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*Pakipaki war-club*

Western Polynesia, Tonga Islands, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

114.5 x 7.5 x 6 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0026

**Provenance**

English private collection

Collection W. Wallis, Salisbury

Galerie Yann Ferrandin, Paris

Acquired at the galerie Yann Ferrandin, Paris, 20 Sept. 2017



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*Apa'apai war-club*

Western Polynesia, Tonga Islands, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

113 x 10 x 5 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0013

**Provenance**

Collection Wayne Heathcote, New York

Collection privée américaine

Acquired at Binoche et Giquello, Paris,

22 June 2017, lot no. 70



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*Kinikini war-club*

Western Polynesia, Fiji islands, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

105 x 35 x 3,5 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0046

**Provenance**

Private collection Kahala, Honolulu, Hawaii

Christie's New York, 5 May 1994, lot no. 18

Bonham's Los Angeles, 11 May 2016, lot no. 63

Galerie Flak, Paris

Acquired at the galerie Flak, Paris, 10 April 2018



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*Bowai war-club*

Western Polynesia, Fiji islands, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

118 x 7 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0039

**Provenance**

French private collection

Galerie Schoffel de Fabry, Paris

Acquired at the galerie Schoffel de Fabry,

Paris, 19 February 2018



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*Siriti war-club*

Western Polynesia, Fiji islands, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

109 x 24 x 4.5 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0014

**Provenance**

Collected in 1845 by Reverend J. Waterhouse

Collection Wayne Heathcote, New York

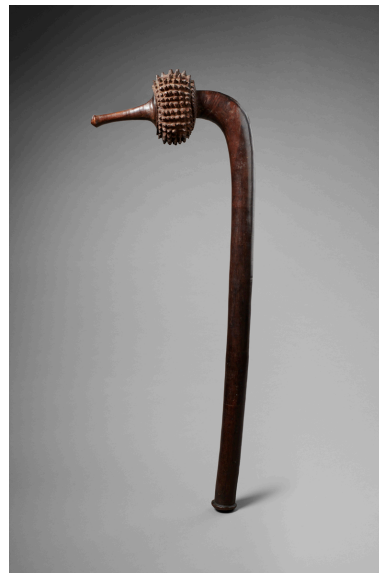
Collection Masco Corporation, Detroit

Sale Sotheby's, New York, 2002

US private collection

Acquired at Binoche et Giquello,

Paris, 22 June 2017, lot no. 69



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*Totokia war-club*

Western Polynesia, Fiji islands, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

93 x 11.8 x 33 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0076

**Provenance**

Collected by Admiral Joseph Maurice Exelmans  
between 1837 and 1839

Transmitted by inheritance

then Galerie Schoffel de Fabry, Paris

Acquired at the galerie Schoffel de Fabry, Paris,  
29 January 2020



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*Uatongi war-club*

Western Polynesia, Fiji islands, Rotuma Group, XIX<sup>th</sup> C.

Wood

127.5 x 11.5 x 4 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0077

**Provenance**

Collection Matthias L. J. Lemaire, Amsterdam, 1960s

Collection Heinz Plester, Gladbeck

Sale Zemanek-Münster-Tribal Art Auktion n° 92, lot no. 9

Galerie Yann Ferrandin, Paris

Acquired at galerie Yann Ferrandin, à Paris, 7 February 2020





## Seven blunt wonders from Tonga and Fiji

Tonga, an idyllic archipelago recently bruised by the wrath of a submarine volcano, has witnessed a rich production of artefacts whose refined geometric decoration is used as an expression of lineage, a unique custom in the Pacific. The collections of the FGA comprise several ancient weapons from these islands, as well as from the neighbouring Fiji, which represent a wealth of information on the society which produced them. Similar weapons are at the core of the exhibition *Power and Prestige: the Art of Clubs in Oceania*, held at the Palazzo Franchetti in Venice until 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022<sup>1</sup> and later at the Musée du quai Branly from the 8<sup>th</sup> June to the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022. And as we shall see, if these wooden weapons can look stern, they have a lot to say...

