

O le filigā 'afa

The Sennit rope braiding process

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Introduction

The coconut sennit rope or *afa* in the Samoan language, is “the most important single article in Samoan material culture.”¹ The *'afa* is made from the husk of a special coconut called the *Niu'afa*.

Individual strands of the coconut husk to form the sennit rope which is used throughout the Pacific to bind, lash, strengthen and reinforce homes, canoes and weapons. Samoans use

the *'afa* in every facet of Samoan living – industrial use, fishing, housing, cooking utensils, customs and practices, even tatu.² The *'afa* is the only terrestrial plant fibre resilient to salt water. Furthermore, there is cultural and utilitarian importance of the *'afa* in the Pacific.



Figure 1 Niu'afa

Filigā 'afa process

In terms of preparation of the *'afa* there are generally seven steps³ to the process. These steps are:

1. *Toli le niu* or selecting/choosing the *niu* (coconut)

In this phase, the right *niu'afa* is sought after. The land is explored, the right coconut tree is selected and the *niu'afa* is identified. The intension behind the use of *'afa* is predetermined

¹ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BucSamo.html>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf1ygq1nEh0>

³ Each village has their own process of making the sennit rope.

before the first stage of harvesting begins. This will dictate the length, strength, width, colouring, and storage of 'afa.⁴

2. *O'a le niu* or husking the *niu*

Once the right *niu'*afa is selected, the husking process begins. Samoan's use the *mele'i* or metal husking stake to remove the *pulu* or coconut husk. As the *pulu* is removed, it is placed in an a woven basket or 'ato in preparation for the next stage. The main purpose of this stage is the separate the interfibrous material from the fibre.⁵



Figure 1 Soaking of coconut husk in sea water

3. *Taomaga* or soaking of the husks

The baskets of *pulu* (coconut husks) are then taken to either the ocean (*sami*) or swamp (*pala/taufusi*) to be buried and soaked (*taomaga*). The location of the *taomaga* depends on the purpose and use of the 'afa. When the 'afa is buried in the swamp, the 'afa is stained black. However, if the 'afa is buried in the ocean, the 'afa retains its natural color. Heavy rocks are placed on the baskets of *pulu* to ensure it is secured. The soaking process can take between six to ten weeks depending on the condition of the sea and swamp. Samoan's believe that the longer the 'afa is buried (irrelevant if its the sea or swamp), it will improve the 'afa's strength and lasting qualities. When the soaking process is completed, the *pulu* is selected and extracted based on its usage and purpose. The remaining *pulu* is left submerged for future use.

4. *Sasa le pulu* or pounding process

The soaked *pulu* is separated by using a mallet (*sa'afa*) and anvil (*malaise*). The *pulu* is pounded over the anvil with the mallet until the interfibrous are separated from the clean inner fibres. This process time consuming and requires patience and dedication. The newly separated fibres are called *matofi*. Once separated, the *matofi* is then cleaned in the ocean to remove the odours and discoloration. The cleaned *matofi* is then placed on top of the *fale* or traditional hut, to remove any further odours and discoloration from exposure to the sun. Immediately after beating, the fiber has a beautiful, silky, yellow color, but this changes after exposure to the usual sennit brown. As already pointed out, some fiber has a

⁴ https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/9044/thesis_access.pdf?sequence=1

⁵ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BucSamo-t1-body1-d4-d4.html>

natural deeper brown or reddish color. The *matofi* may be left out on the roof for some days.⁶

