' collections and the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline. The representation of perceived culturally bounded communities through the objects they use, or used, referred to as 'material culture', was a dual creative project of the ethnographers who collected the objects and the institutions under the roof of which these objects were presented to a Euro-American public. Through these exhibits, not only artefacts were presented but also a series of classifications, more or less clearly implied. Prior to the establishment of anthropology as an academic discipline, objects were often acquired through private collections. It should be pointed out, at

this stage, that this process of acquisition was not preoccupied in collecting a representative range of objects from the communities in which the acquisitions took place (Thomas 1991). There was a tension between private collectors and the state sponsored institutions. As Thomas states:

‘The museum expresses a detached mastery over the objects and fields of knowledge that constitute its strengths; the collector, who may become the museum’s donor, has a personal preoccupation, frequently of a surreptitious and illegitimate kind. The institutionalised collection stands as a detemporalised end-product, as an array of works abstracted from the circuits of exchange; the collector, on the other hand, is situated in the highly contingent time of market or non-market exchange, and often also in the culturally displaced and morally ambiguous position of the colonial traveller’ (Thomas 1994:116).

This tension between the two is also evident in the concept of ‘curios’. For a long period of time, any objects that came from outside of the Western world were known as ‘curiosities’ (*ibid*). The concept of ‘curios’ comes from ideas linked to curiosity. Curiosity is perceived in opposition to ‘a scientifically controlled interest in further knowledge’ (Thomas 1991:127). Therefore curiosity is unstable and grounded in passion, and desire, rather than reason (*ibid*).

There was a sense that, for the curios’ collectors, what was important was not what meaning could be attributed to the object but that these collected objects were indexes of a collector’s travels to remote places (*ibid*). Therefore, the ‘indigenous artefacts virtually became trophies which reflected the broader experience and mastery of a passage around the world on the part of the traveller’ (Thomas 1991:143). There is some resonance with this in the way in which some tattooees, and tattoo artists, go around the world to acquire tattoos. In this process, particular places, people and techniques have more or less status attached to them (see chapter five). To have a tattoo done with traditional tools in Samoa, Hawaii or Aotearoa/New Zealand carries prestige when back in Euro-America; in the similar way to have been hand tattooed in Japan or by the Indonesian Dayak tribe. Some of my informants have often commented to me about the sharp difference given to such tattoos if they have been acquired in the place themselves or at a local Euro-American conventions. Thomas discusses the painting of the portrait of Banks (*ibid*) (Thomas 1994). This portrait was an

appropriation of objects that represented a successful voyage around the world and stood for an accomplished command of the person, and was not perceived by their owners as commodity but rather as markers of personal history and achievements (Thomas 1991). Similarly tattoos become, for some people, trophies and curios. This fact is not lost by some of the protagonists residing in the places they visit. Chime, for example, once commented dismissively about one of these individuals: 'you see this guy is a collector'. When I quizzed him about what he meant he explained to me that there was a difference between people engaging with the place where the tattoos were created and those who just travelled and acquired tattoos as a proof of their passage. However, this is not as the difference between tattoo opportunists and enthusiasts (see chapter four), but a further subdivision of the enthusiasts categories. From this, it would seem that, in the global tattoo community at least, these tensions are still very much at play. However, the tension here is not between the passion of the traveller and the reason of the scientist, but between the perceived levels of engagement with the context of the design and the ensuing gained personal experience (see chapters four, seven and eight).

It has been pointed out that 'the symbolic status of collections as a form of social transaction highlights the colonial process and delineate each actors' positions in the colonial drama' (Coombes 1994). Similarly, the collections held at the 'Moko museum' illustrate both a series of exchanges and the different positions held by the actors in the global tattoo community. However, it is clear that one of the main differences with this particular location is that it is not at the centre of this community. Its director resides in the margins of the local tattoo scene and of the wider society. He does not enjoy an elevated status in the global tattoo community and his local reputation is what he must rely on mostly to assert his status. Steve's inability to create these international bonds could be partly explained by the fact that, due to his criminal past, he found it difficult to be granted travel visas. Therefore he was never able to attend tattoo conventions outside of Aotearoa/New Zealand. This has prohibited him to create through the series of exchanges relationships (see chapters three, four, six and seven) and expand his fame through the dissemination of his name. Taking this into account, it is clear that the museum, as a personal project, can be analysed as a strategy to by-pass this situation and establish his name and associate it with a prestigious role as director of the museum. The museum becomes the place where people come from the world over and have

their photo taken and displayed on its the walls. In a way, the museum act, for Steve, in the same manner that the tattoo conventions environment do for others. Furthermore, the photos, which can be perceived as an act of exchange, replace the tattooing exchange process. Through these, Steve is able to offer an increased dissemination of the name of the tattooees through being on the walls of the museum, while at the same time increasing the status of the museum by having a tangible proof that particular well known individuals of the global tattoo community did visit and engaged with him. At the same time, but indirectly, particular well-known tattoos contribute to this process because of the tattoo artist who created them, rather than the tattooees themselves.

Taking these points into account, a number of parallels seems to become apparent between the Moko museum and institutions such as the Horniman museum in London. As Coombes notes, the Horniman museum was created from one man's obsession with 'curio'. Its management always had for main aim to display these objects to the local community, including the working classes. As the collection's control passed from the hands of the Horniman family to the London County Council, in 1901, the emphasis on the way the exhibits were presented moved from idiosyncratic display to a systematic classification (*ibid*). It could be argued that, similarly to the Horniman museum, but on a different scale, the *Moko* museum was both created as a place to involve the local tattoo community, and was the creation of one man's drive to assemble a collection which may help to propel his status in the global tattoo community. There are also tensions between Steve's idiosyncratic taxonomy and the need, for the museum to be recognised officially, to attain a more systematic classification and historical accuracy which some museums' staff seems to thrive for.

There is a sense that, although from different contexts and time, the two museums share a number of aspects and motivations. Yet, when comparing the type of collections the Horniman, Oxford and Amsterdam museums have displayed, in contrast with the *Moko* museum with its walls covered by photos of tattooees instead of a collection of 'curio' like the three others, it could be argued that the first three have more in common. This also explains the importance, to the *Moko* museum's staff, of the other objects which were to be produced through the series of projects. Ymre's paintings, commissioned by Steve for the

museum, were appropriation of paintings usually found in art museums or galleries. They were meant as a break to the photos and their positioning, at regular intervals on the walls, was a way to give a sense of a more authentic object, a painting being perceived as more valuable than a photo. In the same manner, Al's carved wooden pillars were to transform the space with his craft, in comparison to Steve's polyester painted sculptures. Moreover, the historical boards were intended to add an educational dimension to the place.

Nevertheless, a role which the *Moko* museum has assumed, as one part of a wider movement, has been in contributing to the legitimisation of the practice locally and also to a point globally. This legitimisation has taken place on different levels. To start with, the museum's association with the Maori tattooing practice presents it as a location involved with a culturally 'authentic' custom (see chapter eight). This highlights it as a place to visit to global tattoo fans while on their touristic travels in Aotearoa/New Zealand. There is also a form of appropriation of the concept of the institutional museum. This turns the collection into an educational enterprise. The regular visits from local schools and colleges contribute to some extent at the legitimisation of the tattooing practice and its integration within mainstream culture locally. In a sense, the *Moko* museum is not only a historical and cultural theatre of memory (Clifford 1988), in this case it is also a form of restored memory, but moreover a location where the contemporary practice, as a multi and cross cultural form of embodied expression, is also projected in the future through the re-creation of a linear historical narrative and the ever expanding collection of contemporary tattooees. The *Moko* museum was, therefore, a part of, and involved in the maintenance of, the global tattoo community even if his creator was evolving in the margin of this group.

## 9.12 Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter I discussed the way in which concepts such as museum and Maori ethnic identities were appropriated and used in an imaginative way to increase the status of the *Moko* museum, and to a point its director's own fame, within the global tattoo community. Due to his inability to attend international tattoo conventions and festivals, Steve

attempted to attract worldwide interests through his museum. I also looked at the way in which the photos of tattooees who visited the museum were used in this strategy; acting in a similar way to tattoos in Euro-American tattoo conventions discussed in chapter three. Finally, I discussed the way in which the Moko museum bears similarities with curios collections of the Victorian time, such as the Horniman museum in London. Overall, I have intended to show the way in which ideas of a global tattoo community are created and used in a totally different context than the tattoo conventions and festivals discussed in the thesis so far (see chapter four and six).