### Divine kingship in the Friendly Islands

Tonga, a Polynesian archipelago called “The Friendly Islands” by James Cook, because its inhabitants are generally “friendly and hospitable to strangers”<sup>2</sup>, is also peculiar in that it is the only Pacific archipelago which was never colonized properly speaking (*fig. 1*). It is still ruled by a king, through an ancestral kingship of divine origin. Tonga thus kept a feudal system which is still present in all aspects of everyday life. According to the founding myth, their king (bearing the title *Tu’i Tonga*) is a direct descendant of the creator god, Tangaloa Eiki. This god chose to climb down a tall tree, the *Toa* or Australian pine tree (*Casuarina equisetifolia*), to reach the world of mankind and meet his mortal mistress. From their union was born ‘Aho’eitu, a half-man, half-god being. When he reached adulthood, ‘Aho’eitu left the Earth to pay a visit to his father in Heaven; on his return, he was escorted by heavenly beings who became his *matapule* or “ceremonial attendants”: a title which allowed their successors to touch the chiefs, who are considered as “taboo” or sacred, to cut their hair, to tattoo them and to prepare their corpse for their funeral<sup>3</sup>. With these benefits, they can be compared to priests. As to the many nobles and traditional chiefs, they are connected to the king – and hence to ‘Aho’eitu – but this connection is not direct. According to the oral tradition, this

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fondazioneiligabue.it/en/mostre>

<sup>2</sup> RHYS, *The Voyages*, p. 165; see also p. 286-287.

<sup>3</sup> CARTMAIL, *The Art of Tonga*, p. 29, and p. 35-39.

divine kingship dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>4</sup>. The resulting society is very hierarchized, with a king on top, under whose authority are the nobles and, within different ranks, the many chiefs and the ceremonial attendants. The latter prevail over the common folk or *tu'a*, who are supposed to descend from a worm<sup>5</sup>.

### **Hierarchy, etiquette, presentation**

This very complex hierarchy is rather ubiquitous, and notably in the Tongan language, which comprises six different ways of talking, for instance when talking to or about the king, the chiefs or the *matapule*, or when speaking with a socially equal person<sup>6</sup>. This hierarchy is thus expressed through interpersonal relations, but also notably in the diet, as some dishes were reserved for the king, and others for the chiefs<sup>7</sup>. The respect of etiquette in Tonga has been a necessity and a way of living, and the entire society relies on the right place given to each individual, according to his birth rank and his relatives.

This hierarchy is also visible through the paraphernalia which the king and the chiefs display during presentation rituals, which bear witness to their prestige, their high rank in society then and now, and the importance of lineage: tattoos, headgears (like the fanned feather headdress worn by king Fatafehi Paulaho, *fig. 2*), fly chasers, fans, baskets, fabrics and ceremonial weapons all mark the prominent status of their owner.

### **The voice of geometric patterns**

But there is more: the weapons of the chiefs, wickerwork baskets (*fig. 3 and 4*), refined fabrics of *tapa* and even the tattoos (a traditional pattern is identified, *fig. 5*) all display a common decoration<sup>8</sup>: an intricate array of geometric patterns, where the triangle, zigzag and vertical or oblique lines prevail. In this infinity of lines, sometimes a small figurative element (man or animal) appears, hidden in the geometric maze.

<sup>4</sup> KAEPLER, "Rank in Tonga", *pass.* ; CARTMAIL, *The Art of Tonga*, p. 35-39.

<sup>5</sup> KAEPLER, "Rank in Tonga", p. 180 ; CARTMAIL, *The Art of Tonga*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> TAUMOEFOLOU, *Tongan ways*, *pass.*

<sup>7</sup> BATAILLE-BENGUIGUI, "The Fish of Tonga", p. 190 *sq.*

<sup>8</sup> KAEPLER, *The Pacific arts*, p. 45-46; WEENER, "Tongan Club iconography", *pass.*; BRUNT, THOMAS, *Océanie*, p. 302.