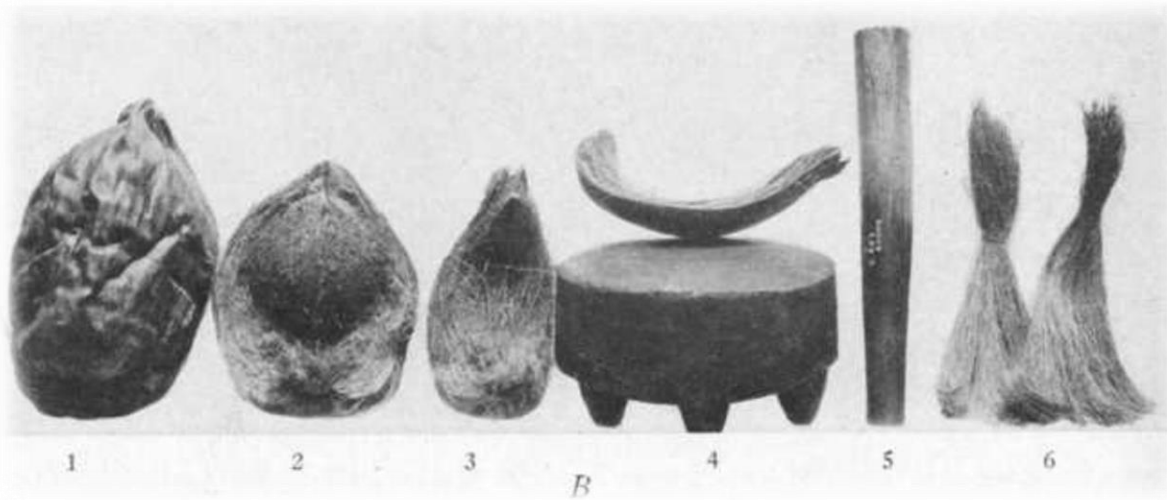


Figure 2 Anvil (B4), Mallet (B5), Matofi (B6)

5. *Fa'ata'a/Binding of Matofi*

The sun-dried *matofi* is gathered together to create the *fa'ata'a*. The binding process begins with the braider sitting down with a bunch of *matofi*. Individual strands of *matofi* are separated by way of length. The longer strands (*mui'a'a*) are kept, while the shorter strands are (*fugafuga*) discarded. The Samoan proverbial expression "*Ia auese le fugafuga, 'ae tu'u ai le mui'a'a*" (Discard the useless short fibres, but keep the good fibre) implies the importance of discarding and separating meaningless or unimportant things from things that matter most.



Figure 3 Figure 4 *Fa'ata'a* process: *Matofi* stands (A1), Separating *Matofi* strands (A2), *Fugafuga* & *Mui'a'a* strands

The longer strands of *matofi* are rolled together through the braider twisting and rubbing the *matofi* on his thigh to bind the individual strands into a thicker strand of *'afa*. This new, thicker strand is called the *fa'ata'a*.

⁶ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BucSamo-t1-body1-d4-d4.html>

6. *Filiga le afa* or braiding the *afa*

Once the *fa'ata'a* bundles are completed, the braiding process begins. Traditionally, the *fili* or braiding process was held during village council. The chiefs would braid/plait '*afa*' during the long village council meetings where they would deliberate and discuss important issues for the village.

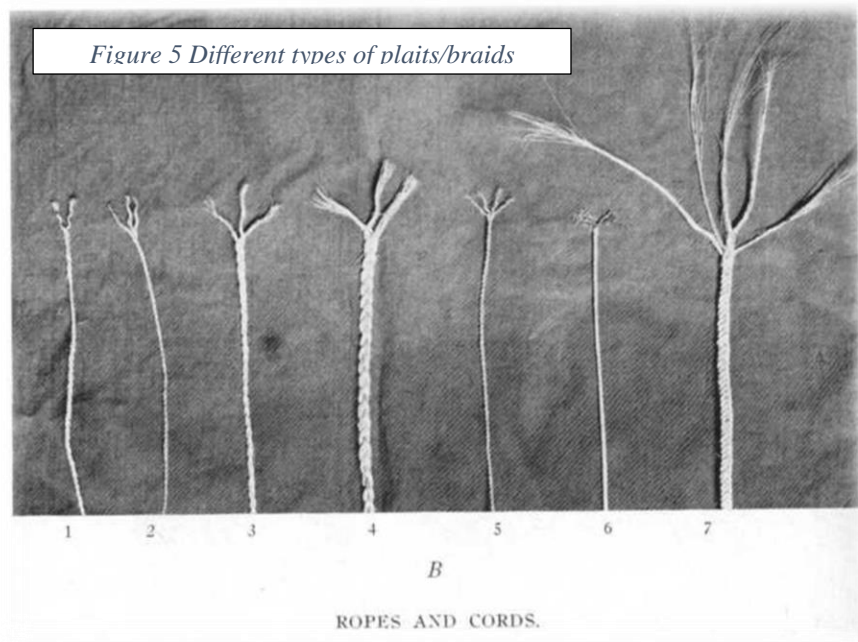
The braiding process also occurred outside of village council meetings.

When fishermen would leave for their fishing expeditions, villagers would come together and plait the '*afa*' while waiting for a safe return of their men. This process was usually done in combination with prayer and singing of hymns.

Whichever the case a commonality that is shared between these different scenarios is the quiet focus, intent, space, and place that was dedicated to the act of *Filigā le 'afa*.⁷

A proverb birthed from *Filiga le 'Afa* "*O le aso ma le Filiga, o le aso fo'i ma le mata'igatila*" conceptually translates to the idea of carrying the same careful consideration and thought into one's words and actions. The impact of words carries heavy weight prompting a slow considerate process. The rush of words in a haste to respond can carry great consequences, *Fili* of the '*afa*' is the slowing down, the careful choosing of materials. It becomes the leader of thought the process of thinking.⁸

During the braiding process, the rolls of *fa'ata'a* are placed next to the braider and the process of plaiting begins. There are different plaiting or braiding styles to accommodate the intent and purpose of its use. Here are some examples.