## Chapter Ten: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have discussed the ways in which my informants are involved in the creation and maintenance of a global tattoo community. Through each chapter, I have presented different aspects of this process. Some chapters have been focused on individuals and their actions on both the local and global stages. Other chapters have reviewed the role of

the tattoo media and of other publications related to the tattooing practice in this process of representation. Overall, I have shown how individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds are involved in series of movements and exchange relationships which determine their status locally but also globally. Yet, such cross-cultural interactions are not without raising issues regarding cultural appropriation and claims to a particular authenticity. In that sense, the global tattoo community is involved in a series of tensions as well as a number of collaborative projects and business partnerships. It is through all these transactional processes, as I will discuss in this final chapter, that this community can take form for individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

In chapters four and six, I have highlighted the importance of events such as tattoo conventions and tattoo festivals worldwide. These regular events act as meeting points for a dislocated group of people. Even if the tattoo conventions in Europe and North America, and in French Polynesia (see chapter four), have changed in their original ethos, from social gatherings to commercial and lucrative events, for most of the participants they still remain the location where people meet, socialise and start new exchange relationships. This is where a community takes a material form. The commercial aspect of the tattoo conventions is an integral part of the way in which status and the internal hierarchy of the global tattoo community is organised. As I have discussed (see chapter six), the competitions and the prizes attributed act both to confirm the status of established artists as well as integrating new ones within its structure of fame. This process is reinforced by the way these events are reported in the tattoo magazines. The prominence of the competitions' winners, in these numerous publications, has for effect to project the agency of tattoo artists internationally. In the case of the Taputapuatea tattoo festival (see chapter four), where there were no competitions and prizes attributed to any of the participants, the sole attendance in itself created a sort of perceived cultural capital within the global tattoo community. This was mainly due to the remoteness of the location where it was held. This meant that there was a certain economic aspect which acted as a financial restriction. Those who attended had to be committed financially to travel to the other side of the world and pay for their accommodation. Yet, what seems to have made this event perceived as important globally was the death of the Samoan tattoo master Sulu'ape Paulo. The event therefore became a celebration and homage to Paulo for a whole group of individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds who were involved in networks such as the neo-tribal and French Polynesian

ones to name but the main ones. These individuals all felt that they, and their work, had been influenced by Paulo's practice. The fact was that he was instrumental, and a pioneer, in the Samoan tattooing tradition being taught to non-Samoan tattoo artists, a practice which was not without polemic in Western Samoa with some of the other local tattoo masters (Mallon 2005). The perceived importance of this particular festival is a potent status marker on the global tattoo stage for both tattoo artists and tattooees who attended it. This was also confirmed by the articles that reported it and which appeared in different tattoo magazines. The article which I discussed, in chapter four, was a good example to compare with the articles discussed in chapter six. The identity of the author being Leo Zulueta, who is considered the founding father of the neo-tribal style and network, was in itself a statement regarding the difference in perception the Taputapuatea festival held globally. The other articles (see chapters four and six) were all authored by journalists. In that sense, it also contributed to affirm French Polynesia as a location integral to the global tattoo community. This in turn opened more opportunities for local tattoo artists to appear in European and North American tattoo conventions. Later tattoo conventions held in French Polynesia have not been perceived as having the same amount of cultural capital as the Taputapuatea festival fostered. Therefore, it is seen as a single event and not a recurrent one. This adds again to the status associated with this festival and gained by the individuals who managed to attend it.

This type of cultural capital associated to this festival, however, is relatively rare compared to the ones, discussed in chapter three, which can be observed during tattoo conventions. The conventions are very similar to tournaments of value (Appadurai 1986) (see chapters four and six). They act as gatherings where the value of the work of specific tattoo artists is determined by their peers. I have not found an example of a tattoo artist who was of a high status within the global tattoo community and acquired their fame without participating in tattoo conventions and appearing in the tattoo media. I am not saying here that the quality of their work is not taken into account because it is. Yet, the quality of their work is not the only thing which will determine their level of success within the global tattoo community. This is even more salient today with the changes in the way tattoo artists are trained. While in the twentieth century, prospective tattoo artists had to follow a three year apprenticeship with one tattoo shop owner, today, many start by buying a tattoo kit by mail order and tattoo themselves and their friends at home. The apprenticeship system still remains today but is not the only way into the tattooing trade as it once was. Apprentices become

more integrated to networks related to their tattoo master and their tattoo shop than individuals who start on their own. Apprentices will, for example, attend tattoo conventions early in their careers and will work for the booth of their respective tattoo shops. They may not tattoo there until later in their careers but their attendance as traders will make them known to other tattoo artists and networks. Individuals who tattoo at home can only attend as traders either once they are working in a tattoo shop or if they themselves have a successful enough shop which can financially sustain their attendance (see chapter six). This again seems to show how these events are seminal to the creation of a community. It seems that, to a point, it is the hierarchical structure which is the basis for a sense of community. The elite are formed of successful tattoo artists, conventions organisers, tattoo shops owners, and the people involved in the publication of the tattoo media. Around them, series of networks spread from the local to the global, in this case, from the tattoo shop to the international tattoo conventions and available media exposure. These elite of the global tattoo community assert control over the entry points into the internal hierarchical structure they create and maintain. The tattoo conventions and festivals held worldwide can be analysed as tournaments of value and the elite of the global tattoo community is in charge of organising such events, as well as the way in which they are reported in the tattoo media.

A crucial aspect of the status an individual can acquire is related to his/her fame along international tattoo networks. Therefore, attendance to tattoo conventions held outside of the national and local context of an artist become instrumental ways to create new exchange relationships and offer a number of friendship and business opportunities. As I discussed in chapter nine, Steve was somewhat restricted by his inability to attend foreign tattoo events and lead him to develop other strategies to enable these opportunities to materialise for him and further his projects. My point is that many tattoo artists seems to be cosmopolitan to the extent that they often move from one tattoo shop to another and to a country to another. This is also expected from some apprentices as they will learn different skills at other tattoo shops while being still attached to their original tattoo masters. In the case of French Polynesia, the movements, that took some of the local tattoo artists to come and work in Europe and North America, were instrumental to their personal fame but also heralded changes back on their local contexts for other tattoo artists. After Chime, Roonui and Purutu went to Europe and worked, learned and exchanged with some of the elite of the European tattoo networks in the 1990's, it became a process that others could attempt and which opened financial

opportunities and possibly brought, to some, international fame. However, as in Europe and North America, the local status of artists became increasingly dependent on these movements. The Taputapuatea tattoo festival was a location where local tattoo artists could encounter some of the elite of the global neo-tribal networks. They were able to engage in the first phase of an exchange relationship which implied a reciprocity of which the second phase would take place either in Europe or North America.

It is also the movements of tattooees which help to create and maintain a global tattoo community. As I have discussed in chapter seven, some tattooees, the enthusiasts, come to French Polynesia, for example, specifically to acquire a tattoo from a local tattoo artist. This is because they have seen them in the tattoo media, met them at an international tattoo convention, or that they already have entered into an exchange relationship with them by having a tattoo done at one of these events. The point is that they go there to experience the local cultural context and perceive their new tattoos as having some form of increased authenticity and value within the global tattoo community. The international fame of the local Polynesian artist is therefore important to attract the tattoo enthusiasts to come to Moorea for example. These movements are involved in creation and maintenance not only of the global tattoo community but also of individual tattoo artists. This is because both tattoo artist and tattooee become the reciprocal agents of each others' value definition. Therefore, the tattooee's tattoo acts as the distributed agency of the tattoo artist when s/he is back in Europe. It furthers the fame of the local tattoo artist beyond their immediate geographical location. However, the local Polynesian artists will still have to attend international tattoo conventions to maintain and increase their level of fame and foster new exchange relationships, such as these I just described.

These movements have also meant some changes in the practice of tattooing in French Polynesia. There has been a sort of professionalization of the practice. The changes have included the introduction of sterilisation and hygiene procedures and heralded more tattoo shops being opened. Many of these were first opened with finances gained through periods of work in European tattoo conventions. Tattoo shops, in Europe, North America and French Polynesia, enable their owners to become more integrated within the local and global tattoo networks. Their ownership facilitates representation in local groups such as professional trade organisations. Tattoo shops are also advertised in tattoo magazines which enable their names and location to be recognised within the global tattoo community. A tattoo

shop also often implies a professional registration to different governmental agencies relating to taxation and health and safety (see chapter four). Another aspect of tattoo shops is that there are usually more than one tattoo artist which works there. For example, when Vatea opened his own tattoo shop on Moorea (see chapters three and four), Chime came to tattoo there for a time. Moreover, when Stephane (see chapter six) came to French Polynesia, he also tattooed local people at Vatea's shop. Similarly, when Pitou (see chapter four) came back after his initial meeting with Vatea at the Taputapuatea tattoo festival, he worked as a piercer in Vatea's shop, and Vatea later went to tattoo at Pitou's piercing shop in France. My point here is that tattoo shops enable their owners to participate more easily in series of exchange relationships and become a destination for foreign practitioners to visit. It also furthers the level of collaboration between them. Furthermore, Vatea's association with Chime had some considerable personal consequences for him. Through presenting Pitou's tattoo in European conventions, Vatea was able to gain some international recognition within the global tattoo community. His association with Chime was also important as Chime had already a substantial reputation in the European tattoo networks due to his work in Spain during the 1990's (see chapter three). Later on, this exposure in the tattoo media and in the European tattoo conventions enabled Vatea to open his own tattoo shop in the south of France and to settle there. Therefore, although different, the European and Polynesian contexts have somewhat created a series of similar hierarchical and practical structures. This could be due to the integration of French Polynesian tattoo artists within the global tattoo community. It is not that there is a homogenisation but rather that there are a number of compatibilities between the way these different networks are organised and take form. These compatibilities also enable local tattoo artists to move to, and evolve in, the global tattoo networks outside of their local context.

The role of tattoo museums in the creation and maintenance of the global tattoo community is not only to present educational displays reifying the history and diversity of the contemporary tattooing practice. It is also instrumental in the creation of fame and status for their owners. As I have noted (see chapter nine), tattoo museums are always associated with a particular tattoo shop and their owners. The tattoo museums affect the position that their owners will assume in the hierarchical structure of the global tattoo community. This is also because, apart from the Amsterdam one (see chapter nine), they are not lucrative operations and imply that the tattoo shop associated with it is financially successful, enough to sustain

this parallel operation. This was also the case with many early European tattoo conventions which were often organised by the owner of the most successful tattoo shop of the city where the event was to be held. In the case of Steve and the *Moko* museum (see chapter nine), he was struggling financially to keep the museum open with the income he earned through his tattoo shop Underground Arts. Yet, it was an important aspect of his status and fame beyond his local context and on the international stage of the global tattoo community. Due to his inability to attend foreign tattoo conventions and to travel internationally, he was not able to enter into exchange relationships in the usual way and to move to work in different tattoo shops around the world. Therefore, the museum became his only strategy to gain some form of global recognition and to attempt to be regarded as part of the elite of the tattooing world. It was through people visiting and participating in the collection of photos of tattoos that he was able to create exchange relationships. However, even then, the exchange relationships were more limited than in other contexts. This was in great parts due to the movements between locations which were not possible. Steve could not reciprocate by himself visiting the individuals he met at the *Moko* museum in their own tattoo shops abroad. In comparison, Steve's first tattoo master (see chapter nine) had gained his international fame on the global stage by working in the UK, Australia and North America and often had visiting European tattoo artists working in his tattoo shop.