Like a family tree, this decoration tells us with its own words, made of triangles and lines, the prestigious genealogy of the owner of the object, stories of families, lineages and unions<sup>9</sup>. This network of lines is affixed to the object so as to wrap it magically and capture the divine *mana*, the supernatural power which inhabits living beings (especially kings) as well as objects in the Pacific area<sup>10</sup>: precious fabrics of *tapa*, for instance, were notably used to wrap the figures of gods, and also for the investiture of chiefs<sup>11</sup>.

### **'Akau tau**

The Tongan language designates weapons as '*Akau tau* or '*Akau*, which comprises a broad range of prestige weapons, which have been well researched by Andy Mills<sup>12</sup>: these objects are long, more or less elaborate blunt war-clubs made of a single piece of wood, sometimes inlaid with ivory. The most frequent ones are the *Pakipaki*, typical with their head shaped like a paddle. Next to them are the *Apa'apai*, the extremity of which is flat or slightly concave. Other types, such as the *Bowai*, a simple stick with whale ivory inlays, or the *Kinikini*, with their bell-shaped profile, are also present in Tonga. Most of these weapons are made from the hard wood of the *Casuarina*, which enabled the divine epiphany<sup>13</sup>, but some very rare exemplars are made of whale bone<sup>14</sup>.

When they were used, these heavy and efficient weapons – with their length, weight and in some cases additional spikes – could perform well as bearers of death. They are also sturdy, very different from those used in a sportive performance show witnessed by James Cook in 1777, during which the two champions, armed with clubs made of green branches of coconut tree, fought in a single combat. According to Cook, these duels would end when one fighter or the other admitted defeat, or when their weapons were broken<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> For these questions, see KAEPLER, "Rank in Tonga", p. 176 sq.

<sup>10</sup> Artwork of the month, May 2020: <https://www.fg-art.org/en/artwork-of-the-month-archives/the-wood-that-moai-are-made-of-two-figures-from-rapa-nui>

<sup>11</sup> KAEPLER, in KAEPLER, KAUFMANN, NEWTON, *L'art océanien*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> MILLS, "'Akau tau", *pass.*

<sup>13</sup> MILLS, "'Akau tau", p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Los Angeles, LACMA, inv. /.

<sup>15</sup> RHYS, *The Voyages*, p. 264; MILLS, "'Akau tau", p. 10.

### **Weapons, chiefs and gods**

Originally, these clubs were used in single combat during the wars between Tongan chiefs. Before Christianization, in Tonga as in Fiji, there were plenty of occasions to shed blood: among many other reasons for war, one can mention personal quarrels, the greed for territory or women, an insult, the violation of a taboo or the irrepressible desire of revenge<sup>16</sup>. The aim was to kill the opponent with several blows on his head: the higher the death toll of the weapon, the more *mana* it gathered. The club thus linked the chiefs with gods and ancestors<sup>17</sup>. In the same way as medieval swords<sup>18</sup>, the wooden war-club of Tonga was therefore an external sign of nobility which had to be carried at all times. The clubs kept in the FGA collection do not show any sign of break, repair or impact, which suggests that they only ever had a ceremonial function.

Christianization put a stop to these battles and the use of clubs. During the civil war from 1790 to 1820 in Tonga, wooden 'Akau were replaced by firearms<sup>19</sup>.

### **Tonga – Fiji – Samoa: same fights**

The rich collections of the FGA comprise exemplars of these *Kinikini* and *Bowai* clubs, but in their Fijian version: since Tonga was at the core of a system of exchange and triangular links with its two neighbours, Samoa and Fiji, the Tongan club types are also found in Fiji, with similar decorations. Tongan carpenters, specialized in the fabrication of canoes, had settled in Fiji and Samoa, which is why carved objects of Tongan style can be found in these islands<sup>20</sup>. One can also imagine that some of these weapons belonged to Tongan warriors installed in Fiji, or to Fijians living in contact with Tongans<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> For the accounts of the early Christianization: CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 4-7.

<sup>17</sup> KAEPLER, in KAEPLER, KAUFMANN, NEWTON, *L'art océanien*, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> For this question, see AURELL, *Excalibur*, p. 124-130.

<sup>19</sup> CARTMAIL, *The Art of Tonga*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> CARTMAIL, *The Art of Tonga*, p. 108-112.

