

On Skin and Bone: Samoan Coconut Oil in Indigenous Practice

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ABSTRACT

International promotional material on coconut oil commonly references its centuries of use as a beauty and health aid by Pacific Islanders. However, this *gesture* towards Indigenous Pacific use of coconut oil is rarely accompanied by substantive information. This paper explores the topical application of coconut oil in three Indigenous Samoan practices: *fofō*, or massage by *taulāsea* and other forms of customary healers or medical attendants; *samaga*, the anointing with coconut oil of the newly inked *pe'a* or *malu* to mark the completion of these customary tattoos; and *liutofaga*, the ritual ‘washing’ of the bones of a deceased relative with coconut oil prior to reinterment. This paper argues that there are interrelated practical, medicinal, and spiritual dimensions to Samoan uses of coconut oil, and that these are usefully understood through reference to Samoan conceptions of sociospatial relationship, or *vā*.

Key words: Samoa, coconut oil, indigenous, Pacific Islands, *vā*, healing, tattoo, death, ritual

Coconut oil crowds the shelves of health food stores and, increasingly, mainstream retailers in developed countries. Touted as a ‘miracle’, its topical and ingestible applications are credited with a wide range of benefits for health and well-being – some scientifically substantiated, others not.¹ Common across international promotional material on coconut oil are references to its centuries of use as a beauty and health

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¹ See, for instance, Bruce Fife, *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (New York: Avery, 1999); Bruce Fife, *Coconut Cures: Preventing and Treating Common Health Problems with Coconut* (Colorado Springs, CO: Piccadilly Books, 2005).

aid in ‘native’ societies, particularly by Polynesians and other Pacific Islanders. However, this *gesture* towards Indigenous Pacific practices of coconut oil use is rarely accompanied by substantive information. Indeed, as with other globally traded ‘ancient’ commodities associated with healthy living,² extolling virgin coconut oil’s indigenous pedigree in generalized, decontextualized ways is a powerful marketing strategy. Western consumers sceptical of commercial pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and agri-industrial food industries are given just enough insinuation of ancient Indigenous practice to suggest coconut oil as an alternative to these industries, without getting bogged down in details.

Coconut products do have a venerable history of use and significance in the Pacific. In Samoa, the coconut tree is oft-referred to as *la’au o le ola*, the ‘tree of life’, because it can be used in various ways for survival: fire and sennit for binding can be made from its husks, shelter from its wood and fronds, water from its young kernel, and food for both humans and animals comes from the nut’s white flesh. Mature coconut meat also yields oil that is used, either as is or mixed with other botanical elements, to heal sores, massage bodies, beautify skin and hair, and protect from the sun and biting insects.³ Samoans continue to use coconut oil today, both in the islands and in the various diasporic sites where Samoans have settled.

Despite its ubiquitous presence, however, there is scant academic work to date that places coconut oil’s ritual and practical significance in the Pacific at the centre of analysis; it is often given only passing mention in ethnographic descriptions of dance, ceremony, and daily life, or in some cases not remarked upon at all. While global popular literature on coconut oil generally disregards the finer nuances of contextualizing Indigenous practice, scholars in the Pacific can ask: if we take the time to explore Pacific uses of coconut oil, embedded in Indigenous matrices of land, environment, social relations, and spirituality, what will we find?

This essay begins to explore this question with regard to the topical application of coconut oil in three Indigenous Samoan practices, both as they take place in the Samoan islands and how they are participated in and experienced by diasporic Samoans living in New Zealand. Considered, in turn, are the use of coconut oil in *fofō*, or massage by *taulāsea* and other forms of customary healers; *samaga*, the anointing with coconut oil of the newly inked *pe’a* or *malu* to mark the completion of these customary tattoos; and *liutofaga*, the ritual ‘washing’ of the bones of a deceased relative with coconut oil prior to reinterment. We draw on published literature, the authors’

² Jessica Loyer, ‘The Social Lives of Superfoods’, PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2016.

³ F. Grattan, *An Introduction to Samoan Custom* (Apia: Samoa Printing & Publishing Company, 1948). <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-GraIntr.html> (accessed December 15, 2016); Augustin Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: An Outline of a Monograph with Particular Consideration of German Samoa*, 2 vols (Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1994 [1901]); Cluny Macpherson and La’ava Macpherson, *Samoan Medical Belief and Practice* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990); Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck), *Samoan Material Culture* (Honolulu: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Bulletin 75, 1930); George Turner, *Samoa: A Hundred Years Ago and Long Before* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1984 [1884]).

personal experience, and approximately 100 h of *talanoa* (conversation) conducted by co-author Alefosio with 25 members of her extended family, church congregation, and personal networks. A central argument is that there are interrelated practical, medicinal, and spiritual dimensions to Samoan uses of coconut oil, and that these are usefully understood through reference to Samoan conceptions of sociospatial relationship, or *vā*. We begin by specifying what we mean when we reference ‘Samoan coconut oil’, before turning to a discussion of fundamental concepts of *vā* and their illustration in the spreading of coconut oil on Samoan skin and bone in *fofō*, *samaga*, and *liutofaga*.

LOLO, *U’U*, AND *FAGU U’U*: SAMOAN COCONUT OIL

Unless otherwise noted, references to Samoan coconut oil in this paper are to the distinctive type of oil that is produced for personal family use or as a small-scale cottage industry in the Samoan islands. This oil, called *lolo* (scented oil) or *u’u* (a general term for oil), is usually infused with herbal or floral elements that render it from pale to deep yellow in colour. It can be found for sale in recycled glass or plastic bottles (*fagu u’u*, typically shortened in speech to *fagu’u*) in Samoan produce and handicraft markets or village road-side stalls (see Figure 1). While this oil is a commodity in its own right, and circulates internationally courtesy of mobile Samoan populations and



FIGURE 1: *Fagu u’u* in the Savalalo Market, Apia, Samoa, 2016. Image: April K. Henderson.

tourists alike, *lolo* is distinct from other commoditised forms of coconut oil from Samoa such as the commercial oil produced since the 19th century as part of the copra industry (see Droessler, this issue), and the virgin coconut oil (VCO) more recently developed for export under much tighter regulation, such as that currently featuring in product lines for global retailer The Body Shop.⁴ With the rise of the VCO industry and the success of regional companies such as Pure Fiji in marketing VCO-based skin-care products, Samoan businesses are now also producing more slickly packaged commercial VCO products scented with chemical fragrances and retailed to locals, tourists, and diasporic Samoans alike. Temporally, the small-scale production of *lolo*, and Samoan meaning-making about it, both precede and persist alongside the production of, and meaning-making about, these other forms of commoditised Samoan coconut oil.