These movements, from the local to the global, are crucial to the creation and maintenance of the global tattoo community. It is through these exchange relationships that individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds are able to find some commonalities and engage in business partnerships, as in the case of Vatea, Chime and Pitou (see chapter four). It is these interactions between individuals and networks and within the hierarchical structure of the global tattoo community which create and maintain it for its participants. They experience it during tattoo conventions and festivals and when travelling as guest tattoo artists around the world in tattoo shops owned by their exchange partners. It is also tangible in the recognition which media exposure in international tattoo magazines, and other publications, brings for some of the participants. Yet, the global tattoo community is also taking form on the local level. Tattoo artists have to be financially successful to be able to enter in the series of movements along the global tattoo networks. This means that their local customers are the foundation of their global status and fame. Furthermore, as I have discussed in chapter seven, the relationship between tattoo artist and tattooee is more than just a

commodity exchange where both parties are alienation and detached from each other. On the contrary, even in the most unconnected of encounters, the tattoo will still be the agent of its producer's fame and status. However, in most cases, my informants talk about their relationships with their tattoo artists as one which entails a personal dimension and a sensual encounter. The personal dimension of the indexicality that tattoo artists enable for the tattooees, and the pain associated with the process of tattooing are perceived as being particularly significant for most of the participants. This means that tattooees often become part of a local network revolving around their chosen tattoo shops. This is because, as I have discussed in chapter seven, the perceived links, which the tattoo artist can give materiality to, are emotionally potent for the tattooees. The importance of memorial tattoo which are related to the loss of loved ones is clear to see in most of my informants discourse about some of their tattoos. However, other types of memorial tattoos seem to be apprehended by informants as transformative processes and as inspirational markers. Tattooees perceive that there is a personal dimension to their relationships with their tattoo artists. This is often expressed by informants even when the exchange was a single meeting and purely a business transaction. In many cases, they will express a form of loyalty to their chosen tattoo artist and it is usual for many tattooees to come back to the same tattoo artist to acquire further tattoo work on their bodies.

These local networks based around specific tattoo shops also take form during series of exchange relationships. The act of tattooing itself is an exchange, but more importantly here is the type of exchange relationships which they personally engage with their tattoo artists. A tattoo artist can chose between exchange relationships which trade a tattoo either as a commodity, a gift, or as part of an exchange by private treaty (Firth 1983). The choice is determinant of the type of relationships implied in the act of exchange. Individuals who receive tattoos as gifts are often the same people who are the social nucleus of a network associated with a specific tattoo shop. This is because there is always an implied reciprocity in the gift exchange. At the same time, many of these reciprocal relationships started as commodity exchange and were transformed in time. It is also often the case that a tattoo gains more value in the global tattoo community if it was received as a gift. In a sense, the less it cost, the more valuable it is perceived as. This is, in some way, reminiscent of Bourdieu's economic world reverse (Bourdieu 1993). This is when an increased economic capital means a perceived reduced cultural capital, and vice versa. Yet, the value of a gift tattoo is increased

in relation to how much it may have cost if it had been traded as part as a commodity exchange relationship. Therefore, the fame of the tattoo artist and their associated financial success, are important value markers of a gift tattoo. This is because the reciprocity is implied in the gift and defines the relationship that the tattooee has with their tattoo artist, and which is indexed by the tattoo as an object to observers. In that sense, tattooees are important agent in the creation and maintenance of the global tattoo community. They engage in financial trade with the tattoo artists which is the foundation of their business and part of their status definition. Tattooees partake in sustained forms of reciprocal relationships which are the basis of the networks associated with particular tattoo shops. They also, by having the tattoo, act as agents of the tattoo artist's fame. The tattoo is an embodiment of the distributed agency of the tattoo artist, and both tattoo artist and tattooee are reciprocal agents of each other's value definition, as I have discussed throughout this thesis.

The global tattoo community takes form and is maintained through series of social gatherings, tournaments of value, hierarchical structures, exchange relationships and movements from a local to a global scale. Individuals' fame, as well as the fame of the networks with which they are associated, is mediated and developed by their media exposure in the magazines and books relating to the tattooing practice. The process is always a collaborative one, yet the choice of who will appear as a feature and how they will be represented remains firmly in the hands of the global tattoo community elite. The 'Tahiti Tattoos' book (1998) was a good example on how a global tattoo community takes form through the cross-cultural collaboration between the elite of the tattoo renewal in French Polynesia, an international fashion photographer, an eminent literary author, and a substantial publishing house. While the result may raise a number of issues regarding the colonial gaze and the process of reactive objectification (Thomas 1997), it nonetheless presented Polynesian tattooing to a global audience. Even Tournier's, although erroneous, differentiation between Western and Polynesian tattooing sets the local practice within a wider framework of use of tattoos across diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, Graffe's interview in '*Tatu Art*' addresses directly some of the perceived issues with the appropriation and authenticity of Polynesian designs by European and North American tattoo artists. There is a form of dialogue which takes place through the tattoo media and series of publications. This would seem to imply that the global tattoo community is also created and maintained through the tensions between different parts of the networks.

These tensions, which mainly revolve around ideas of appropriation and claims to authenticity, are inevitable due to the global nature of the tattoo community and of the cross-cultural aspect of most of the exchange relationships. As I have discussed in chapter eight, appropriation in itself is related to the process of objectification, and objectification to the way human beings make sense of the material world they experience. Accusations of appropriation are therefore almost always political and strategic. In the case of Robbie Williams and Te Rangitu Netana (see chapter eight), the tensions were both internal and external to the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand's cultural politics. Williams was accused of appropriating parts of Maori culture but it was the fact that Te Rangitu Netana had done the work which played at the local level. Although, as I have shown (see chapter eight), the choice of famous and non-Maori tattooees seems to have some effect on the degree to which appropriation is perceived by some. A more credible artist with cultural capital as a political activist against racism, the American musician Ben Harper in this case, did not elicit the same level of criticism. It seems also that some perceived the exchange relationship between Te Rangitu Netana and Williams mainly as a financially driven one which would offer opportunities for media exposure on the part of Te Rangitu Netana. In French Polynesia, one of Chime's motivations to come and work in Europe, which he cited in interviews published in the international tattoo magazines, was his perceived appropriation of Polynesian designs by European tattoo artists. Yet, he tattooed these same designs in non-Polynesian individuals and taught European tattoo artists how to understand the indexicality and to tattoo Polynesian designs. Furthermore, many tourists pass through French Polynesia, those which I referred to as tattoo opportunists (see chapter seven), and acquire a tattoo of a Polynesian design without gaining any knowledge regarding their meaning within the local contemporary cultural context. As my informants noted (see chapter eight), sometimes the tattoo appropriate its wearer and the tattooee becomes engaged within the local cultural landscape, while others do not. This choice is often expressed, as in earlier cases, mainly through different types of exchange relationships. The tattoo opportunists are perceived as involved in a commodity exchange one, while the tattoo enthusiasts are engaged in either a reciprocal gift one or an exchange by private treaty. However, the choice of who appropriates, and how it is perceived, are present in the local context as well as played upon the global stage of the tattoo community.

In the case of French Polynesia, the situation regarding appropriation is complex. As I have discussed in chapter six, the traditional practice of tattooing stopped for more than a hundred years because of the process of Christian conversion and of colonisation. Since its re-introduction as an integral part of the local cultural renewal (see chapter three), the tattooing practice, in French Polynesia, has gone through changes that affected the aesthetics of the designs used, the personal motivations for their acquisitions, and the cultural indexicality attached to the designs. In the pre-contact period, tattoos were a technology of the body to manage the energy called *mana* during social interactions. The tattoos wrapped the individuals. This meant that they were protected from other people's *mana* and that other people and things were not threatened by their own. In the contemporary context, tattoos have become important identity markers which played a potent role in the renewal and revaluation of Polynesian cultural markers and perceived history during the 1970's/80's (see chapters three and five). The local tattooing practice has also become, in the twentieth century, a way for local artists to earn a living through their creativity and skills and to have the opportunity to work abroad. It is somewhat interesting that one of the changes regarding *mana*, between the pre-contact and contemporary eras, is that tattoos now act as a way to project the *mana* of the tattoo artists rather than isolate from its dispersion (see chapter three). *Mana* has become something you have or have not, and to have it influences how successful you are at what you may do. This highlights how traditional concepts have changed in their local understanding and how they affect how tattoos are used by tattoo artists and tattooees in French Polynesia.