<sup>21</sup> CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 46-57.

### Carving one's own weapon

If the weapons produced before the first contacts with Europeans were chiseled by means of shark teeth helved on a piece of wood, since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, they were carved with metal nails, which were exchanged against other goods. The metal tool enables a finer and deeper incision. This feature enables to distinguish the “pre-contact” weapons from the “post-contact” ones. The majority of the weapons considered here, with their fine and deep carving, suggest a date in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest.

But these objects were not necessarily made by expert craftsmen: eye witnesses tell us that warriors, or even chiefs, would spend time carving and chiseling their own weapons, so as to turn these objects into symbols of strength and prestige<sup>22</sup>. The weapon thus became a living being in its own right, and was often given a name expressing its courage and power, such as *Mo'ungalaulau* ('The Mountain of Lamentations'), or *Tu'i Tapavalu* ('The Eight-Sided Lord'), a custom which, again, is reminiscent of some mythical swords of the Middle Ages (Durendal or Excalibur, to name but a few)<sup>23</sup>.

### Diplomatic gifts

These weapons were also offered to high-ranking Westerners. Many clubs of the *Pakipaki* type were given to James Cook and his senior officers, during his trips in 1773, 1774 and 1777 in the Friendly Islands<sup>24</sup>. Their chiseled decoration tells us that some of these 'Akau had been the property of kings and chiefs: the one kept at the Metropolitan Museum<sup>25</sup>, brought back by James Cook, is adorned with small figurative patterns such as plants, an octopus and a turtle, which belonged to the sacred animals whose flesh could only be consumed by the king, because they were considered as the receptacles of the gods<sup>26</sup>. The king, wearing his fanned feather headdress, is even depicted on it, as is the case on another 'Akau kept at the Field Museum of Chicago<sup>27</sup>. A century later, the tradition was still observed in Fiji: in 1875, the *Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau* sent one of his clubs to queen Victoria, as a token of obedience<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 47; see also HOOPER, ““Ceci n'est pas une arme””, *pass*.

<sup>23</sup> MILLS, “‘Akau tau”, p. 14-15; AURELL, *Excalibur*, *pass*.

<sup>24</sup> MILLS, “‘Akau tau”, p. 7 sq.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/769258>.

<sup>26</sup> BATAILLE-BENGUIGUI, “The Fish of Tonga”, p. 185-190.

<sup>27</sup> Chicago, Field Museum; HERDA *et al.*, “What's in a Name?”, p. 449, fig. 4.

<sup>28</sup> HOOPER, *Fiji*, p. 248.

### ***Pakipaki***

We shall start with a *Pakipaki* (fig. 6). The exemplar of the FGA is characterized by its size, its diamond-shaped end imitating a paddle blade, and above all by its geometric decoration, mostly made of zigzags and triangles and distributed among four zones delineated by circular rings in slight relief (handle, upper handle, blade and point); a long central vein in relief underlines the whole length of the club, from the upper handle to the point. The eye gets lost in this profusion of tight lines. The regularity of this pattern gives life to the object, which was meant to underline the prestige of its owner.

### ***Apa'apai of a chief***

As to the exceptional *Apa'apai* club (fig. 7), it is remarkable for the seven ridges, with a double one on top, adorning its blunt head. It is embellished with fourteen parallelepipeds filled with oblique lines, checked patterns, diamonds, and rows of fishbones. All of these surfaces are different: their decoration is typically Tongan, but it is an exceptional decoration, as some of the small squares of the handle include small figures, a fish, probably a tuna and sea turtles (fig. 8 and 9). In Tonga, tuna, turtle and octopus were incarnations of gods<sup>29</sup>. The presence of the turtle, a sacred animal and a divine incarnation also found on the *Apa'apai* of the Metropolitan Museum, suggests that this weapon probably belonged to a chief.

