WATER

Vai (Samoa, Marquesan, Tahitian), water

*wa* in Hawaiian and Maori, is a generic word to indicate water, a liquid, and the fact it's a word shared by most Polynesian languages testifies of its importance.

Water is a constant, ubiquitous presence in the life of peoples from the islands, and the Pacific Ocean was a particularly rich one, which granted the life of those who turned to it for food.

The archipelagos spread throughout the vastness of the Pacific Ocean had different geographical characteristics, which deeply impacted on the way of living of their inhabitants, on their traditions and on their tattoos. Where the ocean was easily accessible, and with it its resources, people considered it as a second home, a giver of life, like in Samoa and Fiji for example, where tattoos were lighter and more symmetrical. Where the islands were steeper and without protection from the oceanic waves, fishing was harder and more dangerous, which led to clans fighting against each other for the best fishing grounds. Tattoos were consequently darker, asymmetrical and richer with war related elements.

Another proof of how important ocean and its characteristics were to survival has been observed in Sikayana and Ontong tattoos, which actually seem to replicate on the shoulders and along the arms the structure and characteristics of the ocean surrounding the islands, being darker where the coast dives deeper into the ocean, and lighter where shallow waters and sands surround the atolls.

Waves, as a symbol of water and of the ocean, can represent change and continuity through change (like waves, which are never the same, and yet never stop washing the shore rhythmically). Swimming or rowing against the waves can be hard, and opposing waves are used in Tahitian tattoos to show adversities, while favorable waves are symbols for positive changes.

The ocean is also a place of rest, and Maori believed that all of their dead left from the northernmost point of Aotearoa, Cape Reinga, back to Hawaiiki, to the land of their ancestors. On this account waves can also symbolize the place of rest, voyage and tradition. The *ngaru* pattern representing the ripples caused by a sailing canoe in the water is also symbolic of speed and travels.