Due to the disconnection the past practice, the tattoo renewal had to re-interpret its own history through the data collected by early explorers and ships' artists who observed the population of these islands when the traditional tattooing practice was still in use. This means that, for example, the style of tattoos which is referred to as 'Tahitian' is mainly inspired and adapted from the tattoo design style specific to the Marquesas Islands in the pre-contact period. Furthermore, Western Samoa is the only place in the South Pacific where the tattooing practice was able to carry on through the colonial period uninterrupted. Some tattoo artists from French Polynesia, including those who were trained in the use of the traditional tattooing tools by Sulu'ape Paulo (see chapter four), have included some distinctive Samoan designs within the tattoos they produced. This has also been perceived by some, in Samoa, as a form of appropriation. Analytically, it can be argued that Polynesian tattoo artists have appropriated their own past by re-introducing the tattooing practice and re-interpreted it with

relevant indexicalities to the contemporary cultural context. However, there is a paradox to the extent that there is a perceived need for a form of authenticity which is directly relating to a link to the past practice of tattooing in the pre-contact era. This is exemplified by Graffe's piece in 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998) (see chapter five), in which he first acknowledges the break in the continuity of the local tattooing practice, but later in the same piece, he states that the practice and knowledge had some continuity. Graffe's training in archaeology at a French university, also points to the entangled relationship between the Polynesian cultural renewal, which took place in the 1970's/80's, and colonial institutions. My main point here is that, partly, a form of authenticity is gained through the process of reactive objectification. The image which is presented to the global audience is, to an extent, a reification of the colonial and exoticised gaze; as the 'Tahiti Tattoos' book (1998) aptly illustrates. This authenticity marker for Polynesian tattoo artists can be important in the global competitive market of tattooing. However, it is mostly the Polynesian tattoo artists who develop their own personal styles, while remaining inspired by traditional Marquesan tattoo designs, who gain the most in status within the hierarchy of the global tattoo community.

This seems to show the complexities of ideas regarding the act of appropriation and the construction of authenticity in both the local to the global contexts, and in the cultural politics of contemporary French Polynesia. Graffe in '*Tatu Art*' (2000) (see chapter five), and other of my informants (see chapter eight), seems to express the view that what really matters to them is not appropriation per se but rather the alienation of the traditional designs, from its perceived original cultural context, which they consider problematic. They do not see any major issue in a non-Polynesian individual gaining some inspiration from a traditional Polynesian tattoo design. They, however, object to the direct copy of either a traditional design or ones which have already been tattooed by a Polynesian tattoo artist. In '*Tatu Art*' (2000), Graffe instruct how to safely appropriate a Polynesian design as he argues that a direct copy, and therefore the alienation, of a traditional design could affect the health of the person doing the alienating. This, I would suggest, indicates that there is a genuine awareness, amongst some of the local cultural agents, of the re-interpretation of the past and the invention of tradition which is taking place in the local context. Yet, as all traditions are invented, this does not deny the contemporary local tattooing practice its crucial role and location within the cultural renewal movement and re-valorisation of Polynesian identity markers. In fact, such re-introductions have also been at play within European and North

American contexts. However, the networks involved in these, like the 'modern primitives' and neo-tribal ones for example, have been less concerned with idea of authenticity than the tattoo renewal network in French Polynesia. They have been the ones who have been appropriating designs and practices and re-interpreting them within a Western context. At times, these re-interpretations have been entangled in primitivist ideas rooted in the colonial gaze. Although, as I already noted, some Polynesian tattoo artists also played on similar reifications of Polynesia to assert their authenticity on the global stage. My point is that, in both contexts, the process of appropriation exhibits some similarities. In both contexts, cultural agents make sense of practices which are no longer in use in their contemporary context, and re-introduce them with indexicalities which are relevant to the individuals who chose to participate in these reformed practices, and to the contemporary socio-cultural context in which these take place. Furthermore, both Polynesian tattoo renewal and Euro-American neo-tribal network have been involved in series of exchange relationships through their early stages, in the 1970's/80's, and have influenced each other in their respective endeavours. For example, individuals involved in the neo-tribal network, in Europe and North America, have been very receptive to the tattooing style of contemporary Polynesian tattoo artists. These have been the tattooees most likely to become tattoo enthusiasts and who would want to associate their tattoos with an experience of the local context from which it is a cultural product and therefore to come and visit tattoo artists in French Polynesia. Many amongst them seem attracted to such network as the French Polynesian one because of their personal search for some form of authenticity for their tattoos. This authenticity is set within the primitivist ideas found in the West and which are references to a sense of lost self in these societies due, in part, to individualism and the construction of fragmented identities. As Tournier in 'Tahiti Tattoos' (1998), they are taken by the claims to authenticity that is advanced by Polynesian cultural agents. Yet, this constructed authenticity takes form out of a dialogical process involving the reactive objectification and reification of local Polynesian culture and identity. The result is an image which is understood across cultures and is compatible with the primitivist motivations, of some European and North American tattoo enthusiasts, to engage with the contemporary Polynesian tattooing practice. At the same time, this is not the case for all of the tattoo enthusiasts who go to French Polynesia. Some are aware of the local political issues and social problems which are a reality of this location. My main point here is that the exchange relationships which are fostered in these encounters and

dialogical reifications, are nonetheless formative of a shared experience between the participants which help to create and maintain the global tattoo community.

Tattoos are objects that tell many stories. There are four main narratives about every tattoo. The first one is the story associated to the biography of their wearers. It is an indexicality which is associated to personal desires, commemorations and confirmations of a commitment and loyalty. These indexicalities are not static and a tattoo will accumulate meaning as the biography of their wearers evolves (see chapter seven). The second narrative is about the encounter with the tattoo artists and the context in which the tattoo was acquired. This story can include both people and places; as in the case of the tattoo enthusiasts and opportunists (see chapter seven). The discourse associated with these stories also establishes the type of exchange relationships the tattooee is engaged in with the tattoo artist. It is often then that the claims of authenticities and issues of appropriations are apparent. The third narrative regarding a tattoo tells the story of the agency of the tattoo artist that produced it. It is when the tattoo is presented, for example, as a photo in a tattoo book available to prospective tattooees. In this case, the wearer can be almost absent from the narrative and the tattoo as an object confirms the skills of the artists and entices others to be tattooed by him/her. The fourth, and final, narrative is related to the place of the tattoo design as an index of the historical context from which it was created. A contemporary Polynesian tattoo encompasses the marks of a past practice and of a colonial process. It is the story of a re-introduction of tattooing through the re-interpretation of a past drenched in the colonial gaze. It is also about how it gained a sort of global popularity as tattoo designs and of the appropriation of its aesthetics and reified cultural identity markers within the same society which suppressed both the tattooing practice and Polynesian identity. This fourth type of narrative differs greatly depending on individuals' awareness of the local socio-cultural context and accurate historical narrative. It is often here that the authenticity of a tattoo is affirmed. However, sometimes individuals use the reified image of a particular group rather than the reality of the local cultural context. Yet, the point regarding authenticity is that it is produced at the moment of acquisition (Phillips and Steiner 1999) of the object. Individuals create an authenticity when they are being tattooed, which like all authenticities and traditions, is constructed. Yet, this does not challenge the validity of their claims. It does not devalue the amount of emotional meaning invested in these moments and interactions by most of my informants. Tattoos are painful, permanent and embodied. They change the

physical materiality of the skin. These aspects are what make tattoos different from any other objects. They have to be taken into account when analysing the practice, as they are crucial to understand how important their tattoos are to my informants.

All the narratives associated with tattoos seem to always involve both the construction of identities and the use of memories. They are used to map and mark stories constructed and assembled with perceptions of the past. This occurs on both the personal biographical dimension and on the level of the creation of group identities. A tattoo will have a personal significance but will also often represent its wearer's membership to a group or networks. It can be a group evolving around a particular tattoo shop, or a particular style; like the neo-tribal network. Moreover, it can denote a shared cultural identity as in the case of French Polynesia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Samoa for example. It can also be a group unrelated to the tattooing practice; such as, for example, a gang or a military regiment. Tattoos are perceived as potent identity markers. When looking at the global tattoo community, tattoos are necessary to assume any position within it. They are the main and most important of the identity marker of this series of networks. Although voluntary, they are a pre-requisite of membership, and the more tattoos, the easier the integration within the group is. Memory is one of the concepts which are used strategically to create and maintain both personal and collective identities. Tattoos are always memorial objects (see chapter seven). They are embodied memories onto which meaning and indexicalities are attached and presented as a narrative defining their wearers. Therefore, the tattoos as objects which encompass the distributed agency of their wearers, producers, and of the context attached to the indexicality chosen as a narrative are also entangled in the creation and maintenance of the global tattoo community.

I would like now to come back to the heuristic analytical comparison, between the Melanesian *kula* exchange ring and the global tattoo community, discussed in chapter four. The fame of individual tattoo artists, and of the networks with which they are associated, is key to their place and status within the internal hierarchy of the global tattoo community. Fame in the Melanesian context, is referred by Munn (1986) as *butu*. The *butu* of an individual, involved in the *kula* exchange ring system, is produced through series of movements and exchange relationships between dispersed and culturally diverse groups and key individuals. Without the act of exchange taking place, *butu* cannot exist. Therefore, it is a product of transactional processes (Munn 1986). Similarly, the fame of a tattoo artist cannot

prosper without him/her producing tattoos, which are inherently transactional processes. Furthermore, it is through other types of exchanges, as I have already described, that tattoo artists increase their fame and status. Through their travels, to international tattoo conventions and festivals and working as guests in tattoo shops abroad, they foster exchange relationships which further their integration in particular networks. Through these movements, and somewhat as *kula* exchange partners experience themselves, they construct their own place in a spatiotemporal order (Miller 1987). However, in the context of the tattoo milieu, fame is also dependent on recognition from the elite which control the tournaments of value and the tattoo media. The *butu* of an individual, as do the canoe prows which act as Gellian traps (see chapters one and four), is the reflection of their capacity to influence their exchange partners and to present the potentiality of future transactions (Munn 1986). The fame of a tattoo artist, with the tattoos s/he produced acting as Gellian traps, is also a reflection of their ability to entice people to be marked permanently by them and enter in an exchange relationship. By acquiring a tattoo by them, the tattooee will become associated with the artist and display an object which will, in part, represent and act as the distributed agency of their producers. This is why both parties become reciprocal agents of each other's value definition. Even in cases where the tattooee will never meet the artist who tattooed him/her, the tattoo will still remain an object which will, at the same time, further the fame of the artist and create some form of cultural capital for the tattooee.