### **Weapons from Fiji: *Kinikini*, *Bowai*, *Siriti*, *Totokia*, *Uatongi***

Five other clubs from Fiji enable us to complete this overview of *insignia regalia* in Western Polynesia<sup>30</sup>. They were all made of a single piece of wood<sup>31</sup>. Three types can be distinguished: weapons common to Tonga and Fiji, like the *Kinikini* or the *Bowai*; weapons only found in Fiji but decorated by Tongans, like some *Siriti* clubs; finally, entirely Fijian weapons, like the *Totokia* club. Let us first consider the *Kinikini* club (fig. 10): originally an attribute of the chiefs and “ceremonial attendants” who originally fought in the first line of battle and therefore had to be sheltered against enemy arrows, this club is equipped with a broad and long tip,

<sup>29</sup> BATAILLE-BENGUIGUI, “The Fish of Tonga”, p. 192 sq.

<sup>30</sup> For the different kinds of combat weapons, see CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 47.

like a shield protecting the warrior's head<sup>32</sup>. Even mature, the *Casuarina* tree could only produce a very small number of broad planks like this one, which suffice to show its uncommon character; it was probably transmitted hereditarily, along with the function of *matapule*<sup>33</sup>. The one in our collection, particularly broad, is entirely decorated with a fine network of geometric patterns of Tongan type, distributed in triangles around a straight vertical ridge crossing a more prominent crescent-shaped one.

The second Fijian weapon, also found in Tonga and Samoa, is the *Bowai* (*fig. 11*), a heavy pole club whose shape is reminiscent of a baseball bat. A very fine baseball bat, with a handle adorned with a strip of geometric patterns, on the pommel of which shines a twelve-pointed star made of whale ivory (*fig. 12*). It is also a royal weapon, as it is believed to have been the favourite weapon of king Seru Epenisa Cakobau. But these weapons also had an oracular purpose: during divinatory rituals, they were aligned vertically, in balance on their base; if they remained standing, the divine omen was favourable. If they fell, it was a bad sign<sup>34</sup>.

The elegant *Siriti* club (*fig. 13*) certainly dates back to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it was collected by Reverend Joseph Waterhouse in 1845. A Methodist minister and missionary in Fiji, he was one of the first to have described the local customs<sup>35</sup>. He converted king Seru Epenisa Cakobau to Christian faith. This is a ceremonial weapon, the blade of which looks like the corolla of a hibiscus flower bended by the wind, or like a *Siriti*, a kind of butterflyfish<sup>36</sup>. The blade is decorated with a carved pattern which always comprises a stylized human figure: according to an ancient label, the exemplar of the Musée du Quai Branly was originally adorned with feathers<sup>37</sup>. This kind of club, particularly heavy, could be used during ceremonies of investiture for the chiefs<sup>38</sup>.

Another, very interesting and strictly Fijian type of club is the *Totokia* (*fig. 14*): the one in the FGA collections was acquired by Admiral Joseph Maurice Exelmans during his expedition in the Pacific from 1837 to 1839. A club with a rather short handle, the end of which is curved like the neck of a large, curious and savage bird. This club is characterized by its head, which

<sup>32</sup> CLUNIE, *Yalo i Viti*, p. 186; HOOPER, *Fiji*, p. 252-253, no. 232 and 233.

<sup>33</sup> MILLS, "'Akau tau", p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> For these matters, see CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> WATERHOUSE, Joseph, *The King and People of Fiji*, 1866; CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> CLUNIE, *Fijian Weapons*, p. 54; HOOPER, *Fiji*, p. 258, no. 242.

<sup>37</sup> Paris, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Inv. 72.53.454

<sup>38</sup> CLUNIE, *Yalo-i-Viti*, p. 152, no. 185; HOOPER, *Fiji*, p. 256.

displays a kind of collar equipped with eight rows of spikes, from which protrudes a long pointed beak. A very heavy “battle hammer”, which was first meant to be carried by chiefs. The shape of the head is probably inspired by the pandanus fruit<sup>39</sup>. Once again, this weapon reflects the great worth of the warrior carrying it, as it only belonged to chiefs and warriors held in high esteem.

Finally, the last one is the most sober of all, a true masterpiece of simplicity. It comes from the Rotuma Group, an archipelago currently pertaining to Fiji. It is a *Uatongi* club (fig. 15), a long bludgeon shaped after the stem of a palm leaf; the slightly flaring blade is elegantly decorated with thin parallel horizontal lines. With its diamond-shaped section, the tip of the weapon is also typical for this heavy club.