In Samoa, *lolo* is produced by several slightly divergent methods. In families, males typically work the land and are also usually tasked with the initial steps of gathering, husking, cracking, and grating coconuts. Grating is still often done using a *matātua'i* (grating stool). Some producers – usually women – then mix the grated flesh with botanical elements and leave it to dry on a slanted surface, such that oil from the drying meat runs off to be collected in a receptacle at the bottom. Others leave the grated flesh to dry on a mat in the sun for just a few hours, then collect it and squeeze out coconut cream using a *tauaga* (a bunch of tough and fibrous threads from the *lau fao*, a native hibiscus). Women may then mix the cream in a receptacle with the desired botanical elements and leave the mixture to sit for 24–48 h until the scent-infused oil separates and floats to the top.⁵ This oil is skimmed off and heated briefly over a stove or fire to cook off any remaining moisture, which, if left in the final product, would cause rapid deterioration. An alternative, faster method involves heating the mixture of cream and botanical elements right away over a stove or fire to speed separation. Those who adhere to the longer processes say this sped-up method produces an inferior ‘burnt’ product whose scent quickly dissipates.⁶ Regardless of the specific method by which it is produced, the resulting *lolo* is stored, and sold, in re-purposed glass or plastic bottles. Bottles without resealable lids, such as the Coca-Cola and Fanta bottles in Figure 1, can be stoppered with a piece of plastic and chunk of coconut husk.

Botanical elements added to *lolo* are primarily chosen for their fragrance. Today, the bright yellow-green flowers of *moso‘oi* (ylang ylang, *Cananga odorata*) are most commonly added because they are heavily scented and grow plentifully in

⁴ John Cretney and Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i, *Traditional, Trade and Technology: Virgin Coconut Oil in Samoa* (Wiego.org., 2015). http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/publications/files/Cretney_Samoa_2004.pdf (accessed December 5, 2015).

⁵ A relatively recent illustration of this method in Galumalemana Steven Percival (director), *O le Aganu'u a Sāmoa: Exploring Sāmoa's Fragrance Culture* (Apia, Samoa: Paradigm Documentaries and Tiapapata Arts Centre Inc., 2011), does not diverge significantly from what was described by Te Rangi Hiroa in 1930 in *Samoan Material Culture*, 620.

⁶ Percival, *O le Aganu'u a Sāmoa*.

Samoa. Historically, however, a wider range of flora featured in oil production. Sandalwood bark or leaves (*Santalum yasi*, called *asi* locally) has particularly deep historical cultural significance⁷ but is not commonly added now due to widespread depletion of the species in Samoa (as elsewhere in the Pacific) in the 19th century.⁸ Other additions include parts of the fragrant shrub or vine *lau maile* (*Allyxia stellata*) or indigenous and introduced species of gardenia.

While fragrance is important, smell is not the only sense catered for. Turmeric root (*Circuma longa*), called *ago*, or *lega* in a prepared powder form, was historically and still is used for ‘medicinal and other purposes’⁹ and coconut oil mixed with turmeric (*sama*) is often referenced in early ethnographic literature as prized for the beauty it imparted to oiled skin.¹⁰ In his analysis of European narratives of first contact with Samoans, Tcherkézoff remarks on the status Samoans accorded to ‘luminous’ skin.¹¹ While his discussion centres on ‘fairness’, meaning paleness, the frequent references to use of turmeric as ‘rouge’ in historic accounts suggests that the golden lustre it imparted enhanced this desired skin luminosity.¹²

The application of *lolo* certainly serves an aesthetic and sensual function then, pleasing the olfactory and visual senses, but such qualities are hardly superficial. There are deeper histories of meaning attached to both fragrance and colour in the Samoan pre-Christian belief system, where certain smells were attributed with powers – such as to attract or ward off evil spirits¹³ – and certain colours, such as the orangey-gold imparted by turmeric root, associated with divinity.¹⁴ The interrelated aesthetic,

⁷ See, for instance, references to sandalwood and the making of *lolo sã*, sacred scented oil, in Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi (hereafter abbreviated to Tamasese), ‘Bio-ethics and the Samoan Indigenous Reference’, in *Su’esu’e Manogi: In Search of Fragrance: Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi and the Samoan Indigenous Reference*, ed. Tamasa’ilau Suaalii-Sauni, I’uogafa Tuagalu, Tofilau Nina Kirifi-Alai, and Naomi Fuamatu (Apia: Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa, 2009), 173–88.

⁸ Douglas Oliver, *The Pacific Islands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951).

⁹ George B. Milner, *Samoan Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 8.

¹⁰ See, for instance, discussions of mortuary rituals and special occasions in George Turner, *Samoa: A Hundred Years Ago*, references in Krämer, *The Samoa Islands*, and NA Rowe, *Samoa Under the Sailing Gods* (New York: Putnam, 1930).

¹¹ Serge Tcherkézoff, ‘First Contacts’ in *Polynesia: The Samoan Case (1722–1848): Western Misunderstandings about Sexuality and Divinity* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, Inc.; Christchurch: Macmillan Brown Centre of Pacific Studies Pacific Studies, 2004).

¹² In another Polynesian context, the Marquesas, early European visitors observed that to prepare for festivals called *koina*, both women and men ‘washed off the juice of the papa vine that they used to lighten their skin, and anointed their bodies with coconut oil. Occasionally this was mixed with the liquid expressed from turmeric, which heightened the fairness of their skin’. See Edwin Ferdon, *Early Observations of Marquesan Culture, 1595–1813* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1993), 68.

¹³ Percival, *O le Aganu’u a Sãmoa*; Sébastien Galliot, ‘Ritual Efficacy in the Making’, *Journal of Material Culture* 20:2 (2015): 101–25; 112.