⁷ https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/9044/thesis_access.pdf?sequence=1 (p 46)

⁸ https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/9044/thesis_access.pdf?sequence=1 (p 46)

7. Wrapping of the *afa*

Once the braiding is completed, the *'afa* is into coils based on the size of each rope. These coils are then stored for future projects. When the *fa'ata'a* is rolled strand is added and becomes actual ply of the plaited braid, it is called an *aga*. Hence when anyone asking the number of plies in a braid, says. "*Pe fia le malosi o lau 'afa?*" (What is the number of the strength of your braid?). The reply comes "*E tolu aga*" (Three plies!).⁹



Figure 6 'Afa (A2), Matofi (A1), Fa'ata'a (A3)

There are three important aspects to the *'afa* making process – *matofi*, *fa'ata'a* and *'afa*. Combined, these three components constitute what is termed a *to'oto'o ali'i* or figuratively, the staff (*to'oto'o*) of a chief (*ali'i*).¹⁰

As they are combined together for one purpose, they are used figuratively to denote unity of purpose in the saying, "*E pei o le to'oto'o ali'i lou finangalo*" (May your will be as the working material of sennit braid).



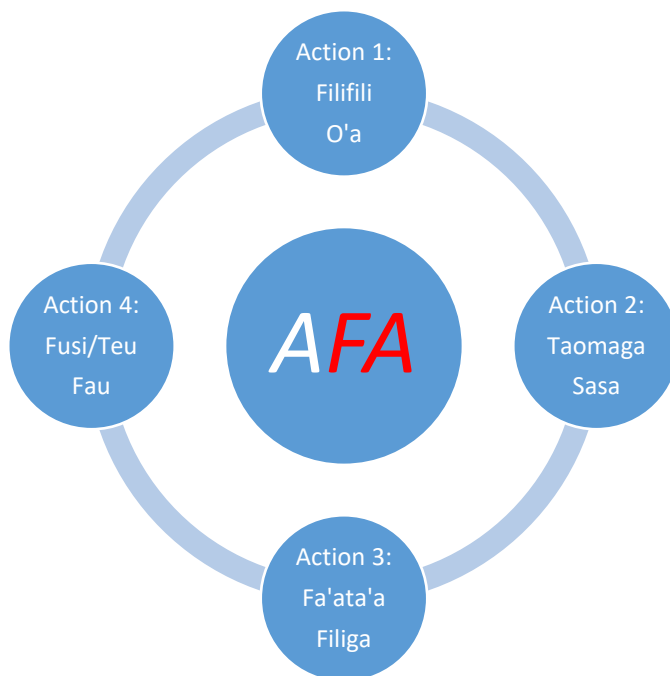
Figure 7 Black and Natural coloured *'afa* used to bind cross-sectional piece in Samoan fale

⁹ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BucSamo-t1-body1-d4-d4.html> (pg 238)

¹⁰ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BucSamo-t1-body1-d4-d4.html> (pg 241)

The AFA approach

The **AFA APPROACH**¹¹ is a four-tier approach that incorporates Samoan ideologies and worldviews towards understanding the family and domestic violence. The word FA in the Samoan language means four (4). Therefore, the **AFA APPROACH** is made up of the four Actions parallel to the 'afa making process:



ACTION	PROCESS	DESCRIPTION
1	<i>FILIFILI</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planner, researching, understanding the issues Talk to family and community members regarding issues Select the issue(s)
	CHOOSING THE NIU	
	<i>O'A</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deconstructing narratives and contributing issues Move from positions to interests

¹¹ Parsons, Leitumalo (2020) O le aso ma le fiiliga, O le aso mata'igatila A Qualitative study looking at Samoan language maintenance within second generation households (MA Thesis)

2	HUSKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move from surface issues to underlying issues
	TAOMAGA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding historical issues • Removing any informaties, blemishes, odors, discolorations (removing of historial issues)
	SOAKING	
3	SASA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the issues • What contributed to the problem
	POUNDING	
	FA'ATA'A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collating themes, occurances, commonalities.
	B INDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on important issues • Get rid of unimportant issues
4	FILIGA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plaiting new narratives
	BRAIDING	
	FUSI/FUSIGA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating bigger coils of new, positive narratives
	WRAP INTO COILS	
	FAU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building or create new narratives
	BUILD	

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API-GBV is a national resource center on domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence in Asian/Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. We envision a world free of gender-based violence for communities with equal opportunities for all to thrive.

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