Even now, these wonderful objects keep a good part of mystery. With their diversity, these weapons have something divine, which still delights us today.

Dr Isabelle Tassignon  
Curator of the Ethnology collection  
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, March 2022

Translation Dr Pierre Meyrat

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<sup>39</sup> KJELLGREN, *Oceania*, p. 289-290.





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## Figures

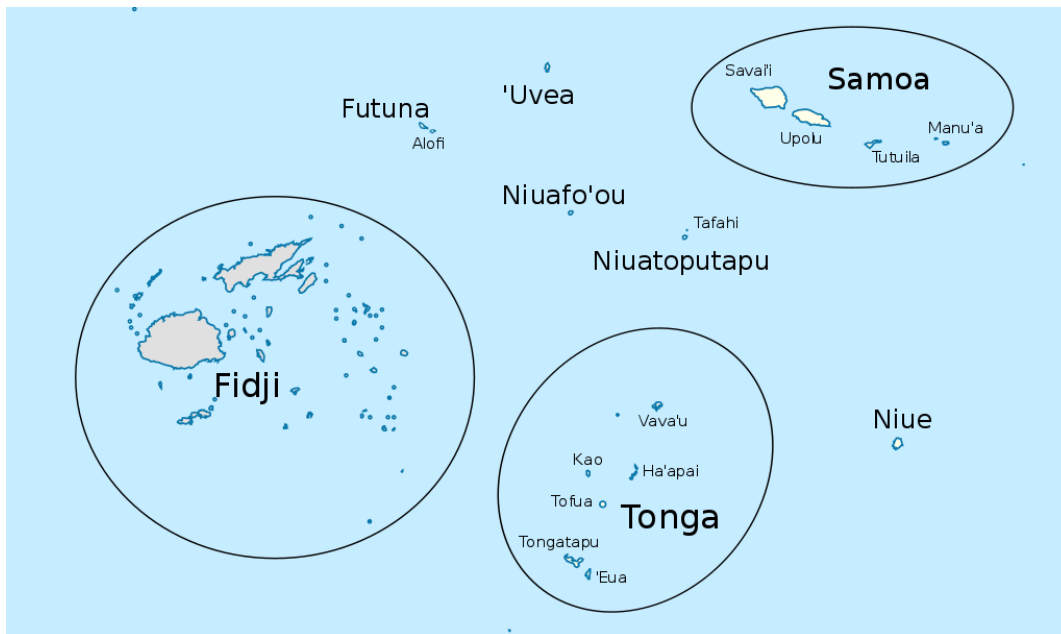


Fig. 1 : Map of Western Polynesia © Skimel, CC BY-SA 4.0



Fig. 2 : Fatafehi Paulaho, king of Tonga. Gravure by J. Hall, 1784, from J. Webber, 1777 © [Wellcome Collection](https://www.wellcomecollection.org/)



Fig. 3 : British Museum, inv. Oc 1982,Q.1117. Basket, plant fibers, 19 x 26 x 9 cm, XVIII – XIX C. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 4 : British Museum, inv. Oc 1980,Q.485. Basket, plant fibers, 11 x 19.5 cm, XIX C. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 5 : Men's thigh tattoo: *in* Dumont d'Urville, Jules, Voyage de la corvette l'Astrolabe exécuté par ordre du roi pendant les années 1826-1827-1828-1829, Paris, 1830-1835, The New York Public Library © from <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-78ba-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>





Fig. 6 : *Pakipaki* war-club

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Fig. 7 : *Apa 'Apai* war-club



Fig. 8 : *Apa 'Apai* war-club, detail



Fig. 9 : *Apa 'Apai* war-club, detail



Fig. 10 : *Kinikini* war-club © Courtesy Galerie Flak. Photographer : Danielle Voirin



Fig. 11 : *Bowai* war-club



Fig. 12 : *Bowai* war-club, detail



Fig. 13 : *Siriti* war-club



Fig. 14 : *Totokia* war-club



Fig. 15 : *Uatongi* war-club

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