¹⁴ Tcherkézoff, ‘First Contacts’.

spiritual, and medicinal qualities attributed to *lolo* mixtures are discussed further in this essay in sections on the work of *taulāsea*, *tufuga tātatau* (master tattooists), and the process of *liutofaga*. For those Samoans who are still influenced, however partially or contradictorily, by an older Indigenous belief system, the oil also serves as a conduit between the seen, and smelled, observable world and the broader para-sensory social and spiritual order. To better understand this social–spiritual order, it is necessary to elaborate the concept of *vā*.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND: *VĀ*

The pre-Christian Samoan Indigenous belief system persists in the modern period, even if only as a ‘culture of whispers’ layered under a firmly indigenized Christianity.¹⁵ According to Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese, this ‘Indigenous reference’ or ‘Indigenous religion’ is premised on a desire for ‘balance, peace, and harmony’ in relationships between ‘man and the cosmos, man and the environment, man and man, and man and himself’.¹⁶ These qualities are attained and maintained through practices of *tapu* – temporary or permanent taboos guiding people’s relationships with the cosmos, environment or each other; *feagaiga* – ‘sacred covenants’ or statuses of relationship and obligation between certain categories of people; and *tuā’oi*, or recognized boundaries that should not be transgressed.¹⁷

The fundamental framework that knits together these various concepts of relationship is *vā*. Albert Wendt explains *vā* as a concept of sociospatial relationship:

Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the unity-that-is-all, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships and the context change. A well-known Samoan expression is ‘Ia teu le va’. Cherish/nurse/care for the va, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism; who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of va, relationships.¹⁸

Drawing on the work of Wendt, Tamasese, and Sister Vitolia Mo‘a, Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni underscores that the relationships encapsulated by the concept of *vā*

¹⁵ Tamasese, ‘Whispers and Vanities’, in *Whispers and Vanities: Samoan Indigenous Knowledge and Religion*, ed. Tamasailau M. Suaalii-Sauni, Maualaivao Albert Wendt, Vitolia Mo‘a, Naomi Fuamatu, Upolu Luma Va ‘ai, Reina Whaitiri, and Stephen L. Filipo (Wellington: Huia Press, 2014), 12.

¹⁶ Tamasese, ‘In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoan Indigenous Religion’, in *Su‘esu‘e Manogi*, 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁸ Albert Wendt, ‘Tatauing the Post Colonial Body’, in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics and Identity in the New Pacific*, ed. Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 402.

extend beyond the human realm, encompassing also relationality ‘between peoples and their God/gods, their lands, other living creatures, the cosmos’.¹⁹ The *vā*, she concludes, is an omnipresent sacred, relational and social space encompassing both the observable and non-observable world, and requires constant care and nurturing.²⁰

The terms *vā tapuia*, *vā fealoa’i*, and *vā feagai* provide additional specificity in how *vā* is conceptualized, and tended, for various types of relationships.²¹ Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese explains that in the Samoan Indigenous reference, *vā tapuia*

literally refers to the sacred (*tapu ia*) relationships (*vā*) between man and all things, animate and inanimate. It implies that in our relations with all things, living and dead, there exists a sacred essence, a life force beyond human reckoning.²²

This sense of sacred relationship is premised on Samoan cosmologies about the origin of the world, wherein genealogical relationships can be traced between human and non-human subjects.²³ In heavily Christian present-day Samoa, *vā tapuia* can now also denote the relational space between people and the sacred realm associated with the Christian god, and the spaces and people associated with him on Earth.

The concept of *vā fealoa’i* – a contraction of *vā fealoaloa’i* – refers to respectful ‘face-to-face’ relationships between people and attendant expectations regarding how these are best maintained in ways that honour people’s roles and statuses. *Vā fealoa’i* is constantly tended through innumerable large and small actions throughout Samoan daily life: through the ritual exchange of specific kinds of goods at an event such as a funeral or wedding; in the use of respectful language acknowledging others’ status and connections to genealogies and place; and in the physical stooping and use of the pardon-begging utterance ‘*tulou*’ when passing in front of a seated adult. While some young Samoans in New Zealand initially find the term *vā fealoa’i* unfamiliar – suggesting that the richer Samoan vocabulary associated with the Samoan Indigenous reference is not always being passed on in diaspora along with the more prosaic linguistic register – most will immediately recognize how the concept manifests in their daily life as soon as it is explained.

Finally, *vā feagai* refers most specifically to relational space between those bound by *feagaiga*, or special covenant relationships governed by protocols of care, responsibility, as well as specific instances of ritual avoidance. As Latu Latai explains, *feagai* literally means ‘to be opposite to another’, but ‘on a deeper level refers to a state of aptness and appropriateness [...] Applied to social relations, the term *feagaiga* is a

¹⁹ Tamasese Suaalii-Sauni, ‘Samoan Migration: diaspora, malaga & the “va”’. Guest lecture delivered to PASI 303 Migration, Diaspora and Identity in the Pacific, Victoria University of Wellington, 28 July 2015.

²⁰ Tamasese Suaalii-Sauni, ‘The va and Kaupapa Māori’, in *Critical Conversations in Kaupapa Māori*, ed. T. K. Hoskins and A. Jones (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2017), 161–78.

²¹ Discussion of *vā* in this section is also informed by Suaalii-Sauni (2015).

²² Tamasese, ‘Bio-ethics’, 175.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

“covenant” directed at maintaining a state of harmony within kin and Samoan society as a whole’.²⁴ Historically, the concept of *feagaiga* applied particularly to special relationships between brothers and sisters, or between high chiefs and orators, but since the advent of Christianity the concept has been extended to include the relationship between pastors and their congregations.²⁵ It has also been invoked by other professions, such as nursing.²⁶

Samoan Indigenous concepts of *vā* developed over millenia as Samoans interacted with their land, sea, and heavens, with each other, and with island neighbours. Concepts of *vā* rested on a belief that the observable world was a manifestation of an overarching cosmic order. Through their actions vis-à-vis their gods, environment, fellow humans and other living creatures, human beings were able to enhance or disrupt the balance of this cosmic order. While the cosmological underpinnings of this belief system are less openly discussed now, outside of academic forums, there are innumerable ways in which these balance-enhancing rituals persist in the practices of Samoan daily life. As we explore in the remainder of this paper, the ways that coconut oil is applied to skin and bone within the Samoan Indigenous practices of *fofō*, *samaga*, and *lutofaga* are illustrative of this.

THE USE OF COCONUT OIL IN *FOFŌ* BY *TAULĀSEA*

In Samoa, there are both doctors and nurses trained in Western medicine who practise within the public and private health system, and customary healers who treat conditions through massage and herbal medicine. The latter are known by a variety of terms, frequently used in overlapping ways.²⁷ In co-author Alefosio’s experience, and amongst both the New Zealand- and Samoa-based participants she conducted *talanoa* with, the terms *taulāsea* and *fofō* predominate. While sometimes used

²⁴ Latu Latai, ‘Changing Covenants in Samoa? From Brothers and Sisters to Husbands and Wives?’, *Oceania* 85:1 (2015): 93–4.

