FREE · COMPANION GUIDE

The Polynesian Tattoo Code

A Field Guide to Motif, Meaning, and the Standard Behind the Needle

by Joshawa Elsas

A preview drawn from Volume I

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

Why this guide exists

Polynesian tattooing is one of the oldest visual languages on earth. For three thousand years it carried the weight of identity, ancestry, and spiritual authority. Then the world changed. The needle became a commodity. The motifs became decoration. The code was lost.

This guide is not the whole book. It is a doorway. Inside it you will find three of the eleven core motifs from Volume I, the two frameworks I use in every consult — MANA and TATAU — and three short stories from twenty-five years in the chair.

Read it slowly. If by the last page you feel the work pulling at you — pulling at a tattoo you already wear, or one you have been thinking about — that is the point. That is the code beginning to do its work.

— Joshawa Elsas

WHAT YOU WILL FIND INSIDE

The Contents

I.	**Three Motifs from Volume I**	*Niho Manō · Enata · Manulua*
II.	**The MANA Framework**	*What the artist must carry*
III.	**The TATAU Standard**	*What the wearer must bring*
IV.	**Three Stories from the Chair**	*Twenty-five years, distilled*
V.	**The Two-Intent Test**	*A one-question filter before any tattoo*
VI.	**Where to Go Next**	*Volume I and the signed first edition*

PART I

Three Motifs

The book contains all eleven core motifs. Here are three — chosen because they show the full range of what a motif must do: protect, name, and hold contradiction. Each entry follows the same structure used throughout Volume I: **Meaning**, **Origin**, and **Misuse**. Read the misuse section first if you already wear a tattoo. It is often where recognition begins.

MOTIF · SHARK TEETH / PROTECTION

Niho Manō



MEANING

The shark's tooth is the oldest protective mark in Polynesia. It does not ask for protection — it commands it. The wearer becomes the shark: feared, respected, and untouchable. Worn correctly, the niho manō is not a threat — it is a boundary. It tells the world what will not be crossed.

ORIGIN

Pan-Polynesian. Among the most ancient and widespread motifs, found from Hawai‘i to Sāmoa to Aotearoa.

MISUSE

Placed without intention, the niho manō becomes decoration — a row of triangles on a wrist or ankle, meaning nothing. Its power comes from the deliberate act of claiming protection over something specific: a child, a marriage, a calling, a recovery. Without a named object of protection, the teeth go blunt.

“A row of teeth without a thing to guard is just a row of teeth.”

MOTIF · HUMAN FIGURE / ANCESTRY

Enata



MEANING

The enata is a human figure — but not just any human. It represents specific people: ancestors, family, community. A row of enata is a genealogy. A single enata is a specific person. The enata is the one motif that always names someone. It is the closest thing in Polynesian tattooing to writing a name on the skin.

ORIGIN

Marquesan. One of the most sacred narrative motifs in the tradition, and one of the most frequently misused outside the Pacific.

MISUSE

Used generically as “people,” the enata loses its specificity. Each enata must represent a named, known individual — a grandfather, a sister, a child, a teacher. A row of seven enata is not “community.” It is seven names. If you cannot say them out loud, they should not be on your body.

“The enata is not a symbol of family. It is a member of one.”

MOTIF · TWO BIRDS / UNION

Manulua



MEANING

Manulua means “two birds.” Its interlocking triangles represent two birds in flight. In Tongan ngatu, documented interpretations include high-ranking parentage on both sides. The Manulua Project also describes it as bringing two groups or families together into a new union.

ORIGIN

Tongan ngatu (decorated barkcloth). Related forms occur in Sāmoa and Fiji, where names and interpretations vary.

MISUSE

Do not describe Manulua as a double spiral or assign it a universal meaning of duality. Keep its Tongan context clear; interpretations depend on the maker, community and use.

Two birds in flight; two families brought together.

CULTURAL SOURCES

Te Papa Tongarewa · Two birds and interlocking triangles
Pitt Rivers Museum · High-ranking parentage on both sides
Manulua Project · Union of two groups or families

THE OTHER EIGHT

Niho Manō. Enata. Manulua. And eight more.

Volume I covers every core motif in the Polynesian visual vocabulary — koru, honu, the frigate bird, the weave, the Marquesan cross, ocean waves, the gecko, and the spearhead variations — with full meaning, origin, misuse, and three to five composition examples for each.

PART II

MANA

What the artist carries before the machine ever turns on.

MANA is the standard the artist must meet before they pick up the needle. Lineage. Study. Restraint. The willingness to say *no* to a paying client when the design has not earned its place. Without MANA, the artist is a vendor.

M — MEANING

Every motif must carry a specific, verifiable meaning connected to the wearer's life story. Not a general meaning. Not a borrowed meaning. A true meaning.

A — ANCESTRY

The design must honor the cultural lineage it draws from. This means understanding which traditions are being invoked — and why this artist has the standing to invoke them.

N — NARRATIVE

The tattoo must tell a coherent story. Each element must connect to the next. The composition is a sentence, not a list.

A — ACCOUNTABILITY

The artist is accountable for the cultural accuracy of every mark they make. Ignorance is not a defense. If you do not know, you do not place it.

PART III

TATAU

What the wearer must bring to the chair.

TATAU is the standard the wearer must meet. Why this mark. Why now. Why on this body. Why from this hand. Without TATAU, the wearer is a tourist. Together with MANA, they make the room sacred again.

T

TRUTH

The design must be true to the wearer's actual story — not an idealized version, not a borrowed narrative, not the version they wish were true.

A

ALIGNMENT

Every motif must align with the wearer's values, experiences, and intentions. Misalignment creates a tattoo that lies — and the body knows.