I would argue that fame in the global tattoo community, the contemporary meaning of *mana* in French Polynesia, Gellian agency, and to an extent Melanesian *butu*, all seem to display some common traits as concepts. They all enable individuals to act upon others' decision making, to entice them into an exchange relationship which will inevitably create some form of reciprocity, and a dialogical process of creation and maintenance of personal and collective valuation. All imply an interaction with the Other, and in that sense, they take form only through transactional processes. In turn, and in all their respective contexts, these transactional processes give form to multi-dimensional and interrelated networks. These networks all have internal hierarchical structures, and fame, *mana*, agency and *butu* are, partly, what determine the status of an individual within these groups. These series of processes, as I have argued, take place in the context of the global tattoo community, as well as in other group identity formation in other cultural contexts. Usually, group identities are constructed around a sense of shared experience and perceived emotional attachments to

either a place or an idea for example. This is how nationalism and ethnicity can become potent socio-cultural concepts around which people congregate. In the case of the global tattoo community, and to an extent the *kula* ring, the participants create a community beyond their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and local contexts. Furthermore, the geographical dislocation which is also a key aspect of such groups, become one of the formative process of the sense of shared experience which they create and maintain through the series of movements and exchange relationships. It could be argued that another group, which presents itself as a global community, shares some of the features of the tattoo world. It is Academia. The dislocated nature of the global academic community leads individuals to engage in travelling to, and working in, other academic institutions different to the one they originally started from. Their status is created through the papers they publish and present at regular events called academic conferences. They engage in exchange relationships ranging from teaching to collaborative projects with other academics from different institutions, and via the dissemination of their work through publications. These published papers and books act as Gellian traps, as a form of distributed agency, to entice others to engage with them in exchange relationships; by being quoted in their own work for example. It is only through these transactional processes that their status and fame will be recognised within the internal structure of the global academic networks. This short playful comparative analysis is just to show that the way the global tattoo community takes form is not unusual. It is specific to its context, just as the Melanesian *kula* ring is to its own cultural context. Yet, the processes which enable people to feel that they are part of an ordered structured community can be observed universally.

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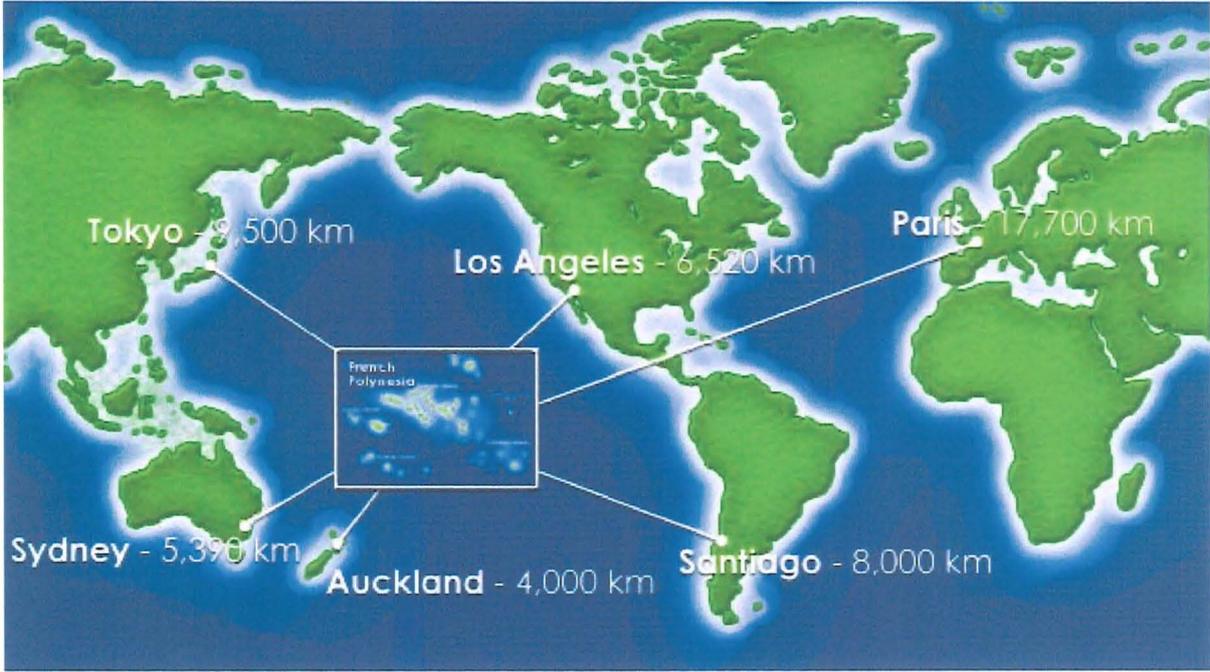
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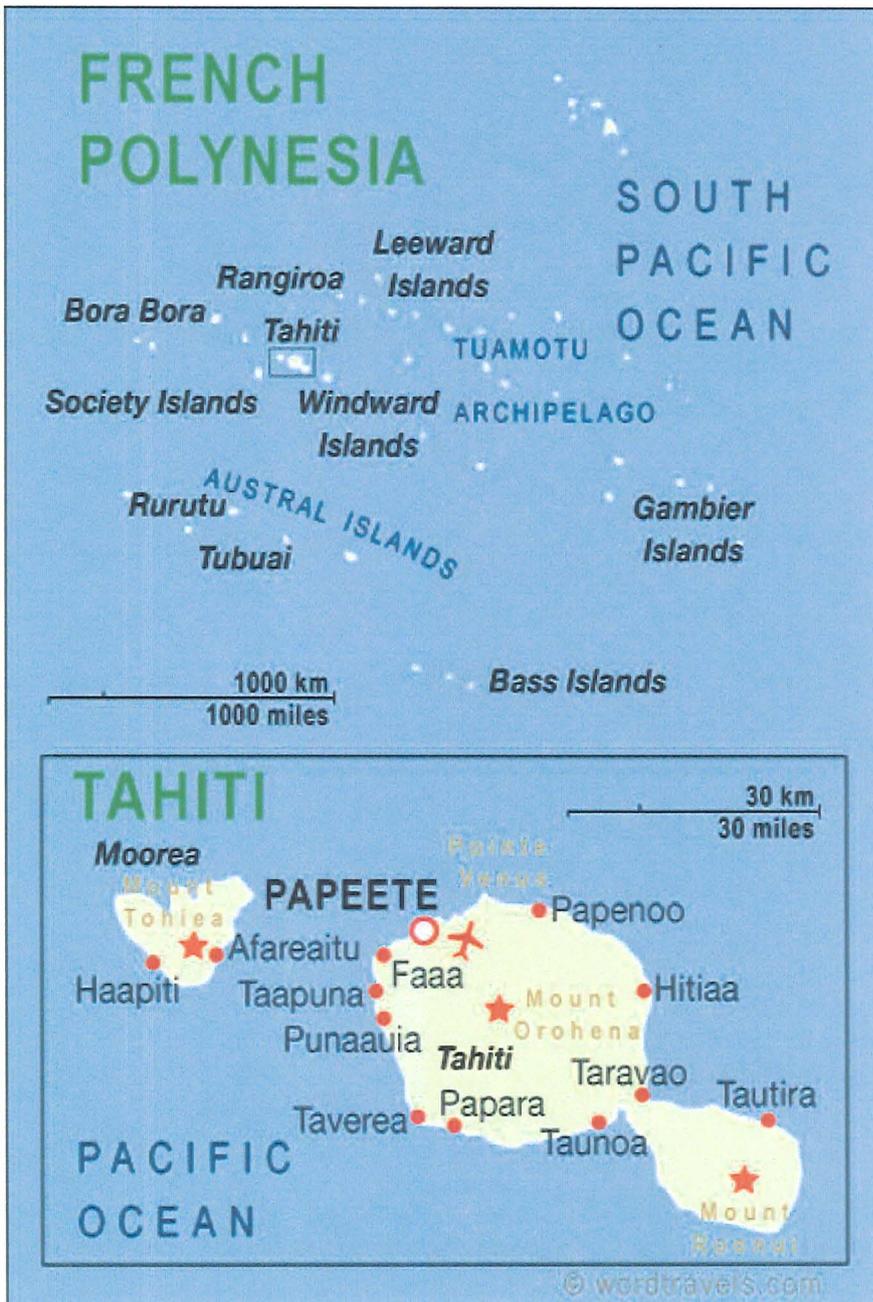
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Appendix A