²⁵ Michiko Ete-Lima, ‘A Theology of the *Feagaiga*: A Samoan Theology of God’, in *Weaving: Women Doing Theology in Oceania*, ed. Lydia Johnson and Joan Alleluia Filemoni-Tofaeono (Suva: Weavers, South Pacific Association of Theological Schools and Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2003), 24–31.

²⁶ For instance, a text on the development of the nursing profession in Samoa features the song ‘Tausima’i Samoa’, by Clinical Nurse Consultant Iokapeta Sina Enoka, that utilises the term *feagaiga* to express connections between the clinical responsibilities of nurses for their patients and the broader cultural and spiritual environment in which they work. In F.N.A. Barclay, *Samoan Nursing: The Story of Women Developing a Profession* (Singapore: KHL Printing Co., 1998), 139.

²⁷ I.M. Lazar, ‘Ma’i Aitu: Culture-Bound Illnesses in a Samoan Migrant Community’, *Oceania* 55:3 (1985): 161–81; ‘Indigenous Curing Patterns in a Samoan Migrant Community’, *Oceania* 55:4 (1985): 288–302; Macpherson and Macpherson, *Samoan Medical*, 118; S.I. Mishra, J. Hess, and P.H. Luce, ‘Predictors of Indigenous Healers Use among Samoans’, *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 9:6 (2003): 64–9; W.A. Whistler, ‘Herbal Medicine in Samoa’, *Allertonia* 9:2 (2006): 39–80.

interchangeably, the term *taulāsea* was more frequently associated with practitioners who were perceived to be influenced by the pre-Christian Indigenous belief system – including engaging with illnesses of apparent ‘supernatural’ origin. The term *fofō*, which can variously mean ‘a massage’, ‘to give massage’, or a healer who administers massage, was a more neutral term that did not necessarily imply such links. For instance, some of those consulted stated that they had no qualms about seeking the help of someone skilled in ‘*fofō*’ to massage their aches and pains, but they balked at the idea of going to a ‘*taulāsea*’ who they apprehensively thought of as a ‘witch doctor’ whose practice would be at odds with their adherence to Christian beliefs. Others perceived *taulāsea* as entertainers, like the *fa’aluma* (clown or trickster) in a Samoan cultural performance.²⁸ Such perceptions evidence the effects of both Christianity and more recent processes of modernization and Westernization in Samoa and in diaspora.²⁹

Many Samoans do still exhibit faith in *taulāsea*, however, and their role in communities remains important.³⁰ Alefosio found that for particular categories of illness that are understood to be specific to Samoans, such as *ma’i aitu* (‘ghost sickness’, encompassing a variety of symptoms and said to be caused by unsettled spirits), respondents admitted that only a *taulāsea* would do: ‘The *taulāsea* is the person who can help people who are *ma’i aitu*. The Indigenous knowledge that the *taulāsea* has creates the possible ways of extracting these evil spirits out of people’.³¹ Drawing on an older Samoan Indigenous belief system that stresses the need for balance between the spiritual, environmental and human realms – the seen and the unseen – the *taulāsea* interprets physical or mental ailments as a manifestation of an imbalance that needs to be rectified. As Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese notes, ‘For Samoans harmony in the body was crucial because it determined how well people could engage in core survival tasks such as planting, hunting, fishing, cooking, sex, play, martial arts and so on’.³² According to the precepts of concepts of *vā*, which stress the interrelatedness of all things, harmony *within* an individual body may be affected if there is a disharmonious relationship in the wider web of physical, social, and spiritual relationships to which that body may be connected. Illness may result from breaches of *vā tapuā*, *vā fealoa’i* and *vā feagai*, and unseen sources of imbalance – including conflict between the living and the dead, or the wrongs of past ancestors – may be

²⁸ V.N. Kneubuhl, ‘Traditional Performance in Samoan Culture: Two Forms’, *Asian Theatre Journal* (1987): 166–76.

²⁹ Macpherson and Macpherson, *The Warm Winds*.

³⁰ Patricia J. Kinloch, *Talking Health but Doing Sickness: Studies in Samoan Health* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1985); P. Kinloch and M. Short, ‘Samoan Spirit Possession: Case Report’, *New Zealand Medical Journal* 90 (1979): 498–9; Mishra, Hess and Luce, ‘Predictors’.

³¹ Samoan-born female, late 50s, regularly practises *fofō*, currently living in New Zealand. Here and throughout this essay, excerpts are incorporated from personal interviews conducted in New Zealand by Toaga Alefosio from 2015–17. The format for confidential attribution includes speaker’s approximate age and whether they are Samoa- or New Zealand-born, as well as any special characteristics relevant to the research.

³² Tamasese, ‘In Search’, 112.

revealed to the *taulāsea*. Their treatments, including massage with coconut oil, are designed to restore both physical and spiritual balance.

Whether the customary medical attendant/healer is thought of as a *fofō*, *taulāsea*, or by other more specialist terms, the use of massage is common to the treatment practices of all, and coconut oil is typically the preferred substance for reducing the friction of hands on skin and enabling the effective kneading of muscles, tendons, and/or bones underneath.³³ As a New Zealand-born Samoan female in her mid 20s describes,

Every time we visited the *taulāsea* for my *fofō* we had to take a bottle of coconut oil. Before we started our *fofō*, the *taulāsea* would ask me “*o ā mai oe, e iai se mea o tigā?*” (How are you, is there anything that hurts?) Each visit to the *taulāsea* was always different depending on how I felt after each session.

Participants indicated that massage with coconut oil is as likely for the treatment of spirit possession as it is for a sprained ankle. In the case of the former, another respondent relayed that ‘Coconut oil is used in many cases as in order to heal someone who is possessed it is important to cover the person’s body with coconut oil and massage their entire body’.³⁴ Another describes both the strictures accompanying his treatment and the tactile experience of the use of *lolo*:

When I was sick and received treatment from a *taulāsea* there were many rules that came with the type of *fofō* that I received. The coconut oil felt warm on my skin and her hands that massaged my body made me feel weak.³⁵

Recognizing the ubiquitous presence of Samoan coconut oil in traditional healing practices, a question forms: for *taulāsea*, is the coconut oil itself accorded healing properties, or is it simply a practical lubricant for massage and effective vehicle for carrying *other* substances, such as botanical additives, that are in fact the ‘active agents’ in restoring balance and promoting healing? Existing literature suggests the latter – for instance, Macpherson and Macpherson relay that ‘Most oil-based solutions are for skin complaints and the oil simply ensures that the active ingredients are kept in place until they are absorbed by the skin’.³⁶ Whistler similarly mentions a range of medicinal plants that might be added to oil, but does not discuss any healing properties attributed to coconut oil itself.³⁷

³³ Macpherson and Macpherson, *The Warm Winds*, 229.