T

TRADITION

The work must demonstrate knowledge of the tradition it draws from — its history, its grammar, and its sacred boundaries. The wearer is responsible for what they ask for.

A

ARTISTRY

Technical excellence is not optional. The cultural weight of the work demands the highest level of craft. Cheap work on a sacred motif is a desecration.

U

UNITY

The final composition must read as a unified whole — one story, one voice, one body of work. Not a collection of souvenirs.

PART IV

Three Stories

Twenty-five years in the chair gives you a lot of stories. These three are pulled straight from Volume I — real consultations, real clients, real moments that shaped the IslandTAT Method. They are the kinds of stories the rest of the book is built around.

STORY ONE · THE HEART PROTOCOL

The Man Who Wanted Strength

A man once came in wanting a Polynesian sleeve. He was not Polynesian. He had the build of someone who worked hard or wanted people to know he did. He pulled up bold sleeves on his phone. Heavy black. Strong flow. “I want something like this,” he said. I asked him what he liked about it. “The strength,” he said. That was the first answer.

So I asked again, differently: “What kind of strength?” Most people are ready for the first question. They are not always ready for the second. He looked at the pictures, then at his own arm. “I don’t know,” he said. “I just want something that feels powerful.” In another shop, that would have been the end of the consultation — a strong sleeve, a deposit, done. But I have learned not to stop at the first answer.

So I asked him about his life. Work. Family. Kids. Then something shifted. He started talking about his father — how his father had been hard on him, how he grew up feeling like he was never enough, how he had spent his adult life trying to become the kind of man nobody could look down on. He talked about pressure. About not wanting his children to feel the emptiness he carried. He did not want a powerful tattoo. He wanted to become a powerful father. That is different. One request is about image. The other is about responsibility. So the tattoo changed.

THE LESSON

“Do not stop at the word strength. Ask what strength is for. If strength is only for image, it becomes ego. If strength is for service, it becomes responsibility.”

STORY TWO · THE UNBROKEN THREAD

The Chamorro Client

A Chamorro client came in wanting a tattoo connected to her identity. Guam does not have the kind of widely documented tattoo history people point to in Samoa, Aotearoa, Hawai'i, Tahiti, or the Marquesas. But Guam does have ancient pattern. It has pottery. It has fragments. It has pieces of clay pulled from the ground carrying marks from people who lived long before us.

She brought photos of pottery sherds from Guam — from an area known for archaeological findings. She wanted those markings considered in her tattoo. She was not asking for a random tribal design. She was searching for a way to carry Chamorro identity through what history had left behind. I looked at the photos. And in one second, I was back at the Bishop Museum, standing in front of a Lapita pot I had studied years before.

The markings on the Chamorro pottery reminded me of that Lapita pot. Not exact. Not something I could turn into a clean academic claim. But the feeling was undeniable. The same deep Pacific language seemed to be breathing through the clay. In that moment, the timeline collapsed. It was no longer just an ancient pot behind glass, or a photo of broken pottery. It was Lapita clay, Chamorro memory, Pacific migration, ancestral pattern, and a modern woman standing in front of me asking how to carry her people on her skin.

THE LESSON

"That is when history stops being a subject. It becomes responsibility."

STORY THREE · THE HEART PROTOCOL

The Man Who Cried After the Drawing

There is a moment that happens sometimes after the freehand drawing is finished, before the needle ever touches the skin. The client stands up. They walk to the mirror. They turn slowly. And something changes in their face. They see themselves differently.

I remember a man who came in with a rough idea and left the consultation with tears in his eyes after seeing the design drawn on his body. He was not crying because the lines were perfect. He was crying because the story was finally visible. His children were there in the design. His father was there. His struggle was there. The part of him that had survived was there. The future version of himself was there too — the one he was trying to become.

That is when you know the tattoo has moved beyond image. The body recognizes the story before the ink makes it permanent. That kind of moment cannot be copied from someone else's tattoo. It has to be earned through listening. It is the difference between borrowing a look and honoring a life — and it is the entire reason the Heart Protocol exists.

THE LESSON

"The body recognizes the story before the ink makes it permanent."

PART V

The Two-Intent Test

Before you place any motif — on yourself or on a client — ask these two questions. If you cannot answer both in one sentence each, the design is not ready.

QUESTION ONE

What is this mark *for*?

Not what it means in general. What it is doing on *this* body. Protection of what? Memory of whom? Naming what passage?

QUESTION TWO

Who is this mark *against*?

Every true tattoo has a boundary. What does this mark refuse? What does it shut out? What does it stand between?

If you can answer both, the design has earned the body. If you can answer only one, the design is half-built — and a half-built tattoo is the kind that gets covered up in two years. If you can answer neither, walk away from the chair. The mark is not yet yours to place.

PART VI · WHERE TO GO NEXT

This is the doorway. Volume I is the room.

The Polynesian Tattoo Code · Volume I

11 CORE MOTIFS	Full meaning, origin, misuse, and composition examples for every motif in the Polynesian vocabulary.
6 FRAMEWORKS	MANA, TATAU, the Two-Intent Test, the Placement Map, the Lineage Filter, and the Refusal Protocol.
40+ CASE STUDIES	Real consults — sale, build, refusal — drawn from twenty-five years of work in the chair.
273 PAGES	A full-color reference designed to live on the studio bench, not the bookshelf.

Readers of this guide get first notice when upcoming volumes of The Polynesian Tattoo Code — Volumes II, III and IV — are released.

VISIT POLYNESIANTATTOOCODE.COM →

“Before motif. Before placement. Before price. The first responsibility is to know which ocean you are standing in.”

— from Volume I