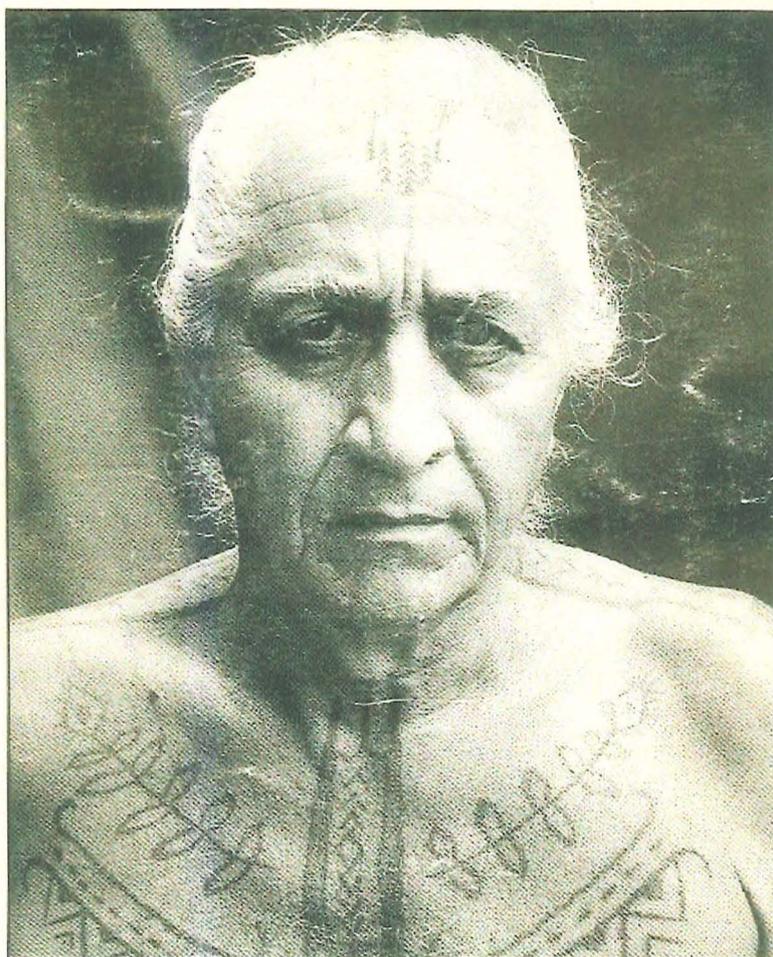
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# TATAU

## TATOUAGE POLYNÉSIE



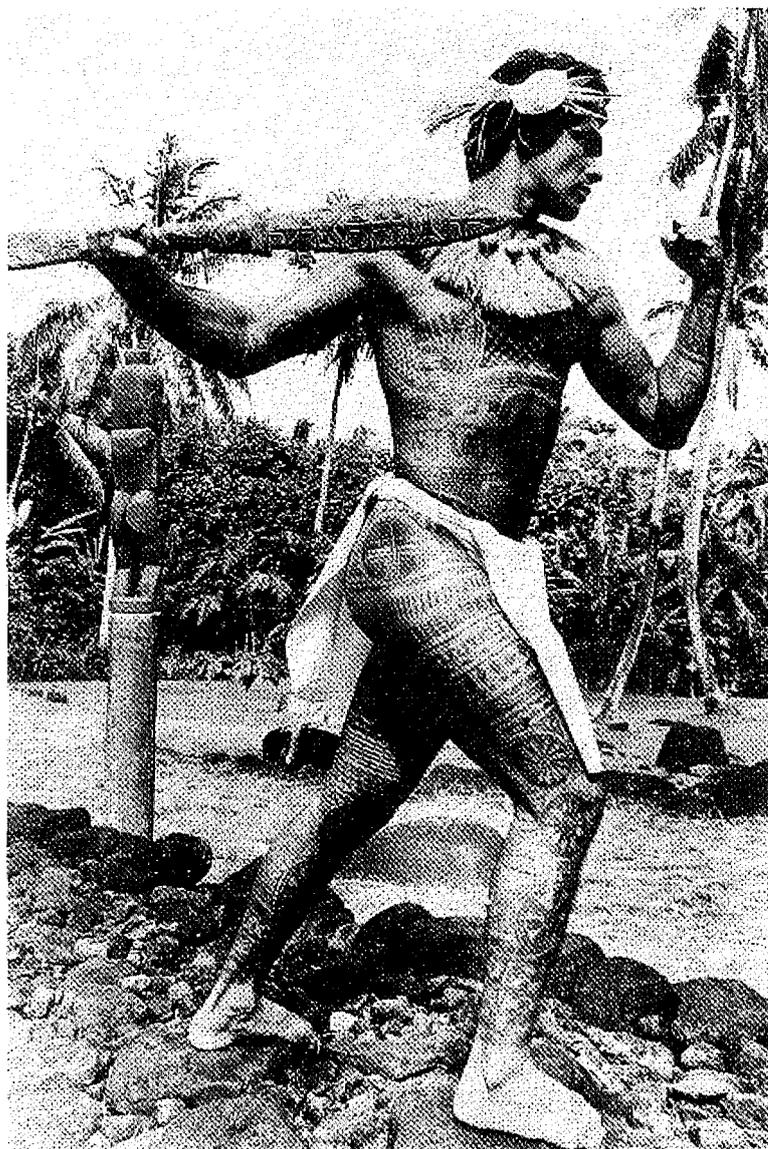
TUPUNA PRODUCTIONS

Appendix D: Roonui in Morvan (1992)



**Roonui.**

Appendix E: Teve in Morvan (1992)



**Teve**, *Danseur*.



Appendix F: Morvan (1992)



**Brigitte Beaux**, *Aide-libraire*.

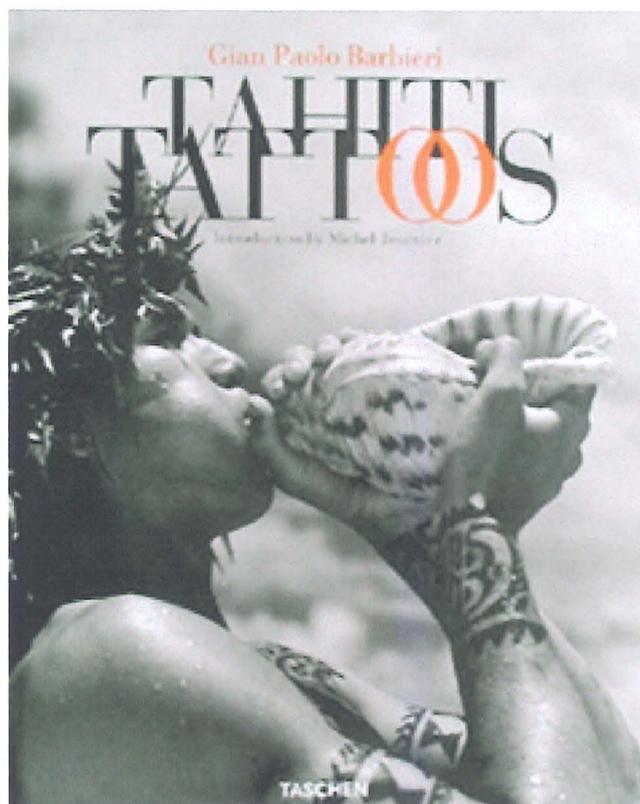




**Robert.**



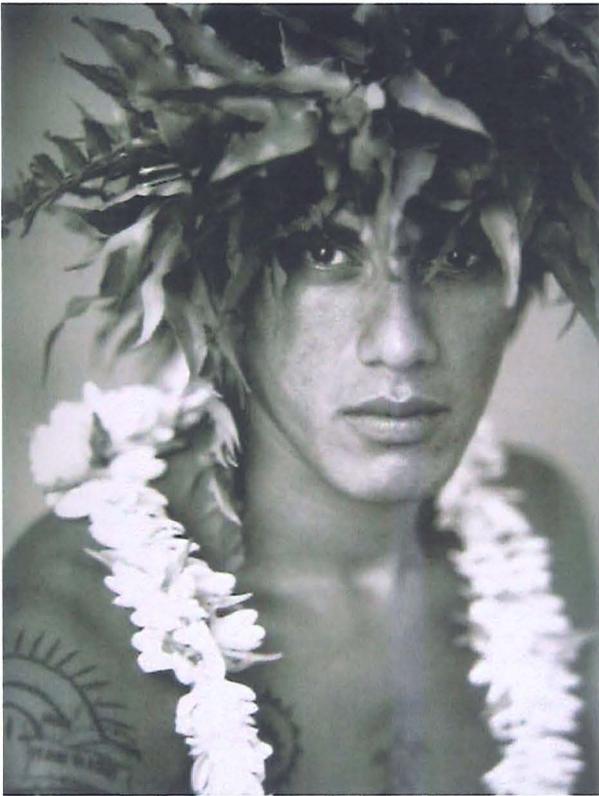
Appendix H: Front Cover of Barbieri (1998)



Appendix I: Barbieri (1998)