³⁴ Samoa-born Female, late 50s regularly practises *fofō*, currently living in New Zealand.

³⁵ Samoa-born Male, mid 40s, currently lives in New Zealand.

³⁶ Macpherson and Macpherson, *The Warm Winds*, 220.

³⁷ In Whistler’s compendium of medicinal plants used by *taulāsea*, the only two indications for usage of *Cocos nucifera* refer to juice squeezed from coconut *husks*, rather than use of coconut oil, even though multiple entries for other plants (such as turmeric) mention that they are added to coconut oil for application. Whistler, ‘Herbal Medicine’.

Co-author Alefosio's conversations with particular *taulāsea*, however, suggest that at least some do attribute importance to coconut oil itself. One *taulāsea*'s comments are particularly interesting; she draws on the well-known Samoan story of the origin of the coconut while explaining her abilities to heal. In the story, a Samoan girl, Sina, shares a relationship with an eel who in common versions of the legend is said to be the transformed Tui Fiti (very high chief or 'king' of Fiji). The eel promises to take care of her and her family. The story concludes with the eel offering his head to be buried next to Sina's house, from which grows a coconut tree providing Sina, her family, and ultimately all of Samoa with the necessities to survive. This legend embodies notions of *vā* – presenting relationships of care, obligation, and interdependence between people, living and dead, and the *fanua* (land) that nourishes their well-being. The *taulāsea* who invoked this story, a Samoa-born female in her mid 40s, describes the significance of the legend to her work, including the special visions that play an important role in her healing:

the eel portrays the element of the spiritual world and with its connection to the coconut it allows people like us who have the gift of being a *taulāsea* to draw connections to the spiritual realm as well [...] My gift allows me to have visions of what may cause the pain in your body, visions of whom maybe threatening your well-being. The coconut oil symbolises new life so, when I apply it on my patients I share their pain and help restore their health.³⁸

This *taulāsea* also has experience working as part of an integrated Western and traditional medical treatment option in a New Zealand hospital, but makes clear demarcation between her use of coconut oil in customary contexts and non-use of it in hospital contexts:

there is a difference when I perform my therapy duties here than at home as a *taulāsea* [...] I do not use coconut oil on my patients here at the hospital, there are other gels and creams that are in place to use, I do not have visions or anything about the patients I encounter with here at the hospital. When I am working at the hospital the relationship I share with my patients is strictly professional.³⁹

For this *taulāsea*, at least, the coconut oil plays an important role as part of a customary treatment matrix: it is not substitutable with other lubricating oils in this customary context, nor used in healing roles that are clearly outside of that context.

This nuanced understanding of coconut oil – as both a specially efficacious substance within customary treatment matrices while not independently efficacious outside of them – is absent in the occasional reference to Samoan practices in international coconut promotional literature. Contrast, for instance, Tamasese's writing on the practice of pre- and post-natal massage by a special class of *taulāsea* called *fa'atosaga*, (literally 'planting and growing the seed'⁴⁰), with US-based coconut oil proponent

³⁸ Samoan-born female, *taulāsea*, based at the time of writing in New Zealand.

³⁹ Ibid.

Bruce Fife's comments about Samoan use of coconut oil to massage babies. *Fa'atosaga* are customary birth attendants who specialize in the care of expectant mothers and are still regularly employed both in Samoa and in diaspora.⁴¹ As Tamasese explains, the *fa'atosaga's* 'main job ... is to steer the mother through massage and good advice towards a successful birth':⁴²

The *faatosaga's* regimen of *fofō* and counseling is holistic. It considers paramount the need for balancing the harmonies of mind and body for the mother, ensuring these are in balance with the growth of the unborn child. The relationships between the mother and the unborn child is sacred. Providing advice and applying massage techniques are, therefore, done with care and respect for the relationships.⁴³

During pregnancy the expectant mother receives regular massage with coconut oil from the *fa'atosaga*, and once babies are born they too are soon introduced to massage. In his book *Coconut Cures*, Bruce Fife draws on this Samoan practice of post-natal massage but decontextualizes the use of coconut oil from its broader context: 'mothers would massage their babies thoroughly with coconut oil from head to toe. It is said to strengthen the muscles and the bones as well as prevent skin infections and blemishes'.⁴⁴ What Fife misses in his discussion is that it is not the coconut oil in and of itself that promotes health, but rather the use of coconut oil as part of a more holistic regimen aimed at maintaining, or restoring, the harmonious balance of body, mind, and spirit of the mother and child within their broader environment.

THE USE OF COCONUT OIL BY *TUFUGA TĀ TATAU* IN *SAMAGA*

One of the best-known proverbial expressions in the Samoan culture, '*O le ala i le pule o le tautua*', ('The pathway to authority is through service'), imparts the wisdom that in order to become a chief in Samoa's chiefly system (*fa'amatai*) or achieve status, people must serve their families and community. In past generations, and for many still today, customary Samoan tattoos serve as a visible indication that a person is willing to serve in such a way. Centuries ago in Samoa it was essential that when a boy transitions into manhood he goes through the pain of the '*au*' (customary tattooing tools) to receive the male tattoo called the *tatau* or *pe'a*.⁴⁵ This tattoo extends from the mid-section of the

⁴⁰ Tamasese, 'Bio-ethics', 180.

⁴¹ New Zealand-based Samoan director Tusi Tamasese's second feature film, *One Thousand Ropes* (Blueskin Films, 2016), centres on a male *fa'atosaga* in an urban New Zealand context and engages heavily with themes of harmony/disharmony in relationships between the living and the dead.

⁴² Tamasese, 'Bio-ethics', 181.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 181

⁴⁴ Fife, *Coconut Cures*, 22.

⁴⁵ J.B. Stair, *Old Samoa: or flotsam and jetsam from the Pacific Ocean* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1897), 158–64; The common name for the male *tatau* and the flying fox is the same – *pe'a*.

back, just at the lower ribcage, across the hips, buttocks, groin, and down the thighs and to the knees. For males, the symbols and motifs represent the roles and responsibilities that a *soga'imiti* (man with the traditional Samoan *tatau*) must be able to carry out within his *'āiga* (family) and *nu'u* (village).⁴⁶

The women's tattoo, the *malu*, involves a more delicate lacework of symbols from the upper thigh to the knee, and historically was not as widespread among females as the *pe'a* was among males. Most accounts suggest it was reserved for chiefly young women (*taupou*).⁴⁷ *Malu* means 'shelter/protected' and the tattoo takes its name from a specific motif, also called *malu*, that features behind the tattooed woman's knee.⁴⁸ Mallon explains that 'The lines of the *malu* [motif] represent the four areas of the fale (house) where different guests are seated', including areas for the high chiefs of a host and visiting village, the area for the orator chiefs, and the area for the *taupou* or 'chiefly young woman'.⁴⁹ The *malu* motif is thus symbolic of a form of gendered complementarity in the harmonious organization of Samoan society. Similar to the male *tatau*, other motifs in the women's tattoo symbolize duties of service, including those expected of women 'inside the house', 'outside the house', and 'obligations to the women's council' such as weaving.⁵⁰ Samoan carriers of customary *malu* and *pe'a* are usually accorded admiration by other Samoans. As one respondent reflected, 'When I see people with the traditional Samoan tattoo, I can only imagine their pain but the blessings that they receive are beyond measure'.⁵¹

The blessing conducted at the end of the customary tattooing process is called *samaga*.⁵² While contemporary Samoan tattoo practices evidence a range of modifications,⁵³ ethnographic and other descriptions indicate that elements of *samaga* tied to an older Indigenous belief system endure. In particular, accounts of *samaga* associate it with the lifting of *tapu*, and with the ceremonial anointment and presentation of the newly inked tattoo in such a way as to highlight its beauty which, in turn, is taken as visual confirmation of harmonious relations between those present – tattooers, tattooed, extended families, ancestors, spirits and environment. Unasa Va'a's early 2000s ethnographic work amongst New Zealand-based Samoans receiving *tatau* in Auckland provides one of the more extensive accounts of *samaga*.

⁴⁶ Sean Mallon, 'Tufuga Tatatau: The Master Tattooists', in *Samoan Art & Artists: O Measina a Samoa* (Nelson, NZ: Craig Potton Publishing, 2002), 104–18; Sean Mallon, 'Samoan *Tatau* as Global Practice', in *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, ed. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 145–69.

⁴⁷ Bernadette Samau, 'Perceptions on the Commercialization of the Malu: A Case of Samoa', *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 4:6 (2016): 69–80.

⁴⁸ Mallon, 'Tufuga Tatatau', 117.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵¹ New Zealand-born female, late 20s, currently living in New Zealand.

⁵² A. Ryman, 'Peti's malu: Traditions of Samoan Tattooing', *The World & I* 19:6 (2004): 160–7. <http://search.proquest.com/helicon.vuw.ac.nz/docview/235845406?accountid=14782>

⁵³ Mallon, 'Samoan *Tatau*'; Unasa L. F. Va'a, 'Five Days With a Master Craftsman', *Fashion Theory* 10:3 (2003): 297–314.

In this elaborate ceremony, marking the completion of a *tatau* operation, the *tufuga* removes any *tapu* (prohibitions) that he might have imposed on the *tatau* initiate, at the very beginning of the operation to guarantee his protection against disease and evil spirits. The recently tattooed person is thoroughly rubbed with a mixture of scented coconut oil and turmeric (*sama*), as a healing agent, sprinkled with the same as a gesture of removing any *tapu*, and finally counseled by the *tufuga*. When this is done, the family of the tattooed person formally thanks the *tufuga* through its appointed spokesperson and most importantly presents him with the balance of his wages, which, in the migrant context, comprises mainly money, but also presentations of food and drink. The event is capped with celebratory activities such as feasting, drinking beer and other alcoholic beverages, singing, and dancing.⁵⁴

Other accounts of *samaga*, both in Samoa and in diasporic contexts, similarly associate it with the lifting of *tapu* (ritual sanctions) that prevail over the actions of both tattooists and tattoo recipients during the tattooing process.⁵⁵

As mentioned earlier, coconut oil and turmeric play an aesthetic role in enhancing the luminosity of the skin, and in this case the beauty of the freshly inked tattoo. Va'a's thick description of a diasporic *samaga* underscores this:

[The *tufuga tātatau*] Tulouena's chief assistant, Saupo, then proceeded to mix the turmeric powder, which I presume was imported from Samoa, and the coconut oil. With the resulting mixture, he rubbed the tattooed parts of Billy's body until the *tatau* shone brightly in the light of the garage where the ceremony was held.⁵⁶

A detailed description of the completion of a *malu* in an early 2000s US migrant context elaborates the additional symbolism of coconut oil and turmeric alongside another symbolic material element often used in the *samaga* – the cracking of an egg on the newly tattooed person's head: '[The *tufuga tātatau*] Suluape completes his creation by cracking an egg over her head and then anointing her tattooed legs with coconut oil and orange-coloured turmeric. The egg, like turmeric, is a symbol of life'.⁵⁷ Sébastien Galliot's more detailed account equates the egg more specifically with the lifting of prohibitions associated with *tapu* (suggesting it is a more recently introduced substitute for coconut water), and provides a great deal more interpretation of the use of coconut oil and turmeric (*sama*). After noting the significance and widespread usage of the mixture across Polynesia and Micronesia in the pre-Christian period, Galliot remarks that

⁵⁴ Va'a, 'Five Days', 304.

⁵⁵ Galliot, 'Ritual efficacy'; Adam Art Gallery, *TATAU: Pe'a: Photographs by Mark Adams. Measina Samoa: Stories of the Malu by Lisa Taouma* (exhibition catalogue). (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 2003), 13.

⁵⁶ Va'a, 'Five Days', 305.

⁵⁷ Ryman, 'Peti's malu', 167.