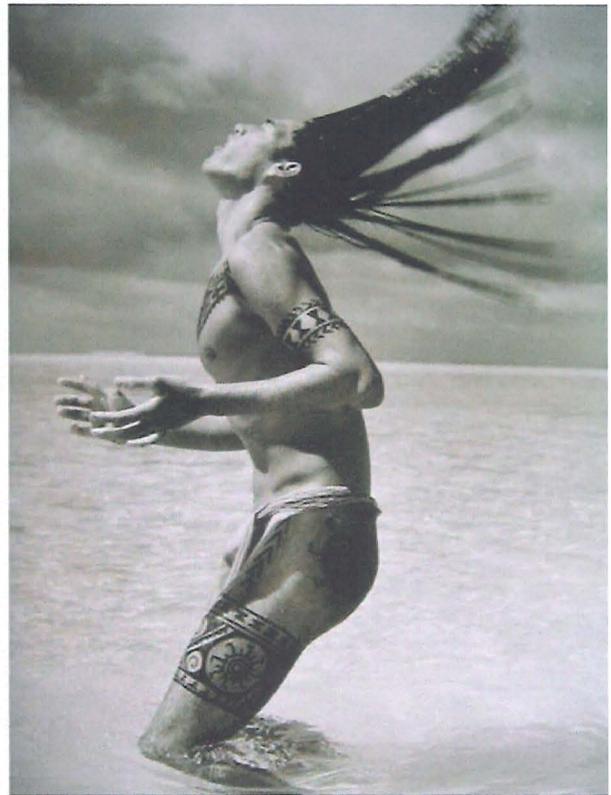
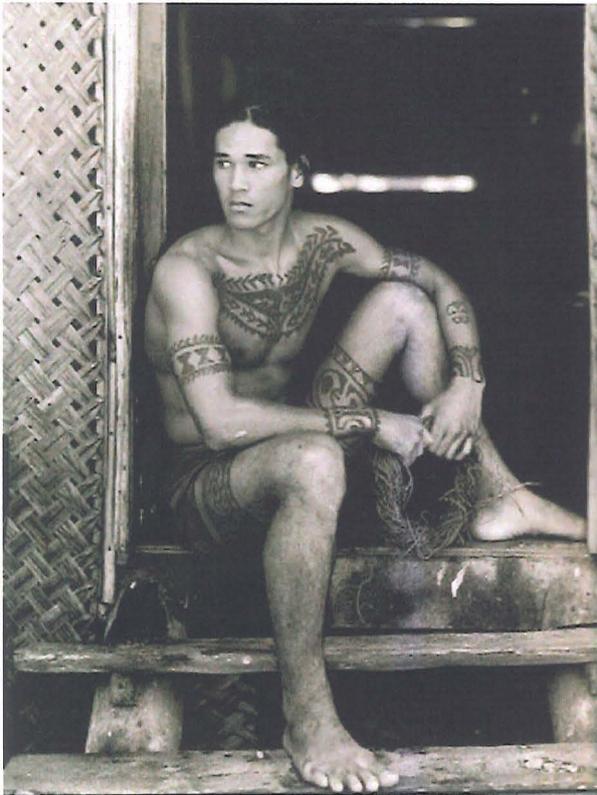
Appendix J: Barbieri (1998)



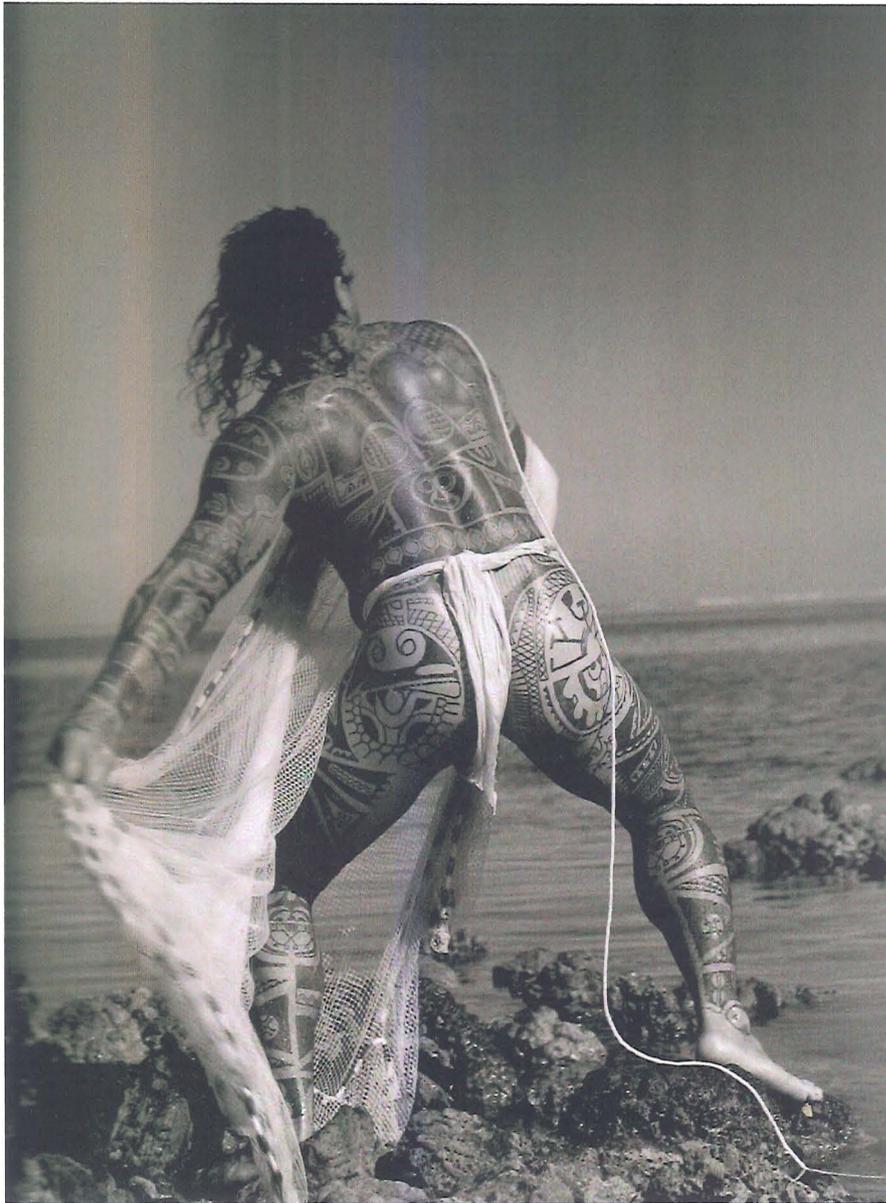
Appendix K: Barbieri (1998)

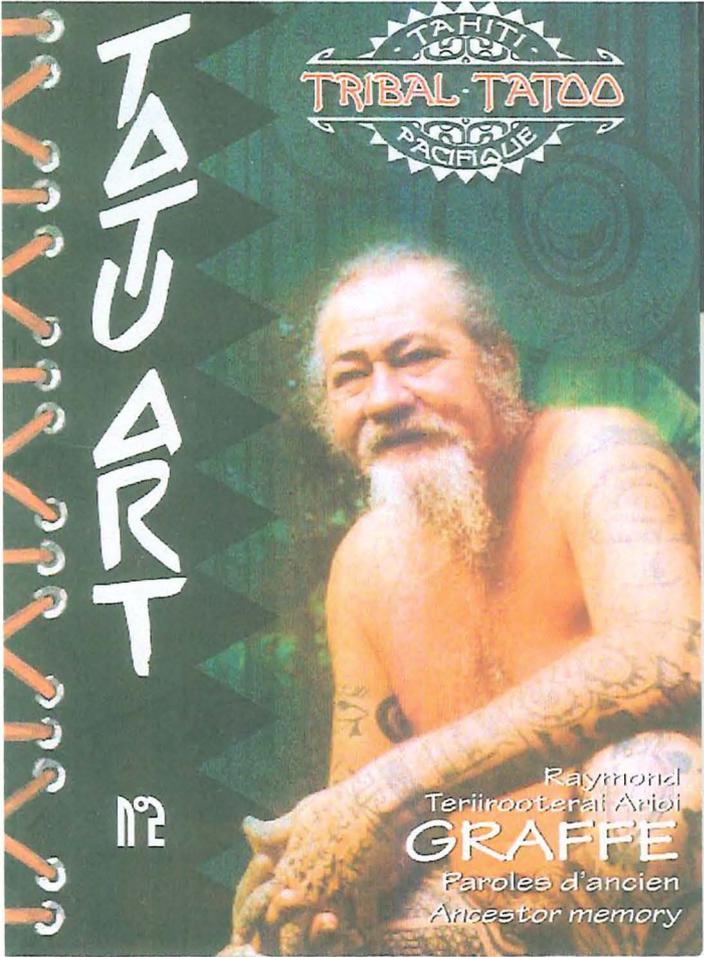


Appendix L: Barbieri (1998)

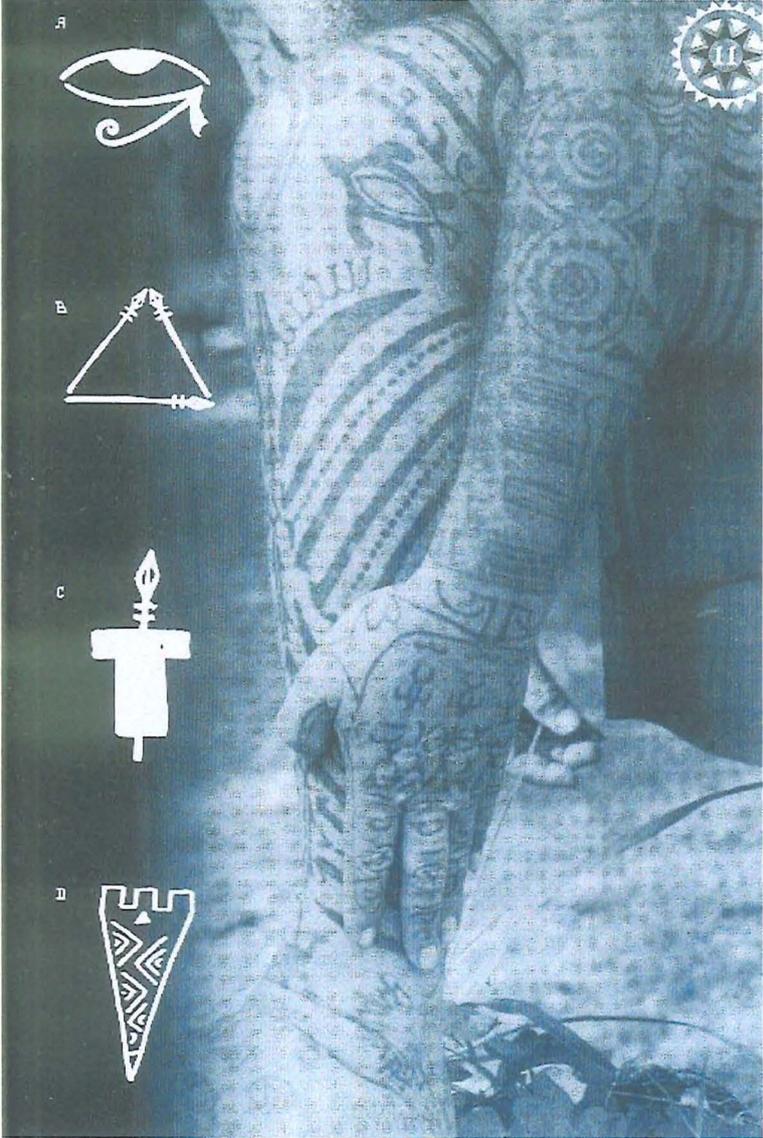


Appendix M: Roonui in Barbieri (1998)