In Samoa, it is also employed as a medicinal preparation and its use in the closing tattoo ceremony is indeed linked to its antiseptic virtues and the relief it affords from the physical discomfort caused by tattooing. However, as this mixture was absent from the operation itself, its presence at the end of the ritual is intended to neutralize the potentially harmful effect of the pigment and to give the *pe'a* or *malu* a lustre and unusual colour. In the contemporary Samoan context, anointment can be interpreted as a ritual act ensuring a continuity between the ancient pre-Christian rites and ceremonies specific to the Polynesian region while at the same time being clearly recognized by Samoans (who are fervent Christians) as an action on the body omnipresent in the rituals of Christianity. Thus, whereas the inaugural prayer both Christianizes the rite and enables the opening of a sacred space, the oil, through its shininess, authorizes the presentation of the body in this space. The oil emphasizes the visual impact of the work, celebrates the person's successful initiation and guarantees they are correctly introduced to the ancestors embodied by the title-holders attending the event.⁵⁸

The absorption of *sama* into the skin is thought to ease the pain and act like an antiseptic to speed healing and relieve the tattoo recipient of discomfort, but it also offers more metaphysical protection: Va'a notes that *sama* 'is regarded by Samoan *taulasea* (traditional healers) as having both medicinal and magical properties'.⁵⁹ These discussions of the application of coconut oil, along with turmeric, in the *samaga* ritual offer depth and specificity to claims currently made in global marketing about the 'ancient wisdom' associated with the anti-fungal and anti-viral properties of both of these natural substances. Furthermore, all of these ethnographic interpretations of *samaga* anchor the use of coconut oil and turmeric within a broader conceptual system premised on maintaining and enhancing harmonious socio-spatial relationships (*vā*) between those physically present at the completion of the tattoo, as well as between them and the ancestors they represent.

Co-author Alefosio's conversations with both *tufuga tātatau* and recipients of *samaga* echo ethnographic accounts of the role coconut oil plays. Master tattooists reflected on the protections provided by the oil; as one *tufuga* relays, 'The coconut oil heals the skin, it is absorbed in the deep cuts of the patterned skin, and it has a pleasant scent which is also believed to fend off evil spirits as the coconut oil is blessed'.⁶⁰ A tattoo recipient recalls, 'The scent of the coconut oil fills the space of where the tattooing took place and our parents believe that the coconut oil was like an essence of blessing too'.⁶¹ The scent lingers on the tattooed individual's body: while their *tatau* is healing, they are advised to keep applying coconut oil to their tattooed skin until the swelling and bruising has healed.

⁵⁸ Galliot, 'Ritual efficacy', 120.

⁵⁹ Va'a, 'Five Days', 305.

⁶⁰ Samoan-born male *tufuga tātatau*, living in New Zealand.

⁶¹ New Zealand-born male, *soga'imihī* (tattooed man), mid 30s, currently living in New Zealand.

After the *samaga* ceremony is complete, the recipient of the traditional tattoo dances with courage knowing that they have overcome the pain of the ‘*au* (tattooing instrument). One woman describes completion of her *malu*:

When the *tufuga tātatau* covered my legs with coconut oil, it was honestly a sign of relief [...] my journey was completed once the *samaga* ceremony finished and I could dance and celebrate my Samoan heritage with my family and friends that were present.⁶²

An elderly male orator reflects on this culminating moment: ‘The person becomes shiny and as they are blessed, in the end they are given the opportunity to perform a traditional Samoan dance with their new “skin”’.⁶³ Dancing, the newly tattooed person acknowledges the support they’ve received from family, as well as the knowledge and skill of the *tufuga tātatau*. Their oiled skin emphasises the beauty of a tattoo that is more of a collective achievement than an individual adornment. The coconut oil makes the dancer’s skin shine, but – just as is recorded in historical sources⁶⁴ – this shine carries deeper significance for it enhances the luminous beauty of the dancer and tattoo, and beauty, in turn, reflects harmonious balance according to a pre-Christian Samoan Indigenous belief system that endures.⁶⁵

THE USE OF COCONUT OIL IN *LIUTOFAGA*

Muā gagana are Samoan proverbial expressions that draw on studied observations of the environment to impart wisdom. A well-known example of this is the proverb ‘*Amuia le masina e alu ma toe sau*’ translated as ‘*Fortunate is the moon to go and then return*’. Samoan orators are most likely to use this proverb during *lauga* (oratory speech) in respect of a deceased person and their families. It is an expression of hope and wishful thinking – if only our departed loved ones could return like the moon.

In Samoa, there is an Indigenous practice known as the *liutofaga* (literally, to change one’s sleeping place), through which people are able to meet with their loved ones again in a spiritual sense whilst cleaning and washing their bones in coconut oil. Of the three Indigenous practices discussed in this paper, *liutofaga* is the least widely known outside of Samoan contexts; it occurs only in Samoa and is carried out with the utmost cultural and spiritual respect. A *liutofaga* involves exhuming the remains of a person that has been buried for a minimum of 10–12 years. It is typically conducted when a more recent death prompts a family to exhume the remains of the person’s long-deceased spouse so that they might be [re]interred together, or in some cases when remains must be shifted. In co-author Alefosio’s experience, the body of the person that is exhumed is likely to have been buried without a coffin in a rectangular space covered in tiles that keep the bones of the deceased well preserved.

⁶² New Zealand-born female recipient of the *malu*, living in New Zealand.

⁶³ Samoan-born male, orator, early 60s, living in New Zealand.

⁶⁴ Grattan, *An Introduction*, 1948.

⁶⁵ Tamasese, ‘In search’.

Many Samoan families bury their loved ones in such a way to minimize complications from decomposition and make future exhumation for a *liutofaga* easier.

The process of a *liutofaga* involves complementary tasks and responsibilities accorded to males and females. The labour of the men is needed to remove the slabs of concrete covering the original burial and to create a new space for the deceased to be reinterred, along with their recently deceased spouse if applicable. Women are responsible for preparing *lolo* and *siapo* (tapa cloth) for the cleansing of the bones. Once exhumed, this cleansing is done exclusively by female family members; bones are ‘washed’ by daughters of the deceased and their daughters. This act can be likened to how mothers bathe their children and rub coconut oil all over the child’s body as a protection from the sun as well as an antiseptic for sores or cuts. In this case, the women wash the bones of their loved ones in coconut oil as a representation of healing pain, a blessing for their journey in the afterlife, and as a demonstration of enduring filial care. This blessing upon the deceased’s bones is completed by wrapping their oiled bones in *siapo*.

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese suggests that an important aspect of *liutofaga* involves *fa‘alanu*, or seeking pardon for breaking *tapu*: ‘When you dig graves, you are disturbing the sleep of the dead and you have to ask pardon’.⁶⁶ He relays how, before its widespread depletion across the Samoan island chain, ‘one of the essential ingredients for performing *liutofaga* would be sandalwood and sandalwood leaves’.⁶⁷ No doubt out of necessity, *liutofaga* usually do not involve the burning of sandalwood nor the use of sandalwood-scented coconut oil now. *Lolo* scented with other botanical elements, however, is still readily available, and either scented or unscented oil may feature in the practice.

Participants in *liutofaga* describe the powerful sensorial presence of coconut oil in the ritual. One man recalls his first encounter with a *liutofaga*:

The scent of the coconut oil lingered in the room where we placed the bones covered in a tapa cloth, the scent remained in the room till it was the day of the funeral and we buried our loved ones and the bones of our nana and papa.

He reports that until this day, he can smell the coconut oil when he ponders on this experience.⁶⁸ The elders in one Samoan family consulted believe that the coconut scent lasts until the day of the burial, because the coconut oil is protecting the family from any evil spirits that may try to disturb this sacred ritual of bringing two people together in one sleeping place. The coconut oil also protects anyone who enters the sacred *vā*, or space, where the bones are resting covered in tapa cloth.

Exhuming a loved one’s body can be unsettling for people who have never experienced a *liutofaga* before and do not understand this Samoan ritual. It can be especially unnerving for diasporic Samoans who have journeyed to Samoa for the

⁶⁶ Tamasese, ‘Bio-ethics’, 193.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶⁸ New Zealand-born male, late 30s, based in New Zealand.

occasion and have never had direct experience with human remains. The elders of a Samoan family are able to comfort younger relatives by openly discussing their own experiences. One Samoan-born woman in her late 60s expresses her concern that this custom may not be practised as often in the future because the younger generations do not understand it. She recalls her first experience of a *liutofaga* to her family:

A *liutofaga* feels like we are having two funerals, the pain is raw [...] just to have a second chance to see our loved ones again and have the opportunity to clean their bones with coconut oil is a special experience, I am thankful I had the chance to witness and experience a *liutofaga*; not many people in Samoa uphold this custom.⁶⁹

Drawing attention to the ongoing relationship that people share with their deceased loved ones, she highlights how they treat their graves with respect by cleaning the graves daily and always saying *tulou* (excuse me) when walking past. During a *liutofaga*, washing their loved ones' bones with coconut oil is a further reminder that even if their loved ones are not physically present, their spirit still lives on their land and their *tofaga* (sleeping place) should always be respected.

Young, diasporic participants in *liutofaga* narrate their coming-to-understanding of the process. Describing a *liutofaga* for her grandfather, one young woman relays how female relatives 'washed his bones with coconut oil and once grandpa's bones were washed, they were wrapped in tapa cloth [*siapo*]'. It was conveyed to her that washing his bones in coconut oil was 'a way of giving him a bath'. Though having initial trepidation about seeing human remains, she was comforted by 'the belief that it was grandpa's bones and we were washing his bones so that he and nana can rest together', which for her 'was a special experience'.⁷⁰ Another young woman describes the role that coconut oil played in the comforting feeling she experienced during a *liutofaga* for her uncle,

The coconut oil gave our uncle's bones a nice scent; and the feeling of washing his bones in coconut oil felt like we were applying it on his skin anyways as we were the nephews and nieces who massaged his body decades ago, so I wasn't scared when we carried out a *liutofaga* for my uncle to be buried together with his wife.⁷¹

As these accounts convey, linking the process of *liutofaga* to the *vā fealoa'i* (respectful relationships) established and nurtured between people in life – such as between a niece/uncle or granddaughter/grandfather – reduces or eliminates participants' fears of washing their bones after death. Further, people participating are comforted by their sense that coconut oil helps protect them from spiritual harm. The complementary labour of male and female relatives of the deceased, and their loving and respectful treatment of the deceased's bones, illustrates and exemplifies principles of

⁶⁹ Samoan-born female, late 60s, based in New Zealand.

⁷⁰ New Zealand-born Samoan female, mid 20s, living in New Zealand.

⁷¹ New Zealand-born female, early 20s, based in New Zealand.

harmonious relationship – particularly between the living and the dead – that underpin the concepts of *vā fealoa'i*, *vā tapuia*, and *vā feagai*.

CONCLUSION

Interpreted according to the Samoan Indigenous belief system, coconut oil in the three Samoan practices of *fofō* by *taulāsea*, *samaga* at the completion of a *pe'a* or *malu*, and in *liutofaga* plays an integral role in restoring and ensuring balanced and harmonious relationships between people, both living and dead, and their seen and unseen environment. Samoan coconut oil beautifies, protects, and enables the enactment of the organizational principles of *vā tapuia*, the sanctity of harmonious balance in relationships between all things, *vā fealoa'i*, the relational space between people, and *vā feagai*, the sacred responsibilities between complementary entities in a covenant relationship.

Of course, all three of these practices continue to undergo changes as a result of changing physical environments and the geographical, economic, and material pressures associated with Samoa's dispersed diasporic communities. As noted in preceding sections, some Samoans both within and beyond the Samoan Islands now disparage and discredit the work of *taulāsea*. Samoan tattooing practices, in turn, continue to shift according to a range of commercial and regulatory pressures. Practitioners of both *fofō* and *tatau* can be highly adaptable: *taulāsea* do sometimes substitute mineral oil or other oils for coconut oil when giving a *fofō*.⁷² *tufuga tātatau* have altered their tools, designs, hygiene practices, venues for administering *tatau*, and key elements of the rituals surrounding payment.⁷³ Even deeply entrenched beliefs stipulating the burial of intact bodies in the ground – rooted in the Samoan Indigenous belief system and further enhanced by Christian practice – are now slowly changing. Recent work by Sailiemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor on the advent of cremation options in Samoa illustrates how funeral practices

have adapted to changes in the cultural, social, economic and political life of Samoans, particularly in relation to the diaspora [...] there has been a blending of Indigenous concepts of caring for the dead and modern practices in relation to the remains of the dead.⁷⁴

All of these examples prompt the question of what and how much of a practice can change before the essence is fundamentally changed? A final Samoan saying comes to mind – one that is increasingly invoked in globalizing Samoan contexts: '*E sui faiga, 'ae tumau fa'avae*', meaning that approaches and methods change, but foundations stay the same. As we conclude this exploration of the use of Samoan coconut oil in *fofō*,

⁷² Macpherson and Macpherson, *Samoan medical*. Co-author Henderson recalls receiving a *fofō* with mineral oil on the small island of Manono in independent Samoa in 1993.

⁷³ Mallon, 'Samoan *Tatau*'.

⁷⁴ Sailiemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor, 'Changing Morphology of Graves and Burials in Samoa', *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 125:2 (July 2016): 184.

samaga, and *liutofaga*, we ponder if, and how, coconut oil will continue to be essential for the anointing of skin and bone in these and other Samoan customary practices in the future.

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