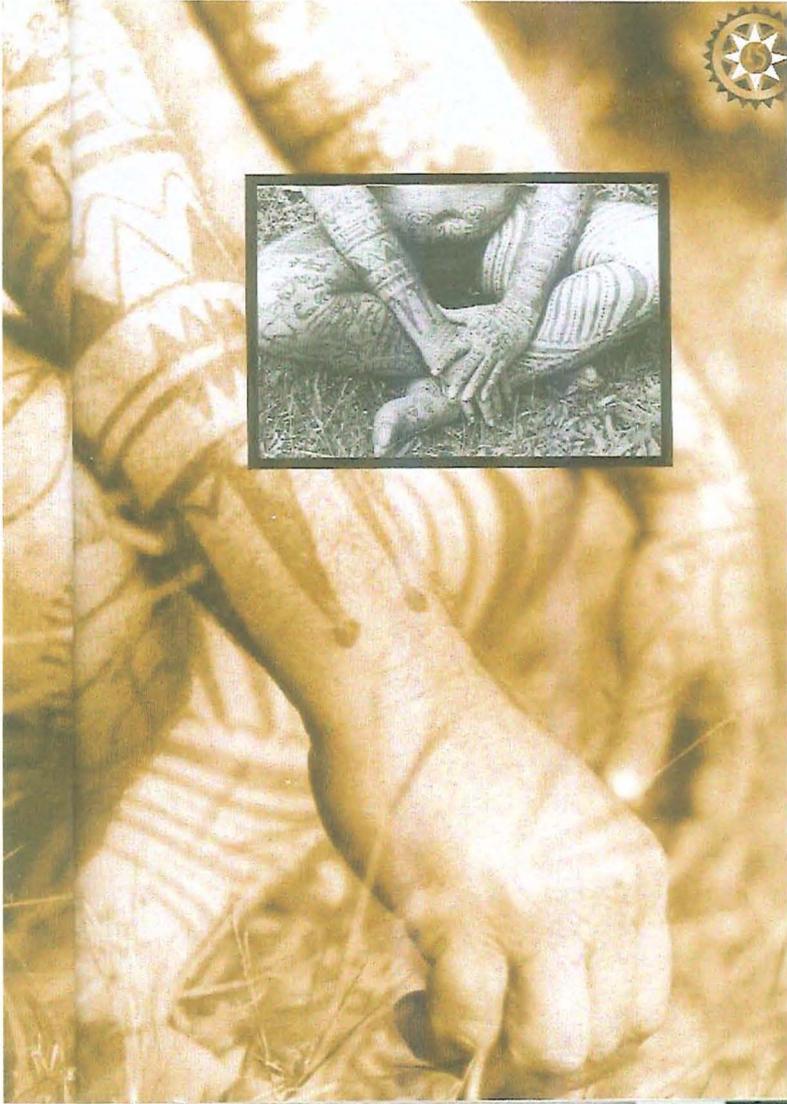


<p>interview </p>	<p>Paroles d'ancien </p>
	<p>Biker le matin, chevauchant sa Harley, barbe au vent, large sourire. Archéologue à midi, dirigeant des fouilles dans les vallées ou épluchant des dossiers au musée de Tahiti et des Iles. Grand prêtre le soir, invoyant les esprits bienveillants à l'accompagner lors d'une marche sur le feu...</p> <p><b>Raymond Teriirooterai Arioi Graffe</b> est une figure emblématique de Tahiti.</p> <p>L'Ancien nous accorde cette interview et, par le biais de TahArt, accueille sa passion : Transmettre son savoir.</p> <p>Propos recueillis par GOTZ</p>
	<p>Raymond Teriirooterai Arioi <b>Graffe</b> </p>

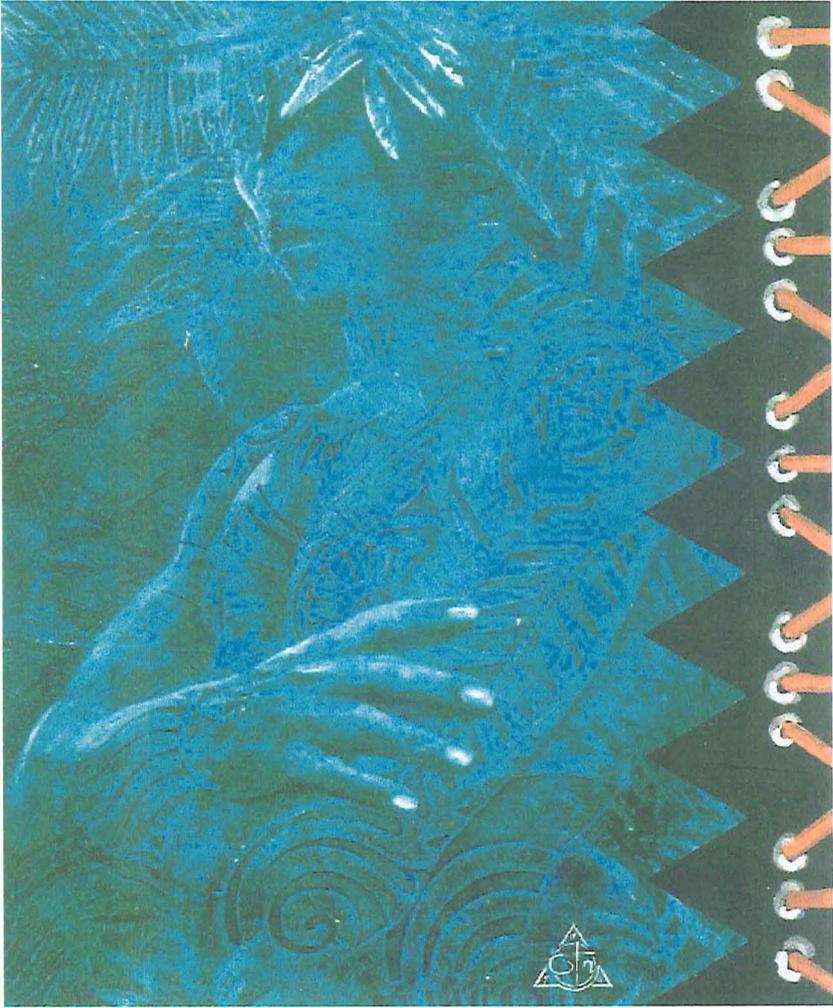




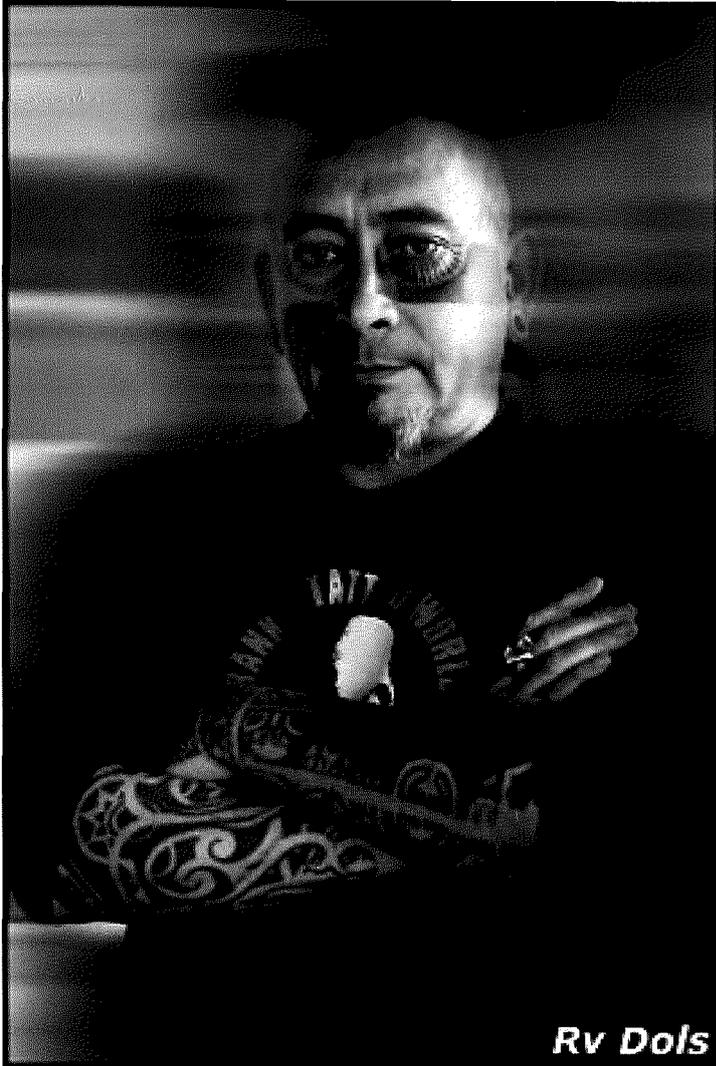
Appendix R: in Gotz (2000)



Appendix S: painting by Gotz in Gotz (2000)



Appendix T: Chime



<http://www.oelpaca.fr/chime.html>